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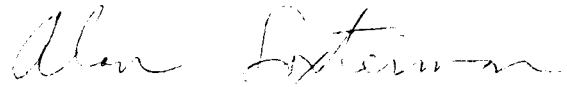Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

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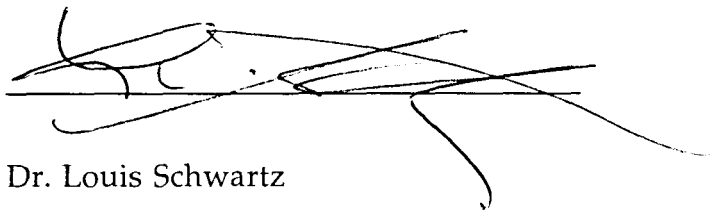
I certify that I have read this thesis and find that, in scope and quality, it satisfies the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

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"nothingness/ in words enclose": Supplementarity and the "Veil"
of Language in Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* and *Watt*

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M.A., English
University of Richmond
1996
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Samuel Beckett has asserted that language is a "veil" in which he must "bore one hole after another. . . , until what lurks behind it— be it something or nothing— begins to seep through." This thesis employs Derrida's assertion that language involves the play of *différance* and the supplementarity of the sign. Since the supplement, in Derrida's words, "fills and marks a determined lack," language calls attention to the gap of nothingness already present in the play of *différance*. *Murphy* and *Watt* present both the desire for the "semantic succour" of the veil and the awareness— more fully developed in Beckett's later work— that, despite a continued wish to enclose nothingness, the veil must be continually rent. This dynamic is thematically and linguistically apparent in these two works. Thus Beckett's characters may not enclose nothingness, but by continuing to "go on" with words they may find value in continuing the process.

"NOTHINGNESS/ IN WORDS ENCLOSE": SUPPLEMENTARITY AND THE
"VEIL" OF LANGUAGE IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S *MURPHY* AND *WATT*

By

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Language in Beckett's Early Novels

> who may tell the tale
> of the old man?
> weigh absence in a scale?
> mete want with a span?
> the sum assess
> of the world's woes?
> nothingness
> in words enclose?[1]

The limitations of language are a preoccupation throughout Samuel Beckett's work, especially in his fiction. With an unsettling circularity, language in his works reveals within itself a dislocation that disrupts his protagonists' quests for either origin or *telos*. Beckett's characters seek a silent stasis, the place at which the self finds relief as self-identical whole and/or as nothingness. When they speak a word, they hope for completion or relief (described in *Watt* as "semantic succour" [*W* 83]) which will enable an ensuing silence, the end at last. But this relief is not achieved; instead the yearning for silence paradoxically necessitates further use of language. All we have are "the old words, the old credentials" which are incapable of enclosing the nothing/everything of existence (*W* 85). Only exhaustion in the absence of exhaustiveness ends the quest for this origin, and we are left with language. Beckett's characters seem trapped in a vicious circle. Yet their

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[1] Samuel Beckett, *Watt*, p.247. Hereafter, citations will appear parenthetically in the text of the essay, denoted by the abbreviation *W*.

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impetus to think, tell, speak, or write may not be entirely futile: the process

exposes the inability of language to enclose, thereby revealing the gap or

dislocation through which these inescapable words can continue to produce

meaning.

The phrase "nothingness/ in words enclose," epitomizes the

elusiveness of meaning in Beckett's scheme of language. The final question

posed in the poem is a rhetorical one, which denies the ability of enclosure

while simultaneously maintaining an implicit assertion, "Perhaps *I* can."

Beckett's characters (creations of language) are doomed to continue speaking/

writing/ thinking in language. The task of reaching nothingness is only

futile when "words" and "tale" are equated with "scale" and "span." I will

argue in this paper that such measurements cannot adequately "mete" or

"weigh" the irreducibility of Beckett's surds. The surd, an irrational number,

becomes an important figure in his world, a trope for his characters, whose

behavior clashes with societal norms and whose logical exercises retain a taint

of irrationality. The persistence of the surd mirrors Beckett's view of art: he

castigates those who find "the irreducibility of pi" to be "an offence against the

Deity."[2] In this sense, an enclosure in words seems to be the insistence to

round off, to reduce and rein in existence as one would represent pi as 3.14.

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[2] Beckett, "Bram van Velde," p. 125. He targets the general history of painting, in which he sees a progressive movement toward "less exclusive relations between representer and representee," a movement which ignores the inherent failure in art and its attempts at pure mediation.

Thus attempts to enclose underscore the failure of language, its exclusion of those elements which do not conform to the systematic order: the "nothingness" resists rigid enclosure. Nothingness remains accessible, however, if we view language not as a tool that neatly encapsulates and transmits discrete entities and prelinguistic "meanings," but rather as that field that comprises the play of signs where meaning is constituted and which thus includes the gap of "nothingness" within itself. In these terms, one is not merely doomed to language, but may instead accept it as a condition of meaning. One cannot forsake language entirely; silence is only a temporary break in the circle of language: even the final curtain of *Waiting for Godot* that silences Vladimir and Estragon leaves us with the intimation that tomorrow holds more of the same "nothing to be done."[3] The function of language, therefore, is not enclosure, but rather a process or movement which destabilizes the binary oppositions of presence/absence, inside/outside, and sign/meaning. By continuing the process, one finds that limit is also limen, and it is at this middle ground that we obtain a fleeting glimpse of Beckett's Nothing.

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[3] Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, p.7. The cited phrase is the first line spoken in the play: it is Estragon's lament on troubles with his boot. Cyclical repetitions (albeit with incremental variants) throughout the play, as well as the ending ("Let's go. They do not move." [60]), allow us to presume that tomorrow holds more of the same. Yet it may perhaps be the day that Godot comes, or the day that the (umbilical) cord doesn't break, so that the two may hang themselves.

"To elicit something from nothing required a certain skill"[4]
Beginnings: Beckett and Derrida

Beginnings, origins, are of central concern in Beckett. As he writes in

his first novel, *Murphy*, "In the beginning was the pun."[5] By parodying the

well-known assertion of the Gospel of John, "In the beginning was the

Word," Beckett here challenges the originary metaphysical presence implicit

in the Biblical phrase. His challenge evokes complexities analagous to those

found in Derrida's concept of language. Drawing on Saussure, Derrida argues

that the nature of the sign is arbitrary, i.e., that no positive foundation links

signifier and signified. The division between signifier and signified, he

argues, enacts (and is enacted by) the play of *différance*— a deferral along a

chain of signifiers constituted by their difference. The signified cannot be

entirely divided from a signifier, because such a division would allow for a

prelinguistic concept, or "transcendental signified."[6] The pun, Beckett's

originary condition of language, is one example of the complex division. In

Murphy's remark on "the stout porter" (*M* 139), we may infer either a draught

at the pub or a portly valet. The signifier "porter" is not fully divided from

either signified (it can refer to these things, although this connection is of

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4 *Watt*, p.77.
5 Beckett, *Murphy*, p.65. Hereafter, citations will appear parenthetically in the text, denoted by the abbreviation *M*. Also, in the beginning of *Watt*, Hackett and the Nixons discuss birth and childhood as Watt appears, in a sense, to be born onto the tram-station platform. For a perceptive discussion of birth/maternal motifs, see Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words.*
6 Derrida, *Postitions*, pp.18-20.

arbitrary origin), and yet it is not irremediably attached to one signified, since it may refer to both. It may conduct this play of meaning because neither a beer nor a servant is present to the reader/listener of the word. We have only the presentation of the sign.

As a substitute that occupies the place of the thing itself, the sign consequently points to the thing while simultaneously announcing its absence. In its presentation as a substitute for the thing-itself to which it refers (as well as for the *eidos* of this thing), the sign functions as supplement. This notion of supplementarity is Janus-faced: it announces itself as addition or surplus, but also as compensation for a lack.[7] Derrida notes, "the supplement occupies the middle point between total absence and total presence. The play of substitution fills and marks a determined lack."[8] By its supplementarity, language is placed in that middle ground that is such a problematic no-man's-land for Beckett. Derrida's original French appropriately provides a wordplay on "marks" and "lack": "marque un manque determiné."[9] The similarity of *"marque"* and *"manque"* emphasizes the necessary use of a "something" to describe "nothing" as absence. *"Manque"* itself is in fact a *marque* which points to the *manque* that is determined. Furthermore, "determiné" also points to a sense of

7 Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p.289.
8 *Of Grammatology*, p.157.
9 Derrida, *De la Grammatologie*, p.226.

determination on the part of the lack: the unattached signifier resolutely

wanders in search of a home.[10] This "lack" is analagous to that which I

termed above the "dislocation" or "gap" inherent in language. We see that

there is no simple absence or presence because the lack evades us as it moves

endlessly along the chain of signifiers, a movement which can always turn

back on itself and leave us where we began (a place which, however, remains

a non-origin). Thus the movement of language spins us in a circle, yet the

circle is never wholly complete.

I have chosen *Murphy* and *Watt* as the focus of this study because the

two novels serve as a transition between the "omnipotence" of Beckett's

predecessor, Joyce, and the literature of silence, failure, and impotence that

dominates Beckett's subsequent work.[11] We may wonder, like the narrator of

Watt, "what was this pursuit of meaning, in this indifference to meaning?"

(*W* 75). At this stage of Beckett's fiction, still moderately conventional in its

manipulations of third-person narration, indifference has not yet

overwhelmed pursuit. The protagonist beomes resigned to the sense of

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[10] *Murphy*, p.5. Murphy asserts to Neary that life is "a wandering to find a home."

[11] Beckett, in an interview with Israel Shenker, dissociates himself from Joyce: "Joyce was the superb manipulator of material [. . .]. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance" ("Moody Man of Letters"). Ihab Hassan, in *The Dismemberment of Orpheus* and *The Literature of Silence*, uses the term "the literature of silence" to name Beckett's mode. Beckett also posits the artist's "fidelity to failure" as the only capacity for art ("Bram van Velde" 125). Hassan and Hugh Kenner also remark that Beckett's style marks a turn from Joyce's seemingly all-encompassing structures: Hassan asserts, "art becomes a 'closed field' and the total verbal competence of Joyce yields to the thorough 'incompetence' of Beckett" (*The Dismemberment of Orpheus* 210). Kenner lucidly and more thoroughly develops a similar point in *The Stoic Comedians*, pp.67-82.

impotence caused by the constraints of language (the necessary absence of a transcendental signified), yet he continues on with a newly found awareness of the possibility opened by the very condition (the gap) that is the source of impotence. These novels begin Beckett's engagements with the conditions of language, those conditions that spawn the narration and un-narration that his characters themselves undertake (thus we may perhaps call them the undertakers of language) more directly in the Trilogy.

In these two early novels, language appears as an imperfect form of restriction and finitude (language *qua* "scale" or "span") in a world of chaos. Yet when language (and therefore the narrative and the self that are constituted in language) is eased of this burden by its users, Beckett accesses the relative freedom that arises from recognizing the use of language as a "coming and a going" (*W* 45, 131-2) rather than as an enclosure.[12] As he remarked in a 1937 letter to Axel Kaun:

> 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.[. . .] To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks
> behind it—be it something or nothing— begins to seep through[13]

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[12] *Watt determines that at Knott's house, "all was a coming and a going." This pertains to language in the sense of active movement in a fashion analagous to Derrida's concept of* différance *as a deferred movement along an interconnected web of signifiers, in which difference marks a division and metonymic similarity marks a connection. Also relevant are my previous remarks on the complex division simultaneous with the arbitrary connection of signifier and signified in the sign. As we will see, Beckett plays out this coming and going in the interstitial areas so prominent in* Watt, *as well as in the middle-ground "gulf," the point of confluence of "meeting and parting," in* Murphy.
[13] Beckett, *Disjecta*, pp.171-72. Beckett remarks on a disdain for English that caused him to turn to French after writing *Watt*. However, his comments also pertain to language in general.

Beckett's dissatisfaction with language, however, necessitates less a tearing

apart than a foregrounding of the materiality of this veil. By exposing the

capacity of language to obfuscate, Beckett draws attention to the ways in which

a peremptory enclosure of meaning necessarily breeds falsification. As I have

already noted, language always already contains certain gaps or holes, the

interstices between the coming and going in the play of signifiers and

signifieds. An emphasis on the materiality of the sign therefore also calls

attention to the holes, through which we may apprehend the Nothingness.[14]

Coming and going, then, is the only way for language to function for

Beckett: the "veil" of language must continually weave and unravel, tear and

be mended, so that it cannot serve as an opaque barrier. A static language that

relies on metaphysical presence engenders a binary opposition of

inside/outside which is "doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail" (W 44).

This vision of language leaves us with a facile Cartesian dualism or the

unrealistic Realist novel with its blind facade of an omniscient narrator.[15] I

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[14] Stephen Connor has also commented on this letter of Beckett's. He notes, "Beckett is not looking for a new language which is more supplely responsive to the task of representing a higher reality. He wants instead to have done with a language because it is inherently falsifying. The problem is that one has to stay inside language even as one tries to sabotage it." (*Samuel Beckett* 17). Connor's own analysis of Beckett's novels demonstrates that repetition effectively undermines authority and enables the works, as read and re-read, to say something new. Thus being "inside language" poses no problem because that iterability which enables language to be used and re-used includes its own capacity for self-sabotage. My present essay addresses the ways (other than repetition) in which Beckett's novels betray a resigned awareness that one need not "have done" with language, that foregrounding its problems frees one from its supposed constraints.

[15] Derrida notes that such an inside/outside opposition persists in the metaphysics of presence, most notably in Husserlian phenomenology. This mode of thought views language as *expression*, i.e., as the

will examine the failures Murphy and Watt face as each attempts his version

of an inside/outside world in the quest for presence, and I will also examine

the continuation enabled in each novel by the recognition of this failure of

logocentrism.

Arsene's mention of Watt "having oscillated all his life" (*W* 41) could

well serve as a description of many of Beckett's characters. This oscillation

also appears in language in its iterability, the repetition of sameness.[16] Just as

the characters seek freedom in the fixed course of an oscillation (Murphy

rocking in the chair, Watt on the railway), so the constraint of the habit of the

"old credentials" of language is used to fill the gap in the circle and lead to

meaning, however provisional or illusory.

In no case is there a "prior system" (*M* 183) on which a monism of self

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exterior manifestation and transmission of a privileged, present, interior thought— a "transcendental signified" (*Positions* 30-34). Such expression would require perfect mediation of meaning, a perfection notably absent among the shrunken conaria, poor hearing, mumbled speech, and short attention spans of Murphy's and Watt's worlds. As such, the project of language would be "doomed to fail." However, by directing our attention to the play of language, the coming and going at work in liminal areas, rather than focusing on the dichotomy of inside/outside, we may find a use for words in spite of the absence of the Word. Thomas Trezise, in his book *Into the Breach*, offers a full analysis on ways in which Beckett's fictional and linguistic concerns contrast with the models of Husserlian phenomenology and existential humanism. Trezise works with a more philosophically sophisticated model of expression than the simplification I offer here. The book charts Beckett's similarity to thinkers such as Blanchot, Bataille, Derrida, and Deleuze, and reaches its sharpest focus in Trezise's analysis of the Trilogy.

16 Derrida, "Signature Event Context," pp.179-83. This iterability is a repetition that also marks difference. In order for a sign to function, it must be repeatable in different contexts, which are limitless. And for these repeatable signs, "the very iterability which constituted their identity does not permit them to be a unity that is identical to itself" (183). Stephen Connor, in *Samuel Beckett*, (especially Chapter One, "Difference and Repetition"), provides extensive background on Derrida's writings on iterability, and ways in which this pertains to repetition in Beckett's work.

or God or a dualism of mind/body (mind/world, inside/outside) can rest.[17]

A subtle recognition of this can be found in Beckett's fragmentary, resigned

admission, "never been properly born," included among the addenda to *Watt*

(*W* 248).[18] Separation from the origin is originary, hence the "gap" or

"dislocation" inherent in language: we begin with puns and the danger of

equivocation rather than with the unity of the Word. The supplement,

which as previously noted "fills and marks a determined lack," points to, and

takes the place of, this gap of nothingness that demarcates the absence of a

meaning. Thus the absence we find is not pure absence, but the trace of a

presence that has always been trace. As Arsene tells Watt, "the coming is in

the shadow of the going and the going is in the shadow of the coming, that is

the annoying part about it" (*W* 57). The expression of annoyance

humorously undercuts the poetic aphorism which precedes it. Yet, as we find

throughout Beckett's work, derisive humor accompanies a trenchant insight.

Yes, it is truly annoying in that it denies "semantic succor," yet the coming

and going is also the condition for meaning.

Both Murphy and Watt stumble along in the quest for the home of

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[17] Murphy believes everything exists in his mind before being inscribed in the stars or elsewhere in the universe.

[18] That its "incorporation" has been "prevented"— as a footnoted disclaimer informs us regarding the list of addenda— demonstrates that this phrase itself has been denied a proper birth of the word. The addendum which follows it, "the foetal soul is full grown" (*W* 248), hints further that this hoped-for transcendence is not linked to a true origin, but rather achieves a form of presence only in a problematic incarnation. Cf. Pozzo's view of the virtual simultanaeity of birth and death in Act II of *Waiting for Godot*: "one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second" (57b).

origin or *telos*. Each finds frustration in the elusiveness of meaning, the elusiveness of the end. However, in the breakdown of the inside/outside paradigm, each makes the move, however reluctantly, into the coming and going demanded of a linguistic being, and this creates a fair measure of freedom and a fleeting glimpse of a *telos* or end. The inside/outside opposition remains a source of tension for both Murphy and Watt. The no-man's land between the two poles is problematic in both texts, but it is the place to which each feels compelled to continually return.

Murphy the "Median" and Absent Center

Murphy is a "novel" in which the structures of sameness and repetition imposed by society seek to constrict the chaos of life and the wandering of the self in its quest for the refreshing unity of home, of wholeness at the origin. Categories and binary oppositions are foregrounded only to reveal their inherent inadequacy. Closure and neatly delineated categories prove impossible to attain in a world that is a "mess of chaos" (*M* 65). Mediation is thus rendered problematic in the novel, a problematization manifest both thematically and in the demonstrations of the inadequacy of language to represent the chaos. Yet Beckett suggests that the point of language may not simply be representation, and we can reconcile ourselves to a world of surds by properly refocusing our attention on the middle-ground rather than on the extremes that never seal themselves shut.

The opening sentences, alluding to Ecclesiastes, establish the central concerns of the novel: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free." Immediately we see the binary opposition of inside/outside, a paradigm in which only the semblance of freedom may be achieved. It is Murphy versus the exterior world of "*Quid pro quo,*" to which he feels he does not belong. Later, we are informed that "I am not of the big world, I am of the little world," is Murphy's chosen refrain (*M* 178).

Cracks soon appear in this model of big world/little world, and wecannot safely place Murphy in either. He cannot be ensconced wholly in the little world of his mind if he can communicate this refrain to those who reside in the big world. Also, we are told that there "was indeed a Miss Counihan" with whose body Murphy's own body had been involved (*M* 6). Murphy feels himself "split in two, a body and a mind" (*M* 109), and therefore such interaction may not involve the "I" (mind) of his refrain. His love for Celia and preference for ginger "divide him" from the purity of his solely intellectual love. The divided *self* seeks unification, and there must be a mediation which makes this possible.

Murphy's recollection of his parting conversation with his former theological mentor, Neary, is particularly telling:

> "'Murphy, all life is figure and ground.'
> 'But a wandering to find home,' said Murphy." (*M* 4)

Neary, at various times a Newtonian or Pythagorean, seeks to impose a sort of mathematical/geometrical model on life: he envisions a world of binary opposites in which the face can stand out against the "big blooming buzzing confusion" (*M* 4). Murphy, however, resists the constraints of figure and ground. He seeks a home, for which coming alive in his mind in the rocking-chair serves as a temporary substitute: we learn of the movement "astir in his mind, in the freedom of light and dark that did not clash, nor

alternate, nor fade nor lighten except to their communion" (*M* 9). Although this communion seems temporarily possible in the "dark zone" (*M* 112) of Murphy's mind, it is a unity noticeably absent elsewhere in the novel.[19]

This is underscored most obviously by the division between Murphy's own body and mind, his "unredeemed split self" (*M* 188). Other prominent discrete, unconnected entities are the characters who seek Murphy to fill a void they feel within themselves.[20] Something is needed to mediate between self and self, between self and other: a something that remains elusive. Murphy's connection to Mercury offers a partial explanation. Murphy remarks, "Mercury, god of thieves, planet *par excellence* and mine, has no fixed colour" (*M* 31). Mercury is also a messenger to the gods, an intermediary, but his fleetness, stealth, and inability to be fixed demonstrate the fleeting, tenuous nature of mediation: he belongs to neither Olympus nor earth. Mercury's Roman name, Hermes, also hints at the barriers to connection, and is echoed when "Murphy's mind pictured itself as a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without" (*M* 107). We thus have a problem in which the essence that encloses also serves as go-

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[19] Murphy seems to find such unity in the patients at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat asylum, whose condition "psychiatrists called exile," but whom Murphy finds "escaped from a colossal fiasco" (*M* 178). By emphasizing the wandering of the self, Murphy implies that each of us is an exile from the point of birth, seeking escape to the peace of home. That the patients vent "pain, rage, despair" indicates that they have not achieved such unity and peace any more than Murphy and the other characters have (*M* 179).

[20] "Murphy then is actually being needed by five people outside himself" (*M* 202). Neary, Miss Counihan, Wylie, Cooper, and Celia are the five who seek to redeem their lives by seeking him.

between. This mirrors the contradicition inherent in the linguistic sign, in which the signifier and signified are irremediably divided, yet remain two sides of the same coin. The spacing of *différance* demarcates the differences that ostensibly "hermetically" seal signifieds from each other (thereby making each discrete signifier recognizable), yet a sameness exists (a dissipation of hermetic seal) that connects the signifieds, thereby enabling the movement of signifieds along the chain and the possibility of signification. Such contradictions are impossible in a world of binary oppositions: Murphy cannot mark an inside/outside, language cannot be merely meaning/sign. Simultaneous division and unification is only possible if *all* is a coming and a going.

Murphy's name also suggests both "morph" (form), and, more importantly, "Morpheus" (god of dreams- the state between consciousness and unconsciousness). As with body and mind, signifier and signified, mediation is rendered problematic because of the inseparability of form and content. Murphy's self, "improved out of all knowledge" (105), resides presumably only within the mind, the self described in section six. Yet the tautological "Murphy was Murphy" (17) calls the materiality of form into this equation of sameness that is differentiation.[21] Coinciding in the signifier

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[21] Sylvie Henning emphasizes the difference that is implied here: "It appears from the equation M=M that M is not, in fact, self identical. The *copula*, indeed, marks an internal difference" (*Beckett's Critical Complicity* 33). The identity principle, however, marks the sameness of the form "Murphy"

"Murphy," the interiority of mind is indistinguishable from the exteriority of body. The attempt to divide these is impossible, and if the coming and going is imposed into an artificial binary opposition, all middle ground is erased and mediation is impossible.[22] As with all transcendent, magical transformations, "Only God could do that. Let there be Heaven in the midst of the waters, let it divide the waters from the waters" (*M* 176).

The dream-realm of Morpheus also remains problematic. In Celia's absence, Murphy tries to move this intermediate realm into an opposition with thought: "If only he had been able to think of her, he would not have needed to dream of her" (*M* 189). Dream is supplement *for thought and for* physical presence; he mentions his physical and emotional "susceptibility to Celia" (*M* 179). His "need" continues "to divide him" (*M* 138, 179) because he clings to the view of thought in his mind as originary presence (*M* 106). It is this maintained belief in originary presence that continues to divide him, and he eventually reaches the point at which his mind can conjure only "lines and colours evoking nothing," since he quests for a presence rather than embracing the process of signification (*M* 252). Like the "imperturbable

(Henning's "M" term). This paradox demonstrates that terms such as same/different and internal/external continually slip from our grasp.

[22] We see a similar problem as Murphy differentiates between the "self whom he loved" and "the self whom he hated" (*M* 194). Within the "Murphy was Murphy" equation, the (interior) self he loves is the same as the (exterior) self he hates. He hopes to overcome this contradiction in the dark zone of his mind: "forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming, without love or hate" (*M* 112). Yet this "Matrix of surds" is only a temporary solution: its "freedom of indifference, the indifference of freedom" (*M* 105) cannot be reconciled to the difference, the *différance* necessary to engagement with the world and with language. Murphy and Endon appear in the same way.

negligence of Providence to provide" (*M* 21), originary presence remains resolutely unreachable. Yet Murphy persists in the opposition "between the life from which he had turned away and the life of which he had no experience, except as he hoped inchoately within himself" (*M* 176). And "he could not fail to side with the latter" (*M* 176). Only the "superfine chaos" (*M* 253), the rapturous explosion into the unity of death can lead him to this latter realm of presence, the origin and *telos* at which "his body was quiet" (*M* 253).

Intermediary settings of time and place in the novel also emphasize the inability to fix or connect people and events. Murphy's mew faces northeast (*M* 1). His accident occurs at "foredawn" (*M* 252), and the funeral is at "forenoon" (*M* 254). The novel ends at dusk (*M* 282). The M.M.M. is situated "on the boundary of two counties" (*M* 157), and Murphy's body is deposited just barely on the side of one of these (*M* 260). These times and places are relational rather than absolute. Such artificial constructions inevitably fail to fix experience, and even within their own systems the delineations are often vague. Beckett's careful emphasis on these positionings serves to underscore their uselessness and the bankruptcy of the language of realism.[23]

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[23] Ihab Hassan notes that events in *Murphy* are more "precisely placed and dated" than those in any of Beckett's other works (*The Dismemberment of Orpheus* 222). I tend to agree with Ruby Cohn that such "punctilious precision" actually "ridicules time and place" (*Back to Beckett* 55). Time and place are

Characters in the novel likewise resist rigid encapsulation. Cooper, the intermediary manservant (who cannot achieve the intermediary position of sitting)[24], meets with his confidants at dusk (*M* 198); he also collects Murphy's ashes at dusk (*M* 273). He is an "analphabet," poorly educated in language, so he resorts to facial gestures of "the finest shades of irresolution" to avoid misquotation (*M* 205). Furthermore, he moves between Wylie and Miss Counihan "with the beautiful indifference of a shuttle" (*M* 198).[25]

As Neary, Wylie, and Miss Counihan proceed in their combined quest for Murphy, they toast "the absentee" ("a tactful description of Murphy") and make a feeble attempt to delineate their relationship:

> "Remember there is no triangle, however obtuse,
> but the circumference of some circle passes through its wretched vertices.. . .
> "Our medians," said Wylie, "or whatever the hell they are, meet in Murphy."
> "Outside us," said Neary. "Outside us." (*M* 213-14)

The medians intersect only in the center, but the center is absent, it is recognized as relational constructs rather than absolutes, and even the precise descriptions show that events are often relegated to the boundaries of these constructs. In a somewhat different view, John Fletcher recognizes *Murphy* as "a parody of the traditional novel" (*The Novels of Samuel Beckett* 41), yet he does not connect this view to his emphasis on the novel's apparent "accuracy" of time and place. (*Samuel Beckett* 38-55). Linda Ben-Zvi remarks that all the exhaustive detail of the novel (time and place, Celia's measurements, etc.) combines to "indicate how easily facts suffice for truth in life" (*Samuel Beckett* 45).

[24] "Cooper never sat, his acathisia was deep-seated and long standing" (*M* 119). Again, humor accompanies insight, while resisting rigidity. Stephen Connor cites this passage as an example of the undermining of metaphor in the novel, thereby renouncing binary oppositions of sign/meaning in favor of the paradoxes and *différance* inherent in language (*Samuel Beckett* 25).

[25] Cf. Beckett, *Molloy*, p.132-33. Moran describes his process: "But I write them [the lines] all the same, and with a firm hand weaving inexorably back and forth and devouring my page with the indifference of a shuttle." As with the intermediary Cooper, the medium of language is flawed: the perceived "indifference" does not render an immaculate mediation.

"outside" the circle.[26] Their medians cannot meet outside of them without this point of intersection. Yet this originary presence or center can offer a compromised connection. When Murphy dies, his ashes are scattered: "the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed" (*M* 275). This dissemination, both unity and dispersal, allows the unity of the originary presence to be suffused through all elements, reach all medians. And the characters can find some measure of solace in the quest they have made throughout the novel. As Ihab Hassan explains, "The need of Murphy's mind is to abolish itself; the need of all his friends is to make of his absence, his disappearance, a presence. Both needs are ironic equivalents" (*The Dismemberment of Orpheus* 222). As I have remarked, each seeks the unity of presence *and* absence, origin *and telos*. Such unity necessarily eludes us in life, in language, in narrative. Until the possible cyclical unity of "birthmark deathmark" (*M* 267) in death, each must endure the irony of the quest, and the compromised solution it offers.

The novel's ending is not wholly optimistic, but perhaps the characters have escaped the rigidity of their delusive quest sufficiently enough to be able to continue on, perhaps to wander toward home. Neary has abandoned the antinomies of "figure and ground" in favor of the view that "Life is all rather

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[26] The circle with an absent center recalls the picture Watt sees in Erskine's room: "a circle and its centre in search of each other" (*W* 129). For a detailed analysis of the picture and Watt's apprehension of it, see my discussion of *Watt* below.

irregular" (*M* 271), and his illegal marriage has been undone by his second wife's suicide. Wylie persists in his self-absorbed behavior, but hints that he will return to Miss Counihan and her plans to "return to the dear land of our birth" (*M* 272). Cooper finally feels that something has "set him free" (*M* 273), and he is finally able to sit down and to uncover his head. Celia has experienced a distasteful return to prostitution, but we find in the novel's final section that she has another vision of the Irish sky, and she has embraced the toil "up the wide hill" as the shortest "way home." (*M* 282).27

Nonetheless, this physical dissemination provides at best a problematic resolution to Murphy's desire for a *telos* expressed in the opening of the novel, his "wandering to find home" (*M* 4). This wandering indicates both the lack of a fixed presence and a desire for that presence. Murphy cannot be the median, or the means to an end, or even the end itself (the center?) because he is both absent and unable to be fixed: he attempts to exile himself from his body and the physical world just as he has exiled himself from Ireland. Celia comes to understand this; she notes "I was the last exile." and says she feels that she is "a part out of him" (*M* 234). The narrator hints at this when Miss Counihan grasps the "key exiled[. . .] from her bosom" (*M*

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27 Other critics have offered less optimistic views of the novel's end. For example, John Pilling, in *Samuel Beckett,*, asserts that Murphy's death is "the only meaningful centre," whereas the others [Celia, Neary, et al.] remain hopelessly scattered on the circumference" (33-34).

219).[28] Murphy has been described as a "key" (that would hopefully open Miss Counihan to Neary), and the cleavage of the exile from the maternal breast implies the very essence of the exile.[29] The recognition is that we are all always already exiles, and fixity remains elusive. We may only, like the exiled signifier, wander along in search of a home. The wandering itself, like the play of language, must embrace continuous movement: any abortive attempts at stasis only disrupt the chance to reach the end.

The functioning of language in the novel repeatedly stresses the problem of mediation. We find that accounts given by various characters have been "expurgated, accelerated, improved and reduced."[30] The story has been irremediably altered by the changes that have been made. By foregrounding the transformation inherent in the use of language, the text itself reminds us that language cannot convey a self-identical presence. The narrator indeed emphasizes the foibles and materiality of his own language.

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[28] Miss Counihan, "who does not confuse her self with her body" (*M* 217), is associated with corporeality throughout the novel. Sylvie Debevec Henning asserts that the character is derived from "Cathleen ni Hoolihan, the traditional symbol of Ireland and heroine of Yeats' play by that name. She appears also as the corporeal double of Celia's more complex (Irish) femininity (*Beckett's Critical Complicity* 204).

[29] Ihab Hassan finds the Beckettian hero a quintessential example of Henry Miller's belief that all exiles "exile themselves from the world's body, the mother's flesh"(*The Dismemberment of Orpheus* 213).

[30] The phrase describes stories related by Celia (p. 12), Neary (p. 48), and Cooper (p. 119). We cannot, however, determine whether the statements of the former two are alteration of the accounts ostensibly given by the characters, or whether the narrator has merely transcribed them. Such an indeterminacy marks an inherent gap in the use of iterable (transmissible) language. In Cooper's case, however, we can be fairly certain that the account has been altered, given Cooper's status as an "analphabete," and therefore the laborious, rough-hewn nature of his diction.

He describes Murphy bound to his rocking-chair: "Seven scarves held him in position." Yet he then enumerates only six scarves (*M* 2). We must be made aware of language as the possibility of a lie, or as the site of an oversight, in which some facet of Murphy's experience has escaped transmission or has been altered.

Unreliability remains pervasive as the narrator continually emphasizes the artificial construct of the text (with its own superimposed boundaries). For instance, he disrupts the traditional pattern of fictional narrative by mentioning that Murphy's mental life is "as described in section six" (*M* 2). And he calls attention to the story (*qua* story-as-fiction) when describing Murphy's inability to conjure up images of creatures, even those "that belong to even worse stories than this" (*M* 251). Another narratorial comment dramatically points to the material presentation of language: "M.M.M. stood suddenly for music, MUSIC, MUSIC in brilliant, brevier and canon, or some such typographical scream, if the gentle compositor would be so friendly" (*M* 236). If we are aware of the materiality of language and the transformations and play of signification inherent in its workings, then we do not fall into the trap that makes us believe in the effacement of the signifier, the presumed closure of some final truth.[31]

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[31] Derrida notes that the metaphysics of presence and its assertion of transcendent "truths" relies on the belief that the signifier can be effaced. See *Of Grammatology*, p.20ff.

Likewise, the novel emphasizes the incapacity of words to describe

mental experience: in his mind, Murphy experiences "such pleasure that

pleasure was not the word" (M 2, 112-13). The narrator, describing Murphy's

mind, states,

> Happily we need not concern ourselves with this apparatus
> as it really was—that would be an extravagance and an
> impertinence—but solely with what it felt and pictured itself
> to be. (M 107)

Since the way "it really was" is "an extravagance" we see that, within the

confines of language, nothingness need not be enclosed and re-presented. All

we have is the division inherent of self picturing self, writing reading itself.

Indeed, this perceiving "self" is itself suspect, and exists here solely through

the account of an unreliable narrator. There is no originary presence

available: all we have is an originary trace.[32] The signifier cannot be effaced,

but there exists no need to efface it if we understand signification as the

process constitutive of meaning.

The narrator's insistence on "keywords" provides further ironic

disruption of the conventional illusion that words mediate some greater

truth. Language proves itself to be a "coming and going," a

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[32] Sylvie Henning, in *Beckett's Critical Complicity*, makes a similar point of the mind's division from itself through the necessity of language (65). Derrida, in *Positions*, explains that "the subject is constituted only in being divided from itself, in becoming space, in temporizing, in deferral" (29). Thus, there is no "in-*different* being" (28). Also see Derrida's "Freud and the Scene of Writing," in *Writing and Difference*, for explanations of the mind as trace rather than self-identical whole.

generated/generative system of differences, rather than a key that can unlock

an enclosed meaning. In one instance, Murphy defrauds his waitress for an

extra third of a cup of tea by maintaining "they have been too generous with

the cowjuice" (*M* 83). The narrator remarks:

> Generous and cowjuice were the keywords here. No
> waitress could hold out against their mingled overtones of
> gratitude and mammary organs. And Vera was essentially a
> waitress. (*M* 83)

This scene plays on the punning nature of language, the complex division of

signified and signifier that enables "mingled overtones." This is clearly a

facetious and exaggerated case which underscores the impossibility of words

to truly be "key" (*i.e.*, to be that which unlocks a self-identical incontrovertible

meaning). The narrator offers a rather feeble rationalization—Murphy's use

of "cowjuice" is "key" due to its maternal connotations, but the use of the

more obvious choice, "milk," would seem to render a more strongly

maternal connotation. That Murphy uses such a misplaced, uncharacteristic

colloquialism indicates that the narrator's comments are ironic. And the

narrator's assertion that "Vera was essentially a waitress" implies sardonically

that truth (from the Latin *verax*) merely serves rhetorical manipulations such

as the centering of certain words as "key."[33]

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[33] Following Murphy's scam, the narrator addresses the reader, "Try it sometime, gentle skimmer." (*M* 84), an ironic rendering of the "gentle reader" addresses common to the Realist novel. "Skimmer" connects Murphy's graft, the milk imagery, and the reading process: the medium of language is fertile ground on which one may seek advantage through misrepresentations or misconstructions. In "Dante. . .

Signifiying systems other than language likewise seem to present their own problems. There appears no system in which we can read a transcendent truth. Stars, for instance, prove to be a poor mediator:

> Murphy could not help feeling that his stars had been guilty of some redundance, and that once go-between [as his proposed career] had been ordained, further specification was superfluous. (*M* 76)

Murphy thus becomes dissatisfied with the system of stars:

> He had been projected, larval and dark on the sky of that regrettable hour [of his birth] as on a screen, magnified and clarified into his own meaning. But it was *his* meaning. (*M* 183)

The stars fail because they are presumed to be the site of an originary presence, either their own or an inscription of the presence of "his meaning."

The body also, when read as text, appears as a failed medium: Murphy looks in Mr. Endon's eyes and sees "the filigree of veins like the Lord's Prayer on a toenail and in the cornea, horribly reduced, obscured, and distorted, his own image" (*M* 249). One body cannot be inscribed on another, and the echoes of "his own image," taunt us with what a poor replication of God we humans are. We want to be the embodiment of an originary, transcendent presence; as a result, we are disheartened to find only sign-as-supplement.

Another text is apparently presented at Murphy's death. The shroud is

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Bruno. Vico. . . Joyce.," Beckett berates readers on their inability to receive Joyce's *Work in Progress* [later *Finnegan's Wake*]: "The rapid *skimming* and absorption of scant cream of sense is make possible by what I may call a continual process of intellectual salivation" (*Disjecta* 26; my italics).

in "folio" (*M* 263) and "octavo" (*M* 264). If the shroud is a text, we may

consider it a poorly mediating text just like any other, because Murphy's

death— the product of "superfine chaos"— is left ambiguous, and cannot

transmit itself clearly. The shroud has a burn mark, and is folded (in folio

and octavo) back on itelf. How are we to read this "act" in the play of

Murphy's life? Although science tries to foist a meaning on the "irrefragable

post-mortem appearance" (*M* 261), we must recognize that nothing is

irrefragable; life is chaos, language is a coming and going, and indeterminacy

reigns. Even the apparent unity of "birthmark deathmark" is rendered

problematic (*M* 267). The seemingly ultimate absence of death retains a trace:

the absence is identified by the "extensive capillary angioma of most unusual

situation" that marked Murphy's imperfect presence on this earth (*M* 266).

In spite of its gaps, the circle remains: we become increasingly aware of the

limitations of systems such as science and language, but we are thrust back

into the system to fill and mark the gap of nothing as something. As

Murphy's ashes are disseminated, we must resign ourselves to the process

that continues, rather than attempt a closure.[34]

    Pure, immediate mediation is impossible, then, because the world is

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[34] Derrida's remark on reading is elucidative for reading Murphy's death (and all the other "texts" presented for our reading): "the semantic horizon that habitually governs the notion of communication is exceeded or split by the intervention of writing, that is, by a *dissemination* irreducible to *polysemy*. Writing is read; it is not the site, 'in the last instance,' of a hermeneutic deciphering, the decoding of a meaning or truth" (*Of Grammatology* 195).

comprised of irreducible surds. We learn that "Murphy had such an irrational heart that no physician could get at the root of it" (M 3). The problem of the surd is inextricably tied to existence from the point at which one falls into the world. At Murphy's delivery, the physician records that, among all the cries of millions of babies, "the infant Murphy's alone was off the note" of "the proper A of international concert pitch" (M 71). However, the ironically described "honest obstetrician, a devout member of the old Dublin Orchestral Society," posits a unison of crying that itself cannot be verified; not all other babies necessarily conform. He merely asserts a personally satisfactory version of order and unity in the face of irreducibility. Such surds remain omnipresent onward to the point of death. The "old boy" at Miss Carridge's boarding-house commits suicide, leaving "meanders of blood on her expensive lino" (M 134). When we come to Murphy's thought of "Descartes linoleum" (M 140), we realize that the chaos of life does not fit into binary oppositions such as Cartesian dualism.[35] When the narrator remarks, "What but an imperfect sense of humour could have made such a

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[35] All such attempts to reduce the irrationality of chaos or to peremptorily make assumptions regarding the unknown lead to an inherent falsification. The reduction of surds to fit the order of a system is also emphasized in *Watt*, p. 34-5: Watt hears verses sung of endlessly repeating decimals, such as "Fifty two point two eight five seven one four. . .." Rubin Rabinovitz, in *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (135), explains that the two verses include the number of weeks in a year and in a leap year, respectively. The numbers stretch on to infinity, thus defying closure. The human system of time leaves a gap open in the revolution of the natural cycle. The constructions of leap years and calendar weeks serve a practical purpose, but such systems should not be embraced as representations of truth about natural reality.

mess of chaos. In the beginning was the pun. And so on." (*M* 65), we may presume that some systematizing principle governs this chaos, but it is imperfect and absent. The gaps inherent in systems such as language are originary imperfections; such gaps may not allow for closure, but they leave room for surds.

By contrast, all attempts to enclose or confine meaning are doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail: such enclosures only mark self-serving falsifications masquerading as truth or illumination: Miss Carridge, Dr. Killiecrankie, the chandlers, and Wylie all serve a false illumination in their attempts to enclose meaning. Murphy notes that unity is "exempt from the big world's precocious ejaculations of thought, word and deed" (*M* 184). Such unity is absent among chaos and surds in life, in the coming and going of language. Attempts to enclose meaning are abortive, falsifying dead ends in the quest for origin: they foist "facts" (rather than self-acknowledged supplements) in the space of the absence. As Murphy notes, the "men, women, and children of science" are merely self-professed "illuminati," engaged in "kneeling to their facts." (177) This is the worship of a false idol in the absence of the Word. [36]

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[36] The narration of the novel itself parodies such "kneeling to facts" through its absurd attention to time and place (discussed above). Linda Ben-Zvi explains that the exhaustive inclusion of absurdly detailed, irrelevant facts in the narration indicates "how easily facts suffice for truth in life" (*Samuel Beckett* 45). Each of the "illuminati" discussed here certainly confuses facts with truth.

Miss Carridge, whose name implies the miscarriage of truth when one

foists her own meaning, is one example.[37] She precociously "ejaculated" an

exclamation of happiness to Celia before she realizes the "catch" that Celia's

proposal entails (*M* 146). Her reconstruction of the old boy's "pathetic and

tedious" death scene becomes lively due to the "cupidity lending wings to her

imagination" (*M* 144). Fearful that the truth of the gory suicide will prevent

her from finding another tenant, she tries to avoid scandal for her boarding-

house by claiming the old boy had a "seizure," which, the narrator tells us, is

"Pronounced on the analogy of manure" (*M* 145). We are given a humorous

portrayal of her bullshit/manure story, in which the superfluous seizure

details and shades of slapstick comedy ("He falls on his face") undercut any

possibility of taking her seriously. Our evaluation of this miscarriage is

further enhanced by the narratorial comments, "Lies.[. . .] All lies." (*M* 145),

that are suffused throughout Miss Carridge's account. She also uses

"onomatopoeia with dumb show" in her rendering of the old boy's death (*M*

145). Such an apparent effacement of the signifier, a seemingly more

immediate mediation, pretends to portray truth, but Miss Carridge merely

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[37] In an earlier scene, Beckett presents a fine twist on the term as Murphy finds a "miscarriage of his tribute" when Celia refuses his insinuation that she resume prostitution (*M* 20). Celia's discussion with Mr. Kelly exposes the "tribute" as a formulaic ruse in Murphy's attempt to persuade her. Thus the real miscarriage is Murphy's feigned indignance when Celia sees the real meaning in his insinuation of "filthy intelligence." Additionally, the more obvious association with fetal miscarriage provides a strong image of the failure of becoming/signifying-into-being.

suppresses meanings that will inconvenience her.

The chandlers also fail to deal with surds. As Murphy encounters them while job-hunting, they are rudely dismissive, and merely mock him in terms of what "'e ain't" (*M* 77). Confronted with various means of expressing this disdain, Murphy feels "its content was one: 'Thou surd!'" (*M* 77). The chandlers, with candle connotations derived in their name, as well as Miss Carridge, who reads *"The Candle of Vision*, by George Russell (A.E.)" (*M* 155), are associated with the fact-foisting embraced by the "illuminati."

A man of science, Dr. Killiecrankie, also presumptively foists a meaning on irreducible surds. We learn that, under his domain, "There were no facts in the M.M.M. except those sanctioned by the doctor" (*M* 155). And at Murphy's death, we find that "words never failed Dr. Killiecrankie" (*M* 262), who is able to positively determine Murphy's death by shock, dismissing (as does the coroner) other possible causes. Yet we can be sure, just as patients are jostled to ease the doctor's explanations at death in the M.M.M. (*M* 156)—and Murphy's remains are "just within my [the coroner's] county" (*M* 260)— we may presume that he has altered facts in his own favor, perhaps to get a coroner who will conduct a less demanding inquest. Yet all are presented as facts of "the irrefragable post-mortem appearance" (*M* 261). Thus facts masquerading as presence cannot be accepted.

Wylie also appears as one who can make words lie like the truth,

presenting fiction as transcendent perfection. His "ravenous eyes" (*M* 233)

that desire light, along with his self-professed status as the voice "of Reason

and Philautia" (*M* 216), associate him with the "illuminati" and reveal his

driving self-interest. A fine precursor to our contemporary sound-bite

merchants, he prolifically tosses out axioms in a casual attempt to

"nothingness in words enclose." Some examples are his reiterated phrases,

"Humanity is a well with two buckets" (*M* 58), "For every symptom that is

eased, another is made worse. The horse leech's daughter is a closed system.

Her quantum of wantum cannot vary" (*M* 57, 200). Although he does not

absolutely quantify it, he boldly "metes want with a span" by asserting that the

span is unvarying. And he assesses the sum of the world's woes: the sum

always evens out at zero, since the positives and the negatives of the two

buckets make all symptoms cancel each other out. Furthermore, he has

determined that the weight of absence is precisely demarcated in the form of

Murphy, to whom he refers as "the absentee." (*M* 213)[38] Such misformed,

self-serving assertions, by masquerading as truths, drive the characters on

delusory searches. When one can participate in the play of language with an

awareness of its foibles, its inherent capacity for untruths, one avoids such

"precocious ejaculations of thought, word and deed," the presumptuous

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[38] Wylie later speaks of "Mrs. M" and the effect on her by "the protracted absence of her young, her ambitious husband" (*M* 228). We later learn that Celia is not Mrs. Murphy (*M* 268), and Murphy's lack of ambition is stressed in his desire to avoid a job.

assertion of an end. Thus opened is the process by which one toils toward the end that seems always on the horizon.

Even Murphy, who acknowledges surds, persists in "precocious ejaculations" of language to delineate fixed cateories of being; he falls into the trap of the "illuminati." This occurs most clearly when he demonstrates a belief in the presence of ideals: he feels that nothing appears in the outside world that does not first exist within the sphere of his mind (*M* 107). The inside forms are "beatific idols," while the outside correspondents are merely "occasions of fiasco" (*M* 178). Murphy recalls the Occasionalism of Arnold Geulincx: "*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis* [Want nothing where you are worth nothing]" (*M* 178).[39] "But it was not enough to want nothing where he was worth nothing" (*M* 179). He continues to be divided between the little world and the big world. Problems arise in Murphy's formulation: the patients at Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, whose psychoses make them appear to Murphy as "escaped from a colossal fiasco" of the big world (*M* 178), still express pains. "The frequent expressions apparently of pain, rage, despair and in fact all the usual, to which some patients gave vent, suggesting a fly somewhere in the ointment of the Microcosmos, Murphy either disregarded or muted to mean what he wanted" (*M* 179). Murphy, dealing in a brand of negative theology, can twist facts to suit his own desires for the little world

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[39] The translation is from Rabinovitz, p.9.

just as the "illuminati" twist facts to suit their own needs in the big world.

He also determines his priority when he forsakes astrology and the

determinations of the big world: "They were his stars, he was the prior

system." (*M* 183). Yet he cannot be the prior system, since his death does not

signal the end of the novel (and of the whole "outside" system). Rather, the

dissemination of "the body, mind, and soul of Murphy" ("freely distributed")

(*M* 275) demonstrates the freedom one obtains, and the true unification in

death that eludes presumptuous categorization of fixity in life ("the big

world's precocious ejaculations of thought, word, and deed" [184]).

And yet Murphy's words betray themselves as fiction and assert their

own materiality. Thus one must look through the play of words for a

meaning; one must view the veil with its tears rather than seek a removal of

the veil of language that uncovers a meaning. Such a phenomenon occurs in

Celia's perception of a conversation with Murphy:

> 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. (*M* 40)

The addition of words, the proliferation of the system of *différance*, defers

meaning along the chain of signifiers, thereby rending the possibility of a

meaning that can be unified with each successive word. That the words seem

to go "dead" implies that meaning is subsumed into the context. Celia will

need to grasp the system of "difficult music" before she can understand the life that is not self-identical within each obliterated word. The "life" of meaning, with its problematic tie to the signifier (just as Murphy has trouble reconciling the problematic link between the life in his mind and his body) is caught up in an endless (with Beckett's penchant for repetition) cycle of death and rebirth (a rebirth that is decidedly not immaculate), wandering and waiting for the end. And Murphy, hoping for the peace of the end, believes such a cycle of resurrection is a mistake.[40]

Murphy's most significant use of language fills and marks the void between himself and Mr. Endon. He blurts out staccato phrases, altering the language, forming a repetition into newness, creating some sort of revelation. That he is a "mote in Mr. Endon's unseen" shows him the disjunction that parodoxically retains an inexorable link in the relationship of form (*morph*, Murphy) and the "within" (*endon*).[41] The gulf is not crossed, and it is not

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[40] Murphy believes that the patients at M.M.M. can achieve an isolation (out of a social context) that promotes a peace of the end: "Left in peace, they would have been as happy as Larry, short for Lazarus, whose raising seemed to Murphy perhaps the one occasion on which the Messiah had overstepped the mark" (*M* 180). We yearn for the perfection of Christ's resurrection, the unity embodied by his place in the Trinity, yet we find in our own life cycles, in our own repetitions of words, the imperfect renewal into Lazarus/Larry, the fallen being of the "nothing new." Murphy seeks escape, and thus seeking "the means to an end," he denies the rebirth of a means to a continued means, a sense of newness in one's "toiling among the nothing new." He laments his imperfect birth, and desires a means to have his rocking chair move "faster and faster and then stop" (*M* 9, 253), rather than "hobble toward the only possible." The association of Murphy with Christ, along with his inability (he attempts to conjure images "In vain" [*M* 251]) to represent a world to himself, to mediate or re-create, underscores the fact that this perfection is impossible.

[41] Numerous other critics have noted the *morph/ endon* connection. For example, see Rabinovitz, pp. 92, 97.

removed, but he has outlined the terms of relation. Murphy cannot reach the core of chaos, but he can grasp the "imperfect sense of humor" that makes "such a mess of chaos," and that will enable him to find a place in the chaos. Yet he continues his reach for transcendence, for the Christlike removal of the gulf. As a result, "superfine chaos" engulfs Murphy and makes him one with the mess.

Another contrast to the fact-foisting of the "illuminati" is the unscientific inquiry into the liminal realm. Mr. Kelly seeks this limen while flying his kite:

> Now he could measure the distance from the unseen to the seen, now he was in a position to determine the point at which seen and unseen met. It would be an *unscientific observation*, so many and so fitful were the imponderables involved. (*M* 280; emphasis added)

The goal of his project, however, remains elusive: the string snaps, and "[t]he end of the line skimmed the water, jerked upward in a wild whirl, vanished joyfully in the dusk" (*M* 282). Yet the result is not a defeat, rather the engagement in this process has enabled a joyful parturition in which the kite, released from its tether, has escaped the "ludicrous fever of toys struggling skyward" (*M* 281). We witness not a dolorous exile, but the escape from the confinements of an absurd misdirection. The kite that seeks the liminal realm need not pertain to seen or unseen; it can wander among them, vanishing to perhaps reappear. Earlier, Celia had noted kites in the distance

("She could just discern them")—"specks against the east," which appear
"motionless and black, in a glade of limpid viridescent sky" (*M* 152). The
kites appear to be an example of Neary's figure and ground, yet when reeled
in, they demonstrate a more chaotic motion. One only finds the illusion of
peace and stasis, but embracing the freedom of the play of these "toys," (and,
as I have also indicated, of the play of language) enables a wandering toward
home.

When language is viewed as a tool of signification rather than as a
vehicle for transcendent truths, it may be twisted to suit self-interest, but
wrongs may be righted because the debate remains open. For instance,
Murphy and Celia discuss his horoscope and their impending separation:

> 'How can you be such a fool and a brute,' she said,
> and did not bother to finish.
> 'But you wouldn't have me go against the diagram,'
> said Murphy, 'surely to God.'
> 'A fool and a brute,' she said.
> 'Surely that is rather severe,' said Murphy.
> ' You tell me to get this. . . this. . . '
> 'Corpus of deterrents,' said Murphy.
> 'So that we can be together, and you go and twist it into a. . .
> into a. . .'
> 'Separation order,' said Murphy. Few minds were better
> concocted than this native's. (*M* 34)

She cannot find words rapidly enough to describe her thoughts, and even if
we are sympathetic to her point of view, Murphy comes out on top because
he is quicker on the draw with language. This point is underscored by the

humor of the narratorial comment, the reference back to Suk's prophecy. However, Celia is not defeated, and the two are not separated at this point. Murphy even accedes to getting a job, and the two remain together throughout his half-hearted search. The occasional confluences (among the sundering) occurring in an ongoing process provide a preferable alternative to the division necessitated by closure.

The system of binary oppositions further breaks down as the gap or gulf between characters in the novel resolutely asserts a material form (the filling and marking of the determined lack). For instance, when Celia meets with Neary, Miss Counihan, and Wylie for the first time, she sits on the edge of the bed so that "Murphy's half of the bed is between her and them" (*M* 231). The four seek "a formula, a status quo agreeable to all" (*M* 233). Yet the formula imposed cannot be accurate: the three insist on calling Celia "Mrs. Murphy," although we find out she merely "would have been Mrs. Murphy" (*M* 268; emphasis added), and they consider themselves Murphy's "very dear friends" (M 267), but only Celia knows him well enough to identify his body (M 266). The nature of coming and going within this liminal area is emphasized by the fact that the bed is the site of meeting and parting, the central piece in the room "where Murphy and Celia had met and parted so often" (*M* 227). Neither presence nor absolute absence asserts itself: only supplement remains. The material marking of Murphy's absence is the site of flux, not

fixity, and only this recognition may enable the other characters to avoid

foisting a presence in the space of this absence. Previously, in the erasure of

some signifier of Murphy, the other characers had been unable to resist

transforming him into some notion of "key," or "end," or other transcendent

presence. They had made him into "the beginning of new life for them all,[. .

.]the end of darkness for all concerned" (*M* 130).

A similar occurrence appears in the final exchange between Celia and

Miss Carridge: "A long look of fellow-feeling filled the space between them,

with calm, pity and a touch of contempt. They leaned against it as against a

solid wall of wool and looked at each other across it. Then they continued on

their ways. . ." (*M* 231). The wall of wool invites an association with Christ

(the Lamb of God) as the only bridge for a gulf.[42] The problematic, incomplete

division of self from self, self from other, meaning from sign, signifier from

signified, can only be marked and filled by a supplement.[43] We lean on the

supplement, longing for it as true presence, as the only redeeming,

immaculately incarnate Word of God that will lead us to Paradise, lead us

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[42] The incarnation of Christ introduces to the world the powers of God the Father. As in Murphy's musings on chaos/gas, "only God," through his decree "Let there be Heaven in the midst of the waters, let it divide the waters from the waters," can introduce a metaphysical presence (*M* 176). The associations of Murphy and Watt with Christ emphasize the nature of their respective quests, and underscore the fact that mere humans may not attain this goal.

[43] Another notable case is Murphy's last scene with Mr. Endon, in which Murphy feels the enormity of the gulf between them, even though the gulf physically appears as "the merest hand's-breath of air" (*M* 248). Murphy, "who did not speak at all in the ordinary way unless spoken to" (*M* 250), attempts to fill the gap with language, in four outbursts that simultaneously delineate the two men's relationship and lament their absence of a relationship.

home.

*   *   *   *   *

Once inside/outside is forsaken, process (of language/life/quest, etc.)
must be embraced. Murphy's rocking chair "recreation" (*M* 31) is his only
means for solace since he is incapable "of renouncing all that lay outside" (*M*
179): it is the recognition of surds, of the irreducibility of existence into an
oppostion of inside/outside. The chair is the site of oscillation, a back-and-
forth, within which one finds "a flux of form, a perpetual coming together
and falling asunder" in the dark zone of the mind (*M* 112).

Celia's experience in Murphy's chair reinforces the connections
between the chair and the workings of language. She finds in the chair a
"silence not of vacuum but of plenum" (*M* 148). The nothingness exists not
as void, but within supplementarity, the "plenum" which fills and marks a
determined lack. And we find that she experiences a continual unweaving
and reweaving of events that embraces the movement and process of
différance in language, of the continual chain of signification: "Penelope's
curriculum was reversed, the next day and the next it was to do all over
again" (*M* 149). The circularity is acceptable as part of the ongoing process.
She embraces a loose weaving (that will presumably necessitate further
unraveling and reweaving); "the coils of her lif are merely "hackled into tow"
(*M* 149), made a manageable conglomeration, rather than solidly bound into

a presumptuous fixity. Language is not denied, but affirmed. Murphy's chair

ritual remains detached from life, ineffable: it evokes a sensation that is "so

pleasant that pleasant was not the word" (*M* 112). Celia, however,

experiences "a most pleasant sensation." (*M* 149). The nature of process

inherent in her experience of the chair and in one's involvement in language

includes a recognition of the inability of closure, and thus the disclaimer of

the determined lack need not be asserted. Rigidity is denied: the process

entails that "the days and places and things were untwisted and scattered" (*M*

149). This resembles Derrida's concept of dissemination, in that it is both a

scattering of undoing and a sowing that enables "generative multiplicity,"

further participation in the process.[44] One must, like Celia, accept the given

materials, the "old credentials," and partake in the cycle. The process may be

continued indefinitely before one may "lie down in the paradisal innocence"

(*M* 149). At the end of the novel, she still must participate in a continuing

process, just as we are all enmeshed in the continual process of language: she

toils "up the wide hill," because there is "no shorter way home" (*M* 282). The

alternative is a self-absorbed run to the bank in the name of "Reason and

Philautia," (like Wylie), or a premature abandonment of the world (like

Murphy), in which one, although freely scattered, still obeys the rules of a

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[44] Derrida notes that "dissemination" plays on both *seme* and *semen,* and thus marks "an irreducible and *generative* multiplicity. The supplement and the turbulence of a certain lack fracture the limit of the text, forbidding an exhaustive and closed formalization of it" (*Positions* 45).

game (Murphy's ashes follow the conventions of football precisely even in their non-Newtonian motion).

Like the purgatory of Murphy's "Belacqua fantasy" (*M* 78), language is a continually revolving process in which one participates "from the spermarium to the crematorium" (*M* 78). Language continues in the circular play of signification, which promotes constant movement along the chain, always enabling the repetition that brings it back upon itself. Belacqua watches "the dayspring run through its [circular] zodiac, before the toil up hill to Paradise" (*M* 78).[45] No moment of transition signals the end of the cycle, and the horizon of Paradise is deferred, but the end is in sight. Similarly, one continues wandering on through the circular play of language that defers meaning, but the words do not enclose. Always already inherent in the continual sundering and reconciliation, the coming and going of language, are the interstices that reveal a glimpse of that elusive thing (home, meaning, Paradise, Nothingness) Beckett seeks behind the veil. Wandering continues,

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[45] The novel's thirteen sections may refer to the twelve signs of the zodiac, then the following section, the break in this circle, in which the toil uphill is made. In this model, indeterminacy still reigns, no point of origin exists, the centre cannot hold: Murphy's mind, the ostensible center of the system of hermetic closure of inside/outside, is displaced from the center by the possibility of home (or Paradise) established in the thirteenth section. A prematurely wrought rigid enclosure would fabricate a center, thus closing off the possibility of the break from the circle needed for an odd term in the series. The thirteen may also refer to twelve disciples and Christ: this possibility coupled with the astrological overtones decenters both metaphysical systems. Thirteen is also, like Murphy's heart, an irreducible surd of which we cannot get to the root . Despite the attempts of section six, we cannot get to the "heart" of *Murphy*. Only when we accept such surds on their own elusive terms can we wander to find home.

but home is within sight.

Watt: No Longer "Without"

Watt continues the problematic relationship of self to world, and the novel intensifies the focus on the inability of language to mediate adequately the attempt to derive meaning from one's experiences. Yet in this novel, Beckett's central character finds a fuller element of freedom and telos in his wandering and in the coming and going of language. Watt's quest brings him to Knott's house, where his departing predecessor, Arsene, remarks that Watt, as he himself had done, wishes for a nothingness: he seeks an existence in which "the little sounds come that demand nothing, ordain nothing, explain nothing, propound nothing,. . . but always simple and indifferent,. . . sites of a stirring beyond coming and going, of a being so light and free that it is as the being of nothing" (*W* 39). We may note that the breakdown of difference is necessary for this "nothing": the coming and going that is the play of *différance* must be suppressed.

Arsene later notes that the result will be the desired harmony, unity with all: "When in a word he will be in his midst at last, after so many years spent clinging to the perimeter" (*W* 41). Like Murphy's "wandering to find home," Watt's journey is for that central point that is both origin and *telos*, the point of rest from the oscillation of coming and going on the circular path

of life in the outside world.   Yet his quest will ultimately fail because the inside world betrays the same sense of flux: borders dissolve, fixity eludes us, and although rest may be possible, *telos* is deferred.   Both Watt and Murphy find the coming and going of oscillation essential to their respective quests for a home.   Murphy's chair is an "available means" (*M* 179) toward the supposed end of fulfillment, but it alone is not quite enough.   However, during the "dead points" (*M* 252) of the rock, the points at which the rocking turns back upon itself, Murphy finds himself in the middle, between world and sky.   Watt finds a similar means in the rails of trains and trams, on which he is "an experienced traveller" (*W* 20, 21).   As Rubin Rabinovitz notes, Watt "can also be thought of as a wattman (a French term for 'tram-driver')" (136).   Watt eventually seeks "The end of the line," but changes from the "nearer end" to "the further end" (*W* 244).   This represents a turn from a premature reach for an end to a determination to continue his engagement with the process, to extend the journey.   Although Watt reaches the apparent *telos* of the asylum, Sam's final encounter with him ends with Watt still in motion: "ever he picked himself up and unmurmuring went on, towards his habitation" (*W* 213).   The wandering continues, but Watt, having encountered the gap at the end of the line, chooses to oscillate in his own manner, backwards.   Similarly, Watt eventually switches from reciting his text "parrot-like" (*W* 156) to modifying the tale through his own "discretion

and sense. . . and aesthetic judgement" (*W* 164). By taking an active part in the process of language, Watt comes to feed on its instabilities and gaps, thereby avoiding the stultifying effects of encountering events and terms that don't conform to a rigid system (the problem encountered by Nackybal, rendered unable to perform his mathematical feats when he encounters numbers from outside the system of his memorized list [*W* 190]). Watt's desire for origin must be discarded in favor of embracing an ongoing process. The need for this transformation arises from the problematization of Watt's world.

Inside/outside antinomies also persist in *Watt*: At Watt's arrival at Knott's, "within" and "without" become the terms with which he places himself, and the process by which Watt crosses the threshold baffles him (*W* 36). During his stay, he finds that dogs and strangers come to the house "from outside" (*W* 91), "the outer world" (*W* 69). Similarly, when confined at the train station, Watt thinks of the "external commotion" (*W* 232) of train schedules and the bustling that accompanies it in the realm "without" (*W* 233, 234).[46] The term "without" implies both an exteriority and a lack. In

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[46] Many critics, such as Rabinovitz, contend that the novel is divided into the categories of an inside world and an outside world, much as Murphy held to a "little world"/"big world" model. Raymond Federman offers a twist on this model with his own tripartite division of a "human" (external) world, an "heroic" (internal, intellectual) world, and an "insane" world (*Journey to Chaos* 95-97). In both of these paradigms Watt's journey inward exposes the incapacity of "normal" modes of thought to deal with the inside world. However, I find that the novel, rather than asserting the primacy of the inside, instead establishes such boundaries merely to demonstrate the stultifying effects of confronting the diversity of experience with habitually conditioned, fixed thought patterns. When language, and

order to meet at the asylum, Sam and Watt must leave the inside of their

mansions and go out to the "little garden" (*W* 153). The outer world is not

just "the big world" anymore; barriers are collapsing. To meet, the two men

must pass through "the other scum," "through this jocose, this sniggering

muck" (*W* 153). A (disdainful) dissociation is made: Sam finds himself and

Watt different from the others, but they remain part of the "scum," living

and moving among these peers, if not tied to them. It is a problematic

delineation rather than complete division. Yet dissociation and difference are

not the only prerequisites in the step toward eventual connection. Watt and

Sam achieve a fair measure of connection when they accept the palpability of

the middle ground with its barriers, imperfections, and gaps. It is this middle

ground— an area both of division and of confluence— that language

occupies.

Several events (or perhaps non-events) serve to outline the problem

Watt faces at Knott's house. Three notable examples, particularly troubling to

Watt, are the "fugitive penetration" made by the Galls (the father and son

who tune the piano), Watt's attempts to name a pot in the kitchen, and

circumstances surrounding the dogs (and their presumed owners, the Lynch

clan) who will ostensibly consume the remains of Knott's meals. Numerous

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therefore thought as well, are recognized as a coming and going rather than enclosure, freedom is
achieved from the baffling stasis which occurs upon encountering that which does not conform to the
system. Inside and outside worlds may offer some point of reference, but we may not regard them as
absolutes.

critics have provided detailed analyses of these scenes and of the ways in which they "reveal problematical aspects of the relationship between language and reality."[47] I therefore will not provide a detailed reading of these passages. I will instead offer a brief view of the failure of language to enclose their nothingness, then turn to other passages in the novel that provide alternate symbols of signification.

The visit of the Galls cannot stay fixed in Watt's mind; he cannot make any assertions regarding what happened. He is unable to accept "that a thing that was nothing had happened, with the utmost formal distinctness [. . .], with all the clarity and solidity of something" (W 76). Watt perceives the events, but he cannot "saddle them with meaning" (W 79).[48] As David Hesla notes, he attempts to "domesticate reality, to lead it about on a leash of words."[49] Yet even as he replays the event in his mind, he cannot affix words that will stick: language and meaning come and go in a continual flux.

Watt's next tribulation occurs when he cannot affix a name to a pot: "It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could

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[47] Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words*, p.21. The whole chapter includes elucidative readings on these and other passages, both in light of Derridean *différance*, and with an awareness of connections to womb/maternal/milk imagery.
[48] Even furtive attempts at meaning frustrate Watt, as he can neither reconcile nor distinguish between an "initial meaning," a "meaning evolved," and the "initial absence of meaning" (W 79).
[49] David H. Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos*, p.70.

say, Pot, pot, and be comforted" (W 81).[50] Watt has no difficulty in using the

pot to prepare meals. The problem resides in language: he needs "semantic

succor." (W 83). Although the pot continues to resist a fixed name, Watt fares

somewhat better with arrangements regarding the remains of Knott's meals.

He formulates twelve possibilities, but realizes that others escape him (W 90).

Yet Watt finds no succor, no solution, but merely a facile palliative: "Not that

for a moment Watt supposed that he had penetrated the forces at play [. . .].

But he [. . .] had made a pillow of old words" (W 117). The pillow is merely an

escape, a brief respite, from the quest for meaning. However, by immersing

himself in the middle ground, the area in which language operates, Watt may

perhaps find that language is constitutive of meaning, and that neither fixity

nor escape is necessary.

Watt cannot reach his much-sought succor of fixity, but the alternative

of coming and going presents itself in the midpoints and medians that appear

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[50] Stephen Connor, *Samuel Beckett*, pp.33-34, provides an elucidative reading of the repetition in this passage, a repetition which, through primordial supplementarity, reflects the pot's self-identity: it is "a repetition of itself." The sign acts as witness to the pot's existence (as Watt witnesses Knott), and therefore becomes constitutive of its being. He continues with a lucid parallel case of the interdependence of language and meaning. Eyal Amiran, in his book *Wanderings and Home*, offers associations of pot with helmet and head (and, metonymically, person), therefore stressing the interior microcosm in which Watt's investigations are pursued. Yet he also notes the Aristotelian connection with Watt's attempt to name it a shield (29-32). Although such a reading is useful, I find the primary function of the pot to be its resistance to a narrow symbolic reading. We may also attach to "pot" the connotation of chamber pot (a sense in which the word is used in both *Molly* and *Malone Dies*), thereby allowing this thing to contain its food in all manner of metamorphoses, from the coming of incorporation to the going of excretion. Lik e the word that seeks to name the pot, this seemingly self-contained, self-evident entity disseminates and slips from our grasp, resisting our attempts to enclose it.

in the novel. Although, in the end, they prove limited as connections or crossing-points, bridges, fences, narrow stretches of trampled grasses, and even a trampled-on language do serve as points of confluence that direct something, "perhaps something" between two seemingly isolated monads.

Bridges and fences serve as figures for language in *Watt*. As both boundary and connector, they demonstrate the liberating potential and the entrapping dangers of signification. The fence at the asylum is described as "a high barbed wire fence, greatly in need of repair, of new wire, of fresh barbs" (*W* 156). The poor condition of the fence recalls the bridge from a few pages before: "a rustic humpbacked bridge, in a state of extreme dilapidation" (*W* 154). The image of decrepit aging has previously been applied to language: the "old words, the old credentials." (*W* 85). Sam and Watt fix the bridge, "For we were attached, you see, to the little bridge. For without it how should we have passed from one part of the garden to the other" (*W* 155). The bridge enables the connection of Watt and Sam, and thereby enables the novel (and hence, their presentation to us, their existence). This parallels the use of language in the quest for silence, for Beckett here lays out the dissatisfaction with language. He does not overcome his disdain, but rather remains attached to this little bridge.

Whereas the bridge provides the crossing, the confluence that enables the demarcation of Watt and Sam, the fence at the asylum is the division that

provides their separate existence and the possibility of their coming together. We do not see a regularity of geometry or the rigid encapsulation that marks binary oppositions: "Now converging, now diverging, these fences presented a striking irregularity of contour. No fence was party, nor any part of any fence" (*W* 156-57). Although discrete entities, the fences are accessible to each other: a "bare yard separated the fences" (*W* 160). This barren ground perhaps serves as a no-man's land, Hellespont, a nothing, for Beckett. Perhaps nothing is here because all is a coming and going in this interstitial area. The fence has holes that make this middle ground accessible, just as language, in its inability to fix an originary presence, contains a dislocation that allows the play of signification. Wandering through a hole, it is this middle ground that Sam tries to understand:

> I perceived, beyond all possibility of error, that I was in the presence of one of those channels or straits described above, where the limit of my garden, and that of another, followed the same course. . . it was impossible for doubts not to arise, in a reasonable mind, regarding the sanity of the person responsible for the lay-out. Continuing my inspection, like one deprived of his senses, I observed. . . Watt" (*W* 158-59)[51]

But then, when he passes through the hole, his senses are "sharpened to ten or fifteen times their normal acuity" (*W* 160). However, this is limen as much as it is limit; the bare yard is the threshold at which Sam's garden

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[51] By questioning the sanity of the person responsible for the layout, Sam parallels the thought expressed in *Murphy* regarding the "imperfect sense of humour" that "could make such a mess of chaos" with things like puns (*M* 65).

nearly reaches Watt's garden. Just as language presents the liminal space in which meaning is created through the force of *différance*, Watt and Sam exchange the most pivotal details of Watt's story in this interstitial area.

Rubin Rabinovitz remarks that Watt's "perception of reality is more acute" at the asylum, due to his turn inward (136). However, Sam, in the above statement, observes that senses are sharpened in the liminal area. The repetition of "ten or fifteen" mocks the attempt to quantify the degree, but this truly is a revelatory experience for Sam. Watt's problems throughout the novel stem from the categorization of inside/outside modes of thinking, and applying these constraints to a reality that resists encapsulation. When his thoughts and language become more malleable, less rigid, life still buffets him about, but he is able to move freely. Rabinovitz even asserts that of the two pictures in Erskine's room, "the abstract painting triumphs over its realistic counterpart." (157) The problem with the "realistic" painting (which is also Watt's problem at Knott's) occurs in the attempt to constrain incompatible perceptions into one mode of representation. A complete retreat inward (of the sort Rabinovitz finds) only escapes this problem by leaving problematic situations on the "outside." However, if we view Watt as participating in the "coming and going," then inside/outside boundaries dissolve, and Watt truly is free to access all realms of experience, just as he and Sam move across and between boundaries at the asylum.

Such a "coming and going" achieves its clearest physical depiction in this area between the fences. It is figured as a region of possibility, of becoming, or meaning: "as though the two fences were but one" (*W* 162). Again, boundaries and divisions break down, become indeterminate. This indeterminacy previously troubled Watt in his attempts to fix the meaning of the Galls' visit and to tie a name to the pot, whereas the indeterminacy now enables a reconciliation. As Sam and Watt walk together in this liminal area, the description progresses from "And then turning, I turning, and he turning,. . ."—a division— to:

> And then turning, *as one man*, we paced back the way we had paced
> back the way we had come, I looking whither we were going, and
> he looking whence we were coming. And so, up and down, up and
> down, we paced between the fences, together again *after so long*,
> and the sun shone bright upon us, and the wind blew wild about us.
>   To be together again, after so long, who love the sunny wind,
> the windy sun, in the sun, in the wind, that is perhaps something,
> perhaps something. (*W* 163)

The scene achieves a poignancy without wallowing in maudlin sentiment. Sam tells that he and Watt are "very fond of fences, of wire fences, very fond indeed; not of walls, nor palissades, nor opacious hedges, no; but to all that limited motion, without limiting vision" (*W* 158). This condition parallels signification through language: the system of signs will not allow arbitrary sounds to convey meaning (a limit to the "motion" of syntax), yet the vision is unlimited because of the endless syntagmatic combinations of signifiers

and the continual play of *différance*. The movement continues, so there can be no sense of arrival at the presence of meaning. Such a delusory denial of the continuation of the process leaves one in a bounded area, as attested by the fence stretching on both sides of the two men, as well as by the further confinement which appears in the novel.

Later, Watt's confinement at the train station approximates the boundaries imposed by the fence. Watt is told that, after being let out, he will be "free to come and go as you please" (*W* 231), and within the dark room, we learn, "The problem of vision, as far as Watt was concerned, admitted of only one solution: the eye open in the dark. The results given by the closed eye were, in Watt's opinion, most unsatisfactory" (*W* 232). Watt can accept the limit to motion, as long as vision is not self-limiting. This is similar to the freedom of the vision within his mind that Murphy seeks while bound to his chair. He is fixed to the chair, which rocks in a regular, limited oscillation, until the whole system topples, leaving him in a "crucified position" (*M* 28).[52]

Another figure for language, the flux between chaos and constraint inherent in signification, is the "jointed unstable thing" Watt ponders. After

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[52] Again, the Christ-resonances call up an imperfectly rendered Christ who fails to provide the final solution, the ultimate redemption. The imperfection of man's reach for Christlike redemption is underscored by Sam's note that Watt appears to him as "the Christ supposed by Bosch" (*W* 159)— a *representation* of Christ rather than an actual presence.

his "pot" ruminations, Watt hopes that things would appear "in their ancient guise, and consent to be named, with the time honoured names, and forgotten."

> Things and himself, they had gone with him now for so long, in the foul weather, and the less foul. Things in the ordinary sense, and then the emptiness between them, and the high heavy hollow jointed unstable thing, that trampled down the grasses, and scattered the sand, in its pursuits." (W 84)

It seems as though Watt asks things to make a ritual self-sacrifice to language, that the naming is in fact an "execution" of the thing, so that the thing may be forgotten. This certainly priveleges the notion prevalent in Western metaphysics that the thing (in its form, idea, or "thingness") is prior to the word. Watt believes that the representation enacted by naming (he hopes for words to be applied to his situation; he doesn't care about understanding) replaces and nullifies the thing. However, in all of Watt's use of language, as well as in Sam's narration, the material sign of language is as palpable as any other "thing." Given the phrase, "the high heavy hollow jointed unstable thing," the alliteration focuses attention on the material sign: the material connection is as valid as any ineffable containment of the nothingness of the thing. Since one cannot enclose "nothingness/ in words" one tries to use the jointed unstable language (whose connections are as precarious as the mere sharing of an "h" or /h/ sound) to fill the emptiness between things.

I must reiterate that the supplementarity of language does not only fill

this lack, this emptiness, but marks the lack as well. In marking the emptiness— by the very "problem" of not being the thing to which it refers— language emphasizes the nothingness in the gulf between word and thing: the veil of language is already rent.[53]

This thing "tramples down the grasses," thus making it analagous to the bull or boar that violently breaks the fence, yet it is hollow like the fence(s), which have a "hollow" or gap between them. The diverging and converging make this thing sometimes seem wide, and sometimes seem no wider than three-quarters the length of an animal. Also, the "scattered sand" recalls the dissemination of Murphy's ashes. Among these somewhat conflicting associations, I must emphasize that the point is not to posit a rigid paradigm— that would merely be another attempt to enclose "nothingness/ in words"— but rather to demonstrate the associations and the realm of possibility conveyed by these figures of signification. The emphasis remains on the hollow and on the movement, rending, and flux that continually occur in this middle realm. The figure eludes our attempts to form a mental picture just as *différance* resists attempts to name and define it. In order to

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[53] And this rending may be considered a precondition in the quest for wholeness, home, origin/telos. "Where there is a reconciliation,[. . .] there must have been first a sundering" (*Ulysses* 193); We have neither present to us: all is a coming and a going. Since we can reach neither beginning nor end, all we have is the midpoint, an oscillation in purgatory. But in this coming and going that constitutes the intermediary realm between origin and presence, we view the condition (always already there) of sundering that anticipates the possibility (however long deferred) of reconciliation. In a similar vein, W.B. Yeats writes in "Crazy Jane Talks to the Bishop": "nothing can be sole or whole/That has not been rent."

include the nothingness, we must accept some discontinuities rather than attempt rigid closure.

Circle and Centre

The picture of a circle in Erskine's room prompts Watt to ponder the effects of perspective, fixity, and comings and goings. The following passage describes his apprehension of the picture:

> A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture. Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue, but blue! The rest was white. How the effect of perspective was obtained Watt did not know. But it was obtained. By what means the illusion of movement in space, and it almost seemed in time, was given, Watt could not say. But it was given. Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and circle entered together on the same plane. Or had they not done so already, or almost? And was it not rather the circle that was in the background, and the point that was in the foreground? Watt wondered if they had sighted each other, or were flying blindly thus, harried by some force of merely mechanical mutual attraction, or the playthings of chance. (*W* 128-29)

That it is "obviously described by a compass" indicates the mechanical precision with which it attempts to encompass, encircle, contain, or enclose. The break in the circle renders this attempt incomplete. In this respect the circle mirrors Watt's own attempts, throughout his stay in Knott's establishment, to encompass all aspects of a situation or thing by means of rigorously mechanized and plotted lists of possible permutations. Yet all such attempts are necessarily incomplete since "nothing changed, in Mr Knott's

establishment, because nothing remained, and nothing came or went, because all was a coming and a going" (*W* 132-33). The picture "represents," in the most obvious sense, the novel's central scheme of attempt to close the hermeneutic circle, to enclose "nothingness/ in words."

Circle and centre themselves seem to take on the quality of word and meaning. The circle is "obviously described" in black on a white background with all the mechanical assurance of a printed or typed word (the material sign). Yet the "centre" cannot be fixed: it is "a point, or a dot," and it appears vaguely somewhere "in the eastern background," an area less prominent, less present than the circle. This point cannot be fixed physically, nominally, or in a sense of what "the point" of the painting is, but this boundless possibility is refreshing to Watt.

Furthermore, the point (or dot) cannot itself be adequately enclosed in words: it is "blue, but blue!" The repetition provides an attempt of language (moving *circularly* back to the original word, or oscillating along a path broken by the "but," and moving back to itself) to convey or enclose meaning through excess. The differentiating conjunction "but" shows that the first "blue" did not adequately enclose meaning, and we must add another "blue," which is emphasized through exclamation (thereby indicating some measure

of sublimity in this celestial color).[54] And as a conjunction, "but" may not be

mistaken as the name of something as "blue" may be taken for the name of a

color or— to cite the example that most troubles Watt—as "pot" may be

confused as the name of the pot. In modifying the second "blue" through a

connection/dissociation, the conjunction "but" necessarily glances backwards

at the first "blue." As such, it appears as a sort of dead point in the

oscillation,[55] a point at which the nothingness behind language (and behind

the painting) is seen. This second "blue" is the same and yet unavoidably

different from the first blue.[56] We still cannot fix this point (or dot, or centre).

The description of the painting begins with a certainty ("obviously

described") and deteriorates as it proceeds to examine all the things tied to this

apparent material certainty. Immediately the question arises, "Was it

receding?" and we are left with the vague, untranslatable "impression,"

"effect of perspective," and "illusion of movement." These apperceptions

cannot be mediated: we must accept them on faith. Similarly, narrator,

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[54] See Lucky's outburst in *Waiting for Godot*: "blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing. . ." (28b).

[55] The "dead point" of oscillation while rocking in his chair enables Murphy, just before his death, to see himself in the middle, between the world and sky (*M* 252). A similar case is the consideration in *Watt* of the midpoint between coming and going, pleasure and pain, youth and age, at which one reaches the "hollow" where one is "free, free at last for an instant free at last, nothing at last" (*W* 201-202).

[56] The difference appears even more strongly than in the "Murphy was Murphy" tautology I discussed previously. The conjunction "but" provides a stronger dissociation than the linking verb "was." The division supplied by the comma adds to this effect, producing a "jointed, unstable thing."

reader, and Watt must take a leap of faith by accepting unsubstantiated assertions: "How. . . Watt did not know. *But it was obtained.* By what means. . ., Watt could not say. *But it was given*" (*W* 128-29; emphasis added). This may seem to posit visual art as a more immediate medium than language, since Watt can accept that his "senses" such as sight provide him with undeniable (if inexplicable) perceptions that make "sense." However, Watt may just be able to take the leap of faith because he lacks knowledge of the medium. He may wonder "what the artist had intended to represent" because "Watt knew nothing about painting," and he may hope that centre and circle are moving "in boundless space, in endless time" because "Watt knew nothing about physics" (*W* 129). Perhaps the excruciating pain caused by Watt's "need of semantic succor" (*W* 83) stems from the fact that he is a "very fair linguist." Perhaps with such knowledge applied to the painting, Watt would not be able to accept simply the fact "but it was."

However, even though Watt can accept on faith that perspective and movement appear, he cannot be certain what these effects show him. He cannot describe the flux that appears before him, he can merely apprehend its existence. This is similar to his current view of Knott, about whom Watt can substantiate little or nothing, but whom he finds to be the principle that underlines all of Mr Knott's establishment. Watt, though he senses certain effects at work in the painting, is frustrated (as always) in his quest for both

an origin and a completion. He wonders if and when the point and circle will

reach the same plane, and he considers, "had they not done so already, or

almost?" (*W* 129). He cannot fix the positions or temporal movement in

either direction.

Among Watt's many possibilities for centre and circle, one appeals

greatly to him:

> at the thought that it was perhaps this, a circle and a centre not its
> centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless
> space, in endless time, then Watt's eyes filled with tears that he
> could not stem, and they flowed down his fluted cheeks unchecked,
> in a steady flow, refreshing him greatly. (*W* 129)

This possibly seems to show the center coming home, and the circle becoming

a home for a new center. Thus the point Watt sees is an exiled or lost center

that will finally return home, and the circle is some emptiness (perhaps like

the "empty heart" "empty hands" of the addenda [*W* 250]) that will be filled.

Watt, however, soon abandons this notion and turns the painting to

various postitions. We are told:

> But in these positions the picture pleased Watt less than
> it had when on the wall. And the reason for that was perhaps
> this, that the breach ceased to be below. And the thought of the
> point slipping in from below at last, when it came home at last,
> or to its new home, and the thought of the breach open below
> perhaps for ever in vain, these thoughts, to please Watt as they did,
> required the breach to be below, and nowhere else. It is by the nadir
> that we come, said Watt, and it is by the nadir that we go, whatever
> that means. And the artist must have felt something of this kind too,
> for the circle did not turn, as circles will, but sailed steadfast in its white

skies, with its patient breach for ever below. (*W* 131)[57]

In this situation, Watt does not allow for a second circle and center; he only imagines a reconciliation between the circle and its estranged center, or a new pairing of the previously separate circle and center.

Oddly, after Watt runs through a series of contemplations the painting and its "illusion of movement in space, and it almost seemed in time" (*W* 130), Sam (we may only surmise it is Sam) offers the following remark:

> Watt did not of course wonder all these things at the time, but some he wondered at the time, and the others subsequently. But those that he wondered at the time, he again wondered subsequently, together with those that he did not wonder at the time, over and over again. And many other things in this connexion also, of which some at the time, and the others subsequently, Watt wondered subsequently also, time without number. (*W* 130)

This remark undermines any illusion of unity or stasis in time for Watt's contemplation, and we are left with the feeling that there is something unspoken about Watt's wondering. Again, the narrative highlights its own incapabilities. "Watt will not/ abate one jot" (*W* 249), yet no story (not even one written by Proust) can continue on unabated. Furthermore, there exists a strange dichotomy here of lack and accumulation that underscores the fact that meaning cannot be fully present in language. We must wonder how many "things in this connexion" Watt has since pondered, and what the

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[57] Birth and sexual connotations in the passage emphasize the sense of union sought between point and circle. Re-entry through the vaginal "breach," the "nadir" by which we come, suggests a yearning to return to the womb.

thoughts, questions, and relieving epiphanies (or, more likely, anxiety-producing anti-epiphanies) comprised his musings. And given for Watt's penchant for inversion, alternation, and compiling of permutations (not to mention the fact that his words alternately please and disgust him, so we may only have the ones consistent with his whims at the time of the telling), we cannot tell whether any unrelated, unexpressed contemplation retains much of the tone Watt takes toward his subject here.

Thus we have an episode narrated as though it occurs at a particular point in time (an interval—perhaps even, arbitrarily, *ten or fifteen* minutes, to use a favorite Beckettian span), with Watt's ostensibly unmediated ruminations on a painting. Yet we now grasp the realization that some things are necessarily left unsaid (or poorly mediated in the telling), and our perception is marred by a sense of lack. And we also find the accumulation that occurs in Watt's mind, a recapitulation that adds to and possibly transforms the original apperception of the painting. We consequently find our mediated perspective obfuscated by the residue of subsequent thoughts and the filthy fingerprints of all who have pawed at and handled this story before it is summarily dropped in our laps. *Watt* shows us that we are mired in this problem in any attempt to relate something to someone, indeed, in all uses of language.

Throughout the novel, the fundamental wordplay of Watt/what offers

us a constant question (reach for meaning), answer (investment of meaning),
and requestioning and reanswering *ad infinitum*. Watt wonders, "Was the
picture a fixed and stable member of the edifice?" (*W* 130). The narrative
denies a fixed answer by offering a peremptory question, an answer "that the
picture was part and parcel of Mr Knott's establishment" (*W* 130), *then* the
"question to this answer" (130), then, after a moment's reflexion" (131), Watt's
decision that the picture "was one of a series" (*W* 131). The novel teases us
with an origin and denies us an origin, because we cannot provide closure to
the beginning or the end of the questioning and answering. All is a coming
and a going. Is the root question the first question or the restructured
question; consequently, how can the answer that precedes the question
answer the question? And how can we accept the answer at which Watt
arrives, if he may continue with another "moment's reflexion"?

The novel teases us by dangling an origin in front of us and
simultaneously denying it. "What" both asserts an origin, a meaning, by
giving us the quiddity of "what" or "whatness," and it denies an origin by
demanding the interrogative "what?"- a seeming question without direction.
It seems that the novel both asserts "what it is," and asks, "is it what?/it is
what?/what is it?"[58]

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[58] I am reminded of the Derridean play on the French *sens*, which means "sense" (meaning), "sense" (of
sensory input), and "direction." The association here is that Watt tries to reconcile things perceived
through the senses with some sense or meaning, and that I find this eternal "what?" to be "a question

Watt's inversions divert attention from the sign-as-name (of a signified presence) to the materiality of signification. At the beginning of each new transformation, Sam notes that at first the sounds "were devoid of significance for me" (*W* 164). Yet in spite of Watt's unfamiliar inversions, différance still operates, and Sam is able to grasp the system of differences that delineate each term in the series and to explain the method by which Watt inverts the sentences, words, or letters. He remarks, "But soon I grew used to these sounds, and then I understood as well as before" (*W* 165). We may be surrounded by "no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names," as Molloy will lament,[59] but we may close our ears to Lear because something will come from this nothing. Understanding wins out: in the coming and going of language, meaning is created.

* * * * *

In *Murphy* and *Watt*, Beckett develops the theme that permeates most of his later fiction: the inability of language to rigidly encapsulate the nothingness and chaos of existence. In the coming and going of language, we find Beckett's characters in the liminal realm that is neither form nor content, inside nor outside, signifier nor signified. This paradoxical flux later achieves its most crystallized articulation in *The Unnamable*:

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without direction" (as above). This recalls my earlier remarks on the "point," which semantically serves as possible origin (center), indexical marker, or meaning.

[59] *Molloy*, p.31. Molloy goes on to say, "All I know is what the words know," and his disclaimer/lament is actually descriptive of the liberating process that constitutes meaning.

> without a mouth I'll have said it, I'll have said it inside me,
> then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that's what I feel,
> an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's
> what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one
> side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as
> foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm
> the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's
> what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one
> hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either.
> [. . .]I'm in words, made of words [. . .], I'm all these words [. . .]
> those that merge, those that part, those that never meet[60]

The quest for *telos* must reach beyond this midpoint, beyond words. Yet

Murphy and Watt, also made of words, cannot reach this point. There is, in

fact, no closed system for them to reach beyond (despite contrary assertions in

Murphy): gaps, errors, and indeterminacy in the texts leave them open, and

the two characters also reappear in the Trilogy.[61] And so the two, like all

selves (constructed by language), must toil in the purgatory of language to

retain the glimpse of Paradise.

Writing on a Joycean mode which he terms "purgatorial" fiction,

Samuel Beckett notes that the primary characteristic of such purgatorial

fiction is "the absolute absence of the Absolute."[62] Although Beckett broke

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[60] *The Unnamable. Three Novels*, p.383, 386. At this point, amid the coming and going of language, perhaps one with this flux, the Unnamable perceives the gap at which he may be a "wordless thing in an empty place" (386). In this character, in this narrative in which the beginning cannot begin and the ending cannot end, we have the closest glimpse of the origin/*telos* of Beckett's Nothing.

[61] The two are named as part of the rabble of stories in Moran's head in *Molloy*, p.137 Malone also names them in *Malone Dies*, p. 236, and they appear unnamed on pp. 281-282 and elsewhere, implicitly. In *The Unnamable* they recur, for example, on pp.293, 303, 305, 391. Certainly Murphy cannot escape being, as he would say, "the contingent of a contingent."

[62] *Disjecta*, p.33.

from Joyce's omnipotence, his disdain for absolutes prompted him to partake

in such purgatorial fiction, a fitting midpoint. His comments demonstrate

Beckett's penchant for paradox: the very disallowance of the Absolute

necessitates in and of itself an absolute constraint. Beckett loathes the

Absolute in the same manner in which Murphy likes ginger: each man's

preference shackles the free gamut of permutations. This, of course, is a

catch-22 because the intrusion of absolutes is even more prohibitive. Yet the

denial of absolutes affirms the play of *différance*, and this, we have learned

from Derrida, is a condition for meaning.

Difference and indifference assert their problematic interplay in the

space vacated by the absolute, and this consideration prompts a wordplay on

"indifference."[63] Given Derrida's point that difference is necessary to the

production of meaning and constitution of the subject, we may deduce that

the eventual achievement of total indifference is the final retreat into

solipsism, the annihilation of self into self.[64] *Différance* is generative of

differences and therefore "Nothing— no present and in-*different* being—thus

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[63] Leslie Hill's book, in fact, acknowledges this in its subtitle, *In Different Words*.
[64] Murphy's annihilation by the "superfine chaos" of the gas explosion becomes the only way in which he can achieve indifference. Just before his death, he had decided to return "back to Brewery Road, to Celia" (*M* 252), thereby succumbing to "his deplorable susceptibility to Celia" that "continued to divide him" (*M* 179). Thus he cannot achieve (in life) the "freedom of indifference, the indifference of freedom" (*M* 105).

precedes difference and spacing."[65] This originary and final Nothing-as-absence is the apparent goal of Beckett's characters. But if this Nothing were in fact the true goal, then Beckett's work would have ended necessarily with the gas explosion of Murphy's demise. And the novel therefore would be an utter failure confronted by a reader whose existence, rather than ending with Murphy's, would continue to be enmeshed in the play of language. Therefore, the Nothing-as-something predominates in Beckett's work, which leaves both characters and readers with fleeting glimpses of possible transcendence, and which affirms (albeit without enthusiasm) the play of language. This affirmation appears in the words "I can't go on, I'll go on."[66] It is in the space between "I can't go on" and "I'll go on" that we find the agonized tension that impels continued engagement with language and thus with the world. The "I can't go on," followed by a comma rather than a period, doesn't make pretenses to closure, rest, or peace—there isn't even a peristaltic stop-start. Rather, the former phrase is immediately drawn forward into the resignation of the latter. Closure is deferred and the reach

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[65] *Positions*, p.28. The only possible name for such a being is God, and such transcendence is absent from language, from the novel. Murphy is replaced for "God" in the epigraph to section six (*M* 107), yet he only achieves this indifference later when he is no longer present in the novel. In *Watt*, the ever-changing, indifferent Knott, the "one who neither comes nor goes" (*W* 57), remains elusive, imperfect, and described as "needing nothing if not, one, not to need, and two, a witness to his not needing, of himself knew nothing. And so he needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease" (*W* 203).

[66] *The Unnamable*, p.414.

for closure is asserted. Beckett, highly aware of seriality,[67] will not mistake an

ending for closure. An ending of "I can't go on" would regress to an

infinitude of hell rather than reach closure, whereas the purgatorial "I'll go

on" enables the reach for the ever-distant horizon of Paradise.

Since meaning can only be construed in terms of difference, the

infinite horizon of Beckett's beloved Purgatory can only be enabled by the

ineluctable, ineffable figure of Paradise on that horizon. Our language may be

imperfect and fallen, but its very imperfections enable the construction of

meaning, perhaps even the possibility of redemption.[68] Beckett even makes a

reluctant nod at this possibility: in *Murphy*, he leads us along with Celia and

Mr. Kelly on an uphill toward the horizon of Paradise. It is a toil "into the

teeth of the wind," but it is the shortest way home. At the end of *Watt*, the

three (wise?) men at the train station view the sunrise (in Watt's absence—

perhaps the ineluctable questing/questioning is on sabbatical), and they

assume the hand of God in its creation. Sam/Beckett's ironic tone is heavily

muted in this passage thereby enabling the possibility of the existence of God,

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[67] See, for example, the mention of "term[s] in a series," such as men, "the centuries that fall," etc., in *Watt*, p.131. Also, many of Beckett's characters reappear serially throughout his work, and the "M" protagonists often seem to meld into one. Critics such as Stephen Connor have remarked that the narrator of The Unnamable may be an "Ur-M," representing, among others, Murphy, Molloy, Moran, Malone, and Mahood (*Samuel Beckett* 39).

[68] Derrida would argue that language is not "fallen," because a Fall would necessitate an originary presence from which it had fallen (*Positions* 53). In this insertion of metaphysical possibilities, I do not believe my argument falls back on a metaphysics of presence. Beckett's metaphysics only exists as a possibility that is gestured and only fleetingly and imperfectly revealed: it is not present, and it is this lack of presence that governs his language and his fiction.

and, at the very least, necessitating the existence of the image of God. It is in the light of the possibility of an absolute (the final grasp of meaning) that we take the leap of faith, casting ourselves over the chasm of the determined lack inherent in language. Beckett, however, leaves us suspended, staring down at the gaping void, trying to locate the nothingness beneath us. It is at this point that he places us as motes in the (almost) absolute freedom of the coming and going of language. And it is here that he accosts us with a wry smile.

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