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CHRONICLES OF DISORDER: SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF POSTWAR NARRATIVE

by

DAVID WEISBERG

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

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PART 1

Trying to Understand Molloy

Introduction: An Encounter

> I had a certain number of encounters in this forest, naturally, where does one not, but nothing to signify.

The reader even minimally acquainted with Beckett's trilogy immediately recognizes in this sentence from the first section of Molloy a set of Beckettian constants: the ubiquitous "I," the nameless space of the forest, the parodic obeisance to formality and the philosophical twist that negates what seems to be the sentence's apparent announcement of a significant narrative event: "but nothing to signify." The next sentence, typically, negates the negation: "I notably encountered a charcoal burner" (112).

Which takes precedence? Will the encounter be notable and interpretable or "nothing to signify," a fragment inscribed in the universal text of the absurd? The question, of course, is moot: Beckett unequivocally intends that his narrator produce paradox, not certainty. Whatever Molloy claims in prolepsis, in the next few densely printed pages Beckett give us in detail the notable, unsignifying encounter, only to have Molloy conclude "that I have delayed over an incident of no interest in itself, like all that has a moral" (115).

These are the parameters of many episodes in Molloy: it

does not signify, but it is notable; it has no interest in itself, but it has a moral. What is the function of this meta-narrative framing and self-reflexive mode of narration? Do these "experimental" techniques really affect the reader's understanding of the encounter in the forest? Or is the hermeneutic paradox a comment on Molloy-the-narrator's difficulty in understanding an event from his own life? What relationship, if any, do such questions have in reference to the action neatly bracketed and vividly described between the framing sentences?

> I might have loved him, I think, if I had been seventy years younger. I never really had much love to spare, but all the same I had my little quota, when I was small, and it went to the old men, when it could.... He was all over me, begging me to share his hut, believe it or not. A total stranger. Sick with solitude probably. I say charcoal burner, but I really don't know. I see smoke somewhere.... A long dialogue ensued, interspersed with groans.... I asked him to show me the nearest way out of the forest. I grew eloquent. His reply was exceedingly confused. Either I didn't understand a word he said, or he didn't understand a word I said, or he knew nothing, or he wanted to keep me near him. It was towards this fourth hypothesis that in all modesty I leaned, for when I made to go, he held me back by the sleeve. So I smartly freed a crutch and dealt him a good dint on the skull. (113)

The paradox about the hermeneutic status of the encounter itself -- notable, meaningless, uninteresting, moral -- is echoed in the expressive narrated action: Molloy trying to understand and communicate with a stranger. Another set of Beckettian constants are evident, neither meta-narrative nor self-reflexive: isolation, sickness, poverty, confusion, the thwarted need for human

companionship and love, and a blow to the head. The humor of the "fourth hypothesis" depends on the contrast between the vocabulary of logic and the pathetic content: it signals the fact that intellectuals and charcoal burners -- the lowest stratum of the social hierarchy -- never converse, except perhaps in jokes. As the encounter continues, the humor turns cruel:

> That calmed him. The dirty old brute. I got up and went on. But I hadn't gone more than a few paces ... when I turned and went back to where he lay, to examine him. Seeing he had not ceased to breathe I contented myself with giving him a few warm kicks in the ribs, with my heels. This is how I went about it. I carefully chose the most favourable position, a few paces from the body, with my back of course turned to it. Then, nicely balanced on my crutches, I began to swing, backwards, forwards, feet pressed together, or rather legs pressed together .... in an ever widening arc, until I decided the moment had come and launched myself forward with all my strength and consequently, a moment later, backward, which gave the desired result.... The shock knocked me down. Naturally.... I rested a moment, then got up, picked up my crutches, took up my position on the other side of the body and applied myself with method to the same exercise. I always had a mania for symmetry. (114)

"Symmetry" is an aesthetic value. Violence is parodied with artifice. Molloy is an aesthete at the same time that he is a crippled vagrant. His careful rendering of how he "went about it" is a miniature discourse on artistic "method," an "exercise" in style. The last line might apply equally to the narrator or Beckett himself, formalist craftsman of the famous "sucking stone" scene (93-100) with its problems of "circulation" and "trim." But Beckett never lets an emphasis on aesthetic form detach itself from a

specific material content. From Murphy's dilemma deciding the order in which he will eat the assorted biscuits of his impoverished lunch (57) to the mathematical permutations of Watt feeding the "needy man"'s "famished dog" (91-100) to Molloy's need to suck his stones in an aesthetically pleasing manner, his characters' "mania" for an artful order, for a principle of distinction, is always contrasted with a condition of poverty and privation. We laugh because we know starving people aren't concerned with aesthetic form; we know that Beckett's characters' don't seriously signify suffering because of the heightened attention to aesthetic form in their pathetic attempts to overcome misery. Such explicit self-conscious artifice, so distant from the sociological concerns of realism or naturalism, mingles uneasily with realism's content of social injustice. Is Molloy's well-wrought beating of the charcoal burner -- motivated by the stranger's desire for human warmth, his desire "to keep me near him" -- a refraction of Beckett, the experimental formalist, beating down and parodying any sympathetic identification the reader might experience with his storytelling vagrants and cripples, as if to render senseless any common concern between his own abstract art and the prosaic messages of "committed" literature? Is Beckett's purpose in letting Molloy, for once, give the blows instead of receive them, an attack not on social injustice but on literature's presumption to take the side

of the powerless victim against an alienating, unjust social world?

The end of the encounter drives the questions home:

> But I must have aimed a little low and one of my heels sank into something soft. However. For if I had missed the ribs, with that heel, I had no doubt landed in the kidney, oh not hard enough to burst it, no, I fancy not. People imagine, because you are old, poor, crippled, terrified, that you can't stand up for yourself, and generally speaking that is so. But given favourable conditions, a feeble and awkward assailant, in your own class what, and a lonely place, and you have a good chance of showing what stuff you are made of. And it is doubtless in order to revive interest in this possibility, too often forgotten, that I have delayed over an incident of no interest in itself, like all that has a moral. (114-15)

The aesthetics of violent symmetry becomes a lesson about a law of social existence: Molloy has a reactionary class-consciousness. He knows he can only assert his autonomy -- show his "stuff," "stand up" for himself -- by crushing someone equally low but a little more vulnerable. If Molloy is vicious, his cruelty is justified by both the formalist-aesthetic need for symmetry and the social-psychological need of the dominated vagrant -- "I am full of fear, I have gone in fear all my life, in fear of blows" (28) -- to exact vengeance on whomever is weaker than he. Which takes precedence? Is Beckett balancing Molloy the victim with Molloy the victimizer to provide formal symmetry -- as he does by breaking the novel into paradoxically corresponding Molloy/vagrant and Moran/bourgeois sections -- or to provide a "moral" about how the social hierarchy reproduces and protects itself by pitting victim against

victim? Why are the formalist techniques in Beckett's fiction so often presented in conjunction with images, parodic and exaggerated, of the "poor, crippled, terrified" remnants of social decay?

The paradox of the framing sentences might, it seems, bear a significant relation to the questions raised by the narrated action in the encounter. If the episode simultaneously is "nothing to signify" and contains a "moral" intended to correct what "people imagine" about the powerless vagrant, then Beckett is both a formalist unconcerned with intentional messages and a social critic. But such divergent cultural roles are hard to imagine as anything but opposites, not least because, as the encounter itself suggests, an over-riding concern with experiments in form seems to militate against or even suppress the reader's sympathy for or serious engagement with Molloy as a meaningful symbol of anything at all "outside the text." Perhaps all we can infer from this initial encounter with Beckett's fiction is that the antinomies of Molloy's meta-narrative play with meaninglessness and morals and his act of socially-induced class-conscious cruelty are part of a single expression, Beckett's quite serious play with the cultural politics of the modern novel.

CHAPTER I

The Silent Speaker: The Voice, Subjectivity and Society in Part I of Molloy

1. The Intentional Paradox

Samuel Beckett's Molloy is a novel of paradox and contradiction. The idiosyncratic and circular narratives of Molloy and Moran pose so many explicit problems of understanding and meaning -- stylistically, thematically, and structurally -- that the attempt to interpret the novel seems to reproduce the same hermeneutic puzzles that the novel itself so strikingly stages. Since its initial reception in 1951, the novel has evoked a sense of interpretive futility in its most astute commentators: "everyone sees in it what he wants to see" (Nadeau, quoted in Abbott 92); "it discloses no more than what it literally means" (Sontag 29); "[its] technique results in a total devaluation of language by accentuating the arbitrariness with which it is applied to the objects it seeks to grasp" (Iser 164-5); "[its] characteristic quality ... has less to do with the expression of ideas than the manipulation of verbal forms.... There exists no intentional message that may be extracted from the verbal motions of the text" (Hill 120). In the face of these daunting features of the novel, the most recent critical works on Beckett have proclaimed that the effort to interpret Molloy and his other fiction is

exhausted; it can now only be regarded as a dispersion of textual effects.[1]

The turn away from interpretation, which began to gain prestige in literary theory and criticism in the decade following Molloy's publication, is both insightful and shortsighted.[2] Writers like Beckett and his contemporaries, from Borges to Robbe-Grillet, were highly conscious of their fiction's status as as narratives that undermine established conventions of storytelling. The critical stance against interpretation takes up a set of problems that many of these innovative fiction writers were already directly incorporating in their work: if Molloy foregrounds problems of understanding in its use of language and in its narrative forms and themes, then criticism of the novel needs to foreground similar problems. Thus interpretation, as a fixed instance of one understanding of a text which leaves the problem of meaning itself unaddressed, avoids the explicit hermeneutic issues at the center of such fiction. The insight of the anti-interpretive stance, at least in regard to Molloy, recognizes that the novel compels the reader to consciously experience "meaning," as constructed through narrative structures and the manipulation of language, as a problem.

This insight, however, also has a serious drawback for the analysis of Molloy. The anti-interpretive stance typically replaces interpretation with a demonstration of

how the text creates a plurality of indeterminate meanings, none of which is privileged over others since meaning, from this perspective, is always viewed as a textual effect rather than an intentional "message." Yet it was the novelists of the postwar period, whose innovations were in part a response to cultural changes involving the institutional status of "high" and popular culture, the conceptualization of the social function of art, and the aesthetic legacies of modernism and the avant-garde, who quite consciously made the interpretation of their own novels an explicit, immanent problem within the works themselves. Molloy does incorporate a specific intention, forcefully and completely worked-out: to make the understanding of its own content explicitly paradoxical, both for the novel's narrators and the reader. In light of this, the anti-interpretive stance seems ultimately self-invalidating. As a critical response to the intentional construction of textual paradox in the novel, the analysis of textual effects actually depends on the very thing it claims the text does not have: an overarching intention.

Literally, paradox means contrary to, or contradicting, common knowledge. But Beckett's pervasive play with logic suggests a stricter meaning: "The significance of a paradox is never the paradox itself, but what it is a symptom of. For a paradox demonstrates that our understanding of some basic concept or cluster of concepts is crucially flawed,

that the concepts break down in limiting cases" (Barwise 4). Beckett's fiction is very much a "limiting case" demonstrating the inadequacy of understanding narrative art as either textual effect or communicative expression. On one hand, in Molloy Beckett plays havoc with the conventions of narrative structure and literary language to such an extent that all positive meaning is denied value. On the other hand, Beckett's foregrounding of these textual problems in meaning and understanding in Molloy is itself sustained through a tension with the novel's communicative, culturally symbolic content. The novel's themes of impoverishment, social marginalization, violence, and bodily transgression, together with its pervasive tone -- ironic, scatological, and satirical -- indicate another overarching intention, alongside that of producing indeterminate polysemous textuality, that links Molloy to works by authors like Rabelais, Swift, Dickens, and Kafka: protest and dissent. The hermeneutic problems that the novel as a whole presents, its overarching paradox, arises from the interplay of and mutual interference between these two conflicting intentional features: Molloy is a novel that both protests against the debasement and suffering of its eponymous hero and, at the same time, textually disrupts the conventions of narrative communication through which the protest is constructed and understood.

These conflicting intentional features -- textuality

and social protest -- were actualized in Beckett's fiction (and must finally be interpreted: see chapters V and VI) in the wider cultural context of the postwar debates over the relationship between literature and politics, which privileged either form or content as the ultimate site of a work's political meanings, and which advocated either aesthetic autonomy or engaged communication as the only effective means of creating significant literature (or "writing") in the new age of "mass" consumer culture, cold war party politics, and Europe "after Auschwitz."[3] When Beckett's use of paradox is culturally situated, the tension between communicative protest and textual (linguistic and narrative) negation by which the overarching paradox in Molloy is constructed indicates that what is ultimately at issue is the very possibility of a tendentious experimental art, a possibility which many avant-garde movements of the interwar period, both left and right, took for granted. For the mature Beckett, paradox became a means of expressing the situation of a postwar writer whose first literary experiments were conducted under the aegis of both Joycean "high" modernism and Surrealist provocation (chapters III and IV), but whose important works were composed during and directly after the war, in a significantly altered cultural and political context (chapters IV and V). In its strident satire of the institutions of art and learning, and through the internalized schism of its narrators' idiot-savant

voices, Molloy identifies its own ability to produce stunningly novel aesthetic pleasure as an integral element of the oppressive conditions which it so emotively opposes.[4]

In "Trying to Understand Endgame" T.W. Adorno attempted to interpret the "organized meaninglessness" (Notes 242) of Beckett's work as a sign of a historically new, paradoxical situation challenging the progressive artist -- what Adorno referred to, in 1961, as the "antinomy of contemporary art" (249). While Adorno's aesthetic and cultural theory itself needs to be viewed within the cultural politics of the period, his reading of Endgame demonstrates the extent to which the social and cultural contradictions of postwar Europe are concretely present in its dramatized "unintelligibility" (243).[5] Adorno's analysis focuses on three intertwined concerns: a refutation of interpretive frameworks emphasizing existentialist concepts such as "being" or "absurdity"; a critique of both modernism's privileging of subjective experience and "socialist realism"'s pretensions to objectivity; and the historical "regression" of modernity -- evidenced by fascism, Soviet totalitarianism, and the capitalist "culture industry" -- which had rendered the philosophical and aesthetic underpinnings of modernism meaningless. The "antinomy of contemporary art" -- aphoristically expressed in Adorno's proclamation that "to write lyric poetry after Auschwitz is

barbaric ("Commitment" 312) -- sets the artist a nearly impossible problem: how does art protest against the regressive tendencies in modernity when it realizes its own historical links to the processes of modernization that had culminated in the barbarism of the second world war?

The answer is paradoxical. On the one hand, Adorno interprets Beckett's drama by "concretely reconstructing the fact that it has no meaning" (Notes 243); on the other, the "fact" of its meaninglessness constitutes a "protest" against "the law of regression" (248) through a negation and parody of philosophical concepts and aesthetic techniques that, unwittingly or not, accommodate themselves to or reproduce the irrationality of a regressive social world. In every one of Adorno's formulations he describes Endgame as an "exemplary" work (250) that confronts, all at once, the horror of Auschwitz, the inadequacy of existentialism, and the "antinomy" of postwar art that can no longer "protest" against social conditions through either an uncritical valuing of individuality and subjectivity or a return to forms of literature that seek to mimic scientific objectivity (such as Zola's naturalism or socialist realism [250]) and thereby forfeit the distance between their own internal logic and the "instrumental" rationality of domination they presume to critique. Thus, for example, he accounts for the historical origins of the play's overall image of senselessness and waste --

> In Endgame, a historical moment unfolds.... After the Second World War, everything, included a resurrected culture, has been destroyed without realizing it; humankind continues to vegetate ... on a rubbish heap that has made even reflection on one's own damaged state useless. (244)

-- or the condition the play evokes which the existentialist confrontation with history cannot answer --

> The catastrophes that inspire Endgame have shattered the individual whose substantiality and absoluteness was [sic] the common thread ... of existentialism. Sartre even affirmed the freedom of the victims of the concentration camps to inwardly accept or reject the tortures inflicted upon them. Endgame destroys such illusions. The individual himself is revealed to be a historical category, both the outcome of the capitalist process of alienation and a defiant protest against it, something transient himself.... Endgame assumes that the individual's claim to autonomy and being has lost its credibility. (249)

-- and Beckett's intentional deformation of dialogue, character, and dramatic structure:

> [D]ramatic categories as a whole are shifted around. All 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 form. The three Aristotelian unities are preserved, but drama itself has to fight for its life. Endgame is the epilogue to subjectivity, and the play loses the hero along with subjectivity. The only aspect of freedom still known to it is the powerless and pitiful reflex action of trivial decisions.... Exposition, complication, plot, peripetia and catastrophe return in decomposed form as participants in an examination of the dramaturgical corpse. Representing the catastrophe, for instance, is the announcement that there are no more painkillers. (259-60)

For Adorno, the "catastrophe" of modernity, of which Auschwitz was the ultimate example, could only be represented through an expression of its ineffability: "The violence of the unspeakable is mirrored in the fear of

mentioning it" (245). Endgame protests against the unspeakable through a refusal to represent it: "The catastrophe is to be spoken only in silence" (249).

Adorno's insight into the simultaneous "silence" and "protest" of Beckett's postwar drama forms a starting point for my analysis of Molloy in several important respects.[6] By situating Endgame within the context of a problem about art's ability to protest and critique -- its very ability to make "meaning" -- and by loosening the drama from its existential moorings, Adorno showed how Beckett's "absurdity" was not an authorial pre-conception but part of the social content of the play: Hamm's and Clov's fear "that they might mean something" (261) is an image of both an irredeemably irrational social world and the artist's dilemma in trying to find a form of protest that would not merely reproduce irrationality as its "meaning." And while Adorno's monolithic vision of cold war society -- capitalist "reification" on one side, communist totalitarianism on the other -- led him to imagine only one possible artistic response, aesthetic autonomy (see chapter VI), which occludes the actual ambivalence and complex contexts of Beckett's (and other postwar writers') work, his analysis of Endgame's confrontation with the "antagonistic tendencies" (250) of postwar cultural politics sets the task for an interpretation of Beckett's fiction more open to a diversity of artistic means and cultural struggles.

As my analyses of voice in Part I of Molloy (see below) and of narrative structure in Part II (chapter II) demonstrate, the most powerful hermeneutic aporias in the novel arise when the metafictional experimentation with language and the conventions of narrative communication is most explicitly intertwined with the social content and themes of protest. For the broadly satirical representation of the "Molloy country," Beckett draws on extant social contradictions and their cultural symbols: the narrators' extreme socio-economic difference, Molloy's analysis of oppressive hierarchies of taste and decorum, Moran's middle-class "horror of the body and its functions," the heightened emphases on interiority and subjectivity, the paralyzing sense of alienation and dissolution of community, the conflict between private inner freedom and public coercion -- all these are expressions of common responses to processes of modern socialization. This expressive social content is the semantic material with which the textual experiments are conducted. According to many critics, including Iser (164-5), the relationship between this social content and the language or style of the novel is arbitrary: after all, Beckett needed to provide some sort of content in order to then negate it, to expose it as mere textual effect. Yet a reading of the novel which takes into account Adorno's insights and Beckett's (if unwilling; see chapter VI) involvement in the cultural politics of the period and the

debates about commitment, autonomy, and "écriture," reveals, to the contrary, a significant interdependence between the evocative power of the textual experimentation and the consciously chosen social content.

As Adorno correctly observed, Beckett's alteration of elements specific to the tradition of drama gave Endgame a structure that sustained and determined its construction of protesting "unintelligibility." Similarly, in the paradoxical forms of Beckett's postwar fiction, specifically novelistic conventions are altered in conjunction with a protesting social content. Significantly underlying the non-signifying "stories" of Molloy and Moran are the skeletal remains of the history of narration, from epic imitation of action to the impressionistic interior monologue. At the core of this alteration in Molloy is the representation of individual subjectivity through the convention of the self-reflexive first-person narrator. Adorno isolated the "abdication of the subject" as the "concrete historical reality" to which Beckett postwar works respond ("Commitment" 314). Adorno's thesis, like the traditional subject philosophy supporting it, needs to be expanded and revised.[7] The contradictory first-person point of view, one of the decisive innovations that marks the distance between Beckett's interwar and postwar fiction, expresses an ambivalence about the individual as speaking, knowing subject: subjectivity is contested, not negated. In Molloy

Beckett deconstructs the modernist technique of the subjective point of view and, at the same time, creates the first-person chronicle of a socially marginalized, physically suffering vagrant who has been rendered "silent" by his "superiors," yet who is nevertheless imbued with considerable powers of self-expression. This intertwined double focus -- on an "I" who tells the story of how he cannot speak for himself -- points to a single, contradictory expression concerning the viability of an aesthetically eloquent subjective "voice" to meaningfully communicate socially-induced human suffering. But only a close reading of Beckett's specific modes of expression in Molloy can adequately demonstrate how the paradox and contradiction that permeate the novel are articulated through the contradictions already present in the social world and in the institution of literature in postwar Europe.

2. The Voice and the Life: The Contradictory "I" and the Frame

The productive interplay between the intentional features in Molloy, between textual paradox and communicative social content, is operative in the novel's most basic structure, its division into two separate first-person narratives. On one hand, this split accentuates the contrast in the narrators' social status: Molloy, a pathologically withdrawn, moneyless vagabond with a

grotesque physical appearance, and Moran, a church-going Catholic property owner, a slavish follower of affluent middle-class "decorum." Yet the two narrations complicate this social contrast by constructing a paradoxical, undecipherable network of similarities between the two characters.[8] The reader's attention is divided between the difference, a contrast in the social content, and the similarity, an effect of the intertextual cross-referencing that the details and symbolic suggestions in each section provoke. The textual paradox leads to a contradiction that seems to conflict with the social contrast: Molloy and Moran are somehow the "same" character. Yet their sameness as textual constructs does not negate their social difference. Rather, a hermeneutic tension is created by the incommensurability of the social contrast and the disruptive textuality created by the paradoxical relation of the two narratives.

That each section is narrated by its protagonist, an "I" who tells his own story in his own voice, strengthens the emphasis on social division. Yet the textual paradox violates the convention of the first person by implying that two distinct characters and voices can occupy a single "I." The recognition of individuality, which the first person both assumes and strengthens, necessitates a strict distinction between speaking subjects. This violation, like every paradox in Beckett's work, is intended to be

understood in two almost opposite ways. Either the novel, through its radical form, disrupts the notion of the autonomous, stable self, especially as it is built up and maintained through linguistic structures and narrative conventions such as the grammatical first person "I"; or, the disruption of the idea and the experience of being an autonomous self is already taken for granted as an historical condition, and the split in the novel and the violation of the "I" are ways of representing an already ruined subjectivity, a devastated self. In other words, Molloy either contributes to a project of "destabilizing" the function of the "I," or it takes an already destabilized and damaged self as its subject matter and its content.[9]

Perhaps the most important technique through which Beckett constructs the overall hermeneutic difficulty in Molloy is his use of a contradictory first-person voice. While the textual paradox breaks apart the unity of the first-person convention, the social content both depends on the convention and expresses the necessity of self-expression through a confessional, testimonial "I." Even before the social differences and the network of similarities between the vagrant Molloy and the "agent" Moran come into play, an initial interpretive problem arises in understanding the relationship between each first person voice and the character to which it "belongs."[10] The very first sentences of the novel suggest a disjuncture between

the voice and the content of the story of Molloy: "I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there" (7). Other examples abound: "And to think I try my best not to talk about myself" (15); "For I cannot stoop, neither can I kneel, because of my infirmity, and if I ever stoop, forgetting who I am, or kneel, make no mistake, it will not be me, but another" (48); "I had forgotten who I was (excusably) and spoken of myself as I would have of another" (56); and the very last sentence of part I, "Molloy could stay, where he happened to be" (124). While in one sense these metafictional devices disrupt the assumptions behind realist and naturalist writing, their deployment in Molloy does not really aim at debunking the claim that a novel is a picture of reality: even before the first world war aestheticism, modernism, and the avant-garde had already conceptualized literature as antagonistic toward the observational, journalistic techniques of Dickens, Balzac, and Zola (see chapter III). Rather, in the context of the late '40s and '50s, these devices aim much more specifically at transforming and "defamiliarizing" modernist assumptions about representing subjective impressions and experience, especially through the conventions of first-person narration.

Like many first-person narratives, both sections of Molloy have narrative frames; that is, they attempt to represent the circumstance of their own creation. At the

beginning of the novel, Molloy is in his mother's room, writing. Since the reason Molloy gives for the journey he is about to describe is a search for his mother, the first section of the novel seems circular: having ended his journey, he will tell us how he finally got to his mother's room, from where he writes the story. However, what is missing from the story is precisely that: the section ends with Molloy in an advanced state of decay, awaiting help in a ditch at the edge of the forest. Since he tells us at the beginning, "I am in my mother's room.... I don't know how I got there," we assume that this lack of knowledge or memory accounts for the "gap" between the end and the beginning, and perhaps also accounts for the use of "there" instead of the expected "here": grammatically, Beckett already disrupts Molloy's textual function as a first-person narrator who is about to tell a story from his own life.

Conventionally, a narrative frame contextualizes an act of storytelling as a motivated, communicative event: the paradigmatic modernist example would be Marlow in Heart of Darkness, telling the story of his journey and encounter with Kurtz to the other men aboard the yacht.[11] Molloy, in his mother's room, identifies the occasion of his writing:

> There's this man who comes every week.... He gives me money and takes away the pages. So many pages, so much money. Yes, I work now, a little like I used to, except that I don't know how to work any more. That doesn't matter apparently. What I'd like now is to speak of the things that are left, say my good-byes, finish dying. They don't want that. Yes, there is more than one, apparently. ... When he comes for the fresh pages he

> brings back the previous week's. They are marked with signs I don't understand.... When I've done nothing he gives me nothing, he scolds me. Yet I don't work for money. For what then? I don't know. The truth is I don't know much. (7-8)

The tension between the disruptive textuality and the social content that characterizes the novel as a whole is evident in Beckett's play on narrative framing. On one hand, Molloy seems to be a caricature of the alienated artist-writer, his audience an anonymous "they" who care nothing for the writer's wishes but simply treat the "pages" as a commodity. Molloy, like a bohemian or romantic poet, does not write for the money; his wish "to speak of the things that are left, say my good-byes, finish dying" is both lyrical and spiritual, in contrast to the representative "man" and his business-like editorial attitude. In one sense, the short sentences and the rather conventional feeling of alienation, expressed in a resigned mood, give the first page of Molloy the quality of a confession, written under compulsion, of a defeated victim.

On the other hand, interspersed between the simple statements are phrases that indicate a disruption of understanding and communication: "I don't know how to work any more"; "signs I don't understand"; "the truth is I don't know much." As the first framing paragraph continues, the series of simple declarative, elemental sentences about Molloy's situation -- "I sleep in her bed. I piss and shit in her pot"(8) -- are mixed with an increasing sense of

futility:

> Here's my beginning. Because they're keeping it apparently. I took a lot of trouble with it. Here it is. It gave me a lot of trouble. It was the beginning, do you understand? Whereas now it's nearly the end. Is what I do now any better? I don't know. That's beside the point. Here's my beginning. It must mean something, or they wouldn't keep it. Here it is. (8)

The end of this framing paragraph contradicts the usual intention of a frame while still retaining the frame's structural function. Rather than explain Molloy's motives for telling his story, it places him in the situation of writing without knowing what his writing means or why he does it. When he declares "It must mean something, or they wouldn't keep it," he resigns the understanding of his story to "them," and at the same time recognizes that his story does have a meaning, even if he can only surmise it from someone else's response. In this sense, Beckett parodically inverts the cliche of the misunderstood artist who persists in writing despite the unwillingness or inability of the public to accept his art: it is precisely the commodification of his work by the anonymous "they" that allows Molloy to write without knowing why.

The ironic contradiction here is difficult to characterize because it works: the effect is not to relay some observation about how an individual can never know the enigma of his own life, but rather to reveal how, no matter how much the meaning and existence of the story depend on some agency outside the individual author, the story is

nonetheless continued as a type of self-expression, a conventional first-person narration. The content that is easily understood because it so clearly refers to a common cultural symbol, the alienated writer in his room, is also subject to both a reversal and a re-affirmation. Molloy feels more alienated because he realizes his position is false: he will go on to tell the story of his life in the form of the first-person narration, as a self-originating act, knowing all along that the story's meaning isn't really his. The force of the first person form, especially as it is worked out in the confessional, victimized mood of the first framing pages, implies that the occasion and aim of his story will to some degree be self-understanding, an exploration of how Molloy got "there," both physically and psychically. Yet already his confusion, ostensibly the result of his traumatic journey prior to his writing, is both a representation of his condition and an effect of the textual paradox. The knot of the contradiction, which relies on a narrative convention and a familiar content to maintain its readability, effectively confuses the reader's expectations aroused by the use of a first-person voice.

The "meta-narrative" self-reflection Molloy delivers near the end of the first section, just before he resumes for the last time the journey to his mother's room, indicates how this contradiction is thematized throughout the story:

> And yet it might have been better for me to try and stay [in the forest]. But I also said, Yet a little while, at the rate things are going, and I won't be able to move, but will have to stay, where I happen to be, unless someone comes and carries me. Oh, I did not say it in such limpid language. And when I say I said, etc., all I mean is that I knew confusedly things were so, without knowing exactly what it was all about. And every time I say, I said this, or, I said that, or speak of a voice saying, far away inside me, Molloy, and then a fine phrase more or less clear and simple ... I am merely complying with the age old convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace. For what really happened is quite different. And I did not say, Yet a little while, at the rate things are going, etc, but that resembled perhaps what I would have said, if I had been able. In reality I said nothing at all, but I heard a murmur, something gone wrong with the silence .... And then sometimes there arose within me, confusedly, a kind of consciousness, which I express by saying, I said etc., or ... by means of other figures quite as deceitful, as for example, It seemed to me that, etc., or, I had the impression that, etc., for it seemed to me nothing at all, and I had no impression of any kind ... and that I might doubtless have expressed otherwise and better, if I had gone to the trouble.... So I said, Yet a little while, at the rate things are going, and I won't be able to move, but will have to stay .... (118-9)[12]

Molloy attempts to explain the disjuncture between the "limpid language" of his narration and the confusion surrounding what "really happened." In one sense, this passage rehearses the problem of a narrator who, telling the story of a traumatic or exceptional experience in his past, is forced for the sake of communicating anything at all to "lie" and use "deceitful" figures of speech. It might even be read as a parody of classic statements of novelistic impressionism, from Proust to Woolf, that consider the subjective "impression" to be the true subject matter of literature.[13] But the passage goes further than parody. The

acuity of the narrating voice that seems the opposite of the confusion and helplessness it is describing breaks apart the unity that the convention of the first person is intended to convey between narrator and character. It achieves this not by dispelling any illusions about the relation between reality and its representation in language. On the contrary, it reasserts the necessity of a subjective point of view in spite of the consciousness that such "impressions" are false. Literary impressionism, in one of its varieties, argued for the subjective truth of the aesthetic impression over the "objective" fact of scientific rationality.[14] But here, the subjective impression is a lie: "I had no impression of any kind." In a sense, the passage turns impressionism on its head, and what is finally asserted, "So I said, Yet a little while, at the rate things are going, and I won't be able to move" is exactly the "lie" that the passage was supposedly going to correct.

The tension created between the two contrasting emphases in Molloy's self-reflection -- his confusion in the woods and his awareness of the "conventions" needed to communicate this confusion and helplessness -- is also a tension between contrasting aesthetic logics. While rejecting impressionism's privileging of subjective experience, the blunt recognition that "you either lie or hold your peace" argues that the subjective voice, the interiority that the "murmur" signifies at its most

absolute, is the only voice available for Molloy. As Molloy's eloquent chronicle of his own disordered speechlessness, Part I presents the use of the first person as both a necessity and a false perspective. The resulting hermeneutic tension forces the reader to accept, consciously or not, a contradiction at the core of the novel: Molloy the narrator is not the same "character" as Molloy the hapless victim and confused searcher for his mother. Molloy speaks "for" Molloy, who is almost entirely speechless during his journey.

The narrating Molloy's sensitivity to the assumptions of impressionism is delivered in a form that has a significant relation to literary impressionism itself: the convention of the "unreliable" first person narrator.[15] In a novel like Ford's The Good Soldier, this convention is fully developed, partly as an examination of the degree to which the subjective, emotional perspective of the narrator determines how he has understood events in his own life -- events that the reader can consider and evaluate independently as a set of objective occurrences. Molloy intensifies and transforms the same convention, for different reasons and with different results. The contradictory disjuncture in the voice of Molloy was already latent in the earlier convention, as an aestheticized dichotomy between the subjective and the objective that was stabilized by ensuring that the attentive reader would be

able to piece together the narrator's emotionally fragmented story after all. In Molloy, the disjuncture is internal to Molloy's voice and much more disruptive toward the act of reading: just as Molloy is both the speaking subject and the silent object of representation, his narrative is simultaneously a phenomonological tour de force of pure interiority and a representation of a series of events and reflections which form the story of Molloy's pathological withdrawal from community and communication. The narrating voice's mimetic capacity to evoke scenes of its own social marginalization and debasement depends on an eloquence that Molloy, as the victimized silent wanderer, does not have. Thus, the interplay and tension between the social content and the paradoxical textuality is heightened and given a specific function: to allow the suffering disoriented vagrant to speak for himself in an aesthetically effective way.

3. Molloy and the Police: Subjectivity, Coercion and the Institution of Art

The contradiction in the first-person voice is a counterpart to the novel's thematic ambivalence toward interiority and subjectivity. Molloy's confusion when he attempts to reflect upon his own condition forms a counterpart to the hermeneutic problems Beckett creates for the reader in regard to the thematic content. The link Beckett forges between, on one hand, a contradictory

reliance on subjective point of view, interiority, and the first-person voice and, on the other, Molloy's and the reader's problem of how to understand the politically-charged social content of poverty, marginalization, and coercion is expressed perhaps nowhere more strongly than in Molloy's encounter with the country town (25-36), one of the novel's key episodes. Strategically juxtaposing the contradictory first-person form with a familiar cultural motif, the confrontation between the vagrant and the police, Beckett draws out the implications of the tension-producing disjuncture between the narrator's testimonial eloquence and the powerless vagrant's terrified silence. Formally and thematically, textually and intentionally, the episode centers on a crisis in communication.[16] While Molloy-the-vagrant suffers from an inability to speak effectively in his own defense in the face of a threatening institutional authority, Molloy-the-narrator expresses a paradox central to the cultural politics of the postwar period concerning the representation of the suffering, brutalized, and dispossessed individual in an aesthetically effective and pleasing way.

Molloy's first visit to the unnamed town is motivated by two themes that span, in shorthand, the poles of much modern literature: the loneliness of the isolated individual, Molloy's "craving for a fellow," and the individual's inability to escape the primal ground of

middle-class socialization, the family and the imperative "to go and see my mother" (19).

> I covered several miles and found myself under the ramparts. There I dismounted in compliance with the regulations. Yes, cyclists entering and leaving the town are required by the police to dismount, cars to go into bottom gear and horsedrawn vehicles to slow down to a walk. The reason for the regulation is I think this, that the ways into and of course out of this town are narrow and darkened by enormous vaults, without exception. It is a good rule and I observe it religiously .... (25)

Here, the first-person narration acquires a simple, reportorial style, with little or no meta-narration to complicate the relationship between the narrating voice and the story of Molloy's journey. The lack of reference to geopolitical places in Molloy is compensated for with images of common public and private spaces: towns, rooms, alleys, churches, suburban houses and gardens, roads, forests, seashores and ditches. Although this lack of reference to the proper nouns of the contemporary world has often (and uncritically) inspired a "universal" reading of Beckett's work, what has been less noticed is the specificity of the social-spatial representations. The image of the "narrow and darkened" passage connecting the open countryside, where Molloy roams disoriented and alone, to what he believes to be his "native town" (40), its use by vehicles antiquated, motorized and, as the bicycle so uniquely represents, transitionally modern, and, importantly, its function as a regulated passage, like a checkpoint at a border, already suggest a historical context linking the isolated Molloy to

a set of organized social relations. Molloy, who, in his role as the asocial grotesque body, must expend great effort to negotiate these "difficult straits" because "of the difficulty I have in advancing on my crutches and pushing my bicycle at the same time" (25), immediately comes into contact with an administered public realm:

> But a little further on I heard myself hailed. I raised my head and saw a policeman. Elliptically speaking, for it was only later, by way of induction, or deduction, I forget which, that I knew what it was. What are you doing there? he said. I'm used to that question, I understood it immediately. Resting, I said. Resting, he said. Resting, I said. Will you answer my question? he cried. So it always is when I'm reduced to confabulation, I honestly believe I have answered the question and in reality I do nothing of the kind. ... It ended in my understanding that my way of resting, my attitude when at rest ... was a violation of I don't know what, public order, public decency. (25-26)

The motif of the powerless outsider's confrontation with the forces of law and order is, like the motif of the alienated artist, an instantly recognizable cultural symbol. Beckett exploited this motif for both comic and thematic effect in many of his prose works from as early as the story "A Wet Night" in More Pricks than Kicks (1934), drawing on anti-authority sentiments similar to those found in a wide range of cultural works, from popular silent film comedies to detective fiction to directly political and didactic literature.[17] Here, Beckett extends and intensifies this common content to further emphasize the tension in the novel between the testimonial eloquence of the narrating Molloy and the powerlessness of the silent, isolated wanderer.

While it is possible to consider the comic efforts of Beckett's heroes to communicate an absurdist parody of logic and rationality, the linking of eloquence, pain, and silence in Molloy is too close, and too carefully worked out, to justify viewing meaninglessness as an authorial intent. Rather, the joke, Beckett's contribution to the impious art of burlesque, is that Molloy's existentially honest reply of simply existing, of "resting," is never a valid one, because the demand to know "what are you doing?" is the privilege of authority, not philosophical speculation. As Moran, in one of his more Molloy-like moods, remarks later in the novel: "If there is one question I dread, to which I have never been able to invent a satisfactory answer, it is the question what am I doing" (237).[18]

Communication and coercion are intertwined in Molloy. Not only do Molloy and Moran present their narrations as being produced under duress, but the overarching tone of protest in both sections strongly suggests, however ironically, that to say anything at all is to somehow give way to a deluding bad faith in the liberating effects of self-expression. In Molloy, the contradiction in the voice that splits apart the unity of the first person suggests that no amount of searching self-reflection will ever yield a coherent identity. What fills in the absence of a stable autonomous identity, which requires a self-identical voice, is identity's reified manifestation in twentieth-century

Europe: identity papers.

> Your papers! he cried. Ah my papers. Now the only papers I carry with me are bits of newspaper, to wipe myself, you understand, when I have a stool. Oh I don't say I wipe myself every time I have a stool, no, but I like to be in a position to do so, if I have to.... In a panic I took this paper from my pocket and thrust it under his nose. (26)

The burlesque turns grotesque, and the anti-authority motif takes on an intensity just at the point where its more popular-cultural forms, circa 1950, would politely retreat. The misunderstanding over the demand for "papers," which in the postwar period connotes a politically charged form of social terror, links the problem of communication and coercion to Molloy's asocial existence and his offending body. Both having one's papers in order and wiping oneself "every time" are elemental forms of socialized behavior. Throughout Molloy the intermittent conflict between Molloy and the "outside world" (117) is localized at the "bodily lower stratum," the profane zone of both transgressive individual behavior and community decency.[19] The narrative connection forged between the grotesque individual and the authoritarian social space is succinctly emblematized by one of the novel's many double-edged jokes: "Hole" is both the name of a town (193) and "the symbol of those passed over in silence ... a link between me and the other excrement ... the true portal of our being" (107). The double meaning of the last sentence in the passage comically exposes Molloy's dire predicament and thematizes the alternation between

compliance and resistance: the innocent mistake is also an act of defiance -- perhaps even revolt -- if the paper thrust under the policeman's nose has already been used. In response, Molloy is dragged to the station:

> He [the police sergeant] listened to his subordinate's report and then began to interrogate me in a tone which, from the point of view of civility, left increasingly to be desired, in my opinion. Between his questions and my answers, I mean those deserving of consideration, the intervals were more or less long and turbulent. I am so little used to being asked anything that when I am asked something I take some time to know what. And the mistake I make is this, that instead of quietly reflecting on what I have just heard, and heard distinctly, not being hard of hearing, in spite of all I have heard, I hasten to answer blindly, fearing perhaps lest my silence fan their anger to fury. I am full of fear, I have gone in fear all my life, in fear of blows. (27-8)

The stylistic variations in Molloy, ranging from completely contradictory, highly self-reflective meta-narrative to the simple clarity of the above passage, are always juxtaposed with a specific content. Here, the contrast is revealing: the style mimics a refined, almost genteel conversational tone, but in the service of explaining why the terrified Molloy can't converse. Within the context of the episode, a certain intentional meaning is expanded: Molloy is confused and anti-social in the presence of others because he is afraid of being beaten. In turn, it is the very fear of being beaten that makes him unable to "reflect" on what others say and answer in an acceptable manner. But in the end he realizes that it is his fear-induced "silence" that might lead to yet another beating.

What many have referred to as Molloy's (and other Beckett characters') solipsism is here a law of self-fulfilling social injustice: whether he answer blindly or remain silent, he is bound to fail. There is no way outside the circle; his inwardness is not a philosophical stance, it is a disastrous defense. The passage can be taken, in its literal clarity, as a plausible explanation of all the hermeneutic problems Molloy (as vagrant) encounters and (as narrator) produces throughout the novel. He is a beaten down beggar, cringing before the very authorities who have made him what he is. In the novel the demand for common sense, like the demand to know "what are you doing," always appears as a disruptive threat that destroys any hope of the sufficient reason necessary for intersubjective communication in the first place. Under the sergeant's interrogation, the inability to speak in his own defense is the other side of the narrating Molloy's testimonial eloquence delivered in the face of "the lifelong charge against me" (47).

The contradiction in the first-person voice, the intertwining of communication and coercion, and the repressive form of identity that only Molloy's "papers," and not his voice, can convey are all indications of how the novel negotiates its alternating tones and themes of expressive eloquence and silence, protest and resignation, resistance and capitulation. Even the title of the book

contains this alternation. As its eponymous hero, it is Molloy's contradictory status as both eloquent narrator and silenced victim that produces the illusion of a self-referential proper name, as if indeed his identity and his voice were one. After "turbulent" intervals of miscommunication at the police's demand to identify himself, Molloy finally has a flash of enlightenment: "My name is Molloy, I cried, all of a sudden, now I remember. Nothing compelled me to give this information, but I gave it, hoping to please, I suppose" (29).

Commanded to give his name, he can only remember it when the outside compulsion is internalized and the sense of his own freedom is restored. But Molloy's sense of autonomy is presented here as servile condescension, "hoping to please": "But they only have to be a little gentle, I mean refrain from hitting me, and I seldom fail to give satisfaction" (28). Freely given under compulsion, the name "Molloy" is the sign of the novel's overall contradictory construction. Its unavoidable reference to anglicized Irish ethnicity contrasts sharply with the novel's equally unavoidable lack of reference to the names and dates of history. Even as an Irish name its status is paradoxical, since it signals both an Irish "authenticity" and the stereotypical, derisive image of an Irish peasantry.[20] Increasingly in Beckett's work, references to Irish cultural politics, so specific in Murphy (1938) that Beckett was sued

by an Irish poet parodied in the novel, are reduced to nominative ciphers. Molloy, as a transitional work between the parodic specificity of the earlier prose and the abstract placelessness of the later, indicates how Beckett continued to refer to an Anglo-Irish cultural content even as the referential aspects of his work took on increasingly cryptic forms.

If it is very difficult to place Molloy, in spite of its title, within any one literary or national tradition -- Irish, English, or French -- the novel makes it equally problematic to identify exactly against what social forces its voices protest. While the motif of the vagrant and the police refers to a broad range of conflict between institutional authority and marginalized outsiders, the next scene in the episode, where Molloy is held prisoner in the guardroom, refers to another form of social and political control:

> But suddenly a woman rose up before me.... I still wonder today if it wasn't the social worker. She was holding out to me ... a mug full of a greyish concoction which must have been green tea with saccharine and powdered milk.... [B]etween mug and saucer a thick slab of dry bread was precariously lodged, so that I began to say, in a kind of anguish, It's going to fall .... A moment later I myself was holding, in my trembling hands, this little pile of tottering disparities ... without understanding how the transfer had been effected. Let me tell you this, when social workers offer you, free, gratis, and for nothing, something to hinder you from swooning, which with them is an obsession, it is useless to recoil, they will pursue you to the ends of the earth, the vomitory in their hands.... Against the charitable gesture there is no defense, that I know of. You sink your head, you put out your hands all trembling and

> twined together and you say, Thank you .... To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth. (29-30)

Enforced acts of charity, like beatings, are a constant in Beckett's prose. The tone here is intensified, both through the use of the second-person appeal to the reader and through the evaluative force of the peroration, especially in the culminating aphorism: "To him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth." In this case the protest, always felt in the voices of the trilogy, goes beyond tone: Molloy will not accept his apportioned filth: "with a convulsive thrust of both my hands I threw it to the ground" (31). The detail in the description of the social worker's proffered "filth" is as realistic as anything in more conventional fiction of social injustice, as is the insight into the relationship between welfare and the persistence of poverty. As a kind of expressionist attack on a political contradiction in bourgeois liberalism the speech forms a counterpart to the paradoxical intensification of the convention of the first-person narrator, the bourgeois individual's "I." This connection is made more solid when Molloy is later released from jail, "conscious of my wrongs, knowing now the reasons for my arrest, alive to my irregular situation as revealed by the inquiry" (31). Protest instantly turns to inwardness and self-accusation -- the comic understatement of "irregular" already estranging the reader from the literal meaning of the scene in jail quoted

above. In one sense, Molloy realizes that his asocial qualities have saved him for now: "To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter.... If it is unlawful to be without papers, why did they not insist on my getting them. Because that costs money and I had none?" (31). His grotesque "creature" body and his poverty are the cause of both his conflict with the law and his release. Regarding himself "a deplorable sight, a deplorable example," and resigned to "never rest in that way again" (31), he articulates the image of himself that belongs to the authority against which (at the end of the episode, as we shall see) he finally protests.

The meta-narrative difficulty of the writer Molloy's statement at the beginning of the novel, "People pass too, hard to distinguish from yourself" (9), is now refracted through a narrated event: it's the vagrant Molloy's view of himself that cannot be distinguished from the others' view of him. What in one place is a textual conundrum is in another place an instance of socially-induced self-loathing. The paradox and the social content play against one another, and at many points in the novel this subtle cross-referencing focuses the reader's attention simultaneously on an unsettling textuality and a culturally symbolic referential content. Thus, the contradiction in the "I" is both a textual effect and a part of the story: while the illusory unity of the autonomous self stands revealed by the

meta-narrative paradox, a narrated event must retain the "I" to demonstrate that the same contradiction is a result of the marginalized outsider's internalization of his debased public image. The convention of the "I" is both linguistically deconstructed and narratively reconstructed: Beckett's broadly critical, parodic treatment of social domination is never presented as standing apart from the social conditions, or the bourgeois individuality, it criticizes.

The critique from the inside also accounts for the satiric wit of the novel. If Molloy has been considered by some academic critics an exquisitely executed philosophical and literary joke, it is only because the laughter it produces derives from the complicity between high aesthetic enjoyment and the extreme social division of its binary structure.[21] The constant supply of comic relief in the novel ironically indicates the painful scarcity of anything to laugh at in the conditions it evokes. This is nowhere more acute than in Molloy's "negative and empirical" critique of sociability itself:

> I have only to be told what good behaviour is and I am well-behaved, within the limits of my physical possibilities.... And if I have always behaved like a pig, the fault lies not with me but with my superiors, who corrected me only on points of detail instead of showing me the essence of the system, after the manner of the great English schools, and the guiding principles of good manners, without going wrong, from the former to the latter, and how to trace back to its ultimate source a given comportment. For that would have allowed me, before parading in public certain habits such as the finger in the nose, the scratching

> of the balls, digital emunction and the peripatetic piss, to refer them to the first rules of a reasoned theory. On this subject I had only negative and empirical notions, which means I was in the dark, most of the time, and all the more completely as a lifetime of observations had left me doubting the possibility of systematic decorum, even within a limited area. (32)

The humor in the passage and its serious intent have the same source: the co-existence of a high style, an intellectual vocabulary, and a sociological self-consciousness with the described habits of the grotesque body, from which the passage originates and to which it refers, is not only rhetorical but also substantive.[22] It is only from the perspective of "the great English schools" that the passage is amusing -- the more the educated reader appreciates it, the less comfort he or she can receive from agreeing, in "principle," with its critique of the oppressive and class-bound standards of "decorum." The function of the first person here is crucial. While binding the exalted language to the debased body, and the intellectual insights to the mind "in the dark," it demonstrates that the knowledge necessary to understand the source of the victim's suffering is also the knowledge that silences him and is denied him. Yet this insight is articulated in a voice that claims both an identification with silence and suffering and an expressiveness that strategically exploits and quite knowingly mocks the intellectual and class privilege it supposedly does not have.

This contradiction in the first-person voice ultimately points to a disjuncture between the forms of knowledge and expression that constitute Beckett's artistic practice and the symbolic image of poverty, suffering and domination that is bereft of expressive intelligence or even a sympathetic self-image. To speak of Molloy's suffering and isolation from any point of view other than Molloy's would be to deny him the very thing that constitutes his humanity: a subjective voice. But Molloy cannot speak for himself, his voice has been silenced, his subjectivity ruined, his life a "long confused emotion" (32). Molloy's "absurd" exaggeration of subjectivity, produced by both the narrating voice's constant self-reflexivity and its insistence on allowing a silenced and terrorized subject to utter its own complaint, eloquently and artistically, stretches the modernist emphasis on the subjective point of view to the breaking point. The dire necessity to be able to speak for and about oneself is fused, through the contradictory "I," with the recognition that the subjective, interior voice is inadequate to understand the conditions of its own impoverishment and domination. This decisive innovation in Molloy, and much of Beckett's postwar writing, is neither a rejection of modernism's subjective turn nor its ultimate extension. Rather, it marks the distance, in practice, separating a potentially liberatory mode of self-expression from literary modernism's privileging of representing the

world through individual subjectivity, an aesthetic concern which in the postwar period already had canonical status, was already part of the class-bound sphere of culture -- the institutions of art and education -- from which Molloy is excluded.

4. A Parting of the Ways: The Social, the Personal and the Representation of Subjectivity

Perhaps one of the more meaningful results of the current debates about "postmodernism" and the culture of "late capitalism" has been the concomitant reassessment, during the last few decades, of the category of modernism itself. What the critique of the now-traditional view of literary modernism entails, as Raymond Williams has asserted, is the rejection of the self-validating "selective tradition" that has singled out features such as formal innovation or the representation of individual consciousness (as in James, Joyce, or Woolf) as "modernist universals" and which has occluded the actual practice and reception of broad cultural phenomena marked by an "internal diversity of methods and emphases: a restless and often directly competitive sequence of innovations and experiments, always more immediately recognized by what they are breaking from than by what, in any simple way, they are breaking towards" (Politics 43).

At stake in this critique of the linear, canonical view of modernism as formalism and interiority is, in part, the

re-interpretation of these "modernist universals" outside of "the context of a literary ideology created by modernism itself" (Menand 6). While the description of the actual, dynamic practices and diverse movements of late 19th- and early 20th-century writing is beyond the scope of this dissertation, I would like, very briefly, to outline (following two important essays by Raymond Williams and Peter Bürger) the historical genesis of "subjectivity" as a modernist universal; for it is my contention (as I have begun to demonstrate) that Beckett's postwar work involves a substantive, critical refiguring of earlier modernist representations of subjectivity and not merely an extension of modernist concerns. As I discuss in chapters V and VI, Beckett's major works occupy a cultural-historical space (the immediate postwar decades, when he wrote the Trilogy and became internationally famous) in which the actual productive cultural tensions of the interwar years -- tensions, as I describe them in chapters III and IV, between aestheticism, Joycean modernism, avant-gardist provocation, and the "tendency" literature of the thirties -- were in the process of being flattened-out by academic and cultural critics, stripped down to a linear, teleological narrative of an austere, formalist "Modernism."[23] Assimilated into this selective tradition -- rather than viewed in the context of both the diverse, contentious cultural politics he experienced during the interwar years when he began to

write and the nascent postwar formulation of the canon of high modernism -- Beckett's work has too often been reduced to a very narrow concept of modernist subjectivity (or a closely related individualistic phenomonology), to one extreme side of what Williams has referred to as the "split" in the British novel originating at the turn of the century.

The split that Williams analyzes was both theoretical and practical, a divisiveness that manifested itself in explicitly laid-out aesthetic programs and, to varying degrees, in "a new situation in the English novel" in the decades preceding the first World War: "It is a period of crisis and of a parting of the ways .... Indeed, the central problem -- the relation between what separates out as 'individual' or 'psychological' fiction on the one hand and 'social' or 'sociological' fiction on the other -- is still, though perhaps in new ways, at the heart of our creative difficulties and concerns" (English Novel 119-20). At the turn of the century, two of the most representative statements of this split were formulated by H.G. Wells and Henry James. But their "critical quarrel" over the function and scope of the novel as an art form, as Williams points out, actually involved a range of inter-related issues which have a vital relation to the way the novel continued to develop between the wars. An influential grouping of concerns begins to appear together. Thus, along with James advancing a "center" of individual consciousness as a

principle of composition, there is an equal emphasis on fictional art as autonomous, in the sense that art should be viewed as an end in itself defined only by a set of strictly aesthetic formal "methods." "What really matters in James," says Williams, "is that act of signifying in which the novel becomes its own subject.... Consciousness in James ... is the almost exclusive object and subject of consciousness" (135). In contrast, for Wells, the novel has "inseperable moral consequences" (Wells 143); literature is a "vehicle," a form of communication that deals explicitly with issues of class politics, technology and history. Not only does Wells reject "intense self-consciousness" (Wells 153) as the novel's primary sphere, but he argues that the novel should function as a form of broad social critique:

> [The novel] is to be the social mediator, the vehicle of understanding, the instrument of self-examination, the parade of morals and the exchange of manners, the factory of customs, the criticism of laws and institutions and of social dogmas and ideas.... I do not mean for a moment that the novelist is going to set up as a teacher, as a sort of priest.... But the novelist is going to be the most potent of artists, because he is going to present conduct, devise beautiful conduct, discuss conduct, analyse conduct ... through and through.... We are going to write ... about the whole of human life. We are going to deal with political questions and religious questions and social questions. We cannot present people unless we have this free hand.... We are going to write about business and finance and politics and precedence and pretentiousness ... until a thousand pretences and ten thousand impostures shrivel in the cold, clear air of our elucidations. (Wells 154-56)

And if, as Williams says, "from that time on and especially in the novel ... people tried to talk of 'social' and

'personal' as separable processes, separate realms" (132) then so too have "committed" and "autonomous" become separated out, as choices that must be made: "at this new frontier, the writer can seem to be required to present himself with a clear identity paper: is he poet or sociologist? interested in literature or in politics?" (132).

The important point, of course, is that this "is no choice at all: the terms, the questions, are just records of a failure" (138). Even in James "the wrenching-apart of 'individual' and 'society' comes in to confuse us .... Since consciousness is social its exploration, its rendering as a process, is connecting, inevitably" (135). And while Williams interprets the novels of the interwar period as a renewal of fiction rather than a breakdown into mutually hostile camps -- Joyce's Bloom is William's most powerful example of how the social reappears as the connecting, rich, everyday language of consciousness -- he comlpains, justifiably, that "literary history hasn't really caught up" (139).[24] Rather than being understood as a set of contrasting but interrelated responses to an historically altered relationship between individual experience -- James' "felt life" -- and the scale and mechanisms of social change, between the writer and the reading public, between "high" art and "mass" or popular writing, the split was, and to a great extent still is, taken

> as a sort of prescription -- actually a biased prescription, a symptom -- when the real sickness is the separation into classes, into categories, into mutually hostile preoccupations and methods: the individual or society; public or private; social or literary studies. (139)

This "parting of the ways" has bequeathed to the critical reception of Beckett's fiction any number of half-interpretations posed as definitive descriptions: a search for the self, an exploration of disembodied consciousness, a meditation on narrative discourse itself, a descent into extreme solipsism, a tour de force of pure textuality, etc. But Beckett's method of parodying and exaggerating to absurd proportions one side of the split serves to expose the untenable logic of the separation itself. The mocking ambivalence of the novel's attempt to isolate subjectivity (and "impressions") as both a form of knowledge or experience and as a canonized aesthetic value expresses a tension -- a mistrust, a heightened awareness of contradiction -- in Beckett's self-understanding as a writer quite consciously working within an elite, "high" literary tradition. In this regard I explore, in Chapter III, Beckett's early critical writings about literature as they relate, in contradictory ways, to the avant-garde's "attack" on the institutions of belles-lettres and l'art pour l'art, to his classical academic training, and to his aestheticist-oriented claims for Proustean and Joycean modernism. But his ambivalent, mocking, and at times painful presentation of subjectivity and the class-bound pretensions of art and

culture also refer back, before Modernism or the avant-garde proper, to the role that ideas about individuality and subjectivity played in writers' attempts to justify the function of the novel, as art and social critique, at the end of the 19th century.

Peter Bürger, in his essay "Naturalism, Aestheticism and the Problem of Subjectivity," deals with approximately the same period as Williams, but in relation to the French novel, a context vitally relevant to the development of Beckett's bilingual works. The debate between naturalism and aestheticism -- Zola and Maurice Barres are the representative figures -- ultimately centers (as Bürger demonstrates) on subjectivity, both the literary representation of subjective experience and the status of the writer's own subjectivity in the process of writing. Although Zola had been attacked by critics for his violation of classical aesthetic norms of beauty and unity, "the critique of naturalism which was mounted by aestheticism was not directed against the violation of ... norms. On the contrary, it put the whole naturalist project of reproducing social reality into question" (Decline 95). Further, in these debates there was "much more at stake than the question of appropriate artistic procedures. What is at issue is rather the institutionalization of literature in bourgeois society ... those general ideas about literature which serve to define its social function" (96).

In his polemical writings about literature Zola attempted to ground literature through a positivist scientific perspective. In the famous essay, "The Experimental Novel," he asserts that

> the experimental novel is a consequence of the scientific evolution of the century; it continues and completes physiology, which itself leans for support on chemistry and medecine; it substitutes for the study of the abstract and the metaphysical the study of the natural man, governed by physical and chemical laws, and modified by the influences of his surroundings; it is in one word the literature of our scientific age, as the classical and romantic literature corresponded to a scholastic and theological age. (23)

Zola's aim, as Bürger points out, was complex: to legitimate his own type of writing in a competitive literary market; to "establish a new concept of literature which will liberate it from the taint of [romanticist] rationality and thus turn it into a useful instrument of our scientific civilization"; to produce fiction that would provide "useful insights into the social and biological conditioning factors of human behavior" and that would clearly communicate these insights to a large number of readers (100).

Bürger accurately locates a constitutive contradiction in Zola's critical writing and in his attempt to practice his notion of a scientific naturalism in his novels. Zola's model, inspired by the positivist claim of scientific objectivity, excludes "the writer's subjectivity from the creative process" (101). The writer is an observer and recorder of the social world; his own subjective, personal views and beliefs should not come into play. Throughout "The

Experimental Novel" Zola quotes from a treatise on the experimental method in medical science to solidify his analogy between the scientist and the writer:

> 'The observor relates purely and simply the phenomena which he has under his eyes.... He should be the photographer of phenomena, his observation should be an exact representation of nature.... He listens to nature and writes under its dictation. But once the fact is ascertained and the phenomenon observed, an idea or hyposthesis comes into his mind, reason intervenes, and the experimentalist comes forward to interpret the phenomenon.' (7)

As Bürger puts it, for Zola, "the subjectivity of the writer appears as a moment which conflicts with the desired objectivity" (101). While Zola insists on "the impersonal character of the method" (Zola 43), this view leads to a problem when Zola feels the pressure to distinguish literature from science and legitimate it as an important social institution in its own right: "A contemptible reproach which they heap upon us naturalist writers is the desire to be solely photographers. We have in vain declared that we admit the necessity of an artist's possessing an individual temperment and a personal expression" (Zola 11). As Bürger points out, in order for Zola to account for why "the novel [can] exercise an effect upon the reader if it organizes all its observational results in a purely rational manner" (101), he falls back on unscientific, romanticist notions of personal expression and the concept of genius. "Since feeling is the starting point of the experimental method, since reason subsequently intervenes to end in

experiment, and to be controlled by it, the genius of the experimentalist dominates everything" (Zola 34). Importantly, he reverts to these ideas by making a contrast not between the scientist and the writer, a comparison he needs to maintain, but rather between the truly significant writer and the hardworking but lesser one who is, at best, more like a modestly gifted crafstman. Thus, on one hand, in naturalism there is "nothing but a vast movement, a march forward in which everyone is a workman, according to his genius.... In naturalism there could be neither innovators nor leaders; there are simply workmen, some more skillful than others" (Zola 44-45); but on the other hand, "form is sufficient to immortalize a work; the spectacle of a powerful individuality reproducing nature in superb language will interest all ages" (49). Or again: "The experimental novelist ... does not interpose his personal sentiments, except in the phenomena whose determinism is not yet settled, and ... tries to test, as much as he can, this personal sentiment, this idea a priori" (53-54). The contradiction is clear. In Bürger's concise terms, in Zola's need to distinguish the naturalist novel from both science and entertainment fiction, he "appeals to the traditional concept of the genius which is actually quite incompatible with his attempt to render literature more scientific.... Zola is unable to explain the position of the productive subject within his own concept of literature" (102).

Bürger demonstrates that the "same sort of contradiction" about subjectivity appears in much of Zola's fiction, where the primacy of representing individuals as socially and genetically determined contrasts with a "psychologization of the action" (108), the technique that most likely accounted for the popularity of his novels.

> Whereas according to his scientific concept of ... literature individual subjects simply possess a functional role, in his novels he actually gives them a determining part to play ... and thus tends to fall victim to the very ideology of the autonomous individual which he otherwise contests in the name of positivist science.... Zola is only able to attack the prevailing institution of literature [i.e., romanticism] with any prospect of success if he also satisfies the real needs of broad circles of the reading public.... [I]f it is true that within developed bourgeois society literature is institutionalized as a domain in which those problems of subjective experience excluded from a social reality organized according to principles of purposive rationality are articulated, then ... the whole naturalist programme stands in direct contradiction to this process of institutionalization.... Within Zola's concept of the representation of the social life world the subject only occupies the place of a functional role-bearer and does not appear as intrinsically problematic. The subject serves to present social conditions in a vivid way, not to thematize the problems of subjectivity as such. (110-111)

Thus, as Bürger shows, "the problematic [concerning subjectivity] which leads to the aestheticist turn to the subject is already implicit within naturalist literature" (113). Just as aestheticism directly attacked naturalism and sought to legitimize its own themes and forms, it also attempted to resolve this contradiction about subjectivity. What is involved is threefold: the heightened emphasis on the authorial subject; the primacy of the representation of

subjective states, personality, and problems concerning the inner "self"; and the autonomy of serious fiction and its absolute differentiation from both positivist science (in Bürger's terms, instrumental rationality) and more popular forms of literature. In the preface to his trilogy of novels, The Cult of the Self (1889-1891), Barres directly opposes Zola's project: "Reality changes along with the observer for it is the totality of our habitual ways of seeing, feeling and thinking.... This [novel] is no logical investigation concerning the transformations of sensibility; rather I am directly reproducing visions and emotions profoundly felt" (qtd. in Bürger 114).[25] Using the first-person form and "alternating the presentation of felt subjective experience with the process of reflection" (Bürger 115), Barres composed a fragmentary narrative in which the clearly autobiographical narrator "opposes the purposive orientation of instrumental rational action with his infinite susceptibility to different impressions and experiences.... [T]he problem of discovering a unitary self becomes the central issue of the work" (Bürger 116).

Instead of "solving" the problem of subjectivity, of accounting for the role of the individual in relation to social and biological determinants, Barres recreates the contradiction on the other side of the split. Not only is his narrator entirely preoccupied with his inner self-development, he actually pursues estrangement from others

and from society. "Alienation is here almost elevated into a principle according to which one should attempt to live" (Bürger 118). Bürger summarizes the dynamic of the split, in this context viewed as an opposition between naturalist objectivity and aestheticist subjectivism:

> If naturalism had grasped reality as objectivity and passed over the problem of the subjectivity of experience, the anti-naturalist novel in the hands of a writer like Barres can obviously only address the problem on the condition that reality is construed in turn as the production of the subject itself.... [T]he naturalist writer captures reality in all its manifold appearances but that reality remains external to the subject ... the aestheticist writer on the other hand captures the active subject but this activity remains a purely ideal posited meaning which leaves the external world unchanged.... [T]hese two movements correspond to one another, even if only by way of reciprocal negation. In this dissociation of the subjective and objective dimensions we can recognize <u>one</u> real historical experience: namely that in which social reality is experienced as a realm which eludes the formative intervention of the subject. (118-19)

This dissociation is bound up with the question of the social function of literature. For while Zola "struggles against romanticism in the name of truth and science precisely because he is convinced that his conception of literature is the one which is really appropriate to a democratic-egalitarian society," Barres "ties the process of literary evolution to the abstract principle of [personal] renewal" (Bürger 124). In fact, Barres concept of self-renewal appears in the first novel of the trilogy, <u>Berenice's Garden</u>, not as a rejection of political aims <u>tout court</u> but as an anti-democratic notion of political activity. As Seigel puts it, "Politics is one of his [the

autobiographical narrator's] modes of self-cultivation, a way to invest his cool, stale sensibility with warmth and life. Boulangism is the only movement that can accomplish this, because it alone recognizes the people as at once a mass to be dominated and a source of instinctual energy" (287).[26] For Zola, naturalism is a "means to a social end," while Barres' aestheticism "radicalizes the autonomous concept of literature ... as an end in itself" (Bürger 124) in opposition to both social progress and a positivist notion of reality, itself an alienating factor that denies the individual an active role in forming social reality.

Just as the choice between "social" and "individual" is *no* choice at all, the choice between these two influential types of aesthetic movements is no choice at all. Many of the oppositions of high modernism, from the personal vs. the impersonal (as in Eliot) or the impression vs. the fact (as in Conrad, Proust, and Woolf), took shape in response to the continuing contradictions inherent in a cultural activity that saw itself as opposed (from reactionary as well as radical perspectives) to the dominant social norms of the early 20th century.[27] In the best works of the period preceding the first World War, such as Joyce's Dubliners, the oppositions make no sense at all, since no amount of analytic effort could demonstrate whether these stories are more naturalistic or aestheticist, more descriptive of a highly specific set of social problems (from Irish

nationalism to alcoholism) or more interested in consciousness, symbolist techniques, lyricism, and epiphanies; more interested in communicating ideas and images or in joining the charmed circle of high art. But the ideology of modernism has, until recently, been so pervasive as to force critical perspectives into separate restricting channels that have, in actuality, a single and complex source.

As a postwar writer responding to the antinomies of these modernist "universals," Beckett negotiated a particular path. It is the interwar, postwar, and contemporary specificities of this path that the remainder of this dissertation will continue to examine, always putting the consequences, half-truths, and false starts of these historical splits in a wider perspective. For, as Andreas Huyssen has written in his discussion of the modernist split between high and "mass" culture (what he calls the "great divide"),

> the famliar ideas of what constitutes a critical art (Parteilichkeit and vanguardism, l'art engagé, critical realism, or the aesthetic of negativity, the refusal of representation, abstraction, reflexiveness) have lost much of their explanatory and normative power in recent decades. (182)

Simply put, to interpret Beckett's fiction only in relation to one side of Williams's split, or Huyssen's "divide," is to both misrepresent its self-evident ambivalence and irony toward inner existence, pure "Being," or the idea of art itself, and, perhaps worse, to abnegate the role of the

literary critic: that is, to be critical. Even the view that Beckett's fiction is somehow about "fiction itself" can be saved from its tautological vacuity if we understand how, beginning in the late 1940s, novelists and cultural theorists felt the need to account for a perceived or experienced congruence between forms of regressive social "order" and the abstract "order" of narrative structures: fiction "itself" always already turns out to be about something else. It is the status of narrative ordering principles and its relation to images of social order in Beckett's fiction, and to the postwar invention of structural narratology, that my next chapter will address.

So far, my analysis of part I of Molloy has demonstrated how Beckett used and exaggerated thematic and narrative conventions to break the "illusion" of the subjective point of view, but in such a way that the result is not to reject the subjective as an aesthetic -- or political -- value. Rather, the aesthetic logic produces a hermeneutic tension that can be located in both the reader's response and in the form of the novel. The reader's ability to identify Molloy as a representation of socially-induced suffering, or to sympathize with him as a victim, is blocked by the novel's intention to highlight its own production of meaning, not as a representation of a social world but as text, as written language. In turn, the techniques of constructing social representation, and the process of

understanding those representations as art, themselves become a content with a particular value. The novel constantly uses its suggestive social content to make a contrast between a privileged social sphere, in which the novel's aesthetic status as pure interiority can be grasped and appreciated, and the world of Molloy's silence, confusion, and pain. This points back to the contradiction in the reader's response: the more the reader identifies Molloy as a victim, the more the text places the reader in the position of Molloy's "superiors," his victimizers. This is rendered explicitly paradoxical not least because Molloy, the only character the reader can identify with, both eloquent narrating subject and isolated, objectified vagrant, must himself take this position; without it, he is silent.

If the status of the "subject" -- in the sense of both the narrating voice and the content -- ultimately winds up in a characteristically Beckettian aporia, the reason lies not only in Beckett's techniques but in the concept itself, with its contradictory emphases on self-originating autonomy and external authority. While it might be tempting to assert that Beckett fully and explicitly exploits the inherent contradiction, this would leave the problem at the mercy of the "split" instead of seeing it as a relation of the individual to social forms and institutions. The problem of "subjectivity," however, can be refigured in a manner more

specific to narrative literature than to language in general or to philosophy: in any story, an individual subject is also an agent. Every theory of plot, story, epic, mimesis, narrative, narrative discourse, etc., from Aristotle to Propp to Ricoeur, has had to confront the ontology of "action" and "agents" (or, actors, actants, protagonists, etc.). I turn, therefore, to part II of Molloy, narrated by Moran, the "agent" of the mysterious "organization," and an analysis of Beckett's experimentation with storytelling (traditional, modernist, and popular) and the structural study of narrative (which was also part of the postwar anti-realist and anti-naturalist polemic), itself centered (implicitly) on questions of individual agency and social determinsism.

NOTES

1. For example, Connor (1988), Hill (1990) and Trezise (1990).

2. Roland Barthes' Writing Degree Zero (originally published in 1953) was one of the earliest -- and most influential -- statements of the anti-interpretive stance.

3. The paradigmatic positions of the postwar debate are best represented by Sartre's notion of "engagement," Adorno's notion of "autonomy," and Barthes' notion of the "writerly." The last part of the dissertation compares the forms and themes of Beckett's fiction to the polemical positions of the theorists.

4. This links Beckett to the avant-garde's anti-art stance. In chapter III I draw on Peter Bürger's The Theory of the Avant-Garde and Raymond Williams' The Politics of Modernism to examine Beckett's relation to Surrealism and the avant-garde in general, especially in the early, interwar fiction and the manifesto-like critical writings on Joyce and Proust.

5. The essay, first published 1961, is Adorno's only sustained analysis of any Beckett work. Adorno refers to Beckett's fiction throughout his writings on aesthetics and cultures.

6. It is important to distinguish Adorno's remarks about Beckett, Kafka, Schoenberg, etc, from his general cultural theory and his claims about the relation of their works to his notion of "aesthetic autonomy," developed most thoroughly in Aesthetic Theory. See Wellmer, Arato (185-224) and Habermas (Theory 339-399) for critical overviews of Adorno's vision of art and society. As I discuss in chapter V, Adorno's concept of autonomy needs to be evaluated in relation to a set of postwar ideas about the relation of literature to politics. In this chapter, I acknowledge aspects of his analysis of Endgame as the starting point for my interpretation of Molloy. Adorno was the first critic to challenge the existential interpretation of the play and significantly confront the social and political meanings and context of Beckett's work.

7. See Huyssen, pp. 16-43, for a critical interpretation of Adorno's "strategies of exclusion which relegate realism, naturalism, reportage literature and political art to an inferior realm" (25) and his reliance on a "theory of the

decay of the ego [which] seems to imply a nostalgia for the strong bourgeois ego and furthermore remains locked into patriarchal patterns of thought" (23).

8. See Connor, pp. 56-57, for a discussion of how the network of differences and similarities in the two narratives create an unsolvable hermeneutic problem. Connor views the relation between the two parts as a problem in intertextuality; as my reading of the novel demonstrates, the textual aspect is only one part of the problematic relation between Molloy and Moran.

9. The "destabilizing" reading of Beckett is the post-structuralist one; the "damaged self" reading is the psychoanalytic and the existential-humanist one. Adorno's analysis of Endgame incorporates important aspects of both, consistent with the Frankfurt School's ambivalent desire to rescue the idea of a "radical subjectivity." See Arato and see also Habermas's essay on Marcuse, "Psychic Thermidor and the Rebirth of Rebellious Subjectivity" (in Bernstein 67-77).

10. Kenner (117-132) discusses a Cartesian mind-body dichotomy in Beckett. Here I am referring to a 20th-century novelistic convention concerning first-person narration, not a seventeenth-century philosophical proposition.

11. As a representation of a situated communicative act, the narrative frame is often read as a metaphor for the complex communicative transaction between text and reader, author and audience. See, for example, Brooks, chapter nine, and Menand, pp. 101-113, for interpretations of Heart of Darkness that relate the frame to the intentions underlying the novelist's narrative act.

12. Not even this lengthy redacted quote gives the full impact and meaning of the passage. Beckett composed the novel in a series of circular set pieces that seem to recapitulate in one way or another the circular and negating form of the two sections as wholes. See chapter II for my analysis of narrative structure in the Moran section.

13. For example, Ford Maddox Ford's "On Impressionism," Pater's essay on "Style," Conrad's preface to "The Nigger of the 'Narcissus'," the last sections of Proust's Le Temps Retrouvé, Henry James's "The Art of Fiction," and Woolf's "Modern Fiction."

14. Walter Pater's essay on "Style" in Appreciations is one of the clearest statements of this opposition between scientific fact and literary imagination, sense and intuition.

15. Any narrator who in telling the story reveals that his or her role in the story and vested interest in telling it in a certain way damages his or her credibility as an accurate describer of events, with the effect of foregrounding the act of narration itself. Conrad and Ford both exploit this convention. Joyce's and Woolf's dissolution of a single narrative perspective are also related to this device.

16. See Bruck for a "sociological" critique of Beckett and Benjamin that emphasizes a "crisis" in communication and, I believe, reductively interprets the Trilogy as a totalized commentary on "the decline in storytelling" (161). I discuss Benjamin's "The Storyteller" in relation to Moran's remarks about storytelling and agency in chapter II.

17. Kenner, among others, has noted the connection between Beckett's work and silent film. Declan Kiberd (126) interprets parts of Murphy as a spoof on the socially-committed literature of the thirties and its notion of the inherent dignity of work. What links the parody to its object of derision is the broad anti-bourgeois stance that naturalism, aestheticism, modernism and the avant-garde took, even though their implied political solutions were opposed. See Williams's The Politics of Modernism for discussions of the aristocratic versus the socialist anti-bourgeois sentiment.

18. The motif is repeated, with variation, later in the Molloy section: "I knew I was bound to be stopped by the first policeman and asked what I was doing, a question to which I have never been able to find the correct reply" (80).

19. The phrase is Bakhtin's; see chapter six, "Images of the Material Bodily Lower Stratum" in Rabelais and his World for a discussion of the relation between such images in literature and forms of popular-cultural expressions about institutionalized authority.

20. For Beckett's relation to Irish cultural politics, nationalism and colonialism see Lloyd; Cairns and Richards (136-37); Harrington; and the chapters on Irish modernism in Deane (Short History).

21. See Kenner, pp. 203-07, for his view of Beckett as "academic clown."

22. See Fletcher, p. 138, for similarities between Swift and Beckett in this regard.

23. See chapter V.4 for a summary of Andreas Huyssen's analysis of the canonization of modernism during the 40s and 50s in Europe and America, the historical pressures under which critics felt it necessary to protect "autonomous" high literature from both totalitarian attempts to turn art into propoganda and capitalism's "commodification" of culture, and the "postmodern" reaction to this "official" version of modernism. In relation to Brian McHale's postmodern reading of Beckett's fiction, I compare Huyssen's cultural-historical idea of postmodernism to those, like McHale's, based on post-structural and semiotic notions of textuality.

24. There were, of course, other literary historians who sought to understand modernism in terms that linked the formal innovations of modernist representations of individual consciousness to the realist representation of everyday life. See, for example, the last chapter of Auerbach's Mimesis on Woolf's To The Lighthouse. For Williams's reading of Ulysses, see The Country and the City.

25. While not well known in the United States, Barres was an extremely influential figure in both artisitic and political circles in fin de siecle France. See Seigel, pp. 278-89, for an account of Barres as novelist and political publicist for the right wing, nationalist, anti-semitic opposition to the liberal parliamentarianism of the Third Republic.

26. See Seigel, chapter 10, for a full account of Barres' anti-democratic cultural politics.

27. For example, see Menand's account of the contradiction inherent in Eliot's notion of the impersonal that had to fulfill "the requirements of a generally diffused aesthetic that condemned the expression of personal 'views' but tied the value of a literary work to the intensity of the author's private experience" (145).

CHAPTER II

Courses of Inaction: Narrative and Agency in Part II of Molloy

1. The Storyteller and the Agent

The second part of Molloy, narrated by Jacques Moran, is marked "II" in the text. The schema of the novel is ingenious and deceptively simple: two apparently separate first-person narratives, one following the other, in which the narrator of the second begins his story by recalling "the day I received the order to see about Molloy" (125). Molloy, of course, is the hero (anti- or otherwise) who narrates part I. The speaking, suffering, irreverent, and paradoxical subject of the first part becomes the object of Moran's search and, since Moran fears what will befall him if he does not find Molloy, the focal point of his increasing anxiety. As Moran's "report" of his ill-fated search for Molloy continues, Beckett sets up, through an abundance of details and suggestions both trivial and substantive, a network of similarities and differences between the two sections that simultaneously provokes and frustrates the reader's attempt to relate them in a meaningful way. Moran may or may not be Molloy himself, or a version of Molloy; "II" may take place after "I," before "I," or at the same time; Moran's son may be the son to whom Molloy alludes, or Moran might be Molloy's son, or Moran's

son an incipient Molloy, etc. There is ample but inconclusive textual evidence for each, and many more, suppositions about the relation of the two narratives as wholes, of their individual events and details, and of their respective narrators.

This binary structure allows Beckett to experiment with several fundamental elements of the novel form and of narrative in general. While later novels, such as The Unnamable, seem to reject a coherent story altogether, Molloy retains just enough of the clear contours of traditional and popular narrative forms (the tale, the parable, the realist novel, espionage fiction) to exploit the reader's expectations about the kind of information, pleasure, and meaning a good plot provides. The overall effect of the carefully constructed duality is to deliberately block or short-circuit the usual type of stable coordinates by which we understand (and retell) any narrative. It is this narrative feature of Molloy that, according to theorists of the postmodern novel, marks the novel's key position (along with other postwar works by Robbe-Grillet and Cortazar) in the transition from the "epistemological" concerns of high modernism to the "ontological" concerns of much contemporary fiction. In other words, the new novel no longer emphasizes, in its formal structure, questions of knowledge or perception, as did the experimentation with point of view (Conrad,

Faulkner, Woolf, Joyce, etc.). Rather, the emphasis is on the status of fictional discourse itself, as a linguistic construct that creates the illusions of character, action, value, and reference to "reality."[1]

Of course, it has long been a commonplace of Beckett scholarship to claim that his novels are concerned with the "nature of fiction" or "the act of narration itself" (Brooks 215). This claim, however, while true enough on its own terms, has yet to yield any meaningful analysis beyond an indication of a vague problematic. Critical emphasis on "meta-fictional" devices such as intertextual allusion, linguistic paradox, or violation of diegetic levels has established that Molloy does indeed raise fundamental questions about narrative discourse. In studies of literary narrative and narratology Beckett's postwar fiction has been viewed as a liminal case: as Genette puts it, it "challenges the notion of how (where) to locate narrative discourse in its specificity as narrative" (135). Molloy, however, not only raises to an acute level of awareness the novel's "ontological" status as fiction, but at the same time expresses a concern with the value of narrative and storytelling. More specifically, "II" tells a story that links the value of narrating to the narrator Moran's experience as an "agent," and to his ability to understand the meaning of his own actions, which include writing his "report" about the search for Molloy.

The link between Moran -- as an agent and a narrator -- and (to use Brooks' phrase) "the act of narration itself" appears in various forms, of which perhaps the most characteristic, in Beckett's postwar fiction, is the paradox:

> Oh, the stories I could tell you, if I were easy. What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others. I would never have believed that -- yes, I believe it willingly. Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one. (189)

Within the paradox Beckett registers a specific kind of ambiguity: Moran is both capable ("I could tell") and incapable ("I have not been able... I shall not be able") of telling stories. This paradox, however, takes place <u>within</u> a story already being told: "I shall not be able to tell <u>this one</u>." The passage contains both a willed refusal to narrate ("if I were easy") and at the same time an almost nostalgic desire to do so. The subjects of the stories he could/cannot tell are intertextual allusions to the characters of Beckett's earlier fiction. The stories and characters are already there for the telling: the paradox here is not really concerned with the ontological status of fiction per se, but with the capability and desire of the narrator to tell a story, one of which he is already (and uneasily) in the midst of telling. The source of Moran's dilemma centers on a relation between stories (their diegetic status seems immaterial here) and a problematic ability or will to tell them.

At its most general level, Moran's paradox expresses a relationship between an individual and an action, between a storyteller and the telling of a story. The paradox is built upon a distinction analogous to the analytical division, a cornerstone of narratology since Propp, between story and discourse.[2] "Story" refers to our everyday understanding of narrative, as a set of significantly inter-related characters, actions and circumstances; "discourse" refers to the set of rhetorical and linguistic devices (Barthes' "codes") through which a story is told. Significantly, discourse, as a rhetorical term, always refers to an action (in speaking or writing) with an intention to persuade or evoke a specific response in the listener or reader. Thus, Moran's paradox is equally about the relation of story to discourse, of characters and events (including himself) to the intentional action of telling them.

As part of the <u>story</u> in "II," individual action, as a paradox and a problem, is represented in two closely related ways: just as Moran is ordered to search for Molloy, he is also ordered, by the same authority, to write the report, which is the story he is telling. Moran's anxiety over his life as an agent compels him to express his complaints in his report to the "Chief." Thematically, individual action is a problem because Moran is forced to act against his will:

> Here are your instructions, said Gaber.... When at last he had finished I told him the job did not

> interest me and that the chief would do better to call on another agent. He wants it to be you, God knows why, said Gaber.... He said ... that no one could do it but you.... In that case it's hard for me to refuse, I said, knowing perfectly well that in any case it was impossible for me to refuse. Refuse! But we agents often amused ourselves with grumbling among ourselves and giving ourselves the air of free men. (128-9)

There is a thematic tension between freedom and compulsion, between Moran's desire to consider himself "free" and the requirements of his existence as an "agent." Beckett's broad characterizations in "II" -- agent and chief, employer and employee, father and son, master and servant -- are all suggestive of social hierarchy and conflict. As my reading of part I demonstrates, the social content of Molloy resides, in part, in a parodic and contradictory exaggeration of cultural symbols expressing social conflicts. In "II," however, the content takes on a more abstract quality. Moran's admission that he cannot refuse, that he knowingly acts against his own wishes, unfolds within a set of more general relations:

> And when I speak of agents and of messengers in the plural, it is with no guarantee of the truth. For I had never seen any other messengers than Gaber nor any other agent than myself. But I supposed we were not the only ones and Gaber must have supposed the same. For the feeling that we were the only ones of our kind would, I believe, have been more than we could have borne.... That we thought of ourselves as members of a vast organization was doubtless also due to the all too human feeling that trouble shared, or is it sorrow, is trouble something, I forget the word.... But to me at least ... it was obvious that we were perhaps alone in what we did.... at times I came even to doubt the existence of Gaber himself.... And ... I might have gone to the extreme of conjuring away the chief too and regarding myself as solely responsible for my wretched

existence. (146-7)

What is first posed as a problem concerning freedom of action is here posed in terms of taking responsibility for one's actions. The structure of relations is the same, whether or not Moran acts alone: he understands his actions as mediated through some source outside of himself, be it a "vast organization" --Beckett's proto-metaphor for society -- or the chief. The problem is not about Moran's uncertainty regarding who the chief is or if there really are other agents like himself, but rather about self-understanding. He cannot account for the events in his story, or even bear to think about them, without two conflicting views of himself: as an individual responsible for his own actions and as an agent of an "anonymous" cause:

> For 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. It will not be said, I think, that I did not take my work to heart. But, rather, tenderly. Ah, those old craftsmen, their race is extinct and the mould broken. (156-7)

While one set of terms is here broadened -- from chief and organization to simply a "cause" -- another is narrowed, from "what I was doing" to "work." The dual emphasis in the novel, as in Moran's paradox about storytelling -- in one direction toward the vividly presented narrated events (the story), on the other toward the "act of narration itself" (the discourse) -- means that "work" is both Moran's search

for Molloy and his telling/writing of the story, two actions which are thematically unified since Moran has also been ordered to write the "report." While many critics, following Genette, claim that in Beckett's fiction, "the action [i.e., the story]...is reduced to the condition of simple pretext, and then abolished" (219), it would be more accurate to say that Beckett creates a tension between story and discourse, between the reader's understanding of "work" and action as story events, and as the discursive construction that creates and communicates those actions. There is always the indication that the narrating act itself is what is at stake, and that the problem of individual agency in the story cannot be separated from the problem of agency in the narrating act.

For a novelist, of course, the narrating act is "work," artistic activity and career. If, as I have begun to show, the narrative experimentation in Molloy is an expression of an experienced problem about individual agency, then the dialectic of individual agent and anonymous cause that "II" constructs might be read as an aesthetically mediated image of Beckett's self-understanding as a type of social actor, as a novelist. The nostalgic tone of the passage quoted above, out of keeping with the cynical and mannered style of most of "II," and its lament for the "old craftsmen," expresses a sense of loss for an historically "extinct" mode of narration. A similar sense of loss was expressed in

Walter Benjamin's critical reflections on changing forms of narration, "The Storyteller" (1936).

For Benjamin, both the storyteller's subject, "communicable experience" (84), and the social stratum in which he or she flourished, "the artisan class" (85), had nearly vanished from European culture after World War I. Benjamin contrasts the nearly extinct storyteller with the dominant, modern bourgeois narrator, the novelist:

> The storyteller takes what he tells from experience -- his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. (87)

The disappearance of the storyteller and the role of the novelist evoke a sense of loss that is most keenly experienced at two extremes: the demise of a social organization capable of sustaining storytelling and a concomitant pervasiveness, in modernity, of the isolated individual. Behind both the decline of storytelling and the rise of the novel is the radical loss of what might mediate between the social and individual, the feeling of community. It is the loss of community that affects the mode of narration in every aspect, from creation to reception: "A man listening to a story is in the company of the storyteller; even a man reading one shares this

companionship. The reader of a novel, however, is isolated, more so than any other reader" (100).

Benjamin's themes of loss, isolate individuality, absence of community and his ambivalence about the rise of the novel begin to suggest some of the broader cultural concerns shaping Beckett's narrative experimentation. The paradox of Moran's ability and willingness to tell a story is embedded in his uncertain relation to the source, meaning, and context of his actions, articulated through the extremes of individual will and anonymous cause, the "solitary" man (156) and the invisible "vast organization." As "story," the absence of a community of "agents" is the decisive social content that compels the thematic ambivalence about narrative, while the emphasis on "discourse" in Moran's meta-fictional comment on his own narrating "work" points to a correspondence between "agent" and novelist. A similar correspondence is suggested in Beckett's emphasis on the theme of "voice."

In one sense, the abstract quality of the content of Moran's story is compensated for in the economy of the narration by the intensity with which the narrative voice expresses anxiety and anger at its situation and the illusions of freedom and compulsion, isolation and companionship. The heightened emotional register is a response to a set of themes and events concerning the ability and will to tell a story, the compulsion to act and

to write the "report," and simultaneously Moran's resistance toward acting and narrating. As in part I, it is the uneasy proximity of an intimate, internal "voice" both to fear and to a sense of complicity with an external, fear-inducing authority that casts doubt on the liberatory effect of self-expression. In a long passage near the middle of Moran's report, the various expressions that bind the paradox of individual action to the act of narration are brought together under the sign of this ambivalent but always deeply-felt sense of voice:

> I have no intention of relating the various adventures which befell us, me and my son ... before we came to the Molloy country. It would be tedious. But that is not what stops me. All is tedious in this relation that is forced upon me. But I shall conduct it in my own way, up to a point. And if it has not the good fortune to give satisfaction, to my employer, if there are passages that give offense to him and to his colleagues, then so much the worse for us all, for them all, for there is no worse for me .... And if I submit to this paltry scrivening which is not of my province, it is for reasons very different from those that might be supposed. I am still obeying orders, if you like, but no longer out of fear. No, I am still afraid, but simply from force of habit. And the voice I listen to needs no Gaber to make it heard. For it is within me and exhorts me to continue to the end the faithful servant I have always been, of a cause that is not mine, and patiently fulfill in all its bitterness my calamitous part, as it was my will, when I had a will, that others should. And this with hatred in my heart, and scorn, of my master and his designs. Yes, it is rather an ambiguous voice and not always easy to follow, in its reasonings and decrees. But I follow it none the less .... And I feel I shall follow it from this day forth, no matter what it commands. And when it ceases, leaving me in doubt and darkness, I shall wait for it to come back, and do nothing, even though the whole world, through the channel of its innumerable authorities speaking with one accord, should enjoin upon me this or that, under pain of unspeakable punishments.... It also tells me, this voice I am only

> just beginning to know, that the memory of this work brought scrupulously to a close will help me to endure the long anguish of vagrancy and freedom. Does this mean I shall one day be banished from my house, from my garden, lose my trees, my lawn, my birds ... all those things at hand without which I could not bear being a man, where my enemies cannot reach me, which it was my life's work to build, to adorn, to perfect, to keep? I am too old to lose all this, and begin again, I am too old! Quiet Moran, quiet. No emotion, please. (180-1)

The internal disjuncture of Molloy's voice, as I have analyzed it, is turned inside out in Moran's. In possession of all those things that Molloy lacks, from a home and a son to the command of a "systematic decorum," Moran unconsciously shifts his sense of unfreedom from external to internal causes. Molloy's voice does not belong to him because it expresses the objective conditions that have, it claims, reduced him to silence and subjective withdrawal -- it is a voice that must break the limitations and deprivations imposed on it in order to protest against them. Ironically, the voice forfeits its justification to protest just at the moment its protest reaches its most eloquent and incisive expression: neither silent nor confused, it implicitly blames itself along with Molloy's "superiors." In "II," however, Beckett relies on a character type who is in possession of the knowledge and resources necessary to critically reflect upon the conditions of his own existence. If Moran protests, it is through the perspective of his class status, not, as in the case of Molloy, in spite of it.

Perhaps the most salient difference that structures the binary schema of the novel is a broadly sketched socio-

economic one: Molloy's disoriented, propertyless vagabondage in contrast to Moran's home, gardens, son, servant, church, and career. In the key passage above, it is at the intersection of Moran's sense of endangered class status and identity -- "well-shaven and perfumed and proud of my intellectual's soft white hands" (233), as he later puts it -- and his anxious reflection on the sources of his narration, ranging from the external compulsion to write to the internal voice's "reasonings and decrees," that the story most strongly reflects on the discourse as an intentional, rhetorical act. Moran is an "agent" with a "voice" who expresses anxiety and resistance in the knowledge that his will and ability to narrate, his desire for freedom, and the prerogatives of his endangered social status are inextricably intertwined. And if, as I later discuss, the very terms "agent" and "voice" refer equally to narrative discourse (every narrative must have an agent, be told in a voice) and to Moran's condition, then they are also expressions concerning the role of individual agency, rational will, and social identity in the work of the novelist.

In Beckett's prewar critical writing (as I analyze it in the next chapter), his proximity to the avant-garde resided in two areas: an anti-art stance and, as in the surrealist's theory of automatic writing or Beckett's conceptualization of Proustian involuntary memory, a fantasy

of a free, agent-less creation, without the imposition of individual will or conscious rationality. A set of contradictory values, inherited from aestheticism, contradicted the avant-gardist leanings: the work of art as an ultimate value over and against the vulgar realities of everyday life, and the artist as a martyr to his long years of inspired labor. What the contradictory values share, as a point of contention, is the question of the role of the artist's rational control in relation to both the process of writing and the artistic object itself. Only the total "sublation" of art into life, and the dismantling of the modern institution of art, from the very idea of the individual artist to the organs of publishing and criticism, could have made the dream of an unbridled, will-less, agent-less creative access to the "real" come into being.[3] This same conflict over individual agency appears in Moran's struggles as an "agent" to understand the relation of his own will and desires to his acts of working, searching and storytelling. The problem of agency, in Beckett's aesthetic ideology and as a thematic and formal concern in Moran's chronicle of agents, stories, voices, and organizations, refers to a single, if complex, cultural and political concern of postwar fiction and criticism.

The successful fictional experiments of Beckett's best writing result (as I argue throughout this dissertation) when Beckett "solves" the conflicts in his interwar

"aesthetic ideology" by working out these conflicts, explicitly and immanently, in the themes and techniques of his postwar works. The irreconcilable cultural attitudes of the avant-garde and aestheticism that implicitly inform (and weaken) the earlier fiction become, in his postwar writing, thematized contradictions in the works themselves and part of Beckett's consciously selected artistic material. In regard to agency, Beckett refigured the conflict, which could only lead to an aporia at the level of conceptual formulation, as an immanent aesthetic problem of narrative form in a story about the relation of a narrator to his narrative. From Aristotle's theory of mimesis to Ricoeur's study of time and narrative, the understanding of "story" has been inseparable from the concept of action. Since agency signifies the relation of an individual to the source, meaning, and consequence of his of her actions, we need to turn to the changing representation of action and activity in Beckett's fiction.

2. "Strong enough at last to act no more"

Problems of action or acting appear, in some form, in almost all of Beckett's work. The significance of one of Beckett's most persistent motifs, the undesirability or difficultly of physical mobility, which becomes increasingly acute in the novels of the Trilogy, cannot be reduced to an atavistic, Cartesian complaint against the tyranny of the

body.[4] Rather,the pervasiveness of inaction in his fiction is part of a broader cultural response to norms of productive labor and technological progress.[5] In Beckett's prewar fiction, characters like Belacqua (the name alludes to Dante's personification of sloth), in More Pricks than Kicks, and Murphy protest, in the manner of the bohemian aesthete, against norms of rational or purposive activity through their ironically willful adherence to parodic and rigorous principles of laziness, irresponsibility, anti-sociability, and disdain for work and "the mercantile gehenna" (Murphy 26) of urban, middle-class life. But immobility and withdrawal, hardly conducive to an engaging novel, are compensated for in the early fiction with both an energetic, allusive, and constantly punning omniscient narrative voice and a purposively convoluted (though minimally interesting) plot. This is the case in Beckett's first published novel, Murphy, which begins with an image of the hero's self-immobilization, ritualistically bound to his rocking chair. When, in the second chapter, Murphy listens to Celia's demand that he look for some kind of job, his response is described in an oxymoronic paragraph that contrasts action with inertia:

> He closed his eyes and fell back. It was not his habit to make out cases for himself. An atheist chipping at the deity was not more senseless than Murphy defending his courses of inaction .... He had been carried away by his passion for Celia and by the most curious feeling that he should not collapse without at least the form of a struggle.... To die fighting was the perfect anti-thesis of his whole practice, faith and

intention. (26)

The oxymoronic trope, itself a rhetorical short-circuiting of productive communication, is clearest in the phrase "Murphy defending his courses of inaction," in which the active verb, "defending," and the noun of movement, "courses," are inimical to the "intention," which is "inaction."[6] Thematically, Murphy's problem resides in how to actively resist activity. It is not difficult to see here a version of the conflicting ideas of the agency and willlessness of the artist as they appear in Beckett's critical pieces (see chapter III). In the early fiction, however, the conflict is consciously raised only as a theme. The omniscient narration and the plot line seem inordinately complex and precociously deliberate and require, on the reader's part, an active attention disproportionate to the minimal rewards gained by following the story.[7] Beckett's letter (1936) in response to the publisher's request that he cut parts of Murphy indicates the problem: "I do not see how the book can be cut without being disorganized... Do they not understand that if the book is slightly obscure it is because it is a compression and that to compress it further can only result in making it more obscure? ... And of course the narrative is hard to follow. And of course deliberately so" (Disjecta 103).

While in both Murphy and Molloy the problem of action centers on the oxymoronic "courses of inaction" and reflects

an antagonism towards the "instrumental" means-end rationality of modern society, in Murphy it is only the hero who represents this antagonism. Beckett's use of a baroque, convoluted plot, an abstruse literary language, and arch-intellectual allusions creates an ironic distance between the characters and the omniscient narrator. While this ironic distance is the novel's most effective and interesting formal feature, it contradicts and weakens its central thematic feature in a manner that seems to undercut Beckett's own intentions: the hero's will to inaction is neutralized, rather than effectively expressed, by the narrative's too-eager compensatory activeness. The novel, as a whole, falters because the valuing and "defense" of inaction, so central to Beckett's attitude toward everyday life, is contradicted by the mode and style of narration, which reflects aestheticist values toward intellectual labor. In his early fiction and criticism, Beckett tries to express simultaneously a set of contradictory beliefs about the value and nature of work and conscious, rational action (see chapter III).

In Molloy, however, the theme of inaction and the "discourse's" ability to actively express and defend a "story" of inaction are explicitly intertwined. As a whole, the blockage created by the binary structure of the two parts makes the narrative impossible, rather than difficult, to "follow." While the deliberate obscurity of the narrative

in Murphy is created in order to be deciphered, in Molloy the desired aesthetic effect is to solicit and then block the reader's expectations about basic narrative structures, such as the causal and temporal relations of the episodes and events, or the consistent identity of the narrating voices. The shift in narrative point of view, from the interwar omniscient to the postwar first person, serves to link the agency of the character to the agency involved in narrating. Thus, when Moran, awaking in the forest and finding himself crippled, alone and abandoned by his son, contemplates a "course of inaction," the themes of agency and the modes of narrative expression appear as aspects of a single problem:

> I was therefore alone, with my bag, my umbrella (which he might have easily taken too) and fifteen shillings, knowing myself coldly abandoned, with deliberation and no doubt premeditation .... And I remained for several days, I do not know how many, in the place where my son had abandoned me, eating my last provisions (which he might easily have taken too), seeing no living soul, powerless to act, or perhaps strong enough at last to act no more. For I had no illusions, I knew that all was about to end, or to begin again, it little mattered which, and it little mattered how, I had only to wait. And on and off, for fun, and the better to scatter them to the winds, I dallied with the hopes that spring eternal, childish hopes, as for example that my son, his anger spent, would have pity on me and come back to me! Or that Molloy, whose country this was, 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! Yes, I let them spring within me and grow in strength, brighten and charm me with a thousand fancies, and then I swept them away, with a great disgusted sweep of all my being, I swept myself clean of them and surveyed with satisfaction the void they polluted. And in the evening I turned to the lights of Bally, I watched them shine brighter and

> brighter, then all go out together, or nearly all, foul little flickering lights of terrified men. And I said, To think I might be there now, but for my misfortune. (221-2)

The thematic shift from the earlier fiction is clear: from a "defense" of inaction to a paradox about agency. The central paradox in the passage, "powerless to act, or perhaps strong enough at last to act no more" is presented in conjunction with themes relating to the dialectic of solitary agent and vast organization: isolation, compulsion, and the longing for companionship and community, even in spite of Moran's disdain for the distant "lights of terrified men." Moran's course of inaction is expressed not, as in Murphy, as an oxymoron contrasting activity with inaction, but as an hermeneutic impasse: there is no way to distinguish inaction as a lack of capability, "powerless to act," from inaction as an exertion of capability, "strong enough ... to act no more." This is not a defense of inaction, but a problem in understanding it, related to Moran's anxiety over his own actions as they are mediated between the poles of solitary self and unknowable, abstract organization. This polarity is partially analogous to one in political and social theory, where the question of individual agency is, in one sense, an attempt to reconcile the poles of determinism (as in scientific marxism or structuralism) with individual rational choice (as in classical liberalism). In a narrative, however, it is the total relation of characters and events that gives the

represented actions meaning. In Molloy, the thematic shift from a defense of inaction to a paradox about agency is also a formal shift from a carefully contrived, convoluted plot to an episodic series of events which are related and unified, but nevertheless cannot be understood simply as a total relation of cause and effect, of before and after, of action and consequence, etc.

When read as a single narrative event, Moran's reflection upon being abandoned by his son does in fact evoke, through temporal references and themes of hope and fear, the presence of an overarching narrative. The passage appears in the midst of a sequence of events with an implied causality that suggests an Aristotelian beginning, middle, and end. At the same time, however, the event's status as part of an overall configuration of events is disrupted. The disruption is controlled by the paradox about agency: unable to understand the meaning of inaction -- where doing nothing is either a sign of powerlessness or capability, passivity or strength -- the narrator is equally uncertain about the parameters of storytelling: "For I had no illusions, I knew that all was about to end, or begin again, it little mattered which, and it little mattered how, I had only to wait."

The style, which in the earlier fiction seems to contradict the authorial homage to non-instrumental inaction, in this case contributes to the expression of a

problem in agency as a problem in narrative itself. In Murphy the sentences constantly twist and turn with a deliberately recondite vocabulary, literary reference range, and grammar: syntax, like the plot itself, becomes an exercise in the reader's willingness to "follow" (see chapter IV). Here, however, the opposite occurs. The short phrases that make up the sentences almost stand on their own: I was therefore alone; eating my last provisions; and grow to be a friend; I watched them shine brighter and brighter. At the level of the sentence the style offers no resistance to understanding. But the accretion of simple words, phrases and sentences creates the expectation that the narrated events, like the phrases themselves, will fit together in an intelligible order. While the theme of inaction and the problem of agency are explicitly expressed at the level of the sentence and the single event, at the level of the total configuration of events this explicitness is denied. In Molloy, Beckett's style makes each object, gesture and thought starkly recognizable in order to then intentionally frustrate the attempt to fit them all together. The plethora of commas which separates each nearly autonomous phrase and breaks down the narrative into hundreds of simple statements indicates how far Beckett's so-called "monologues" are from the unbroken "stream of consciousness" technique of Molly's soliloquy in Ulysses, where an associative logic orders the narrative

configuration. In The Unnamable (see chapter VI), the single comma-bound phrase becomes the monad of meaning, and even the attempt to fit together the phrases within a single sentence becomes a problem in configuring single "events" into a meaningful whole. In later works, especially How It Is, the commas are removed but the phrase-by-phrase construction is retained, making "reading" a constant struggle to recognize unmarked units of meaning and relate them in coherent, variable configurations.

A "semantics of action" (basic to all narratives) is also clearly expressed and simultaneously disrupted, linking Moran's damaged sense of agency to Beckett's narrative innovations.[8] Along with the sense of overall conflict -- the father with the son, the agent with the organization, the isolated individual with the town and its "little flickering lights of terrified men" -- the passage also refers to a range of concepts by which actions are understandable as conscious and willed events: deliberation, premeditation, hope for help and friendship, fear of punishment, etc. Yet if, in "II," actions cannot be meaningfully understood, nor beginnings differentiated from ends, then neither can hopes and fears be realized or alleviated or even understood as a relation of cause and effect, of agents to their acts. Rather, hope is raised as if only in order to be blocked: "And on and off, for fun, and the better to scatter them to the winds, I dallied with

the hopes that spring eternal, childish hopes ... and then I swept them away ... and surveyed with satisfaction the void they polluted."

The notion of "hope," which refers a present state of despair to a future happiness, has an inherent narrative temporality which Moran negates, not only psychologically in the manner of the nihilist, but also by reducing it to a hackneyed trope: "hopes that spring eternal." Yet Moran's dismissal of hope as a possible progression in time, which in historical narrative always has a utopian dimension, does not negate the imagined set of reconciliations: "my son would have pity on me and come back to me ... Molloy ... would come to me ... and grow to be a friend ... and like a father ... Youdi [the chief] would not punish me." What Adorno interpreted as the negative power in the "autonomous" works of Beckett and Kafka -- the artist's refusal to represent reconciliation in the realm of the aesthetic while the social order destroyed the conditions that would make reconciliation possible -- is also a refusal to narrate, to reconcile the sequence of events in a chain of causality, even if the causality is finally "absurd" or tragic.

The utopian moment in Beckett's postwar fiction always revolves around this sense of hope and imagined reconciliation between symbols of social hierarchy like father and son, but this utopian element appears only at the level of the sentence or the single event. There is no way

to meaningfully represent reconciliation without also representing meaningful individual action. In the Trilogy, actions and hopes can only be undermined or dismissed because the narrative progression from prior to present to after, from cause to effect, is blocked. Thus, hope retains all its narrative and temporal implications, but must be devalued and negated because, as Adorno would say, the dialectic of history has come to a standstill. But Adorno's remarks about history are in this case more relevant to art than to society: it is narrative expression that has come to a standstill. The controlling problem of agency, of individual action that has no recognizably meaningful relation to either the "agent" or the anonymous cause, makes hope, reconciliation, and utopia possible as thematic events the realizations of which are denied -- made "void" -- by the experimentation in narrative form.

3. Techniques of Abstraction: Culture, Society, Narrative

The term "agent," like several other central terms in "II," suggests three distinct meanings: social, cultural, and narrative. The social reference, as I have already discussed, is to an individual whose actions are mediated through the forms of social organization; culturally, it refers to the popular novel of espionage; narratologically, it refers to a basic narrative element, a character who does something, variously termed agent, actor, actant, etc. In

fact, the use of similar abstractions that refer, simultaneously, to a social, a cultural, and a narrative phenomenon structures Beckett's experimentation with storytelling. First, as we have seen, Moran as an individual agent does not understand his actions because the social mediation is beyond -- or hidden from -- his understanding. Second, much of the narrative expectation that Beckett evokes and then frustrates stems from his conscious parody of a popular cultural form, the novel of detection and intrigue -- a genre many critics view as a paradigm for conventional modern narrative in general. Third, the meta-narrative aspect of "II" constantly refigures and renders paradoxical the social and cultural references. Simultaneously a social actor and a parody of the secret agent, Moran is also the agent of the narrative structure, an abstraction that expresses the definitive link between narrative discourse and the understanding of individual action.

The tripartite abstraction in "II" is pervasive and follows this same pattern. The plot begins with Moran receiving

> the order to see about Molloy. It was a Sunday in summer. I was sitting in my little garden, in a wicker chair, a black book closed on my knees. It must have been about eleven o'clock, still too early to go to church. I was savouring the day of rest, while deploring the importance attached to it. (125-6)

The social referent is clearly the complacent "slightly libertarian" (125) bourgeoisie, while the narrative parodies

the convention of novelistic expectation ("All was still. Not a breath" [126]), whether it be characterized as the immanent disruption of complacency or the initiation of intrigue. But these social and cultural references are immediately abstracted:

> I've always loved doing nothing. And I would have gladly rested on weekdays too, if I could have afforded it. Not that I was positively lazy. It was something else. Seeing something done which I could have done better myself, if I had wished, and which I did do better whenever I put my mind to it, I had the impression of discharging a function to which no form of activity could have exalted me. But this was a joy in which, during the week, I could seldom indulge. (126)

On one hand, Moran's enjoyment of "doing nothing" is expressed as a prerogative of his social status. On the other, "doing nothing" becomes a paradox about the relationship between "function" and "activity." The parody of philosophical logic, present in almost all Beckett's drama and fiction, here relates more to structural models of narrative, with their typologies of agents and functions, than to Descartes or positivism. In the <u>discourse</u>, "doing nothing" is a "function," while the "form of activity" is a variable content of the <u>story</u> that does not affect the paradigmatic structure. Moran's love of "doing nothing" refers just as much to his class status as it does to the logic of narrative discourse. Beckett's abstractions articulate with those of narratology around the paradox of inaction, because narrative and action cannot be separated: the paradox about agency is always also a paradox in the

narrative form. The effect of the simultaneous metafictional and social-cultural references is to create a tension between the discourse and the story, between the "act of narration itself" and the specific cultural meanings out of which the story is constructed. And this tension always reveals itself most strongly whenever agency or action is thematically explicit.

The disruption of bourgeois complacency at the beginning of the plot suggests a typical narrative logic: the formula order-disruption-restoration of order (through transformation) is clearly invoked. In Marxist-oriented narrative analysis, which follows Lévi-Strauss's analysis of myth, this formula reveals the ideological function of the novel, "the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction" (Jameson 77).[9] But here the formula is apparently invoked, at times parodically, only in order to be violated. Unified by the overarching narrative function of the "search" for Molloy, the episodic plot moves from the initial order to increasing disorder, signaled most strongly by Moran's growing anxiety and physical deterioration. After the messenger Gaber destroys Moran's peaceful Sunday of "doing nothing" with the "order" to find Molloy, Moran is forced to act. The tension between compulsion and freedom, as we have already seen, unfolds within a set of larger abstract relations between Moran and the "vast organization." Thus, the social-political "contradiction" that the novel

expresses, and the expectation of its "resolution," concern the illusory individual freedom that Moran clings to in the face of being forced to obey the "anonymous" organization. However, just as the order-disorder-restoration formula is evoked and then violated, so too is the contradiction-resolution formula. The thematic contradiction in the plot is not resolved; rather, it becomes increasingly pronounced, both as part of the story and in the narrative structure, the discourse.

The ultimate sign of this contradiction in the discourse is the "negating" form of narrative closure that Beckett creates through the minimal narrative frame. Narrative analysis has placed a great emphasis on endings and closure because it is only in retrospect that the various strands of a story can be recognized as a specific sequence of events that cohere (or, in a bad story, inadequately cohere) into a configured whole. Similarly, the "resolution" of an overarching thematic contradiction is coterminous with plot closure. As in part I, the frame in "II" refers to the time of the narrating act, the present: "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I am calm.... My report will be long." Since Moran's anxiety is expressed in relation to his function as an agent, the narrating act -- writing the report -- is also a source of anxiety. As we have already seen, the paradox about agency and storytelling, and the anxiety over Moran's class status

expressed through the concept of "voice," emerge at this overlap of story and discourse, of narrated event and narrating act. Since the chronology of the plot (i.e., the chief's order and Moran's search for Molloy) leads up to the time of the narrating act (Moran writing the report in retrospect) then the end of "II" should seamlessly close the narrative. Moran returns home, having been abandoned by his son, crippled, in debt, his garden in ruins, his house deserted. Announcing the close of his tale, "Now I may make an end," and recalling the reiterated order to write the report, Moran reflects in the last lines of the novel on the conditions under which his narration has been undertaken.

> I have spoken of a voice telling me things. I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one. So that 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 into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining. (241)

The possibility of narrative resolution exists in the relation between freedom and the "voice." Beckett's use of the abstract concept of voice, like that of agent, also exploits the three simultaneous references: socially, it is a marker of the individual's autonomy, especially in regard to the connection (made throughout the Trilogy) between writing and coercion; in the culture of the modern novel, it

signals interiority, both as a manifestation of private conscience or of psychic (or mystical) irrationality (i.e., hearing voices); narratologically, voice is the category that describes the relation of the narrated events to the time, place, and origin of the narrating act. Barthes and Genette both place great emphasis on voice as the most important marker of traditional, "bourgeois" narrative (the third person, in the absolute past) and the new, "writerly" mode (first person, in the present) that breaks with this tradition and its "repressive order." The closer the time, place, and origin of the narrating act to the narrated events, the more the emphasis is on the discourse, while the story (the represented action) appears only, as Genette put it, as a "pretext."

Beckett blocks the possibility of resolution inherent in the theme of voice in all its implications: the contradictions between freedom and compulsion, between interiority and external (or objective) rationality, and between discourse and story are left in tension. Since the multiple significance of "voice," emphasized in all his postwar fiction, allows Beckett to unify his concerns with social, aesthetic, and narrative expression, then the blockage must be all at once a matter of language, of thematics, and of narrative form. Moran begins to "understand" the voice, but the positive meaning of understanding is undercut: "I understand it, all wrong

perhaps." While the "report" has already been demanded by the organization, once in a letter from the Chief and once again by the messenger, now the voice itself becomes the authority for narrating. The question, "does this mean I am freer now?" elicits another epistemological doubt and indicates a final, ambivalent transition from external to internalized coercion. Yet the famous last two lines seem to throw the entire story (that is, the themes and actions represented) into the realm of metafictional illusion and mere "pretext." Iser points to the end of the novel as a "total negation ... which results in a total devaluation of language by accentuating the arbitrariness with which it is applied to the objects it seeks to grasp" (164-5). However, this "devaluation" must be understood not only, as Iser implies, as the discourse negating the content of the story, but also as the ultimate sign of the irresolvable tension between story and discourse.

The negation of the final lines is constructed through a linguistic paradox which exploits the inherent contradictions in language as a formally closed system (as opposed to an open and dialogic one).[10] It follows the form of the well-known paradox "everything I say is a lie." Thus, when considered as discourse (as language or text), "II" cancels itself out, or rather, it short-circuits, since the chain of negation would logically continue with each statement from the first, "It is not midnight," to the last,

"It was not not raining," and over again, switching from affirmation to negation and back again ad infinitum. But the thematic paradox in the story is just as strong as the linguistic paradox in the discourse. The protest against external coercion signalled by the ambivalent "voice" manifests itself as a refusal to give the chief the kind of report he wants. The thrice repeated "He asked for a report he'll get his report" (164, 165, 240) is a rallying cry against the enforced narrating act. The negations in the last lines, as part of this refusal to narrate under duress, are motivated by the events in the story, even if the linguistic paradox short-circuits their ontologically stable status as "reliable" fictional statements. The refusal to resolve any of the contradictions, all of which relate back to the core paradox of agency and the relation of individual to organization, is a sign of the tension Beckett creates, in the form of the novel, between discourse and story, and not merely a decisive turn against the story in favor of a metafictional emphasis on the discourse. It is this tension that renders the palpably expressed social and cultural contradictions paradoxical and inseparable from the more formal concerns with narration "itself."

Unlike the next novel of the Trilogy, Malone Dies, which terminates in a series of fragments that shift between conflated diegetic levels, "II" has a more coherently organized closure that strengthens the contradictions rather

than resolves them. As Peter Brooks observes, postwar experimental writers like Beckett have created and exploited "an altered situation of plot, which no longer wishes to be end determined" (314). Closure, however, need not refer only to how a plot or story resolves itself. If, as Ricoeur claims, the dynamic of emplotment transforms a sequence of actions or events into a configured, temporal whole by providing some type of end point from whose perspective the events cohere, then we might say that in "II" this "end" point makes a set of contradictions cohere by not resolving them. Hayden White discusses the transition in early Europe from history as chronicle, a listing of events that simply lead up to rather than inform or determine the chronicler's present, to history as narrative, which depends upon the presence of a moral or ethical perspective that imbues events with a teleological necessity: the historian's active awareness of his or her own present determines the way in which a sequence of events becomes a relation of events whose clearest manifestation is in whatever historical moment the historian chooses to close the narrative. Thus, another way of describing the tension between discourse and story in "II" would be as a tension between chronicle and narrative forms. Just as a chronicle cannot (or does not aim to) account for the chronicler's present as an outcome of the past, the narrative cannot account for the past except as a leading-up-to the present. The paradoxical form of

closure in "II" not only leaves the textual and thematic contradictions in place, but also points to the necessity of narrative closure as, simultaneously, a manifestation of coercion and an act of protest. The ethical or moral standpoint that would legitimize the narrativizing retrospective, the reclamation of one's own voice, is presented as too ambivalent to make the episodic sequence of events in "II" cohere, and at the same time is too strongly expressed (like hope) to simply be discounted as the possible "point" or end (i.e., moral) of the story. Like Beckett's ambivalence toward interiority in part I, his ambivalence toward plot or story requires that the resolution of the symbolic social conflict be presented as a possibility that his own artistic method blocks or holds in suspension but never merely ignores.

The ending of a story is also an end in the sense of a goal, even if it is the absence of any goal that creates the intended aesthetic effect (the artist's goal) of evoking a sense of futility or indeterminacy. In our practical understanding of agency, however, what differentiates an action from an occurrence (accident, randomness, natural disaster, etc.) is in fact the presence of an immediate or ultimate end or purpose. Beckett exploits the abstract idea of "purpose," as he does "agent" and "voice," in relation to a set of social, cultural and narrative associations. Moran's attempt to understand the purpose of the overarching

action, the search for Molloy, becomes one of the central themes of the story. The need for a "purpose" first appears as Moran's reluctance to face the task ahead of him:

> The fact is I had not yet begun to take the matter seriously. And I am all the more surprised as such light-mindedness was not like me. Or was it in order to win a few more moments of peace that I instinctively avoided giving my mind to it? Even if, as set forth in Gaber's report, the affair had seemed unworthy of me, the chief's insistence on having me, me Moran, rather than anybody else, ought to have warned me that it was no ordinary one. And instead of bringing to bear all upon it without delay all the resources of my mind and my experience, I sat dreaming of my breed's infirmities and the singularities of those about me.... I stirred restlessly in my armchair, ran my hands over my face, crossed and uncrossed my legs, and so on. The colour and the weight of the world were changing already, soon I would have to admit I was anxious. (131-2)

The novelistic formula order-disruption-restoration is strongly evoked, the "disruption" now becoming manifest in Moran's experience of anxiety. The problem of understanding the meaning of his actions is already present in Moran's desire to avoid thinking about what he now has to do, even though he knows he must expend the conscious effort "to grasp the Molloy affair" in order to succeed (133). That the sense of coercion is now accompanied by a sense of pride at being singled out for the extraordinary mission is consistent with the ambivalence of "voice" as both freedom and internalized authority. Thus, the necessity and difficulty of understanding the purpose of the search for Molloy is presented at first as a thematic concern connected to Moran's contradictory status as an individual agent, and, as well, conforms to the parodied espionage plot. The social

and cultural references are then related to narration itself through Beckett's technique of abstraction.

Moran retires to his room to think. "My concern at first was only with its [the Molloy affair's] immediate vexations and the preparations demanded of me. The kernel of the affair I continued to shirk. I felt a great confusion coming over me." In order to avoid the "kernel," the purpose of the search, Moran begins with practical matters:

> Should I set out on my autocycle? This was the question with which I began. I had a methodical mind and never set out on a mission without prolonged reflection as to the best way of setting out.... But if I was in the habit of first settling this delicate question of transport, it was never without having, if not fully sifted, at least taken into account the factors on which it depended. For how can you decide on the way of setting out if you do not first know where you are going, or at least with what purpose you are going there? But in the present case I was tackling the problem of transport with no other preparation than the languid cognizance I had taken of Gaber's report. I would be able to recover the minutest details of this report when I wished. But I had not yet troubled to do so, I had avoided doing so, saying, The affair is banal. To try and solve the problem of transport under such conditions was madness. Yet that was what I was doing. I was losing my head already. (134)

The particular problem facing Moran becomes abstract: "the problem of transport." And "purpose," itself generalized within the problem of transport, becomes even more abstract, since it is not a lack of specific "details" that evokes Moran's sense of aimlessness. The effect of Beckett's use of abstraction makes the story reflect upon the discourse: how can the narrative proceed without the requisite goal or purpose that configures the actions and episodes? However,

since the tension between discourse and story never allows the story to collapse into a problem of narration "itself," the lack of purpose remains equally a moment in the action and an aesthetic problem concerning the ordering principle of narration.

Beckett relates the absence of "purpose" -- as a problem in the discourse and the story -- to an equally abstract question about meaning. In a long paragraph in which Moran attempts to understand the essence of his mission, the themes of isolated agent, anonymous organization, loss of community, and purposeless action are all intertwined within a set of abstractions that suggest that the absence of conditions necessary for the construction of a meaningful story is also the absence of those necessary for a meaningful life. Even the conditions for reflection seem disrupted by the agent-organization contradiction:

> Far from the world, its clamours, frenzies, bitterness and dingy light, I pass judgment on it and on those, like me, who are plunged in it beyond recall .... From their places masses move, stark as laws. Masses of what? One does not ask. There somewhere man is too, vast conglomerate of all nature's kingdoms, as lonely and as bound. And in the block the prey is lodged and thinks himself a being apart. Anyone would serve. But I am paid to seek.... I get up, go out, and everything is changed. The blood drains from my head ... my eyes search in vain for two things alike, each pinpoint of skin screams a different message, I drown in the spray of phenomena. It is at the mercy of these sensations, which happily I know to be illusory, that I have to live and work. It is thanks to them I find myself a meaning.... And yet it is not unpleasant, before setting to work, to steep oneself again in this slow and massive world... where, of course, no investigation

> would be possible.... For it was only by transferring it to this atmosphere, how shall I say, of finality without end, why not, that I could venture to consider the work I had on hand.... And though this examination prove unprofitable and of no utility for the execution of my orders, I should nevertheless have established a kind of connexion, and one not necessarily false. For the falsity of the terms does not necessarily imply that of the relation, so far as I know. (151-2)

On one hand, it is the "illusory" sensations of disorder and indeterminacy against which Moran measures the "meaning" of himself and his "work." On the other, his revery-like reflections "far from the world" "prove unprofitable and of no utility for the execution of my orders." Two types of aesthetic expression are contrasted: one chaotic, illusory, but meaningful; the other ordered, of "utility," but existentially empty. Moran attempts to bridge them through an idea that itself becomes a principle of organization, both in regard to the Molloy affair, the story, and to the narrative discourse. Moran admits that he can only attempt to understand the purpose of his "work" by "transferring it to this atmosphere ... of finality without end," a phrase which suggests the aesthetic principle of narrative closure without resolution. This in turn leads to a yet more extreme abstraction: "the falsity of the terms does not necessarily imply that of the relation." Understanding the purpose of one's actions is like configuring the elements of a narrative: it is not the truth of the particular events that are issue, but the way in which they relate as a whole. But the process of

understanding or describing the relation of the "terms" and therefore the purpose of his actions is blocked: the overarching "relation" of individual agent to anonymous organization (or, in the even more abstract terms given above, of the "being apart" to the "masses" and the "vast conglomerate") forms the only context in which to understand agency and remains, for Moran, a contradictory and anxiety-producing paradox. In the network of terms and relations which Beckett constructs in "II," the individual-social paradox appears at every blocked intersection of action and meaning, at every disruption of story by discourse.

The narrative trope of the search serves to join the sundered halves of the novel and figures the relationship between the two parts as a relationship between the two principal characters, Molloy and Moran. Just as the two parts form a network of narrative detail and suggestion that cannot be reconciled into a stable or meaningful set of relations, neither can Moran understand his relation to the ostensible object of his search, Molloy. Moran's attempt to relate himself to his "quarry" involves abstractions that continually refer back to the overarching contradiction of agent/organization: "Molloy, or Mollose, was no stranger to me. If I had had colleagues, I might have suspected I had spoken to them, as of one destined to occupy us, sooner or later. But I had no colleagues and knew nothing of the circumstances in which I had learnt of his existence.

Perhaps I had invented him, I mean found him ready made in my head" (152-3). The possible relations between the two narrators are abstract enough to represent narrative archetypes: the search for Molloy as destiny or, as a projection of the searcher, as a search for self. The parodied conventions of the espionage plot interfere with the psychological plot of the "self" and its existential variants:

> If anyone else had spoken to me of Molloy I would have requested him to stop and I myself would not have confided his existence to a living soul for anything in the world. If I had had colleagues things would naturally have been different. Among colleagues one says things which in any other company one keeps to oneself. But I had no colleagues. And perhaps this accounts for the immense uneasiness I had been feeling ever since the beginning of this affair. (153)

Like a member of one of the Resistance cells to which Beckett belonged during the war, Moran is obliged to keep all knowledge about his "work" to himself. The analogy is evocative and anti-absurdist: only a strong faith in the overarching purpose of the Resistance could guarantee the meaningfulness and necessity of each Resister's actions carried out in danger, isolation and ignorance. Further, Moran's list of abstractions about Molloy -- "a prisoner," "he sought refuge," "massive and hulking," "without being black, of a black color" (154-5) -- transform the search for self into the search for the "Other": Molloy is "Just the opposite of myself, in fact. It was a change" (155). In "II" destiny, the self and the "Other" are part of the set of

abstractions that indicate the tension between the story and the discourse. At each point in Moran's speculations about his relation to Molloy -- of which he admits "What is was all about I had not the slightest idea" (155) -- the paradox of his relation to the organization appears as the only context that might help link the seeker to the sought, the agent to his action, one narrative event to another. Molloy is neither a symbol of the bourgeois Moran's inner self, nor his repressed other. Rather, the ambiguities and abstractions about Molloy replace the missing purpose of the overarching action. Relatedness, of the episodes to each other, of Molloy to Moran, or of the story to the discourse, always refers back to the most basic relation, that of the individual to the social organization. Beckett's experimentation with narrative is structured by and thematically exploits the congruence between the ordering principles of narration and the understanding of individual agency.

4. Structures Without Agents: Beckett and the postwar critique of narrative

The contemporary understanding of narrative as an isolatable, distinct discursive entity -- transhistorical and transcultural -- and the search for the synchronic "deep structure" of narrative forms began with Propp's Morphology of the Folk Tale and the school of Russian formalism (1915-30). By the 1960s, many influential

theorists of the novel took for granted that a typology of plots derived from the deep structure of myths and folktales was necessary to understand the genesis of the novel, the dominant narrative form in modern literature. Northrop Frye (1963) also assumes that this interest in the structure of narrative is shared by the contemporary novelist: "Folk tales tell us nothing credible about the life or manners of any society ... [they] are simply abstract story-patterns, uncomplicated and easy to remember.... Writers are interested in folk tales ... because they illustrate essential principles of storytelling" (27). The reference to folk tales (and also myths) recalls the whole development of the structural study of narrative, from Propp to Lévi-Strauss. That the writer would, along with the theorist, discern in these genres the "essential principles of storytelling" suggests that by the end of the postwar period the general concern with "narration itself" had a firmly established belief: "narrative" was a timeless structure empty of any specific social or psychological content.

The problem, for Frye, Bakhtin, Barthes, Genette, Jameson, Brooks, and others who want to incorporate the insights of the structural study of narrative into the theory of the novel, is how to describe the process by which "narrative," a seemingly universal structure, becomes filled with the social content, cultural specificity, and aesthetic intentionality of the novel-- in other words, how to

describe the transformation, in an any given literary work, of an abstract pattern (or combination of patterns) into a culturally and historically situated set of meanings. Implicitly, this transformation from abstract structure to situated meaning depends upon the presence of agency: the writer's and the reader's. The search for deep structure, upon which the study of narrative is based, already implied the unimportance of individual agency. In the folk tales, myths, and other anonymous or "collective" types of narrative from which narratology first derived its description of deep structures, there is no individual agent, either of production or reception. But these are all premodern genres. It is the determining, intentional role of the individual writer that most clearly distinguishes the novel from those genres that, according to structuralist theory, are nothing but abstract patterns. The transformation from abstract structure to novel is the transformation from premodern collectivity to the individual author as producer. As Benjamin points out in "The Storyteller" (see above) this transformation occurs both in writing and reception.

Perhaps no writer has come to represent the archetype of the modern novelist more than Flaubert, both as a professional aesthetic specialist and as the writer whose innovations first influenced the modern novel's turn toward an emphasis on the act of "narration itself." Lukács, in his

defense of narration in "Narrate or Describe," attempted to link the narrative point of view of Flaubert's novels to his position as a writer firmly entrenched in a fully developed bourgeois society: for Flaubert and Zola "the only solution to the tragic contradiction in their situation [as writers who expressed revulsion toward the values of the political and social order of their time] was to stand aloof as observers and critics of capitalist society. At the same time, they became specialists in the craft of writing, writers in the sense of the capitalist division of labour" (119). For Lukács, this position as "observer" and "specialist" led to an emphasis away from narration, which he views as rooted in human action, toward detached description. Without the perspective of the social actor, either in the point of view of the novel itself or in the artist's self-understanding, mere observation cannot adequately express historical reality:

> truth is revealed only in practice, in deeds and actions. Men's words, subjective reactions and thoughts are shown to be true or false, genuine or deceptive, significant or fatuous, in practice -- as they succeed or fail in deeds and actions.... Primitive poetry -- whether fairy tales, ballads or legends ... -- is always based on the primacy of action. This poetry has continued to have a profound meaning because it depicts the success or failure of human purpose in the test of practice. It remains vital and interesting despite any fantastic, naive and outlandish presupposition because it focuses on this eternal, fundamental truth.... When the artistic literature of a period does not provide actions in which typical characters with a richly developed inner life are tested in practice, the public seeks abstract substitutes. Such was the case with literature in the second half of the nineteenth century. Literature based on observation excludes this

interaction to an ever-increasing extent. (123-4)

Lukács' 1936 partitioning of the bourgeois novel into narration (Balzac and Tolstoy) and description (Flaubert and Zola) is analogous to the structuralist-based division (following Barthes and Genette) of novels into those with an emphasis on "story" and those with an emphasis on "discourse" or "narration itself." What distinguishes Lukács' argument from the postwar narrative theory are the opposing values: his notorious disdain for the experimental modernist novel is matched by more recent theorists' embrace of the liberating effects of Flaubert's, Proust's (Genette), or Robbe-Grillet's (Barthes) experimentation with plot and story. While Lukács places the position of the writer, action and agency at the center of his argument about the late nineteenth-century novel's failure to "narrate," Peter Brooks, writing from a perspective fully informed by the structuralist study of narrative, similarly links problems in action and agency to the modernist emphasis on the "discourse," though with a different verdict on the meaning of this turn. In Flaubert's L'Education sentimentale

> to act as if the world could be changed is the error. To act in the belief that it must change as the result of your action risks the result of idiocy. If L'Education sentimentale claims to be the history of Flaubert's generation, it appears to pass its severest judgment on that generation's belief that change is within the grasp of human agency.... [T]he promise that the novel seemed to tender its readers, that Frédéric's hitherto aimless career might take on meaning when "the moment" finally came, and that the novel itself might become structured by the superior orderings of history, comes to naught. Like the model of the Balzacian novel,

> history is finally a deceptive ordering, a fiction, and what's more, a corrosive fiction in that it leads men to kill one another in the streets.... the lesson in history in L'Education sentimentale ... appears to counsel passivity, the knowledge that action is futile. (203)

For Brooks, this negative lesson is countered by the novel's meta-narrative aspect, the intensification of which reaches its ultimate form in Beckett:

> the achievement of L'Education sentimentale does not reach us as a direct commentary on life, but rather as a commentary on the narrative forms in which life has traditionally been rendered. This commentary ... works toward bringing into the foreground the place from which all commentary proceeds, the act of narration. And when the nature of narration as a repetitive recapitulative mechanism -- almost independent of what it recapitulates - has been laid bare, the threat of return to "preorganic quiescence" becomes clear and present: what is to keep the narrative going? Only -- we have almost reached the situation of Samuel Beckett' narrators -- the act of narration itself. (215)

Although I have taken their arguments about Flaubert and narration somewhat out of context (Lukács' Weberian-Marxism and Brooks' Freudian model), when taken together they suggest two inter-related processes. First, they link Flaubert's position as a literary writer in modern bourgeois society (for Lukács, fully formed after 1848 in France) to the theme of the futility of individual action, the futility of the individual as an explicitly social actor. Secondly, they link both Flaubert's aesthetic ideology and the themes of problematic agency to the formal innovation in his work, which places emphasis on the discourse (Lukács: description). Neither Brooks nor Lukács imply that Flaubert is simply a "formalist" or that his work lacks content.

Rather, they suggest (as I have suggested concerning Beckett) that the formal innovation in narration, and Flaubert's thematic defense of inaction, are two aspects of a single expression and a single, complex response of the writer to the triumph of bourgeois society after 1848.

If Flaubert stands as the archetype of the emergence of the bourgeois writer, then in the postwar debates about the value of narrative in contemporary literature, Robbe-Grillet holds an analogous position. Goldmann and Barthes both hold him up as the exemplar of the postwar, innovative novelist most significantly responding (like Flaubert) to a newly entrenched social order. Both critics also use a structuralist concept of narrative to explain his importance. While Goldmann's analysis explicitly links the formal innovation to a thematically presented problem of agency, Barthes implicitly links the innovation and rejection of narrative to the agency of the writer and, significantly, of the reader.

For Goldmann, there is a specific transformation of the abstract structure of myth in the novel Les Gommes:

> The kinship [between Les Gommes and the Oedipus myth] resides in the fact that, in each case, there is a concatenation of events unfolding in accordance with an ineluctable necessity, quite unaffected by men's intentions and acts. Structurally, however, the necessity of ancient tragedy, which .... transforms human life into destiny, has very little in common ... with the mechanical and inevitable process that unfolds within a world in which individuals in search of liberty have lost all reality and importance. The content of the work is precisely this mechanical and ineluctable necessity that governs both relations

> between men and relations between men and things in a world that resembles a modern machine deprived of self-regulatory mechanisms. (142)

Similarly, in Le Voyeur, at the core of the novel is the crisis of agency: "The theme of these two novels [is] the disappearance of any importance and any meaning from individual action" (145). It is this theme which, according to Goldmann, "explains the style of the work" (144).[11] But what is really at issue is the structural homology between a content-based reading of Robbe-Grillet that locates a lack of agency as the central concern and the social structure, as Goldmann sees it, of postwar Europe:

> What Robbe-Grillet is indicating, what constitutes the subject of his first two novels, is the great social and human transformation brought about by the appearance of two new, extremely important phenomena -- on the one hand, the self-regulations of society and, on the other hand, the increasing passivity, the character of 'voyeurs', that individuals are gradually assuming in modern society, the absence of any active participation in social life.... (146).

The glaring contradiction in Goldmann's analysis resides in the degree of agency and rationally-chosen intentionality he accords the novelist (and the critic), even in the face of this "realistic" description of complete passivity. In other words, unlike Lukács (who seemingly underwrites Goldmann's structural-Marxist interpretation), he cannot account for the relation between, on one hand, the agency of the writer as a social actor and, on the other, the themes of inaction and passivity and the transformation of the abstract narrative pattern into a specific set of

situated cultural meanings. While both agree that Robbe-Grillet is a "radically realistic writer" (Goldmann 149), Barthes shifts the emphasis away from Goldmann's reliance on "the simple level of the story" (148). Barthes' defense of Robbe-Grillet, and his attack on "narrative," refigures the conceptualization of agency through a much more formalist, discourse-based analysis and a broader concern with postwar culture.

Barthes' early work is one of the most influential expressions of the postwar reaction to the dissolution of the avant-garde project and the beginning of a cold-war reconceptualization of the relation between literature and politics.[12] There are two key concepts in his analysis of narrative. First, from Writing Degree Zero, the formula: narrative equals the repressive order of bourgeois society and its self-justifying ideology.

> Narration, as a form common to both the Novel and to History, does remain, in general, the choice or the expression of an historical moment [the nineteenth century]. ... the preterite [the narrative past tense], which is the cornerstone of Narration, always signifies Art; it is a part of a ritual of letters. Its function is no longer that of a tense. The part it plays is to reduce reality to a point of time ... it aims at maintaining a hierarchy in the realm of facts.... Allowing as it does an ambiguity between temporality and causality, it calls for a sequence of events, that is, for an intelligible Narrative. This is why it is the ideal instrument for every construction of a world; it is the unreal time of cosmogonies, myths, History and Novels. It presupposes a world which is constructed, elaborated, self-sufficient, reduced to significant lines .... Behind the preterite there always lurks a demiurge, a God or a reciter.... the narrator reduces the exploded reality to a slim and pure logos, without density ... and whose sole function

> is to unite as rapidly as possible a cause and an end.... So that finally the preterite is the expression of an order, and consequently of an euphoria.... For all the great storytellers of the nineteenth century, the world may be full of pathos but it is not derelict, since it is a grouping of coherent relations.... The narrative past is therefore a part of a security system for Belles-Lettres. Being the image of an order, it is one of those numerous formal pacts made between the writer and society for the justification of the former and the serenity of the latter. (29-32)

Barthes' manifesto-like statement casts "Narration" as an abstract principle of ordering representations of "reality." The stress is on its "function," which is ideological, since "it involves giving to the imaginary the formal guarantee of the real" (33). This function helps "justify" both the repressive order of bourgeois society and the existence of bourgeois "Art." As an ordering principle, narrative is linked to an historically specific form of society and to literature as a social institution. Here, the opposition is between the nineteenth-century narrative-based novel and history (Balzac is the typical example) and other works "when the Narrative is rejected in favour of other literary genres" (32). Thus, with Flaubert, and reaching full development in Robbe-Grillet, there begins "an art which in order to escape its pangs of conscience [i.e., its complicity with bourgeois society] either exaggerates conventions or frantically attempts to destroy them" (38). Narrative, then, is that set of ordering conventions that "guarantees" a particular social order. The literary and critical movement that rejects Narrative conventions is

therefore a revolt against that order and, at the same time, a revolt against its typical artistic institutions (i.e., Belles-Lettres).

The second key concept, in "Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966), is equally polemical. Here, the underlying opposition is not between nineteenth-century "bourgeois" realism (Balzac) and convention-defying modernism (Flaubert to Robbe-Grillet), but rather between forms of contemporary culture, between "contemporary writing" and "mass culture." Significantly, the concept of narrative, in the early essay "the expression of an historical moment," becomes, as in all structuralist analysis, synchronic: "narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale ... [it] is international, transhistorical, transcultural: it is simply there, like life itself" (Image 79). In turn, the polemic is not articulated as against narrative and for non-narrative literature, but -- decisively -- against literature with an emphasis on "story" and advocating literature with an emphasis on "discourse."

Although the ostensible purpose of the essay is to delineate narrative's "implicit system of units and rules" (81), the earlier polemic is here refigured to disclose story-emphatic mass culture as a repressive ordering principle. For example, Barthes uses Goldfinger (both the Fleming novel and the movie) to illustrate (following Propp) that all narratives are made up different classes (cardinal

and catalyser) and units of "functions." Barthes explains:

> If, in a fragment of narrative, the telephone rings, it is equally possible to answer or not answer.... the space separating the telephone rang from Bond answered can be saturated with a host of trivial incidents or descriptions --- Bond moved towards the desk, picked up one of the receivers, put down his cigarette, etc. These catalysers are still functional... but their functionality is attenuated, unilateral, parasitic; it a question of a purely chronological functionality .... whereas the tie between two cardinal functions [the phone rang, Bond answered] is invested with a double functionality, at once chronological and logical.... cardinal functions are both consecutive and consequential. Everything suggests, indeed, that the mainspring of narrative is precisely the confusion of consecution and consequence, what comes after being read in narrative as what is caused by; in which case narrative would be a systematic application of the logical fallacy denounced by Scholasticism in the formula post hoc, ergo propter hoc -- a good motto for Destiny, of which narrative all things considered is no more than the 'language.' (94)

Barthes' explication of "narrative communication" makes the polemical intention of this analysis clear: just as mass cultural narrative is the modern form of myth and "Destiny," another kind of writing opposes the systematic conflation of sequence with causality. Contemporary experimental writing is, in fact, the demythification of narrative convention. It is also in relation to narrative communication where Barthes links the social function of narrative to the agency of the writer and the reader.

Because there "can be no narrative without a narrator and a listener" (109), Barthes must "describe the code by which the narrator and reader are signified throughout the narrative itself" (110). "In fact, narration strictly speaking (the code of the narrator), knows only two systems

of signs: personal and apersonal" (112). While grammatically these two signs are represented by "I" and "he," in narrative the personal can be masked by the use of the third person, itself a "sign" of narration: "The whole of the beginning of Goldfinger, though written in the third person, is in fact 'spoken' by James Bond" (112); that is, focalized through Bond even though presented in what Barthes considers the "traditional mode of narrative," the apersonal, "designed to wipe out the present of the speaker. As Benveniste puts it: 'In narrative, no one speaks'" (112). For Barthes, what characterizes the mass culture narrative is the "dishonest tourniquet of the two systems," mixing the personal and the apersonal: "A detective novel by Agatha Christie ... only keeps the enigma going by cheating on the person of the narration: a character is described from within when he is already the murderer -- as if in a single person there were the consciousness of a witness, immanent to the discourse, and the consciousness of a murderer, immanent to the referent" (113). From this observation, Barthes asserts that the dominant "psychological novel," while claiming to represent a purely locutionary act that originates from an individual consciousness, "usually shows a mixture of the two systems, successively mobilizing the signs of non-person and those of person." This leads to a contradiction that the mass cultural or realist-psychological novel hides: by attempting to create the

representation of an individual consciousness, it actually belies the fact that it is the traditional, apersonal narrative code, a linguistic code, that creates the consciousness:

> it is the very content of the person which is threatened: the psychological person (of referential order) bears no relation to the linguistic person, the latter never defined by states of mind, intentions or traits of character but only by its (coded) place in the discourse. It is this formal person that writers today are attempting to speak and such an attempt represents an important subversion (the public moreover has the impression that 'novels' are no longer being written) for it aims to transpose narrative .. whereby the meaning of an utterance is the very act by which it is uttered: today, writing is not 'telling' but saying that one is telling and assigning all the referent ('what one says') to this act of locution; which is why part of contemporary literature is no longer descriptive, but transitive.... (114)

Being "transitive," there must be a corresponding shift in the signs of the reader:

> In the same way, one can say that every narrative is dependent on a 'narrative situation,' the set of protocols according to which the narrative is 'consumed.' In so-called 'archaic' societies, the narrative situation is heavily coded.... Generally, however, our society takes the greatest pains to conjure away the coding of the narrative situation: there is no counting the number of narrational devices which seek to naturalize the subsequent narrative by feigning to make it the outcome of some natural circumstance .... The reluctance to declare its codes characterizes bourgeois society and the mass culture issuing from it: both demand signs which do not look like signs. (116)

It was from this point that Barthes was later to develop, in S/Z, his idea of the writerly: "Why is the writerly our value? Because the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a

consumer, but a producer of the text" (4).[13] The logic of Barthes' analysis of narrative, as it is derived from structuralism, is revealing. For what happens, under the guise of the structuralist enterprise, is a curious reversal: the more that "contemporary writing" declares its narrative codes, emphasizes the discourse by transposing the personal mode into the purely apersonal, the more active or productive the reader. This leads to another reversal. The more that "story" -- the representation of meaningful individual action -- is de-emphasized in favor of discourse, the more the reader's agency is activated. For Barthes, it is the intentional artistic demythification of narrative in Robbe-Grillet's work -- dismantling sequence as causality, disclosing its own codes through an emphasis on discourse, and removing those narrative conventions whose function is to depict action as motivated and intentional -- that allows "writing" to regain some non-ideological relation to an actual social world. In Le Voyeur, there is a "tendentious destruction of the story. Plot recedes under the weight of objects. No motives or crime or events, only isolated description of materials denied any intentionality" (Critical 53); "the novel becomes a direct experience of man's surroundings" (23). Barthes' analysis of narrative would serve no purpose without the controlling value of the "writerly": it is the alienated agency of the reader as a passive "consumer" that corresponds to the ordering

principle of the mass-culture narrative based on classical norms of the bourgeois novel and history.

Paradoxically, by actively removing agency in the form of motivated actions from the narrative, the experimental writer activates the reader's individual (as opposed to "mass") productive (as opposed to passive, consumptive) capability. The contemporary "writer" (i.e., the nouveau romancier) transforms the abstract structure of narrative, which is rooted in the premodern genres of myth and folk tale, by extracting narrative's apparent originary focus, a positive notion of individual action. Consequently, this allows the writer to consciously, actively, deny his or her agency as a member of the bourgeois order in which narrative passed from the anonymous-collective to the professional-individual. It was this problem of the active passivity of the writer that Beckett's early work attempted to confront, and that the avant-garde, as in Surrealism's notion of "automatic" writing, tried to develop into a method (see chapter III).

This "anti-narrative" analysis of narrative presents a closed circle of thought: structuralism showed that narrative was nothing but an abstract set of codes, functions, actants, moods, etc., only in order to then valorize a type of writing that (according to Barthes) extracted, denied, or exposed these things as mythic, mystifying, a "logical fallacy." This has its complement in

post-structuralism's claim that individual agency, as in Barthes and Foucault's rejection of the "author," is an insignificant factor in understanding cultural processes (see chapter V, section 4). As Anthony Giddens has argued, structuralism and post-structuralism are flawed because they are "unable to generate satisfactory accounts of human agency" (211). He cites, for example, Lévi-Strauss's claim to show in his study of myth "not how men think in myths, but how myths operate in men's minds without their being aware of the fact" (qtd. in Giddens 206). In Foucault, according to Giddens, "not only does history have no overall teleology, it is in an important sense not the result of the action of human agents.... That 'history has no subject' can readily be accepted. But Foucault's history tends to have no active subjects at all. It is history with the agency removed.... Moreover, that reflexive appropriation of history basic to history in modern culture does not appear at the level of the agents themselves" (214).

Just as the category of the individual agent is demonstrated as unimportant in the study of history and myth, so too is agency extracted from narrative (which is the ur-logic common to history and myth). But the extraction of agency in the study of narrative is not just the result of a linguistically-based methodology hostile to "Cartesianism and to every philosophy...that treats [individual] consciousness as a datum upon which the

foundations of claims to knowledge may be established" (Giddens 206). It is, in itself, an expression of that sense of a "reified" world of objects and object-like human interactions that Goldmann reads in Robbe-Grillet. Thus, it is as an expression about a perceived crisis of agency, rather than as a science laying bare the abstract patterns of narrative, that the structural polemic against narrative shares an allegiance with Beckett's postwar novels.

Yet Beckett's postwar writing never achieved the post-structuralist inspired call for "narration itself." The constitutive tension in Molloy between story and discourse does not dismiss agency but poses it as a problem. According to Barthes, Genette, and most versions of post-modernism, "narrative" (Lyotard's "master-narrative") could only be opposed through emphasis on the "ontological" status of fiction as a cultural, coded construct rather than as a reference to the social world. In narratological terms, this means an emphasis on the discourse, on "narration itself." But, as my analysis of Molloy has shown, it is Beckett's carefully constructed intention to make his emphasis on story and his emphasis on discourse interfere with or block each other. As Ricoeur has argued, a "story" is always about an agent, an action, a cause and a result, even if to show the failure of human actions, while a "narrative discourse" (as a description of underlying logic) is an abstract, rationalized model that signals the constraints of

agentless, universal patterns of functions and modes. The tension between discourse and story is a tension between two expressions about the presence and absence of agency, about novels as communication and novels as "text," about the writer as a social actor or an immaterial transcriber of ordering principles. While the influential critical-theoretical position sided with discourse over story, Beckett kept the antinomies in dynamic tension.

The shift in Beckett's postwar work -- from the self-contradictory "defense of inaction" to a narrative experimentation where the paradoxical absence of meaningful individual actions is rooted in the loss of community and expressed as a disruption of the ability to tell stories -- is indicative of the development of his work in general. The war is not only a stark chronological marker in Beckett's career -- he was thirty-four when he joined the Resistance -- but it marks a set of changes in his vision of art itself. Beckett was reluctant to speak about his own fiction; there was really no need to -- the changes are dramatically evident in the shape of the works themselves. It is as if Benjamin's storyteller, the purveyor of wisdom and experience, had returned -- as if from some void -- to inform his listeners that the conditions of their existence, the cohesive community, had dissolved, and that he could not, in telling the story of its dissolution, find any explanation or justification for his ability or his

willingness to do so. It is to the interwar works, and the context of an artistic community -- avant-gardist and modernist -- that I now turn.

NOTES

1. This is McHale's thesis in his very influential Postmodernist Fiction. In chapter V.4, I argue that McHale's concept of postmodernist fiction is based on a notion of metafiction whose underlying logic is very similar to modernist claims for aesthetic autonomy. The view of postmodernism -- as art which is "about" art and representation in general -- does not really describe or account for anything particularly new or distinctive in literature since World War II.

2. There are alternative terms, such as "statement" and "utterance," or a tripartite, Story-plot-discourse, as in Brooks. See Ricoeur (vol. 2, chapters 2 and 3) for the genesis and implications of these analytical distinctions for the study of narrative.

3. See the discussion of Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde in the next chapter.

4. This is Hugh Kenner's view, which is implicitly upheld by those critics who understand Beckett's fiction as a species of existential phenomenology.

5. The celebration of laziness and a principled indifference to work is a common theme in much modern fiction. Henry Miller's Tropic of Cancer (written in the thirties when he and Beckett were both living in Paris) is perhaps the classic statement of the interwar version of this archetypical "bohemian" attitude. See Ihab Hassan's The Literature of Silence for a comparison of Miller and Beckett; see also Orwell's "Inside the Whale" (which I discuss in chapter VI).

6. See Hill, pp. 23-26, on oxymoron as a key Beckettian trope.

7. Unlike Ulysses, in which the difficulty of piecing the day's events together are related to Joyce's intention to present, in parts of the book, an in-progress life and mind, Murphy provides the reader with no justification for its plot's complexity.

8. The phrase "semantics of action" is Ricoeur's. As Ricoeur demonstrates, "every narrative presupposes a familiarity with terms such as agent, goal, means, circumstance, help, hostility, cooperation, conflict, failure, etc., on the part of its narrator and any listener" (I, 55). Rather than as a

structure, Ricoeur understands narrative discourse as a linguistic, rhetorical recoding of already meaningful and ordered human activities. Stories ultimately originate in a "preunderstanding" or "practical understanding" of "the domain of action" (I, 55); "If, in fact, human action can be narrated, it is because it [action] is always already articulated by signs, rules and norms. It is always already symbolically mediated" (I, 57); "What is resignified by narrative is what was already presignified at the level of human acting" (I, 81).

9. In Jameson, the "real" resolution can only be articulated through a historical master narrative of class struggle and reification. While many of his individual insights about the ways in which works of fiction frame social or political phenomena in aesthetic or abstractly psychologized terms are valuable (as in The Political Unconscious), too often this type of ideology critique winds up chastising novelists for not being good Marxist historians.

10. See Bakhtin's seminal essay "The Problem of Speech Genres" for a critique of formalist linguistics which, in part, informs my own critical perspective here.

11. Goldmann never adequately describes the form of the work because it is his purpose to show that the theme of the crisis of agency controls every aspect of the novel. Instead, he reverts to the classical aesthetic concept of the unity of form and content: "Robbe-Grillet has something to say, and like all true writers, naturally seeks the forms best suited to expressing it" (141).

12. See chapter V.4 and the epilogue for Barthes' relation to theories of postmodern fiction and to Adorno's notion of aesthetic autonomy.

13. As Genette admitted, it was Barthes' concept of the writerly that implicitly organized his derivation of the categories of narrative discourse from Proust: "everything underlying Proustian narrative in the direction of interference and repetition was an element of transgression of classical norms and therefore a factor of valorization" (Revisited 27-28).

PART 2

The Mind, the City, and the Work of Art: Cultural Conflicts, 1929 -1945

Introduction: The Literary Field

Beckett is a profoundly postwar writer. Although he began writing in the late 1920s, all of his major fiction -- the novellas, Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, and Texts for Nothing -- was written in an amazingly brief five-year period immediately following his return to Paris in 1945. By the mid-1950s, he had become -- as Kenneth Rexroth, in a 1956 review of the Trilogy, called him -- an "international public figure like Lollobrigida or Khrushchev" whose reputation was (and still is) based almost exclusively on the critical success of the Trilogy and Endgame and the more popular success of Waiting for Godot. The three books of fiction he wrote before and during the war -- when his contemporaries, from Sartre and Camus to Orwell and Auden, had already published major works -- either had received very little attention, as with More Pricks than Kicks and Murphy, or, as with Watt, had been roundly rejected by publishers.[1] While Beckett's postwar statements about an "aesthetic of failure" are usually taken to refer to a universal "human condition," an avant-gardist notion of "anti-art" or a postmodernist "dissolution of the writing subject" (the phrase is Foucault's; see chapter V.4), the

common sense referent of this "failure" should not be ignored. Put bluntly, Beckett had entirely failed to establish himself as a recognized or economically self-sustaining writer.[2] For reasons I examine in detail in Part 3, after the war Beckett would manage to take stock of this failure, choose a new language of composition and a new audience (French), a new narrative point of view (the contradictory first-person), and, as I shall argue, develop a significantly different attitude toward writing as a public, communicative act that ultimately affected every aspect of his fiction. In so doing, he would transform "failure" into a stunning success. This part of my dissertation will explore both the cultural-political roots of Beckett's "failure" as a writer during the interwar years and the ways in which, during the Occupation of Paris, Beckett began to reformulate his understanding of narrative art.[3]

As I argue in Part 1, Beckett's major fiction negotiates and integrates a set of concerns that typically have been expressed, in criticism, as antithetical cultural-political positions: committed or autonomous, mass or elite, readerly or writerly, story or discourse, etc. While these positions were not given paradigmatic formulation (specifically in relation to the naturalist or realist novel and its retrospective narrative structure as the characteristic cultural form of bourgeois society) until

after the war in the works of theorists like Sartre, Adorno and Barthes, many of the underlying issues -- from the impact of technocratic capitalism on aesthetic communication to the nature of the artist's responsibility toward political struggle -- were being raised with the greatest urgency in the years when Beckett was publishing his first works.[4] As I discussed above (chapter I.4), around the turn of the century novelists from Zola to Henry James were arguing in various and conflicting ways that the novel -- as an important form of modern art in its own right, distinct from "entertainment" fiction or uninspired social reportage -- needed to address, in a new and increasingly complex manner, the problematic relationship between individuality and the spheres of society and politics.[5] Such an issue was itself intertwined with the conflicting claims made for subjective experience or objective knowledge, for the novel as an art form or as social critique. What Raymond Williams called the "renewal" of the novel after the first world war was, in many regards, a response to the contradictory antagonisms that had separated Zola from Barres, or Wells from James. But by the time of Beckett's public entrance into debates about the novel and art -- his 1929 essay on Joyce's "Work in Progress" -- the situation had changed dramatically. "Renewal" was breaking down into new cultural antagonisms, just as the political arrangements made at the end of the first world war were breaking down into new, even

more horrifying failures of European civilization.

While the effectiveness of Beckett's postwar fiction resides, I argue, in the way Beckett constructed narrative paradoxes by making antagonistic cultural-political values appear as explicitly contradictory -- both in the first-person narrative form and the social content -- the failure of his interwar fiction is rooted, analogously, in Beckett's ambivalent and at times self-contradictory attitudes toward (to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's phrase) the "literary field"[6]; that is, the available set of aesthetic ideologies and cultural-political positions of the late twenties and thirties in relation to which Beckett, as a young writer, was trying to shape his own vision. Thematically and structurally, Beckett's earliest fiction reveals his contradictory and ambivalent allegiances to a number of antithetical ideas about writing and the social function of art. Most importantly, what appears as a latent or self-contradiction in Beckett's early critical writing and fiction becomes, in one way or another, explicitly thematized and incorporated into the narrative form in the postwar fiction. Simply expressed, his early works are contradictory; his later works are intentionally "about" political-cultural contradictions.[7] Thus, while I have already discussed (in chapter II) one such example concerning Beckett's changing expression of individual agency and its relation to narrative form in Murphy and

Molloy, my analysis in the next two chapters not only locates a set of underlying contradictions in the interwar work, but also shows how they derive from Beckett's unstable relation to the literary field. Just as in his early critical writing (discussed below) Beckett's admiration for the revelatory powers of Proustian involuntary memory and Surrealist automatism become difficult for him to reconcile with his praise of Joyce's conscious, rational artistic labor, in the early fiction differing expressions about the value of rational action conflict with each other in ways that Beckett strains unsuccessfully to smooth over. And, as I discuss both here and in the final part of the dissertation, ideas about an aesthetic technique such as automatic or spontaneous writing freed from rational control were always formulated as a response to societal or political norms and values; aesthetic rationality becomes a counterimage to an "instrumental" rationality whose resources were being marshalled to construct instruments of genocide and mass annihilation.[8]

Criticism devoted to Beckett's oeuvre has dealt with the earlier work generally in two unsatisfactory ways. For some, the early stories, novels, and poetry reveal in embryonic form the themes and techniques of the postwar works, which are acknowledged as the ultimate achievement. Others take an approach analogous to the grand museum retrospective of an artistic genius: every scrap of writing is a unified and

significant object in its own right and deserves extended admiration. The first approach distorts the early work by imposing upon it the necessity of leading up in a linear fashion to some inevitable telos; the second suspends all critical judgment. My approach takes something from both but differs significantly. My interest in these works lies mostly in interpreting how they reveal Beckett's unsuccessful attempt to negotiate the competing claims of the literary field, from which I isolate a set of values that, since the end of the 19th century, continued to appear in differing configurations in both creative and critical writing. While the versions of canonical modernism constructed from the late 1950s through the 1970s tended to collapse the writing of the period into an austere formalism, the range of literary values that were then operant were diverse and polemically inter-related. Specifically relevant to Beckett's work are, for example: aestheticist (or l'art pour art) notions of artistic genius, of art as an autonomous system of meaning and of aesthetic beauty as entirely free of ethical or moral considerations; a "Joycean" modernist experimentation with radical stylistic diversity and the creation of a universal literary language; "Eliotic" modernist ideas about the value and function of literary tradition; avant-gardist attacks on the institution of art and a rethinking of creativity itself, not as manifested in "organically" unified objects but as a

consciousness-changing process; both "fellow-traveller" and avant-gardist attitudes toward fascism, communism and capitalist democracy; and "tendentious" writers' stress on the communicative aspect of literature and their hopes of reaching a "mass" audience.[9]

My purpose in examining the early works in this context is two-fold. First, I account for Beckett's early "failure" (and, within the works themselves, successful moments and passages) as a relation of the internal themes and forms of the fiction to the external pressures and expectations exerted by Beckett's community of writers and readers. It is important to keep in mind that during these years (1929 to 1945) the moment of "high" modernism had passed, avant-garde groups like the surrealists were beginning to split up over questions concerning political commitment, and the idea of the nation-state -- a locus of traditional literary values which many members of the international avant-garde had vehemently rejected -- was rapidly failing to provide a model of progressive cultural and social organization (see chapters IV and V). Second, I begin to account as well for the thematic and formal shifts in Beckett's fiction -- from, for example, an omniscient third-person narrator who plays games with language over and above the lives of the characters, as in "Dante and the Lobster" and Murphy, to a self-reflexive first-person narrator who produces starkly expressed paradox about the meaning of his own life -- by

showing how the insurmountable aesthetic problems he encountered as a result of these self-contradictory cultural attitudes eventually forced Beckett into a new awareness about his own aesthetic practice. It was not simply that, after the war, he learned from his mistakes, but -- as I show in relation to Murphy and Watt (chapter IV) -- that he was all along struggling to reconcile conflicting views such as the primacy of reality residing in either the "inner" mind or the "outer world," or language as either a self-contained system or a means of intersubjective communication. He would only be able to find a form which could accommodate outer and inner reality, autonomy and communication, etc., in the context of both an altered literary field and his own, worked-through understanding of literary art as a social institution.

CHAPTER III

Dante or the Lobster: Constitutive Contradictions in the First Fiction and Critical Writing

1. Joyce and Proust: Involuntary Epics

Beckett's only extended critical writing is an essay, commissioned by a London publisher, entitled Proust, published in 1931. In 1929, he had been asked by Joyce to submit a piece to a collection of essays intended to promote, in advance, the publication of Finnegans Wake ("Work in Progress"). Both this piece, "Dante ... Bruno . Vico .. Joyce" (sic) and Proust are difficult to read as serious attempts at criticism or aesthetic theory, though they are commonly read this way in Beckett scholarship. One feature that renders them problematic as criticism is their highly idiosyncratic form. Unlike many modern novelists who wrote directly about their own work or about fiction in general (such as James, Proust, Ford, Wells, Conrad and Woolf) Beckett makes little attempt to engage in a recognizable critical discourse -- journalistic, scholarly, or belletristic. Instead, he exploits ellipticism, parody, provocation (including the use of the second-person "you"), an arcane vocabulary and a difficult range of academic and "high" cultural allusion and reference, with a tone closer to the avant-gardist manifesto than to literary criticism. Yet while the manifesto was often a means of artistic self-

promotion, Beckett's idiosyncratic proclamations are refracted through a consideration of others' writings. Neither criticism distanced from its object nor a declaration of his own artistic stance, these writings remain interesting because they demonstrate in their elliptical arguments an attempt to smooth over the contradictions arising from Beckett's espousal of ideas and claims culled from antagonistic aesthetic perspectives, none of which Beckett relates directly to his own work, but which he values in the works of others.

The earlier essay centers on Joyce's work as the ideal of aesthetic autonomy: "Here form <u>is</u> content, content <u>is</u> form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read -- or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not <u>about</u> something; <u>it is that something itself</u>" (<u>Disjecta</u> 27; emphasis in text). Artistic writing has no communicative function; or rather, it only communicates self-referentially. In one sense this statement merely intensifies the aspect of classical aesthetic theory that defined the specifically aesthetic realm as that which transcends the cognitive or critical faculty's division between the general and the particular, as that which fuses form and content. Joyce merely brings the aesthetic experience par excellence to its fruition. Yet the essay goes on to specify "the formal structure raised by

Mr Joyce after years of patient and inspired labour" (31) in terms of the artistic material, Joyce's created language. Beckett attempts to justify Joyce's use of a language no one else speaks or writes, an aesthetically autonomous language, by historical reference to Dante's similarly provocative innovation in literary language, the adoption of Italian over Latin:

> If English is not yet so definitely a polite necessity as Latin was in the Middle Ages, at least one is justified in declaring that its position in relation to other European languages is to a great extent that of mediaeval Latin to the Italian dialects. Dante did not adopt the vulgar out of any kind of local jingoism nor out of any determination to assert the superiority of Tuscan to all its rivals as a form of spoken Italian.... His [Dante's] conclusion is that the corruption common to all dialects makes it impossible to select one rather than another as an adequate literary form, and that he who would write in the vulgar must assemble the purest elements of each dialect and construct a synthetic language that would at least possess more than a circumscribed local interest: which is precisely what he did. He did not write in Florentine any more than he did in Neapolitan. He wrote a vulgar that could have been spoken by an ideal Italian ... but which in fact was certainly not spoken nor ever had been. Which disposes of the capital objection ... that at least Dante wrote what was being spoken in the streets of his own town, whereas no creature in heaven or earth ever spoke the language of Work in Progress. (31)

For Beckett, the creation of "a synthetic language" and "an adequate literary form" is a response to both an officially proscribed, dominant literary language -- Latin or standard English -- and the corrupted forms of spoken dialect, as well as a resistance to any region-based or nationalistic notion of linguistic superiority. In some respects, his praise of a "synthetic language" disengaged

from actual speech coincides with broader avant-garde attempts to create a universal language of form. But Beckett's defense of Joyce's "formal innovation" (31) rests on an extended analogy not to contemporary writers but to a medieval poet: literary language is viewed not as a process of innovations from one literary form to the next, but as an ongoing process of great literature to distinguish itself from a surrounding world of "local" spoken language and an ossified standardization. Pater, in his famous essay on "Style" (1888), had already made a similar case in defense of literary prose. The artist "opposes the constant degradation of language" (17). While science deals with "fact," and history is on the "border of science," artistic prose writing expresses "sense" (4-6). Language, for artists, is a raw "material," a medium like the "sculptor's marble" (9). Good writing aims at a "unity or identity of mind" (19). Music becomes "the ideal of all art ... because in music it is impossible to distinguish the form from the substance or matter" (35).

Beckett's defense of Joyce relies heavily on this aestheticist notion of aesthetic autonomy, which views literary language as a separate, unique type of discourse that clearly distinguishes and distances itself from science, history, "analysis" and the "vulgarity in the actual world" (Pater 14). Yet the tone of Beckett's defense, and of Joyce's work, is far from Pater's notion of art as a

"cloistered refuge" for the "select few" (14): "Here is direct expression.... And if you don't understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it" (26). Pater ends his essay with an appeal to the "matter" of art, the "dignity of its interests ... devoted further to the increase of men's happiness, the redemption of the oppressed ... the glory of God" (36). While Pater argues for the "beauties of prose" (2), Beckett chooses other qualities: "Shakespeare uses fat, greasy words to express corruption .... We hear the ooze squelching all through Dickens' description of the Thames.... This writing that you find so obscure ... is the savage economy of hieroglyphics. Here words are not the polite contortions of 20th century printer's ink" (28). The surprising reference to Dickens in itself marks, in relation to the tenor of the rest of the essay, an uneasy attachment to the autonomy Beckett espouses. While maintaining a concept of autonomy which shares much with aestheticism and its idealization of unity of form and content, the appeal is to disruption rather than refuge, provocation rather than cloister, contortion rather than beauty. The Paterian defense of literary language is inflected with Breton's anti-aestheticism: "Beauty shall be CONVULSIVE or it will not be at all" (Breton 160).

The movement between Beckett's notion of the autonomy of literary language and the avant-garde's anti-art stance

becomes more complex in the essay on Proust. In fact, the terms are somewhat reversed: Proust's writing is described as a break with rationality in terms similar to the surrealist notion of automatic writing, while the notion of aesthetic autonomy is upheld through a defense of art's detachment from any extant ethical, moral, or practical sphere. Beckett's interpretation and positive evaluation of Proust center on a set of oppositions -- subject\object, fact\feeling, the real\the imagined, intellection\sensation, surface\essence, classical\romantic -- that were common in theories of aestheticism and impressionism, from Pater and Proust himself to Ford and Woolf. Yet the central opposition is much more specific: voluntary as opposed to involuntary memory. The devalued term is the first:

> Voluntary memory (Proust repeats it ad nauseam) is of no value as an instrument of evocation, and provides an image as far removed from the real as the myth of our imagination or the caricature furnished by direct perception. There is only one real impression and one adequate mode of evocation. Over neither have we the least control. (15)

Voluntary memory is a form of conscious control that blocks the perception of the "real." It is similar to "habit":

> But when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment. Unfortunately Habit has laid its veto on this form of perception, its action being precisely to hide the essence -- the Idea -- of the object in the haze of conception -- preconception. (23)

Voluntary memory and habituated, conventional thought ("preconception") preclude access to art's object of representation, "essence," and its desired effect, "enchantment." Like bourgeois morality, or the rationality of a disenchanted modernity, "Habit is a compromise between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability" (19). Beckett's characterization of Proust's project as the emancipation of perception from habituated modes of everyday experience and rationalization is, in one sense, similar to the Russian formalist notion of "defamiliarization." Yet what Beckett emphasizes is not a conscious innovation that dislodges the object from habituated thought, but the lack of rational control all together:

> Involuntary memory is explosive, 'an immediate, total and delicious deflagration.' It restores .. the past object ... because it abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, because in its flame it has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal -- the real. But involuntary memory is an unruly magician and will not be importuned. It chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle.... the first [miracle of involuntary memory] -- the famous episode of the madeleine steeped in tea -- would justify the assertion that his entire book is a monument to involuntary memory and the epic of its action. The whole of Proust's world comes out of a teacup .... (33-4)

Beckett further emphasizes the a-rational form of this access to the real by referring to the objects that spark off involuntary memory "by some immediate and fortuitous act

of perception" as "fetishes," such as the madeleine steeped in tea or "the noise of a spoon against a plate" (36-7). Yet this access to the real is also described by analogy to a new technology of representation -- shocked out of his habitual mode of perception by the sight of his dead grandmother, Proust's narrator is given access to a vision of reality: "The notion of what he should see has not had time to interfere its prism (sic) between the eye and its object. His eye functions with the cruel precision of a camera; it photographs the reality of his grandmother" (27). Again, in reference to the image of Albertine: "Albertine is multiple, and just as the most modern applications of photography can frame a single church successively in the arches of all the others and the entire horizon in the arch of a bridge or between two adjacent leaves, thus decomposing the illusion of a solid object into its manifold component aspects, so the short journey of his lips to the check of Albertine creates ten Albertines, and transforms a human banality into a many headed goddess" (49).

Through the emphasis on involuntary memory, the a-rational, and the analogy of the camera, Beckett presents the characteristic quality of Proust's writing as a direct recording of impressions without the imposition of rational thought or agency. He formulates this in several variations -- "He is almost exempt from the impurity of will ... will, being utilitarian, servant of intelligence and habit, is not

a condition of the artistic experience" (90); "we are reminded of Schopenhauer's definition of the artistic procedure as 'the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason'" -- (87) and develops it into an aesthetic principle of narrative, explicitly contrasting it with "the grotesque fallacy of a realistic art" (76) and classicism. "The classical artist assumes omniscience and omnipotence. He raises himself artificially out of Time in order to give relief to his chronology and causality to his development. Proust's chronology is extremely difficult to follow, the succession of events spasmodic, and his characters and themes ... are presented and developed with a .. contempt for the vulgarity of a plausible concatenation" (81-2).

This view of Proust's writing, however, cannot be sustained in the essay for the simple reason that the force of the involuntary leaves only a negative definition of the artist's activity: "the artist is active, but negatively" (65): instinctual, will-less, by accident, detached, inexplicable. The only positive elements in Beckett's account are the distorting or interfering power of reason and will, the instrumental forces that involuntary memory overcomes. Yet Beckett is too attached to the notion of the writer as the conscious creator of a new language -- Joyce's "years of patient and inspired labour" -- and of literature as an autonomous activity with its own set of rules and

logic, to be satisfied with relegating art to the unconscious and the agentless. The resemblance between his characterization of Proust's project and the surrealist notion of automatic writing suggests the contradiction in Beckett's argument. Raymond Williams, citing Breton, analyzes the contradiction in the surrealist position:

> 'Everyday' and 'ordinary' language, or sometimes 'the language of a decadent bourgeois society', blocked true creative activity, or (for another different formulation was also employed) prevented us embodying -- almost one can say 'representing' -- the true process of thought..... And so to 'automatic writing': "a pure psychic automatism by which one proposes to express, either verbally or in writing, or in any other way, the real functioning of thought: dictation by thought, in the absence of any control exercised by reason, and without any aesthetic or moral consideration." ... [O]ne can look back on 'automatic writing', for all the meagerness of its actual results, with a certain respect for its ambitions of practice .... For language was being simultaneously identified with the blocking of 'true consciousness' and, to the extent that it could emancipate itself from its imprisoning everyday forms and, beyond that, from the received forms of 'literature', as itself the medium of the idealized 'pure consciousness'.
>
> One way out of this contradiction was the move to Surrealist film, but most writers stayed in the double position and then of course at once encountered the obvious and ominous question of 'communication'.... There [was] an emphasis ... on the experience itself, rather than any of the forms of embodying or communicating it. (Politics 73)

In the Joyce essay, language was already considered as "the experience itself" rather than its communication. Yet Beckett's defense of Joyce's language by the analogy to Dante's Italian implied, at the same time, an "ideal" communicability, a pure language assimilating "all the dialects of his country" (Disjecta 30). In the Proust essay,

however, the emphasis is not on language, but the process of involuntary memory which is similar to automatic writing in its result: access to true consciousness. And an analogous contradiction arises: for the surrealists, language was both what blocked access to the real and the means of reaching it; for Beckett's Proust, the act of narrating -- ordered, willed and active composition -- blocks access to the real, but must also, somehow, be a means of representing the real. The analogy of the camera merely defers the contradiction. Instead, Beckett's solution to the problem follows a formulation from the last volume of La Recherche:

> Now he [the narrator] sees his regretted failure to observe artistically as a series of 'inspired omissions' and the work of art as neither created nor chosen, but discovered, uncovered, excavated, pre-existing within the artist, a law of his nature.... The conclusions of the intelligence are merely of arbitrary value, potentially valid. "An impression is for the writer what an experiment is for the scientist -- with this difference, that in the case of the scientist the action of the intelligence precedes the event and in the case of the writer it follows it."... The artist has acquired his text: the artisan translates it. "The duty and the task of a writer (not an artist, a writer) are those of a translator." (84)

The opposing terms are familiar, though here the artist is not only distinguished from the scientist, but the artistic process is conceived as the reverse of the scientific, strengthening its claim of autonomy. Intelligence, formerly banished from the artistic in the essay, now reappears as a secondary feature. But the separation is maintained by the untenable dichotomies: art and artisan, artist and writer. The implication is that art itself is essentially an

experience, while the work of art is a secondary phenomena. Beckett's choice of "artisan" (in the place of Proust's "translator"), like his image of Joyce's labor, recalls Pater's vision of Flaubert as "the martyr of literary style" (24) -- Flaubert: "my labour like a true working man, who ... beats away at his anvil" (qtd. in Pater 26).

Beckett reiterates the dichotomy a few pages later, and the contradiction between the avant-gardist and the aestheticist attitudes becomes glaring: "For Proust the quality of language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics. Indeed he makes no attempt to dissociate form from content. The one is the concretion of the other. The Proustian world is expressed metaphorically by the artisan because it is apprehended metaphorically by the artist: the indirect and comparative expression of indirect and comparative perception" (88). Somehow, "quality of language" is separate from "aesthetics" (which now seems linked with "ethics"). The semantic distance between artist and artisan is maintained, but only by the further polarization of perception and expression, both of which are, however, metaphoric, "indirect and "comparative." Neither of these terms supports the claim for the non-rational or "involuntary" nature of the true creative process and the access to the real. The oppositions which centered on the distance between "voluntary" and "involuntary" necessarily collapse when Beckett attempts to

account for Proust as a writer.

The avant-garde's stance against the constricting forms of rationality included (at least in theory) an antagonism to the work of art itself, the commodified object valued by the bourgeois institution of art -- ideally, dada and surrealism would not create artistic objects, but would break down the distance between the art and life, creating and living. Beckett, while taking a position close to surrealism concerning the constricting role of rational and conscious composition, maintains a contradictory, aestheticist emphasis on the work of art as an end in its own right. Thus, towards the end of the essay, the pressure to account for Proust as an active creator of the "epic" of involuntary memory results in placing him within a number of already established literary roles: romantic ("art is the apotheosis of solitude" [64]; "He is a Romantic in his anxiety to accomplish his mission .... He does not seek to evade the implications of his art such as it has been revealed to him"[81]); autonomous aesthete ("Proust is completely detached from all moral considerations"[66]; "his complete indifference to moral values and human justices"[89]); symbolist ("Proust's point of departure might be situated in Symbolism" [80]); impressionist ("By his impressionism I mean his non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception" [86]). The last paragraph of the essay moves from the

aestheticist trope of music as the ideal art -- "music is the Idea itself, unaware of the world of phenomena, existing ideally outside the universe ... untouched by the teleological hypothesis" -- to an anti-art provocation -- "opera is a hideous corruption of this most immaterial of all the arts.... opera is less complete than vaudeville, which at least inaugurates the comedy of an exhaustive enumeration" -- and back to art again -- "Music is the catalytic element in the work of Proust. It asserts to his unbelief the permanence of personality and the reality of art" (92).

In highlighting these unstated, constituent contradictions in Beckett's attempts to negotiate aestheticist and avant-gardist notions of art as an end in itself and art as a creative process that overcomes the constricting deformations of rational and willed composition, I do not mean to imply that his observations are invalid or confused. Rather, as I will show in regard to his early fiction, they reveal an unstable set of attitudes toward both avant-garde and modernist notions about literature and its function. Beckett was never an "official" member of any avant-garde group nor an aesthete who removed himself from every activity save the creation of autonomous works of art. Instead, as an innovative writer beginning his career in the aftermath of two decisive, but ultimately contradictory movements, styles and intentions -- British

modernism and the "historical avant-garde" (themselves containing many contradictory, diverse elements; see section 3 below) -- the arguments he makes in these essays that attempt to smooth out the underlying contradictions demonstrate an unresolved struggle. The resolution, I argue, would only come after the war, when history had, in part, made the avant-garde's project obsolete and British modernism's allegiance to aestheticist principles seem inadequate.

It might be argued that Beckett's criticism, in the final analysis, has little to do with his attitude toward his own fiction. While devoid of the argumentation that the essays provide, and which give a more complete idea of how Beckett negotiated the underlying contradictions, the often-referred to "German letter of 1937" stages the same instability:

> It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it.... Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute.... Or is literature alone to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have been so long ago abandoned by music and painting?... so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights....
>
> ... At first it can only be a matter of somehow finding a method by which we can represent this mocking attitude towards the words, through words.
>
> ... An assault against words in the name of beauty. (Disjecta 172-3)

Language is both the "veil" and the means of tearing it apart; words must be "misused" so that "literature" may approach "music and painting"; words are both non-communicative and non-rational, "a path of sounds" which still needs to "represent this mocking attitude," and all of this "in the name of beauty." Rather than provide a paradoxical artistic credo that parallels the paradox of Beckett's fiction, the letter demonstrates the apparently urgent attempt to find a position within a set of attitudes that cannot cohere.

2. "It is not": Juxtaposition and Ethical Judgment

Like his early critical writing Beckett's first fictions reveal a set of conflicting cultural attitudes that he attempts unsuccessfully to unify. The title of Beckett's second published story, "Dante and the Lobster," reveals in shorthand a set of aesthetic concerns.[10] Structurally, it uses a surrealist technique: juxtaposition. But while Breton had advocated a poetic image based on Lautréamont's jarring juxtaposition of objects from everyday life -- "the fortuitous encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table" (qtd. in Lippard 2) -- Beckett's juxtaposition depends on a quite different type of contrast that the story goes on to exploit: the young hero's immersion in translating Dante is disrupted by his obligation to run an errand for his aunt, buying a lobster

for dinner. The two sides of the contrast -- a life of the mind centered on a study of classical literature and the "obligations" (10) of everyday life -- are for the hero antithetical; however, by the end of this collage-like parodic presentation of an afternoon in the life of the juvenile, artistic-bohemian protagonist in Dublin, the omniscient third-person narrator attempts to mediate high art and mundane life with a third element: a moral or ethical judgment about suffering and justice.

The story begins with the hero's head quite literally in a book:

> It was morning and Belacqua was stuck in the first of the canti in the moon. He was so bogged that he could move neither backward nor forward. Blissful Beatrice was there, Dante also, and she explained the spots on the moon to him. (9)

The first long paragraph extends this motif: Belacqua (the protagonist's name is an allusion to a character in Dante, canto four of the Purgatorio, and his "legendary torpitude" (Kenner 18)) is immobilized by a literary, intellectual problem. "He pored over the enigma, he would not concede himself conquered, he would understand at least the meanings of the words" (9). Literature appears as a kind of closed system: just as the theme and tone assume the reader's familiarity with the allusions to Dante, the problem of understanding The Divine Comedy is presented as internal to Dante's work itself: Belacqua, as a reader, is presented on the same plane with the poet Dante and

Beatrice, figures in the poem. Yet the third-person narration breaks the hermeticism of the literary realm. The storytelling voice, although focalized here through Belacqua, is on a separate diegetic plane. While the story represents literature as a unidimensional, closed-off realm, the very mode of omniscient, parodic narration -- which relies on distance, on one perspective reflecting on another -- contradicts the theme. In Molloy, as I have shown, a similar narrative contradiction is explicitly thematized. Here it is not: it appears as a latent tension in Beckett's artistic practice, not a content in the story.

The theme of literary culture as an hermetic system is expanded in the next two paragraphs, which also delineate the controlling juxtaposition:

> He was still running his brain against this impenetrable passage when he heard midday strike. At once he switched his mind off its task. He scooped his fingers under the book and shovelled it back till it lay wholly on his palms. The Divine Comedy face upward on the lectern of his palms. Thus disposed he raised it under his nose and there he slammed it shut. He held it aloft for a time, squinting at it angrily ....
>
> ... Nothing could be done until his mind got better and was still, which gradually it did and was. Then he ventured to consider what he had to do next. There was always something one had to do next. Three large obligations presented themselves. First lunch, then the lobster, then the Italian lesson. (9-10)

Belacqua "switched his mind" from Dante to "obligations," from classical literature to everyday life. While the transition is presented as absolute, as "switch" implies, his mind needs to become "still" before the transition can be effected. The literary landmark, The Divine Comedy,

becomes materialized as an object, which he slams shut and considers "angrily." The transition between art and life involves a hostile gesture toward one realm or the other. The narrative style also registers the switch, from an allusive beginning in which the character is viewed as inside the literary system, along with Dante and Beatrice, to the object-like quotidian list: lunch, lobster, lesson.

Juxtaposition, as a narrative technique, relies on both contrast and the absence of other perceived relationships. The plastic collage achieves its effects by linking diverse materials that are usually considered functionally distinct -- a painted surface and a scrap of newspaper, for example, in a work by Picasso. In the story, however, the controlling contrast seems not only to juxtapose culture and everyday life, or art and obligation, but to reverse their functions. The hero's frustration and immobility when immersed in Dante unsettle his mind. Yet "lunch," first appearing as the disruptive "obligation," is presented in the terms of isolation, sensation and passion usually associated with the romanticist notion of art:

> He must be left strictly alone, he must have complete quiet and privacy, to prepare the food for his lunch. (10)
>
> Toast must not on any account be done too rapidly .... Otherwise you only charred the outside and left the pith as sodden as before. If there was one thing he abominated more than another it was to feel his teeth meet in a bathos of pith and dough. (11)
>
> He would snap at it [the sandwich] with closed eyes, he would gnash it into a pulp, he would vanquish it

> utterly with his fangs. Then the anguish of pungency, the pang of the spices, as each mouthful died, scorching his palate, bringing tears. (13)

This is, of course, parody. But the lunch of charred toast, "Savora, salt and Cayenne" (12) and "Gorgonzola cheese" (13) is also another juxtaposition and an affront to bourgeois taste in its most literal sense: "He didn't want fragrance, he wasn't a bloody gourmet, he wanted a good stench" (14). Nor is it free from literary allusion, but this time to Joyce: "gorgonzola" is the petty-bourgeois Leopold Bloom's lunch as well. The story emphasizes both a separation between art and life, Dante and the lobster, and a parodic type of unification -- the humor of the lunch comes from its presentation as a romanticist, even aestheticist value of sensation, but over a trivial and definitely anti-aestheticist object: "a good stench." In Molloy, taste, manners and learning -- culture -- are explicitly identified as the source of both the hero's suffering and the effective articulation of his misery. Here, however, there is neither suffering nor causal identification. Instead, there is bohemian indignation and juxtaposition. The figure of Belacqua in the story is himself a juxtaposition of art and social life, both an allusion to Dante and, as he is referred to in another story, a bohemian "dirty lowdown Low Church Protestant high brow" (172).

While he devotes his attention to Dante, to the

sensations of his grotesque lunch, and later in the story to his Italian teacher, his indignation is directed at the contents of everyday life. He burns a hole in the wallpaper of his cheap room -- "This was hooliganism pure and simple. What the hell did he care? Was it his wall?" (12). He walks to the grocer's: "Now the great thing was to avoid being accosted. To be stopped ... and have conversational nuisance committed all over him would be a disaster" (13). He despises his connection to family: "his lousy old bitch of an aunt" (16). He is anti-bourgeois, bohemian-poor, an aesthete of the grotesque, but a lover, like Pater, of Dante. Belacqua himself is a juxtaposition with a contradictory function: since the middle of the 19th century the figure of the bohemian symbolized an attempt to make the simple actions and celebration of everyday life the focus of art, not an attempt to emphasize their separation.[11]

The omniscient narrator, when focalized through Belacqua, shares with him the attitudes of the aesthete, bohemian, avant-gardist, classicist, and high modernist. However, there are moments of narration when the focus shifts, when the voice has no apparent relation to any of the character's voices, and when there is an ethical evaluation made or suggested. On one hand, there seems to be an attempt to portray the juxtaposition of attitudes and tastes as itself an ethical stance. On the other, the ethical suggestions cannot be made through the techniques of

collage, nor through Belacqua's contradictory assemblage of attitudes and tastes. In other words, in order to suggest that the bohemian-aesthete is somehow superior to his surroundings and more sensitive to suffering and injustice, Beckett needed another type of narrative voice and a more explicitly integrating story structure. An aesthetic goal of resolution or epiphany that would bind the elements in the story seems at variance with the principles of collage, not in any absolute sense -- a good collage is harmonious or balanced regardless of its disparate, "non-organic" character -- but rather as a question of degree and emphasis. An analysis of the plot and narrative voice demonstrates that Beckett attempted to "resolve" the juxtapositions through a non-focalized (i.e., not issuing from the mind of any character) ethical realization at the end of the story, but that in doing so he revealed the inadequacy of the collage-like technique to provide any perspective from which to do so.[12]

The plot revolves around a trivial problem. The story takes place in Dublin, which is explicitly mentioned midway in the story, and begins with Belacqua alone in his room, immersed in a translation problem in Dante. He hears "midday strike" (9) and mechanically switches his mind to the "three large obligations" (10) that will make up the rest of his afternoon. While making his grotesque-aesthete lunch, he notices a photo in the Herald which he uses as a tablecloth.

"The rather handsome face of McCabe the assassin stared up at him." He makes his toast with "real skill" to ensure the desired "bathos of pith and dough" (11). The narration of the toast-making is interrupted by a brief reflection, relating back to the passage in Dante, but allusively presented: "The spots were Cain with his truss of thorns, dispossessed, cursed from the earth, fugitive and vagabond. The moon was that countenance fallen and branded, seared with the first stigma of God's pity, that an outcast might not die quickly" (12).

The "outcast" in Dante is structurally related to the condemned assassin McCabe in the newspaper, but the connection is not explicitly made. Also, a connecting evaluation relevant to both Dante's outcast and the Dublin prisoner is embedded in the reflection on Dante: it suggests a disapproving attitude towards a religious morality that exalts suffering over forgiveness. Belacqua continues to make his toast, and then ventures out to the grocer's to buy his cheese. He is careful to avoid others, since the enjoyment of his lunch depends on absolute isolation. He enters "a little family grocery. In the shop they were not surprised. Most days, about this hour, he shot in off the street in this way" (13). Although the action is habitual, and Belacqua feels that the family "were very decent obliging people" (14), there is no personal interaction between the customer and the grocer. Because the cheese is

not the "stenching rotten lump" Belacqua ideally desires, he becomes angry and indignant, but storms out with the cheese anyway, and the grocer remains impassive. Significantly, for the first time in the story there is a shift in narrative point of view:

> The grocer, without closing his eyes or taking them off the receding figure, blew his nose in the skirt of his apron. Being a warm-hearted human man he felt sympathy and pity for this queer customer who always looked ill and dejected. But at the same time he was a small tradesman, don't forget that, with a small tradesman sense of dignity and what was what. Thruppence, he cast it up, thruppence worth of cheese per day, one a tanner per week. No, he would fawn on no man for that, no, not on the best in the land. He had his pride. (15)

The portrait of the grocer is isolated. It seems both sympathetic and condescending. His "sympathy and pity" for the "ill and dejected" Belacqua is neutralized by his "small tradesman sense of dignity." This paragraph is closer to the Dublin of Dubliners -- the paralysis and indifference of a rigidly moralistic, petty-bourgeois community, rendered in an almost naturalist tone through the consciousness of its isolated members -- than to the rest of the story. The narration immediately shifts back to Belacqua, equally isolated, but a willfully isolated grotesque aesthete. The "problem" of the plot, in all its triviality, is explicitly stated as Belacqua sits alone in the pub eating his lunch. It revolves (like a plot from Dickens or Balzac) around time, money and the city:

> At a quarter to three he was due at the [language] school. Say five to three. The public closed, the fishmonger reopened, at half-past two. Assuming then

> that his lousy old bitch of an aunt had given her order in good time that morning ... so that her blackguard boy should on no account be delayed ... it would be time enough if he left the public as it closed, he could remain on till the last moment. Bennissimo. He had half-a-crown. That was two pints of draught anyway .... he would still be left with coppers enough to buy a Herald and take a tram if he felt pinched for time. Always assuming, of course, that the lobster was all ready to be handed over. God damn these tradesmen, he thought, you can never rely on them. He had not done an exercise but that did not matter. His Professoressa was so charming and remarkable. (16)

Beckett needs to explicitly lay out the problem of the plot because the collage-like presentation does not allow the reader to imply relations between characters, motives or actions. Dublin and the "tradesmen" appear as an obstacle course between the Dante of the opening, beer, and the charming Italian teacher. While in Dubliners, to which More Pricks than Kicks has been compared (as a parodic version of a series of related stories about middle-class life in Dublin), moral obligation is viewed as an arena of struggle over conflicting values -- capitalist-individualist vs. community, religious-nationalist vs. secular-socialist, naturalist-practical vs. aestheticist-spiritual, etc. -- here moral obligation appears unimportant. For Belacqua, struggle takes place only over cultural mastery (Dante) and an anti-aesthetic (slamming the book closed angrily, making lunch). The rest is blind necessity, measured in minutes, coppers and pints.

Morality, however, is not absent from the story, but rather has no integral relation to most of the narrated

events. Like cause and effect, the psychology of character necessitates a more integrating structure than surrealist juxtaposition. The plot confirms this. After musing on his "proffessora" in a passage full of a male-adolescent's aesthete judgments ("Manzoni was an old woman ... Pellico was another ... the 19th century in Italy was full of old hens trying to cluck like Pindar" (16-17)), he heads to the school. He is surprised that the cheese was, after all, to his liking:

> Also his teeth and jaws had been in heaven ... It was like eating glass. His mouth burned and ached with the exploit. Then the food had been further spiced by the intelligence ... that the ... murderer's petition for mercy, signed by half the land, having been rejected, the man must swing at dawn in Mountjoy and nothing could save him.... Belacqua, tearing at the sandwich and swilling the precious stout, pondered on McCabe in his cell. (17)

The earlier moral suggestion, embedded in Dante, concerning mercy and suffering, and the photo of McCabe glimpsed in the paper, are now narratively joined. Yet these elements do not combine into a moment of meaning or judgment. What is important to notice is that this is neither an invitation for the reader to make an evaluation (as Jauss [42-45] claims for the function of free indirect discourse in Madame Bovary) nor a case for an avant-gardist contempt for the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality expressed through images of cruelty (as in Artaud or Lautréamont, or even later Beckett). The earlier moral suggestion is sincere, but the conflicting styles and aims in the story give it no

functional role or coherent place.

There is a complexity of related, culturally and morally inflected themes: Dante's purgatory and McCabe's prison, prolonged suffering and execution, divine and democratic ("signed by half the land") mercy. This complexity is built up through juxtaposed moments, not a series of interrelationships. The last pages of the story, however, show an attempt to integrate the themes, to create a kind of epiphany. The conflicting styles and intentions, however, defeat any symbolic resolution, and the attempt is simultaneously sincere and parodic. Following the structure of the controlling juxtaposition, the moral-social problem of purgatory that begins in Dante and moves to McCabe ends up with the lobster. Despite Belacqua's fears, the lobster is ready, and the man at the fish market assures him of its freshness. This sets up the story's anti-epiphanic ending:

> "Lepping fresh, sir" said the man, "fresh in this morning."
> Now Belacqua ... supposed the man to mean that the lobster had very recently been killed. (18)

The lobster in a bag, he goes to his Italian lesson, where he asks the professora about the difficult passage in Dante. She suggests that for practice he "might do worse than make up Dante's rare moments of compassion in hell" (19). As he walks to his aunt's house he sees in the "yellow light" of early evening an injured horse, and then a "poorly dressed couple ... in the bay of a pretentious gateway, she sagging against the railings, her head lowered, he standing

facing her ... his hands dangled by his sides." (20-1). These images, like the momentary image of the grocer, have the feeling of a naturalist study. They compel the walking Belacqua to reflect: "Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together? A little mercy in the stress of sacrifice, a little mercy to rejoice against judgment.... poor McCabe, he would get it at the neck at dawn" (21).

He reaches his aunt's and they go to the kitchen, where he gives her the lobster and is shocked to discover that it is still alive. The story ends with a judgment:

> It [the lobster] shuddered again. Belacqua felt he would be sick.
>
> "My God" he whined "it's alive, what'll we do?"....
>
> "Boil the beast" she said, "what else?"
>
> "But its not dead" protested Belacqua "you can't boil it like that."....
>
> "Have sense" she said sharply, "lobsters are always boiled alive. They must be." She caught up the lobster and laid it on his back. It trembled. "They feel nothing" she said.
>
> In the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. For hours, in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly.... Now it was going alive into the scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath.
>
> Belacqua looked at the old parchment of her face, grey in the dim kitchen.
>
> "You make a fuss" she said angrily "and upset me and then lash into it for your dinner."
>
> She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.
>
> Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.
>
> It is not. (21-22)

The ending is perhaps the least parodic part of the story, and the moral-ethical problem of mercy and pity is

given a kind of objectification. Yet the surrealist juxtaposition, the bohemian anti-aestheticism, the high cultural and modernist allusions, and even the naturalist moments, are simply left behind. There are moments of lyricism -- "In the depths of the sea..." "her face, grey in the dim kitchen" -- which suggest an epiphanic mood, but epiphany would require that the lobster -- like for example Michael Furey at the end of "The Dead" -- be a multi-valent symbol; but symbolism is an aesthetic strategy that most of the story seems to reject. The story ends in juxtaposition, even though the mood seems the opposite of avant-garde provocation.

This unstated contradiction in aesthetic modes is most strongly revealed in the last line: "It is not." It is the only line of the story that is purely omniscient narration. It expresses a strong judgment: that pain must never pass unexpressed. The relative unimportance of the pain, in relation to McCabe's (or his victim's, or Cain's), strengthens the absolute refusal to ignore even the smallest example of unfeeling. Rabinovitz, in his study of Beckett's early fiction, concludes that the story's ending shows that "Beckett's main concern is his protagonist's moral equivocation" (47), but the last line is not a judgment directed at the hero. Rabinovitz accounts for this by claiming that "Beckett's method in these episodes [in <u>More Prick than Kicks</u>] is to introduce recurring details which

call attention to subjects that the narrator tries to avoid" (43). The question this raises is directly related to the story's contradictory structure: how can an author supply details in a third-person narration that "the narrator tries to avoid"? This points to the convention of the unreliable narrator -- which the trilogy explicitly exploits and intensifies -- but here it signals an uncertain narrative structure. The voice that delivers the last line does not fit well with either the parodic omniscient narrator who hovers above the narrative material, nor with any character's consciousness: a third voice -- the author's point of view? -- must be introduced because the story has no organizational structure to integrate such a judgment. Yet the judgment is made nevertheless.

This judgment out of nowhere, constructed through a narrative perspective incongruous with the rest of the story, is a sign of Beckett's conflicting techniques and concerns. In fact, the very appearance of an <u>attempt</u> towards some kind of unification or epiphany is perhaps the only thing that holds the story together and prevents it from becoming an indeterminate collage of contradictory aesthetic modes. But the last line merely suggests an overarching intention. That the suggestion is made through an ethical judgment seems to indicate an overall aesthetic confusion. The only thing that could bring "Dante" and the "lobster" together in a meaningful way is the very thing that its

parodic and juxtapositional structure of high culture and crustacean cannot create: a meaningful judgment.

3. Versions of Modernism

The story, as an example of Beckett's earliest prose, is constructed of contradictory aesthetic modes and values -- contradictions which the story never brings to light or thematizes. What this implies is not so much that Beckett had not yet decided on a style or thematics best suited to what he wished to express; rather, it indicates that Beckett did not find his "voice" in these early works because he had not found a way to orient himself, as an artist and a fiction writer, within a range of available positions. Written in 1932, after landmark works like Ulysses and "The Waste Land," and in the wake of avant-garde movements such as dada and surrealism, the story marks a range of these and other positions, from naturalism to aestheticism. Beckett was academically and classically trained and also thoroughly conversant with, and an advocate for, the most innovative contemporary art and literature. His early "critical" writings indicate a similar contradictory affinity for both the aesthetics of the avant-garde, especially in regard to surrealism's notion of automatic writing, and much more traditional allegiances to romanticism, aestheticism and modernism's notion of aesthetic autonomy. These are not just stylistic concerns, but cultural positions that make claims

for the function of art in modern society.

Two related points need to be clarified and justified. First, I am not suggesting that Beckett, or anyone at the time, could possibly view these aesthetic modes as a set of separate, clearly defined alternatives from which he or she could consciously choose.[13] Rather, it was in the thirties that the innovations of modernism and the avant-garde created historically unprecedented possibilities and combinations, as well as destroyed the possibility that there could be any one dominant literary mode. Beckett's first professional recognition came in 1929 when Joyce asked him to contribute to a volume lauding and publicizing his work in progress, Finnegans Wake, itself already the transformation of certain implications of modernism and one of its most eccentric works. This is not to say that there ever was a single dominant mode of literature in modern Europe, but rather that the argument for an overarching singular aesthetic (such as Zola's arguments for naturalism or Pater's for aestheticism) could no longer be made with confidence after the most productive moments of the "historical" avant-garde and high modernism.[14] Secondly, I have claimed throughout that these aesthetic modes were contradictory; or, more specifically, implied contradictory cultural-political positions. Neither claim is self-evident or uncontested. In fact, more often than not Joycean modernism and avant-garde experimentation have been viewed

as congruous, not contradictory.

While certain aspects of these claims -- that by the thirties the idea of a dominant aesthetic literary mode had been rendered moot, and that different works of high modernism and the avant-grade embodied contradictory aesthetic values -- have been made by critics and cultural theorists, they have not been adequately related. Franco Moretti's essay "The Long Goodbye: Ulysses and the End of Liberal Capitalism" addresses key aspects of the cultural politics of British modernism in the interwar period that formed the literary field to which Beckett's earliest work responds.[15] First, Moretti points out a divergence in the intentions behind modernism's use of myth:

> In Eliot ['s discussion of the "mythic method"], there is a clear distinction: on the one hand myth ('controlling, ordering, giving a shape and a significance'), on the other, history ('immense panorama of futility and anarchy'). Myth must mold history: it is the active agent of the pair, form to history's content. In Joyce, myth and history are complementary: they presuppose and neutralize each other, and it is impossible to establish a formal or ideological hierarchy between the two. In Joyce, myth is not identified with the aesthetic form (as in Eliot), and therefore cannot be the starting point for a new cultural hegemony.(emphasis in text) (192)

Joyce and Eliot both exploit myth in their works, and their shared interest in myth and allusion has been, and still is, viewed as a definitive feature of modernism.[16] However, the ways they do use myth, and the types of myth they choose, are almost antagonistic. At the time, Eliot viewed their projects as complementary, and his prestige as a poet

and critic has helped define this modernist "universal." However, the difference in their use of myth implies a divergent cultural politics. Eliot's agenda is constructed on a conservative premise: it locates value in the cultural icons of the past, and devalues his own social present. Joyce's position, in contrast, is "structurally ambiguous: neither an 'apology' for nor a 'criticism' of classical capitalism" (190-1). It is these two distinct, but at the time conflated, agendas of "modernism" that are partially embodied, and contradict each other, in Beckett's early work.

According to Moretti, Joyce did not use myth as an ordering principle but rather used both the world of the present and the "high" cultural landmark which the Odyssey represented in his own cultural milieu as complementary counterparts -- "to parody Bloom with Ulysses and Ulysses with Bloom" (192). As opposed to Eliot's notion of the mythic method, Joyce's use of myth did not -- could not -- argue for any form of "cultural hegemony." In fact, Moretti argues that the very lack of any hierarchically ordered principle of organization in Ulysses is its most significant feature:

> The most peculiar aspect of Joyce's novel is that it uses a plurality of aesthetic forms that lie at opposite extremes.... In Ulysses, then, the world goes to pieces not because it is a text prolific in apocalyptic visions, but, rather, because in it every idea of a cultural system goes awry. Stuart Gilbert, in James Joyce's Ulysses, observes that 'All facts of any kind, mental or material, sublime or ludicrous, have an

> equivalence of value for the artist.' This principle of equivalence which establishes itself in Joyce's novel is irreducibly opposed to the hierarchical principles of the great bourgeois culture of his time. By rendering any 'organic' pretension of the work of art vain, Joyce also declares the impossibility of 'deducing' from it an idea of a cultural system capable of restoring order to society.
>
> Joyce dismantles the ideology of 'organic' art.... Dissolution is possible and effective only because of an extremely controlled formal involvement. But this formal involvement -- here is the decisive innovation -- now aims completely at showing that every style is arbitrary and therefore irrelevant.
>
> .... To propose two or more conventions for the same 'object'... is to invalidate them all and renounce all hegemonic pretensions. This is exactly what happens in Ulysses. (204-5)

While good arguments could be made against this interpretation, Moretti's description provides a relevant framework for understanding Beckett's relation to the "literary field" that he experienced as a young writer, personally, intellectually and professionally.[17] For someone in Beckett's position, the situation of the novel, after Joyce, seemed radically indeterminate. The "plurality of styles" in Ulysses precludes the possibility that any one style dominate. "In Joyce, when one episode is presented in two or three or fifty different styles, the procedure is not based on any codified literary motivation" like James's or Conrad's use of different points of view which are motivated by the shifting psychological states of their characters. "It is pure technical exploration." All the styles in the novel "therefore, are equally irrelevant as interpretations of reality or formalization of literary language." Because of this, "Joyce does not found a school ... [to] imitate one

of Ulysses many styles betray[s] the fundamental intention of his novel: the systematic refusal to assume one style as the privileged vehicle of expression" (206).

The contradictory juxtaposition of aesthetic modes and intentions in Beckett's early work is, in part, due to the enormously influential impact of Joyce's experiment. And, as Moretti has shown, once the cultural-political ambivalence of Joyce's project had been felt -- his ambiguous refusal to "order" the narrative representation of contemporary society very much in opposition to Eliot's conservative intention -- then not only questions of style were open, but the existence of cultural hierarchy (or hegemony) itself appears as a problem, not a given. Yet Moretti's analysis falters when he attempts to take the implications of Joyce's ambivalence outside the realm of modernist high culture. While Moretti carefully separates the ideological strands of Eliotic and Joycean intertwining of myth and the modern, he conflates Joyce with the avant-garde in three important respects. Since his conflation is typical of those made in many interpretations of the period, and since it is necessary in relation to Beckett's position to lay out the distinctions, it is worthwhile to examine Moretti's claims.

There are three points to highlight. Moretti claims that in Ulysses 1) "Joyce dismantles the ideology of 'organic' art" (205); 2) "there is no qualitative distinction between 'elite' and 'mass' culture" (206); and

3) "Joyce's indifference to any criterion of functionality or truth in cultural forms brings him close to Dada" (206). All of these claims are related, since the organic work of art was a self-defining feature of "elite" art and since avant-garde movements such as dada and cubism had already, by the interwar period, created the collage and juxtaposition techniques that exploited discontinuity of themes and materials and which blatantly violated earlier norms of aesthetic organicism. Yet, as Peter Bürger has argued, the defining feature of the "historical" avant-garde cannot be located at the level of content or style. Rather, its specificity resides in its attempt to transform the <u>function</u> of art. Reacting to aestheticism's heightened value of aesthetic autonomy -- Wilde's mocking "all art is quite useless" (4) makes him transitional, ridiculing aestheticism from within its own ideals -- the avant-garde was the first art movement that was able to understand art as an <u>institution</u> functionally divorced from everyday life and therefore "useless" and unable to effect transformations in society or everyday life. Williams concurs:

> I am accepting the conventional delineation of the avant-garde as a complex of movements from around 1910 to the late 1930s. In real practice there are no such convenient break-points. What is almost the only distinguishing feature, and even then incompletely, is less a matter of actual writing than of successive formations which challenged not only the art institutions but the institution of Art, or Literature, itself, typically in a broad programme which included, though in diverse forms, the overthrow and remaking of existing society. (<u>Politics</u> 67)

From this perspective, Joyce's project, like that of Eliot or Woolf, seems much closer to an "aestheticism [that] merely rejects the means-end rationality of everyday life" (Bürger, Theory 49) than to dada, Surrealism, Italian futurism, Brecht, Constructivism, etc. While "elite" art and "mass" culture may be represented in Ulysses without "qualitative distinction" as a content, the book's own status as an autonomous art object, meticulously crafted and brought to perfection by a master genius and to be interpreted and appreciated by a classically-educated elite, is not an issue. It was modernist novels such as Ulysses -- following a development from at least Flaubert in France, and Pater and James in England -- that gave the novel, a genre always associated with popular literary culture (or, in the case of Zola, positivist science), the status of high culture, dependent for the unfolding of its layered meanings on the "entire wealth of philosophical and theological knowledge, [the] power of psychological and aesthetic analysis, [the] culture of the mind educated in all the literatures of the world" (Curtius, qtd. in Moretti 204).

If, in "Dante and the Lobster" and his early critical writing, Beckett found himself -- at a moment when the European novel, as in Finnegans Wake, had, in the search for a universal language, ironically severed itself from any real readership -- responding uncertainly to these varying, conflicting agendas of modernist art, by the time he turned

to the novel form a very different kind of situation was beginning to influence the task of the writer. In Murphy Beckett attempts to fuse a novel about a "mind" striving to shut out the outer world of the modern metropolis with the story of a man and a woman failing to communicate or to find love and companionship. Yet, as most other writers of the time were crying out, the inner "mind" was a meaningless place to be when the outer world -- from the agitations for worldwide revolution to the rise of German fascism -- could no longer safely be ignored.

NOTES

1. Beckett was born in 1906, Sartre in 1905, Camus in 1913, Orwell in 1903, Auden in 1907. Watt was not published until 1953, when Beckett was becoming well-known for his postwar fiction.

2. He had also tried translating and literary journalism, with very modest success and even less financial reward. Beckett has often said that he considers his interwar work insignificant; see Bair, chapters 4 through 12.

3. By "failure" I am not suggesting that Beckett's early works are neither interesting nor enjoyable. I am simply responding to both my own reaction, and the reaction of almost all readers who are not academic specialists, toward his fiction. Molloy is a much more effective (moving, funny, beautiful, readable, seemingly urgent, "profound," "subversive," unified, disruptive -- the reader may choose his or her own values) novel than Murphy. Nor can this "failure" simply be ascribed to Beckett being a young writer who had not sufficiently developed his talents until after the war. In many ways, as I will discuss, the early fiction is much more sophisticated than the postwar fiction. It is exactly in Beckett's own attitude to cultural values like intellectual sophistication where the failure of these works lie. Of course, many critics praise the early fiction as masterpieces of high modernism. This dissertation is, in part, an argument directed against this view.

4. I discuss some of the ways in which the cultural politics of the interwar years get taken up and transformed by novelists and academic critics in the cold war period in Part 3.

5. This issue was likewise becoming the focus of the then emergent field of cultural sociology. As Simmel expressed it in his seminal 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life": "The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external culture and technique of life" (324).

6. A "literary field" is "a space of objective relations between positions -- between that of the celebrated artist and that of the avant-gardiste, for example." According to Bourdieu, "by analyzing the literary field as a space of positions corresponding to a space of homologous aesthetic

positions we are able to transcend the opposition... between internal readings and external analysis and at the same time preserve the benefits and requirements of two approaches traditionally considered irreconcilable" (544).

7. By "intentionally" I refer to Beckett's techniques, not to the meanings of his work; that is, in the postwar work Beckett knew that he was constructing paradoxes that involved explicit cultural-political values. For example, see my discussion (Chapter V) of the image of Marxist orator in the very first story he published after the war.

8. Adorno's concept of "aesthetic rationality" is discussed in the epilogue. I differ from Adorno here in that I take "instrumental" rationality to be, in itself, an ambivalent cultural force and not a monolithic colonization of consciousness; thus, I read "aesthetic rationality," as a "counterlogic" to instrumentality, as equally ambivalent.

9. In my discussion below I accept, for the most part, Peter Bürger's distinctions between aestheticism, modernism and the "historical avant-garde," though I do not accept all of his argument. His understanding of the specificity of the avant-garde provides the best framework for understanding Beckett's relation to surrealism, dada, etc. This might not be the case for other writers of the period.

10. This story appears as the opening story in Beckett's first book of fiction, More Pricks than Kicks.

11. See Seigel's Bohemian Paris for an excellent cultural history of both the actual lives of artists and "bohemians" and the cultural symbols that served to define bohemia as the space in which the contradictions arising from processes of modernization in 19th-century Europe could be turned into a way of life.

12. There is an obvious problem with terms such as collage, juxtaposition, resolution, integration, etc. Each of these requires a specific context that would indicate what, at the time, appeared incongruous, shocking, a violation of norms. Russian formalism has long ago shown the dialectic of innovation and convention that always makes such descriptive terms relevant and unstable. Yet, I think that the vocabulary of aesthetic techniques of modernism and the avant-garde have become part of our common understanding of aesthetic judgments, even while classical norms of harmony and beauty can be, and are, applied to works whose original intention was to oppose those norms. That the terms have no absolute meaning does not, in the context in which I am using them, render them merely "ideological."

13. As Bourdieu puts it: "The space of positions adopted by the writer that the analyst must reconstitute does not appear as such to the writer himself" (556).

14. Of course, this was not a phenomenon internal to literature but was also bound up with the other changes, economic and social: the increasing secularization and democratization of society, developing modes of mass communication and technology, the relation of "art" to entertainment and its commodity status, etc.

15. "Ulysses," Moretti claims, "caused a deep split within the development of European literature and particularly, the novel: this much was immediately clear. Less clear was ... the link between this split and the rupture that occurred in the functioning of capitalist societies at the turn of the century" (182). Moretti's purpose in the essay is to demonstrate the "structural homology"(190) between the historical "crisis" of liberal capitalism in England (reliance on imperialism, commodity fetishism, advertising, resistance to monopoly or state-regulated capitalism, etc.) and the aesthetic logics and ideological implications in the works of British high modernism. Here, I want to focus on only one side of this "homology," though it should be stated that while Moretti's argument about the relationship between economic history, on one side, and culture, on the other, is provocative, it is weakened by its implicit base-superstructure model. His observations on the work of Joyce and Eliot, however, do not rely on accepting the causal premises of the larger argument.

16. As Menand notes concerning Eliot's ideas about the mythic method, the idea "seems to be parodied by the footnotes to his own poem.... modernist literature holds many funds of irony to mock its own prescriptions" (113). Modernist works of art are too ambivalent to function in the clear dichotomies outlined in the explicit aesthetic programs of their authors; but, I maintain, the attitudes in the aesthetic ideology do indeed shape actual works, though not only in ways the author intends.

17. Moretti, for instance, does not see one part of Ulysses as being more influential or praised than others. Someone like Raymond Williams, however, singles out the Bloom sections -- Molly and Leopold -- as the decisive sections of the book. If Ulysses is read as book of parts, some of which work better than others, than Moretti's view is flawed. At the time, however, Joyce's admirers and critics emphasized how unified the novel's diversity was, how it all wound together into the perfect work of organic, autonomous art.

CHAPTER IV

Contact with the Outside World: Murphy in the City, Watt and the War

1. Contesting "Social Reality"

1938 marks an important beginning, and an important end, in Beckett's career. After having been rejected by no fewer than forty-two publishers, Beckett's first novel Murphy was finally released by Routledge in March of that year. His previous book, the collection of stories More Pricks than Kicks, published by Chatto and Windus in 1934, had done miserably: only two copies had been sold in 1935.[1] The publication of Murphy, a much more developed work than the earlier collection, would presumably establish Beckett as a serious novelist. The book received a brief, moderately favorable notice in the March 12 TLS (see below). Beckett was now a publicly recognized, if still relatively obscure, young Anglo-Irish novelist.

In 1938 Beckett also published a review of a volume of poetry by Denis Devlin, a friend from Ireland, in the journal transition. In contrast to the frustrating difficulty he had experienced finding a place for his first substantial work of fiction, he had always had a friendly forum for his shorter pieces in the international, Paris-based journal whose importance was closely tied to its serial publication of installments from Joyce's "Work in

Progress." In fact, Beckett's first published piece, the commissioned essay on Joyce, appeared in one of the earliest numbers of transition, in 1929, and he went on to publish over twenty-five stories, poems, translations and reviews in the journal between then and 1938. More so than with any other single literary publication or group, it was with transition and its circle of contributors -- and readers -- that Beckett was closely associated.

Beckett's review in 1938 most concretely marks an end for Beckett because it appeared in the very last issue of transition.[2] Beckett's interwar artistic community was about to undergo a radical transformation. As transition editor Eugene Jolas explained many years later, summing up both the journal's self-proclaimed purpose and the reason it ceased publication, the

> by then inevitable approach of World War II made it no longer possible to concentrate on abstract laboratory problems, or to daydream about new forms in art and language. The totalitarian menace was looming on the horizon, and I came more and more to feel that the writer could defend the spirit only by participating actively in the battle against the enemy. (14)

Beckett's difficulty in finding a British publisher for his first novel and his decade-long association with transition are, if viewed within the perspective of the cultural politics of the thirties, mutually determining. Put in terms current at the time, transition maintained a "formalist," "abstract" apolitical aesthetic that by the mid-thirties was no longer fashionable or, for many writers,

sensible or ethical. In many respects Murphy, like the work of many transition writers, too closely resembled the writing of an out-of-date literary experiment of the twenties, with its arcane allusions and vocabulary, its concerns with metaphysics, the occult and the private life of the "mind," its convoluted syntax and purposively trivial yet overly-complex plot structure.[3]

Jolas's belief that by 1938 such abstract, experimental literature was pointless in the face of oncoming war can be justifiably interpreted as a belated confession of artistic failure -- authors such as Auden, Orwell, Malraux, Gide, Aragon (the list goes on) had decided years before that writers should abandon this aesthetic "daydream" and actively, concretely take a stand in their writing against fascism, war, capitalist imperialism, the oppression of the working classes and totalitarianism.[4] Already by 1935 transition stood for many writers as a symbol of a dangerously apolitical literary hermeticism and became, like many of the surrealist poets it published, a target of attack in journals such as Left Review, which viewed Jolas's aesthetic as not only irresponsible but "near-Fascist" (qtd. in Cunningham 5). If publishers were reluctant to take on Murphy, it was because, like transition itself, it seemed to belong to the high modernism of the previous decade and was irrelevant to the urgently communicative, politically-charged tendential writing of the thirties. Even the

staunchly belletristic reviewer in the TLS wagged a politely accusing finger at Beckett's irresponsibility: "one feels that the talent and knowledge [Murphy] reveals deserve a theme of more depth and substance" ("Murphy").

The harsh oppositions of thirties' cultural politics were usually presented as a set of interrelated choices: communism or fascism, the proletariat or the bourgeoisie, concrete communication or abstract formalism, active participation or passive observation, the totality of humankind or the elite individual, the literature of socialist realism or the literature of a dying capitalism.[5] Inevitably, within literary works themselves, these oppositions manifested themselves in contradictory ways -- thus, for example, Malraux, one of the writers most closely associated with the Soviet Union and socialist realism, was vilified by other socialist and communist intellectuals for portraying the Chinese revolution in his 1934 La Condition Humaine not as a vast class struggle but as an opportunity for individualistic acts of heroism in an essentially irrational, meaningless world.[6]

In many respects, Jolas's 1929 transition manifesto "the Revolution of the Word," which claimed that "pure poetry is a lyrical absolute that seeks an a priori reality within ourselves alone" and "the imagination in search of a fabulous world is autonomous and unconfined" (173), marks the end of the interwar avant-gardist attempt to make

consciousness or language itself the locus of political and social transformation. What Jolas implicitly hopes to yoke together -- the pure, autonomous word and mind with the idea of "revolution" -- is precisely what the political pressures of the decade were ripping apart. Just as transition was beginning its publication in 1929 of autonomous, pure literary experimentation, the founding fathers of Surrealism, Breton and Aragon, were angrily divided over the question of how closely poets and artists dedicated to a revolution in language and consciousness should involve themselves in the party politics of an anti-fascist, anti-nationalist proletarian revolution. As one chronicler of the decade's divisions put it: "Henceforth [from 1930] surrealism pursued its course on two parallel paths: that of political Revolution, that of the ever widening exploration of the unknown forces of the unconscious" (Nadeau 175).

For Jolas, there is still the need, as in earlier avant-garde thought, to link a "pure" experimentation with mind and language to an abstractly political notion, "revolution." But now, it seems that aesthetic revolution begins to pose itself in direct opposition to an increasingly explicit link between the writer and the language, goals and commitments of organized political groups. If we accept this logic -- as critics implicitly do -- Beckett's writing appears simply antithetical to that of explicitly leftist writers, antithetical, in fact, to the

entire trend, quite diverse in itself, of politically tendentious literature, from Aragon to Orwell. But this opposition -- revolution of words on one side, of the world on the other -- are two sides of an incomplete picture.

The problem of interpreting Beckett's work in a meaningful relation to the broader cultural context of both the thirties and the postwar decades is still caught up in this difficult opposition. In most cases, we have now put the divisive evaluations of the decade in an historical perspective; by and large they are no longer operant in our own critical vocabulary. Aside, perhaps, from those "formalist" (the scare quotes indicate an historical usage) or experimental writers of the period who explicitly embraced in their works and lives various aspects of a regressive political ideology (like Celine, Pound and Lewis), we are no longer willing to judge the writers of the period by applying the period's own damning oppositions. Similarly, we now know how politically oppressive much of the "alliance" between left-leaning intellectuals, the communist party and the Soviet Union could actually be. However, and in a very important way, the overarching opposition between formalist and tendentious art, as it was constructed throughout the period itself, has remained a controlling perspective in regard to Beckett's work. But once the <u>evaluative</u> oppositions of the period have been rendered historical and are viewed as part of an active

polemic and not as accurate judgments, then the still accepted descriptive opposition -- between Beckett, Joyce, and transition on one hand and that of the "Auden Generation" on the other -- needs similarly to be worked through rather than implicitly upheld.

The often-cited review Beckett published in the final number of transition is a case in point for viewing his work within, rather than antithetical to, the explicitly political literary trends of the thirties.[7] In several ways the review reveals a struggle on the part of the just-published young novelist to find terms of connection between art, politics and, in his own words, "social reality." Defending his friend Devlin -- as he already had Joyce and others -- against the charge of obscurity, Beckett begins with a dig at explicitly political literary art and criticism. Devlin's work, "with himself on behalf of himself ... is a relief now that verse is most conveniently to be derided (or not) at the cart-tail of faction.... The relief of poetry to be derided (or not) on its own terms and not in those of politicians, antiquaries ... and zealots" (Disjecta 91).

While the phrase "antiquaries and zealots" no doubt refers to the Celtic Revival and the cultural conservatism of Irish nationalists, the defense of Devlin's autonomous art, his "profound and abstruse self-consciousness," is made explicitly in reference to a pan-European cultural-political

prescription: the doctrine of socialist realism.[8] Devlin's best work depends "on a minimum of rational interference" which overrides any concern for unambiguous messages: "art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear." Art can only be judged in

> terms of need, not of opinion, still less of faction; opinion being a response to and at least (at best) for a time an escape from need, from one kind of need, and art, in this case these poems, no more (!) than the approximately adequate and absolutely non-final formulation of another kind. Art has always been this -- pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric -- whatever else it may have been obliged by the 'social reality' to appear, but never more freely so than now, when social reality (pace ex-comrade Radek) has severed the connexion. (91)

The oppositions are present, but they are not static. Importantly, Beckett's concern is with the "terms" in which poetry is judged, and not with denying the relation of art to "social reality." The typical critical take, that in the review Beckett "sides with the self against society" (Cohn 12), is locked in the ideology of the period it presumes to critically examine. In fact, "social reality" and "connexion" are active, operative terms here. Other phrases, like "terms of need," "escape from need," "obliged by the 'social reality' to appear," are just as vaguely political as they are vaguely aesthetic, referring doubly to material concerns as well as to a metaphysics of autonomous art. By the end of the paragraph, however, Beckett's loose logic takes on a definitive target. "Social reality" appears twice in the concluding sentence: once in scare quotes, indicating

a usage Beckett distrusts, and once as a political fact. The rights to this "term" are clearly being contested, not conceded (this same begrudging refusal to concede the importance of the social situation of art will appear, with a change of emphasis, ten years later in the famous "dialogue" with Georges Duthuit; see chapter VI.3).

If for Beckett art is "pure interrogation," it is nevertheless "obliged" to be other things as well, to have an impure manifestation in "social reality." Beckett's mistrust, in this first usage, signals a disparity between the artist's aspiration and the work of art's contingent appearance in an actual, historical world of "need." Then, however, Beckett addresses a specific moment in the cultural politics of the period by making "social reality" the dominant concern. If the doctrine of socialist realism, as defined by Karl Radek, one of the principle speakers at the very influential First Soviet Writers' Congress of 1934, put forth a monologic version of "the position of man on this planet" (Radek, in Bukharin 158) to which all progressive writers must subscribe, then Beckett wanted to point out that this same, officially sanctioned "social reality" had seen it necessary, by 1938, to purge "ex-comrade Radek" from its ranks and send him into exile.[9] Acceptable versions of "social reality" were contingent on social reality.

For Beckett, it is the operant social reality which has "severed the connexion" between a "need" best addressed in

art and a "need" in political terms. Radek had claimed that it was writers like Joyce -- Ulysses was "a heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed with a cinema apparatus through a microscope" (153) -- who had falsified the representation of the social world "under a cloak on impartiality" (158). Radek's charges against Joyce and other modernists, which were echoed in leftist journals in England and France, centered on a set of related concerns:[10] Joyce's realism was too narrow, both elitist and petty bourgeois, when what needed to be portrayed was the totality of social relations (as in Marx, Balzac and Tolstoi); his language was mandarin when it was necessary to speak to a mass audience; and his preoccupation with the "irrational" and the "subconscious" precluded him from a "conscious" engagement with "the fate of humanity" (158). Beckett's response reverses the charges: it is politicians and zealots who have falsified art's necessary function of "interrogation." For Beckett, Radek's fate was a compelling sign of how the attempt to define, politically and authoritatively, "social reality" was itself a fatal severing of cultural expression from the reality of lived experience.

As with Beckett's earlier criticism, it is difficult to identify anything more definite here than a struggle, in his idiosyncratic syntax, to maintain some kind of connection between art and social reality even while he argues for the

clear separation of the "terms" of aesthetic judgment and political or sociological judgment. The topical, biting reference to Radek and Beckett's punning description of Devlin's fusion of form and content as "extraaudenary" (94) are signs of an engagement, at an ironic distance, with questions of "tendency" and political art. But what can the contested, active and yet also ideological (with scare quotes) phrase "social reality" mean coming from a writer like Beckett? His first novel, written while Beckett was living in London and Dublin in 1935-36 and which takes place in London and Dublin of the "postwar-recovery" (50), does not so much answer the question: rather, it greatly expands the terms and the scope of Beckett's struggle with the idea of social reality itself.

2. "Contact with outer reality"

The brief notice on Murphy in the TLS, which viewed the book as a "curious ... elaborate parody of the world we know," isolated a passage from the novel as best describing the protagonist Murphy's "attitude toward life" ("Murphy"). The redacted passage, as it appears in the notice, refers to Murphy's employment as an attendant at a hospital for the insane, his feeling for the patients there and

> his loathing of the textbook attitude towards them, the complacent scientific conceptualism that made contact with outer reality the index of mental well-being.... All this was duly revolting to Murphy, whose experience as a physical and rational being obliged him to call sanctuary what the psychiatrists called exile and to

> think of the patients not as banished from a system of benefits but as escaped from a colossal fiasco. (100-01)

"Contact with outer reality" is the key phrase here. On one hand, it recapitulates one of the most persistent aporias of modernism and modernity, that an inner reality and an outer reality exist separately, and can be evaluated and gauged as such, as on an "index." On the other hand, it also expresses the "choice" of the artist in the thirties: respond to the "colossal fiasco" by either engaging and fighting it, by making "contact," or by escaping into the freedom of inner imagination, romanticized in part of the novel, albeit ironically, as madness. Murphy is clear about his choice: rather than fight against scientific conceptualism and an ideological "system of benefits" he chooses to side with a passive withdrawal into his mind. "His vote was cast. 'I am not of the big world, I am of the little world'" (101). This is more or less the major conflict in the novel: Murphy's struggle to escape the exigencies of the "big" or "outer world" so that he might enjoy the "sanctuary" of the little, inner one. But is this an image of the author's struggle as well, of Beckett's choice?

Murphy's struggle to "come alive in his mind" (6) and Beckett's struggle to reconcile his ambivalence -- mistrustful and acknowledging -- toward "social reality" with his insistence on the purity of imagination and

aesthetic judgment resemble each other in a complex, contradictory way. The struggles are both internal and external, psychic and physical, linguistic and communicative: what stands most in Murphy's way are the contingencies of the outer reality of everyday life whose ultimate priority he challenges; for Beckett the novelist, the struggle is to find a mode and voice of narration that resists a stable depiction of "social reality" without conceding the concept itself. At certain points in the novel, and in relation to Murphy's feelings of "brotherhood" for his patients, this ambivalence is explicitly thematized, and lightly parodied, as a philosophical problem:

> The nature of outer reality remained obscure. The men, women and children of science would seem to have as many ways of kneeling to their facts as any other body of illuminati. The definition of outer reality, or of reality short and simple, varied according to the sensibility of the definer. But all seemed agreed that contact with it, even the layman's muzzy contact, was a rare privilege.
>
> On the basis of this the patients were described as 'cut off' from reality, from the rudimentary blessings of the layman's reality.... The function of treatment was to bridge the gulf.... (101)

This phenomenological relation between the "nature" of outer reality and the "sensibility of the definer" helps justify Murphy's identification with the patients who symbolize for him "that self-immersed indifference to the contingencies of the contingent world which he had chosen for himself as the only felicity and achieved so seldom" (96). To be "cut off" from "layman's reality," the mind "a closed system ... self-sufficient and impermeable" (64) is,

from this perspective, only exchanging one definition of reality for another. Yet Beckett's need to justify, rationally and communicatively, Murphy's choice of rejecting "layman's reality" in favor of the psychotics' is an indication of an outer reality the definition of which is never questioned by the omniscient narrator. It is to this outer, social reality that the problem of Murphy's quest to "come alive in his mind" (6) is always referred, even though "outer reality" is presented, pseudo-philosophically, as a contingency, no more or less primary than Murphy's "mind."

This ambivalence -- outer reality as an operant force that motivates the struggle to escape into the mind, or outer reality as a contingent idea that varies with each individual mind -- creates a problem in the construction of the novel and, in turn, a problem in interpreting it. As the narrator explains, "Murphy felt himself split into two, a body and a mind. They had intercourse apparently, otherwise he could not have known that they had anything in common. But he ... did not understand through what channel the intercourse was effected nor how the two experiences came to overlap" (64). Body and mind are associated in the novel with outer and inner realities, the big world of money, motion, work and other people whose "sight and sounds ... detained [Murphy] in the world to which they belonged, but not he, as he fondly hoped" (6) and the little world of internal stillness, the imagination "cut off" from

everything but itself. For Murphy, "the problem [of intercourse between body and mind] was of little interest" (64); yet the novel as a whole and its omniscient narrator also display a lack of understanding this "channel" of overlapping experiences of world and mind, of "social reality" and autonomous art: what is a matter of indifference for Murphy appears, I argue, as an underlying "problem" in the construction of the novel itself. Like Murphy's mind, the novel is split into two "closed systems" between which "intercourse" is always apparent: it is the means of their interaction that the novel fails to understand. Unlike the later fiction (as I have discussed in the previous chapters), this failure is not thematized or incorporated into the mode of narration. Rather, what makes Murphy most significant in terms of Beckett's development is the expression of the struggle within which the failure occurs.

The opening chapters of the novel evince the two "systems" of the novel, the apparent connection between them, and the failure to understand how they relate. Beckett sets up the plot as a kind of parody of modernist melodrama centering on Murphy, who "belonged to no profession or trade; came from Dublin" and lived on "small charitable sums" (14). He is a version of the Anglo-Irish bohemian-aesthete protagonist of More Pricks than Kicks -- Murphy's intellectual, occult studies with Neary and his quest to

self-sufficiently "come alive in his mind" (6) partially resemble an avant-gardist attempt to recreate everyday life as an aesthetic object. But his will to withdraw into the mind comes into conflict with his attraction, physical and emotional, for Celia, a working-class woman forced by necessity into prostitution whose only real friend is her old, infirm grandfather. Murphy can only "come alive in his mind" when alone, his body at rest and "appeased" (6). When he wants Celia to quit working the streets -- gender roles in the novel remain uncritically locked into norms of monogamy and male dominance despite the overall disdain for middle-class values towards career, religious morality or nation[11] -- and live with him, he is confronted with the "question of economy" (16): "When there was no money left ... Celia said that either Murphy got work or she left him and went back to hers. Murphy said that work would be the end of them both" (16).

The situation with which the story begins, despite the eccentric details, is a set of near-cliches void of psychological character development (the narrator refers to all the characters, except Murphy, as "puppets" [71]), as is the convoluted but equally conventional subplot involving the love interest of Murphy's former teacher, Neary. What is not conventional is the writing.[12] Parody, while relevant to Beckett's intentions, does not adequately describe the relationship between plot and presentation. The novel is

full of intellectual jokes, punning references to high, occult, arcane and contemporary culture which function primarily as a display of the narrator's easy and clever command of a "Joycean" range of knowledges. The sentence structures vary from simple declarations -- which sketch out the plot -- to complex, self-consciously mannered arabesques of rhetorical inversion, chiasmus and oxymoron. But many of these features, as they appear in conjunction with the story, are remnants of Beckett's allegiance to certain aspects of modernism that the most effective parts of Murphy already leave behind and the postwar works completely abandon or transform. The essential thing is not the games with words, played at a level that cuts most readers out of the competition. Rather, the active, omniscient game with words, constructed outside the experience of the characters, attempts to compensate for -- ride over rather than address -- the failure to understand the interaction between systems of mind and reality, words and world, that the conventional but necessary plot makes apparent. When Celia confronts Murphy with his breaching of his promise to find work, his response is constructed in one of the novel's basic modes of narration:

> He closed his eyes and fell back. It was not his habit to make out cases for himself. An aetheist chipping the deity was not more senseless than Murphy defending his courses of inaction, as he did not require to be told. He had been carried away by his passion for Celia and by a most curious feeling that he should not collapse without at least the form of a struggle.... To die fighting was the perfect antithesis of his whole

practice, faith and intention. (26)

"Inaction" needs to be defended, actively and with a struggle. Even withdrawal into the mind involves a struggle as long as there is an outside world in or against which the withdrawal takes place. The themes of individual agency, impassivity and physical paralysis, important in all of Beckett's fiction, are presented here as objective, as not affecting the shape or voice of narration. The oxymoronic logic, as in the phrase "courses of inaction," allows the omniscient narrator to both sympathize with Murphy's reaction to the "colossal fiasco" and to maintain an active, communicative link to a world outside the mind. There is, in Beckett's compositional technique, an ambivalence toward "inaction" -- silence, withdrawal, the self-sufficient mind -- that conflicts with, almost contradicts, the thematic pseudo-philosophical valuing of impassivity and inner self-sufficiency and the devaluing of outside reality and inter-connecting communication.

In one sense, the last line of this passage is a rebuke to a directly political aesthetic whose ideal practitioner would be willing "to die fighting" for a cause.[13] Importantly, Beckett suggests, in this same scene of conflict between Murphy and Celia, a congruence between his own aesthetic ideal and Murphy's "senseless" defense of himself:

> She looked at him helplessly. He seemed serious.... She felt, as 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. It was like difficult music heard for the first time. (27)

Here are the two systems: on one side, an image of an autonomous language, like "difficult music," that is semantically void, from which communicative "sense" is withheld; on the other, a description in the clearest, communicative language of a woman and man failing to understand. Both of the systems are linked in the act of communicating their separation; but it is the story of their separation, of Murphy's withdrawal from outer reality, of the game with words unrelated to the experience of the characters, that Beckett's novel emphasizes. While Murphy is in many ways an image of the "antithesis" of the committed writer, the novel itself is an expression of Beckett's ambivalence towards this cultural-political image, an attempt to defend and describe -- omnisciently, parodically, oxymoronically -- what Beckett himself does not accept as a definition of his own "practice, faith and intention." It is a rejection of one side of the opposition -- the revolution of the word, the formalism "cut off" from the social reality -- but without an acceptance of the other side.

The struggle to keep these two systems separate when their "overlapping" is apparent becomes manifest at the most general level in the juxtaposition of the two middle chapters of the book. Chapter five narrates the familiar

terrain of the modern male novel -- a man, alone, moving through an alienating, hostile urban world, while his woman waits for him at home; chapter six is an ironic description of an entity called "Murphy's mind" (63). Both chapters are characterized by word play, parody, and intellectual gamesmanship. And while each chapter makes apparent the "contact" between inner and outer worlds, each as a whole exemplifies their separation. As Raymond Williams observed about a key innovation in the Bloom sections of Ulysses, "there is no longer a city, there is only a man walking through it.... The substantial reality, the living variety of the city, is in the walker's mind" (Country 243-44). Joyce's portrait of modernity is an interaction of objective city -- as both potential community and alienating urban space -- and observing mind, which can only be communicated through the subjectivity of the male observer. In Joyce, the emphasis is on the interaction from the perspective of an individual consciousness; its own sense of individuality and inwardness is presented as a product of, and a reaction to, the modern world. It is this interaction that the two central chapters of Murphy separate out: the novel of the man, the woman, and the city in chapter five and the novel of the mind, as an isolable object, in chapter six. Compare, for example, the opening lines of each. From five:

> The room that Celia had found [for her and Murphy] was in Brewery Road between Pentonville Prison and the Metropolitan Cattle Market. West Brompton knew them no more. The room was large and the few articles of

> furniture it contained were large. The bed, the gas cooker, the table and solitary tallboy, all were very large indeed. (40)

London is a set of proper nouns that signify manufacture, labor, the laborer's intoxicant, the force of law, slaughter and commerce. This is the outer reality, as definitive and stable as the voice of the omniscient narrator: its nature is not dependent on the "sensibility of the definer." The cheap furnished room, between prison and market, a "cage" (5), is likewise a hard, alienating reality. Within it the lone woman feels lost. In contrast, six begins:

> It is most unfortunate but the point of this story has been reached where a justification of the expression 'Murphy's mind' has to be attempted. Happily we need not concern ourselves with the apparatus as it really was -- that would be an extravagance and an impertinence -- but solely with what it felt and pictured itself to be. (63)

When the narrative is focused inward, the voice needs to point to itself, to its own need for "justification"; there is a double inwardness -- a picture of "what it pictured itself to be" -- yet the passage is in essence objective, outside the working of the "apparatus," looking in. Perhaps it is only from the perspective of Beckett's postwar fiction -- with his creation of an inner voice so intense that its own contradictory functioning is a powerful expression of the connection between mind and world -- that we can see how inadequate this is, even as a joke. But even while the separation is made so complete that each side,

outer and inner, needs its own separate chapter, within each chapter itself connections become apparent, become inescapable.

In chapter five, the outside reality, the "laymen's reality," is characterized by a damaging instrumental rationality. Murphy goes out to look for work so that Celia does not have to go back "to walking the streets ... or wandering in the Market, where the frenzied justification of life as an end to means threw light on Murphy's prediction, that livelihood would destroy ... life's goods" (42). Murphy, "on the jobpath," hopelessly awkward and anti-social, anxious "to cultivate the sense of time as money which he heard was highly prized in business circles" (43), passing through the space of the interwar city scarred by "those malignant proliferations of urban tissue known as service flats" (47), perceiving places of possible employment as "slave-markets" (47), is met with an "attitude of derision" by those from whom he ineffectually seeks work. This is outer reality: "for what was all working for a living but a procuring and a pimping for the money-bags, one's lecherous tyrants the money-bags, so that they might breed" (47). In response, weary and defeated, afraid of the consequences for him and Celia if he cannot manage to earn a living, he fantasizes a Dantesque image of escape and withdrawal, sitting on a hill against a rock in

> embryonal repose, looking down at dawn across the reeds to the trembling of the austral sea and the sun.... he

> actually hoped he might live to be old. Then he would have a long time lying there dreaming, watching the dayspring run through its zodiac .... This was his Belacqua fantasy and perhaps the most highly systematized of the whole collection. It belonged to those that lay just beyond the frontiers of suffering, it was the first landscape of freedom. (48)

Inwardness and the tradition of high literature are joined in the fantasy -- this is the subjective, utopian moment of the chapter, "just beyond the frontiers of suffering." The inwardness is a response to the outward reality, so much so that it must be "systematized" in order to stand up to the hierarchical exchange-value system of modernity, but the emphasis is on the antithesis between Dantesque "Paradise" and the "miasma of laws" (48), the "mercantile gehenna" (26) of modernity. There is no interaction between mind and outer reality; subjectivity, like literature, is a systemized, closed withdrawal. But the expression of the withdrawal is not within the closed system, but active, responsive, as though a "landscape of freedom" was made visible by the force of the miasma of London.

The omniscient narrator does not imaginatively enter Murphy's subjective response, but rather presents it as yet another image of the separation between inner and outer, literature and reality, though outer reality is the compelling horizon against which the inner appears. The critical view of outer reality -- an attitude shared by both Murphy and the narrator -- becomes a narrated conflict:

enervated by this "vision" Murphy decides to sit down and take his "forepenny lunch." He finds "a branch of the caterers he wanted" and begins the "ritual" whereby "he defrauded a vested interest" out of a penny or two by drinking half his tea and complaining vociferously to the waitress that she has brought him the wrong kind until she brings him another. The narrator describes this petty "swindle" in heroic and political terms:

> no matter how the transaction were judged from the economic point of view, nothing could detract from its merit as a little triumph of tactics in the face of the most fearful odds. Only compare the belligerents. One the one hand a colossal league of plutomanic 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 fourpence. (50)

The trivial action is made humorous through hyperbole: this is not an image of class struggle, but a case of Beckett exploiting the terms of struggle to give a parodic dignity to the "solipsist"'s plight. In order to do so, the "plutomanic" outer reality must be represented as existing outside the mind of the solipsist. The solipsist is the hero, but the narrative perspective is closer to the "cunning of the sane."[14]

Murphy's "fourpenny lunch" is linked to the concept of "formalism" -- in the cultural politics of the period a literary quality always aligned negatively with solipsism and passivity -- in another, important sense. Later in the chapter, Murphy goes to Hyde Park to eat the packet of

assorted biscuits he buys in the restaurant where he enacts his swindle. Like Molloy with his sucking stones, Murphy's attention turns to a problem of form:

> They were the same as always, a Ginger, an Osborne, a Digestive, a Petit Beurre and one anonymous. He always ate the first-named last, because he liked it the best, and the anonymous first, because he thought it very likely the least palatable. The order in which he ate the remaining three was indifferent to him and varied regularly from day to day. On his knees now before the five it struck him for the first time that these prepossessions reduced to a paltry six the number of ways in which he could make this meal. But this was to violate the very essence of assortment.... Even if he conquered his prejudice against the anonymous, still there would be only twenty-four ways in which the biscuits could be eaten. But were he to take the final step and overcome his infatuation with the ginger, then the assortment would spring to life before him, dancing the radiant measure of its total permutability, edible in a hundred and twenty-ways.
>
> Overcome by these perspectives Murphy fell forward on his face in the grass, besides those biscuits of which it could be said as truly as the stars, that one differed from another, but of which he could not partake in their fullness until he had learnt not to prefer any one to any other. (57)

Toward what end is this preoccupation with form and "total permutability" narrated? In Watt and Molloy, the permutations -- considered by many critics to be the essence of Beckett's method -- are carried out in the language itself: sucking stones and words are equally permuted according to Molloy's destitute desire for symmetry. The modulated repetition of phrases in the later fiction breaks the flow of narrated action -- the action is as equally in the permutation of language as in the distribution of simple objects or actions (see below). But here Murphy's concern with form is not refracted in the mode of narration. Rather,

"total permutability," the desire for "fullness," is related to a principle of distinction: only by relinquishing the priorities and pleasures of taste and sensation can a fourpenny lunch of five biscuits become, imaginatively, satisfying. Murphy's poverty -- itself a result of his desire for inner self-sufficiency in response to the instrumental outer world -- leads him to an awareness that links aesthetic pleasure to social hierarchy: a lack of "fullness" in a material sense, his impoverished lunch, makes questions of taste and sensual preference damaging. Conversely, for Murphy to act upon his likes and dislikes means foregoing the fullness that indifference would bring. This choice -- trivial if the game with words and biscuits is the sign of an indifferent art, but serious if the game with words is covering up Beckett's ambivalent struggle to make words and world interact -- is indicative of an artistic problem relevant to Beckett's subsequent fiction: how to reconcile a conscious, rational rejection of hierarchies of taste and judgment with a literature that somehow makes an aesthetically pleasing and effective "fullness" out of an impoverished semantic or rational material.

The schisms in the novel -- between inner and outer, word and world, omniscient narrative game and "puppets" whose words fail to hold their meanings -- do not allow a development of the implications of Murphy's choice. With

Beckett's later narrators, a similar awareness is directly linked to their contradictory functioning as silenced objects and speaking subjects; critiques of the social hierarchy of taste are expressed, in spite of the paradoxes inhering in the "closed system" of language, through poignant aphorisms -- as Molloy bitterly learns, "to him who has nothing it is forbidden not to relish filth" (see Chapters I and II). But in Murphy there is no subjective realm through which such an awareness becomes integral to the story of the protagonist. Instead, in the following chapter, Beckett presents the "justification of the expression 'Murphy's mind'" outside of a concern with "this apparatus as it really was." While it is Chapter five -- the seedy solipsist dreaming and wandering alone through a hostile environment -- that implicitly expresses the problem Beckett's successful postwar fiction would center on and transform, it is in chapter six that Beckett most explicitly attempts to merge mind, word and art and oppose them to "outer reality." Yet far from presenting the aesthetic statement that some critics -- accepting rather than questioning the underlying oppositions of the period -- have claimed it proposes, chapter six presents instead the dead end to which the very oppositions, philosophical and aesthetic, lead.

Beckett is at pains to make Murphy's mind an arena for aesthetic arguments: "Murphy's mind pictured itself as a

large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without. This was not an impoverishment, for it excluded nothing that it did not itself contain." Aware that this is a tautology, not a productive paradox, the narrator needs to point out that "this did not involve Murphy in the idealist tar. There was the mental fact and there was the physical fact, equally real if not equally pleasant" (63). Already the "justification" of the expression "Murphy's mind" becomes a justification of a division between inner and outer that, from an omniscient perspective looking in, Beckett cannot sustain. In turn, the division is belabored in terms of "criteria" reminiscent of the review of Devlin:

> The mental experience was cut off from the physical experience, its criteria were not those of the physical experience, the agreement of part of its content with physical fact did not confer worth on that part. It did not function and could not be disposed according to a principle of worth. (64)

As in the idea of aesthetic autonomy Beckett expressed in the review, here there are two realms of experience which cannot be judged with a single "principle of worth." But while in the review it was "social reality" that ultimately severed the connection between aesthetic and social "worth," here it is inner reality, Murphy's mind, that determines the "cut off." Contributing to the loss of expressive language which this attempt to justify entails is Beckett's replacement of concrete images of the material world -- so important to the power of Beckett's inner voices because they help objectify, make palpable, the pain of the

separation of self from community, of language from signification -- with pseudo-philosophical abstractions. Aware of this loss of necessary narrative tension, Beckett tries to recover a sense of material struggle by animating his abstractions with vaudevillian variables: "He neither thought a kick because he felt one nor felt a kick because he thought one.... Perhaps there was, outside time and space, a non-mental non-physical Kick from all eternity.... But where then was the supreme Caress?" (64). If throughout the chapter the language becomes comically expressive only in reference to blow and caresses, conflict and reconciliation, its pseudo-Platonism is always sterile and self-contradictory. While Murphy believes that "his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change except its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body," it is exactly the vicissitudes of the body that are primary: "But motion in this [mental] world depended on rest in the world outside" (64).

Murphy's goal in withdrawing into the inner world of his mind is to feel "sovereign and free" (65), but the withdrawal, characterized by physical impassivity, is described as a compensation for a lack of agency in the outer. There are "three zones" of Murphy's mind.

> In the first ... 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.
>
> In the second were the forms without parallel.

> Here the pleasure was contemplation.... Here was the Belacqua bliss and others scarcely less precise.
>
> The third, the dark, was a flux of forms.... the world of the body broken up into the pieces of a toy.... without love or hate or any intelligible principle of change... Here he was not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom. (65-66)

Of the three -- fantasies of total reprisal, contemplation or darkness -- it is the last that Murphy ultimately desires: "in the dark, in the will-lessness, a mote in its absolute freedom" (66). As in the surrealist's uneasy union of communist politics and pure automatism -- a union broken by force of the reality of worldly politics at the beginning of the decade -- it is in the dark of the will-less, formless unconscious that freedom becomes not an individual prerogative but a condition of existence. But the freedom is reached, here at the end of the chapter, through a chain of rational "justifications" built on a series of oppositions that Beckett cannot maintain. The private, withdrawn subjective realm in which such freedom becomes visible or imaginable is antithetical to the narrative perspective, which can only look in at a mind, an "apparatus," looking at itself. Doubly removed from the most complete image of freedom in the novel, the omniscient game with words -- Murphy's mind is ultimately only an "expression" -- is locked outside the utopic dream. As if Beckett realizes the ineffectual manner in which these sincerely utopic moments of freedom are achieved, he ends the chapter by reminding the reader of the "colossal fiasco" which, after all, seems

to be the only reality that counts, the reality to which the novel as a whole is addressed: "This painful duty [of justifying the expression 'Murphy's mind'] having now been discharged, no further bulletins will be issued" (66). The "mind," as Beckett has strained to imagine it, is a lost cause.

* * *

The split halves and forced separations in Murphy indicate, in the late thirties, a range of aesthetic directions Beckett's fiction might take. His ambivalence toward literature's role in taking on the "terms" of social realism or political definitions of the "outer world" leads him, in his first novel, to an impasse: aesthetic autonomy, imagined as a closed, self-sufficient system of mind and language, blocks rather than provides access to the liberation of the "real" (as he put it in "Proust," see chapter III) from habituated modes of consciousness. Just as chapter five, Murphy in London, reveals that it is only from a perspective which clearly defines the outer world as an instrumental rationality that a withdrawal into the mind can be justified, chapter six mocks subjectivity by making the mind not, as in "stream of consciousness," an active observing voice, but a static, contradictory set of oppositions between inner and outer, viewed from the outside. Beckett's choice of omniscient point of view and the ironic, allusive, oxymoronic game with words itself

points to the impasse: on one hand, the novel implies that language cannot refer seriously to anything but its own functioning, but on the other hand narrative -- the story of withdrawal from community and meaning -- cannot function without a relation to the outer reality. Beckett would either need to take one of these propositions to some sort of ultimate conclusion, or to find a linguistic and narrative form that would somehow reconcile them. Murphy shows the signs of Beckett's struggle with these divergent impulses, but it fails to make a convincing case for either.

3. Watt: Novel of Resistance or Accident of War?

However ambivalent Beckett was toward the idea of a literature that understood itself in political terms, as an Anglo-Irish intellectual traveling in the mid-to-late thirties between Germany, Paris, London and Dublin, he was far from ambivalent toward the "social reality" he witnessed all around him. Unlike the older Joyce, who according to Richard Ellmann, presented to his friends a "cultivated disengagement" concerning the threat of German fascism, Beckett openly expressed his anti-Nazi sentiments (Ellmann 709). In September of 1939, when Hitler invaded Poland and France and England declared war on Germany, Beckett, who was staying at the time in officially neutral Ireland, quickly returned to Paris. By the end of October of the next year, he had joined the French Resistance. His biographer Deirdre

Bair vividly relates the drama of Beckett's involvement in the war, the day-to-day dangers he faced, the discovery of his intelligence-gathering activities by the Gestapo, his nearly tragic escape from Paris in August 1942 and his isolated existence in the small village of Roussillon in southeast France where, for two-and-a-half years, living and working under the deprivations and anxieties of the war, he wrote his second novel Watt.

The story of Beckett's life and the interpretation of Watt have been oddly inter-related: oddly, because while in most cases the events of an author's life are evoked in order to shed light on his or her artistic practice, in Beckett's case it seems that the events in his life have been explained in light of his reputed aesthetic beliefs. For example, Bair gives this account of Beckett's decision to join the Resistance, which she calls his "abandonment of neutrality":

> All around Beckett senseless arrests and killings were commonplace. Even more devastating was the knowledge that numerous friends were either openly collaborating with the Germans or indirectly toadying to them. He found himself unable to remain neutral any longer. Now that the war touched his friends, it was no longer a philosophical exercise....[His friend Paul] Léon's incarceration was just one of the events which led to Beckett's abandonment of neutrality: "I was so outraged by the Nazis, particularly by their treatment of the Jews, that I could not remain inactive," he said. Long after the war, when an interviewer asked Beckett why he had taken an active political stand, he replied, "I was fighting against the Germans, who were making life hell for my friends, and not for the French nation." He was being consistent in his apolitical behavior. (308) (emphasis added)

Just as an ideology of aesthetic autonomy insists that political or moral values are irrelevant to artistic values, here, dominant ideas about Beckett's writing lead to a similar insistence about his life. Beckett's Resistance work was "apolitical," his attitude toward the war "philosophical." His motives are personal; Beckett, his critics constantly repeat, "sides with the self." Neither politics nor history can be admitted as a meaningful context for his actions. The same holds true for interpretations of Watt: "an academic exercise for a vital mind hemmed in by the accident of war" (Bair 329); "the principle theme of the novel [is] the need to know and the difficulty and indeed impossibility of knowing.... Pure form... takes over, and meaning evaporates" (Harvey 95; 99); "Watt's journey metaphorically represents an inner experience" (Rabinovitz 125); "[it] probes the precarious foundations of meaning by showing clarity and stability to be provisional effects of a larger network of inconsequence, arbitrary coincidence and self-defeating discontinuity" (Hill 20). Like Beckett's "apolitical" choice, the novel he wrote during the most devastating and transformative political and historical event of the 20th century bears no significant mark of the world around it. Like an "accident of war," its relation to its historical context is an "arbitrary coincidence."

While Watt is in many ways Beckett's most radical attempt to put into practice his interwar notions of

aesthetic autonomy, it is in this aesthetic choice, and in the specific form which Beckett gives it, that the novel's significant relation to the political context of the war resides. Even the single paragraph cited above from Bair's informative biography suggests, in its contradictions, the formative context. Beckett's friends -- intellectuals and artists, many Jewish, many associated with transition and other journals in which he published -- were the community that formed his most important (in some cases only) audience. His relation to them was both professional and personal; it was within this community -- in creative response to it -- that Beckett's ideas about art and his own work took shape. And while fascism crystallized ideologically around a politics of nation and race, most of the international artistic community of immigrants and exiles to which Beckett belonged abjured these values. To reject a politics of nation, as Beckett says he did, was de facto a political act. Beckett's choice -- and it was a conscious, difficult choice since, as Bair points out, not all of Beckett's friends or fellow artist-intellectuals were willing to, or even wanted to, actively oppose the Nazis -- was not apolitical, but was based on the values of an international community that refused fascist and nationalist French, Irish and English notions of culture, identity and inclusion.

As Raymond Williams has pointed out, there was a

formative relationship between the cross-cultural status of many modernist and avant-garde artists -- those who during the first half of the century came to London, Paris or Berlin from "colonized or capitalized regions [within Europe] ... linguistic borderlands ... [or] as exiles ... from rejecting or rejected political regimes" -- and literary innovation:

> For in each of these cases, though in interestingly different ways, an old language had been marginalized or suppressed, or else simply left behind, and the now dominant language either interacted with its subordinate for new language effects or was seen as, in new ways, both plastic and arbitrary; an alien but accessible system which had both power and potential yet was still not, as in most earlier formations, however experimental, the language or the possible language of a people but now the material of groups, agencies, fractions, specific works, its actual society and complex of writers and game players, translators and signwriters, interpreters and makers of paradoxes, cross-cultural innovators and jokers. The actual social process, that is to say, involved not only an Apollinaire, a Joyce, an Ionesco, a Beckett, but also, as Joyce recognized in Bloom, many extempore dealers and negotiators and persuaders .... (Politics 78)

For Beckett -- who began his career in 1929 by praising Joyce's "Work in Progress" as "a synthetic language" that, comparable to Dante's transformation of corrupt, localized (and hierarchic) Italian dialects into an "ideal Italian," transformed a reified and corrupted spoken English into an aesthetically autonomous language (see Chapter III) -- artistic innovation was carried out in a context in which language itself became detached, in various ways, from the idea of a nation or a people.[15] Fascism attempted, both ideologically and through physical force, to destroy the

actual set of social groupings in which, for Beckett and others, artistic innovation was also a process of communication, even while in extreme cases this innovation -- as in Finnegans Wake, for example -- meant at the same time a severing of communication with all but a very select group. Actively taking a political stand against fascism entailed a defense of the lines of communication that linked Beckett's aesthetic beliefs and practices, his very identity as an international artist, to a whole way of life -- a way of life that since the inception of an artistic bohemia in the mid-19th century had provided a social arena where the sons (and, in different ways, daughters) of the middle class could express, in creative works and modes of behavior, the contradictory implications of modernization, capitalism and imperialism.[16] Fascism not only threatened Beckett's friends, it threatened the only social matrix in which his writing could dialogically be conceived.

In itself, a commitment to aesthetic autonomy has no one political meaning. But during the rise of fascism and Stalinism the idea that art should serve no external purpose takes on a specific importance. Both fascism and Soviet totalitarianism necessitated the destruction of cultural freedom in order to consolidate social control and maintain the repression of democratic dissent. And what offended the cultural prescriptions of Nazi and Soviet doctrine alike -- even more than direct attacks on beliefs about the German

"race" or the dignity of the proletariat, which could be directly refuted -- was ambiguity. Cultural control means not only the suppression of "degenerate" artists and works, but the assurance that an audience sees the "correct" meaning of a work, clearly and unassailably.[17] Even in the most democratic societies, attacks on artistic "decadence" -- from the trials of Flaubert, Wilde and Joyce to the travails of Finley and Mapplethorpe -- ultimately have as much to do with the difficulty in pinning down the artist's attitudes and intentions concerning the images he or she evokes, or even the artist's attitude toward "art" itself, as with the controversial subject matter.

When viewed in such a context -- in which the cross-cultural makeup of the artistic community, literary innovation, ambiguity and radical aesthetic autonomy form an implicit set of values antithetical to fascism -- the extreme ambiguity and communicative difficulties in Watt, so different from the intellectual puzzles of Murphy, appear as expressions of Beckett's changing cultural politics, just as his decision to join the Resistance marks a change in his personal, lived politics. And while the changes themselves were forced by the fascist invasion and war, the direction of the changes was consciously chosen from within a range of already existing alternatives. It is change within continuity that must first be accounted for.

In one sense, the "heroes" of both Murphy and Watt are

the omniscient voices, but Beckett's concern with narrative as well as language necessitates a protagonist. This is Celia's description of Murphy, told to her grandfather Mr. Kelly, near the beginning of the novel:

> Celia replied that Murphy was Murphy. Continuing then in an orderly manner she revealed that he belonged to no profession or trade; came from Dublin -- 'My God!' said Mr. Kelly -- knew of one Uncle, a Mr. Quigley, a well-to-do ne'er-do-well, resident in Holland, with whom he strove to correspond; did nothing that she could discern; sometimes had the price of a concert; believed that the future held great things in store for him; and never ripped up old stories. He was Murphy. He had Celia.
>
> Mr. Kelly mustered all his hormones.
>
> 'What does he live on?' he shrieked.
>
> 'Small charitable sums,' said Celia. (14)

This is an explanation, full of references to the outer world, in a clipped and clever style, almost jaunty; Murphy as bohemian, dependent on the loose change of the upper class. Compare this to an early passage in Watt, where Mr. and Mrs. Nixon and Mr Hackett, sitting on a bench in an unspecified town, observe Watt getting off a bus. At first, seeing Watt from a distance, they are "not sure whether it was a man or a woman. Mr. Hackett was not sure that it was not a parcel, a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin, wrapped up in dark paper and tied about the middle with a cord" (16). Discovering that Mr. Nixon had once been acquainted with Watt and had loaned him some money, Mr. Hackett, burning with curiosity, insists that Nixon tell him more about the "solitary figure."

> I really know nothing, said Mr. Nixon.
>
> But you must know something, said Mr. Hackett. One

> does not part with five shillings to a shadow. Nationality, family, birthplace, confession, occupation, means of existence, distinctive signs, you cannot be in ignorance of all this.
>
> Utter ignorance, said Mr. Nixon.
>
> He is not a native of the rocks, said Mr. Hackett.
>
> I tell you nothing is known, cried Mr. Nixon. Nothing.
>
> A silence followed these angry words, by Mr. Hackett resented, by Mr. Nixon repented.
>
> He had a huge red nose, said Mr. Nixon grudgingly. (21-22).

The change -- within the continuity -- is formal and thematic. Rather than explanation, this is enumeration, a list of the criteria of identity that the "figure" Watt lacks: Beckett's protagonist has no "distinctive signs." The geopolitical is reduced to a scant synecdoche: "the rocks." The language is likewise reduced, the dialogue given a rhythmic simplicity. Instead of a character sketch there is stark ambiguity, trivial and mocking. And while to know "nothing" becomes a kind of epistemological limit in the novel, there stands in contrast the "five shillings" and the "huge red nose": nothingness with the broadly-sketched face of a bum. Other attributes accrue in the first pages, according to Mr. Nixon -- "no fixed address"; "truthful, gentle and sometimes a little strange"; "to be seen in the streets"; "a university man" who only drinks "milk" (22-23) -- yet the function of the attributes is not to create a character but to fill a narrative space, to make a minimal but specific "figure," to give the narrative just enough semantic material to create a situation and a question: "What does it matter who he is?" (25) asks Mrs. Nixon. "He

is setting out on a journey" (17) says Mr. Nixon. Who? Where? This is enough to get the novel on the way.

The nature of the change -- from a Murphy to a Watt, from an arch-intellectual and convoluted game with words to a style of enumeration and an almost quaint, always slightly mocking simplicity, from a refracted image of an artist to a figure which nevertheless, even in its lack of detail, stays within the parameters of a socially marginal/self-alienated type -- is hard to characterize without an idea of where the change will lead in the later works. In the most important sense, Watt is a transitional work: it has almost no significance -- no mode of signifying -- except as a transition, a change in directions. This is part of its radical "autonomy" and a consequence of the context of its creation. If we jump ahead to the first lines of the last novel of the postwar Trilogy one thread of Beckett's development is revealed: "Where now? Who know? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on" (3). The action is wholly in the questioning voice, the urge to tell a story becomes the narrative impetus, the existence of words is tied in with the struggle to define them, there is a need to keep narrating as if someone is there, behind the voice, threatening. But in The Unnamable the questions necessary to any narrative are raised explicitly as questions within the voice itself -- there is

no pretense to make them questions from outside, from a Hackett and a Nixon. The semantic material is part and parcel of a conflict with and over words and story, with the pain of not being able to discern inner from outer, capitulation from resistance, freedom from compulsion -- the voice, so to speak, of a totally administered world (see Chapter VI). The attempt to explain, as in Murphy, is gone; the attempt to construct ambiguity, as in Watt, is gone; what is left is pervasive, undifferentiated conflict.

As a whole, the form of Watt tends toward extremes, where "total permutability," present in Murphy as a communicated concept, part of the bohemian-intellectual response to the "plutomanic" instrumentality of modernity, becomes a totalized method of composition:

> Here he stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. Here he lay. Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window; from the fire to the bed, from the bed to the fire; from the bed to the fire, from the fire to the bed; .... [thirty-three lines later] from the fire to the door, from the door to the bed. (203-04)

The simplest words, the simplest actions: nothing is expressed here, there is only a filling of pages with a minimal variety of literary material or invention. Such permutations appear to varying degrees in almost every scene in the two central sections of the novel, and in different forms, such as Watt's spoken inversions of spelling and word order (164-68; see below). The effect is to break down the basic notions of writer and reader: just as no creative

thought is required once the four concrete nouns -- window, door, fire, bed -- are chosen, no reading is required. This is the novel's gesture toward radical autonomy. Language is neither narrative, expressive or conceptual: its function is to take up the material space and duration-time of writing, with absolutely no intent of generating the reader's interest. Language becomes like a code of dots and dashes arranged in a mechanical fashion: a code without a key, because the interpretive community for whom it is intended no longer exists. This is the ideal or limit style in Watt: the break with the outer world is no longer justified in a language that makes "contact" even as it rejects it. Rather, the break is with communication itself. Loss of community means loss of communication.[18]

But there is a contradiction. The ideal of aesthetic autonomy, as Beckett recognized in Joyce's "synthetic language," was also a universal language, an expressive self-contained meaning, a "closed system" purposively fashioned with patient artistic labor (see chapter III). In Watt language is not like Murphy's "difficult music heard for the first time": autonomy, in this context, turns out to be the antithesis of artistic work, a mechanical static enumeration. Every spiritual or philosophical suggestion of meaning in the novel -- like "absurdity" or "necessity" -- is subjected to this non-communicative abstract ideal. Thus, when Watt ponders the conditions under which he serves his

master Knott:

> But he had hardly felt the absurdity of those things, on the one hand, and the necessity of those others, on the other (for it is rare that the feeling of absurdity is not followed by the feeling of necessity), when he felt the absurdity of those things of which he had just felt the necessity (for it is rare that the feeling of necessity is not followed by the feeling of absurdity). (133)

The very last line of the novel in the author's "addenda" -- "no symbols where none intended" -- reiterates this overall schema: there is no negation of meaning (symbolic or otherwise) because, ideally, the language is a result of neither the creative work (conscious or "automatic") nor the intentionality necessary to make a meaning in the first place.

It would be tempting to link Watt's radically impoverished, labor-less autonomy directly to the impoverishment and scarcity of war; to see it as an attempt to make something out of almost nothing, an effort totally cut off from communication or meaning that reflected the total irrationality and destructiveness of historical chaos. Yet its continuity with Beckett's other fiction makes this inadequate -- true enough perhaps on its own terms, but not really the novel's essential quality. For, as in the works Beckett wrote in French directly after the war, the contradictions inhering in the implications of a radically autonomous art -- contradictions revolving around the need for expressive communication and the conscious will of the artist -- begin, despite the formal extremes, to become

thematized, tentatively and statically. An ambiguity constructed, in stark contrast to the earlier fiction, out of the most concrete and simple sentences and phrases becomes part of a story -- told from a perspective outside the experience of ambiguity -- of the difficulty of communication.

That two of the concrete terms within this ambiguity are "master" and "servant" is also important. One of the most overall signs of the three determining features of the novel -- a type of radical autonomy, an extreme ambiguity and the loss of cultural community during the war -- is Watt's placelessness.[19] While in More Pricks than Kicks and Murphy the sense of the outer world of Dublin and London was a necessary contrast to an aesthetic and "mental" inner world, in Watt the scant parodic references to England or Ireland function only as ciphers of Beckett's Anglo-Irish past. Just as Watt has no psychological or inner existence as a character, the novel has no need to create a corresponding sociological or outer existence. But the novel's aspirations toward total geopolitical dislocation pose a problem in narrative form. The central scenes of radical ambiguity and verbal permutation -- the incident of the Galls, the naming of the pot, the feeding of the dog, etc. -- are not free floating, not the "logographs" that Beckett once considered as a possible description of his own artistic project.[20] Rather, even while extracting the

outside world from the world of the novel, Beckett still employs a "semantics of action" (Ricoeur) drawn from the history of social hierarchy.

The overall novelistic situation through which the novel's formal experiments are expressed -- Watt's life as a servant in Knott's country house -- is deliberately broad enough to serve as an image of both social domination and of the relationship of language to meaning and ambiguity. In the novel social domination, the condition of servitude, is also the condition in which language loses its ability to refer to things and events. Thus, for example, Watt's "need of semantic succour" (83) is illustrated through his inability to understand the relationship between the word "pot" and the object he cooks with as a servant in Knott's kitchen and into which his "tears of mental fatigue" and physical "exertions" fall (88). The mechanistic verbal manipulations describing how Watt followed Knott's instructions to feed leftovers to the famished dog is played out with a political content: the enumerated possibilities lead to the speculation that Knott maintained at his own "expense on some favourable site ... a kennel or colony of famished dogs" as well as gave small sums of charity to "a suitable large needy local family" whose impoverished children could lead, for generation after generation, the famished dog to the back of the mansion each night (99-100). The novel's overall social image -- "the poor old lousy old

earth" (46) -- consists of the stable "superior existence" (50) of the master, Knott, a series of replaceable servants, including Watt, and "immense impoverished families ... miles around in every conceivable direction" (100). What denies this image (which is no doubt Beckett's skeletal description of rural Ireland) the status of a social content is Beckett's commitment to extremes of ambiguity and autonomy.[21] Almost the opposite of Molloy, Watt has no class consciousness. And while Molloy inveighs against his "superiors" (see chapter I.3), Watt has no internal protesting voice. His only function is to signify, and be subsumed in, a pervasive ambiguity.

Ambiguity in the novel is both represented and produced: what links the content -- the representation of ambiguity -- to the textual effect is the question of individual agency. Watt's seemingly meaningless behavior may be purely determined by his fear of being decisive: "Too fearful to assume the onus of a decision, said Mr. Hackett, he refers it to the frigid machinery of a time-space relation" (21). His speech is likewise detached from rational norms or volition: "Watt spoke also with scant regard for grammar, for syntax, for pronunciation.... The labour of composition ... had here no part, apparently. But Watt spoke as one speaking to dictation, or reciting, parrot-like, a text" (156). While such an image evokes the figure of the avant-garde poet, Watt's innocence and his

position as a servant makes him the antithesis of the unfettered bohemian. Ambiguity is the conjunction of a willed willessness -- as in automatic writing -- and an outside determination, a mindless servitude. The long, central passages describing Watt's attempts to understand "incidents" that transpire while he is a servant in Knott's isolated mansion likewise present ambiguity as a two-sided content, the expression of which necessitates a "labor of composition" that the novel always resists. Explicit problems in understanding are expressed in a form that strives, as if toward an ideal, for the radical extreme of words meaninglessly filling up pages.

When, in parts of the novel, Beckett attempts to reconcile the two impulses -- one toward the formal ideal of radical autonomy, one toward a story that attempts to construct stark images of radical ambiguity -- he inevitably turns to the theme of communication, as if this, ultimately, is the only possible goal, no matter how much the conditions under which he is writing make such a goal undesirable and impossible. Like the naming of the "pot," the "incident of the Galls" (70-79) is often cited by critics to demonstrate how the novel undermines meaning through a demonstration of the "arbitrary" nature of signification. But what the "incident" reveals are images of ambiguity related to Beckett's ideas about radical autonomy and the value of rational, communicative language. The Galls are piano-

tuners. Their visit to Knott's house where Watt is a servant is narrated from an omniscient perspective, in the clearest, simplest terms: "While Watt looked round, for a place to set down his tray, Mr. Gall Junior brought his work to a close, put back his tools," etc. The father and son have a short, enigmatic conversation and then leave. The narrator refers to this as "the principle incident of Watt's early days in Mr. Knott's house." The next several pages are then taken up with Watt trying to understand "what had happened." At first, this is given a purely formalist emphasis: the incident "continued to unfold, in Watt's head, over and over again .... it developed a purely plastic content, and gradually lost ... all meaning, even the most literal" (72-73). The loss of literal content "caused him to seek for another, for some meaning of what had passed, in the image of what had passed" (73).

While at first this looks like a search for another system of meaning outside the literal, such as allegory, the focus remains not on finding a meaning, but on continuing to construct ambiguity. The ambiguity does not center on the incident's missing significance, but on Watt's desire to communicate: "Watt did not know what happened. But he felt the need to think that such and such a thing had happened then, the need to be able to say ... Yes, I remember, this is what happened then" (74). Just as the problem of meaning becomes a desire for communication, the language becomes

more abstract and the repetitions, precisely grammatical and controlled, tend toward the limit style. The narrator places an aesthetic value on the incident of the Galls -- "of great formal brilliance and indeterminable purport" -- that seems to reflect (or parody) Beckett's own aesthetic ideal in the novel. For Watt, however, the incident is a source of anxiety. And while the omniscient perspective up to this point is wholly outside the narrated action, the theme of communication forces the distinction between Watt's anxiety and Beckett's aesthetic ideal to break down. The ambiguities, now formulated as a question, stabilize not as an epistemological or hermeneutic problem, but as an intersubjective problem of communicating. As such, the outside perspective must be broken:

> But what was this pursuit of meaning, in this indifference to meaning? And to what did it tend? These are delicate questions. For when Watt at last spoke of this time, it was a time long past, and of which his recollections were, in a sense, perhaps less clear than he would have wished.... Add to this the obscurity of Watt's communications, the rapidity of his utterance and the eccentricities of his syntax, as elsewhere recorded. Add to this the material conditions in which these communications were made. Add to this the scant aptitude to receive of him to whom they were proposed. Add to this the scant aptitude to give of him to whom they were committed. And some idea will obtain of the difficulties experienced in formulating ... the entire body of Watt's experience.... (75)

In one respect, this is an expression of Beckett's self-awareness of his own artistic entanglement with the extremes of modernism and the avant-garde: the pursuit of meaning, the indifference to meaning. But the form of this

expression, with its antithetical terms of "pursuit" and "indifference," results in aporia. In turn, this impasse leads to a transformative change in perspective, a transformation -- situated between the earlier omniscient, mandarin game with words and the postwar contradictory first-person voice -- which takes shape in outline form in this key passage. There is a consciousness struggling to understand. It as yet has no place in the narrated actions, it's simply there: on one hand, "the obscurity of Watt's communications," on the other, "the scant aptitude to receive of him to whom they were proposed." Between Watt and the receiving consciousness stand the difficult "material conditions"; between the narrating voice and the reader stands "the scant aptitude to give." But because there is no communicative context -- the historical condition that compels Beckett toward the ideal of the "closed system" of radical autonomy -- the chain of transmission is broken: ambiguity remains the thematic focus, but it is always constructed -- here explicitly -- around the problem of communication.

In the second part of Watt, through the actual process of writing and experimenting under the extreme conditions of war, Beckett pushes himself into a new awareness: the more the conditions that make communication possible are destroyed, the greater the need for communication, for intersubjectivity. But the aesthetic ideal of the "closed

system" still controls the novel, delimits the awareness. In Watt Beckett explores, within the limits that he will reconcile and transform in the postwar fiction, this new awareness in two ways. First, as the "incident of the Galls" continues, the protagonist comes to a new, troubling awareness: "a thing that was nothing had happened, with the utmost formal distinctness.... [But] Watt could not accept ... that nothing had happened, with all the clarity and solidity of something" (76). (The ellipses in the quotes, which I have redacted for the sake of brevity, hide the extent to which the form and style, here and throughout most of the novel, strive for the ideal limit.) While Watt "could not bear" this ambiguity, he somehow finds it possible to communicate it to the receiving, narrating intelligence:

> to elicit something out of nothing requires a certain skill and Watt was not always successful.... No, he could never have spoken at all of these things, if all had continued to mean nothing, as some continued to mean nothing, that is to say, right up to the end. For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man ... and as the only way one can speak of man, even our anthropologists have realised that, is to speak of him as though he were a termite. (77)

On one hand, the abstract terms which are shifted around, "something" and "nothing," are meaningless because they simply refer to each other -- they tend toward the radical ideal. But the narrative voice, shifting away from the problem of communication between Watt and himself, finds an analogy for these abstractions. The reduction of man to

termite is a metaphor for the inadequacy of a totalized expression: to speak of "man" as a whole is already a loss of human value. And just as Watt cannot "affirm" an identity between his own sense of being and the word "man," but nevertheless "continued to think of himself as a man, as his mother had taught him" (83), Beckett cannot himself use "man" as a positive description, but nevertheless needs to forge a link between the radical ideal of autonomy and the ultimate communicative referent of any narrative, the social world. To refuse to call oneself a "man" or write about "man" takes on a humanist value; as with the term "social reality" Beckett is contesting the rights to a concept he views as historically debased.

The receiving consciousness, manifested in the "Galls" incident as an unspecified link in the process of intersubjective communication, is a sign of the communicative dilemma resulting from Beckett's focus on ambiguity and autonomy, his reaching for the rationalized extension of certain tendencies implicit in Joycean modernism and the avant-garde. The analogy that evokes "man" out of nothing points to another way Beckett attempts to deal with his changed awareness, itself a result of the "labour of composition": the "anthropologist" becomes his model for the image of the receiving, narrating voice. The beginning of section three makes explicit a shift in narrative perspective: "It was about this time that Watt was

transferred to another pavilion, leaving me behind in the old" (152). The turn to a direct first-person, implicit in the earlier references to a receiving consciousness, is not motivated by a plot, nor is there any attempt to render plausible the narrator's claim that Watt "told" him the entire story. The manifestation of the "I" is motivated only by the extremes of ambiguity and autonomy which conflict with the desire for communication. As such, the "I," given the authorial name "Sam" (153), is constructed not as a character but as a means of communication, a means of transmitting the story.

Sam and Watt meet in the fields and gardens behind their masters' mansions, fields crisscrossed with barbed wire fences (156). At first, there seems to be an indication that the relationship of the narrator Sam to Watt is symbolic of an attempt toward regaining, in spite of the difficulties they encounter in communicating and their existence as servants, a human bond: they meet on "a rustic humpbacked bridge in a state of extreme dilapidation" which, one day, almost collapses under Watt. "And he would have certainly have fallen, and perhaps have been carried away by the subsequent flood, had I not been at hand to bear him up." Sam receives no thanks for his help. Instead, he and Watt begin to repair the bridge, lying on their stomachs, arms outstretched "until our task was done.... Then, our eyes meeting, we smiled, a thing we did rarely, when

together.... And then we did a thing we seldom did, we embraced.... We were attached, you see, to the little bridge" (154-55).

While the bridge and the embrace, provisional signs of an eccentric parable of brotherhood in a time of war, point toward an incipient plot development to enliven the novel's static scenes of ambiguity and permuted phrases, the ideal of autonomy compels the focus to return to the problem of communication. No longer one who experiences ambiguity, Watt is now the producer of ambiguity. Along with its "scant regard" for norms of spoken speech and its automatistic quality, Watt's mode of speech is linked, somewhat parodically, to other modernist concerns, such as ritual and the unconscious: "When Watt spoke, he spoke in a low and rapid voice .... [T]hat there ever issued from the mouth of man ... except in moments of delirium, or during the service of the mass, a voice <u>at once</u> so rapid and so low, is hard to believe" (156). While Watt is supposedly the source of the novel's mangled story, here his speech is presented more as an object to be analyzed: what becomes important is the narrator's active attempt to decode and record Watt's increasingly cryptic communications. The novel begins to mimic and parody an analytic report, as if Sam were a cultural anthropologist who both engages personally with the inscrutable native other -- "Often my hands left his shoulders, to make a note in their little notebook" (165) --

and studies him.[22] Watt's direct speech is laid out in italicized "examples" from each "period" (164-68) of his relationship with Sam. The narrator describes the rules of his "manner" of talking, citing "inversion," "ellipse," "reversal of discourse," etc. And as soon as the narrator begins to understand Watt's system of communication, Watt modifies his manner of speaking, as if to thwart him:

> So all went well until Watt began to invert, no longer the order of the words in the sentence, but that of the letters in the word.
>
> This further modification Watt carried through with all his usual discretion and sense of what was acceptable to the ear, and aesthetic judgement. Nevertheless to one, such as me, desirous above all of information, the change was not a little disconcerting. (165)

Watt's otherness -- at the beginning of the novel he resembles a thing, and at the end an incidental observer, "Lady" McCann, asks "Is it a white man" and comments on his "extraordinary accent" (244) -- reflects, in the mechanistic manner that saves Beckett from the "labour of composition," an aesthetic rationality that opposes norms of everyday communication in the most ludicrous and transparent way. Watt's inverse speech (he also begins to walk backwards) is a parodic image of the "aesthetic judgment" of modernist innovation, just as the narrator's desire for "information" is a parodic image of the need to understand. While the relationship between Sam and Watt expresses, as in the bridge scene, the value of human compassion, communication -- the most essential social interaction -- can only be

expressed as the incommensurability of art and knowledge, aesthetic and purposive rationalities. This, finally, is the meaning of Beckett's most non-communicative novel.

Lacking both the inactive struggle against the outer world, as with Beckett's earlier aesthete-bohemian protagonists, and the struggling inner voices in his later works, Watt is a static, transitional work. If the cultural values of the international community to which Beckett belonged during the interwar years compelled him to take an active political stand, the loss of that community compelled Beckett to take to extremes a vision of aesthetic autonomy whose ultimate implication was the denial of a communicative or expressive art. But it was Beckett's attempt to make a story out of this vision of autonomy and ambiguity that necessitated an image of a receiving and communicating consciousness. That this image of interaction takes a static form -- the observer or recorder on one side, the figure of ambiguity with neither will nor freedom on the other -- is an indication of the transitional nature of the work itself, written at a time of extreme historical uncertainty. The dead-end impasses of Beckett's ideas about language and aesthetics -- with the contradictory values concerning the will or rational control of the writer, the ideals of both a self-contained meaning and a rejection of meaning, the simultaneous attraction to the closed system of high art and a provocative anti-art stance, his unwillingness to concede

terms like "social reality" without attempting to redefine them -- are brought into stark, schematic relief. The intellectual games with syntax, learning and vocabulary in Murphy are stripped away to reveal a set of irreconcilable antinomies: master and servant, observed figure and observing consciousness, meaningless art and artless information, things or the names of things. If Murphy recorded Beckett's struggle to find an aesthetic form that connected his notions of an outer and inner reality, Watt is the record of how Beckett discovered, through the experimentation with extremes, that the only way to reconcile the underlying contradictory cultural values was to be found in the communicative function of language and narrative -- the very aspects of literary art that the destruction of community had rendered impossible. It was with this new awareness, and with a re-connection to a literary community in postwar Paris, that Beckett would begin to transform his failure into a powerful artistic success.

NOTES

1. Information about Beckett's life and publishing history in this chapter is drawn from Bair (chapters 9, 10, and 11), Graver and Federman (xiii-xx), and Cooke (7-12).

2. After the war, a French publisher, Georges Duthuit, bought the defunct transition from American Eugene Jolas and renamed it transition 48. Beckett did several unsigned translations for the journal but no longer published original work in it. His first postwar story appeared in a very different kind of journal, Sartre's Les Temps Modernes (see chapter V).

3. See, for example, Dylan Thomas's negative review of the novel in New English Weekly: Beckett "has not yet thrown off the influence of those writers who have made "Transition" (sic) their permanent resting place.... If I do not straight-forwardly praise his new book ... for its obvious qualities -- of energy, hilarity, irony, and comic invention -- then it is [Beckett's] fault: he should never try to sell his bluffs over the double counter. I must say that 'Murphy' is difficult, serious and wrong" (republished in Butler 12-13).

4. Valentine Cunningham's encyclopedic British Writers of the Thirties gives a good summary of the heated debates and ideological divisions of the decade. See also Samuel Hynes' The Auden Generation for an account of the decade's explicit concerns with social and political problems and Herbert Lottman's The Left Bank for an account of the various alliances between the communist party, French writers and diverse anti-fascist movements.

5. One of the most extreme politically-oriented literary figures of the decade, Christopher Caudwell, considered most of these choices superficial -- what was necessary was an entirely new relation to the "bourgeois" institution of art: "Most bourgeois artists are at present treading the road of alliance [with the proletariat] -- Gide in France, Day Lewis, Auden and Spender in this country -- and many of the surrealists have signed the same treaty. Such an alliance can only be an "anarchist alliance." .... [This] means they do not enter the proletarian organization but remain outside the ranks as 'fellow travelers.' ... They often glorify the revolution as a kind of giant explosion which will blow up everything they feel to be hampering them. But they have no constructive theory -- I mean as artists: they may as economists accept the economic strategies of socialism, but

as artists they cannot see the new forms and contents of an art which will replace bourgeois art.... Of course this anarchic position of the contemporary bourgeois artist is only a variant of the old tragedy of bourgeois revolt" (318-320). Basically, Caudwell's position implies the most overarching opposition of all: "art" as opposed to some new, as yet unimagined "proletarian" creative activity whose forms and function would correspond to a transformed world.

6. See Lottman, p. 64, for the Soviet critique of Malraux's novel. Leo Bersani, in chapter five of The Culture of Redemption, makes a similar point about Malraux's contradictory expressions of Marxist determinism and individual choice. As both Lottman's and Cunningham's surveys of Western leftist artistic attitudes of the decade point out, the high value placed on individuality in art and culture by British and French writers was a major source of tension between "fellow travelers" and Soviet party officials.

7. The review was reprinted in 1984 in a collection of Beckett's miscellaneous writings, Disjecta, and is now considered part of the Beckett canon.

8. Beckett had repeatedly attacked much of the poetry of the Celtic Revival: "These are the antiquarians, delivering with the altitudinous complacency of the Victorian Gael the Ossianic goods" (Disjecta 70).

9. Radek was condemned as a Trotskyite in the Moscow "show trials" of 1937 and sent to Siberia. He died, by the official Soviet account, at the hands of a fellow exile, in 1939.

10. See Cunningham, pp. 299-300, and Lottman, pp. 62-67, for the importance of the Soviet Writers' Congress for Western leftist writers. The redacted proceedings of the congress -- Radek's speech was one of the main events -- was quickly translated and published in Britain in 1935.

11. See Susan Suleiman's Subversive Intent for an account of how avant-garde writers retained and exploited middle-class values concerning male dominance.

12. The novel constantly flirts with cliches and attempts to "defamiliarize" them through stylistic inversions. The very first line -- "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new" (5) -- is typical.

13. Orwell's 1940 essay "Inside the Whale" is a clear statement of how strong the imperative to become engaged in political struggles, such as the Spanish Civil War, was for

British writers of the decade, and how problematic this idea of engagement was as a measure of aesthetic value. I discuss the essay in chapter VI.3.

14. Kiberd interprets this scene as a "spoof on the socially-committed literature of the thirties" and "an attack on the notion of the inherent dignity of work" (126) that ultimately relate to Beckett's Protestant beliefs about the value of self-reliance.

15. See Hobsbawn, chapter 6, for an account of the right-wing "invention" of the linguistic-ethnic definition of "nation" in the late nineteenth century.

16. See Jerrold Seigel's Bohemian Paris for an excellent socio-historical explanation of the rise of an urban bohemia as a response to the contradictions of modernity and the avant-garde's "dialectic between the project of individual liberation and the matrix of collective life" (387). Janet Wolff's "The Invisible Flaneuse" in Feminine Sentences discusses women artists' restricted access to the public spaces which constituted much of the subject matter and social arena of canonical modernism.

17. Thus the need the Nazi's felt for mounting several "degenerate" art exhibits across Germany which offered the public concrete interpretations of the works of many avant-garde and modernist artists, usually presenting them as signs of mental illness, sexual perversity, moral weakness, anti-patriotism, etc. See Stephanie Barron's "Degenerate Art": The Fate of the Avant-Grade in Nazi Germany. As one visitor to the Entartete Kunst exhibition in Munich in 1937 described it: "the visitors were practically forced by the installation and the accompanying texts to despise the art and the artists. And this reaction was praised as the proper attitude of "true" Germans who should not be misled by those who wanted to destroy "true" art" (Barron 43).

18. Post-structuralist critics like Connor view Beckett's use of permutation and repetition as an effective means of subverting stable meanings in favor of a liberatory break with an oppressive order. But a device like repetition is in itself meaningless and can be used equally to reinforce monolithic meanings, as in advertising and propaganda.

19. The novel has many other elements: extensive parodies and verbal burlesques of Catholic intellectuals, prudishness, bureaucracy and the Celtic Revival, and simple word play both clever -- as with the names of the twins Art and Con (101) -- and liberatingly infantile, as in Watt's "Ot bro, lap rulb, krad klub" (165). As a whole, however, these elements are subordinate to -- and refractions of --

the central concerns with ambiguity and the extremes of a radically non-communicative form.

20. See Disjecta, p. 172.

21. See John Harrington's The Irish Beckett for an interpretation of the novel that focuses on its possible "antecedents" in Anglo-Irish literature, from Tristram Shandy and "A Tale of a Tub" to the "Big House" novel.

22. James Clifford draws interesting parallels between surrealism and ethnography in the first half of the century, comparing "their way of taking culture seriously, as a contested reality -- a way that included the ridiculing and reshuffling of its orders" (121).

PART 3

Untellable Stories and Unnamable Texts: Cultural Politics in the Postwar World, 1945-1955

CHAPTER V

The Beggar's Mask: Rewriting Male Modernism in the Postwar "Nouvelles"

1. The Beggar's Mask

Despite all his efforts, Beckett never really had a chance at becoming a very good modernist.[1] By 1929, the year he began his literary career with a commissioned essay in praise of one of high modernism's most problematic swan songs, Joyce's "Work in Progress," demands for ceaseless artistic innovation -- "make it new" -- were starting to sound old. Beckett's first published book, a 1931 monograph on Proust, praised the liberatory power of "involuntary memory" almost a decade after Surrealism had established the a-rational and the unconscious as endless sources of poetic truth. Indeed, by 1931 the founding members of the Surrealist group -- champions of "automatism" and the single most influential literary avant-garde movement of the twenties -- were breaking up over the question of whether artistic and social revolution should be fomented through unleashing the power of the unconscious or consciously committing the poetic imagination to the cultural

prescriptions of the Communist Party.[2] The literary aspirations of the thirties -- the decade during which Beckett wrote and published his first two books of fiction -- toward a more accessible and directly political writing had cast serious doubt on the viability of maintaining many modernist beliefs and practices which Beckett, in his own fashion, had adopted. Among the most prominent of these sometimes conflicting and contested modernist literary values were (as I have described them in relation to Beckett's early prose) an elliptical and allusive plot organization; a gaming with words and intellectual puns; an alignment with a selective tradition of both academically canonical and arcane literature of the past; a disdain for naturalist narrative, popular journalistic fiction and the bourgeois category of "art" itself; a thematics of bohemian-aesthete passivity and withdrawal; and a celebration of automatic or will-less writing combined, paradoxically, with admiration for the painstaking labor of autonomous, self-contained artistic genius. As I have shown in Part 2, Beckett's pre-war fiction and criticism attempted to negotiate this complex set of cultural values that, by the 1930s, were already viewed by many writers as contradictory and inadequate to a rapidly changing cultural and political world. Beckett's "failure" -- a key word in his postwar aesthetic -- to find a narrative form that would both accommodate such divergent and waning values and still be

truly "modern" (that is, "new" and innovative) seems, in retrospect, inevitable. If in his early writing Beckett was a failed modernist whose work went largely unnoticed, it was not because he tried unsuccessfully to move beyond the "modernisms" of his immediate past, but because he tried too hard to incorporate too many conflicting modernist values all at once.

During the war, after the Nazis had discovered his involvement in the Resistance and he had been forced to flee Paris, Beckett wrote his third book of fiction, Watt. In certain respects, its stylized obsessive repetitions and its thematics of extreme ambiguity form an eccentric homage to earlier, pre-World War I modernist concerns, recalling both Gertrude Stein's "logographs" and dadaist nonsense.[3] Yet these somewhat regressive (that is, earlier modernist) stylistic gestures, and the novel's minimal and abstractly early-modern content -- master and servant on Knott's feudal-like estate -- are themselves signs of Beckett's coming to terms with the contradictory legacies of modernism that had shaped his previous work. Living in a small village in the south of France, cut off from friends and colleagues associated with the transition group (some of whom, Beckett knew, had died in prison camps), the future frighteningly uncertain, Beckett found himself writing into a void. His artistic community destroyed, communication now took on the vague promise of a utopian ideal. While the utter simplicity

of most of the syntax and language in Watt (so different from the intellectual gaming in his previous novel, Murphy) reflects a desire for a totally accessible style, the novel's incessant permutations of simple words and phrases reduces the promise of communication to an absurdist joke. If, in Finnegans Wake, Joyce's attempt to create a universal literary language had resulted in a polysemous code whose multiple meanings were accessible only to a small, highly educated coterie, in Watt Beckett created its mirror opposite: a language almost anyone could understand but that meant nothing. Like the novel's stick figures of social schism -- servant and master -- the stylistic extremes of communicability and modernist aesthetic autonomy could not be reconciled. Rather than smooth over the tension between communication and autonomy, as the arch-intellectual omniscient narrators of the earlier fiction do by making language a mandarin puzzle, Beckett let the extremes starkly stand side by side (see Chapters III and IV). Watt is Beckett's most meaningless book because in writing it he realized that the values of modernism -- as he had experienced it in Paris, London and Dublin of the interwar years -- could no longer generate meaning of any kind.

At the center of Watt, however, Beckett constructs a tentative metaphor of the hope of overcoming the impasse of a modernist writing that sought, simultaneously, an ideally pure communication -- unmediated access to the truth of the

subconscious, unsocialized mind -- and an increasingly opaque aesthetic "rationality" (as Adorno called it) that rejected communicative norms.[4] Midway through the novel the omniscient narrator becomes a character, Sam, who "embraces" the bizarre subject of his narrative, the mystified servant Watt. The relationship between narrator and servant-hero is centered around the narrator's desire to understand, and Watt's desire to express himself, no matter how difficult the "obscurity" or "material conditions" of communication (75). But the attempt to communicate is one-way: like an ethnographer in some remote region of feudal-like social relations -- where the master and his servants reside in an isolated mansion with "immense impoverished families" populating the surrounding countryside (100) -- Sam tries to decode Watt's garbled and childlike attempts to tell his story.

While the Sam\narrator-Watt\informant relationship is quickly subsumed into the novel's overall will to meaninglessness, the provisional metaphor is indicative of Beckett's growing awareness - an awareness that grew out of the process of literary experimentation, itself Beckett's response to his isolation from an artistic community -- that aesthetic modernism had made the act of narrative communication itself a problem. Breaking down this problem into a narrating intelligence attempting to break through the unintelligibility of a narrated "other" -- the minor,

parodied petty bourgeois characters at the beginning and end of the novel view Watt as an object-like "figure" (16) or racially ambiguous: "Is it a white man?" one of them asks (244) -- provided only a simplistic and static solution. The other solution, which necessitated not isolation but a living, active reunion with an audience and a (relatively) free public realm, was to re-imagine the problem of narrative communication not as a relationship between narrator and narrated -- itself part of modernism's exploration of narrative perspective -- but as a relationship between narrator and audience, writer and reader.

Watt had led Beckett to two somewhat contradictory places. On one hand, both the "technique" and the social content of his fiction had seemingly regressed, from sophisticated language games and the bohemian-aesthete, anti-bourgeois satire of contemporary Dublin in More Pricks Than Kicks and London in Murphy, to the mindless permutations and neutralized feudalistic no-place of Watt. On the other hand, Beckett's extreme formal experimentation with a style at once totally accessible and yet incommunicative -- in conjunction with the schematic themes of social schism, communication and ambiguity -- had moved him beyond the ultimately contradictory games with language. With astonishing success, Beckett was able to shape this simultaneous regression-progression into a new, startlingly

direct mode of narrative expression in the first fictions he wrote after his return to Paris in the fall of 1945, a group of stories written in French as the "Nouvelles" and translated into English as the first three stories in Stories and Texts for Nothing.[5] The very first of these new fictions -- published in partial form in Sartre's Les Temps Modernes in 1946 and titled in English "The End" -- is an episodic narrative that sets a pattern for Beckett's major postwar fiction.[6] The unnamed first-person narrator recounts, in a voice that ranges from an affectless childlike simplicity to an ironic lyricism, how he was released after an unspecified but apparently lengthy stay at a hospital-like "charitable institution" (49) whereupon he wanders "lost" (51) through unnamed city, suburb and countryside, physically grotesque and deteriorating, reduced to begging for coins, isolated and fiercely anti-social, wallowing in his own excrement, object-like and unfeeling toward everything except distant memories of his childhood, until he finally (and paradoxically) commits suicide. In this haunting "story in the likeness of my life" (72) constructed with disregard for the limits of conventional life-story closure (the death of the hero), Beckett creates an identityless, narrating persona whose primitive, object-like existence signals an unfulfillable yearning for some form of expression outside of modernism or even of modernity itself.

The implicit dangers of such a yearning need to be addressed up front. Beckett's "primitivism," as Lukács ("Ideology" 293; see below) recognized it, shared with regressive political ideologies a rejection of Enlightenment rational norms. Fascism was itself a profoundly anti-modern social movement which took full advantage of the technological progress of modernity and whose culture of propaganda included certain advanced artistic techniques like cinematic montage. But while the cultural politics of fascism strove to recreate an archaic concept of social identity -- the naturally superior, racially pure, nation-bound self -- Beckett's postwar writing, beginning with "The End," strives to reject, partially through its "primitivism," any positive notion of social or personal identity altogether. Yet how could a first-person narration, a "story in the likeness" of a life, do away with an individuated voice, the voice of a modern person with a nationality, an ethnicity, a socio-economic class, a gendered sexuality, and a sense of independence and autonomy? The difficult struggle to seek a way out of modernism that is not a lapse into forms of irrational premodernity becomes Beckett's overarching postwar project, his subject matter, his story.

This shift in Beckett's intent and method of composition is powerfully evoked in a central image from "The End" when midway through his episodic story the

impoverished narrator tries to make his way back to the city where he can beg for coins:

> Soon there were carts, but they all refused to take me up. In other clothes, with another face, they might have taken me up. I must have changed since my expulsion from the basement. The face notably seemed to have reached its climactric. The humble, ingenuous smile would no longer come, nor the expression of candid misery, showing the stars and the distaff. I summoned them, but they would not come. A mask of dirty old hairy leather, with two holes and a slit, it was too far gone for the old trick of please your honor and God reward you and pity upon me. It was disastrous. What would I crawl with in the future? I lay down on the side of the road and began to writhe each time I heard a cart approaching. That was so they would not think I was sleeping or resting. I tried to groan, Help! Help! But the tone that came out was that of polite conversation. (62)

The first-person voice, telling the story of his life through the beggar's "mask," becomes Beckett's paradigmatic postwar narrative persona, the single most important feature and technique of his career; as such, it deserves close attention. The mask which is at the same time a face, and the voice which is both expressive yet unable to "groan," thematize a set of key concerns in Beckett's rewriting of modernism. First, Beckett's mask is pre-modern: like an archaic or "primitive" artifact -- "a mask of dirty old hairy old leather, with two holes and a slit" -- it is unindividuated, it gives no clue to the narrator's public or private self. Its only mark is that of nature in decay: *aging* skin. Second, Beckett fashions this mask in opposition to notions of an authentic voice or self: it is incapable of expression, and expression itself is nothing but an "old

trick," not an outer manifestation of some prior inner thought. Indeed, the "mask" is also the face itself; there is nothing behind it that is more expressive, it hides no authentic self, no real identity. Third, Beckett explicitly constructs the mask as an aesthetic choice: there are "other clothes, another face." The mask is the sign of a writing that consciously and explicitly rejects expression because it reveals that expression itself is false. Fourth, Beckett presents the narrating voice as explicitly contradictory: an aesthetic, lyrical instrument which gains emotive power in proportion to its represented inability to express: "I tired to groan, Help! Help! But the tone that came out was that of polite expression." Just as the face -- a primary site of expressing everyday human emotion -- can no longer be contorted into an expressive (or pathetic) individuated shape to "please your honor," the voice -- the ultimate instrument of communication -- is incapable of anything but middle-class chatter. These contradictions that Beckett explicitly builds into the narrating persona's face and voice reflect contradictions in the modernist idea of an autonomous art: writing is entirely self referential -- it is only authentically itself -- yet it strives to communicate, the narrator strives to express himself with face and voice; Beckett's art stands in opposition to bourgeois standards of propriety and common sense, yet the voice cannot escape the "tone of polite conversation," no

matter how primitive the mask, no matter how grotesque and offensive the body that writhes on the ground.

These four theme-forms, and the contradictions they produce, permeate Beckett's postwar writing. But this is only half the story of "The End." The mask, Beckett is at pains to remind us, is always a beggar's mask. Its lack of expressiveness comes with a cost: "It was disastrous." To create a pathetic expression, false or otherwise, is the beggar's only hope of eliciting sympathy: "What would I crawl with in the future?" In the major fiction written in the decade following the war, Beckett incorporates his concern with class and social status in a way that is quite distinct from the modernist disdain for middle-class norms, a disdain that took on a wide range of cultural-political responses, from Eliot's literary elitism to Lewis's fascism and Aragon's communism. In Beckett's postwar project, the rejection of any positive notion of identity means, before anything else, the rejection of membership in the socio-economic order. For Beckett, the beggar becomes an emblem of "otherness" that can never be recuperated or celebrated. One reason why Beckett's work still displays a certain "negative" innovative force stems from the logic of this choice: since W.W.II (in an emerging post-modern and post-colonial world) new, positive, progressive notions of individual identity and subjectivity have arisen around the "otherness" of differences in gender, sexuality and

ethnicity. Yet a positive notion of identity cannot be formed around the "otherness" of extreme poverty, begging and homelessness. It is only the figure of the abject beggar, far below the working class whose failure to form itself into the "revolutionary subject of history" Western Marxists already bemoaned with the rise of fascism and U.S. capitalist hegemony, that can symbolize the loss of all positive identity Beckett hopes to embody in his writing.

What I am suggesting here has two important implications. First, if Beckett's major work has anything at all to contribute to the emergence of feminist or post-colonial perspectives, it is only to the degree that his commitment to moving beyond the European, male modernist values that dominated his early work explicitly engages the self-contradictory nature of those values, contradictions that were implicit in his own early fiction.[7] In this sense, Beckett is a traditionalist; he works within rather than against the European male modernist tradition, even as he attempts to radically reformulate it.[8] He creates no new perspective outside the cultural tradition itself. Secondly, and most important for my analysis, this attempt involved a <u>specific social content</u> that allowed him to formally rework the narrative and linguistic strategies of high modernism in a non-regressive manner. In these first of his postwar fictions, Beckett fashions a face-as-mask -- a way of writing and narrating -- whose themes of non-authenticity,

pre-modernity, aesthetic self-consciousness and the conflicted status of aesthetic autonomy are formed in conjunction with a "story in the likeness of [a] life" about a homeless, dispossessed, wandering beggar. The fact that Beckett explicitly constructs the story through a narrating persona whose contradictory voice discounts any possible reading of it as a realistic portrait of the hopelessly poor makes the necessity of the social content even stronger: without the minimal requisites of membership in a socio-economic strata, no authentic self (face or voice) is possible.

2. Art and Begging in "The End"

The first pages of "The End" describe the hero-narrator's expulsion from the institution of charity or social welfare into the city street where he wanders "lost" and disoriented. This expulsion, repeated in various forms in the "Nouvelles" (in the beginning of "The Expelled" the narrator-hero is literally thrown out the front door of the middle-class home; in "The Calmative" the narrator asks "Was I being thrown out?"), is the paradigmatic origin of all Beckett's postwar narrators and can be traced forward through Molloy's diatribes "against the charitable gesture" and "the social worker" (30) and Malone's institutional-like sickroom until the very last phrase of The Unnamable -- "I can't go on, I'll go on" -- which already forms part of the

first lines of "The End":

> They clothed me and gave me money. I knew what the money was for, it was to get me started. When it was gone I would have to get more, if I wanted to go on. The same for the shoes, when they were worn out I would have to get them mended, or get myself another pair, or go on barefoot, if I wanted to go on. (47)

Both the narrating persona and the act of narration have their origin in the sphere of material need and social hierarchy: "to go on" refers to both the hero's ability to act and the voice's ability to tell the story. The institution imbues the narrator with a liminal social identity: the passive recipient of charity, already an incipient beggar, soon to be barefoot and moneyless. Beckett makes the narrator explicitly aware that the institution is the only context in which he has an identity within the bounds of modernity, an identity which requires both a sense of individuated independence -- an inner self -- and what Max Weber called (in reference to the expulsion of Adam and Eve from paradise in one of modernity's earliest definitive works, Paradise Lost) the individual's "acceptance of his life in this world as a task" (88). Forced to leave after an unspecified but apparently lengthy stay in the institution, the narrator has a parting conversation with the officious administrator, Mr. Weir:

> I am greatly obliged to you, I said, is there a law which prevents you from throwing me out naked and penniless? That would damage our reputation in the long run, he replied. Could they not possibly keep me a little longer, I said, I could make myself useful. Useful, he said, joking apart you be willing to make yourself useful?... If they believed you were really

> willing to make yourself useful they would keep you, I am sure.... Perhaps, I said, they would consent to take me back and keep me a little longer. This is a charitable institution, he said, and the money you receive is a gift. When it is gone you will have to get more.... Never come back here, whatever you do, you would not be let in. (49)

Beckett's postwar rejection of one of the principle features of modern fiction -- the attempt to represent from various perspectives, seriously, satirically and antagonistically, a contemporary social world -- is here presented as the social world's final rejection of his narrating persona. The hero's desperation to maintain his liminal identity is already a sign of his loss of identity. He thinks fondly of the publicly-administered object-like existence he is about to lose: "I saw the familiar objects, companions of so many bearable hours. The stool, for example, dearest of all. The long afternoons together.... At times I felt its wooden life invade me, till I myself became a piece of wood" (49). Beckett thus presents his narrator's regression toward an inanimate, asocial existence, and his own rejection, as a writer, of what he once called "social reality" (see chapter IV.1), as part of a single process which begins with the ultimate symbol of modernization itself: money. It was modern art's functional uselessness, theorists of modernism from Wilde to Adorno maintained, that gave it value in a world increasingly prone to judge everything in instrumental terms of exchangability. Beckett fuses this idea into the narrating persona itself: he is

incapable of being "useful," of exchanging himself for anything. The primitive beggar's mask, as we have seen, cannot even exchange a look of misery for a handout.

For Beckett, then, this expulsion from the lowest rung of the social hierarchy is the first step in creating the inexpressive, primitive, identityless persona, the beggar's mask. And it is always important for Beckett to foreground the persona as mask, not as an authentic face of the dispossessed. Begging, as well, must be represented not realistically but as a reflection of Beckett's notions about art and writing. At first, after his expulsion, the narrator is stirred back into a sensate existence simply because his material needs are no longer cared for in even the most minimal way: "I longed to be under cover again, in an empty place, close and warm.... From time to time someone would come to make sure I was all right.... It was long since I had longed for anything and the effect on me was horrible" (52). With this renewed longing, and with the money he has been given, the narrator is tempted to create a public identity for himself, outside of the minimal one he has acquired in the institution:

> In the days that followed I visited several lodgings, without much success. They usually slammed the door in my face... It was in vain I put on my best manners, smiled and spoke distinctly.... It was at this time I perfected a method of doffing my hat at once courteous and discreet, neither servile nor insolent. (53)

Beckett needs to make the narrator's descent into primitive facelessness a process in which the hero himself

has little control. His bowler hat, itself a symbol of modernity, Chaplin's sign of "Modern Times,"[9] is also indicative of the narrator's inability to define himself: "The hat was a bowler," the narrator remarks when "they" give it to him upon his expulsion, "Keep your hat and give me back mine ... they replied they had burnt [it]" (47). No matter how he tries, his "method" of mimicking civility fails him. Likewise, when his money soon runs out, the narrator gives a detailed description of his method of begging, presenting himself in terms of the modern class-conscious world from which he is excluded. Once individual expressiveness is lost -- the narrator's face has now become the expressionless mask, "two holes and a slit ... too far gone for the old trick of please your honor" -- the face itself is too grotesquely primitive to be shown in public. Beckett metaphorically links the problem of begging without a face to the search for a new type of non-modernist writing. For the hero, figuring out how to beg under such conditions becomes a methodical search for a new mode of expression:

> So I covered the lower part of my face with a black rag and went and begged at a sunny corner.... I couldn't use my hat because of my skull. As for holding out my hand, that was quite out of the question. So I got a tin and hung it from a button ... of my coat, at pubis level. It did not hang plumb, it leaned respectfully towards the passerby, he only had to drop his mite. But that obliged him to come up close to me, he was in danger of touching me. In the end I got a bigger tin ... and I placed it on the sidewalk at my feet. But people who give alms don't much care to toss them, there's something contemptuous about this gesture which

> is repugnant to sensitive natures.... There are those, to be sure, who stoop, but generally speaking people who give alms don't much care to stoop. What they like above all is to sight the wretch from afar, get ready their penny, drop it in their stride and hear the God bless you dying away in the distance.... In the end I got a kind of board or tray and tied it to my neck and waist. Some days I strewed it with flowers.... They must have thought I loved nature.... I leaned against the wall, but without nonchalance, I shifted my weight from one foot to the other and my hands clutched the lapels of my coat. To beg with your hands in your pockets makes a bad impression, it irritates the workers, especially in winter. (63-5)

In the "tone of polite conversation" Beckett here sketches out a reception theory of begging. The audience includes aesthetes and romantics -- those with "sensitive natures" or a sentimental attachment to "nature" -- as well as the disaffected "workers." In his attempt to create the primitive storytelling persona Beckett takes account of the perspectives of a class-stratified society and presents the beggar -- with his archaic mask and his black veil and who refers to himself as "the wretch" -- as an objectified vision of the random "passerby" loathe to come too close but equally unwilling to completely ignore this sign of social decay. Indeed, the beggar's strategy for making a good impression is presented as a reaction-formation to both genteel and working class notions of propriety and justice. His attempt to elicit a response from his audience is nothing but a reflection of the fear or shame he inspires in others, and it reflects the change in Beckett's idea of art. Beckett's interwar modernist opposition to both polite bourgeois taste and popular culture is turned inside out:

unlike the manner in which he had his earlier bohemian-aesthete heroes and arch-intellectual omniscient narrators stand and speak above and outside the "colossal fiasco" (Murphy 101) of the everyday world, Beckett here shapes the narrating persona's language, voice and self-understanding as a critical manifestation of the tastes and attitudes of the cultural world high modernism opposed.

Throughout the story Beckett intensifies the narrator's primitivism in close proximity to modernist values of the self and individuality. Thus, while in one respect the beggar speaks from the position of the modern individual -- the city street is the male modernist's typical vantage point -- at the same time he grows more objectified and primitive as he adopts the perspective of the crowd passing by. Beckett presents the narrator's physical sensation of self, bound up in early modernism with the individual's intensely private and ultimately tragic attempt to expand the range of exquisite sensual pleasure (as in Huysmans and Wilde), as a regression to an infantile pre-socialized state beyond distinctions of public and private: "I unbuttoned my trousers [on the street corner] discreetly to scratch myself" he proudly asserts. "It was in the arse I had the most pleasure. I stuck my forefinger up to my knuckle. Later, if I had to shit, the pain was atrocious.... Often, at the end of the day I discovered the leg of my trousers all wet. That must have been the dogs. I personally pissed

very little" (65). Even while these primly correct descriptions of human degradation continually enact the contradiction of a critical literature which, still tied to European institutions of art and learning, cannot escape its status as "polite conversation," Beckett at the same time directly counters the possibility that his satire will be read as an expressionist emblem of some anti-capitalist political ideology. The story's counterpart to the bourgeois "charitable institution" is the radical leftist reformer, who equally turns the narrator into a passive identityless primitive:

> One day I witnessed a strange scene.... For some time past a sound had been scarifying me.... It was a man perched on the roof of a car and haranguing the passers-by. That at least was my interpretation. He was bellowing so loud that snatches of his discourse reached my ears. Union ... brothers ... Marx ... capital ... bread and butter ... love [ellipses in text]. It was all Greek to me.... All of a sudden he turned and pointed at me, as at an exhibit. Look at this down and out, he vociferated, this leftover. If he doesn't go down on all fours, its for fear of being impounded. Old, lousy, rotten, ripe for the muckheap. And there are a thousand like him.... Every day you pass them by ... and when you have backed a winner you fling them a farthing... It never enters your head ... that your charity is a crime, an incentive to slavery, stultification and organized murder. Take a good look at this living corpse. You may say it's his own fault. Ask him if it's his own fault.... Then he bent forward and took me to task.... Do you hear me, you crucified bastard! cried the orator. Then I went away, although it was still light. But generally speaking it was a quiet corner, busy but not overcrowded, thriving and well-frequented. he must have been a religious fanatic, I could find no other explanation. Perhaps he was an escaped lunatic. He had a nice face, a little on the red side. (66-67).
>
> The beggar's self-definition as untouchable wretch,

fashioned from the responses of the stratified crowd passing by, is confirmed through his objectification as a political "exhibit," an edifying spectacle for the masses. The scene serves Beckett's purpose in two ways. First, it intensifies the narrator's identitylessness even further by denying him any oppositional stance to his social origin, the charitable institution. The more the narrator's social degradation is mockingly presented from a leftist political perspective, the more the narrator mimics the middle-class's aversion to a political "interpretation" of poverty. Conversely, when elsewhere in the story the narrator catches a glimpse of his archetypically capitalist-bourgeois "son" -- "striding along with a briefcase under his arm ... bowing and scraping and flourishing his hat" -- he is quick to utter a judgement -- "The insufferable son of a bitch" (58) -- that literally negates the narrator's possible identity as father of a solid, charitable citizen. While the parodied marxist extremist consigns him to a lumpenproletariat oblivion, the narrator himself inveighs against any sign of his own contribution to the reproduction of the bourgeois social order. Beckett gives his beggar persona no political identity; instead, the narrator rejects every chance to develop one.

Secondly, Beckett invites and mockingly challenges the postwar political reception of his own work. Beckett knew quite well that no parody of a communist, no matter how

broad, would be taken lightly in Parisian literary circles just after the war.[10] The story's publication history suggests this was the case. Only the first half of "La Suite" (the original French title of "The End") was published in the explicitly leftist Les Temps Modernes; the second half, which contained the episode with the orator, was omitted. Beckett later claimed that the omission was due to a misunderstanding, but one of the editors, Simone de Beauvoir, claimed that the second part was rejected because it did not fit the general tone of the journal (Bair 353; Fletcher 96). More significantly, by the late fifties, when Beckett's postwar fiction and drama had garnered international acclaim, it was the primitive, perverse, animal-like existence of the narrating persona that came under attack by Marxist critics of modernism. Lukács's critique of Molloy -- "Beckett presents us with an image of the utmost human degradation -- an idiot's vegetative existence" ("Ideology" 292) -- sounds rather like the orator's description of the narrating beggar in "The End." But Lukács, Beckett's most strident critic, understands something about the social and political genesis of Beckett's fiction that Beckett's starry-eyed champions who hypostatize notions of the "self" or the dissolution of the "writing subject" miss altogether. For Lukács, Beckett's work -- following that of Kafka, Musil, Proust, Dos Passos, Faulkner, Joyce -- was the "ne plus ultra" of a literary

modernism whose "frank glorification" of "the purely subjective," of "perversity" and "psychopathology," was an honestly intentioned but ultimately empty "moral protest against capitalism" (290). While realism (for Lukács, quite distinct from naturalism's observational determinism) presents man as "zoon politikon, a social animal," "the ontological view governing the image of man in the work of leading modernist writers is the exact opposite" (280):

> Man, for these writers, is by nature solitary, asocial, unable to enter into relationships with other human beings.... Man is "thrown-into-being." This implies, not merely that man is constitutionally unable to establish relationships with things or persons outside himself; but also that it is impossible to determine theoretically the origin and goal of human existence.... Man, thus conceived, is an ahistorical being.... This negation of history takes two different forms in modernist literature. First, the hero is strictly confined within the limits of his own experience. There is not for him -- and apparently not for his creator -- any preexistent reality beyond his own self.... Secondly, the hero himself is without personal history. He is "thrown-into-the-world": meaninglessly, unfathomably. He does not develop through contact with the world; he neither forms nor is formed by it. The only "development" in this literature is the gradual revelation of the human condition. Man is now what he has always been and always will be. The narrator, the examining subject, is in motion; the examined reality is static. (280-282)

Beckett's narrating persona in "The End" and its extension in the later fiction is without doubt part of this larger development, ascribed by Lukács to both naturalism and the more "writerly" works of high modernism. But is Beckett's primitivism an acritical intensification of modernism's subjective, existential rejection of historical narrative and of character as social, public actor? Or is it

a critical exploration of the consequences, for the individual and for literature, of such a vision of "man"? While such a project would be dismissed by Lukács -- whose static oppositions of realism and modernism, "perspective" and "distortion," "typical" and "pathological" do not allow him to perceive important variations within the works of modernism themselves -- his insight into the profound "negation of history" in Beckett's fiction well describes the manner in which Beckett attempts to create a narrating persona without an identity. Yet while Lukacs could only pose as an alternative to modernism what seems to be a return to the realism of Balzac or Tolstoy (in the "New Realism" of Solzhenitsyn, for example), Beckett sought new literary forms to undermine the modernist vision of "man" as an essentially asocial self. Just as Beckett mocks the leftist view of the lumpenproletariat and the pathological, on the street corner or in literature, he equally derides the literary apotheosis of an autonomous inner self.

Beckett's primitivism, rather than merely presenting a more absolute ontological view of character as isolated being, begins to reflect back on the modernist values that Lukács describes. Social connectedness, the loss of which Lukács bemoans, returns in "The End" as the missing element that would allow a strong self of sense to exist in the first place. Beckett constantly links the narrator's increasing regression away from both social identity and

self-sufficient interiority to the memory of his origin in the institution and his weakening attachment to his liminal identity as beggar. Taking up residence in a rotting, rat-infested boat shed on the grounds of an abandoned "private estate" (67), he gradually gives up his "work" (67) on the corner. At first, this is presented as an ironically humble triumph of the will:

> It seemed to me I had grown more independent of recent years. That no one came anymore, that no one could come any more, to ask me if I was all right and needed nothing, distressed me then but little. I was all right, yes, quite so.... As for my needs, they had dwindled as it were to my dimensions and become, if I may say so, of so exquisite a quality as to exclude all thought of succour. To know I had a being, however faint and false, outside of me, had once the power to stir my heart. (70)

What imparted the narrator with a sensation of self, what once stirred his heart, is the connection to charity and begging he has lost. "Being" is a social phenomenon; to have no "outside" manifestation of self means a loss of interiority, not an intensification of subjective sensation in opposition to, or in rejection of, an alienating social world. Independence, once the sign of a healthy modern ego, is achieved negatively, as though it were an affliction. At the same time, as the hero grows more and more selfless, Beckett continues to expose the narrator as mask, as the aesthetic expression of a bourgeois writer: the narrator's radical negation of self is never too far, in "tone," from the wistful sigh of a mildly regretful, lonely pensioner: "You become unsociable, it's inevitable" (70).

Beckett locates the extremes of the narrating persona's identitylessness and regression at the limits of the "life" he is telling: senility or infantilism, when the fulfillment of "needs" is totally beyond the control of the individual. He has taken to lying for days on end in the old, coffin-like boat in the shed:

> There were times when I wanted to push away the lid and get out of the boat and couldn't, I was so indolent and weak, so content deep down where I was. I felt them hard upon me, the icy, tumultuous streets, the terrifying faces .... So I waited till the desire to shit, or even to piss, lent me wings. I did not want to dirty my nest! And yet it sometimes happened, and even more and more often. Arched and rigid I edged down my trousers and turned a little on my side, just enough to free the hole. To contrive a little kingdom, in the midst of the universal muck, then shit on it, ah that was me all over. (70)

Lying in his own shit, defiling the isolated independence of his "little kingdom," having neither a social nor inner being, Beckett's narrator is now the primitive, helpless creature suited only for the institution of charity from which he was originally expelled and to which he is forbidden to return. The narrator's regression is also a regression of the narrative order: just as the narrator can no longer "go on" without money -- as he was warned from the very beginning -- Beckett's episodic story structure, far from the interwoven, shifting perspectival intricacies of high modernist plots, has gone nowhere and comes to a halt with the narrator's physical paralysis. Yet in this first postwar fiction, working out the narrative persona that will become his literary signature, Beckett

creates a tenuous narrative closure that still retains a vestigial positive notion of identity. Unable to move from his boat-coffin, the narrator begins to have "visions" that provide temporal and spatial narrative movement.

> I knew they were visions because it was night and I was alone in my boat.... I was neither cold nor warm and all seemed calm. Now the sea air was about me, I had no other shelter than the land.... I saw the beacons, four in all, including a lightship, I knew them well, even as a child. It was evening, I was with my father on a height, he held my hand. I would have liked him to draw me close with a gesture of protective love, but his mind was on other things. (71)

As the unloved son who, earlier in the story, renounced his own role as father, the narrator here acquires a lyrical psychological depth, and a past, that his regression into object-like selflessness denies. The individuated expressiveness absent from the beggar's mask returns as the distant memory of repressed emotion. But this return of the repressed -- which is also a return to a psychological notion of self and identity -- is accompanied by an interference in narrative communication where the relationship between diegetic levels, between "story" and "discourse," becomes unstable (see Chapter II). The story ends with the narrator's apparent suicide "in my boat and gliding on the waters" (71), which is embedded within the "vision" itself. Beckett makes this violation of narrative closure both dramatic and emphatically meta-textual (emphasizing the act of writing) in the last lines of the story:

> [T]here I was down on my knees prying out the plug with my knife. The hole was small and the water rose slowly.... Back now in the stern-sheets, my legs stretched out, my back well propped against the sack stuffed with grass I used as a cushion, I swallowed my calmative. The seas, the sky, the mountain and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the utmost confines of space. The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on. (72)

The beggar's mask, the narrating persona who has neither "courage," "strength" nor even a sense of "being," is ultimately deprived a textual stability. The psychological depth is flattened out, made into the "trick" that the *narrating* hero takes all expression to be. This meta-textual aspect of the narrative -- a feature which becomes increasingly pronounced in Beckett's next postwar fictions and which has become the focus of postmodern and poststructuralist readings of his work (see section 4 below) -- was already implicit in the face of the expressionless beggar and the methodical descriptions of begging. While the voice, story and images of the beggar's mask, inevitably marked by the "tone of polite conversation," explicitly involve contradictions about the status of "high" art, the disruption of diegetic stability involves contradictions at the level of reception, of the reader's ability to understand the relation of the sometimes lyrical and always effective narrating voice to the grotesque loss of identity.

The beggar's mask is one sign of Beckett's attempt to move away from modernism through the creation of an

identityless voice that seems to invalidate questions of narrative authenticity, of the match between character and voice or between the character's identity and geopolitical place. Likewise, the meta-textual disruption at the end of the story makes the reader's understanding of the story itself a problem. Thematically, Beckett focused on socio-economic status as the ultimate determinate of individual identity, while formally he exploits contradiction and textual paradox. Both of these aspects of his postwar project are linked to another, integral element of male-modernist narrative: the modern city. Beckett's first postwar fictions take place in (thematically) and are structured by (formally) the dissolution of the city as the ordering principle of modern fiction. The contradictions arising from the expressionless beggar's mask are narrated in an altered and chaotic postwar "space."

3. From City and Novel to Story and Text

"Death," Walter Benjamin wrote, "is the sanction of everything the storyteller can tell":

> Just as a sequence of images is set in motion inside a man as his life comes to an end -- unfolding the views of himself under which he has encountered himself without being aware of it -- suddenly in his expressions and looks the unforgettable emerges and imparts to everything that concerned him that authority which even the poorest wretch in dying possesses for the living around him. This authority is at the very source of the story. (Illuminations 94)

"I don't know when I died," begins one of Beckett's

1946 stories, "The Calmative." "It always seemed to me I died old, about ninety years old, and what years, and that my body bore it out, from head to foot":

> But this evening, alone in my icy bed. I have the feeling I'll be older than the day, the night, when the sky with all its lights fell upon me, the same I had so often gazed on since my first stumblings on the distant earth. For I'm too frightened this evening to listen to myself rot, waiting for the great lapses of the heart, the tearings at the caecal walls, and for the slow killings to finish im my skull, the assaults on unshakable pillars, the fornications with corpses. So I'll tell myself a story, to try and calm myself, and it's there I'll feel old, old, even older than the day I fell, calling for help, and it came. Or is it possible that in this story I have come back to life, after my death? No, it's not like me to come back to life, after my death. (27)

If for Benjamin, writing between the wars, storytelling was an art whose decline was directly tied to modernity's increasing destruction of the bonds of community and solidarity, then for Beckett, writing in the wake of a war perhaps even more traumatic and transformative than the one Benjamin had experienced, the need to tell stories -- the story of a life -- returns, grotesquely and tortuously, deformed by the loss of the authority or vantage point that would give it meaning. Part of Beckett's subject matter becomes the struggle to find a mode of storytelling no longer tied to the traditional authority that, as Benjamin poignantly observed, a death -- dying as a "public process in the life of an individual," in the presence of others, of neighbors and friends (93) -- imbued. Without the stability of death as a clear boundary of the meaning or form of a

life story, neither space nor time has a stable manifestation. "I'll tell my story in the past none the less," claims the narrating persona of "The Calmative," "as though it were a myth, or an old fable" (28). The narrator hopes to mimic some epic form, but his "fable" lacks the most basic feature of the mythic: the monologic voice of authority. Indeed, the narrator knows his act of telling is the very antithesis of epic stability: "All I say cancels out, I'll have said nothing" (28). This is the ultimate failure of the storyteller: instead of purveying wisdom and experience, there is only the futility of language -- a closed system of self-referential signs -- and a death, in isolation, that bestows no meaning or order.

For a writer whose first fictional works strained to incorporate the most sophisticated, mandarin and at times non-communicative and alienating techniques of modernism and the avant-garde, this explicit, deeply-felt longing for stories marks a significant departure. What emerges in the postwar "Nouvelles" is an image of the storyteller -- a narrating first person voice -- whose primitive, suffering, deathless existence is itself an emblem of the ruins into which stories, for Beckett, had collapsed. While the narrator longs for a story like an "old fable" -- a longing, like Benjamin's, for a non-modern form of communicating experience -- Beckett constantly plays this longing against the absence of the authority or stability necessary, in the

narrator's life experience, for such a return. In "The Calmative" the narrator's expression of his present existence is utterly chaotic and negating, beyond even form-giving death, while the idea of a "story" becomes nothing but the memory of an authority, and an authoritative human bond, long vanished:

> But it's to me this evening something has to happen, to my body as in myth and metamorphosis, this old body to which nothing ever happened, or so little, which never met with anything, loved anything, wished for anything, in its tarnished universe, except for the mirrors to shatter, the plane, the curved, the magnifying, the minifying, and to vanish in the havoc of its images. Yes, this evening it has to be as in the story my father used to read me, evening after evening, when I was small, and he had all his health, to calm me, evening after evening, year after year.... (29-30)

Both the experimental form -- paradoxical and yet, as in Watt, bearing the promise of communication -- and the narrator's longing for a stable story are two aspects of a single process. Part of the overall regression-progression (as I have called it) of the "Nouvelles," they signal Beckett's attempt to rewrite the modernisms he experienced between the wars. As with the creation of the identityless narrating persona -- the beggar's mask --- this attempt always manifests itself as both a theme and a form, a representation and a method of composition. And if "story" stands for the authoritative, stable, death-bound fixity of a tellable life and a community-bound purveyance of experience and wisdom, then modern fiction, the novel and modernist innovation are bound up with all those processes

of modernization -- from the rise of a middle class in a money economy to technologies of aesthetic reproduction -- that dissolve the traditional ties of solidarity and, consequently, the forms of traditional storytelling. For Beckett, "story" stands in contradistinction to the narrating persona's desire for the shattered mirror and the "havoc of its images": the longing for the premodern "fable" and the "ne plus ultra" of modernist, mimesis-shattering writing are put into a dynamic, productive tension. In the simplicity of the storytelling language and the paradox of their negating forms Beckett's first postwar fictions seem to hover, in tension, between the modernity and modernism they reject and the return to stories and community they constantly insist is impossible.

Ultimately, this productive tension reveals itself in some of the most basic form-themes of Beckett's postwar project: an anti-realist placelessness, the injunction to "go on," and the shift toward textuality, toward an increasing emphasis on the act of narration itself. As part of Beckett's postwar rewriting of modernism, these inter-connected features -- abstract and meaningless in themselves -- are concretely formed in relation to one of the most significant theme-forms of modern European fiction: the metropolis. While I do not have space to even begin to describe the complex inter-relations between modernity, urbanization and modern literature (about which there is a

growing body of critical literature), I wish to point out two very general ideas important to understanding Beckett's postwar project. First, in conjunction with industrialization and imperialism, the modern cosmopolitan city becomes the pervasive source of modern literature; it is the geopolitical seat of politics, education, art, fashion and finance to which modern writers were drawn, in which they were able to live and work. As Raymond Williams has pointed out, even the defining contours and understanding of the countryside (or the sea, or the world beyond Europe) becomes increasingly dominated by the perspective of the urban dweller and the political hegemony of the metropolis. Secondly (according to a critical view which originates in Simmel's turn-of-the-century analysis of a uniquely modern, urban consciousness) the highly stratified and complex social life of the city determines the themes and form of the modern novel, the organization of the plot of everyday life as a sequence of time and space relations subject to sudden changes and reversals, as in Balzac, or manifested in the flowing, internalized, multi-faceted highly individualized observations of the "flaneur" or wanderer, as in Ulysses. As Franco Moretti put it in relation to Balzac, "the urban narrative environment makes it possible, for the first time, to create an enthralling plot without having to resort to the freak [of the gothic novel] .... what engages the reader is no longer the 'state

of exception' ... but the unpredictability harboured in ordinary administration and everyday life.... with Balzac the 'prose of the world' ceases to be boring" (115). The city, then, is the decisive social world (both in its creation and reception) and an overarching theme-form of modern European fiction.

Now, what seems to be one of the most important and, ironically, innovative features of Beckett's postwar fiction is its placelessness and the paratactic and seemingly chaotic shape of the paradoxical narratives of isolated wandering. The "Nouvelles" "take place" in that abstract series of rooms, refuges, benches, seasides, forests, ditches and unspecified and barely glimpsed cities or "towns" that characterize the novels of the trilogy. But the rather haunting absence of the proper nouns and specific geopolitical order of social reality -- and the longing for stories amidst the deathless "havoc" of the narrating persona's present experience -- have a determinant source. Seen from the perspective of Beckett's earlier fiction and the rewriting of modernism that its "failure" provoked, this placelessness appears as a decisive and determining rejection of the city as a theme-form and organizing principle of fiction. In both More Pricks than Kicks and Murphy Beckett had taken a typical male-modernist urban perspective. As I have shown (see Chapter IV), Murphy's retreat into the "apparatus" of his mind -- a process

metaphorically linked to the autonomy of art -- is a reaction to the "malignant proliferations of urban tissue know as service flats" (47) and the "closed system" of modern life, the "mercantile gehenna" (26) of contemporary London. In the transitional novel Watt Beckett had constructed a feudal-like nowhere zone in which to stage the extremes of ambiguity and autonomy, but the novel's static structure and static metaphors of communication (see above) resulted not in a reworking of modernist cultural values but rather the manifestation of their ultimate meaninglessness. It is not until the postwar "The End" that the wandering beggar's mask and the longing for stories come together and are shaped in response to the city's loss of status as an ordering principle of narrative.

Expelled from the institution, the narrator finds himself in a place hostile to storytelling, a place which is also an image of a transformed, postwar world:

> In the street I was lost. I had not set foot in this part of the city for a long time and it seemed greatly changed. Whole buildings had disappeared, the palings had changed position, and on all sides I saw, in great letters, the names of tradesmen I had never seen before and would have been at a loss to pronounce. There were streets where I had remembered none, some I did remember had vanished and others had completely changed their names. The general impression was the same as before. It is true I did not know the city very well. Perhaps it was quite a different one. I did not know where I was supposed to be going. I had the great good fortune, more than once, not to be run over. My appearance still made people laugh, with that hearty jovial laugh so good for the health. (51)

The city is not only a space of disorientation, but

signals a loss of expressiveness. The characteristic male-modernist responses to the city street -- from extreme alienation to exhilarating sensory stimulation -- are replaced by the blandest of observations: despite the obvious great changes, "the general impression was the same as before." Just as "The End" is strewn with fragmentary references to the war (the narrator mistakes the receipt Weir gives him for a "safe-conduct" (48) and his hat for a "kepi" (53)), the narrator's benumbed emergence from the hospital-like institution into the city street resembles the psychic trauma of the shell-shocked veteran returning home. But for Beckett the postwar city will not function even as a narrative sign of social chaos or personal dislocation. Rather, Beckett presents the "greatly changed" city as a space of narrative debility: unimpressed, "at a loss to pronounce" the new "names of tradesmen" (so crucial to the reader's ability to follow Joyce's meticulous, interiorized mapping of middle-class Dublin), without a goal, and uncertain finally of whether the change has occurred within himself or in his surroundings, the narrator's story will be detached from any ordering principle arising from or reflecting the physical and social urban space. Even more, in the city street the narrator can only register continuity and emotion in respect to his own objectification: "My appearance still made people laugh." While the city street provided the modernist narrator with the invigorating

"shock" or alienating spectacle of modernity itself -- a stimulus to male subjectivity -- it conversely deprives Beckett's postwar narrator of the necessary coordinates of modernist narration, temporal and spatial, not least of which is his own status as subjective recorder of his own experience, thoughts and emotions.

For the narrating persona, to be lost in the city is to be detached from the narrative order of modernity. Beckett repeats this theme throughout the "Nouvelles." In "The Expelled" the "town" is associated with paralysis: "Now and then I would go to the window and look out. But then I hastened back to the depths of the room.... I felt ill at ease with all this air about me, lost before the confusion of innumerable prospects. But I still knew how to act at this period, when it was absolutely necessary" (13). Individual action -- even in modernist fiction a minimal narrative requirement -- fades away with the loss of the modern public space. Thus, for Beckett, the simplest action of all -- walking down the sidewalk -- must take on the greatest weight. In "The Expelled," the narrator walking in the city becomes the parodic negation of the flaneur, the observer of modern life who is both part of and detached from the crowd:

> The weather was fine. I advanced down the street, keeping as close as I could to the sidewalk. The widest sidewalk is never enough for me, once I set myself in motion, and I hate to inconvenience strangers. A policeman stopped me and said, The street for vehicles, the sidewalk for pedestrians. Like a bit of old

> testament. So I got back on the sidewalk, almost apologetically, and persevered there, in spite of an indescribable jostle, for a good twenty steps, till I had to fling myself to the ground to avoid crushing a child.... I would have crushed him gladly, I loathe children, and it would have been doing him a service, but I was afraid of reprisals.... I fell then, and brought down with me an old lady.... Her screams soon drew a crowd.... I took advantage of the confusion to make off, muttering unintelligible oaths, as if I were the victim, and I was, but I couldn't have proved it. They never lynch children, babies, no matter what they do .... I personally would lynch them with the utmost pleasure, I don't say I'd lend a hand, no, I'm not a violent man, but I'd encourage the others and stand them drinks when it was done. (15-16)

If the narrator of "The End" experiences the postwar city as a place of narrative disability, the narrator of the "The Expelled" can neither navigate the physical space of the city, describe the "indescribable jostle" of the street or even separate the feelings of urban alienation and isolation from a mob mentality: Beckett makes him no less victim than victimizer, both the ultimate outsider and the anonymous man of the crowd, the silent supporter of the lynching party. And like the narrator of "The End" his presence in the street and the compulsion to "go on" are linked to his dwindling ability to define himself as a member of any socio-economic order: "The great disadvantage of this condition," he says when his money runs out, "which might be defined as the absolute impossibility of all purchase, is that it compels you to bestir yourself" (18).

As a space of class relations, the city is discontinuous with Beckett's socially identityless narrating personae. In "The End" the beggar's withdrawal from the

street corner leads to his full, negative development as an insensate, passive, independent object; in "The Expelled" the narrator, unable to fulfill the role of modernist city observer, takes refuge, with the little money he has left, in a horsedrawn cab, itself a symbol of a disappearing European urbanity, the city of Balzac, Dickens and Joyce's Dubliners. As a mask -- simultaneously the impoverished outcast and an image of the bourgeois author -- the narrating persona recognizes the cabman's lowly social standing (his "primitive people's speech," his "atrocious life ... out of doors in all weathers," his reliance on "his beast" [20]) as the social-realist counterpart to his own textual identitylessness. Rather than take the cab from one part of the city to another -- an action which might present the city, as the modernist novel does, as a set of socially differentiated places -- the narrator goes home with the cabman and spends the night in his rat-infested stable. Beckett's rejection of the city as a meaningful narrative space, reflected in the parodic spasms of the narrator's city stroll, results in a double ambivalence as the story ends. On one hand, the narrator is impulsively indifferent to the fate of this lowly symbol of the European city: "I was seized, then abandoned, by the desire to set fire to the stable" (24); on the other hand, he is ambivalent toward the story itself: "No reason for this to end or go on. Then let it end" (23). As in "The End," The Expelled" closes with a

shift toward the "text" itself:

> The horse was still at the window. I was sick and tired of this cabhorse. Dawn was just breaking. I did not know where I was. I made toward the rising sun, towards where I thought it should rise, the quicker to come into light. I would have liked a sea horizon, or a desert one. When I am abroad in the morning, I go to meet the sun, and in the evening, when I am abroad, I follow it, till I am down among the dead. I don't know why I told this story. I could just as well have told another. Perhaps some other time I'll be able to tell another. Living souls, you will see how alike they are. (25)

The deeply felt ambivalence toward the act of storytelling is also a projection of some pre-modern, asocial world. To wander beyond the city is to seek some alternate, as yet unformed narrative order. To wander beyond the city is to wander into a language that has *no* home.

In "The Calmative," where the longing for the authoritative death-bound "story" is most explicitly put into conflict with the modernist "havoc of images," the dissolution of the city and the loss of a modern narrative order is intertwined from the outset. If in "The End" and "The Expelled" Beckett was working out the creation of the beggar's mask in relation to the rejecting/rejected social reality -- the expulsion from the charitable institution and from the bourgeois home -- in "The Calmative" (written after the other two) the primitive narrating persona has already lost the liminal social identity of passive victim.[11] The need to "go on," and discovering the means to go on, become problems that affect every aspect of the narrative. The most immediate difficulty, after the loss of a form-giving death,

is the disposition of the narrative space:

> What possessed me to stir when I wasn't with anybody? Was I being thrown out? No, I wasn't with anybody. I see a kind of den littered with empty tins. And yet we are not in the country. Perhaps it's just ruins, a ruined folly, on the skirts of the town, in a field, for the fields come right up to our walls, their walls .... I have changed refuge so often, in the course of my rout, that now I can't tell between dens and ruins. But there was never any city but the one. It is true you often move along in a dream, houses and factories darken the air, trams go by, and under your feet wet from the grass there are suddenly cobblestones. I only know the city of my childhood, I must have seen the other, but unbelieving. All I say cancels out, I'll have said nothing. (27-8)

The geopolitical city -- and the city of distant memories or even dreams -- "cancels out." From the "Nouvelles" on, much of Beckett's fiction will re-enact, through the beggar's mask, this paratactic, associative wandering through spaces that refer to a social world left behind, in ruins, rejected, forgotten, unbelieved, canceled out: "The paths of other days were rank with tangled growth. I leaned against the trunks to get my breath and pulled myself forward with the help of boughs. Of my last passage no trace remained" (28). Without the city -- without a modern perspective, an observing intelligence who describes the social world or the impressions and thoughts that it evokes -- all that is left is abstract movement, to "go on." This theme-form of movement is, for Beckett, an alternative formed in the process of rejecting the paradigmatic figure of male modernist, the walker in the city. And what the deathless, goal-less, place-less movement provides is the

skeleton -- stripped bare of identity -- of a narrative order, since, abstractly, movement is nothing but a time-space relation. But Beckett's abstraction of narrative organization -- an abstraction that becomes explicitly thematized in Part II of Molloy (see chapter II) -- always metaphorically refers back to the originary moment in "The End" and the tension between the desire for stories and the "havoc of images," a thematized, dynamic conflict between the desire to communicate and Beckett's experience of the aesthetic rationality of modernism. Compare, for example, the openings of the "The End" and "The Calmative" (quoted above) with the opening of "Text 1" written almost a decade later:

> Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't anymore, I couldn't go on. Someone said, You can't stay here. I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go on. I'll describe the place, that's unimportant. The top, very flat, of a mountain, no, a hill, but so wild, so wild, enough. (75)

While the degree to which "story" and the chaotic act of narrating (the "discourse"; see chapter II) are explicitly fused is much greater in the "Texts" than in the first postwar "Stories," the continuity is striking. The voice, lost in time and rooted in space, still registers its identityless existence as the passive object of a "someone." The need to "go on" is motivated, an expulsion from some origin outside the control of the "I." The "place," while "unimportant," must nevertheless be described in order for movement -- narrative movement -- to occur. The place, an

unnamed "wild" fragment, is not nature but rather a space outside modernity where there are no signs of social identity: it will find its counterpart, equally outside of modernity but free of all reference to a natural world, in the hyper-organized "flattened cylinder" (7) of "solid rubber" (8) which forms the narrative space of the 1971 The Lost Ones. This interlacing of placelessness, identityless voice -- "what matter who's speaking" asks the voice of "Text 3" (85) -- outer compulsion and object-like existence whose narrative impulse comes from the problematic need to move, to "go on," is the consequence of the rejecting-rejected social world and its urban-bound narrative order. The more severe the rejection, as in the post-trilogy "Texts," the more every narrative utterance is also an explicit expression and manifestation of the difficulty of storytelling.

Beckett's postwar rewriting of modernism reveals that, for the European writer, there is no place outside of modernity -- the world symbolized and created by the metropolis -- from which to write, there are only the signs and effects of what an attempt to reject modernity entails. The increasing "textuality" of his fiction -- its constant and tortuous self-reflexive quality -- is also a consequence of this attempt. Other postwar writers responding in various ways to the tradition of urban male modernism sought different alternatives. Some, like Camus in The Stranger or

Bowles in The Sheltering Sky, refigured modernism's notion of distant, non-European places unsullied by the ossified social and cultural conventions of modernity as a place that stripped away an already ruined, modern, individualist identity. Others, like Márquez in One Hundred Years of Solitude, presented the historical annihilation of older forms of communal identity as bound up in the processes of literacy and writing constitutive of forms of modernization that went hand in hand with the destructive effects of imperialism and global capitalism. Or writers, like Robbe-Grillet in The Erasers, extended and intensified the modernist notion of the alienating city to an image of a totalized structure of inexorable time-space relations that negated individual agency. But Beckett constructed his postwar rewriting of interwar modernism with recourse to neither a pre-modern or non-European "otherness" nor a representation of the "late capitalist" world where the metropolis engulfs all. Rather, in conjunction with the contradictory narrating persona of the beggar's mask -- both primitively inexpressive and an image of the modern, bourgeois writer -- the "text" fills in the rejection of the geopolitical places of modernity as the space of narrative action, of abstract movement. Part of Beckett's active process of rewriting modernist aesthetic values, the "text," as with any narrative space, is never without content: it is always the scene of explicit contradiction, of a struggle

with the story, with the desire for "stories" and the concepts of community and communication they evoke.

In "The Calmative," whose opening paragraphs are stylistically close to the novels of the trilogy and the "Texts for Nothing," this process -- from city to text, from the struggle ensuing from the expulsion from socio-economic status to the struggle to tell stories -- is given explicit expression. Like the beggar's mask of "The End," the narrating persona, beyond death, frightened, anguished, in his "den littered with empty tins" (27), is a contradictory double image, bound and ruined by his own sense of independence: "in my distant refuge, my hands twined together, my head bowed, weak, breathless, calm, free, and older than I'll have ever been" (28). But unlike the beggar, who winds up shitting all over his "little kingdom" of autonomy and dissolving into "visions" and meta-textual instability, the narrator here is compelled by this double state "to stir": "For me the setting forth, the struggle and perhaps the return" is his annunciation of the narrating act (30). This doubleness is echoed in the tension between the stability of "the story my father used to read me .. to calm me" and the desire "to vanish in the havoc of [shattered] images." It is no longer money, but the need -- which is also a compulsion -- for stories that provokes the mimesis of narrated, motivated action.

The city, as we have seen, is already canceled out as a

narrative possibility -- there is no sign of connection between the narrator and the modern world: "of my last passage no trace remained" (30). And yet there is no place outside of modernity to go. Thus, the narrating persona recounts a foray from the "refuge" into the city as a paratactic series of symbols, images, and "encounters" that both evoke and negate modernity and the aesthetic forms of modernism. Even the entrance to the town seems to deny its existence as a modern place --

> Beyond this meadow to my certain knowledge a path, then a field and finally the ramparts, closing the prospect. Cyclopean and crenellated, standing out faintly against a sky scarcely less somber, they did not seem in ruins .... I entered the town by what they call the Shepherd's Gate without having seen a soul.... The further I went into the city the more I was struck by its deserted air. (30-1)

-- yet the overall mood is extreme modernist alienation -- "I felt the houses packed with people, lurking behind the curtains" (31); "All the mortals I saw were alone and as if sunk in themselves" (38). On one hand, the hauntingly empty and attenuated town, where "the trams were running, buses too, but few, slow, empty, noiseless, as if under water" (30), is a place the inspires narrative anxiety: "What would, what could happen to me in this empty place?" On the other hand, as the narrator heads toward the sea and the harbour -- ancient sources of adventure, commerce, fables and storytelling -- it might also provide the basic elements of narrative: words and actions.

I went right across the city and came to the sea,

> having followed the river to its mouth. I kept saying, I'll go back, unbelieving. The boats at anchor in the harbour, tied up to the jetty, seemed no less numerous than usual, as if I knew anything about what was usual. But the quays were deserted and there was no sign or stir of arrival or departure. But all might change from one moment to the next and be transformed like magic before my eyes. Then all the bustle of the people and the things of the sea.... And I might slip unnoticed aboard a freighter outward bound and get far away and spend far away a few good months, perhaps even a year or two, in the sun, in peace, before I died. And without going that far it would be a sad state of affairs if in that unscandalizable throng I couldn't achieve a little encounter that would calm me a little, or exchange a few words with a navigator, for example, words to carry away with me to my refuge, to add to my collection. (31-2)

While the writing moves further away from epic stability towards "textuality," with its equivocations, its "unbelieving" and unknowing, its reminders that the only reality is language -- "for we are needless to say in a skull, but I have no choice but to add the following few remarks" (38) the narrator announces in the middle of his tale -- the images become archaic and evoke the longing for communication and community. Sitting by the harbour the narrator has his first "encounter": "I found facing me a young boy holding a goat by a horn... He was barefoot and in rags. Haunter of the waterfront he had stepped aside to see what the dark hulk could be abandoned on the quayside. Such was my train of thought." But the narrator's desire "to exchange a few words" are thwarted by his own contradictory existence as primitive inexpressive mask and self-conscious bourgeois. At first, it his distance from the social world -- and the world of high literature -- that silences him:

> I resolved to speak to him. So I marshalled the words and opened my mouth, thinking I would hear them. But all I heard was a kind of rattle, unintelligible even to me who knew what was intended. But it was nothing, mere speechlessness due to long silence, as in the wood that darkens the mouth of hell, do you remember, I only just. (33)

But when the boy is about to leave the narrator is inspired:

> [W]ith a great gesticulation of my whole body I motioned him to stay and I said, in an impetuous murmur, Where are you off to, my little man, with your nanny? The words were hardly out of my mouth when for shame I covered my face. And yet they were the same I had tried to utter but a moment before. (34)

Beckett imbues the shame of the grotesque old man who longs for contact with the young boy -- an archaic symbol who from a distance the narrator "might have taken for a young centaur" (34) -- with the pathos of a portrait of urban destitution. The boy offers him "a sweet out of a twist of paper such as you could buy for a penny.... The sweets were stuck together and I had my work cut out to separate the top one, a green one, from the others, but he helped me and his hand brushed mine" (33). When the silent boy walks away after the narrator's shamefully banal words, the narrator is full of regret: "If I had had a penny in my pocket I would have given it to him, for him to forgive me, but I did not have a penny in my pocket, nor anything resembling it. Nothing that could give pleasure to a little unfortunate at the mouth of life" (34).

In the narrator's entrance into the city and his first encounter, Beckett evokes images of fables and storytelling like the harbor and centaur, and a naturalist pathos of

urban deprivation, in contrast to the narrating persona's modernist alienation and the writing's meta-textual irony. The city of "The Calmative" seems to hover -- in tension -- between the world of the storyteller and the world of the modern novel. Beckett makes the city and the narrator's search for "words" yield images so diverse in their attitudes toward modernity and modernism that no prior paradigm of modern fiction can contain them. Thus, after the boy and his goat wander off, the narrating persona's primitivism is heightened in direct conjunction with a heightened textuality and the rejection of the city:

> I was nearly going to have the goat dung, then pick up a handful of the pellets so soon cold and hard, sniff and even taste them, no, that would not help me this evening. I say this evening as if it were always the same evening, but are there two evenings? I went, intending to get back as fast as I could, but it would not be quite empty-handed, repeating, I'll never come back here. (35)

And as the narrator -- shifting uncertainly between the act of writing "this evening" and the narrated actions -- *begins to move on*, his sensation of self is the opposite of his image reflected in the physical surface of the city: "My legs were paining me, every step would gladly have been the last, but the glances I darted towards the windows, stealthily, showed me a great cylinder sweeping past as though on rollers on the asphalt" (35). The pain of going on, the old, slow "dark hulk" of the grotesque body, is transformed into a Leger-like cubo-futurist image of mechanical speed. The efficacy of much of Beckett's postwar

fiction resides in the dynamic tension between these two attitudes toward writing and representation: neither the regression to a primitive, pre-social state nor the hyper-modernist urban image is adequate. Both are fused in the voice of the narrating persona and his walk through the emptied-out space of modernity.

The narrator's movement through and out of the city is narrated according to a paratactic logic with no paragraph breaks, no compositional thesis statements, because the images and sensations follow only the abstract principle of "going on" from one episode to the next: the fusion of primitivism and modernity is reflected in the flow of language that mimics not interior thought but physical momentum. Contradictory visions of a fading modernity appear within this flow of constant motion:

> I only saw one cyclist! He was going the same way as I was.... He was pedalling slowly in the middle of the street, reading a newspaper which he held with both hands spread open before his eyes. Every now and then he rang his bell without interrupting his reading. I watched him recede till he was no more than a dot on the horizon. (38)

Hugh Kenner has termed this image the "Cartesian Centaur"(121), seeing in it one of Beckett's many parodies of the enlightenment attempt to separate out mind and body, knowledge and its objects in the physical world. But within the context of the story -- in which the young boy/centaur in the harbour symbolizes both the idea of storytelling and the narrator's sense of shame at needing stories and simple

human companionship -- the centaur-like quality of this modern image indicates the mixture of primitivism and modernity, story and text, with which Beckett constructs the narrating persona and voice. Archetypical symbols of the modern age of the European city, the bicycle and the newspaper are themselves technological extensions of the moving body and the observing mind. If the man can impossibly negotiate both at the same time, as his ringing of the bell proves, it is not because, as Kenner suggests, he has solved the Cartesian "muddle" (121) of the mind-body relationship in Beckett's fictional world; rather, it is because modern European "man" appears, in the postwar "Nouvelles," as the anonymous, mechanized "other" of the narrating persona, as nothing but a mediating cog in the physical and intellectual devices of modernity. In Molloy, of course, it is the narrator's painful difficulties with his bicycle at the gate of the city that draw the attention of the authorities (see chapter I). As the grotesque walker through the city in "The Expelled" comments when exhorted by the policeman to clear the walkway, "He pointed out to me that the sidewalk was for everyone, as if it was quite obvious that I could not be assimilated to that category" (16). "Man" is "everyone" who commands the space and information of the city, everyone that the narrator is not.

In "The Calmative," "man" -- the noun is usually unadorned, the beggar emphasizes his own facelessness

through his vision of a faceless modernity -- becomes the narrating persona's only hope for gaining, within the ceaseless flow of narrative movement, some stable sense of time and space within the city:

> But suddenly ahead of me a man on the same side of the street and going the same way.... I slowed down so as not to burst in on him and so heighten the aversion my person inspired even in its most abject and obsequious attitudes. And a moment later, keeping humbly in step with him, Excuse me your honour, the Shepherd's Gate for the love of God! At close quarters he appeared normal apart from that air already noted of ebbing inward. I drew a few steps ahead, turned, cringed, touched my hat and said, The right time for mercy's sake! I might as well not have existed.... Given my need of help I can't think why I did not bar his path. I couldn't have, that's all, I couldn't have touched him. (39)

Modern "man," like modernity, is unstoppable. Unable to fix himself in time and space, lost in the city and the narrative flow, caught up in the contradictory position of the obsequious, grotesque beggar's mask, the narrator gives up, sits on a bench and dozes off. Here, he experiences his final "encounter" with modern man and his last chance for the "exchange" of words -- an encounter in which Beckett parodically confronts the male modernist linkage of narrative action, love, sex and the role of chance meeting in the metropolis of romantic possibility.[12]

In "The End" the narrator, on his descent toward total independence and primitivism, provisionally rents a cheap basement room (which he is, of course, eventually thrown out of) before his money is gone. His perspective, both physically and socially, corresponds to the lowest possible

male modernist point of view: "From my bed I saw the feet coming and going on the sidewalk. Certain evenings, when the weather was fine and I was equal to it, I fetched my chair ... and sat looking up into the skirts of the women passing by" (54). In "The Calmative," since the narrator is from the very beginning beyond the narrative stability of death, this typical male perspective belongs not to narrator but to modern "man" himself. The encounter is sudden: "the next thing was a man sitting beside me." The narrator's first impulse, to try again to fix himself in time and space, is proven utterly pointless: "He said a time, I don't remember which, a time that explained nothing, that's all I remember, and did not calm me. But what time could have done that?" (40). Nor can the man, who claims to be a traveler "not from these parts," help the narrator find his way out of the city space. But he might, instead, fulfil the narrator's desire for an "exchange" of words and stories. In fact, the man himself solicits a story: "But tell me," he says to the narrator, "the story of your life." The narrator is horrified -- "My life! I cried" -- because it is precisely his disorientation in the modern narrative order that prevents him from being able to tell it. Modern man, however, has no such trouble. "Shall I tell you mine, then you'll see what I mean. The account he gave was brief and dense, facts, without comment. That's what I call a life, he said, do you follow me now? It wasn't bad, his story,

positively fairy-like in places" (41).

"Facts, without comment," the opposite of the narrator's own tortuous self-reflexivity, becomes an ironic description of the narrative stability he longs for. But such a modern story cannot be "exchanged" freely. The man lets the narrator know right away what kind of story he wants to hear in return: "Are thighs much in your thoughts," the man asks him, "arses, cunts and environs. I didn't follow. No more erections naturally, he said. Erections? I said." Seeing that the narrator cannot exchange a good story in return, the man tries to sell him one of the "phials" he has in his black bag:

> I told him I had no money. No money! he cried. All of a sudden his hand came down on the back of my neck, his sinewy fingers closed and with a jerk and a twist he had me up against him. But instead of dispatching me he began to murmur words so sweet that I went limp and my head fell forward in his lap. Between the caressing voice and the fingers rowelling my neck the contrast was striking. But gradually the two things merged in a devastating hope.... (42)

Always referring the narrator's inability to tell, or exchange, stories to the originary expulsion -- "When it [the money] was gone I would have to get more, if I wanted to go on" begins the very first postwar "Nouvelle" -- Beckett also casts this final encounter in the city as the failure of even male sexual desire to generate an ordered narrative, one with a clear goal. Beckett mocks the male modernist vantage point and its chance urban encounter between the independent male observer and a female figure of

romance, replacing it with the primitive narrating persona's sexless acquiescence to the modern "man" -- a travelling salesman, the quintessential figure of so many joking, sexist stories. The contrast between the "caressing voice" and the threatening hand around the neck is a re-figuring of the dynamic tensions that appear throughout "The Calmative," between story and text, primitive and modern, beggar and bourgeois, grotesque body and cubo-futurist cylinder. They merge, like story and text, in a "devastating hope" for some new mode of storytelling. But this final encounter reveals nothing new: "I have reached this point (in my story) without anything having changed, for if anything had changed I'd think I'd know" (42) the narrator comments in the midst of the man's violent embrace. There is no "help" for the narrator in the city, no resolution to the tension between the longing for a fable and the havoc of shattered images.

Closure -- a chance to impose an order from the stable perspective of an endpoint -- can no longer be sought in the narrative space of the modernist city. Beckett, we recall, closes "The End" with a meta-textual destabilizing of psychological interpretation -- the return of repressed emotion -- and "The Expelled" with an ambivalence toward stories that was also a projection of some pre-modern world. At the end of "The Calmative" he explicitly negates the modern city, through whose emptied out image the narrator has been searching in his need for communication and

stories. Alone again he tries to find his way back to the Shepherd's Gate, to the space of refuge and writing beyond the rejecting-rejected modernity:

> At first nothing, then little by little ... a kind of massive murmur coming perhaps from the house that was propping me up. That reminded me that the houses were full of people, besieged, no, I don't know.... The sound was not continuous, but broken by silences possibly of consternation. I thought of ringing at the door and asking for shelter and protection till morning. But suddenly I was on my way again. But little by little, in a slow swoon, darkness fell about me.... I found myself admiring, all along the housefronts, the gradual blossoming of squares and rectangles, casement and sash, yellow, green, pink, according to the curtains and the blinds, finding that pretty. Then at last, before I fell, first to my knees, as cattle do, then on my face, I was in a throng. I didn't lose consciousness, when I lose consciousness it will not be to recover it. They paid no heed to me, though careful not to walk on me, a courtesy that must have touched me, it was what I had come out for. It was well with me, sated with dark and calm, lying at the feet of mortals .... But reality, too tired to look for the right word, was soon restored, the throng fell away, the light came back and I had no need to raise my head from the ground to know I was back in the same blinding void as before. (45)

From the mood of extreme alienation to the cubist-impressionist housefronts to the fall amidst the anonymous throng Beckett's image of this emptied out city evokes a modernism that only lands his narrator back in the "void" where he began. Indeed, one of the strongest and most influential aesthetic ideals of the interwar period, the role of the unconscious in artistic creation -- an idea to which Beckett himself had been very attracted (see chapter III) -- is derided in two ways. The narrator, whose paratactic logic defies any rational order, nevertheless

clings insistently to his "consciousness." But even more, it is the modernist valuing of the unconscious mind that he most detests: "But it's the end. Or have I been dreaming? No no, none of that, for dream is nothing, a joke, and significant what is worse" (43). Not even the unconscious meaning of dreams -- unraveled in Freud's Vienna, in Proust's urbane involuntary memories, in the Surrealist's aimless wandering of Paris streets -- can help restore him to stories and fables. Only ironically and negatively does the narrator get what he "had come out for": his resigned acceptance of the word "reality" signals for Beckett the end of modernism's struggle against realism and naturalism. The "void" -- encountered literally in the middle of the postwar city street -- is the only space possible outside of modernity.

But of course such a resignation does not entail a return to some prior notion of this always contested "reality," a rejoining of the narrative order with the rejected-rejecting social world. Through the creation of the beggar's mask, the primitive narrative persona, and through the thematic and formal rejection of the narrative order of the modern city, Beckett works out in these first postwar fictions a new narrative dynamic whose most general manifestation is the tension between story and text, a tension that he never separates from the social content etched upon the beggar's mask. In the next fiction he wrote

after the "Nouvelles," Molloy, Beckett plays out this tension and its juxtaposition with the social content in its definitive form -- even the organization of the novel into separate Molloy and Moran sections which intertextually efface the class division between the beggar Molloy and the bourgeois Moran is an expansion of the techniques and themes that have their inception in the narrator's expulsion from the charitable institution and from the narrative orders of modernity (Chapters I and II). And, if in the final novel of the trilogy and the "Texts for Nothing," the "text" seems to completely efface the story and writing becomes Beckett's only subject matter, the struggle to "go on" -- or to go silent -- is always evoked as a conflict of needs that cannot be resolved in the realm of writing, of art, alone. Just as the narrator of "The End" realizes that his expressionless face as mask will cost him his marginal status as beggar, will ruin his ability to evoke the passer-by's (and the reader's) pity, the narrator of "The Calmative" knows that his foray into the emptied-out modern city -- into the rejected-rejecting social world -- is both necessary and costly: "I wasn't returning empty-handed, not quite," he admits of his "encounters" far from his refuge, "I was taking back with me the virtual certainty that I was still of this world, of that world too, in a way. But I was paying the price" (37).

The "price," for Beckett, is a matter of cultural

values. For in the "Nouvelles" Beckett addresses his audience in a new language and a new style that rejects much of the stylistic sophistication of his own interwar writing and of the artistic community for whom Joycean modernism served as the overarching ideal. But this rewriting of modernism involves new aesthetic values, new hierarchies concerning the function of art and narrative communication which raise important issues about the more general question of Beckett's place in the transformations from earlier modernist to contemporary or "postmodern" culture. It is to these issues we must now turn.

4. Author or "Writing Subject?": Beckett and Postmodern Fiction

In the postwar "Nouvelles" Beckett began to find solutions to the aesthetic problems that had contributed to the "failure" of his earlier fiction -- works, as I have shown, shaped by a set of contradictory aestheticist, "high" modernist and avant-gardist values and practices. With the abandonment of the omniscient game with words and the creation of the first-person narrating persona of the beggar's mask, and with the rejection of the modern narrative theme-form of the metropolis and the turn toward a geopolitically placeless "textuality" (the emphasis on the act of narrating and the problem of storytelling), Beckett began to explore explicitly the problem of aesthetic-narrative communication. At the core of this problem was the

need to re-imagine a relation between art and "social reality," a need that his early work always evoked but then avoided through its shifting, clashing cultural values, a contradictory collage of styles and themes most clearly evinced in the narrative perspective's separation from the represented world of the bohemian-aesthete protagonist. On one hand, in Beckett's first postwar fictions, "social reality" becomes even more attenuated, but on the other, this rejection of the social world is made into a problem affecting the voice and represented actions of the suffering, speaking beggar's mask: it is a rejected-rejecting social world whose existence is manifested -- ironically but with the new communicative force of the simplified language -- in the beggar's "devastating" self-image as victim of his own will to independence and individuality. Correspondingly, communication is no longer just an antagonism between an aesthetically "advanced" writer and a public "ignorant" (as Beckett rebuked them in his essay on Joyce; see Chapter III) of a new aesthetic rationality. Rather, communication is now imagined as a problem situated between the narrator and his own "story," as a difficulty <u>shared</u> by storyteller and reader alike. The turn toward "text," as it is worked out always in conjunction with the beggar's mask, is the sign and vehicle of this newly imagined relationship.

Does Beckett's rewriting of his own struggle with

modernism make him a postmodern writer, a "late modernist" or merely the "non plus ultra" (Lukács' term) of certain tendencies prevalent in modernism since the turn of the century? Or is his work transitional, a link between two cultural moments that belongs wholly to neither? On one hand, the question is entirely tautological: it all depends on how we characterize these contested and debated categories in the first place. But on the other hand, the question is revealing if viewed in relation to the broader cultural issues underlying the attempt to theorize a "postmodernist" fiction or art. My purpose, then, is not to place Beckett in one category or another, but rather -- working from my assertion that Beckett's postwar fiction "solved" problems stemming from the contradictions in his earlier attempt to incorporate divergent modernist values -- to examine critically some influential ideas about postmodern literature (and how these ideas themselves relate to views of canonical modernism). Beckett's work -- as I have argued -- has been assimilated to concepts of metafiction (in both postmodernist and poststructuralist views) that ignore the actual process and significance of his turn toward the text and the re-imagining of the relation between art and social reality underlying it. Theories of canonical postmodern fiction, as Raymond Williams observed about theories of modernism before them, are already beginning to efface the "internal diversity of

methods and emphases" (Politics 43) that characterize the development of postwar literature. Untangling Beckett's entwinement with the postmodern sense of meta-fiction will, in turn, help clarify some of the issues and contexts surrounding the emergence of his postwar cultural politics.

There are three main themes around which ideas of postmodern fiction have developed: the first concerns the "ontological" status of fictional discourse itself (McHale) and related notions of meta-textuality, intertextuality and representation; the second concerns the idea of "the writing subject" (Foucault, Barthes) and the relation between author, reader and text; and the third concerns the "great divide" (Huyssen) between "high" and "low" (popular, mass, etc.) culture. A fuller understanding of Beckett's postwar project needs to bridge some of the gaps between these themes. McHale, Foucault and Barthes, and Huyssen will serve in my argument as influential proponents of paradigmatic statements about the meaning of postmodern fiction.[13]

Brian McHale's Postmodernist Fiction (1987) has emerged as one of the most influential attempts to describe a general shift in narrative forms since the postwar period and to build a canon of postmodernist works. McHale's description takes into account recent attempts at defining postmodern literature (Lodge, Hassan and Wollen, for example [7]) and has been cited as a definitive statement about postmodern fiction in major socio-economic (Harvey 1989),

feminist (Suleiman 1990) and post-colonial (Appiah 1992) analyses of postmodern culture. Given its influence and the pivotal role Beckett plays in his argument, it is worth looking at McHale's discussion in some detail.

For McHale, modernist fiction "as a whole" is organized by what he calls an "epistemological dominant": "modernist fiction deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions such as ... How can I interpret this world of which I am part? ... How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability? .... How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of knowledge? And so on" (9). Corresponding to these concerns are a number of characteristically modernist formal devices: "the multiplication and juxtaposition of perspectives, the focalization of all the evidence through a single 'center of consciousness' ... virtuoso variants on interior monologue," etc. Modernism thus "transfers the epistemological difficulties of its characters to its readers; its strategies ... <u>simulate</u> for the reader the very same problems of accessibility, readability and limitation of knowledge that plague" the represented and narrating characters (9-10; emphasis in text).

Postmodern fiction, on the other hand, is organized by an "ontological" dominant. It "deploys strategies which engage and foreground questions like ... Which world is

this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it." Such questions "bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world it projects.... What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text?.... How is a projected world structured?" (10). McHale underscores the fact that, when pushed far enough, epistemological questions inevitably become ontological questions, and vice-versa. But he claims that postmodern writing self-consciously foregrounds ontological questions and puts epistemological ones in the background (11). The best way to see this shift, says McHale, is to look at "writers who in the course of their careers travel the entire trajectory from modernist to postmodernist poetics" (11). Beckett is, he recognizes, one of these writers.[14]

McHale isolates the increasing meta-textual and intertextual features in the novels of the trilogy as the sign of this "travel" from modernism to the postmodern. Thus, while on one hand the juxtaposition of the two separate narrators in Molloy resembles "a minimal structure of modernist perspectivism," the "internal contradictions" inhering in the two narratives and the "blurring of identities" between the two narrators already begin "to destabilize the projected world and ... foreground its ontological structure." This destabilizing is taken further

in Malone Dies through intertextuality and a conflation of diegetic levels. First, "Malone's claim to authorship of Molloy has the effect of foregrounding the act ... of fictionalizing.... Malone's stories of Macmann .... constitute a second, embedded ontological level." But the novel ends with "the text breaking off while we are still at the level of the secondary world" thus "leaving us to wonder which was the 'more real' world." This second novel of the trilogy evinces a "limit modernist ... hesitation between an epistemological ... and an ontological dominant." This limit is exceeded in The Unnamable where the narrator claims to have been the author of "all the worlds of Beckett's earlier fictions." Like Malone, he "projects worlds, but he displays greater freedom of ontological improvisation than Malone ever did, constructing, revising, deconstructing, abolishing and reconstructing his characters and their worlds." Even more, the narrator is aware of his own status as a fiction and "tries to imagine himself as the character of someone else," a "they" or "master" who must inevitably be a construct of yet someone even more "otologically superior." The narrator "can never get outside of his own imaginings to the reality of his ultimate creator." The novel radically "foregrounds the fundamental ontological discontinuity between the fictional and the real" (12-13).

McHale's analysis implies, then, that while modernism retained a continuity between social reality and fiction by

focusing on epistemological problems about knowing the world, Beckett moves beyond modernism and this continuity by proclaiming, with every resource of narrative discourse, that fictional worlds can only relate to other projected, fictional worlds. McHale makes this aspect of his argument explicit when he attempts to account for why this "ontological" emphasis becomes dominant during the last half of our century. Following (partially and implicitly) Baudrillard's vision of a contemporary world of "simulacra," McHale claims that postmodern fiction employs, in the final analysis, the logic of a trans-historical mimesis:

> [P]ostmodernist fiction turns out to be mimetic after all, but this imitation of reality is accomplished not so much at the level of its content, which is often manifestly un- or anti-realistic, as at the level of form... what postmodern fiction imitates, the object of its mimesis, is the pluralistic and anarchistic ontological landscape of advanced industrial cultures.... one of the features of this ontological landscape is its permeation by secondary realities, especially mass-media fictions [for McHale, "the morning newspaper ... the car radio ...sports ... holidays ... a James Bond adventure movie"] and one of the most typical experiences of members of this culture is that of the transition from one of these fictional worlds to the paramount reality of everyday life, or from paramount reality to fiction.... And how does postmodernist fiction achieve this modeling of our pluralistic ontological landscape? Precisely by foregrounding ... the ontological structures of the text ... (38-39)

Ultimately, McHale's account of postmodernism relies on notions of literature, culture and mimesis that, as I will discuss in relation to Huyssen below, seem to recapitulate key modernist values. For McHale, there is a strict separation between postmodern fiction and mass culture

(which becomes part of literature's subject matter, its "object of mimesis"); popular culture constitutes a "secondary reality" that is neither the "reality of everyday life" nor has the aesthetic power of postmodern fiction, whose textual games themselves reveal ("foreground") the fictionality of this secondary reality. The mimetic logic McHale describes (which he also likens to a "mirror of reality" [39]) does not really differ from modernist notions of mimesis which claimed that fiction presented the image, perception, "impression" or "sense" of things and facts (see chapter I) rather than things or facts themselves. Indeed, McHale's focus on meta-fiction and inter-textuality seems to construct a neo-modernist concept of aesthetic autonomy: what distinguishes the canonical works of postmodernism from the "secondary reality" of "mass media fictions" in "advanced industrial cultures" is their formal emphasis on being absolutely and self-consciously fictional, "discontinuous" from the real world and its "anarchistic" second reality. Like canonical male modernism, postmodernism's importance can only be established by separating itself from the illusions ("secondary reality") of mass and popular culture. The ontological dominant of postmodernism is to the anarchy of popular images and representations what the epistemological dominant of modernism was to the naivete of realism and positivism. The shift in emphasis is not really a shift in its "underlying

systematicity" (7), as McHale claims, nor a shift in its social function or values. The "discontinuity" McHale emphasizes is not, in effect, between meta-fiction and the world, but between the works of Beckett, Pynchon, Robbe-Grillet, etc. and the world of mass and popular culture.

The underlying logic of McHale's argument had already been expressed, in concise form, in Roland Barthes' "Structural Analysis of Narratives" (1966), an essay which like McHale's claims to be descriptive but which in effect relies on evaluative oppositions. While not yet claiming, as he was to do in S/Z, the productive "writerly" text -- which closely resembles McHale's postmodernist fiction and which includes the works of Beckett and Robbe-Grillet -- as his value, Barthes nevertheless sets the writerly (or, here, "avant-garde") text in opposition to the mass cultural narrative. The difference between them is exactly what McHale implies it is:

> [E]very narrative is dependent on a 'narrative situation,' the set of protocols according to which the narrative is 'consumed.' In so-called 'archaic' societies, the narrative situation is heavily coded; nowadays, avant-garde literature alone still dreams of reading protocols.... Generally, however, our society takes the greatest pains to conjure away the coding of the narrative situation: there is no counting the number of narrational devices which seek to naturalize the subsequent narrative by making it the outcome of some natural circumstance and thus, as it were, 'disinaugurating' it.... The reluctance to declare its codes characterizes bourgeois society and the mass culture issuing from it: both demand signs which do not look like signs. (Image 116)

On one hand, there is a mass culture that functions

like McHale's "second reality": it strives to naturalize itself rather than stress the "discontinuity" between fiction and reality. On the other, there is an avant-gardist (Barthes here cites Michel Butor, who also appears in McHale's canon) text which does "declare its codes" in order to emphasize its ontological status and its distance from nature. Barthes' later formulation of the ideal writerly text as "a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds" (S/Z 5) repeats the opposition in a more abstract language. "The enormous mass of our literature," Barthes claims, are "readerly" texts which strive to present themselves as "a structure of signifieds," a set of organized meanings -- this is McHale's "secondary reality" of "mass-media" fictions. The writerly, avant-gardist text, however, explicitly emphasizes the "signifier," writing not as meaning but as the constructing of meaning, "production without product" (4-6). This is the mimesis of postmodernist fiction: it discloses the secondary reality as fiction, the world of signifieds as signifiers. If, in McHale, postmodernist fiction turns out to be not an opposition to modernism but to the mass culture of contemporary society, for Barthes the writerly text is nothing but the negation of the "mass of literature": "for the plural [writerly] text, there cannot be a narrative structure, a grammar, or a logic" (6). There are only signifiers as signifiers, fictions foregrounded as fictions. Postmodernist or writerly

fiction stresses its ontological status as signifier, as discourse, it "declares its codes," while the popular or mass culture fiction only functions ideologically as a second reality or a second nature.

One of Barthes' most interesting points -- though one of his least convincing -- is that somehow writerly texts change the relationship between literature and reader. For Barthes, the readerly (bourgeois, mass cultural) text is a "product" intended to be consumed; it makes the reader a consumer. But the writerly text can only be "produced" by the reader him- or herself, because, as nothing but a galaxy of signifiers, it creates indeterminate ("plural") configurations of meaning: it is not a reified product whose meaning can be used up or exchanged for something else (i.e., for an interpretation). The "ideal" writerly text demands that the reader actively construct a reading out of its "galaxy of signifiers," a reading which is only provisional and can be infinitely "rewritten." Aside from his use of terms both scientific (signifier) and abstract (galaxy), it is difficult to distinguish substantially Barthes' claims from the normal-language modernist claim for innovation and difficulty. Any novel that breaks with the existing conventions of narrative representation (and the reifying conventions of bourgeois society) and that makes the reader work at reading could be said to be "writerly" to some degree. To the extent that McHale's idea of

postmodernist fiction rests, ultimately, on the way such meta-fiction discloses, through mimesis, the world of mass culture as a world of fictions (signifiers claiming to be signifieds), it is equally a theory of modernism in a different guise. The writerly and the postmodernist are, it seems, trapped in the logic of modernist writing. If there is a difference, it is one of degree or variation, not of function or composition.

Closely related to Barthes' notion of the writerly, and equally influential, is Foucault's idea of the dissolution of the "writing subject" in "contemporary writing," which he expressed, in paradigmatic form, in the celebrated essay "What is an Author?" Both McHale (who cites him throughout his book) and Foucault stress the way this new writing breaks down distinctions between author and narrator, author and character, story and meta-story, fiction and other types of writing. While for McHale this breaking of boundaries serves to stress the ontological status of fiction and its discontinuity from the world, for Foucault it signals the way in which new writing resists notions of "individualism" and advances a "proliferation of meaning" that the bourgeois or modern category of the "author" ideologically limits (118-19). Beckett is his first and most important example of the new writing:

> Beckett nicely formulates the theme with which I would like to begin: "'What does it matter who is speaking,' someone said, 'what does it matter who is speaking.'" In this indifference appears one of the fundamental

> ethical principles of contemporary writing (écriture). I say "ethical" because this indifference is not really a trait characterizing the manner in which one speaks and writes, but rather a kind of immanent rule... dominating [writing as a practice].... today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression.... it is an interplay of signs arranged less according to its signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier.... a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears. (101-2)

There are several themes -- explicit and implicit -- running through Foucault's use of Beckett as an exemplar of "contemporary writing" which are relevant here. At the most general level, Foucault is advancing and advocating a kind of postmodernism in the sense that his essay (and perhaps his entire project) is intended to deconstruct and move beyond key modern and modernist categories: the "author" as genius, writing as representation or meaning (as signified rather than signifier), literature as a form of "expression," the autonomous individual, etc.[15] In doing so he assimilates Beckett into his own project. For the sake of brevity, I only wish to point out rather than belabor the fact that at a performative level Foucault's authoritative citing of a famous "author" at the beginning of his own deconstruction of the ideological "author function" is a contradiction of the type that poststructuralism, as a whole, cannot seem to avoid.[16] Indeed, much of Foucault's argument -- about how historically "it has not always been the same types of texts which have required attribution to an author" and how "in the seventeenth or eighteenth

century" it became necessary for literary texts to be attached to an individual author while scientific discourse became detached from the authority of the individual (Hippocrates, Pliny, etc.) and instead became "authorized" through experimentation and empirical evidence -- is actually an unacknowledged articulation of a Weberian view of the increasing differentiation of the spheres of science, culture and religion in modernity. Foucault's explanation of the historical "author function" implicitly employs a kind of humanist or sociological analysis that Foucault himself philosophically rejects. The contradictions arising from attempts to assimilate Beckett into theories of postmodernist fiction are similar to the contradictions implicit in Foucault's project of breaking with modernist forms of intellectual practice. What claims to be postmodernist or a break away from modernism is in effect a working out of ideas, problems and oppositions already a part of, or implied in, the modernist intellect and imagination.[17]

The contradictions, however, are instructive. Foucault cites "Text for Nothing 3," a post-trilogy work in which Beckett's turn toward textuality is most pronounced but which, as I have argued, still bears the signs of, and is constructed through, the dynamic interaction with the rejected-rejecting social content. Like McHale and Barthes, he notes how Beckett's work stresses "the signifier" rather

than the signified. This results, Foucault claims, in a move away from "expression," it releases a positive "plurality of meaning" (119), and it serves to de-emphasize the importance of the individual "writing subject," the individual author, which for Foucault is a sign of power and control, "a certain functional principle by which, in our culture, one limits, excludes and chooses; in short, by which one impedes the free circulation ... the free composition ... of fiction" (119). Thus, Beckett's work consciously (if it's an "ethical principle" it must be conscious) strives to foreground its own status as non-expression, as signifier rather than signified, as "indifferent" to questions relating the act of writing to historically situated individuals. While on one hand Foucault seems to impart to these features an abstractly democratic value (as his advocacy of the "free circulation" of fiction implies), on the other hand he wants to avoid any vision of society or history that would rely on a modern notion of individual freedom. That the writing subject -- along with the author function and restrictive notions of authenticity -- must dissolve into "the anonymity of a murmur" (119) emerges as a kind of pre-condition or sign of a more democratic or free social world.

These aspects of Foucault's essay add something missing from both McHale and Barthes. Its more historical dimension -- which, I argue, does not in substance diverge

from modernity's own self-critique -- implies that there is a significant, reciprocal relationship between the rise, in the modern era, of the ideological, restrictive "author function" and this new writing in which "the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality" (102). But it is exactly this type of causal relationship that Foucault's anti-modernist mode of argumentation can't -- or rather, resists -- making. As Foucault recognizes from the very outset, "this indifference [to questions of individual authorship] is not really a trait characterizing the manner in which one speaks and writes" (101). There is a gap between the historically situated notion of the "author" and the more amorphous poststructural notion of the "writing subject": an unexplained divide between the modernity Foucault analyses ("our era of industrial and bourgeois society, of individualism and private property" [119]) and the apparent creative response of contemporary writers like Beckett. This gap, signalled by Foucault as something quite concrete ("the manner in which one speaks and writes"), can only be described historically, as a development within modernity itself, a question not of the "writing subject" but of the relation of the writer to the modern institutions of art, literature, culture, education, etc., through which the author function operates; in other words, it is a question of the relationship between Beckett's consciously chosen project of dissolving, in fiction, the "writing

subject" and the cultural-political situation of the postwar writer.

It is this type of historical-institutional question which is raised in Andreas Huyssen's account of postmodernism and postmodernist literature. Indeed, he begins by questioning what McHale and many others take for granted, "whether this transformation [in the arts] has generated genuinely new aesthetic forms or ... mainly recycles techniques and strategies of modernism itself, reinscribing them into an altered cultural context" (181). In many respects, Huyssen's analysis is intended as a corrective to, or contextualization of, both formalist (like McHale's) and post-structuralist accounts of the avant-garde, modernism and postmodernism. While McHale and Barthes construct their definitions of the postmodern or the writerly through a neo-modernist opposition with mass, popular or bourgeois culture -- outlining a kind of neo-modernist theory of aesthetic autonomy -- Huyssen places the relationship between postmodernism and mass culture at the center of his argument. Working through an analysis of the cultural politics of the avant-garde between the wars, a critique of Adorno's view of modernism as a "reaction formation" to the culture industry and commodification (57), and referring to Christa Wolf's observations on male and female aesthetic subjectivity, Huyssen reconstructs a model of male modernism which views the high canonical works of

Flaubert, Kafka and Joyce as themselves shaped in a dynamic relationship with everyday cultural experiences:

> Contrary to the claims of champions of the autonomy of art, contrary also to the ideologists of textuality, the realities of modern life and the ominous expansion of mass culture throughout the social realm are always already inscribed into the articulation of aesthetic modernism. Mass culture has always been the hidden subtext of the modernist project. (47)

Citing Adorno's remark to Walter Benjamin -- "Both [modernist art and mass culture] bears the scars of capitalism, both contain elements of change. Both are torn halves of freedom to which, however, they do not add up" (58) -- Huyssen wants to understand how -- or if -- postmodernist art and literature makes an attempt at rejoining these torn aspects of a democratic culture: "At stake in this debate about postmodernism is the great divide between modern art and mass culture, which the art movements of the 1960s intentionally began to dismantle in their practical critique of the high modernist canon" (59). In many respects, Huyssen's argument has little to do with the immediate postwar fiction of writers like Beckett. While his contention is that "the most significant trends within postmodernism have challenged modernism's relentless hostility to mass culture"(188), by "modernism" Huyssen is explicitly referring to "a certain austere image of 'high modernism' as advanced by the New Critics and other custodians of modernist culture" (189). Thus,

> the revolt of the 1960s [in pop art, Beat literature, Donald Barthelme, John Cage, for example] was never a

> rejection of modernism per se, but rather a revolt against that version of modernism which had been domesticated in the 1950s, become part of the liberal-conservative consensus of the times .... In other words, the revolt sprang precisely from the success of modernism, from the fact that in the United States, as in West Germany and France, for that matter, modernism had been perverted into a form of affirmative culture. (190)

"Against the codified high modernism of the preceding decades" (the decades in which Beckett wrote his major fiction), Huyssen contends, "the postmodernism of the 1960s tried to revitalize the heritage of the European avant-garde" (188) (like Peter Bürger -- see Chapter III -- Huyssen carefully distinguishes avant-gardist from other modernist cultural politics). It did so in four ways: first, it displayed "a powerful sense of the future and new frontiers, of rupture and discontinuity, of crisis and generational conflict, an imagination reminiscent of ... Dada and surrealism rather than high modernism" (191); second, it "included an iconoclastic attack on ... the 'institution art' ... the ways in which art's role in society is perceived and defined ... produced, marketed, distributed, and consumed" (191-92); third, like the 1920s avant-garde's excitement about photography and film it embodied an uncritical "technological optimism" in the "new media" of television, video and computers (193); and fourth, it was characterized by a "largely uncritical attempt to validate popular culture as a challenge to the canon of high art, modernist or traditional" (194). Huyssen relates this

understanding of the emergence of postmodernism in America to a European context.

> For a number of historical reasons [including the traditionally weaker ties in the U.S. between "high" art and political and economic hegemony] the ethos of artistic avantgardism as iconoclasm, as probing reflection upon the ontological status of art in modern society .... was culturally not yet as exhausted in the U.S. of the 1960s as it was in Europe at the same time. From a European perspective, therefore, it looked like the endgame of the historical avantgarde rather than like the breakthrough to new frontiers it claimed to be. My point here is that American postmodernism of the 1960s was both: an American avantgarde and the endgame of international avantgardism. (195)[18]

As far as Beckett's place within these transformations, Huyssen seems to agree with John Barth, quoting his 1980 claim that Beckett's Stories and Texts for Nothing, a "late modernist marvel," "was the effective exhaustion not of language or of literature but of the aesthetic of high modernism" (qtd. in Huyssen 189). Within Huyssen's cultural-institutional framework, Beckett's most intense period of fiction writing, from Murphy in the-mid 1930s to the Texts in 1955, falls into a kind of gap between the works of literary high modernism and the reaction, beginning in the late 1950s primarily in the U.S., to canonical modernism and the attempt to recapture -- often times naively or uncritically -- the cultural politics of the avant-gardes of the first three decades of the century. Huyssen describes this gap in terms of the historical and cultural pressures that in part led to the canonization of high modernism in terms of an "austere" aesthetic autonomy:

> [T]he primary place of what I am calling the great divide [between high modernist and mass culture] was the age of Stalin and Hitler when the threat of totalitarian control over all culture forged a variety of defensive strategies meant to protect culture in general, not just modernism. Thus conservative critics such as Ortega y Gasset argued that high culture needed to be protected from the "revolt of the masses." Left critics like Adorno insisted that genuine art resist its incorporation into the capitalist culture industry which he defined as the total administration of culture from above.... It is surely no coincidence that the Western codification of modernism as canon of the 20th century took place during the 1940s and 1950s, preceding and during the Cold War.... [T]he age of Hitler, Stalin, and the Cold War produced specific accounts of modernism, such as those of Clement Greenberg and Adorno, whose aesthetic categories cannot be totally divorced from the pressures of that era. (197)

If, for Huyssen, the postmodernism that emerged in the 1960s has any enduring importance, it is mainly in relation to the way in which it has moved beyond this "logic of modernism" in response to new historical challenges: "the great divide that separated high modernism from mass culture and that was codified in the various classical accounts of modernism no longer seems relevant to postmodernist artistic or critical sensibilities" (197). From this perspective, formalist and poststructuralist attempts to construct a model of postmodernist, writerly or contemporary fiction (or writing) that ignore or implicitly re-construct the "great divide" belong more to the sensibility of the period of modernism's canonization than to the cultural politics of a <u>post</u>modern sensibility.

* * *

None of these accounts, by themselves, adequately

explain or describe Beckett's postwar response to the modernisms he had experienced in Dublin, London and Paris between the wars -- a response best emblematized in the image of the beggar's inexpressive mask and the shift from the modernist city to the "space" of the text. Yet when taken together they suggest how Beckett's innovations (in language, style, themes and forms) of the postwar period emerge within a set of aesthetic and cultural values in a process of transformation. The "ontological" emphasis of his fiction that foregrounds the "discontinuity between the fictional and the real" and the meta-textual strategies through which the fiction declares its "codes" in a "galaxy of signifiers" and (in theory) makes reception into an active production rather than a passive consumption are features -- as we have seen -- that link, rather than separate, Beckett's fiction to modernist aesthetics. Yet from Foucault's perspective, this turn toward the "signifier" and the turn away from "expression" is tied to an historical process in which literature becomes bound up with modern forms of control and the organized, institutional mediations between reader, writer and text that limit the "proliferation of meaning." The individualistic "author function" is itself a sign of literature's inextricable ties to the modern institutions of publishing, criticism and academe. Beckett's narrating persona, the beggar's face which is also a mask -- "a mask

of dirty old hairy leather, with two holes and a slit ... too far gone for the old trick of please your honor and God reward you and pity upon me" -- and the ironic failure of the beggar's voice -- "I tried to groan, Help! Help! But the tone that came out was that of polite conversation" -- is itself a startling image of inexpressiveness and the effacement of the postwar "writing subject." But while Foucault, in his poststructuralist project, posed the move away from expression and the dissolution of the writing subject as a solution or corrective to the restrictive "author function," Beckett's narrative creation of the mask poses this dissolution as an explicit contradiction, as a problem in aesthetic communication which is thematized throughout his postwar fiction. The writing subject is not "dissolved" -- not in "The End" or in the later "Text" that Foucault quotes -- but rather forced to take up an untenable, contradictory position, both inside and outside the modern, bourgeois institution of "polite conversation" it wants to escape.

Both the emphasis on the "signifier" and the effacement of the writer behind the beggar's mask -- a mask that hides no authentic self behind it -- can be viewed as extensions of modernist concerns with protecting "high" culture, as Huyssen put it, from the control of bourgeois, capitalist and totalitarian pressures to fuse art with an accommodating elitist humanism, with commerce or with propaganda. But as

we have seen, the techniques and themes in the "Nouvelles" evince a mode of expression quite distinct from interwar "high" modernism, a mode of expression that Beckett created through an explicit rejection of his earlier, mandarin games with language and learning and with the theme-form of the metropolis. As Huyssen has convincingly argued, the postwar period saw the consolidation -- within the (overwhelmingly male) institutions of art criticism, academe and the museum -- of a version of (overwhelmingly male) modernism that was itself becoming the official bourgeois culture against which both modernists and avant-gardists had tried to promote their own, difficult, at times intentionally outrageous, unreadable and offensive work. In this sense, Beckett's postwar fiction, with its turn to the text, occupies a cultural-historical space in which the tensions between the actual aesthetic practices of the interwar years -- tensions, as I have described them, between aestheticism, Joycean modernism, avant-gardist provocation and the "tendency" literature of the thirties -- were in the process of being flattened out, reduced to a linear, teleological narrative of an austere, formalist "Modernism." For Beckett, however, the tensions of the past were still operant, his failure to negotiate them a formative pressure.

What this pressure resulted in cannot be described as a "late modernism" that simply followed a neo-aestheticist logic of aesthetic autonomy, nor a "postmodernist" attempt

to break down the "great divide," or even less an "endgame" of international avant-gardism, but rather a distinct re-imagining of the idea of aesthetic autonomy itself. On one hand, in the voice of the new narrating persona there is an attempt -- which had its origins in the transitional Watt -- to create a communicative language and a thematics of identityless suffering and isolation, always linked to the rejected-rejecting social reality. Vocabulary, syntax, allusions and symbols are greatly simplified. On the other hand, this communicative directness serves a contradictory purpose: it is only by making the narrative voice and themes communicative that the disruptive turn toward the text can be effective. And the turn toward the "text" is narrated and given thematic substance through a rejection of the place of modernism itself -- the city so important to both the Joycean and surrealist projects. Aesthetic autonomy -- that is, those qualities of the art work that "protect" it (theoretically) from commodification and propaganda and distinguish it from the "polite conversation" of an affirmative belles-lettres -- is no longer, for Beckett, an opposition between high art and popular culture, or between the Joycean modernism of the "transition" group and "social reality." Rather, it is manifested, in the work itself, as a relationship between fiction and the reader in which the problem of communication, of understanding the link between the narrating voice and the rejected-rejecting social

reality, is itself thematized. The paradox and the contradictions in the dynamic tensions between the desire for "story" and the modernist "havoc of images" are embedded in the voice and self-understanding of the narrative persona himself. The reader and the narrator are lost, together, in a world bereft of any stable narrative or social order.

But there is a "price" to pay for both this new communicativeness and the motivated, disruptive turn toward the text. The price is manifested in the writing as suffering, as the narrator's pathetic wallowing in the shit-covered "kingdom" of his independence from the social world and its literature of polite conversation. For the reader, the price is a new form of difficulty, a price that many readers are not willing to -- or indeed cannot -- pay. Beckett's first postwar fiction, and the increasingly difficult and inter-dynamic fusion of story and text which follows in the trilogy and the "Texts for Nothing," reject the narrative values of popular culture as much as they reject key features of the modernisms of the past. If Beckett continued to write from what Huyssen calls modernism's "pedestal of high art," it is a pedestal whose foundations Beckett makes contradictory and whose pretensions his "tone of polite conversation" parodies .

In the later fictions, the dynamic tension of the rejecting-rejected social world remains the driving force, and the problem of aesthetic communication so strikingly

etched in the suffering, faceless mask of the beggar reaches an even more acute expression. In The Unnamable, the final novel of the trilogy and in many ways the culmination of the innovative move away from modernism begun in 1946, the severe need to communicate, coming into maximum conflict and tension with an even more severely contradictory social content, compels Beckett toward a new theme-form: the "totally administered" social and cultural world in which the divisions between "self" and "other," individual and society, freedom and compulsion, collapse. It is a concern Beckett shares not only with a number of other postwar international male writers (such as Robbe-Grillet, Borges, Gombrowicz and Orwell) but also with cultural theorists, such as Adorno, Barthes and Sartre, who were trying to describe a new postwar situation affecting the relationship between art and politics, writing and society. It is Beckett's working out of this theme-form -- the ways in which he imagines the only solution to problems of artistic communication as a denial of the tradition of European male modernism that ultimately authorizes his own art -- that is the subject of my last chapter.

NOTES

1. Throughout this chapter I use the terms modern, modernism and modernity to mean somewhat different things in different contexts. Here, I refer to the very conventional notion of literary modernism -- Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Kafka, the experimental avant-garde, etc. Elsewhere, I refer more specifically to the "historical avant garde," "aestheticism" "Joycean modernism," etc, in order to stress the very great differences within "modernist" works and writers. I also want to stress that the manner in which Beckett experienced and understood these works and writers does not necessarily correspond to either the conventional views of modernism nor to the more recent re-evaluations of modernism, such as in Bürger and Williams (see Chapter III; also, see below, section 4, for how the conventional, academic-critical sense of modernism began to be constructed and canonized during the postwar decade under discussion in this chapter).

2. See Nadeau, Part Two, for a description of the first surrealist experiments with, and ideas about, automatic writing, dreams, the unconscious, etc., beginning in 1923; See Chapter 14 for the split, along cultural-political lines, between Aragon and Breton after Aragon's participation in the Second International Congress of Revolutionary Writers in Kharkov. See also Breton's reference to the "social face" and the "poetic face" of the controversy surrounding Aragon's famous poem "Red Front" (reprinted in Nadeau 296).

3. Beckett refers to Stein's "logographs" in the often-cited "German Letter" of 1937 (Disjecta 172).

4. See the epilogue for a discussion of Adorno's concepts of aesthetic rationality and aesthetic autonomy.

5. Beckett's switch to French as the primary language of composition is part of his reformulation of problems inherent in his earlier fiction in English. Yet, for all the quite sophisticated and complex psycho-dynamic and linguistic-metaphoric explanations critics have come up with for the meaning of this switch, it seems to me that there are two quite practical reasons that -- for whatever other motives Beckett may have had or whatever other effects such a change entailed -- underlie his move to French. First, he wanted to sever his relationship to any national concept of literature -- he became one of a number of international writers, like Borges or Gombrowicz, who self-consciously distanced themselves from any easy identification between

"nation" and "literature," a response to the nationalism of the first half of the century that had such tragic results. Secondly, and independently of the first more ideological motive, was the fact that his reception by the English-reading public had been abysmal. Censored in Ireland, ignored for the most part in England, unknown in the U.S., he looked to the French intellectual and artistic community as his new public. See Hill (40-58) for a post-structuralist and psycho-analytic discussion of how the simultaneous existence of French and English versions of Beckett's postwar fiction contributes to the destabilizing of identity in his work; see Fletcher (94-99) for how Beckett used French as a way of simplifying his style and making his writing more direct and emotively satirical. I deal here with Beckett's English versions of the "Nouvelles." The discrepancies and minor changes between the two versions do not affect my readings or general argument.

6. Beckett wrote five fictional works in French before he began Molloy in 1947: "La Fin" (originally titled "Suite"), "L'Expulsé," "La Calmant," "Premier Amour" and "Mercier et Camier." These were eventually translated as "The End," "The Expelled," "The Calmative," "First Love," and "Mercier and Camier." Of these, Beckett was originally only interested in publishing three -- "The End," "The Expelled" and "The Calmative," the definitive French versions of which appeared together in the 1955 volume Nouvelles et textes pour rien. Many years later, after he had become a world famous author, he published, in French and English, the other two works. In this chapter I focus on the three "Nouvelles" that Beckett saw as representative of his best work and which he wished to have published immediately. See below for why only the first half of "Suite" ("La Fin") was published in Les Temps Modernes.

7. David Lloyd has attempted to read the contradictions about authenticity in Beckett's fiction as "an aesthetic of non-identity..... [which] equally writes out the inauthenticity enforced upon the colonized subject" (55). For Lloyd, this is a sign of Beckett's critical rejection of the Celtic Revival's "fetishization of national identity" (50) in which "Irish nationalists reproduce in their very opposition to the Empire a narrative of universal development which is fundamental to the legitimation of imperialism" (46). Lloyd's reading of Beckett is both too narrow and too broad. On one hand, for this type of analysis one would have to understand Beckett's rejection of "authenticity" in relation to ideologies of nationalism in general and not only in the context of colonization, since Beckett understood himself in the context of European modernism and the avant-garde. On the other hand, (as I will discuss in section 4 of this chapter and Chapter VI) in a

certain sense Beckett reinscribes "authenticity" by invoking new ideas of aesthetic autonomy -- Lloyd never deals with Beckett's relationship to the institution of art. Perhaps more importantly, Lloyd's argument rests on an internal contradiction: if Beckett really does reject all forms of "identity," then there is no compelling reason to read him in an Irish context. Lloyd implicitly assumes that because Beckett was born in Ireland, he is an Irish writer; Beckett himself (unlike Joyce) had no interest in being an Irish writer and throughout his works he parodies such a notion. Lloyd has to create Beckett as an authentic Irish writer (Lloyd himself admits his reading is "strained" [41]) in order to show that Beckett then rejects Irish authenticity. It would be more accurate to say that Beckett rejected the notion of national literatures altogether and occasionally wrote about his relation to Ireland in the context of such a rejection. See Williams (Politics 77-80) for a discussion of how immigrants and exiles from all over Europe were separated from national languages and literatures and contributed to an international avant-garde whose project involved the search of a trans-national language of form.

8. By "male modernist" I mean the canonical works of high modernism and the avant-garde in the written and plastic arts that constructed their cultural values through exaltations of female sexuality, by metaphorically feminizing mass culture, by privileging public spaces such as the street or the cafe to which women had limited access and, in many cases, by assuaging masculine insecurities by aggressively opposing the "new woman" and women's struggles to gain access to the worlds of politics, art and education. For key arguments about how canonical modernism was shaped -- in form and content -- in relation to a patriarchal social structure see: Gilbert and Gubar; Huyssen (44-62); Suleiman (11-32); and Wolff (34-50). I discuss Beckett's relation to some of these issues, such as his use of the figure of the female prostitute in Murphy (chapter IV.1) and, in section 3 of this chapter, his parody of the male observer of modern, urban life.

9. See Robinson for a discussion of the bowler hat as a common symbol of modernization.

10. See Lottman (231-237) for the strained relations between Sartre's Les Temps Modernes, Camus Combat (and many other leftist literary journals that dominated French intellectual life) and the Communist Party from the end of the war until 1949.

11. See Fletcher (90) for the order in which the "Nouvelles" were written.

12. This theme-form could be traced in modern fiction from such novels like Flaubert's Sentimental Education with Frédéric's chance sighting of Madame Arnoux at the beginning of the novel to the avant-garde exultation of chance, male sexuality and "amour fou" in Nadja. See Suleiman (101-110) for an analysis of the way Breton constructs a concept of self around the conjunction of aimless wandering, chance and the figure of the woman.

13. I do not discuss here the relation of these ideas to debates about postmodernism in philosophy between, for example, Habermas, Lyotard, Rorty, or to attempts to lay out a homology between postmodern cultural and economic forms, as in Harvey and Jameson.

14. The others are Robbe-Grillet, Fuentes, Nabokov, Coover and Pynchon. Obviously, though apparently unaware of it, McHale is limiting his discussion to a dominant male-modernism. I will discuss Robbe-Grillet's relation to Beckett in Chapter VI.

15. About Foucault's relationship to the philosophical and discursive norms of modernity, see Habermas ("Modernity"; Philosophical 336-67) and Fraser (35-54).

16. See Gidddens for a discussion of how some of the contradictions of post-structural thought can be traced back to Sassure's distinction between langue and parole.

17. See Huyssen (213) for why he thinks Foucault's arguments here are irrelevant to postmodernism and merely reverse without critical effect the "very ideology that invariably glorifies the artist as genius." Huyssen does not deal with the specific ways in which, I believe, Foucault's essay is both useful and contradictory.

18. Huyssen goes on to view the postmodernism -- American and European -- of the seventies and beyond as unfolding in an historical context that lacks the political aspirations of the 1960s. He also constructs a narrative of decline, co-optation, random eclecticism and collage that resembles the formalist accounts of the postmodern against which he inveighs: the "1970s seems to be characterized ... by an ever wider dispersal and dissemination of artistic practices all working out the ruins of the modernist edifice .... supplementing it with randomly chosen images and motifs from pre-modern and non-modern cultures as well as from contemporary mass culture" (196). In this he fails to obey his own insights about the danger of nostalgia.

CHAPTER VI

Nightmares of Autonomy and Commitment: The Unnamable, Orwell's 1984, the "Nouveau Roman" and the Canonization of Modernism

1. Portrait of the Artist: Author, Writing Subject, Man

By the time Beckett wrote The Unnamable -- the culminating volume of the trilogy, his major prose work completed in 1950 -- he had already developed a number of narrative innovations that, as I have argued, were constructed in response to unresolved tensions underlying the high modernist, avant-gardist, and socially "committed" cultural agendas of the interwar period. For Beckett, these tensions manifested themselves as a set of literary problems that centered on the relationship of language to "social reality," the status of art as both self-referentially autonomous and communicatively expressive, and the anti-bourgeois (and in many cases anti-modern) sentiments of a literary tradition that was itself rooted in the institutions of art, education, and manners of modern Western Europe.

Perhaps the most general sign of Beckett's development -- from a writer whose early work is characterized by a self-contradictory attempt to embrace a set of conflicting cultural values to one whose most successful fiction consciously draws on and parodically exploits many of the "aporias" of modernist and avant-gardist aesthetics -- is

his invention of the beggar's "mask," a narrating persona and perspective that allowed him to re-imagine a link between a politically suggestive, communicative social content and the normative and formalist dimensions of aesthetic autonomy.[1] Thus, to cite just one aspect of this innovation, in the "Nouvelles" and Molloy Beckett presents both the narrator's isolated, impoverished, painful withdrawal into acute self-consciousness and the emphasis on "text" (on the "discourse" or act of narrating "itself") as interrelated responses to a rejecting-rejected social reality. The narrator's expulsion from the socio-economic order; his paradoxical status as a silent, expressionless mask with neither an inner nor a public identity who nevertheless tells his disordered story in an eloquent, communicative, emotive voice; the stark images of a geopolitically vague, primitive world -- all are indicative of Beckett's development beyond one of modernism's central organizing features, the detached masculine observer of urban life.

The Unnamable marks another stage in Beckett's changing relationship to the cultural politics of the interwar period. As in the postwar fiction written immediately before it, the innovations in narrative perspective specific to The Unnamable "solve" contradictions that were implicit in Beckett's "failures" of the 1920s and '30s by making them explicit and productive. As I have argued, Beckett's first

books of fiction were marked by a contradictory distance between the passive, bohemian-aesthete urban hero who values avant-gardist notions of sublating art into life and the omniscient narrative voice that emphasizes the separation between high culture (conceived as a "closed system") and the instrumental demands and communicative norms of everyday life. In the "Nouvelles" Beckett's development of the first-person voice and the figure of the abject wanderer presents similar problems of passivity, communication and social identity, but from the perspective of the bourgeois world from which the narrator is excluded. In the guise of the beggar's mask Beckett's narrator no longer derides the bourgeois world from the vantage point of a translator of Dante or the pseudo-philosophical abstraction of "Murphy's mind"; rather, the narrator-hero pathetically mimics the middle-class "polite conversation" of the gentry who toss him pennies to assuage their guilt-ridden disgust.

In Molloy, Beckett splits the narrating persona in two. In part I, he extends the device of the beggar's mask and intensifies the paradoxical status of the voice as both a terrified silence and an eloquent testimonial of its own marginalization; the narrator recognizes that his escape into interiority reflects the cultural values of the institutions of art and learning against which his grotesque existence serves as an indictment. In part II, Beckett plays on this recognition of the complicity between modernism's

valuing of interiority and the middle-class world it derides through the parodically arch-bourgeois narrator Moran. The narrative interference caused by the symbolic and linguistic cross-referencing between the two narrative voices both depends on the social fact of extreme class difference and textually effaces that difference. The ultimate effect of the novel is to create a hermeneutic impasse that cannot adequately be explained by either neo-avant-gardist notions of anti-art (like Mauriac's [1958] category of "aliterature") or neo-modernist ideas of textuality. Put in most general terms, in Molloy Beckett deliberately played and parodied cultural-political values against each other, from the representation of the alienated individual to the manipulation of language as a closed system. To isolate one feature or another as the novel's meaning -- the absurd, psychic suffering, textual paradox, etc. -- is to miss the dynamic interplay that makes the novel work so successfully, despite its minimal episodic narrative structure.

In Malone Dies, the second novel of the trilogy, Beckett experimented with a similar but, in many respects, less effective narrative perspective. The first-person narrator Malone, alone, approaching paralysis and death, and confined to a bed in what seems be a public institution for the poor, describes his own pathetic condition and tells third-person stories -- "neither beautiful nor ugly ... calm .... almost lifeless, like the teller" (2) -- about an

impoverished family and an insane asylum that deteriorate and intermingle with the frame story of his own isolated demise. Compared to the mimetically-varied voice of the silent/speaking Molloy, and the inventive interplay of the Molloy and Moran sections, the novel seems static -- closer, in some sections, to a relatively conventional dramatic monologue, and in others, to the schematic oppositions in Watt. And while in part II of Molloy Beckett's metaphor of society, the "anonymous organization" that both gives Moran's actions meaning and deprives him of the will to act, generates narrative intrigue, in Malone Dies the social content is somewhat regressive -- a reversion to the "charitable institution" that expelled the protagonist in the first lines of "The End" or to the tired metaphor of the asylum, harking back to Murphy. Some years later, writers like Camus, with the judge-penitent narrator of The Fall, and Fuentes, with the death-bed confession of the narrator in The Death of Artemio Cruz, would be much more successful with this type of static, self-pitying monologue intermingled with images of a life lived in vain, primarily because they use it in conjunction with geopolitically decisive social and historical contexts, something that Beckett was never willing -- or able -- to provide.

In The Unnamable, however, Beckett reworked the narrating perspective he created in the "Nouvelles" and extended in Molloy in a new and extreme direction. Beckett

had imbued these earlier narrators with a persona by presenting their loss of identity (and consequently their primitive existence and the emphasis on the "text") as a process -- a reaction-formation to the rejecting-rejected social reality, to male modernism's urban-spectator perspective and to modernist values of subjectivity and interiority. In contrast, The Unnamable begins with a series of questions and statements that presents the first-person narrator already removed from any context whatsoever. Neither beggar, isolated wanderer, nor moribund invalid, the narrator's only defining feature seems to be his uncertainty about who and where he is, his relationship to the words he is uttering, and what he should do:

> Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I .... Can it be that one day, off it goes on, that one day I simply stayed in .... Perhaps that is how it began. You think you are simply resting, the better to act when the time comes, or for no reason, and you soon find yourself powerless ever to do anything again. No matter how it happened. It, say it, not knowing what. Perhaps I simply assented at last to an old thing. But I did nothing. I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me. These few general remarks to begin with. 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? (3)

The preoccupation with individual agency and the contradictory status of the voice, both important features of the previous postwar works, become in The Unnamable the preconditions for the abstract conflicts of the entire book. The questions are simultaneously mimetic, the voice of a consciousness in crisis, and rhetorical -- Beckett is making

up a story by asking where, who, when, how to proceed, rather than by providing answers of place, name, period, or represented actions. In one sense, the opening of the novel is nothing but Beckett's self-consciousness about his own rejection of modernism: "affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later" is a good description of one of the organizing principles of the narrative method he began to develop in 1945. What has been termed the novel's emphasis on "intertextuality" -- the narrator's references to the characters of Beckett's earlier fiction, from Murphy to Molloy -- is also a sign of this self-consciousness. Similarly, one of the novel's main paradoxical motifs centers on an anxiety-ridden preoccupation with the authenticity of the voice and the narrator's longing to "find a voice of my own, in all this babble" (84): "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me," (or, in one of many later variations) "They say they, speaking of them, to make me think it is I who am speaking. Or I say they ... to make me think it is not I who am speaking" (115). Given the novel's pervasive self-reflexivity about voice and narrative procedure, the narrator's struggle against "their language" which "they have crammed me full of to prevent me from saying who I am" (51) seems to refer, abstractly but intentionally, to Beckett's uncertainty about the status of his own experimental rejection of the modernist project.

There are, however, two contrasting implications of the type of narrative perspective that Beckett constructs in The Unnamable. On one hand, the narrator's crisis of self-definition and agency is an abstract image of problems about writing -- specifically, writing in the wake of modernism and the avant-garde -- that Beckett himself is experiencing. If this is so, then Beckett's reductive development of the narrating persona -- from the beggar, the vagrant, the arch-bourgeois, or the invalid toward an abstract "I" -- and the intertextual references take on a specific function. The reader is invited to make an identification between the narrator and the author not only because of the narrator's overall concern with language and voices -- "it's entirely a matter of voices, no other metaphor is appropriate" (52) -- but also because it's the only identity the narrative suggests. On the other hand, Beckett exploits to a degree far greater than in earlier works those resources of written language that interfere with language's referential and mimetic capacities and emphasize instead contradiction, paradox, "aporia," etc. As one recent commentator put it, by "constantly contradicting his own utterances and self projections he [the narrator] evokes the fleeting notion of a subject at the vanishing point" (Schwab 133). From this perspective, the first-person identityless narrator appears as an abstract device with which Beckett explores the relationship between language and concepts of the

individual, the self and "subjectivity" (Schwab 131). Thus, viewed one way, Beckett's narrative innovation in the last novel of the trilogy tends to emphasize writing as a very problematic activity and the narrator as emblematic of the writer's situation; viewed another way, the novel tends to emphasize the narrator (the "I" or the "subject") as a very problematic entity and writing as a means of exposing traditional "philosophical and empirical notions of the subject" as absurd or inconsistent (Schwab 137). The title of the novel itself embodies this contrast: "unnamable" may refer to the author's inability to find a name for such an extreme type of novel, or it may refer to the narrator himself as a unstable linguistic construct.

Throughout the novel Beckett creates images of the narrator as both an author struggling against a set of objective conditions that he experiences but cannot understand and as an abstract "subject" struggling against linguistically-bound definitions of the self. At times, Beckett lets this double-status stand as a concrete contradiction:

> How, in such conditions, can I write, to consider only the manual aspect of that bitter folly? I don't know. I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee. It is I who think, just enough to write, whose head is far. (17-18)

Beckett also links the narrator's situation to ideas about the double-status of the power of language to both dominate and set free. For example, there is the running theme of

"silence" and "words." In one place, the narrator refers to his own disordered testimony as "the terror-stricken babble of the condemned to silence" (94). Images of imprisonment reinforce the sense of a thwarted need to communicate or express: the narrator registers his physical situation as "motionless" (5) and "condemned" (19) in a prison-like "void" (17) surrounded by a dark "enclosure wall" (16), in a formless place of "the utmost calm, the most perfect order" (7), of "uniform suffering" (112) and "terror" (88) where he feels "all change [is] to be feared" and an "incomprehensible uneasiness" (9); at times, he imagines there is a "collar, or ring, of cement" (62) encircling his neck. "I'm in a dungeon, I've always been in a dungeon" he claims at one point (114). He feels himself

> a wordless thing in an empty place, a hard shut dry cold black place, where nothing stirs, nothing speaks, and that I listen, and that I seek, like a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts .... (138)

But "silence" is equally presented as a goal, as a way of escaping the prison house of language. Filled with "their language" the narrator faces a terrifying linguistic determinism. "I'm in words, made of words, others' words ... this dust of words, with no ground for their settling" (139); "it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun from me, all the trouble comes from that" (164). Silence holds the promise of peace:

> They have told me, explained to me, described to me, what it all is, what it looks like, what it's all for, one after another, thousands of times in thousands of

> connexions, until I must have begun to look as if I understood. Who would ever think, to hear me, that I've never seen anything, never heard anything but their voices? And man, the lectures they gave on men, before they even began to trying to assimilate me to him! What I speak of, what I speak with, 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 now I must speak, even if I have to do it with their language, it will be a start, a step towards the silence and the end of madness .... (50-51)

The contrast between narrator as "author" and narrator as "subject" is bound up with the contrasting values of silence and language (variously termed words, voices, speech, writing). This contradictory view of language as both determining consciousness or "being" (where language is understood as a set of conventions that pattern thought and behavior) and as liberating consciousness (where language is understood as an imaginative means of access to meanings freed from convention, as in the Surrealist notion of automatic writing) is, of course, part of Beckett's inheritance from the avant-garde movements of the interwar period. But in The Unnamable Beckett sets up the conflicting views in order to emphasize the contradiction itself over and above any conviction that language either imprisons or liberates. Thus, the narrator describes the occasion of his narration as a response to an explicitly impossible situation; a response that generates the contradiction itself -- "The search for a means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue" (15); "Talking of speaking, what if I went silent? What

would happen to me then? But fie these are questions again.... they keep on pouring out of my mouth.... it's to prevent the discourse from coming to an end, this futile discourse which is not credited to me and brings me not a syllable closer to silence" (26).

If, during the interwar years, Beckett was unaware of the contradictions inherent in avant-gardist and modernist notions of language and consciousness, by the time he was finishing the trilogy, he seems to have become obsessed by those contradictions. And he manages this obsession, characteristically, with an ironic concern for playing cultural-political values off one another. No matter how much the pervasive sense of struggle over voices and words in the novel, between the "I" and the "they" or "me" and "my master" (30), resonates with values of individual freedom or autonomy, the image of what might be gained by such a struggle is bleak and angry:

> Ah a nice state they have me in, but still I'm not their creature, not quite, not yet. To testify to them, until I die, as if there were any dying with that tomfoolery, that's what they've sworn they'll bring me to. Not to be able to open my mouth without proclaiming them, and our fellowship, that's what they imagine they'll have me reduced to. It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed. But I'll fix their jibberish for them. I never understood a word of it in any case, not a word of the stories it spews, like gobbets in a vomit. My inability to absorb, my genius for forgetting, are more than they reckoned with. Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll be myself, in the end. Nothing will remain of all the lies they have glutted me with. And I'll be myself at last, as a starveling belches his odorless wind, before the

bliss of coma. (51)

While the narrator rails against their "lectures" and "words," he realizes there is no alternative: to be oneself, to find one's own voice, Beckett tirelessly reiterates, would be no better. In this abstract battle of voices, the vanguardist dream of an irrational, unconscious, individual language is powerless to undo the language of conformity, convention and enforced "fellowship." "I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak," says the narrator, summing up his introductory paragraph, "And at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never" (4). The "never" carries the full weight of both resistance and resignation. Throughout The Unnamable Beckett seems to insist that struggling and capitulating, at least in avant-gardist literature, always amount to the same thing.

By the late 1940s the contradictory views of language Beckett hones in on were not particularly new. But the analogous contrast of narrator as author or as a "subject" formed by language does constitute a substantial innovation. In the 1970s influential theorists like Foucault rightly picked up on that aspect of Beckett's later postwar works (especially in the Texts for Nothing whose paradoxical forms were a direct outcome of the experimentation in The Unnamable) that emphasized the relation between language and "subject" (see chapter IV.4). However, somewhat like the initial American canonization of Beckett -- for example, in

Frye's 1960 description of The Unnamable as the ultimate modernist work in the mode of Eliot and Joyce, a "hypnotic voice muttering like a disembodied spirit at a seance, or like our own subconscious" (reprinted in Graver 212-13) -- the French-theoretical reception, in its self-styled role as a neo-vanguardist intellectual movement in the tradition of groups like the Symbolists or the Surrealists, never saw the critical ambivalence toward the avant-garde and high modernism integral to Beckett's fiction. Later critics, veering off into neo-modernist visions of aesthetic autonomy or wholly seduced by poststructuralist theories about language and the destabilized self, have been content to work within this (by now) standard line of inquiry. Yet it is only in relation to the other implications of Beckett's new narrative mode in The Unnamable -- the emphasis on the narrator as author and on language neither as a determinant of consciousness nor the liberator of the unconscious but as writing, as an activity that is already situated within a struggle over conflicting values -- that the notion of the narrator as "subject" makes any narrative or aesthetic (rather than abstractly philosophical) sense.

Most views of Beckett that describe The Unnamable as a "pure textuality" (Schwab 167) that negates the mimetic and representational functions of literature implicitly recognize --despite their critical convictions -- this other aspect of the novel. For example, Gabriele Schwab, whose

1994 essay (cited above) is perhaps the most careful and even-handed analysis of the novel as an "exhaustion of literary subjectivity" (132) in which "negation is used to subvert the very foundations of language and subject" (158), continually refers to the narrator as "he." Gender distinction is a basic feature of modern identity; the narrator's undeniable maleness (which no post-structurally informed critic seems to question) implies that Beckett's language "mimics" the voice of a particular person or character type. In fact, the narrator is not only undeniably male, he is also undeniably European, educated, a bourgeois. Thus, when in one of his dozens of attempts to explain his contradictory experience of words, the narrator assumes an identification with an imagined reader, his voice is genteel and familiar:

> I say what I'm told to say, that's all there is to it, and yet I wonder, I don't know, I don't feel a mouth on me, I don't feel the jostle of words in my mouth, and when you say a poem you like, if you happen to like poetry, in the underground, or in bed, for yourself, the words are there, somewhere, without the least sound, I don't feel that either.... (133)

In other places, the narrator violently rejects his bourgeois origins, but in a typically bourgeois and masculinist fashion. Telling one of his stories about "Mahood" (a name which the narrator uses in his attempt to wrest his voice away from the "I" but that equally refers to himself) about the grotesque death and putrefaction of his family, the narrator sums up:

> But the bouquet was this story of Mahood's in which I appear as upset at having been delivered so economically of a pack of blood relations, not to mention the two cunts into the bargain, the one for ever accursed that ejected me into this world and the other, infundibuliform, in which, pumping my likes, I tried to take my revenge. (48)

While this story's imagery is surreal, its cruelty absurdly intensified -- "stamping under foot the unrecognizable remains of my family, here a face, there a stomach" (49-50) -- and its intent refracted through the narrator's overall crisis of authenticity, its relation to a masculinist literary tradition in which women appear, as mother and whore, as the sign of men's entrapment in conventional society and, consequently, as objects of their aggression, is obvious. No matter how much Beckett short-circuits a realist or naturalist faith in the ability of language to evoke an objective world, he equally imagines a culturally specific perspective from which such a "subversion" of communicative norms is attempted. What thus actually constitutes the impressive innovative form of the novel is not its supposed status at "the cutting edge of contemporary explorations of language and subjectivity" (Schwab 131) but rather Beckett's self-conscious construction of a narrator whose struggle to escape the language of social order and identity -- of convention, pronouns, and grammar, of "they" -- never loses the representational specificity which the narrator's performance seemingly negates.

Beckett ensures this specificity in two ways. First, he

makes the abstract anxieties and guilt of the first-person narrator appear, simultaneously, as stereotypically mid-century bourgeois. For example, the narrator displays a masculinist repression of emotion, a complacent fear of change, an overriding desire for order, a sense of individual powerlessness, and a suspicion that his own existential suffering is nothing more than compensation for his ashamed awareness that he has never really experienced suffering at all. Secondly, through various images of the narrator -- from the "bright boy of the class" (125) to a head stuck in a jar (55) -- and references to knowledge and learning, Beckett parodically refracts attitudes about the social function of the writer in bourgeois society. Indeed, Beckett directly mocks the pretension that a modern "voice" could be purely impersonal or a creation of some purely linguistic, universal process:

> But my dear man, come, be reasonable, look, this is you, look at this photograph, and here's your file, no convictions, I assure you, come now, make an effort, at your age, to have no identity, it's a scandal .... (125)

Perhaps the underlying reason critics in the 1960s and '70s over-emphasized the supposed "universal" quality of Beckett's later fiction is because Beckett shows that the claim of universality is also the expression of those who fear they are losing the social position necessary to maintain particular cultural tastes as unchanging principles of judgment.[2] In one of the novel's most effective passages

-- the fifth and longest of seventeen introductory paragraphs that form an "exordia" (19) to the 157-page associatively-organized single paragraph that makes up the bulk of the novel -- the narrator's attempt to describe his situation in the prison-like void exhibits his fear of expressing intense emotion and his need to imagine himself as the perspectival center of his universe, even as he realizes there are no grounds for such a belief. Thus, he begins:

> I have always been sitting here, at this selfsame spot, my hands on my knees, gazing before me like a great horn-owl in an aviary. The tears stream down my cheeks from my unblinking eyes. What makes me weep so? From time to time. There is nothing saddening here. Perhaps it is liquefied brain. Past happiness in any case has clean gone from my memory, assuming it was ever there. If I accomplish other natural functions it is unawares. Nothing ever troubles me. And yet I am troubled. Nothing has ever changed since I have been here. But I dare not infer from this that nothing ever will change. (6-7)

Intense sadness, a sign of human compassion, can only be admitted with the insistence that nothing is wrong; the sensate body is objectified, so fearful is the voice of losing its sense of stability. Beckett makes the narrator's anxiety appear as a fixation on order. Just as he insists that "all has proceeded, all this time, in the utmost calm, the most perfect order" (7), Beckett turns the narrator's admission of denial -- "Nothing ever trouble me. And yet I am troubled" -- into a formula whose repetition allows him to avoid facing his psychic disorder: "So I have no cause for anxiety. And yet I am anxious" (18); "So there is

nothing to be afraid of. And yet I am afraid" (20).

In his attempt to understand his surroundings, the narrator expresses an obstinate self-complacency:

> I owe my existence to no one .... These notions of forbears, of houses where lamps are lit at night, and other such, where do they come to me from? And all these questions I ask myself. It is not in a spirit of curiosity. I cannot be silent. About myself I need know nothing. Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities. Rhetoric. (7)

Any sign or indication of something that might disrupt the order -- such as the manifestation of emotions or the memory of one's connection to others -- is immediately contained by the narrator's nervous compulsion to keep talking. In turn, utterance becomes the narrator's means of denying any role in or responsibility for the "conditions" he finds himself in. Even self-reflection becomes an occasion not for critical thought but for reinforcing the narrator's devotion to the status quo:

> ..... from the unexceptional order which has prevailed here up to date may I infer that such will always be the case? I may of course. But the mere fact of asking myself a question gives me to reflect. It is in vain I tell myself that its only purpose is to stimulate the lagging discourse, this excellent explanation does not satisfy me. Can it be I am the prey of a genuine preoccupation, of a need to know as one might say? I don't know. I'll try it another way. If one day a change were to take place, resulting from a principle of disorder already present, or on its way, what then? That would seem to depend on the nature of the change. No, here all change would be fatal .... (8)

Similarly, when the narrator suspects a "principle of disorder" in the lights he sees -- "what is there so strange about them, so wrong? Is it their irregularity, their

instability, their shining strong one minute and weak the next" (7) -- he momentarily considers himself part of the problem: "They are perhaps unwavering and fixed and my fitful perceiving the cause of their inconstancy" (8). Consequently, he is tempted to give up thinking of himself in the privileged perspective of the "center," and he admits that, in any case, his views are narrowly "fixed": "I like to think I occupy the center, but nothing is less certain. In a sense I would be better off at the circumference, since my eyes are always fixed in the same direction" (8). But being open-minded and considering the possibility of his own relative position to "disorder" only leads back to the complacent admission/denial that something is wrong:

> It is equally possible, I do not deny it, that I too am in perpetual motion.... In which case there would be no further grounds for my complaining about the disorder of the lights, this being due simply to my insistence on regarding them as always the same lights and viewed always from the same point. All is possible, or almost. But the best is to think of myself as fixed and at the center of this place, whatever its shape and extent may be. This is also probably the most pleasing to me. In a word, no change apparently since I have been here, disorder of the lights perhaps an illusion, all change to be feared, incomprehensible uneasiness. (9)

Beckett's method here is to make abstractions concrete by dissolving the distance between compositional problems -- for example, narrative perspective -- and the narrator's psychic state of "incomprehensible uneasiness."[3] If there is still no technical term for the paradoxical perspective Beckett obsessively perfected in The Unnamable -- or only inadequate terms, like "meta-fiction," which restate the

cultural logic underlying canonical descriptions of high modernism (see chapter V.4) -- it's not because Beckett's artistic ingenuity unraveled critics' assumptions about interpretation (as the "against interpretation" or poststructuralist views imply). Rather, Beckett makes perspective such an integral problem in the content of the novel that his own formal strategies cannot be considered outside the narrator's "incomprehensible uneasiness" over being, as it were, decentered. The rejection of key modernist techniques and their cultural-political implications that Beckett began in The End culminate in The Unnamable with the rejection of perspective altogether -- but only as Beckett understood perspective, as the relation of individual agency to the activity of writing. Only a totally (in theory) perspective-less form could mimic the utter incomprehensibility and futility of individual action that is part of Beckett's social vision of the postwar world. This perspective-lessness is given a stark image: the narrator emotionlessly cries out that his

> very eyes can no longer close as they once could ... to rest me from seeing, to rest me from waking, to darken me to sleep, and no longer look away, or down, or up open to heaven, but must remain forever fixed and staring on the narrow space before them where there is nothing to be seen, 99% of the time. They must be as red as live coals. I sometimes wonder if the two retinae are not facing each other. (17)

Radically uncertain about the authenticity of his own voice, believing neither in the power of words nor silence, rejecting both submission to an anonymous "they" and faith

in an autonomous self, insisting without cause that he occupies the center of his universe, anxious and troubled though claiming there is nothing wrong, weeping without emotion, fixated on absolute order and fearing all change, complacent about himself even though he understands nothing of the world around him, and blinded by his constant vigilance: this is Beckett's image of the author in the void. The abstractness of the void is itself part of the image's content. The narrator's anxieties and fears are just as much a response to "conditions" that have no relation to a concrete social world as they are a response to questions -- "I. Who might that be?" (68) -- whose answers, when posed in a void, can only wind up in hyper-self-conscious "aporia." If it is necessary for the postwar writer to face the void, Beckett seems to suggest that it is this existential space itself which generates, rather than addresses, the dilemmas about "man." In The Unnamable, the void is not an authentic experience of the self stripped of its superficial, culturally and historically contingent identities; rather, it is a place where critical consciousness -- the awareness of one's own relation to problems like "suffering" and "disorder" -- becomes nothing but a defensive fear of losing one's place in the "center."

But the void is not the only place into which Beckett projects his image of the author. In many places the "I" and "they" seem to function in the novel like terms in a debate

over the meaning and value of "words" and the "voice," a debate in which the narrator hypothetically takes the position of a dominated "I" in order to oppose a symbolic authority:

> I have spoken for my master, listened for the words of my master never spoken, Well done, my child, well done, my son, you may stop, you may go, you are free, you are acquitted, you are pardoned, never spoken. My master. There is a vain I must not lose sight of.... there may be more than one, a whole college of tyrants, differing in their views of what should be done with me, in conclave since time began or a little later, listening to me from time to time, then breaking up for a meal or a game of cards.... (31)

Outside the void "words" become actions, a means of punishing the weak or vulnerable:

> I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born, or for no particular reason, because they dislike me..... it is in some way related to that lesson too hastily proclaimed, too hastily denied. For all I need say is this, that if I have a pensum to perform it is because I could not say my lesson, and that when I have finished my pensum I still have my lesson to say, before I have the right to stay quiet in my corner, alive and dribbling, my mouth shut.... (30-31)

The word games are controlled by the master, so that even a right answer contributes to the narrator's subjugation:

> For even if I hit upon the right pensum, somewhere in the churn of words at last, I would still have to reconstitute the right lesson, unless of course the two are one and the same.... But let us first suppose, in order to get on a little ... that it is in fact required of me that I say something, something that is not found in all I have said up to now. But thence to infer that the something required is something about me suddenly strikes me as unwarranted. Might it not rather be the praise of my master, intoned, in order to obtain his forgiveness? (32)

The attitude the narrator assumes towards his "master"

is characteristic of most of Beckett's postwar narrators: a servile condescension in which the narrator's pathetic failures appear as a result of his exclusion from the master's realm of ethics and behavior:[4]

> I want all to be well with you, do you hear me, that's what he keeps dinning at me. To which I reply, in a respectful attitude, I too, your Lordship. I say that to cheer him up, he sounds so unhappy. I am good-hearted, on the surface.... What he means by good, my good, is another problem.... Let the man explain himself and have done with it.... But what good, there must be more than one. The supreme perhaps. In a word let him enlighten me, that's all I ask, so that I may at least have the satisfaction of knowing in what sense I leave to be desired. If he wants me to say something, for my good naturally, he has only to tell me what it is and I'll let it out with a roar straight away. It's true he may have already told me a hundred times. Well, let him make it a hundred and one, this time I'll try and pay attention. (34-35)

But in The Unnamable Beckett self-consciously makes all linguistic actions refer, inevitably, to his own writing, and all questions of servitude and domination refer, abstractly, to questions about the social role of the modern writer. Thus, Beckett cites the very first line of The End, his first important postwar story, and makes a reference to Molloy in the context of the narrator's past failures to adequately deal with this sense of domination and with his identification with the "underling":

> For what I am doing is not being done without a minimum of mind.... The master. I never paid him enough attention. No more perhapses either, that old trick is worn to a thread. I'll forbid myself everything, then go on as if I hadn't. The master. A few allusions here and there, as to a satrap, with a view to enlisting sympathy. They clothed me and gave me money, that kind of thing, the light touch. Then no more. Or Moran's boss, I forget his name.... But to investigate this

> matter seriously, I mean with as much futile ardour as that of the underling, which I hoped was mine ... no, that never occurred to me. (33) (emphasis added)

Much more than inter-textual play, this is a form of self-critique. Beckett both expresses doubt about the cultural-politics informing his creation of the beggar's mask -- the narrating persona that marks his postwar transformation of modernist fiction -- and tries, using self-critique as a narrative method, to shape the conflicting claims of modern literature, from absolute autonomy to a commitment to the "underling," into even more explicitly contradictory forms.

For Beckett, the "void" -- starting with "Murphy's mind" -- had always been a place where the struggle to imagine a link between art and society, between inner mind and "social reality," sacrificed that communicative aspect of art which ultimately constitutes art's relation to a social world. But Beckett equally parodied the void as a place where existential truths must be faced. Rather, it is Belacqua buying cheese, Murphy on the "jobpath," the beggar on the street corner, or Molloy in "town," where, for Beckett, "social reality" appears as an experience or cultural content shared between narrator and reader. And in these scenes -- whose links to naturalism and realism form the necessary dynamic without which Beckett's experimental techniques would lose all their specific effects -- existential questions are revealed and parodied as forms of coercion. Thus with Molloy, Beckett's most fully-developed

hero:

> But I entered the first shelter I came to and stayed there till dawn, for I knew I was bound to be stopped by the first policeman and asked what I was doing, a question to which I have never been able to find the correct reply. (80)

In The Unnamable, the narrator's existential dilemma that the void itself provokes -- "What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation" (3) -- is also parodied, most clearly when Beckett projects the image of the narrator-as-author into the street; that is, into a more direct relation with the narrative perspective of the modernist novel. This image is developed in one of the narrator's "stories" that he tells himself, in his search to be free of the voices that fill him and the make his search for an authentic voice futile. Consistent with the self-critiquing mode of the entire novel, Beckett begins the episode (which the narrator refers to as "the last story") by metaphorically summarizing the reduction of the narrating persona that, since The End, has characterized Beckett's reworking of modernism:

> But at the period I refer to now this active life is at an end, I do not move and never shall again, unless it be under the impulsion of a third party. For of the great traveller I had been, on my hands and knees in the later stages, then crawling on my belly or rolling on the ground, only the trunk remains (in sorry trim), surmounted by the head with which we are already familiar.... Stuck like a sheaf of flowers in a deep jar, its neck flush with my mouth, on the side of a quiet street near the shambles, I am at rest at last. If I turn, I shall not say my head, but my eyes, free to roll as they list, I can see the statue of the apostle of horse's meat, a bust. (55)

While the narrator in the void responds to the vague abstractness of his condition, the narrator's situation in the "street" is both oppressively concrete and referential. Indeed, Beckett's Parisian neighbors and colleagues might have recognized the spot, on the "Rue Brancion" (77) across from the Vaugirard abattoirs and the bust of Emile Decroix, "the apostle of horse's meat," that sits above its eastern entrance, not far from where Beckett once lived.[5] While the image is constructed from surrealist principles of juxtaposition, the narrator in his jar presents himself as the antithesis of avant-gardist provocation:

> Though not exactly in order I am tolerated by the police. They know I am speechless and consequently incapable of taking unfair advantage of my situation to stir up the population against its governors, by means of burning oratory during the rush hour or subversive slogans whispered, after nightfall, to belated pedestrians the worse for drink. And since I have lost all my members, with the exception of the onetime virile, they know also that I shall not be guilty of any gestures liable to be construed as inciting to alms, a prisonable offence. The fact is I trouble no one, except possibly that category of hypersensitive persons for whom the least thing is an occasion for scandal and indignation. But even here the risk is negligible, such people avoiding the neighborhood for fear of being overcome at the sight of the cattle, fat and fresh from their pastures, trooping towards the humane killer. From this point of view the spot is well chosen, from my point of view. (55)

This "point of view" is one Beckett had been developing since The End. The beggar on the street corner, with his expressionless mask, was a parodic emblem of both bourgeois shame and communist demands for a didactic art; Molloy, in his confrontation with the police at the city gates, an

affront to decency and a revolt against the "systematic decorum" of his "superiors"; in The Unnamable Beckett reformulates the same scene, but makes the refracted image of the author completely harmless, stripped of arms, unable to offend the middle-class or violate the oppressive law. His masculinity, too, survives only as a reminder of what no longer has power or the ability to affect others. Other, possibly unintended effects of such a "spectacle" are also neutralized:

> And even those sufficiently unhinged to be affected by the spectacle I offer, I mean upset and temporarily diminished in their capacity for work and aptitude for happiness, need only look at me a second time, those who can bring themselves to do it, to have immediately their minds made easy. For my face reflects nothing but the satisfaction of one savouring a well-earned rest. It is true my mouth was hidden, most of the time, and me eyes closed.... And alone perhaps the state of my skull, covered with pustules and bluebottles, these latter abounding in such a neighbourhood, preserved me from being an object of envy for many, and a source of discontent. I hope this gives a fair picture of my situation. (55-56)

On one hand, Beckett builds up this parodic, grotesque figure -- the last vestigial appearance in his fiction of the modernist flaneur -- to debunk the aesthetic credo of provocation or shock, even while in other parts of The Unnamable Beckett aims to shock and provoke. As one earnest commentator put it, "it would be dishonest to pretend that its [The Unnamable's] anguish did not cause discomfort in us, that its hatred, grief and misery did not make it somewhat unbearable to read" (Fletcher 179). But Beckett's postwar vanguardist impulse, his aesthetic of "failure" and

his expressed disdain for all "affirmative" or representational art (see section 2 below) was in part characterized by a pervasive, undercutting self-criticism. Thus, on the other hand, Beckett makes his tale of the narrator-in-the-jar parodically comment on art's rather prosaic functions in bourgeois society:

> Once a week I was taken out of my receptacle, so that it might be emptied. This duty fell to the proprietress of the chop-house across the street and she performed it punctually and without complaint, beyond an occasional good-natured reflection to the effect that I was a nasty pig, for she had a kitchen garden. Without perhaps having exactly won her heart it was clear I did not leave her indifferent.... And when snow fell she covered me with a tarpaulin.... Yes, it was fatal, no sooner had the tarpaulin settled over me, and the precipitate steps of my benefactress died away, than the tears began to flow. Is this, was this to be interpreted as an effect of gratitude?.... Besides, I realized darkly that if she took care of me thus, it was not solely out of goodness.... It must not be forgotten that I represented for this woman an undeniable asset. For quite apart from the services I rendered to her lettuce, I constituted for her establishment a kind of landmark, not to say an advertisement, far more effective than for example a chef in cardboard, pot-bellied in profile and full face wafer thin. That she was well aware of this is shown by the trouble she had taken to festoon my jar with Chinese lanterns, of a very pretty effect in the twilight.... And the jar itself, so that the passer-by might consult with greater ease the menu attached to it, had been raised on a pedestal at her own expense. It is thus I learnt that her turnips in gravy are not so good as they used to be, but that on the other hand her carrots, equally in gravy, are even better than formerly. The gravy has not varied. This is the kind of language I can understand, these the kind of clear and simple notions on which it is possible for me to build, I ask for no other spiritual nourishment. (56-57)

This is the counterpart to the author in the void. The language the narrator has been searching for turns out to be, provisionally, the chatter of the petite-bourgeois, and

his search for "what to do" is fulfilled by the demands of the chop-house -- "I represent for her a tidy little capital" (57), he is proud to announce. In a festooned jar, raised on a pedestal, the narrator is not only an emblem of a domesticated avant-gardist art whose visual shock techniques were historically developed alongside the techniques of advertising and the mass media. The episode also functions as a domestic comedy which deteriorates into a grotesque cry for communication and companionship, growing more pathetic with the narrator's increasing loss of perspective and his return to the void. Most of the time, his proprietress neglects to cover him in bad weather:

> I have tried to make her understand, dashing my head angrily against the neck of my jar, that I should like to be shrouded more often. At the same time I let my spittle flow over, in an attempt to show my displeasure. In vain. I wonder what explanation she can have found to account for this behaviour. She must have talked it over with her husband and probably been told I was stifling, that is just the reverse of the truth. But credit where credit is due, we made a balls of it between us, I with my signs and she with her reading of them. This story is no good, I'm beginning almost to believe it. (58)

His head and torso begin to wither in the elements and the "woman, displeased at seeing me sink lower and lower," fills the bottom of his jar with sawdust and fixes his head in a cement collar (61-62). His perspective severely limited, he is no longer able to observe his shadow at "the hour of the aperitif" when people pause to read the menu, a "joy, for which my part I should have thought harmless, and without danger for the public" (73). He becomes fearful that

his "protectress" will cease caring for him. He realizes that now the people passing by no longer notice him at all, not even "the hungry compelled by the position of the menu ... to post themselves literally face to face with me, in the full blast of my breath." The only outside evidence he has of his own existence are the dogs who piss on his pedestal and the flies attracted to his rotting torso: "The flies vouch for me, if you like, but how far? Would they not settle with equal appetite on a lump of shit?" (75). By the end of the episode, these images -- as absurd as they are evocative of torture and human decay -- begin to dissolve with the narrator's suspicion that his story is just another device by "they" to distract him from his search for authentic speech or silence. Having lost hope that someone passing by would notice him and realize "this man is ailing, we must call an ambulance" (76), he turns to the woman as the only means of validating his self-worth:

> She loves me, I always felt it. She needs me. Her chophouse, her husband, her children if she has any, are not enough, there is in her a void that I alone can fill.... There was a time I thought she was perhaps a near relation, mother, sister, daughter, or suchlike, perhaps even a wife, and that she was sequestrating me.... This woman has never spoken to me, to the best of my knowledge.... Never an affectionate word, never a reprimand. For fear of bringing me to the public notice? Or lest the illusion should be dispelled?... The moment is at hand when my only believer must deny me.... something has changed. It is not a night like other nights.... I must be patient. It is cold ... and yet I don't feel the cold on my head.... Has my head lost all feeling?.... For this feeling of being entirely enclosed, and yet nothing touching me, is new. The sawdust no longer presses against my stumps, I don't know where I end. I left it yesterday, the

> street, the chophouse, the slaughter.... There will never be another woman wanting me in vain to live, my shadow at evening will not darken the ground. (78-80)[6]

The dissolution into the void marks a loss of human compassion; it also marks the difference between "story" and "text." For the narrator, the stories he tells -- including the episode of the jar -- are distinct from his abstract, aporia-ridden existence in "words." "And I see myself slipping, though not yet at the last extremity, towards the resorts of fable. Would it not be better if I were simply to keep on saying babababa, for example, while waiting to ascertain the true function of this venerable organ [i.e, the voice]?" (28), he asks himself in the void. As in Beckett's other postwar works, the tension between story and text manifests itself as a longing for a cultural form grounded in an experience of community and the authority of a meaningful death, both of which -- for Beckett and many others, and more so than ever after the second world war -- seemed irredeemably lost (see chapters II.4 and V.3). But in The Unnamable the emphasis on text -- on the placeless void, on the act of speaking itself, on words -- is much more pronounced because stories or narrative also appear as the conventional language of the master, as a trap. And, like the contradictions about avant-gardist and modernist notions of language in general that Beckett explicitly exploits, "stories" become caught up in the same obsessive logic of paradox. To tell a "story" about your life outside the void

is to capitulate to "them"; but to allow "them" to tell stories about you is even worse. "Mahood" -- one of the narrator's names for himself as a "subject" of language -- appears as an emissary from them, a figure who has "represented" the narrator "in the midst of men" (12) and "usurped" his name, "the one they foisted on me, up there in their world" (13):

> It was he told me stories about me, lived in my stead, issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back into me, heaped stories on my head.... It is his voice which has often, always, mingled with mine, and sometimes drowned it completely. Until he left me for good, or refused to leave any more, I don't know.... When he was away I tried to find myself again, to forget what he said, about me, about my misfortunes, fatuous misfortunes, idiotic pains, in the light of my true situation, revolting word. But his voice continued to testify for me, as though woven into mine, preventing me from saying who I was... it will disappear, one day, I hope, from mine, completely. But in order for that to happen I must speak, speak.... (29)

Yet by the end of the novel, when the unending, pointless struggle to wrest away an authentic voice from the "babble" has worn away the narration to a chaotic, breathless chain of phrases, "stories" and representation seem to be the narrator's last defense:

> .... there was never anything to be got from those stories, I have mine, somewhere, let them tell it to me, they'll see there's nothing to be got from it either, nothing to be got from me, it will be the end, of this hell of stories ... perhaps I'll curse them yet, they'll know what it is to be the subject of conversation, I'll impute words to them you wouldn't throw to a dog ... I'll get my own back,a few flitters of mind, they'll see what it's like ... then I'll let down my trousers and shit stories on them, stories, photographs, records, sites, lights, gods and fellow creatures .... (130)

Perhaps the only binding element that emerges from Beckett's manic accumulation of contradictory values about stories and language, about the narrator as an abstract subject in the void and as a culturally-situated author who has lost all faith in the power of his own voice and art -- the only constant in the fierce, anguished clash of "affirmations and negations" -- is the sense of struggle. And for struggle to exist, there must be a decisive moment when a critical consciousness is wrested away from the solipsistic sense of self in the void or self-definition as only a matter of fleeting "words." For Beckett, critical consciousness is antithetical to linguistic determinism, solipsism and the European ideal of aesthetic experience itself:

> I still leave much to be desired, I have no technique, none. For example, in case you don't believe me, I don't yet know how to move, either locally, in relation to myself, or bodily, in relation to the rest of the shit. I don't know how to want to, I want to in vain. What doesn't come to me from me has come to the wrong address. Similarly my understanding is not yet sufficiently well-oiled to function without the pressure of some critical circumstance, such as a violent pain felt for the first time. Some nice point in semantics, for example, of a nature to accelerate the march of the hours, could not retain my attention. For others the time-abolishing joys of impersonal and disinterested speculation. I only think, if that is the name for this vertiginous panic as of hornets smoked out of their nest, once a certain degree of terror has been exceeded.... And sometimes I say to myself I am in a head, it's terror makes me say it, and the longing to be in safety, surrounded on all sides by massive bone. (87-88)

It is "critical circumstances" rather than "the time abolishing joys of impersonal and disinterested speculation"

that ultimately define expression, no matter how chaotic or formless. Solipsism -- being "in a head" -- is a defensive response to "terror" and not an a priori of authentic existence. While the status of this critical consciousness within the novel as a whole is, like everything else, manically ambivalent, the struggle heard in almost every line -- the struggle to resist and the struggle to resign -- grows more and more intense as the "uneasy" sentences of the initial paragraphs and stories break down into the threadbare logic of phrases whose repetitive structure alone propels the exhausted voice. There are images, towards the end, of solidarity and defeat in the face of domination:

> Enormous prison, like a hundred thousand cathedrals, never anything else any more from this time forth, and in it, somewhere, perhaps, riveted, tiny, the prisoner, how can he be found ... those are words, it speaks of a prison, I've no objection, vast enough for a whole people ... I must be there already, perhaps I'm not alone, perhaps a whole people is here, and the voice its voice, coming to me fitfully, we would have lived, been free a moment, now we talk about it ... no, I'm alone, perhaps the first, perhaps the last, talking alone, listening alone, alone alone, the others are gone, they have been stilled, their voices stilled.... (172)

And there is the sense, common in the critique of modernity since Durkheim's notion of "anomie," that individual freedom without the cohesion of community or tradition was unbearable: "yes, we must have walls, I need walls, good and thick, I need a prison, I was right, for me alone, I'll go there now, I'll put me in it" (173). The narrator begins to hear nothing but the echo of his own

self-hatred and guilt: the voice is a "confession," an "indictment," it is "accusing," -- "I want to be punished, better than I am, ... I want to go, give myself up, a victim is essential" (175). The source of the guilt, it seems, has been from the very beginning the narrator's awareness of a wasted opportunity:

> Possessed of nothing but my voice, the voice, it may seem natural, once the idea of obligation has been swallowed, that I should interpret it as an obligation to say something. (31)

The expressive voice, once considered a gift bestowed on the poet by the muses, has become a burden in postwar Paris. But this, of course, is one of Beckett's themes, not an aesthetic program. As the famous final phrases of the novel indicate --

> you must say words as long as there are any ... perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would 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. (179)

-- Beckett equally expresses, despite the obscurity in which he still lived and worked after having written eight books of fiction including those of the trilogy, an enigmatic affirmation of the obligation to write. Beckett's obsessive entanglement with the contradictory cultural politics of high modernism and the avant-garde had led him both to reject the assumptions and aspirations of the interwar period and to create a narrative form out of nothing but those contradictions, laid bare and carried out to

exhaustion. The affirmation at the end of The Unnamable is a sign of Beckett's awareness that he had finally found a way of overcoming his devotion to an idea of radical aesthetic autonomy -- one that denied the expressive and communicative aspects of literature -- without taking up any alternative position.

Both the types of problems Beckett faced as a writer, and the solutions he found, were quite specific to his experience of failure in the interwar years, his isolation from any literary community during the last years of the war, and his critical reassessment of high modernism in the immediate postwar period. To understand more fully this specific development of Beckett's fiction, culminating in 1950 in The Unnamable, it is necessary both to critically examine how his work was assimilated into a one-dimensional, neo-vanguardist notion of modernism -- begun by a new generation of critics and writers in the mid-1950s who had come of age after the war -- and at to see how it forms a counterpart to the postwar work of another writer, George Orwell, who had like Beckett lived through and struggled to come to terms with the cultural-political aspirations and failures of the interwar years.

2. The Reinvention of the New: Robbe-Grillet, the Aesthetic of "Failure," and the Canon of High Modernism

Beckett finished writing The Unnamable in January of 1950. According to his biographer, although Beckett seemed

to have an "underground reputation" in France, he had been unable to find a publisher for Watt or any of his longer postwar fiction: Molloy, his best novel, had already been turned down by six publishers. Finally, in November 1950, the entire trilogy was accepted by Editions de Minuit, a struggling postwar publishing house looking for new experimental writing.[7] Molloy (in French) was published in March of 1951, Malone Meurt in October. En attendant Godot, which Beckett had written in late 1948 as a "relaxation" from the rigorous composition of the trilogy (qtd. in Bair 381), had its world premiere in Paris in January 1953; L'Innomable was published in July of that year. In 1955, the English version of Molloy came out in Paris and New York. Waiting for Godot was performed in London later that year and in Miami and New York in early 1956. In April of the same year, in one of the earliest articles about Beckett published in the U.S., Kenneth Rexroth remarked, somewhat wryly, that "the European reception of Beckett in the last couple of years ... has been dizzying. He has become an international public figure like Lollobrigida or Khrushchev" (325). Within the span of five years, beginning around 1951, Beckett had gone from being an obscure writer in his mid-40s whose major works had either received little or no public interest and had sold miserably, or had been repeatedly rejected for publication, to being an "international public figure."

Beckett's appearance in the arena of world literature marks the end of the most important phase of his career as a writer, a phase which ended with The Unnamable. Though Beckett would go on to write many shorter plays and prose pieces, and one more book-length fiction at the beginning of the 1960s, nothing he wrote before 1945 or after 1950 -- with the exception of Endgame, begun in 1955 before the London or New York premieres of Godot -- had the impact or striking originality of the works he produced in the five years after the war. Beckett himself, just at the moment when he began to gain worldwide attention, recognized the uniqueness of this period. In an interview in May, 1956, in the New York Times, he seemed to suggest that his importance as a writer was entirely restricted to the writing of the immediate postwar years:

> I wrote all [sic] my work very fast - between 1946 and 1950. Since then I haven't written anything. Or at least nothing that has seemed to me valid. The French work brought me to the point where I felt I was saying the same thing over and over again....
>
> At the end of my work there is nothing but dust - the namable. In the last book - "L'Innomable" - there's complete disintegration.... There's no way to go on.
>
> The very last thing I wrote - "Textes pour rien" - was an attempt to get out of the attitude of disintegration, but it failed. (qtd. in Graver 148)

In some respects, this statement might best be understood in relation to the guarded public persona Beckett began to cultivate in the late 1950s, the self-effacing, utterly inscrutable yet matter-of-fact utterer of postwar pessimism -- a persona which critics in the press soon

elevated to the status of a cultural icon, the misunderstood artistic genius, both a social misfit and an olympian aesthetic specialist who nods every once in a while in the direction of the bewildered and suspicious masses. Nevertheless, there is a good deal of truth in Beckett's suggestion that his postwar aesthetic of disintegration and failure, while only beginning to gain critical recognition in the late 1950s, was already a thing of the past. While his later theater pieces could certainly be linked to the development of performance art in the 1960s and '70s, around the time Beckett published his next book-length work of fiction, Comment c'est (1961; English version, How It Is, 1964), there was already a new set of cultural developments -- especially in the genre of the novel -- that seem very distant from Beckett's reworking of the European high modernist and "historical" avant-garde traditions. To cite only a few of the novels that, from the 1950s to the early '60s, seemed to initiate a new "school" or lend prestige to a previously marginal one: the "beat" movement, with Kerouac's On the Road (1957); the Afro-American novel, with Ellison's Invisible Man (1952); the feminist novel, with Lessing's The Golden Notebook (1962); the Latin-American "boom" novel and "magical realism," with Carpentier's Los Pasos Perdidos (1953) and Rulfo's Pedro Páramo (1955); the post-colonial novel, with Achebe's Things Fall Apart (1958); the "angry young man," with Sillitoe's Saturday Night and

Sunday Morning (1958); and the "nouveau roman," with Robbe-Grillet's Les Gommes (1953).[8]

Among these various movements and emphases, it was, of course, only the nouveau roman that claimed Beckett's postwar fiction as part of its own project; many critics have since viewed Beckett's trilogy -- especially The Unnamable -- and the novels of Robbe-Grillet, Saurraute, and Sollers as closely-related harbingers of both contemporary postmodern metafiction and post-structuralist writing (see chapter V.4). Yet a closer consideration of Robbe-Grillet's theoretical writings on the "new novel" in the late 1950s and his fiction reveals a set of significant distinctions between his and Beckett's theory and practice -- distinctions that confirm Beckett's suggestion that his own project was, in a sense, completed in 1950.

Quite unlike Beckett, Robbe-Grillet -- who was born in the year of high modernism's apogee, 1922, and whose first novel was published in 1953 -- had not experienced the diverse, conflicting agendas of the interwar years. For Robbe-Grillet, and others of his generation, the attempt to create a new novel in the 1950s involved, simultaneously, creating a version of modernist/avant-gardist narrative aesthetics -- reaching back to the now classic opposition Balzac/Flaubert -- which ignored the diverse emphases of narrative experimentation from the mid-19th century through the interwar period. Instead, they created a linear,

stylistic model of "écriture" that had as its principle, teleological characteristic an ever-increasing stylistic "rejection" of the conventions of "bourgeois realism." In fact, Robbe-Grillet -- whose vanguardist claims for a "revolution" or "rebirth" in art vis-à-vis the novel (New 17) seem to repeat many of the contradictions of the earlier avant-garde -- was one of the first postwar canonizers of modernism as a set of stylistic experiments, a canon of modernism whose unassailable prestige among academics and other official "custodians of high culture" in the late 1950s and early '60s inspired the "postmodern" questioning of established barriers between high and low cultural styles and forms (see chapter V.4).

In Robbe-Grillet's writings on the new novel, Beckett appears as the direct descendant of Flaubert, Proust, Kafka, and Joyce. Along with Robbe-Grillet's new novels, Beckett's postwar fiction entails "a rejection, finally, of every pre-established order" (73). But Robbe-Grillet's fiction conforms to the characteristic narrative perspective of the modern novel (realist and otherwise), and his theory of the mid-50s articulates a neo-aestheticist notion of aesthetic autonomy -- both of which Beckett's postwar fiction and occasional critical remarks explicitly reject. Beckett's postwar project, as I have argued throughout, was inextricably bound up with the cultural conflicts of the interwar years; Robbe-Grillet's project, in contrast, was

explicitly neo-vanguardist and left unexamined several of the same cultural-political contradictions that Beckett had struggled with, seized on, made explicit, and parodied. My purpose in briefly contrasting Beckett's project of 1946-1950 with Robbe-Grillet's, from the 1953 publication of The Erasers through his theoretical writings of the late 50s, is twofold: first, to extricate Beckett from the one-dimensional appropriation of his work in Robbe-Grillet's polemical writing -- an appropriation that served as a model for many subsequent views of Beckett's fiction as modernist "écriture"; and, second, to further specify how Beckett's aesthetic and cultural values were contingent upon his own conflicted experience during the interwar years, something quite distinct from Robbe-Grillet's neo-vanguardist claims of another era.

Like the avant-garde and modernist manifesto writers of the early 20th century, in For a New Novel (a collection of separate essays which were originally written, published, and revised from 1955 to 1963) Robbe-Grillet emphasizes both the importance of the "new" and a faith in art's power to transform society:

> the term New Novel ... is merely a convenient label applicable to all those seeking new forms for the novel, forms capable of expressing (or of creating) new relations between man and the world, to all those who have determined to invent the novel, in other words, to invent man.... the systematic repetition of the forms of the past is not only absurd and futile ... it can even become harmful: by blinding us to our real situation in the world today, it keeps us, ultimately, from constructing the world and man of tomorrow. (9)

Similarly, he attacks the regressive institution of letters:

> we must make no mistake as to the difficulties such a revolution will encounter. The entire caste system of our literary life (from publisher to the humblest reader, including bookseller and critic) has no choice but to oppose the unknown form which is attempting to establish itself. (17)

Many of the oppositions Robbe-Grillet draws also recall earlier modernist and avant-garde ideas: for example, his distinction between the aesthetically revolutionary value of "presence" against the Balzacian, bourgeois value of "Signification (psychological, social, functional)" (21), or between message/content and form/style -- "the genuine writer has nothing to say. He has only a way of speaking" (45). Like distinctions between "impression" and "fact," such divisions serve both to carve out a unique sphere for literary art over science or sociology and to ensure that aesthetic judgment remain autonomous. But it is not coincidentally in relation to the notion of aesthetic autonomy that Robbe-Grillet begins to come up against some of the same difficult contradictions Beckett himself encountered in his early essays of Proust and Joyce. For example, having already linked the new novel to an abstract valuing of "revolution," Robbe-Grillet goes on to clearly distinguish his project from any directly political program. While the cold war context of writers' rejection of past ties to the Communist Party -- as in the famous volume The God that Failed, published in 1949 -- is certainly of some

relevance here, Robbe-Grillet's explicit rejection of Sartre's "obsolete" notion of "commitment" (34) is couched in quite general terms of aesthetic autonomy:

> the necessity a work of art acknowledges has nothing to do with utility. It is an internal necessity, which obviously appears as gratuitousness when the system of references is fixed from without: from the viewpoint of the Revolution, for example, as we have said, the highest art may seem a secondary, even absurd enterprise.... the work must seem necessary, but necessary for nothing.... (45)(emphases in text)

On one hand, Robbe-Grillet strives to restore the avant-guardist value of a revolutionary art; on the other hand, he seems to advance a notion of aesthetic autonomy not unlike, in many regards, turn-of-the-century aestheticism, an aestheticism against which, as Peter Bürger and others have argued (see chapter III.3), the historical avant-garde mounted its project of connecting art, everyday life, and political struggle. At times, Robbe-Grillet seems to be taking a directly anti-avant-gardist stance: "we must now, once and for all, stop taking seriously the accusations of gratuitousness, stop fearing 'art for art's sake' as the worst of evils" (38). At other times, he employs a notion of the "avant-garde" positively, but (as with later uses of the term "modernism") its meaning is restricted to an opposition with mass culture:

> The word 'avant-garde'... despite its note of impartiality, generally serves to dismiss -- as though by a shrug of the shoulders -- any work that risks giving a bad conscience to the literature of mass consumption. Once a writer renounces the well-known formulas and attempts to create his own way of writing, he finds himself stuck with the label "avant-

garde." (26)

Ultimately, Robbe-Grillet can only reconcile his idea of aesthetic autonomy with the vanguardist linking of literature and revolution through a formula so vague as to approach meaninglessness:

> Let us, then, restore to the notion of commitment the only meaning it can have for us. Instead of being of a political nature, commitment is, for the writer, the full awareness of the present problems of his own language, the conviction of their extreme importance, the desire to solve them from within. Here, for him, is the only chance of remaining an artist and, doubtless too, by means of an obscure and remote consequence, of some day serving something -- perhaps even the Revolution. (41)

There is, however, another basic contradiction underlying Robbe-Grillet's attempt to outline a revolutionary yet wholly autonomous -- "for itself alone" (12) -- literature. Somewhat like Beckett in his early writing, Robbe-Grillet's idea of aesthetic autonomy is bound up with a celebration of conscious artistic labor which is totally at odds with the interwar avant-garde's celebration of will-less, unconscious, "automatic" creation freed from all critical aesthetic judgment or self-conscious technique:

> Actually, it is enough to read Kafka's diaries, for example, or Flaubert's correspondence, to realize straight off the primary role taken, even in the great works of the past, by a creative consciousness, by will, by rigor. Patient labor, methodical construction, the deliberate architecture of each sentence as of the whole book--this has always played its part. After The Counterfeiters, after Joyce, after Nausea, we seem to be tending increasingly toward an age of fiction in which the problems of style and construction will be lucidly considered by the novelist, and in which critical preoccupations, far from sterilizing creation, can serve it as a driving force. (11-12)

While Robbe-Grillet thus encourages the conscious agency of the writer, he condemns a related concept: the agency of the hero. As I have already discussed, the structuralist and post-structuralist theory of narrative, idealized in Barthes' notion of the "writerly," advanced a proposition that the reduction of "story" -- the representation of a series of individual, motivated, interrelated actions which Robbe-Grillet and others equated with the conventions of realism and a repressive bourgeois social "order" -- resulted in a more active mode of reception whose political meaning lay in its opposition to the supposedly passive "consumption" encouraged by the products of capitalist mass culture (see II.4). Thus, for Robbe-Grillet, one of the "obsolete notions" (25) that the new novel does away with is "character" or "hero" -- the purposively acting individual. For Robbe-Grillet, "character" stands for the representation of an "individual" with "a proper name," "parents," "heredity," "a profession" and "a face which reflects ... a past which has molded that face and that character" (27). According to Robbe-Grillet, "the great contemporary works" of writers like Camus, Kafka, Faulkner, and Beckett reject the category of character by denying their inventions any of these pre-established social co-ordinates which might imbue them with "enough individuality to remain irreplaceable, enough generality to become universal" (28). Importantly, for Robbe-Grillet, this

rejection is historically motivated. "The novel of characters," he claims, "belongs entirely to the past, it describes a period: that which marked the apogee of the individual" (29). "The present period," he continues, "is rather one of administrative numbers. The world's destiny has ceased, for us, to be identified with the rise and fall of certain men" (29).

In the post-individual world, "the novel seems to stagger, having lost what was once its best prop, the hero" (29). Without a hero, "to tell a story has becomes strictly impossible" (33). But Robbe-Grillet is quick to point out that in the new novel things do "happen": "Just as we must not assume man's absence on the pretext that the traditional character has disappeared, we must not identify the search for new narrative structures with an attempt to suppress any event, any passion, any adventure" (33). Yet the key difference between the bourgeois, individualistic, hero-bound story and the new novel turns out to reside in the power of the new writer to invent, to act with total freedom. The bourgeois novelist constructs a narrative out of "prefabricated schemas people are used to, in other words, their ready-made idea of reality" (31):

> narrative ... represents an order. This order ... is linked to an entire rationalistic and organizing system, whose flowering corresponds to the assumption of power by the middle class.... All the technical elements of the [bourgeois] narrative ... the past tense and the third person ... chronological development, linear plots ... impulse of each episode toward a conclusion, etc. -- everything tended to

> impose the image of a stable, coherent ... entirely decipherable universe. Since the intelligibility of the world was not even questioned, to tell a story did not raise a problem. The style of the novel could be innocent. (32)

In contrast to the bourgeois novelist's naivete and absolute faith in an established order, the modern writer -- starting with Flaubert -- stands for pure invention:

> What constitutes the novelist's strength is precisely that he invents, that he invents quite freely without a model. The remarkable thing about modern fiction is that it asserts this characteristic quite deliberately, to such a degree that invention and imagination become, at the limit, the very subject of the book. (32)

> Each novelist, each novel, must invent its own form. No recipe can replace this continual reflection. The book makes its own rules for itself, and for itself alone. (12)

In some respects, no matter how vanguardist his attitude, Robbe-Grillet's faith in the new novelist's absolute ingenuity is itself a reflection of one of bourgeois society's most cherished and foundational values, the autonomous individual's capacity for self-creation independent of the forces of nature, or of a deterministic religious or social environment. In other respects, his advocacy of the new novel displays normative democratic values about freedom of expression which are threatened by both "the extreme Right" and the "the extreme Left" (167). And, like most serious artists of his generation, he is anxious over the recognition that in a world of centralized mass communication art is losing is status as a publicly valued category. "In order to succeed," he writes, "the New

Novel asks the public to have some confidence, still, in the power of literature, and its asks the novelist to be ashamed no longer of producing it" (167). But most relevant for my argument is Robbe-Grillet's expression of two inter-related ideas about the relation of art to society and politics that seemingly recapitulate or even make more contradictory, rather than work through or provide new insight into, underlying cultural-political questions of the interwar period: the impulse to claim art's revolutionary power is upheld by a notion of aesthetic autonomy that severely undercuts art's power to effect anything except art; and the conscious, rational, highly inventive, and original agency of the writer appears only to the extent that the world appears dominated by passivity, ready-made ideas of reality, and a pervasive "order" -- a social vision which demands that the writer deny the "hero" or the individual character the ability to act freely or interpret reality in any consciously critical way.

Rather than conform to Robbe-Grillet's neo-vanguardist vision -- Robbe-Grillet mentions Beckett throughout as an exemplar of key principles of the new novel[9] -- Beckett's critical remarks in the late 1940s and '50s emphasize a quite different awareness of his own relation to writers like Joyce and Kafka and to earlier 20th-century notions of aesthetic autonomy. Consider, for example, one of Beckett's most remarked-upon statements from the 1956 interview:

> I must say it was difficult to get to the end [of Kafka's The Castle]. The Kafka hero has a coherence of purpose. He's lost but he's not spiritually precarious, he's not falling to bits. My people seem to be falling to bits. Another difference. You notice how Kafka's form is classic, it goes on like a steamroller -- almost serene. It seems to be threatened the whole time -- but the consternation is in the form. In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form....
>
> ... Joyce is a superb manipulator of material -- perhaps the greatest. He was making words do the absolute maximum of work. There isn't a syllable that's superfluous. The kind of work I do is one in which I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of esthetic axiom that expression is achievement -- must be an achievement. My little exploration of that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable -- as something by definition incompatible with art.
>
> I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er.... The other type of artist -- the Apollonian -- is absolutely foreign to me. (qtd. in Graver 148-49)

While Robbe-Grillet and other structuralist-influenced critics began in the 1950s and '60s to formulate a linear model of modernism running from Flaubert to Beckett, Beckett himself -- by the mid-1950s -- wants to distance his work from the "achievement" of high modernism. Beckett relates his "exploration" of "impotence, ignorance" to a situation in which both the artist and his "hero" experience a common crisis of agency. And for Beckett, the "Apollonian" control exercised by writers like Joyce and Kafka is an inappropriate goal for the postwar writer. As he put in a 1961 interview, "To find a form that accommodates the mess,

that is the task of the artist now" (qtd. in Graver 219). The writer appears not as a creator of a new reality nor an agent of revolutionary change, but as someone caught up, with his audience, in a world Beckett characterizes as a "buzzing confusion," a "mess." Far from suggesting a vanguardist role for the artist, Beckett claims that the artist's only responsibility is to respond plainly to his or her vision of the world:

> One cannot speak anymore of being, one must speak only of the mess. When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that is now simply the mess. (qtd. in Graver 219)

Beckett's wholesale absorption into models of modernism -- advanced by both vanguardist critics and cultural conservatives who wanted to preserve high art against a debased sphere of mass or popular culture -- ignores a vital dimension of his entire career (see chapter V.4). As I have shown, from his earliest writings on Beckett was always struggling to reconcile two views of art: as wholly autonomous and as a communicative response to a contested "social reality." If, in the few interviews Beckett gave when his work began to gain recognition, he clearly set his project apart from a high modernist notion of aesthetic autonomy -- imagined as the artist's "omniscience and omnipotence" -- in his one major postwar aesthetic statement, the "Dialogues" with art critic Georges Duthuit

first published in 1949, Beckett expresses his belief that art is always a response to its "occasion," even if the artist's task is at present to express the "increasing anxiety of the relation itself" between art and social reality. The one-dimensional view of Beckett as high modernist aesthete, neo-vanguardist poetic revolutionary, or phenomonological philosopher -- all of which Beckett himself quietly disavowed -- has lead critics to seriously misread this statement as an apotheosis of absolute autonomy. Thus, one (among many) major study of Beckett that ignores the actual formation of his career adduces parts of the "Dialogues" to claim that Beckett's "entire canon" is informed by "unremitting efforts to find a literary shape for the proposition that perhaps no relationships exist between or among the artist, his art, and an external reality" (Dearlove 3). A more informed reading of the "Dialogues" demonstrates, to the contrary, Beckett's complex interest in re-imagining a notion of aesthetic autonomy that does not uncritically repeat the ideological oppositions of the 1920s and '30s.

As in his interwar writings on Proust and Joyce, in the "Dialogues" Beckett expresses his ideas about art in reference to the work of other artists -- in this case, three contemporary painters. But unlike the tone of his earlier, manifesto-like critiques, the "Dialogues" are somewhat parodic and self-effacing. Presumably based on

actual conversations between Beckett and his friend Duthuit, the three brief "Dialogues" were written down by Beckett alone and are characterized by ironic asides and stage directions that serve to make Beckett -- referred to as speaker "B" -- appear as an ineffectual, hyper-sensitive spokesman for a highly idiosyncratic view of art. While gently parodying the figure of the enigmatic artist, Beckett seems, at the same time, quite serious about his praise of artistic "failure." The meaning of the "Dialogues" resides equally in B's pronouncements and in the logic of the exchange between D. and B.; indeed, the dialogue form Beckett chose itself suggests that his own statements ought to be understood not as oracular aesthetic credos but as provisional responses embedded within an ongoing argument about the nature of modern art.

Beckett begins with the painter Tal Coat, whose work Beckett considers, along with that of Matisse, "a thrusting towards a more adequate expression of natural experience .... By nature I mean here, like the naivest realist, a composite of perceiver and perceived, not a datum, an experience" (Proust 101-02). Beckett considers art that only attempts to explore this "composite" -- which he describes by a typical modernist opposition between "experience" and "datum" -- to be an art of the past. When D. objects to B.'s dismissal of Tal Coat, B. responds: "I agree that the Matisse in question, as well as ... Tal Coat, have

prodigious value, but a value cognate with those already accumulated.... The only thing disturbed by the revolutionaries Matisse and Tal Coat is a certain order on the plane of the feasible" (102-03).

It is in the context of this dismissal of a key modernist concern with subjective "experience" -- which Beckett views as a further development of realism -- that Beckett makes his most often-quoted critical statement. This "plane of the feasible," D. responds, is the only plane there can be. B. agrees, but he nevertheless advocates an art that is "weary of pretending to be able." Instead, B, prefers "the expression that there is nothing to express ... no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (103). On one hand, this is a denial of modernism's most basic values, the demand for ceaseless innovation and the search for the "new." On the other hand, however, the statement suggests a new aesthetic project, a new form of "expression" whose form and content arise out of the tension between an "obligation to express" and an awareness that art no longer serves any vital function. This tension between a anti-modernist denial of art's power and a vanguardist impulse to envision a new art is played out throughout the "Dialogues." While these two attitudes threaten to cancel each other, Beckett nevertheless retains two positive values, both of which suggest a relationship between the artist and society, between art and

communication. Art, for Beckett, is neither self-referential nor reality-creating: it is rooted in the need or responsibility to communicate, the "obligation to express."

Rather than form the endpoint of the "Dialogues" -- as its quotation so often out of context by critics suggests -- this statement appears in the first dialogue; Beckett goes on to develop his notion of what kind of art might appear once the basic aspirations of modernism have lost their meaning. The second dialogue is on Andre Masson, a painter who had been one of the original members of the Surrealist group in the early 1920s and had at one time publicly supported the communist party. D. remarks that in the past Masson had been concerned with "the creation of a mythology; then with man, not simply in the universe but in society," but that now his concern is "inner emptiness." To this thumbnail sketch of the cultural politics of the interwar years B. responds that although he is "little familiar with the problems" Masson "set himself in the past" and which "have lost for him their legitimacy," he nevertheless feels "their presence not far behind these canvases veiled in consternation" (109). For B., Masson's work is more acceptable than Tal Coat's, but still seems mired in aesthetic concerns which are no longer valid. While D. maintains that Masson wants to reduce these problems "to nothing," he points out that there is still a positive "rehabilitation" in his work. Anticipating B.'s objection to

this, D. asks, "But how can Masson be expected to paint the void?"

Beckett responds, "He is not. What is the good of passing from one untenable position to another...?" For B, the "void" is part of an obsolete aesthetic vocabulary. Masson appears not as an artist of the "void" but one "literally skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression" (110). When D. points out that even in Masson's desire to reduce aesthetic problems to nothing, he "has to contend with his own technical gifts, which have the richness, the precision ... of the high classical manner," B. agrees that this "throws light on the dramatic predicament of the artist" (111-12). For B., the artist's technical ability is itself a problem in the postwar period; it interferes with the aesthetic "dream of an art" which ultimately expresses a crisis in the function and capabilities of art itself.

It is in the third dialogue, on Bram van Velde, that Beckett draws a crucial link between B.'s idiosyncratic statements on art and an admission that art is always an expression of its historical situation or the artist's "predicament." For Beckett, van Velde, in contrast to Tal Coat and Masson, "is the first to accept a certain situation and to consent to a certain act." D. asks him to clarify and B. repeats his formula: van Velde, "helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint." "Why," asks D., "is he obliged to paint?" B. can only

respond: "I don't know."

At this point, through D.'s questions, B. is backed into a corner. The result of this situation, D. asks skeptically, "is art of a new order?" B. responds defensively: "Among those whom we call great artists, I can think of none whose concern was not predominantly with his expressive possibilities, those of his vehicle, those of humanity" (120). D. interrupts: "One moment. Are you suggesting that the painting of van Velde is inexpressive?" B. answers "(A fortnight later) Yes." (120). D. considers this proposition absurd. B. attempts to defend himself in two ways. First, he defines inexpressive art as art that strives to be "independent of its occasion"; second, he claims that while other artists have tried to free art from any outside concern, "van Velde is the first whose painting is bereft, rid if you prefer, of occasion in every shape and form, ideal as well as material."

D. considers such a view tautological and, without acknowledging so, more or less repeats B.'s own formula from the first dialogue: "But might it not be suggested, even by one tolerant of this fantastic theory, that the occasion of his painting is his predicament, and that it is expressive of the impossibility to express?" (121). D. chastises B. for his inconsistency and, when B. suggests he should give up trying to explain, D. presses him to go on. B. accedes by claiming this his own view is not, it turns out, really

descriptive of van Velde's project: "How would it be if I first said what I am pleased to fancy he is, fancy he does, and then that it is more than likely that he is and does quite otherwise?" What follows is the longest unbroken speech in the "Dialogues," and is perhaps the closest thing Beckett ever offered in the way of an explanation of his view of art, even though he has already claimed in prolepsis that art is probably "otherwise." B. admits that he has tried many times, in many different ways, but always "in vain," to say what he is now trying to say. Importantly, he locates his most successful attempt in relation to class society:

> The pathetic antithesis possession-poverty was perhaps not the most tedious [of my prior attempts]. But we begin to weary of it, do we not? The realization that art has always been bourgeois, though it may dull our pain before the achievements of the socially progressive, is finally of scant interest. The analysis of the relation between the artist and his occasion, a relation always regarded as indispensable, does not seem to have been very productive either, the reason being perhaps that it lost its way in disquisitions on the nature of occasion. (124)

"Occasion" is here specified as art's status in bourgeois society. "Socially progressive" art, which causes B. pain, is like all art embedded in bourgeois society. To realise this might, B.'s remark suggests, mitigate its achievement; but in the end the social status of art is "of scant interest" -- not because it is unimportant, but because analyses of art that focus on "the relation between the artist and his occasion" lead more to a description of

social context, "the nature of occasion," and less to a consideration of aesthetic qualities. Far from a rejection of the importance of social context, Beckett seems to be arguing that aesthetic works cannot be explained by merely exploring the social forces in which they take shape.

As if trying to correct, rather than reject, a socially and historically informed view of art, B. insists on a thoroughly dialectic approach:

> It is obvious that for the artist obsessed with his expressive vocation, anything and everything is doomed to become occasion, as is apparently the case to some extent with Masson.... But if the occasion appears as an unstable term of relation, the artist, who is the other term, is hardly less so, thanks to his warren of modes and attitudes. The objections to this dualist view of the creative process are unconvincing. (124)

If the social context or "occasion" of art is always changing and developing historically, then so too are the artist's "attitudes" toward his "vocation." Thus, the relationship between the terms, between artist and occasion, can never be settled. The implication is that artistic attitudes develop historically according to an autonomous logic that has an unfixed but inevitable relation to social and historical change. B. goes on to develop his notion of aesthetic autonomy by projecting this duality onto the work itself. The "occasion" is also the content of the work of art, which B. refers to ironically as the "ailment"; the artist's "modes and attitudes" is also the form, which B. refers to as the "manner":

Two things are established, however precariously: the

> ailment, from fruits on plates to low mathematics and self-commiseration, and its manner of dispatch. All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself, as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to [sic]. The history of painting, here we go again, is the history of its attempts to escape from this sense of failure, by means of more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between representer and representee .... (124-25)

For B., the historically changing relationship between art and its "occasion" can be traced in the changing relationship between form and content, a relationship characterized by an "acute and increasing anxiety." What interests Beckett is not so much modern art's increasing attention to formal matters or formal experimentation; rather, Beckett sees the project of modern art most clearly as a crisis residing in the relationship between its own formal concerns and the occasion which provides or allows it a content. Thus, modernism's attempt to create "more authentic ... relations between representer and representee" appears as a response to the art of the past's "failure" to relate, in some adequate manner, these dual aspects of the creative process. Up to this point, Beckett's quasi-Hegelian, quasi-Kantian schematic of art's dialectical development and its dual nature is abstract enough to accommodate a number of more worked out theories of art -- political, sociological, psychological, or belletristic.

However, when B. wants to make an argument for an "art of a new order," he is forced to abandon the "dualist view,"

according to which art's expressive power always appears in relation to its occasion. On one hand, he claims that

> van Velde is the first to desist from this estheticised automatism, the first to submit wholly to the incoercible absence of relation, in the absence of terms or, if you like, in the presence of unavailable terms, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living. (125)

Yet, on the other hand, B. immediately recognizes that, in light of his own previous remarks, this is just another sign of the changing relationship between a new aesthetic attitude and a new context:

> I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and the act of which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation. I know that my inability to do so places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in what I think is still called an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists. (125-26)

Beckett's vanguardist impulse -- which imagines art of a "new order" as an aesthetic autonomy in which expressionlessness takes the form of art's detachment from any context -- is kept in check by his own abstract notion of art's historical development and the artist's "obligation to express." The "Dialogues" end not with an affirmation of an art "bereft ... of occasion in every shape and form," but with B.'s self-deprecating admission that he is unable, or unwilling, to try to reconcile his explicitly contradictory views of art. D. gently reminds B. of his intention to

supplement his own view of van Velde with a consideration that it "is more than likely" van Velde "is and does quite otherwise":

> D. -- Are you not forgetting something?
> B. -- Surely that is enough?
> D. -- I understood your number was to have two parts. The first was to consist in your saying what you -- er -- thought. This I am prepared to believe you have done. The second --
> B. -- (Remembering, warmly) Yes, yes, I am mistaken, I am mistaken.

B.s final word in the "Dialogues" leaves the question of art's communicative, expressive quality -- which is always part of its relationship to the world, an aspect of its social function -- entirely open; it is a question, Beckett seems to suggest, that is not the artist's responsibility to answer, but only to "express."

* * *

It seems evident that during the postwar period Beckett understood his own project and its relation to modernism quite outside the neo-vanguardist aspirations of the "New Novel." Beckett's conception of art of a new order is explicitly undercut by his own awareness that the artist's "dream" to make art wholly autonomous or "inexpressive" is itself an "expression" of the artist's "predicament" in the social world. Beckett's re-imagined relationship to the cultural-politics of the interwar years -- especially in regard to the key issues of agency and autonomy -- is manifested in his postwar development of a narrative perspective that responded to and increasingly diverged from

modernism's typical vantage point of the male urban spectator. Just as the claims made by Robbe-Grillet (and others who canonize Beckett's work through a one-dimensional, formalist interpretation of high modernism, the avant-garde, or postmodern metafiction) have little in common with Beckett's ambivalent critical remarks, the narrative forms and concerns of the new novel are emphatically distinct from the "beggar's mask" in "The End" or the writer struggling with the void in The Unnamable.

Robbe-Grillet's first fictions of the 1950s and '60s are characterized by three principle features: a dispassionate, omniscient, highly descriptive narrative voice; an experimentation with narrative structure in which an intricately organized plot -- of the investigation of a political crime in The Erasers or the events surrounding the murder and mutilation of a young girl in The Voyeur -- is arranged into a series of overlapping scenes whose causal and temporal relations are intriguingly left open; and a depiction of individuals unknowingly caught up in a series of fixed events which seem to determine their fate over and above their wills or desires.

All of these features are dependent on the established techniques and narrative perspectives of the modern novel. In The Erasers, for example, Robbe-Grillet draws on the popular crime novel -- whose male hero, the alienated detective who moves through the social spaces of the city

looking for clues, is a paradigmatic modern narrator/observor -- and a typically modernist use of mythical structure, evident in the novel's pervasive formal and thematic allusions to Oedipus.[10] On one hand, the protagonist of the novel, the special agent Wallas who winds up committing the murder he thinks he is investigating, seems to be little more than a "pawn" or a "mere agent of the plot" (Britton 68), while the olympian detachment of the narrator's descriptions and pronouncements -- "Things take their immutable course.... The perfectly adjusted machinery cannot hold the slightest surprise in store" (19) -- serves to focus the reader's attention on the narrator's highly organized, purposeful manipulation of an otherwise stereotypical detective plot.[11] On the other hand, however, the figure of the detective is emblematic of the narrative perspective of the novel as a whole. The detective is, first and foremost, the detached walker in the city:

> Wallas likes walking. In the cold, early winter air he likes walking straight ahead through this unknown city. He looks around, he listens, he smells the air; this perpetually renewed contact affords him a subtle impression of continuity; he walks on and gradually unrolls the uninterrupted ribbon of his own passage, not a series of irrational, unrelated images, but a smooth band where each element takes its place in the web.... It is of his own free will that he is walking toward an inevitable and perfect future. (47-48)

Wallas's observations become a "ribbon" or "web" where the "series" of images takes on a meaningful configuration: in this sense, he is like Robbe-Grillet's idea of the novelist as a creator of reality. But Robbe-Grillet

distances Wallas from the narrator by making Wallas's sense of order only an "impression" and his "free will" an illusion in the face of an "inevitable and perfect future" that only the writer -- and through the writer's controlled organization of the material, the reader -- knows. The narrative perspective in The Erasers is thus a variation of the observing, detached walker in the city. The double experience of alienation and potential freedom evoked by the urban social space, so pervasive in modern literature, is figured as a contrast between the hero's illusory free will and the narrator's omniscient manipulation of a series of events, a manipulation explicitly emphasized by the oracular, detached style of the novel. The difference between earlier constructions of this perspective and Robbe-Grillet's lies in the degree to which the sense of autonomy and freedom becomes associated exclusively with the formal manipulation of the material, while the hero -- deliberately lacking interiority or subjectivity -- is only capable of an illusory sense of participation in the images he observes or the events he is involved in.[12]

The content of Robbe-Grillet's new novels are not, as some might argue, arbitrary to their narrative structure and perspective. No matter how much his novels purport to "subvert" the conventions of popular or degraded forms of narrative, their own interest is intimately bound up with themes of masculine identity pervasive in modern culture,

high and low: physical mobility, social alienation, detachment, aggressive sexuality, and violence. While The Erasers constructs its narrative innovations around the elements of the masculinist detective novel, The Voyeur, Robbe-Grillet's second novel, centers on the apparent rape, murder, and mutilation of a young girl on a sparsely populated island and the isolated wandering of Mathias, a traveling salesman who may -- or may not -- have committed the crime, but who is undeniably fascinated by the image of the victim's ravaged body. As Susan Suleiman has written in regard to Project for a Revolution in New York, Robbe-Grillet seems to view "fantasies of mutilation, rape, torture, and murder" -- staples of the "porno-detective novel" -- as cultural myths or données that the contemporary writer freely chooses to manipulate, "subvert," or "deconstruct" in his project of "cultural demystification" (57-58). But, as Suleiman's sophisticated reading of the novel demonstrates, "far from deconstructing male fantasies of omnipotence and total control over passive female bodies, Projet repeats them with astonishing fidelity.... Whatever else Projet may be, it is definitely a man's book" (65-66).

Robbe-Grillet's new novels consistently uphold the observational, masculine perspective that, as I have shown, Beckett explicitly strove to minimalize, parody and -- in the extreme case of The Unnamable -- reduce to a state of fear and anxiety over the loss of power, autonomy, and

centrality. My point is not to claim that Beckett's work is more original or interesting than Robbe-Grillet's, but to demonstrate the inadequacy of the formalist reading of Beckett as modernist par excellence that Robbe-Grillet himself promoted. Along with the influence of theorists like Barthes, this neo-vanguardist concept of modernism has affected the academic reception of Beckett since the 1960s and has served to assimilate Beckett's work to a group of narrative innovations and theories -- from the nouveau roman of the 1950s to the "postmodern" metafiction of the 1980s -- whose cultural and literary concerns are quite distinct from those informing Beckett's fiction. Once the ideological oppositions of the interwar period -- and their postwar manifestations in categories such as "signification" and "presence" or the readerly and the writerly -- have been put aside, Beckett's fiction appears much more meaningful in the context of works by writers who, like Beckett himself, had experienced and actively struggled with the conflicting agendas of the interwar years in their earlier works, and whose work of the 1940s demonstrates a critical reassessment of the cultural politics of the early 20th century.

3. Nightmare of Commitment: Orwell's "Inside the Whale" and 1984

In 1946, shortly before he began to work on his last novel, 1984, Orwell wrote:

> Animal Farm was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political and artistic purpose into one whole. I have not written a novel for seven years, but I hope to write another fairly soon. It is bound to be a failure, every book is a failure, but I know with some clarity what kind of book I want to write. (qtd. in Crick 1)

Orwell's sense of failure and his clarity of purpose as a writer in the 1940s were closely linked. If for Beckett failure had become an aesthetic goal, for Orwell literary failure was inevitable because history had rendered the practice of art itself problematic, had burdened the writer with a purpose that conflicted with aesthetic concerns:

> The invasion of literature by politics was bound to happen. It must have happened, even if the special problem of totalitarianism had never arisen, because we have developed a sort or compunction which our grandparents did not have, an awareness of the enormous injustice and misery of the world, and a guilt-stricken feeling that one ought to be doing something about it, which makes a purely aesthetic attitude towards life impossible. No one, now, could devote himself to literature as single-mindedly as Joyce or Henry James. (qtd. in Williams, Orwell 35)

There are deeply-seated similarities in Orwell's and Beckett's visions of failure in the postwar world, similarities to be found neither in shared values nor intentions but in a shared experience, in deeply-felt and long-developed responses to a shared awareness. Like Beckett, Orwell wrote the works for which he became internationally famous in the aftermath of the war; and like Beckett, he had begun his career in the late 1920s in Paris and London, faced with a set of difficult, conflicting choices. Well-educated sons of middle-class families, both

Beckett and Orwell had entered and negotiated a polarized literary culture which demanded that the writer justify his choices. As Williams put its in regard to Orwell:

> He was living ... at a time and within a class in which the whole practice of writing was problematic.... In the confident middle class, intent on its version of practicality, writing was thought of as an impractical secondary activity, an alternative to "doing something real".... [unless] the impractical activity had practical effects: that is to say, made money. The successful author ... was then an admired and rewarded producer, like any other. But .... there was also the fact that on this projection the writer had no autonomous purposes: his definition of achievement would be shaped from the beginning by an external and alienated standard. At the same time a growing minority of the same social class made a related but apparently opposite abstraction in reaction to this. If the only orthodox test of achievement was "social" recognition and success, then this could be "opposed" by a simple negation. The "writer," the true writer, had no commercial aims, but also, at root, no social function and, by derivation, no social content. He just "wrote." And then as a self-defined recognisable figure, he lived outside society: unconventional, the "artist." (30-31)

As Williams points out, this ideological polarization is part of "a real social history" in the development of bourgeois life and thought since the 19th century (see chapter I.IV). Within the pressures and categories of the period, Orwell's choice "was in the other direction from that emphasis of the twenties .... he chose content before form, experience before words ... became the socially conscious writer of the thirties rather than the aesthetic writer of the twenties" (32). But Orwell himself saw this as a forced choice: in a different era, he claimed, he would have written "ornate or merely descriptive books ... [but]

as it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer" (qtd. in Williams 33). As Williams suggests, the tension between what kind of writer Orwell felt he might have become and what kind of writer Orwell felt history had "forced" him to be -- his uncertainty about whether or not a literature "invaded" by political ceased to be literature at all -- informs much of his best writing. "It would be easy to say," Williams notes, "that almost all Orwell's important writing is about someone who gets away from an oppressive normality.... Yet it would be truer to say that [it] is about someone who tries to get away but fails" (39). There is a substantive link between Orwell's sense of artistic failure, as he expressed it in the postwar years, and the failure of his heroes, up through George Winston in 1984, to escape an oppressive social reality. Just as Orwell felt forced, by his own historical situation, to take the role of the socially-responsible writer -- with all that this entailed for him, from the need to communicate to a broad audience to the choice of subject matter -- his characters fail to free themselves from their social roles and historical situations. As Williams puts it, Orwell "felt, simultaneously, that the flight was necessary but also useless" (39).

Uselessness, passivity, the futility of struggle and failure -- these are hardly values one would expect from the "committed" writer of the 1930s. But by the beginning of the

1940s Orwell, like Beckett, had been compelled to critically rethink the literary values and choices of his own formative past. That they had made opposite choices is only one side of the story; what is perhaps more important is that both ended up struggling against the implications of those choices, had sensed failure as the inevitable outcome of the polarization itself and had -- in important ways -- made failure the focus of their postwar vision. The 1940 essay "Inside the Whale" is the most direct expression of Orwell's rejection of the cultural politics -- as he had experienced it -- of the 1920s and '30s. And what is most striking in this rejection is that, at the moment of the most severe historical crisis, Orwell is provoked into a defense of aesthetic autonomy -- or rather, a version of aesthetic autonomy that Orwell pieces together out of the failures and ruins of the interwar period and which, like Beckett's notion of inexpressive art, understands literary value only as a reflection of failure, of "the <u>impossibility</u> of any major literature until the world has shaken itself into its new shape" (50).[13]

Orwell's view of the historical crisis itself and the normative values of autonomy -- as freedom of expression and of the individual -- are linked at the most general level:

> While I have been writing this essay another European war has broken out. It will either last several years and tear Western civilization to pieces, or it will end inconclusively .... What is quite obviously happening, war or no war, is the break-up of <u>laissez-faire</u> capitalism and of the liberal-Christian culture....

> Almost certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships -- an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction. The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence. But this means that literature ... must suffer at least a temporary death. (48)

It is from this perspective that Orwell re-assesses the literature of the preceding two decades. To do so, Orwell first tries to get rid of a principle opposition of the period: "at bottom it is always a writer's tendency, his 'purpose', his 'message', that makes him liked or disliked.... And no book is ever truly neutral. Some or other tendency is always discernible, in verse as much as prose, even if it does no more than determine the form and the choice of imagery" (24). His grouping of writers is typical -- Joyce, Eliot, Lawrence, Lewis, etc. on one side, the "Auden-Spender group" on the other. But he quickly points out the grouping is problematic: "Lawrence and Eliot were in reality antipathetic, Huxley worshipped Lawrence but was repelled by Joyce ... and Lewis attacked everyone in turn" (25). What the writers of the twenties share is not a common way of writing but a set of values and tendencies, a kind of "pessimism" and a hostility "to the notion of 'progress'" (25-26). But even more so, in these writers' works

> there is no attention to the urgent problems of the moment, above all no politics in the narrower sense. Our eyes are directed to Rome, to Byzantium, to Montparnasse, to Mexico, to the Etruscans, to the Subconscious, to the solar plexus .... When one looks back at the twenties, nothing is queerer than the way

> in which every important event in Europe escaped the notice of the English intelligentsia. (27)

Orwell mocks the more pretensions aspects of the 1920s -- "in 'cultured' circles art-for-art's-saking extended practically to the worship of meaninglessness ... To judge a book by its subject matter was the unforgivable sin, and even to be aware of its subject matter was looked on as a lapse of taste" (27-28). But "the best writers of the twenties," he adds, "did not subscribe to this doctrine, their 'purpose' is in most cases fairly overt, but it is usually a 'purpose' along moral-religious cultural lines. Also, when translatable into political terms ... the tendency of all the writers in this group is conservative" (28).

In contrast, the "Auden-Spender" group which emerged in the 30s displays a very different "tendency." On one hand, Orwell -- who never mentions his own work in reference to this group -- clearly sympathizes with their "leaning towards Communism" (30). "By throwing 'pure art' overboard they have freed themselves from the fear of being laughed at and vastly enlarged their scope. The prophetic side of Marxism, for example, is new material for poetry and has great possibilities" (31). Yet Orwell's main point is that the politically-left, committed writers of the 30s failed both to further social progress or to produce vital literature. Compared to the "vary varied origins" of the writers of the 20s, "nearly all the younger writers fit

easily into the public-school-university-Bloomsbury pattern" (31). While promoting egalitarianism, "Marxized literature has moved no nearer to the masses" (32). Most, Orwell claims, took up the cause of communism during "the period of anti-Fascism" without understanding or really caring about the reality of the Communist party in Spain or the Soviet Union. "[S]uch things as purges, secret police ... etc. are too remote to be terrifying. They can swallow totalitarianism <u>because</u> they have no experience of anything but liberalism" (36). Young writers searching "for something to believe in" found in Communism "a Church, an army, an orthodoxy, a discipline" (35). For Orwell, who dedicated his entire career to socially responsible, left-leaning prose, this overview of the 1930s carries a most sweeping judgment:

> On the whole the literary history of the thirties seems to justify the opinion that a writer does well to keep out of politics.... Any Marxist can demonstrate with the greatest of ease that 'bourgeois' liberty of thought is an illusion. But when he has finished his demonstration there remains the psychological fact that without this 'bourgeois' liberty the creative powers wither away.... Literature as we know it is an individual thing, demanding mental honesty and a minimum of censorship. And this is even truer of prose than of verse.... The atmosphere of orthodoxy is always damaging to prose, and above all it is completely ruinous to the novel, the most anarchical of all forms of literature.... The novel is practically a Protestant form of art; it is a product of the free mind, of the autonomous individual. No decade in the past hundred and fifty years has been so barren of imaginative prose as the nineteen-thirties. (39)

This harsh reaction to the interwar period -- with the conservative or "reactionary outlook" (28) of the twenties coming off no better than the left orthodoxy of the 30s --

leaves Orwell in a contradictory position that, not incidentally, is analogous to Beckett's "inability" in the last of the "Dialogues." For Beckett, according to his own dialectical schema of the duality of the creative process, "inexpressive" art must be, despite its attempt to "fail," an expression of its "occasion" -- his "ideal" form of art, he tacitly admits, is self-contradictory. For Orwell, "no book is ever really neutral. Some or other tendency is always discernible" -- this is the point of a good deal of his essay. But the two overall tendencies of the past two decades are invalid: "progress and reaction," he declares, "have both turned out to be swindles" (48). Obliged by history to be a political writer, rejecting high modernism and committed writing, viewing all political positions as invalid -- all of this under the pressure and recognition of an historical crisis that would seem to call for critical thought rather than resignation -- Orwell is left with two inadequate alternatives: either declare literature obsolete, or else identify some other type of literature whose "tendency" manages to avoid the hopeless impasse he has so emphatically described.

Like Beckett, Orwell ultimately chooses neither an apocalyptic nor a positive position, but rather risks self-contradiction; and like Beckett he attempts to refashion some notion of aesthetic autonomy out of the failures of the 20s and 30s. Orwell singles out Henry Miller, author of

Tropic of Cancer, as "the only imaginative prose writer of the slightest value" of the past decade. And while "Inside the Whale" might appear, at first glance, as a lengthy, circuitous and very positive review of Miller's fiction up to date, Miller actually functions in the essay as a symbol for the overall crisis: his "importance is merely symptomatic" (50). In describing and praising Miller's work and "tendency" Orwell constantly refers to the literary values of the 1920s and '30s that he has already rejected. Thus, like the Joyce-Eliot group's works, Miller's novel "about American deadbeats cadging drinks in the Latin Quarter" ignores politics in an irresponsible manner: "a novelist who simply disregards the major public events of the moment is generally either a footler or a plain idiot" (10). Like Ulysses, it is one of those novels that "create a world of their own" and that "opens up a new world not by revealing what is strange, but by revealing what is familiar" (11). At times, Orwell describes Tropic of Cancer as a modernist masterpiece: "the drunks and deadbeats are handled with a feeling for character and a mastery of technique that are unapproached in any at all recent novel.... [Miller] drop[s] the Geneva language of the ordinary novel and drag[s] the real-politick of the inner mind into the open" (13). But Orwell also distances Miller from interwar modernism's links to aestheticism:

> What Miller has in common with Joyce is a willingness to mention the inane, squalid facts of everyday

> life.... But there the resemblance ends. As a novel, Tropic of Cancer is far inferior to Ulysses. Joyce is an artist, in a sense in which Miller is not and probably would not wish to be.... Miller is simply a hard-boiled person talking about life. (15)

In other places, Orwell combines a Wildean notion of art's purposeless with a celebration of the common person:

> Voyage au bout de la nuit is a book with a purpose, and its purpose is to protest against the horror and meaninglessness of modern life -- actually, indeed, of life. It is a cry of unbearable disgust. Tropic of Cancer is almost exactly the opposite. The thing has become so unusual as to seem almost anomalous, but it is the book of a man who is happy.... Exactly the aspects of life that fill Céline with horror are the ones that appeal to him. So far from protesting, he is accepting. (15-16)

Miller's passivity and acceptance are, for Orwell, the signs of a purposeless purpose:

> To accept civilization as it is practically means accepting decay. It has ceased to be a strenuous attitude and become a passive attitude .... But precisely because ... he is passive to experience, Miller is able to get nearer the ordinary man than is possible to more purposive writers.... he simply lies down and lets things happen to him. It is a voice from the crowd, from the underling, from the third-class carriage, from the ordinary, non-political, non-moral passive man. (18-19)

Miller creates an autonomous literature, individual and free from orthodoxy, by giving in to defeat and terror -- "To say 'I accept' ... is to say that you accept concentration camps, rubber truncheons, Hitler, Stalin" (17) -- and by happily embracing the role not of the "propagandists" but the "victims" (18). But Orwell turns this negative attitude into a positive, modernist mimesis which reveals how bad the modern world really is:

> At this date it hardly needs a war to bring home to us the disintegration of our society and the increasing helplessness of all decent people. It is for this reason that I think that the passive, non-co-operative attitude implied in Henry Miller's work is justified. Whether or not it is an expression of what people ought to feel, it probably comes near to expressing what they do feel.... No sermons, merely the subjective truth. And along those lines it is still possible for a good novel to be written. (47)

Paradoxically, the future of the novel -- the literary form most closely linked to liberal democracy -- depends on a passive acceptance of the destruction of its own conditions. "The passive attitude will come back, and it will be more consciously passive than before" (48). Like Beckett's skepticism about the agency of the writer, Orwell's contradictory praise of the passive attitude is both part of his social vision and a critical response to the cultural politics of the interwar years. For both writers, "passivity" and "failure" were never aesthetic credos, but indications of a crisis in literature's relation to a set of social conditions. For this reason, despite all his praise, Orwell must in the end deny Miller's status as a true artist: "But do I mean by this that Miller is a 'great author', a new hope for English prose? Nothing of the kind. Miller himself would be the last to claim or want any such thing" (49). Miller's autonomous stance -- "completely negative, unconstructive, amoral" -- is both the source of his integrity and the sign of a pervasive failure. Tropic of Cancer's "importance is merely symptomatic.... It is a demonstration of the impossibility of any major literature

until the world has shaken itself into its new shape" (50).

* * *

Like "Inside the Whale," 1984 projects a fatalism about the possibilities of the future in relation to the cultural and political failures of the past. The novel has been variously read as an anti-communist tract in the vein of The God that Failed, a Swiftian satire of both postwar communist and capitalist bureaucracy, a prophetic dystopian fantasy, and a despairing expression of Orwell's deteriorating health and nihilism.[14] Orwell himself viewed it as a "fantasy, but in the form of a naturalistic novel" (qtd. in Crick 20); it seems, in general, to belong to "a tradition of documentary realism of didactic or reformist intent" directed at the widest possible audience (Crick 107). But there is an underlying logic in the novel -- a set of thematic and formal concerns related to Orwell's conviction that the demands of politics and art were incompatible and even mutually destructive -- which has its counterpart in a novel like Beckett's The Unnamable.

Beckett's struggle with the implications of a radical aesthetic autonomy had led him to play out the contradictions inherent in modernist views of literature rather than adopt alternative styles or concerns. In The Unnamable, this struggle appears in the attempt to create a "perspectiveless" perspective -- developed throughout his postwar fiction in response to a rejected-rejecting social

reality -- and in the nearly obsessive attention to an inherent "aporia" in modernist thought: language is both determining and expressive of the self and external reality; language is both the medium of social control and the means of escaping habituated modes of thought and existence. By the late 1940s, Orwell had experienced a similar struggle concerning the implications of the committed writing of the 1930s. Like Beckett, Orwell does not adopt an alternative position outside the tradition he critiques; rather he attempts to express the tragic conditions and consequences surrounding the attempt to fuse art with politics, and politics with art.

Orwell's struggle with the idea of a politicized art appears in 1984 as the struggle of the protagonist -- Winston Smith, a "writer" for Ministry of Truth -- against a totalitarian world characterized by the complete collapse of the spheres of science, culture, and politics upon whose relative autonomy liberal democracy depends. As Walter Benjamin suggested in 1936, the Communist politicization of art and the fascist aestheticization of politics were complementary processes, both of which ultimately destroyed progressive, critical thought.[15] Both the extreme narrative perspective of the novel and its central theme of a consciousness-controlling centralized culture against whose language, images, and concepts Smith struggles to gain a critical sense of self are -- like the extremely reduced

perspective and the narrator's struggle with voice in The Unnamable -- formulated out of the cultural-political impasses of the interwar period. 1984 is narrated by an omniscient, critical voice that itself cannot exist under the conditions the narrator describes, and presents Smith's struggle, as we shall see, in terms of an act of individual writing that begins to free him from "the prevailing mental condition ... of controlled insanity" (344) created through the techniques of Newspeak. Indeed, Newspeak itself, and the centralized cultural production of Oceania, are reflections of both the radical vanguardist aesthetics of the interwar period and the critique of mass culture that was a formative subtext of "high" modernist literature.

In his first book, Down and Out in Paris and London (1933), Orwell had fashioned his own beggar's mask -- an autobiographical first-person narrator who works and lives among the poor and homeless and sympathetically describes the conditions of their lives. Yet the narrator, who never identifies himself or his own social background, tacitly admits that he is only observing from the outside and can never really experience the social degradation he is describing: "The man who really merits pity is the man who has been down from the start, and faces poverty with a blank, resourceless mind" (180). The premise of the book, that actual experience guarantees the integrity of a description of a social inequality foreign to both the

author and the reader, is always in tension with the need to observe and explain from an omniscient, critical perspective: "I wish," the narrator remarks when recognizing the limitations of his experiential perspective, "I could be Zola for a little while" (64). While Beckett -- in response to the failures of his interwar fiction and its modernist, omniscient linguistic puzzles -- took the subjective perspective to its ultimate, self-contradictory conclusion in The Unnamable, Orwell took the tensions between the naturalist-observor and realist-participant perspectives of his interwar fiction and reportage to an equally extreme conclusion in 1984.

In his 1956 essay "History as Nightmare" Irving Howe defended the extremity of the novel's form and style. At around the same time that critics who aligned themselves with an avant-gardist tradition were beginning to view The Unnamable as a work of "aliterature," a "systematic deterioration of language" which existed outside concerns with "aesthetic value" (Mauriac 81), Howe -- whose concern was with novels "in which political ideas play a dominant role" (17) -- saw 1984 as both the culmination of the development of the modern political novel and its negation: "In a sense, it is a profoundly antipolitical book, full of hatred for the kind of world in which public claims destroy the possibilities for private life" (239). But Howe defends the book precisely because it expresses so clearly how the

political trends of the 20th century could lead to "a nightmare in which politics has displaced humanity and the state has stifled society" (239). Howe's defense echoes Orwell's own conflicted attitude toward politicized literature. "It is a remarkable book" he claims, but "whether it is a remarkable novel or a novel at all, seems unimportant" (236). Orwell's vision of politics invades his concern for art:

> The style of 1984 is the style of a man whose commitment to a dreadful vision is at war with the nausea to which the vision reduces him. So acute is this conflict that delicacies of phrasing or displays of rhetoric come to seem frivolous .... The last thing Orwell cared about when he wrote 1984, the last thing he should have cared about, was literature. (237)

Complaints that the book's language is flat, that its characters lack "psychological specification" and its plot is deficient in "dramatic incident," Howe claims, ignore the fact that Orwell's vision of politics demanded a new form:

> Orwell is trying to present the kind of world in which individuality has become obsolete and personality a crime. The whole idea of the self as something precious and inviolable is a cultural idea ... a product of the liberal era; but Orwell has imagined a world in which the self ... is no longer a significant value, not even a value to be violated.... The book cannot be understood, nor can it be properly valued, simply by resorting to the usual literary categories, for it posits a situation in which these categories are no longer significant. Everything has hardened into politics .... About such a world it is, strictly speaking, impossible to write a novel, if only because the human relationships taken for granted in a novel are here suppressed. (237-38)

If Robbe-Grillet's call to rid the novel of "obsolete" categories such as "character" entails a neo-modernist

demand for radical aesthetic autonomy, Howe's view of 1984 sees the political destruction of any autonomous civil society as the correlative to the inadequacy of the novel of individuated characters. Taken together, these two views suggest the ways in which Orwell's and Beckett's most extreme postwar novels center on the same concerns. In both novels aesthetic and individual autonomy appear as values, but only in relation to a "situation" in which social and psychic autonomy have been destroyed. While Beckett sought to mimic, in the narrative form, the consciousness of the writer whose sense of autonomy is already ruined and who desperately seeks to find an illusory "center," Orwell sought to represent, in the content, the social conditions under which autonomy is no longer possible. Both projects necessitate an extreme perspective, one that either disturbs the reader's ability to understand the narrative as a coherent representation of anything at all except the inability to speak and tell coherently, the other that affords the reader all the critical and historical perspective and coherence that the protagonist Smith is denied.

The extremity of these perspectives also created problems, a sense of failure registered by both the authors and their readers. If Beckett's perspective-lessness greatly distanced The Unnamable from the modern novel's links to journalistic, historical, sociological, and psychological

discursive models, making the last book of the trilogy seem much more radically self-referential and "meaningless" than Molloy or Malone Dies, Orwell's totally outer perspective made 1984 read, for many, like a didactic or socio-political tract rather than a work of fiction. Parts of the novel, like the appendix on "The Principles of Newspeak" and the excerpts from the "the book," are written in the form of the political or historical essay. As Williams points out, Orwell had difficulty integrating these documents from a totalitarian future into that aspect of the novel characteristic of Orwell's fiction in general, the story of Smith's nascent awareness of a better world and his failed attempt to escape a cruel, oppressive society.

The example Williams cites of Orwell's difficultly in integrating the narrative and essayistic aspects of the novel are indicative of a tension between the perspective of an omniscient observor and that of a participant observor. On one hand, the narrator has total knowledge, from beyond any position within it, of the world he is describing:

> Newspeak was the official language of Oceania and had been devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc.... The version in use in 1984 .. was a provisional one.... It is with the final, perfected version, as embodied in the Eleventh Edition of the Dictionary, that we are concerned here. (417)

On the other, the narrator speaks as if the world he is describing is a projection of his -- and the readers' -- present experience:

> Newspeak was founded on the English language as we now

> know it, though many Newspeak sentences, even when not containing newly-created words, would be barely intelligible to an English-speaker of our own day. (418)

This tension -- not severe enough to amount to an incoherence in the novel's structure -- is indicative of Orwell's experiment with an untried form that aspires to accommodate, convincingly, a world in which the ability to think or describe critically has been destroyed. At times, this condition is described with the same thematic intensity as is the condition of the narrator in The Unnamable, though always from the outside:

> It was as though some huge force were pressing down upon you -- something that penetrated inside your skull, battering against your brain, frightening you out of your beliefs, persuading you, almost, to deny the evidence of your senses.... Not merely the validity of experience, but the very existence of external reality, was tacitly denied by their philosophy.... And what was terrifying was not that they would kill you for thinking otherwise, but that they might be right. For, after all, how do we know that two and two makes four? Or that the force of gravity works? Or that the past is unchangeable? If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind, and if the mind is controllable -- what then? (225)

In addition to this set of themes, Orwell built into the structure of the novel "intricacies of deception and betrayal" (Williams 99) which make "external reality" problematic at the level of reader response as well. For example, what appears at first as the narrator's -- or Orwell's -- historical projection in the excerpts from the rebel Goldstein's book turn out, in the story of Smith's struggle, to be an elaborate deception, written by the Inner

Party torturer O'Brien, who claims that "the book" is "nonsense" (384).[16] But the narrative fact that "the book" is a deception -- part of the Party's reign of physical and psychic terror and their destruction of any autonomous science or culture -- does not invalidate it as an attempt at historical projection.[17] In many ways, authorship, writing and the instability of language are central concerns in 1984. Both consistent with Orwell's intentions and as unintentional consequences of the narrative form, the images and notions of writing in the novel reflect Orwell's critical rethinking of the cultural politics of the interwar years.

To some extent, Orwell's vision of the destruction of any autonomous writing -- fictional or historical -- leads to an unintended parallel between Orwell's description of Oceania and the Party's own cultural production. Consider, for example, the passage from the child's textbook, written by the Party to indoctrinate the young:

> In the old days (it ran), before the Glorious Revolution, London was not the beautiful city that we know today. It was a dark, dirty miserable place where hardly anybody had enough to eat .... But in among all this terrible poverty there were just a few big beautiful houses that were lived in by rich men who had as many as thirty servants .... These rich men were called capitalists. They were fat, ugly men with wicked faces, like the one in the picture....dressed in a long black coat and ... a tophat. This was the uniform of the capitalists, and no one else was allowed to wear it. The capitalists owned everything ... and everyone else was their slave.... If anyone disobeyed them they could throw them into prison.... The chief of all the capitalists was called the king .... (219)

Orwell included this in the novel for several, quite apparent reasons: it shows the Party's distorted invention of history and, as Winston copies it out in his secret diary, its self-evident lies about London further stir Winston's distrust of everything but his own, direct experience. As well, it reveals that aspect of the novel that links the capitalism of the past to Oceania: the Inner Party is an elite who live far from the cramped squalor and social decay of Smith's London. But this linkage creates a problem, for the narrator's contrasting descriptions of the impoverished life of both ordinary Party members and "proles" on one side, and the life of the elite on the other, seem to repeat the same fairy-tale simplifications of the Party's lies and distortions. Consider, in comparison to the child's textbook, the scene where Smith finally works up the courage to visit O'Brien at home:

> But merely to walk into such a place needed an effort of the nerve. It was only on very rare occasions that one saw inside the dwelling places of the Inner Party, or even penetrated into the quarter of the town where they lived. The whole atmosphere of the huge block of flats, the richness and spaciousness of everything ... the white-jacketed servants hurrying to and fro -- everything was intimidating.... The passage down which [the servant] led them was softly carpeted, with cream-papered walls and white wainscoting, all exquisitely clean. That too was intimidating. Winston could not remember ever to have seen a passage way whose walls were not grimy from the contact of human bodies. (301-02)

The intentional double status of "the book" -- as historical projection and as ideological distortion -- is repeated in this doubling. Orwell is forced, through the

extremity of his perspective, to write in a way that the novel itself mocks as false. This type of almost unavoidable simplification is emblematic of the failure inherent in Orwell's attempt to write a novel about a world that, as Howe commented, is nothing but politics. But this simplification and overlapping need to be considered, as well, within the novel's explicit themes of writing and language and their relation to modernism and the avant-garde. These themes arise, first and perhaps most importantly, in Smith's double status as a writer.

The novel begins with Smith's first act of rebellion -- his attempt to write down, in a secret, forbidden diary, "the interminable restless monologue that had been running inside his head" (162). Although constantly under surveillance in his small, shabby apartment, Smith manages to find a space of privacy "outside the range of the telescreen" in a "shallow alcove ... which, when the flats were built, had probably been intended to hold bookcases" (161). Orwell invests the scene of writing-as-resistance with images that link Smith's struggle to that of the modern novelist struggling against the encroachment of a standardized, technocratic mass culture. The alcove that was once a bookcase; the outlawed paper Smith is about to write on, "a peculiarly beautiful book.... [with] smooth, creamy paper, a little yellowed by age ... of a kind that had not been manufactured for at least forty years"; the furtively

obtained pen, "an archaic instrument, seldom used even for signatures"; the "dose" of cheap gin he gulps down and the crumpled cigarette he lights before he begins to write (160-62) -- are all symbols of the modern, alienated writer in his room, and stand in opposition to the centralized, technological culture industry of Oceania, the "speakwrite" that Smith uses in his job of revising the historical record (188) and the "novel writing machines" of the "Fiction Department" (268).

In the world of the novel, any individual expression, no matter what its intention, is considered subversive and severely punished. Orwell presents Smith's diary not as a statement of reasoned political opposition, but rather as isolated self-expression, both antithetical to the official culture and involving a sense of purposelessness and a process of uncovering an inner awareness through the suspension of conscious will:

> He dipped the pen into the ink and then faltered for just a second. A tremor had gone through his bowels. To mark the paper was the decisive act. In small clumsy letters he wrote:
>
> April 4th, 1984.
>
> He sat back. A sense of complete helplessness had descended upon him. To begin with he did not know with any certainty that this <u>was</u> 1984....
>
> For whom, it suddenly occurred to him to wonder, was he writing this diary? For the future, for the unborn.... How could you communicate with the future? It was of its nature impossible. Either the future would resemble the present, in which case it would not listen to him: or it would be different from it, and his predicament would be meaningless.
>
> For some time he sat gazing stupidly at the paper.... It was curious that he seemed not merely to have lost the power of expressing himself, but even to

> have forgotten what it was he had originally intended to say. For weeks past he had been making ready for this moment, and it had never crossed his mind that anything would be needed except courage. The actual writing would be easy. All he had to do was to transfer to paper the interminable restless monologue that had been running inside his head, literally for years.... The seconds were ticking by. He was conscious of nothing except the blankness of the page in front of him.... Suddenly he began writing in sheer panic, only imperfectly aware of what he was setting down. (162-63)

What Smith actually writes -- a spontaneous description without "capital letters" or "full stops" of a violent, propagandistic war film he had seen the night before and the agitated response of the audience -- is both an indication of the cultural images that were always "battering against your brain" and his attempt, taking the form of a stream-of-consciousness, of escaping them. "Winston stopped writing.... He did not know what had made him pour out this stream of rubbish. But the curious thing was that while he was doing so a totally different memory had clarified itself in his mind" (164).

The memory brought to consciousness through the process of writing contrasts another act of individual, spontaneous written expression with Smith's position as a writer at the Ministry of Truth, whose function is to manufacture the mass culture, from newspapers to pornography, with which the Party both pacifies the population of Oceania and "manipulate[s] public opinion" (335). The memory centers on the "Two Minutes Hate," a televised form of ritualistic propaganda intended to arouse hatred against the enemies of

the Party and the nation, especially the political apostate Emmanuel Goldstein. Smith remembers how, seated in the midst of his fellow workers who began to express "uncontrollable exclamations of rage" (167) at the images and words issuing from the telescreen, he found himself

> shouting with the others and kicking his heel violently against the rung of his chair. The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but, that it was impossible to avoid joining in. Within thirty seconds any pretence was always unnecessary. A hideous ecstacy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill and torture ... seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic. And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp. Thus, at one moment Winston's hatred was not turned against Goldstein at all, but, on the contrary, against Big Brother, the Party and the Thought Police; and at such moments his heart went out to the lonely, derided heretic on the screen, sole guardian of truth and sanity in a world of lies. And yet the very next instant he was at one with the people about him .... (168)

Smith's visceral response to the Two Minutes Hate is, in one sense, an expression of the complex response to mass culture during the interwar period -- the simultaneous fascination with and fear of the power of popular media such as photography and film and the recognition of their inherently ambivalent nature. The form of the Hate -- in which the voice and face of Goldstein change into those of a sheep which then melts into the face of an enemy soldier and eventually is transformed into the reassuring image of an all powerful Big Brother (169) -- is also a projection of earlier cinematic experiments with film editing and

photomontage which, while intended by avant-garde artists to liberate the imagination, could also be used to instill hatred and manipulate consciousness. Smith, now sitting alone in his refuge-like alcove, remembering the morning's events and distancing himself intellectually from the visceral effects of the film and the emotions of the agitated audience, can express his most authentic feelings:

> His eyes refocused on the page. He discovered that while he sat helplessly musing he had also been writing, as though by automatic action. And it was no longer the same cramped awkward handwriting as before. His pen had slid voluptuously over the smooth paper, printing in large neat capitals --
>
> DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER
> DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER
> DOWN WITH BIG BROTHER
> ....
>
> over and over again, filling half a page. (171-72)

Momentarily, Smith panics at this written manifestation of a concrete, active opposition to the Party, and he is tempted to tear out the page and give up the diary altogether. But he realizes that the significance of his action lies not in the written object but in the process that created it. "He had committed -- would still have committed, even if he had never set pen to paper -- the essential crime that contained all others in itself. Thoughtcrime" (172).

This process, which leads Smith from a nascent critical consciousness toward an active opposition, follows a familiar, interwar cultural logic: writing as self-expression stands in opposition to a technocratic mass media; the will-less spontaneity of writing by "automatic

action" breaks through socially-conditioned modes of thought; tapping into the innermost mind -- the "skull" as Orwell's narrator calls it -- leads to a new, revolutionary perception of and attitude toward "external reality." Smith's struggle with language, which works both against and within the mass-cultural images of hate and anger, forms a counterpart to the cultural productions of Ingsoc that "dislocate the sense of reality" (343) and strip thought of all critical capability. Smith's diary entry -- with its propagandistic climax of repeated anti-Party slogans -- is itself a negative image of Newspeak and "doublethink," the Party's central cultural innovations and its most effective means of social control.

While Orwell invests Smith's writing in the alcove with a range of modernist values and concerns, Newspeak is imagined in terms of a vanguardist literary movement. Syme -- Smith's friend, a somewhat artistic, "delicate" intellectual philologist (199-200) who works in the Research Department compiling the Eleventh Edition of the Newspeak dictionary -- values the "new" and the radical rejection of tradition as much as did many of the avant-garde artists of the early 20th century:

> 'By 2050 -- earlier, probably -- all real knowledge of Old-speak will have disappeared. The whole literature of the past will have been destroyed. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Byron -- they'll exist only in Newspeak versions, not merely changed into something different, but actually changed into something contradictory of what they used to be. Even the literature of the Party will change.' (202)

Syme is a vanguardist, extolling the beauty of the conceptual destruction of an antiquated bourgeois morality and admonishing Smith for lagging behind the linguistic innovations that will shape the future:

> 'We're destroying words -- scores of them, hundreds of them, every day. We're cutting the language down to the bone....
>
> 'It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words.... After all, what justification is there for a word which is simply the opposite of some other word? A word contains its opposite in itself. Take "good" for instance. If you have a word like "good," what need is there for a word like "bad"? 'Ungood' will do will do just as well.... [W]hat sense is there in having a whole string of vague useless words like "excellent" and "splendid" and all the rest of them?... In the end the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words -- in reality, only one word. Don't you see the beauty of that, Winston?...
>
> 'You haven't a real appreciation of Newspeak, Winston ... Even when you write it you're still thinking in Oldspeak. I've read some of those pieces that you write in the Times occasionally. They're good enough, but they're translations. In your heart you'd prefer to stick to Oldspeak, with all its vagueness and its useless shades of meaning. You don't grasp the beauty of the destruction of words.
>
> 'Has it ever occurred to you, Winston, that by the year 2050, at the very latest, not a single human being will be alive who could understand such a conversation as we are having now?' (200-01)

Doublethink, the conceptual basis of Newspeak, is described in terms of negation and contradiction. While similar terms became, by the 1960s, part of the formalist-oriented critical vocabulary in which a selected group of modernist works -- including Beckett's -- were canonized and conceptualized in opposition to both "committed" and popular writing, for Orwell, in the late 1940s, the concepts appear in the context of propagandistic manipulation rather than a

liberating modernist "écriture":

> His [Smith's] mind slid away into the labyrinthine world of doublethink. To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully-constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which canceled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it .... That was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word "doublethink" involved the use of doublethink. (186)

In The Unnamable, contradiction and negation have an ambivalent status, as signs of the narrator's state of fear and panic as well as his struggle against the conditions that overwhelm and seemingly imprison him. For Beckett, the legacy of the cultural politics of the interwar years had rendered "expression" a self-contradictory act. In 1984, through techniques of verbal and visual manipulation which bear similarities to aspects of the avant-garde, the Party seeks to make individual expression explicitly impossible. As Syme puts it to Smith, "the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought. In the end we shall make thoughtcrime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it" (201).

This formulation's proximity to Beckett's famous statement (quoted in section 3 above) is strikingly emblematic of the ways in which his and Orwell's postwar projects are complementary responses to a single, complex context. While Beckett had extended certain implications of modernist thought to such an extreme that "expression"

became thoroughly self-contradictory, Orwell extended the most dire implications of "committed" literature to such a degree that expression appears on the verge of extinction, but by virtue of some of the very ideas that were, at one time, intended to liberate the mind and the voice. For the oligarchic rulers of Oceania Newspeak and doublethink form "a system of thought" in which "the dominion of the Party" rests on its ability "to dislocate the sense of reality" (343). If Beckett rejected high modernist and avant-gardist assumptions without accepting any available alternative, Orwell rejected the tenets of committed writing without accepting the dislocating, disorienting aspirations of much modernist literature. The actual experience of the complex, inter-animating cultural-political tensions of the interwar years led both Beckett -- in the development of his narrating persona as a response to a rejected-rejecting social reality -- and Orwell -- in his valuing of autonomous, individual expression, spontaneity, and other modernist and avant-gardist values -- to break down the conceptual bases of the opposition between "commitment" and "autonomy." For both writers, the opposition itself was the ultimate failure, a failure they could not get beyond but could only express.

If The Unnamable ends with a contradictory affirmation of the obligation to write, despite the narrator's suffering and the impossibility of ever disengaging his own story from

the punitive language of his masters, 1984 ends with a grotesque parody of the committed writer: tortured into submission, Smith has accepted as truth the self-contradictory slogans imposed on him by an "anonymous" (193) authority. His body (not unlike that of a Beckettian anti-hero) a "rotting," hairless "bag of filth" (394), he at last takes up the "stump of pencil" his torturers have given him and writes out the orthodoxies of the Inner Party -- Freedom is Slavery, two and two make five, God is Power (398) -- and struggles to block out the vestigial awareness of any "arguments that contradicted them" (399). Affirmation is the sign of total defeat: "He accepted everything" (398).

Neither Beckett's fragile affirmation of the will to express nor Orwell's bleak negation of political will point to the possibility of any change, to the transformation of individual consciousness or social life, to the revolution of the word or the world, toward which the cultural politics of the interwar years had always oriented itself. And while cultural politics has since taken on new forms, from the identity politics of race and gender to the "postmodern play" with the hierarchies of high and low, the antagonisms -- if life in the academy and the endless diatribes in the media are any indication -- have grown even stronger. If these novels continue to speak forcefully to many people, it is because we are still for the most part trapped in the same contradictory, self-defeating oppositions of the past

that they tried so obsessively to mock, renounce, and render obsolete.

NOTES

1. By "normative dimension" of aesthetic autonomy I mean that aspect of democratic culture that forms the counterpart to totalitarian, anti-democratic or religious-moral attempts to contain or prescribe artistic expression; by "formal" dimension I mean the ways in which art is defined and shaped as an activity or object with functions and properties distinct from those of science, history, politics, sociology, etc. As discussed in Chapters IV and V, and below in the present chapter, in itself "aesthetic autonomy" has no political valence, but takes on varying degrees of radical, reactionary, liberal or conservative meaning in relation to particular historical or cultural situations.

2. This needs to be seen within the context of postmodernism in Huyssen's sense, discussed in the last section of the previous chapter.

3. Beckett had partially accomplished this in the Moran section of Molloy, where his concern over goals and ends, for example, are direct expressions about the problem of a goal-less or purposeless story; see chapter II.3.

4. Molloy's speech about "my superiors, who corrected me only on points of detail instead of showing me the essence of the system, after the manner of the great English schools" (Molloy 32) is the locus classicus of this attitude in Beckett's fiction; see chapter I.3.

5. Decroix was an early proponent of horse meat; see Fletcher (184).

6. This is perhaps an allusion to Beckett's experience in the Resistance, when for two months he was forced to hide from the Gestapo, taking refuge in various friends attic's and basements, including Nathalie Sarraute's (Bair 318).

7. See Bair (406-07).

8. For some surveys of these developments in the novel, see, for example, Hewison (England), Schaub (U.S.), Britton (France), Sinfield (Britain and Anglophone), and Gonzalez (Latin America).

9. Thus, for Robbe-Grillet, Beckett rejects character (28) and story (33), and Beckett values presence over signification in Godot (111-125).

10. See Morrissette (3-5) for Robbe-Grillet's use of myth.

11. Britton provides some useful descriptions of Robbe-Grillet's fiction and describes some of the intellectual context in which the theory of the new novel took shape. However, most of her analysis is limited by her overly formalist concerns. See pp. 67-72 for her structuralist reading of Les Gommes

12. See my discussion of Goldmann on Robbe-Grillet, chapter II.4, concerning the representation of individual agency in the nouveau roman. Goldmann does not address Robbe-Grillet's understanding of the writer's agency or how it informs his innovations in narrative structure.

13. See E.P. Thompson's "Inside Which Whale" for the historical background of Orwell's attack on the leftist politics of Britain in the 1930s. The weaknesses in Orwell's position that Thompson points out are, I believe, indications that Orwell is much more important as a cultural rather than a political critic, that cultural-politics rather than historical-political analyses are his real concern.

14. Crick (92-105) provides a summary of the responses to the novel.

15. See the end of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (Illuminations 241-42). Benjamin's attitudes toward the politicization of art are open to interpretation; see the epilogue.

16. See Williams (Orwell 98-99).

17. In Orwell Williams also points out how many of the ideas laid out in "the book" are consistent with Orwell's non-fiction writing of the same period. He also discusses the possibility that Orwell, had he not been severely ill during much of the time he was writing 1984, might have tried to smooth over the tensions in narrative perspective. Nevertheless, the inconsistencies are indicative of Orwell's search for an adequate narrative form.

EPILOGUE

Engagement, Ecriture, Autonomy: the Displacement of Politics in Postwar Critical Theory

> The notion of the art work as critique actually informs some of the more thoughtful condemnations of postmodernism, which is accused of having abandoned the critical stance that once characterized modernism. However, the familiar ideas of what constitutes a critical art (Parteilichkeit and vanguardism, l'art engagé, critical realism, or the aesthetic of negativity, the refusal of representation, abstraction, reflexiveness) have lost much of their explanatory and normative power in recent decades. This is precisely the dilemma of art in a postmodern age. (Huyssen 182)

During the interwar years when Beckett began his career, the rise of fascism, the consolidation of the Soviet revolution, the economic crises of the 1930s, and the expanding potential of photography and film determined, to a great degree, the ways in which writers and critics understood the relationship between art and politics.[1] As the historical situation became increasingly polarized with the approach of war, so too did ideas about the role of the writer in society become narrowly, antagonistically polarized. But the most insightful cultural critics of the period -- themselves inevitably caught up in the polarization -- continued to argue for the relative autonomy of art, even as they insisted that art could no longer remain neutral.

A case in point is Benjamin's "The Author as Producer,"

originally delivered as a lecture at the Institute for the Study of Fascism in Paris in 1934. Benjamin hoped to persuade his culturally-conservative, left/communist audience that only a formally innovative art, like Brecht's epic theater, could be truly progressive in the current political climate, and that the function of most of the conventional "so-called left-wing literature," with which his audience was much more familiar, was "to wring from the political situation a continuous stream of novel effects for the entertainment of the masses" (Reflections 229). Arguing that "the tendency of a literary work can only be politically correct if it is also literarily correct" (221), Benjamin claimed that the self-conscious development of new forms and techniques would lead the best writers to "observations that provide the most factual foundation for solidarity with the proletariat," to see themselves not just as artists but as "producers" (236). If the writer understands his work not only in terms of its "political line," but equally in terms of its mode of organization, technique, and reception, then his writing appears to him as work and the process of writing as production; the writer could then join cause with the proletariat not as an intellectual specialist, as in bourgeois society, but as a fellow worker. In turn, the effects of revolutionary technical innovations in the work, such as montage or Brecht's "interruption of action," would turn "readers or

spectators into collaborators" (233).

When viewed in historical perspective, Benjamin's lecture is remarkable in two respects. First, it constructs a model of cultural politics through a kind of metaphorical (Benjamin calls it "dialectical") linkage between progressive and radical political ideas and innovations in aesthetic form and technique.[2] Modernist and avant-gardist techniques of collage are "progressive" in relation to, say, realist or naturalist techniques of uni-perspectival representation. But for Benjamin, this type of "progressive" art did not, on its own, entail political progress as well. Like political "tendency," progressive technique is a necessary but not sufficient condition for critical art. Truly progressive art, for Benjamin, necessitates both aesthetic autonomy -- the writer's freedom to consider writing primarily in terms of form and technique, i.e., as art -- and a commitment to progressive political ideas. Because Benjamin links these two demands metaphorically, his view of critical art is open to much interpretive debate; it has also been read as an attack on aesthetic autonomy as subjective expression, which must be subordinated to a utopian, collective program.[3] Second (and related to this metaphorical construction of cultural politics), in this essay and others, Benjamin sets the agenda for some of the most influential ideas about cultural politics in the postwar decades, from notions of the political potential of

aura-breaking popular cultural forms to Barthes' notion of the "writerly" in which reading becomes "production."

But the increasing politicization of art of the interwar period left a problematic legacy for the postwar generation of literary theorists. On one hand, the idea that all art had an overarching, fixed political valence -- either reactionary or progressive, bourgeois or revolutionary -- now seemed axiomatic. But on the other -- with the defeat of fascism, the increasing awareness of the totalitarian nature and imperial aspirations of the Soviet Union, the beginning of the postwar economic "boom" in advanced industrial nations and the new "consensus" between labor, management, and government -- the "tendencies" of the interwar period were becoming meaningless.[4] In the context of this historical change, a new paradigm of cultural politics was taking shape, a transformation in ideas about the relationship between art and politics. While Benjamin had tried to link aesthetic autonomy and politics through the metaphor of progressive technique, in postwar Europe one side of the linking -- the idea of innovation in technique as entailing a radical politics -- would be promoted to the status of a fully-developed theory; "tendency," in turn, became detached from organized political parties or practical political struggles within Europe and became abstracted or displaced in various ways.

Sartre's notion of "engaged" art, as expressed in

Literature and Existentialism (originally published in 1947), was the most influential starting point for the renewed debates about literature and politics. In many respects, Sartre seems to be reiterating the 1930s' call for commitment. Making a distinction between poetry and "writing," Sartre demands that the writer "utilize" language for a purpose: "The writer is a speaker; he designates, demonstrates, orders, refuses ... persuades" (19). For Sartre, writing is a form of "action" which must have a definite, worthwhile purpose in relation to "a system of transcendent values" (22-23). As in previous attacks on "formalism" or art-for-art's-sake, questions of style, technique, and beauty are unimportant; "Style should pass unnoticed .... words are transparent.... In short, it is a matter of knowing what one wants to write about" (25-26). Through the conscious choice of a subject matter and the intention to persuade through an instrumental language, the writer's primary concern is with the questions, "What aspect of the world do you want to disclose? What change do you want to bring into the world by this disclosure?" (23).

As a postwar theorist, however, Sartre does not identify these changes or disclosures with the same specificity or directness as did the thirties' writers who took up anti-fascist, pro-communist positions. Instead, Sartre focuses first on an abstract, universal idea of an "appeal to freedom." Developing a rudimentary reception

theory, Sartre argues that writing and reading are two sides of a single action. "Reading is directed creation" (45); "the writer appeals to the reader's freedom to collaborate in the production of his work" (46). Sartre's existential theory of engagement, his categories of "freedom" and "choice," are presented first and foremost as free floating, individualistic and not bound up with any social or political forces:

> The belief which I accord the tale is freely assented to.... the characteristic of aesthetic consciousness is to be a belief by means of engagement, by oath, a belief sustained by fidelity to one's self and to the author, a perpetually renewed choice to believe.... reading is a free dream.... the reader's feelings are never dominated by the object, and as no external reality can condition them, they have their permanent source in freedom.... (50-51)

In the last part of his book, "For Whom Does One Write," Sartre does, however, attempt to relate his emphasis on content and the existential abstractions to an "external reality" and to a more political notion of freedom. But this is the most problematic part of the argument. To some degree, Sartre follows a familiar, quasi-Marxist historical argument against types of modernist "negativity and abstraction" (148-49): with the rise of bourgeois society after the French Revolution, the writer sees himself more and more in opposition to the values of modern society, yet at them same time "it was the bourgeoisie alone which maintained him and decided his fame" (123). The writer lives "in a state of contradiction and dishonesty" -- he

ideologically opposes and castigates the class whose interest he actually serves. Unwilling or unable "to leave it and try out the interests and way of life of another class," the writer instead makes writing into an autonomous, self-reflexive, formalist game. He withdraws, values "solitude" and abandons the communicative function of writing (123), until, by the 20th century, the most creative aestheticist, modernist or avant-garde writers aim for "a heightened artificialism" as in Des Esseintes or "a concerted destruction of language" and "nothingness" as in Mallarmé (130). The modern writer, from Flaubert to the Surrealist, is a contradictory "rebel, not a revolutionary" who serves as an "accomplice" for the bourgeois classes: "it was better [for society] to keep the forces of negation within a vain aestheticism, a rebellion without effect; if they were free, they might have interested themselves on behalf of the oppressed classes" (135).

But Sartre must deviate from ideas about the historical development of the writer in class society in order to maintain that "the essence of the literary work is freedom totally disclosing itself as an appeal to the freedom of other men" (151). Sartre's logic is somewhat tortuous, but his conclusion is clear: the writer's freedom is incomplete, unrealized, unless he makes a communicative, concrete appeal to all people (his "virtual" public), not just to an oppressive bourgeois class (his "actual" public). The writer

must make a "negation of formalism" (154), which is now nothing but a sign of his contradictory status as "rebel," and communicate to the "sum total of men living in a given society" (155). The writer helps create a "classless" society by making his work an "appeal to freedom" directed at all men, whose awareness of freedom is both awakened and strengthened through their "free" act of constructive reading. While "different forms of oppression" have hid "from men the fact they were [in essence] free," the engaged writer reveals to them their freedom and participates in their liberation (151-156).

What emerges in Sartre's attempt to connect a Marxist political teleology to a belief in an essential, abstract freedom is a view of the writer not as a person embedded in class society, but as one who has, by the very choice of becoming a writer, already reached the condition toward which others, his readers, must struggle: "no one is obliged to choose himself as a writer. Hence, freedom is at the origin. I am an author, first of all, by my free project of writing" (76). An author, for Sartre, is already a symbol not of class conflict but its resolution. Having no conception of the engaged writer as a social actor among other social actors, Sartre actually poses this writer as the person who has no relation to class society at all. From his already-realized essential freedom the writer can then choose to more fully realize it by appealing to all men; men

who unlike the writer live under particular social constraints that "hide" their freedom from them.

The problem this raises can be seen in the examples Sartre chooses, from the "jew" (76) to the "negro" writer Richard Wright (77-80) to his later championing of Frantz Fanon.[5] As other parts of his book make clear, Sartre knows that those who "choose" to become writers are for the most part not from oppressed classes or groups; writing is a bourgeois occupation. His formula comes too close to being a tautology: the writer's freedom is predicated on the social fact that he is already a person in a position that makes him relatively free to choose a career, be it as a writer or anything else. Sartre actually needs examples of writers who, living under forms of very palpable social oppression, choose writing as a way of fighting against oppression -- their own and of people who share their social status. In the end, Sartre's theory cannot address the situation of the European bourgeois writer at all. And this is one sign of the postwar historical shift: his own freedom no longer threatened by fascism or pressured to conform to the dictates of a specific "political line," the engaged European writer living in a relatively democratic society begins to understand cultural politics only in relation to others. His engagement, his integrity, is guaranteed by the oppression of "others," of black americans, jews, colonial subjects, etc. His own, actual relation to the institutions

of bourgeois society, to what the committed writer of the thirties might call the mode of cultural production, remains unexamined.

The most famous extended response to Sartre's manifesto in French is Barthes' 1953 Writing Degree Zero. As Susan Sontag points out in her introduction to the English version, Barthes book is so "terse and unconcrete" that it seems as though "Barthes were depending on his reader's familiarity with the generous development of the terms of the debate provided by Sartre" (xi).[6] I have already discussed Barthes' understanding of modernism and his rejection of "narration." Here, I only want to point out how Barthes poses the idea of "écriture" in opposition to Sartre. If Sartre modified the interwar idea of tendential writing into an abstract engagement between the writer's freedom and the unrealized freedom of the oppressed, Barthes hypostatizes a metaphorical linkage between avant-gardist experimentation and a wholly abstract revolutionary or utopian politics. For Barthes, all articulated political programs, and all writing that poses itself as communication, are themselves inherently oppressive. He begins his attack on commitment by claiming: "Writing is in no way an instrument of communication" (19). For Barthes, writing is always imagistic, "symbolic, introverted, ostensibly turned toward an occult side of language" (19). He sees all attempts at "political writing" to be the

imposition of order, a sign of "power" (20). Since for Barthes, "the content of the word 'Order' always indicates repression" (26), any writing that claims to represent or argue for a political or social order is ultimately repressive: "in the present state of History, any political mode of writing can only uphold a police state" (28).[7]

Barthes' conviction that there can be no positive notion of "order" whatsoever leads him to advocate a "mode of writing" that, like earlier avant-gardist notions, seeks to reject any "bondage to a pre-ordained state of language" (76); that approaches "an ideal absence of style" (77). While Barthes offers various evocations of what this writing might look like or how its "form as an instrument is no longer at the service of a triumphant ideology," these evocations are all necessarily in a negative form: "The new neutral writing takes its place in the midst of all those ejaculations and judgments [of journalism, bourgeois or engaged writing] without becoming involved in any of them; it consists precisely in their absence" (77). The emptying of content that Sartre saw in the rise of modernism, and which he considered the sign of the writer's contradictory stance toward a bourgeois public, Barthes sees as a "disengaging" (76) of literature from all oppressive "order." To empty writing of all conventions is a utopian project: "the search for a non-style or an oral style, for a zero level or a spoken level of writing is, all things

considered, the anticipation of a homogeneous social state" (87). The belief that linguistic and discursive conventions are determinant, always implicit in Barthes' early work, leads to a view that equates the vanguardist rejection of conventional, narrative literature with political emancipation: "Literature becomes the Utopia of language" (88). If Sartre had to sidestep the problem of the engaged European writer's relation to his own social status and context, Barthes' vanguardist view posits an ideal transcendent position for the writer, as the term "zero-degree" suggests; a position emptied of any productive relation to the order or organization of his or her own social world or literary tradition.

Adorno's concept of "aesthetic autonomy" represents another influential response to Sartre. Perhaps the most fundamental distinction between Adorno, on the one hand, and Sartre and Barthes, on the other, is that Adorno places the writer's position in society at the center of his ideas about a critical literature. As he claims in his most direct polemic with Sartre, the 1962 essay "Commitment," "an emphasis on autonomous works is itself sociopolitical in nature" (318). For Adorno, the political meaning of critical literature lay neither in a communicative appeal from writer to reader nor in the writer's ability to transcend an oppressive order through a "neutral" writing. Rather, because the writer is bound up in the social processes of

modern society -- most importantly, for Adorno, the commodification of culture and the encroachment of instrumental reason over all forms of human interaction -- the writer opposes these socio-political forces by constructing an aesthetic counterlogic or "rationality" based on what he calls "a determinate negation of meaning" (316).

While Adorno's ideas about autonomy and negation are related to earlier modernist notions, he understands them not only as values which exist "in opposition to society" (Aesthetic 322) but as themselves produced and determined by developments in the modern institutions of art and culture. His objection to Sartre rests not on Sartre's political intentions, but on his naivete about how contemporary culture functions more generally. Sartre's emphasis on content and communication is, for Adorno, perfectly in sync with the requirements of both conservatism and the "culture industry," which can cynically turn a profit from images of human suffering that assuage the bourgeois viewer's guilt instead of activating a critical stance. "Commitment in itself," Adorno writes, "remains politically multivalent so long as it is not reduced to propaganda.... Cultural conservatives who demand that a work of art say something join forces with their political opponents against atelic, hermetic works of art" ("Commitment" 302). For Adorno, the critical work of art must confront, in its form and "social

content," the instrumental reason dominating social relations and the underlying formal principles of the products of mass culture, which he sees as the degradation of a potentially egalitarian art.[8]

Adorno's basic idea about how critical art succeeds in resisting the dehumanizing processes of modern society by confronting those processes -- through a "determinate negation of meaning" -- is embedded in his idea of aesthetic autonomy, most fully explained in the unfinished Aesthetic Theory which he was working on when he died in 1969, but which expresses ideas he had been developing since the end of the war.[9] For Adorno, aesthetic autonomy means three inter-related things: a socio-historical development; art's ideological self-conception; and a value, an aspect of critical modern art that Adorno defends and advocates. First, aesthetic autonomy is a thoroughly historical category: "Autonomy, art's growing independence from society, is a function of the bourgeois consciousness of freedom, which in turn is tied up with a specific social structure. Before that, art may have been in conflict with the forces and mores dominating society, but it was never 'for itself'" (320). The autonomy of art, like the autonomous individual, is bound up with the development of capitalism and secular society. The idea of art as a sphere of free, unfettered expression is a result of its institutional status -- like that of law or science -- in

bourgeois society. But what this also means is that, in becoming free from ties to religion or the court, art becomes integrally connected to economic forces and the domination inherent in the social hierarchies of capitalism.

This leads to the second aspect of autonomy, art's ideological self-conception:

> Politically progressive critics have accused "art for art's sake" ... of fetishizing the concept of the pure, self-sufficient work of art. This indictment is valid in that works of art are products of social labour ... prior to any analysis of what they express, art works are ideological because they... posit a spiritual entity as though it were independent of any conditions of material production, hence as though it were intrinsically superior to these conditions. In so doing art works cover up the age-old culpability that lies in the divorce of physical from mental labour. (323)[10]

The more that capitalist relations determine social relations, the more art posits itself as separate and opposed to society. Yet in positing itself as absolutely separate from a prosaic, unjust reality, art denies its own historical relation to bourgeois society -- to which it owes its freedom -- and blindly reiterates underlying social hierarchies.

For Adorno, however, modern art can only oppose the domination inherent in modern society by intensifying its autonomous status, not denying it. Adorno argues that only the most thoroughly "autonomous art" is authentically political. The quality of autonomy resides in a work's formal structure, its aesthetic rationality. Since the domination inherent in modernity results for Adorno --

following Weber and Lukács -- from the increasing rationalization of society, art can only resist by developing its own form of non-instrumental, aesthetic rationality. For Adorno, any attempt in art to communicate a politically progressive message -- that is, to subordinate the work's autonomy to an instrumental intent -- merely serves to integrate art into the overall logic of capitalism.

Thus, "determinant negation" means the process by which the critical writer, by virtue of his position within society, shapes his work through a dynamic reaction to the palpable, everyday experience of the world that capitalism and rationalization create: "works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality" ("Commitment" 314). This is not a transcendent position, but it is an explicitly paradoxical one. Since for Adorno communicative norms are bound up with instrumental rationality, "authentically" autonomous art reacts to those norms and actively deforms them or renders them self-contradictory. On one hand, Adorno seems to imply that the most "political" contemporary literature, which completely and integrally dismantles the logic of mass culture and instrumental reason, would be nearly incomprehensible. But, on the other, Adorno wants to retain art's communicative function by insisting that the <u>determinate</u> negation remains meaningful because -- as in the works of Kafka, Beckett or

Joyce -- it retains the "imprint" of the dehumanizing norms it resists. As he admits, "no firm criteria can draw the line between a determinate negation of meaning and a bad positivism of meaninglessness" (316). In other words, a nonsensical (for example, Dadaist poetry) or wholly non-communicative literature simply has no force; total disengagement from the conventions and logic of mainstream literature and communicative language amounts to resignation rather than resistance.

It is not coincidental that Adorno planned to dedicate Aesthetic Theory to Samuel Beckett.[11] As I discuss in the beginning of the dissertation, for Adorno, Beckett was perhaps the only postwar writer who was able both to articulate "the negation of meaning in an aesthetically meaningful way" (Wellmer 96) and serve as an emblem for the paradoxical situation of art in a postwar Europe "after Auschwitz." Yet while Adorno's, Sartre's and Barthes' ideas about what constitute a critical art were posed polemically in opposition to each other -- explicitly and implicitly -- I have tried to show throughout this work that Beckett's postwar fiction actively tried to overcome these types of oppositions. For, in Sartre's sense, Beckett's work does take up an identification with the oppressed; in Barthes' sense, it does seek to neutralize its own relation to the order of narrative convention; in Adorno's sense, it does actively recreate, in a negative way, a reified,

instrumental consciousness. To a great degree, Beckett was indirectly incorporating aspects of all these ideas of a critical art. If anything links Beckett's work more closely to Adorno than to other postwar theorists, however, it is both writers' awareness of the writer's (and the critic's) inextricable entanglement with the social order his work presumes to oppose.

In the postwar theorization of a critical art, "politics" becomes an abstract entity -- less and less tied to political parties, organized movements, or institutional arrangements of power. Instead, in takes place in relation to an "inner" freedom, an ideal absence of order, a subjective negation of an objectively oppressive world. Part of this no doubt stems from a deep and understandable pessimism about the ability of European enlightenment traditions -- upon which liberal democracy is based -- to effectively avoid the unmeasurable barbarism that was unleashed during the second world war. But it is equally important to acknowledge that during the time Beckett was becoming famous and when ideas about existential freedom, <u>écriture</u> and negativity were starting to become fashionable in European and American intellectual circles, the struggles of other groups hitherto denied much of a political subjectivity -- women, black americans, colonial subjects -- began to change our understanding of cultural politics. The abstractions and paradoxes about art and politics issuing

from postwar Paris, Frankfurt or New York were themselves a sign that politics -- direct, urgent, and palpable in everyday, lived experience -- was being taken up elsewhere.[12]

NOTES

1. In the mid-thirties Beckett considered becoming a film maker and, according to Bair, wrote to both Eisenstein and Pudovkin in the hopes of going to Moscow to study with them (204-05; 233).

2. Raymond Williams summarizes the development of this type of linkage in Marxism and Literature: "Significantly, since the late nineteenth century, crises of technique -- which can be isolated as problems of the 'medium' or of the 'form' -- have been directly linked with a sense of crisis in the relationship of art to society, or in the very purposes of art which had previously been agreed or even taken for granted. A new technique has often been seen, realistically, as a new relationship, or as depending on a new relationship. Thus what had been isolated as a medium, in many ways rightly as a way of emphasizing the material production which any art must be, came to be seen, inevitably as a social practice; or, in the crisis of modern cultural production, as a crisis of social practice. This is the crucial common factor, in otherwise divers tendencies, which links the radical aesthetics of modernism and the revolutionary theory and practice of Marxism" (163-4).

3. For example, as Arato points out in comparing Benjamin with Adorno, the essay "is also remarkable for its apology for the instrumentalization of art in the Soviet Union. To be sure Benjamin attacks artistic autonomy not in the name of administration but in the name of a collective, open, experimental, technically innovative political art form" (214). My point is that, given the rhetorical context of the lecture and the increasing pressure in the thirties to deny art any autonomy at all, Benjamin's emphasis on "literary correctness" urges a reconsideration of form and technique, qualities traditionally thought of as strictly aesthetic concerns.

4. The economic and cultural historian David Harvey gives an excellent summary of these changes in the relationship among state, industry and labor in the most advanced industrial nations from 1945 to the early 1970s. See The Condition of Postmodernity, pp. 119-188.

5. See his introduction to Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth, in which Sartre tries -- very problematically, I believe -- to identify with Fanon by warning his French

audience, in which through his use of the first person plural he includes himself, that Fanon does not intend to speak to them, but only about them. Somehow, Sartre speaks for Fanon through claiming that Fanon, as a post-colonial, is rightly demanding that he, and he alone, can speak for himself.

6. Sontag cites other evidence of how the book is shaped as a polemic against Sartre's influential formulations of the late 1940s; see pp. x-xvi.

7. Some of these hyperbolic statements appear as a direct response to Stalinism; see, for example, p. 24 and p. 73.

8. Adorno's clearest expression of his concept of "social content" is in the essay "Lyric Poetry and Society." See Huyssen, chapter 2, for a nuanced interpretation of Adorno's attitude toward mass culture.

9. See the "Editor's Epilogue" to the English translation, pp. 493-498.

10. See Brenkman, pp. 59-76, for an excellent discussion of the importance of ideas about the social division of labor for Marxist cultural theory.

11. See the "Editor's Epilogue," p. 498.

12. This does not mean that artists involved in these struggles did not also concern themselves with similar ideas. See, for example, the debates about the role of the "Negro Writer" in the postwar world (reprinted in Gibson), which revolve around ideas about commitment and aesthetic autonomy.

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