

**“Form Fading Among Fading Forms”: Death, Language and Madness in the Novels
of Samuel Beckett**

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Abstract

The primary thesis of this dissertation is that the development of narrative strategy and technique through the course of Samuel Beckett's fictional *oeuvre* enacts a parody of the Cartesian method of doubt, in which the search for first principles, instead of providing grounds for certainty, is a hopeless, grotesque quest for a self which eludes any and every assertion. My chief concerns are thus, firstly, to explicate and elucidate the nature of such narrative strategies and techniques, and how these can be said to parody epistemological procedure; and secondly, to interrogate the implications of this parody for the epistemological and interpretative endeavour of which the human sciences are comprised. These two issues are explored by way of an examination of Beckett's earliest novel, *Murphy*, and the narrative impasse that arises from the contradiction between this work's largely realist form and quasi-postmodern content. I thereafter argue that the later fiction, most particularly the *Trilogy*, achieves formal and stylistic solutions to the aesthetic and epistemological challenges raised by the earlier work.

Beckett's fictional *oeuvre*, I contend, can best be construed as an attempt to attain that which exceeds and escapes narrative in and through narrative, namely madness or death. The achievement of either would entail the obliteration of the possibility of narrating at all, and the novels, engaging in a self-deconstructing endeavour, thus occupy a profoundly paradoxical position. Any attempt to interpret a body of work of this nature can only respond in an analogous manner, by trying to make meaning of the subversion of meaning, and deconstructing the assumptions that inform its procedures. This dissertation argues that it is precisely in the way in which it necessitates such self-reflexive discursive analysis that the import of Samuel Beckett's fiction lies, and extrapolates the significance of this for an understanding of discourse, literary criticism, and epistemological procedure.

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Introduction

There is something ironic about the simple fact of the sheer volume of secondary literature on Samuel Beckett. For a writer whose literary project is almost unanimously considered to depict the destitution of human meaning to have inspired, or perhaps the more appropriate word might be 'provoked,' the amount of criticism, commentary and exegesis that Beckett has, presents an absurdity that rivals anything he himself ever came up with. That said, however, it would be facile and fallacious to try and account for as substantial and complex a body of work as Beckett's with a simple assertion of its nihilism. To construe its meaning as being a depiction of meaninglessness, or something similar, would merely be the precursor to a comprehensive account of what the force of this literature consists in, without beginning to take cognisance of the challenges it poses to literary and critical discourse.

This is not my intention at all, and would hardly seem to be that of any of the critics and commentators who have, in some instances, devoted entire careers to the explication of Beckett's writing. If anything, the recognition that the central significance of a set of texts is to make our ideas of meaning and discursive sense problematic would be the starting point for an investigation into, firstly, what such notions of sense and meaning consist in and, secondly, how literature, as an art form which exists only in language, can undermine these and continue to be meaningful. The central critical problem thus becomes the question as to how, given the fact that conventional modes of making meaning are undermined, we can continue to respond at all.

Much of the secondary literature takes up this second consideration. Concerned as they are with the very possibility of meaningful response, these readings tend, at one point or another, to end up reflecting on their own presuppositions and procedures, and how they can continue trying to make sense of a body of work that seems to parody everything about such an attempt. The problem to which these readings respond presents a serious challenge: if one takes the picture of human being and doing that Beckett's work presents at all seriously, to continue to try to understand it according to the norms and conventions of humanistic scholarship seems bound to make one feel unsettlingly like one of the characters in the narratives themselves. But this, I think, is precisely why

so many people have felt compelled to respond to the work's apparent refusal of analysis. If the discursive enterprise in which we are engaged is to continue in good faith whilst also taking seriously the challenges posed to its methods and mores by Beckett's writing, an interpretation thereof needs to acknowledge its own apparent absurdity in this context while demonstrating the necessity, nevertheless, of continuing to try to render the material sensible. An adequate interpretation needs simultaneously to explain why Beckett's work may indicate that meaning, in any conventional sense, is impossible, and how one can make such a stance meaningful. "One could almost say," as Theodor Adorno puts it, "that the criterion of a philosophy whose hour has struck is that it prove equal to this challenge" (1958, 257).

Beckett's work poses this great a challenge because of the parody that animates it, a parody I conceive of as aimed primarily at philosophical procedure as exemplified by enlightenment rationality, most specifically that of Descartes. While this dissertation does not provide the scope for an exhaustive analysis of parody, I conceive of it, in what I take to be a largely conventional understanding, as a method of refutation by imitation. Parody imitates its subject so closely that, in certain, crucial respects, it elucidates aspects and characteristics not clearly apparent in the original. This function of parody is the artistic equivalent of an argumentative *reductio ad absurdum*, whereby the implications of specific positions or theses are taken to their illogical conclusion. In this thesis I read Beckett's *Trilogy* as conducting exactly such a procedure in relation to Descartes' *Meditations*, and thereby enacting a search for narrative first principles, a literary performance of the operation of a mind trying to find the certainties on which it can found itself and by way of which it can proceed.

Contra Descartes, however, in Beckett's depiction, this search provides no starting point, no foundation, but rather the attempt steadily and progressively opens up a vertiginous absence of any firm reference by way of which thought can orient itself, and the subject situated in – indeed, prey to – language can ground his assertions. The protagonists are left contemplating a condition it would be absurd to try and make sense of while nevertheless remaining incapable of not attempting to do so. By the end of the *Trilogy* the state to which the not-quite-eponymous Unnamable has sunk presents a gruesome literalisation of the notion of a 'thinking thing' by playing out the implications

of such a conception of human being in a manner which renders the pretensions of autonomy and self-transparency in all their stark absurdity. As the narratives that form the *Trilogy* progress inexorably to this point, and the stability underpinning all activities of consciousness is eroded, their narrator-protagonists resort to one of two equally futile responses.

Either, like Murphy and Molloy, they seek a pre-originary haven, a place prior to the origin of linguistically constituted subjectivity, in which they can retreat from the dialectics of consciousness, or, like Malone and Watt, they attempt to find their way through language (by way of language) to a state in which they can free themselves of the condition of consciousness. The former response is futile because it can offer, insofar as the subject retains subjectivity, only another linguistically constituted site, and the only condition which can resemble the hoped for haven is death; the latter is futile because the attempt to transcend the need for language by way of language, to use language to escape language, can only ever deliver one to another language, and the attempt, and the belief in the potential efficacy of the attempt, thus becomes a form of madness.

The condition which the protagonists seek to escape, though, is no less mad. As the Unnamable puts it:

What I speak of, what I speak with, it all comes from them. It's all the same to me, but it's no good, there's no end to it. It's of me I must now speak, even if I have to do it with their language, it will be a start, a step toward silence and the end of madness, the madness of having to speak and not being able to, except of things that don't concern me, that don't count, that I don't believe, that they have crammed me full of to prevent me from saying who I am, where I am, and from doing what I have to do. (1959, 327)

The condition the speaker here describes perfectly exemplifies what Lacan conceives of as the nature of psychosis. What psychosis makes evident, not merely for the psychotic but for any consciousness, according to Lacan, is that “the symbolic order needs to be conceived of as something superimposed . . . [which] has nothing to do with living existence, that it extends and perpetuates itself beyond it” (1993, 96). The task confronting the speakers is thus an utterly impossible one. Possessing only language with which to escape from language, a language that is imposed on the self from without, having only thought with which to put an end to thought, Beckett's protagonists vacillate

between equal and opposite impossibilities, their activity becoming the texts which make up the *Trilogy*.

The way these texts enact the activity of thought and language trying to undo themselves and in the attempt merely prolonging and compounding their own absurdity strikes me as that which is most significant about the novels of the *Trilogy*. This failure of consciousness to undo itself is also that which makes a simple interpretive relationship to these texts impossible. Beckett's work proceeds by way of a systematic and rigorous undoing of all the devices that generate narrative and figurative meaning. This undoing is equivalent to, is the very way in which, the protagonists' attempt to reach a place outside of language is conducted. By this undoing I do not mean merely the way the novels and plays undermine the conventions of plot and character, for instance, and the ways in which we derive meanings from these, but a subversion of aspects of narrative as elementary as the structure of metaphor (an issue I discuss in my first chapter).

The significance of this is great. One can see the basis of symbolic thought itself as the process of expressing one concept in terms of another, such as operates in the creation of figure. The subversion of this process thus constitutes an attempt to undo the operational principle of consciousness itself, of, at least, the sort of consciousness at work in the creation of metaphysical or poetic meaning. In the novels of the *Trilogy*, for example, the act of narration is carried out with the sole intention of escaping the need to narrate, where narration is coterminous with consciousness. This attempt to end the need to narrate is enacted in an attempt to escape from all rhetorical figures. What becomes more and more apparent as the attempt progresses, however, is that the mind is nothing but such rhetorical figure, that insofar as consciousness is conscious, it is an inescapably figural and narrative consciousness.

A sufficient formal, stylistic and structural response to this quandary would, accordingly, not merely be a feat of tremendous literary ingenuity but a complete conceptual revolution. The "central critical question," then, as Christopher Ricks puts it, is "whether [Beckett] achieved ways with words constitutive of such a conviction rather than just respectful of it" (1993, 12). This, I contend, is exactly what the importance of Beckett's achievement consists in: rather than espousing a merely conceptual rejection of meaning (which would be, finally, another conceptual meaning), I see Beckett's fiction as

systematically pursuing a formal and stylistic means whereby such meaninglessness is enacted, whereby the writing performs the textual equivalent of such a meaninglessness.

As a representation of the complete and necessary failure of this process, however, the novels are formally very successful, with the failure of the narrator's attempts mimicking the failure of the consciousness depicted to reach beyond itself, and being thus constitutive of that which it describes. While the general effect of the formal technique at work in this depiction has long been recognized, the paradox it presents has not been clearly enunciated or thoroughly investigated. Christopher Ricks writes "[t]he principle is at once profoundly mimetic and profoundly anti-mimetic. Mimetic, in that nothing could be more imitative than for words to be what they say; anti-mimetic, in that nothing could be *less* compatible with *imitation* than something's actually being that of which it speaks" (54-5).

What is not in doubt is that Beckett's writing is, in one way or another, actively constitutive of its meaning. The question as to whether or not this constitutes a mimetic technique is left unanswered; or, rather, given two possible answers. In the former view, mimesis is considered the use of language as symbolically performative of that which it means: the failure of meaning that the texts thematize is enacted in the structural, narrative and syntactic destruction of meaning that occurs within them, and the novels stand thus symbolically for that which they mean. In the latter view, mimesis is understood as allegorical imitation, whereby figural or narrative strategies are employed to figure forth their meaning. The model for the former would be Descartes, whose writings depict his doubts in their literal truth; the model for the latter would be Dante, whose depiction of his journey can be read as figuring some more abstract, spiritual process in tangible terms.

The texts with which I am concerned subvert both modes of the generation of meaning: Beckett's narrators reject the allegorical aspects of the "resorts of fable," and grow angrily impatient with the symbolical possibilities of "fucking scenery" (1959, 279). Paradoxically, however, this subversion is brought about by the use of both possibilities. In allegorising the failure of allegory to be the basis of meaningful discourse by depicting narrators failing to make meaning through their telling of stories or making of allegory, and symbolising the failure of symbolism to make meaning in the immediate,

tangible being of these characters who reject symbolism as fiercely and ferociously as they can, the *Trilogy* presents a situation in which no meaning can be generated. The distinction between symbol and allegory, content and form, dissolves in the general assault on the meaningful possibilities of narrative that the *Trilogy* enacts.

This assault is carried out through a systematic rejection of all modes and means of figuration. Beckett cited as his reason for turning to French as the language in which he wrote a desire to write “without style” (Knowlson 1996, 357), to escape the very idiomatic nature of the English language, and this tendency can be seen as that which instigates the characteristic formal principles in his work. The rejection of allegory as structural effect, and the rejection of symbol as figural effect, is part of a movement toward greater and greater narrative destitution, employed as a method for the depiction of the destitution of subjective meaning. In this, rather facile, sense the technique is obviously mimetic: the breakdown of narrative structure corresponds to or enacts the breakdown of a conventional subjectivity, with this conception of mimesis corresponding to the first version outlined by Ricks.

There is a more profound sense in which these texts are mimetic, however. H. Porter Abbot, for example, discusses Beckett’s work in terms of Yvor Winters’ notion of “imitative form” (1973, 4), which he describes as a form and technique that puts the reader into the same relationship to the text as the text depicts its protagonist as being in to the world. In this sense, the great modernist experiments of Joyce, Woolf and Faulkner can all be seen as examples of imitative form. Importantly, any such form will proceed from a specific picture of the mind and thesis as to the way in which it works. Beckett’s fiction depicts the mind as inevitably failing to appropriate that which it attempts to understand, as sliding inexorably into a murkier and murkier mire of obscurity and confusion, which, because of the imitative nature of the form, is reiterated in any attempt to interpret it.

Since the thematic content of the narratives is ostensibly evacuated of all meaning, an understanding of the significance of the rejection of significance carried out by these works can only be attained by way of an analysis of the manner in which the rejection is performed. In order to do this I shall begin by discussing *Murphy*, Beckett’s earliest full-length novel, pointing to and drawing out the implications of the narrative

impasse that results from the contradiction between the thematic material and the largely conventional form in which it is presented. Having shown why such an impasse occurs, I shall proceed to discuss the ways in which the three novels of the *Trilogy* achieve formal responses to this aporia.

Thereafter, I concern myself with an interpretive irony this performative aspect of the narratives entails. Given the fact that these are texts which actively perform the failure of certain of our faculties to achieve meaningful resolution, how does interpretation go about making sense of them? Related to this question is the puzzle as to why so many people, with so many different agendas, assumptions and methods, have felt drawn to Beckett's work and seen in it a dramatization of the intellectual, psychological, or social theses they have invoked it as embodying.

I believe a response to the latter question to be elucidative of what is perhaps the central issue in literary studies. J.M. Coetzee, in his essay "What is a Classic?", offers the definition that, "in allegorical terms," a classic is "a book that will bear the weight of having read into it a meaning for [one's] own age" (2001, 5). The successive waves of readers who have found Beckett's books capable of bearing the weight of their often philosophically weighty meanings, and the diversity of meanings they have loaded thereon, seem to exemplify especially clearly what Coetzee means here.

What strikes me as most interesting, though, is the fact that these texts possess the classical quality described above in direct proportion to the extent to which they reject the validity of such allegorical construal. Beckett's texts endlessly reiterate the pointlessness, the futility, of attempting to make meaning of anything. His protagonists are, without exception, characters caught in situations which render any and every attitude they can adopt or assertion they can make about their condition absurd. It would seem that exactly that faculty whereby allegorical meanings are elicited, the faculty with which we construe sense of texts, that is most thoroughly indicted in the *oeuvre*. The irony of the legion of interpretations, and the apparent inexhaustibility thereof, is thus an especially fascinating one.

My contention is that this inexhaustibility is a product of the manner in which Beckett depicts thought and language attempting to reach beyond themselves, and the way in which this attempt always leaves a remainder of thought and language which

defeats its purpose. The depiction of this process and its implications are described particularly well by Jacques Derrida when he writes that, in relation to Beckett's writing, it is "[t]he composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of the works, even the ones that seem the most 'decomposed,' that's what 'remains' finally the most 'interesting,' that's the work, that's the signature, this remainder that remains when the thematic is exhausted" (1992, 61). The "remainder that remains when the thematic is exhausted" is exactly what the texts are about, finally, and it is the way in which the novels produce this that constitutes their greatest achievement. My concern in this dissertation will be primarily with elucidating how the works enact this and how one can theorize the significance thereof.

The texts with which I am concerned thus parody interpretation itself, but paradoxically lend themselves to almost inexhaustible interpretation. My argument is that the *Trilogy* enacts the process of consciousness constituted in and by language trying to escape itself by way of attaining either death or madness, each of which would seem to offer it an alternative to itself, but finding continuously that these, however, are exactly those possibilities which are refused language insofar as it remains language, and the attempt is thus profoundly self-contradictory. This thesis is concerned with Beckett's formal response to this challenge, and the implications the project may have for interpretation itself.

A Note on the Scholarship

The number of secondary works dealing with Beckett's plays and fiction makes it impossible to refer consistently and coherently to every commentator, critic and theorist who has dealt with the texts I here concern myself with. I have made every effort to refer to the thoughts and observations of earlier commentators where I have drawn from them or they have coincided with mine, but there no doubt remain some which will have escaped my notice. That said, I do hope, and believe, that much of what I have to say is original.

I have taken into account all book-length studies which deal specifically with the *Trilogy*, and also drawn on numerous articles and referred to certain writers in translation.

In the main, I have not concerned myself with any of the work on the drama or the short fiction.

The writer whose work has most directly influenced my own is Simon Critchley, whose basic contention regarding Beckett's fiction is that "interpretation inevitably both lags behind the text that it is trying to interpret and overshoots it: saying too much and saying too little, saying too little by saying too much. In relation to Beckett, the philosophical hermeneut becomes a rather flat-footed puppet dancing to the author's tune" (2004, 169). In light of this perspective, I have found that my central concerns and conceptual frame-work differ quite radically from much of the work of other commentators. Critics such as Friedman and Fletcher (1967), for example, tend to identify and explain specific literary or philosophical references in order to cast light on the meaning of the text, and many other readings also spend their time chasing what Critchley refers to as "philosophical red herrings" (168). Where the role and effect of these allusions is to parody or deconstruct such a manner of relating to literature, such a procedure would seem to miss the wood for the trees. A major exception to this trend is the work of Hugh Kenner, one of the earliest of commentators on Beckett. Kenner (1961) was the first to identify the importance of the presence of Descartes in the texts, and also emphasised the peculiarity of the use of form in the fiction and drama. His understanding of both of these topics I have drawn on extensively.

In a manner analogous to the procedure of Friedman and Fletcher, much of the vast amount of scholarship which construes Beckett's writing as emblematic of some sort of existential heroism in the face of metaphysical absurdity seems to me wilfully to miss quite salient points in the desire to salvage certain conceptions of subjectivity. Michael Robinson, for example, writes that Beckett "speaks of the heroic absurdity of human endeavour in the face of death" (1970, 32), while John Fletcher proposes that even though "Beckett is gloomy about life, he retains a sort of faith in man" (1967, 14). My qualms with these assertions are put particularly well by Theodor Adorno who writes that "Beckett picks up existentialism, which had been standing on its head, and puts it back on its feet" (1958, 271). Rather than attempting to affirm subjectivity in a universe in which it no longer makes sense, Beckett's fiction shows how the subject dissolves into the rhetorical manifestations by means of which it tries to bring itself about. The self is

shown to be an epiphenomenon of the play of language, and thus, as Kenner writes, “the serene confidence of the lordly cogito . . . is similarly dissociated” (1961, 131).

This dissociation is achieved by the portrayal, as Francis Doherty points out, of “the writer who uses writing in order to avoid the inevitable task of facing himself” (1971, 20). Doherty’s understanding of the linguistic situation and figural constitution of subjectivity in this literature is one of the earliest of the readings that reject the humanist presuppositions underlying existential interpretations. His reading and others like it which emphasise the way in which Beckett’s writing makes conventional notions of philosophical interpretation and traditional exegesis problematic through the foregrounding and complication of the subject’s relationship to language and to itself through language, are much closer to my own intuitions. The most notable examples of such interpretations, which proceed within a poststructural or postmodern paradigm, are those of Leslie Hill (1990), Steven Connor (1988), Thomas Trezise (1990), Richard Begam (1996), and Anthony Uhlmann (1999).

Thomas Trezise contends that the majority of Beckett scholarship “amounts to an exercise in ideology rather than in genuine reflection” (1990, ix) and proclaims his intention to be the attempt to “challenge . . . the assumptions underlying virtually the entire corpus of Beckett criticism” – (with cavalier hyperbole, given the fact that as early as 1967 Ihab Hassan had recognized that Beckett’s work illustrates that since “[c]ertainty in knowledge is no longer possible . . . epistemology must become parody” [30]). Begam reads Beckett’s work in the context of the origin of postmodernity in the debate between Lyotard, Habermas and Vattimo (1996, 3), arguing that it engages with identical issues to those with which postmodern thought is primarily preoccupied and defined, while Uhlmann draws out the analogies between Beckett’s fiction and poststructural thought.

Despite the greater similarity of my concerns with these readings, they seem to me all to lapse into the sorts of interpretations which the theoretical scheme by means of which they approach and situate the texts renders problematic. As if by some sort of exegetical return of the repressed, writers who assert that, for instance, Beckett’s work illustrates that “[h]uman experience is an experience of nothing: the only reality it knows is the inability to interpret its own structure” (Levy 1980, 3), see no equivalent insight as applicable to their own procedure. Indeed, it is often the more

poststructural readings which tend closest toward becoming “exercises in ideology,” with the fiction seeming as if appended as a useful exemplification of the ideas under discussion, with the irreducibly literary quality, the inexhaustible remainder, conveniently ignored.

That said, however, I recognize that my own interpretation falls into exactly the same sort of quandary – as any interpretation at all necessarily must, interpretation being the adversion to a meta-language and conceptual scheme with which to explain that which the text itself does not make explicable. Beckett’s novels, however, parody precisely this conceptual move, and the attempt to interpret them is exactly what the texts themselves would seem to make impossible. As Critchley puts it, “whatever transcendental, metalinguistic or hermeneutic key is employed to unlock the text, such matrix will always let the text fall back and remain as a remains” (2004, 171). Understanding Beckett’s work, then, can only mean understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning.

Because such a reading emphasises the insufficiency of thematic readings, I have relied especially on writers who pay particular attention to the formal strategies and effects of the fiction. H. Porter Abbot has provided many of the most important and far-reaching insights guiding my thought, most especially the more recent of his two monographs, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect* (1973). Other works on the particularities and effects of Beckett’s formal techniques which I have drawn on are those of Kenner (1961), Hesla (1971), Miller (1992), Wolosky (1995) and Rabinowitz (1992). I have also used the biographical studies of Bair (1978) and Knowlson (1996).

Chapter One

This chapter consists of a critical analysis of *Murphy*, Beckett's first full-length novel, and an interpretation thereof that illustrates how the early work prefigures the author's subsequent concerns with the attempt to find a way beyond discursive narrative within, or through, narrative. While the *Trilogy* makes the necessary failure of this paradoxical endeavour its very subject matter, *Murphy* treats the escape from consciousness as an attainable narrative and existential goal. I contend, however, that the novel's failure to achieve some sort of suitable structural or stylistic response to the conceptual and narrative problems it deals with is mirrored in its protagonist's failure to transcend his own language-bound subjectivity, and the mutuality of these two failures, the stylistic and conceptual, bring about the particular formal innovations that characterize Beckett's later fictional projects, of which the *Trilogy* stands as paradigmatic example. An account of *Murphy*, besides its own intrinsic interest, is thus of great help for a clear formulation of what the later innovations consist in and respond to.

Very few commentators deal equally well with *Murphy* and the later works. Those who responded to what they thought of as the Joycean intellectual slap-stick of the early novel, such as Kate O'Brien (1979) and Dylan Thomas (1979), must have become increasingly puzzled, even appalled, by the almost ascetic barrenness that increasingly preoccupied Beckett and characterized his later work. Conversely, those drawn to the literary and conceptual games played with the later experimental fiction would probably consider *Murphy* a strange hybrid of picaresque Balzacian social realism and a novel of ideas. While there is a strong tendency to treat Beckett's work as an homogenous expression of a particular *Weltsanschauung*, few commentators have pointed out the basis of any substantial formal or conceptual continuity between the early novel and those comprising the *Trilogy*, with the notable exception of Richard Begam.

Begam's *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, which construes the author's fictional *oeuvre* as a "deconstruction of the cogito" (1996, 155), sees *Murphy* as an attempt "to disengage novelistic character and novelistic form from their Cartesian underpinnings" (64), analogous to that conducted by more extreme means in the *Trilogy*. The thematic concerns treated in this novel, and formal responses to the challenges they

pose, Begam argues, all prefigure those which would form the abiding preoccupations of the later works. He is careful to point out that:

[t]his is not to say that Beckett tried to write an experimental novel and failed; rather, he attempted to show what the experiment would look like, where it might take him, what it would involve. One of the things it involved was the explosive deconstruction of its own assumptions, a set of aporias carried to critical mass. Another was a sustained exploration of the problem of novelistic character and novelistic form. (65)

My own point of view falls entirely in accord with this, and I have drawn on Begam's theorizing fairly extensively.

Murphy's Journey and the Cartesian Parody

In sharp contrast to most of Beckett's work, *Murphy* largely adheres to realist novelistic convention, and, as such, lends itself to a largely conventional reading. As A. Alvarez writes:

Murphy has its own special perfection and contains not one ill-written sentence . . . the plot notches into place like a jigsaw; by the last page every detail has been taken up and given its own special twist. The result is a formal perfection of which even Flaubert might have been proud. (1973, 34)

This flawless formal finish (reminiscent, for example, of Conrad's *The Secret Agent*) nevertheless works within a narrative strategy that renders all the presuppositions from which realist fiction proceeds problematic – presuppositions primarily regarding the nature of the subject and the manner of its relation to space, time and the self. Richard Begam describes this aspect of the novel especially well when he writes:

The Balzacian formulation of the novelist as the secretary to society, and the Stendhalian formulation of the novel as a mirror carried along a highway, both rely on the Cartesian notion that an observing consciousness accurately perceives the world and accurately records it. But if things do not compel words so much as words compel things – indeed, if the whole idea of trying to find the point of correspondence between language and reality is wrong-headed – then the mimetic ambitions of the realist novel will ultimately come to grief. (1996, 64)

The peculiar combination, in *Murphy*, of realist technique for the presentation of thematic content which subverts all the assumptions on which such technique is based, makes the novel especially elucidative of how and why non-realist formal strategies become necessary.

Murphy relates the adventures and death of its eponymous protagonist, an idle, indigent young Irishman, who lives in London and subsists on the difference between his rent and the sum he convinces his landlady to bill his benefactor for. Lazy by conviction as well as inclination, Murphy believes the highest attainable good to be a complete absorption in his own consciousness, and to this end avoids, insofar as is possible, any commerce with the physical world. Having become engaged to a sometime prostitute named Celia, however, he finds himself compelled to find work in order to prevent her needing to return to hers, and duly finds employment at an asylum for the insane called the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat. During his time here he comes to believe that certain of the patients have attained the total interiority of being he has hitherto aspired to, and thus abandons his fiancé the more thoroughly to pursue his own solipsism by apprenticing himself to the psychotics. Having glimpsed something like a dissolution of conscious identity, though, Murphy decides to abandon the attempt and return to the workaday world, but finally dies in the flames of an explosion of the radiator in his garret at the asylum before he can do so.

Murphy's story, in common with the novels of the *Trilogy*, follows the narrative structure of the quest, a plot construction at least as old as the *Odyssey*. Beckett uses the form to subvert the expectations of progressive coherence and undermine the implications of teleological conclusion to which the form traditionally lends itself. Shira Wolosky observes that Beckett's journeys represent "a radical defiguration of a whole tradition of literary journeys in which progress is presented physically in order to represent progress of a moral, emotional, religious, or psychological kind" (1995, 53). The protagonists – dazed, confused vagabonds (succumbing to paralysis and dementia as they try desperately to find their way toward a place which, or figure who, represents redemption, or merely away from the situation in which they find themselves, and finding in this search only more futility) – enact the narrative's own, inevitably futile, attempt to generate meaningful progress.

The plot of the novel arranges itself around two lines of pursuit, the principal of which is that of Murphy, who “was seeking what he had not ceased to seek from the moment of his being strangled into a state of respiration – the best of himself” (1993, 4). Parallel to this narrative run the events of which the second line of pursuit consists, brought about by and befalling a disreputable cast of secondary characters, all of who pursue Murphy for various reasons of their own. The narrator tabulates them:

Murphy then is actually being needed by five people outside himself. By Celia, because she loves him. By Neary, because he thinks him the friend at last. By Miss Counihan, because she wants a surgeon. By Cooper, because he is being employed to that end. By Wylie, because he is reconciled to doing Miss Counihan the honour, in the not too distant future, of becoming her husband. (105)

At an indefinite point in the past, Murphy studied under Neary, something of a composite caricature of various proponents of ideological consolation from Pythagoras to Christ, who “could stop his heart more or less whenever he liked and keep it stopped, within reasonable limits, for as long as he liked”:

This rare faculty, acquired after years of application somewhere north of the Nerbudda, he exercised frugally, reserving it for situations irksome beyond endurance, as when he wanted a drink and could not get one, or fell among Gaels and could not escape, or felt the pangs of hopeless sexual inclination. (6)

Murphy’s purpose in studying under Neary, though, is not to achieve the alleviation of his physical cravings. Rather, Murphy hopes that Neary will achieve “a mediation between [the] extremes” in his heart (6). Love – or, more properly, lust – is the principal thematic mode with which the novel enacts the enthrallment to organic existence described above. All the secondary characters in search of Murphy need him because he can bring about the requital of their love, or lust, or need for money, and it is from love (and lust, and the need for money) that Murphy escapes into his solipsism.

Murphy’s differences with Neary come to a head over Neary’s attitude to love, which he describes to Murphy as “the single, brilliant, organized, compact blotch in the tumult of heterogeneous stimulation” (6). Murphy, conversely, to adopt the terms of Neary’s scheme, is in search of the pure tumult of heterogenous simulation, which the compact blot merely disfigures. On their leave-taking, Neary tells Murphy that “all life is

figure and ground,” to which Murphy replies: “[b]ut a wandering to find home” (6). This “home” Murphy conceives of as ground devoid of figure; mind without body; the form of thought, of being, without any contents of thought or being.

Neary concludes:

“For whatever reason you cannot love in my way, and believe me there is no other, for that same reason, whatever it may be, your heart is as it is. And again for that same reason -”

“Whatever it may be,” said Murphy.

“I can do nothing for you” said Neary.

“God bless my soul,” said Murphy.

“Just so,” said Neary. “I should say your conarium has shrunk to nothing.” (8)

The conarium, an infinitesimal point situated at the tip of the pineal gland, is the point at which Descartes posited the interaction of body and mind as occurring (Begam 1996, 44). The fact that Murphy’s “conarium has shrunk to nothing” indicates that there can be no traffic between his body and mind, and Murphy thus conceives of his self as a solitary, solipsistic consciousness apparently entangled in the inconveniences of the physical realm. The narrator offers, in free indirect mode, half-hearted explanations of the seeming congruence of the mental and physical planes, saying that:

Murphy was content to accept this partial congruence of the world of his mind with the world of his body as due to some such process of supernatural determination. The problem was of little interest. Any solution would do that did not clash with the feeling, growing stronger as Murphy grew older, that his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body. Of infinitely more interest than how this came to be so was the manner in which this might be exploited. (64)

The “manner in which it might be exploited” becomes Murphy’s primary preoccupation. From this radical solipsism he derives a belief that, because one can exert actual control over only one’s mind, one ought to renounce the attempt to exert control over anything other than one’s mind; should, indeed, cease desiring at all. The sentiment is summed up in a phrase approvingly quoted from Geulincx: “*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*” (101) – “Where one can do nothing, there one should will nothing.”

This attempt to transcend volition and attain a form of consciousness devoid of any contents of consciousness can be read as an allegory of Beckett's own fictive project, which is enacted through his systematic divestment of his fiction of formal technique. As J.M. Coetzee writes:

Consciousness of self can only be consciousness of consciousness. Fiction is the only subject of fiction . . . The separation of thinker and thought, creator and creature, is a fiction of fiction, one of the internal rules by which the game is played. Murphy ("Murphy", *Murphy*) by and large submits to the rules, but he mocks them too. (1969, 26)

The absurd ways in which *Murphy* submits to the rules – of characterization, temporal plot progression, and unities of time and place – provide the substance of the reasons for which it mocks them. While Murphy is a character caught in the constraints of discursive subjectivity, *Murphy*, as an exercise in subjective discourse, attempts to undo these very constraints and highlight their arbitrary, absurd, nature. In the process of undermining the formal characteristics of discursive consciousness and the manner of narrative it engenders, Beckett's fictional *oeuvre* constitutes a parody, a *reductio ad absurdum*, of Descartes' philosophical project.

Just as Descartes set about his systematic project of doubt, Beckett, in the *Trilogy*, systematically shears narrative of all that is extraneous and ornamental, attempting to reduce it to its most basic generating instance. Where Descartes was in search of certainty, though, Beckett wades further and further into an irredeemable absurdity, until, with *The Unnamable*, we encounter a consciousness doubting even its own capacity to doubt but compelled to go on narrating, in the face of its own absurdity, because, being stranded in language, it has no other option.

Murphy's Mind

We first encounter Murphy at the beginning of the novel naked and strapped to a chair. His devotion to indigence, finding expression in this self-restriction of motion, is the product of a coherent existential project. As the narrator explains:

He sat in his chair in this way because it gave him pleasure! First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind. For it was not until his body was appeased that he could come alive in his mind, as described in section six. And life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure was not the word. (1993, 6)

The section six alluded to is one of the novel's most notably experimental passages, and the aspect that gave publishers and public the most difficulty on publication (see Bair 1978). The entire chapter consists of an analysis and description of the nature of Murphy's mental universe and his phenomenological experience thereof, a radical diversion from the largely realistic tone and procedure that predominates elsewhere in the novel. As we are reminded, "Murphy's mind is after all the gravamen of these informations" (1993, 63), and thus warrants a section devoted to itself alone.

The mind the narrator describes is premised on a basic dualism: "Murphy felt himself split in two, a body and a mind" (64), and, while recognizing that these have effects on one other, Murphy "did not understand through what channel the intercourse was effected nor how the two experiences came to overlap. He was satisfied that neither followed from the other. He neither thought a kick because he felt a kick nor felt a kick because he thought one . . . Perhaps there was, outside of space and time, a non-mental non-physical Kick from all eternity" (64).

The narrator characterizes the way in which Murphy's mind interacts with his body as analogous to a man wanting to sleep being disturbed by a rat wanting to move:

A man is in bed, wanting to sleep. A rat is behind the wall at his head, wanting to move. The man hears the rat fidget and cannot sleep, the rat hears the man fidget and dares not move. They are both unhappy, one fidgeting and the other waiting, or both happy, the rat moving and the man sleeping. (65)

Murphy, engaged in physical activity, is in the situation in which body and mind "are both unhappy." Up and about, Murphy "could think and know . . . with a kind of *tic douloureux* sufficient for his parody of rational behaviour. But this was not what he understood by consciousness" (65).

Instead, by consciousness Murphy understands a continuum separated into three distinct states, "three zones, light, half light, dark, each with its speciality" (65). These zones can be likened to states of consciousness described by mystic traditions which

place a premium on the transcendence of discursive subjectivity, and are states of mind in which Murphy frees himself of the need to participate in the cycle of cause and effect which governs the commerce of the physical world. Rather than consisting merely in an apathetic cessation of mental activity, such mental states are pursued and attained by way of specific mental effort of a kind likened to meditative practice or ascetic discipline. The course of the novel can be read as charting the successive stages in Murphy's progressive experimentation with such techniques in his attempt to attain a totally self-enclosed solipsism.

The mind described in section six is one seeking the principle of its own being through a steady rejection of its awareness of the world. This attempt is made by way of a process of discarding the contents of its consciousness in favour of the apprehension of the form of that consciousness itself. Because Murphy's mind "functioned not as an instrument but as a place, from whose unique delights precisely these current facts withheld him" (67), he sets about his task of finding the quintessence of his mental being by rejecting "these current facts" in the hope of apprehending his mind itself, the pure form of thought unclouded by any conceptual contents. The three mental states described constitute three degrees of success in this project.

In the first zone, the light, "were the forms with parallel, a radiant abstract of the dog's life, the elements of physical experience available for a new arrangement" (65). This zone allows Murphy to contemplate with detachment the events occurring on the physical plane, and exercise an apparent control over them: "[h]ere the pleasure was reprisal, the pleasure of reversing the physical experience. Here the kick that the physical Murphy received, the mental Murphy gave. Here the whole fiasco became a howling success" (65). In "the light," the events of the phenomenal world are abstracted with detachment and subordinated to the status of pockets of conceptual matter, becoming mere grist for the mill of mental machination.

In a state of deeper abstraction, the half-light, "were forms without parallel. Here the pleasure was contemplation" (65). This is a state in which abstract concepts may be appraised and understood, and an existence wholly cognitive pursued without the need for physical response arising. For Murphy, the half-light "had no other mode in which to be out of joint and therefore did not need to be put right in this" (65). The desirability of

existence within these states over those of physical existence lies in the fact that “[i]n both these zones of his private world Murphy felt sovereign and free, in the one to requite himself, in the other to move as he pleased from one unparalleled beatitude to another” (65).

It is in his access to the third zone, however, where the structures and strictures of physical existence melt away and he enters what he calls “the dark,” that Murphy begins to attain a state of being and consciousness that can be considered significantly different to the Newtonian physical world he is trying to escape:

The light contained the docile elements of a new manifold, the world of the body broken up into the pieces of a toy; the half-light, states of peace. But the dark neither elements nor states, nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming, without love or hate or any intelligible principle of change. Here there was nothing but commotion and the pure forms of commotion. Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom. He did not move, he was a point in the ceaseless unconditioned generation and passing away of line . . . Thus as his body set him free more and more in his mind, he took to spending less and less time in the light, spitting at the breakers of the world; and less in the half-light, where the choice of bliss introduced an element of effort; and more and more and more in the dark, in the will-lessness, a mote in its absolute freedom. (66)

Murphy here attains the dissolution of the formal ordering principles that constitute the phenomenal world, which results in the capacity and efficacy of will falling away in an undifferentiated field of random activity, a ground devoid of figure. In gaining access to the dark, the subjective awareness that constitutes his self dissolves, and Murphy becomes an undefined point of pure sensation, a consciousness utterly unself-conscious and experiencing the field of ungoverned phenomenal impressions of which it finds itself part. The attainment of an existence wholly within the “little world,” as he calls it, is thus not a task, as such, or a problem to which he needs find a solution, but rather just the way things happen to be. The problem is, rather, how to “tolerate, let alone cultivate, the occasion of fiasco, having once beheld the beatific idols of his cave?” (101).

Murphy is forced to cultivate the occasions of fiasco because of Celia’s insistence on his profitable employment; as the narrator puts it, “[t]he part of him that he hated craved for Celia, the part that he loved shriveled up at the thought of her . . . [but] [t]he self that he tried to love was tired” (8-9). Total identification with the part of himself that

he loves is prevented by the imperatives of the physical being, primary among these his sexual need of Celia. Having fallen in love and become engaged, Murphy's slim income proves too small to support both of them, and she issues an ultimatum that either Murphy find work or she leaves him and goes back to hers, to which Murphy, after vacillation and evasion, acquiesces.

The aversion to work is not due to mere laziness, or not due merely to laziness. Indeed, "[i]t struck her [Celia] that a merely indolent man would not be so affected by the prospect of employment" (22). Murphy's reluctance to work is due, rather, to "metaphysical considerations, in whose gloom it appeared that the night had come in which no Murphy could work" (16). Murphy's idleness is the product of the belief that "the end degrades the way into a means" (101), and the resulting desire to embrace the way as an end in itself.

The novel continually equates the generation of income with prostitution. "For what was all working for a living," the narrator rhetorically asks, "but a procuring and a pimping for the money-bags, one's lecherous tyrants the money-bags, so that they might breed?" (46) Similar scathing reference is made to Wylie's mind, which runs "on the correct cash-register lines, an indefatigable apparatus for doing sums with the petty cash of current facts" (103). When compared with Murphy's vision of mental transcendence, the commercialism of Wylie's attitude highlights the grubby pettiness of the mind thus concocted. Murphy's relation to the economies of commerce and sex is parodically schematized in a scene in a tea-room in which he attempts to swindle an extra cup of tea: "[o]n the one hand a colossal league of plutomaniac caterers, highly endowed with the ruthless cunning of the sane, having at their disposal all the most deadly weapons of the post-war recovery, on the other, a seedy solipsist and four pence" (50).

It is, fittingly, through a character that Murphy meets in this tea-room that he acquires the job in the MMM. A degenerate named Austin Ticklepenny, in whose surname the novel's conjunction of the sensually provocative with the simply economic is enacted, provides Murphy with his initial employment, and through this, his discovery of his own personal vocation. Having found employment at the MMM, Ticklepenny has become worried that his own mental health may be in danger of being lost. Resignation would entail the forfeiture of two weeks' pay, and "between going mad and having the

rest of his life poisoned by the thought of having worked for a week for nothing, Ticklepenny found little to choose” (55). He accosts Murphy in the tea room and launches into an impassioned diatribe relating his predicament. Murphy, at first wanting only to get away from the creature, finds his interest pricked and, before long, agrees to take on Ticklepenny’s responsibilities, thus inaugurating the series of events that will lead him as close to a realization of his aspirations as he will come.

Psychosis – Vocation and Trope

Murphy’s similarity to and affinity with certain of the patients of the MMM is alluded to early in the novel. One of the factors that conspires to convince Murphy on his arrival at the Mental Mercyseat “that he had found his kindred at last . . . was the absolute impassiveness of the higher schizoids” (102), making them models of his own life-ideal. The patients’ “self-immersed indifference to the contingencies of the contingent world” (98) is a state Murphy has pursued his entire life, and “what more vigorous fillip,” the narrator rhetorically asks, “could be given to the wallows of one bogged in the big world than the example of life to all appearances inalienably realized in the little?” (103). So profound is the effect on Murphy of the encounter with the mental patients that he begins to consider

[h]is success with the patients the signpost at last on the way he had followed so long and so blindly, with nothing to sustain him but the conviction that all the other ways were wrong . . . It meant that they felt in him what they had been and he in them what he could be. It meant that nothing less than a slap-up psychosis would consummate his life’s strike. (104)

The sense of vocation the mental patients evoke in Murphy is the result of more than merely the indifference to the contingent world that they exhibit. Instead, the fascination the patients exert over him stems from an epistemological orientation they exhibit and to which he aspires. The novel describes the “textbook psychotic” as having a “tendency to equate those objects, ideas, persons, etc. evincing the least element in common” (103) with one another, and elsewhere numbers Murphy as “one of the elect, who require everything to remind them of something else” (40). What Beckett means by

psychosis and the function it serves in *Murphy* can be understood in this notion of the tendency to equate, and provides the key to my reading of the novel.

The tendency to equate is a manner of reading the world metaphorically, decoding the objects and events around oneself in such a way that similarities and continuities are established rather than differences. A synthetic rather than analytic attitude, this mode of understanding is, I will argue, the basis for the generation and interpretation of literature, and Murphy's mode of understanding is thus analogous to that operative in literary exegesis. The manner in which this is employed in *Murphy* leads the protagonist into an impasse from which he cannot extricate himself, an impasse which corresponds to and enacts the absurdity inherent in this, or perhaps any, manner of totalizing thought. Beckett's response to the impasse is the adoption of the modus operandi that the later novels make use of: a procedure that is simultaneously narrative and rhetorical and also a self-conscious parody of these forms and assumptions; the use of narrative to express that which undermines and renders narrative impossible. The conceptual necessity of recourse to this sort of form is, however, already evident in the idea and role of psychosis in *Murphy*.

Murphy foregrounds psychosis as trope and posits it as its protagonist's *telos*. The novel also attempts to enact something approximating psychosis as a formal technique, one of the primary ways in which this is done being the description of Murphy's changing relationship to his treasured horoscope and the ways in which this then echoes these tendencies ironically in the narrative, which I describe at greater length later in this chapter. Another of the ways in which this is done is through the quasi-superstitious references to the moon or other astrological bodies in the specification of time, the juxtaposition of differing, contingent perspectives to undermine coherence, and the protagonist's attempt to transcend the linguistic condition of his existence. For Beckett, psychosis represents a manner of understanding to which Murphy aspires, only to find it, on its attainment, to be a manifest impossibility. The point of Murphy's quest, and of the novel itself, lies precisely in this failure, and the recognition of the impossibility that brings it about. The impossibility of Murphy's journey mirrors Beckett's attempt to write a novel that articulates psychosis as a theme – psychosis being that which is, by definition, linguistically inarticulable. This desire to transcend the

discursive and articulate psychosis, simultaneous to the despairing certainty of the utter impossibility of doing so, becomes what all of Beckett's subsequent fiction enacts.

Beckett's art thus finds its being in its attempt to negate the condition of its being. In language, Beckett presents Murphy's attempt to get outside of language, and the implications of this paradox are what bring about the systematic purging of all adornment of language and artificiality of narrative that the *Trilogy* engages in. What is at stake in this aesthetic project, this rigorous artistic nihilism, is the testing of the limits of the sense-making capacities of language and narrative by means of a sceptical reduction.

Beckett's novels are about novels, and the comic absurdity of agents who go about attempting to construct some sort of meaning through narrative; his novels are about language itself, and the condition attained when it is pushed, with absurdity, to the limits of its sense-making capacity. To elucidate how narrative is stretched to these limits, I will outline a conception of language characterized as innately narrative, and which is based on a theory of the nature and function of metaphor.

According to Jacques Derrida:

[m]etaphor has always been defined as the trope of resemblance; not simply a resemblance between a signifier and signified but as the resemblance between two signs, one of which designates the other. This is the most general characteristic of metaphor, which is what authorizes us to group under this heading all the so-called *symbolical* or *analogical* figures . . . (figure, myth, fable, allegory). (1982, 215)

Metaphor is the basis for the ways in which we create narrative meaning in literature, or any use of language that is not strictly denotative, and must therefore be the model for our interpretation thereof. By conjoining signs in new, non-discursive arrangements, metaphor produces polysemic texts which create meanings which denotative expression could not. Allegory, figure, myth and fable operate in the same way: by specific configuration of their literal narrative elements they generate coherences. Interpretation of these thus proceeds on the perception of similarities and parallels such as those posited by metaphor; and our mode of metaphorical interpretation is thus the model for our interpretation of literary texts in general, for our decoding of narrative. The metaphorical arrangement of language creates expression that is denotatively non-sensical, but that allows a new sense to emerge through the wreckage, as it were. This is what Paul Ricoeur

means when he writes “that the strategy of discourse by means of which the metaphoric utterance obtains its result is absurdity” (1976, 176). Metaphor brings concepts into a conjunction that disrupts discursive sense and creates absurdity, thus compelling interpretation that elicits sensible meaning from the non-discursive configuration. The discursive rupture brought about is domesticated by interpretation. It is the procedure of interpretation itself, however, our method of domesticating absurdity, that Beckett renders absurd. His psychotics, in equating those things having the least elements in common, conduct a *reductio ad absurdum* on our interpretative procedures, in the process making the manner with which we resolve absurdity itself absurd.

This undoing of the interpretative faculty is what Umberto Eco calls ‘overinterpretation.’ Starting from “a method of interpreting the world and texts based on the individuation of the relationships of sympathy that link microcosm and macrocosm to one another,” which proceeds on the perception of analogy and similarity, Eco writes:

Once the mechanism of analogy has been set in motion there is no guarantee that it will stop Every time one thinks to have discovered a similarity, it will point to another similarity, in an endless progress . . . *from a certain point of view everything bears relationships of analogy, contiguity and similarity to everything else.* (1991, 47-8; italics original)

When Beckett numbers Murphy one of an elect “who require everything to remind them of something else” he is depicting him as a practitioner of the mechanism of analogy referred to above. Oddly enough, though, what Eco here describes might easily be a description of the *modus operandi* of literary criticism, which is concerned primarily with the eliciting of consistent meanings from texts, and the description of the procedures and patterns that generate meaning. Elucidating the implications of this notion of analogy from a more strictly psychoanalytic perspective, J. Lechte writes that

Lacan begins to see that paranoia is not a hallucinatory delusion which leaves reason and logic behind, but is, rather, based on a surfeit of reason and interpretation. In a certain sense, paranoia leads to a radical over-interpretation of a text. . . . Through the notion of paranoia, madness is not so much in the writer but in the reading. We can thus ask how close such paranoia comes to being a delirium of rationality and interpretation rather than a delirium where meaning and reason would be entirely absent. (1996, xi)

Beckett's psychotics, in their equation of things evincing the least elements in common, instantiate what is here described as a "paranoid state," taking the manner of interpretation to an absurd extreme.

It is significant that the four levels of classical allegorical interpretation (which can be considered the most complete systematization of the exegetical procedure Ricoeur describes) are the product of a specific neo-Platonist metaphysical system, which itself is a metaphor: Platonism posits the ideal realm as the equivalent of the figurative level one adverts to in reading metaphor, and the literal absurdity of the world is thus rendered meaningful by the addition of an exterior hermeneutic level. As John T. Kirby writes, "[i]t would not overstate the case to say that Plato's whole ontology . . . is rooted in semiotics" (1997, 534).

But if one uses this, a metaphysical scheme which is itself a metaphor, as the model for the interpretation of metaphor and a criterion for interpretative validity, one ends up with only circularity. According to Heidegger:

The notion of transposition and of metaphor rest on the distinction, not to say the separation, of the sensory and the non-sensory as two domains each subsisting for itself. This kind of separation between the sensory and the non-sensory, between the physical and the non-physical, is a fundamental characteristic of what is called 'metaphysics,' which confers upon Western thought its essential characteristics. . . . It is particularly determinant for the way in which we represent the Being of language. This is why metaphor is often utilized as an auxiliary means in the interpretation of poetic, or more generally artistic, works. (qtd in Derrida 1982, 226)

Heidegger's contention is that "[o]nce this limitation of metaphysics has been seen, the determining conception of 'metaphor' collapses by itself" (226). In other words, metaphor ceases to be a model for the metaphysical meaning of the world, and becomes merely the mode of generation and interpretation of poetical meaning, because that which resolves the disjunction between literal and figurative, content and form, figure and ground, is exactly that which posits the opposition to begin with. The logical conclusion of a conventional hermeneutic project is the interpretation of interpretation itself, and in the process the perception of its own absurdity.

Murphy's venture, and the conceptual trajectory it follows, are ironically prefigured in the "Hindu polyhistor of dubious caste" who "had been writing for many

years, still was and trusted he would be granted the Prana to finish, a monograph provisionally entitled: *The Pathetic Fallacy from Avercamp to Kampendonck*. But already he began to complain of those sensations that some weeks later . . . were to drive him to the gas oven” (1993, 110). The theorist shares with Murphy manner of death, presumable metaphysical outlook and central critical preoccupation.

The tendency to equate that the psychotics display, and to which Murphy aspires, has the effect of undoing the conclusions of discursive reason and its metaphysical structures, bringing all to equality in one vast, undifferentiated cosmos. Where, for Neary, “all life is figure and ground” (6), Murphy’s ideal is “Neary’s big blooming buzzing confusion or ground, mercifully free of figure” (138). The drawing of analogies between the most conventionally disparate objects or events has the effect of dismantling the structure of the macrocosm as posited by discursive reason, bringing consciousness to immediate awareness of itself. Murphy’s progress through the novel thus enacts a systematic acquisition of the capacity to read things metaphorically, the logical conclusion of which would be the attainment of a state approximating that possessed by the psychotics. This progression is enacted in the novel by way of Murphy’s changing interpretations of his horoscope.

The Self-Undoing Prophecy

Murphy, perhaps out of actual superstition but more probably as a way of delaying having to work, refuses to begin looking for a job until Celia has found a personalized horoscope for him. She duly acquires a script entitled “THEMA COELI *with Delineations, Compiled by Ramaswami Krishnaswami Narayanaswami Suk*” (22), thereafter known as ‘Suk,’ which comes to play a crucial role in Murphy’s life. The horoscope is typical of the genre in its combination of the blindingly obvious with the impenetrably vague, offering advice on what colours Murphy ought to wear, on what days he can expect luck and what calamities he ought to guard against. “With regards to a career,” for example, the horoscope advises Murphy to “inspire and lead” or act as “go between, promoter, detective, custodian, pioneer or, if possible, explorer” (23). Murphy treats the horoscope with great reverence: “Suk’s theme of Murphy’s heaven went

everywhere with [him]. He had committed it to memory, he chanted it privately as he went along. . . . He observed its precepts to the best of his ability” (46).

Significantly, astrology is itself an avowed exegesis, in which the practitioner reads signs from the skies at the time of one’s birth and interprets the significance these bear for one’s particular situation. The entire universe is, in this perspective, an allegory, all of whose levels correspond, and whose meaning and significance are accessible provided the correct interpretative procedures are followed. In the astrological scheme, the heavens hold absolute, unquestionable significance which an initiated elect interpret. Murphy’s initial relationship to his horoscope is one of unquestioning deference, which gradually gives way as the exegetical attitude which leads to this is overcome. His eventual discovery of his ‘destiny’ consists in a recognition of the role his own interpretation of the horoscope has played, and with this insight he achieves freedom from his own previous modes of interpretation, and hence the horoscope itself. The predictions the horoscope makes are finally thus ironically fulfilled, this fulfilment consisting primarily in a transcendence of the belief in the horoscope itself.

Murphy’s reading of the horoscope is emblematic of the changes that occur in his relationship to the world, and undergoes two distinct shifts in the course of the novel. When first brought the reading, Murphy uses it as a justification for his continued refusal to find employment. Told that his lucky number is 4, his lucky day Sunday and his propitious years 1939 and 1990, Murphy, when asked by Celia “[c]an you now work after that?”, replies: “[c]ertainly I can. The very first fourth to fall on a Sunday in 1936 I begin. I put on my gems and off I go, to custode, detect, explore, pioneer, promote or pimp, as occasion may arise” (23). Celia, exasperated, says:

‘You tell me to get you this . . . this . . .’
 ‘Corpus of deterrents’ said Murphy.
 ‘So that we can be together, and then you go and twist it into a . . . into a . . .’
 ‘Separation order,’ said Murphy. (24)

Murphy’s ability to twist the horoscope into a separation order already intimates his own interpretive freedom: while he purports to treat the text unequivocally, taking its prescriptions at face value and treating the advice it offers as having the status of the laws of logic or the word of god, he does so, in reality, in pursuance of his own interests. The

cosmology Murphy believes in informs and ensures the validity of the interpretation of it that he believes his horoscope to be, which, in turn, determines his response to it. In this sense the initial interpretation is passive, taking the text's word as definitive and the conformity of one's own response to it for granted. The imputation of total authority to the text allows Murphy to avoid having to accept any interpretative responsibility, and thus prolong the apathy of his own existence. In this understanding, the validity the horoscope has is unimpeachable, its prescriptions being decoded from the very fabric of the universe, and the text is thus inseparable from the world it claims to interpret and predict. One can no more exercise interpretive freedom than one can alter the nature of the world. Such an attitude reiterates the hermeneutic circularity of which Heidegger is critical: the interpretation is correct because its analysis of that which it interprets stipulates that the procedures to which it adheres are correct.

The first change in Murphy's interpretative stance occurs when he encounters Ticklepenny. Listening to him describing his job in the MMM, Murphy is "stunned by the sudden clash between two hitherto distinct motifs in Suk's delineations" (53):

What made Murphy feel really confident was the sudden syzygy in Suk's delineations of lunatic in paragraph two and custodian in paragraph seven. . . . [T]heir union made the nativity appear as finely correlated in all its parts as the system from which it purported to come. . . . Thus the six-pence worth of sky, from the ludicrous broadsheet that Murphy had called his life-warrant, his bull of incommunication and corpus of deterrents, changed into the poem that he alone of the living could write. (56-7)

The change that occurs here allows Murphy to move from a relation of deference in which the horoscope serves merely to proscribe courses of action, to one in which it becomes "the poem that he alone of all the living could write." In this sense, the prophecy becomes equivalent to something like a score for a piece of music, or the text of a play: inert until given performance, and written specifically in order to be performed. Murphy's belief in the complete descriptive power of the text gives way to the recognition that the efficacy of the nativity lies in the active interpretation and enactment of it, and the manner of the activity of interpretation is thus afforded priority over that which it interprets.

His second change of exegetical attitude occurs when, having discovered his vocation at the MMM, Murphy reflects on the possibility that his aptitude for the job may have been prefigured in Suk's prophecy. The idea revolts him, and he reacts forcefully against "the attribution of this strange talent solely to the moon in the Serpent at the hour of his birth" (103). In the MMM, as Murphy begins to perceive the possibility of complete freedom from the external world in the model of the psychotics, he denies any belief in the validity of the prophecy, renouncing its efficacy and discovering a realm in which its prescription is invalid.

The more his own system closed around him, the less he could tolerate its being subordinated to any other. Between him and his stars there was no doubt correspondence, but not in Suk's sense. They were *his* stars, he was the prior system. He had been projected, larval and dark, on the sky of that regrettable hour as on a screen, magnified and clarified into his own meaning. But it was *his* meaning. The moon in the serpent was no more than an image, a fragment of vitagraph. (104)

With this change in perspective "the sixpence of sky changed again, from the poem that he alone of all the living could write to the poem that he alone of all the born could have written" (104). Coinciding with Murphy's discovery of his kindred in the MMM and the ensuing belief that he has discovered a way out of discursive consciousness through the epistemic absurdity of the psychotics is the insight that any interpretation he may have made of the prophecy would always be his interpretation – as he recognizes, "it was *his* meaning," and thus, "[s]o far as the prophetic status of the heavenly bodies was concerned Murphy had become an out and out preterist" (104). Murphy has here seen through the determining conception of metaphor on which the exegesis is founded – attained a status in relation to his nativity equivalent to that of the narrator's to the novel itself – and, thus able to treat the substance of the text as preterite fiction, achieves authorial license which allows him to interpret and manipulate the text with any degree of irony he may wish to. This interpretative attitude is the basis for the tendency toward analogy which the psychotics display: any reading is possible, anything can be read as a signature of anything else, and any reading is thus prone to universal irony and the absurdity this creates. As Eco puts it, "[o]nce the mechanism of analogy has been set in motion there is no guarantee that it will stop" (1991, 48).

Beckett's psychotics try not so much to prevent this interpretative fallacy as to embrace it wholeheartedly, and thus instantiate an interpretative *reductio ad absurdum*. By reducing everything to a version of, or pattern for, everything else, everything is reduced to an equal, indifferent significance. The higher schizoids know the possibility of every interpretation and the validity of none, and thus possess total exegetical freedom. The analytical differentiation of the world into discrete phenomena, displaying self-identity and non-contradiction, is undone, in favour of an epistemological unification of all events and phenomena as instances of similarity or analogy. Beckett, while writing a novel that subscribes, for the most part, to the conventions and procedures open to a quasi-allegorical exegesis, parodies these insofar as they subscribe to the norms shared with Suk's horoscope.

Perhaps the most fundamental manner in which narrative purports to generate allegory is in its specification of temporal progression. Conventionally, the unfolding of the plot in time aspires to narrative verisimilitude, which is done by structuring the series of events described in a time-frame analogous to those with which we make sense of our own lives. In *Murphy*, the delineation of the temporality of events related is often facetiously precise – “[t]he encounter, on which so much unhinges, between Murphy and Ticklepenny, took place on Friday, October the 11th (though Murphy did not know that), the moon being full again, but not nearly so near the earth as when last in opposition” (1993, 67) – and specified with reference to astrological characteristics: “[t]he moon, by a striking coincidence full and at perigee, was 29,000 miles nearer the earth than it had been for four years” (19). The astrological conjunctions considered to have causal determining power over the subject are rendered ironic in the novel's self-conscious temporal specification, parodying usual temporal superstition and the fictive conventions related to them. Beckett's “by a striking coincidence” points to this. Alternatively, temporal reference is rendered relative and uncertain, as in “[t]he next day was Saturday (if our reckoning is correct)” (86). The effect of these baroque specifications of the time-frame of the novel is to highlight the artificiality of the temporal arrangement, and thus foreground the arbitrariness of its significance.

Another way in which the fundamental arbitrariness and partiality of narration is emphasised is in the conjunction of third-person with first-person narrative in instances

where the third person narrator narrates instances of characters narrating events to one another. When Celia tells her grandfather of her relationship with Murphy, through an account that is designed to be misleading, her reportage, reported by the narrator, shifts between first and third person and is rendered irretrievably relative. We are told that Celia's grandfather, Mr. Kelly, asks

'How do you know all this?' said Mr. Kelly.

'What?' said Celia.

'All these demented particulars,' said Mr. Kelly.

'He tells me everything,' said Celia. (12)

The apparently makeshift excuse for the specificity of the narration – “[h]e tells me everything” – while parading itself like a narrative band-aid on a sore thumb, has the effect of calling into question narration itself, of rendering all reportage ironic.

The instability of narration is further emphasised in the description of “Neary's account [which is] expurgated, accelerated, improved and reduced” (31), while the narrator, nominally responsible for the quality of the text, tells us that

It is hard to say where the fault lies in the case of Ticklepenny, whether with the soul, the stream or the lips, but certainly the quality of the speech is most wretched. Celia's confidence to Mr Kelly, Neary's to Wylie, had to be given for the most part obliquely. With all the more reason now, Ticklepenny's to Murphy. (53)

One of the striking effects of these intrusions is to highlight the unreliability of narration, and draw attention to the structure and construction of the text. Far from being a wilful narrative gimmick, this technique enacts the self's relation to the self through narrative, and the generation of identity is thus portrayed as occurring not so much through the production of narrative as through the interpretation of the world and events as if they were narrative. In this regard, Murphy's relation to his horoscope has already been pointed to as playing a crucial role. Similarly, the narrator says elsewhere that “[e]verything that happened became for Celia yet another reason for Murphy's finding work. She exhibited a morbid ingenuity in the matter” (41).

But it is also Murphy's interpretation of the patients of the MMM, his narration of them to mean what he wants them to, that renders his attempt to escape discursive reason a failure and his flirtation with psychosis a parody: “[t]he frequent expressions of pain,

rage, despair and in fact all the usual, to which some patients gave vent, suggesting a fly somewhere in the ointment of the Microcosmos, Murphy either disregarded or muted to mean what he wanted” (102). Thus, even Murphy’s belief that the psychotics inhabit a world free of the necessity of interpretation is an interpretation, and a wilfully blind one at that (as Begam points out [1996, 56]), and it is the act of identification, and thus of interpretation, that exiles him from those he identifies with.

The attempt to resolve the contradiction that manifests itself in this way in *Murphy* is the problem to which the novels of the *Trilogy* seek to find a solution. Narrative, finding its being only in language, cannot not offer meanings or make interpretations of that which it purports to be about, cannot not mean. This contradiction arises because the goal the protagonists, narrators and fictions themselves are aspiring after is the dissolution of meaning, structure and discourse: the means whereby they try to achieve their own annihilation is precisely that which they hope to annihilate, which means every attempt perpetuates the failure. Just as Murphy tries to escape the snares of discursive identification, so too Beckett tries to narrate the story of someone who does so, and in so doing escapes all that narrative is constructed with. The self-contradiction of the project is obvious and inescapable, but the attempt nevertheless exerts a powerful fascination over the author. Basically, the dilemma is how to present the absence, refusal or transcendence of all that is narrative in narrative. The bulk of Beckett’s artistic achievement lies in the rhetorical and structural innovations he brings to the attempt to resolve this paradoxical project, which become the characteristic narrative strategies of the *Trilogy*. In the following section I will show how these tendencies are already evident in *Murphy*.

The Language of Absurdity

While the plot of Murphy’s progression through the novel can therefore be unpacked in a conventional exegesis utilizing the modes and methods which divest metaphor of its absurdity, the ‘moral’ of the story, such as it is, points to the problematic status of such reading generally. This is specifically enacted through certain syntactic and conceptual structures that Beckett adverts to, principal among which is a figure of speech called the

'Irish Bull.' Defined as "a self-contradictory proposition; in modern use, an expression containing a manifest contradiction in terms or involving a ludicrous inconsistency" (Ricks 1993, 189), the bull achieves the same effects as Beckett's use of binarism. Coleridge says of the bull that it "consists in the bringing together [of] two incompatible thoughts, with the *sensation*, but without the *sense*, of their connection" (qtd in Ricks 1993, 189). The bull thus shares formal similarities with metaphor, but uses these for the subversion rather than the creation of discursive sense. This figure is apparent everywhere in Beckett's work, and can be considered his signature syntactical construction, with the closing statement of *The Unnamable* being an excellent example: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (1959, 48). Such a construction establishes an immediate and vivid semantic and conceptual absurdity, which, in contradicting itself, forces the absurdity of interpretation to the fore. Coleridge continues as follows:

The psychological condition, or that which constitutes the possibility of this state, being such disproportionate vividness of two distant thoughts, as extinguishes or obscures the consciousness of the intermediate images. . . . Now the change of one visual image or object for another involves itself no absurdity, and becomes absurd only by its immediate juxtaposition with the first thought. (qtd in Ricks 1993, 189)

This is equivalent to the psychological condition brought about by metaphor in its conjunction of concepts that do not have a complete logical concordance. Where metaphor offers apparent nonsense in order to accentuate the interpretive process, and thus achieve a new or more acute sense or meaning, the bull does so in order to accentuate meaninglessness itself; where metaphor offers apparent absurdity for the sake of sense, the bull offers only absurdity. The narrator says of Celia that "she felt so often with Murphy, spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated, before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next; so that in the end she did not know what had been said" (1993, 27). This might well be a description of the syntactical effect generated by Beckett's use of the bull or, even more aptly, the formal quality of all of his later fiction.

Another way in which Beckett achieves this sort of linguistic self-destruction is in his peculiar use of binary opposition. Binary polarity is the basis of discursive reason, the principle from which the laws of excluded middle and non-contradiction are derived.

J.M. Coetzee writes that “[i]f we can justify an initial segmentation of a set into classes X and not-X . . . the whole structure of mathematics will follow as a gigantic footnote” (1973, 45). Beckett undermines the conceptual structure based on binarisms by either making the distinction absurdly irrelevant, as is the case with “[t]wo sorts of reprimand were familiar to Ticklepenny, those that left him in the necessity of wiping his face and those that did not” (1993, 97), or by making an apparent opposition amount to an actual identification, in a case such as “you must choose, between the things not worth saying and those even less so” (Beckett 1959, 36).

The extent of this subversion of discursive sense is also apparent in the narrator’s assertion that “[n]ot the least remarkable of Murphy’s innumerable classifications of experience was that into jokes that had once been good jokes and jokes that had never been good jokes. What but an imperfect sense of humour could have made such a mess of chaos. In the beginning was the pun” (1993, 41). Thus cuts *Murphy* right to the heart of the rationalistic conception of the mind and the language in which it finds its existence. The assertion with which John’s gospel opens, that “[i]n the beginning was the Word,” offers a starting point for neo-Platonism’s interpretative platform by emphasising the classificatory, categorical use of language: God separates the light from the dark, the water from the land, establishing the binary system of differences that brings order from the unformed chaos. When *Murphy*’s narrator claims that, in contrast, “[i]n the beginning was the pun,” the categorical authority of the word and its systems of linguistic signification are undermined by the ambiguity of the pun which, rather than establishing unequivocal certainties, propagates indeterminacy. The pun exposes the utterly arbitrary nature of the relationship between signifier and signified, and the consequent metaphysical absurdity inherent in our systems of signification.

This particular understanding of systems of signification is emphasised in many mystical traditions, which emphasise the artificiality of our linguistic categorization of the world and the fundamental inaccuracy of our conceptual frameworks. Chaos, in these schemes, is the metaphysical and ontological actuality of the world. Much mystical procedure consists in the attempt to train the mind to the perception of reality as it really is, in much the same way as Murphy attempts to reach formlessness, a condition in which there were “neither elements nor states, nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into

the fragments of a new becoming” (66). While this is possible as Murphy’s overt goal, Beckett, in using language, is working in a medium that is inherently discursive, and therefore begins from those postulates mysticism seeks to do away with. While his protagonist can approach the problem of the “time cancer” as a narrative to be escaped, Beckett, as narrator, cannot, because, as T.S. Eliot observes, “[w]ords move, music moves, only in time” (1963, 194). This is the central thematic concern in Beckett’s fiction, and that which necessitates the formal subversions which his later prose carries out, and the reason that he subsequently chooses writers, characters compelled to write, as his protagonists. The bull and deconstruction of binaries go some way toward achieving this subversion; another method for the depiction of the non-discursive is illustrated in this passage of conceptual and eventual syntactic dissolution:

And the etymology of gas? Could it be the same word as chaos? Hardly. Chaos was yawn. But then cretin was Christian. Chaos would do, it might not be right but it was pleasant, for him henceforward gas would be chaos, and chaos gas. It could make you yawn, warm, laugh, cry, cease to suffer, live a little longer, die a little sooner. What could it not do? Gas. Could it turn a neurotic into a psychotic? No. Only God could do that. Let there be Heaven in the midst of the waters, let it divide the waters from the waters. The Chaos and Waters Facilities act. The Chaos, Light and Coke Co. Hell. Heaven. Helen. Celia. (100)

This passage pulls all of the novel’s central themes together in a construction that mimics the dissolution of mental sense by the reportage of interior monologue (which nevertheless exhibits a certain associative and etymological logic). The crumbling meditation on chaos, itself an example of syntactic and conceptual chaos, prefigures Murphy’s later mystic dissolution and death – gas being the final instrument of his death, and thus the passage back to chaos and formlessness. *Murphy* here enacts the attempt of a discursive consciousness trying to transcend discursive consciousness, which is Murphy’s goal and the primary narrative challenge the novel faces, and also the central project of the *Trilogy*.

The paradox inherent in any conception of language’s relation to a conscious attempt to transcend consciousness has always been apparent to those to whom this has presented itself as desirable, and it is thus that Shira Wolosky writes that “[w]ithin mystical discourse . . . the problem of language is treated as tangential to prior spiritual or

philosophical goals. Striving to resist differentiation in its spirituality and discursive reason in its epistemology, mysticism sees language as a dispensable means for accomplishing these ends” (1995, 3). The psychotic’s “tendency to equate those objects evincing the least element in common” follows this sort of movement away from the conceptual and symbolic realm of linguistic description into one which adheres more closely to a mystical ideal of non-differentiation and absorption in the all which Murphy so desperately longs for, and which certain passages of the text (such as the gas-chaos passage cited above) try syntactically to mimic.

Outside Mr Endon

Murphy’s efforts to attain formlessness culminate in the attempt to make some sort of contact with a patient of the Mental Mercyseat named Mr Endon: “It seemed to Murphy that he was bound to Mr Endon [whose name is derived from the Greek for ‘inside’ and whose indifference to the external world is complete] by a love of the purest possible kind, exempt from the big world’s precocious ejaculations of thought, word and deed” (Beckett 1993, 104). The narrator explains that “Mr Endon was a schizophrenic of the most amiable variety, at least for the purposes of such a humble and envious outsider as Murphy” and that he represents “a psychosis so limpid and imperturbable that Murphy felt drawn to it as Narcissus to his fountain” (105).

The attempt to make communicative contact with Mr Endon begins to preoccupy Murphy entirely, presenting itself as a quantifiable symbol of the interiority he has been in search of. Murphy becomes thus, in relation to Mr Endon, what the secondary characters such as Wylie, Neary and others are in relation to Murphy. Mr Endon, representing the state of will-lessness and ablation of desire to which Murphy aspires to attain, cannot be willed after. Murphy’s active will and wilful activity to the ends of engaging with Mr Endon defeats his own purpose, with his love for Mr Endon becoming similar to the love that enthral all the secondary characters in their own manic fiasco. As Begam points out, *Murphy* “raises the problem of how one self-consciously seeks anti-self-consciousness, of how one wilfully achieves will-lessness.” (49)

The absurdity of Murphy trying to make contact with Mr Endon mirrors the absurdity Murphy encounters when he considers trying to explain his own way of being to Ticklepenny:

Murphy amused himself bitterly and briefly with the question of the answer he would have made to a person of his own steak and kidney, genuinely anxious to understand and desirable of being understood by, a Mr Endon at his own degree of incipience for example. But before the imperfect phrase had time to come the question crumbled away in its own absurdity. It was not under that the rare birds of Murphy's feather desired to stand, but by, by themselves with the best of their attention and by others of their species as with any that might be left over. (109)

Because Mr Endon is represented as inhabiting an existence outside the limits of discursive reason, and can thus not engage in conversation or interact linguistically, Beckett stages Murphy's attempt to make contact with Mr Endon through games of chess. Murphy begins a game with Mr Endon in the morning, which he returns to periodically throughout the day when free of other duties, while Mr Endon, wandering to and from the board lost in his air of general distraction, makes his alternate moves. The opponents' apathy to the avowed intention of the game is so thorough that it would often be the case that "the game wore on, till evening found it almost as level as it had begun," and "after eight or nine hours of this guerrilla, neither player would have lost a piece or even checked the other" (106).

Beckett uses the game of chess as an allegory for Mr Endon's consciousness and Murphy's attempt to reach it. Conversational contact with Mr Endon would contradict what Mr Endon stands for in the novel – namely a state of consciousness other than that which traffics in the commerce of language and reason – which means that Beckett needs to invoke a form that is a-linguistic, drawing on a descriptive system that makes sense in ways different to that of narrative. Murphy, wanting to gain access to a realm in which the normal causal nexus of reality breaks down, and where our linguistic descriptions thus cease to have efficacy, cannot do so in language, just as Beckett cannot describe the transcendence of, or escape from, language in language. This is something altogether different to the stream of consciousness dissolution of sense (such as Lucky's monologue in *Waiting for Godot* (1956, 42) and others like it throughout Beckett's *oeuvre*), in which grammar breaks down and words are strung together senselessly. Instead, what is needed

here, and in any instance in which a subject seeks to attain a meaning that transcends the meaning of language, is a system of interaction that does not merely break language down, but mimics it in certain vital respects while being concerned with utterly different goals.

There are a number of factors that make chess an ideal medium with which to depict this: as a rule governed mode of symbolic interaction, and hence analogous to language, chess becomes the form in which Murphy's attempt and failure to communicate with Mr Endon is communicated. Drawing on Wittgenstein's conception of language-games, Baker and Hacker elucidate the analogy as follows:

Whether language is a calculus or not, (i) the outward similarity of words is comparable to chess pieces, and no less misleading; (ii) the combinatorial possibilities of words are comparable to the possible configurations of chess pieces; (iii) the use of words in an utterance is like the use of a chess piece in a move; (iv) the meaning of a word is (up to a point) analogous to the powers of a chess piece; (v) just as a chess piece has significance only in the context of a move, and a move is a move only in the context of a game, so too, correctly understood, a word has meaning only in the context of a sentence and a sentence is a sentence only in language. (1980, 91)

Chess is a rule-governed structure of interaction, which renders it formally similar to language and other mental activities, while not being constrained to 'mean' in the same way that language is. While language almost invariably attempts to say something about something other than language, chess is never about anything other than chess, and can thus represent the form of thought without needing to render any conceptual content.

The games Murphy and Mr Endon play can be seen as equivalent to conversations, but are used as models for a use of language that undoes the presumptions on which our use of language proceeds. Midway through the eleventh chapter, in the novel's second notable deviation from narrative convention, Beckett places the transcription of a game that Murphy and Mr Endon play. The transcription is positioned at a crucial point in the novel, immediately preceding, and inducing, Murphy's culminating vision of formlessness. Formally, this can have no efficacy unless it is enacted: unless one can picture the moves the opponents make or play out the game on an actual board, the text can have no meaning, and the transcription of the game of chess is

thus a piece of narrative that has absolutely no descriptive content in itself, coming very close to instantiating narrative form without any narrative content.

In this game, Mr Endon moves his pieces back and forward in a self-enclosed pattern that does not recognize the opposing pieces at all, while Murphy unsuccessfully tries to engage Mr Endon in play, until finally, Murphy, “with fools mate in his soul, retires” (1993, 138). According to Deirdre Bair:

What is interesting about this game is Murphy’s unnecessary resignation following Mr Endon’s forty-third move. He could have moved his queen one move more, forcing Mr Endon into either confrontation or retreat. Mr Endon would have had to capture Murphy’s queen or disturb the symmetry of his pieces. There is no way that Mr Endon could have ignored such a move if Murphy had made it. Mr Endon would have been forced to acknowledge Murphy’s existence. The fact that Murphy chose instead to resign demonstrates that he accepted defeat in something more than a game of chess: he is defeated by Mr Endon himself, forced to realize that there will be no communication between them. (1978, 224)

Murphy’s failure to force Mr Endon into recognizing him is precisely that which brings him as close as he comes in the course of the novel to attaining his ideal of the absence of consciousness. Mr Endon moves his pieces as if making independent patterns, and cannot be induced to move them as if he were playing a game with Murphy.

The aporia that is made manifest in Mr Endon’s mode of play brings Murphy to an impasse that elicits a quasi-mystical experience in response, which is the closest he comes to an actual experience of formlessness and the void, in which he:

began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence, to abuse a nice distinction, not of *percipere* but of *percipi*. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up to, the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real. Time did not cease, that would be asking too much, but the wheel of rounds and pauses did, as Murphy with his head among the armies continued to suck in, through all the posterns of his withered soul, the accidentless One-and-Only, conveniently called Nothing. (138)

Murphy’s main project is the transcendence of subjectivity, while, conversely, his desire to be seen by Mr Endon is the urge to have his subjectivity recognized. Mr Endon’s non-perception of him undoes the selfhood that is predicated on recognition by another, which

leads Murphy to that “rare postnatal treat . . . the absence of *percipi*,” in which he can cease being and come into contact with “the accidentless One-and-Only,” the attainment of what he believes himself to have been in pursuit of his whole life.

Later, however, Murphy returns to Mr Endon, and brings his eyeball as close to Mr Endon’s as he can, trying practically to bring about Mr Endon’s perception of him. Having failed to get Mr Endon to communicate with him, he attempts to make Mr Endon see him. In this posture, eyeball to eyeball,

Murphy heard words demanding so strongly to be spoken that he spoke them,
right into Mr Endon’s face, Murphy who did not speak at all in the ordinary way
unless spoken to, and not always even then.

the last at last seen of him
himself unseen by him
and of himself (140)

This is what leads the narrator to conclude that “[t]he relation between Mr Murphy and Mr Endon could not have been better summed up by the former’s sorrow at seeing himself in the latter’s immunity from seeing anything but himself” (140). Murphy, finally, sees himself as a speck in the unseeing unseen and, by the fact of his still seeing, still being a seeing subject, knows that he has not reached that to which he has aspired. This inescapable subjectivity that Murphy finds himself caught in exemplifies perfectly what Coe sees as Beckett’s view of the human condition: “that of an indefinable *Neant* within, conscious of a possible relationship with an equally indefinable *Neant* without, yet invalidating that relationship by the very fact of its consciousness” (1964, 4). Murphy’s relationship to the nothing is invalidated by his desire for it, and he is left exiled from the interiority he has believed Mr Endon to represent. Richard Begam, describing this situation, writes that “[t]he encounter with Endon represents, in other words, a moment of self-reflexive consciousness, although it simultaneously represents an attempt to transcend self-reflection and enter into the third zone. The contradiction involved here will ultimately prove irresolvable” (54).

And it is after this episode, perhaps recognizing the impossibility of his project, that Murphy consciously decides to bring himself back to discursive reality – “[i]t was his experience that this should be stopped, whenever possible, before the deeper coils were

reached” (1993, 141) – and to return to Celia. Murphy, having come as close to total solipsism as he possibly can, decides to return to normality and once again embroil himself in the fiasco of the economies of commerce and sex. Having made this decision, though, and having settled down for a brief rest in his garret, his leaking radiator explodes and he dies in the resulting conflagration.

Murphy’s death is the culmination of the parody that his quest has been, the final consummation of the impossibility he has lived for. His desire to achieve freedom from desire, time, and the discursive constraints implicit in these, is finally achieved in his death, and his predicament – that of the discursive subject who wants to transcend discursive subjectivity – is thus ironically resolved.

Beckett himself, however, confronts, as an artist, an analogous predicament. An authentic existential and metaphysical nihilism means that the only feasible response to the aesthetic challenges he faces is a negation, a refusal to speak or enter discursive subjectivity in any way. This, though, is the one route which Beckett, as an artist working in words, cannot take: to say ‘no,’ to say the nothing, is still to say something. The impossible attempt to transcend, or escape, discursive consciousness, becomes Beckett’s central artistic challenge, the response to which becomes both trope and technique of all his subsequent fiction, with the *Trilogy* being a systematic, extended meditation on the possibilities of an art that says nothing, on an art that attains its existence in the repudiation of its own existence. Coe articulates the nature of this project very clearly when he writes:

The artist is driven – by the very fact of being an artist – to realize, to create in art, that which is not, which cannot be, because, as soon as it is realized in concrete terms it ceases to be itself. Consequently, it must fail. Beckett’s own art likewise is an art of failure: it is by definition trying to do something that it cannot conceivably do – to create and to define that which, created and defined, ceases to be what it must be if it is to reveal the truth of the human situation: Man as nothing in relation to all things which themselves are Nothing. (1964, 5)

The heroic monologues of which the *Trilogy* is comprised, each being a systematic reduction of the possibilities and plausibility of the act of narration itself, are an exercise in the putting into practice of the implications of this insight.

Chapter Two

The preoccupations with death, madness and the outside of language that are thematically present in *Murphy* become, in *Molloy*, the very formal and structural principles within which the narrative operates, formal structures which paradoxically work to undo themselves and instantiate or enact a narrative formlessness. This subversion of conventional narrative strategy is primarily carried out by making plot a regressive rather than a progressive structure, by way of which the narrator is brought to a point at which he can no longer authorise his own narration; the events narrated cumulatively render the narrator incapable of narration, a condition which then destabilises the whole text. In this chapter I construe the subversion in *Molloy* of the relation between the narrating consciousness (which is also the critical, interpreting consciousness) and its narrative product as an allegory of the relationship of criticism to literature, concluding that the novel brings about the narrative and interpretive equivalent to a hall of mirrors. The attempt to say anything – to produce a coherent and conclusive narration or interpretation – necessitates that something be said about the attempt which, in turn, necessitates an explanation, ad infinitum, thus enacting the infinite and exponential regression that constitutes the relation between narration and interpretation.

The conclusion of this regression, an impossible, entirely imaginary conclusion, is a state analogous to that which Murphy hopes to attain by gaining access to the vacuity represented by Mr Endon. While the impossibility of such a conclusion is recognized by Murphy, the attempt remains the generating motive of the novel's plot. With *Molloy*, however, and the works which follow it, the acknowledged impossibility of conclusion, coupled with an utter inability to stop longing therefore, is the central, paradoxical fact of the narrating consciousness. The narratives themselves squirm, as such, on the horns of this dilemma, rather than progressing toward any conclusive point; or, in perhaps a more apt formulation, systematically eliminate all their various narrative contrivances in the attempt to reach the one, unreachable truth: that narrative itself is the falsehood. *Molloy* performs the initial eliminations, the initial reduction toward absolute elimination – of self, of consciousness, of narration – which the *Trilogy* carries out.

Molloy's Structure

Molloy comprises two narratives, in the first person, of equal length. In the first of these the eponymous Molloy recounts his attempt to find his mother, and in the second an agent named Moran, who is sent in search of Molloy, relates his attempts to find him. Both ventures fail dismally. Molloy, having lost the use of his legs and capable only of crawling, falls into a ditch, loses consciousness and, coming to, finds himself installed in the room from which he relates his tale. Moran, the champion of bourgeois propriety, having set out to recuperate the dishevelled, inchoate Molloy, finds that his quest brings about the disintegration of his own carefully crafted subjectivity, undermining all the rigid exclusions by way of which his self has been forged and bringing him to a recognition of the chaos on which his own identity is founded.

Moran's degeneration is of especial interest in the context of Beckett's *oeuvre*, in that, as the fastidious, house-proud patriarch, he begins his story in diametric opposition to the dissolute vagrants who populate this author's pages and stages. While in works like *Malone Dies* or *Waiting for Godot* the absence (of, for example, structure, meaning, progress or resolution) that is both theme and effect is most stark, and artistically efficient, as absence pure and simple, it is difficult to conceptualise meaningfully when not implicitly contrasted with that structure or meaning of which it is the absence. The attempt to construe the significance of such absence is helped immeasurably by having a presence with which to contrast it, and it is thus that Moran's disintegration casts light on that which the destitution of characters such as Molloy and Malone consists in.

Moran prides himself on being "a sensible man, cold as crystal and as free from spurious depths" (1959, 113), and considers his task the challenge of bringing Molloy's "unfathomable mind, now beacon, now sea" (106) from obscurity to clarity. Moran's quest can be read as analogous to the work of interpretation, with the irony of his conception of himself and his role being that, rather than finding his quarry and explicating "the Molloy affair" (113), his quest brings about his own physical and mental deterioration and leaves him in a state of abjection similar to that of the character he commenced his journey in search of. The juxtaposition of the dishevelled Molloy with the exact and analytical Moran sets up a relationship analogous to that of the critical

reader to the literary text, in that Moran the critic applies his interpretative faculties with the intention of extracting some sort of message, meaning or moral from the story. This attempt, however, merely brings about the dissolution of those faculties themselves, as his interpretation brings him to the acknowledgment that that via which his interpretation proceeds is no more coherent or unitary than that which it purports to clarify.

The implications of such a depiction of the status of analysis for any attempt at an interpretation of the novel has meant that most critics and commentators have paid specific attention to the light – or obscurity, rather – cast on their own procedure, with a good example being Bernard Pinguad who asks “are we making a drastic mistake in trying to interpret this monstrous tale, which is like a stone fallen from the sky?” (1979, 70). A less hypothetical stance is taken by the severely censorious Frank Kermode, who writes:

Molloy is a powerful book, rich in imagery and theological wit. Yet it is an example of the harm that could come to artists devoted to what Yvor Winters calls ‘primitivism and decadence,’ to rendering the delinquency of modern humanity by a deliquescence of form and language . . . [Beckett] yields progressively to the magnetic pull of the primitive, to the desire to achieve, by various forms of decadence and deformation, some Work that eludes the intellect, avoids the spread nets of habitual meaning. Beckett is often allegorical, but he is allegorical in carefully fitful patches, providing illusive footholds to any reader scrambling for sense. . . . This fallacy, the fallacy of expressive, or imitative form, recurs constantly in modern literature. (1960, 204)

Disregarding his indictment of the techniques and tactics the novel employs (to which I will return, in order to contest), Kermode’s identification of the attempt to “avoid the spread nets of habitual meaning” and the manner in which Beckett is “allegorical in carefully fitful patches” seems to me to highlight that which is both most distinctive and structurally fundamental in *Molloy*. Many commentators have similarly construed *Molloy* as an allegory, or even a myth, embodying certain fundamental aspects of the relationship to language that occurs in literature. Maurice Blanchot writes that when “Moran, without knowing it, becomes Molloy, [this constitutes] a metamorphosis which undermines the security of the narrative element and simultaneously introduces an allegorical sense, perhaps a disappointing one, for we do not feel it is adequate to the depths concealed here” (1979, 118), while Northrop Frye contends that *Molloy* can be considered as “a

kind of myth that might be read as a psychological, a social, or a religious allegory, except that it cannot be reduced to an allegory, but remains a myth” (1979, 206). Both critics touch on the sense *Molloy* elicits that allegory is simultaneously at work and working to subvert allegorical models of interpretation. Being an allegory of allegory, *Molloy*, as is often the case in instances of self-reference, engenders an irreducibly paradoxical relationship between the act of narration and the content narrated. The situation this brings about is neatly articulated by Thomas Trezise when he writes that Moran’s story “is an allegory, not in the sense that it would refer to an ordinary signified but in the sense that it refers to a pre-ordinary signifier. It is, in other words, the sign of a sign, the allegory of an allegory” (1990, 58). Thus “the story of Moran’s dispossession is essentially an allegory of the dispossession of Moran’s story” (56).

Moran’s story is dispossessed not only by his failure to explicate “the Molloy affair” (1959, 113), but also by the crisis of language that this failure inaugurates. The novel ends with Moran describing how he “went back inside and wrote It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows [the words with which Moran’s section begins]. It was not midnight. It was not raining” (176). Ruby Cohn observes that this may suggest that Moran’s story begins in a midnight of the soul and an existential storm (1962, 117), but the sentence’s self-referential circularity also implies that, above and beyond the collapse of Moran’s critical faculties, his ability to situate himself in any unequivocally meaningful relationship to language is completely undermined, and his own narration thus opens onto a vertiginous chasm of language not grounded in any stable relationship of signifier to signified. While Trezise’s observations touch on the self-referential peculiarities of the novel, I would contend that *Molloy* is, rather, a sign of the failure of signification, an allegory of the failure either to carry out an allegorical reading of the world or meaningfully to construe one’s own experience through allegorical structures of signification. Moran is dispossessed not only of his property, his son, his job and the use of his legs, but also, most crucially, of the ability to make any of these meaningful, while something analogous happens to the interpreter hoping to recover a stable meaning from the text.

The work of interpretation, though, cannot leave its task at the point at which it acknowledges that the text with which it is concerned renders its *modus operandi* absurd.

One's realization that interpretation itself is in question can serve only as the impetus to fresh attempts to derive a meaning, to re-evaluate one's own procedures or to question the presuppositions from which one proceeds. There appear to be two possible avenues whereby these can be pursued. One direction would lie in the meta-critical attempt to formulate interpretive policies that take cognisance of the novel's indictment of traditional procedure. David Lodge, for instance, thinks of Beckett as having "a strong claim to be considered the first post-modern writer" (1977, 221), with the need for a radically new interpretive mode that this implies. Melvin J. Friedman writes that "[w]hat T.S. Eliot once called 'metaphysical moments' when referring to the ages of Dante, the English metaphysical poets, and the French symbolist poets may be said to assume a fourth literary presence during the sixty year (1929 – 89) writing career of Samuel Beckett" (1995, 350).

While the question as to whether or not Beckett is generally seen or will continue to be seen to represent quite as radical a departure as this is uncertain, his coincidence with and huge influence on the developments in, specifically French, literary theory during the twentieth century indicates that his work is paradigmatic of a style of literature that has demanded major interpretive innovations. The commentaries of Adorno (1958), Cavell (1969), Nussbaum (1960) and Critchley (1998) all respond to this aspect of Beckett's writing, primarily by way of meta-critical meditations on the relation of the work of interpretation to the work of art, explorations of the implications of a literature that seems to refuse all conceptual schematization, and reflexive reflections on the role and possibility of theory in relation to or in the wake of a body of work that renders any theoretical procedure absurd. As seems only logical of readings which emphasise the rupture specific works effect with tradition, these all pay especial attention to the work's distinguishing formal characteristics, and seek to account for the way in which formal peculiarities engender the particular effects they see being produced. I shall return to the readings offered by these four theorists, with particular emphasis on the function they see being fulfilled by form, after outlining two alternative approaches the critic confronted by works such as these can take, approaches I see as proceeding in diametrically opposite directions, but remaining, nevertheless, equally fallacious.

As already indicated, one avenue open to interpretation is to construe the novel as an allegory, or fable, of the work of literature or interpretation itself. While all the aforementioned commentators touch on the allegorical aspects *Molloy* exhibits, those who do the novel justice, such as Blanchot and Frye, emphasise the way in which allegory is insufficient, even parodied, thus undermining the possibility of allegorical models of interpretation. Where the importance of this subversion is not noted, there arises a tendency to use allegorical interpretation as a means of domesticating what is specifically and irreducibly resistant to conventional interpretation. The relation established between content and form in allegorical readings is a fairly stable, fixed and perspicuous one, with the former structured by and in the service of the latter. In such a reading, *Molloy* merely conceals its meaning beneath a veneer of meaninglessness which operates as a formal distraction serving certain rhetorical ends while the text goes about making sense in a traditional manner. Frank Kermode, for example, writes (four years after damning the *Trilogy*'s "imitative form") that:

To emphasise the formal interest can be a fashionable way of concealing the true nature of our curiosity. Beckett is a puzzle maker, quaint and learned. We look for clues, guess at meanings. His formal sophistication may be the meat the modern burglar brings along to quiet the avant-garde housedog. Under it all, he is a rather old-fashioned writer, a metaphysical allegorist. . . . He has reinvented philosophical and theological allegory, and as purely as Spenser he needs the right to be sub-rational, to conceal intention under an appearance of dreamlike fortuity, to obscure the literal sense. The only difference is that his predecessors were sure there was such a sense, and on this bitch of a planet he can no longer have such certainties. This difference does not affect the proposition that Beckett's flirtations with reality are carried on in a dialect which derives from the traditional language of learning and poetry. (1968, 175)

Kermode here touches on all that seems most significant about the work, and does all he can to ignore the unsettling significances thereof. This is most evident in his determination to disregard the formal complexities of the writing. The stance is not quite as explicit as his earlier speculations about "the harm that could come to artists" through "a deliquescence of form and language," but the "formal sophistication" is nevertheless still written off as merely "the meat the modern burglar brings along to quiet the *avant-garde* housedog" while "old fashioned . . . theological allegory" carries on regardless. This sort of reading is possible only by separating the form of the work quite completely

from the content, and treating the former as derivatively decorative while considering the latter to be that which the intrepid critic goes forth and recovers, very like Spenser's Red-Crosse Knight on his quest for perfect virtue.

The problem with Kermode's stance stems from his failure adequately to account for the implications of the content of Beckett's vision (in contrast to, for instance, Spenser's), for any attempt to express it in language. One cannot express the destitution of meaning in any way analogous to the way meaning is conventionally expressed, "in a dialect which derives from the traditional language of learning and poetry," precisely because it is the very set of assumptions that underpin such traditions that are questioned or rendered problematic. Kermode's double-headed domestication of the writing occurs by way of the consoling assertion that Beckett is really a "very old fashioned writer" and that his formal strategies are a merely faddish accessory to a traditional "philosophical and theological allegory." When it is philosophy and theology that are at stake, however, and allegory, as a manner of reading and writing, that is rendered problematic, and when this interrogation is carried out by way of language, which comes freighted with all the laws of discursive logic on which it is premised, the formal techniques to which the author resorts must be exactly what deserves most attention. The subversion of traditional meaning cannot be signified in the way in which discursive denotation proceeds, as the success of the medium would contradict its own message; "this has no meaning" remains a meaningful statement. The evacuation of discursive sense can only be coherently achieved by linguistic performance, by the rehearsal and enactment, in language by language, of the destitution of language itself.

The only theoretical way to go about construing destitution such as this (such destitution consisting, in large part, in the denial of the efficacy of the theoretical apparatus itself) is by way of the form through which the text attempts to divest itself of all its modes of making meaning. The depth and density of this procedure is expressed well by Kenner when he writes as follows:

Like music, Beckett's language is shaped into phrases, orchestrated, cunningly repeated. The statements it makes have torque within the work's content and only there, while the form, the symmetry, ministers to the form of the work, its uniqueness. . . . After years of familiarity with his work, I find no sign that it has ambitions to enunciate a philosophy of life. (1973, 37-8)

This strikes me as critically more responsible and aesthetically more responsive to the texture and temper of the writing than the view that sees the form of these works as a merely *avant-garde* affectation. A reading which places this sort of emphasis on the formal aspects of the work would provide a point of departure for an exegesis that can free itself from the reiteration of the existential humanist or classical formalist conceptions of the self, the work of art and the role of interpretation that seem most obviously put in question by the novels but which, nevertheless, provide the paradigm by way of which most of the early commentary on Beckett's writing proceeds.

The adoption of a purely formalist interpretation, however, while having the virtue of taking the implications of the form of the works more fully into account, presents the possibility of erring toward the opposite extreme of the attempt to focus exclusively on content. An example of this tendency is provided by S.E. Gontarski when he writes the following:

Beckett's continuing artistic struggles are to discover or develop accurate, pleasing, formal substitutes for the logic and causality that he rejected by repudiating naturalism or psychological realism. The aesthetic danger is, of course, simply finding another external form, a danger to which Beckett may have partly acceded in his more formalist drama and prose. (1985, 5)

It seems, to say the least, highly questionable whether Beckett aspired to "accurate, pleasing" formal effects, but this passage is riddled with contradiction for other reasons. The idea, in the first sentence, that the work's aesthetic project is the attempt to develop a structure or system to replace logic and causality misses the extent to which any possible substitute would be equally fallacious (because, as Eliot writes, all "[k]nowledge imposes a pattern, and falsifies" [1963, 199]). The second sentence, in contrast, while evincing an awareness of the intrinsically falsifying nature of system which is lacking in the first, then misses the total impossibility of not subscribing to some pattern if one is working in language. Beckett's work is caught between the fallaciousness of structure, the impossibility of not lying insofar as one uses language, and the impossibility of not, despite this, doing so.

The paradox animating the efforts of the dual protagonists of *Molloy*, and an engagement with which the entire subsequent *oeuvre* consists, is that of the attempt,

acknowledged to be impossible, to escape those constraints imposed by language through the use of language. An analogous paradox arises with regard to the attempt to escape formal structure, which, nevertheless, produces and becomes its own structure. J.M. Coetzee articulates the tension which produces and is produced by this situation well when he writes that it “is utterly appropriate for an artist to whom defeat constitutes a universe that he should march with eyes open into the prison of empty style” (1973, 45).

Beckett’s style is the product of a systematic attempt to escape style, and the project enacts the attempt to negotiate the implications of Eric Levy’s following insight:

the questioning in Beckett’s fiction no longer concerns merely the objective pole of experience . . . but now addresses the very process of structuring experience into the poles of subject and object. . . . Human experience is an experience of nothing: the only reality it knows is the inability to interpret its own structure. (1980, 3-4)

Levy’s study is one of the earliest and best examples of the way in which a poststructuralist analysis of Beckett’s work can make coherent and useful sense of the aforementioned paradoxes. This sort of approach can be seen to prefigure later deconstructionist readings, which pay close attention to the internal contradictions and the self-referential undoing performed by texts, and thus tend toward a closer analysis of their forms and structures narratives employ.

There is, however, a sense in which critics who place these works in the context of the deconstructionist reversal of ontological, metaphysical and discursive polarities, while clearly justified in their analysis of their overall effect, miss or ignore the problems they pose to interpretation and pay insufficient attention to the role and status of art given the implications of the impasses and aporias emphasised by post-structuralist discourse. With regard to novels such as Beckett’s, which obsessively dwell on and reiterate their own incoherence and absurdity, highlighting the way in which they contradict themselves in virtue of their own form and rhetorical strategy would seem somewhat redundant. As Critchley writes, quoting Attridge, “in respect of deconstruction with Beckett’s work, ‘there’s not much left to do’” (2004, 172). The most pressing challenge would seem to be not so much to illustrate how these works subvert and undermine their own meaning-making procedures, but rather how to make any sense of them, and how to consider the

role of interpretation meaningful in relation to them. Accordingly, the deconstructionist readings that seem to me most useful are those, such as Brienza (1987) and Toyama's (1991), that use the subversions of meaning performed by the texts as the starting point for an interrogation of the conventional conception of the role of the reader and the task of interpretation.

The most fruitful line of inquiry into the implications for interpretive procedure posed by Beckett's work is offered by H. Porter Abbot, who orients his analysis around the observation that "formal disintegration, no matter how fiercely pursued, still eventuates in form" (1973, 137), and sets about investigating Beckett's fiction by way of the effects of this notion of form. Drawing on Yvor Winters' already cited notion of imitative form, Porter Abbot makes the telling observation that through "imitative form . . . the reader is forced into a relationship with the book, which imitates the central figure's relationship with the world" (8). This strikes me as the decisive insight into the function of form in Beckett's work. We experience Malone's "mortal tedium" with him in his writing; we wait, with the tramps, for Godot. The fragmentation of form and subversion of novelistic convention make reading and trying to understand the novels an experience analogous to the protagonists' experience of themselves and their worlds. Thus, rather than constituting old-fashioned theological allegory, Moran's tale of the disintegration of his rational and interpretive apparatus – about the dissolution of his own allegory, as it were – enacts the breakdown of the protagonist's discursive structures in such a way that a reading of the novel becomes an experience analogous to it. Rather than recuperating a meaningful message from an apparently chaotic form, the experience of the chaos of the form, and our very inability to render it meaningful in any conventional way, is what *Molloy* is 'about;' the destitution of Moran's story renders any interpretation similarly destitute. The possibility of making anything of this destitution, of rendering the experience of the meaninglessness performed by the text significant, becomes that which is most obviously put in question by the novel.

At this point I turn to the readings of Adorno, Cavell, Nussbaum and Critchley, who seem to me to offer the most profound and plausible responses to this problem. All four writers focus on the way in which our ideas of meaning and significance are made problematic in Beckett's work, and emphasise the re-interpretation of interpretation

necessitated by the subversion of meaning carried out in Beckett's work. The great strength of these readings lies in the manner in which they negotiate a way between the equal and opposite simplifications of humanist interpretations, on the one hand, which view the works as "old-fashioned theological allegory," and deconstructionist readings which claim that the texts engage in an unequivocal repudiation of meaning. The exegeses which I proceed to consider all pay close attention to the fact that, precisely because meaning is repudiated, we are forced to rethink our assumptions regarding meaning – but emphasise the fact that we *are* forced to do so, despite the inevitable absurdity of the attempt. How we go about making this attempt, how we can continue to try to do so, becomes the crux and substance of Adorno, Cavell, Nussbaum and Critchley's discussion.

***Endgame* and the Meaning of Meaninglessness**

Both Adorno and Cavell write on *Endgame*, and one could point to the fact of its having been written during the same phase of Beckett's career that brought about *Molloy* and the rest of the *Trilogy* as justification for using interpretations of the play to illuminate the novel. Furthermore, the general remarks the two writers make regarding the role of form in Beckett's work and its significance are applicable to the *oeuvre* as a whole, and, indeed, to any work of art whose form makes conventional interpretation problematic. Insofar as it is the form of *Molloy* that is of particular interest, and both theorists emphasise the effect of the peculiar form made use of in the play, the relevance is clear. The two critics offer, to my mind, the most perceptive and convincing analyses of the effects achieved by Beckett's form and the most compelling account of the implications of these not only for our understanding of our interpretive procedures of this, or any other, literature, but of the way in which we understand ourselves, our lives and the world.

Because the way we experience ourselves in the world is so dependent on our structures and procedures of interpretation, it is precisely those aspects of the narratives that render interpretation problematic that are most significant. The primary significance of Beckett's work, in the opinion of Adorno and Cavell, is the way in which it makes us

acknowledge the need to rethink our notions of artistic and philosophical signification and interpretation. The meaning of these works is the way in which they put meaning on trial, and the formal strategies by way of which this is enacted demand an analogous re-interpretation of the nature of interpretation from the responsive reader or audience. The significance of such a re-interpretation of our modes of understanding, in these views, is to undermine structures of thinking that have become, or have always been, implicitly harmful. The point is not to replace such paradigms with others (a move which would merely reiterate the original problem), but to attempt to learn to live, think and interact without the need for such structural definition. Both Adorno and Cavell thus draw fundamentally ethical lessons from *Endgame* in a way that corresponds to Porter Abbot's view that, by putting us in a position analogous to that occupied by the protagonists, Beckett's texts make us undergo certain experiences or sensations that bear on the way we think of and experience ourselves in our world. In this sense, then, the readings of Adorno and Cavell are aptly applicable to not only my construal of *Molloy* but also Beckett's entire *oeuvre*.

What is perhaps less easy to reconcile with my reading is the critics' shared insistence on the apocalyptic nature of Beckett's play, which Adorno considers a response to the Holocaust (in his opinion, the only response possible) and Cavell sees as depicting a world in the wake of atomic devastation. I would doubt that either the Holocaust or the atomic bomb looms nearly as large in our consciousness as they no doubt did for these writers, immediately after the Second World War and at the beginning of the Cold War, and one could very well ask whether readings that rely so heavily on these for their sense of the works are still relevant. If not having actually learnt to love the bomb, we seem at least to have been able to stop worrying, and, while the horrors of the Holocaust remain almost inconceivably atrocious, are there not other appalling crimes against humanity closer, in time and space, to address? While this may be so, the relevance of these writings, I would argue, lies in their recommendations for how philosophy, art and culture are to respond to instances of unspeakable inhumanity, events which would seem to render any response impossible. The specific event, whether genocide or potential global extinction, is secondary; the magnitude of the damage to

human civilization remains germane, having become, if anything, more so now than at the time of writing.

The prescriptions the two critics offer for philosophical and cultural conduct are premised on the insight that, as Cavell puts it, “the Gods of the world went too far” (1976, 149), that those ideals and procedures in terms of which existence has generally been made meaningful have not merely not averted atrocity but actually brought it on. It has usually been in the name of philosophical or cultural conceptions of teleological progress that atrocity has been made possible, and the correct response lies in the recognition that, as Cavell writes:

The greatest endgame is eschatology, the idea that the last things of earth will have an order and a justification, a sense. That is what we hoped for, against hope, that was what salvation would look like. Now we are to know that salvation lies in reversing the story, in ending the story of the end, dismantling Eschatology, ending this world of order in order to reverse the curse of the world laid on it in its Judeo-Christian end. Only a life without hope, meaning, justification, waiting, solution – as we have been shaped for these things – is free from the curse of God. (49)

In Adorno’s view, which is concerned more with instrumental rationality than Judeo-Christian mythology, the equivalent to “dismantling Eschatology” is the need to achieve a sense of the irrationality of reason. By this he is not advocating a simple primitivism, or urging that we try and undo the fact of consciousness. “It is not as a *Weltanschauung* that the absurd replaces the worldview of rationality” he writes, but “rather, in the absurd that worldview comes into its own” (1958, 284). Rationality, freed from an eschatological scheme in which reason is both the being and *telos* of the universe, comes fully into its own in its recognition that it is itself the source of metaphysical absurdity rather than that which offers a solution, that the attempt to offer a solution is the primary false move. “Consciousness,” Adorno writes, “gets ready to look its own end in the eye” (294) as the realization dawns that the solution to the riddle of existence lies in ceasing to think of it as a riddle, and coming to accept it as merely existence. Thus, Adorno’s conclusion is the same as Cavell’s, who writes “[s]olitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence – these are not the givens of Beckett’s characters but their goal, their new heroic undertaking” (1976, 156).

I shall proceed to outline these arguments in greater detail, beginning with Adorno's.

“Can One Live After Auschwitz?” – Adorno on *Endgame*

Adorno's reading, which Simon Critchley considers “the philosophically most powerful and hermeneutically most nuanced piece of writing on Beckett” (1998, 187), focuses closely on the effect and implications of the particular formal subversions at work in *Endgame*, arguing that it is by way of these that the text's inversion of phenomenological existentialism is carried out.

Beckett, according to Adorno, “takes existentialism, which had been standing on its head, and puts it back on its feet” (1958, 271). His argument proceeds from the contention that phenomenological existentialism, having begun on the right track by situating its philosophical starting point in subjective experience (rather than abstraction or idealism), lapses into the old error by essentialising subjectivity. While Critchley rightly emphasises “the extraordinary violence of Adorno's interpretation . . . which treats Sartre, Camus, Jaspers and Heidegger as if they were saying the same” (1998, 259), its critique of the rhetoric of authenticity and freedom which is premised on their hypostasization of the self remains valid. In Beckett's drama, which “abandons those [existential] positions like an outmoded bunker” (Adorno 1959, 251), the idea of authenticity becomes a farce, a hollow slogan which serves merely to mask the destitution of subjectivity by turning a blind eye to the problematic implications of the notions of self, philosophy and ethical system in light of the condition in which we find ourselves. The continued insistence on these categories seems at best irrelevant and at worst immoral, and the real question becomes how one can continue to justify philosophy and culture at all.

Culture, having been co-opted into the complete commodification of society, is no longer in a position to remedy or criticize itself, and philosophy, insofar as it is not doing so, will remain an irrelevant, and often tautologous, aside. The strength of Beckett's response to this situation is elucidated by Lambert Zuidervaart when he comments that “here lies a premise omitted from [Adorno's] *Endgame* essay:”

Whereas philosophy can no longer confidently criticize academic disciplines such as economics and sociology when trying to understand its own time, authentic artworks such as *Endgame* contain a penetrating apprehension of contemporary society. To the extent that philosophy wants to be a thoughtful apprehension of its own time, *Endgame* calls for philosophical interpretation. The difficulty of interpreting this play is that it exposes the irrationality of contemporary society while resisting rational exposition. (1991, 153-4)

From this perspective, the challenge *Endgame* poses to interpretation, like the absence of metaphysical meaning, becomes, rather than a fact hostile to cherished human subjectivity and intention, the only stance that will not entail dangerous hypostatization, and thus the only possible ethically responsible attitude. Beckett's work thus represents, in light of this, a serious response to a situation which compels one to give form and voice to a philosophical stance which means, essentially, the impossibility of either.

Adorno's appraisal of *Endgame* proceeds, then, as an analysis of the ways in which the play, through its form, performs an apprehension of its world that achieves what philosophical theorising or political critique could not, and the value he attaches to it is the result of the way it responds to the dramatic challenge he articulates as follows:

Drama cannot simply take negative meaning, or the absence of its meaning, as its content without everything peculiar to it being effected to the point of turning into its opposite. The essence of drama was constituted by that meaning. Were drama to try and survive meaning aesthetically, it would become inadequate to its substance and be degraded to a clattering machinery for the demonstration of worldviews, as is often the case with existentialist plays. . . . Through its own organized meaninglessness, dramatic action must model itself on what has transpired with the truth content of drama in general. (1958, 260)

Beckett's achievement is to have come up with a formal solution to this challenge, the primary means by which he does so Adorno considers to be "parody, both of philosophy . . . and of forms" (1958, 261), wherein parody is understood as a literal *reductio ad absurdum* of certain postulates and procedures of philosophical method and the conceptions of drama that proceed from these. Adorno's understanding of parody implies that "dramatic categories as a whole . . . are parodied. But not derided. In its emphatic sense, *parody means the use of forms in the era of their impossibility*. It demonstrates this impossibility and by doing so alters the forms" (278; italics mine).

The role of form in Beckett's writing thus exposes the absurdity of the presuppositions on which any metaphysical, existential or otherwise philosophical project can be grounded by extrapolating the implications of these in a context in which they are rendered impossible. Adorno exemplifies the procedure at work here by hypothetically putting certain postulates of Jaspers' in the mouth of one of Beckett's characters, writing that:

Platitudes like "I cannot live without struggling and suffering; . . . I cannot avoid guilt; . . . I must die" lose their blandness when they are retrieved from the a priori and returned to the sphere of phenomena. . . . [Beckett's] play responds to the comedy and ideological distortion in sentences like "Courage in the boundary situation is an attitude that allows me to see death as an indefinite opportunity to be myself." (271)

Taken out of an academic existential treatise and uttered in the apocalyptic light that dimly illuminates *Endgame*, these statements render the form of the discourse in which they are uttered absurd. This is done, as Adorno notes, not by derision, and certainly not for derision. In Beckett's works claims such as "I cannot live without struggling and suffering," "I cannot avoid guilt" are uttered in dead-pan earnest which renders them infinitely more subjectively meaningful (the only way, in Adorno's opinion, that remains in which anything can be so), but, in so doing, also contingent and partial. Thus the form of thought and manner and thinking that spouts these slogans as complacent philosophical platitudes is cast in stark relief, and in so doing "the qualities of nobility and affirmation disintegrate . . . qualities with which philosophy . . . adorns an existence Hegel already called 'foul'" (271).

This ironic recasting of existential ontology is what Adorno means by "the use of forms in the era of their impossibility" (278). Doing so, however, simultaneously entails the creation of a new form out of the destruction of the old, which occurs by making the central thematic preoccupation of the work the question "what is the *raison d'être* of forms when the tension between them and something that is not homogenous with them has been abolished, without that slowing down progress in the artistic mastery of materials?" (278). The result of this contradictory situation is, as Molloy writes, "a form fading among fading forms" (Beckett 1959, 17), a form that enacts the formlessness corresponding to and consequent on the realization that "there is no longer any

substantive, affirmative metaphysical meaning that could provide dramatic form with its law and epiphany” (Adorno 1958, 260).

Instead, dramatic form must model itself on and enact the implications of this loss of meaning not by enunciating Sartrean allegories of meaninglessness, nor by the affirmation of Dadaist anarchy, but by the ironic use of forms “in the era of their impossibility,” which thereby dramatizes the vacuous character of obsolete models of metaphysical meaning in present circumstances, while simultaneously, perversely transforming them. As Zuidervaart writes, the “negation of meaning becomes aesthetically meaningful when it is realized in the material with which the artist works. Because such a realization requires form, authentic negation requires formal emancipation, not emancipation from form” (1991, 175).

Through the modeling, and formal imitation, of what has occurred to the truth content of the world in general, Beckett’s work forces the reader or audience into a situation analogous to that of Adorno’s vision of postmodern humanity’s relation to its existence. In the light of the Holocaust, the desire for metaphysical meaning is what has come to seem the most monstrous aspect of existence, and the quest for a transcendent truth that which has allowed inhumane, senseless violence to be perpetrated on particular and immanent bodies. The most pressing task of philosophy thus becomes the need to overcome the need for meaning itself, and to subordinate the imperative to make sense to a concern for the generally senseless particular and immanent, for things as they are. “Hence interpretation,” according to Adorno, “cannot pursue the chimerical aim of expressing the play’s meaning in a form mediated by philosophy. Understanding it can mean only understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning” (1958, 261).

This is the interpretive equivalent of the role philosophy must fulfil in its attempt to evacuate the world of all the harmful and dangerous doctrines of transcendence it has given rise to. The paradoxical task of interpretation thus becomes the reflexive attempt not to do violence to the work by ascribing a meaning, but rather to see through the assumptions that bring about the ideological commitments to do so. Interpretation interprets itself, and thus undoes its own dangerous assumptions.

Redemption from Redemption – Cavell on *Endgame*

Stanley Cavell's reading, proceeding wholly independently of Adorno's, reaches, on the whole, remarkably similar conclusions. Taking his cue from Hamm, the protagonist's name, Cavell sees the action of the play as taking place on board the ark, and construes *Endgame* as what can perhaps best be described as a Nietzschean parable. Seeing the play's protagonist as Noah's disenfranchised son, Cavell imagines a situation in which Hamm sees God's salvation of his family not as evidence of good will but impotence: God, having been unable to justify his creation, then proves incapable of properly destroying it, and the covenant he subsequently secures with Noah is just a shifting of responsibility. As Cavell writes:

God has reneged [his] responsibility, and doubly. In meaning to destroy all flesh, he has confessed that existence cannot be justified by him. And in saving one family and commanding them to replenish the earth, there is a high hint that man is being asked to a god's work, that he is not only abandoned to his own justification, but that he must undertake to justify god himself, to redeem God's curse and destruction. (1976, 140)

Hamm's response to this, Cavell imagines, would be to take it upon himself to conclude God's business by ending the game in which transcendental meaning is the aim. "[W]hat must end," Cavell postulates Hamm as thinking, "is the mutual dependence of God and the world: *this* world, and its gods, must be brought to a conclusion" (140). This hints at the significance of the title, which refers to a situation in a game of chess in which two kings – in the context of the play "Hamm and the old King, the King of Kings" (155) – circle one another on a board on which the pieces have been obliterated, strategy all but exhausted, and the playing out of possibilities grinds tediously toward its conclusion.

The action of the play thus consists in the attempt to bring the game to an end, which is carried out, on Clov's part, by trying, or perhaps only threatening, to leave and, on Hamm's part, by trying to complete the story he tells to whoever he can force, or bribe, to listen to it. Through the narration of what he calls his "chronicle" (1964, 40),

Hamm imagines that he will be able to bring things to a close. In this he is very like Malone, whose narration aims to attain the most complete and total closure imaginable. Where Malone hopes only to bring the story to an end, though, Cavell thinks that “Hamm, the artist, still hopes for salvation through his art; hopes to move his audience to gratitude, win their love through telling his story” (1976, 151). His need for an audience, though, his need for his stories, is exactly what keeps him, and Clov also, trapped in the game. When, for example, Clov asks “What is there to keep me here?” Hamm replies “[t]he dialogue” (1964, 41). The sado-masochistic relationship that obtains between the two can be explained as based on this mutual need for narration, on the need to speak and listen, which gives rise to discourse. Because the play ends ambiguously, with Clov standing at the exit with bags packed as he listens to Hamm’s “final soliloquy” (19), there is every indication that Clov fails, finally, to leave, and that the end of the game merely serves as pretext for the beginning of a new one.

The nature of this attachment, or compulsion, rather, is made apparent and substantiated by Nagg, Hamm’s father. Hamm calls his father, who is also a story teller, “accursed progenitor” (15), and rails at him for having brought him into being; when he asks him why he did so, his father replies “I didn’t know.” “What? What didn’t you know?” Hamm persists, to which his father: “That it would be you” (35). The conflict between Nagg and Hamm is waged by way of their stories, with the authority granted by being the narrator counterbalanced by the need to have someone listen: at one point Hamm has to bribe Nagg with the promise of a sugar plum to get him to listen to him tell his story, while Nagg wakes his wife to make her listen to the story he has been telling their entire life together.

Our stories are always also our interpretations, the ‘spin’ we put on things, the way we make sense. In *Endgame*, then, the point is to have someone listen to you, to have someone to speak at, or be in a position where someone needs you to listen. This is the truth Nagg has arrived at, while Hamm is still stuck with his delusive eschatological dreams. Rather than longing for it all to end, Nagg says “I hope the day will come when you’ll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice, any voice. . . . Yes, I hope I’ll live till then, to hear you calling me like when you were a tiny boy, and were frightened, in the dark, and I was your only hope” (38).

Having been the father and voice of authority, such as Hamm is in the play and having been deposed, Nagg's only desire has become that of wanting to see the situation reversed again, of seeing Hamm reduced to the need to hear a voice or have someone listen which will presumably re-affirm his own strength or afford him some sort of sadistic pleasure. Either way, what is indicated is that what these characters finally desire is not to end the game, but to play it their own way.

Hamm's intention to tell the story to the end is, then, just another story. When he proclaims that he is nearing the end of his story, Clov disparages this claim with the assertion "But you'll start another" (41). Cavell sees in this the idea that Hamm's

Endgame will come when he is able "to speak no more about it," stop telling himself the old stories of justification, or the new story that justification can be found in art, or indeed that art, as we have conceived and practised it, has any relevance at all to our current necessities. (1976, 152)

The telling of stories engenders new narratives, creating tides and currents which others are carried along in or have to struggle against, as stories call for interpretations which become themselves new stories. This is like a narrative version of karma, an interpretative law of birth and re-birth. The connection between engendering offspring and bringing narrative into being – the one perpetuating humanity, the other, the humanities – is made explicit in the conclusion of Hamm's tale.

While the particulars of the story change with each attempt Hamm makes to tell it, the interaction it describes remains much the same. A man, emaciated, approaches the narrator of Hamm's story crawling on his hands and knees. He asks for some food for his son, or, in the final version, which brings the play to a close, when offered work, asks if his son will be allowed to stay with him. The narrator of the story Hamm tells, says:

It was the moment I was waiting for. [Pause] You don't want to abandon him? You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your last million last moments? [Pause] He doesn't realize, all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what the earth is like nowadays. Oh, I put him before his responsibilities! (1964, 52)

The father's responsibility is, presumably, to let his son die where he had abandoned him, knowing only hunger and cold and death. Hamm's attempt to undo creation and

propagation finds analogy in his recommendation that the father let his son die, with the weight of the admonition being impressed upon him as no less than a responsibility. The relevance of this is emphasised by another story Hamm tells:

I once knew a madman who thought the end of the world had come. He was a painter – and engraver. I had a great fondness for him. 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 that rising corn! And there! Look! The sails of the herring fleet! All that loveliness! [*Pause*] He'd snatch away his hand and go back into his corner. Appalled. All he'd seen was ashes. [*Pause*] He alone had been saved. (32)

The character here described has been saved because he has given up hope of salvation, redeemed because he no longer believes redemption will change anything at all. This is the case because, as Cavell writes “[t]hat which used to seem life’s leaven, the sources of meaning and coherence . . . morality, art, religion and the rest, lead lives of their own, grown out of hand, [and] shear man’s existence from him” (1976, 49). The world and human existence are too full of meaning, have been adorned with delusory myths of transcendence and salvific narratives of redemption which have brought about atrocity and made ordinary life uninhabitable, and the only sensible response to this is a concerted undoing of these paradigms.

“As if atonement were in itself a sin” – Nussbaum on *Molloy*

Martha Nussbaum draws extensively on Cavell’s interpretation for her analysis of *Molloy*, but differs in her procedures and conclusions in crucial ways. “Stories,” argues Nussbaum, “contain and teach forms of feeling, forms of life” (1990, 226). In the course of a reflection on the modes and means of the production of narrative and the interpretations they elicit from us, Nussbaum argues that the telling of stories and, even more importantly, the exegesis thereof, allow us imaginatively to practise the lived sense of moral decision-making and thereby provide the structure that shapes our emotional and moral reasoning. Narratives, she argues “are essential to the process of practical reflection: not just because they happen to represent and also to evoke emotional activity, but also because their very forms are themselves the sources of emotional structure, the paradigms of what, for us, emotion *is*” (225).

Nussbaum's concern is thus primarily with the aspects of Beckett's writing that bear on the emotional and ethical construction of the subject, and how these relate to other stories concerned with similar issues. The divergence between this sort of reading and that espoused by Cavell or Adorno, both of whom interrogate the very notion of subjectivity, may seem great, but Nussbaum's ideas adhere much more closely to theirs than may first appear to be the case. Where Cavell and Adorno show how Beckett interrogates subjectivity as a metaphysical or ontological conception, Nussbaum's project can be read as offering existential, ethical or psychological recommendations for ways in which to bring such insights into lived and felt practice. Where the former two argue that Beckett's work undoes subjectivity, the latter pays close attention to the way in which this is carried out with specific reference to our constitution in and by narrative. Nussbaum can thus be seen as giving specific application to the general ideas of Cavell and Adorno.

While Adorno argues for a radical deconstruction of our ideas of subjectivity as autonomous and self-legislating agency, and Cavell emphasises the need to undo the teleological assumptions that very generally underpin our thinking about ourselves as subjects, Nussbaum's case is that we can go about putting such ideas into practice by deconstructing our emotional mythology, as it were. Our subjectivity is very largely learnt by way of the stories and histories the culture into which we are born maintains and legislates itself with: we are taught how to be a subject, what it is to be a subject, by way of the tales we are told (1988, 226-8). In a similar vein to Adorno and Cavell, Nussbaum thinks that there is a pressing need to subvert and undermine a large portion of our assumptions about subjectivity, which can best be done, for a number of reasons, by way of literature.

Arguing that *Molloy* situates itself in and responds to a specifically Christian tradition of stories of redemption, much like Cavell's construal of *Endgame*, and that its plot unfolds the implications of a certain cosmological and ethical script, Nussbaum states unequivocally that the "story that is Molloy's life . . . is the story of original sin, of the fear of God's judgement, and of the vain longing for salvation" (239). The novel's schematic geography, comprising Hole, Turdy and Bally, and the environs surrounding

each of these towns, with their anal, genital and sexual connotations, is interpreted as indicating that:

the basic fact of this world is the fact of the filthiness of conception, the fact that the pregnant married woman is by her act wrapped in shit, and that the new baby, even before it acts and feels, is born into the world through the shit. His entire life is lived, from then on, in shameful proximity to vagina, anus and balls. Inasmuch as the child is a child born of woman, he is covered in her filth. (238)

Molloy's belief in his anal birth – evident in his reference to his mother as “she who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct” (1959, 16) – is thus construed as a version of original sin. The crucial implication of this is that his urge to return to his mother, which animates his entire narrative, “which might in one way be a project of atonement . . . is, in the light of the sexual desire that motivates it, a guilty desire for filthy penetration and a compounding of original sin” (Nussbaum 1988, 238). This aspect of his condition is well described by Malone, when telling us of Macmann, who felt “that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement” (1959, 240). That which damns him and his only hope for escape from damnation are the same thing, and his desire for redemption by way of a return to a point preceding his own birth is thus posited as his primary crime.

Another aspect of this crime is apparent in Nussbaum's equation of ethical with narrative structures (1988, 233-6): Molloy's desire to precede his own birth can be construed as a desire, in his narrative, to reach a place before, or outside of, that narrative itself, and the point of the telling of his story is the hope of reaching a point at which he can cease telling stories. In practice, though, this is only an incentive to the further telling of stories, which compounds the original problem: the story becomes one long scatological scrawl on the clean purity of the white page which, having come about, must be continued in the hope that the narration thereof might come to transcend, and thus erase, itself. This is the “hell of stories” that the Unnameable speaks of himself as inhabiting, and which all the protagonists of the *Trilogy* seek to escape in a way analogous to that in which the Christian, mired in a life the very nature of which is sinful, seeks to reverse the condition of his existence.

In relation to this picture of filth, disorder and damnation, Moran is – initially, at least – posited as the clean, respectable upholder of the proprieties of law and order, whose task is the recuperation of Molloy. Moran’s comfortable and confident occupation of his place in the organization which governs his existence constitutes an affirmation diametrically opposed to the rejection of the self and the world that Molloy’s story enacts. The relation of the former to the latter can be equated with the relationship of the superego to the ego, or, in a Christian idiom, the higher, spiritual aspect of man’s being to his fallen, bodily condition. The point of his quest for Molloy is the hope of salvaging meaning from the anarchic disintegration that his story describes and, in Nussbaum’s narrative-ethical scheme (234), Moran thus enacts the function and role traditionally played by the reader, who approaches *Molloy* in the expectation of being delivered a message or meaning which will make sense of the fiction in which it is embedded.

This conception of the role of the reader, as detective or seeker after truth, and the understanding of interpretation consequent on this, mirrors the relation, in the Christian cosmological scheme, of God toward the individual soul, a relation which is allegorized by the organization which sends Moran on his quest. “Youdi’s role of judge and assessor,” Nussbaum writes:

is imitated by his agents in their own lives, as they play the role of judge to their women, their children, their own guilty thoughts and desires. The paradigm of Youdi infuses their journeys with purpose; and through membership in the Youdi organization all their movements and actions take on a significance beyond themselves. (15)

The narratological equivalent of this is a textual scheme in which:

the writer is, for the reader, God the father: the one who makes things mean, the one who makes the world, the one who evokes and structures the reader’s emotions. . . . In Moran’s detective story, the writer is the one who manipulates the reader’s desire to seek and condemn, to track and judge the guilty prey. (243-4)

Moran’s story, however, undermines the possibility of redemption this function seems to hold out – redemption by way of an interpretative recuperation of Molloy’s ‘meaning’ – by making Moran’s quest in search of Molloy a search that results in Moran’s discovery that the “Molloy who was seen as quarry outside him proves to be the disorder and

unseemliness within” (Nussbaum 1988, 242). Instead of being that with which the disorder Molloy represents can be safely caught, categorized and classed in a taxonomy which takes account of and thus invalidates the otherness it posits as its opposite, Moran’s quest, as an act of interpretation, becomes, increasingly, the source of disorder itself, and that which undoes the rigid controls and protocols that hold his body and soul together. Moran’s quest for the shambling, inchoate Molloy results in a disintegration of all physical and mental dignity which renders him indistinguishable from Molloy himself.

The culmination of this process finds him back where he started, in the garden of his home, but living now outside rather than in the house. While his servants have abandoned the house, which has run to seed, and the little enclave of control he had laboured to create has succumbed to entropy, Moran is depicted as at peace, finally, with his body and the world around him, and beginning to learn to listen to a voice that “did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in turn had taught to his little one” (176). The novel ends with Moran writing:

At first I did not know what it wanted. But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, I understand it, all wrong perhaps. That is not what matters. It told me to write the report. Does this mean I am freer now than I was? I do not know. I shall learn. Then I went back inside and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows [the words with which Moran’s section begins]. It was not midnight. It was not raining. (1959, 176)

The plot thus concludes with Moran taking up a vocation identical to that of Molloy, writing at the behest of a voice or agency neither of them knows, for reasons they cannot fathom, and producing pages whose significance they cannot begin to see. The growing sense of identity between the characters seems to have been completed.¹ In marked contrast to the motives animating Molloy (disgust with the body and the desire to escape it), however, Moran’s story can be seen as evidencing an acceptance of the body, a relaxing of the tyrannical sway he has held over his world, and “the happy discovery that the world does not need to be interpreted, it can simply be lived in, accepted, trusted” (Nussbaum 1988, 245). In this view, the conclusion to Moran’s act of interpretation is

¹ As Uhlman points out, “The increasing resemblance between Moran and Molloy has been noted by Cohn, 1973: 88 – 91; Kenner, 1973: 96 -7; Fletcher, 196: 149; 1970: 157-70; Doherty, 1971: 49-60; Ben-Zvi, 1986: 83-90; Alvarez, 1974: 54; Dettmar, 1990: 83; Rabinowitz, 1990: 31-67; Connor, 1988: 49-63; Trezise, 1990: 39-41)” (1999, 49).

thus the transcendence of interpretation itself, and “with the refusal of human language [which marks the start of Moran’s career as a writer] we seem to have broken the chain by which the ‘long confused emotion’ perpetuates itself, father to son” (245).

This resolution, though, Nussbaum contends, is precisely what the structure of the novel refuses: “Beckett’s anti-narrative is too many sided, too ironic, to leave us with any simple comfort” (246). Comparing the ending of Moran’s story to the literary gardens of Lucretius and Voltaire’s *Candide*, which she considers “two powerful narratives of secular salvation” (245), Nussbaum argues that to believe that, in Beckett’s case, the return to the garden marks a transcendence of the Oedipal order Moran began his journey in the service of would merely evidence our long habituation to and desire for narratives of redemption such as have constituted so much of the Western literary tradition. The circle Moran describes, while obviously evidencing a transfiguration, is not a simple turn from darkness to light, from sin to salvation. Rather, Nussbaum argues, Beckett demands that we “call the new turn into question from its inception, making us ask ourselves whether this project of bringing hope and the other emotions to an end is not itself a project that lies securely in the grip of the old emotions, a project born of disgust, striving toward salvation” (246).

Moran’s “fiction that he is putting an end to fictions,” the story he tells us about his homeward journey up to the point at which he begins to hear the voice that speaks in a language other than that of Youdi’s phallogocentric order, is thus the story of how he has been brought to the point at which Molloy is when he begins his story. It is the story of how he arrives at the point at which Molloy’s attempt to return to pre-existence can begin, and the collapse of Moran’s Oedipal order inaugurates the abject quest for his mother that is Molloy’s story. Moran’s tranquility in the garden is thus not a transcendence of guilt and return to innocence, but the product of a disgust equivalent to that which activates Molloy. Nussbaum puts the issue as follows:

The only difference is that previously [in Molloy’s case] the disgust was directed at only a certain aspect of the self – the bodily, born-of-woman aspect – whereas now it moves, so to speak, one level up and takes as its target Moran’s whole being as social “contrivance”, including, and especially, his emotions of guilt and disgust. This second-order disgust, and the corresponding second-order longing (for a redemption from the longing for redemption) are the structures that organize Moran’s homeward journey. (246)

This is why we “are forbidden by such indications from having the thought that something liberating and happy and conclusive is happening here” (250). What is on trial, rather, and indicted, in Moran’s search, is the nature of our story-telling apparatus and the meanings we derive therewith as narrators or readers: Moran tells a story of how he came to tell the story of the futility and absurdity of his attempt to tell stories at all, and

The fiction that he is putting an end to fictions is, we are informed at the end, an artfully contrived fiction of its own. . . . it is encased within the very structures it opposes, and announces as much with relish, confessing, in the end, to its own fictionality and making us see that this assault on stories is just another story What it comes to is you can’t get beyond writing, if writing is in fact what you are doing. You are, apparently, stuck with “the convention that you either lie or hold your peace.” . . . We have learned our lesson so thoroughly that we cannot depart from it, even to end it. We go on telling stories in the only way we know; and on the other side, if anything, is only a silence. (248)

Both Molloy and Moran’s story thus play out a doomed desire for redemption from narrative: Molloy to return to the silence that preceded the commencement of his story, Moran to recuperate the kernel at the core of his story and thus dispense with the story in which it is embedded. They both want to escape their condition as narrating and narrated subjects, but every effort of theirs to do so merely compounds their curse, just as our every effort, as readers or critics, to establish from their stories an articulation of the conclusion their story exemplifies, or a meta-language descriptive of their stories, engages us in the very discourse the novel renders absurd. Just as, for Molloy, “atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement,” interpretation is that which renders our procedure absurd, but that which we cannot cease to proceed by.

It could be argued that the narrative of redemption, as Nussbaum sketches it, can be construed as the basic structure by which we understand the act of interpretation; just as narratives of redemption proceed toward a transcendence of the narrative itself in the gathering up and resolution of the components of its plot’s complication, the act of interpretation attempts to organize the entirety of the text into a coherent, organic work that offers specific meanings and conclusions. The exegete’s desire to offer a transparent and faithful explication of the text is analogous to Molloy and Moran’s desire, through the telling of their stories, to escape their stories; the humanist belief in redemption by explication and clarification is the equivalent of the protagonists’ respective attempts to

undo the muddles and muck of their own stories. Molloy's refusal of this entails a refusal of interpretation, meaning, and explication analogous to the text's performance of discursive dissolution, but is, at the same time, the reason we cannot stop being confronted by the challenges this refusal implies. Nussbaum reads *Molloy* as a powerful deconstruction of narratives of redemption which demands of any work of interpretation which may concern itself with the novel a corresponding awareness of the assumptions and desires which underlie our entire tradition of such narratives and an equivalent deconstruction of its own procedures. This, in Nussbaum's opinion, is the import and value of Beckett's novel.

Simon Critchley reaches a similar conclusion, arguing that

What Beckett's work offers us . . . is a radical decreation of these salvific narratives, a paring down or stripping away of the resorts of fable, the determinate negation of social meaning through the elevation of form, a syntax of weakness, an approach to meaninglessness as an achievement of the ordinary without the rose-tinted glasses of redemption, an acknowledgment of the finiteness of the finite and the limitedness of the human condition. (2004, 211)

This conclusion is reached via a thorough and incisive evaluation of the readings of Beckett offered by Adorno, Cavell, Derrida, Blanchot, Deleuze, Christopher Ricks and Nussbaum. The subtlety of Critchley's attention to the nuances of Beckett's writing and his easy mastery of the various theorists' interpretations, makes his commentary, as he terms Deleuze's work, "a veritable conceptual juggernaut of philosophical interpretation" (180). The overall import of this beguiling body of work is outlined with great lucidity and no intellectual ostentation, and the conclusions reached are sincere and compelling.

Critchley's *Molloy*

The interpretations of *Molloy* offered by Critchley and Nussbaum agree on almost every point: like Nussbaum, Critchley takes the model for Gaber as "all too obviously the Angel Gabriel" and Youdi as "inevitably Yahveh" (2004, 190); they both consider Moran's story to constitute "what Moran calls 'the disintegration of the father'" (190); *Molloy* represents, to both critics, an indistinct, inchoate "anti-self" against which Moran is played off; both see the protagonists' journeys as forming two parts of a single process,

one in which, in Critchley's words, "the authoritarian Oedipal subject becomes the pre-Oedipal abject self" (190), and both point out the "progressive and deepening symmetry between the two parts of the novel" by which the characters are gradually rendered equivalent (190).

The meta-critical implications of *Molloy* also seem to be shared, with Nussbaum's idea of redemption from the desire for redemption striking me as exactly equivalent to "the achievement of the ordinary" that Critchley inherits from Cavell. It seems that the ideas of Cavell represent a fundamental influence for both writers, and is perhaps that which brings Nussbaum and Critchley most into alignment. Critchley begins his reading by observing that the "writings of Samuel Beckett are particularly, perhaps uniquely, resistant to philosophical interpretation" (165). What stands out is the fact that regardless of what interpretative approach or hermeneutic scheme is adopted, something about the total effect of the work is missed, or lost, or left behind. He writes:

None of the once fashionable, but now rather stale, philosophical clichés in terms of which Beckett's work has been discussed seem vaguely adequate to their object, whether it is the sub-Cartesian interpretation where Beckett is allegedly concerned with 'the inexpressible nature of the self whose figurings people the landscape of post-Cartesian modernity', or the sub-Heideggerian interpretation where Beckett strives to attain 'the existential authenticity of being prior to language or of being *as* language', or the sub-Pascalian absurdist interpretation where Beckett expresses 'the quintessential and pessimistic tragic fate of modern man', or whatever. Even if it is granted that the inadequacy of such interpretations has the unintended merit of sending one back to the text in search of other meanings, it may be the case that philosophically mediated meanings are precisely what we should *not* be in search of when thinking through Beckett's work. (166)

"Philosophically mediated meanings are precisely what we should *not* be in search of" because of the refusal of the validity of philosophically mediated meaning that the novels themselves perform. Beckett's novels, with their protagonists as authors doing everything they can to escape from their stories, necessitate a manner of interpretation that recognizes the absurdity of proceeding via conventionally understood exegesis; necessitate an exegesis that recognizes that "[w]hatever transcendental, metalinguistic or hermeneutic key is employed to unlock the text, such a matrix will always let the text fall back and remain as a remains" (171).

What makes this writing significant, though, in Critchley's opinion (because writing that defies interpretation is surely as ubiquitous as any insignificant scrawl) is that while any interpretation at all responsive to the texts needs be aware of its own absurdity in the scheme the novels posit, this does not mean we can stop attempting to explain, account for or interpret these texts. Instead, this is the very reason we must try, and keep trying, to account for their effect. While knowing that, given the implications of the picture of being in relation to language that the novels of the *Trilogy* present, the attempt to make a meaning (in any conventional sense) of literature such as this is absurd, we are nevertheless obliged to go on trying to do so. Very like Malone, who cannot not write but cannot die, criticism or theory confronted with a refusal of the validity of discourse as total as Beckett's must respond, and go on responding, aware of its own absurdity in trying to do so. The task that Beckett's work confronts us with, in Critchley's opinion, is that of "making a meaning out of the refusal of meaning that the work performs without that refusal of meaning becoming a meaning. It is a question of conceptualizing and communicating that which resists conceptualization and refuses communication – a necessary and impossible task" (177).

Taking on the ideas of Adorno and Stanley Cavell regarding the notion of "meaninglessness [as] a task, an achievement" (211), and the cleaving to meaninglessness as the redemption from the need for redemption, Critchley sees the only possible response to a work such as *Molloy* as being a self-reflexive subversion of the whole set of assumptions and procedures by which interpretation proceeds; as he quotes Adorno as writing, "[u]nderstanding it can only mean understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning" (2003, 177).

Critchley's issue with Nussbaum arises from his belief that she insufficiently acknowledges the extent of the implications of this refusal of meaning, owing to her attempt to describe the novel as a coherent and systematic exemplification or enactment of certain psychoanalytic theses about human motivation and behaviour. This is problematic because Nussbaum, arguing that the effect of the work is to induce a transcendence of the need for transcendence, can be read as merely offering another form of transcendence of the actuality of the text, thereby contradicting her own interpretation by offering an interpretation. In Critchley's terms, she makes a meaning out of the refusal

of meaning, thus betraying the nature of the text, and in so doing, she “swallows Beckett’s psychoanalytic red herrings whole and with some sauce” (118). He argues as follows:

Despite the undoubted felicities offered by such a psychoanalytic reading of *Molloy*, I find [Nussbaum’s] use of Kleinian categories a little too easy and fluent (the object of guilt is “parental sexual act” . . . the object of disgust is “above all the female body” . . .). What does it mean to employ such interpretive categories in relation to a work of such theoretical self-consciousness as Beckett’s? There is, I feel, the danger of *hermeneutic literalism* here. (118)

The charge is substantiated by Critchley’s contention that “[s]ilence is not, as Nussbaum and so many commentators on Beckett assume, the goal of his work, rather writing is the necessary *deseccration* and *desacralization* of silence” (178). A literal hermeneutic project would aspire to total and coherent explanatory capacity, summing the multi-vocal and ambiguous literary text in analysis of its meaning. Such an explanation having been achieved, the rest would be, as they say, silence. The point of Beckett’s writing, however, is the refusal of the possibility of just such a conclusiveness, the condemnation of his protagonists to continuous futile narration that nevertheless remains the only way in which they can be. They are caught in a dilemma in which, as Levy puts it, the “only certainties left are the falseness of all interpretative structures and the radical unintelligibility of human experience without them” (1980, 10). Thus, their narrations are necessarily false but, nevertheless, a necessary falsehood; they cannot speak and they cannot not speak, and the narrative strategies and formal subversions which Beckett’s prose fiction deploys are the logical response to this dual impossibility.

Molloy occupies a crucial place in this process, enacting, as it were, the initial disintegration of consequential plot construction. The way we render such a strategy meaningful is central to interpretive procedure, and the undoing thereof thus implies a need to rethink the categories and conceptions through which we make sense of texts. Primary among these is the notion of allegory. Insofar as a text is assumed to need interpretation, it is considered allegorical. What is of especial interest in Beckett’s work, and *Molloy*, particularly, is the way the narratives subvert the structures any allegorical procedure would presuppose, an issue to which I now turn in greater detail.

It seems to me that the four writers discussed above can be grouped into a coherent discourse on Beckett. Where Adorno and Cavell both focus on the subversion of meaning, of the way in which meaning is put on trial, Nussbaum begins to explore the implication of the ideas espoused by the two earlier thinkers for our conception of subjectivity and narrative, and subjectivity as narrative. Critchley, similarly, beginning from premises very close to those of the three aforementioned thinkers, focuses on the manner in which these works unsettle conventional attitudes and approaches to philosophical thinking, and thus undermine philosophically mediated interpretations. My reading follows most closely on from Critchley's, looking at the way in which the form and structure of *Molloy* both lends itself to interpretation by conventional means, by mimicking and mirroring certain conventional narrative strategies, and simultaneously subverts the possibility of such readings by parodying the conception of reading and thinking on which these rely. The primary technique through which thus parody is carried out is a self-deconstructing allegory, an allegory of the impossibility of allegory, which I shall proceed to discuss.

Moran's Allegory of the Undoing of Allegory

While Moran's story can be interpreted as being based on a Judeo-Christian arrangement as exemplified by Cavell (1976, 49) and Nussbaum (1990, 243), it could also, and just as plausibly, be read as a dramatization of a Sartrean description of the intra-personal dynamics of the interaction of freedom and facticity, with Moran's life and identity being a god-project the failure of which is the tale of his quest for Molloy. Or again, it could be construed as constituting an allegorical representation of the activities of consciousness such as posited in psychoanalytic theory, a notion alluded to by Vivien Mercier when he writes that we can:

read [*Molloy*] as an allegory of the Ego and the Id. Molloy, like the Id, has no sense of time, no unified will, nothing but instinctual drives. . . . Moran, on the other hand, is hounded by the super-ego and chock full of anxiety and guilt. Read this way, the book changes very little in total effect, for when Moran comes to identify himself more and more with Molloy and decides that he has been a man long enough, selfhood as we know it is being annihilated, even if we

do not choose to describe the process in terms of the Ego's being reabsorbed by the Id." (1979, 73)

The story's openness to construal in terms of various possible schemes plays a part in the charge of hermeneutic literalism levelled by Critchley. In an allegory such as *The Pilgrim's Progress*, for instance, in which the relationship of the narrated events to the intended meaning can be construed as fairly unidirectional and unidimensional – where, for example, the role or significance of the character named “Christian” is fairly specific – a hermeneutic literalism can justifiably be adopted. To take the same approach to *Molloy*, however, is obviously to miss the importance of the story in crucial ways.

An interpretation that claims that Molloy's story is really about, in some exclusive sense, the desire for redemption from the symbolic sphere, co-opts the novel to its own agenda without acknowledging the indictment served on such agendas by the novel itself. While one is obviously able to, and, at some point, must, say that the text enacts or dramatizes certain theses particularly clearly or well, the attempt to reduce its significance to one specific meaning is to fall into the same trap as Moran, and thus to ignore that aspect of the novel that Derrida terms “the remainder that remains when the thematics are exhausted” (1992, 62). The manner in which the thematics are exhausted is what most interests me, and the crucial and perhaps clearest stage in the process is the dissolution which takes place in Moran's narrative.

Moran is of especial interest amongst the characters of Beckett's canon, since, at the beginning of his narrative, he is diametrically opposed in outlook and motivation to the derelict, apathetic vagabonds that populate this author's pages and stages. These destitute vagrants, evoking a purgatory of unchanging and inescapable tedium, inhabit spaces and engender actions – or inertia, rather – that tend toward disintegration, impersonality and mortal stasis. Such dissolution of character, action and scene undermines the possibility of making any sense or meaning of that which is presented in and as narrative, through a systematic reduction of narrative from the “resorts of fable,” with its scope for figuration and figural exegesis, to stark literality.

Shira Wolosky, following Stanley Cavell's observation of Beckett's tendency toward “pure denotation” (1976, 120), calls this systematic rejection of figure “apotropism” (1995, 50), conceived of as the turning away from all trope and figure

(which becomes, in turn, its own figural procedure. As Coetzee notes, the rejection of style is itself a stylistic technique [1973, 45]). Wolosky substantiates this notion by describing how in *Ping*, a late short prose piece, Beckett parodies abstract ideas of human relation by using words such as “related,” “acquainted,” and even “copulation” (1995, 227) in their purely physical, spatial or temporal sense, thus presenting a world in which the “higher,” more ideal forms of human relation cease to mean anything. To be related to others in this world is merely to occupy a space describable in relation to them, and no more; to copulate is no more nor less than, literally, to be joined. A similar example of this tendency is the reduction of the progression of plot, in *Fizzle I*, to a bare description of the protagonist’s motion in time, which makes “words that in other contexts open into metaphysical or psychical meaning . . . lose any sense but that of the physical dimension and direction” (53).

The progression of the *Trilogy* consists in a systematic deployment of apotropism as rhetorical technique, from the subversion of plot in *Molloy* through to the complete disruption of syntax in *The Unnamable*. The rhetorical move toward denotation, though, enacts and performs an equivalent attempt on the part of consciousness to transcend ornament and figure in the attempt to attain that which creates and precedes them. What becomes increasingly evident in the process is that the distinction between conceptual content and rhetorical ornament is impossible: the protagonists’ systematic rejection of fable, figure and fiction inevitably consists of an erasure of what they themselves, as characters constituted in and by all these techniques of rhetoric, actually are. Hence, that which initiates narrative for these narrators is the urge to get beyond narrative, an urge which is, and can only be, fundamentally and inescapably a narrative, rhetorical urge.

Moran stands outside of this process of apotropism by being – initially, at least – a firm believer in the efficacy of economies of signification and figuration. Beginning his tale as a comfortable householder, occupying the roles of master and father, Moran’s relationship with his son is the most realistic and psychologically subtle of those depicted in the *Trilogy* (indeed, the only relationship, properly speaking, at all). Moran’s devotion to and belief in the work he carries out for Youdi situates him within a teleologically oriented endeavour from which other characters, among them Murphy, actively strive to escape. His narrative style, with its measured, magisterial tone capable of syntactic

nuance and precise qualification is, accordingly, the most stylistically polished of the narrators in the *Trilogy*. Mostly, however, it is his stickling concern for the petty proprieties of sacred and secular conduct, and the sadistic, punitive ways he enforces these in his attempt to shore up his sense of order against the chaos that threatens to envelop him, that most distinguishes him from the vagrants who, like Molloy and Malone, impatiently await their own disintegration.

Moran's attempts to subjugate his world to the dictates of his own reason, exemplified in his ill-concealed hostility toward his son, are the logical concomitant of the authoritarian, patriarchal scheme he himself occupies. Youdi, the "chief" of the organization Moran works for, issues directives via his messenger Gaber which Moran, as an "agent," receives and carries out. This set of relationships can be construed as schematic of what Derrida terms the "phallogocentric" order (Johnson 1977, 226) – the conception of language which underpins Western metaphysical thinking. Language, in this view, is primarily denotative, based on an assumption of the univocity of meaning and consequent accessibility of thought. Moran receives orders from the chief that are unambiguous and imperative, and his response to them is concerned entirely with the recovery of the letter of his law, the literal meaning it is the text's intention to convey. The most apparent model for this arrangement, as Nussbaum (1990, 243) and Critchley (2004, 190) both observe, is that of the Old Testament, but the novel's interest lies in large part in the flexible applicability of this scheme.

For instance, one could substantiate a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Molloy* by drawing on Lacan's understanding of the nature of language and the subject's situation in relation to it, drawing out the implications of the Augustinian picture for the constitution of subjectivity (Baker and Hacker 1980, 16-23), and seeing Moran's story as an exemplification of the condition of the subject attaining existence in and through relation to the linguistic realm. In Lacan's understanding, the symbolic, linguistic order is patronymic, and provides the basis for all social or psychological order. The phallus is "the sum of all signification" (1993, 45), the absolute signifier, in relation to which the subject is situated and as a function of which it comes about. (Before my entry into the symbolic order, there is no 'I,' no 'me'; my subjectivity comes about with the advent of my acknowledgement of the schemes posited by the order of signification.) The

constitution of the subject, and with it, admittance into the symbolic order of language, occurs through a symbolic castration of the self before the order of signification: the self is renounced and the subject, as a function of signification, is identified with. The use of language is made possible by the deference to the order of signification, and language then structures all social and moral convention through the agency of the Name of the Father (Lacan 1993, 57).

If Moran's story is construed as an allegory of the subject situated in language, Youdi, the centre from which all directives come, and in relation to which all significations are significant, occupies a place equivalent to the phallus, to the Name of the Father, and Moran's obedience to his directives is the fit position of the properly constituted subject operating in the field of language. As Youdi's messenger and the medium through which the chief's meaning is conveyed, Gaber fulfils a function equivalent to language itself as understood in the Augustinian picture. Elucidating the scheme of relations posited in the organization, Moran describes the relationship between "the agent [and] the messenger" which emphasises the inert, subordinate character of the messenger:

Gaber understood nothing about the messages he carried. Reflecting on them he arrived at the most extravagantly false conclusions. . . . This was not all. His memory was so bad that his messages had no existence in his head, but only in his notebook. He had only to close his notebook to become, a moment later, perfectly innocent to its contents. And when I say he reflected on his messages and drew conclusions from them, it was not as we would have reflected on them, you and I, the book closed and probably the eyes too. But little by little as he read. And when he raised his head and indulged in his commentaries, it was without losing a second, for if he had lost a second he would have lost everything, both text and gloss . . . To be undecipherable to all but oneself, dead without knowing it to the meaning of one's instructions and incapable of remembering them for more than a few seconds, these are capacities rarely united in the same individual. (107)

Just as, in its phallogocentric conception, the medium of language, when operating properly, serves merely to carry the conceptual message, here Gaber, the messenger, carries significant currency and engenders meaning only insofar as he is the medium of Youdi, the logos whose spirit invests the message with significance. The letter, in the phallogocentric scheme, attains meaning in proportion to the extent that it participates in the figuration of abstract ideas and thus acts as vehicle for the unfolding of the logos.

Gaber himself comprehends nothing, remembers nothing, and does not contribute anything other than transport in the distribution of meaning. He thus plays a role equivalent to the literal, tangible reality of language, whose messages are invested with the spirit of sense only by the intention of the chief and their subsequent interpretation by an agent.

In the phallogocentric conception, thoughts are pictures of the world, spoken words are names of thoughts, and written phonetic letters are transcriptions of the sounds of words. The spoken word is thus closer to the ideality of meaning than the written, which is at two removes from the presence that invests the sign with meaning. Gaber's messages are of import as being transcriptions of the words of Youdi, which are brought back to existence, as it were, through their comprehension by Moran. Gaber himself, though, cannot make sense of the instructions he carries, cannot reincarnate the presence of their meaning, because "his memory was so bad that his messages had no existence in his head, but only in his notebook."

"There is Something About a Father Which Discourages Derision"

At the beginning of his story, Moran is depicted as inhabiting a comfortable and assured position within a functioning social and psychological hierarchy which establishes and defines his relationship to his superiors and dependants. One of the factors that makes Moran's relationship with his son so much more complex than any other depicted in the *Trilogy* is the fact that, while all the other novels are monologues, much of Moran's spoken interaction with his son is vocally rendered. The general impression that emerges is one of continuous contestation: Moran tries to trip his son up by giving him long and complex instructions which, Moran hopes, he will forget, be confused by and fail to carry out properly, thus providing an excuse for rancour.

The contestation is especially apparent in the almost constant contradiction between what Moran says to his son and the thoughts he records accompanying these statements. An example occurs when his son buys the bicycle for which he was sent. On his return, Moran says "I had to admit it must once have been quite a good bicycle. I would gladly describe it, I would gladly write four thousand words on it alone. And you

call that a bicycle? I said” (156). At another point he asks “Is it possible he loved me then as much as I loved him? You could never be sure with that little hypocrite” (120).

The sharp juxtaposition of devotion and distrust is an attitude arising directly from the universe Moran inhabits. Youdi’s tyranny has a Kafkaesque arbitrariness to it which condemns the agents in his service to live in the double bind of being under threat of punishment for failure to perform duties he has failed to realize it is their duty to perform. Moran thus lives in constant terror of the failure to comprehend the incomprehensible. The only sensible response to conditions such as these is paranoia, manifest as the excessive deployment of interpretative faculties in the attempt to pre-empt punishment brought about by a failure to become aware of and respond to encrypted commands issued by the almighty. Youdi’s directives are obscure, arbitrary and random, and Moran’s well-being and livelihood depend on his ability to decipher and carry out the messages he receives. The ability to do this, or a consequence of the continual attempt to do this, is a state of mind premised on a distrust that renders any operation of thought paranoid: it is Moran’s ability to read, to decipher and to decrypt his world and its messages that he relies on for the keeping together of body and soul.

One of the implications of this attitude is the adoption of the punitive obscurantism characteristic of Youdi in his relations with his son. The Name of the Father that structures the world Moran inhabits thus also provides the model for his relationship with his son, whose initiation into the field of language and the order of signification Moran facilitates through continual conflict and symbolic castrations. An example of this sort of pedagogy through combat occurs when, having sent his son off to fetch a thermometer with a “long and rather difficult sentence, which contained no fewer than four or five imperatives” he asks “You know which mouth to put it in?” Explaining this, Moran writes:

I was not averse, in conversation with my son, to jokes of questionable taste, in the interests of his education. Those whose pungency he could not fully savour at the time, and they must have been many, he could reflect on at his leisure or seek in company with his little friends to interpret as best he might. Which was in itself an excellent exercise. At the same time I inclined his mind towards that most fruitful of all dispositions, a horror of the body and all its functions. (118)

The ability to use language is here synonymous with the ability to understand and accept a certain set of moral, psychological and metaphysical laws (such as “a horror of the body”) which cumulatively constitute the Name of the Father and govern the function of the subject.

These laws are the net effect of the distinction of self and other that is brought about by the situation of the subject in language. The social organization which this reflects, and of which this is the basis, is premised on the distinction between self and other, which makes possible the entire set of dichotomies drawn between public and private, sacred and secular, literal and figurative, and all the other oppositions that govern the maintenance of the proprieties of social order. Moran’s concern with his household is exemplary of this, as are his worries over the minutiae of sacred prescriptions over secular conduct, such as whether he can take communion after a lager and whether one may play, let alone work, on a Sunday.

The work Moran does, the cause he is an agent for, is the maintenance and perpetuation of this organization, which is at one point described as the bringing of clear and distinct sense, or meaning, out of an undifferentiated chaos. Moran describes how “[t]here somewhere man is too, vast conglomerate of all of nature’s kingdoms, as lonely and as bound, and in that block the prey is lodged and thinks himself a being apart. Anyone would serve. But I am paid to seek. I arrive, he comes away. . . . It is thanks to them I find myself a meaning” (112). The searching Moran carries out is thus the recuperation of man, the freeing of the “prey” from the indifferent mass of which it is a part. Interestingly, Moran describes something very similar to “the dark” to which Murphy retreats from the world when he gives an account of the procedure he goes through preliminary to embarking on his journey:

It is . . . in the gloom that I best pierce the outer turmoil’s veil. . . . Far from the world, its clamours, frenzies, bitterness and dingy light, I pass judgement on it and on those, like me, who are plunged in it beyond recall. . . . All is dark, but with that simple darkness that follows like a balm upon the great dismemberings And yet it is not unpleasant, before setting to work, to steep oneself again in this slow and massive world, where all things move with the ponderous sullenness of oxen, patiently through the immemorial ways, and where of course no investigation would be possible. (111)

In Moran's case the dark is entered for the sake of the work he has to do, in order for something to be brought back from it, rather than for its own sake, as is the case with Murphy. Moran's relationship to the dark is that of the analytic to the synthetic, saddled with the obligation to make coherent sense of that which does not do so of itself, which is why his work constitutes a hermeneutics. Describing his search as "looking for what was wanting to make Gaber's statement complete" (137), Moran points out the similarity his role has to that of a hermeneutics that conceives of its task as the explication of the meaning of a text that remains incomplete without such an explication. Moran, like the exegete, conceives of himself as completing the task of figuration, of accomplishing the actual point of the activity of figural signification, in his bringing of the indistinct and inexplicit into explicit distinction.

This conception of his task is elucidated when Moran writes that "what I was doing I was doing neither for Molloy, who mattered nothing to me, nor for myself, of whom I despaired, but on behalf of a cause which, while having need of us to be accomplished, was in its essence anonymous, and would subsist, haunting the minds of men, when its miserable artisans should be no more" (114). The task of discursive explication will continue insofar and for as long as the subject is faced with an agency that escapes and undermines the order in which its subjectivity is organized. Such a seeking, the finding, and the recovery of meaning from indeterminacy is the activity of consciousness, and the means whereby consciousness condones its own nature and prolongs its projects.

Moran is thus the agent of literal hermeneutics, assured of the order for which he works and confident in its capacity to bring meaning back from the obscurity he is presented with. This is only half of the story, however, because Moran's story is the story of the disintegration of this elucidatory project and the irruption of the abject into this organization. Having begun his story with the statement "[i]t is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows" (92), Moran ends it with "I went back inside and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (176). Through this self-undoing, the extent of the disjunction between the time narrated and the time of narration is evidenced, and the picture of exegetical earnestness Moran

presents must thus be read as counterfoil to that which it gives way to, which is presented in the person of Molloy, to whom I now turn.

Molloy: The Panting Anti-Self

Neither Critchley nor Nussbaum devote much attention to the role played by Molloy in the novel that bears his name. While both see him as the “panting anti-self” that acts as foil to Moran’s up-tight subjectivity, his obscurity is left obscure. This is no doubt partly because that which Molloy stands for is reached by Moran himself in the process of his own degeneration, and can thus be inferred from an analysis of the latter. Both Critchley and Nussbaum consider Molloy to be, in one way or another, a part of Moran himself, an aspect of his being that his own endeavours bring to the surface, or rather part of him which, in the wake of the degeneration and disillusionment he undergoes, becomes apparent. While this may be partly the case, it seems to me that the depiction of Molloy, specifically the depiction of the role he occupies in Moran’s thought, is crucial to a coherent construal of the novel which seeks to make sense of the state to which Moran is brought.

Simply put, Molloy represents, in relation to Moran, the indeterminate, that which is, by definition, indefinable. In the person of Molloy, Beckett personifies that which cannot be recuperated by consciousness, and which thus disrupts and calls such consciousness into question. Molloy is a character whose most distinguishing characteristic is a lack of uniform or unified set of distinguishing characteristics. Molloy’s indistinction is apparent from the moment he is brought to the attention of Moran, who is, initially, like Molloy himself, unsure of even the name of his quarry: “[o]f these two names, Molloy or Mollose, the second seemed to me perhaps the more correct. But barely” (113). The confusion over his name indicates the exclusion from or failure to integrate fully into the patronymic symbolic order, an exclusion which instantiates a preliminary and basic exclusion from the realms of signification and conceptual structure; who Molloy is and the position he occupies is thus rendered indeterminate from the very outset.

Molloy's indeterminacy is best conceived as the obscurity which it presents to the categorizing structures of Moran's thought. Moran describes how, when Molloy came to mind, "I was nothing but uproar, bulk, rage, suffocation, effort unceasing, frenzied and vain. Just the opposite of myself, in fact" (114). Molloy, "the true denizen of [Moran's] dark places," is the other on whose abjection Moran's entire identity and subjectivity is premised, which is why, when issued his directive to go in search of Molloy, Moran believes that "I knew then about Molloy, without however knowing much about him." (115)

Moran embarks on his description of his quarry by saying "I shall say briefly what little I did know about him. I shall also draw attention, in my knowledge of Molloy, to the most striking lacunae" (114). What little Moran does know indicates a dishevelled, inchoate creature shambling disorderedly through a wilderness:

He had very little room. His time too was limited. He hastened incessantly on, as if in despair, towards extremely close objectives. Now a prisoner, he hurled himself at I know not what narrow confines, and now, hunted, he sought refuge near the centre. . . . Even in open country he seemed to be crashing through jungle. He didn't so much walk as charge. In spite of this he advanced but slowly. He swayed, to and fro, like a bear. (116)

Most of his description, however, is concerned with "the most striking lacunae," and the little that Moran can positively say that he knows about Molloy turns out to consist of obscurity:

He rolled his head, uttering incomprehensible words. . . . He was massive and hulking, to the point of misshapeness. And, without being black, of a dark colour. . . . I had no clue to his age. . . . As he appeared to me, so I felt he must have always appeared and would continue to appear until the end, an end indeed which I was hard put to imagine. For being unable to conceive what had brought him to such a pass, I was no better able to conceive how, left to his own resources, he could put an end to it. . . . I had no information as to his face. I assumed it was hirsute, craggy and grimacing. Nothing justified my doing so. (115-6)

What is most clearly apparent about Molloy is that almost nothing is clearly apparent, that he is "incomprehensible," all of which leads Moran to admit, candidly, "[w]hat it was all about I had not the slightest idea" (116).

Further compounding the disruption of order Molloy represents is the plurality that he creates within the organization for which Moran works. At the beginning of his venture Moran observes that “there were three, no, four Molloys. He that inhabited me, my caricature of same, Gaber’s and the man of flesh and blood somewhere awaiting me” (115). This, however, seems not, initially, to present a problem to Moran’s single-mindedness:

That there may have been two different persons involved, one my own Mollose, the other the Molloy of my enquiry, was a thought which did not so much as cross my mind, and if it had I should have driven it away, as one drives away a fly, or a hornet. How little one is at one with oneself, good God. I who prided myself on being a sensible man, cold as crystal and as free from spurious depths. (115)

Molloy’s potential to undermine subjectivity and undo laboriously constructed identity – “How little one is at one with oneself” intimates the eternal presence of an other – is here alluded to, and recognized at the outset, while, at another point, Moran describes how “Thus was inscribed, on the threshold of the Molloy affair, the fatal pleasure principle” (99).

In Freudian and psychoanalytic discourse, the pleasure principle is that which the reality principle, rationality, is established to constrain and make productive. The analogous dichotomy in Bataille’s thought is that between the erotic principle and the work principle (1962, 40). Moran’s relationship to Molloy may be read as an enactment of the relation between these two principles: the orderly agent attempting to recuperate and situate the inchoate, abject figure plays out the structuring, governing role the reality principle plays in relation to the libidinous instincts. In the hindsight of his narration, Moran comes to recognize that his simple and unquestioned conception of the hierarchy between the rational and the pre-rational, between the orderly and clarifying and the disorderly and obscure, was wrong from the outset, and the pleasure principle played a much more germinal role in his endeavour than the endeavour itself could possibly conceive.

While Moran gets glimpses of the fatality of the pleasure principle in the course of his quest, these do not allow the extent of the catastrophe Molloy will come to represent in the scheme of his existence to be fathomed adequately. This is necessarily

the case, as that with which Moran sees, the “inenarrable contraption” (1959, 115) by way of which he conceives of and structures his world, is that which is premised on the exclusion and repression of the pleasure principle. Just as rationality cannot fully conceive of its opposite and remain rationality, Moran, in coming to grips with that in opposition to which he defines himself, must relinquish the principled, ordered being he is contrived to be. The dissolution of the self is a dissolution that remains necessarily untellable insofar as the self to which it occurred has dissolved. The resulting narrative paradox is pointed out in the following passage:

That a man like me, so meticulous and calm in the main, so 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, that a man so contrived, for I was a contrivance, should let himself be haunted and possessed by chimeras, this ought to have seemed strange to me and been a warning to me to have a care, in my own interest. Nothing of the kind. I saw it only as the weakness of a solitary, a weakness admittedly to be deplored, but which had to be indulged in if I wished to remain a solitary, and I did, I clung to that, with as little enthusiasm as to my hens or to my faith, but no less lucidly. Besides this took up very little room in the inenarrable contraption I called my life. . . . And if I had to tell the story of my life I should not so much as allude to these apparitions, and least of all to that of the unfortunate Molloy. (115)

The neat, tidy, ordered existence that is the “inerrable contraption” Moran calls his life is entirely undone by the irruption of disorder brought about by the quest for Molloy. Were Moran to tell the story of his life, it would be constituted of all that which is undermined by his incipient abjection – his house, his hens, his person and his authority. Ironically, the story he ends up telling, the story about the disintegration and loss of all these, while obviously also a story about him and his ‘life,’ is not his life as he desires or understands it to be, but rather the story of the loss of all that from which he has constructed his identity and the subsequent emergence of that which has been excluded as alien, other and unfathomable.

A crucial stage in the breakdown of Moran’s reality principle occurs toward the beginning of his homeward journey, when, abandoned by his son and told to relinquish

his quest for Molloy, his rigid identity has begun to break down and he begins to glimpse his fundamental vagrancy in the interstices. It is at this point that he states that:

And with regard to the Obidil, of whom I have refrained from speaking, until now, and whom I so longed to see face to face, all I can say with regard to him is this, that I never saw him, either face to face or darkly, perhaps there is no such person, that would not greatly surprise me. (162)

In Critchley's view, "Moran's anagrammatic gift to Freudian readers where 'the Libido' becomes, somewhat clumsily, 'the Obidil'" (2004, 190) is significant only in that it makes nonsense of a concept used in psychoanalytic thinking. Like the numerous philosophical allusions scattered throughout Beckett's work, which are also construed as "red herrings," the purpose of this is merely to make a certain conceptual scheme pointless. In line with the previous points made regarding the pleasure principle and the construction of identity, I see this passage as doing much more than merely parodying allusive method. Critchley's construal strikes me as somewhat reductive, emphasising far too strongly the aspects of the novel that deconstruct meaning and paying too little attention to the schemes (in this instance, the psychoanalytic) within which and by way of which such a deconstruction is carried out. The context of the already mentioned passage about the "Obidil" bears this out.

Remaining for several days at the place where his son had abandoned him, Moran tells of how he began to entertain "childish hopes" that Molloy "would come to me, who had not been able to go to him, and grow to be a friend, and like a father to me, and help me do what I had to do, so that Youdi would not be angry with me and would not punish me," or that "my son, his anger spent, would have pity on me and come back to me" (162). Having raised such hopes, though, he proceeds to sweep "them away, with a great disgusted sweep of all my being" (162), as idiotic, illusory, and childish. It is immediately after describing this disillusionment that Moran mentions, in passing, as an associative aside, "the Obidil, of whom I have refrained from speaking, until now, and whom I so longed to see face to face" (162). Of him he says that "all I can say with regard to him is this, that I never saw him, either face to face or darkly" (162), before moving immediately on to describe how:

At the thought of the punishments Youdi might inflict upon me I was seized by such a mighty fit of laughter that I shook, with mighty silent laughter and my features composed in their wonted sadness and calm. But my whole body shook, and even my legs. . . . Strange laughter truly, and no doubt misnamed . . . (163)

No doubt misnamed, resembling a fit of weeping, or being overcome by an emotion or sensation utterly disruptive of self-control, the psychic reaction exemplified in this episode is highly significant. Having described at the outset how the pleasure principle was inscribed on the threshold of the Molloy affair, Moran, arriving at this state of affairs in which he has lost his self-control, hoping for the agency he had set out in pursuit of to come and rescue him, being beset by fits of laughter that shake him with the force of orgasm at the prospect of the vengeance of Youdi, must surely be understood as doing more than sending the reader after “psychoanalytic red-herrings” in referring to the “Obidil.” Rather, in the anagrammatic, mirror-image rendering of the “Libido” (the instinctual energy which the reality principle is established to check, and which can thus never be seen face to face in the scheme of the reality principle, the field of language), Moran intimates that whose emergence constitutes his breakdown, without being able, because of the breakdown, to come to terms with it or conceptualise it adequately.

The relation to an obscurity which undermines sight, the desire to see that which entails the impossibility of seeing, that Moran here describes, is analogous to what Maurice Blanchot characterizes as the essential aspect of the work of literature in “The Gaze of Orpheus” (1982, 16). Blanchot likens the work of the author of imaginative fiction to Orpheus’s attempt to rescue Eurydice from the underworld. The author’s attempt to bring something new, something previously inconceivable, to light through the medium of his writing parallels Orpheus’s attempts to bring Eurydice back from the nether world with the power of his song. Importantly, for Blanchot, the artist’s attempt, insofar as it attempts to bring the obscure to light, must necessarily fail: that which the artist desires to bring to the light is that which by its very nature is obscure, and the attempted elucidation thereof represents a betrayal of its nature (17). Just as the attempt to give voice to that which escapes discursive reason in discourse contradicts itself, the work of art necessarily belies its own intentions.

What the artist intends to bring to light, that which instigates and is essential to the work of art, Blanchot terms “the other dark” (1982, 174). The other dark is conceived

of it as necessarily escaping the conventional economies of signification. While discursive reason works on the binary oppositions of good and bad, light and dark, it itself is premised on the originary exclusion of the “*other dark*,” a dark that is dark not in diametrical opposition to light but is that dark on which the opposition of dark and light is made. It is this dark – an essential dark, as it were, an essential inessentiality – that the author wants to bring to light, which is exactly why the author must fail. If allegory is the use of figure to speak of what is otherwise than figure, Blanchot’s artist creates allegory in that he attempts to speak of that which is other than speech itself, attempts to depict that which is the opposite of depiction.

Moran’s failure, then, is the necessary failure of reason to appropriate what escapes reason, but in his failure is glimpsed that abjectivity which he set out to attain, as his physical, mental and emotional integrity breaks down and his world becomes chaotic around him. Moran’s hermeneutic project fails to recuperate a unitary, coherent truth, and his quest is presented as delusive. This, however, does not mean that any interpretation of the novel must share these traits; without undertaking an interpretation it would not be possible to establish that interpretation is somehow on trial. This means, rather, that interpretative procedure needs to be aware of its capacity and tendency to appropriate the other and assimilate it to its own ends, of its potential to colonize discourse that exceeds or escapes its own domain in the attempt comprehensively to explain its subject. Moran’s inability to exact an allegorical recuperation of *Molloy* does not mean that we avoid bringing our exegetical procedure to bear on *Molloy*, or are somehow at fault for trying to make the novel mean something, but rather that we become and remain aware of the implications *Molloy* has for our attempts to do so.

A Form of Formlessness

This allows me to return to the concerns with which I began this chapter. The dissolution of allegory that *Molloy* performs means the conceptual oppositions within which the tension of the text is maintained and by way of which we should approach it is not that between form and content but, rather, form and formlessness. Blanchot’s understanding of literature points to this dialectic (between the formlessness that the artist seeks to bring

to light and the form within which it is necessarily belied), as being the instigating tension for any work of verbal art. The purpose of constructive work engaged in by conscious intention is to give that which is not conscious expression; the structures which we establish, whether conceptual, linguistic or ethical, are established in order to allow us to transcend them. As in *Malone Dies*, in which the purpose of the narration is to allow the narrator to escape, or overcome, his being, the purpose of the creation in Beckett's later texts is the attempt to achieve obliteration. The relationship between Moran and Molloy perfectly dramatizes this. The point, however, is that that which the narration hopes to achieve – formlessness, obliteration, death – is the one thing which, being a formal construct, it cannot. As Critchley writes

In the *Trilogy*, there is the relentless pursuit, across and by means of narrative, of that which narration cannot capture, namely the radical unrepresentability of death. Yet, and this is the paradox upon which, arguably, the entirety of Beckett's fiction turns, to convey this radical unrepresentability, the *Trilogy* must represent the unrepresentable. (2004, 188)

It is the engagement with this challenge that leads Northrop Frye, for instance, to consider the novels of the *Trilogy* “mythical” (1979, 207). The fact that the content the form points to, or is structured to represent, is the absence of all and any possible content, means that the signifying structures of allegory are undermined. “Because no subject matter is simply what it is,” writes Adorno, “all subject matter appears to be the sign of an inner sphere. But the inner sphere of which it would be a sign no longer exists, and the signs do not point to anything else” (1958, 269). The subversion of the binary Platonic structure of form cohering to idea is achieved by the evacuation of any possible sense from the ideal plane.

Bataille makes a point similar to that of Frye, claiming that *Molloy* is the product of “myth – monstrous, and arising from the slumber of reason” (1979, 62). He explains his conception of the significance of the mythical thus:

There are two analogous truths that can only take shape in us in the form of a myth, these being death and that ‘absence of humanity’ that is death's living semblance. Such absences of reality may not indeed be present in the clear-cut distinctions of discourse, but we may be sure that neither death nor inhumanity,

both non-existing, can be considered irrelevant to the existence that we are, of which they are the boundary, the backdrop, and the ultimate truth. (62)

The representation of non-being, vacuity, the final silence, which is “the boundary, the backdrop, and the ultimate truth” of human consciousness and existence, therefore represents the most truly important artistic endeavour – according to Beckett, the only true artistic endeavour, all else being “desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping” (1949, 21). This, however, is exactly that which is impossible to represent, formlessness being the one thing one cannot capture in an artistic form, and the artist is thus stuck on the horns of an inescapable dilemma: incapable of going on, he is incapable of desisting from doing so. Thus, condemned to failure, his only hope is to fail better, as Beckett puts it. Construed in this way, the dichotomy by way of which this fiction is best approached is, rather than form and content, that of form and formlessness. This aporia was identified by Beckett very early in his career, when he asserted that “[t]o be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail” (21).

This may seem to pose the problem of whether, as Bataille phrases it, “[a]n author writing while consumed with indifference to what he writes might seem to be acting out a charade” (1979, 63). He may well be, but the charade itself, the performance, is nevertheless significant, with the pretence of indifference and the studied formlessness achieving, in Bataille’s view, precisely the effect pointed to by Porter Abbot in his understanding of imitative form. Just as the latter sees the strategies of the text operating to mimic the experience of the protagonist, Bataille regards the effect of “the author’s attack on the reader” (60) as being the affective equivalent of the “frantic progress towards ruin that animates the book” (61). In light of this, he is led to ask “is not the mind that discovers this pretence also engaged in pretences – every bit as fallacious, but with the naivete of unawareness?” (63). The core and crux of the novel emerges when it is recognized that:

The truth, stripped of pretences, is not to be so easily attained, for before we can attain it we must not only renounce our own pretences, but forget everything, no longer know anything, be Molloy: an impotent idiot, “not knowing what [he] was going to do until it was done.” All we can do is to set ourselves in search of Molloy, as does Jacque Moran of the second part of the book. (63)

As Maurice Nadeau puts it, Beckett “took us along with him into his forest. We too will only come out of it on our elbows and our knees. It will take years” (1979, 54).

Chapter Three

In this chapter I illustrate how the formal and conceptual undoing which is carried out in *Molloy* is continued in the latter two novels of the *Trilogy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. The subversion of form conducted in *Malone Dies* continues to operate through allegorical aspects of narrative in a manner analogous to that described in relation to *Molloy*, by way of a further deconstruction of the notion of plot and the implied meaning-making procedures plot represents. *The Unnamable* represents the culmination of the undoing of narrative carried out in the *Trilogy*, with all the resorts of fable reduced to nothing but an almost incomprehensible murmur which cannot be stopped and cannot be escaped. With this final depiction of consciousness reduced to its starkest aspect, that is, of a voice continuing to narrate despite the absurdity of anything it can possibly say and a mind continuing to try to make sense of a situation which renders the very attempt to do so absurd, but nevertheless going on because incapable of not doing so, Beckett's parody of the Cartesian cogito is carried to its thorough-going conclusion. The latter half of this chapter explains how such parody is carried out and extrapolates the depiction it may have for any conception of interpretation in relation to texts such as these.

The *Trilogy's* Failure of Interpretation

A point that supports my thesis regarding Beckett's work's subversion of the possibilities of interpretation particularly well is the steady diminishment of critical response, and the general bewilderment of that which continued, to the latter parts of the *Trilogy* at the time of the novels' publication. While many commentators seized on *Molloy*, with alacrity, as a novel that undermines novelistic plot and procedure and dramatizes impasses of subjectivity, fewer were able to construe anything of *Malone Dies* or *The Unnamable*, despite the systematic deployment of remarkably similar strategies to the former novel in the latter two.

This is exemplified particularly well by the case of Maurice Nadeau, one of the more enthusiastic and insightful of critics contemporary with Beckett, who writes that

“*Molloy* gave the impression that it was impossible to go further in the conquest of Nothingness. *Malone Dies* pushes back the boundaries of the undertaking. . . . After which, it is difficult to imagine that there could be anything left for Beckett but silence” (1952, 78). Accordingly, Nadeau failed to offer any comment on *The Unnamable*, presumably feeling that were silence not the only retreat left for Beckett, it had become so for the commentator. What makes the *Trilogy*’s final two novels as resistant to commentary as they are is the increasing simplification, the steady stripping away of every exterior narrative theme and technique in the attempt to present the actuality of that which is behind and which generates such attributes. The process is so successful that many commentators are left with nothing to say.

This is not the case with recent critics of a poststructuralist persuasion, to whom the *Trilogy* presents in very clear relief the decomposition of authorial control, the linguistic slippage within the irretrievably fragmented text, and the play of undecidability at work in every assertion around which their entire discourse is oriented. Richard Begam, for example, reads *Malone Dies* as presenting a fictional ‘death of the author’ analogous to the theoretical ones posited by Derrida, Foucault and Barthes (1996, 21), while Leslie Hill sees the novels, most particularly *The Unnamable*, as depicting a conceptual equivalent to Blanchot’s notion of ‘the neuter,’ writing that some of Beckett’s principle themes are “repetition, memory, law, . . . difference, paradox, transmission, aporia” (1990, 102). Anthony Uhlmann, in a similar vein, points out the intersections between the depiction of subjectivity in the *Trilogy* and the theoretical work of, among others, Foucault, Deleuze, Levinas and Derrida (1999).

Relevant as these readings are, I cannot avoid the feeling that they are prey to exactly that which they claim the texts render impossible: arguing that Beckett’s work is essentially concerned with the problematization of subjectivity or the indeterminability of language would seem to offer rather determinate and unproblematic interpretations of novels which are neither. There is an inescapably allegorizing tendency in these readings, inasmuch as the literature is read as giving form to theories which can be completely abstracted from the works. Thus, while one can agree with Trezise that “the interpretation of Beckettian subjectivity must start from scratch” (1990, x), what most needs reappraisal is the nature of interpretation itself. The most apparently problematic aspect of the fiction

is the manner in which it both opens itself to almost any reading while simultaneously authorizing almost none. Starting from scratch, then, will not be much help if it merely reiterates the conclusive interpretative procedure which it hopes to correct; interpretation itself needs to be rethought.

Having said that, and having tried to do the latter, my own analysis nevertheless succumbs to exactly this aporia. Insofar as one is trying to make sense of a text, one inevitably draws on precisely the procedures of abstraction and generalization which necessarily falsify that of which they purport to speak. Put another way, the *Trilogy* illustrates that, in response to the Unnamable's question, "[c]an one be ephectic otherwise than unawares?" (293), the lesson that Beckett's fiction, and almost every attempt to interpret it, teaches us is that the answer is a very unephectic and unequivocal 'no.'

And herein lies the great depth of Beckett's fiction: in fiction, and by employing the formal strategies which he does, Beckett enacts and dramatizes certain theses (for want of a word) which any form of philosophical or explanatory discourse would belie; theses which an analytic discourse, because of its very form, can only contradict itself in the attempt to enunciate. Just as the progenitors of poststructural thought work to dismantle the opposition between philosophy and literature from the side of theory, Beckett's fiction depicts, in a literary form, the slippery slope on which the mind slides from one into the other. And as I have repeatedly pointed out, this is done by using Cartesian philosophical procedure to undo itself, by taking analysis to its own most illogical extreme and showing what it may come to look like. As Cavell puts it, "[t]he discovery of Beckett's work, both in topic and technique is not the failure of meaning (if that means the lack of meaning), but its total, even totalitarian success – our inability not to mean what we are given to mean" (1976, 116). In this chapter, I illustrate how *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* enact the implications of "our inability not to mean what we are given to mean."

Both Malone and the protagonist of *The Unnamable* function as surrogates for the interpreter in the way explained by Porter Abbot's notion of imitative form. The reader attempts to make sense of the bleakness and destitution of the narrators' condition in exactly the same way they themselves do, if at a second remove; Malone and the Unnamable's narrations are, primarily, attempts to interpret, to make sense of, their

situation. The imperviousness of their condition to these is replicated in an impossibility of really making sense, in any vaguely conventional way, of their respective narratives.

But this is precisely the point. Simon Critchley's observation that the salient characteristic of the *Trilogy*, from an interpretative point of view, is the impossibility of espousing any clear and unequivocal thesis regarding the philosophical import of the work, that the most noteworthy aspect of the fiction is the way in which it defies explication, strikes me as the most penetrating point made on Beckett. As he puts it:

[T]he peculiar resistance of Beckett's work to philosophical interpretation lies, I think, in the fact that his texts continually seem to pull the rug from under the feet of the philosopher by showing themselves to be conscious of the possibility of such interpretations; or, better, such interpretations seem to lag behind the text they are trying to interpret; or, better still, such interpretations seem to lag behind their object by saying too much: something essential to Beckett's language is lost by overshooting the text and ascending into the stratosphere of meta-language. (2004, 165-6)

Viewed this way, these texts, which are themselves presentations of the faculty of interpretation operating in situations in which the attempt to interpret can only be construed as absurd or insane, thus become beguilingly enigmatic exercises in self-reflexive attempts not to reflect. What becomes most clearly the issue is the act of interpretation itself, and the apparatus which is at work in the attempt to make sense, philosophical or otherwise, of the world, of ourselves, or of literature (which is, generally, itself some sort of attempt to make sense of the world, or ourselves, et cetera).

As the preoccupation and method of the preceding two chapters would already have indicated, my opinion is that this process of turning the cogito back on itself is done by way of particular formal strategies. These strategies can be seen as analogous to the modernist attempt, as exemplified by Joyce, Woolf, Proust or Faulkner, to depict the stream of consciousness as it presents itself to the mind. (The difficulty of talking about fictional forms such as these in a vocabulary freighted with the Cartesian distinctions of subject and object, thinker and thought, content and form, becomes immediately apparent; the stream of consciousness does not present itself to the mind, it simply *is* the mind). Whereas Proust and Joyce, to whom Richard Begam compares Beckett in this regard (1996, 13-15), depict the process whereby the mind acts as author of itself by way

of a history of its narration of itself to itself, in Beckett's fiction the process does not lead anywhere, does not arrive at a stable subjectivity, or render itself perspicuous in any way. Instead, keenly aware of the futility of all they may possibly say, and wanting only to be allowed to go silent, to cease having to speak, this writer's protagonists are condemned nevertheless to go on narrating, as if "flayed alive by memory," their minds "crawling with cobras, not daring to dream or think and powerless not to" (269), as Malone puts it.

In a similar vein, Thomas Trezise writes that Beckett's fiction reminds us that

The task of the writer is rather to open the question of literature itself as the dispossession of that world, and most notably its foundation, the *cogito* or "first person." His uncompromising preoccupation with the question of subjectivity as a question, as a *recherché* in the Proustian sense of the term, as a search originating in the immemorial dispossession of subjectivity itself. (1990, 33)

The implications of the process beginning in the dispossession of Moran's story, and followed through with in the destitution which overtakes Molloy, grow increasingly stark in *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, in which the pursuit of the first person erodes the ground of subjectivity and opens meaning onto a gaping abyss. Beckett interrogates the question of literature so thoroughly that all meaning, all sense, disappears into the void. My concern in this chapter is to illustrate how any reading of the novels must engender an analogous process for the attempt to interpret them, and how interpretation itself must be reconsidered in light of this. I go about doing so by comparing the relationship to language depicted in the novels to two analogous theoretical constructions of a similar situation, namely Derrida's thinking on *différance* and Lacan's understanding of the governing dynamics of psychosis, and extrapolating the implications these hold for our understanding of what understanding itself may be.

I Am, Therefore I Think

Whereas, in *Molloy*, the self-undermining aspects of form operate by way of a subversion of plot and disorganization of the time of narration – operate, as it were, as framing devices which destabilize the narration they frame – beginning with *Malone Dies* and growing increasingly acute in the fragmented, self-consuming narration of *The*

Unnamable, a different, more endemic, sort of formal instability comes into play. This instability consists largely of the narrators' repeated acknowledgement, within their own narratives, of, at best, the insufficiency of narrative to achieve that which, implicitly, any narration must hope to, and, at worst, the indication that that which they primarily seek relief from is narration itself. Condemned to speak, they remain, nevertheless, sharply conscious of the absurdity, falsity, and futility of anything they can possibly say, and thus any attempt to engender a narrative, to string together a story or make verbal sense of their condition, implodes, leaving them contemplating the incomprehensible, inarticulable state in which they find themselves. And yet these narrators nevertheless remain unable not to try to articulate such a state, which brings about further narration, which, in its turn, prolongs and exacerbates the absurdity in a double bind which can only be escaped by ceasing to be.

Accordingly, such is exactly what the narration ostensibly seeks to achieve: non-being. In *Malone Dies*, this can be construed quasi-thematically, as the narrative occurs as the protagonist's means of whiling away the time until he dies, but, more fundamentally, the attempt to attain non-existence is instantiated as a narrative strategy, a way in which the narrators of *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, failing all else, try to evacuate their narration of any content; try, as it were, to make their narration commit suicide. Malone is the first to refer to this as an "aporetic" (181), but the term is repeated by the narrator of *The Unnamable*, in what Critchley calls a "sketch of a method to be followed in the text" (2004, 195). At the very beginning of his monumental narrative, the *Unnamable* asks:

What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. I should mention before I go any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means. Can one be ephectic otherwise than unawares? I don't know. (1959, 293-4)

As Critchley observes, "these are performative enactments of the very method being described" (2004, 195), with language finding itself blocked at every point of possible progression, being forced to retract every assertion as it is made. The acknowledgement

that one says aporia without knowing what it means enacts an aporia of description or designation, the resigned “I don’t know” is itself an ephectic suspension of judgment on the possibility of being ephectic otherwise than unawares – a suspension of judgment that is possible only because of the narrator’s unawareness.

The notion of an aporetics contradicts the question as to how to proceed, implying – or, more properly, actively denoting – the impossibility of progress, an absolute impasse. One thus proceeds by acknowledging one’s inability to proceed, to go on; but one goes on, nevertheless, in circles, “as if with one foot nailed to the floor” (Critchley 2004, 194). Such a method is required because of the state inhabited by the narrator, of which he says “[t]he fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter. And at the same time I am obliged to speak” (294).

A useful manner of characterizing such an aporetics would be by way of reference to the analogy Wittgenstein draws at the end of the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (which comes immediately before his assertion that “[w]hat we cannot speak about we must consign to silence” [1961, 151]), where he characterizes the use of words to reach a conclusion as equivalent to the use of a ladder to reach a point. The point having been reached, Wittgenstein argues, the ladder ceases to be necessary – “[one] must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after [one] has climbed up it” (151).²

To adapt the analogy, given the radical instability of language in Beckett’s vision, the ladder is taken apart as the narrator ascends it, falls apart under the pressure of meaning that which it is incapable of meaning. This is enacted, logically and linguistically, in passages such as the following:

² A possible reference is made to this in *Watt*, as Jacqueline Hofer notes (1959, 74-5), in the monologue Arsene, the retiring butler, delivers to Watt as the former prepares to leave. The monologue is, in many ways, a precursor to those of the *Trilogy*, in which the narrator’s attempts to “eff the ineffable” bring about strange contortions and convolutions of language. Arsene, describing a change brought about during the course of his stay in the house of Mr Knott, describes how “[s]omething slipped. And the world itself changed What was changed was existence off the ladder.” John Fletcher takes issue with Hofer’s Wittgensteinian construal of this passage, writing that the “interpretation is quite erroneous. Mr Beckett told me in 1961 that the ‘ladder’ is a reference to a ‘Welsh joke’ (an *Itma* classic, I’m informed)” (1967, 87-8), while Richard Begam makes a similar point following correspondence with Beckett himself (1996, 73). Nevertheless, the general relevance of the ideas Wittgenstein propounds strikes me as remaining valid to any discussion of, if not *Watt*, at least the *Trilogy*.

. . . I won't say it, I can't say it, I have no language but theirs, no, perhaps I'll say it, even with their language, for me alone, so as not to have not lived in vain, and so as to go silent, if that is what confers the right to silence, and it's unlikely, it's they who have silence in their gift, they who decide, the same old gang, among themselves, no matter, to hell with silence, I'll say what I am, so as not to have not been born for nothing . . . (1959, 328)

Contra Wittgenstein, the inability to speak of things, one's inability to speak of anything at all, means that one is "obliged to speak"; the impossibility of uttering any conclusive statement compels one to go on speaking. The form that evolves through the course of the *Trilogy* systematically pursues a response to the quandary this entails, by way of, at first, an attempt to lever oneself out of language by way of language, and later by trying to make it implode on itself and perhaps, in this way, attain silence.

This is the logic at work in the self-invalidating sentences in *The Unnamable* that, having begun to make an assertion, fizzle out or fall apart under the weight of their own inadequacy (their own delusion as to the possibility of making any assertions, one could say). An example of this is the assertion that "I resume, so long as, let me see, so long as one, so long as he, ah fuck all that, so long as this, then that, agreed, that's good enough, I nearly got stuck" (367). Inversely, however, the preceding sentence, while dramatizing the entropic aspect of the narrative, also points to the instigating principle. The narrator, finding his chain of consecutive occurrence falling apart as he tries to make them cohere, can fall back on a meagre "this, then that"; the only definitive criterion is that he not "get stuck." Similarly, Malone at one point writes "I have no time to pick my words, I am in a hurry to be done And yet no, I am in no hurry. Decidedly this evening I shall say nothing that is not false, I mean nothing that is not calculated to leave me in doubt as to my real intentions" (207).

Being incapable of remaining silent, there is obviously no way in which the narrator can stay "stuck," but a more rigorous obligation underpins the progressive demand that instantiates the narratives of the *Trilogy*. Being incapable of keeping still – of desisting from thinking and speaking – these narrators are incapable of ceasing to exert their analytic faculty on their condition, of not trying to make their state mean something. While the dual narratives which constitute *Molloy* disintegrate within a structure that in many ways resembles those whereby narrative sense is often construed, they nevertheless

disintegrate, in the process parodying the pretensions of such structures to offer salvation by way of meaning. The situations from which *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* are narrated render the redemptive capacities of the sense-making apparatus absurd, and yet – this being the hysterical, unbearable irony – the protagonists cannot relinquish the attempt to make sense. Faced with a situation that admits of no interpretation, they cannot cease trying to palliate their condition by way of interpretation.

What is made evident in the course of the narration is the fact that interpretation is its own end; or rather, that the impossibility of ending obliges one to a perpetual interpretation. Not being able to “draw the line and make the tot,” the narrator, resigned to meaninglessness and obscurity, is nevertheless still compelled to go on making sense in whatever way he can. An example of this aspect of the discourse occurs very early in *The Unnamable*, at the point at which the narrator writes “[h]ere all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities. Rhetoric” (296), and gives as an example “[t]hese lights for instance, which I do not require to mean anything” (296). He proceeds to explain what he means thus: “I am relying on these lights, as indeed on all other similar sources of credible perplexity, to help me continue and perhaps even conclude” (296). Just as the narrator does not “require” the lights to mean anything, so too we, strictly speaking, do not require anything to mean anything. Because “the discourse must go on,” however, he relies on them, he needs such sources of perplexity, in order to continue narrating, thinking, postulating, to continue making sense of his (strictly senseless) world.

This side of death, the only discourse that could do justice to the state which the narrators try to narrate, the only narration that could offer a sensible response to the condition they attempt to find words for, would be the language of madness. Such a language, however, if truly mad, would not be a language, and, if a language, would exclude the madness it seeks to speak. Thus the narrators wriggle on the end of the line, incapable of speaking their predicament, their predicament the incapacity to speak their situation. Incapable of speaking a language of madness, their attempts begin to sound more and more like madness itself.

In so doing, however, the form of the discourse begins to approximate the situation it is trying to describe – the form of thought begins to resemble the content of

thought – and the narrative attains a stylistic equivalent of the disintegration of language and consciousness it depicts. Both *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* can be read as internal monologues of characters who, faced with the proposition “I think, therefore I am,” attempt, and fail, to cease being by trying to stop thinking.

Malone Dies

Where *Molloy* uses plot to undermine the notions of progress and conclusion narrative structures imply, *Malone Dies* renders absurd the very possibility of plot. The assertion of an internal coherence to events, whether causal, emotional or logical, is the move on which the delineation of plot depends, and the way in which we make sense of ourselves as agents and the series of events that constitute our lives is primarily narrative. The series of events that constitute Malone’s narrative, however, admit of no interpretation, either to Malone himself or to us as readers, in terms of consequential plot development. Stranded near to complete stasis, expecting nothing, hoping for nothing (except death), the things which occur in Malone’s narration are merely occurrences. They are not developments toward a conclusion or symbolically significant. When his discomfort is replaced by calm, this is merely the result of the inevitable flux of time, and the calm will just as inevitably return to discomfort. Nothing leads to anything else, nothing progresses.

This absence of progress undermines the procedures whereby we understand plot. A sense of consequential development allows events and symbols to be arranged in a conceptual scheme; where no such development occurs, events and symbols merely are, occurring uncannily severed from any pattern or order which would render them comprehensible. This is precisely the effect achieved by *Malone Dies*, an effect which makes the novel a very difficult book to read. Just as Malone himself has no scheme by way of which to make his existence mean anything other than the sheer fact of its continuation, his narration of this waiting deflects interpretative intention and renders the positing of a conceptual scheme entirely fallacious.

The insufficiency of narrative for the demands made of it is evident in another way. At the beginning of his narration, Malone ostensibly resigns himself to the impossibility of making his situation meaningful, and declares that all he hopes for is to

play: “[i]t is no longer the ancient night, the recent night,” he writes, “now it is a game, I am going to play” (1959, 180). I take him to mean by “the ancient night, the recent night” the earnest belief in and attempt to reach some sort of outside of language and subjectivity, an equivalent to that which animates the quests Murphy, Molloy and Moran undertake.

One can read the “earnestness” as that to which Murphy is prey: the belief in and desire for some sort of conclusion or *telos*, some peace that surpasses cogitation. This assertion is substantiated when at another point he describes his familiarity with “the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home” (195). Molloy, too, (in the interpretation Nussbaum offers [1988, 242]), in his desire to reach his mother, to return to the point preceding his own birth, exemplifies this longing for darkness. Malone ostensibly tries to give up on this endeavour, attempting to content himself merely with playing.

Malone describes his own relationship to these desires when he writes that, at some point:

. . . I gave up trying to play and took to myself for ever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wondering, darkness, long stumbling with outstretched arms, hiding. Such is the earnestness from which, for nearly a century now, I have never been able to depart. From now on it will be different. I shall never do anything any more but play. No, I must not begin with an exaggeration. But I shall from now on play a great part of the time (180)

Trapped between the ancient night and playing, however, Malone’s continuous efforts to narrate are punctuated with his exasperated acknowledgment that all his narration is basically pointless, and that he can nevertheless still not stop. Wanting only to play, Malone finds himself, more and more, incapable of doing so, breaking off his narrations with a despondent “[t]his is awful” (191), and asking “shall I be incapable to the end of lying on any other subject [than myself]?” Having given up the hope of achieving anything meaningful through narrative, Malone discovers that it is insufficient even to distract him from the meaninglessness in which he is mired.

The way in which Malone’s attempt, and consistent failure, to lose himself in his narrative is continuously interrupted by eviscerating self-analysis, reflection on the futility of his endeavour and musings on the absurdity of his situation gives the narrative

its characteristic rhythm. Examples of this are instances such as when, having begun his first story about Saposcat, he wearily pauses to observe “[w]hat tedium. And I call that playing” (189), or describes how “[a]fter the fiasco, the solace, the repose, I began again, to try and live, cause to live, be another, in myself, in another. . . . But little by little with a different aim” (195). Just as the beginnings of a sustainable tempo are being established, Malone explodes with exasperation at the falsity, futility and incapacity of his narrative to do anything other than merely fill time.

The most striking effect of these interruptions is to render the rhythm with which Malone’s narration proceeds identical to the conceptual pattern Derrida describes as characteristic of reading. Pointing out the way in which, during the act of reading, the mind oscillates between immersion in the words and the attempt to establish a conceptual framework in which to place them, between unmediated sense and mediating interpretation (without being able completely to achieve either, because unable to proceed without either), Derrida writes that the rhythm characteristic of this activity is “a plurality of continuous jerks, of uninterrupted jolts” (1986, 105). Such is a particularly apt characterization of the rhythm of *Malone Dies*, with its aborted attempts to lose itself in narrative punctuated with random observation and meditation. One example of the technique – in miniature, so to speak – is a passage such as “[i]n his country the problem – no, I can’t do it” (1959, 196), while another good illustration is his self-encouragement when he muses “[d]ead world, airless, waterless. That’s it, reminisce. . . . Dearest of lights, wan, pitted, least fatuous of lights. That’s it, babble” (201). This technique is, significantly, not without rhythm; the texts have a unique tempo and musicality. My contention is that this tempo is exemplary of certain aspects or states of consciousness

Derrida similarly describes the nature of this oscillation between text and meta-text when he writes that, when reading, one must continuously “replunge [meta-language] into the text in order to extract it from the text” (1986, 115). Malone at one point talks of how he “affirms, denies, go down”, and he himself repeatedly tries to immerse himself in his narration, to lose himself in the telling of a story, only to be forced out of it by his irresistible urge to comment on it, to subject his narrative to criticism. And the criticism is almost inevitably a disillusioned diatribe on the hopelessness of his entire project.

Malone's meta-narrative interludes often take the form of reflections on the metaphysics of narrative, so to speak; observations regarding the possibility, nature and significance of the fact that there are beings who find it necessary to narrate their existence into meanings (the degree to which it is necessary indicated by the fact that, despite having decided only to play, Malone continuously finds himself trying to make sense of his situation, to find meaning). A good example of this is his assertion that "[a]ll I want now is to make a last effort to understand, to begin to understand, how such creatures [who exist in and through narrative] are possible. No, it is not a question of understanding. Of what then? I don't know. . . . The last word is not yet said between me and – yes the last word is said. Perhaps I simply want to hear it said again. No, I want nothing" (1959, 199). The situation from which Malone narrates – on his death-bed, having given up the hope of any redemption by narration – renders the activity of telling stories acutely absurd, and yet he nevertheless finds himself compelled to continue.

Malone Dies can thus be read as an allegory of the act of writing and the condition of the writer. Simultaneously, however, nothing could be more simply realistic – the situation presented is plausible, there is no fantastical element to it, and the writing we read is that written by Malone himself. As such we can construe his narrative as merely what it is: a story about someone waiting to die and subjected to mortal tedium as he endures it. The allegory is thus, in a way analogous to that described in relation to *Molloy*, an allegory of the impossibility of allegory, and the condition depicted in *Malone Dies* is thus one in which the subject is situated in language with which he cannot do anything to help his condition. The self-deconstruction of the tales narrated in *Molloy* is taken a step further to the point at which stories cannot even begin to be told, or, if they begin, do not lead anywhere. Allegory – to speak otherwise, to talk of that which is other than that which is the literal content of which one speaks – is rendered impossible.

Every narrative gambit Malone makes is thus subject to his own self-ironising; every attempt to make a meaning – or even merely to play – is undermined by this impossibility of allegory. A point which strikes me as related to this is that made by Northrop Frye who argues that at the very extremes of the ironic mode – such as with Beckett, or Kafka – one begins to approach the mythic; a stark enough depiction of the human condition elevates human being to some sort of universality of banality that brings

it within touching distance of the universal and timeless (1957, 46). Something like this is at work in *Malone Dies*: the “mortal tedium” its writer-protagonist battles becomes allegorical of the human condition as a whole.

The notion that Malone allegorises the the condition of the subject constituted in and by language is substantiated by the fact that the games he plays are stories, language games. He describes how Sapó “was sorry he had not learnt the art of thinking, beginning by folding back the second and third fingers the better to put the index on the subject and the little finger on the verb . . . and sorry he could make no meaning of the babel raging in his head, the doubts, desires, imaginings and dreads” (1959, 193). At another point he describes how, what with his degeneration, the subject has begun to fall far from the verb and the object to disappear somewhere in between (235). Malone’s storytelling is thus a dramatization of consciousness itself as existing in language; being conscious is represented as merely the playing of the sorts of games that he is playing.

The situation elucidates the nature of the allegory in a further sense. Confined to his bed, all he has with which to manipulate his world are his stick and his pencil. In this sense they function, quasi-allegorically, as phalluses: in Lacan’s post-structural reinterpretation of Freud, the Oedipal dynamic is construed as taking place in the entrance and through the access to language. The Name of the Father, the Phallus, is the sum total of signification, the system of laws that govern the operation of language. Symbolic castration occurs through one’s renunciation of one’s pre-verbal self (conceived as an agglomerate of drives and desires) and identification of oneself as the subjective “I” situated in language, and hence subject to all the constraints language implies (Lacan 1993, 95-6). Situation in language, however, gives one the capacity to control and manipulate the world around oneself, to subject it to conceptual control. Malone’s stick is thus, functionally, identical to a certain use of language, being that with which he pulls things toward and pushes things away from him, that with which he manipulates his environment. Such a depiction, though, works to deflate any notions of language as carrier of truth or means whereby meaning is disclosed, which is why the allegory is one which points to the impossibility of allegory.

Malone's response to the loss of his stick, which is perhaps the most brilliant instance of philosophical parody in all of Beckett's work, is a good example the way his situation makes allegory impossible. Malone writes "I have lost my stick," and decides:

I suppose the wisest thing now is to live it over again, meditate upon it and be edified. It is thus that man distinguishes himself from the ape and rises, from discovery to discovery, ever higher, toward the light. Now that I have lost my stick I realize what it is I have lost and all it meant to me. And thence ascend, painfully, to an understanding of the Stick, shorn of all its accidents, such as I had never dreamt of. What a broadening of the mind. (1959, 255)

The parody here works not merely by the transposition of terms from enlightenment rational discourse into a context in which the philosophy can offer no possible consolation, but through the dramatization of the conceptual procedure the discourse itself rehearses – by way of a *reductio ad absurdum*. In light of the absolute stasis of Malone's situation (and, by implication, ours), the ideas of ascension and progress are saved from appalling delusion only by the hilarity of the depiction. Malone's proposal precisely rehearses the conceptual move singled out by Derrida, in "White Mythology" (1982), as characteristic of metaphysical thinking (as elaborated on in chapter one), and deconstructs it as thoroughly as one could hope to.

The pencil is even more fundamentally connected to the protagonist's subjectivity, being that through which he comes into being: when he loses his pencil, he ceases to exist, insofar as his existence is existence in print. As Malone himself writes, "[t]his exercise book is my life" (1959, 222). This point ties in to Porter Abbot's categorization of Beckett's writing as "autography" (1996, 5). Grouping Beckett with Rousseau, St Augustine, and Laurence Sterne, Porter Abbot sees the idea of the way in which these writers not so much write their existence as find their existence in writing as fundamental to an understanding of the *oeuvre*. Rather than there being a relation such that the life lived is written in an autobiographical manner, the life is the life of and in writing; it is in writing that these writers exist, so to speak. 'Autography,' hence, in contrast to autobiography, refers to the achievement of the self in writing, rather than the living of a life which subsequently comes to be written.

Sterne seems an especially useful intertext with which to situate Beckett, and closer in tone and intention to the latter than either St Augustine or Rousseau, whose

projects would seem to offer the possibility, or at least proceed on the assumption of the possibility, of a positive autography. With Beckett, however, as with Sterne, the act of narration continuously deflects or defers the achievement of a self: the digressions whereby the narrative attempts to reach its subject matter merely open on to other digressions, all of which circle around the absence at the centre of being. Where St Augustine and Rousseau write in order to bring a self into being, the texts of Beckett and Sterne illustrate the way in which writing and narrative consciousness prevent one from achieving self-identity. It is this contradiction at the heart of selfhood that traps Malone in his constant, irresolvable dialectic between the games he plays and the absence, the end of the game, he hopes to achieve. Michael Sherringham sees this as “a process rooted in the workings of the reflexive consciousness itself. Beckett’s fictions are haunted by a sense that the mind’s quintessential mode is citation: in quest of the source of its own narration, it can only cite alien authorities. When it wishes to play the author, it can only quote” (1985, 82).

In a similar vein to Porter Abbot’s above-mentioned observation, Begam compares Beckett’s project to those of Joyce and Proust, exemplified in works such as *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Remembrance of Time Past*, the latter of which must be the clearest and least equivocal instance of an autographic novel of all those mentioned. In contrast to Proust’s work, in which the work of writing brings the writer to the self and identity from which he writes, in which the self is the achievement of the work, “[f]or Beckett,” Begam writes, “there is no epic struggle to make the past and present cohere in a moment of self-revelation, no grand effort to ‘unite’ the hero and ‘the narrator,’ to confront the man who ultimately will become the ‘author of his own story.’ In other words, what Beckett gives us is not an autobiographical novel but its critical deconstruction” (1996, 6).

While the mind depicted in *Malone Dies* has given up trying to find the source of its own narration, it nevertheless still finds itself veering back, as if by the inexorable velocity of the language by way of which it proceeds, to the futile attempt to attain a certainty on which the self may be founded. This dialectical vacillation moves between being and creation, between living and inventing. Where the autographer seeks to bring himself into existence by creating, by narrating, his being, Malone’s narration, while

presented in the first person, continuously indicates the way in which the very fact of the narration obscures the self it ostensibly means to illuminate. Describing what he calls his “present state,” Malone writes:

All my senses are trained full on me, me. Dark and silent and stale, I am no prey for them. I am far from the sounds of blood and breath, immured. I shall not speak of my sufferings. Cowering deep down among them I feel nothing. It is there I die, unbeknown to my stupid flesh. That which is seen, that which cries and writhes, my witless remains. Somewhere in this turmoil thought struggles on, it too wide of the mark. It too seeks me, as it always has, where I am not to be found. (1959, 187)

That the self here described does not coincide with even the thought which “struggles on” indicates why narration, or the attempt to engage in language of any kind, will inevitably falsify that which it purports to record. Malone concludes the above-quoted passage by saying of thought “[o]n others let it wreak its dying rage, and leave me in peace” (187). Narrative consciousness is thus depicted as one of, perhaps the principal, aspect of being that the self waits to be delivered from.

A movement between the “ancient night” and the playing of games such as described earlier is elucidatory in this context. The self cannot achieve complete and total unitary self-coincidence, “shapelessness and speechlessness . . . darkness . . . hiding” (181), without ceasing to be, but it cannot continue to be without wanting to be completely self-identical. In like manner, the self cannot step out of the game, but it cannot not attempt to do so; the game is constituted by the attempt to escape it. Malone’s narration vacillates between these two equal and opposite impossibilities, with the depiction of the condition this entails taken to its illogical conclusion in *The Unnamable*.

The desire for conclusion, for conclusive closure, is thus identical to the desire for death. Malone’s urge to tell a story about another is the means whereby he can cease to be, whereby he can completely objectify his self and escape subjectivity. Thus, Malone’s death happens as he narrates the end of the story of Macmann, and the convergence between the two is complete, with a formally neat conclusion. On closer inspection, however, exactly the opposite is evidently the case: Malone’s death means the impossibility of concluding the story of Macmann. Rather than finding resolution in the conclusion of his tale, the conclusion of his life denies all resolution. This contradiction

between the form he hopes to bring about and the formlessness that threatens it, the fear of which is embodied in Malone's anxiety that he will finish either too soon or not finish at all, is, finally, impossible to find a way around.

In this way the text enacts the narrative double bind which I find its most interesting characteristic. From the very beginning the prospect of his death forces Malone to consider the formal properties of his narration. Death, Malone's finitude, is that which demands that he structure his narration in time, while his death is simultaneously that which obliterates the possibility of structuring narration, that which removes any capacity he may have to structure it. The conundrum seems articulated when he writes "[a]ll my life long I have put off the reckoning saying, Too soon, too soon. Well it is still too soon. 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" (182).

What he refers to here is a point in existence at which a conclusion can be achieved, a point at which he can step back from his own life and thought and see it as having achieved the completion that a complete life would have. The significant fact, though, is obviously that one only reaches this with one's death, and thus there can never be a moment in one's life when, edified at last, one can draw the line and make the tot. In this sense the work of art becomes analogous to the work of life, and the relationship to form to that of one's relationship to one's own death. There is no vantage point within life from which one can observe life, no language other than language with which one can evaluate language. There can be no *Aufhebung*, but only the continuous vacillation between the impossibility of speech and the impossibility of silence. The condition of this irresolvable dialectic is rendered even more excruciatingly acute in *The Unnamable*.

The Unnamable

The situation of the protagonist in *The Unnamable* presents a gruesome literalisation of what a 'thinking thing' might resemble: the narrator, who refers to himself at various times as Basil, Mahood and Worm before accepting that he is, quite literally, the Unnamable (and to whom I thus refer, for consistency, as 'the Unnamable'), having lost

his torso and arms, is a head attached to a torso without arms or legs stuck in a barrel of sand outside a restaurant on the Rue de Brancion. As Deidre Bair explains, however:

This novel is really about the obsessive-compulsive need for words, not about Mahood, Worm, Basil or any of the others who are named in its pages. "At the end of my work there's nothing but dust- the namable," Beckett has said. "In the last book, *L'Innommable*, there's complete disintegration. No 'I,' no 'have,' no 'being,' no nominative, no accusative, no verb. There's no way to go on." (1978, 400).

And yet, within the lump of flesh which is this narrator, thought struggles on. The stream of consciousness which passes through his mind is attributed to a sadistic "they," a committee of the Zeitgeist whose words the narrator speaks and whose ideas he expresses. "I don't say anything, I don't know anything," as he puts it, "these voices are not mine, nor these thoughts, but the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me" (1959, 350). The protagonist, compelled continuously to think the thoughts and utter the words of others, finds himself split from himself, and thus condemned to try and find his way back to some sort of self-identity by way of his narration.

This situation illustrates aspects of consciousness made apparent in psychosis. According to Lacan, what psychosis makes evident about not only the abnormal mind but all consciousness is that "the words we depend on are imposed on us, that speech is an overlay, a parasite, the form of cancer with which human beings are afflicted" (qtd in Miller 1980, 46). Psychosis occurs when there is a failure, a refusal, to completely enter the symbolic order, which occurs because the subject fails to fully internalize "the law of symbolization" (Lacan 1993, 83). It is because no law of signification is established whereby the use or interpretation of language can be unequivocally grounded that the frantic and irrational hermeneutic activity that characterizes psychosis, discussed in the first chapter, is brought about. The law remains ancillary to the subject, rather than being completely introjected, and language is thus experienced as something foreign and invasive. The psychotic fails to identify him or herself entirely and unequivocally with the subject produced by language, or remains aware, in ways which are usually repressed, that "the subject is only a second copy of his own identity" (97). For the psychotic, I is, very literally, an other.

Such a situation gives rise to “a kernel of inertia” (32), an “impasse” (219), something “legible but without issue” (31), which, because it cannot be assimilated into the field of signification, returns as the uncanny, both recognizable and hideously different. The words the Unnamable speaks, the thoughts he thinks, and the characters he variously tries to identify himself with present themselves to him in exactly this, irretrievably estranged, manner. Lacan writes that the psychotic experiences “an irruption in the real of something that he has never known, a sudden emergence of a total strangeness that will progressively bring on a radical submersion of all his categories to the point of forcing him into a veritable reshaping of his world” (86).

A comparison of the narrators of the *Trilogy* with Daniel Schreber, whose memoirs Freud and Lacan used as their primary text on psychosis, is especially revealing on the above-mentioned point. Schreber writes that “*it’s not I who refer everything to myself, it’s he who refers everything to me, it’s this God who speaks non-stop inside me, through his various agents and extensions*” (qtd in Lacan 1993, 135; italics original). The idea that language is the product of a foreign agency, and consciousness a parasite, which is here expressed is a conception recapitulated in all the narratives which comprise the *Trilogy*, and represented in its greatest acuity in *The Unnamable*. A good example of the similarity is the instance in which the narrator writes:

I shall start asking myself questions, prompted by them, like those I have been asking concerning me, and them, and these sudden shifts of time and age, and how to succeed at last where I had always failed, so that they may be pleased with me, and perhaps leave me in peace at last, and free to do what I have to do, namely try and please the other, if that is what I have to do, so that he may be pleased with me, and leave me in peace at last, and give me quittance, and the right to rest, and silence, if that is in his gift. (1959, 337)

All mental activity is construed as the imposition of words and thoughts belonging to another, and consciousness is experienced as a parasitic affliction.

Lacan writes that “this network [of voices], which is symbolic by nature and maintains the image in a degree of stability . . . is necessary so that everything doesn’t suddenly reduce to nothing, so that the entire veil of the imaginary relation doesn’t suddenly draw back and disappear in the yawning blackness” (1993, 99). This observation points out the opposition between language and nothingness which

constitutes the dialectic in which the Unnamable's narrative vacillates particularly clearly. Beckett's depiction, however, would seem to suggest that language, instead of being a necessary barrier between the "yawning blackness" and the self, is that which stops the self from being able to lapse blissfully back into the nothingness which all its efforts are directed to finding again. The yawning blackness is related to with not horror but, as Malone puts it, "the rapture of vertigo" (1959, 195). The *Trilogy's* narrators all hope to escape the network of voices, but all remain prey to the persistence of the voice that goes unstoppably on.

In one sense, the narrators simply *are* this voice that goes on – which is why their desire for silence is a desire for self-extinction. The Unnamable, though, nevertheless posits a self – or an aspect of his self – who escapes the psychotic play of signification as existing within the darkness, beyond the reach of the discourse. This "kernel of inertia" the narrator designates "Worm," a being who precedes signification, who exists, so to speak, at the centre from which all words issue, a self which is a non-self who escapes the self-laceration that is signification. Worm neither is nor is not, existing by definition in a place where the logic of binaries that govern signification has not yet taken hold; that which is before the primary differentiation of self and other has been made. In Lacanian terms, Worm, "epicentre of joys, of griefs, of calm" (349), represents being before the advent of the symbolic order, and the protagonist says of him that "[w]hat he does not know is that there is anything to know. His senses tell him nothing, nothing about himself, nothing about the rest, and this distinction is beyond him. Feeling nothing, knowing nothing, he exists nevertheless" (349). Paradoxically, however, Worm "seems the truest possession because the most unchanging. The one outside of life we always were in the end, all our long vain life long. . . . The one ignorant of himself and silent, ignorant of his silence and silent, who could not be and gave up trying" (349). Worm, not knowing there is anything to know, escapes the economy of knowledge, and thus occupies that space of consciousness, posited from as early as *Murphy*, which has not lapsed into subject-object relations and in which the subject imagines he can escape his subjectivity.

While the Unnamable identifies his self, his true, pre-originary self, with Worm, (just as Murphy considers the "best of himself" the part exceeding, as going beyond, the

realm of the nameable), he also recognizes that if he were to try and “be Worm” it would prove “impossible” (350). “If I were Worm I wouldn’t know it,” the narrator recognizes, “I wouldn’t say it, I wouldn’t say anything, I’d be Worm” (350). As long as he says or thinks or knows anything, thus, he knows he cannot be Worm. This conundrum represents the culmination of the process of the sloughing off of the series of selves described in the *Trilogy*, as the speaker’s attempt to identify himself, to pin himself down, as it were, with a name, become ever more frantic and futile.

In relation to this failure of naming, Richard Begam makes the interesting and apposite observation that Derrida at certain points explicitly refers to *différance* as the condition defined precisely by unnamability. “Indeed,” writes Begam, “so intimate is the relation between *différance* and the ‘unnamable’ that Derrida concludes his title essay on the subject [of *différance*] by treating these two terms as virtually interchangeable” (1996, 154). *Différance* is, of course, the pre-conceptual movement which allows conception to take place, that which allows systems of difference and signification to occur. Signification, though, aspiring to unequivocal meaning, seeks to suppress the play of *différance* on which it is founded, and the re-appearance of the latter thus always threatens to subvert whatever economy of difference is premised thereon (Derrida 1982, 6-10). It is the latter that deconstructive reading hopes to open the text up to, to indicate in which ways the play of *différance* is re-inscribed, despite the author’s intentions, in the text. *The Unnamable* reaches an extreme of self-deconstructive procedure that would be difficult to equal, with the very opening statements of the novel perfectly exemplifying the irreducible play of *différance* described above: “I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on” (1959, 293). The way in which every assertion immediately puts itself implicitly in question, puts the very act of asserting in question (“keep going . . . call that going”), enacts the abysmal self-referential procedure deconstruction seeks to implement.

Derrida’s philosophical enterprise can very broadly be conceived of as the attempt to allow into philosophical discourse, which thinks of its *telos* as the attempt to attain unequivocally clear assertion and absolute transparency, the play of *différance* which destabilizes any statement and renders any use of language ludic. Rather than continuing after the metaphysical goals of total and certain explanation, of an “active interpretation,

which substitutes incessant deciphering for the unveiling of truth as the presentation of the thing itself in its presence” (Derrida 1982, 18), deconstructive reading emphasizes the irreducible polysemic play of textuality. Derrida’s thought attempts to open closed systems up to the other in opposition to which they are defined.

Such a project amounts to an attempt to achieve the conceptual equivalent of what Lacan understands psychosis to be. (Lacan, after all – and I make this observation with tongue only partially in cheek – claims that “the index of psychosis is the neologism” [1993, 71]). The psychoanalytic and deconstructionist positions mirror each another in particularly elucidative ways on this point: where Lacan considers psychosis the foreclosure of the Name of the Father as the principle guaranteeing the stability of signification, Derrida sees his project as the opening up of a field of signification artificially stabilized by the foreclosure of *différance* to the irreducible and uncanny multiplicity on the eradication of which it is premised.

Furthermore, the linguistic effects Derrida describes as characteristic of *différance* are identical to those which Lacan points out as occurring in the case of psychosis. For example, Derrida writes that “[t]here is no essence of *différance*; it (is) that which not only can never be appropriated in the *as such* of its name or its appearing, but also that which threatens the authority of the *as such* in general, of the presence of the thing itself in its essence” (1982, 25). He continues: “[w]hat we know, or what we would know if it were simply a question here of something to know, is that there has never been, never will be a unique word, a master-name [a Name of the Father]. (1982, 25-7)

While the parallels with Lacan’s thinking are clear enough not to need spelling out, it is revealing that Derrida, in tracing a genealogy of his thinking on *différance* from Nietzsche through Freud, points out the similarity between many of the latter’s insights and his own thinking. Derrida writes, for instance, that *différance*, “which, as an energetics or economics of forces, commits itself to putting into question the primacy of presence as consciousness, is also the major motif of Freud’s thought” (18).

Derrida’s criticism of Lacan, in “The Purveyor of Truth” (1987), proceeds from his contention that, while Lacan recognizes the irreducible alterity at the heart of systems of signification, in his location of the subject as instantiated by way of castration, he reinscribes this absence into a conventional metaphysical topology arranged around

absence as originary presence, and an alterity that is thus domesticated into an economy of the same. Barbara Johnson rightly points out that “Lacan himself, however, never uses the word castration in the text of the original Seminar [under discussion]. . . . Derrida, by filling in what *Lacan* left blank is repeating the same gesture of blank filling for which he criticizes Lacan” (1977, 218).

Derrida’s contention is perhaps best understood as an argument against the sort of comprehensive explanatory power psychoanalytic discourse is generally considered to credit itself with. Deconstructive procedure is premised on the belief that any explanation or interpretation remains prey to linguistic slippage and the play of traces, whereas Lacan, in Derrida’s opinion, is espousing the view that “truth inhabits fiction as the master of the house, as the law of the house, as the economy of fiction” (1987, 178).

Over and above Johnson’s point with regard to the way in which his reading performs exactly that which it accuses Lacan of doing, however, Derrida’s criticism ignores, or misses, the profoundly reflexive character of Lacan’s thinking. This reflexivity is most prominent in the conceptualization of psychosis – and the conceptualization of the conceptualization of psychosis. (With regard to this, it is worth bearing in mind that Lacan’s earliest psychoanalytic work of substantial length, his doctoral dissertation, was concerned with the psychotic phenomenon).

Foreclosing on the law that governs and guarantees the symbolic order, the psychotic illustrates, in ways normality could not, what this law consists in and how it constitutes our subjectivity. As Caroline Dean puts it “[s]ince psychosis is defined by the absence of this original signifier, the psychotic becomes a rift in the symbolic order, a rift that designates the symbol as symbol, not as truth. . . . The psychotic is thus a metaphor for what is impossible, unknowable, yet most true about the self: what Lacan calls the other par excellence – the real” (1992, 118). This recognition leads Lacan to an insight very similar to the situation Beckett’s narrators find themselves in, in which any and every attempt to comprehend, or conclude, or reach a state in which they may be silent, must by necessity be conducted by way of the very thing which makes conclusion impossible. The real is that which, by definition, cannot be read, but which every reading hopes to recuperate – and in reading loses. Thus, the real is also that which destabilizes any attempt to reach closure.

The picture of consciousness sketched above may initially seem to differ quite radically from any sort of theoretical scheme whose exponents propound notions such as the possibility of a talking cure and the analysis and interpretation of not merely our ordinary, conscious use of language but the more enigmatic aspects of mentality. Lacan's major conceptual innovation, and the source of the great elasticity and subtlety of his discourse, lies in his rethinking of notions such as 'cure' and 'interpretation' in light of the insights afforded by the psychotic phenomenon. Lacan comes to see that, as Dean writes:

the unconscious is constructed through the very process of trying to understand what it is and how it works, through the process of accounting for why readings make sense. It is always already normalized or symbolized. At the same time, it is always already the blind spot of reading, the force that directs the reading and yet is itself impossible to read except in the terms we have constructed to read it. Therefore, the transferential relationship with the Lacanian analyst does not lead to a "cure," which would suggest the possibility of eliminating blind spots. It leads instead to a recognition of the unacknowledged desire in the analysand's demands, to the recognition, that is, of the analysand's own blind spot. (118)

This sort of aporetic play strikes me as fundamentally very similar to the process deconstruction engages in. Because reading itself creates the obscurity to which it is prey, because the irresolvable dialectic between clarity and opacity is what makes conception possible – because "atonement [is] in itself is a sin, calling for more atonement" (Beckett 1959, 240) – psychoanalytic thought "structures a lack into the heart of knowledge," which is thus "doomed to be for ever incomplete, the desire for it driven by an eternal quest for an ever irretrievable other" (Dean 1992, 118).

The process through which the narrative subject progresses in the course of the *Trilogy* enacts exactly this "eternal quest," in which the "irretrievable other" is conceived of as the self, as the self-identity which will allow the quest to come to an end. Tim Parks articulates the nature of the dynamic governing this process particularly well when he writes:

Consider the irony of having a mind that once believed itself big enough to get round everything. But it isn't. Again and again it retreats into bewilderment. Until bewilderment is what it directly knows. What it knows are repeated approaches,

some meticulous, some ingenious, all in vain, to the fog of bewilderment. . . . Only what is impervious to our scheming offers the mind the bewilderment it seeks, the repose in wonder. (1999, 123-4)

Thus the autonomous and comprehensive Cartesian cogito comes to know, at the end of the long adventure of clarification and enlightenment, that that which can never be known is the process of knowing itself. The answer to the question posed by the Sphinx (which, as Hegel puts it, “stands as a symbol for symbolism itself” [1920, 83]), is, finally, ‘man.’

The novels which constitute Beckett’s *Trilogy* thus enact the way the mind goes about making these “repeated approaches, some meticulous, some ingenious, all in vain, to the fog of bewilderment,” the way it goes about attempting to find its form in the frenzied dissolution which constitutes its content. Just as the attempt, in the novels, does not provide any certainty but rather puts the faculty whereby the attempt is made systematically in question, so too any attempt to interpret such texts is led irresistibly to a questioning of the set of assumptions and procedures whereby it proceeds, “[u]ntil bewilderment is what it directly knows.”

And herein lies the inexhaustible fecundity of Beckett’s texts, and literature as a whole, qua literature, for interpretation; this is what allows a text to become what Coetzee calls a classic in “allegorical terms” (2001, 5). That which simultaneously calls forth and thwarts the attempt to establish certainty and find truth is what the mind, finally, relates to and defines itself by. As the Unnamable inimitably puts it:

[Y]ou must go, I can’t go on, you must go on, I’ll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it’s done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door opens on my story, that will surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on. (1959, 418)

The *Trilogy*, depicting the process of going on, of making sense and establishing certainty, continually slipping out from underneath itself, shows the riddling mind to itself, as the Sphinx does, in that which puts it in question; what we read, in these novels, is a parody of what reading is. This is what makes these texts “allegorical classics,” in Coetzee’s sense, par excellence; what allows us repeatedly to make

renewed sense of them and repeatedly reinterpret what we mean by ‘making sense.’ All of which is possible because, as Parks, quoted above, puts it, “[o]nly what is impervious to our scheming offers the mind the bewilderment it seeks.” Bewilderment, such as that inhabited by the Unnamable, is the mind’s true medium.

Having touched on Hegel’s conception of the Sphinx-like nature of the symbolic, his thought on the matter seems a particularly apt note on which to end. Hegel’s thinking on the interpretation of works of symbolic art concerns the fusion of form and content which they perform, the manner or method of interpretation this calls forth, and the way this relates to the more general work of human intellection. Hegel writes of the work of symbolization that it “fails to grasp itself from the truth of its own substance in a form of external reality which is alone adequate to express it, and instead envisages and brings the same home to consciousness in that which is merely cognate with it, but also that which is equally foreign to it, is, in general terms, the symbolical; and we find it here concentrated to a point as riddle” (1920, 83). Etymologically, ‘riddle’ derives from the verb ‘to read,’ standing as its cognate object. To read, thus, is to riddle; to be conscious, to be riddled with symbols none of which brings us clarity or truth or conclusion, but merely more symbols.

What Hegel calls this “straining after self-conscious spirituality, which fails to grasp itself in a form of external reality which alone is adequate to express it” (83), perfectly characterizes the process the narrators of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* undergo and enact as their continuously failing attempts to attain a form or voice which would allow the attainment of formal conclusion and silence. In a process analogous to the Cartesian reduction, Beckett’s protagonists work toward escaping the form in which they find themselves confined. All of their attempts however, instantiate new forms, in a process eternally opening onto a deeper abyss – a process that is reiterated in the attempt to interpret these works, and which continuously calls for renewed interpretation. We are thus in a situation very similar to that of the Unnamable, who writes:

I add this, to be on the safe side. These things I say, and shall say, if I can, are no longer, or are not yet, or never were, or never will be, or if they were, if they are, if they will be, were not here, are not here, will not be here, but elsewhere. But I

am here. So I am obliged to add this. I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, can but a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little, sufficiently, I don't know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, and to those places where I was, where I shall be. But I have never been elsewhere, however uncertain the future. And the simplest therefore is to say that what I say, what I shall say, if I can, relates to the place where I am, to me who am there, in spite of my inability to think of these, or to speak of them, because of the compulsion I am under to speak of them, and therefore perhaps to think of them a little. (303-4)

The final fact of Beckett's fiction is simply that the voice goes on; this is all it says, and all that can safely be said of it. This may be a source of unspeakable horror, but perhaps, just possibly, there is some glimmer of hope in the relentless persistence of this voice.

Conclusion

In this thesis I have argued that Beckett's *oeuvre*, and the *Trilogy* in particular, conducts a parody of, and fictional equivalent to, the sceptical reduction Descartes engages in in his attempt to establish first philosophical principles. This parody is carried out by way of a narrative form which depicts a stream of consciousness seeking a starting point, a ground on which to situate its being and activity, in a way analogous to Descartes' *Meditations*, but finding that every attempt to do so provides only another narrative and another protagonist which intrudes between the story and the story-teller.

My contention has been that the evolution of the particular formal strategies and techniques through the course of Beckett's career can be construed as a systematic response to the paradox inherent in the attempt to depict the parody of the cogito described above. I have accordingly illustrated how *Murphy*, the earliest of his novels, deals with themes which recur throughout the *oeuvre* and which necessitate the peculiar structural subversions the *Trilogy* carries out. These subversions go right to the very heart of what narrative is constituted by, and the process of narrative reduction can be conceived of as the paring away of all excess rhetorical adornment in the attempt to arrive at the self which produces the adornment. This process of stripping away and paring down does not, however, arrive at any self or lead to the realization of certainty, but rather opens onto a dizzying abyss of referential indeterminacy, as exemplified in the very title of the novel with which this process culminates, *The Unnamable*.

I have argued that this process of continual failure to find the self through narrative is conducted through, and depicted as a subversion of, fictional forms, principal amongst which is allegory. The protagonists' failure to create allegory equates to a failure to render the literal content of their experience figurative, to sublimate their existence by way of figuration into something which means more than the simple fact of the stark destitution of their being. Moreover, the narrative failure this represents is equivalent to a fundamental interpretative failure which consists in the incapacity to create meaning, to read one's life in such a way that it can be made significant of something other than the life itself. I have thus argued that insofar as one interprets a text one renders it, to a greater or lesser extent, allegorical; that interpretation is necessarily allegorical.

The subversion of allegory carried out in the *Trilogy* thus makes any possible interpretation very problematic. This depiction of the failure of interpretation engenders an exegetical paradox which produces something of a double-bind for any attempt to read these novels and construe a meaning from them. Where the central importance of a series of narratives is to complicate the notion of meaning and to put the faculties and procedures whereby we elicit significance from the world, our existence, or art into question, the significance of such narratives will primarily be to force one to engage in a self-reflexive re-interpretation of one's assumptions regarding the nature of interpretation itself. I have argued that this is precisely the salient characteristic of Beckett's work, and have oriented my reading as a response to the issues implied by this insight.

Beckett's work, I have argued, is thus literature about literature, a depiction of our manners of depiction, which is the basis of its inexhaustible richness as a source of interpretation. The central assertion around which this thesis has been organized has been that this fiction enacts the absurdity inherent in any interpretation, and thus continuously calls forth, and thwarts, renewed interpretation. Beckett's novels take the assertion that "I think, therefore I am" to its illogical conclusion, thus demanding that we think, and offer explanations as to what we are, in spite of the hopelessness of every attempt to do so. The fictional enactment of this attempt is intimately tied up with the two conditions which are categorically inimical to linguistic, or perhaps any, representation: death and madness.

However, because death and madness represent the exterior limit of, as it were, the dialectical other in opposition to which being and consciousness are established, they are the two conditions which representation must necessarily seek to incorporate. Although this attempt, as already indicated, must necessarily fail, the compulsion to continue making the effort is inescapable, and represents perhaps the very basis of conceptual and artistic work. I have been concerned with illustrating how Beckett's fiction enacts this effort and this failure, and the project's implications for interpretation.

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