The Literature of Dissolution: Sickness in Samuel Beckett's Fiction

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### Abstract

Beckett's art is predicated on his understanding and use of sickness in both its literal and figurative forms. In this thesis I deal critically with all of Beckett's major fiction, as well as with several lesser-known works. In the first chapter I cite evidence of Beckett's early preoccupation with physical illness and suggest a correlation between this preoccupation and his use of religious language and imagery. In Chapter Two I discuss the major women characters, who are portrayed as healthy and robust and are contrasted with the moribund heroes.

In the next chapters, on <u>Murphy</u> and <u>Watt</u>, the subject of mental illness is examined. In these and the later chapters, Beckett's sense of play and his use of humour are explored within the context of the theme of sickness and dissolution.

The theme of dissolution is reiterated in the structure of the trilogy and the transformation of Moran into the Unnamable. The dissolution of the physical self is related to the dissolution of the material world and in Chapter Thirteen I explore Beckett's use of ruins to this purpose.

The disintegration of the body and of the world finds its correlative in Beckett's rendering of language. Beckett's style exposes the process of the search for silence as a search for health and a disintegration of syntax. Sickness is seen as chaos and health as "the silence of which the universe is made." (Molloy p. 122) Table of Contents

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#### Preface

To mention that Beckett's characters suffer invariably from a variety of abrasions, contusions, deformities, handicaps, diseases and discomforts is to state the obvious, but it is an observation which previously has been given only slight attention in regard to the method of Beckett's art, or which has been over-simplified to a degree that renders the observation insignificant. Beckett's use of sickness, however, is an important aspect of his writing and must be given closer critical attention before we are able fully to appreciate the dynamics of his imagination and his art. The following is a work of criticism which examines Beckett's use of sickness to this end.

Sickness gives form to Beckett's fiction. Not only does sickness help shape the individual works, but it helps shape the canon as well. The dissolution of the physical self is correlated to the disintegration of language. Thus, sickness is not only a metaphor and vehicle for Beckett's ideas, but, more importantly, becomes a function of his form and style as well.

## Acknowledgements

I would like first to thank my supervisor, Dr. Richard Cave, whose patient advice was always sound and pertinent. I owe the greatest debt of thanks to Mr. Beckett, not only for his inexhaustibly interesting work, but also for his kindness in consenting to meet with me in October, 1979.

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The people responsible for the Beckett Archives at Reading University are also deserving recipients of my appreciation. Without exception, they were friendly, interested and helpful. Finally, I would like to thank Mr. Acheson, the headmaster at the Portora Royal School, who was very hospitable to me during my visit there in 1978, and willingly supplied me with information from Beckett's school file. Notes

The following abbreviations will be used throughout

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# this paper:

Fiction

А	=	"Assumption"
С	=	Company
DB	=	"DanteBruno.VicoJoyce"
$\mathtt{FL}$	=	First Love
Fz	=	Fizzles
H	=	How It Is
LO	=	The Lost Ones
М	=	Molloy
MC	=	Mercier and Camier
MD	=	Malone Dies
MP	=	More Pricks Than Kicks
My	=	Murphy
NK	=	No's Knife
P	=	Proust
U	=	The Unnamable
W	=	Watt

Miscellaneous

RU	Ħ	Reading	Univer	sity	Library	Archives
Z	=	Confessi	ions of	Zenc	<u>&gt;</u>	

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# Chapter One

# Sickness

The images and language of sickness appear throughout the Beckett canon. Sickness is an early preoccupation with Beckett which later helped to give form to his most important works. Richard Coe expresses a common assumption when he writes that in Beckett's view physical suffering is temporal and therefore irrelevant, that the life of the mind consequently takes all precedence over the life of the body.<sup>1</sup> However, not only is the mind dependent on the body in many ways, as we shall see in this chapter, but also, physical suffering in Beckett's work helps shape the images and language we find there.

<u>Webster's New World Dictionary</u> defines sickness as a condition of being incapacitated by ill health. Health is defined as physical and mental well-being, freedom from defect, pain and disease, normality of physical and mental functions. However, these definitions are self-contradictory, for surely it is not "normal" to be free from defect, pain or disease if by normal we are meant to understand that condition experienced by the majority, or indeed by virtually

1 Richard N. Coe, <u>Samuel Beckett</u> (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1968), p. 63. all members of the population. Such defects as pigeon-toes, short- or far-sightedness, bunions and other such imperfections at least must affect those who are fortunate enough to be free from more serious afflictions. Perhaps we should refer, in speaking of health, to the ideal condition of physical and mental functions, rather than to the merely normal; or say that health is a state of well-being in spite of whatever malfunctions exist, as exist they do.

In his book, <u>Blueprint for Health</u>, D. Stark Murray states:

(T)o recognize a state of complete wellbeing is nearly as rare as to achieve it, for man's imperfect use of his environment, his imperfect use of his own body and his imperfect resistance to many diseases all conspire to keep many people below their optimum condition.<sup>2</sup>

Murray is here elaborating on a definition given by Rene Dubos, who describes health as "a modus vivendi enabling imperfect men to achieve a rewarding and not too painful existence while they cope with an imperfect world."<sup>3</sup> This is a more realistic definition than Webster's and is the one I will adopt for this paper, as it concurs with what we find in Beckett.

In <u>Watt</u>, for example, Beckett demonstrates his idea of health during the examination of Louit and his unique

<sup>2</sup> D. Stark Murray, <u>Blueprint for Health</u> (London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd., 1973), p. 19.

But the man is in t-t-tolerable health? Can direct his steps unaided? Can sit down, sit, stand up, stand, eat, drink, go to bed, sleep, rise and attend his duties, without assistance? (W p. 179)

This state of tolerable health, however, includes an affliction: "a diffuse ano-scrotal prurit ... of sixty-four years standing." (W p. 181) Ironically, it is the satisfaction which Mr. Nackybal, whose name Beckett has chosen with his characteristic sense of humour and suitability, receives from the scratching of this pruritis which causes the committee members to exclaim, "What vitality! At his age! The open-air life! The single life!" mistaking for supreme well-being the momentary relief of a life-long torment. Beckett suggests here that we commonly and mistakenly define as good health mere independent action; that no matter how much a person may suffer, we count him healthy as long as he does not make a nuisance of himself to those around him.

In <u>Malone Dies</u> Beckett further explores the complexities of health. Malone describes Macmann's attempt to stay well and unafflicted by a rainstorm by deciding to lie supine rather than prone on the ground in the pelting rain:

> (H)e fancied that the nape of the neck and the back right down to the loins were more vulnerable than the chest and belly, not realizing, any more than if he had been a crate of tomatoes, that all these parts are intimately and even indissolubly bound up together, ... and that a drop of water out of season on the coccyx for example may

lead to spasms of the risorius lasting for years as when, having waded through a bog, you merely die of pneumonia and your legs none the worse for the wetting, but if anything better, thanks perhaps to the action of the bog-water. (MD p. 239)

Macmann is not a crate of tomatoes made of separate and individual parts. His atoms are not protected from one another as are tomatoes in their skins. It is unreasonable for Macmann to expect to protect one part of himself while exposing another, for the irony exists that legs unseasonably wetted may result in the lungs giving out. Molloy has elaborated the complexities of health in an earlier passage:

> But I must say that with Lousse my health got no worse, or scarcely. By which I mean that what was already wrong with me got worse and worse, little by little, as was only to be expected. But there was kindled no new seat of suffering or infection, except of course those arising from the spread of existing plethoras and deficiencies. But I may very well be wrong. For of the disorders to come, as for example the loss of the toes of my left foot, no, I am wrong, my right foot, who can say exactly when on my helpless clay the fatal seeds were sown. ... For all things run together, in the body's long madness, I feel it. (M pp. 55-56)

The phrase "the body's long madness" depicts a unique view of the natural life processes. The use of the word madness to describe both the natural functions and the malfunctions of the body serves to emphasize the seeming randomness of affliction. We are reminded that both deficiencies and plethoras lead to illness and further that we can not know when or where the seeds of disease are sown. We

are left with a sense of the absurdity of ever thinking we are truly healthy.

The interdependence of the parts of the body extends to the dependence of the mind on the body, as evidenced in the short story entitled "A Case in a Thousar."."<sup>4</sup> This story, published in 193<sup>4</sup>, is set in a hospital. The title has the typical double meaning we have come to expect from Beckett's wit, recalling first the cliché of something being so unique that it stands out as a single example from thousands; but meaning also perhaps that the case related here is only one chosen from thousands of other similar stories.

The piece begins with the old saw that the operation was a success even though the patient is doing poorly. In this instance the patient is a boy named Bray. The surgeon (crudely but aptly named Bor), we are told, does not hold this failing health against the boy ("[he] shrugged his shoulders without rancour"), and he calls in a consultant physician. The story is about this physician and the boy's mother.

Mrs. Bray waits every day outside the hospital in a kind of vigil until she is allowed in briefly to visit her son. Dr. Nye, the consulting physician, recognizes her as his own childhood nurse whom, as a child, he had wanted to

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Samuel Beckett, "A Case in a Thousand," <u>The Bookman</u>, August 1934, pp. 241-242. All further quotations from this work are taken from this publication.

marry. We are told there was a "trauma at the root of this attachment," but neither we nor Mrs. Bray are made aware of what that trauma might have been. We are told only that there is something which Dr. Nye wants to ask her about those days and further that there is something which she desires to tell him. When her son dies (possibly as a result of poor advice from Dr. Nye) Mrs. Bray continues her vigil outside the hospital until Dr. Nye returns from a holiday. Finally they meet again and the long-expected information is exchanged, but it is "so trivial and intimate" that the narrator declines to inform us of the matter.

Particularly important in this story is the reference to the doctor's own health as being somewhat "below par" as he suffers from a bad heart, chronic depression and painful feet. These disturbances distract the doctor from thinking, and he concludes that "in the absence of the feet of some other person ... the meditative life has little to recommend it." This is particularly meaningful when we consider Coe's statement quoted earlier that physical suffering is temporal and therefore irrelevant to the life of the mind. Clearly Dr. Nye's experience contradicts this assertion.

There are references to this phenomenon in the other works as well. In <u>More Pricks than Kicks</u> we read, "[Belacqua] had allowed himself to get run down, but he scoffed at the idea of a sequitor from his body to his mind." (MP p. 28) Here, although the dependence of mind on body is denied, the fact remains that Belacqua is having trouble thinking because his

body is tired. Similarly, the narrator of <u>Murphy</u> admits that the body's condition is an unavoidable influence on thought: "Murphy tried to come out in his mind. But his body was still too busy with its fatigue." (My p. 100) In Beckett's art sickness comes to have a significance beyond the merely physical.

Beckett's early interest in sickness for his art can be seen in a recently released fragment. In 1936-37, Beckett began planning a play about Samuel Johnson "in love." In her new book, <u>Just Play</u>, Ruby Cohn has published the partial scene that Beckett actually wrote, and has described at some length the two-hundred pages of notes which he made in preparation for the play.

Beckett intended the play to be in four acts, one act for each of the years between Henry Thrale's death in 1781 and Mrs. Thrale's marriage to Gabriel Piozzi in 1784. The first act is set shortly after the death of Mr. Thrale in 1781. This is the segment for which the partial scene was written. The notes indicate that this scene was to inform the audience of Hester Thrale's boredom and Johnson's "apprehension," in both senses of the word, of her feeling for the absent Signor Piozzi.

The second act, set in 1782, was to deal somewhat with the relationship between Johnson and Mrs. Thrale by showing Johnson in a "love misery," but includes many quotations from Johnson's letters about illnesses and the deaths of acquaintances. By the third act, set in 1783, Cohn tells us directly,

"Beckett's interest has shifted from the couple to disease and death."<sup>5</sup> Johnson is by now severely paralyzed and Beckett devotes ten pages of his notes for this act to letters of Johnson which are primarily about illness, with only passing reference in the notes to Mrs. Thrale.

There are several other points of interest to us which Cohn cites from Beckett's notes for this play. The first is his analysis of the final meeting between Johnson and Mrs. Thrale. After copying <u>verbatim</u> Vulliamy's three-page account of the meeting, Beckett writes:

> 'After his stroke June 1783 he actually declines her offer to come and see him until he is in a state of more complete dereliction. Any letter with details of his "complication of miseries" suppressed by Mrs. T., anxious to make him appear merely senile.'<sup>0</sup>

Beckett then departs from Vulliamy and turns again to Boswell, specifically for what Boswell relates of Johnson on madness and death. Cohn writes:

> Beckett then devotes some eight pages to detailed discussion of Dr. Johnson's illnesses, as described by contemporary physicians, and including the autopsy called a 'neuropsy.' On facing pages Beckett translates into modern vocabulary the maladies of acromegaly, dropsy, eye ailments, endocrine disorders, tumor of the testis, asthma.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ruby Cohn, <u>Just Play: Beckett's Theater</u> (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 158.

- <sup>6</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 154.
- <sup>7</sup> ibid., p. 156.

Beckett also notes later that the letters of June 1784, to Dr. Brocklesby from Johnson are important for their medical details.<sup>8</sup>

Cohn mentions, too, that Dr. Robert Levett had been Johnson's apothecary for a long while before he came to live with Johnson. In Beckett's dramatic fragment Levett appears briefly as "slightly, respectably, even reluctantly drunk."<sup>9</sup> In him we see the clown, for he emits a hiccup "of such force that he is almost thrown off his feet." This hiccup startles the other residents at Bolt Court - Mrs. Desmoulins, Miss Carmichael and Mrs. Williams - from their knitting, reading and meditating, respectively. There follows an exchange in the form which was to distinguish Beckett's <u>Waiting for</u> Godot. After a brief silence, Mrs. Williams speaks:

> Mrs. W: Words fail us. Mrs. D: Now this is where a writer for the stage would have us speak no doubt. Mrs. W: He would have us explain Levett. Mrs. D: To the public. Mrs. W: To the ignorant public. Mrs. D: To the gallery. Mrs. W: To the pit. Miss C: To the boxes. Mrs. W: Mr. Murphy. Mrs. D: Mr. Kelly. Miss C: Mr. Goldsmith.

Mrs. Williams has earlier engaged us by an account of her ailments saying, "I may be old, I may be blind, halt and maim, I may be dying of a pituitous defluxion, but my

<sup>8</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 158.

<sup>9</sup> ibid., p. 299. All quotations from Beckett's fragment, "Human Wishes," are from Cohn, <u>Just Play</u>, pp. 295-305.

hearing is unimpaired." Her "colloquial powers" are also unimpaired, adds the sly Miss Carmichael. Mrs. Desmoulins asks what a pituitous defluxion is, but the other women ignore her. Then begins some banter in which the three women exchange insults, ending when Miss Carmichael laughs heartily at being called a loose woman and the daughter of a loose woman. Mrs. Williams and Mrs. Desmoulins discourse on what may or may not move them to mirth, in what could be called the high prose style of the eighteenth century, ending with Mrs. Williams composing and reciting a rather merry poem on the subject of her mirthlessness:

> Madam, for mirth, for my part, I never had the heart; Madam, for my part, to mirth I have not been moved since birth.

It is then established that no one in the house is merry, with the possible exception of Hodge, the cat, who, Mrs. Williams insists, <u>can not</u> be merry. It is at this point that Levett enters, bringing a bit of merriment to the scene.

After the exchange quoted above, there follows some confusion about who is dead and who is not among their acquaintances. Miss Carmichael is surprised to hear that the dear Doctor has "discharged his debt to nature" seven years ago. Mrs. Desmoulins is extremely upset to learn that Mr. Kelly, the creator of <u>False Delicacy</u>, has been "laid to rest." The use of such phrases to describe death is indeed a false delicacy and drives Mrs. Williams to explain, "She means the wretched man is dead. ... D-E-A-D. Expired," and finally to exclaim at the top of her voice, "KELLY IS DEAD, MADAM," to ensure that there is no mistaking his condition. But the doubt these women display concerning the deaths of their friends suggests the difficulty of identifying the point at which the process of dereliction turns to death. Mrs. Williams reiterates the idea in saying that she is "dead enough [herself]...not to feel any great respect for those that are so entirely." Mrs. Williams then speaks as if to herself, reciting a catalogue of the names of her friends who are now dead, recalling to us today the kind of catalogue of dead and ailing people that we read in <u>All That</u> Fall.

Miss Carmichael has coincidentally been reading a book which she now begins to read aloud:

> 'Death meets us everywhere, and is procured by every instrument and in all chances, and enters in at many doors; by violence ... and secret influence; by the aspect of a star and the stink of a mist; ... by the emissions of a cloud and the meeting of a vapour; by the fall of a chariot and the stumbling at a stone; by a full meal or an empty stomach; by watching at prayers; by the sun or the moon; by heat or a cold; by sleepless nights or sleeping days; by water frozen or water thawed; by a hair or a raisin; ... by violent exertion or by sitting still; by severity or dissolution; by God's mercy or God's anger; by everything in Providence and everything in manners, by everything in nature and everything in chance.'10

<sup>10</sup> Although Mrs. Williams wagers that the author of these melancholy words is Sir Thomas Browne, Miss Carmichael discovers for her that the author is Jeremy Taylor, from his <u>Rules and Exercises of Holy Dying</u>. (The ellipsis points indicate where I have left out words which were inserted into the recitation by Beckett.)

Here we are introduced to the idea of the pervasive nature of sickness and death which emerges consistently and importantly throughout the Beckett oeuvre.

There are many possible reasons for Beckett not to have continued with this play. He told Deirdre Bair in 1972 that it was the problem of language which he found insurmountable, that he could not accomodate the Irish inflections of the other characters with the kind of language which Johnson would necessarily speak.<sup>11</sup> Ruby Cohn suggests alternatively that he "could not resolve the conflict between the realistic biographical drama (he had intended) and the verbal ballet that he actually found himself writing."<sup>12</sup>

My conjecture is that in addition to the problem of language, a difficulty arose when Beckett's original intentions of showing Johnson "in love" became overshadowed by the subject of sickness, and sickness as mere subject matter was inadequate to support the drama. Bair surmises that "the man and the medium were not yet suitably matched."<sup>13</sup> I suggest further that the content and form were at this point equally unsuited, for although Beckett had successfully written of sickness in his novel, <u>Murphy</u>, it was to be many years until he would be able to shape the form of his theatre to accomodate his vision.

11 Deirdre Bair, <u>Samuel Beckett: A Biography</u> (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 255.

12 Cohn, <u>Just Play</u>, p. 162.

13 Bair, p. 256.

It is interesting to note that the point at which Beckett stopped writing this play was after the recitation of the passage from Taylor's <u>Rules and Exercises of Holy</u> <u>Dying</u>, that daunting list of the ways of death by various disasters and diseases. This is the point at which sickness comes to dominate, but it is also where the themes of sickness and religion merge by virtue of the source of the quotation, as well as through the references to God's mercy and anger as possible sources of a man's demise. Beckett frequently forces the consideration of theological issues through the association of sickness and religion. In his poem, "Ooftish," for example, he establishes such a relationship in uncompromising language:

> offer it up plank it down Golgotha was only the potegg cancer angina it is all one to us cough up your T.B. don't be stingy no trifle is too trifling not even a thrombus anything venereal is especially welcome

you won't cure it you won't endure it it is you it equals you any fool has to pity you so parcel it up the whole issue and send it along the whole misery diagnosed undiagnosed misdiagnosed get your friends to do the same we'll make use of it we'll make sense of it we'll put it in the pot with the rest it all boils down to blood of lamb<sup>14</sup>

The line "it all boils down to blood of lamb" suggests that

14 Samuel Beckett, "Ooftish," <u>Collected Poems in</u> English and French (London: John Calder, 1977), p. 31.

in Beckett's view the consideration of sickness leads unavoidably to a consideration of religion.

Later, the narrator of First Love makes a promise which is fulfilled by the various narrators of Beckett's later works, that of describing in detail the various pains he Significantly, he says he would be "omnidolent," suffers. parodying our familiar name for God, the Omnipotent. He is conscious of the impiety of such a wish and realizes not only that it is impious to parody the name of the Almighty in this way, but also that it would be sacrilege not to feel pain. The implication is that we can only know suffering in relation to non-suffering and if this narrator were all pain and nothing else, he would cease to suffer and would therefore be an affront to God whose existence depends upon our need for consolation for our suffering. Even so, the narrator is able to create a joke from his pain, punning with his choice of the words 'ill' and 'rub':

> But even them, my pains, I understand ill. That must come from my not being all pain and nothing else. There's the rub. ... To be nothing but pain, how that would simplify matters! Omnidolent! Impious dream. I'll tell them to you some day none the less, if I think of it, if I can, my strange pains, in detail, distinguishing between the different kinds, for the sake of clarity, those of the mind, those of the heart or emotional conative. those of the soul (none prettier than these) and finally those of the frame proper, first the inner or latent, then those affecting the surface, beginning with the hair and scalp and moving methodically down, without haste, all the way down to the feet beloved of the corn, the cramp, the kibe, the bunion, the hammer toe, the nail ingrown, the fallen arch, the common blain, the club foot, duck foot, goose foot, pigeon foot, flat foot, trench foot and other curiosities. (FL pp. 27-28)

In <u>Waiting for Godot</u>, Lucky describes the deity Himself in terms of disease, discoursing on a god of "divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia who loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown." Why some are excepted from this divine love is a question which greatly disturbs at least one of Beckett's protagonists, Belacqua Shuah.

The theological language which Beckett uses throughout his little masterpiece, "Dante and the Lobster," compels its consideration in the context of religion here. In this story, Belacqua is having difficulty with the canti of the moon. Not only is the problem in the translation of the explanation Beatrice puts forward, and in the logic of the explanation itself ("the demonstration was so dense that Belacqua could not make head nor tail of it") but further, the problem lies implicit in Dante's original quotation. That is, the question of why there are black spots on the moon is not only astronomical, but metaphysical as well.

In Judaic-Christian tradition, the black spots represent Cain, as Belacqua reminds us during the ritual of the burnt toast offering:

> When the first candidate was done, which was only when it was black through and through, it changed places with its comrade, so that now it in its turn lay on top, done to a dead end, black and smoking, waiting till as much could be said of the other.

For the tiller of the field the thing was simple,...he had it from his mother. The spots were Cain with his truss of thorns, dispossessed, cursed from the earth, fugitive and vagabond. The moon was that countenance fallen and branded, seared with the first stigma of God's pity, that an outcast might not die quickly. ... [B]elacqua on his knees before the flame, poring over the grill, controlled every phase of the broiling. (MP p. 11)

The question becomes why did God accept Abel's gift and not his brother's; why does misery arbitrarily blacken and sear existence? Who can say why the lobster and other outcasts must not die quickly? Belacqua is more just; he toasts each slice to equal crispness. In life, distribution of favour and penalty is less consistent.

This story is beautifully constructed. The strength of its shape lies in the religious imagery, which begins the moment we discover Belacqua poring over Dante. When Belacqua ceases his examination of the passage in question, he places his hands beneath the open book to raise and close it. The image is described in religious terms: "The Divine Comedy face upward on the lectern of his palms." (MP p. 9)

Belacqua's agenda for the day begins with the preparing and the partaking of his lunch. The preparation of this lunch is, as suggested above, a ritual, with Belacqua performing as high priest. The sacrament of bread and cheese is a living sacrifice, just as are the lobster, McCabe and the crucified Christ:

> He laid his cheek against the soft of the bread, it was spongy and warm, alive. But he would very soon take that plush feel off it, by God he would very quickly take that fat white look off its face. (MP p. 11)

What he wanted was a good green stenching rotten lump of Gorgonzola cheese, alive, and by God he would have it. (MP p. 13)

He refers to the slices of bread as "candidates." Two pints on draught and a bottle of stout replace the traditional liquid.

Throughout the story Beckett chooses words and images which are familiar to us from a Biblical context. The name of God is invoked ten times and Belacqua's feet are said to 'crucify' him. While Belacqua is making his lunch, there is a passing reference to the proverbial sparrow, upon every one of which, of course, God has an eye, although Belacqua certainly does not: "the crumbs, as though there were no such thing as a sparrow in the wide world, were swept in a fever away...." (MP p. 10) Belacqua claps the rounds of his toast together like "cymbals," and "they clave the one to the other." (MP p. 12) Then he "[makes] himself ready for the road," and intends a righteous war against his sandwich, thinking how he will "devour it with a sense of rapture and victory, "smiting" it, "gnash[ing]" it and "vanquish[ing]" it. (MP p. 12) The grocer, we are told, does not "[wash] his hands like Pilate," but rather, flings out his arms "in a wild crucified gesture of supplication" when Belacqua rails at him for delivering unto him an inferior piece of cheese. The lobster, too, is seen "cruciform on the oilcloth" on the table. And Belacqua reasons that the word fish will do well enough to describe the lobster to the French instructor, since he does not know the French for lobster and since "fish had been good enough for Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour." (MP p. 17)

It is significant that the face of Belacqua's aunt is described as "old parchment," for it is from her that Belacqua hears the age-old assurance that lobsters feel nothing, which she states even as the creature trembles on the table. As in a catechism learned by rote, Belacqua consoles himself over the lobster's misery: "Well, ... it's a quick death, God help us all." "It is not," returns a voice in the wilderness. The brevity and position of this final statement give it an emphasis which suggests an authority beyond that of a mere narrator.

The story "Dante and the Lobster" is concerned with the problem of favour and penalty, as established already in the discussion of Cain and Abel above. Belacqua, as he walks to his aunt's house with the doomed lobster, muses upon the equally doomed McCabe and upon Dante's "rare movements of compassion in Hell." He wonders, "Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together?" (MP p. 18) The word that appears in Dante is <u>pieta</u>, which means both piety and pity, but Belacqua's experience contradicts this coalition. Beatrice's explanation has been "a rapid shorthand of the real facts" and Belacqua is left confounded on this issue of reward and punishment which to him seem merely arbitrary.

In a later story in this collection, we come upon a Jesuit whose grasp of cause and effect, judgment and punishment, is more secure.

'Observe,' he [says]. 'I desire to get down. I pull this cord and the bus stops and lets me down. ... In just such a Gehenna of links ... I forged my vocation.' (MP p. 55)

The words which Beckett has chosen for this man of the cloth are important. The metaphor of Gehenna as the place where the links of this man's religion were vulcanized suggest that his beliefs are unsound. The fires of Gehenna, Jerusalem's dumping ground, are fueled by refuse. "The best reason ... that can be given for believing," explains the Jesuit, "is that it is more amusing. ... We do not count our change." (MP p. 55)

The images of religion are combined with those of sickness when Moran speaks of the Eucharist as a pain-killer ingested in the hope that it will assuage the anguish and anxiety of life. He is disappointed:

> The host, it is only fair to say, was lying heavy on my stomach. And as I made my way home I felt like one, who, having swallowed a pain-killer, is first astonished, then indignant, on obtaining no relief. (M p. 102)

The Dublin-born painter Francis Bacon also combines the imagery of religion and sickness to create his art. His paintings are sometimes triptychs and the subject is often that of crucifixion. In many of the paintings, gaping, screaming mouths form the centre focus. "Head VI," 1949, for example, pictures the bust of a man in a cube. His head is featureless, save for the screaming mouth. Above this orifice there are no eyes; the head dissolves into the void, making the mouth seem isolated and acorporal. It is not

surprising to learn that Bacon's inspiration for these mouths derives from his fascination with the colourful illustrations of diseases of the mouth which he discovered in medical textbooks.

In Bacon's "Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion," 1944, the figures are ghoulish freaks of nature: malformed, legless, armless, sightless. Again the most striking feature in two of them is the gaping, over-large mouth. The central figure has a bloodied bandage wrapped around its head above the mouth, reinforcing the suggestion of disease, ailment, or wound. Obscene and grotesque, at once repulsive and fascinating, these mouths call to us or call out for us in what one critic names the best visual representation of the human cry.<sup>15</sup>

So, too, with Beckett. I am not suggesting that Beckett's use of sickness is merely literal any more than I would say that Bacon's painting are mere illustrations of diseased mouths. Rather, both artists use these very real, often horrific aspects of human life to extend their meaning through quite unique styles. It is this process in Beckett's work to which I devote my attention.

5 Simon Wilson, lecture at the Tate Gallery, 5 February, 1979.

### Chapter Two

Women and Beckett's Sick Men

Beckett's women characters are deserving of far more critical attention then they have previously received. They are a vital element in the full understanding of Beckett's art. Beckett's male moribunds are set in direct conflict with the traditional life force by contrasting them with the energetic women characters with whom they come into contact. Further, the women represent a creative energy which is essential for the artist/protagonist of the early works. Beckett's women can best be considered in the light of the theme of sickness and infirmity; healthy and robust, the major women characters are antidotes for his sick men.

Throughout his writing Beckett deals with dualities; with personalities as well he balances one against the other. In <u>Imagination Dead Imagine</u>, the two figures in foetal position are male and female, creating with their bodies the likenesses of <u>yin</u> and <u>yang</u>, negative and positive: the one can not exist in its full potential without the other. Herein lies the problem Beckett's men face in trying to exist alone.

At some time all the heroes have been dependent on a woman. All men, of course, are totally dependent upon their

mothers for at least the first nine months of their lives - a relationship which haunts the Beckett narrators and which is remembered throughout the <u>oeuvre</u>. Beyond that, however, the heroes of the novels periodically become the wards of women. The extreme case of Mahood, for example, illustrates this dependence. Housed in a jar outside a restaurant, Mahood is tended by a woman. One day she is late and Mahood exclaims, "Please God nothing has happened to my protectoress." (U p. 343) The same may be said by almost any of the heroes.

Mercier and Camier seek protection and solace from a woman in their time of need. At one point they are unable to decide which course of action to take next, but they unhesitatingly agree to spend the night at Helen's. She welcomes them without question.

Murphy is kept and tended by the faithful Celia through her work as a prostitute. When she asks that Murphy "make [him]self decent and walk the streets for work" himself, their relationship seems at an end:

> 'Either I do what you want or you walk out. Is that it? ... Yes or no?' said Murphy.... 'Yes,' said Celia. 'Now you hate me.' 'No,' said Murphy. 'Look is there a clean shirt.' (My p. 27)

The yes and no are juxtaposed: man, the <u>yin</u>, the eternal no; woman the eternal yes, the <u>yang</u>, as Molly Bloom says for all time:

> ... and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put

my arms round him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.<sup>1</sup>

Within the context of Oriental art the symbols of yin and yang are traditionally presented as female and male, respectively. However, Beckett has never advocated strict adherence to traditional conventions and apparently finds no difficulty in reversing these labels as they suit his char-In A Dream of Fair to Middling Women he encourages acters. the comparison of his characters to the forces of yin and yang when he writes of the intense sexuality of Belacqua's woman friend, saying, "There she sits, yang...." (D p. 46) I therefore use the interpretation given by Chu Hsi: "through movement generates the yang"; "through tranquility generates the yin."<sup>2</sup> In Murphy, Celia describes her relationship to the hero in a way which could easily speak for most of the male-female relationships in the Beckett canon. She states, "I was a piece out of him that he could not go on without," thus reinforcing the idea of the yin and yang which are interlocking, interdependent forces. (My p. 130)

Beckett's major women characters are portrayed as positive, energetic, sexual and strong. Their mere physical endurance is presented as a phenomenon at which the heroes

<sup>1</sup> James Joyce, <u>Ulysses</u> (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1975), p. 7<sup>04</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> From a translation by Wing-tsit Chan, <u>A Sourcebook</u> in Chinese Philosophy (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1963) p. 638. continually wonder and of which they are a little afraid. Molloy, for example, is struck by Lousse's ability to remain squatting for a long time:

> But none the less from time to time I heard the chiming of the hours, from the clocks and belfries, chiming out longer and longer, then suddenly briefly, then longer and longer again. This will give some idea of the time she took to cozen me, and of her patience and physical endurance, for all the time she was squatting or kneeling beside me, whereas I was stretched out at my ease on the grass, now on my back, now on my stomach, now on one side, now on the other. (M p. 48)

The women's indomitable sexuality in particular is irksome to the lassitudinous heroes. In <u>More Pricks than Kicks</u>, the beautiful and daunting Lucy only becomes truly acceptable to Belacqua when she becomes a sexual ruin, when her body is destroyed and she is no longer a threat to his inadequate sexuality. He much prefers merely gazing into her eyes. Moreover, the narrator writes of her:

> [She died] after two years of great physical suffering borne with such fortitude as only women seem able to command, having passed from the cruellest extremes of hope and despair that ever sundered human heart to their merciful resolution, some months before her decease, in a tranquility of acquiescence that was the admiration of her friends and no small comfort to Belacqua himself. (MP p. 105)

The unpublished <u>Dream</u> deals almost exclusively with this issue of the difference between the lethargy of the hero Belacque and the assertiveness of the women he meets. Midway through the typescript we find Belacqua on a ship, musing upon the women he is leaving behind, or more specifically, upon "his incompetence and indolence compared to their lust." (D pp. 121-122) One incident demonstrates this difference clearly. Early in the novel the woman he calls Smerry insists upon their relationship taking a sexual turn. She continues in this way until he finally exhorts her:

> 'For the love of God will you not take a loiny cavalier servente and make me hornmad ante rem and get some ease of the old pruritus and leave me in peace to my own penny death and my own penny rapture.' No no no no, she would not let a man near her unless she loved him dearly, furchtbar lieb. And she was right and he was wrong and that was that - and would you be so kind as to take up position, my sad beautiful beloved? So. A man knows but a woman knows better. (D p. 17)

The next time she comes to him she is sad and sombre. The narrator reveals to us Belacqua's thoughts:

So he would always have her be, rapt, like the spirit of a troubadour, casting no shade, herself a shade. Instead of which of course it was only a question of seconds before she would surge up at him, blithe and buxom and young and lusty, a lascivious petulent virgin.... (D p. 20)

A tension is created between the need which the heroes have for women and their awe of women which sometimes manifests itself in fear or enmity. When Molloy is rescued from an angry crowd by Lousse, whose dog he has just killed with his bicycle, he discovers that sanctuary can sometimes grow to be confinement. Molloy finds the gates of Lousse's

garden locked and fears his food is drugged. The role he plays in Lousse's household is that of surrogate for the pet dog he has displaced. Mahood, too, describes how his protectoress restricts his already limited movements. Tired of his game of teasing her by sinking his head below the rim of the jar, she has a collar of cement put around the rim of the jar, thus confining her ward even more.

The dual role of women can not be better demonstrated than in the short story "Assumption," which depends upon an understanding of the dependence/resentment relationship Beckett's men have with women.<sup>3</sup> The protagonist of this story is an artist who struggles with what he calls a "wild rebellious surge" which contends to be released in "one splendid drunken scream." To keep this beast at bay he allows himself less and less to break the silence, while fearing that "by damning (sic) the stream of whispers he [raises] the level of the flood."

At this stage "the Woman" comes to him. There is an enormity of thought expressed in that capital letter. Representative of all women, she intrudes upon the artist's seclusion and silence:

> She turned on the light and advanced carelessly into the room. An irruption of demons would not have scattered his intentness so utterly. . . . He looked at her venomnously....

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Beckett, "Assumption," <u>Transition</u> 16-17, June 1929, pp. 268-271.

He clenched his hands in a fury against the enormous impertinence of women, their noisy intrusive curious enthusiasm.... (A p. 270)

And yet he finds her presence edifying:

When at last she went away he felt that something had gone out from him, something he could not spare, but still less could grudge, something of the desire to live, something of the unreasonable tenacity with which he shrank from dissolution. (A p. 270)

Through this woman and her intrusive enthusiasm the protagonist has discovered a new dimension in himself. Like Celia, she becomes the piece of him he can not do without. He grows to depend upon her coming each evening.

The time they spend together is charged with a fervour which Beckett describes in religious terms:

He was "spent with ecstasy" and the woman gazed at his face which she had "overlaid with death." Such language speaks not only of the religious/mystical experience, but also of sexual fulfillment; both 'death' and 'ecstasy' are terms which are at once religious and sexual.

The mystical experience of death and regeneration suggests the creative activity of the artistic imagination, which the Woman, as life-giver, has stimulated in him. Through her the "rebellious surge" is released and he screams his drunken scream: [S]he was swept aside by a great storm of sound, shaking the very house with its prolonged, triumphant vehemence, climbing in a dizzy, bubbling scale, until, dispersed, it fused into the breath of the forest and the throbbing cry of the sea. They found her caressing his wild dead hair.

The title of this story works on two levels. First is the religious idea of assumption as an ascent to a better world. This refers not only to the artist's literal death at the end, but also to his nightly transports. Both these events are occasioned by the Woman. The second level of meaning for the title of the story reinforces the view of women established here; it is the assumption, the presumption of the Woman, her "enormous impertinence," which has initiated this creative experience. Through the Woman, Beckett's artist/protagonist has achieved that which he both dreaded and longed for; she has been the precipitator of both his achievement and his demise.

Beckett's men grow to resent their women's robust health, their untiring sexuality, and their confidence and ability to cope with life. The men's reaction will be to abandon the women, but they will spend the rest of their days regretting the separation. "Indeed she still disturbs me, but no worse now than the rest," says the narrator of First Love. (FL p. 26)

The story of <u>First Love</u> could be the untold but implied history of all the heroes in the Beckett canon. The narrator is a man cruelly locked out of his home after the death of his father. Eccentric and introverted, he leaves

the money he received from his father in his pocket and forages for food by day and "stretches out" both in body and mind on a bench by a canal at night. One evening, however, his solitude is disturbed by a woman who also wants to use the bench. He moves his feet and she sits.

She sings softly to herself and he finds this soothing, but eventually the need to stretch out as usual overcomes him and he asks her to leave. After some discussion ("The mistake one makes is to speak to people." FL p. 22), she allows him to put his feet in her lap, which he does, although her presence still seems to disallow a good stretch of his mind.

But soon, as he becomes aware of the flesh on her thighs, it is not his mind which concerns him. "It did not escape her naturally, women smell a rigid phallus ten miles away and wonder, How on earth did he spot me from there?" (FL p. 24) His first impulse is to kick her between the legs, a suggestion which illustrates perfectly the tensions present in Beckett's heroes in their relationships with women and their sexuality. Instead, he allows her to relieve him and they continue to meet like this every evening until he tells her he has had enough.

He finds, however, that he misses her and her soft singing, so he returns to the bench one evening to find her huddled against the cold, for by this time it is winter. She invites him to move in with her, as she has two rooms. This he does and, in one of the most comical scenes in Beckett's repertoire, immediately rearranges the furniture

to his liking; that is, he removes everything but the sofa to the corridor.<sup>4</sup> The sofa he then turns to face the wall and climbs into it "like a dog into its basket."

Anna, undaunted, somehow manages to consummate their cohabitation and they live happily in this way for some months, Anna still able to see her clients in the other room. Her faint singing still pleases him, but he admits it only in his typically negative fashion: "This did not greatly incommode me, this occasional sound of singing." (FL p. 54)

The occasion for his abandonment of Anna/Iulu is that of the birth of their child. This desertion is Beckett at his most grim:

> What finished me was the birth. It woke me up. What that infant must have been going through! ... It must have been her first... As long as I kept walking I didn't hear (the cries), because of the footsteps. But as soon as I halted I heard them again, a little fainter each time, admittedly, but what does it matter, faint or loud, cry is cry, all that matters is that it should cease. For years I thought they would cease. Now I don't think so any more. I could have done with other loves perhaps. But there it is, either you love or you don't. (FL pp. 60-62)

<sup>4</sup> This arrangement is significant throughout the works, again contrasting men and women as opposites. This room, now empty save for the sofa, is like the abodes of all the heroes: sparsely furnished rooms or empty hovels. The women, however, live in rooms which are adequately furnished, if not cluttered. Consider the description we have of Lousse's room in <u>Molloy</u>: "The room was chock-full of pouffes and easy chairs, they thronged all about me, in the gloom. There were also occasional tables, footstools, tallboys, etc., in abundance." (M p. 38) The bitter irony of this final statement demonstrates the misapprehension we find in Beckett's protagonists concerning the emotion we call love. The women, true to their men for whatever reasons, are ill-used by these men who eventually abandon them.

The short piece <u>Enough</u> addresses this issue of abandonment in a new way for Beckett. <u>Enough</u> is the only nondramatic work in the Beckett canon that has a woman in the role of first-person narrator. This work reinforces the disparate notions of men and women we have been discussing. This woman is positive, is a protectoress, and is summarily dismissed.

Brian Finney describes the narrator of this work as an old man and the tale as a memory of time spent with, as Finney puts it, his "earlier, older self (in the sense that the child is father to the man.)" Finney continues:

To convert a hell of suffering into a dream of heaven, the self has been driven to extremes of inventiveness, finally erasing everything from his memory but the flowers through which he had dragged with his youthful counterpart.<sup>5</sup>

Eugene Webb agrees that the narrator is male and even sets the boy's age precisely at six years when first he met his elder companion, although the only clue to his age which Beckett gives us is that he was of "an entirely different

<sup>5</sup> Brian Finney, "<u>Assumption</u> to <u>Lessness</u>: Beckett's Shorter Fiction," <u>Beckett the Shape Changer</u>, ed. Katharine Worth (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 78-79. generation."<sup>6</sup> However, since most other critics agree that the narrator of this piece is intended to be a woman I will not take the time here to defend this assumption.<sup>7</sup>

Like the other major female characters, this woman is subservient to the needs of the man for whom she cares. She submerged her personality entirely beneath his: his desires became hers, his questions were her questions; but without her he could not have gone on.

Again it is the man who breaks off the relationship. She leaves him unquestioningly when he asks her to do so, but it is a curious departure:

> One day he told me to leave him. It's the verb he used. He must have been on his last legs. I don't know if by that he meant me to leave him for good or only to step aside a moment. I never asked myself the question. I never asked myself any questions but his. Whatever it was he meant I made off without looking back. (NK p. 153)

We might think from this that she took advantage of this ambiguity in language to escape from him and from servitude. The passage presents the problem inherent in such relationships; the women, not bound in any legal or moral way to their men because the men give them nothing in

<sup>6</sup> Eugene Webb, Samuel Beckett: <u>A Study of His Novels</u> (London: Peter Owen, 1970), p. 170.

<sup>7</sup> Also, the fact that Beckett had Billie Whitelaw portray the narrator at a reading of <u>Enough</u> at La Mama in New York in April, 1981, should end this dispute. return, are actually free to withdraw their support at any time. That she refers to the incident as the time of her "disgrace" implies that she feels somehow responsible for the separation, but this could mean nothing more than a guilt suffered by an overly sensitive nature to thoughts that she may have abandoned her companion prematurely and left him when he may still have needed her. "[I] kept telling myself he was on his last legs," she says to reassure herself.

The opening sentence of this piece, "All that goes before forget," has led some critics to assume that the original first paragraphs of the work have been destroyed or are unwritten.<sup>8</sup> On the contrary, I believe that the phrase "all that goes before" refers to all the works previously written. Beckett is in a constant search for the definitive piece, the work with which he can end. Again and again such references appear in his work of the desire to end but the futility of trying. Hamm's first solioquy begins: "Enough, it's time it ended.... And yet I hesitate to . . . to end." It is to this sense of 'enough' that the title of the narrative refers, emphasized by the repeated phrase "too much" which plays on the cliché "enough is enough": "Too much at a time is too much." "Too much silence is too much." We might hear in these phrases echoes of the narrator as she

<sup>8</sup> Hugh Kenner, for example, writes, "Thus <u>Enough...</u> begins, 'All that goes before forget,' as though to explain why all that goes before is missing...." <u>A Reader's Guide</u> to Samuel Beckett (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 176.

left her man, murmuring, "Enough is enough."

The first paragraph sounds as if it came from <u>Texts for</u> <u>Nothing</u>, matching it both in style and intent. However, the last sentence summarily dismisses such associations with the curt phrase, "So much for the art and craft," reducing "all that went before" to so much techne.

The same curtness emerges near the end when the narrator states, "What do I know of man's destiny? I could tell you more about radishes." (NK p. 159) In this way not only both art and craft, but also the moralizing and metaphysical aspects of literature are dismissed. We are left with the bare facts - in a literature devoid of facts.

In one instance we are told details of a scene which later are to be contradicted:

I set the scene of my disgrace just short of a crest. On the contrary it was on the flat in a great calm. (NK p. 158)

What are the facts of this matter, then? We do not know if this narrative is imperfect memory or creative fiction. We do not even know if our narrator is alive, for there are several evidences to the contrary:

I would say yes indeed the end of this long outing was my life. (NK p. 156)

I don't know what the weather is now. But in my life it was eternally mild. (NK p. 158)

About the radishes she assures us, "If I saw one I would name it without hesitation." But could we be sure that what she names a radish would actually be a radish as we understand it? We certainly could not if we recall the suspect credibility of the antecedent narrators.

<u>Enough</u> is unique. Beckett himself wondered aloud to John Fletcher about the piece, saying, "I don't know what came over me....<sup>9</sup> It is unique because it offers a female narrator; it is the only narrative of the period after 1961 in which the first person does not give way to the third person; written in the period of <u>Ping</u>, <u>Lessness</u>, <u>The Lost</u> <u>Ones</u>, and <u>Imagination Dead Imagine</u>, it is unique in that, as Pilling points out, "The repetition of all the possible hypotheses in a given permutation is only one paragraph long, (while) <u>Ping</u> and <u>Lessness</u> are in permutative form throughout."<sup>10</sup> While the others are preoccupied with the art and craft, <u>Enough</u> purports to suspend them.

<u>Enough</u> is also the only narrative which ends on a note of consolation. The life this woman shared with the man is enough for her; she is not dissatisfied. The warm and tender memory of their time together is evidenced by the final moving statement: "Enough my old breasts feel his old hands." This statement is written in the present tense; her breasts, still young when the couple parted, are now old but can yet feel the satisfaction of having known love, and this is enough.

Although this study is devoted to Beckett's fiction, a chapter on Beckett's major women characters would be

<sup>9</sup> Finney, p. 75.

<sup>10</sup> John Pilling, <u>Samuel Beckett</u> (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 29.

noticeably incomplete without mention of Winnie, perhaps Beckett's best-known female character, the endearing optimist of Happy Days. Winnie is paradigmatic of Beckett's major women characters; she is optimistic, enthusiastic, sensual and enduring. Winnie not only endures, she makes the very best of the bizarre circumstances of her existence. Buried to her waist in the sand, she fastidiously metes out her few remaining resources to accomodate her need to pass each day in constructive activity. In contrast to Willie. who merely reads the classified section of an ancient newspaper and crawls in and out of his burrow, Winnie does things. She primps, she sings, she prays; she dauntlessly fights the dissolution which surrounds her and which will inevitably swallow her. There is no one to see her except Willie, who never looks, but still she combs her hair, brushes her teeth and cleans her fingernails. These mundane activities, though seemingly ridiculous under the circumstances, are yet admirable in a way that Willie's sluggish existence is not.

If Winnie were mindlessly unaware of the reality of her existence, these things would not be so admirable. But Winnie is poignantly aware of her circumstances. She takes pleasure in reciting half-remembered phrases, repeating them as if unaware of their full meaning: "What is that wonderful line? Oh fleeting joys - oh something lasting woe," she pronounces wistfully as if the nouns were transposed. But as the play progresses, it becomes clear that she is not

completely unaware of the double meanings attached to what she says. She recalls the memory of Willie's marriage proposal: "I worship you, Winnie, be mine. Life's a mockery without Win," fully aware that life, as she repeats these words, is more than a mockery for both of them. The insistent words, "Oh this is a happy day," become unsheathed as she repeats them throughout the play, revealing a cutting sarcasm.

Perhaps the most sensitive - and certainly the most complex - portrait of a woman in Beckett's work is found in <u>Murphy</u>. While Winnie is the uncontested heroine of <u>Happy</u> <u>Days</u>, a case can be argued for Celia as the heroine of <u>Murphy</u>. Although all the characters in this novel undergo some degree of transformation as a result of their contact with Murphy, the changes which occur in Celia are the most profound and the most interesting.

The second and the final chapters of Murphy's tale are devoted entirely to Celia. Thus we can view the novel as a cycle of her progress from the role of mother and nurse to her crippled father, through her association with Murphy as his paramour and protectoress (quite literally rescuing him from his overturned rocking chair), back again to caring for her father, and all the while she is supporting these two men with income earned by selling her body to yet other inadequate men.

Celia's role in relation to men must be distinguished from her character. Her relationship to Murphy is important to the development of this novel, but she is also

important as an independent character. It has been suggested that her name gives her religious status, with St. Cecilia as her possible namesake.<sup>11</sup> Francis Doherty calls her "Celia, the heavenly."<sup>12</sup> This, I believe, applies not only to her saintly nature, but is a pun on the earthly meaning of the word as well: Celia is beautiful. Although Celia is saintly in some respects, to view her in this light is to be blinded to her true character. She is good, but she is very much of this world. It is this earthly quality in her which both attracts and repels Murphy.

Celia represents the physical world to Murphy. Chapter Two opens with a list of statistics and descriptive words. The first sentence of the chapter begins with "she," a pronoun whose antecedent is, grammatically, not a person but merely a list of physical characteristics which came before. We do not read Celia's name until the fourth paragraph. Her occupation as a prostitute serves to emphasize even more her physical nature and whatever loyalty Murphy has for her stems from his sexual need for her. When Murphy takes too long to find work, Celia threatens him:

> Celia said that if he did not find work at once she would have to go back to hers. Murphy knew what that meant. No more music.

11 Jeri Kroll, "Belacqua as Artist and Lover," Journal of Beckett Studies No. 3, Summer 1978, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> Francis Doherty, <u>Samuel Beckett</u> (London: Hutchinson and Co., Ltd., 1971), p. 28.

Goaded by the thought of losing Celia even were it only by night, ... Murphy applied at a chandlery.... (My p. 47)

But Celia in her own right becomes more than a goad and a satisfaction. She is more even than the inspiration which Murphy sometimes needs to transport himself into his mind. Celia is, in fact, the focus of this novel. The quest for Murphy which at first determines the development of the novel becomes instead a quest for Celia. The seekers do not find Murphy, but they do find Celia.

The portrayal of Celia is one of Beckett's most sensitive characterizations of a woman. It is in her that the most significant changes take place. Her life, like the novel itself, is a cycle. From the physical world of prostitution she escapes briefly to a world of the mind, but she is forced to return to her former ways. Unlike the male protagonists who would abandon such responsibilities, Celia returns to care for Mr. Kelly. This is neither a judgment nor a commendation, but merely demonstrates a difference. The women's proclivity towards practical matters, their sure presence in the physical world, is not necessarily preferable to the attitude we find in the men. Rather, we sense that Celia is defeated by her physicality.

Celia is suicidal; she wants to escape this life. When Murphy first meets her, she has just come away from the Thames where she had been contemplating suicide:

Celia's course was clear: the water. The temptation to enter it was strong, but she

## set it aside. There would be time for that. (My p. 12)

When the old man upstairs kills himself, Celia is greatly affected. Murphy tries to comfort her by expounding on the benefits to the old man that will result from his demise, but, we are told, "This was quite beside the point, for Celia was mourning, like all honest survivors, quite frankly for herself." (My p. 79) In a sense, Celia does die. She ceases to be her vigorous self and becomes at first like the old man and finally like Murphy: she moves upstairs into the old man's former room; later she stays cloistered in her room either pacing back and forth or rocking naked in the chair.

When Neary, Wylie and Miss Counihan come to see Celia, she tells Miss Carridge that she has been absorbed in her "swan crossword ... seeking the rime, the panting syllable to rime with breath." The word she seeks, of course, is death and her own swan song. She even says she is dead, "dead to the voices of the street." (My p. 128)

While Murphy and the old man escape from this physical world, Celia must return to it. In Chapter Thirteen, Celia is left to face a life of loneliness. The final scene is one of desolation: the kite, which rose into the sky with such promise, has broken away and is now unattainable. Mr. Kelly, in his attempt to rescue it, becomes a pathetic figure of ruined humanity. Celia braces herself for the long journey ahead of her with her burden:

Celia toiled along the narrow path into the teeth of the wind, then faced north up the wide hill. There was no shorter way home. The yellow hair fell across her face. The yachting-cap clung like a clam to the skull. The levers were the tired heart. She closed her eyes. <u>All out</u>. (My p. 158)

Her final gesture is one of acceptance and resignation to an empty and at times destestable fate. She will end her days caring for the needs of men and will receive nothing in return towards the fulfilment of her own needs. Even the physical contact she will receive, which might have been some consolation, is deprived of all beauty by Beckett's description of her client in the park:

> A weekend lecher well advanced in years, sprawling on his sacrum (which was a mass of eczema) in a chair directly before her, discomposed his features in what he had good reason to suppose was the smile obscene, and jingled his change, his very small change. (My p. 156)

It is important to note that in each of Beckett's first two published novels, the narrative continues for one chapter after the death of the protagonist. The final chapter of <u>Murphy</u> shows Celia carrying on. The final chapter of <u>More Pricks Than Kicks</u> discovers the surviving Mrs. Shuah tending to the practical needs of the dead Belacqua. <u>More Pricks Than Kicks</u> contains many of the characters and images created earlier in the unpublished <u>Dream of Fair to Middling</u> <u>Women</u>, mentioned above. Like <u>Dream</u>, <u>More Pricks</u> is concerned with the various loves of the poet-protagonist, Belacqua Shuah. The chapters form a chronological account of Belacqua's life, each chapter a story of Belacqua's encounter with one or more women. References to the other stories in the collection are conveniently footnoted for us.

The first chapter, "Dante and the Lobster," has already been discussed at some length in the previous chapter of this paper. Although Belacqua is enamoured of his Italian teacher, there is little more to say about their relationship except, perhaps, to remark that Belacqua is oddly insensitive to her lack of interest in him. The importance of Dante to this volume, however, must be noted. Belacqua's vision of women can be likened to the idea we have of Beatrice as the focus of Dante's inspiration and love. Beatrice is not a woman of flesh, but is a fiction, an ideal. We do not even know for certain who the living object of Dante's affection was, but we do know that his desires were never satisfied in a physical sense through her. Beatrice is the creation of an artist. Belacqua's problem is that his women refuse to be what Beatrice was for Dante; they are flesh and blood women. Like the woman in "Assumption," they are at once the source and guietus of his inspiration as an artist.

In the second chapter of <u>More Pricks</u>, Belacqua's attentions to Winnie are strictly for immediate gratification. Together they climb a hill overlooking the area of Fingal. Their conversation, interrupted by frequent sexual activity, is interspersed with their thoughts revealed to us by the narrator. This device lends much humour, as well as insight, to the scene.

For example, we come to know that Belacque has impetigo

and Winnie's spoken concern for his condition is a balm to his ego. Her words "came to Belacqua like a drink of water in a dungeon." He speaks on about Fingal to cover his confusion at her concern, but Winnie's thoughts are less generous than her words: "What a geyser, she thought."

Later, however, their moods are in accord and things become "very pleasant all of a sudden." Winnie is gazing quietly at the view and Belacqua thinks, as the Belacqua in <u>Dream</u> thought of his Smerry, that it would be nice if she remained so: "he willed her not to speak." But Winnie does speak and a line is lifted from the earlier work: "(who shall silence them, at last?)" (D p. 167) The narrator reveals Belacqua's thoughts: "[Women] were all the same when it came to the pinch - clods."

A dichotomy is developed here between the artistic Belacqua and the pragmatic Winnie. As Belacqua waxes poetic on Fingal as "a land that you don't have to dress up to, that you can walk on in a lounge suit," Winnie observes with considerably more sagacity that she sees nothing but "the grey fields of serfs and the ramparts of ex-favourites." Later, as they make their way to the tower of Portrane, they ask directions of a farmer and Winnie makes an expedient decision about the route they should take: "They agreed, Belacqua and the man, that it needed a woman to think these things out. Suddenly there was a tie between them." This is a wonderfully understated insight into human nature. The men, in unspoken comraderie, acquiesce condescendingly to the woman's better judgment.

As Winnie and Belacqua continue on their way, it is Belacqua who begins to talk too much and the narrator interjects with irony, "who shall silence them, at last?" Belacqua continues to expound: "I want very much to be back in the caul, on my back in the dark for ever." Winnie responds, again cutting through the empty words to the practical reality, "A short ever ... and working day and night." This officious observation is followed by the begrudging remark, "The beastly punctilio of women." Coming from the narrator, this judgment weighs heavily against women as spoil-sports in the game of life, concerned as they are with the practicalities of living.

The chapter ends with Winnie abandoned by Belacqua to be escorted home by her friend, Dr. Sholto. Belacqua has abducted the farmer's bicycle, which is endearingly personified by the pronoun 'they' which serves to make of Belacqua and the bicycle a romantic couple:

> He ran down the margin to the road and it bounded alongside under his hand. He mounted and they flew down the hill and round the corner till they came at length to the stile.... (MP p. 29)

Belacqua has escaped with the bicycle to conduct in private his "sursum corda" amongst the ruins and then to relax in the nearest public-house. These private experiences which Belacqua prefers to intercourse with women, become a source for much amusement on the part of the reader and much astonishment and dismay on the part of the brides in later chapters.

In the next chapter, Belacqua has a somewhat mystical experience with a woman unknown to him. He is waiting "for a sign." A woman comes to him in the end, offering salvation. In this chapter religious language plays an important part in establishing the tone of the narrative. The phrase "waiting for a sign" is parodied by the sentence which begins the next paragraph: "There were signs on all hands. There was the big Bovril sign to begin with, flaring beyond the green." But this is not the kind of sign which Belacqua needs and he continues to look for another.

He then sees the blind paralytic being pushed home in his wheelchair. We are given some information about this man who is something of a tyrant and who is tended by a poor relation, a couple who perhaps prefigure the characters Hamm and Clov in Beckett's <u>Endgame</u>. To avoid the unpleasantness of seeing a blind paralytic, Belacqua speeds down Pearse Street, but ironically he witnesses an even greater tragedy there. A little girl, carrying bread and milk home to a tenement in Mark Street, is killed by a bus.

When Belacqua finally makes his way to a public-house, he is unaccountably unable to receive the satisfaction he expects there. He wonders if the "trituration of the child" has "upset him without his knowing it," for he finds himself "sitting paralyzed and grieving ... good for nothing but to stare at his spoiling porter and wait for a sign." (MP p. 40) The choice of the word "trituration" to describe what happened to the child indicates that we are not to think lightly of the occasion; it was not a clean death

and will not be spoken of in euphemism. Equally disturbing for Belacqua has been the sight of the paralytic, for the word is used here to describe Belacqua in the pub. These incidents have not been gratuitous interjections, but lead purposefully to the moment when Belacqua looks up from his porter and sees "a hatless woman advancing slowly towards him."

This woman is portrayed as an angel; her face is notable for its lack of traces of suffering and is described as full of light, serene. The woman speaks to Belacqua in a "white voice"; she is selling seats in heaven. With arm whirling, she describes how heaven goes around and around, "rowan and rowan." It is this, her hypnotic "tiresome Ptolemy," which finally wears down Belacqua. Perhaps this is the sign for which he has been waiting. The earlier threats of sickness and death subconsciously impel him to purchase salvation from this woman.

The next woman with whom Belacqua has a relationship is called the Alba. This name, which derives from the words for white and dawn, recalls the "white voice" of the angel in the previous chapter and reinforces the idea of women as the artistic salvation for the poet Belacqua. The Alba is Belacqua's Beatrice. Their relationship is asexual. Like the woman in "Assumption," the Alba spends the night stroking Belacqua's hair. But this time the poet is resurrected and, in the fashion of the aubade after which the Alba is named, Belacqua leaves her at dawn.

The title of the chapter in which we meet the Alba is "A Wet Night" and perhaps alludes not only to the fierce "nor'wester" which drenches Belacqua on his way to a party, but also to the unfortunate accident which Belacqua has at the feet of the Civic Guard, as well as to the abundance of drink consumed by all at the party.

The hostess of the seasonal gathering which Belacqua and the Alba attend in this chapter is called the Frica, a name we are perhaps to associate with the words fricative or friction, for she is a harsh-looking woman. She is described as equine, and with talons. Her "horse face" has flared nostrils and bulbous eyes. "The mouth champs an invisible bit, foam gathers at the bitter commisures." She has a brisket, withers, a rump and pasterns, and she wears a "hobble-skirt." For the party she has given herself a look more appropriate to evening wear, says the narrator; by combing her hair back from her face until "to close her eyes became a problem," she looks like a "throttled gazelle."

There follows a vivid description of her features which are distorted by the coiffure: "the upper-lip writhed back in a snarl to the untented nostrils. Would she bite her tongue off, that was the interesting question." (MP p. 58)

When Belacqua finally appears at her party, she is more than solicitous. Belacqua has been caught in the rain <u>en</u> <u>route</u>; moreover, he has removed his shoes and bared his chest to the storm and arrives "drenched to the skin," as the Frica leeringly puts it. She is delighted at this because not only is it a bit of welcome excitement, but it

also presents an opportunity for her to apply her lens to the keyhole as Belacqua disrobes to dry himself off. Her plan is foiled, however, as Belacqua insists that he merely needs a towel to take off the "rough wet."

The Alba, in contrast to the Frica, is a "dauntless daughter of desires";that is, while the Frica has her own desires, the Alba is fortunate enough to stimulate desire to others. She is confident of being the belle of this and all other balls. Her entrance at the Casa Frica in her red dress predictably stimulates a volley of commentary among several male members of the party. The Alba adjures her hostess, "Keep them off," but they will not be kept and the Frica retires to her own conquests. The narrator notes the irony that this scarlet woman is tonight "a power of good," captivating as she does many of the guests who would otherwise have retired to secluded corners for "vile necking."

The Alba is Belacqua's "current one and only," a paradoxical term which ridicules the conventional idea of fidelity; if she is merely current, she can hardly be one and only. An "unsubduable movement of misericord" induces the Alba to greet Belacqua with a term of endearment, which comes to him "like a pint of Perrier to drink in a dungeon." (MP p. 71) This simile is contrasted nicely to the metaphor which described earlier Belacqua's like reaction to Winnie's words of concern over his impetigo, which came to him "like a drink of water in a dungeon." Clearly the Alba is of rarer stuff; she is "urbane in the best sense."

The Alba is, as Belacqua discovers through an

advertisement for corsets, not to be classified. The advertisement reduces women to distinct categories: "A woman ... is either: a short-below-the-waist, a big-hip, a sway-back, a big-abdomen or an average." The Alba, however, "had no waist, nor did she deign to sway. She was not to be classified. Not to be corseted. Not woman of flesh." (MP p. 51) She is, of course, as much flesh as any other woman and Belacqua's panic that she might reveal some of it in a backless gown is subdued only after he makes a telephone call to the Alba's maid to discover with relief that the dress "buttons ups behind, sir, with the help of God." Had her dress revealed flesh, her mystique and therefore her usefulness for Belacqua's artistic purposes would have waned.

This physicality of women prevents the intended mystical union of Belacqua and Ruby Tough in the next chapter. Belacqua has cultivated Ruby to "connive at his felo de se." In contrast to most of the other women we have been discussing, Ruby is not well. She is, we are told, "neuraesthenic on top of everything else." "Everything else" presumably refers to the incurable disorder which will shorten Ruby's life considerably. This is not an unpleasant prospect for Ruby who, at age thirty-four, is still a maid and feels life holds little for her anyway.

Ruby is attractive, but the attraction that she holds for Belacqua is only in her capacity and willingness to help release him from the physical world. The day we meet Ruby is the day she and Belacqua drive off to fulfill their pact. Ruby has removed her skirt to facilitate her ascent of the

hill where the event is to take place. Belacqua is disconcerted by the sight of Ruby in her knickers and asks her to put her skirt back on. Sensing her advantage, Ruby says simply that she prefers it off. She is discovering her influence and power. When they can not for a moment find the cork-screw, Ruby says with wonderful bravado, "Knock its head off, shoot its neck off." She indulges greatly in the wine and seems to be enjoying herself, much to the exasperation of Belacqua, for he fears she is backing out.

In the end, the life force does win. Aided by "Digitus Dei," as Belacqua puts it, the gun goes off. In their relief at finding themselves still alive (after "the silence [had] spent its fury"), they embrace and the inevitable happens. Punning on the seventeenth century use of the verb 'to die,' the narrator points out that this is ironically perhaps the only occasion that Belacqua "achieved what he set out to do."

In the next chapter, "Walking Out," the hand of God again ameliorates events for Belacqua when his fiancee, Lucy, is hit by a car while riding to meet him. The horse is killed and Lucy is paralyzed. It is macabre that while Lucy is lying maimed, Belacqua, thinking that he has preceded Lucy to their meeting place, wanders off into the woods to have what he calls his "personal experience," the very thing which has caused Lucy's intemperate haste and therefore probably her accident. Belacqua, on this the eve of their wedding, has told her that he means to have no part of her physically and that she should take for herself a cicisbeo.

She is blinded by outrage that he could be such a "creepycrawly" and does not see the car advancing towards her on the road. As mentioned earlier, this accident is providential for Belacqua. Lucy marries him and makes no demands on him sexually. He is fulfilled through her because "he finds in her big eyes better worlds than this."

After the death of Lucy, Belacqua no longer needs his women to be beautiful, as were the Alba, Ruby and Lucy. Thelma, the next woman we meet, is "definitely not beautiful." Belacqua tries to convince himself that she has a "cherharming personality" and intense sexual appeal, but in reality she has memely a father whose demise is imminent and whose fortune is considerable. Thus we see again the role of woman as keeper and sustainer.

Although a homely woman, Thelma will still serve to transport Belacqua to other worlds, for the one thing all Belacqua's women have in common is soul. This accounts, the narrator tells us, for their attraction to the strange Belacqua. He is a poet and a poet, to women with soul, is a "very nubile creature." "So nubile that the women, God bless them, can't resist them, God help them." (MP p. 108) There is an irony in the form of this sentence arising from the confusion of the antecedents to the third person plural pronouns. 'God bless them' clearly refers to the women and, according to form, the 'God help them' should also refer to the unfortunate women who fall for poets. But the 'God help them' might instead refer to the poets, whose misfortune it is to be beloved by women whose presence in their

lives is complex at best. The title of the chapter, "What a Misfortune," suggests this interpretation in that Belacqua considers it both a necessity and a misfortune to be married.

Jeri Kroll, in her essay "Belacqua as Artist and Lover," suggests that Belacqua's marriage indicates a dangerous move towards conventionality. At first uninterested in marriage, Belacqua later marries three times in rapid succession. Kroll believes this threatens his achievement as an artist. She writes, "Conventional beliefs should never influence the writer's direction. ... Once Belacqua gives in to one primary convention (marriage), he seems to be on the way to giving in to them all."<sup>13</sup> Kroll suggests further that Beckett thus does away with his hero on the operating table in order to preserve him from further complicity with convention. While this may be true to a degree, a more inclusive reason for Belacqua's trouble as an artist is suggested below.

When Belacqua asks his bride if she knows what a 'babylan' is, her response is, "Something to eat?" This is not only an indication of Thelma's physical nature, but might also bode ill for the fate of Belacqua. Kroll presents a convincing argument to establish that the word 'babylan,' as Belacqua uses it here, refers not to the pagan priestess or medium, as is put forth in Laurence Harvey's well-known interpretation,<sup>14</sup> but rather derives from the word

<sup>13</sup> Kroll, p. 35.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence Harvey, <u>Beckett as Poet and Critic</u> (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 258.

'<u>Babilanisme</u>' as Stendahl uses it to mean someone who is impotent, a eunuch.<sup>15</sup> But the word must function in both ways simultaneously, for aspriestesses, Thelma and all women are threatening forces to Belacqua.

This interpretation of the double use of the word is supported in the next chapter, "The Smeraldina-Rima's Billetdoux." The language of this letter is humorous, but it is also ominous. Kroll points out that in <u>Dream</u>, when the Smeraldina does not understand a word Belacqua uses, she also responds with the words, "What's that? ... Something to eat?" The women's associations, writes Kroll, are physical, not spiritual. As Kroll suggests, in the pagan view, woman as priestess is arbiter of life and therefore perhaps of death as well. The Smeraldina-Rima, in her robust physicality, might devour Belacqua's spiritual nature.

The Smeraldina's simplicity has been little questioned by critics; they seem to take her at her lusty word. But upon examination, her words are artful. Her feelings for Belacqua are no deeper than his for her or any other woman. Her vision of their relationship, as well as her clichéd phrases, come from fiction. Consider the easy transitions between the paragraphs.

From laments upon how miserable she is without him, she moves freely into "I was at a grand film last night...." She then tells him that she is going dancing on Saturday. After further protestations about her undying love and the fact that nothing matters but that they love each other, she

<sup>15</sup> Kroll, pp. 27-30.

says, "Analiese is hacking round on the piano and there is no peace so I will stop." "Hacking round" is strikingly colloquial compared to the florid prose she has been using to declare her love. Her detachment is obvious. She is only artfully distracted by her love; if she were truly in love, nothing could keep her from this communication of it, least of all the sounds of a piano. Recall, too, that as she passed the fat man in the passage "he said Grüss Gott but (she) dident hear him." Her distraction is studied; her language is rhetorical. She even gives the source of a quotation she uses: "(Goethes Faust)." We sense that her image of their love comes not from reality, but from the book she is reading, Die Grosse Liebe.

There is an important line when she describes the difference between the love which she and Belacqua share and the love which exists between Ivy and Bill. Her mother says that the latter pair disturb her "when they go on together," whereas Smerry and Bel do not. The Smeraldina thinks "it is because the love between Ivy and Bill is not real, there always seems to be some sort of affection about it." (MF p. 140) The Smeraldina of course means 'affectation,' but the use of the word 'affection' suggests that this truly is the difference between the couples: Bill and Ivy are genuinely fond of each other; Belacqua and the Smeraldina affect a love for the purpose of realizing a fiction, of living out their respective fantasies through each other.

The Smeraldina is different from the other women Belacqua

'loves' in several ways. She is only semi-literate in English, she is almost vulgar in her sexuality, and she is cursed with a running sore on her leg. Ruby, although dying of an incurable disease, had no such noxious symptoms. This grotesque image marks the Smeraldina in a way we recognize from early literature, as lascivious. Here sickness depicts character. The narrator assures us that "bodies don't matter." But of course bodies do matter, as evidenced by the physical descriptions we receive of all the women. The Smeraldina is not excepted and her body, not surprisingly, matches her "slobbery-blubbery" nature.

Women and their bodies are important to Belacqua even to his final unfortunate breath. In "Yellow," the chapter in which Belacqua dies, strange women attend him like priestesses, washing him and preparing him for his final moment. First there is the night nurse, then the day nurse Miranda, then the "Aschenputtel" to tend the fire, then the matron, then two women to remake the bed and finally the theatre sister. "What a number of women there seemed to be in this place!" the narrator remarks.

These preparations are for a rite which will symbolically unsex Belacqua. He is likened to a bride, ceremoniously dressed and prepared for the sacrifice. The voluptuous Miranda comes to do the libation. She douses with picric and ether the offending part, the baby anthrax which is here called "his little bump of amativeness." "(W)hy this severity?" Belacqua wonders. The reader understands from the words used to describe the lump that Miranda is a

priestess come to make a babylan, or eunuch, of Belacqua: "It jutted out under the short hairs like a cuckoo's bill."

The sexual images continue in the discussion of Belacqua's toe, which is to be shortened. Miranda giggles when she sees its inordinate length, but she does not (or pretends not to) understand Belacqua's intention when he says, "A long foot ... I know, or a long nose. But a long toe, what does that denote?" (MP p. 154) It is clear that he is trying to impress her with his virility by implying that a long toe, like a long foot, traditionally denotes sexual prowess. This view is supported later when Miranda leaves him: "Some people go. Others leave. Belacqua felt like the rejected of those two that night in bed." (MP p. 154) This is a meaningful gesture on her part. Belacqua, who has repeatedly rejected the healthy sexuality of the women who loved him, is here treated as the sham he is.

The title of this chapter is important here, too. Belacqua is 'yellow' or cowardly, in facing his operation. He wonders whether to approach it like Heraclitus or Democritus, whether to weep or to laugh. But he has also been a sexual coward, preferring the privacy of his own experience and denying his women the legitimate expression of their love for him. It is this cowardice and not merely the threat of becoming conventional which serves to destroy Belacqua as an artist and a man.

The colour yellow is used further to suggest the sickness which pervades all life. Belacqua watches the yellow sun move across the yellow wall: "This dribble of time,

thought Belacqua, like sanies into a bucket, the world wants a new washer." The yellow pus of time is a revolting image. It vividly reinforces the importance of the language and imagery of sickness to Beckett's work.

Vivian Mercier has also written a chapter concerning the women in Beckett's work. Mercier claims that these women are martyrs to their insipid and unrequited loves for Beckett's men. He writes:

> Fair to middling, good or bad, Beckett's women never change: their ardor for love and for suffering remains unquenchable to the gates of death and beyond.<sup>10</sup>

In this very chapter he has corrected an earlier view in which he had stated that the women in <u>Play</u> were selfsacrificing altruists, believing earlier that they expressed pity and compassion rather than jealousy and contempt in their speeches about the other two. In just this way should his generalization about the unquenchable ardour for suffering he finds in Beckett's women be changed after more careful reading to discover a greater individuality and humanity in them than he finds at present. These women are not masochists who revel in their rejection as Mercier implies. Rather, they are warm-blooded, disappointed but positive and energetic people. They are the life force, the <u>yang</u>, and catalyst for the <u>yin</u>.

16 Vivian Mercier, <u>Beckett/Beckett</u> (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 229.

## Chapter Three Murphy and the Alien Reality

We have seen how Beckett portrays the human body as adversary; but the mind, too, can fail. Beckett addresses the subject of mental illness deftly, with both humour and compassion. He asks us not only to question our definition of sanity, but also to ask why sanity should be thought superior to divergent modes of the mental process. He also asks us to sympathize with the sufferers of mental illness in their very real agony.

Beckett accuses us of expecting too much from our dianoetic powers, saying that we "give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear." He says a person must create for himself an alien reality, "<u>un univers a part</u>": "One must make a world on one's own in order to satisfy ones!

<sup>1</sup> This is taken from <u>Samuel Beckett Directs Endgame</u>, Michael Haerdter's diary of the rehearsals at the Schiller Theatre, Berlin, 1968, published by Suhrkamp. Haerdter's diary is to be published shortly by John Calder, Ltd. as part of the book <u>Beckett at Work</u>, edited by Dougald MacMillan. I have the quotation from the programme notes to <u>Endgame</u> produced by the San Quentin Drama Workshop at the Open Space Theatre, London, October 1978, directed by Rick Cluchey. need to know, to understand, one's need for order."<sup>2</sup> This universe is an asylum from the chaos of the world and Beckett often employs, quite literally, insane asylums to suggest the creation of <u>un univers</u> a part.

In each of the novels with realistic settings, lunatics and asylums are incorporated or suggested. I refer to More Pricks than Kicks, Murphy, Watt, Molloy and Malone Dies. A case could also be argued for the situation of the Unnamable, with his talk of "keepers." In the story "Fingal," from More Pricks than Kicks, we find the first reference to asylums, those monuments to ruined minds. Belacqua and Winnie have climbed a hill overlooking Fingal. The area is scattered with ruins: the ruins of a mill are a landmark for the area of Portrane; near the Portrane Lunatic Asylum lie the ruins of a church; and in a field beyond are located the ruins of a "square bawnless tower." "Abstract the asylum and there was little left of Portrane but ruins," says the narrator. (MP p. 28) This statement carries a double intent, for it comes at the end of the paragraph which describes the inmates of the asylum at their exercise, suggesting that although the building itself is sound it houses ruined minds, as well as meaning that it is surrounded by crumbling churches, towers, and mills.

The description of the inmates is brief. We see some kicking a football, others lounging about alone or in groups, and others, in a gang, walking round and round the playground:

2 ibid.

The head of one appeared over the wall, the hands on the wall, the cheek on the hands. ... Winnie remarked that the lunatics

seemed very sane and well-behaved to her. Belacqua agreed, but he thought the head over the wall told a tale. (MP p. 28)

With this delicate bit of understatement, Beckett introduces the whole concept which is to pose itself as a problem throughout his work; that is, the question of what tale the head over the wall has to tell. This lunatic bears silent witness to what will become a major motif in Beckett's fiction, the question of sanity.

Part of the novel <u>Watt</u> is set in an asylum. The situation of Molloy at Lousse's suggests that he is in some such institution. <u>Malone Dies</u>, too, might be set within an asylum. Malone is not sure himself where he is. His story begins where Molloy's ended, and Molloy's story ended, it must be remembered, where it began: on the first page of the trilogy with the words, "I'm in my mother's room." Malone, like Molloy, says he does not know how he got to this room where he now lies, but suggests, like Molloy, that perhaps it was in an ambulance.

Malone tells us categorically that his room is not in a hospital or a mad house or a house of rest in any sense of the word:

> I have listened at different hours of the day and night and never heard anything suspicious or unusual, but always the peaceful sounds of men at large, getting up, lying down, preparing food, coming and going, weeping and laughing, or nothing at all, no sounds at all. (MD p. 183)

However, three pages later he writes, "My sight and hearing are very bad." Perhaps these normal sounds of the daily life of men at large are hallucinations, or the audio accompaniment to the stories he invents.

The suggestion that he actually is in a room in an asylum receives strong support at the end of the novel with the introduction of Macmann into an asylum. Macmann was last heard of rolling across a vast plain, just as Molloy had done before falling into a ditch and losing consciousness. Macmann, too, loses consciousness and is next found in an asylum, where he was brought presumably in an ambulance. He first meets Moll, to whose care and charge he is committed, and here "thin yellow arms" are mentioned, reminding us of the "gaunt hands" of the woman who fills and empties Malone's pots, described as follows within the first several pages of the book:

> All I see of her now is the gaunt hand and part of the sleeve. Not even that, not even that. Perhaps she is dead, having predeceased me, perhaps now it is another's hand that lays and clears my little table. (MD p. 186)

Indeed, Moll does die and is replaced by Lemuel. One day Lemuel is put in charge of an excursion. It is the description of the five men he takes on this excursion which specifically incorporates Beckett's observations of the mentally ill.

It is important at this point to consider Beckett's personal encounters with the mentally ill. Beckett himself entered psychiatric analysis early in 1934, upon the

recommendation of his friend, Dr. Geoffrey Thompson, who was a physician interested in becoming a psychiatrist. According to Bair, Dr. Thompson and Beckett had spent many hours together in Dublin discussing physical and mental illness. Beckett was reportedly fascinated by some of the diseases he saw when he visited Thompson at the Rotunda Hospital where he worked. Later, when Thompson began his psychiatric residency at the Bethlehem Royal Hospital in Beckenham, Beckett often visited his friend there and was able to go into the wards where he saw many forms of mental illness, which we find described at various points throughout his work.<sup>3</sup>

The men whom Lemuel takes on the final excursion in <u>Malone Dies</u> are credible examples of the various kinds of patients Beckett was likely to have seen, and whose symptoms we can find as traces in several of the protagonists as well. First is the man who is "dead young," a Murphy who sits in his rocking chair with his eyes wide open and who moves only when forced to do so. Though young in years, he might just as well be dead; his soup bowl remains full and his chamber pot empty.

Next is the Saxon. He is like all the vagabond narrators in that he is perpetually looking for something while at the same time wondering what that something might be. He tries to maintain a position in the centre of the room, recalling the picture in Watt's room of the dot

<sup>3</sup> This biographical information is from Bair, pages 177, 169-170, and 205, respectively.

seeking its centre in the circle and Hamm who is obsessed with occupying the exact centre of his room. The Saxon often dreams of a man named Quin; earlier Malone has wondered what became of his clothes and "the flannel given to [him] by Quin." (MD p. 252)

The third member of the excursion party likes to spend his days ranging about the park in all directions. Like Moran, he carries a cloak and an umbrella in fastidious anticipation of inclement weather. The fourth and last man to be described here (Macmann himself being the fifth member of Lemuel's party) is "a misshapen giant, bearded, occupied to the exclusion of all else in scratching himself, intermittently." (MD p. 284) When his bowl has been filled he stretches out his hand for it, "in the daily disappointed hope of being spared the trouble of getting up."

As has been discussed earlier, the difference between the well and the healthy is arbitrary. With wry humour Beckett demonstrates the difficulty of distinguishing between the well and the healthy in the asylum where Macmann is confined:

> Thanks to the white cloak with its blue butcher stripes no confusion was possible between the Macmanns on the one hand and the Lemuels, Pats and Jacks on the other. (MD p. 278)

It is quite simple to tell the attendants from the attended: the former wear white coats, while the latter wear stripes.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> This irony is further obviated by Beckett's use of the withdrawn and indifferent Murphy, the retarded and sadomasochistic Lemuel and the brutal Pat as guardians of the certified.

The house of Saint John of God in which Macmann is living is quite simply another of Beckett's microcosms, created for objective analysis of the world at large. "[N]o questions were ever asked in the House of Saint John of God, but stern measures were simply taken, or not taken, according to the dictates of a peculiar logic." (MD p. 277) The same peculiar logic rules the world we know, as Beckett demonstrates throughout his works. Recall Belacqua and the strange logic which dictates that the lobster, and man, shall not die quickly, and that little girls shall be killed by buses.

G.C. Barnard has seen the correlation between Beckett's characters and the mentally ill as we define them. He devotes his book to delineating the characteristics of schizophrenia in each of Beckett's major narrators. He describes them as follows:

> In my view the <u>Trilogy</u> presents one man whose various schizophrenic phases are described under the names of Sapo, Moran, Macmann, Molloy, and Malone, with the Unnamable and Pim as his post-mortem states. ... [A]nd the couples Estragon-Vladimir, Hamm-Clov are different split personalities.5

Although Barnard goes too far in his tight, clinical analysis of Beckett's characters as split-personalities, he is correct in identifying certain symptons of schizophrenia in each of them. I must, however, disagree with

<sup>5</sup> G.C. Barnard, <u>Samuel Beckett: A New Approach</u> (London: J.M. Dent and Sons, Ltd. 1970), p. 54.

his application of that term. It is a far too narrow and clichéd approach to consider schizophrenia as the exotic Jekyll-Hyde syndrome we call "split-personality." Although this phenomenon certainly does exist among some sufferers of schizophrenia, the vast majority of diagnosed schizophrenics suffer what is more appropriately referred to as changes in mood rather than in a total eclipse of one distinct personality by another. A dictionary offers a better understanding of the term than the one Barnard describes by cataloguing the common symptons of the disease, calling it "a mental disorder characterized by indifference, withdrawal, hallucinations, and delusions of persecution and omnipotence."<sup>6</sup>

Many psychologists profess that the term schizophrenia properly refers to a split or fracture in the patient's perceptions of reality, rather than a split in personality. That is, the patient perceives himself and the world around him in quite a different way from the way in which others perceive them. One patient, when asked why he did not comb his hair or keep himself tidy, replied that whenever he looked in a mirror, he saw an elephant and elephants do not comb their hair. <sup>7</sup> As ridiculous as this sounds, the point is that this man <u>actually</u> saw an elephant when he looked in a mirror. Beckett relates the same phenomenon in

<sup>6</sup> <u>Webster's New World Dictionary</u>, The College Edition, 1964.

7 In conversation with Dr. Allan Cott, New York, 1973.

## Endgame. Hamm says:

I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. ... I used to go and see him, in the asylum. I'd take him by the hand and drag him to the window. Look! There! All the rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! ... He'd snatch away his hand and go back to his corner. Appalled. All he had seen was ashes. (Endgame p. 32)

Dr. Russell Meares, a psychiatrist, recognized the symptons of schizophrenia in Beckett's characters and wrote an article entitled "Beckett, Saurraute and the Perceptual Experience of Schizophrenia." He outlined these symptoms under the following classifications: 'The Spiral of Anxiety,' 'The Search for Silence,' 'The Domination by Stimuli,' 'The Changing of Meaning,' 'The Loss of Boundary of Self,' 'Emotional Disconnection,' 'Hallucinations,' 'Thought Disorder,' and 'Catatonia,' each of which could stand as a chapter in Beckett criticism, as well as in a psychology textbook. In this article E.W. Straus is quoted:

> 'The schizophrenic does not withdraw from reality into a world of dreams; he is immersed in an <u>alien reality</u> with physiognomies which in the severest cases paralyze all action and cut off all communication.' (emphasis mine)<sup>0</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Russell Meares, "Beckett Saurraute and the Perceptual Experience of Schizophrenia," <u>Psychiatry</u>, Vol. 36, February 1973, p. 68. In order to know what constitutes a delusion, we must first agree on what is reality.<sup>9</sup> The question thus arises, whose reality is real? The fracture which occurs in the perception of the schizophrenic is not a clean break, but rather takes a zigzag course which renders consistent analysis of perception impossible; so that at one time a person may see things which are not actually there, while at other times he may perceive the environment quite "normally." Still other times might find this person more sensitive to stimuli so that he may smell and hear things which actually are there but which would be unperceived by a "normal" person, just as the odours and sounds an animal experiences are too subtle for the human senses.

In view of this understanding of schizophrenia, we all harbour schizophrenic tendencies. Perception is individual and therefore complex. In <u>Murphy</u>, Celia is concerned about the old man who lives above her, for she has not heard any sound from his room for awhile. The landlady assures her, however, that <u>she</u>, the landlady, has heard him moving about as usual. "But how could you have and not me," asks Celia. "For the excellent reason," answers Miss Carridge, "that you are not I." (My p. 78) The narrator tells us that Miss Carridge is rather proud of her striking use of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> In "The End," Beckett's narrator speaks of having "real visions." The term is an important one, for how does a dream or vision differ from an hallucination, or a real vision from an unreal one?

I would like to pre-empt the criticism that Beckett's narrators are self-indulgent and suffer only from psychosomatic ills by suggesting that no distinction be made here between 'real' and psychosomatic sickness, for psychosomatic ills are no less painful and incapacitating than any other.

nominative case pronoun here, whereas it is actually her observation on the individuality of perception which is of more import.

Clinical schizophrenia is only a matter of degree; we are all potential psychotics. Beckett once described madness to Kay Boyle as "a geographical location inside the self."<sup>10</sup> That is, we each have within us a degree of madness. To extend Beckett's metaphor, I submit that we may wander perilously close to insanity, or even cross accidentally into such territory momentarily. The severe cases Beckett sees as isolated from sanity by deep crevasses which can not be crossed until a bridge has been painstakingly constructed for the return.

In <u>Murphy</u>, perhaps more than in any other work, Beckett addresses the subject of mental illness. The asylum where Murphy finds employment is situated in a schizoid manner in two counties:

> The Magdalen Mental Mercyseat lay a little way out of town, ideally situated in its own grounds on the boundary of two counties. (My p. 90)

Dualities and dichotomies are the focus of this novel: mind and matter; sanity and insanity; chance and predestination; order and chaos.

The novel opens with both the sun and Murphy behaving in predetermined ways: "The sun shone, having no alternative"; "Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free."

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Kay Boyle, "All Mankind is Us," <u>Samuel Beckett:</u> <u>A collection of Criticism</u>, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: McGraw-<u>Hill Book Company, 1975)</u>, p. 16.

Whether or not Murphy's behaviour is actually predetermined is a question which arises throughout the novel. In many ways his actions and the events which happen to him can be seen as an interlocking and immutable series. In another way, however, we might say that Murphy construes events to suit his purpose, in the same way that he interprets his horoscope from the Swami Suk to serve his own end. When he reads that Sunday is his lucky day, four his lucky number. and that 1936 and 1990 will be successful and prosperous years for him, he promises Celia that on "the very first fourth to fall on a Sunday in 1936" he will begin to look for work. Thus it is that he justifiably calls this horoscope his "life-warrant," a "corpus of deterrents," a "separation order," and his "bull of incommunication," with the emphasis on a colloquial rather than religious interpretation of the word 'bull.'

Although astrology is important to the novel, the idea of predestination is also ridiculed in several ways, such as when Miss Counihan is seen upbraiding her Hindu mentor in Gower Street. It is written that the Hindu "made a wild gesture of metaphysical liquidation and sprang into a taxi that happened to be passing or, as he firmly believed, was clocking off an inscrutable schedule from all eternity." (My p. 126)

We might, however, reasonably presume that Murphy's death has been predestined. It was not mere chance, then, that led Austin Ticklepenny to Murphy's table that one lunchtime, nor chance that Murphy accepted his offer. The night of Murphy's death was foreshadowed by Neary's experience on Saturday, 19 October. Neary had become obsessed with his search for Murphy and now saw Murphy as an end, rather than merely as a means to bed Miss Counihan. The night before Murphy's death Neary had a strange experience:

> A curious feeling had come over Neary, namely that he would not get through the night. He had felt this before, but never quite so strongly. In particular he felt that to move a muscle or utter a syllable would certainly prove fatal. He breathed with heavy caution through the long hours of darkness, trembled uncontrollably and clutched the chair-arms. He did not feel cold, far from it, nor unwell, nor in pain; he simply had this alarming conviction that every second was going to announce itself the first of his last ten minutes or a quarter of an hour on earth. (My p. 125)

When morning comes, Neary's hair has turned completely white.

It would not be chance, then, that the next night is Murphy's first on night duty, nor that this is when Murphy discovers that he is to Mr. Endon no more than "a speck in Mr. Endon's unseen." As he gazes into Mr. Endon's eyes he recites some prophetic lines: "'The last Mr. Murphy saw of Mr. Endon was Mr. Murphy.'" (My p. 140) As Murphy returns to his quarters, he disrobes: "He took off his clothes one by one as he went, quite forgetting they did not belong to him, and threw them away." (My p. 141) This ritualistic disrobing under a starless sky suggests Murphy preparing himself for the sacrifice. Although we are told he vaguely intends to return the next day to Celia, events claim a different course for him. Is it mere chance that someone turns on the gas in the lavatory, or had this person, like the Hindu's taxi, been clocking off an inscrutable schedule for all eternity to rescue Murphy from the material world?

His final resting place, too, hardly seems accidental when we consider one important aspect of the scene - the colour yellow. Although Murphy has requested that his ashes be flushed away, events resolve that they shall be distributed over the floor of a saloon. Murphy's lucky colour yellow has been in evidence throughout the novel in several important ways; in Murphy's bow tie, in Celia's hair, in the walls of their room, and in Murphy's complexion. He has told Ticklepenny that he "cannot live without fire." The yellow flame is present at his death so that not only is he asphyxiated by the gas, but is charred by fire as well. More to the point, however, is the description we have of the saloon with its ochre floor and glass tanks of whisky, "a slow cascando of pellucid yellows." "So all things hobble together for the only possible," the narrator has suggested. (My p. 127)

Another dichotomy which is explored in <u>Murphy</u> is that between order and chaos. When Neary tells Murphy that "all life is figure and ground," he describes the ground as a "big blooming buzzing confusion" against which occasionally a special figure emerges. For Neary at the time that figure is Miss Dwyer; it then comes to be Miss Counihan and finally Murphy himself. For Murphy that figure comes to be Celia, until the end when no face will figure against the ground of his confusion.

In the chess game between Murphy and Mr. Endon, it is again chaos that triumphs. Mr. Endon, whose tactic is to create summetry with his pieces, through strictly legal chess moves, is able, in forty-three moves, to return all his pieces to their places of origin - with the exception of the two centre pawns which have each been moved a space forward to allow for the bishops to do their dance, and the inexplicable turning of the rooks upon their heads. He does this, that is, to the point of returning the king to its space, but Murphy's queen is guarding that square. Since the king can not put itself into check, Mr. Endon's order is foiled. Rather than torment Mr. Endon either by forcing him to acknowledge the existence of an opponent and capture the queen, or by leaving him in perpetual disorder, Murphy resigns. But it is clearly understood that chaos/gas is ever the victor.

The seemingly facetious footnote in this chess game, that the first mistake white made was his first move, becomes a serious remark when we realize that Murphy can never retrieve that pawn. In the first eight moves, Murphy tries to mirror Mr. Endon's strategy. Mr. Endon's pieces return to their original positions, but Murphy's pawn is stuck in the centre of the board, irretrievable. This is, of course, why Mr. Endon never plays white. Murphy is thus forced to play his chaotic game.

Murphy, of course, is eventually overcome by gas/chaos, and his remains become one with the ground, the confusion. We read in the final paragraph of the novel that "the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon." Although this statement would seem to settle the question of whether mind and body can be separated, we must not accept too readily an easy solution. Nor should we merely take our hero's desire for such separation as the deed.

The duality receives comic attention in Chapter Ten of the novel during the games-playing session of Neary, Wylie and Miss Counihan. The mind is defined here by Wylie as "the little ego and the big id," and the body is defined, in terms of ailment, as "the swelling heart, the dwindling liver, the foaming spleen, two lungs with luck, with care two kidneys, and so on." (My p. 122)

Miss Counihan is described by Wylie as "the only nubile amateur ... in the Twenty-six Counties who does not confuse her self with her body, and one of the few bodies, in the same bog, equal to the distinction...." (My p. 121) Similarly, Miss Counihan's regard for Murphy rests largely, she says, in his freedom from what she calls, also in terms of illness, "psychosomatic fistula" of an unharmonious union of mind and body; he is "both mind and body, neither mind that is nor body." The relationship is far from clear.

Several bodies are given special attention in this novel. Celia is described in strictly physical terms at the beginning of Chapter Two: we read her height, weight, colouring, and various measurements. Thus Celia is planted firmly and incontestably in the physical world, at least for the present.

Cooper's body is of interest, too, for he is afflicted with a strange malady which prohibits his sitting down and his taking off his hat. Neary's condition is mentioned, comically, only in passing. When Miss Counihan and Wylie come to see him, he gets out of bed naked and explains, "Do not be alarmed ... the vast majority are bedsores." Wylie's horrified expression can only be surmised, and the cause of the other sores remains a distasteful mystery. By saying less, the words do more to stimulate the reader's imagination.

Murphy has received from his Swami Suk the prophetic words, "When Health is below par, Regret may be entertained." The capitals are significant, elevating the words to a universal application. The tone, too, in its understatement, while creating a comic effect, also serves to suggest something beyond what the words say. Visions of the severely afflicted rise out of "below par," and despair seems more appropriate than "Regret." Here is Beckett again making language do more than the literal meanings of the words induce.

Miss Carridge has a disorder which is particularly regrettable, especially to those around her. Miss Dew, also, although a minor character, is notable for her affliction. She suffers from duck's disease, an illness which affects only women. The narrator jests that this is why its common name is duck's disease. Miss Dew's buttocks "spring directly from behind the knees." (My p. 58) She accosts Murphy as he lies on the grass in the park contemplating the order in which he should eat his biscuits. The narrator explains her mistake: "Seen from above and behind Murphy did look fairly obliging." She tells Murphy

that she makes her living by the oui-ja board. Her "protector" is Lord Gall of Wormwood, a man whose name suggests further physical ills. He seeks information from the beyond.

Miss Dew has come to the park to feed the sheep, but they will have none of her lettuce. We learn later that it is merely the wrong hour of the day, an hour when sheep are interested in nothing, and that Miss Dew should not be hurt that they rejected her offering. However, Miss Dew is hurt and returns to claim her dog, Nelly, whom Murphy has been holding for her. The dog has eaten Murphy's biscuits, except the ginger (Murphy's favourite), which it rejected after sampling. Murphy insults the dog, calling it a "rutting cur" and Miss Dew is further saddened.

Miss Dew's control is a "panpygoptotic Manichee" from the fourth century, named Lena. It is appropriate that Lena is a Manichee, a member of that eclectic school of Christian and pagan thought. Like Murphy, she sees the world as divided into the two contending principles of mind and body (light and dark, good and evil). But she herself resides in a third world, a world of transition between the physical and spiritual. This patron of the sufferers of duck's disease can not yet sit down with complete comfort. But things do improve for her with every passing century and she assures Miss Dew that in "a thousand years she might look forward to having thighs like anyone else, and not merely thighs, but thighs celestrial." (My p. 61) What other kind of thighs would one expect to have in the next world?

This episode is comic, but Miss Dew reappears in the final chapter, a tragic figure in the park where Celia takes

Mr. Kelly to fly his kite. Miss Dew is alone with Nelly, "who with Lord Gall was almost all she had in this dreary <u>en-deca</u>," She walks homeward where, we are told, a pair of socks from Lord Gall awaits her, with a note attached which reads: "'If this pair of socks does not prove more productive, I shall have to find a new control.'" (My p. 156)

As interesting as the bodies of various characters may be, the mind is of greater interest in this novel. Murphy's mind, we are told, functions "not as an instrument but as a place," and so for Murphy the dichotomy is between what he calls Microcosmos and Macrocosmos, which he comes to identify as the psychotic versus the psychiatric points of view. Murphy says of himself, "I am not of the big world, I am of the little world." He thus finds in his wards at the Mercyseat a brotherhood, "the race of people he had long since despaired of finding." (My p. 97)

The first description we have of the patients on Murphy's ward is strangely potent - strangely because it so vividly describes people who are not even present. It portrays simultaneously the humour and despair of their situation:

> There were not many patients about as Murphy followed Bom through the wards. Some were at matins, some in the gardens, some could not get up, some would not, some simply had not. (My p. 96)

Those who could not, would not and had not roused themselves are the ones who interest us most. There is a pathos in these words which demands our attention.

Those who were present are described revealingly, especially the "paranoids, feverishly covering sheets of paper with complaints against their treatment or verbatim reports of their inner voices." (My p. 96) This image is suggestive of the scribe in the later work, <u>Texts for</u> <u>Nothing</u>, and perhaps of other Beckett narrators as well.

Murphy is humbled by his exposure to these people:

The most easily identifiable of his immediate feelings were respect and unworthiness. Except for the manic ... the impression he received was of the self-immersed indifference to the contingencies of the contingent world which he had chosen for himself as the only felicity and achieved so seldom.... (My p. 96)

Murphy becomes so involved with these people that he no longer is able to come alive in his mind:

He blamed this on his body, fussy with its fatigue after so much duty, but it was rather due to the vicarious autology that he had been enjoying since morning, in little Mr. Endon and all the other proxies. That was why he felt happy in the wards and sorry when time came to leave them. He could not have it both ways, not even the illusion of it. (My p. 107)

It is within the context of Murphy's sensibility that Beckett confronts the dichotomy of sanity and insanity. Murphy, we are told, loathes the "textbook attitude" the doctors and nurses take towards their patients, which makes "contact with outer reality the index of well-being."

> The definition of outer reality, or of reality short and simple, varied according to the sensibility of the definer.

But all seemed agreed that contact with it, even the layman's muzzy contact, was a rare privilege. ... The function of treatment was to bridge the gulf, translate the sufferer from his own pernicious little dungheap to the glorious world of discrete particles, where it would be his inestimable prerogative once again to wonder, love, hate, desire, rejoice and howl in a reasonable balanced manner, and comfort himself with the society of others in the same predicament. (My p. 101)

Here reality is referred to tongue-in-cheek as "reality short and simple." Nothing, of course, could be less simple than reality, especially in relation to mental illness. Society is satirized for having, or needing, 'professional realists'; that is, people trained to determine what reality is and licenced to dictate whose behaviour is sane and whose is not, whose perceptions are real and whose are not. Accordingly, laymen, as the rest of us are called, have only "muzzy contact" with the real, something like a priest's laity whose association with the divine can ever only be secondary to that of the ordained.

In the passage above, the healthy are said to have the "inestimable prerogative" to be and to suffer in conformity with society's standards rather than in an individualistic way. Such an understanding of sanity is actually a modern psychiatric concept:

> '[M]adness ... is not in a <u>person</u> but in a <u>system of relationships</u> in which the labelled patient participates. Schizophrenia, if it means anything, is a more or less characteristic mode of disturbed group behaviour.'ll

11 Dr. Cooper, <u>Psychiatry and Anti-Psychiatry</u>, cited in Barnard, p. 13. Here again we find the relative rather than the absolute view of sickness. As we saw earlier with Mr. Lowitt's specimen in <u>Watt</u>, sickness is acknowledged only when it interferes with other members of society. Left alone, a schizophrenic is not deemed ill, but only comes to be considered unwell when his behaviour does not conform to our preconceived notion of approved group behaviour. In effect, the patient at the Mercyseat is required only to exchange his private sufferings for more universal modes of unrest. He is required, also, to find comfort in a prescribed manner, rather than through any of his own invention.

Murphy considers the self-contained microcosm of some of his wards to be far superior to the macrocosm of the 'outer reality' of the 'contingent world.' But his estimation is, as the narrator puts it, "lovingly simplified and perverted." Once again Beckett has recourse to religious imagery to illustrate his point, this time in a description of the main building of the asylum:

> To adopt for a moment as a purely descriptive convenience the terms and orientation of church architecture, the layout of the wards was that of nave and transepts, with nothing east of the crossing. ... North of the nave were the kitchens, patients' refectory, nurses' refectory, drug arsenal, patients' lavatory, nurses' lavatory, visitors' lavatory, etc. The bedridden and more refractory cases were kept together as far as possible in the south transept.... The whole place was overheated and stank of peraldehyde and truant sphincters. (My p. 96)

It is more than mere descriptive convenience which induces such imagery. The reference to the stench of the asylum and the fact that the place is overheated forces an analogy

to the mephitic nature of a religious correspondent; these are the hellish vapours of an infernal place.

If oblivion to outer reality sounds an enviable state, as it does to Murphy, it must never be forgotten that the schizophrenic is sometimes trapped in an inward hell:

> The frequent expressions apparently of pain, rage, despair ... to which some patients gave vent, suggesting a fly somewhere in the ointment of Microcosmos, Murphy either disregarded or muted to mean what he wanted. ... [E]ven if the patients did sometimes feel as lousy as they sometimes looked, still no aspersion was necessarily cast on the little world where Murphy supposed them, one and all, to be having a glorious time. One had merely to ascribe their agitations, not to any flaw in their self-seclusion, but to its investment by the healers. (My p. 102)

It is no doubt true that his wards suffer from the sadistic treatment they receive from the Clinch clan, as well as from the notoriously unpleasant forms of modern psychiatric therapy such as electric shock, chemical shock, side effects from medications and unnecessary use of debilitating drugs. However, much of the pain, rage and despair they experience is due entirely to their disease.

Similarly, the graceful phrase "Sleep and Insomnia, the Phidias and Scopas of Fatigue," which Murphy learned as a student from Neary, makes no sense, we are told, when applied to the M.M.M.:

> It might have held good in the dormitory of a young ladies' academy, where quite possibly also it had been inspired.... [But here] those that slept did so in the frozen attitudes of Herculaneum, as though sleep had pounced upon them like an act of

God. And those that did not did not by the obvious grace of the same authority. The contortions of the resistive in particular seemed to Murphy not so much an entreaty to nature's soft nurse as a recoil from her solicitations. (My pp. 133-13<sup>4</sup>)

Murphy's death may be predetermined, because all death is predetermined, but his life is not. The difference between the inner life that Murphy experiences and the lives of the patients at the sanatorium is that Murphy's alien reality is willed. This is not to say that the Mr. Endons and Mr. Clarkes did not will themselves at first into their respective states of mind (nor is it to say that they did), but only that they have by the time we meet them lost the freedom which distinguishes Murphy. Murphy's mind does not control him; rather, he allows it to take over at certain times. Even then, the transition is not always successful. Murphy created for himself an alien reality, but did not surrender to it.

## Chapter Four

## Watt

In the previous chapter, the world as we know it was described as being made of 'discrete particles,' chaotic, unrelated objects, or 'things,' which are separate from the self as well as from each other. Murphy was driven to discover for himself another world, an alien reality, to which he could escape from the chaos and temporality of this world. For Watt, objects lead to what might be called a "reverse epiphany"; when confronted with things he ceases to understand.

Man is not in this world alone. To understand ourselves we must first understand objects and our relationship to them. Not only have objects come to have lives independent of us, but they also have created a dependence within us; it is through changes in things that we come to mark time. This idea will be elaborated later in this chapter.

Beckett has addressed himself to this new relationship we have with things in the following way:

The things! There are so many things; the eye is as incapable of comprehending them as the mind of grasping them. So a person creates his own world, <u>un univers a part</u>, to withdraw into when one gets tired.... The crisis started with the end of the seventeenth century, after Galileo. The eighteenth century has been called the century of reason, <u>le siecle de la</u> raison, I've never understood that: they're all mad, <u>ils sont tous fous</u>, <u>ils</u> deraisonment! They give reason a responsibility which it simply can't bear, it's too weak.... Leonardo da Vinci still had everything in his head, still knew everything, the tie between the self and things no longer exists....l

The relationship between the self and things is given consideration in many of Beckett's works. Winnie, in <u>Happy Days</u>, tells us that things have lives of their own: Brownie, though the heaviest thing in her bag, continually rises to the top; the mirror she breaks and throws away she knows will be back in her bag the next day. The independent life of things is noted by Moran when he rises from a sitting position and his pants, like Estragon's, fall ridiculously about his ankles. His remark foreshadows the correlation between this phenomenon and the creation of the alien reality: "This inertia of things is enough to drive one literally insane," he says. (M p. 120)

Molloy turns to things as surrogates for all other relationships. He says, "(I) don't like men and I don't like animals. As for God, he is beginning to disgust me." (M p. 106) Molloy's stones are perhaps the most remarkable example of the surrogate role things play in the lives of Beckett's characters. The sucking of them imitates a baby's first experience of love, but a mother can be a complicated

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Programme Notes to <u>Endgame</u>, San Quentin Drama Workshop. See Chapter Three, footnote one for further details.

love-object. Stones, for all the complexity involved in trying to suck them evenly and in turn, can in any event be thrown away when they prove too difficult, as mothers and other animate objects cannot.

Malone's penchant for things derives from Molloy's experience. He explains:

And but for the company of these little objects which I picked up here and there, when out walking, and which sometimes gave me the impression that they too needed me, I might have been reduced to the society of nice people or to the consolations of some religion or other.... [I] loved to finger and caress the hard shapely objects that were there in my deep pockets, it was my way of talking to them and reassuring them. And I loved to fall asleep holding in my hand a stone, a horse chestnut, or a cone.... And those of which I wearied, or which were ousted by new loves, I threw away, that is to say I cast round for a place to lay them where they would be at peace forever. ... Or I buried them, or threw them into the sea.... But many a modern friend too I have sent to the bottom, weighted with a stone. (MD pp. 248-249)

The objects are personified, clearly substituting for human relationships, which are dreaded. The act of discarding the objects becomes an act of murder as Malone describes the weighting of wooden objects with a stone before casting them into the sea.

The Unnamable is intent upon things throughout the opening pages of his narrative. He wonders whether to include them, but soon discovers he has no choice:

> And things, what is the correct attitude to adopt towards things? And, to begin with, are they necessary? What a question. But I

have few illusions, things are to be expected. ... If a thing turns up, for some reason or another, take it into consideration. Where there are people, it is said, there are things. (U p. 294)

The saying is proved true in the following paragraph when along with Malone comes Malone's hat.

Beckett's characters are foiled even in their relationships with the inanimate, for lost things are found again, or reappear as spectres. The silver knife rest is the best example of this. It first appears in robust reality on Moran's table. Later it is mentioned by Molloy as something he stole from Lousse's house. He says it is silver and describes it as two crosses joined by a bar, but he does not understand its function. Later still it becomes a mere suggestion of what it was before: Malone describes it as "a needle stuck into two corks."

The same kind of metamorphosis occurs with Moran's umbrella which becomes for Malone a stick with one curved end, also reminiscent of the gaffs and sticks which appear periodically throughout the stories and plays. Such reduction of matter parallels the transformation which takes place in the characters themselves: Moran has a very clear notion of his identity and function; the Unnamable certainly does not.

The same transformation occurs in <u>Watt</u>. In this novel we are not interested in <u>what</u> happens, but rather, in <u>how</u> it happens; not 'how' in the sense of 'why' (how it came to pass), but rather, how we are told of events. We are interested in

the shape of events and the shape of their expression, with the tacit understanding that the event might never have occurred except in its expression.

The novel is composed of four parts. The first part deals with Watt's journey to Mr. Knott's house. Through the observations and insipid conversation of a few unexplained characters, we learn of Watt's strange appearance, his bizarre manner of walking, that he borrowed money to buy a single boot, and that he drinks only milk. We also learn that "if there were two things that Watt disliked, one was the moon, and the other was the sun," and that "if there were two things that Watt loathed, one was the earth and the other was the sky." (W pp. 31-34) These two well-balanced statements are strictly clichéd expressions, but what bizarre things to dislike, what expansive things to loathe. Are we to infer that Watt is averse to all things in heaven and earth, or that everything between earth and sky (i.e. men, animals and things) is more acceptable to him?

In these early pages, we also learn something about Watt's health. His skin does not heal well, his blood may be lacking some unnamed substance, and he had, after five or six years, a running sore "of traumatic origin." The very first page of the novel acquaints us with the poor health of an inconsequential character, Mr. Hackett, whose condition makes impossible his remaining motionless for long. Thus from the first does Beckett introduce the context of sickness, which will later help give form to Watt's experience.

We are introduced to a porter at the train station, who,

Sisyphus-like, transports things (i.e. milk cans) back and forth across the platform. Watt bumps into this porter and receives some verbal abuse from him, to which he listens patiently and with humility. The scene is observed by the newsagent and we are given all manner of gratuitous information about this man, including the point that he was of "more than usual acerbity," and suffered from "unremitting mental, moral and perhaps even physical pain." (W p. 23) Of what importance all this is, in a strictly conventional literary sense, remains a mystery, for the man never reappears. However, at a later point Arsene elaborates on and hopes to justify the use of detail as a necessary prelude to arriving at freedom.

To this purpose Arsene interrupts his lengthy narrative concerning his friend, Louit, to assuage a supposed impatience in his listener, Mr. Graves, saying:

> If I tell you all this in such detail, Mr. Graves, the reason is, believe me, that I cannot, much as I would like, and for reasons that I shall not go into, for they are unknown to me, do otherwise. (A p. 180)

He then suggests that Mr. Graves, as a young man, must have used many tools, attended to many details in planting his garden, but that now, as an experienced gardener, he needs only "seed, earth, excrement, water and a stick." Arsene asks how this transformation took place, "until [Mr. Graves] arrived, little by little, at [his] present freedom." This foreshadows, although certainly not intentionally, the transformation that will take place in Beckett's own literature. As his early writing is full of seemingly endless detailing of characters and events, so his later work will be skeletal by comparison. He will continue to attend to detail, but will exclude all but the essential.

There are two more important points which arise in Part One of this novel. Mr. Nixon, a slightly more important character than the newsagent, says some prophetic words. In response to Mr. Hackett's enquiries about Watt, Nixon exclaims, "I tell you nothing is known.... Nothing." Cut of context, as they were undoubtedly meant to be taken, these words formulate a theme for the novel.

Later, when Watt is on the train to Mr. Knott's, he rides with his back to the engine and the narrator remarks, "Already Watt preferred to have his back to his destination," for this is the way Watt will begin to walk when he enters the asylum.

The rest of Part One is given to Watt's first encounter at Mr. Knott's house. Curiously, Watt recognizes the area coming into the station which is his destination. Has he been to Mr. Knott's house before? He somehow manages to enter the house and is spoken to - or at - by Arsene, whose "short statement" accounts for nearly half of Part One of the novel, some twenty-six pages.

Arsene, during his time at Mr. Knott's house, has experienced what Watt will experience there, a dissociation of himself from reality. He describes the phenomenon to Watt:

> Something slipped. ... There is a great alp of sand, one hundred metres high, between the pines and the ocean, and

there in the warm moonless night, when no one is looking, no one listening, in tiny packets of two or three millions the grains slip, all together, a little slip of one or two lines maybe, and then stop, all together, not one missing, and that is all... It was a slip like that I felt, that Tuesday afternoon, millions of little things moving all together out of their old place, into a new one near by, and furtively, as though it were forbidden. (W p. 41)

Consequently, he goes on to explain, his perceptions were altered:

The sun on the wall, since I was looking at the sun on the wall at the time, underwent an instantaneous and I venture to say radical change of appearance. ... At the same time my tobacco-pipe, since I was not eating a banana, ceased so completely from the solace to which I was inured, that I took it out of my mouth to make sure it was not a thermometer, or an epileptic's dental wedge. (W p. 42)

There is a wonderful parallelism here: "the sun on the wall, since I was looking at the sun on the wall at the time"; "my tobacco-pipe, since I was not eating a banana." These sentences are bound not by their form, but by their functions. In the first sentence the dependent clause serves to explain; it explains why he mentions the change in the appearance of the sun on the wall rather than the appearance of any other phenomenon. But in the second sentence, while the clause is offered to us as an explanation in the way the clause above served, the information that he was not eating a banana explains nothing. If anything, it confounds the situation: why would he have been eating a banana? What do we care of all the things he was <u>not</u> doing? The reference to the implements of illness are important here. Already this new perception is associated with sickness, a metaphoric as well as a literal one which will lead Watt to an asylum. The shifting of the sand together, rather than as discrete particles, indicates that the experience will take Watt out of the world of our reality and into that other of timeless, nameless mass.

Watt's first experience on his way to this alien place occurs early in Part Two of the novel. It is the incident of the piano-tuners, which Watt reduces to a series of possible relationships and significances, only to have them dissolve into nothingness.

> This fragility of the outer meaning had a bad effect on Watt, for it caused him to seek for another, for some meaning of what had passed, in the image of how it had passed. (W p. 70)

H. Porter Abbott compares and contrasts this experience in <u>Watt</u> with the experience of Jonathan Harker in Stoker's <u>Dracula</u>.<sup>2</sup> Abbott points out that both protagonists travel on trains to the farthest stop on the line, both stand perplexed in front of the door of a mysterious house, the circumstances which are presented to both men within these houses are equally absurd, and both men end in asylums. The difference is that the nineteenth century hero, Jonathan Harker, though

<sup>2</sup> H. Porter Abbott, "King Laugh: Beckett's Early Fiction," <u>Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism</u>, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1975), pp. 51-62.

confused by his bizarre experience, is completely restored to his original equilibrium by the news that what he thought may have been merely hallucinations were actual ocurrences, were real. With that, Harker is able to face the anarchic absurdities he recalls. "It was the doubt as to the reality of the whole thing that knocked me over," he explains. Watt, on the other hand, is to have no such consolation. He will live on with the knowledge "that nothing had happened, with all the clarity and solidity of something, and that it revisited him in such a way that he was forced to submit to it all over again." (W p. 73)

The real turning point for Watt, the point at which there is no turning back, comes to him a very short time later, as he muses upon Mr. Knott's pots:

> [I]t was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot. ... For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. ... Then, when he turned for reassurance to himself ... he made the distressing discovery that of himself too he could no longer affirm anything that did not seem as false as if he had affirmed it of a stone. (W pp. 78-79)

Watt is no longer able to distinguish between things, nor himself from object.

In his essay, "The Satiric Shape of <u>Watt</u>," John Chalker distinguishes Watt's response to his experience from that of Roquentin in Sartre's <u>Nausea</u> by stating that:

> Roquentin acknowledges the unique reality and horror of the individual experience. But Watt ... denies the individual experience. ... Watt escapes always away from the particular and unique so as to

organise the enchantment of his experiences according to 'the propositions of his teaming syntheses.'<sup>3</sup>

The phrase "the proposition of his teaming syntheses" is from Beckett's <u>Proust</u>: "The creature of habit," writes Beckett, "turns aside from the object that ... resists the propositions of his team of syntheses...." (P p. 23) Watt turns from objects and from man. In his attempt to define himself, he resists the particular and thus moves farther away from the possibility of definition.

Witold Gombrowicz writes that:

Man is made in such a way that he continually has to define himself and continually escape his own definitions. Reality is not about to let itself be completely enclosed in form. Form for its part does not agree with the essence of life. Yet all thought that tries to define the inadequacy of form becomes form in its turn and thus only confirms our tendency towards form.<sup>4</sup>

Watt's reflections on the events at Mr. Watt's house, his words (his 'pillows of words,' as he puts it), are a continued attempt to encompass reality, to give form and thus meaning to his experience. As time continues at Mr. Knott's, Watt grows "used to his loss of species." Talking to Erskine, or rather, Erskine's talking to him would have helped save Watt from this loss of identity; but

<sup>3</sup> John Chalker, "The Satiric Shape of <u>Watt</u>," <u>Beckett</u> <u>the Shape Changer</u>, ed. Worth, p. 36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Witold Gombrowicz, Introduction to <u>Structuralism</u>, ed. Jacques Ehrmann (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1970), p. vii.

Erskine never did, until it was too late. He also spoke to Watt when it was yet too early; that is, during the first weeks he would address Watt on the subject of his duties. But this, we are told, was at a time when "Watt's words had not yet begun to fail him, or Watt's world to become unspeakable." (W p. 82) To be unspeakable means to have no form, for words give form to thought and to the world.

The form of this novel is at once what Coleridge called mechanic and organic. The mechanic form of <u>Watt</u> is the ancient tradition of the frame-story. It is a form which Beckett will come to use often, but which he first uses here. We have a narrative which tells of a man named Watt. But Watt himself tells a story within this narrative of his time at Mr. Knott's, a story which we get second-hand (perhaps). Within that story, too, are several tales, and so the mechanic form itself begins to function organically, shaping itself from within, fusing content and structure as we go deeper into the tale.

One such tale within Watt's story is that of the Lynch clan. This narrative is preceded by a statement of immense contrast. We are first given a lengthy description of the preparation of Mr. Knott's meal. Watt's impression is that the meal has been prepared and served in just this way for a very long time. The segment ends with the statement, no doubt true, that "This arrangement represented a great saving of labour. Coal also was economized." (W p. 86)

On first reading, this concluding sentence sounds quite logical. But in the light of the construction of the rest of the novel with its minute attention to detail, the endless variations on the possibilities of the causes and manner of

events, the simple statement that coal also was economized strikes us as absurd. <u>How</u> was coal economized? Was there a system at work to save coal as intricate and extensive as that constructed to ensure that Mr. Knott's leftovers would not go to waste? This latter concern for economy is the subject of speculation for a full twenty-six pages: ten pages describing how dogs might be kept for the purpose, interrupted by eleven pages on the Lynch clan who are the keepers of the dogs, concluding with five more pages on the dogs themselves. By contrast, the brief remark about coal reminds us that we are in a world of extremes.

The episode of the Lynch clan is an extreme of sickness. Every member of the family - five generations of them - is maimed or diseased. Collectively, they constitute a grotesque for the family of man. In describing them, even in their most repugnant states of illness, Beckett counters the grimness of the subject with humour. When Sam's wife, Liz, gave birth, she became healthier than she had been during her forty years and twenty pregnancies. Her good health and high spirits ironically presage her death. Ann's two children are healthy and resilient at birth; they are fine, bouncing babies. Beckett ridicules the cliched expression by telling us that "they did not remain fine very long, nor did they continue to bounce." (W p. 103) Sam, of course, is the most comical member of the clan. His affliction is probably the most serious, but he does the most with what he has left to him. A paralytic from the waist up and from the knees down, he roams the countryside, "committing adultery

until it (is) time to go home to his supper, after which he [is] at his wife's disposal." (W p. 104) This section ends with a wonderfully satiric passage:

> But once Watt had grasped, in its complexity, the mechanism of this arrangment, how the food came to be left, and the dog available, and the two to be united, then it interested him no more, and he enjoyed a comparative peace of mind, in this connexion. Not that for a moment Watt supposed that he had penetrated the forces at play, in this particular instance, or even perceived the forms that they upheaved, or obtained the least useful information concerning himself, or Mr. Knott, for he did not. But he had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words, for his head. (W p. 115)

This is satiric because although it took Watt this amount of time and energy to appreciate the system of dogs and leftovers, the reader has long since ceased being the least interested. What keeps us reading is the language; not the "forces at play," which Watt supposes even now he has not penetrated, but the "forms that they upheaved." And it is satiric because how did Watt come to know all this? He "pieced it together from the remarks let fall, every now and then, in the evening, by the twin dwarfs Art and Con." (W p. 109) Rather, let us say it is fabrication, information heard and misheard, pieced together by a man whose perceptions and comprehension are becoming admittedly less and less reliable. The names of the dwarfs, too, might indicate that we have been "conned" by the "artist."

By the end of Part Two, Watt is "sicker" and "aloner."

He despairs of ever learning more about himself or Mr. Knott. The next morning he is moved upstairs by the removal of Erskine and the arrival of Arthur.

We come to learn that Part Three is actually the fourth and final part, but let us take them as Beckett presents them. In Part Three we learn of the existence of Sam, who identifies himself as the narrator of this tale. Sam is a lunatic who meets Watt in the asylum. Sam hears this strange tale from a very sick man in confused sequence and in language which continually changes and which he has continually to learn. A look at just one of these transitions will illustrate the problem:

> The following is an example of Watt's manner, at this period: <u>Ot bro, lap rulb, krad klub.</u> <u>Ot murd,</u> <u>wol fup, wol fup.</u> <u>Ot niks, sorg sam,</u> <u>sorg sam.</u> These were sounds that at first, though we walked breast to breast, made little or no sense to me. ... Thus I missed I suppose much I presume of great interest touching I suspect the second stage of the second or closing period of Watt's stay in Mr. Knott's house. (W p. 163)

And so it goes every time Watt changes his pattern of speech. We, like Arsene, like Watt, come to learn that we can trust no knowledge. This is why I said earlier that some of what happens occurs only in its expression. Sam, or Watt, is fabricating it.

The relationship of Sam and Watt is in part explained by the position they assume when they speak. Sam describes it: Then I turned him around, until he faced me. Then I placed his hands, on my shoulders, his left hand on my right shoulder, and his right hand on my left shoulder. Then I placed my hands on his shoulders... Then I took a single pace forward, with my left leg, and he a single pace back, with his right leg (he could scarcely do otherwise). ... And so we paced together between the fences, I forwards, he backwards.... (W p. 161)<sup>5</sup>

To meet, they crawl through their respective fences like Alice through the looking-glass. They pace to and fro in an unvisited place, a strange and bounded little world. Their respective positions make each a mirror image of the other. Sam even suggested this metaphor when he described Watt approaching him backwards and then turning and facing Sam:

> [I] felt as though I were standing before a great mirror, in which my garden was reflected, and my fence, and I, and the very birds tossing in the wind.... (W p. 157)

The image of the mirror suggests that the two men are one; that Watt is a figment of Sam's imagination, or perhaps that Sam is Watt's alter-ego who appears to him while he is in the asylum. After all, the name Sam is merely a slightly abbreviated 'same.' Watt's mirror-image language and behaviour also supports this idea. Although Watt's language is never strictly speaking a mirror-image, and although it

<sup>5</sup> This attitude, of course, reminds us of Dante's damned.

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keeps altering, the metaphor is helpful in establishing the relationship between Watt and Sam. $^{6}$ 

Watt's narrative of what happened to him at Mr. Knott's house is interrupted in Part Three by a thirty-page narrative which is the story of a Mr. Ernest Louit, a not-so-earnest student. This narrative teems with variations and details. It is told by Arthur to Mr. Graves, the gardener, one evening while Watt is nearby and Mr. Knott is moving about the lawn. Arthur relates this story the better to illustrate a point he is making about the present difficulty of obtaining a substance called Bando in Ireland. The story illustrates nothing of the sort and ends only when Arthur seems to lose interest in it. Arthur has not actually lost interest in it; he stops talking because he wishes to return to the house, "to Mr. Knott's house, to its mysteries, to its fixity. For he had been absent longer from them, than he could bear." (W p. 198)

The syntax of this final sentence demonstrates that language, too, has its mysteries, its fixities. Beckett continually rearranges idioms for us. Idiomatically this sentence would read, "For he had been absent from them longer than he could bear." That Beckett adopted this construction for his English translation indicates his continued and conscious effort to upheave language.

<sup>b</sup> I will use this metaphor in Chapter Seven as well, to discuss the relationships among the narrators of the trilogy. Hugh Kenner calls the entire book

a raid of syntax upon chaos, establishing what syntax can establish, and rhythm, and pattern, and precision of naming, amid a pervasive incompetence, a climate of hearsay, and a tendency of th- data to shift.

This is a fair appraisal. This novel's predecessor, <u>Murphy</u>, was of that other world, its chapters well-defined, discrete particles, alternating between Dublin and London, Celia's flat and the Mercyseat, in a logical, albeit hectic, sequence. With <u>Watt</u>, Beckett's fiction takes on a new form; no longer is it divided neatly into chapters, but is rather composed of "Parts," sometimes in seemingly random sequence; the four parts of <u>Watt</u> are ordered one, two, four, three; the four parts of the trilogy - a further disordering of form - are given two, one, three, four. The words which make a pillow for Watt's head serve only to ease a disturbance, as he puts it, but do not, and can not, explain the ineffable, express the inexpressible.

After the Louit story, the remainder of Part Three is given to informing us of Mr. Knott's dress and habits. We are, in fact, given more information than we would like, but in spite of the details we receive, Mr. Knott remains a mystery to us and to Watt. This endless information informs us of nothing, except in a negative way; that is, Watt learns that nothing can be known and from this a certain tranquility develops.

7 Kenner, A Reader's Guide, p. 77

Watt became ataraxic upstairs with Mr. Knott. He was serene when he left and remained serene with two minor infractions: the first is when he is outside Knott's grounds and he bursts briefly into tears; the second is when he is on the platform at the station and sees a vision and desires to know if the figure is of a man or a woman, a nun or a priest. These emotions are soon to pass, however, and Watt resumes his life of detachment.

Watt's vision occurs in Part Four. He sees this figure on the highway he has just traversed. We are told, "Watt seemed to regard, for some obscure reason, this particular hallucination as possessing exceptional interest." This interests us for two reasons. In the first place it is interesting because it informs us that Watt is guite used to having hallucinations or visions, just as in the beginning we realize that he is accustomed to hearing inner voices as he listens to the mixed choir in his head. It also interests us because concurrent with this vision, prophetic words form somewhere within Watt, like a message written on a wall: "Watt felt them suddenly glow in the dark place, and go out, the words, The only cure is diet." (W p. 225) One can see the image of these words lighting up as in neon. Perhaps not otherwise are Truths revealed, but the message is anticlimactic. This message is in the language of sickness, offering a cure. In contrast to the situation, their meaning first of all strikes us as funny, but also suggests the gravity of Watt's ailment. It is not an ailment in the usual sense and does not have a cure, or at least not as

simple a cure as diet. These words suggest a literal, mundane disease; Watt's sickness is metaphysical.

Some of Watt's symptoms, of course, are familiar to us as symptoms of schizophrenia. Watt's perceptions are awry: he has an hallucination, he smells a peculiar odour which becomes stronger and weaker, he sees a disembodied mouth and hears its voice and knows its history. This voice is particularly striking. It comes mysteriously to the reader; a single paragraph interrupts the description of the waiting room which Watt has just entered. Out of newhere come the words: "Whispering it told, the mouth, a woman's, the thin lips sticking and unsticking...." This mouth creates an eerie mood and suggests the image of the future theatre piece, Not I. "The woman's name had been Price"; presumably she is dead. She tells Watt about the waiting room, but he has heard her voice before: "He was not displeased to hear her voice again.... " The image is both macabre and comic, for this woman is reduced to a mere disembodied mouth ("pale bows of mucus") and voice, and yet we are told something of her past, a life. In a very comic way we are told, "some thirty-five years earlier she has shot, with colours flying, the narrows of the menopause." (W p. 233)

Just before Watt loses consciousness, thanks to the high-spirited Mr. Nolan, he experiences what seems like another hallucination, but is not. John Fletcher analyzes the experience by reiterating that Watt lost his innocence at Knott's, that he realizes there that the world is full of uncertainty and "only great patience will resolve some of its enigmas. He therefore waits, in the waiting room, for a chair and a picture to materialize from the chaos of phenomena...."<sup>8</sup>

These objects in the waiting room are personified: the chair is called a "companion"; Watt "came to know this chair, so well, that in the end he knew it better than many a chair he had sat on, or stood on...." (W p. 235) The picture is given life: it "emerges, without haste." Both objects are transitory, "[they] had not been always here, would perhaps not be always here." (W p. 236) They are mutable, as are all objects.

Frederick J. Hoffman writes in his book <u>The Mortal No</u> that modern literature is concerned with the "density of objects." He observes that time has come to be marked by the changes which occur in objects, that time is now spatial:

> As the belief in immortality (which is that special aspect of eternity that belongs to me) becomes less and less certain, more attention is paid to time, and achieves a spatial quality. Instants of time become spatial objects in a scheme of succession; it is their spatial quality that attracts and not their sequential nature. ... If death is a wall and not a doorway, the pace of experience diminishes, the attention to time is translated into an absorption in space, and every detail of change is noted and treasured. Instead of a metaphysics dependent upon an infinite extension of the given, we get an ontology of objects and experiences. Death turns us toward life and forces us to admire or cherish it (even though we may despair of it as well), to

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John Fletcher, The Novels of Samuel Beckett (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 85.

begrudge the passing of time (which is signified by changes occurring in objects) and eventually to despair of conclusions.

This final point is certainly true in Beckett's work. In "Text VIII" of <u>Texts for Nothing</u>, the scribe writes, "time has turned into space." In the short work <u>Enough</u> the two travelers keep "time" with a podometer: "We did not keep tally of the days. If I arrive at ten years it is thanks to our podometer." (NK p. 158) That is, they measure time by the space, the distance they travelled. Pim, in <u>How It Is</u>, <u>crawls</u> through "<u>un temps enorme</u>," translated as "vast tracts of time," investing time with a spatial quality. In <u>Watt</u>, the narrator remarks on the passage of time by musing on the changes which will take place in Watt's greatcoat and hat:

> It was to be observed that the colours, on the one hand of this coat, on the other of this hat, drew closer and closer, the one to the other, with every passing lustre. Yet how different had been their beginnings! The one green! The other yellow! So it is with time, that lightens what is dark, that darkens what is light. It was to be expected that, once met, they would not stay, no, but continue, each as it must, to age, until the hat was green, the coat yellow, and then through the last circles paling, deepening, swooning cease, the hat to be a hat, the coat to be a coat. For so it is with time. (W p. 217)

Beckett's art reflects this principle. Life is mutable and an art which tries to capture this must also be so.

<sup>9</sup> Frederick J. Hoffman, <u>The Mortal No: Death in the</u> <u>Modern Imagination</u> (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1964), p. <u>4</u>. The Beckett canon is full of experimentation, shifting forms and style which, like <u>Watt</u>, attempt to be that which they express. These experiments are not always entirely successful and for this reason the work which Beckett began next remained unpublished for twenty-four years.

## Chapter Five Mercier and Camier

In her article in the <u>Journal of Beckett Studies</u>, Lois Friedberg-Dobry points out that Mercier and Camier begin their journey on St. Macarius' Day.<sup>1</sup> Although Friedberg-Dobry proceeds with a discussion of <u>Waiting for Godot</u>, her discovery can better be applied to the novel from which it comes. Macarius, in the Greek, means 'happy.' This could be an ironic reference to the outlook of Mercier and Camier, as Friedberg-Dobry suggests, or it could indicate that we are about to enter a playful world, a world in which something only seems to happen. Mercier and Camier only seem to take a journey; the narrator only seems to be accompanying them.

The journey these two men take is a journey to selfhood. As we saw in the previous chapter, nothing remains the same, all things transform. In the world of inanimate things, these changes, though sometimes mysterious, record the passage of time. But in the world of people, change can frustrate the search for self. Play, in the form of ritual and repetition, can give form and stability to the mutable.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Lois Friedberg-Dobry, "Four Saints in Two Acts: A Note on the Saints Marcarius and the Canonization of Gogo and Didi," Journal of Beckett Studies, No. 6, Autumn 1980, pp. 117-119.

In her article, Friedberg-Dobry talks of two Saints Macarius, the Elder and the Younger. She cites a tale from Butler's <u>Lives of the Saints</u> about a journey these two men made together. On their way the two travellers encountered some Roman soldiers. One officer asked them why they were so cheerful in the face of their extreme poverty. The Younger answered, "You have reason to call us happy, for this is our name. But if we are happy in despising the world, are not you miserable who live slaves to it?" The officer was so moved by this that he gave all he had to the poor and lived thereafter as a hermit.

The two travellers, Mercier and Camier also get rid of their worldly possessions. They abandon their bicycle, they forget their umbrella, and their sack disappears. Camier methodically empties his pockets in a kind of ritual of renunciation: he tears out, crumples up and throws away individually the leaves of his notebook; he withdraws a large envelope from his pocket and throws away individually the items in it; he then throws away the envolope. Left with nothing but the raincoat and the clothes on their backs, they decide to get rid of the raincoat as well.

Another analogy to the Saints Macarius found in the couple Mercier and Camier is their vow of abstinence. The travellers have only just begun their journey when Camier suggests having a drink. When Mercier reminds him of their agreement to abstain, Camier responds, "I don't call drink ... a quick nip to put some life in us." They stop at the first pub. Whether they agreed to abstain from sex as well, we do

not know, but Camier is active at Helen's and late in the novel they ask directions to the nearest brothel. These, perhaps, are the first indications that their journey will ultimately fail.

In their thoughts of abstinence and their renunciation of possessions, the two wayfarers are preparing themselves, however ineffectually, for something. After the final renunciation of the raincoat, Camier says, "So let our watchword be-." Mercier offers "Seek?" (MC p. 66) One of the functions of the early allusion to the Saints Macarius is to create a tone of religious expectation. Religious language is used throughout this work and Mercier's word suggests the Biblical axiom, "Seek and ye shall find." The irony, of course, is that the one action does not necessarily follow the other. Indeed, Mercier and Camier fail in their quest. But what is it they are looking for? The religious language suggests that they seek salvation. In fact, the word salvation is used by Camier when he speaks of his disquiet over the loss of the sack: he has an intuition "that the sack contains something essential to [their] salvation." (MC p. 59) It is not, however, salvation in a religious sense which is the goal of their quest, but rather the salvation of knowledge of the self.

Eric Levy writes that this novel is primarily about subjectivity. Mercier and Camier need each other to differentiate themselves from others, from things, and from each other. Moving from the general to the specific, they must first acknowledge their dissimilarity to things, a task which faces several of the Beckett heroes and which is not as easily managed as at first it seems. Recognizing their likeness to others, they must then each differentiate themselves from all others, using the single other as representative of all. Levy concludes, "Each makes the other's relation to the world a little more secure."<sup>2</sup> ("We would never have hit on it alone, said Mercier." (MC p. 94))

This, to me, seems the best explanation of the relationship between the two travellers. Ruby Cohn has suggested that the relationship is rather that of mind and body, with Camier representing the body and Mercier the mind.<sup>3</sup> But, as John Fletcher points out, this identification is too neat.<sup>4</sup> It is true that Camier is the one who goes for food and it is he who complains of his physical ailments (a point neither Cohn nor Fletcher mentions), but, as Fletcher reminds us, Mercier has a wife and children and it is Mercier who "describes himself as the wreck and his friend as the tugboat....<sup>5</sup>

Neither Mercier nor Camier maintains the dominant role. The result of one of their early consultations explains this shifting of strength and dependence:

2 Eric P. Levy, <u>Beckett and the Voices of Species</u> (Totowa, New Jersey: Gill and MacMillan, Barnes and Noble, 1980), p. 41.

<sup>3</sup> Ruby Cohn, <u>The Comic Gamut</u> (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1962), p. 97.

<sup>4</sup> Fletcher, <u>The Novels of Samuel Beckett</u>, p. 116.

5 ibid.

It so chanced that Mercier, up to now, had shown himself the live wire, Camier the dead weight. The reverse was to be expected at any moment. On the less weak let the weaker always lean, for the course to follow. They might conceivably be valiant together. That would be the day. Or the great weakness might overtake them simultaneously. (MC p. 19)

The responsibility for their final parting, too, remains purposefully ambiguous, as we shall see.

Camier's physical ailments include a cyst, for which he had been carrying sulfamides in the sack, and which he says is "Dormant ... but under the surface mischief is brewing." (MC p. 30) But Mercier, too, is sick. His worst ills are those of the spirit, but in one soliloquy while Camier is away getting sandwiches, he admits of physical ills as well: "...I am Mercier, alone, ill, in the cold, the wet, half mad, no way on, no way back." (MC p. 62) When Camier returns, Mercier vomits the sandwich he has eaten, a graphic illustration of his physical and spiritual condition.

In this, as in Beckett's other work, most of the characters - even the incidental ones - are sick or maimed. First we meet the venal ranger who threatens to force the two travellers from their shelter in the park. His pain is described in excruciating detail:

> He suffered torment with his hip, the pain shot down his buttock and up his rectum deep into the bowels and even as far north as the pyloric valve, culminating as a matter of course in uretro-scrotal spasms with quasi-incessant longing to micturate. (MC p. 14)

Mr. Madden, the man on the train, has no nose. He says,

quite rightly, "People love you less when your snout starts to crumble." (MC p. 40) Mr. Madden is a rather sick character in another way as well. Possibly foreshadowing Mr. Lambert whose only joy is in killing pigs, Madden fails at all he tries to do except in slaughtering the animals of the farm. He thus becomes butcher's boy, poulterer's boy, knacker's boy, undertaker's man, and sexton, "one corpse on top of another," he says wryly. He was also apugilist and that most heinous of rural criminals, a barn-burner.

Patrick, the man who works at the inn, is a noncharacter. He never appears, but things are said about him. He is reported "out sick" and later we learn that he is dead. This incidental passing of a life is a grim reminder of mortality, but is not without humour. The manager and the barman, ignoring the plight of Mercier and Camier who want to be shown to a room, discuss Patrick, whose absence has just been noticed by the manager. Mercier becomes impatient and cries, "A pox on your Patrick! ... Do you want to finish me?" (MC p. 47) It is a cruel irony that Mercier's curse proves true.

But sickness, in this world, is cause for laughter, as Mercier explains to Camier. When Camier complains of his cyst, Mercier chides him for lacking "a sense of proportion." Camier says he does not see the connection, whereupon Mercier explains it to him:

> 'Just so,' said Mercier, 'you never see the connexion. When you fear for your cyst think of your fistula. And when you tremble for your fistula consider you chancre. This method holds equally for what is called happiness. Take one for example

entirely free from pain all over, both his body and the other yoke. Where can he turn for relief? Nothing simpler. To the thought of annihilation. Thus, whatever the conjuncture, nature bids us smile, if not laugh. And now, let us look things calmly in the face.' After a moment's silence Camier began to laugh. Mercier in due course was tickled too. Then they laughed long together, clutching each other by the shoulders so as not to collapse. (MC p. 58)

Apart from the delightful visual image created here, there are several things to consider in this important passage, making a connection between sickness and happiness. First is the reference to the "body and the other yoke." The other yoke (joke?), of course, is the mind, which here is admitted as having its share of pain, the kind which Mercier suffers as he muses on "the horrors of existence." (MC p. 22) If such a state as Mercier describes is possible - complete health in body and mind - then why should annihilation be cause for smiling? Because just as with pain, where there is always to be considered the possibility of further and increase pain as well as release from pain, so with happiness there is not only the possibility of continued happiness, but also the fear of the end of happiness. Thus annihilation, that is, freedom from both pain and happiness, is the end sought.

Sickness is used, too, as a metaphor to describe the reaction Mercier receives as he enter a pub:

[An acute observer might have been put] in mind of those walking sick who still all speech where they pass, dispel the body and fill the soul with dread, pity, anger, mirth, disgust. Yes, when you outrage nature you need be mighty careful if you don't want to hear the view-halloo or suffer the succour of some repugnant hand. (MC p. 81)

There is an irony in the words "when you outrage nature." The sick and the maimed are, in fact, victims of nature's own outrage. The image of sickness stays with us until the end of the book when the view which Mercier chides Camier into sharing with him offers a "grim pile," a hospital for diseases of the skin and mucous membrane. Mercier remarks, "Not all that howling this evening." (MC p. 121)

Mercier is drawn to the canal because for him it has always represented a means of escape. Symbolic of the River Styx, the canal is mentioned several times throughout their journey. When the two men decide to get rid of their raincoat, Camier calls it a cerecloth, suggesting that it is yet too soon for their end, that they have much journeying to do before their final rest. Thus, they leave the coat on the bank of the canal to decompose. The coat is personified: "It looked flayed. Flitters of chequered lining, its ghostly tartan rending to behold, still clung to the shoulders." (MC p. 65) Its pockets contain "Life in short." This openair burial of the ghostly raincoat is both an end and a beginning. It marks the end of the first half of the novel, at the end of Chapter Four, approximately sixty pages into the book, and marks the beginning of the final four chapters and next sixty-odd pages. It also marks the second phase of the journey of Mercier and Camier.

As always, the language which Beckett uses reflects the form of the idea. The inability of Mercier and Camier to

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complete their journey to selfhood is mirrored by their inability even to say the word journey. Both Camier and Mercier fall victim to this inadequacy. First, Camier proposes a toast: "'Here's to you. ... And to the success of our\_\_\_\_\_.' But this was a toast he could not complete." (MC p. 83) Neither could he complete his journey. Shortly after this, Mercier has the same difficulty:

> Mercier said, 'Let us resume our .' At a loss he gestured, with his free hand, towards his legs and those of his companion. There was a silence. Then they resumed that indescribable process not unconnected with their legs. (MC p. 88)

The process, though not unconnected with their legs, is not entirely dependent on their legs, either.

Mercier continually remarks that he is tempted to commit suicide. As he and Camier make their way towards the canal, he suggests that the whim may take them to throw themselves in. At Helen's, he refuses both bed and couch, saying he will lie on the floor and "wait for dawn." He continues:

> 'Scenes and faces will unfold before my gaze, the rain of the skylight sound like claws and night rehearses its colours. The longing will take me to throw myself out of the window, but I'll master it.' He repeated, in a roar, 'I'll master it!' (MC p. 28)

In such language and intonation, his wish is artifice. Again later he speaks of suicide only for effect: "I'd throw myself out of the window if I wasn't afraid I might sprain my ankle." (MC p. 41)

But Mercier is right in suggesting that some kind of violence is a necessary part of the discovery of selfhood. Just as we are rent from our mother's body at birth, some blood must be shed, some violent act must take place for the rebirth of the self. Twice in this novel such an act takes place. Early in the novel a woman is hit by a motor vehicle and lies bleeding in the street. Mercier and Camier rush to the scene and are "rewarded" by the vision of her suffering. The language on this page is overtly religious, offering familiar imagery. Camier has just complained that he is unable to "resurrect" Mercier, who is regressing ("I'll start crawling any minute.") After the accident, Mercier feels much better: "He was in fact transfigured." Camier marks the lesson they have learned from this: "Never to despair ... or lose faith in life." (MC p. 33) Such language suggests the ritual sacrifice of one for the salvation of others.

Later, with the brutal beating to death of the policemen, a further opportunity exists for the two men to be reborn to themselves, but they "strove in vain ... to grasp the full consequences for them of what had chanced." Instead, they are tormented by "a pelting of insatiable blows" in their skulls. These "endocranian blows," as they are called in the chapter summary, are ghostly echoes of what the policeman had just suffered, but lead to nothing for the salvation of our two friends.

John Pilling has commented on Beckett's use of the eighteenth century literary convention of interpolation. He cites three functions of the interpolated story. Very

briefly, they are to provide a new character with a background and an individuality; to add a complication to the plot or to unravel one already established; and to give the author-narrator a "breather" and a "chance to illustrate some moral speedily and elegantly."<sup>6</sup> Pilling contends that Beckett's interpolations "never quite do any of these things."<sup>7</sup> However, at least one interpolation in <u>Mercier and Camier</u> gives the lie to this interpretation. Pages seventy-six and seventy-seven reveal a philosophical concept - a "moral," if you will - quite elegantly. A passer-by with a watch is conjured up to illustrate the point:

> Ask the hour of a passer-by and he'll throw it at you over his shoulder at a venture and hurry on. But you may be easy in your mind, he is not far wrong who every few minutes consults his watch, sets it by official astronomic time, makes his reckonings, wonders how on earth to fit in all he has to do before the endless day comes to an end. (MC pp. 76-77)

There is pootry in these final lines which berate us for our petty preoccupations. It is characteristic of Beckett's style that the interpolated passage is named by the narrator "an attack of wind," and equally characteristic that the wisdom and beauty of it is revealed through a contradiction in terms: "before the endless day comes to an end."

Later Beckett borrows yet again a convention from

<sup>6</sup> Pilling, <u>Samuel Beckett</u>, pp. 40-41. 7 <u>ibid</u>., p. 41 another century. Chapter Seven opens in the attitude of a nineteenth century novel:

A road still carriageable climbs over the high moorland. It cuts across vast turfbogs, a thousand feet above sea-level, two thousand if you prefer. It leads to nothing any more. A few ruined forts, a few ruined dwellings. The sea is not far, just visible beyond the valleys dipping eastward.... (MC p. 97)

This language continues for a further twenty-eight lines. It ends abruptly with the unconventional words, "end of descriptive passage." Of course we have known all along that this is not a nineteenth century novel, particularly since the narrator has given us our preference between one thousand and two thousand feet above sea-level. But not until these final words do we realize that the narrator has been merely amusing himself. Like Caravaggio, who painted grandly all manner of fruits, vegetables, metal, glass and fabric to show his critics and admirers contemptuously just how well he could paint these things, to show off his great skill because they were more interested in skill than in genious, this story-teller shows us he can be conventional in the best manner, that his unconventional form is a matter of choice, of genius.

H. Porter Abbott suggests that the whole of Mercier and Camier is an amusement for Beckett. He writes:

[Mercier et Camier] is simply an effort to carry out a variety of simultaneous exercises. (Beckett] uses a new language, extends certain disintegrative techniques, revives conventions from <u>Murphy</u>, tests out the couple before Godot, and experiments

with the kind of symmetricality so prevalent in the work of the sixties. ... <u>Mercier et Camier</u> could well have been what it appears to be: an amusement, the kind of pastime perhaps that the later narrators find themselves so desperately in need of.

Although Abbott goes too far in reducing this novel to a mere exercise, the point is well expressed that this novel demonstrates "the formal potential of amusement and play."

The language of the novel, of course, is often playful. It is full of puns. In the opening description of the park we are told that the beech will pine: "[The beech tree's] days were numbered, it would not cease henceforward to pine and rot till finally removed, bit by bit." (MC p. 10) Later Mercier remarks on the many decorations on the ranger's uniform and asks Camier, rhetorically, "Do you realize the gallons of diarrhoea that represents?" Camier responds, "Darkly ... as only one so costive can." (MC p. 16)

There are also exchanges which recall stage burlesque routines, as when Mercier says, "Speak up ... I'm not deaf," (MC p. 85) or the following:

I should like to ask some simple questions, said Camier. ... I don't mean that kind, said Camier. What kind so? said Mercier. This is looking up.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> H. Porter Abbott, <u>The Fiction of Samuel Beckett</u>: <u>Form and Effect</u> (London: University of California Press, 1973), p. 91.

You'll see, said Camier. First, what news of the sack? I hear nothing, said Mercier. The sack, cried Camier, where is the sack? (MC pp.87-88)

Of course, the ambiguity lies in Mercier's response that he hears nothing. Does it mean that he has heard no news of the sack, or that he heard nothing of Camier's question? Camier thinks the latter and shouts his question at him.

Beckett's interest in play techniques is in evidence throughout his work. Most critics point to the influence which the burlesque clowns have had on the antics of Beckett's characters, as well as on their language. More importantly, however, the archetypal patterns found in the play of children give form to both the language and ideas of much of Beckett's play. By child's play I mean unlearned and unstructured forms of play which we can distinguish as fundamental patterns. These involve play as repetition, which is the process of ritual and exploration.

Like some of the play of children, this novel is simple, but not puerile. There are complex things and deep mysteries taking place beneath the surface of events. Consider the appearance of Mr. Conaire. He bursts upon the scene larger than life, a loquacious, obtrusive presence. He has come from nowhere and returns to nowhere. Unexplained, he seeks Camier with whom he has an appointment at this very place where Camier has come only by chance. Mr. Gall, the manager of the inn, is familiar to Mercier from his dreams. Mercier calls him his "nightmare pal." This, too, is unexplained. Perhaps Mercier is mistaken, for we have read, "Mr. Gall had never appeared to him thus, but always erect and smiling and radiant," (MC p. 46) and later the manager is addressed as Mr. Gast.

The name Gall we know from <u>Watt</u>, but he does not fit the description. Of course Watt himself has altered so as to be "unrecognizable." (MC p. 111) Such mysteries are not conventional in adult literature, but are accepted without question in the fairy tales of children; giants simply exist and are where they should be even if only by chance; dreams do come true and people do inexplicably change shape.

Consider the following exchanges:

Don't you wish we could get out of this place? X: Yeah, 'cause it has yucky things. Y: X: Yeah. 'Cause it's fishy, too, 'cause it has fishes. And it's snakey, too, 'cause it has snakes. And it's beary, too, 'cause it has bears. And it's hatty, too, 'cause it has hats. Where's the hats? (X ends the game.) Y: X: Υ: X: (X puts a toy car under a three-legged stool which has a magnifying glass in its centre.) That's the biggest car I ever saw! Y: (X looks in the glass and laughs.) (X fetches a hat and places it under the glass, looking expectantly at Y.) That ('s) the biggest hat I ever saw! Y: (X discovers a stuffed snake and holds it up.) (draws back in exaggerated alarm) What's that? Y: (laughs at Y's pretended fear) It's a snake. Χ: Υ: Do it again.  $(X holds up the snake.)^9$ 

Suggestive of exchanges between Beckett's couples, these vignettes are actually recorded sessions of children at play.

Here we see the importance of repetition to the play of

<sup>9</sup> Jerome S. Bruner, Alison Jolly, Kathy Sylva, ed., <u>Play - Its Role in Development and Evolution</u> (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1976), pp. 577-581. children. In this way, play can function on two levels. First, repetition can lend a security to the unknown or unpleasant. John Fletcher points out that the behaviour we expect from Beckett's characters becomes ritualized through repetition. He writes:

> One therefore expects, with the same assured anticipation with which one greets the clown, the Beckett hero, in every tale, to execute certain ritual gestures, to submit to certain regular happenings.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, when Krapp peels his first banana and throws the skin on the floor, we are fairly certain that he will slip on it as we have seen the slap-stick comedian do a hundred times
before. We are not disappointed in our expectations. The rain, the hats, the greatcoats, the bicycles, the familiar gestures appear to us again and again.

With <u>Mercier and Camier</u>, too, we are not disappointed. On their final night together, the two men are making their way back to some ruins where they will spend the night:

> Soon falls began to enter into play, now Camier accompanying Mercier (in his fall), now the reverse, and now the two collapsing simultaneously, as one man, without preconcertation and in perfect interindependency They did not immediately rise, having practised in their youth the noble art, but rise in the end they did. And even at the worst moments their hands kept faith, although no knowing now which gave and which received the clasp, so confounded the confusion at this stage. (MC pp. 102-103)

10 Fletcher, The Novels of Samuel Beckett, p. 128.

Here is the perfect expression of child's play ('practised in their youth the noble art'). That their hands remained clasped symbolizes the sense of security derived from this familiar game.

But the play of children can also be anarchic. Convention is dashed, chance reigns. This is the aspect of the burlesque which most attracts Beckett. In a review of Sean O'Casey's "Windfalls," Beckett praised O'Casey's farces, saying:

> Mr. O'Casey is a master of knockabout in this very serious and honourable sense that he discerns the principle of disintegration in even the most complacent solidities, and activates it to their explosion.11

In the world of Mercier and Camier, no rules apply. There is no reason for them to go on, nor no reason to go back. The "principle of disintegration" leads them to the point at which they part. That evening they discuss where to spend the night, whether to find ruins to sleep in or to walk until they drop from fatigue. Mercier quips that their choice is now between "ruin and collapse." (MC p. 101)

Hugh Kenner writes that this novel is Beckett's first tribute to dissolution. It is not abandoned, he contends, but rather, it "artfully runs down."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, there is a symmetry within this novel which supports this notion of the way in which the work is complete. The ending of the novel

12 Kenner, <u>A Reader's Guide</u>, pp. 90-91.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Samuel Beckett, "The Essential and the Incidental," <u>The Bookman</u>, Christmas 1934, p. 111

reflects the beginning. In the opening scene, two dogs sharing a shelter with Mercier and Camier are stuck together after coitus. They are driven into the rain against their will by the ranger who thus inadvertantly does them a service, for they will become unstuck by the rain. When Mercier and Camier ultimately take different roads, the narrator says, "Unstuck at last!" The words recall the image of the two dogs. But unlike the two dogs, who received satisfaction from their temporary union, Mercier and Camier failed to achieve the goal for which they were united.

Of course the chapter summaries help to create a sense of continuous form. And a further symmetry is achieved through the comedy of errors which results in their parting, just as had occurred in their meeting: each seeks the other in a place where he was, but is no longer. Both meeting and parting are full of misunderstanding.

They meet, as if by chance; they part, again haphazardly. They seem to be accomplishing something, but in the end have failed to accomplish anything. Perhaps, as Levy suggests, death is the only truly subjective event, the only sure route to the true self:

> Death is the unique event in this redundant universe, the sole thing that, happening but once to a given individual, can confirm his individuality. All other acts and occasions are cyclic, recurring endlessly, varying only according to local circumstances. 13

13 Levy, p. 41.

In the following chapter, we will see how the narrator of the <u>Nouvelles</u> strives to end and thus moves one step closer to establishing an identity.

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## Chapter Six

"The Expelled," "The Calmative" and "The End"

While working on <u>Mercier et Camier</u> in 1946, Beckett wrote and published a short piece entitled <u>Suite</u>, his first fiction in French. This was followed by three more short works: "L'Expulse," "Premier amour" and "Le Calmant," written in that order.<sup>1</sup> "The Expelled," "The Calmative" and "The End" (as <u>Suite</u> was to be named) were finally published together, in that order, in 1955 (French, in English in 1967) under the title <u>Nouvelles</u>. <u>First Love</u> was published separately and not until 1970 in French and 1973 in English.

As with <u>Watt</u> and <u>Molloy</u>, the several parts of the <u>Nouvelles</u> appear out of chronological order. For ease of discussion, I will therefore first deal with "The Expelled," then "The End," and finally with "The Calmative."

Just as Mercier and Camier began their journey several times - returning to Helen's house, leaving again - the narrator of the <u>Nouvelles</u>, has many opportunities to begin anew. As the first part opens, we witness him being thrown out of his home, by a family, presumably, who can no longer tolerate

<sup>1</sup> I have this information from Fletcher, who has it from Beckett. <u>The Novels</u>, p. 91.

his bizarre, if unobtrusive, and unclean habits. He tells us quite straightforwardly that this event was "neither the cradle nor the grave of anything whatever." He continues, "Or rather it resembled so many other cradles, so many other graves, that I'm lost." (NK p. 11) The latter statement has more truth in it, for beginnings and endings are what his life seems to be about.<sup>2</sup>

The ejection from his house corresponds, of course, to the ejection from the womb. His preoccupation from then on is to return to a surrogate for the womb, some place where he might remain undisturbed until ready for the grave. He finds a cab which suits his purpose, being both womb-like and coffin-like, but can not remain undisturbed because of the inordinate kindness of the cabman. Later he is kicked out of an asylum - ironically called a charitable institution - where he has been cared for, and warned never to return there. He finds a room in a basement which is guite perfect until he is made to leave to make room for a pig. He finds shelter in a cave by the sea, but again the kindness of a friend, and the sound of the sea, drive him away. He lives for a time in a shed, but has no one to bring him food and no way to get it for himself, so he must leave there. Each of these events is, in fact, a cradle for him, a new beginning in his effort to end.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Coe tells us that most of Beckett's work deals with these issues, saying, "Beckett's very titles reveal his preoccupations: 'La Fin,' <u>Fin de Partie, La Derniere Bande</u>, and the punning <u>Comment c'est ('commencer')." Coe, p. 59</u>. We might add to this list "For to End Yet Again."

The first story, "The Expelled," established the character of the protagonist, a character who will maintain his identity throughout the three parts and who tells his own tale. The first person narration, of course, is Beckett at his best, and for this reason, if for no other, the three <u>Nouvelles</u> are superior to <u>Mercier and Camier</u>. In particular, this voice as Beckett uses it affords greater humour. John Fletcher writes, "The style in these stories is a bland kind of literalness," which allows for the kind of forceful irony we find in Swift's <u>A Modest Proposal</u>, for example.<sup>3</sup>

This blandness might not seem humourous when describing an event which befalls someone else, but is quite laughable when we realize the narrator is discussing himself. For example, after being thrown out of his house, and in possible danger of being beaten, he tells us, "I rested my elbow on the sidewalk ... settled my ear in the cup of my hand and began to reflect on my situation...." (NK p. 10) Such is the measure of his detachment.

He grew detached in childhood, he tells us, as a result of his incontinence, which caused him to walk warily, rolling his torso "no doubt intended to put people off the scent," he puns. He concludes:

> My youthful ardour, in so far as I had any, spent itself in this effort, I became sour and mistrustful, a little before my time, in love with hiding and the prone position. (NK p. 14)

<sup>3</sup> Fletcher, <u>The Novels</u>, p. 104.

He is not a likeable character, hating children, hoping that an old lady whom he has caused to fall has broken her leg, and finding relief in disappointment. He is also physically unattractive, having a peculiar walk - as a result of his childhood experience - and an unsightly pustule on his head. When the cabman first sees him, he laughs. Our hero thinks perhaps the cabman is laughing at him, but the laugh is brief, "which suggested that I was not the joke." Later, as this hero's condition worsens, he finds he is more frequently the object of derision. Even dumb animals find cause to stare. "What's wrong with your ass?" he asks his friend. '"Don't mind him," he said, "he doesn't know you."' (NK p. 54)

The scene at the public horse trough is brilliantly conceived and expresses a sense of wonder in the beast there:

> The iron shoes approached and the jingle of the harness. Then silence. That was the horse looking at me. Then the noise of pebbles and mud that horses make when drinking. Then silence again. That was the horse looking at me again. Then the pebbles again. Then the silence again. Till the horse had finished drinking or the driver deemed it had drunk its fill. ... Once, when the noise stopped, I turned and saw the horse looking at me. The driver too was looking at me. (NK p. 47)

The picture which arises from this last sentence cleverly shifts the ridicule from the protagonist to the driver, as the comparison is implicitly made between the dumb horseface and the driver. Also, the absolutely original metaphor of pebbles and mud is a thrilling piece of writing, for of course that <u>is</u> the noise horses make when drinking, had we only thought to name it.

Earlier, this narrator has asked rhetorically, "But does one ever know oneself why one laughs?" (NK p. 17) In spite of Bergson, laughter is still not easy to dissect. The <u>Nouvelles</u> are second only to the Trilogy in this bland wit of which Beckett is the master. And "The Calmative" is perhaps the most humorous of the three. The comments made in passing, those which are not an integral part of the narrative, are the best examples of this. These are of that category of the comic which is expressed by language, rather than created by it, as Bergson has described that distinction.<sup>4</sup> More specifically, their humour is expressed through the tone of the words, more than through the words themselves:

> ... I was in the prime of life, what I believe is called in full possession of one's faculties. Ah yes, them I possessed all right. (NK p. 12)

The transposition of the noun, verb, object of English grammar into object, noun, verb, puts the emphasis on 'them,' creating an irony from the implication that it is only his faculties that he possesses, as he has just been thrown out of his home.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Bergson, "Laughter," <u>Comedy</u>, ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1956), p. 127.

Where to? he said. He had climbed down from his seat on purpose to ask me that. And I who thought I was far away already. (NK p. 17)

There is a <u>double-entendre</u> here. In addition to the humour derived from the literal meaning - the hero's thinking that the cab was on its way, even though he had specified no destination - there is an irony in the situation of this metaphysical wanderer who, thinking he is on his way somewhere, is continually frustrated at finding out that he has gone nowhere.

> He waited for me on the sidewalk and helped me climb back into the cab. I was sick and tired of this cabman. He clambered back to his seat and we set off again. (NK p. 21)

That the narrator became sick and tired of the cabman comes as a surprise because the man is so solicitous and kind. The placment of this revelation is surprising as well, creating humour through perfect timing.

The following are examples of humour created by language and need no explanation:

Divided by my life to come [the money I had left] was negligible, unless my conjectures were unduly pessimistic. (NK p. 19)

Perhaps she had dandled me on her knees while I was still in swaddling clothes and there had been some lovey-dovey. (NK p. 19)

...You must not loiter in the cloister now the rain is over. (NK p. 46)

Bergson writes:

Deep-rooted in comic, there is always a tendency ... to take the line of least resistance, generally that of habit. The comic character no longer tries to be ceaselessly adapting and readapting himself to the society of which he is a member. He slackens in the attention that is due to life. He more or less resembles the absent-minded.<sup>5</sup>

This protagonist more and more ceases to adapt himself to society. Early in "The Calmative" he says:

I was ill at ease with all this air about me, lost before the confusion of innumerable prospects. But I still knew how to act at this period, when it was absolutely necessary. (NK p. 13)

Later, he recalls less and less how to act; he even loses his ability to speak at one point, so out of habit is he from living in isolation. He has a period of adaptation much later, as he is forced to adapt his manner of begging until he finds a method which is successful for him.

"The Expelled" establishes this character's proclivity towards what he calls "reverie." As he lies on the sidewalk in front of his house in a situation that would be traumatic by anyone's definition, he envisions a landscape: "charming with hawthorn and wild roses, dreamlike." The slamming of the door alone rouses him from this "spell." These words reverie, dream and spell - are important to remember as we discuss the second part of the narrative, misleadingly named "The End."

<sup>5</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 187.

To open this tale, the hero is thrown out of an asylum. How he got there and why, and how long he has been staying, we do not know. These openings which Beckett chooses, <u>in</u> <u>medius res</u>, are effective in a way that like openings of other authors are not, for they express not merely the fact that we are in the middle of something, but an emotion as well: "There were not many steps." Of course we want to know what steps, but as we discover the circumstances which led to this statement, the understated emotion overwhelms us. So, too, with the first line of "The End": "They clothed me and gave me money." This at first sounds a positive thing, but when we learn the true circumstances of the event, we realize that it is rather a betrayal.

As he makes his way from the asylum, he attracts attention, but at this point the attention is not derision, as it will become when he deteriorates further. He says, "My appearance still made people laugh, with that hearty jovial laugh so good for the health." (NK p. 47) There is a bitter irony here in this mock-optimistic tone, for what kind of person derives good health from laughing at the ill-health and misfortune of others? This tale is full of such irony.

There are several indications that this character is something of a Christ-figure: he expounds on the proper way to cross oneself, he rides into town on an ass, he is turned away from staying in a stable and he spends a night in another. In fact, he says, rather hyperbolically, "Stables have always been my salvation." (NK p. 53) I say this is hyperbolic because he has merely found a curry-comb in one

to brush his clothes, and because he is not allowed to stay in another. But this thinking does not take us very far. Rather, the terms of his adaptation to society and his mock suicide are what interest us here.

The circumstances of his begging are at once entertaining and profoundly distressing. When the hero decides to re-enter society rather than starve to death in the mountains, his supposed death-wish is shown to be a lie. The description of his experiences on the road back to town and later in town on the street corner, are castigations against our society and the attitudes which create outcasts out of the sick, the indigent and the elderly. Even those sympathetic to the misfortunes of others do not escape criticism. Spoken with an ingenuousness which suggests there is nothing to hide, these words instead reveal an ugly truth:

> So I got a tin and hung it from a button of my ... coat.... It did not hang plumb, it leaned respectfully towards the passerby, he had only to drop his mite. But that obliged him to come up close to me, he was in danger of touching me. In the end I got a bigger tin ... and placed it on the sidewalk at my feet. But people who give alms don't much care to toss them, there's something contemptuous about this gesture which is repugnant to sensitive natures. To say nothing of having to aim. They are prepared to give, but not for their gift to go rolling under the passing feet or under the passing wheels, to be picked up by some undeserving person. So they don't give. There are those, to be sure, who stoop, but generally speaking people who give alms. don't much care to stoop. What they like above all is to sight the wretch from afar, get ready their penny, drop it in their stride and hear the God bless you dying away in the distance. (NK pp. 58-59)

In regard to the incident of the Marxist orator, John Fletcher puts it well:

[A] Ithough we recognize some justic in the orator's remarks, we feel more sympathy for the inoffensive man whose peace has been disturbed by the interfering hostility of those representing ideologies of universal improvement.<sup>C</sup>

The Marxist has sacrificed the dignity of this indivisual for the sake of the masses. However disgusted we may be by the character of this individual, we nonetheless would guard whatever little dignity he has against this red-faced intruder.

I mentioned earlier that the words reverie, dream and spell would be important to the understanding of this story. Add to this list the word 'vision,' a term which the narrator uses later to describe his experience in his boat:

> [T]he next thing I was having visions, I who never did, except sometimes in my sleep, who never had, real visions, I'd remember, except perhaps as a child, my myth will have it so. I knew they were visions because it was night and I was alone in my boat. What else could they have been? So I was alone in my boat and gliding on the waters. I didn't have to row, the ebb was carrying me out. Anyway I saw no oars, they must have taken them away. ... There were stars in the sky, quite a few. ... The banks receded more and more, it was inevitable, soon I saw them no more. The lights grew fainter and fewer as the river widened. (NK pp. 65-66)

The description of this dream or vision continues in a way

<sup>6</sup> Fletcher, <u>The Novels</u>, p. 105.

which suggests suicide: a hole has been cut in the bottom of his boat/coffin; a chain is attached to his waist and to the boat; and he drinks the contents of a phial he finds in his pocket. But these images are merely suggestive of suicide; they substantiate the wish of suicide, but not the act. The language of the narrative which follows this, "The Calmative," which is actually part two of the published work, is consistent with the idea that this is merely a vision, a dream or reverie. Although the tale begins "I don't know when I died," these words are not to be taken literally. Rather, they awaken us to a dream world which at times seems drug-induced. Perhaps the phial did contain some sort of sedative, after all.

This dream episode combines memory and fantasy. It is the most difficult of the three stories, but it is also the most fascinating and the most eloquent. We have been told all about memory in the first story: "Memories are killing," says the narrator. (NK p. 9) In the context in which it is written, this comes as a colloquialism meaning merely that memories are very strange things. But he goes on to say:

> So you must not think of certain things, of those that are dear to you, or rather you must think of them, for if you don't there is the danger of finding them, in your mind, little by little. That is to say, you must think of them for a while, a good while, every day several times a day, until they sink forever in the mud. That's an order. (NK p. 9)

Here we have two categories of memory: that which is voluntary and that which is not. This narrator defines as memory

only the involuntary; we do not have a name for the former. Perhaps he would call that fiction, since wherever thought enters, there is creation. And so to preserve that which we love we must try to remember it, the assumption being that memory what it is - we will not be able to call it to mind and will thus forget, and the things we love will be preserved forever from thought; whereas, those things which we do not summon therefore do not run away, but lie in wait to pounce when least expected.

Memory, of course, is a corollary of time; it bridges the present to the past. "The Calmative" is written in the past tense, but the narrator explains that this is merely for inconvenience:

> I speak as though it all happened yesterday. Yesterday indeed is recent, but not enough. For what I tell this evening is passing this evening, at this passing hour. ... I'll tell my story in the past none the less, as though it were a myth, or an old fable, for this evening I need another age.... (NK p. 26)

And later, he says, "But it's to me this evening something has to happen, to my body as in myth and metamorphosis...." (NK p. 27) The use of the word myth to identify the time and tense is a clever and meaningful device. We come across it again later in <u>Molloy</u> when he writes, "I speak in the present tense, it is so easy to speak in the present tense, when speaking of the past. It is the mythological present, don't mind it." (M p. 26) The coinage of the term 'mythological present' indicates that what we read may not have happened as it is reported. Our conventional term 'historical present' is elaborated in this way to mean not only that the statement made in such a tense may be false (myth in the sense of something fictional), but also that the events described are of great import, are as old as time itself, are apocryphal. This is the sense in which the term myth is used in "The Calmative" as well. He wants his tale to be taken as visionary, timeless and of universal importance. ("I say cathedral, it may not have been, I don't know, all I know is it would vex me in this story ... to have taken refuge in a common Church." (NK p. 33))

The dream quality of the narrative is uninterrupted. He describes the brightly lit and strangely deserted streets of the town he enters and says, rightly, "But all might change from one moment to the next and be transformed like magic before my eyes." (NK p. 29) Indeed, things do happen like magic. He, with the pained legs and clumsy walk, finds himself gliding along "as though on rollers": "I must have been moving fast, for I overhauled more than one pedestrian ... without extending myself, I who in the normal way was left standing by cripples...." (NK p. 32) His experiences in the church or cathedral are a dream sequence par excellence. With no warning, the organ begins to sound; he goes through a door which is not an exit but which takes him to the foot of a spiral staircase; he rushes up the staircase "like one hotly pursued by a homocidal maniac," a universal dream image. Eloquently he asks, "Into what nightmare thingness am I fallen?" (NK p. 34)

He has come away, ironically, to calm himself. This

story he is telling is an attempt to distract him from hearing himself rot, a figurative way of describing merely being alone with himself, as deterioration is continuous on both sides of the grave. As he returned from his journey into town, he took with him, he says, "the virtual certainty that [he is] still of this world, of that world too, in a way." (NK p. 3<sup>4</sup>) The ambiguity of 'this' and 'that' must be explained. 'This' world is the world we are in as we read the story, his dream world. 'That'world is the world from which he came, the so-called real world. What he has been seeking to comfort himself is confirmation of his existence and identity.

Identity has always been a problem for this narrator. In "The Expelled" he says:

> I have always been amazed at my contemporaries' lack of finesse, I whose soul writhed from morning to night, in the mere quest of itself. (NK p. 11)

Later, he is called to a lawyer's office to receive an inheritance: "He verified my identity. That took some time." (NK p. 18) In "The End," too, he creates a metaphysical joke from a common expression: "I didn't pay attention. Strictly speaking I wasn't there. Strictly speaking I believe I've never been anywhere." (NK p. 61) But in "The Calmative," the search for his identity becomes less humorous and more desperate; nightmarish, if you will.

Some things which happen reassure him: a boy with a goat gives him candy, a man gives him a phial, a throng of people step around him as he lies on the ground. All these are reassurances that he exists. His shadow, too, has been of some use to him in this way: My shadow, one of my shadows, flew before me, dwindled, slid under my feet, trailed behind me the way shadows will. This degree of opacity appeared to me conclusive. (NK p. 36)

None of these things, however, is all-conclusive. The man with the phial, for example, appeared as if by magic. We read:

> I must have dozed off, for the next thing was a man sitting beside me. I was still taking him in when he opened his eyes and set them on me, as if for the first time, for he shrank back unaffectedly. Where did you spring from? he said. (NK p. 37)

On this slim evidence, our narrator might as easily be a figure in this other man's dream.

More conclusive of his identity, perhaps, are the narrator's pains. In addition to cysts, crablice and pustules, this character suffers leg pains. When they desert him for a time in his reverie, he calls this weakness. When they return, he writes:

> My pains were back, but with something untoward which prevented my wrapping them around me. But I said, Little by little you are coming to. (NK p. 40)

In the end, however, the best evidence he has of his identity is, as always, his story. Even though he has warned us in the beginning that he will say nothing ("All I say cancels out, I'll have said nothing." (NK p. 26)), the story remains. Memory or fantasy, the story lives and so, by extension, must the narrator. Chapter Seven

The House of Mirrors

Molloy warns us that the identities of Beckett's narrators may be difficult to recognize, saying:

> [I]f ever I stoop, forgetting who I am, or kneel, make no mistake, it will not be me, but another. (M p. 36) Yes it sometimes happens and will sometimes happen again that I forget who I am and strut before my eyes, like a stranger. (M p. 42)

His premonition comes true at Lousse's house where he moves around the room investigating his new home, without his crutches. Seeing them leaning against a chair, he remarks:

> It may seem strange that I was able to go through the motions I have described without (the help of my crutches). I find it strange. You don't remember who you are, when you wake. (M p. 38)<sup>1</sup>

This statement suggests, of course, that he is not awake, but merely dreams these things which seem inconsistent with his character and handicap. However, to isolate these

<sup>1</sup> Moran has experienced the same phenomenon: his paralyzed leg miraculously functions normally when he beats to death the man in the forest. (M p. 152)

adventures to a dream world or to a vision of hell or an afterlife, as the popular notion is, leads ultimately to disappointment. To do so is to force the imagination to within the boundaries of sleep or death. It is important to understand the living relationships among the Beckett narrators before continuing with a discussion of the Trilogy.

The narrator of "The Calmative" has suggested an appropriate metaphor for speaking of these relationships. He says:

[T]his old body ... which never ... wished for anything, in its tarnished universe, except for the mirrors to shatter, the plane, the curved, the magnifying, the minifying, and to vanish in the havoc of its images. (NK p. 27)

This image helps to elucidate the complex and difficult relationships among the narrators of the trilogy. There is no doubt that the egos which Beckett has created are 'elusive,' as Frederick Hoffman rightly names them, but given the proper metaphor, their identities become easier to comprehend.<sup>2</sup>

Beckett's works form a house of mirrors ("the plane, the curved, the magnifying, the minifying"). Certainly the circus image is appropriate with its implications of clowns, tramps, and social misfits. Each avatar is a reflection of the others, their features at once homologous and distorted.

<sup>2</sup> Hoffman uses this term in his title "The Elusive Ego: Beckett's M's," <u>Samuel Beckett Now</u>, ed. Melvin J. Friedman (London: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 31-58. We regard each character in diminishing perspective; a character in a novel telling about a character in a novel, and so on. The house affords no exit; in search of escape, a character bumps into himself, or rather a simulacrum of himself, and becomes lost again in the maze of mirrors.

Wallace Stevens writes of a glass of water:

That the glass would melt in heat, That the water would freeze in cold, Shows that this object is merely a state, One of many, between two poles. So, In the metaphysical, there are these poles.<sup>3</sup>

There are these poles, as Beckett is well aware: between the poles of conception and death transpire many states of being. Each individual is a constantly changing reality.<sup> $L_1$ </sup> Beckett writes in <u>Proust</u>, "We are not merely more weary because of yesterday, we are other, no longer what we were before the calamity of yesterday." (P p. 13) Later he states that "the individual is a succession of individuals." (P p. 19)

In Beckett's world all these selves come together in <u>The Unnamable</u>. This narrator sits (perhaps) as in a dream, relating vague images and sensations which may or may not be accurate: "perhaps it is Molloy in Malone's hat"; is it a cry

<sup>3</sup> Wallace Stevens, "The Glass of Water," in <u>The American</u> <u>Tradition in Literature</u>, Third Edition, ed. Bradley, Beatty, Long, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1967), p. 1745, 11. 1-5.

Malone writes that he changes states; at times he is like sand, at others he is liquid or like mud, and at others yet he "would be lost in the eye of a needle, [he is] so hard and contracted." (MD p. 225) or the sound of something breaking, or perhaps these are the same. Characters drift inexplicably in and out of view: "Two shapes then, oblong like man, entered into collision before me. They fell and I saw no more." (U p. 299) These visions or hallucinations are memories of all that has come before, the "collective unconscious," so to speak, of the Beckett canon.

This collective began in Beckett's art as early as his first published novel. When Beckett wrote his stories of Belacqua, he did not know that he would one day write <u>Molloy</u>, <u>Mercier and Camier</u>, or <u>Godot</u>, yet all these characters and more are contained in the phantom-like presence of an inconsequential vagabond mentioned in passing in the story "Walking Out."

Belacqua, a middle-class aesthete, comes upon a cart which is seemingly unattended.<sup>5</sup> He looks around for the beast of burden which must accompany such a cart and sees a man seated under it. The man is described as a "complete down-and-out" and Belacqua feels ashamed of his own bourgeois appearance and ample belly. He has just been thinking "what a splendid thing it is when all is said and done to be young and vigorous," for he has just successfully manoeuvred a wall which barred his way. This is the comment which sets the stage and tone for the scene. Its ironic reference is apparent at first when applied to the impressive act of getting over a low

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Belacqua in relation to the vagabond is suggestive of the character Beckett will develop later into Moran, whose social position contrasts sharply with the itinerant Molloy.

wall, and becomes bitterly emphasized when reflected against the tinker who is far less able to be vigorous in his deprived state than the well-fed Belacqua.

However, it is this vagabond, a tinker, who is set up to be the "true man." Like some Lawrentian ide.1, he sits Christlike in an aureole of sunlight, calmly mending a pot while Belacqua's dog wets the rags he calls his trousers.<sup>6</sup> The man merely smiles and says, "Game ball," a remark which Belacqua disdains to follow ("After that further comment was impossible"), and Belacqua walks away, musing on this character, this "real man at last."

This scene is in the nature of a Millet painting. The figure of a working man, his own draught animal, calmly mending his wares while lit by a heavenly light, is a figure serene, his "instinctive nobility ... not acquired ... but antecedent." In truth, the man is a homeless vagabond, broken in body as well as in spirit by the weight of his work. His serenity may well be resignation to his fate, the Christian man who turns the other cheek when Belacqua's dog urinates on his only trousers, since he can do nothing else. His nobility may be that of the weary who are beyond caring.

Belacqua, who is himself a voyeur, later meets with Lucy and her jennet and we read, "The vagabond could see them between adjoining spokes of his wheel, by moving his head into

It is not only the halo of sunlight nor the man's placid demeanour which compels the comparison to Christ, but also the suggestion that he looks, in this light, like a "new-born lamb."

the right position he was far enough away to frame the whole group in a sector of his wheel." (MP p. 98) The only other reference to him is in the next paragraph: "The group broke up and soon the vagabond, peering out through his sector, saw only the grey of the road with its green hem." (MP p. 98) Even the wheel can be seen as a metaphor which Beckett would elaborate through the recurring images in his later works, as the narrator of "Text VII" explains:

> What thronging memories, that's to make me think I'm dead, I've said it a million times, But the same return, like the spokes of a wheel, always the same, and all alike, like spokes. (NK p. 104)

A vagabond, a pot, and wheels, soon to become Beckettian motifs, appear from the shadows of Beckett's head in this very first prose fiction. That Belacqua shares some of the characteristics of the later tramps - his voyeurism, his sloth, his obsession with ruins and mental homes, his avoidance of sexual encounters, his aspirations to writing, his boil and deformed foot - includes him in this all-in-one of Beckett's creation. The tinker here is an aspect of Belacqua, the part which wants to quit society and be merely a spectator, as well as the subconscious presence of all the vagabonds to come.

All these "spirits" come together in the trilogy and again later in <u>How It Is</u>. "To tell the truth," says the Unnamable, "I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy on, I believe we are all here...." (U p. 295) The shift from 'they' to 'we' is a significant admission of the Unnamable's identity with the past characters, and the exclusion of any mention of Belacqua and the vagabond from "Walking Out" is evidence that the total pervasiveness of these subconscious spirits eludes even Beckett.<sup>7</sup>

I use the term spirit in a loose sense to indicate something elusive, rather than in a religious or mystical sense. Beckett's characters do not die and reappear in an after-life. Rather, they inhabit an 'alien reality,' such as I have described in Chapter Three above. Malone's tale, as his words fade into silence, certainly suggests death as Lemuel and his cronies float off into unknown waters in their boat; but Malone reappears. Like the failed suicide who is sure at the time that death has come at last, he wakes up later, gagging and delirious in unfamiliar surroundings, unnamable.

Recall the mock ending of the narrator in "The End." So with Malone: both men desire death - or say they do - and dream of the peace and silence it would bring, a sense of being gently rocked in a boat at night, suggestive of the pre-natal comfort and security a child experiences in the amniotic fluid inside the womb. However, in the final sentence of "The Calmative," the character admits he is "without the courage to end or the strength to go on."

Beckett has said that he considers the canon to begin with <u>Murphy</u>. (See Fletcher, <u>The Novels of Samuel Beckett</u>. p. 242.) In <u>The Unnamable</u>, however, Beckett writes of the avatars: "[B]eginning with Murphy, who wasn't even the first...." (U p. 394)

There is no reason to believe that he has ended, for he does go on. $^{8}$ 

While Malone's language at times suggests that he is literally dying, it suggests at other times that these are mere figures of speech. For instance, early in the novel he says, "Beyond the grave, the sensation of being beyond the grave was stronger with me six months ago." (MD p. 184) Later he tells us, "And on the threshold of being no more I succeed in being another. Very pretty." (MD p. 194) The image is very pretty indeed and confirms the way we should view the transition of Malone into the Unnamable.

John Fletcher writes in an essay that he is "unrepentent" in having called <u>Malone Dies</u> "quite straightforward." He assures us that Malone actually dies and cites several conjectures as to the exact moment that even takes place. He then gives us his own opinion:

> But a careful count reveals a majority of assertions from Malone which point clearly to the fact that he dies as the pencil falls from his hand at the very end: the frenzy of the closing pages is therefore not so much infernal as the result of hic death-agony.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>o</sup> No one has ever suggested that the narrator of <u>First Love</u> is in a post-mortem state, and yet we are given such clues as might indicate such a condition: the story opens with the character in a cemetery and later he says of his hat, "it has followed me to the grave." (FL p. 34) The same evidence is given when Moran begins his quest: "Some twenty paces from my wicket-gate the lane skirts the graveyard wall. The lane descends, the wall rises, higher and higher. Soon you are faring below the dead." (M p. 135) We must never take these 'clues' too literally.

<sup>9</sup> John Fletcher, "Given Birth to Unto Death," <u>Twentieth</u> <u>Century Interpretations of 'Molloy,' 'Malone Dies' and</u> <u>'The Unnamable,' ed. John C'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey:</u> <u>Prentice Hall, 1970), pp. 58-61.</u>

Alec Reid writes, "For Beckett the difference between life and death is absolute...."10 I feel these views are quite wrong. Beckett's world is sometimes dangerously seductive. Malone's style of life, for example, would tempt any schular: to be fed uninterrupted at regular intervals; to lie naked so that getting up, dressing, and washing cease to be necessary; and to have no obligations but to write and to imagine. Such a cerebral life seems idyllic. It is no wonder that so many Beckett scholars insist that the characters have died and gone to heaven; to be nothing but consciousness surely sound paradisaical. But Malone Dies is not so straightforward a work as Fletcher suggests. Molloy has warned us that "all that is false may more readily be reduced, to notions clear and distinct." (Mp. 82) It is an admonition which critics should heed more often. The simplicity of Malone Dies is deceptive, as is the difference between life and death. Death in Beckett's work, like every other 'fact,' is relative and can only be defined in context.

The advance of modern medicine has brought with it philosophical questions concerning the point at which life stops, as well as confusion about where essential life is located. We have learned that life does not necessarily end when the heart stops, or if the brain ceases to emit electrical impulses. People who have lived through these experiences describe uncannily similar sensations of leaving their bodies

<sup>10</sup> Alec Reid, <u>All I Can Manage, More Than I Could</u> (Dublin: The Doleman Press, Ltd., 1968), p. 56.

and viewing from above the frantic attempts of hospital staff to restore life. They speak as well of a white, evanescent light and the feeling of being beckoned down a brightly-lit tunnel.

For Beckett, too, the difference between life and death is vague and inconstant and presents perverse problems for the narrators. Malone, in particular, does not want to end too soon. He hopes to time his "inventory" to coincide exactly with his death:

> All my life long I have dreamt of the moment when, edified at last, in so far as one can be before all is lost, I might draw the line and make the tot. (MD p. 182)

The narrators move through various states of consciousness, often mistaking one phase or another as that of death, but discovering later that such has not been the case.

At one point Malone rightly states, "It's vague, life and death." (MD p. 225) Borrowing Tennyson's phrase, Alfred North Whitehead writes of the 'blindly running' electrons which determine life and death. Refuting the widely-held theory of mechanistic determinism, as espoused by John Stuart Mill, Whitehead writes: "The gap between living and dead matter is too vague and problematical to bear the weight of such an arbitrary assumption [as determinism]." He continues:

> The electron blindly runs either within or without the body; but it runs within the body in accordance with its character within the body; that is to say, in

accordance with the general plan of the body, and this plan includes the mental state.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the activity of the particles which constitute our world is determined by the situation, the context. Whitehead concludes:

> [M]y therory involves the entire abandonment of the notion that simple location is the primary way in which things are involved in space-time. In a certain sense, everything is everywhere at all times.<sup>12</sup>

In this respect, Beckett's narrators can have dissipated at each successive ending and yet reconstituted their memories and characteristics within the context of the new situation. Such an interpretation is supported by Malone's description of a hand which re-distributes his particles, or grains:

> And it is without excessive sorrow that I see us again as we are, namely to be removed grain by grain until the hand, wearied, begins to play, scooping us up and letting us trickle back into the same place, dreamily as the saying is. ... [F]or as long as I can remember the sensation is familiar of a blind and tired hand delving feebly in my particles and letting them trickle between its fingers. (MD p. 225)

These grains might well be the millet which makes up the proverbial heap which the Greek philosopher Zeno proved

<sup>11</sup> Alfred North Whitehead, <u>Science and the Modern</u> <u>World</u> (New York: The Free Press, 1967), p. 79.

<sup>12</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 91.

against all contradiction could never by complete. So it is with the Self, as Richard Coe has ably demonstrated in his chapter entitled "A Little Heap of Millet."<sup>13</sup>

Hamm, too, says, "Moment upon moment, pattering down, like millet grains of. . . that old Greek, and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life." (Endgame) Death, then, would not be the completion of the pile, but the sweeping away of all the particles; not simply the re-distribution of which Malone speaks, but the complete dispersal of the particles from the original context. This is not to speak of transubstantiation of the flesh, nor transmutation of the soul. Rather, the narrators have simply flowed in and out of themselves in the same way we move from one age to another, hardly able to recognize our earlier selves. When we read of Molloy he is the Molloy alone in his mother's room; when we read of Malone he is the Malone of old age; when we read of the Unnamable he is the man of the epilogue, a term which Malone introduces and which will be elaborated later. But when we finish reading and close the book, the three are one, a trinity.

In his story "Under Ether," J.M. Synge describes the experience of passing in and out of death's realm. Synge subtitles the tale "Personal Experiences During an Operation." Sections of this piece are well worth setting down here for their close correspondence to the experiences of Beckett's narrators. Synge has entered the hospital to have a growth

<sup>13</sup> Coe, pp. 88-111.

removed from his neck. After a brief introduction, in which he describes his surrounding, we find him on the operating table. Finally the ether is applied and he writes:

> For what seemed an eternity no change came. Suddenly the light grew brighter, and a rigidity tingled through my limbs. ... A change passed across me, and my fingers locked with sudden stiffness. Speech was gone. Volition was gone. I was a dead weight; a subject on a board; toy of other wills. It was agony. ... Horrible noises were in my ears. The ceiling, which now shone with terrible distinctness, seemed bending over the nurses.... Voices were behind me. ... Suddenly I was in a chaos of excitement, talking loudly and incoherently. ... My hands broke from my control and waved in the luminous clouds. ... Another paroxysm of frenzy, and my life seemed to go out in one spiral yell to the unknown. I seemed to traverse whole epochs of desolation and bliss.<sup>14</sup>

His experiences of a 'spiral yell' and of traversing 'epochs of desolation and bliss' recall the scream and ecstasy of the narrator of "Assumption." The ceiling bending over him reminds us of Malone's room pulsating like the walls of a womb. The very language Synge uses reminds us of the words we read from Beckett's narrators: the talk of an eternity, the loss of a sense of time, an awareness of light, of noises in his ears and voices behind him, of feeling a dead weight and toy of other wills, of finding his own volition gone. First speech is gone, then he rambles loudly and incoherently. The image of hands that have a life of

<sup>14</sup> John M. Synge, "Under Ether," <u>The Collected Works</u>, Vo. II, ed. Alan Price (London: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 39-43. their own, out of control, also reminds us of Beckett's words. Synge speaks of traversing epochs, putting himself outside of time and space.

When Synge regained consciousness he was ill for a long time and still disoriented. He tells of receiving friends the next day:

> That afternoon my friends were admitted to see me, and my weakness came still more to the front. From five o'clock deep drowsiness came over me, and I lay as in lethargy with the lights carefully lowered. A faint jingle of tram-bells sounded far away, and the voices of Sunday travellers sometimes broke into my room. I took notice of every familiar occurrence as if it were something I had come back to from a distant country. The impression was very strong on me that I had died the preceding day and come to life again, and this impression has never changed.

The similarity between Synge's experience and that of Belacqua, who also 'died' under anaesthesia while having a tumour of sorts removed from his neck, is too nice not to be mentioned. I am quite certain, of course, that Beckett at the time did not intend Belacqua to reappear, but it can easily be conceived that when the later narrators began not to go away, such an explanation is not far from their experience.

It is often assumed by critics that when the narrators say they want to die, that this is their true desire. But can we ignore Molloy's statement to the contrary?

> For death is a condition I have never been able to conceive to my satisfaction and which therefore cannot go down

in the ledger of weal and woe. ... Yes, the confusion of my ideas on the subject of death was such that I sometimes wondered, believe it or not, if it wasn't a state of being even worse than life. So I found it natural not to rush into it and, when I forgot myself to the point of trying, to stop in time. (M p. 68)

With Beckett we can assume nothing. We must also remember that these characters suffer nothing if they do not suffer velleities; what they will and what they actually achieve are often quite different things.

The following passage from <u>Malone</u> suggests a view which most critics seem to forget:

If this continues it is myself I shall lose and the thousand ways that lead there. And I shall resemble the wretches famed in fable, crushed beneath the weight of their wish come true. (MD p. 194)

There are two important points made here. The first is that of the thousand ways which lead to the self, reiterating the proposition made earlier about the shared identities of the many narrators. That is, to get to Malone we have come through Molloy, Moran, the narrator of "The Calmative," and several others as well. Secondly, Malone is aware that if he is not careful, his wish to die may come true and be discovered to be as undesirable as the wishes made by the wretches of the fable. Such a possibility suggests that the death wish of the narrators is tentative rather than absolute and incontrovertible.

<u>Malone meurt</u> can also be translated as Malone is dying, the present continuous. The title of this novel should be

taken as an indication of Beckett's intentions. Malone is dying as we all are; he does not achieve death. It is rather the process of dying and not the state of death which is central to this novel.

Malone throughout is killing time; we learn of Mr. Lambert's obsession with the pigs he kills; we see the mule thrown unceremoniously into its grave and its stiff legs knocked down with a shovel; we are told how rabbits often die before they are actually killed and that pigeons and chickens struggle to stay alive, sometimes even denying death by continuing to run around headless. All these descriptions serve to inform us that different animals die differently, but each in a way unique to its species:

> For all pigs are alike, when you get to know their little ways, struggle, squeal, bleed, squeal, struggle, bleed, squeal and faint away, in more or less the same way exactly, a way that is all their own and could never be imitated by a lamb, for example, or a kid. (MD p. 201)

So, too, with man. We kill time while awaiting death; that is our own particular way of dying.

Dying is a continuous process which begins at conception and ceases only when the last blindly running electron runs no longer within the context of the body's plan. Malone is dying as we all are, and if his life becomes more cerebral as he moves into a kind of senility in which he can no longer remember a name by which to call himself, it is still a life and we share in it. Malone foretells of such a stage when he describes MacMann in the following terms: [F] or he has still the whole of his old age before him, and then that kind of epilogue when it is not very clear what is happening and which does not seem to add very much to what has already been acquired or to shed any great light on its confusion, but which no doubt has its usefulness, as hay is left out to dry before being garnered. (MD p. 232)

This is written of Macmann as he lies in the forest, crawling towards an unknown end. The old age before him is Malone's own experience, and the 'epilogue' which comes before the body is garnered, put into the earth, is that of the Unnamable. If we ignore this explanation we miss the relationships of the narrators within the trilogy. Old age may seem eternal, but it is not.

The Unnamable tells us that he is the essential narrator and has enlisted all the previous narrators to live for him, to suffer for him:

> I thought I was right in enlisting these sufferers of my pains. I was wrong. They never suffered my pains, their pains are nothing, compared to mine, a mere tittle of mine, the tittle I thought I could put from me, in order to witness it. Let them be gone now ... those I have used and those I have not used, give me back the pains I lent them and vanish, from my life, my memory, my terrors and shames. (U pp. 305-306)

He refers to the previous narrators as his "vice-existers." (U p. 317) He admonishes himself not to show weakness, even though he is suffering, saying, "No cries, above all no cries, be urbane, a credit to the art and code of dying...." (U p. 316) Here again we have the continued process of dying and not the state of death described. He says he has been "brought ... to death's door," but there is no indication that he has crossed the threshold. (U p. 317) In the following chapter I will discuss the metamorphosis of Moran, the first narrator of the trilogy, into Molloy, his successor.

## Chapter Eight

The Dissolution of a Patriarch

The process which transforms Moran into the Unnamable begins in the novel <u>Molloy</u>. Moran is a patriarch, a stalwart, mobile, punctual member of society who, through a kind of degenerative process, eventually becomes a static outcast with no name. This process begins with Moran's metamorphosis into Molloy.

I used the term patriarch to describe Moran because I feel it represents in a single word the qualities which distinguish Moran from the later avatars. I have borrowed the term from Italo Svevo's novel, <u>The Confessions of Zeno</u>, because Svevo's depiction of a patriarch is bound to the concept of health. I am not suggesting here that Svevo's Zeno has been a literary influence on Beckett. John Pilling has written of such influences, saying:

> At this point some modern heroes immediately spring to mind: Rilke's Malte, Gide's Lafcadio, Svevo's Zeno. But Beckett explicity repudiates them because they have failed to kill the marioneette' in themselves that is always enabling them to return to the normal world.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pilling, <u>Samuel Beckett</u>, p. 138. Beckett's phrase, to 'kill the marionette,' is from his review of Rilke's <u>Poems</u>, <u>Criterion</u>, 13, 193<sup>4</sup>, pp. 705-706. This is quite true. Zeno does, in fact, return to society, while Moran's dissolution continues into the isolated Malone and ultimately to the totally detached Unnamable. However, I find the story of Svevo's Zeno useful in explaining the changes which occur in Moran.

For Zeno, as for Moran, patriarchy is analogous to health.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Moran, Zeno is not a patriarch, but wishes to become one. He comes to understand that there are three essential constituents of the patriarch: these are a sound notion of time, a confident sense or ordered space together with the faculty of movement within it, and the belief that these and all things can be measured and know.

Zeno views all of life in the context of health and sickness. "Sickness is a conviction, and I was born with that conviction," he states emphatically.  $(Z p. 34)^3$  All his life Zeno has been in pursuit of health, which preoccupation he blames for his lack of success in every aspect of

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> In order to avoid any possible confusion throughout this discussion I will state now that I shall never have occasion to refer to the ancient Zenos - either of Citium or of Elea; I will speak only of the fictional Zeno of Svevo's creation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> The original Italian reads: "La malattia, è una convinzione ed io nacqui con quella convizione." Italo Sveno, <u>La Coscienza di Zeno</u> (Milano: Dall'Oglio, 1938), p. 33. Beryl de Zoete has translated this sentence using the awkward term 'ill-health.' I think the Italian word 'malattia' used by Svevo can better be translated here as the sibilant sickness, making the sentence read more smoothly. Also, 'sickness' is a word of more conviction than the almost euphemistic 'illhealth' and so is more appropriate here. All further references to Svevo's novel will be from <u>Confessions of Zeno</u>, trans. Beryl de Zoete (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1976).

his life, including his undistinguished performance on the violin:

I could play well if I were not ill, but I am always pursuing nealth even when I am practising balance on the four strings of a violin. (Z p. 116)

One day Zeno meets an elderly gentleman whom he grows to admire and Zeno determines to marry one of the gentleman's daughters. Their names were Ada, Augusta, Alberta, and Anna. "My name is Zeno, and I felt as if I were about to choose a wife from a far country," he writes. (Z p. 80)

Though in love with Ada, he is rejected by her and after many weeks of suffering finally proposes to Augusta in order to get a good night's sleep at last. Augusta accepts gladly and makes an ideal wife, whom Zeno grows truly to love, although this does not prevent him from eventually being unfaithful to her. It is through his marriage to Augusta that he comes to some profound realizations concerning health and sickness.

> (I) formed the great hope that I might in the end grow like Augusta, who was the personification of health. ... Augusta walked boldly along the path so many of her sisters have trodden before her on this earth; those who are content to find all their happiness in law and order.... Although I knew her security to be ill-founded, since I was its foundation, I loved and adored it nonetheless. I felt obliged to treat it with the same respect I had previously shown to spiritualism. It might be true, and so might faith in human life. (Z p. 150)

How similar this view of women is to the attitude we have seen previously as expressed in Beckett's works. Later Zeno writes, expressing the same outlook we find in Beckett, "Women always know what they want. There was no hesitation on the part of Ada who rejected me, of Augusta who accepted me, or of Carla (his mistress) who let me do as I liked." (Z p. 179)

He learns through Augusta that a vital aspect of health is to have a sound notion of time:

> (F)or her the present was a tangible reality in which we could take shelter and be near together. I tried to be admitted to this sanctuary and to stay there.... (Z p. 151)

Augusta ordered their day around a rigid schedule and unalterable rules. Meals were served at the same time each day, walking clothes were hung in the closet immediately upon returning home, evening clothes were on no account to be worn during the day. "All these hours had a genuine existence and were always in their right place." (Z p. 151) Just such a character is what Zeno hoped to become under the influence of Augusta:

> [I] myself was on the way to becoming the patriarch I had previously hated, and who now stood for me as an emblem of health. ... I desired health for myself and did not mind what happened to those who were not patriarchs. (Z p. 152)

In addition to a sound sense of time, Zeno includes in his theory of health a notion of movement through space which

is founded on a fictitious illness called Basedow's disease. All living creatures, Zeno explains, are ranged along a certain line. At one end is Basedow's disease, whose victims "use up their vital force recklessly in a mad vertiginous rhythm." At the other end are wretched beings, "doomed to die from a disease that looks like exhaustion but is really cowardice." (Z p. 280)

> Between the centre and Basedow's end are to be found all those whose life is consumed in desire, ambition, pleasure, or even work; towards the opposite end those who merely sprinkle crumbs on the plate of life and eke out a long, miserable existence that can only be a burden to society. But even this burden seems to be a necessary part of life. Society goes forwards because Basedowians urge it on, and does not fall into the abyss only because the others hold it back. I am convinced that if one were to constitute a society one might do it more simply, but it is actually made like this, with a goitre at one end and a dropsy at the other; and nothing can be done about it. Those at the centre have the beginnings of either goitre or dropsy, and all along the line throughout the whole of humanity there is no such thing as perfect health. ...

I still believe that at whatever particular spot of the universe one settles down one ends by becoming poisoned; it is essential to keep moving. (Z p. 280)

This discourse evinces ideas which are to occur throughout Beckett's works: that life is a state of being along a line which offers at one extreme goitre and at the other end dropsy, and that continually to move along it as in the ordered fashion of an Augusta is to achieve a state of health and well-being. "That's not moving, <u>that's moving</u>," Beckett writes in <u>Whoroscope</u>, implying that the achievement is a laudatory one.

Beckett's first attempt at a novel begins and ends with

the hero, Belacqua, "moving on": "Behold Belacqua an overfed child pedalling faster and faster, his mouth ajar and his nostrils dilated...." (D p. 1) Handwritten on the back of the last page of the typescript is the revised ending: "(A) voice, slightly more in sorrow than in anger this time, enjoined him to move on, which, the pain being so much better, he was only to (sic) happy to do." (D p. 21<sup>4</sup>) This voice seems to understand the preconditions of normalcy and urges our protagonist to continue on his way.

Molloy tells us that the conflict between staying where he is and moving on has always been present in him. He explains:

> For in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on. ... And these inseparable fools I indulged turn about, that they might understand their foolishness. (M p. 28)

Malche is no longer able to indulge the inclination to movement, or has simply surrendered to the desire for stasis, but he listens to the people in his house and suggests that we are taught the importance of movement from birth:

> [I] n this house there are people coming and going ... and multitudes of fine babies, particularly of late, which the parents keep moving about from one place to another, to prevent their forming the habit of motionlessness, in anticipation of the day when they will have to move about unaided. (MD p. 219)

The narrator of "Text VII" talks of the emblematic patriarch he calls 'X', whose most important characteristic is that he is mobile: (T)hat paradigm of human kind, moving at will, complete with joys and sorrows, perhaps even a wife and brats, forbears most certainly ... but above all endowed with movement. (NK p. 104)

In Beckett's trilogy, Moran is given all the attributes of the patriarch: he is orderly, punctual, ambulatory, and healthy. He is a man who believes in the existence of facts and shuns all that is equivocal. By the end of the trilogy this stalwart member of society has degenerated to become disoriented and static, an outcast with no name.

Moran leads an ordered life. Like the healthy Augusta, he has a place for everything and keeps everything in its place:

> [I] came and went in my room, tidying up, putting back my clothes in the wardrobe and my hats in the boxes from which I had taken them the better to make my choice, locking the various drawers.... (M p. 126)

Time for him has a tangible reality; he keeps a rigid schedule. On the morning Gaber comes to see him, Moran chooses not to go to mass at all rather than to be late for the service. His mealtimes are punctual:

> I shall sit down at four o'clock, I said. I did not need to add sharp. (M p. 98)

Moran the patriarch moves with confidence within the established order; he is sensible of his place in the hierarchy. When he finds himself considerably out of sorts over the Molloy assignment, he goes into the garden to refresh himself, but discovers that his order has been disrupted: Finding my spirits as low in the garden as in the house, I turned to go in, saying to myself it was one of two things, either my house had nothing to do with the kind of nothingness in the midst of which I stumbled or else the whole of my little property was to blame. (M p. 123)

It is indeed the whole of his property which is to blame. As a patriarch, Moran defines himself in terms of his household. He is at the top of his particular pecking order within the confines of his property, as we often witness through the bullying of his son and of Martha. After receiving his assignment from Gaber, Moran tells us:

> My hands were full of grass and earth I had torn up unwittingly, was still tearup. I was literally uprooting. (M p. 165)

When Moran leaves his home and property in search of Molloy, he unearths the very foundations of his patriarchal self.

In a subtle but significant way, Moran is jarred loose from his established position through the language of sickness. Twice within the first few pages of his recitation people ask Moran if he is ill. Both times are as a result of a variation in his usual schedule. First Martha wonders why he does not eat lunch: "She asked if I were ill." (M p. 97) Later Father Ambrose remarks that he thought Moran was ill because he did not come to mass. (M p. 100) The pain in his leg which Moran suffers later in the bathroom is the malfunction which will deveop into a paralysis in the forest, a manifestation of Moran losing the vestiges of his patriarchy, as he later loses his keys and his son, both symbols of his position in the established order.

## Moran is described as a man who is

... patiently turned towards the outer world as towards the lesser evil, creature of his house, of his garden, of his few poor possessions, discharging faithfully and ably a revolting function, reining back his thoughts within the limits of the calculable so great is his horror of fancy.... (M p. 114)

In other words, Moran is a patriarch, demanding facts and avoiding anything which hints of the imagination. But there is a greater patriarch than Moran in the hierarchy of this novel, and that is Youdi. It is after being made aware of his impotence in relation to Youdi that Moran becomes particularly vicious to his son. When I used the words 'pecking order' earlier, I merely followed Beckett's lead, for he makes a point of describing the grey hen's inevitable fate:

> The day was at hand, if she did not take a turn for the better, when the other hens would join forces and tear her to pieces, with their beaks and claws. (M p. 128)

He has just described Moran's similar treatment of Jacques Jr.. Moran, who is commanded by Youdi on a journey he does not wish to take, has pleasure in literally dragging his son out of a sleep he does not wish to abandon:

> Desperately he clung to his sleep. That was natural. ... [I] began to shake him and help him out of bed, pulling him first by the arms, then by the hair.... I had to muster all my strength to overcome his resistance. ... [H]e broke from my hold, threw himself down on the floor and rolled about, screaming with anger and definance. The fun was beginning already. (M pp. 126-127)

Youdi insists on facts. It is he presumably who wants the report which Moran is at such pains to give. Moran, no longer the patriarch as he writes it, loads the report with what details he can: "I dissolved a sleeping-powder in the milk. He asked for his report, he'll get his report." (M p. 121) It is no matter if these "facts" contradict each other, as in the well-known 'it is midnight/it is not midnight' statements.

Youdi maintains that what he thinks he knows, he knows, and further that what he knows, or believes he knows, is true. There has been much discussion as to the meaning of Youdi's name, suggestive of Yaweh, the supreme patriarch. The name suggests as well the Yahoo of Swift's invention, but I submit that the major importance lies in its root, You. Youdi represents us, fools who try to rein our thoughts to within the limits of the calculable and then presume to understand the whole.

Even Moran, petit-patriarch that he is, at times realizes and accepts that there is a relativity to knowing. He suggests that there are an infinite number of Molloys and in so doing reveals Youdi's prejudices:

> The fact was there were three, no, four Molloys. ... To these I would add Youdi's were it not for Gaber's corpse fidelity to the letter of his messages. Bad reasoning. For could it seriously be supposed that Youdi had confided to Gaber all he knew, or thought he knew (all one to Youdi) about his protégé? Assuredly not ... I will therefore add a fifth Molloy, that of Youdi. (M. 115)

That all he knows and all he thinks he knows are the same to Youdi indicates his affinity to our own image. We are the Youdis of the world, wanting facts where there are none, expecting there to be facts which are knowable and which are accessibl: to us. Malone warns us later of this obsession when he says of his stick, "I see part of it, as of all one sees." (MD p. 256)

One of the ways in which Beckett demonstrates this point is through the seemingly endless permutations of information he presents. Molloy begins his narrative with a simple account of two men, A and C, meeting on a country road as he watches from the shadow of a rock above the road. He continues to relate all manner of possibilities as to the natures of the men and the substance of their meeting until we are left knowing no more than we did when he began. He concludes:

> And perhaps it was A on one day at one place, then C another at another, then a third the rock and I, and so on for the other components, the cows, the sky, the sea, the mountains. I can't believe it. No, I won't lie, I can easily conceive it. (M pp. 14-15)

The effect of these permutations of details is two-fold. First it works as a reverse epiphany; that is, illumination is obliterated rather than heightened as each new possibility is computed. Second, as the information is presented each new fact nullifies the one before. Using words as bricks, Beckett constructs a scene or situation and then proceeds systematically to dissemble it. An idea is made chimerical and turns into something else as if by magic.

Molloy belittles our preoccupation with facts and details when he says:

I apologise for these details, in a moment we'll go faster, much faster. And then perhaps relapse again into a wealth of filthy circumstance. But which in its turn again will give way to vast frescoes, dashed off with loathing. Homo mensura can't do without staffage. (M p. 63)

Homo mensura: as a species we measure, count, weigh, and generally annihilate the life and beauty of true awareness in our pedantic dissections, our preoccupation with parts, details, and explanations. The word 'staffage' here means two things. As a form of the word 'staff' it names a kind of building material made of plaster and fibre which is used for the decorative pieces on statues and buildings; that is, it is the unnecessary, frivolous bits we demand from a writer. The <u>Oxford English Dictionary</u> states that the word 'staffage' itself is a corruption of the French <u>estoffer</u>, referring to the accessories of a picture. Both these meanings combine here to refer to the unnecessary details in the fresco of language.<sup>4</sup> Beckett asks is it a desire for knowledge or mere pedanticism which forces these requirements?

Molloy puts us all properly in our places by delightfully ridiculing the presumption that we can know all of anything when he awakes at Lousse's house to find that his beard has

The 'filthy circumstance' of details gives way to 'frescoes.' The term fresco not only suggests the type of painting, but also implies that his writing will be 'fresh,' new, even though 'dashed off with loathing.'

been shaved off. He says, "Perhaps they had dyed it too, I had no proof they had not." (M p. 38) The ludicrous suggestion that they had dyed his beard before shaving it off makes the assumption that they had not dyed it equally ridiculous and by extension makes all assumptions ludicrous. The realization that we can know nothing is an important one, as Molloy explains:

> For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker. (M p. 64)

It is at the point of this discovery that Moran ceases to be the patriarch and becomes Molloy, the incurious seeker. As Molloy he no longer moves confidently within the limits of his property. He loses his sense of direction and his sense of time. He no longer knows things he thought he knew and time ceases to exist for him as it used to:

> What I assert, deny, question, in the present, I still can. But mostly I shall use the various tenses of the past. For mostly I do not know, it is perhaps no longer so, it is too soon to know, I simply do not know, perhaps shall never know. (M p. 105)

He is not only beyond knowing, but moves out of time and space as well. Molloy describes the experience:

> [A]nd I, when I stayed still, as I did most of the time, was fixed too, and when I moved, from place to place, it was very slowly, as in a cage out of time, as the saying is, in the jargon of the schools, and out of space too

to be sure. For to be out of one and not out of the other was for cleverer than me, who was not clever, but foolish. But I may be quite wrong.  $(M p. 51)^5$ 

Understanding now what we do of the concepts of knowledge, time, and space and their correlation to the notions of health and sickness, it is not surprising to find abundant references to disease and disability throughout Molloy's narrative. We know of course that Molloy has trouble with his legs and requires crutches to manoeuvre himself about. In a wonderful passage he tells us, however, that his legs were often the least of his worries:

> The fact is, and I deplore it, but it is too late to do anything about it, that I have laid too much stress on my legs, throughout these wanderings, to the detriment of the rest. For I was no ordinary cripple, far from it, and there were days when my legs were the best part of me, with the exception of the brain capable of forming such a judgement. (M p. 82)

There is a <u>double-entendre</u> in the phrase "laid too much stress" on his legs, which means both that he has walked on them too much during these wanderings as well as that he has spoken of them too often.

Puns abound as he speaks of the state of his health, as in the following passage where he plays upon the phrase "under the weather," which is a euphemism for being sick but is used

 $<sup>^{5}</sup>$  Cleverly, the suggestion that he may be quite wrong refers not only to the improbability of being simultaneously out of time and space, but also to the assertion that he is foolish.

here literally as well to mean exposed to the elements:

And I had been under the weather so long, under all weathers, that I could tell quite well between them.... (M p. 51)

Certainly one of the most comic episodes in the entire Beckett canon is that of Molloy and the policeman who, heedless of Molloy's handicap, claims that his unconventional posture while resting on his bicycle is in violation of public order and decency:

> Modestly, I pointed to my crutches and ventured one or two noises regarding my infirmity, which obliged me to rest as I could, rather than as I should. But there are not two laws,...one for the healthy, another for the sick, but one only to which all must bow, rich and poor, young and old, happy and sad. He was eloquent. I pointed out that I was not sad. That was a mistake.<sup>6</sup> (M pp. 20-21)

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The earlier edition of Molloy, published first in 1955 by Olympia Press as a separate volume and then later by John Calder in 1955, also as a separate volume, reads, "But there are not two laws, one for the healthy, another for the sick...." (p. 21) In the Calder edition with the three novels of the trilogy published as a single volume, also published first in 1959, the line reads, "But there are not two laws, that was the next thing I thought I understood, not two laws, one for the healthy...." (p. 20) The new Picador edition of the trilogy also has the line this way. The original French reads, "Je crus comprende alors qu'il n'y avait pas deux lois, l'une pour...." (Molloy (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1951), p. 28.) This reads much more smoothly than the English "that was the next thing I thought I understood," and so I find the Olympia Press reading preferable for its simple and direct wit. This is the way I have presented the quotation above. The ellipsis points indicate where the extra words appear in the volume from which I am quoting, which is the Calder single volume edition of the trilogy. Here again we find Beckett a master of comic timing. Molloy's response that he is not sad and further the simple statement, "That was a mistake," are almost unequalled in precision anywhere in the canon. The policeman's point, too, that there are not two laws, bespeaks not only of the man-made laws which he is employed to enforce, but could also refer to the laws of nature which affect all; nature is as indiscriminate in choosing victims as the policeman is in apprehending criminals.

When Molloy catalogues his infirmities, we find yet another example of the way the subject of sickness occasions humour through the language and tone the narrator uses to address it:

> I fix at this period the dastardly desertion of my toes, so to speak in the thick of the fray. ... But you are right, that wasn't a weak point properly speaking, I mean my toes, I thought they were in excellent fettle, apart from a few corns, bunions, ingrowing nails and a tendency to cramp. No, my true weak points were elsewhere. (M p. 80)

It seems, rather, that his weak points are everywhere. He is blind in one eye, is toothless, possibly has lost his sense of smell and of taste, and although he is not deaf but on the contrary professes to have very sensitive hearing, he sometimes has a defect of the understanding and hears only sounds without understanding their meaning. (M p. 50) His wrists are "swollen and racked by a kind of chronic arthritis probably." (M p. 89) He also complains of the boils his mother gave him and continues:

The heart beats, and what a beat. That my ureters - no, not a word on that

subject. And the capsules. And the bladder. And the urethra. And the glands. Santa Maria. (M p. 81)<sup>7</sup>

Like Zeno, who says at one point that his health is perfect in spite of his pains, Molloy comes to a rather ironic conclusion. After this daunting list of ailments, he says:

> And then I should be sorry to give a wrong idea of my health which, if it was not exactly rude, to the extent of my bursting with it, was at bottom of an incredible robustness. (M p. 80)

This passage satirizes our notion of health with its references to health's rudeness and by the bizarre picture which presents itself in the rewording of our clichéd expression that someone can be 'bursting with health,' which does not at all seem a healthy state to be in.

Svevo satirized our notion of health, too, in a parable which Zeno relates. While writing at his desk one night, Zeno strikes at a fly which is bothering him. He merely stuns the insect and paralyzes one of its legs. Zeno watches fascinated as the fly rights itself and proceeds to clean its wings as though nothing had happened to it:

> [T]he fly's tiny pain-racked organism was acting on two mistaken assumptions. First of all, in cleaning its wings so

<sup>7</sup> The malfunctioning of these glands and organs is of particular importance here because of Beckett's continual wordplay upon the process of elimination. Molloy assures us that he leaks urine, which he says he smells in his perspiration and his saliva: "How I eliminate, to be sure, uremia will never be the death of me." (M p. 21) The implication is that the writing itself is the outpouring of poisons which must be got rid of.

persistently the insect showed that it did not know which was the wounded limb. Secondly, its persistent efforts showed that it assumed health to be the portion of everyone, and that though we have lost it we shall certainly find it again. These errors are quite excusable in an insect that only lives for one season and has no time to learn by experience. (Z p. 109)

The statement is completed in our minds: 'but such an error is not excusable in man, who lives for many seasons and should learn by his experience that health is neither the portion of everyone nor can it easily be regained once lost.'

Later Zeno writes:

Life is a little like disease, with its crises and periods of quiescence, its daily improvements and setbacks. But unlike other diseases life is always mortal. It admits of no cure. It would be like trying to stop up the holes in our body, thinking them to be wounds. We should die of suffocation almost before we were cured. (Z p. 377)

This is the same point Molloy is making when he speaks of his robust health, in spite of a myriad of ailments, for he describes his very life breath in such terms:

> And between you and me there was never anything wrong with my respiratory tracts, apart, of course, from the agonies intrinsic to that system. ... Ah yes, my asthma, how often I was tempted to put an end to it, by cutting my throat. But I never succumbed. The noise betrayed me, I turned purple. (M pp. 78-79)

He says he has often been tempted to 'put an end to it' by cutting his throat, the antecedent to the pronoun 'it' being not only asthma but life itself, as 'putting an end to it all' refers euphemistically to the act of suicide. Therefore the agonies intrinsic to the respiratory system are the agonies of life itself and the cessation of life alone will put an end to the ailments he suffers.

In the following chapter we will continue to examine the disintegration which occurs and will deal with the concept of suicide as Molloy has suggested here.

## Chapter Nine Reconquering the Self

If the characters of the trilogy do not die, they do at least experience violence, either actively committing an act of violence on someone else or suffering violence themselves. The sadism and violence in Beckett's work has not yet been thoroughly examined. I believe that it stems from the impulse to reconquer the Self. The very opening of the trilogy suggests the correlation between the quest and violence when Molloy writes of the man called 'C' who might happen that way again "to look for something, or to destroy something." (M p. 11) The possibility that he would come again to destroy something startles us here, but is in keeping with the further process of the narrators' looking for and discovering themselves.

Antonin Artaud explains the impulse to violence in this light:

If I commit suicide, it will not be to destroy myself but to put myself back together again. Suicide will be for me only one means of violently reconquering myself, of brutally invading my being.... (emphasis mine)

<sup>1</sup> Cited in A. Alvarez, <u>The Savage God</u> (New York: Bantam Books, 1973), p. 125.

Moran bludgeons to death his own likeness, Malone is hit violently on the head, the Unnamable tramples underfoot the remains of his family in the rotunda. Thus each successive narrator seeks brutally to invade, violently to reconquer himself.

I have found it useful to view the quest for self from a Freudian vantage. There is some justification for this to be found in Beckett's language, for when Moran is planning his journey in search of Molloy, and decides for the moment to take his autocycle because he likes it best, Beckett writes: "Thus was inscribed, on the threshold of the Molloy affair, the fatal pleasure principle." (M p. 99) Later Moran refers to Molloy as his Obidal, an anagram for Libido, as has been frequently noted.

Norman O. Brown, in his Freudian analysis of history entitled <u>Life Against Death</u>, gives a clear expression in these terms of individual human development as a process of growth from dependence on the parent to becoming parent:

> The first stage, the oral stage ... [is] the stage which discovers the anxiety of wanting, but not being able to find, the mother's breast. Therefore, says Freud, it is the stage which discovers the dualism of subject and object.<sup>2</sup>

Moran seeks Molloy; Molloy discovers that he is not Mother and begins to seek Mother. Brown continues:

In Freud's second stage, the anal stage, the dualism of subject and object is

Norman O. Brown, <u>Life Against Death</u> (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1972), p. 116. transformed into that of activity and passivity. ... (D)enying its own dependence (the child) asserts its independence by rebellious action, by seeking to transform passivity into activity, as in the game, 'Now let's play that I am the mother and you are the child.'<sup>3</sup>

We have already seen how child's play is an important feature of Beckett's work.

> At this point Eros, through the project of becoming both mother and child, in flight from death transforms death, already transformed into a principle of negation, into a principle of negative activity or aggression. (([H]ence the label, analsadistic)).<sup>4</sup>

Moran gives his son an enema; Moran kills his night visitor. Molloy knocks Mag on the head; Molloy kills the charcoal-burner.

Mag:Molloy::Molloy:Moran::Moran:Jacques Jr.. The action of the trilogy demonstrates the search for the Self; as Moran goes in search of Molloy, his anti-self, Molloy is in continual search for Mag, the earth mother or parent self. Rejected as he was by her at birth, he lives seeking only to re-establish himself in her womb-tomb, the earthen grave.

> And of myself, all my life, I think I had been going to my mother, with the purpose of establishing our relations on a less precarious footing. ... And when I appeared to give up and to busy myself with something else, or with nothing at all any more, in reality I was hatching my plans and seeking the way to her house. (M p. 87)

<sup>3</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 117.

4 ibid.

David Hayman calls <u>Molloy</u> a "bicyclical tale," expressing with an appropriate image the circularity of this bi-parteid novel.<sup>5</sup> In each of the two parts we have ended where we began: Molloy in his mother's room not knowing how he got there; Moran back at the home he left in search of Molloy and not knowing that he found him. This depicts the recurring theme in Beckett's works of the need to search and the futility of the quest, the need to speak and the futility of saying anything, the need to go on and the futility of living.

In all his peregrinations Molloy goes nowhere:

...Molloy, your region is vast, you have never left it and you never shall. And wheresoever you wander, within its distant limits, things will always be the same, precisely. (M pp. 65-66)

Moran invokes the image of Sisyphus to reiterate the same theme:

And it may even be they are not too particular about the route he takes provided it gets him to his destination safely and on time. (M pp. 133-134)

As with Sisyphus, the destination of Beckett's narrators within the trilogy is ever the same. Each seeks his symbolic parent-self to abolish and usurp.

"The maximum of corruption and the minimum of generation are identical: in principle, corruption is generation." So writes Beckett in "Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce," elaborating on the theories of Giordano Bruno and Giambattista Vico. (DB p. 6)

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> David Hayman, "Molloy or the Quest for Meaninglessness: A Global Interpretation," <u>Samuel Beckett Now</u>, ed. Friedman, p. 134.

To borrow Beckett's metaphor, the flowers of corruption in Moran are the seeds of vitality in Molloy, who in turn germinates Malone and so on to <u>How It Is</u>. These <u>corsi e</u> <u>ricorsi</u> of Vico's ideology are evidenced throughout Beckett's work.

Molloy describes the state he seeks, which critics have taken to indicate a moribund state, just this side of the grave:

> To be literally incapable of motion at last, that must be something! My mind swoons when I think of it. And mute into the bargain! And perhaps as deaf as a post! And who knows as blind as a bat! And as likely as not your memory a blank! And just enough brain intact to allow you to exult! And to dread death like a regeneration. (M pp. 140-141)

These words, however, describe not only the penultimate corruption of the life of the body, but the initial stages of life as well. Certainly the foetus is deaf, dumb, blind and incapable of independent motion, with just enough brain to maintain sensitivity to its state; it is not conscious of its being, perhaps, but it functions on one level as Beckett's moribunds do by ingesting and excreting.

This is nearly the state which Malone has achieved as he lies in bed, emptying his dish and filling his pot. The brain is there, too, as in Molloy's wish. Malone's state is, in fact, one of increased self-consciousness. Although he denies it, Malone is concerned almost entirely with himself. He has, after all, very little to distract him from himself. On the very first page of the novel he says that he will try not to be aware of himself: Yes I shall be natural at last, I shall suffer more, then less, without drawing any conclusions, I shall pay less heed to myself.... (MD p. 180)

Almost one hundred pages later, he exclaims, "But enough about me." Later, he admits, "All my senses are trained full on me, me."

Recall that essential to the making of the patriarchal Moran was a sound orientation in time and space. In his transformation, Molloy spoke of his disorientation: ("My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on...." (M p. 36)) Malone suffers a further disintegration in his sense of time:

> In the old days I used to count ... and then I divided, by sixty. That passed the time, I was time, I devoured the world. Not now, not any more. A man changes. As he gets on. (MD p. 202)

"In the old days," refers, of course, to the time when he was Moran, when he did devour the world - at least his own little world of house and garden. Division by sixty signifies not just a proclivity towards arithmetic, but an understanding of the sixty-second, sixty-minute portions of man-made time, which are now meaningless to Malone. Malone also experiences a disorientation in his sense of space:

> And if I were to stand up again, from which God preserve me, I fancy I would fill a considerable part of the universe.... (MD p. 235)

These two passages inform us that Malone has attained the sense of disorientation in time and space which is essential to the progression from patriarchy to selfhood. In keeping with the idea that his body is immense, he describes the sensation of his self as trapped inside that body:

> (My feet) are so much further from me than all the rest, from my head I mean, for that is where I am fled, my feet are leagues away. (MD pp. 234-235)

Earlier he has said, "If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window." (MD p. 219) This attempt at dissociation of the self from the body ultimately fails. Malone considers, "But perhaps it is the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought. All things hang together, I am in chains." (MD p. 219) Malone's body is important at this point, and particularly important is the idea of his impotence, for the further dissolution of Malone leads him to a state of increased consciousness.

In Svevo's novel, Zeno says, "Health cannot analyze itself even if it looks at itself in the glass." (Z p. 155) Moran's experience verifies this statement:

> Physically speaking it seemed to me I was now becoming rapidly unrecognisable. ... [But] to tell the truth I not only knew who I was, but I had a sharper and clearer sense of my identity than ever before, in spite of its deep lesions and the wounds with which it was covered. (M pp. 170-171)

Paradoxically, Moran knows himself better when he is unrecognizable. The metaphor of sickness is important here, as elsewhere; the lesions and wounds which Moran suffers offer the clues to his true identity.

In her book, Illness as Metaphor, Susan Sontag quotes

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from a fragment of Novalis, written 1799-1800:

'The idea of perfect health,' ... ' is only scientifically interesting; what is really interesting is sickness, 'which belongs to individualizing.'<sup>O</sup>

Sontag continues: "Disease is what speaks through the body, a language for dramatizing the mental: a form of self-expression."<sup>7</sup> As early as his first published novel, Beckett was expressing this idea in his work. Balacqua takes comfort in the awareness of his pain:

> ... the rabbet of his nape took the cornice, it wrung the baby anthrax that he always wore just above his collar, he intensified the pressure and the pangs, they were a guarantee of his identity. (MP p. 65)

The verb "wore" is significant, suggesting that Belacqua chooses to appear this way, or at least carries his affliction proudly, wearing it as a wounded soldier wears a medal or as some such symbol of identification. Indeed, the anthrax might well be said to be Belacqua's identity, as in the process of having it removed, he dies.

The sense of identity which comes through affliction is a result of an increased consciousness which pain awakens. Frederick Hoffman has written comparatively about Beckett's work and the short novel <u>Notes From Underground</u>.<sup>8</sup> One idea expressed in Dostoevsky's work is that of the association of pain and consciousness. Hoffman does not go into this, but the point is useful here to illustrate what is happening within

<sup>6</sup> Susan Sontag, <u>Illness as Metaphor</u> (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p. 30.

<sup>7</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 43.

<sup>8</sup> Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Underground Man: Background of the Modern Self," <u>Samuel Beckett</u>: <u>The Man and His Works</u> (London: Forum House Publishing Co., 1969), pp. 3-55. the trilogy. As the narrator of the trilogy becomes more afflicted, his consciousness becomes more acute. Consciousness of his suffering leads to more suffering and so on in a spiral effect. As the Underground Man says, "I swear, gentlemen, that to be too conscious is an illness - a real thorough-going illness."<sup>9</sup> But, as he later discovers, consciousness of suffering is what distinguishes man from the lower orders. He elaborates:

> Why, suffering is the sole origin of consciousness. Though I did lay it down at the beginning that consciousness is the greatest misfortune for man, yet I know man prizes it and would not give it up for any satisfaction. Consciousness, for instance, is infinitely superior to twice two makes four. Once you have mathematical certainty there is nothing left to do or to understand. There will be nothing left but to bottle up your five senses and plunge into contemplation. While if you stick to consciousness, even though the same result is attained, you can at least flog yourself at times, and that will, at any rate, liven you up. Reactionary as it is, corporal punishment is better than nothing.10

As Malone nears a state of pure consciousness - that of the Unnamable - his pain increases:

My head. On fire, full of boiling oil. ... The pain is almost unbearable, upon my soul it is. (MD p. 275)

The Unnamable is not merely more conscious; he becomes consciousness itself.

<sup>9</sup> Fyodor Dostoevsky, "Notes from Underground," <u>Three</u> <u>Short Novels</u> (New York: Dell Publishing Co., 1972), p. 28.

10 <u>ibid</u>., p. 54.

## In another article, Hoffman writes:

The trilogy is, quite simply and superficially, a portrayal of the loss of self. It begins with the impact of pain (and loss of members) upon self-confidence; it proceeds to explore the mind of a moribund; it ends upon the question of the total loss of name and of naming, or being and creativity.11

Contrary to what Hoffman writes, the trilogy is a portrayal not of the loss of self, but of the quest for self, and this is not superficial at all, nor does it lead to a loss of creativity. What the Unnamable loses in his physical self, he gains in consciousness of the true self. His loss of a name, which is truly a superficial means of identification, takes him one step nearer to the core of his true identity. The Unnamable reaches an embryonic state (he even sees himself as egg-shaped), in preparation for re-entry to the womb.

Hoffman cites as evidence of the Unnamable's loss of self the passage which he rightly calls "an elaborate parody of official patterns of self-identification".<sup>12</sup>

> But my dear man, come, be reasonable, look, this is you, look at this photograph, and here's your file, no convictions ... look, here's the record, insults to policemen, indecent exposure, ... look, here's the medical report, spasmodic tabes, painless ulcers ... sight failing, chronic gripes.... (U p. 380)

11 Frederick J. Hoffman, "The Elusive Ego: Beckett's M's," Samuel Beckett Now, ed. Friedman, pp. 50-51.

<sup>12</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 57.

But Hoffman wrongly concludes from this that the Unnamable therefore has no identity. The passage proves quite the contrary because it is a parody. These means of identification are superficial: photographs, police reports, even medical reports. The true self can not be known by such means as these. Moran indeed could identify himself in this way; he is corporeal and shallow. The Unnamable, having lost his corporality, is closer to the center of the self.

Charles Peake asks an important question in light of the search for self:

'If the ideal self, the latent consciousness is the object of the search, who or what is doing the digging?' Ask 'What am I?', and the first-person pronoun at once appears to suffer a fission into one 'I' which is being investigated and one which is investigating.<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the Unnamable frequently speaks of a subjective force, which he refers to as "they", which acts upon him as on an object. Eric Levy suggests that this 'they' refers to words themselves: "This pronoun appears throughout the work, and where the antecedent is unclear it is always 'words.'"<sup>14</sup> The words are the superficial identity; words which lie, or at best mislead, can never be trusted to describe the true self.

His true self is only to be discovered in the true silence of the blank page. At one point he says he must

<sup>14</sup> Levy, p. 59.

<sup>13</sup> Charles Peake, "'The Labours of Poetical Excavation,'" Beckett the Shape Changer, ed. Worth, p. 50.

"say words, as long as there are any." (U p. 418) He says:

...I've drowned, more than once, it wasn't I, suffocated, set fire to me, thumped on my head with wood and iron, it wasn't I, there was no head, no wood, no iron, I didn't do anything to me, I didn't do anything to anyone, no one did anything to me.... (U p. 412)

Not only must he say everything, he must also say the opposite of everything. After all the words have been said, he must obliterate them, annihilate them, cancel them out until all that is left is the utterly blank page.

Words, which were Malone's companions, become in this sense the Unnamable's tormentors. He says he has been macerated up to the mouth. (U p. 412) To be macerated means both to be tormented and to have wasted away, an ironic state for the Unnamable who is tormented by words, but has wasted away until he has nothing but words, is nothing but a mouth. Abbott speaks of this work as part of a sequence in the "process of formal corruption" which Beckett "has both encouraged and fought throughout his career."<sup>15</sup>

The corruption of form is analogous in Beckett's work to the bodily corruption which the narrators suffer. Eric Levy writes:

15 Abbott, The Fiction of Samuel Beckett, p. 126.

Malone is a sick narrator. His problem with silence is part of (his) narrative disease. In health, silence is the best friend of any narrator.<sup>10</sup>

The Unnamable, writes Levy, is "pure narrator"; he is defined only by his words and silence.

Jan Hokenson writes:

After world, body, and even language dissolve, there remains being, undefined and unnamed, but manifestly present in anguished rhythms, bitter comic tones and sheer unending will to be.<sup>17</sup>

The will to be is the force behind the narrative. Malone's talk of defenestration was, as he well knew, an empty threat. Suicide is sometimes understood as the only truly free act of will available to man. Beckett makes us understand a different view when he suggests that we are all ultimately victims of suicide. Sickness is the body's mutiny against the self. Our bodies are adversaries and we can choose either to hasten suicide or to let it run its course. The Unnamable elaborates:

> [T]here are even those whose sang-froid is such that they throw themselves out of the window. No one asks him to go to these lengths. But simply to discover, without further assistance from without, the alleviations of flight from self, that's all, he won't go far, he needn't go far. Simply to find within himself a palliative for what he is, through no fault of his own. (U pp. 370-371)

16 Levy, p. 59.

17 Jan Hokenson, "Three Novels in Large Black Pauses," Samuel Beckett, ed. Cohn, p. 84. The word 'palliative' used here means first simply an excuse; that is, one is asked to find a reason for what one is. But a palliative is also something which alleviates pain and perhaps the suggestion here is that one should seek within the self the alleviation of the pain of existence.

Malone, in search of a palliative, was still able to discover a certain grim humour in his situation: "The end of a life is always vivifying" (MD p. 212); [He will] die one day like any other day, only shorter." (MD p. 208) Even his invective against the world is put in such a way as to make us laugh:

> Let me say before I go any further that I forgive nobody. I wish them all an atrocious life and then the fires and ice of hell and in the execrable generations to come an honoured name. (MD p. 180)

The very extravagance of his wish lightens the tone of it. The idea of an honoured name being a curse is contrary to expectation and seems ludicrous, although we can still understand by it the emotions which underlie it.

The Unnamable demonstrates less humour and more gall. In an extended metaphor of sickness, he describes what the end of his quest would be:

> They hope things will change one day, it's natural. That one day on my windpipe, or some other section of the conduit, a nice little abscess will form, with an idea inside, point of departure for a general infection. This would enable me to jubilate like a normal person, knowing why. And in no time I'd be a network of fistulae, bubbling with the blessed pus of reason. (U p. 356)

The conduit of which he speaks is that which runs between his mind and his voice (windpipe), between thought and word. The sentence "This would enable me to jubilate like a normal person, knowing why," refers to the idea of the palliative suggested above. That is, knowing why we suffer is often palliative enough; if there is a reason, the suffering makes sense. But of course reason is here ridiculed as pus, a by-product of infection.

Malone, too, has ridiculed the logic of cause and effect in relation to sickness and suffering:

> (P)eople are never content to suffer, but they must have heat and cold, rain and its contrary which is fine weather, and with that love, friendship, black skin and sexual and peptic deficiency for example, in short the furies and frenzies happily too numerous to be numbered of the body including the skull and its annexes, whatever that means, such as the club-foot, in order that they may know very precisely what exactly it is that dares prevent their happiness from being unalloyed. And sticklers have been met with who had no peace until they knew for certain whether their carcinoma was of the pylorus or whether on the contrary it was not rather of the duodenum. (MD p. 243)

Of course a carcinoma can kill one if it is of the pylorus or the duodenum.

The Unnamable considers that his suffering is a form of retribution; that he is being forced to say these things, over and over, until he gets it right:

> A parrot, that's what they're up against, a parrot. If they had told me what I have to say, in order to meet with their approval, I'd be bound to say it, sooner or later. But God forbid, that would be too easy, my

heart wouldn't be in it, I have to puke my heart out too, spew it up whole along with the rest of the vomit, it's then at last I'll look as if I mean what I'm saying, it won't be just idle words. (U p. 338)<sup>10</sup>

In the end, the Unnamable calls these words, his outpourings, a confession:

...it's like a confession, a last confession, you think it's finished, then it starts off again, there were so many sins.... (U p. 415)

Eugene Webb writes of this metaphor:

The whole idea of guilt and punishment may be only a hypothesis withno real relevance, one more thought produced by consciousness in its endless necessity to fill up the silence....19

However, the image is too ubiquitous not to be of some significance. The metaphor continues to the final page, with the words

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Beckett introduces a parrot or cockatoo at several points throughout his works. Helen in <u>Mercier and Camier</u> has a cockatoo which gets sick and dies. Lousse has a parrot in <u>Molloy</u> and Mr. Jackson, Malone's friend, is said to have had a pink and grey parrot. In <u>Endgame</u>, Hamm's sheet could possibly represent the cover put nightly over a bird's cage, while Hamm, the actor, actually "parrots" the words written for him by the playwright. In <u>Dream</u>, parrots are used metaphorically to describe a physical condition: "Belacqua was] greatly distressed in the head. All night the parrots had swung roosting from his palate." (D p. 27)

Perhaps Beckett chooses this bird to reappear because of the sexual slang in the name cockatoo, or perhaps because of the simile "as sick as a parrot," a suggestion which is supported by Beckett's preoccupation with sickness and the fact that this bird, like man, is inclined to an inordinate number of illnesses. Possibly, too, he chooses in this way to emphasize the idea of repetition. A cockatoo uncomprehendingly repeats what has been said to it. The narrators, too, sometimes speak of their words as not their own. The Unnamable, in particular, complains of this.

<sup>19</sup> Webb, p. 129.

"strange pain, strange sin," equating pain with retribution for a sin.

The idea of suffering as retribution for sins, known or unknown, is frequently expressed in Beckett's work; in particular, the narrators consider the possibility that they are being punished for the sin of having been born. Malone addresses this issue in his tale of Macmann as he lies on the ground in a rainstorm:

> For while deploring he could not spend the rest of his life (which would thereby have been agreeably abridged) under this heavy... rain, now supine, now prone, he was quarterinclined to wonder if he was not mistaken in holding it responsible for his suffering and if in reality his discomfort was not the effect of quite a different cause or set of causes. (MD 243)

The idea of punishment came to his mind, addicted it is true to that chimera and probably impressed by the posture of the body and the fingers clenched as though in torment. And without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living. And no doubt he would have wondered if it was really necessary to be guilty in order to be punished but for the memory, more and more galling, of his having consented to live in his mother, then to leave her. (MD p. 240)

The search for self can be seen as the atonement for having lived in and then left the mother, an atonement achieved only through reconquering the parent-self.

This process does not end with the end of the trilogy, but continues into Beckett's next novel, <u>How\_it Is.</u> The next

## Chapter Ten

A New No: The Celebration of the Negative

In his essay on Proust, Beckett speaks disparagingly of what he calls our "permicious and incurable optimism." The implication is that optimism is a disease; that unquestioning optimism in the face of the suffering that surrounds us is perverse, and is therefore to be considered sickness in a true sense. However, in rejecting specious optimism, Beckett strives for a new form for celebration. Through constant speculation and exploration, an effort is made to discover and renew a genuine affirmation of life. Beckett celebrates the negative in order to arrive at a new expression of the positive.

In his book, <u>Samuel Beckett and the Pessimistic Tradition</u>, Steven Rosen has reviewed Beckett's relationship to his pessimistic predecessors from Heraclitus to Proust.<sup>1</sup> Although Rosen makes many interesting points of comparison, I object to Rosen's use of the word pessimistic applied to Beckett. A doctrine of pessimism is one which considers the existing world to be the worst possible, expects misfortune in all

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Steven Rosen, <u>Samuel Beckett and the Pessimistic</u> <u>Tradition (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutger's University</u> Press, 1976).

circumstances, and connotes an attitude of complaint and querulousness. Negativism, however, the word I choose to apply to the attitude we find in Beckett's work, is characterized by doubt and skepticism. It questions the validity of accepted values and is underlined by the possibility that the present world, as bad as it is, may not be the worst possible. It also suggests the possibility of something better. It is negativism, rather than pessimism, which Beckett espouses.

Beckett belittles the sick optimism which Mahood evinces by portraying it as comic. Planted to his neck in a jar, Mahood describes his activities:

> Now I'm getting used to the sawdust. It's an occupation. I could never bear to be idle, it saps one's energy. And I open and close my eyes, open and close, as in the past. And I move my head in and out, in and out, as heretofore. (U p. 334)

This is a delightful passage in which Mahood tries to convince himself that his situation could be worse. After all, he can still open and close his eyes and move his neck in and out, just as he has always been able to do. It would be worse, he says, not to have an occupation, to be merely idle. Mahood is right in thinking his situation could be worse, for it becomes so. A collar of cement is put around the rim of the jar to prevent his moving his head in and out. Ever optimistic, he remarks, "I take advantage of this to learn to stay quiet." (U p. 335)

In his "Myth of Sisyphus," Albert Camus writes that there is no fate that can not be surmounted by scorn: as Sisyphus

descends once more to retrieve the rock, he can curse his fate and carry on. Camus continues, "If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy."2 Beckett often has recourse to the image of Sisyphus in his work, but in one instance it is Camus' Sisyphus alone to which he refers. In Molloy, Moran says, "But I do not think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now, always at the same appointed place." (M p. 133) Here Beckett belittles the "fashion" of turning hardship into blessing. Such saccharine optimism might actually deny our humanity. But the proposition that our humanity rests in our ability to scorn our fate and rejoice in our suffering is not Beckett's concern. For one thing, the term 'human' is too indiscriminate to be of much use. As Beckett writes in an essay on the van Velde brothers, 'human' is a word "that we reserve for times of great massacre.... With 'it's not human,' all is said - to the dustbin with it."3 Rather, Beckett forces us to think creatively about our traditional responses to the ideas of hope and despair.

Moran continues to remark on the predicament of Sisyphus:

<sup>2</sup> Albert Camus, <u>The Myth of Sisyphus</u> (New York: Random House, 1955), p. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Samuel Beckett, "La Peinture des van Velde, ou: le Mode et la Pantalon," <u>Les Cahiers d'Art</u>, 20-21 (1945-1946), p. 356. The original reads: "C'est là un vocable, et sans doute un concept aussi, qu'on réserve pour les temps des grands massacres. ...Avec 'ce n'est pas humain', tout est dit. A la poubelle." This translation is by John Fletcher in <u>Samuel Beckett's Art</u> (London: Chatto & Windus, 1967), p. 21. And perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would keep hope alive, would it not, hellish hope. Whereas to see yourself doing the same thing endlessly over and over again fills you with satisfaction. (M p. 134)

There are two terms here which surprise us: first the reference to "hellish hope"; then the word "satisfaction" where "despair" would be expected and apparently more appropriate. That hope is hellish is an idea contrary to all standards of human endeavour and yet it is one which Beckett elaborates throughout his works. That a desperate situation as that of Sisyphus could fill one with satisfaction defies our expectations.

Beckett does not mean here that such endless repetition as that of Sisyphus's journey up and down the mountainside could be one of satisfaction and fulfillment. Rather, he chooses the word deliberately to startle us into thought: it is impossible that we should not mentally fit the more suitable word "despair" in its place. By employing what can be seen as a form of sarcasm, Beckett forces us to choose the more appropriate term ourselves and thereby creates a far stronger impression than would otherwise be presented.

Kierkegaard has given us the most comprehensive understanding of despair, and one which coincides with what we find in Beckett's works, when he writes that "despair is the sickness unto death." He continues:

> It is indeed very far from being true that literally understood, one dies of this sickness, or that this sickness ends with bodily death. On the contrary, the torment of despair is precisely this: not to be able to die. So it has much in common with the

situation of the moribund when he lies and struggles with death, and cannot die. So to be sick unto death is, not to be able to die - yet not as though there were hope of life; no, the hopelessness in this case is that even the last hope, death, is not available. When death is the greatest danger, one hopes for life; but when one becomes acquainted with an even more dreadful danger, one hopes for death. So when the danger is so great that death has become one's hope, despair is the disconsolateness of not being able to die.

In this passage Kierkegaard's explication of the metaphoric sickness of despair - which can, of course, be regarded as or lead to a quite literal form of sickness as well - aptly describes the moribunds of Beckett's creation. The situation which Kierkegaard describes is identical to that expressed in Beckett's works: the denial of hope, the longing for death, the inability to die.

Steven Rosen describes the strength of Beckett's writing as "triumphant unhappiness asserting itself against specious consolations" such as love, philosophy and religion which "gives Beckett's writing much of its distinctive shock effect."<sup>5</sup> We might add to this list the consolation of death denied, as well. The term triumphant unhappiness describes an unusual victory, but it depicts the negative energy with which Beckett creates out of failure the opposite of failure.

In line with Beckett's view, Leslie Fiedler asserts that optimism is not the province of serious fiction. He explains:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Soren Kierkegaard, <u>A Kierkegaard Anthology</u>, ed. Robert Bretall (New York: The Modern Library, 1946), pp. 341-342. <sup>5</sup> Rosen, p. 21.

To fulfill its essential moral obligation, [serious] fiction must be negative.... The image of man in art, however magnificently portrayed - indeed, precisely when it is magnificently portrayed - is the image of a failure. There is no way out.<sup>6</sup>

This coincides with Beckett's view when he reputedly told Professor W.S. Maguinness, "I'm not interested in stories of success ... only failure."<sup>7</sup>

In an interview with Israel Shenker in 1956, Beckett explained, "The very last thing I wrote - <u>Textes pour rein</u> was an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration, but it failed."<sup>8</sup> Ironically, it is through this failure that he succeeds, by creating a new possibility for the negative. In <u>Texts for Nothing</u>, Beckett explores the possibilities of the negative and discovers a doctrine of writing which was to become his personal style.

The thirteen <u>Texts for Nothing</u> are published in a larger volume entitled <u>No's Knife</u>, an expression taken from the thirteenth text. Beckett arms his negative, as the title <u>No's Knife</u> implies, and sets out to discover a new no, through endless contradictions and denials. The mood begins immediately with the first words of "Text I," a single word is followed by

<sup>o</sup> Leslie Fiedler, <u>No! in Thunder</u> (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1963), pp. 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Bair, p. 349. Malone also tells us: "I began again - but little by little with a different aim, no longer in order to succeed, but in order to fail." (MD p. 195)

<sup>8</sup> Israel Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters," <u>The New York</u> <u>Times</u>, 6 May 1956, sec. 2, p. 1. a denial of that word: "Suddenly, no, at last ....."

The narrator of the <u>Texts</u> is a single voice or scribe, involved in what he calls continuing to give up. The term is two-fold. He means it in the sense of 'to surrender,' 'to quit,' but what he is actually doing is continuing to give up his words; that is, he wants to stop, but continues to speak/write. His language is full of contradictions, often made within a single breath or stroke of the pen: "I'll never try to understand any more, that's what you think"; "I can do nothing more, that's what you think."

The first text begins familiarly enough. The narrator begins by telling a story or describing a memory - he is not sure which. To help himself with that most difficult first step, he describes the 'place,' the setting, the traditional first step for a writer, although he inconoclastically remarks that he starts with this because it is "unimportant." We are not, however, expected to believe him. We find our hero, predictably, in a trough, "scooped deep by the rains" - the familiar vagina/womb image. "Someone said, ... What possessed you to come? I could have stayed in my den, snug and dry, I couldn't." (NK p. 71) The writer is as powerless to resist the creative impulse as the mother and foetus are to resist birth.

The birth of this narrator is a difficult one. He describes his struggle to remove himself from the trough after leaving the den:

I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack

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foundered in the street, struggling no more, struggling again, till it gives up. I say to the head, Leave it alone, stay quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever. (NK p. 71)

A difficult birth, but the umbilical cord has been cut. With typical precision the narrator puns, "(M)y hat is gone ... I was attached to it." (NK p. 74) To understand this joke, the reader must know that Beckett's vagabonds are usually quite literally attached to their hats by means of a string through a buttonhole; and to know this might also mean to understand the hat as womb, the string as umbilical cord. With this, "Text I" places us in life. But the grave imagery is reiterated so that we will not miss the duality, the eternal cycle of birth and death: "I am down in the hole the centuries have dug.... They are up above, all around me, as in a graveyard." (NK p. 72)

In "Text II" the grave imagery takes precedence. He refers to the nearby farm of the Graves brothers and speaks of the light above him, where the elements are:

> [T]he living find their ways, without too much trouble, avoid one another, unite, avoid the obstacles, without too much trouble, seek with their eyes, close their eyes, halting, without halting, among the elements, the living. (NK p. 77)

This is a description of life which Beckett will elaborate in <u>The Lost Ones</u>, his vision of life as a purgatory where people move in the semi-darkness of semi-consciousness and uncertainty.

The language of sickness emerges several times in this Text. In an effort to hasten death, the speaker tries to

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prevent himself from uttering "health-giving howls." He warns himself to ration his groans and to "watch out for the genuine death-pangs, some are deceptive, you think you're home, start howling and revive." (NK pp. 78-79) He says that his present state is "pure ache," but then scoffs at the implied distinction between past and present suffering, saying, "pah you were saying that above and you a living mustard-plaster."

His present surroundings are not well defined: "nothing very definite in the way of creation," he says. The use of the word 'creation' suggests the context for the interpretation of the next line, a description of his surroundings: "Dry, it's possible, or wet, or slime, as before matter took ill." The suggestion here is that man himself is a disease; in an evolutionary sense, he is the result of a germ growing, by accident or divine intent, in the primordial slime.

In "Text III" we discover that the previous talk of being in a grave has been a ruse. Dead men do not speak, do not tell stories, do not think or remember. Real death is silence and the end of consciousness. The death of the narratives is a metaphoric death, the feeling of the end, the consciousness of the futility of living, but living nonetheless.

In "Text I" the speaker has said:

I've given myself up for dead all over the place, of hunger, of old age, murdered, drowned, and then for no reason, of tedium, nothing like breathing your last to put new life in you.... (NK p. 74)

Consequently it is no surprise to find in "Text III" that there is a resurrection of the spirit, so to speak. This three-part process of a birth, the descent into the grave and ultimate resurrection is familiar to us. However, I used the term 'spirit' only in the sense that we say someone is in high or low spirits. In "Text III" the narrator's spirits liven. "Start by stirring," he directs himself, "there must be a body.... With a cluther of limbs and organs, all that is needed to live again...." (Nk p. 81) Little by little he feels life again in his limbs, his feet.

He imagines a companion for himself; the tempo of the narrative picks up as his imagination reels with details of this relationship:

> I'll have a crony, my own vintage, my own bog, a fellow warrior, we'll relive our campaigns and compare our scratches. Quick quick. He'll have been in the navy, perhaps under Jellicoe, while I was potting at the invader from behind a barrel of Guinness, with my arquebuse. We have not long, that's the spirit, in the present, not long to live, it's our positively last winter, halleluiah. We wonder what will carry us off in the end. (NK p. 83)

This is a wonderful passage, which continues through a sadly humorous and somewhat crude description of their respective ailments. The delightful image of the narrator "potting at the invader from behind a barrel of Guinness" adds greatly to the performance. The interjections of encouragement he gives himself - "Quick quick," "that's the spirit" - lend an urgency to the tempo.

But suddenly, with "No, that's all memories," he breaks the spell and he is alone again and forlorn: No, alone, I'd be better off alone, it would be quicker. He'd nourish me, he had a friend a pork-butcher, he'd ram the ghost back down my gullet with black pudding. With his consolations ... he'd prevent discouragement from sapping my foundations. (NK p. 84)

The closing passage reveals the meaninglessness of the tirade, the insignificant sound and fury of this narrative: what we think is something happening is nothing; what we think is a story, a life, is not. We read:

> There is no flesh here anywhere, nor any way to die. Leave all that, to want to leave all that, not knowing what that means, all that, it's soon said, soon done, in vain, nothing has stirred, no one has spoken. Here, nothing will happen here, no one will be here.... And the voices, wherever they come from, have no life in them. (NK p. 86)

Here is the ultimate denial, and this after beginning the section with the definitive promise, "no more denials." We are presented with the denial, the denial of the denial, the denial again; alone, not alone, alone again, like a musical score.

"Text IV" is couched in the conditional mood. It opens with the questions, "Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it's me?" The text ends with the tidy, "That's where I'd go, if I could go, that's who I'd be, if I could be," implying that the words between the opening and closing lines have answered the earlier questions. The words between have been, if not a direct answer, at least an exploration of the possibilities. The speaker at this point is more positive, ironically by virtue of a double negative: "I don't say no, this evening." Indeed, he does not once contradict what he says with his usual 'No.'

There emerges within this Text several important discoveries through this speaker's exploration of his identity. The first is what we learn of the complex relationship between this speaker and his creator, whom he calls "the same old stranger as ever, for whom alone accusative I exist." He says this is "a simple answer," but it is far from simple. The use of the word 'stranger' signifies that this other is himself; it is an allusion to the quotation from Proust we find in Beckett's Proust: "'One lies all one's life long ... above all to that stranger whose contempt would cause one most pain oneself.'" (P p. 64) The word 'accusative' here works on two levels. In a grammatical sense it indicates that the speakerself is the reason for the actions of the author-self, the object of his creative activity. In another sense, however, the word indicates that the speaker is an accuser, bringing charges against his creator. He says his author is "mad, mad, he's mad. The truth is he's looking for me to kill me."

It seems, however, that the two selves accuse each other, for the speaker continues:

He thinks words fail him, he thinks because words fail him he's on his way to speechlessness, to being speechless with my speechlessness, he would like it\_to be my fault that words fail him, of course words fail him. He tells his story every five minutes, saying it is not his, there's cleverness for you. He would like it to be my fault he has no story, of course he has no story, that's no reason for trying to foist one on me. (NK pp. 87-88) Here is the second discovery revealed to us in "Text IV." The question of the necessity of a story leads to the discovery of the first person narrative as an effective and appropriate creative style. The speaker says:

> (N)o need of a story, a story is not compulsory, just a life, that's the mistake I made, one of the mistakes, to have wanted a story for myself, whereas life alone is enough. (NK p. 89)

We may read this statement on one level to mean that the narrator's discontent has been unwarranted, that even though nothing happens, existence is sufficient because nothing that happens is of any importance anyway. However, we might also take this as a reflection of Beckett's memory of the birth of his first person narrators beginning with the <u>Nouvelles</u>, and the onset of his most concentrated and productive period of writing. The narrator complains, "If at least he would dignify me with the third person, like his other figments...." But the <u>Texts</u> retain the intimacy of the first person throughout.

The narrator continues:

To breathe is all that is required, there is no obligation to ramble, or receive company, you may even believe yourself dead on condition you make no bones about it.... (NK p. 89)

The joke of death in life being acceptable provided that you "make no bones" marks again the idea of the metaphoric death of the Beckett canon. The pun which on one level warns against the process of decomposition (to become mere bones) reminds us of the early admonition that we must not make nuisances of ourselves in life or in death. "Text IV" has suggested the relationship between narrator and creator as of that between accuser and accused. It is not surprising, then, to find in "Text V" the imagery of the law courts: "I'm the clerk, I'm the scribe, at the hearings of what cause I know not." The language throughout this Text is that of a court of law. The narrator writes of the judge, party, witness and advocate; he says he is "in the dock" and speaks of "the session this evening" where he, as scribe, notes all. There is an orator, a council, a justice, and "gentlemen of the long robe." He states that he is "in the toils of that obscure assize where to be is to be guilty."

More important than this revelation of guilt is the understanding we come to through a wonderful passage describing the act of writing itself:

> Yes, I see the scene, I see the hand, it comes creeping out of shadow, the shadow of my head, then scurries back, no connexion with me. Like a little creepy crawly it ventures out an instant, then goes back in again, the things one has to listen to, I say it as I hear it. (NK p. 93)

This image must be read at two levels simultaneously. The literal image is one of the scribe describing what he actually sees as he bends forward over his desk, the light from the room behind him casting the shadow of his head and shoulders onto the paper in front of him. As he moves his hand from left to right across the page, writing the words we now read, the shadow of his hand "comes creeping out of shadow, the shadow of [his] head." Then it "scurries back" as he moves his hand rapidly back into the shadow to begin the next line.<sup>9</sup> The use of the word 'head' instead of 'mind' encourages this interpretation. He calls his hand a "little creepy crawly" having "no connexion with (him)self," which is a sensation we have all experienced as we sit laboriously writing the words our minds formulated whole seconds ago. Our thoughts are distracted now from the hand's labour; we feel dissociated from that activity, as if the hand had a life of its own separate from ours.

On another level, we understand that this crawling thing creeps out from the shadow of his head; that is, the words, unsummoned, find their way out of his subconscious mind, "the shadow of his head," and he writes them as he hears them. This is the creator insisting upon the separation of himself from his voices, his characters, saying that they inhabit him but do what they like; he takes no responsibility for their words and actions, "no connexion with me."

The act of writing is frequently likened to the miracle of birth in Beckett's work. In his first novel, <u>Dream</u>, we read, "If ever I do drop a book," a line which suggests the birth of a child. (D p. 124) Like a child, product of oneself and an act of creation, a work of art grows independent of its parent-author.

The image at the end of "Text V" shows the scribe weary of writing: "Yes, one begins to be very tired, very tired of

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Malone, too, describes the experience of his hand moving across the page as he writes: "My little finger glides before my pencil across the page and gives warning, falling over the edge, that the end of the line is near." (MD p. 207)

one's quill, it falls, it's noted." If the scribe has tired and his quill has fallen, who then is noting "it falls, it's noted"?

"Text VI" elaborates on the disclaimer that the scribe is writing only what he hears and is not responsible for what he writes. This evening he is not hearing it very well: "Wretched acoustics this evening, the merest scraps, literally." This is a wonderful ruse; we are betrayed into believing in the separation.<sup>10</sup>

The verdict of "Text V," we recall, was guilty. "Text VI" finds the speaker in the care of "keepers," looking for a way out. Of course this image is not a mere literal explanation of the speaker's situation. Rather, it bespeaks of his intense efforts to escape from the urge which impels him to break the silence. He says, "I know, if my head could think I'd find a way out, in my head, like so many others, and out of worse than this...." He wonders what his keepers do in the intervals between these evening sessions and he describes his present as a Purgatory where he is "plunged in ice up to the nostrils the eyelids caked with frozen tears...."

The second half of "Text VI" contradicts the information we received in the first half. There have been no tears. He is closer to mirth, he says, than to tears; but then he determines to be grave. There are no apparitions nor keepers.

<sup>10</sup> The same thing occurs in "Text XI" when, after several false starts, the speaker becomes exasperated: "it's as though, it's as if, come on, I don't know, I shouldn't have begun." Obviously all could be erased and the reader none the wiser, but the mistakes remain to signify a creative impulse separate from the consciousness of the narrator.

There is no question of how the intervals are filled. The words themselves contradict the silence: "this farrago of silence and words, of silence that is not silence and barely murmured words."

In "Text VII" the speaker is missing. He searches for himself everywhere, saying, "I'd like to be sure I left no stone unturned before reporting me missing and giving up." He intends to look for himself in all his old haunts, "those places where there was a chance of my being, where once I used to lurk, waiting for the hour to come when I might venture forth, tried and trusty places...."

"This tone," he remarks correctly, "is promising, it is more like that of old .... " Indeed, there are many remnants of former things within the thirteen Texts. We hear of Pozzo, are reminded of Neary's haunt in Murphy (Glasshouse Street), of the "vulgar Molloy, a common Malone," and later the speaker describes his shape as one we recognize as that of the Unnamable. In "Text VII," the image of the speaker is strikingly like Watt, waiting at the railway station with his ticket between thumb and forefinger. The station is said to be "in ruins" and the glass door is "black with the dust of ruin." In the previous Text the narrator has described himself as "a little dust in a little nook." The importance of dust and ruins to Beckett's works will be discussed in a later chapter, but it is interesting to note how many already familiar references are incorporated within these thirteen Texts.

"Text X" begins, "Give up, all given up, it's nothing new, I'm nothing new," reinforcing the point above that there

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is much that is familiar to us within the Texts. But we must not take these words at face value. There is a development here, a growth towards a new wisdom. The wisdom which is gained from these thirteen explorations can be seen as an awareness of new possibilities and capabilities. In "Text XIII" the narrator says, "who can the greater can the less, once you've spoken of me you can speak of anything...." This is not a statement of the insipid hope of the "life above," which was spoken of early in "Text II": "How one hoped above, on and off. With what diversity." Rather, it is an affirmation of strength gained through the confrontation of the negative.

Texts VIII, IX, X and XIII are specifically concerned with this development of the new negative. In "Text VIII" we read the brutal suggestion, "ah if no were content to cut yes's throat and never cut its own." Again the mood is conditional, implying that no has not yet dispensed with yes, and that even if he did, he would then cut his own throat and thus destroy himself, so nothing would be changed.

In "Text IX" the speaker states, "the yeses and noes mean nothing to his mouth." He invents the figure of a mute, an idiot, staring at himself in the glass, or staring before him in a desert, "sighing yes, sighing no, on and off," without meaning.

What is needed is a condition to supersede both yes and no. In "Text XI" the narrator complains of his task: "And it's still the same old road I'm trudging, up yes and down no, towards one yet to be named...." (NK p. 123) He continues: [5] omething better must be found, a better reason, for this to stop, another word, a better idea, to put in the negative, a new no, to cancel all the others, all the old noes that buried me down here, deep in this place which is not one, which is merely a moment for the time being eternal, which is called here ... yes, a new no, that none says twice.... (NK p. 127)

It is for a new no that Beckett searches, and for this reason I suggest that the title of this work not only alludes to the musical rest period, as many critics have observed, but that it also reads as a dedication; that is, these texts are dedicated to nothingness. "Text XII" reiterates the birth, death and resurrection which were described in the first three texts, but ends with the words "nothing ever as much as begun, nothing ever but nothing and never, nothing ever but lifeless words."

In the final text an oxymoron keeps us wondering if no has finally used his weapon against yes: "whose the screaming silence of no's knife in yes's would...." (NK p. 135) The suggestion is clear that if yes dies, no also suffers. That is why Beckett seeks a new no, one not relative to yes.

Elsewhere Beckett puts it this way: "Not hope, but the possibility of another situation than the present one."<sup>11</sup> If Beckett's work is not a literature of hope, neither is it one of despair. Beckett's negativism is creative; in celebrating the negative, Beckett has forced an exploration of new possibilities.

Programme Notes to Endgame, San Quentin Drama Workshop. For further details, see Chapter Three, footnote one.

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## Chapter Eleven

# How It Is

Beckett has revealed that he finds writing a play an easier and less anxious occupation than writing a novel because of the boundless possibilities which make the latter awesome and chaotic, while the physical restrictions and external requirements give the former a sense of certainty. He describes writing a novel as a sensation that he is "entering a jungle, an area of utter lawlessness."<sup>1</sup> Beckett has learned to use this lawlessness, these new possibilities, to his best advantage, and never more so than in the novel, <u>How It Is</u>. When he returned to writing a novel after ten years and four plays, he seems to have revelled in the new-found freedom from the theatre's restrictions. He created a world of unprecedented sparseness, contradictions, immobility and filth. But rather than to obscure, this novel works only to clarify.

It is in this work that the problem of identifying Beckett's narrators reduces itself to the least common denominator. We are told incontestably that this narrator is alone; that Pim, Bom, Krim and Kram are his inventions; that he meets no one, pursues no one, and escapes from no one but himself. The others are his playmates, fictitious companions such as the characters

<sup>1</sup> Reid, p. 20.

the other narrators invent from their stories. "I saw him dreaming with the help of a friend or failing that boon all alone." (H p. 53) So, too, does this narrator lack the boon of real companionship; he dreams alone and plays at being another:

> to play at him who exists or at least existed then I know I know so much the worse there's no harm in mentioning it no harm is done it does you good now and then they are good moments what does it matter it does no harm to anyone there isn't anyone (H p. 57)

Pim he does not exist  $(H p. 27)^2$ 

This narrator explains away the confusion we see among some interpretations of Malone's death, for instance, and the unbroken relationship between each succeeding narrator in the novels:

> you are there somewhere alive somewhere vast stretch of time then it's over you are there no more alive no more then again you are there again alive again it wasn't over an error you begin again all over more or less in the same place or in another (H p. 22)

We must view this work, then, as an extension of the trilogy. Beckett as much as tells us this when he has his narrator explain that his tripartite plan for this novel may not work:

> fleeting impression I quote that in trying to present in three parts or episodes an affair which all things considered involves four one is in danger of being imcomplete (H p. 130)

<sup>2</sup> The importance of companionship - even imagined companionship - will be examined in the following chapter. What he had thought could be said in the three parts of the trilogy he now finds incomplete. And so we must consider the evolution of this work in the context of the entire body of work that came before.

"Voices and mud include nature and art," writes Tindall. He continues:

> Beckett, who has said this before, seems compelled, like Pim, to say it again. But, as every artist must, he tries new forms for old stuff. <u>Comment c'est</u> is a new form for 'the nothing new.'3

In one respect this is a fair analysis of the position this novel holds in the Beckett canon, for it is in fact a culmination and compilation of ideas which have appeared throughout the previous works. The important development in this work, compared to the Unnamable's preoccupation with his 'tormentors' whom he name Basil and his crowd, is that this narrator "[doesn't] say any more who is speaking that's not said any more it must have ceased to be of interest." (H p. 21) And indeed, it has ceased to be of critical interest because by now we have accepted Beckett's unconventional portrayal of the author's relationship to his narrator. What does interest us in this novel is the way Beckett handles this and the other themes which have continued into this work.

Ruins play a complex role throughout Beckett's works.<sup>4</sup> Ruins figure largely in this novel, for the mud not only serves as a fit metaphor for the excremental quality of human existence

<sup>3</sup> William York Tindall, Samuel Beckett (London: Columbia University Press, 1964), p. 39

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> The importance of ruins to Beckett's work will be discussed in Chapter Thirteen.

which is suggested throughout the canon, but also as the end result of the entropic forces of the universe upon matter. What we see in the earlier works as crumbled towers and ruined dens, appear now in still further disintegrated form. Mud is presumably what would result if the matter of all we know on earth were left to break down to its elemental state; it is the end of order. Entropy, as used here, is the tendency for form to reduce itself to chaos. Chaos, in one view, is the natural state of the universe; order the enforced. Left alone, ordered matter disintegrates into disorder. Mud is the ultimate ruin, the most reduced state of matter and therefore the most appropriate setting for this novel in a series of novels that have depended upon ruins - of buildings, of bodies, and of disordered minds.

Here he calls his previous writings ruins, and calls this one progress:

but progress properly so called ruins in prospect as in the dear tenth century the dear twentieth that you may say to yourself to a dream greenhorn ah if you had seen it four hundred years ago what upheavals (H p. 22)

He of course is speaking literally here about proper ruins he imagines in the distance in his imagination, reminiscent of the days in Ireland, as in the dream of walking with the girl and a dog; but the additional reference to the preceding writings must not be missed. Such an allusion reinforces the idea of the narrator as an artist. As he reflects upon the work of the past, seemingly centuries old, he expresses the attitude that compared to the upheavals involved in the births of the previous works the present one is easily born.

"(A)h my young friend," he continues, "this sack if you had seen it I could hardly drag it and now look my vertex touches the bottom." (H p. 22) This passage suggests additionally that the narrator feels he is coming to the end of his resources as a creator, an anxiety which has shown itself before in Beckett's works in the suggestion that each work completed is the last. Fortunately, such fears have been unwarranted.

What is especially interesting in the earlier passage above is the way we are initiated into this narrator's time scale: "as in the dear tenth century the dear twentieth." Both centuries are equally distant; conventional time means nothing to him. He rejects even the language of such time, saying contemptuously "that word again" each time he slips back into using conventional terms: "but the days that word again" (H p. 40): "the day comes that word again." (H p. 63) He elaborates this rejection:

> these words of those for whom and under whom and all about the earth turns and all turns these words here again days nights years seasons that family (H p. 17)

He is speaking here about horological time, the man-made and arbitrary way in which we divide time into bite-size segments in order that we may digest it in our imperfect minds. Horological time makes us slaves to the relentlessly sweeping second hand; it is what gives us our concepts of being late, our anxiety to keep appointments, and causes the frenzy with which life on earth turns, all of which are meaningless to the Beckett narrator.

Rather, the Beckett narrator exists in chronometrical time, the real time in which moments and vast tracts alone are relevant. "(T)here are moments," our narrator continually remarks, and "vast tracts of time" are his only durations. In this time a moment may be as long as our century, a vast tract as short as our minute. Keeping time ceases to be necessary or interesting; "no more figures, no more time," he writes. (H p. 73) "(A)t the end of the myriads of hours an hour mine a quarter of an hour there are moments...." (H p. 23)

In this light, too, when Beckett writes of "centuries of silence" (H p. 24), we can take it not only to mean that horological time has no place here, but also to refer to the frustrating silent periods in Beckett's writing career; months or years which must have seemed centuries during which he was unable to produce a body of work.

For someone who has rejected horological time, however, this narrator exhibits a strange fascination with Pim's watch (a watch, or course, which he only imagines since there is no Pim: "a watch wristlet to the feel ... better a big ordinary watch complete with chain" (H p. 58)). He draws Pim's hand, which clutches the watch, towards him, but the satisfaction it gives him is not that which we might at first think, that of a link between him and the past life where clocks and watches played such a major role. Rather, we soon discover the kind of sustenance it gives him:

I drink deep of the seconds delicious moments and vistas (H p. 59)

way off on the right in the mud to me abandoned the distant ticking I derive no more profit from it none whatever no more pleasure count no more the unforgiving seconds measure no more durations and frequencies take my pulse no more ninety ninety-five

it keeps me company that's all its ticking now and then but break it throw it away let it run down and stop no something stops me it stops I shake my arm it starts no more about this watch (H p. 59)

He forsakes the watch as timepiece and establishes it as companion. The reference to the taking of a pulse with use of a watch suggests the similarity of a watch's ticking to the beating of a heart so that the sound of the watch comforts the narrator in the way a clock put into the bed of a puppy keeps it quiet at night; the ticking acts as surrogate for its mother's heartbeat and dispels the loneliness it otherwise would feel. "(C)ount no more the unforgiving seconds measure no more duration," the narrator promises himself. The old concepts of time and space have ceased to mean anything; the vast tracts of each are immeasurable.

"(M)y sack sole variable," he explains, "my days my nights my seasons and my feasts." But the sack is an unreliable timepiece, as might be expected: "undiminished for years then of a sudden half as many." As we have seen before, however, the sack not only contains imaginary tins of tunny for the narrator's sustenance, but is also the symbolic retainer for his creative resources. His creative life flows fully nourished for years at a time, he tells us in this way, but suddenly he feels starved and incapable of creating.

As with all Beckett's narrators, because this character

has so little, that little accumulates a great deal of significance, disproportionate to what our experience would otherwise allow. To the narrator, his sack is mother, lover, and companion, as well as timepiece, pillow, and larder. "(I)t is ... thanks to my sack that I keep dying in a dying age," he explains. (H p. 17)

As Malone fondled his pillow, as Molloy sucked his stones, so does this narrator invest his sack with a number of roles.

> the sack as we have seen there being occasions when the sack as we have seen is more than a mere larder for us yes moments when if needs be it may appear more than a mere larder to us (H p. 135)

the sack again other connexions I take it in my arms talk to it put my head in it rub my cheek on it lay my lips on it turn my back on it turn to it again clasp it to me again say to it thou thou (H p. 17)

In the following passage, the sack is clearly seen as a womb, the narrator reliving his birth experience in this way:

my life again above in the light the sack stirs grows still again stirs again the light through the worn thread strains less white sharp sounds distant still but less it's evening he crawls tiny out of the sack me again I'm there again the first is always me then the others (H p. 88)

So also does Beckett describe the creative process and relive the literal birth of this narrator from the womb of his imagination, which is again the sack. "[H]e crawls tiny out of the sack me again I'm there again the first is always me then the others": the narrator is born; the other characters evolve from his imagination and need. This book, then, can be seen as about 'how it is' with the writer's craft. Again we find described here the sensation of the hand which writes as being a thing apart, that it is separate and independent of the writer. In <u>Texts for Nothing</u> it was named a "little creepy crawly" which emerges at will from the shadow of the head. In this work it appears again as possessing a life of its own:

I call it it doesn't come I can't live without it I call it with all my strength it's not strong enough (H p. 19)

[I] make it out way off on the right at the end of its arm full stretch in the axis of the clavicle (H p. 28)

It can't be far a bare yard it feels far it will go some day on its four fingers having lost its thumb ... it will leave me I can see it close my eyes the others and see it how it throws its four fingers forward like grapnels the ends sink pull and so with little horizontal hoists it moves away (H p. 28)

Even when the hand responds to his commands, he still speaks of it in the third person:

it strays among the tins ... it brings out the little oval tin (H p. 33)

He writes of the 'miracle' of the hand, opening and closing, which would also imply the miracle of writing, of creation.

> I turn to the hand that is free draw it to my face it's a resource when all fails images dreams sleep food for thought...

when the great needs fail the need to move on the need to shit and vomit and the other great needs all my categories of being

then to my hand that is free rather than some other part (H p. 14)

When all else fails, his art is his sustenance.

Understandably, most criticism of this novel to date has emphasized the physical structure of the work, the totally unprecendented form which Beckett uses. The language is familiar and at the same time unfamiliar. The words themselves are short, mostly monosyllabic, and quite ordinary, except of course for the occasional erudite interjection, but these inclusions are the exceptions which prove the rule. The narrator explains that he has done searching for a new language; the old one suffices: "here no more searching," "no searching not even for a language." (H p. 17) As he has abandoned conventional time, however, so too does he reject the conventions of this ordinary language by omitting all unnecessary words, punctuation and capitalizations. He calls it, appropriately, a "midget grammar."

John Fletcher suggests that the syntax and construction of this novel are a parody of the kind of semi-literate language used by a French peasant.<sup>5</sup> More to the point, however, the novel can be seen as written in the same form which is described for use on Pim's back. The narrator writes, he tells us, briefly, for Pim's sake, using just the essential few words:

> unbroken paragraphs no commas not a second for reflection with the nail of the index until it falls and the worn back bleeding (H p. 70) a few words what he can now and then I am not a monster (H p. 64)

And so we might think Beckett sees himself carving into our own

<sup>5</sup> Fletcher, <u>The Novels of Samuel Beckett</u>, p. 219.

tender consciousness his painful messages. Again later, this time in self-critical parody, he has his narrator write, "drivel drivel happily brief" (H p. 62) in further explanation of this choice of abbreviated language.

Many critics remark on the physical condition of this narrator, saying he is inordinately well for a Beckettian hero:

Unlike other heroes of Beckett's French fiction, the 'I' of <u>Comment c'est</u> is relatively intact physically, for he lacks only a right thumb and a voice.

(T) his body... is quite unmutilated except that it lacks the thumb of the right hand....7

However, this is misleading. Although he lacks only a thumb and perhaps a voice, we must not overlook the fact that he can not walk, nor even crawl or move for an extended period. He continually refers to his limitations, his exhaustion:

> here at my ease too weak to raise the little finger (H p. 39) All that beyond my strength (H p. 58)

First, if we can believe his memory of younger days - and in this instance there is no reason for us not to believe him, since the picture he presents coincides with the descriptions we have had earlier of Belacqua and the later vagabonds - he has always been a somewhat unusual if not ridiculous figure.

Cohn. The Comic Gamut, p. 192. Fletcher, The Novels of Samuel Beckett, p. 211.

#### He describes himself:

me pale staring hair red pudding face with pimples protuding belly gaping fly spindle legs sagging knocking at the knees wide astraddle for greater stability feet splayed one hundred and thirty degrees fatuous halfsmile to posterior horizon figuring the morn of life green tweeds yellow boots all those colours cowslip or suchlike in the buttonhole (H p. 30)

Although pimples and a protuding belly are not very serious afflictions, spindle legs and splayed feet may result in painful ambulation later. Indeed, at present he can not walk at all.

He also feels pain, the constant, the given factor in Beckettian algebraics. It distracts him at times from his other thoughts:

> fire in the rectum how surmounted reflections on the passion of pain irresistible departure with preparatives appertaining (H p. 38)

Later he intends, like the narrator of <u>First Love</u>, to discuss his pains at length:

then if necessary my pain which of my many the deep beyond reach it's preferable the problem of my pains the solution (H p. 32)

The problem, the solution; mathematical terminology for the human condition of perpetual sickness, deformity and pain. Pain is identified with existence. If there is no pain, there is no life; where there is life, there is pain. Hence it is necessary for Pim to experience pain. His suffering is his credibility and his life. This is one of the reasons for the sadistic training he receives at the narrator's hands.

However, one way in which we can recognize Pim as a fiction is that only in fiction would events and actions occur with such predictable regularity. Pim responds to set signals, the sacks wait at regular intervals; but these are wishes rather than realities, for nothing is so certain in the world of our experience. More realistic is the narrator's "sudden quasi-certitude." (H p. 41) As for justice, although he claims there is such a thing in his world, he describes quite another state. His sack, it seems, has not lasted the journey to Pim, while Pim's sack is still intact:

> not burst Pim's sack not burst there's no justice or else just one of those things that pass understanding there are some

older than mine and not burst perhaps better quality jute and with that still half-full or else something that escapes me

sacks that void and burst others never is it possible the old business of grace in this sewer (H p. 61)

Here again the language of religion best serves the purpose of Beckett's narrator. In a later passage he parodies the prayerful:

> I would go to the world's end on my knees ... how I last on my knees hands joined before my face thumb-tips before my nose finger-tips before the door my crown or vertex against the door one can see the attitude not knowing what to say whom to implore what to implore no matter it's the attitude that counts it's the intention (H p. 89)

We are reminded here of Vladimir and Estragon who consider imploring although they know not to whom nor for what. Again the deity is suggested in a parody of the trinity. Each set of three - travellers, abandoned, pursued - represents this divine invention:

> illumination here Bem is therefore Bom or Bom Bem and the voice quaqua from which I get my life these scraps of life in me when the pantings stop three things one (H p. 113)

Bem and Bom are the father and the son, each being the other, and the voice is the holy ghost; the three together are one and are meaningless cant, "quaqua."

In the pilgrimmage above the narrator travels, praying and on his knees, with his dog. Dog, of course, is the anagram for god, an appropriate companion on a pilgrimmage. He says of this dog, though, "I'm the brain of the two ... it hasn't all its wits mine now to think for us both." (H p. 89) And indeed he does think as a god, creating lives and circumstances, worlds in fact in which his own particular kind of justice reigns.

His justice, we are told, rests in mathematics, and a strange justice it is:

we are regulated thus our justice will it thus fifty thousand couples again at the same instant the same everywhere with the same space between them it's mathematical it's our justice in this muck where all is identical (H p. 112)

"I always loved arithmetic," our narrator confesses, "it has paid me back in full." (H p. 37) This is an ambigous conclusion; to be paid back in full may well mean to receive a kind of retribution or punishment, one's 'just deserts.' In this case I would say it does, for irony is rampant when he speaks of the justice which mathematics has brought:

> try and understand no accidents no asperities our justice (H p. 136)

Krams innumerable if you like or one alone my Kram mine alone he's enough here where justice reigns (H p. 134)

nothing to be done in any case we have our being in justice I have never heard anything to the contrary (H p. 124)

no one here knows himself it's the place without knowledge whence no doubt its peerlessness (H p. 123)

This last quotation is a tongue-in-cheek reference to our own peerless world where nothing can be known, least of all ourselves.

Like all Beckett's narrators, this narrator is both welleducated and a misologist. He discusses his education in the life above disparagingly in the same bitter tone which the Unnamable uses to speak of his teachers with their problems and solutions:

> Some of this rubbish has come in handy on occasions, I don't deny it, on occasions which would never have arisen if they had left me in peace. I use it still, to scratch my arse with. Low types they must have been, their pockets full of poison and antidote. (U p. 300)

Beckett has chosen before to give some of his characters the names of spices or herbs: Estragon, the French for tarragon; Clov, the spice used to scent corpses in a play which reeks or death; and here Basil. It is no surprise that he gives the name of Basil, the herb which turns bitter when cooked, to the teacher of whom he says "One in particular, Basil I think he was called, filled me with hatred." (U p. 300) The same bitterness is evident in the tone of <u>How It Is</u> when he describes his education:

> it's not said where on earth I can have received my education acquired my notions of mathematics astronomy and even physics they have marked me that's the main thing (H p. 41)

the history I knew my God the natural (H pp. 14 and 34)

the humanities I had my God and with that flashes of geography (H p. 42)

not much more but in the tail the venom I've lost my latin one must be vigilant (H p. 42)

As we can see from this last comment, though he may have lost his Latin, and in spite of what he says elsewhere, he has not lost his sense of humour. Nor has he lost the venom in the tail of his wit. This is Beckett at his best, as in the following passage, which is a total integration of humour and castigation:

> some reflections none the less while waiting for things to improve on the fragility of euphoria among the different orders of the animal kingdom beginning with the sponges (H p. 38)

Fortunately, we are spared these reflections, but the point is well taken. The humour in the suggestion is obvious; the levels of bitterness less so. The exaggerated terms he uses -'fragility' and 'euphoria' - emphasize the outrageous absurdity of the possibility of continued happiness. The image called to mind of laughing sponges ridicules not only the philosophers who presume to dissect, understand and therefore control this elusive emotion we call happiness, but also the so-called natural scientists who presume further by ordering into arbitrary classes and families the cohabitors of the earth who are for the most part happily unaware of these peremptory relationships. A design, a plan, seems all that is needed to keep chaos at bay.

Beckett's narrators are notorious planners. Their plans, just as infamously, continually go astray. H. Porter Abbott writes of this phenomenon:

> Molloy never did get to 'draw up the inventory of his goods and possessions' and we hardly need his own admission to know that he 'made a balls of' his report. Malone says he is going to tell us four stories.... This plan is immediately revised to three stories, to be followed by his inventory, and it is hard to say whether he ends up telling one or two stories. The inventory, inserted before the end, is incomplete.

In <u>The Unnamable</u>, too, the speaker has grand plans which are continually described, attempted, abandoned, or simply forgotten. The narrator of <u>How It Is</u> has a plan, like Malone, of three distinct parts. Malone describes his programme as two serious parts with an unserious part intervening. Although this later narrator does not say as much of his plan it is, nonetheless, similar; the two 'serious' parts being his state of solitude before and after Pim and the intervening part being the fictitious encounter with Pim, just

Abbott, The Fiction of Samuel Beckett, p. 140.

as Malone invented his stories in play.

Abbott feels that in <u>How It Is</u> "the program ... not only works, but the narrator continually reminds us that it is indeed unfolding according to schedule."<sup>9</sup> It is true that the narrator keeps reminding us that things are going according to his plan, but we are foolish if we believe him too readily. One consideration is that he has told us himself that to deal in three parts with something which requires four means that one runs the risk of being incomplete. Further, he admits that there are more parts than just those named 'before, with, and after Pim.' There is the part with Bem, for instance:

> not before Pim that's done part one before that again vast stretch of time

two there were two of us his hand on my arse ... Bem had come to cleave to me see later Pim and me I had come to cleave to Pim the same thing except that me Pim Bem me Bem left me south (H p. 109)

And, although we do get what he promised in 'before, with, and after Pim,' we get so much more in the way of visions, memories, and hypotheses that one feels further divisions or subdivisions may be in order.

This narrator has succeeded in one thing, though, the one thing in which all Beckett's narrators excel, and that is in killing time. In many ways there is more similarity between this narrator and the character of Winnie in

<sup>9</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 141.

<u>Happy Days</u> than the four narrators of the trilogy, although the five figures share many characteristics. First, the overtly optimistic and wondering tone of the heroine echoes through some of the passages in this novel. This narrator describes the movements of his hands while preparing his meal:

> pretty movements little swirls of fingers and palms little miracle thanks to which little miracle among so many thanks to which I live on lived on (h p. 35)

This insistence on the 'miracles' of life as something for which we should be grateful reminds us of Winnie's attitude, in spite of the mock-seriousness evident here. And again, the philosophical tone of the following passage parodies the dreamy resignation to life's levelling which we find in Happy Days:

> grope in panic in the mud for the opener that is my life but of what cannot as much be said could not as much be always said (H p. 34)

This is as much as to say that the story of his life is a series of mealtimes - groping on the mud for the opener; "but of what cannot as much be said" is a sly choice of words which should really read "but of whose life cannot as much be said."

The importance of the meal itself assumes vast proportions, like each of Winnie's daily routines; carefully controlled and itemized, they are inflated to fill the time. nothing now but to eat ten twelve episodes open the tin put away the tool raise the tin slowly to the nose ... wipe my mouth that without fail so on at last<sup>10</sup>

it's the big scene of the sack it's done I have it behind me the day is well advanced (H pp. 35-36)

Germaine Brée, in her article entitled "The Strange World of Beckett's 'grands articulés,'" suggests that the reason this novel is set in mud is that it represents the eighth circle of Dante's inferno in which the perjurors or falsifiers of words drag themselves through the mud for all eternity.<sup>11</sup> If this is true, then the narrator of <u>How It Is</u>, composite of all who came before, must serve time for the lies of all Beckett's narrators.

We are lied to in several ways. The first is the philosophical. It is not a new idea that all words are lies. When we speak we lie because words are not and never can be identical with thought. In using words, which are finite, to express ideas, which are infinite, we have necessarily limited and changed the original thought. As Wittgenstein writes, "We can not say what we can not say." We have no resource with which to deal with anything outside our own limited vocabulary and that restricts and alters all true

It is a very nice touch that he should think to wipe his mouth after eating in this muddy place, just as Winnie fastidiously cares for her appearance in a sand pile where no one sees her; both emphasize the utter uselessness of so much human activity.

11 Germaine Brée, "The Strange World of Beckett's 'grands articulés,'" Samuel Beckett Now, ed. Friedman, p. 79. meaning; therefore all we say is false.

The second way in which the narrators lie is that each openly contradicts something he has just said, or he reminds us that he is a liar and not to be trusted: "No, that's not what happened," says Molloy. Malone speaks of "this important quarter-truth" and later warns, "Lies all lies." The Unnamable tells us, "All lies. I invented it all." In <u>How It Is</u> we learn we have been duped: "the whole story from beginning to end ... completely false." (H p. 144)

The writer of fiction must, in creating events and characters which never occurred or existed, perjure himself. In <u>Texts for Nothing</u>, the writer's craft is described in the following way:

> I rub to and fro against my lips, where they meet, the first knuckle of my forefinger, but it's the head that moves, the hand rests, it's to such details the liar pins his hopes. (NK p. 93)

In <u>How It Is</u> we have such details to convince us of the narrator's veracity:

my arm bends therefore my right it's preferable which reduces from very obtuse to very acute (H p. 55)

on the miraculous flesh perpendicular to the crack the stump of the thumb and thenar and hypo balls on the left check the four fingers on the right hand therefore we are not yet head to foot (H p. 51)

In the novel <u>Nightwood</u>, by Djuna Barnes, the doctor suggests one reason we condone, or rather encourage, such fabrications: Do you know what has made me the greatest liar this side of the moon, telling my stories to people like you, to take the mortal agony out of their guts, and to stop them from rolling about, and drawing up their feet, and screaming, with misery which they are trying to keep off, saying, "say something, doctor, for the love of God!" And me talking away like mad. Well, that, and nothing else, has made me the liar I am.12

The philosophers and natural scientists satirized by Beckett above play at reducing chaos by creating systems of order according to designs which they invent. Writers of fiction invent worlds of make-believe, through which we can confront the overwhelming solitude and confusion which surrounds us. Like us, Beckett's narrators seem to be whistling in the dark:

> find something else to last a little more questions who were they what beings what point of earth that family whence this dumb show (H p. 32)

> never long idle if nothing I invent must keep busy otherwise death (H p. 81)

He divides his meal into episodes, he creates 'families' of questions to answer, in order to keep death at bay. When the sack - companion, larder, surrogate mother - ceases to fulfill its function, he invents Pim. He holds onto Pim with the same determination with which he held onto the sack: "he can't repel me it's like my sack when I had it still this providential flesh I'll never let it go." (H p. 55) He gives Pim his own memories and shares with him

<sup>12</sup> Djuna Barnes, <u>Nightwood</u> (London: Faber and Faber, 1936), p. 193.

the reminiscences of his life above: a past when he was upright and wandered, though still alone, among the other mortals.

His life above seems to have been that of the previous avatars: like Belacqua, he walked among the green hills of Ireland with his girlfriend and a dog; like the character in <u>Film</u>, he "hugged the walls in the midst of [his] brotherly likes" (H p. 37); and he teaches Pim to communicate in the same sadistic way in which Molloy rapped on his mother's skull.

His previous life was lonely, due partly to his own desire for solitude and partly to man's inherent inhumanity. He says he is now living his wish, his wish for complete solitude, in spite of himself, and finds it is perhaps not what he really wanted or expected:

> I don't flee I am banished ... stay for ever in the same place never had any other ambition with my little dead weight in the warm mire scoop my wallow and stir from it no more that old dream back again I live it now (H p. 39)

But above with the others seems to have been little different from his present solitary state; seldom did he receive compassion or attention: "at every bodily pain ... I screamed for help with once in a hundred some measure of success." (H p. 37) With sardonic wit he describes the time his foot was caught in a lift and two hours later "to the dot" help came, but even then only because someone had called the lift and it had not come.

Understandably, this narrator has no great love for humanity. He tells of his fears when out in the world: unable to take a step particularly at night without stopping dead on one leg eyes closed breath caught ears cocked for pursuers and rescuers (H p. 42)13

Again the paradox: the self-same family of man contains both enemy and friends. We must feel great sympathy for this man who spent his days in hiding and his nights in anxious journey:

> hid by day a hole a ruin land strewn with ruins all ages (H p. 85)

> never knew anyone always ran fled elsewhere some other place my life above places paths nothing else brief places long paths the quickest way or a thousand detours the safest way always at night (H p. 78)<sup>14</sup>

The phrases "brief places long paths" give us an indication of the kind of disestablished life this hero had, in keeping with the history of his precursors; pilgrims, vagabonds, never able nor inclined to hold a job or establish a position, except perhaps the foetal position. Twice he describes himself as in the foetal position, "knees drawn up back bent in a hoop" (H p. 10), an attitude he describes as "Belacqua fallen over on his side tired of waiting forgotten of the

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> The animal imagery used in this description heightens the comic effect of this remarkable character, while at the same time it creates a pathos for the treatment he received at the hands of his brothers: we would treat a dog with more compassion.

<sup>14</sup> The words Beckett uses here might well describe his own experiences during the war as he escaped from Paris: "brief places" indicates short stays in any one place, "long paths," "a thousand detours,""the safest way," "always at night," all describe a furtive escape.

hearts where grace abides asleep." (H p. 24) The birth imagery is important:

> my life above what I did in my life above a little of everything tried everything then gave up no worse always a hole a ruin a crust never any good at anything (H p. 78)

"A hole a ruin": again we discover the feminine and masculine symbols which appear in this guise throughout the works. These places are his refuge and salvation, protecting him by day and welcoming him to the eternal night.

> another inch and I fall headlong into a ravine or dash myself against a wall though nothing I know only too well to be hoped for in that quarter (H p. 41)

The wall he refers to in this passage could be the remnants of a ruined tower, the degenerated phallic symbol which appears throughout the works; the ditch of course depicts the womb and grave, those havens for all Beckett's heroes. As Molloy sought his mother's room, as Malone envisaged pulsating walls, and as the Unnamable felt himself egg-shaped, so too does this narrator hope to find his parental image, to turn again upon himself, go back to his beginnings, so that he may end.<sup>15</sup>

The boat and harbour-lights which signal the false endings in The Calmative and later in Malone Dies appear here, too:

> little heap in the stern it's me all those I see are me all ages the current carries me out the awaited ebb I'm looking for an isle home at last (H p. 86)

15 This narrator has gone back to his beginnings in one obvious way by occupying as he does the primal muck.

We can only suppose, but with strong evidence, that this narrator, too, will fail to find his parental home and resting place. We can well believe the premonition he expresses when he says, "I'll be back no alternative someday." (H p. 105)

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### Chapter Twelve

## Company

The short novel <u>Company</u> is a unified exploration of identity, creativity and the process of senility. Senility here refers to the mere process of growing older. There are four "characters" in this work: a narrator, a voice, a hearer, and much later a new figment called the "crawling creator." Forty-six pages of the novel are in the third person; these are the words of the narrator. Two pages of these forty-six are devoted to information about the voice, ten pages are about the crawling creator, and the remaining thirty-four pages in the third person are about the hearer in the present.

The first two lines of the novel are set apart from the rest: "A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine." This 'imagine' can be taken either as an exclamation (imagine such a thing!) or as a command: we, the readers, are immediately commanded to bring our imaginations into play to see someone on his back in the dark. The narrator moves quickly from the general 'one' to the specific 'he': "To one on his back in the dark. This he can tell by the pressure on his hind parts...." Still, the problem of identity remains ambiguous. We read, "To one on his back in the dark a voice tells of a past." The indefinite article 'a' suggests that this could be anyone's history.

The narrative sections, told by the voice in the second person, are more intimate. There are sixteen narrative sections, totalling approximately thirty-six pages. These sections consist of accounts from the hearer's life. These accounts are not strictly chronological, but do follow the hearer from his birth to old age.

The first narrative section deals with a scene from early childhood. The hearer is on his way home from Connolly's Stores with his mother, who holds his hand. He asks a question about the distance of the sky and his mother becomes angry. She shakes off his hand and makes a "cutting retort (he] has never forgotten." The ploy of leaving the reader guessing at the devastating statement reappears here, reminding us of Beckett's early short story, "A Case in a Thousand," where the secret which Mrs. Bray tells the doctor is too "trivial and intimate" to be repeated. Whether or not this retort from his mother had a lasting effect on the hearer's response to the sky we can only guess, but the blue sky is a motif which we find repeated throughout the narrative sections of this novel.

The next narrative section, which appears on pages fifteen through eighteen, is about the hearer's birth. More specifically, it is about the hearer's father, who becomes an important figure in the later narrative sections. The father is a great walker, an activity which will consume many of the hearer's days in later life. We recognize the father's actions from another tale, as well. Like the narrator of <u>First Love</u>, the hearer's father has left the house on the day of his son's birth in order to avoid hearing the anguish of birth, the "pains and general unpleasantness of labour and delivery." The hearer will quite literally follow in his father's footsteps and become a wanderer himself. Indeed, in the very next section we find him "an old man plodding along a narrow country road." He has been out from sun up to sun down. His father's shade accompanies him and halts at his elbow when he halts to calculate the miles he has walked in his life.

The next narrative section again depicts a scene from the hearer's childhood. On his way home from kindergarten he stops his little cycle to open a gate for an old beggar woman and receives her blessing. Blessings in Beckett's world are equivocal at best. Recall Belacqua who purchases salvation from the old woman in the pub. That the woman's blessing is recalled in this way to the hearer indicates that we are to take the words not just as a clichéd expression, but that they meant something to the boy. Perhaps they indicate a world in which one purchases salvation through good works, an idea which is further explored in one of the later sections.

Within this brief narration, we are introduced to the woman whom the beggar wishes to visit. The woman of the house had once attempted to fly from the first floor window. Ironically, the next section finds the hearer as a boy diving from a high board and the following one finds him flying from the top of a large fir tree onto the branches below. In the first instance his father calls him a brave boy to fall from

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such a height; in the second, his mother says he is a naughty boy. The woman, of course, was deemed mad.

The next narrative section finds the hearer as an adult on his way from some place to another. He is a familiar character to us in his greatcoat, grimey and stiff with age, his battered block hat and his boots. He is on a road, but he verges suddenly and cuts through the hedge and "vanishes," hobbling across the gallops. The word 'vanishes' is striking because the question arises, from whose sight does he vanish? Since these narratives take place within the memory of the hearer, in his mind's eye, so to speak, as we read them, then we might ask does the image merely disappear from his mind's view, or is there someone on the road to watch him disappear? The question of point of view takes on a new dimension here and is one which is raised throughout the work. The answer is made clear later. In this instance, it could be death from whose view he escapes in his peregrinations. Beckett could be creating a pun out of the name Croker, as 'to croak' is a slang expression for dying and Croker's Acres, which lie ahead on the road, could be taken as a term for a cemetery.

The next narrative scene takes us back to the hearer's childhood and the blue sky. Sadly, the boy has learned not to ask questions and not to confide his secrets. "The first time you told them and were derided," the voice reminds him. Already as a boy the hearer wanders from sunrise to sunset. He climbs in this instance to a hiding place on the hillside and strains his eyes to see the pale blue shape of a mountain seventy miles away against the pale blue sky. Already as a

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child his imagination is strong. He sees this image again as he lies now on his back in the dark.

The next scene is the most moving of the narrative sections. As a boy, the hearer finds a hedgehog crossing the road and with only good intentions - to save it from the cold he puts it in a hatbox in a disused hutch, leaving the door open for the creature to come and go at will. "The glow at your good deed is slower than usual to cool and fade," the voice reminds him. But this time, he receives for his good deed, not a blessing, but only a bitterly tragic lesson. The language of this section in particular moves us. The voice uses complete sentences, longer than most others in the novel, and an intimate, friendly tone, flattering the boy and carrying us along in sympathy with the words until the end when we discover the irony which lies behind them:

> Kneeling at your bedside you included it the hedgehog in your detailed prayer to God to bless all you loved. And tossing in your warm bed waiting for sleep to come you were still faintly glowing at the thought of what a fortunate hedgehog it was to have crossed your path as it did. (C p. 40)

Here again the blessing asked for this innocent creature sounds ominous when the fate of the hedgehog is revealed. The irony of this last statement about the good fortune of the hedgehog, and the implication of a pre-determined fate in the words "crossed your path," suggest two things. First is the irony that this young child, this well-intended boy who does good deeds, has been ordained in some mysterious way to be the harbinger of suffering and death to an innocent creature. Second is the idea of corruption as the determined end of all life. The grotesque image of the hedgehog created by the final words of the section seems to tell us that no matter whom we love and bless in our prayers, their lives will end in corruption. "The mush. The stench." Contrasted to the lengthy, complete sentences of the rest of the narrative, these final words weigh heavily. These nouns, unhampered by any adjective, verb or object, are more telling than a complete sentence or longer phrase would be; they are as definitive as the end of the hedgehog's life.

The next section is the longest of the narrative parts. It deals, in eleven-and-a-half pages, with three stages of the hearer's life: first his old age, then his young adulthood, and within this part, his childhood. Five-and-a-half pages are given to the last time he went out walking. It was spring and the placentae from the births of the lambs were strewn across the snow, an image which reinforces the presence of death in life: spring and the living lambs are juxtaposed to the cold snow of death and the dead tissue of the bloody placentae.

The hearer again walks across the field instead of along the road, but now his feet sink heavily into the snow; his way is difficult. We are told he hesitates, although there is no need to do so for his feet would be able to take him along this familiar route even with his eyes closed. Nor does he halt from tiredness, nor from old age. It is his heart which is all at once too heavy to go on. This is a turning point in the hearer's life which helps to account for his present situation. Significantly, his father's shade no longer accompanies him. Without his father's companionship, he will seek alternative company in his imagination.

The next paragraph brings us back to his early adulthood. Within this paragraph is a framed remembrance of another time as a boy with his father, trying to imitate his father's chuckle and the father chuckling only to hear the boy imitate him. The remembrance is stimulated by the place: in this scene the young man is in the summerhouse where his father used to go after his midday meal each Sunday to read <u>Punch</u>. The words ending this part, "You press your little nose against the pane and all without is rosy," speak of the influence his father had on the boy's little world. We understand why as an adult the hearer should wish his father's shade to accompany him on his way. The rosiness, of course, comes from the stained glass pane through which the boy is looking, but suggests further the influence his father had on the boy's life.

After this interlude of childhood, the scene is again in the summerhouse as an adult waiting for a woman. As he waits, he calculates the volume of the summer house. When the woman arrives, her "violet lips" do not return his smile, so he begins calculating her height from various points - sitting, standing, kneeling. He finally leaves this and opens his eyes to her, but again her "ruby lips" do not return his smile.<sup>1</sup> He lowers his eyes and finds her

<sup>1</sup> The colour of the woman's lips recalls the red pane of glass, associated with pleasant memories of childhood.

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breasts and abdomen larger than he remembers. This reminds him of his father's belly straining against his waistband. He wonders if she is pregnant. Both close their eyes. The voice says, "You go back into your mind. She too did you but know has closed her eyes." This is an indication that the voice is omniscient, or at least is privy to more information than the hearer himself, for the voice knows here what the hearer did not.

The next narrative section places the hearer again in young adulthood with a woman. It is an intimate and evocative scene. The lovers are reclining beneath an aspen; he supine, she prone. Their faces meet and their bodies are at right angles. Her hair covers their faces as she bends over him.

> Within the tent of hair your faces are hidden from view. ... She murmurs, Listen to the leaves. Eyes in each other's eyes you listen to the leaves. In their trembling shade. (C pp. 66-67)

Again we might ask, from whose view are the faces hidden? The image creates an intimacy between the lovers. The "trembling shade" of the leaves evokes the trembling within the lovers as they gaze at each other, "eyes in each other's eyes."

The remaining three sections of narrative deal with the old age of the hearer. In the first part he is still able to go about, still in his greatcoat. The section begins, "A strand. Evening. Light dying. Soon none left to die." These words suggest the coming death of the hearer, or at least suggest the end of his wanderings. But the next words deny any end to light: "No such thing as no light. Died on

to dawn and never died." These words indicate that when the old man is no longer able to go out, his imagination will continue to take him places, will light his way back to the places he went as a young man and as a boy.

This paragraph tells us, too, that the voice is not simply the memory of the hearer, for, as we have seen earlier, the voice knows and sees more than the hearer did at the time of the event. Here, for example, the hearer stands with his eyes closed and yet the voice describes the shadows of his greatcoat and his staff disappearing as the sun sets.

The next section finds the hearer closer to the stage which is the present. He no longer goes out, but remains in his furnished room. Presumably he sits at a desk or on a bed or pallet, perhaps like Krapp, with a light directly over it. When he turns on this light, it illuminates his watch. Like his father's shade, the shadow of the second hand is company; he follows the changes which occur as the second hand passes around the face of the watch. He finally bows his head again until dawn, leaving the light on, perhaps for company.

In the previous scene, objects such as the watch could still fulfill the role of company, but in the final narrative scene, which describes a time just prior to the present, the hearer is entirely alone on his back in the dark. He is on a bed or pallet, presumably, but the voice is an addition. The voice is trying, in vain, to convince the hearer that this 'you' about which it speaks is the hearer himself. He views himself, it tells him, as he would "a stranger suffering

say from Hodgkin's disease or if you prefer Percival Pott's surprised at prayer." Here the imagery of disease is used to suggest the seeming aberration of selfhood. The first person is the true and perfect self and can admit of no defect, no past with its tragedies. The hearer denies his self by denying the first person, denies his past so that the suffering which became a heavy heart and finally a "numbness of woes" is not his own. Untouched by his past, he creates fables, tells stories of events which seem to him diseases that have afflicted another and not himself.

The final words of the novel are those of the voice at the end of this section. They echo the opening words of the narrator. So, in effect, we have the personal history of the hearer within these narrative scenes. But this is secondary to what the narrator has to say.

I will call the sections voiced by the narrator "descriptive," as opposed to the "narrative" sections spoken by the voice. In the intial descriptive section, the identities of the various characters seem fairly straight-forward; but upon examination, this explanation is less clear than it at first appears:

> Use of the second person marks the voice That of the third that cankerous other. Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not. (C p. 9)

"Use of the second person marks the voice," means that when the second person is used, the voice is speaking. The next ' sentence reads, in other words, as follows: the use of the third person marks the hearer, here called "that cankerous other," of whom the voice speaks. But this is unclear, for the hearer never speaks. The understood verb 'marks' can not be used in this sentence in the same way it was used in the previous one. Rather, the use of the third person, as stated earlier, indicates the narrator speaking. The third person pronoun 'he' indicates the hearer as object, not as speaker - except when it indicates the voice as object, as we will see later. Rarely, too, the narrator uses the second person pronoun, as in the above explanation and as on page forty-three when he says, "Let him be again as he was. The hearer? Unnamable? You."

The second section of description displays some of the humour we will see in the narrator's use of language throughout the novel.<sup>2</sup> At the end of the section he states that the hearer must have some degree of mental activity in order to be good company. He continues:

> But it need not be of a high order. Indeed it might be argued the lower the better. Up to a point. The lower the order of mental activity the better the company. Up to a point. (C p. 15)

This final complete sentence, the composite of the various components of the situation, is axiomatic. An axiom is by definition absolute, but this narrator qualifies his axiom and makes a joke, although his tone is deadly serious.

<sup>2</sup> Contrary to what John Leonard wrote in his review ("There is very little laughter in <u>Company.</u>"), there is a great deal that is laughable in this work. (<u>New York Times</u>, Monday, 22 December, 1980.).

The eighth descriptive section, beginning on page thirty-four, is humourous throughout. After a confused opening, the narrator states, "Confusion too is company up to a point." There follows another axiomatic statement and a qualification of the axiom: "Better hope deferred than none. Up to a point. Till the heart starts to sicken." But the sick heart, too, is company - up to the point at which it starts to break. The humour of the construction disallows this idea to be interpreted as too morose. Rather, it makes the hearer more companionable.

It is difficult to discuss the next example of Beckett's humour in this work without quoting the full context in which it appears, but that would be out of place here. The line resides in a lengthy and not very interesting series of questions and suggestions about what the hearer might actually hear. This series is curtailed by the line, "Reserve for a duller moment," as if the moment at hand were not dull; as if the further computation of these possibilities could in any way make a duller passage interesting.

Characteristically, too, Beckett creates puzzles: "Would it be reasonable to imagine the hearer as mentally quite alert? Except when he hears." The hearer is defined by what he does: he hears; herein lies his identity. But the irony is created by making him alert only when he is not doing what defines him, and this creates a contradiction.

On page seventy-nine, Beckett reworks a cliché to create a wonderful sentence. The narrator is discussing the various positions available to his figment. Fallen on his face, he might decide to turn onto his side or onto his back. The

narrator states: "The supine though most tempting he must finally disallow as being already supplied by the hearer. With regard to the sidelong one glance is enough to dispel them both." Playing upon the expression, a "sidelong glance," Beckett rearranges these words so that 'sidelong' actually modifies the unstated 'position,' but also works to create the impression of looking askance at this figment lying awkwardly on his side.

In his lengthly review of several works by and about Beckett, Michael Wood says of Company:

> The fact that there is <u>no</u> company here, that the prostrate figure doesn't speak, that he can't or won't acknowledge the past proposed as his own, plunges the text into unrelieved gloom at the end.<sup>3</sup>

Such a comment grossly misrepresents the true tone of this work. These final explorations into the self and the process of creativity are not gloomy, but rather are a celebration. What the narrator seeks are his origins, the primary self, the first person and parent of himself and of his creations.

In fairness to Wood, there is within this novel a litany of negative answers to all questions which might on the surface sound gloomy, but which becomes humourous with predictability. At one point the question is asked whether the hearer has gained anything by being given the name Haitch. The answer is no, so his name is taken from him. Later,

<sup>3</sup> Michael Wood, "Comedy of Ignorance," <u>New York Review</u> of Books, Vol. XXVIII, No. 7, 30 April, 1981. questions are asked about certain senses the hearer might have: "Inexplicable premonition of impending ill? Yes or no? No. Pure reason? Beyond experience. God is love. Yes or no? No." (C pp. 72-73) Although the negative answer to this final question is profoundly gloomy, the inappropriateness of the context in which it appears moves us to mirth.

As stated before, the narrator talks of three things: he tells us of the hearer, of the "crawling creator," and of the voice. The third descriptive section deals entirely with the characteristics of the voice. We learn that it is mobile, it sometimes ceases, and it repeats itself, with only minor variations, in an attempt to make the hearer recognize the 'told' as himself. The first paragraph of the next descriptive section also tells us something about the voice, that it is faint at its loudest and ebbs to fainter still.

In the fifth section we learn yet another trait of the voice. When the voice speaks, a faint light is shed, or rather, the darkness lightens. We learn, too, that the tone of the voice is always flat. This mysterious light, this same flat tone, are familiar to us from many of Beckett's other works. The flat tone, we are told much later, denotes the absence of love.

On page ten we are told that the voice never tells the hearer he is alone. However, at the end of the novel, the voice says unequivocably that the hearer is alone: "And you as you always were. Alone." The 'alone' is set apart at the end just as the opening words were set off by a space.

The solitary position of this word reinforces the solitude of the hearer.

The narrator also suggests that the object of the voice is merely to "plague one in need of silence." He says that the flat tone and repetition are perfect, but if there were less mobility and less variety of faintness, then the voice would have found its optimum level and position to wear the hearer into submission, into admission of the first person and of this past as his own. There is a curious use of language here. The narrator compares the effect of the voice to a drop of water upon a surface. The water erodes most quickly when it falls always in the same place: "As best to erode the drop must strike unwavering. Upon the place beneath." This last phrase is from Portia's soliloquy in The Merchant of Venice, in which she compares the quality of mercy to a gentle rain from heaven. This allusion suggests an irony, for far from being merciful in its persistence, the voice is a goad, an annoyance, in its insistence that the hearer admit that which he wishes to deny. On the other hand, the voice as company is a mercy to the solitude of the hearer when he desires company and not silence.

We have seen how the voice speaks of the refusal to acknowledge the first person pronoun in terms of disease. So, too, does the narrator use the metaphor of illness to discuss the act of creation which is here taking place. He wonders rightly, "What kind of imagination is this so reason-ridden?" The answer comes: "A kind of its own." The narrator is here referring to the inclination to dimensions

and computations which appear throughout the various sections of the novel. He is, he says, too reason-ridden to use his imagination exclusively, and yet too imaginative to be completely reasonable. On pages fourteen and fifteen, we read that he "reasons ill." On page forty-four, he says he "imagines ill." In these instances the word 'ill' is used as an adverb to describe that his reason and imagination both are aberrant, are sick. We have heard this use of the word before in Texts for Nothing, when the scribe complains that his narrator is mad, for he "reasons ill." Here the suggestion is not that the narrator is mad, but rather that he is too imaginative for work requiring pure reason. This narrator is in a kind of purgatory of creativity: he is in a limbo between relying on the intellect and the imagination; he can trust neither completely.

A third instance where the word ill is used in this novel is as a noun. The narrator, on page seventy-three, speaks of "impending ill." The word ill is here subsituted in the cliché "impending doom," and not only reinforces the importance of the language of sickness to Beckett's work, but also represents all that can go wrong in life. The word 'doom' creates a sense of finality, the absolute end of things; whereas, 'impending ill' suggests a multitude of mishaps, a more realistic and, if examined, a more discomfitting outlook.

<u>Company</u> is a <u>tour de force</u> of confused identity. Initially we are led to think that the hearer is the main imaginitive force of the work, that he is the prime mover and inventor of the narrator and the voice. Then we learn that the voice, knowing more than the hearer, must be the true creator. We learn from the narrator, exploring the relationship of the voice to the hearer, that it is the voice and not the hearer refusing to say 'I':

> He [the voice] says further to himself referring to himself, When last he [I] referred to himself (myself) it was to say he was [I am] in the same dark as his (my] creature [the hearer]. (C p. 59)

But just as the voice knows more than the hearer, evidenced by the various things the voice witnesses that the hearer does not, so does the narrator know more than the voice. The voice is unaware of the existence of the narrator throughout the narrative scenes; that is, until the final narrative scene when the voice says, "The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark." The one fabling is the narrator, here acknowledged by the voice for the first time; the "one with you" is the voice, and the "you" refers to the hearer. In this way the emphasis shifts one step further from the hearer as the primary figure to the narrator as the creator of these various figments - so far, of both the hearer and the voice.

Ultimately, then, it is the narrator who refuses to acknowledge the first person, projecting his own rejection upon his figments. In an important passage, set apart as a separate paragraph, the narrator describes himself: Yet another then. Of whom nothing. Devising figments to temper his nothingness. Quick leave him. Pause and again in panic to himself, Quick leave him. (C p. 64)

In his desperation to avoid talking to himself, the narrator creates another figment. He is called a "devised deviser," a "crawling creator," terms which suggest that although he is a figment of the narrator, perhaps it is through him that the voice and then the hearer have been created, or now exist. It is established that this deviser can not devise, or create, while crawling: "Could not conceivably create while crawling in the same create dark as his creature." This line is at once poetic and a puzzle of words. "Create dark" is a beautiful expression of the imagined world. Since to conceive is to create an idea, the use of 'conceivably create' forms a pun. The root 'conceive,' also suggests the act of parenting, giving birth. The word 'creature,' too, emphasizes the act of creation in the context of these other words; here it means simply that which is created, not 'creature' in any derogatory sense, but the implication is present, too, that the created thing has an independent life. Each of these "characters" created by the narrator is perhaps capable of creating independently; each has become something of a personality.

The problems of identity and creation raised within this work are thus ultimately resolved. Recall that the opening words of the novel adjured us to "imagine!." While everything is asked of the imagination, nothing is left to it, through Beckett's precise use of language. The narrator is the only creature in the novel about whom we have no information except this, that he is devising these figments "to temper his nothingness." Such an activity has honourably occupied many of Beckett's characters in both the fiction and the drama. In <u>Endgeme</u>, for example, Hamm tells what he plans to do when he no longer has anyone to listen to him:

> Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark. (Endgame p. 45)

He will create figments, turn himself into several, in order to have company, as a child consoles himself in the dark.

As we saw earlier, in Chapter Five, child's play is the principle which underlies much of the creative activity of Beckett's narrators. As Mercier needed Camier, as Sam needed Watt, as the narrator of <u>How It Is</u> needed Pim, so does the narrator of <u>Company</u> need his figments. As a child, he created company out of the blue of the sky; as an adult, he was accompanied by the image of his father's shade; as an old man he was comforted by other kinds of shadows. In his 'epilogue,' inert and physically alone, he creates figments. Both childhood and old age devise for company.

In <u>Texts for Nothing</u>, the scribe writes, "I'm holding myself in my arms.... sleep now, as under that ancient lamp, all twined together, tired out with so much talking, so much listening, so much toil and play." (TN p. 75) These words reiterate the sense of comfort derived by the narrators from their imaginative playmates. Molloy describes a more urgent need for companionship: "I know how to summon these rags to cover my shame." (M p. 16) These "rags" are his figments, the two characters 'A' and 'C' whom he might or might not have seen on the road. The shame he mentions here suggests the idea of the nothingness which the narrator of <u>Company</u> felt needful of tempering with his creations.

Hugh Kenner writes that the monologues of the narrators are reassurances to themselves.<sup>4</sup> This explanation is only half right; it does not fully take into account the creative aspect of these imaginings. They are not mere ramblings of lonely souls, but rather, are precise, determined acts of creation; attempts to create Something out of Nothingness.

The heroes of the trilogy are story-tellers, creative writers. Malone actually calls his story-telling "playing," and uses images of both sickness and play:

> Now it is a game, I am going to play. I never knew how to play, till now. I longed to, but I knew it was impossible. And yet. I often tried. I turned on all the lights, I took a good look all round, I began to play with what I saw. People and things ask nothing better than to play, certain animals too. All went well at first, they all came to me, pleased that someone should want them to play with them. If I said, Now I need a hunchback, immediately one came running, proud as punch of his fine hunch that was going to perform. ... I shall never do anything more from now on but play. No, I must not begin with an exaggeration. But I shall play a great part of the time, from now on, the greater part, if I can. (MD pp. 180-181)

<sup>4</sup> Kenner, A Reader's Guide, p. 114.

Malone describes the difficulty of achieving something imaginative:

I have done that. And all alone, well hidden, played the clown.... I couldn't play. I turned till I was dizzy, clapped my hands, ran, shouted, saw myself winning, saw myself losing, rejoicing, lamenting. Then suddenly I threw myself on the playthings, if there were any, or on a child, to change his joy to howling. ... For I was already in the toils of earnestness. That has been my disease. I was born grave as others syphilitic. And gravely I struggled to be grave no more, to live, to invent.... Perhaps I have lived after all, without knowing ... Live and cause to live. (MD p. 195)

Malone calls his earnestness a disease which caused him not to live. The narrator of <u>Company</u> complained that he reasoned ill and imagined ill. This combination of gravity and levity, of reason and imagination, results in a greater art. Malone's final statement quoted above suggests this: "Perhaps I have lived after all." To the artist, the process of inventing, of "causing to live," is the activity of life itself.

## Chapter Thirteen

Ruins and Magic

Djune Barnes wrote in her novel Nightwood:

What is a ruin but Time easing itself of endurance? Corruption is the Age of Time. (W)e do not 'climb' to heights, we are eaten away to them, and then conformity, neatness, ceases to entertain us. Man is born as he dies, rebuking cleanliness....

Beckett's understanding of this process and function of corruption leads him to reject, rebuke, conformity; sickness and deformity become the only possible vehicles for his thought. As he has deformed his characters, so does he transform the language, breaking it into pieces and corrupting logic, interrupting sequency of thought. In the seven works I will be discussing later, the sense of place and time of day evident there have as their corollary the creative process. Twilight becomes the hour of the imagination. Ruins become more than a mere metaphor for physical dissolution; they are a correlative of the form and syntax of the writing as well.

The prominence of ruins in Ireland and the haunting

<sup>1</sup> Barnes, p. 169.

atmosphere they give the land are suggested by the narrator of First Love:

> What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, is that all is derelict.... (FL p. 30)

The word derelict has a dual role to fill here. In one way it merely means abandoned, in reference to the scant population which the misanthropic narrator regards in favour of the island. Its stronger use, however, is in reference to the deteriorated and ruined property which covers the land. The word 'charm' Beckett chooses here means in the first sense something pleasant, but in the second suggests the additional meaning of something magical. This magical aspect of the ruins and the writing will also be explored in the following pages.

In "Afar a Bird" Beckett calls Ireland a "ruinstrewn land." With the same sensibility, George Moore wrote:

> [T]here is a pathos in Ireland, in its people, in its landscapes, and in its ruins. ... If ever the novel I am dreaming is written, <u>Ruin and Weed</u> shall be its title - ruined castles in a weedy country.<sup>2</sup>

Beckett's work assumes the heritage of the association of Ireland with her ruins. In <u>Molloy</u>, Moran tells us that his son has won prizes at school in history and geography, which are subjects that "for obscure reasons [are] regarded as

<sup>2</sup> George Moore, <u>Hail and Farewell: Ave</u> (London: William Heinemann, Ltd., 1947), pp. 4-5.

inseparable" by the school authorities. (M p. 131) Ireland's geography is as inseparable from her literature as it is from her history. In Beckett's works, too, this association can be seen.

The ruins which are strewn across the land in Beckett's works are largely either crumbling towers or decaying dens. They are described in the following passages:

> long ago that time you went back that last time to look was the ruin still there where you hid as a child someone's folloy ... Foley was it Foley's Folly bit of a tower still standing all the rest rubble and nettles ... all day long on a stone among the nettles" (That Time p. 10)

I see a kind of den littered with empty tins. And yet we are not in the country. Perhaps it's just ruins, a ruined folly, on the skirts of the town, in a field.... I have changed refuge so often, in the course of my rout, that now I can't tell between dens and ruins. ("The Calmative" NK p. 25)

These descriptions are thinly disguised sexual images, repre-

The sexual representation of ruins is given further evidence in the story "Fingal" from <u>More Pricks than Kicks</u>, in an episode which explains one interpretation of the book's title: "The place was as full of towers as Dun Laoghaire of steeples"; it is a place where lovers lie among the ruins and, as Winnie adds dryly, "Where much has been suffered in secret, especially by women." (MP p. 24)

Beckett further plays upon the words 'ruined folly' to describe the human condition. His characters, whose bodily functions are in constant disorder, are only representative of all humankind: crippled, blind, toothless, incontinent, and plagued by various excrescences. Belacqua's feet are in ruins: "to walk was painful, while to run was torture." (MP p. 101) One of his nurses is abrasive: "The voice of this person was in ruins, but she abused it further." (MP p. 156) The groundsman at the cemetery is described as "a fine man in ruins" (MP p. 167) and in <u>Enough</u>, the narrator remembers a certain event as "the day he drew the back of his left hand lingeringly over his sacral ruins." (NK p. 157) The deceased Murphy is laid to rest on a "slab of ruin marble" (MY p. 146) and our euphemism for a corpse is "the remains."

Molloy tells us that he has studied astronomy, geology and anthropology, each one intended to "kill a few years" for him. He continues:

> In the end it was magic that had the honour of my ruins, and still today, when I walk there, I find its vestiges. But mostly they are a place with neither plan nor bounds and of which I understand nothing, not even of what it is made, still less into what. And the thing in ruins, I don't know what it is, what it was, nor whether it is not less a question of ruins than the indestructible chaos of timeless things, if that is the right expression. It is in any case a place devoid of mystery, deserted by magic, because devoid of mystery. (MY pp. 39-40)

In this difficult and important passage, Beckett continues to play upon the word 'ruins.' In a seemingly illogical progression he takes us from the figurative use of ruins as an aged mind, to the literal meaning as a place, and on again to a figurative suggestion of ruins as a haunted imagination. Molloy states, 'magic had the honour of my ruins'; that is, magic had the honour of my interest and attention, fragmented though it (my attention) was due to the incursion of my advaned senility, and when I walk there (among the ruins of my mind) I still find the vestiges of magic.

Then comes the literal meaning: 'they are a place'; 'I don't know what it is, what it was.' This means first that he does not know what the ruins used to be, a den or a tower, but also suggests the colloquial use of the phrase: "I don't know what it is about (ruins), but they intrigue me."

Finally he finds a phrase to explain the meaning of this recurring image of ruins by calling it "the indestructible chaos of timeless things," recalling Djuna Barnes's phrase of "Time easing itself of endurance." However, he undercuts this revelation immediately with the exasperating qualification "if that is the right expression."

After these <u>doubles-entendres</u> and contradictions, however, we are left with an illumination of immense importance to our understanding of Beckett's work, for in this passage we have learned that the place where Molloy wanders is the same as that which the Unnamable inhabits; a living, timeless, indefinable limbo:

> [T]he place may well be vast, as it may well measure twelve feet in diameter. ... I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain. ... From centre to circumference in any case it is a far cry and I may well be situated somewhere between the two. It is equally possible, I do not deny it, that I too am in perpetual motion, accompanied by Malone, as the earth by its moon. ... All is possible, or almost. (U p. 297)

It is easy to understand why Beckett chooses to locate his characters in such a place where, having 'neither plan nor bound,' almost anything is possible. The cliché 'a far cry' fulfils several purposes. It first states how very different the centre of a circle or sphere is from its circumference. However, since he admits that he could as easily be at the edge as at the centre, the difference is negated and the far cry becomes just that - a cry and not a distinction. A cry is immeasurable in terms of rule and yardstick, but demonstrates a huge and hollow distance. The identification of the narrator as a planet accompanied by the moon Malone enhances this suggestion of illimitable space. This place is not, as some would have us believe, an afterlife; nor is it as Hugh Kenner suggests, an extra-terrestrial world.<sup>3</sup> Rather, it is the world of the imagination.

Since <u>The Unnamable</u>, Beckett's writing has become what I choose to call runic in nature. The term complements the early obsession with the physical presence of ruins within his pieces and connotes the magical power of the original Nordic symbols. I use the word rune here to mean any secret means of communication.<sup>4</sup> Some of Beckett's later works are baffling on first encounter and one needs essentially to decipher them before gleaning a coherent understanding of

<sup>3</sup> Kenner, <u>A Reader's Guide:</u> of <u>Enough</u>, p. 176; of Imagination Dead <u>Imagine</u>, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup> I take my definition for this word from <u>A Handbook to</u> <u>Literature</u>, ed. Thrall, Hibbard, Holman (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 434.

them; they seem almost to be written in a kind of code or secret syntax which only the initiated are able to comprehend.

I am supported in my suggestion that Beckett's works are runic by other critics who find it appropriate or necessary to use the language of archaeology and magic in speaking of Beckett's work. John Pilling calls <u>Ping</u> "mesmeric" and describes <u>Still</u> as "spellbinding."<sup>5</sup> He speaks of Beckett's "excavation of the site of selfhood," and describes the prose with the words "lapidary plainness."<sup>6</sup> Enoch Brater writes nearly a full-page extended metaphor in such terminology:

> Belle-lettrists ... will no doubt preoccupy themselves with excavating fragments from earlier Beckett works buried deep beneath the seemingly barren surface.... Enthusiasts can be counted on to uncover Beckett shards, but in the process of unearthing the neo-classic remnants of the playwright's uncanny self-reference....

In "Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce," Beckett wrote in praise of "the savage economy of hieroglyphics" and it is to this enceint sparseness which he attains in these later works. (DB p. 15) The seven pieces from this period I will be dealing with here are <u>All Strange Away</u>, <u>Imagination Dead Imagine</u>, <u>The Lost Ones</u>, Ping, Lessness, Fizzle Five, and For to End Yet Again.

<sup>5</sup> Pilling, <u>Samuel Beckett</u>, p. 50; "The Significance of Beckett's <u>Still</u>," <u>Essays in Criticism</u>, Vol. XXVIII, April 1978, No. 2, ed. Stephen Wall and Christopher Ricks (Oxford: Published by the editors), p. 143.

<sup>6</sup> <u>ibid</u>., p. 144; p. 145.

<sup>1</sup> Enoch Brater, "Fragment and Beckett's Form in <u>That Time</u> and Footfalls", Journal of <u>Beckett Studies</u>, No. 2, p. 76. These seven works have several things in common, not the least of which is the mysterious syntax which will be discussed later. Each, in its own way, is concerned with describing a certain place. For Beckett not only is the shape of ideas important, but also the shape of places. The single square and sparsely furnished room which many of Beckett's characters occupy has been an important element in a third of his major works: it is Murphy's sanctuary, Watt's microcosm, Molloy's goal, Malone's world. Very like a stage, the single room is the setting for many of the theatre pieces, including <u>Endgame</u>, Krapp's Last Tape, Eh Joe, and Ghost Trio.

Beckett's rooms have been described as metaphors for the mind. It is sometimes suggested that the two windows high in the wall of Hamm's room in <u>Endgame</u> represent eyes peering outward while the activity and ideas of the play take place within a human skull.<sup>8</sup> Malone denies it, but in denying suggests that he exists only in a head.<sup>9</sup>

In the following discussion I will trace the transformation of this room through the various geometrical shapes which it assumes to its final disintegration, suggesting relationships which exist in Beckett's work among the sense of place, time of day, and the life and death of the creative imagination.

<sup>8</sup> Cohn, <u>The Comic Gamut</u>, p. 241.

<sup>9</sup> The Unnamable attempts an explanation of the compulsion towards this location: "And sometimes I say to myself I am in a head, it's terror makes me say it, and the longing to be in safety, surrounded on all sides by massive bone." (U p. 353) He later dismisses the idea with vulgar finality: "[I]t's a head, I'm a head, what an illumination, ssst, pissed on out of hand." (U p. 375) <u>Fizzle Five</u> begins "Closed place," and continues, "The ditch seems straight. Then reappears a body seen before. A closed curve therefore." Here we have the familiar assumption and denial characteristic of Beckett's work. These three sentences integrate the shape of the place with the idea of the reappearance of Beckett's characters throughout his works: the sentence "Then reappears a body seen before," recalls the Unnamable watching familiar figures move in and out of view; it also serves to identify the ditch as a curve.

The language of this short work is at times startlingly pedestrian; in fact it is almost static, composed as it is of hackneyed phrases and too-familiar syntax such as "Just room for the average sized body"; "Bigger it has to curl up"; "In the beginning it was all bright"; "It does not encroach on the dark"; and "It is on a higher level than the arena." However, I am grateful to Christopher Ricks for kindly sending me a copy of an unpublished essay which prevented me from dismissing this work too readily for this reason.

Ricks defends Beckett's use of the cliché as a "dead piece of language, a dead metaphor; of which you might say that it is dead but it won't lie down."<sup>10</sup> He goes on to describe the many ways in which Beckett animates the English language by choosing the least vital expressions and breathing new life into them. It is a consideration which must predominate throughout the study of these later works.

In an earlier version of this chapter I had pointed to

<sup>10</sup> Christopher Ricks, "<u>Samuel Beckett</u>," an unpublished lecture, p. 14.

the following sentence as an example of this deadness: "They appear six times smaller than life." Ricks, too, cites this example, but says of it, "The dead phrase, curiously, looms larger than usual, less demeaned, larger than life, or than its usual lifelessness, once it has been rotated into 'six times smaller than life.'"

I am not entirely convinced that this is true in the context of the entire piece, but I am able to point to several other examples of ways in which Beckett does put vitality into certain of his phrases. The sentence quoted above, "Then reappears a body seen before," becomes poetic solely by virtue of the order in which the words appear. Put more directly, and more correctly by conventional standards, it reads, "A body seen before then reappears," thus losing its power with the loss of its mystery. By placing the subject after the verb Beckett delays the moment of recognition just slightly and thereby enhances our interest.

"The track follows the ditch all the way along.... It is made of dead leaves. A reminder of beldam nature." These sentences are the "Beckett shards" of which Enoch Brater spoke, the recognizable bits from earlier works. They recall the image of Dan and Maddy in <u>All That Fall</u> making their way home along the track or road by the ditch, and the dead leaves decomposing there. The comfortable cliché 'mother nature' becomes beldam nature, again reminding us of Maddy, a hideous but indomitable old woman whose name is a diminutive of

11 <u>ibid</u>., p. 23.

'Mad Ruin,' as Cohn reminds us.<sup>12</sup> But the term is more important as it applies to nature itself, turning the idea of a benignant force, 'mother nature,' into a Pandemonium, a brutal but honest description of the aspect of nature we usually try to ignore.

The use of language as discovered in these later works is not new to Beckett. What is new is that with them he has arrived at the point which the Unnamable described in the following way:

> It's a lot to expect of one creature, it's a lot to ask, that he should first behave as if he were not, then as if he were, before being admitted to that peace where he neither is, nor is not, and where language dies that permits of such expressions. ... It will perhaps be less restful than I appear to think, alone there at last, and never importuned. No matter, rest is one of their words, think is another. But here at least, it seems to me, is food for delirium. (U p. 337)

'Food for delirium' not only revitalizes the cliché by merely suggesting thought, but further extends its meaning to a certain kind of thought, to an agitated and aberrant mental state which is of course what we readers so often experience at the hands of Beckett with his assertions and denials, his beings and not beings.

With <u>All Strange Away</u> we have arrived at the place to which the Unnamable refers, a place where old language dies and new expressions and new tenses are born. With the

<sup>12</sup> Cohn, "The Laughter of Sad Sam Beckett," <u>Samuel Beckett</u> Now, ed. Friedman, p. 192.

exception of <u>Enough</u>, there is no more writing in the first person. Instead we are told, "[L]et him be, on the stool, talking to himself in the last person...." Perhaps it seems to us that the third person is used, but how much more descriptive of Beckett's intention is his own term, 'last person.'

And here no longer is the sentence the smallest unit of thought. In an age of haste and abbreviation, an age of memos rather than memoranda, of hyphens (appropriately called dashes) which separate the sentence fragments which constitute the bulk of our everyday correspondence, here the phrase reigns. Beckett has taken the phrase, mogul of the late twentieth century, and made a literature of it.

The earliest of the works under discussion, All Strange Away, begins, "Imagination dead imagine. A place, that again. Never another question." Each of the phrases, contrary to what we have been taught to expect of our grammar, is a complete thought. First, of course, is the phrase which was to become the title of the work that followed directly from this piece. It presents the impossible situation of an imagination imagining itself dead. "A place, that again," tells us that it is the setting which will be under consideration, and knowing how conventional it is to begin a narrative with a description of the setting, the "that again" expresses just a little exasperation with the preoccupation. What is different here, though, is that the narrative will be composed entirely of the setting: "A place, then someone in it, that again." "Never another question," assures us that all else will be be avoided: no plat, no action, no theme.

I would now like to recall Beckett's early praise of "the savage economy of hieroglyphics" and relate this suggestive phrase to the several works written since 1963 which I named earlier. It is useful, I believe, to envision these pieces as hieroglyphics of a high order. They are not narratives in the usual sense, but yet they communicate much. Using phrases as the hieroglypher uses symbols, Beckett presents a word picture, a visual image which tells a peculiar kind of story.

<u>All Strange Away</u> is a haunting piece, and offers much food for delirium. The opening lines can be seen as an incantation, as the narrator conjures up various images in an attempt to find one which will suit. First we read "Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war, no, not that again." Immediately following comes, "Five foot square, six high, no way in, none out, try him there." This seems to work and the narrator settles down to the business at hand.

The cubicle in which the figure is trapped (perhaps again reflecting Bacon's paintings) is constantly changing its dimensions. There is no reason, of course, why it should not. That it does adds to the eeriness and uncertainty of the piece. It might almost be inspired by a sense of the macabre, with its ever-shrinking walls closing in upon the victim inside. But the shrinking stops at the point where the body is curled to the most economical use of space, just as the writing condenses increasingly to its most economical state.

The word savagery which Beckett chose to describe such economy of expression, works on two levels. First it implies

a primitive essence, an intuitive understanding which dismisses the need for anything "literary" in the most pejorative sense of that word. Also, however, the word refers to a violence which Beckett exploits by savagely cutting away at his own style, demanding a stricter discipline of himself by using only that which is necessary, rather than all that is available to him, for expression. The economy of mathematical language appeals to this sense of discipline. The symbols abcd which he uses here are far more precise than any group of words could be to identify the point of reference. Beckett is finally succeeding in his effort to free himself of the cumbersome knowledge which sometimes marred his early work in selfconscious aggrandizement.

The initial 'someone' who inhabits the cube is identified in the masculine gender. He is involved in the curious and frustrating task of trying to find a pin while a light goes on and off. He has a candle and matches to aid him, but they serve only to increase his frustration, for as he lights the candle to illuminate the room, the light comes on inside the cubicle. When he blows out the candle so as not to waste it, the light is extinguished as well. Fortunately the candle, pin, and matches are soon dispensed with and the figure is left to be discovered in various positions by the light.

His eyes are "burnt ashen blue" and "unseeing glaring." "Fancy is his only hope," we are told, and he imagines faces and various portions of a woman's body which transform gradually to become the sole figure in the cubicle. The narrator remarks that the sex of this figure has not been

seen so far, so therefore it might well be a woman. He names her Emma. As the cube shrinks, so Emma must fold her body according to the dimensions it assumes, until finally the shrinking stops and "the body [is] tripled or trebled up and wedged in the only possible way in one half of the available room leaving the other empty, aha."

The second section of the piece is curiously labelled "Diagram." I say curiously because in fact the previous section has been more diagrammatical than the second section will be. The latter part is much more expressive of action and emotion. It describes how Emma squeezes her shoulder as she might squeeze a rubber ball or bulb. She sometimes sleeps, but her sleep is disturbed by cacodemons which make her waking a "sweet relief" and further make her resultant longing for sleep a folly "to be resisted again in vain." We read the word 'hemicycle,' which underlines the cyclical nature of Emma's sleeping and waking, resisting and succumbing. And we read another recharged cliché: "now add for old mind's sake sorrow vented in single sighing." Not only does this reworking of a cliché indicate a timeless world - since 'time' has been removed from the cliché - a cyclical world where nothing begins or ends but merely continues, but it also reinforces the location of this cosmos in the mind or imagination only.

It is significant that this figure fills only one-half the space of the room which has become a rotunda now instead of a cubicle, a rotunda which the narrator compares to "certain beehive tombs," for it is the space left empty which assumes more importance at the end with the closing words, "faint memory of lying side by side." We have read of Emma's "memories of past felicity no save one faint with faint ripple of sorrow of a lying side by side," which describes a single brief moment of happiness in her life, a single moment of lying side by side that brought her only joy but even that tinged with sorrow. This bittersweet memory visits her again at the end, establishing the chimerical presence of someone with her, by her side, in the rotunda.

The importance of symmetry to much of Beckett's work is well known. It becomes a gruesome "mania" when the desire for symmetry leads Molloy to kick the charcoal burner on both sides even though he had already killed him with kicks directed to one side. (M p. 84) The obsession further demands from Molloy that he go through innumerable variations in transferring his stones from pocket to pocket to find a symmetrical distribution. Beckett's theatre directions call for symmetrical staging (<u>See Theatre II</u>) and the antics of the characters in <u>Godot</u> must end, Beckett states, not in a random heap but with the four bodies intersecting at a central point.<sup>13</sup>

In <u>Imagination Dead Imagine</u> symmetry is regained with the presence of a second body to fill the space left empty in the previous work, completing the sphere of male and female, <u>yin</u> and <u>yang</u>. There is a singularly transitory nature to this particular 'speck' which travels through the boundless expanse of the imagaination as a meteoroid travels through space:

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>15</sup> Beryl S. Fletcher and John Fletcher, <u>A Student's</u> <u>Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett</u> (London: Faber and Faber, 1978), p. 69.

[N]o question now of ever finding again that white speck lost in whiteness, to see if they still lie still in the stress of that storm, or in the black dark for good, or the great whiteness unchanging, and if not what they are doing. (NK p. 164)

It is curious that we should expect to lose this couple forever when our experience with Beckett has ever been to the contrary.

<u>The Lost Ones</u> enjoys a wide and popular appeal. Unlike most of Beckett's work, this piece lacks inconsistencies; instead of containing facts which only turn upon themselves to become contradictions, this work is limited to statements which remain unchallenged. Here we read, "For in the cylinder alone are certitudes to be found and without nothing but mystery." (LO p. 42) For once the words prove true. Here the cylinder remains a cylinder, the ascending of the ladders never varies, the niches do not change.

The deadness of the language is consistent with the atmosphere within the cylinder. Paradoxically, it is by including verbs in this work that Beckett has achieved this static style: by using complete sentences instead of the phrases which predominate in the other works of this period, Beckett has created a limbo of language. It is true that some of the characteristic word play is still present here - "The situation of this latter having lost his ladder is delicate indeed" (LO p. 23) but the language, for the most part, is dead. Beckett achieves this deadness partly through the inordinate use of the verb 'to be' in its various inactive forms.

On the four pages numbered 23 through 26, for example, the verb 'is' appears fourteen times in eighteen sentences; the future tense 'will be' appears once. These verbs are dead weight to the writing. There are some sentences which have been relieved of this weight through the use of what we call the 'understood' verb. These are more interesting constructions and lead to the terse phrasing which Beckett will develop for the later works:

> Idle to imagine the confusion that would result from the absence of such a rule or from its non-observance. (LO p. 22)

Not to mention the intolerable presence of properties serving no purpose. (LO p 23)

This last line ironically speaks to my point; the verbs, articles and conjunctions which clutter our language come to serve no purpose and so their presence will soon be intolerable.

Clearly the vanquished tribe described so vividly in this work reflects our own unhappy breed. Here the golden rule is upheld again in a rewording which revitalizes the very idea: "It is enjoined by a certain ethics not to do unto others what coming from them might give offence." (LO p. 58) Here violence erupts, especially against those who try to "jump" the queue; couples meet, make love and part; and a general apathy prevails.

Seen as an allegory of our own earthly hell, however, the work is not entirely satisfying. If we examine it rather as a specific kind of purgatory from which these seekers are trying to escape and consider what the voice of "Text IX" has said, the work becomes enriched:

> There's a way out there, there's a way out somewhere, to know exactly where would be a matter of time, and patience, and sequency of thought, and felicity of expression. (NK p. 117)

Here is the purgatory of the writer, whose release is to be discovered in the patient employment of the logic (sequency of thought) and rhetoric (felicity of expression) of composition. It is for just such an escape that Beckett searches, the ultimate composition which will bring silence.

In an important passage we are told that lack of fraternity prevents any of the seekers from finding the way out. If a "score of volunteers" joined forces to keep a ladder upright in the centre of the cylinder, one seeker could discover "the way out to earth and sky":

> But outside their explosions of violence this sentiment [fraternity] is as foreign to them as to butterflies. And this owing not so much to want of heart or intelligence as to the ideal preying on one and all. So much for this inviolable zenith where for amateurs of myth lies hidden a way out to earth and sky. (LO p. 21)

Whatever Beckett intends as the problem, the solution is clearly to be found with the true mythologists, who are writers, and it is this escape into earth and sky with which the next three works deal in sequence.

As with <u>The Lost Ones</u>, <u>Ping</u> is most successful when regarded as a symbolic presentation of the art and act of writing. The repeated word 'ping' itself is one of the accoutrements of writing, as it recalls the sound of the bell on a typewriter which rings as the end of each line is near. This tiny bell sound can be as relentless as Winnie's alarm and as insistent as the goad in <u>Act Without Words II</u>.

For my purposes, the most important phrase in this work is "traces blurs signs no meaning," which occurs three times in

that order and in various other forms throughout the work. It appears once with 'signs' and 'no meaning.' The fifth time it is seen, the blur is grey. Then there is the suggestion 'perhaps a meaning.' Next is a longer interruption between 'traces' and 'blurs': "Traces alone unover given black grey blurs signs no meaning." Then comes "Traces blurs light grey eyes hole light blue almost white fixed front ping a meaning...." Again comes the suggestion of no meaning, but this time with the qualification 'perhaps no meaning,' and finally 'no trace,' erasing all that came before.

We know from earlier works that Beckett equates his writing with the word 'traces.' Malone humourously remarks that "one dare not write too lightly, if a trace is to be left." (MD p. 223) It is the pun on the word lightly which tells us that the trace is actually the work itself rather than the mere pencil traces on paper. If one writes too lightly, in the sense of quality or merit, the work will not last to posterity.

The narrator of "Text XIII" says, "[T]here is nothing but a voice murmuring a trace. A trace, it wants to leave a trace, yes, like air among the leaves, among the grass, among the sand...." (NK p. 133) And so we might interpret the traces of <u>Ping</u> as of this murmuring voice: traces of the writing, blurs of the recurrent characters, and signs we would interpret but wrongly as there is no meaning.

The previous works have variously described a curve, a cube, a sphere, and a cylinder. The figure in <u>Ping</u> is encased in a rectangular space akin to a coffin. Like a mummy he stands transfixed, but with eyes imploring. Here truly is the economy of hieroglyphics, a secret message which perhaps holds a magic

spell such as the ancient runes. The totally original syntax enhances the mystery of the piece. The words once ordered seem to rearrange and crumble, just as the refuge-coffin and the figure itself will disintegrate in the following pieces.

Before continuing with the discussion of the final works from this period, <u>Lessness</u> and <u>For to End Yet Again</u>, let us recall once again the play <u>That Time</u>, where the analogy of stone ruins with human decay becomes evident. Voices A, B, and C represent the three ages of man: Voice A elicits a memory from childhood, playing among the ruins with imaginary playmates; B recalls the lovers sitting on a stone at the edge of the wood; C tells of the old man, resting on the marble slab at the portrait gallery. On just such a slab are corpses laid to rest.

Dust to dust; these images and the final revelation in the library illustrate just that. We are prepared for the climax earlier with the following: "the words dried up and the head dried up and the legs dried up," so that when it comes we know the dust refers to man.

> you were never the same after never again after something to do with dust something the dust said sitting at the big round table with a bevy of old ones poring on the page and not a sound ...

not a sound only the old breath and the leaves turning and then suddenly this dust whole place suddenly full of dust when you opened your eyes from floor to ceiling nothing only dust and not a sound only what was it it said come and gone come and gone no one come and gone in no time gone in to time (That Time p. 16)

1

"Never the same after that," is a phrase repeated throughout the work, emphasizing the sense of irrevocable change. We are indeed never the same from one day to the next; each day changes us, wears us down a bit more. "The words dried up and the head dried up and the legs dried up" speak of the trepidation of the writer towards a future in which he may no longer have a share in the magic world of inspiration, as well as of physical decay.

Lessness and For to End are, in part, explications of this erosion and fear. For to End tells how the process begins:

> First change of all in the end a fragment comes away and falls. With slow fall for so dense a body it lights like a cork on water and scarce breaks the surface. (FZ p. 56)

Later the line is repeated with slight variations to indicate that the very first change of all - not 'in the end' this time, but in the beginning - is at birth, which is itself the beginning of the end, signified by the word 'mother' which Beckett uses here to describe the original structure:

> First change of all a fragment comes away from mother ruin and with slow fall scarce stirs the dust. (FZ p. 58)

In this subtle and evocative way Beckett attunes us to his design.

He calls the figure here 'the expelled' and refers to the ruins as those of 'a refuge.' There are double meanings here, for the figure was expelled from the womb at birth and that nine-month haven could surely be called a refuge in Beckettian parlance. But also, suppose that this figure has been 'expelled' from a literal refuge, one perhaps like the character in <u>Ping</u> inhabits but which has now crumbled to ruins around him. Refuge, then, is used in a sarcastic sense and we are reminded of the caveat in Beckett's directions for <u>Film</u> that the room is an "illusory sanctuary." In Beckett's wider vision we must now also accept the earth and the sky as illusions, for here Beckett names them "mock confines," thereby forcing us to consider infinity.<sup>14</sup>

In <u>Lessness</u> the ruins are named the true refuge for just this reason; the walls having crumbled, the long search for the way out is over. Where there are no walls, there are no exits and therefore no need exists to search for an escape: "[T]rue refuge issueless." The only real sanctuary, therefore, is found where there are no exits and no possibility of exits; in ruins only.

Disintegration into dust is the goal sought - not mere death which holds possible horrors of an after-life in purgatory, hell, or even in heaven - but disintegration. The calm which pervades these two works evokes the serenity of an Eastern religion with its precepts of becoming one with the universe, of merging with earth and sky, of reaching the

14 The litter-carriers in For to End should not go unmentioned. "It is the dung litter of laughable memory," which they carry. This recalls Christy in <u>All That Fall</u> and his wagon of dung, as well as the Biblical dung heaps of human misfortune such as the one to which Job was relegated. It has "a pillow (which) marks the place of the head," indicating that it is a conveyance for people, perhaps for corpses, as was the custom during the days of Plague to carry away the dead, the refuse.

The position in which the carriers proceed again recalls Dante's damned.

paranirvana, the ultimate death from which no rebirth is possible.

"For to end yet again skull alone in a dark place pent bowed on a board to begin." This is the writer again writing about writing: his head is bowed once more over the board of his desk; the canon is depicted appropriately as a succession of endings as he tries to end yet again; the images described are those within his skull.

The word 'issueless' which persists throughout <u>Lessness</u> comes to mean not only without an exit, but also without content. Such a reading has been suggested earlier in the trilogy when Molloy tells us that we would do better to blacken not the margins of the writing, but the words themselves, so that "the whole ghastly business looks like it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery." (M p. 13)

There are two fears, then: the possibility that these traces will be forgotten, leaving no trace; and the fear that the inspiration might be used up before the writer's life is done. Just as Malone strives to time his inventory to end at the exact moment of his demise so that he can 'draw the line and make the tot," just as the narrator of <u>How It Is</u> hopes that he will not come to the end of his resources (the bottom of his sack) too soon, this narrator expresses the hope that the well of his inspiration will run dry only at his death.

These two 'desert pieces' have one other important feature in common; the light in which they appear is described as dusk or dawn, those magic hours used for certain Celtic rites for achieving union with the universe and unity of being

in one's self. These in-between hours when day is not yet night and night is only turning into day are the hours of inspiration: "there dawns and magic lingers a leaden dawn." (For To End, pp. 55-56)

Yeats, in his notes to <u>The Dreaming of the Bones</u>, writes of the two natures which govern all life.<sup>15</sup> The solar nature, he tells us, is subjective, and moves through its life continually towards a more objective form of existence. The lunar nature is objective and moves during its life to a subjective form of experience. After death a reverse intellectual order occurs in which the solar moves towards subjectivity and the lunar towards objectivity. In the spiritual world the objective is wisdom while the subjective is innocence. Dusk and dawn can then be seen as the meeting of the solar and lunar aspects of a human nature; the marriage of the subjective and objective, of innocence and wisdom, is the union which gives birth to art.

Beckett's admiration for the works of Racine is well known. In <u>Dream</u> he writes, "Racine is all twilight." (DW p. 176) He suggests that dusk is an hour which separates the conventional and mundane from the mystical and creative nature. At dusk the men of business take refuge in near-by lounges on their way from office to home. He continues:

> The local poets, in this respect differing from the better-to-do, crept forth at this hour and came abroad, each from his publichouse, for the daily snipe of inspiration. (DW p. 139)

15 W.B. Yeats, "The Dreaming of the Bones," <u>The Plays of</u> W.B. Yeats, Variorum Edition, ed. Russell K. Alspach (London: Macmillan, 1966), p. 177. In <u>For To End</u> Beckett writes of the dusk, "figment dawn dispeller of figments," which suggests the artist at night writing while the coming day dispels the inspiration of the figments of the imagination. In <u>Lessness</u> the idea is expanded: "figment dawn dispeller of figments and that other called dusk." The first dawn dispels the figments or dreams of night; the second, called dusk, dispels the illusions of the day, suggesting that all life is a dream.<sup>16</sup>

In an image which appears now as a premonition of the works which were to come, Molloy describes the place where he wanders in his imagination:

> For what possible end to these wastes where true light never was, nor any upright thing, nor any true foundation, but only these leaning things, forever lapsing and crumbling away, beneath a sky without memory of morning or hope of night. (M p. 40)

We could have no better description of these late pieces which are lit by a twilight sky and where there are only "these leaning things," "crumbling away."

T.S. Eliot wrote of his art in such imagery as Beckett uses: "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." These words depict art as a reinforcement, shoring up his

<sup>16</sup>Malone, too, has suggested that dusk is the dawning of illusions when he wrote: "[I] was once in utter darkness and waiting with some impatience for dawn to break, having need of its light to see certain little things which it is difficult to see in the dark. And sure enough little by little the dark lightened and I was able to hook with my stick the objects I required. But the light, instead of being dawn, turned out in a very short time to be the dusk." (MD p. 220) defenses against the onslaught of time. Art extends life both quantitatively and qualitatively. Beckett's art extends to the very limits of the possible. In the next chapter I will examine several works that attempt the impossible, that attempt to voice "the silence of which the universe is made." (M p. 122) Chapter Fourteen

The Voice of Silence

The pursuit of silence, of course, has been an important consideration for all of the Beckett narrators since <u>Watt</u>. Guy Croussy writes:

> La seule évolution notable (in the Beckett canon) est la disparition des objets, des êtres et des voix, de la lumière et des ombres, vers le Silence.1

We have seen that in the later works objects have disappeared, as has the voice of the first-person narrator. All that remains is language.

Moran has complained that "all language (is) an excess of language." He continues:

> Not one person in a hundred knows how to be silent and listen, no, nor even to conceive what such a thing means. Yet only then can you detect, beyond the fatuous clamour, the silence of which the universe is made. (M p. 122)

This phrase, "the silence of which the universe is made," implies a sense of hope for the future attainment of the goal of silence. If the universe is made of silence, then

<sup>1</sup> Guy Croussy, <u>Samuel Beckett</u> (Paris: Hachette, 1971). p. 225. silence is the natural order and language is the aberration. In her discussion of illness, Susan Sontag quotes the eighteenth century physician Bichat who claimed that health is the "silence of the organs" and disease "their revolt."<sup>2</sup> This metaphor might be usefully applied to Beckett's presentation of health as the silent universe and the revolt which words express as sickness.

The Unnamable has despaired of achieving the silence which is the true silence:

It will be the same silence, the same as ever ... brief spells of hush, as of one buried before his time. Long or short, the same silence. Then I resurrect and begin again. That's what I'll have got for all my pains. (U p. 397)

He is describing here, of course, the situation of the continual rebirth of the Beckett narrator. He puns upon the word 'pains,' which comes to have several meanings here. In the clichéd sense the word merely means 'trouble,' referring to the trouble he has taken to continue to speak in the hope that he will one day be released from ever having to speak again. The word also refers to the literal ailments which he and his precursors have suffered. It could also allude to birth pains, reiterating the analogy made throughout the <u>oeuvre</u> between the act of writing and giving birth. Finally, the pain he names here could describe in a figurative way the sickness of language which has infected the silence of the universe.

<sup>2</sup> Sontag, p. 43.

Within the framed story of Sapo in <u>Malone Dies</u>, we find an image which was to be expanded and developed in the works written more than fifteen years later. Sapo sits in the dark cottage, listening to the sounds of the Lamberts at their work:

> But silence was in the heart of the dark, the silence of dust and the things that would never stir, if left alone. And the ticking of the invisible alarm-clock was as the voice of that silence which, like the dark, would one day triumph too. And then all would be still and dark and all things at rest forever at last. (MD p. 31)

The words "the silence of dust and the things that would never stir" remind us of the 'desert pieces' discussed in the previous chapter. The ticking of an alarm-clock marks the incessant passing of time, which ultimately triumphs by force of sheer persistence. That the clock is invisible reminds us that time passes whether we mark the minutes of not.

In the works of the previous chapter we discovered traces of the stillness predicted here. In several recently-published works and one yet unpublished which I will discuss below, the stillness named here becomes the dominant theme. Written in 1973, <u>Still</u> and <u>Sounds</u> are pieces which, like the other short works written after 1963, both ask and answer certain questions about the nature of art and the creative imagination. <u>As the Story</u> <u>Was Told</u>, an unpublished work, describes in a bizarre manner the impetus of the writer to write. <u>One Evening</u>, a work recently released, describes in yet another way the impulse of nature towards silence. <u>One Evening</u> can perhaps be seen as an emblem for the death of creativity.<sup>3</sup> The main character of this piece is a woman. Again the woman is the survivor. While gathering flowers for the grave of her long-dead husband, a widow stumbles against the body of a recently-dead stranger. This work, though slight, is interesting because the narrative is absolutely dependent upon the colours described.

"Yellow at the end of the black arm," depicts the woman, dressed in black, standing "stockstill," gazing at the body she has discovered. "The white hair in the grass," describes the body on the ground. The figures are not people - either alive or dead - but are reduced to mere patches of colour: the man is greenish with a splash of white; the woman is black with a touch of yellow. Indeed, the narrator admits he has contrived to have a few flowers present solely for the effect of their colour: "But for the need of yellow at the end of the black arm there would be [no flowers at all]."

"Black and green garments touching now. Near the white head the yellow of the few plucked flowers." These lines are the only means we have of detecting what is happening. The woman, represented by black, bends down to the dead man, whose coat has been described as greenish. The woman's hand, still holding the yellow flowers, is now on the ground near the dead man's white head.

Mystery surrounds this scene. Does she bend to listen for his possible breath, does she kiss him, does she succumb

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Beckett, "One Evening," <u>Journal of Beckett Studies</u> No. 6, pp. 7-8.

herself to the suggestion of death and all the strangeness of the evening, or dees she feel compassion and merely bend to place the flowers at this man's head instead of at her husband's grave? Whatever the reason, she remains there, unmoving, until the sun sets.

That "her old friend her shadow irks her" suggests her apprehension of death. The shadow reminds her of her own deathly shade and she turns to face the setting sun. She continues to face the sun, even as she sits by the body, until the sun finally sets.

There is an eeriness about the scene. The woman has noted a strangeness:

Too much strnageness for a single March or April evening. No one abroad. Not a single lamb. Scarcely a flower. Shadow and rustle irksome.

This is not even to mention the discovery of the body, which is perhaps the strangest part of the evening. The absence of people, the scarcity of flowers, and the lack of any trace of lambs or lambing suggests the end of all creative things.

Recall that this is the twilight hour, the magic hour of inspiration. There is a narrative presence here which is constantly creating, even as he depicts the end of creation. Three times he evaluates his work ("That seems to hang together") and twice he reminds himself not to go too fast with the narrative. We are led to believe that this is a memory ("It happened so long ago"), but whose? Is the narrator, then, the woman, speaking now in the third person? I think not. Rather, the scene is developed as a painting in which words have been used instead of paints. Set at the twilight hour, it is an act of imagination; it is an image created from blocks of colour.

The narrator suggests wittily that the scene is a "tableau vivant if you will. In its way." It can be seen as a <u>tableau vivant</u>, but the qualifications ("if you will"; "in its way") are necessary to point up the irony in the use of the term in regard to this scene, for one of the figures is actually dead.

<u>One Evening</u> is a guiet piece, a still piece. The single sound - that of the rustle of the woman's skirt serves only to emphasize the stillness of the scene and when that, too, ceases, all is silent.

John Pilling has written an excellent essay on Beckett's <u>Still</u>. He says, "<u>Still</u>, like all great literature ... creates the taste by which it is to be enjoyed."<sup>4</sup> It is an integration of quiet language describing quietude. And yet the title serves to inform us that this, too, is simply another attempt at the impossible, for while the seated figure is in repose, we read, "though actually close inspection not still at all but trembling all over." (Fz p. 48) The title, then, does not only refer to silence. The word

<sup>4</sup> Pilling, "The Significance of Beckett's <u>Still</u>," <u>Essays in Criticism</u> Vol. XXVIII, April 1978, p. 149.

'still' can mean 'yet again,' a continuation of Beckett's search for the silence of which the universe is made.

Just as the figure has been described as still while he is not, so night is called dark and then corrected with "of course no such thing just less light." The arm, too, moves in a way which is "impossible to follow let alone describe," and yet the movement is described in detail and very effectively. The impossible silence, then, may yet be achieved.

<u>Still 3</u>, published for the first time in <u>Essays in</u> <u>Criticism</u>, shows this solitary figure "back in the chair at the window head in hand as shown dead still listening again in vain." The change here is that there is no longer any change in light; no night, no day. The only way time might be marked is by the "incarnation bell" from the valley if the wind is right, or by Old Mother Calvet pushing her cart out at dawn and back at dusk.

With this work the word 'still' acquires yet a third meaning. It is a term used in photography to indicate still pictures as opposed to cinematic images. As the figure sits in his chair in the constant dusk light, faces appear in his imagination, black and white images of people and "some other creature:"

> Till in imagaination from the dead faces faces on off in the dark sudden whites long short then black long short then another so on or the same. White stills all front no expression eyes wide unseeing mouth no expression male female all ages one by one never more at a time. (Essays, p. 157)

The faces are life size, as if held at arm's length, which reminds us of the man in <u>Film</u> sitting in his chair viewing his still photographs one by one.

<u>Sounds</u> is about loneliness. This man waits each evening to hear sounds which will deliver him from his solitude. There was a time when birds flew overhead and visitors came, but now "none come," "none pass," "even the nightbirds," not for "some time past."<sup>5</sup> There was a time, also, when he could hear sounds from the room or from the loft, "low and brief never twice quite the same to wonder over a moment."

It is his solitude which he wishes these sounds to cover, for he tells us that worse than no sound at all are the sounds he makes himself, while walking along the path for instance. Now not even the wind visits him to drown his solitude. In the past it was often "so loud certain nights he could pace to and fro ... or mutter old words once got by heart." But no longer, and now he stays quite still.

When the silence becomes too unbearable, however, he takes up his torch and goes to stand beneath the tree until he hears "enough," for the leaves, though unflurried by the wind, still make faint sounds in the air. He sometimes puts his arms around the tree "as if human," so great is his need for company. He sometimes stays there for hours, then goes back again to sit still in the chair with only the creak of

<sup>5</sup> This piece is also published in the Appendix to John Pilling's essay on <u>Still</u> in <u>Essays in Criticism</u>.

the wicker before all is quiet again. In the chair, he often dreams of a place where no sounds are possible, so that his solitude would never intrude and he might never feel the eternity of the present.

James Knowlson and John Pilling have collaborated on a book which addresses these works. There are several points upon which I disagree with their interpretation. For example, they speak of the faces in Still 3 as a single "mummified figure," rather than as a series of photographic images, thereby missing the suggestiveness of the title. They also state that the man in Sounds "is listening for a sound not because he hopes for something from it ... but rather because he wishes to devise a strategy for abolishing its existence."<sup>6</sup> This is at variance with the evidence which Beckett gives that the man seeks external sounds in order to cover his own, which function in this piece as the perceiving eyes in Film; that is, they are proofs of his existence and of his solitude, which he would rather not have proved.

These three pieces - <u>Still</u>, <u>Still 3</u> and <u>Sounds</u> - have a companion piece in a work which was written in the same year and is yet unpublished. It is called <u>As the Story Was Told</u> and it answers the question implicit in the others of the identity of the narrator.<sup>7</sup> <u>Sounds</u> is in the third person:

<sup>6</sup> James Knowlson and John Pilling, Frescoes of the Skull (London: John Calder, Lts., 1979), pp. 181 and 179, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> Reading University Library Archives, MS 1396/4/14, dated 8 August, 1973.

"he must up suddenly out of the chair." No pronoun appears to identify the figure in either <u>Still</u> or <u>Still 3</u>, but the language is such that we sense all this is being related by an observer. With the unpublished piece the relationship becomes clear; the observer is the observed, just as in Beckett's Film. The teller of the story is the told.

This piece begins, "As the story was told me I never went near the place during sessions." These sessions are reminiscent of the executions in Kafka's story "In the Penal Colony." Kafka's story was suggested to me by Beckett's use of the word 'harrowing' to describe the nature of the sessions and by the fact that the listener can not bear to hear them described at length:

> [I] asked what sessions and these in their turn were described, their object, duration, frequency and harrowing nature. I trust I was not more sensitive than the next man, but finally I had to raise my hand.<sup>0</sup>

<sup>O</sup> Kafka writes: "'Yes, the Harrow,' said the officer, 'a good name for it. The needles are set in like the teeth of a harrow and the whole thing works something like a harrow, although its action is limited to one place and contrived with much more artistic skill.'" Franz Kafka, "In the Penal Colony," <u>The Penal Colony</u>, trans. Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), p. 194.

I am not suggesting that this is a deliberate allusion on Beckett's part, but merely that the word choice and the situation are suggestive of Kafka. I am not alone in seeing similarities between the works of Beckett and Kafka. George Szanto's book, <u>Narrative Consciousness: Structure and Perception in the Fiction of Kafka, Beckett and Robbe - Grillet</u>, deals comparatively with the two writers. He says: Kafka's immediate follower was Samuel Beckett. This is not to say that Beckett copied Kafka or that he was Kafka's disciple - merely that Beckett read Kafka, could not avoid a partial influence, and brought a great deal of his own to his writing.

((Austin: University of Texas, 1972), Introduction, p. 7.)

The listener is told he lived in a hut in a grove far enough away from the tent where the sessions took place so that "even the loudest cry could not carry, but must die on the way." His memory and imagination merge as the teller continues:

> Lying there with eyes closed in the silence that followed this information I began to see the hut, though unlike the tent it had not been described to me, but only its situation. It reminded me strongly of a summer house in which as a child I used to sit quite still for hours on end, in the windowseat, the whole year round.

Again it is dusk as he remembers or imagines himself sitting in a wicker chair at the window of the hut, "very straight and still, with (his] arms along the rests."

The man seems to be in charge of the sessions taking place in the tent, for a hand appears in the doorway, holding out to him a "sheet of writing." He reads this and tears it up. "A little later the whole scene disappeared." He continues, "As the story was told me the man [in the tent] succumbed in the end to his ill-treatment, though quite old enough at the time to die naturally of old age."

That the teller and told are one is revealed in the following way: "I lay there a long time quite still ... till it must have seemed the story was over. But finally I asked if I knew exactly what ... was required of the man." Presumably

Ruby Cohn has also drawn comparisons between the work of Beckett and of Kafka. (Comparative Literature, Eugene, Oregon, Spring 1961) the old man in the tent was being tortured into submitting certain words, particular writing, but even the chief inspector did not know what those words were which would release the man from his bondage and anguish.

It is rather macabre to compare the process of writing to a Kafkan torture, but it is not the first time that the Beckett narrator has been spoken of as a prisoner of other wills forced to expel words in the hope of finding the ones which will release him from his task. We might recall here, too, the harrowing experience of Pim. The narrator of <u>How It Is</u> describes how he carved words on Pim's back with his fingernails and with the tin-opener until Pim made the required sounds.

If the Beckett narrator achieves the impossible and expresses the silence of the universe, continuing to pare away all extraneous language from his work, then perhaps release will follow. Until then the writer lives in the hell which is an eternal present, just as do the characters in Beckett's later drama who are destined to repeat their stories again and again. Like the figure in <u>Sounds</u> he may dream of a place where no sound is possible, but his continued efforts to express it serve only to prolong that which he is impatient to have pass quickly.

Proust has expressed this irony, in language which I could not hope to equal:

> Somewhere in one of the tall trees, making a stage in its height, an invisible bird, desperately attempting to make the day seem shorter, was exploring with a long, continuous note the solitude that pressed it on every side, but it received at once so

unanimous an answer, so powerful a repercussion of silence, and of immobility that, one would have said, it had arrested for all eternity the moment which it had been trying to make pass more quickly.<sup>9</sup>

By shattering the silence, the bird has made the silence which follows more obtrusive; by trying to make the moment pass quickly, it has created an eternal present. Just so does the Beckett narrator continue his self-defeating task.

He speaks in an attempt to make all speech cease. Bicycles, greatcoats and gaffs have wasted away; all that remains is language and the voice of silence. Beckett has created a language which reflects the sickness of the universe, and which gives form to his ideas. In <u>Texts for Nothing</u> we read of a time "before matter took ill." (NK p. 79) This implies the possibility of a time when the world will again be made healthy. But health which is the true silence of the universe - will come only through the dissolution of language. Beckett's language a literature of dissolution - has become that which it has tried to express.

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