'Permanent Parabasis': Beckettian Irony in the Work of Paul Auster, John Banville and J.M. Coetzee

Michael Springer

Doctor of Philosophy

University of York

Department of English and Related Literature

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Abstract

This thesis considers the influence of the writing of Samuel Beckett on that of Paul Auster, John Banville and J.M. Coetzee through the lens of Romantic irony, as formulated by Friedrich Schlegel and, later, Paul de Man. The broad argument is that the form of irony first articulated by the Jena Romantics is brought in Beckett's work to something of an extreme, and that this extremity represents both one of his most characteristic achievements and a unique and specifically troublesome challenge for those who come after him. The thesis hence explores how Auster, Banville and Coetzee respond to and negotiate this irony in their own work, and contrasts their respective responses. Put briefly, I find that all three writers to one extent or another deflect Beckett's irony, while engaging with it: Auster adopts certain stylistic and structural aspects of Beckett's work, but on the whole reaches fundamentally different epistemological and existential conclusions; Banville engages closely with the epistemological and existential challenge posed by Beckett's irony, and attempts to balance this with a contrasting sense of the capacity of art and the imagination to make meaning of the world; and Coetzee, after an initial attempt at stylistic imitation, moves away from this but remains fundamentally influenced by certain insights into subjectivity and ethical relation he derives from Beckett's work. Of Auster's work, I consider most closely 'White Spaces' and *The New York Trilogy*, arguing that the former represents a transitional development toward the tone, perspective and voice of the latter; of Banville's, *Doctor Copernicus* and *Eclipse*, contrasting the former's confidence in human capacities for knowledge of the world and the self with the latter's more Beckettian skepticism and disenchantment; and of Coetzee's, *In the Heart of the Country* with *Waiting for the Barbarians*, showing how the latter abandons the former's marked Beckettian stylistic traces while continuing to evidence the influence of Beckett's work in the depiction of matters such as subjectivity, language and interpersonal relation. By way of conclusion, I consider how such later writing might reshape or alter our understanding of Beckett's work, and propose directions for further research into the place of Romantic irony in Modern and contemporary fiction.

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Declaration of Originality

I hereby confirm that this work is my own, is original, and has not previously been submitted for examination at this or any other institution or published elsewhere.

Introduction

In this thesis, I trace the influence of the writing of Samuel Beckett on that of three writers of the generation following his, Paul Auster, John Banville and J.M. Coetzee, through an analysis of the way in which the later writers adopt, adapt, negotiate, deflect and develop the irony I consider characteristic of Beckett's work. This irony is framed primarily in the terms first proposed by Friedrich Schlegel and later rearticulated by Paul de Man.[1] I take this aspect of Beckett's work to represent something of a high-water mark of a movement initiated (if not solely at the very least in significant part) by Schlegel and the Jena Romantics, and one that has informed Western conceptions of and attitudes to art and aesthetic discourse since that time. The ways in which this irony is negotiated in the work of these later writers can hence be read as demonstrating a continuity in the contemporary era of important aspects of Romantic literary and aesthetic praxis and theory, and thus provides a reliable and perspicuous barometer of its relevance to our current culture of letters – for good and ill: the fact that all the writers considered in this study are white, heterosexual men may be taken to indicate a certain narrowness in the scope of these concerns. There are obviously other aspects to Beckett's legacy, and other ways of understanding it – as performances of *Waiting for Godot* in war-torn Sarajevo and hurricane-devastated New Orleans attest. Nevertheless, it does seem to me that the aspect of the writing that I focus on is among the most idiosyncratic and typical, and hence among those that most clearly define Beckett's achievement.

My argument is that irony, as defined and espoused by Schlegel, is closely bound up with a conception of art as a pre-eminently efficacious site of what Jacques

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[1] Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1991); Paul de Man, 'The Concept of Irony', in *The Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996); Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality', in *Blindness and Insight: The Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, ed. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986).

Rancière terms 'dissensus'. [2] The fundamental continuity between Romantic and modernist aesthetic practice and thinking is the prizing of art for the sake of intervention into and reframing of the terms of social, cultural, and political configurations in a manner in which political forms, being parts of such configurations, are in important ways unable to do.[3] The Romantic preoccupation with the revolutionary and the utopian is the clearest marker of this, and it is based on a perception of the individual as always necessarily exceeding any social, cultural or political role she may find herself identified with, and a correlative ability – freedom – to transcend, question, and transform these. (J.M. Coetzee's proposition, in the essay 'The Novel Today,' regarding the ability of fiction to challenge the formulation of the choices open to the subject in a given political regime expresses precisely the same idea.)[4]

Rancière's idea of dissensus similarly has to do with the ways in which the field of the political is opened up to that which exceeds it, or that which it occludes. In Rancière's somewhat idiosyncratic use of the term, 'politics' is opposed to authoritarianism: political action is the demand by a self-recognizing political subject for just and equitable modes of governance and social organization.[5] This contestation of the status quo is what makes 'politics' dissensual, and the nexus between politics, conceived of thus, and modern art is demonstrated by Rancière's use of the term 'the distribution of the sensible'. 'The distribution of the sensible' is the specific set of sanctions established by a given social regime controlling what – or who – can and cannot be thought, said, seen, heard:

> Politics occurs when those who 'have no' time take the time necessary to front up
> as inhabitants of a common space and demonstrate that their mouths really do
> emit speech capable of making pronouncements on the common which cannot be
> reduced to voices signalling pain. This distribution and redistribution of places

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[2] For a discussion of this idea, see Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, ed. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009) and *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2006).

[3] See, e.g., Ernst Behler, *German Romantic Literary Theory* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993).

[4] J.M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today', *Upstream 6*.1 (1988).

[5] This is stated perhaps most clearly and succinctly in 'Ten Theses on Politics', *Theory and Event, 5*.3 (2010): n.p. http://muse.jhu.edu.ezproxy.york.ac.uk/journals/theory_and_event/v005/5.3ranciere.html.

and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible.[6]

Political action hence involves an interruption of the distribution of the sensible for the sake of exploding a given social configuration in order to allow admittance to what – who – has hitherto been excluded. Importantly, Rancière understands modern art to be involved in an exactly analogous redistribution of the sensible: 'the relationship between aesthetics and politics consists in … the way in which the practices and forms of visibility [and in the case of literature, by implication, language] themselves intervene in the distribution of the sensible and its reconfiguration' (ibid., 25).[7]

This is an observation connected to, and strengthened by, Derrida's claim that the modern Western conception of literature, the 'institution' of literature since the eighteenth century (and by extension that of the arts more generally), is one grounded in the 'the socio-juridico-politico guarantee' vouchsafed to the writer to say anything:

> this institution of fiction which gives in principle the power to say everything, to break free of the rules, to displace them, and thereby to institute, to invent and even to suspect the traditional difference between nature and institution, nature and conventional law, nature and history. … The institution of literature in the West, in its relatively modern form, is linked to an authorization to say everything, and doubtless too to the coming about of the modern idea of democracy.[8]

While Derrida marks the point of the appearance of this institution as the eighteenth century, its – specifically political – dissensual potential is emphasized especially

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[6] Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents,* 24–5.

[7] It should be noted that in such definitions Rancière is being more prescriptive than descriptive: 'There are not always occurrences of politics, though there always exist forms of power. Similarly, there are not always occurrences of art, although there are always forms of poetry, painting, sculpture, music, theatre and dance' (*Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 26).

[8] Jacques Derrida, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature: An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), 37. Importantly: 'Not that it depends on a democracy in place, but it seems inseparable to me from what calls forth a democracy, in the most open (and doubtless itself to come) sense of democracy.'

sharply in the nineteenth, and its continuities with modernist and subsequent aesthetic concerns are limned especially clearly at this point.

I read Schlegel's valorization of irony as proceeding from a perception closely connected to that of the dissensual dimension of art: as no conceptual configuration can give full account of the brimming potentialities of the subject, the trope of irony provides an appropriate discursive analogue of the perpetual self-transcendence this leads to; as he puts it, 'Irony is the clear consciousness of eternal agility, of an infinitely teeming chaos.'[9] Just as the dissensual capacity of art is premised on its freedom with respect to inherited or imposed schemes, irony instantiates the subject's necessary and inevitable exceeding of any horizon attributed to her. Irony, like dissensus, involves the subversion and disruption of conceptual schemata by the offering of an alternative perspective, which makes possible a renewed conception of the schema it disrupts and in this way vouchsafes the possibility 'to break free of the rules, to displace them'. For Rancière, this is the basis of the ability and requirement of Modern art to place in question those values and precepts taken as given.[10]

Such a positing of alternative points of view, and hence the dissensual disruption of categories, is made possible by the way in which literature suspends and puts into play thetic procedure. As Derrida puts it, 'poetry and literature have as a common feature that they suspend the thetic naivety of the transcendent reading':

> Poetry and literature provide or facilitate 'phenomenological' access to what makes of a thesis a *thesis as such*. Before having a philosophical content, before being or bearing such and such a 'thesis', literary experience, writing or reading, is a 'philosophical' experience which is neutralized or neutralizing insofar as it allows one to think the thesis; it is a nonthetic experience of the thesis, of belief, of position, of naivety, of what Husserl called 'the natural attitude'. The phenomenological conversion of the gaze, the 'transcendental reduction' he recommended is perhaps the very condition (I do not say the natural condition) of literature. But it is true that, taking this proposition to the limit … the

[9] Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 100 (fragment 69).
[10] Rancière, 'Aesthetics as Politics' and 'The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics' in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*; and 'The Distribution of the Sensible' in *The Politics of Aesthetics.*

phenomenological language in which I'm presenting these things ends up being dislodged from its certainties (self-presence of absolute transcendental consciousness or of the indubitable cogito, etc.) and dislodged precisely by the extreme experience of literature, or even quite simply of fiction and language. (Ibid., 45–6)

As with my characterization of irony, Derrida's description of literature emphasizes its capacity to exceed a given configuration and hence to place in play, to disrupt, the arrangement of the terms on which it is founded. While I take due care not to conflate the bracketing Derrida here suggests as characteristic of the modern institution of literature and the irony I see instantiated with especial force and acuity in Beckett's writing, there is certainly a not insignificant degree of overlap between them. As Derrida himself puts it,

> Paul de Man was not wrong in suggesting that ultimately all literary rhetoric in general is of itself deconstructive, practising what you might call a sort of irony, an irony of detachment with regard to metaphysical belief or thesis, even when it apparently puts it forward. No doubt this should be made more complex, 'irony' is perhaps not the best category to designate this 'suspension', this *epochē*, but there is here, certainly, something irreducible in poetic or literary experience. Without being ahistorical, far from it, this trait, or rather *retrait*, would far exceed the periodizations of 'literary history', or of the history of poetry or belles-lettres, from Homer to Joyce, before Homer and after Joyce. (Ibid., 50)

Literature's ability to say anything is fundamentally connected to such metaphysical irony, such non-thetic theses: the freedom granted to the literary with respect to the discursive is precisely what makes possible the bracketing of otherwise fixed assumptions, and through this the renewed engagement with them, that Rancière considers to be made available through dissensus.[11]

An important consideration in this schema is the starkly contrasting treatments of these two aspects, political dissensus and metaphysical irony, at the hands of history

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[11] Rancière, 'Aesthetics as Politics' and 'The Ethical Turn of Aesthetics and Politics' in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*; and 'The Distribution of the Sensible' in *The Politics of Aesthetics.*

since early Romanticism. The utopian pretensions of aesthetic dissensus have been steadily and inexorably deflated, as the political and social inefficacy of that on which they were based has increasingly been demonstrated and the technologization and rationalization of the world has proceeded apace. Adorno's aesthetic thinking is perhaps the best example of this deflation.[12] In this scheme, Modern art comes to represent merely the capacity to reject the terms of an increasingly commodified and rationalized modern world: its historically and socially redemptive valence shrinks to the inference of some positive alternative from one's rejection of all options with which one is presented, without this being given any definite form or incarnation – indeed, it being necessary for it not to be given any form or incarnation in order to retain what ambivalent redemptive valence it may possess. The Romantic assertion of the freedom and transcendence of the individual comes from this perspective to seem the first, violent throes of the passing of a humanistic paradigm in the face of a world in which what had hitherto been taken for granted as 'human' could be so no longer.

Irony, in contrast, appears to have become more and more central to a certain, currently rather prominent and influential, aesthetic regime. In this perspective, it is taken as being almost axiomatic that works of art do not make claims or propose arguments, that they are to be encountered and engaged with through a different set of conventions and procedures than are, for example, political propositions. Derrida's point, quoted above, regarding the licence granted literature to say anything, and the connection of this to an ideal democratic practice, seems a reasonable framing of this: in allowing the bracketing of the thetic, irony makes possible an interrogation of the positionality of the position itself, and hence the conception of its boundaries and contraries. In this way, throughout this development from early Romanticism to the present, irony has thus retained its dissensual character: it is the trope that is always stepping beyond the terms of a given configuration, a 'permanent parabasis'

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[12] As expressed perhaps most clearly and emphatically in the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1997).

('*permanent Parekbase*'), as Schlegel has it.[13] Unshackled from Romantic metaphysical confidence in the absolute and epistemological assurance in the capacities of the individual imagination, however, the initially limited ambit of the operability of irony's corrosive energies steadily expands, from Byron, through Flaubert, to writers such as Kafka and Beckett, with whom metaphysical irony reaches a disquieting intensity. Important contributory factors in this expansion and proliferation of irony are the specific changes that Romanticism brought about in Western literature.

As Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe argue in *The Literary Absolute*, the conception of literature formulated by the Jena Romantics that continues to hold considerable sway in Western thought − indeed, remains that which defines 'literature' − is a response to the Kantian conception of the inaccessibility of the pure ideas of reason to intuition. From its inception, hence, the romantico-modern literary has been defined by a certain relationship to the unrepresentable. In the thought of Schlegel and the early Romantics, irony plays a crucial role in the presentation of the unrepresentable: directly invoking the Kantian problematic, Schlegel claims, 'an idea is a concept perfected to the point of irony, an absolute synthesis of absolute antitheses'.[14] Rodolphe Gasché glosses this thus:

> An idea, consequently, continuously transcends the synthesis, or sublation that it achieves. It is destructive of the form of the idea itself as not fully adequate to its concept. An idea that unifies and brings into infinite interchange two absolutely antithetical thoughts is always only a self-presentation of the idea as such, and must therefore, ironically, destroy its own actualization.[15]

As I argue in subsequent chapters, Beckett's fiction (and via him that of the later writers considered in this thesis) manifests precisely such a vacillation, such an

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[13] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Zur Philosophie' (fragment 668), in *Kritische Friedrich Schlegel Ausgabe* (Vol. XIIX), ed. Ernst Behler (Munich: Schöningh, 1972), 85. 'Parabasis' refers to the conventional interlude in the action of classical Greek comedy in which the actors left the stage and the chorus, stepping outside of the theatrical space, addressed the audience directly, usually on subjects totally unrelated to the dramatic action. Aristophanes's works provide perhaps the best examples of this (see e.g. *The Wasps*, trans. D. Barnett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988)).

[14] Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 33 (fragment 121).

[15] Rodolphe Gasché, 'Ideality in Fragmentation', foreword to Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, xiv–xv.

engagement with an impossible obligation: the very name *The Unnamable* indicates the centrality of such a preoccupation to the work. In other ways, however, Beckett parodies certain of the most prominent of the Romantic's concerns through a *reductio ad absurdum*. The idea of the subject-work tied up with the notion of *Bildung* [16] is thoroughly satirized in Beckett's work, as, ultimately, is the facility of art or irony to provide access to the realm of pure ideality. In this respect, then, Beckett's is a meta-irony, one that subjects the Romantic project to its own devices and achieves unsettling results. This also means, thus, that one can see Beckett's work as representing the fulfilment or culmination of this particular strand of enquiry, which makes it of momentous significance to Modern literature and thought.

An analysis of the work of Paul Auster, John Banville, and J.M. Coetzee is of interest in the context of such considerations for a number of reasons. All three explicitly avow their indebtedness to Beckett's work. All three have achieved a certain degree of pre-eminence in the contemporary Anglophone literary world, in slightly different ways and in different milieux, and they can thus, without too much contestation, be taken to represent an influential and prominent field of the current world of international English letters. (The number of other potential candidates for this list is indicative of the breadth of Beckett's influence, and the range of contemporary literature that to some extent or another takes its cue from him.) An analysis of these writers' work is hence instructive on the matter of the lasting legacy of Beckett's achievement, the creative possibilities opened up by his work, and the direction in which a certain branch of the novel has developed since the middle of the last century. Consideration of the work of these three later writers and their response to Beckett's work also sheds light on the significance of Beckett to our present moment: what aspects of his work can be appreciated anew, what aspects have lost their relevance, and the ways in which the significance of the work has changed, or endured, since the time of its first appearance.

My choice of these writers for consideration is determined largely by the way I approach Beckett. I find Adorno's, Stanley Cavell's and Simon Critchley's readings of Beckett to be those that best articulate what I find most interesting about the work, and I

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[16] As discussed, for example, by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe in *The Literary Absolute*, 32.

see my own reading as following on from these. All of these readings are concerned with the ways in which Beckett's work challenges a given schema in which a particular understanding of ends subordinates other factors as means; all see Beckett's work as deconstructing such oppressive conceptions, and hence as being intrinsically philosophical, insofar as it mounts a challenge to particular conceptual arrangements whereby attitudes, values and beliefs are justified and defended. My interest in irony in Beckett's work and the challenges it poses to interpretation, and my reading of the depiction of subjectivity, can be understood to proceed from a consideration of Adorno's ideas on *Endgame*'s challenge to instrumental rationality, Cavell's ideas on the same play's disruption of eschatological and teleological beliefs, and Critchley's ideas on Beckett's work's self-deconstructive dismantling of meaning and interpretation.[17]

In this thesis, given that the legacy I consider is that comprised of three novelists, I am most concerned with Beckett's novels. As I understand Beckett's achievement in the form to represent something of an extremity, I am interested in delineating the development to this extreme: how forms, themes, styles and devices are adopted and intensified to achieve the particular effects I see them achieving. These seem to me most clearly evidenced in the progression of the trilogy,[18] and it is hence to these three novels that I devote most attention, while making occasional reference to other works.

The first chapter first provides a discussion of the idea of influence that informs this study, and then outlines my conception of Beckett's irony, with specific reference to the trilogy, through Schlegel's and de Man's treatments of the concept. In the second chapter I discuss Auster's, Banville's and Coetzee's recorded or published statements on Beckett's work and its significance for their own, and then consider the significance of

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[17] I have written on these readings at greater length in '*Endgame* and the Meaning of Meaninglessness', *JLS, 26*.1 (2010): 179–190.

[18] While I am aware that Beckett resisted the characterization of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* as a 'trilogy', I adopt the term for these three novels in this thesis for a number of reasons: the implied circularity of the form, with the end of the last novel gesturing toward the beginning of the first; the reappearance of characters from earlier novels in later ones; and statements by the narrators that appear to encourage the reader to view the three novels as linked (e.g., inter alia, that at the very beginning of *Molloy*: 'This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it'll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but one but one' (*M*, 4)).

the three writers' statements on style for an understanding of the Beckettian legacy. Chapters three, four and five respectively provide analyses of the presence and modulation of such ironic techniques in the work of Auster, Coetzee and Banville. In order to provide a sense of the varying significance of this influence over the course of the authors' careers – of the ways in which it either wanes or waxes – in each case I compare two works that demonstrate a significant difference or development in this respect. In the case of Paul Auster, these are near-consecutive works, the prose poem 'White Spaces' (1980) and the novels comprising *The New York Trilogy* (1985–86), with the former being taken to demonstrate the ways in which Auster arrives at his own idiomatic statement of Beckettian irony, and the latter read as an expanded application of the possibilities opened up by it. For Coetzee, I compare *In the Heart of the Country* (1977), with its relatively blatant Beckettian style, tone, and even allusions, with *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), which adopts a markedly different register. In doing so I demonstrate that, while the later Coetzee jettisons the stylistic habits that superficially and obviously mark the earlier novel as proceeding in a Beckettian vein, the structure of the narrative and its depiction of subjectivity and human relationship are based on an irony that has much in common with Beckett's, and that Coetzee's fiction can hence be seen to demonstrate fundamental and lasting traces of Beckett's influence. In the case of Banville's work, I compare the early *Doctor Copernicus* (1976), with its relatively perspicuous narrative mode and optimistic conclusions about the possibilities of human knowledge of the world, with the later *Eclipse* (2000) in order to demonstrate that, from an early affinity with an almost Romantic view of the capacities of the imagination and perception, Banville's later work adopts a far more ironic attitude toward these matters, drawing closer to a Beckettian view of subjectivity that is profoundly skeptical of the possibility of real knowledge of the world or the self.[19] By way of conclusion, I consider the ways in which such later writing has made possible a renewed engagement with Beckett's work: aspects of the latter that had previously not

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[19] The arrangement of the chapters is intended to reflect, as discussed in greater detail later, my perception of the relative depth of these three writers' engagements with and influence by Beckett, moving from the least profound (Auster) to the most (Banville). Chapter two is hence arranged to mirror this. When I refer to all three authors in a list-like manner, I do so alphabetically, to avoid an implied imputation of priority.

been appreciated and are now more prominent, aspects previously noted that are now cast in a different light, and previously prominent aspects that now appear somewhat diminished in importance.

A detailed description of the model of influence that informs my inquiry is provided at the beginning of chapter one. For the present, it suffices to indicate that I am not so much interested in anxieties of influence and misprision as in the ways in which the technical, stylistic and thematic innovations of Beckett's work open up possibilities for later writers, and what this says about the significance of Beckett's achievement and what significance it has for our understanding of later literature. In 'Kafka and His Precursors', Borges claims that consideration of later writers' adoptions and adaptations of earlier writers' work casts light on the earlier work and renews or recasts our understanding of it.[20] One might say that I turn Borges's idea on its head: I am interested in attempting to obtain a better understanding of these later writers' work by considering it through the heuristic of a Beckettian genealogy. In contrast to the agonistic view of influence proposed by Harold Bloom, such a legacy is based on and maintained by elective affinity: it is the effect of a continuing relevance and value of the given body of work, and it can be discerned in the later writers' development and continuation of themes and techniques proposed in the former. This is not to claim that there are no agonistic aspects to the relation. It seems clear that the two forms of engagement can occur simultaneously, in various combinations; in this case I confine my analysis to those dimensions of influence that are most conscious and present to awareness. Nor is it to claim that such transmission is uncomplicated: given the corrosiveness of Beckett's irony, all three later writers do struggle to one extent or another with it, which leads to crucial deflections in their treatment of it, but this struggle is of a different order to that conceived of in Harold Bloom's understanding of influence.

A number of works dealing with Beckett's influence on various writers and his place in contemporary letters have recently been published (with the centenary of his birth in 2006 providing the occasion for a number of them): the monographs *Since*

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[20] Jorge Luis Borges, 'Kafka and His Precursors', in *Labyrinths*, ed. Donald Alfred Yates (London: Penguin, 2000), 25.

Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism by Peter Boxall (2009), *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett* by Patrick Hayes (2010), and *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* by Stephen Watt (2009), and the collections *Beckett after Beckett* (2006), edited by Anthony Uhlmann and Stanley Gontarski, and *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All* (2008), edited by Linda Ben-Zvi and Angela Moorjani.[21] The Oxford seminar on the topic, Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies, has also provided important interventions in this field, many of which have been published in the collections that resulted from this: *Beckett's Literary Legacies* (2007), edited by Matthew Feldman and Mark Nixon; the volume of *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* entitled 'Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies'; and the 2013 collection *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies*.[22] This study has most in common with Boxall's work, in that both seek to trace some broad aspects of Beckett's influence on contemporary writing. My approach differs from his, however, in that I focus on one aspect of Beckett's achievement, irony, and provide an analysis of how it has been incorporated into certain examples of contemporary literature, whereas Boxall's study touches on a greater variety of aspects of Beckett's work and legacy, and a more diverse range of contemporary writers. The strength of the approach adopted here, it seems to me, is that it allows for a clear delineation of one specific branch of contemporary Beckettian influence, with a strong characterization of its implicit epistemological basis and rhetorical scope. I do not hope to claim that only one aspect of Beckett's work is of interest in this respect, but I do feel that narrowing the focus to the matter of irony is a particularly good way to situate Beckett's work and that of the three later writers in the context of broader developments in Western literary history, as well as to isolate certain crucial philosophical underpinnings of this development and the work whereby it is

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[21] Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writing in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009); Patrick Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel: Writing and Politics after Beckett* (Oxford: OUP, 2010); Stephen Watt, *Beckett and Contemporary Irish Writing* (Cambridge: CUP, 2009); Anthony Uhlmann and Stanley Gontarski, eds, *Beckett after Beckett* (Gainesville, FL: UP of Florida, 2006); Linda Ben-Zvi and Angela Moorjani, eds, *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All* (New York: Oxford UP, 2008).

[22] Matthew Feldman and Mark Nixon, eds, *Beckett's Literary Legacies* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2007); Erik Tonning, Matthew Feldman and Matthijs Engelberts, eds, 'Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui, 22* (2010); Peter Fifield and David Addyman, *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013).

developed. As touched on briefly above, I understand Boxall's conception of the 'broken tradition' that Beckett engenders to be a very apt way of characterizing his significance for later writers. Unlike Boxall, I do not characterize it primarily in historical or political terms: where Boxall's broken tradition is a result of Anglo-Irish displacement and alienation, that which I delineate in this thesis is connected to the history of the novel and the nature of modernity, as discussed in connection with Bakhtin's thinking above. It might well be claimed that such a use of Boxall's idea traduces it, running counter to the gist of the original argument. In my defence I would point out that, while this is a somewhat distant extrapolation, Boxall himself situates Banville, who is neither Protestant nor Anglo-Irish, within this broken tradition. The way Banville takes up this position is not discussed – his belonging to this tradition is simple asserted at various moments in the essay – but this perception would seem to indicate that the basis of this tradition could be framed in different terms. These could be alternative, perhaps broader, historico-political co-ordinates, or, as in my conception, rhetorical, aesthetic and philosophical bases. This is not to say that my conception cannot be articulated in historical or political terms; interesting discussions could no doubt be had about the significance of such responses in late capitalist culture and the extent to which they either acquiesce in or provide a locus of resistance to various economic, historical and political forces. It is simply the case that such are not my primary concerns here.

This does however raise the question of the possibility of tracing a political dimension to the discussion carried out in this thesis. As my drawing on the work of Adorno and Rancière might indicate, I am interested in the way that, in modernity, the aesthetic relates to the political and other dimensions of culture. While I do not engage with the political implications of these question directly, my thinking has been informed by these thinkers' shared idea that the aesthetic represents a site of contestation, a means whereby prevailing modes of perception, justification and explanation can be challenged and dismantled on terms other than those made possible by these modes themselves. I do see the work of all of the writers considered here to exemplify this aspect of the aesthetic to one degree or another (another reason to characterize such a tradition as

'broken' – or perhaps as a 'tradition of breakage'), but I do not engage with political or historical dimensions extensively here.

While I draw on Hayes's work extensively in my discussion of Coetzee's work in this thesis, his study does not deal with the other writers on which I focus, and the overlap between my work and his is hence limited to this material. There are certain areas of limited overlap between this study and Stephen Watts's book. Most prominently, perhaps, his idea of 'retrofitting' coincides to some extent with the use to which I put Borges's notion of writers creating their own precursors. There is far more to distinguish the two enterprises, however. There is the question of content: my work focuses exclusively on novels, where his does so only to a limited extent, and does not adopt a specific geographic focus, where his is concerned specifically with Ireland. The animating impulses of the respective enquiries also contrast to some extent. Watts frames his understanding of influence largely in the Bloomian terms of agon and anxiety, extrapolated via national genealogies and concerns; as I have indicated, I am interested in elective affinities, and the way these provide or are used to negotiate national, historical or political constraint.

Of work that has been done on Beckett and Romanticism, that dealing with Schlegel's irony has the most overlap with this study. Andrew Eastham's view of the similarities between Beckett's work and Schlegel's conception of irony is that to which my own is closest. In his essay 'Beckett's Sublime Ironies: The Trilogy, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and the Remainders of Romanticism', Eastham argues that Beckett uses Romantic irony to stage an encounter with the sublime. Like me, Eastham understands Beckett's irony in the trilogy to enact an 'abyssal' evacuation of subjectivity.[23] Also, in a manner analogous to my sense that irony in the four writers considered here arises from interminable dialectics that do not admit of conceptual resolution, and hence as undermining the capacities of representation and comprehension, Eastham considers irony to be 'the appearance of the infinite within the horizon of representation' and thus to 'appear as the limits of representation are experienced' (ibid., 118).

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[23] Andrew Eastham, 'Beckett's Sublime Ironies: The Trilogy, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and the Remainders of Romanticism', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, *18*, "All Sturm and no Drang": Beckett and Romanticism, Beckett at Reading 2006, (2007), 124.

Chapter I: Beckett's Irony

In this chapter, I spell out my understanding of the nature of the irony present in Beckett's work by way of a discussion of various conceptions of the term, drawing primarily on the thought of Friedrich Schlegel and, following him, Paul de Man, and contrast these with what I term 'allegorical' modes. I also touch on the significance of the idea for the work of Auster, Banville and Coetzee at a number of junctures. Thereafter, through a discussion of the formal and stylistic strategies adopted in Beckett's trilogy, I describe the specific ways in which his work instantiates a Romantic irony such as discussed by Schlegel, with specific focus, in the final section, on the depiction of subjectivity in the works. Because I see this irony as having important implications for Beckett's legacy and the response of later writers to it, however, I first elucidate my understanding of the relation of influence as considered in this study.

'if indeed one can be "successor" to a crisis': a model of influence

The model of influence I adopt in this study is derived from the three authors' own comments on their relation to Beckett's body of work, an analysis of the style, structure and theme of the novels in question, and a consideration of Bakhtin's theories of the genesis, development and nature of the novel as a literary form. The first of these is carried out in the following chapter, and the second will comprise the majority of this dissertation. It is to the last, Bakhtin's theory of the novel, the implications of this for a construal of influence and intertextuality in the genre, and the ways in which this differs from Harold Bloom's idea of influence, that I here turn.

Harold Bloom's thesis, outlined in *Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry*, has become the most influential treatment of the subject of influence insofar as it concerns poetic texts and authors. In Bloom's understanding, influence is a matter of rivalry, in which 'strong poets' seek to overcome their forebears by 'misreading … so as to clear imaginative space for themselves.'[24] The anxiety referred to in the title is the instigating

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[24] Harold Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford UP, 1973), 5.

impetus for such misreading: the burden of history and the weight of tradition confront the poet as a challenge to be overcome, and the poet's response to such a challenge is to misread, in one or a number of possible ways, his or her forebears in order to make possible their own contribution to it.

There is an explicitly Oedipal dimension to this model, and Bloom claims that Freud, along with Nietzsche, serves as the major influence on his theory (ibid., 8). The almost inevitable recourse to familial vocabulary when discussing the question of influence ('forebear', 'heir', 'lineage') may serve to strengthen this point of view, as would certainly – at least in the case of the writers under consideration at present – authors' own accounts of their attitude, evaluation and response to exemplary predecessors. I do not want to deny that such elements are an important aspect of the relation of subsequent writers to prior; what I claim is that these comprise one aspect of the matter of influence, but do not account for all that is involved in the matter of an individual author's response to a literary forebear or tradition.

The particular point I wish to contest is Bloom's assertion that the history of literature – or at least of poetry – consists in a progressive decline. As he puts it,

> The young citizen of poetry … quests for an impossible object, as his precursor quested before him. That this quest encompasses necessarily the diminishment of poetry seems to me an inevitable realization, one that accurate literary history must sustain. The great poets of the English Renaissance are not matched by their Enlightenment descendants, and the whole tradition of the post-Enlightenment, which is Romanticism, shows a further decline in its Modernist and post-Modernist heirs. The death of poetry will not be hastened by any reader's broodings, yet it seems just to assume that poetry in our tradition, when it dies, will be self-slain, murdered by its own past strength. (Ibid. 62)

While Bloom does claim that 'strong' works of literature are in a crucial sense engendered by the struggle of writers with tradition, a conception of literary history such as that outlined above implies a necessary and irrevocable impediment of later works by earlier: the more ground that has been covered, the more material used, the less there remains for those who come after to do.

An example of a contrasting understanding of the interaction is to be found in Derek Attridge's *The Singularity of Literature*, which draws on Kant's account of the nature and function of originality in artistic and technical traditions.[25] In this construal, an exemplary, original work can, and usually does, elicit and engender responses. A strikingly original treatment of a given form, a new presentation of a particular topic or another such innovation can make possible subsequent works that follow on from and develop the innovation of the prior work by way of further innovation. Where the Bloomian construal concentrates on the personal, emotive aspects of influence, Kant focuses on the technical development of a specific field, and the possibilities opened up by innovation. A consequence of this difference is the fact that, in the Bloomian model, the history of poetry is a steady diminishment, a gradual shrinking of possibility and resources, whereas, in the Kantian view, renewal is possible in the form of original responses to epochs, materials, conventions, and forms. An explanation for this difference may perhaps be found in the nature and aims of poetry – as Bakhtin understands them – and the ways in which these differ from those of other forms of literature, art and general human endeavour.

Bakhtin claims in his essay 'Epic and Novel' that the novel differs from other genres primarily in its relation to the past. The epic, preeminent among and, in Bakhtin's account, synecdochic for poetic forms, speaks from and takes place in an 'absolute past' which 'is the single source and beginning of everything good for all later times'.[26] The past, here, as the source and origin of tradition, is valorized to an extreme degree, and is treated with a sacred reverence. Proximity to this past confers value, and aesthetic and temporal priority hence coincide; conversely, the further something is from the source, the less value it has (another formulation of the idea of the steady diminishment of accomplishment posited by Bloom). This is necessitated by the 'formal-substantive characteristic' of epic poetry: 'its reliance on impersonal and sacrosanct tradition, on a commonly held evaluation and point of view – which excludes any possibility of another approach – and which therefore displays a profound piety toward the subject

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[25] Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004).
[26] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981), 15.

described and toward the language used to describe it, the language of tradition' (ibid., 17). The novel, in contrast, breaks down the barrier of absolute distance instantiated in the epic, speaking from and addressing the present. Even when set in and concerned with the past, its procedures, register and sensibility are contemporary, and meant to bring the subject matter closer rather than to elevate it. The pious attitude to tradition is replaced with curiosity and a willingness to question accepted notions and forms, among which, importantly, are other genres and works of literature. Sanctity and seriousness are replaced with familiarity.

An important point is that '[i]t is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorized) distance' (ibid., 23). As Bakhtin points out, in a passage worth quoting at some length,

> Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close, of drawing it into a zone of crude contact where one can finger it familiarly on all sides, turn it upside down, inside out, peer at it from above and below, break open its external shell, look into its centre, doubt it, take it apart, dismember it, lay it bare and expose it, examine it freely and experiment with it. Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object, before a world, making of it an object of familiar contact and thus clearing the ground for an absolutely free investigation of it. Laughter is a vital factor in laying down that prerequisite fearlessness without which it would be impossible to approach the world realistically. As it draws an object to itself and makes it familiar, laughter delivers the object into the fearless hands of investigative experiment – both scientific and artistic – and into the hands of free experimental fantasy. (Ibid.)

Important in this analysis is the connection between the comic and the prosaic, between humour and the quotidian, a connection exemplified by the seminal Modern novel *Don Quixote*. The centrality of a comic attitude to the diminishing of epic distance and the creation of the novel would seem to suggest that any model of influence that relates to the form would necessarily need to factor in comedy.

Auster's, Banville's and Coetzee's attitudes and responses to Beckett's work are likely to be informed by something more than a reverence for the past and a sense of the

oppressive weight of tradition. This is due, as argued above, to the nature of the novel itself, but also to the nature of Beckett's achievement with the medium, one of the most striking of consequences of which is an undermining, a restructuring, of conceptions of influence and tradition. Beckett's achievement in some senses recapitulates, in the shorter history of the modern European novel nested within Bakhtin's more expansive view (whereby the naturalist novel, having become the epic of the bourgeoisie, is then itself subverted by non-naturalist forms), precisely the disruption and destabilization Bakhtin attributes to 'the novelistic' itself. As Peter Boxall puts it,

> [O]ne of the most significant of Beckett's legacies, I would argue, is a conception of legacy itself, a conception of influence, which does not depend upon such opposition between past and future generations, between father and son, between parent and child. In Beckett's writing, the father is as likely to belong to the future as he is to the past, just as those who register Beckett's influence tend to think of him not as a parent to be slain, but as a possibility to be glimpsed.[27]

From this perspective, Beckett's influence, like that of the novel in general, is thus, rather than a citadel to be stormed, the spectral authority that cannot be made present, the castle K. continuously fails to approach.[28]

The shift between the Bloomian and Bakhtinian conceptions of tradition and influence may correspond to and follow an understanding of the relationship between the political and aesthetic, and hence the nature and function of literature. In situations in which, or to people to whom, the sources and grounds of power and authority seem self-evidently justified, the aesthetic partakes of such authority, and is thus justified, through its reflection, supplementation and explication of it. *The Aeneid*, *The Divine Comedy* or *Paradise Lost* are exemplary instances of what literature in this conception can and should be. When the basis of power seems less self-evidently justified, the strength of the aesthetic lies in its power of contestation – not of this or that position or regime, but of assertion in general, in its ability to destabilize and put into play any and

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[27] Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett*, 16.
[28] John Bolin's recent book, *Samuel Beckett and the Modern Novel* (Cambridge: CUP, 2013), provides detailed evidence of Beckett's extensive engagement with the tradition of the Modern European novel.

all positions. Jacques Rancière's notion of dissensus and the importance of this in Modern art articulates a situation such as the latter particularly well.[29]

Toward the beginning and for a large portion of the novel's history the subversive energies Bakhtin identifies operated to relatively strictly circumscribed ends. Like carnival, such parody is a temporary inversion for the sake of perpetuating the status quo; the disruption, authorized and constrained, ultimately reinforces prevailing power bases. In the modern era, however, such potentialities assume a valence beyond that completely constrained by political-aesthetic norms, manifested through an irony that troubles the possibilities of simple prescriptive accounts of ethics, authority, and power. Such a form of literature thus instantiates something of Rancière's dissensus discussed above, a form of opposition to a given 'distribution of the sensible' through subversion of its organizing tenets.[30]

There is something of such an opposition through subversion in Peter Boxall's characterization of Beckett's work as belonging to a 'broken tradition'. [31] Boxall delineates a tradition in Irish writing that he sees as dealing with a certain cultural and geographic dislocation through an embracing and emphasis of this very dislocation. Considering most prominently Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Bowen and Beckett (although Banville's work is also included in this trajectory), Boxall argues that the distorted presentation of (specifically Irish) place in such work reflects an Anglo-Irish sense of estrangement that finds a solution in a renunciation of unproblematic attachment or belonging. Such a renunciation is crucial to the establishment of an authentic Irish identity: 'An Irish tradition here is founded upon the disappearance of Ireland, because it is only through such disappearance, such failure of reference, that the experience of living in cultural suspension can be accurately or authentically evoked'.[32] Such a self-positing on the part of Anglo-Irish literature in a position of minority parallels Bakthin's understanding of the novel itself as occupying a decentred, non-traditional space. Significantly for my project, considering as it does the question of

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[29] Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.
[30] See footnote 2 above.
[31] Boxall, *Since Beckett*, 21–37.
[32] Ibid., 29.

influence and legacy, Boxall considers such decentring to pose specific challenges in respect of responding to and following after such writers: as they situate themselves in a position removed from or oblique to tradition, writers who attempt to follow after them need to some extent or another to similarly achieve such obliquity. As Boxall puts it, 'For those who come after Beckett, it is necessary to find a way of belonging to this broken, dislocated tradition, to find a way to speak with a voice that comes at once from within and outside the face.'[33] I endeavour, in the remainder of this study, to trace the ways in which Auster, Banville and Coetzee go about doing this.

Given my invocation of Bakhtin's thought, it may seem odd that I make use of the term 'influence' at all, rather than organizing my analysis around intertextuality. I have chosen to do so because I see the relationship between Beckett and these later writers as, in Elke D'Hoker's words, more than 'merely a matter of stylistic winks and intertextual nods'.[34] Instead, it consists in a response to and development of innovations in the use of the form of the novel, which in the progression from *Murphy* (1938) to *The Unnamable* (1953) Beckett profoundly de- and reforms, and a continuation, complication and extension of thematic concerns. These are issues that can be accounted for and explicated on the basis of the notion of intertextuality, but the formative role Beckett's work plays in all three writers' development would suggest that the interaction may be better apprehended through the notion of influence.

This is not to say that I shall not make reference to the intertextual play between these texts; there is much explicit and implicit echoing of and response to themes, form and narrative strategies. Certainly, my analysis, concerned as it is in large part with the logic of the development of a particular form of the novel, has need of recourse to a concept that entails the inter-illumination of texts. However, as Boxall indicates, among the most intriguing of Beckett's legacies is a particular notion of legacy itself, of the ways in which relations to the future and the past are possible, and this is a matter better approached by way of influence.

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[33] Boxall, *Since Beckett*, 37.
[34] Elke D'Hoker, 'Self-consciousness, Solipsism, Story-telling: John Banville's Debt to Samuel Beckett', *Irish University Review 36*.1: 69.

I now turn to a discussion of Beckett's achievement, with specific emphasis on the irony of his work, preparatory to the later elucidation of the influence of this on later writers. In writing here on irony, I follow most closely the thinking of Friedrich Schlegel and, following him, Paul de Man. Furthermore, as de Man does,[35] I shall contrast the phenomenon with a certain conception of allegorical reading and writing in order to clarify it through opposition. Broadly stated, if allegory obtains its effects through correspondence, correlation, and contiguity, irony works by divergence, disjunction, and disruption; where allegorical modes of reading and writing emphasize and focus on the possibility of transparent and unambiguous interpretation, ironic modes seek to place the possibility of understanding and meaning in question and to disrupt the processes whereby significance is created or elicited.

'the rapture of vertigo': irony and its others

In all of its manifestations, irony involves ignorance or incomprehension. From Sophocles to Swift, Socrates to Sokal, the effect of irony hinges on the speaker or addressee, or both, of a given statement, actual or implied, not fully knowing or understanding the significance of what is being said. In *A Modest Proposal*, for example, the speaker fails to recognize the horror of what he is proposing; in Flaubert, the understanding of the irony is heavily dependent on and inflected by the awareness of the possibility of not understanding it, of the consciousness of an implied buffoon. As Wayne Booth points out, this can operate within the parameters of a fairly structured and stable rhetoric such that the divergence between what is said or written and what is meant is easily and instinctively resolved by anyone who is familiar with the form, or it can be more unstable and far-reaching, exerting disruptive effects that are not quite as

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[35] Paul de Man, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality'. While, in this essay, de Man to some extent aligns allegory with irony (the former as diachronic non-coincidence of signifier and signified, the latter as synchronic), the form of allegory with which he is concerned is specifically Romantic allegory, which he understands to be informed by a loss of faith in teleological, religious conceptions of history, and the closure and self-coincidence of which is hence unmoored. The implication is that pre-Romantic allegory ('allegory' as I use the term in this thesis) can be characterized as precisely such a closed and totalized economy of signification.

easily accounted for.[36] Booth labels Beckett's irony 'infinitely unstable', and considers it finally to be a form of nihilism, much as Hegel and Kierkegaard claim of Romantic irony. I differ with this point of view, as shall be discussed in some detail later in this chapter. The form of irony with which I am here concerned, as Gary Handwerk describes it, 'involves not only the perception of someone else's blindness, as in dramatic irony, but an enacted awareness of the factors that make everyone subject to repeated bouts of blindness.'[37]

It is Schlegel who transforms the previously prevalent understanding of irony from that of a relatively narrow rhetorical device to the more broadly ranging sense of existential or cosmic incongruity, which I will argue is a result of a perception of a structural irony, the term is usually attended with today.[38] The question of irony is central to Schlegel's entire enterprise, and he treats of the subject in a suitably ironic manner. One consequence of this is that no clear and unequivocal definition of irony can be proposed. As J. Hillis Miller writes,

> it is difficult, if not impossible, to state in so many words a 'concept of irony' …. Why this difficulty? It is because irony is, in the end, or perhaps even from the beginning, when there is no more than a 'touch of irony' in a discourse, unreasonable, incomprehensible. Irony is '*Unverständlichkeit*' or 'incomprehensibility' as such, as Schlegel's essay 'On Incomprehensibility' abundantly shows in its comic failure to be entirely reasonable and perspicuous about irony.[39]

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[36] Wayne Booth, *A Rhetoric of Irony* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1974).

[37] Gary Handwerk, *Irony and Ethics in Narrative: From Schlegel to Lacan* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1985), 93.

[38] 'Of course, there is … a rhetorical species of irony which, sparingly used, has an excellent effect, especially in polemics; but compared to the sublime urbanity of the Socratic muse, it is like the pomp of the most splendid oration set over against the noble style of an ancient tragedy.' Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 6 (fragment 42).

[39] J. Hillis Miller, 'Friedrich Schlegel and the Anti-Ekphrastic Tradition', in *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*, ed. Michael Clark (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000), 61.

Nevertheless, Schlegel does offer a number of formulations that may be read as gesturing toward a definition of the phenomenon. Perhaps the most interesting of these, at least in connection with Beckett's trilogy, is that of 'a permanent parabasis'.[40]

Paul de Man, picking up on and extending this (with due caution that '[d]efinitional language seems to be in trouble when irony is concerned'[41]), defines irony as 'the permanent parabasis of the allegory of the tropes' (ibid.), making reference to the necessarily confused nature of any attempt to treat of irony in rhetorical or tropological terms. As de Man puts it,

> Trope means 'to turn', and it's that turning away, that deviation between literal and figural meaning, this turning away of the meaning, which is certainly involved in all traditional definitions of irony, such as 'meaning one thing and saying something else', or 'praise by blame', or whatever it may be – though one feels that this turning away in irony involves a little more, a more radical negation than one would have in an ordinary trope such as synecdoche or metaphor or metonymy. Irony seems to be the trope of tropes, the one that names the term as the 'turning away', but that notion is so all-encompassing that it would include all tropes. And to say that irony includes all tropes, or is the trope of tropes, is to say something, but it is not anything that's equivalent to a definition. (Ibid., 614–5)

This trouble is evident, and very clearly so, as early as Quintilian's treatment of the subject. As Gordon Teskey notes, Quintilian defines allegory as 'continued metaphor' and irony as 'other speaking' (saying the opposite of what one means),[42] treating irony as a class of allegory. As Teskey points out, however, 'one cannot … by extending a metaphor, say the opposite of what one means',[43] and Quintilian's system thus snags on the question of whether or not allegory encompasses irony entire. The solution is seemingly ad hoc:

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[40] Friedrich Schlegel, 'Zur Philosophie', 85.

[41] Paul de Man, 'The Concept of Irony', 615.

[42] Quintilian, *The Institutio Oratoria of Quintilian with an English Translation by H.E. Butler* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1920), 8.6.44 and 8.6.54

[43] Gordon Teskey, *Allegory and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1996), 56.

Quintilian elsewhere states that irony can manifest itself either in the realm of figures or in that of tropes, and that figurative irony can have nothing to do with tropes such as metaphor and its extended form, allegory. Even for him there are species of irony that appear to escape enclosure by allegory, although their escape is equivocal. The first of these escapees 'derives its name from negation' and is called antiphrasis, 'opposite speaking'. Quintilian's uncertainty as to the inclusion of irony in allegory turns on whether antiphrasis, as absolute opposition, is a sport of irony or its radical essence. If antiphrasis is irony's essence, than all moods of irony, from affectionate teasing to *saeva indignatio*, must threaten the very existence of what allegory has to affirm: the logocentric coherence of its meanings, grounded in the material unity of its signs – in a word, polysemy. (Ibid., 56–7)

If allegory represents an almost Hegelian system in which the tropological motions of language are all finally sublated into an encompassing unity, irony represents the remainder, the very possibility of difference that can never be incorporated into an economy of the same. This is why it is a permanent parabasis of the allegory of the tropes: irony consists in stepping outside the circumscribing schema that accounts for meaning and that produces a sum significance without remainder, by taking the tropological turn through 180 degrees, such that obliquity becomes diametric opposition.

This is the source of Hegel's, and, thereafter, Kierkegaard's, objections to Schlegelian irony, which both characterize as 'absolute infinite negativity'. Kierkegaard claims that it 'is negativity because it only negates; it is infinite because it negates not this or that phenomenon; and it is absolute because it negates by virtue of a higher which it is not. It is a divine madness which rages … and leaves not one stone standing on another in its wake.'[44] Hillis Miller clarifies the source of Hegel's and Kierkegaard's opposition to Schlegelian irony as stemming from the following:

If irony is infinite absolute negativity, saying no to everything, it is therefore a permanent suspension or parabasis. Once you have got into this state of

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[44] Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Constant Reference to Socrates*, trans. Lee M. Capel (London: Collins, 1966), 282.

suspension you cannot get out of it or go on progressing through some *Aufhebung* or sublation toward the eventual fulfillment of the absolute Idea. Irony is antithesis without any possibility of synthesis at a higher stage. It is an aporia in the etymological sense: a dead end or blind alley in thought, beyond which it is impossible to progress.[45]

It is this aspect of the phenomenon that elicits the charges of nihilism. Importantly, however, it also implies that the ironic position is a necessarily non-thetic one. As Schlegel puts it, irony 'contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative, between the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication.' [46] This characterization echoes an idea of Adorno's on Modern art – 'The transition to the discursively recognized universal by which the politically reflecting particular subject hopes to escape atomization and powerlessness is in the aesthetic sphere a desertion to heteronomy'[47] – and the implications of the two points for discursive practice are analogous.

There is, however, a third way between the Schlegelian and Hegelian positions, and this is well articulated in Lloyd Bishop's distinction between the modalities of French and German Romantic irony. Bishop considers Beckett to be among the most recent of examples of a specifically French tradition of Romantic irony. For Bishop, German Romantic irony as exemplified by Schlegel is marked by a euphoric 'certainty of transcendence',[48] an attitude that, while recognizing the incommensurability of the finite and the absolute, is nevertheless at no point especially troubled by questions about the place of human consciousness in the cosmos as a result of this. Schlegel's claim that 'Irony is clear consciousness of eternal agility, of the infinitely teeming chaos', for example, continues to lay stress on the subject's 'clear consciousness', and the place and identity of such an awareness in 'the infinitely teeming chaos' does not arise as a problem. In contrast to this, Bishop claims that French Romantic irony, represented by

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[45] Hillis Miller, 'Schlegel and the Anti-Ekphrastic Tradition', 61.
[46] Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 13 (fragment 108).
[47] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 42.
[48] Lloyd Bishop, *Romantic Irony in French Literature from Diderot to Beckett* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1989), 10.

such figures as Diderot, Stendhal, Flaubert, and Beckett, 'involves the perception and artistic expression of unresolved ambivalence, contradiction, and paradox in human nature (including the hero and the author), of relativism in the realm of human values, and of a radical agnosticism in epistemological and metaphysical matters' (ibid.).

The German Romantic point of view is characterized by an awareness of insurmountable epistemological constraints coupled, despite this, with a supreme faith in the capacities of the imagination. Kant's understanding of the sublime is a good example of this: the very perception of human limitation serves merely to reassert the unlimitedness of the imagination, which is thus reaffirmed even by the fact of its failure. The persistence of tragedy in German Romanticism is similarly explained by this fundamental confidence in the human capacities to come to terms with the world. In contrast, as Bishop points out, the French equivalent of this is marked by a much deeper skepticism regarding the commensurability of our understanding and the world it seeks to account for, and is thus characterized by a tragicomic, absurd vision of humanity. This sort of Romanticism, and this sort of irony, is marked by a clear-eyed awareness of the partiality, limitation and presumptuousness of any claim to knowledge and understanding, which entails that the treatment of such matters invariably partakes of a deflation of pretensions and a diminution of human capacities.

Beckett's work is certainly, and perhaps more than any other writer's, marked by a 'radical agnosticism in epistemological and metaphysical matters'.[49] In interviews and non-fictional writing he repeatedly expresses the conviction that the world does not admit of human comprehension. (One thinks of the passage in *Molloy* (1951), parodying another Romantic prone to transcendent swoons: 'he said, life is a thing of beauty … and a joy forever. … I said, Do you think he meant human life?' (*M*, 172).) Tom Driver, for example, recalls Beckett saying, 'When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too

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[49] Bishop, *Romantic Irony in French Literature*, 10.

philosophical for me. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess.'[50]

A central preoccupation of Beckett's work is the negotiation of the implications of this insight for art. For instance, 'Three Dialogues' with Georges Duthuit are a sustained exploration of the possibilities and potentialities for art in the wake of the collapse of Western metaphysical certainties, and copies of notes taken from lectures delivered by the writer at Trinity in 1930 record that he was, through the unfavourable comparison of Balzac with Flaubert, at that point already conceptualizing Modern art in terms of its admittance of uncertainty and ambiguity.[51] Tom Driver recalls an especially lucid avowal of this aesthetic:

> What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.[52]

The emphasis placed here on form can be used to make sense of Beckett's reading of certain French writers: Flaubert, for example, famously spoke of wanting to write a novel that would be *about* nothing and simply *be* pure form; Dan Gunn speculates that Beckett's explanation of his decision to write in French as stemming from 'the need to be ill equipped' (*mal armé*) might perhaps be a bilingually punning reference to 'the poet who made impotence so central to his oeuvre, Mallarmé.'[53] Given this, it seems not overly contentious to contend that Beckett's sense of a writing without style is intimately connected with his desire to create a form that admits the chaos.

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[50] Tom Driver, 'Interview with Samuel Beckett', *Columbia University Forum* (Summer 1961), reprinted in Graver and Federman, eds, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1996), 219.
[51] Brigitte Le Juez, *Beckett before Beckett: Samuel Beckett's Lectures on French Literature* (London: Souvenir Press, 2010).
[52] Driver, 'Interview', 219.
[53] Dan Gunn, 'Introduction', *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* (Vol. II), ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: CUP, 2011).

Rather than a definable position, irony is manifest as an *élan*, a certain comportment toward others, ideas and the world that consists in the awareness of antitheses that admit of no sublation. The 'feeling of the indissoluble antagonism between … the impossibility and the necessity of complete communication' is the source of the attitude to the work urged by writers such as Stanley Cavell, T.W, Adorno, Simon Critchley and Jean-Michel Rabaté, and that would seem necessarily to inform any response to literature, and Beckett's work in an especially intense, acute manner. Critchley discusses Derrida's 'good metaphor' for such reading, the dredging machine.[54] Critchley sees the metaphor as implying that 'whatever transcendental, metalinguistic or hermeneutic key is employed to unlock the text, such a matrix will always let the text fall back and remain as a remains.'[55] Critchley is here responding to Derrida's claim that, in Beckett's writing, 'The composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works, even the ones that seem the most "decomposed", that's what "remains" finally the most "interesting", that's the work, that's the signature, this remainder which remains when the thematic are exhausted.'[56] This, again, draws attention to the importance of style in the attempt to come to terms with Beckett's work: the trace that remains after the thematics have been exhausted, the texture and tone that persist in signifying after the significance – or the lack thereof – has been accounted for.

This similarly implies that the ironic mode comes down to a question of style. The point is well made by Maebh Long:

> Writing so as to acknowledge the structural reworking(s) of irony involves a certain style, an engagement with a work that recognises within its singularity a force of reworking that explodes the text beyond its author, form, language, event. That is, each singular event is both produced and undone by the potential of the mark to be hyphenated to itself and other marks through infinite, aleatory (dis)connections. This 'style', which is also form or structure, performs a certain contamination of genres and discourses; the philosophical and the

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[54] Jacques Derrida, *Glas*, trans. J.P. Leavey Jr. and R. Rand (Lincoln: Nebraska UP, 1986), 204.
[55] Simon Critchley, *Very Little … Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy and Literature* (London: Routledge, 2004), 171.
[56] Jacques Derrida, 'An Interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Acts of Literature*, 61.

literary, the public and the private, the fictional and the autobiographical, etc. Structural irony is therefore neither specifically humorous nor specifically bleak, although it can be manipulated to produce laughter and tears.[57]

Long's argument that the 'style' in which structural irony consists has the effect of disrupting demarcations between registers and forms would suggest an affinity with Bakhtin's notion of the novelization of genres, and her definition of the technique as residing in 'form' or 'structure' resonates with my foregoing discussion of Beckett's work. The idea of the simultaneously productive and disruptive effects of the phenomenon also falls directly in line with Schlegel's and de Man's characterizations. This latter implies, as Long indicates, the necessity of an awareness of the inescapable provisionality of any interpretation of such writing, and the need to be prepared perpetually to reposition and rethink hermeneutic schemata due to the 'infinite, aleatory (dis)connections' it sets in motion.

As almost everyone who writes on irony recognizes, the phenomenon is not a thetic one; it plays with and parodies thetic procedures, and in so doing obtains a perspective on them that they themselves are not able to, but it is not about the taking of positions. Irony operates on the paradox of positionality embodied in the assertion of a limit, as Blanchot's response to and development of Levinas's thought aptly demonstrates. In a *Festschrift* for Levinas, Blanchot describes how his encounter with the philosopher when they were students made him aware of a conception of philosophy as perpetual vigilance:

> Philosophy would be our companion forever, day and night, even in losing its
> name, becoming literature, knowledge, or nonknowledge – or becoming absent.
> Our clandestine friend, about whom we respect – we love – that which did not
> allow us to be linked to her, while having a premonition that there was nothing
> awake in us, nothing vigilant, including even sleep, that was not due to her

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[57] Maebh Long, 'Derrida and a Theory of Irony: Parabasis and Parataxis' (PhD thesis, Durham University, 2010), 16, http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/665/

difficult friendship. Philosophy or friendship. But here philosophy was precisely not an allegory.[58]

Blanchot does not elaborate on this final point (that such a philosophy is precisely not allegory), but his aim in using it seems sufficiently well substantiated by the argument that follows. Levinas's philosophy is characterized as an engagement with an insurmountable 'skepticism', meant not in the sense in which it is used in either ancient or modern philosophy[59] but as the force of that which is 'otherwise than being',[60] of that which ontology traduces. Such skepticism is the effect of the Other, its unknowability and inapproachability, and it is irrefutable because any refutation must occur in the order of the same, and hence be a refutation not of that which escapes conception but of some (mis)representation of it: 'Skepticism is easily refuted, by a refutation that leaves it intact'.[61] The impossible relation to such skepticism is the central focus of Levinas's philosophy, which hence does 'not affirm anything that is not surveyed by an indefatigable refuter, to whom he does not yield, but who obliges him to go further, not outside of reason, into the facility of the irrational or of mystical effusion, but toward another reason, toward the other as reason or exigency' (ibid.).

The implications of this position for a feasible method for philosophy, Blanchot claims, produce the distinction Levinas draws, in *Otherwise than Being*, between the saying and the said. The said signifies a closed economy of reference, in which, as in allegory, the validity of the substitution of same for other, the movement from word to meaning, is assured by the control of the dominating scheme: 'Through the said, we belong to order, to the world (the cosmos); we are present to the other with whom we can deal as equals – we are contemporaries' (ibid., 148–9). 'Through Saying', in contrast,

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[58] Maurice Blanchot, 'Our Clandestine Companion', trans. David B. Allison, in *Face to Face with Levinas*, ed. Ralph A. Cohen (Albany: SUNY Press, 1986), 44.
[59] Robert Bernasconi, 'Skepticism in the Face of Philosophy', in *Re-reading Levinas*, ed. Robert Bernasconi and Simon Critchley (London: Athlone, 1991).
[60] 'We have been seeking the otherwise than being from the beginning, and as soon as it is conveyed before us it is betrayed in the said that dominates the saying which states it', Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1999).
[61] Blanchot, 'Clandestine Companion', 145.

we are torn from that order, but without order quietly disappearing into disorder: noncoincidence with the Other, the impossibility of being together in simple simultaneity …. On the contrary, we are subjected, laid bare (in a laying bare that is not presence or unveiling), a risky laying bare of oneself, obsessed or besieged through and through, to the point of 'substitution' – one that almost does not exist, existing only for the other – in the 'one for the other' relation. This relation must not be conceived as identification, for it does not pass through being, nor is it simply nonbeing, for it measures the incommensurable. It is a relation of absolute impropriety, of strangeness and interruption. (Ibid.)

This conception of 'saying' converges with my understanding of Beckettian irony: both work to rupture ontology, to fissure language in such a way as to interrupt its interruption of alterity.

Blanchot, importantly, and very differently from Levinas, sees literature as playing, or able to play, as significant a role in this form of responsibility as philosophy. Levinas's view of the relation of literature to the ethical can without distortion be claimed to be Platonic (in form and derivation), distrustful of the persuasive valence of rhetoric and uneasy about the irresponsibility of fiction.[62] Blanchot, in contrast, sees literature as the form of discourse best able to disrupt mastery and self-enclosure to bring about a Levinasian ethical relation to the other. Literature is, in this view, essentially ethical (in the Levinasian sense of the term), bringing about the renegotiation of the category of the same through an encounter with an alterity that eludes, subverts and undermines conceptual schemes. Discussing the effect of the *il y a*, which he calls 'one of Levinas' most fascinating propositions',[63] Blanchot writes:

it draws us towards the uncertain outside, endlessly talking outside the truth – in the manner of an Other whom we cannot get rid of simply by labelling him deceitful (the evil genius), or because it would be a joking matter, since this speech, which is only a perfidiously maintained laughter, is nonetheless

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[62] Emmanuel Levinas, 'Reality and Its Shadow', in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 129–144; Jill Robbins, *Altered Reading: Levinas and Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999).
[63] Blanchot, 'Clandestine Companion', 49.

suggestive. At the same time, this speech escapes all interpretation and is neither gratuitous nor playful. In the end it is sober, but as the illusion of seriousness, and it is thus what disturbs us most, since this move is also the most apt to deny us the resources of being itself, such as place and light. Perhaps all this is a gift of literature, and we do not know if it intoxicates while sobering, or if its speech, which charms and disgusts, doesn't ultimately attract us because it promises (a promise it both does and does not keep) to clarify what is obscure in all speech – everything in speech that escapes revelation, manifestation: namely, the remaining trace of nonpresence, what is still opaque in the transparent. (Ibid., 49–50)

The terms in which the *il y a* is here described – it 'escapes all interpretation and is neither gratuitous nor playful' – correspond closely to the way in which I have thus far characterized the effect of irony. The long and dense history of theorization of the phenomenon also in some way indicates that irony both does and does not keep its promise 'to clarify what is obscure in all speech – everything in speech that escapes revelation, manifestation: namely, the remaining trace of nonpresence, what is still opaque in the transparent.'

Like Orpheus, whom Blanchot describes as wanting 'to look into the night at what night is concealing – the other *night*, concealment made visible',[64] the reader's desire to gain access through language to that which is by definition precluded by language can only proceed by way of a certain law-like transgression that is nevertheless not reducible to a law. Irony is the strategy whereby this series of contradictions is achieved. The movement of irony is analogous to that described above whereby philosophy traverses its own limits in the establishing of them, whereby the thinking of the limit is simultaneously the thinking of the excess of the limit. Such an un-delimitable vacillation is the reason why an ethical philosophy, like Orpheus's inspiration, is 'precisely not allegory': the interpretation of allegory operates within a restricted economy, in which correlation and abstraction – meaning – operate with clearly

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[64] Maurice Blanchot, 'The Gaze of Orpheus', in *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Essays*, ed. P. Adams Sitney, trans. Lydia Davis (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill, 1981), 100.

circumscribed parameters, without excess, while the ethical stance is turned always toward, open to, exactly that excessive, inassimilable trace. As Johan Geertsema has argued, and as a glance at the history of the term since Schlegel makes clear, irony is the trope whereby Western thought has safeguarded this force of interruption. One might, if one felt so inclined, claim that literature, or art generally, is the institution whereby Western culture has safeguarded it.[65]

Of the authors considered in this study, this schema is most relevant to the work of J.M. Coetzee, given the number of responses to his work that read it as performing and exploring a markedly Levinasian engagement with the other, and given the emphasis on allegory in readings of his fiction.[66] Central to the textual strategies whereby Coetzee achieves this is an ironic undermining of allegory exactly analogous to the infinite dialectic between skepticism and responsibility discussed above. A certain form of allegory is elicited precisely for its habitual mode of conclusion to be interrupted, a particular motion of interpretation initiated in order to be perverted, and the sense of failed comprehension engendered thus enacts the ontological slippage that Levinas considers fundamental to the ethical relation.

I see this enacted in Beckett's trilogy, where the narrators' attempts to tell stories, achieve certainty, or order their experience invariably give way to more and more extensive and irresolvable ambiguity and incomprehension. An equivalent process seems almost inevitably to occur in any attempt to make sense of this writing. The effort to derive a meaning from this work that so persistently and thoroughly undermines its own would surely entail very close scrutiny of the assumptions and categories that inform the notion of interpretation itself. And yet, confronted with a text, a work of art, we cannot but try to make sense of it, even if that sense is finally a rejection of the notion of sense itself, and the endeavour hence destined to failure.

'No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.'[67]

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[65] Jacques Derrida as much as does so in 'This Strange Institution of Literature', in *Acts of Literature*.

[66] Mike Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible: The Idea of Hospitality in the Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009); Johan Hendrik Geertsema, 'Irony and Otherness: A Study of Some Recent South African Narrative Fiction' (PhD Thesis, University of Cape Town, 1999).

[67] Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: Calder, 1983).

'something gone wrong with the silence': irony in Beckett

Among the most prominent and consistently agreed on aspects of Beckett's work is the volatile and unstable irony it performs and puts into play. In all of this writing a certain principle of irony is instantiated with such rigour and intensity that it becomes the discursive equivalent of a universal acid: this sort of 'ironic temper', as Paul de Man puts it, 'can dissolve everything, in an infinite chain of solvents'.[68] It is for this reason that Beckett's writing is among the best examples of Northrop Frye's claim that the ironic mode, which begins in 'realism and dispassionate observation', when pushed to far enough of an extreme, 'moves steadily toward myth'.[69] That is, what begins as an explicitly un-metaphysical form achieves – precisely through the rigorous and stringent renunciation of metaphysical recourse – something approximating metaphysical gravity. Parallels, for example, between *Malone Dies* (1951) and Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, or the trilogy and the *Divine Comedy*, exemplify this. This is not, however, to discount the unique and consistent comic aspect of almost all the works. One of the most difficult aspects of discussing Beckett's work is maintaining an awareness of, and giving equal emphasis to, the subtle balance that is struck between these two modalities. Bakhtin's comment about the 'ambivalent laughter, at the same time cheerful and annihilating'[70] that is elicited by the proto-novelistic forms is a particularly apt characterization of the tone of Beckett's writing.

The undermining of pieties and proprieties carried out through the diminishing of hierarchical distance is also a central feature, as is the inscription of a reflexive awareness of the ironies and instabilities of any particular point of view. Further, like the originary move away from distanced, hierarchically valorized subject matter and forms that Bakhtin sees as having made the novel possible, Beckett's characteristic literary innovation consists in the incorporation of the low, the unnameable, the nothing, of content assumed essentially inimical to aesthetic expression. The similarity of early work such as *Murphy* to Menippean satire, which fits squarely into the category of pre-

[68] Paul de Man, 'The Concept of Irony'.
[69] Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957), 42.
[70] Mikhail Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', 15.

novelistic parodic forms, has long been noted.[71] The work of the middle and later periods, though, evolves in a more complex, subtle direction. My argument in this section is that the quasi-metaphysical irony instantiated by Beckett's fiction and drama is a result of a following through with the comic, parodic energies alluded to by Bakhtin with such scrupulous rigour that, through some sort of meta-ironic reversal, they attain an almost metaphysical gravity (what is invoked in notions such as the absurd and so on). In contrast, passages of conventionally elevated register are attended by an inescapable hilarity. The discourse – whether on the stage or page – meanders between these two poles, with neither being accorded ultimate priority.

By 'meta-ironic' I here refer to the nihilistic valence of the work, instantiated in the prevailing emphasis on finitude, ignorance, and impotence. The production or appreciation of irony often implies superiority over someone else, of being in on a joke at another's expense or of seeing another's ideas as deluded. This is the case, for example, in novels of Flaubert's such as *Madame Bovary* and *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, in which characters' sentimentality and unthinking conventionality are implicitly ridiculed from a position that sees through these. In order for this to be the case, the irony has to be stable, and bounded by a clear demarcation that separates two types of positions: those that fall within the demarcation, which are subject to irony; and those outside of this demarcation, which are not. In contrast, Beckett's writing, as instantiated for example in the structure and style of the trilogy, can be seen to subject this specific stance to a destabilization that produces an irony of one greater degree, an irony of irony, which instantiates the 'infinite *vertige*' de Man considers characteristic of modern, post-Romantic irony, and which, I will argue, characterizes the structure of the trilogy.

Such a rendering ironic of irony is paralleled by the description in *Watt* of the '*risus purus*': 'the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy' (*W*, 40). In comparison with the 'intellectual laugh', which 'laughs at that which is not true', and the 'ethical laugh', which 'laughs at that which is not good', this is described as 'the dianoetic laugh', which, it is implied, laughs at the very capacity of the human mind to

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[71] Robert Harrison, *Samuel Beckett's Murphy: A Critical Excursion* (Athens, GA: U of Georgia P, 1968).

find things funny, that is, to believe in its ability to establish a position of sufficient clarity and perspective to be able to recognize the incongruent and the absurd, and to distinguish this from that which is not it.[72]

It is in this sense that I understand Nell's statement in *Endgame* that 'Nothing is funnier than unhappiness': it is precisely that which we cannot accommodate, accustom ourselves to, or comprehend, and which thus disrupts security and certainty, that is the source of the laugh of laughs, the response that recognizes the inability of understanding to equip us for life in this world. Importantly, this recognition in and of itself precludes the possibility of recourse to the tragic as a means of accounting for the condition, as it undermines the confidence in human fitness for the world that is a necessary precondition for the tragic to hold. Instead, the only possible attitude is a tragicomic one that, in recognizing the limitations and absurdities inherent in the condition of having insufficient epistemological purchase on existence even to be sure of the extent to which this is the case, becomes subject to the infinite slippage of an unbounded, unstoppable irony.

While such seems to me something like the general tone and register of, if not all of Beckett's writing, then certainly the trilogy, it is a remarkably broad, diffuse phenomenon, and is thus elusive and difficult to pin down. It is, however, to a large extent instantiated through the accumulation of discrete and more clearly definable ironic techniques. Lloyd Bishop, for example, identifies the following seven modalities of irony in Beckett's writing: 'the ambivalent deflation of the hero', 'deflation of the narrator', 'authorial self-parody', 'self-reflexive irony', 'the self-deconstruction of the narrative', 'an explicit recognition by hero, narrator and implied author of the paradoxical coexistence of contraries of which the human condition is composed', and 'an intangible ironic spirit hovering over the entire work and aimed not only at God and man but at the work itself and its author'.[73] It is something like this last, the 'intangible ironic spirit hovering over the entire work', that I hope to pin down and describe in this section. While it may supervene on the other six, more delimited, forms of irony, this

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[72] For the sake of precision, it is perhaps important to point out that all of these are described as 'laughs that strictly speaking are not laughs, but modes of ululation' (*W*, 29).

[73] Bishop, *Romantic Irony in French Literature*, 187.

seems to me a qualitatively different phenomenon, and one that because of this poses rather different challenges to interpretation and has different implications for the tradition than do the others.

Perhaps the least clear-cut of these is the matter of 'authorial self-parody'. There are numerous instances of what can be taken as 'authorial self-parody' in Beckett's non-literary writings and in interviews; as Bishop points out, he claims that the trilogy occurred to him when he became aware of his own 'stupidity', and there are many other examples of the author's disparagement of his own work (ibid., 189). It seems far more the case, however, that such represents the author's genuine opinion, rather than a consciously ironic self-parody such as one finds in Byron (*Childe Harold* and *Don Juan*, for example)[74] or other writers who employ the technique.

Similarly, while there are clear instances of the author's use of events, places or people from his own life in his writing, as is thoroughly detailed in James Knowlson's biography,[75] this is by no means necessarily self-parodic, and the material in such instances is almost invariably thoroughly worked on and altered, and used for obvious aesthetic and thematic ends. Therefore, while it is possible to establish relatively conclusively the points at which the author is making reference to himself or his life, and the source of these, it is difficult to identify clear and unequivocal moments of authorial self-parody in the novels or plays themselves. The tone and subject of the works in question further complicate such identification.

As these are without exception novels about the failure of authority over the narrated material and the collapse of the faculties whereby sense is made of the self and the world, they can be read as commenting on Beckett's own understanding of his aesthetic praxis. (Nevertheless, it must be said that such a point of view is finally supported by extra-textual evidence in the form of interviews and the author's own critical writing, rather than by winks and nudges in the works themselves.) As is the

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[74] Jerome McGann, 'Byron and Romanticism: A Dialogue', in *Byron and Romanticism*, ed. James Soderholm (Cambridge: CUP, 2002), 299; Malcolm Kelsall, *Byron's Politics* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987), 151; Caroline Franklin, *The Female Romantics: Nineteenth-century Female Novelists and Byronism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 2, 31.

[75] James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997).

case in *Krapp's Last Tape*, this aspect of the writing may thus be read as an encouragement to read the characters as surrogates for Beckett himself, and, in this way, as a parody of a certain set of notions of authorship. In making such a claim, however, I am by no means urging that Beckett's work be read as veiled autobiography or confession, or that the ultimate meaning of it be reduced to something of this nature. Rather, this aspect of Romantic irony serves to bring into question the relationship of the author to the work – another prominent theme of the trilogy – and to destabilize any easy resolution of this. If such is the case, it is to some extent possible to see the sentiments expressed by the narrators of the novels of the trilogy as expressing, to one degree or another, the author's own views, and thus as carrying out a fundamental authorial self-parody.

The other three of the first four aspects of irony Bishop mentions ('the ambivalent deflation of the hero', 'deflation of the narrator', and 'self-reflexive irony'), however, are strongly evident in Beckett's work. They are also staples of both Bakhtin's understanding of the novelization of literature and Romantic irony, and are an inevitable consequence of an admitting of multiple points of view in the attempt to give voice to the immanent plurivocity of experience. Byron, for example, provides many instances of deflation of the hero and narrator, and this is something of which it is almost impossible not to be aware in Beckett's work. Molloy and, by the conclusion of his narration, Moran are figures able to move only by crawling, a collection of unruly tics and urges bound together only very loosely by a vague and crumbling sense of a goal to be accomplished. Like their psyches, and perhaps to be read as figures for these, their bodies steadily give way, fall apart, and rebel against them. Malone is not even mobile, and the narrowing of the horizons of his concerns serves to render him absurd, while with the advent of the Unnamable we are presented with something well and truly sub-human, physically and spiritually.

As the stories of these heroes are narrated in the first person, such a depiction of their failures and shortcomings serves similarly to deflate the narrator. This sort of deflation plays a crucial role in the creation of the prevailing general ironic sense that shades the narrative as a whole. One aspect of this occurs through, for example, aspects such as Molloy's admission of the unreliability of his memory, or the obstructions to the

Unnamable's acquisition of a clear perspective on things implicit in his physical, and metaphysical, condition, which alert the reader to the fact that much of the narration needs to be treated with a degree of skepticism on the basis of simple sensory or cognitive unreliability, as the narrators themselves readily admit. Malone, for example, when describing the conditions in his room, writes, 'In the beginning it was different. The woman came right into the room, bustled about, enquired about my needs, my wants. … All that must be half imagination' (*MD*, 9). Moran toward the conclusion of his narration provides a very good example of what I am here describing:

> But I also said, Yet a little while, at the rate things are going, and I won't be able to move, but will have to stay, where I happen to be, unless someone comes and carries me. Oh I did not say it in such limpid language. And when I say I said, etc., all I mean is that I knew confusedly things were so, without knowing exactly what it was all about. And every time I say, I said this, or I said that, or speak of a voice saying, far away inside of me, Molloy, and then a fine phrase more or less clear and simple, or find myself compelled to attribute to others intelligible words, or hear my own voice uttering to others more or less articulate sounds, I am merely complying with the convention that demands that you either lie or hold your peace. For what really happened was quite different. (*M*, 89)

Such a statement undermines the reliability or veracity of everything that has gone before, casting everything that has been and is to be related in doubt. This is one of the principle ways in which 'the self-deconstruction of the narrative' is brought about, by creating an interminably and inescapably paradoxical relation between the text and any interpretation thereof. The narrative's ambivalence about its own signification means that the attempt to interpret it must of necessity be – to some extent, at least – an attempt to establish the significance of this ambivalence.

The course of the trilogy presents a steady intensification of a structural irony of this sort, which finds its beginning in the second portion of *Molloy*. Moran's narration, which can be, and usually is, read as the chronological beginning of the trilogy, begins, 'It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows' (*M*, 95); the narration ends, 'Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining' (*M*, 184). The concluding few sentences thus

place in question the entire narrative of the protagonist's development to that point, a development that has – if one could call such a 'development' – consisted in the steady disfigurement of Moran's body and mind. This sort of explicit contradiction of statements, which frames Moran's otherwise largely perspicuous narration to render it unreliable, intrudes at moments into Malone's ramblings and becomes in *The Unnamable* something of a compositional principle, such that in the final nine-page sentence of the novel almost every assertion is immediately followed by its own negation: 'that's all I know, it's not I, that's all I know, it's not mine, it's the only one I ever had, that's a lie, I must have had the other, the one that lasts, but it didn't last, I don't understand, that is to say it did, it still lasts, I'm still in it, I left myself behind in it, I'm waiting for me there, no, there you don't wait, you don't listen, I don't know' (*U*, 134).

Another crucial aspect of such structural irony is the problematic identity of the narrating subject. Schlegel's definition of irony – 'a permanent parabasis' – provides a particularly apt description of the structure and technique of Beckett's trilogy. The idea of a permanent parabasis entails a *mise en abyme*, a perpetual stepping outside of a given narrative into another narrative, out of which one steps into yet another, and so on ad infinitum. One example of this is provided in *Malone Dies*, in which Malone's narration alternates between the attempt to tell stories and various comments, reflections, and meditations on these attempts. Much of the narrative is thus comprised of parabasis – or, as Genette terms the narrative equivalent of the dramatic technique, 'metalepsis'[76] – that consists in comment on the 'story' itself. A similar thing occurs in the first portion of *Molloy*, with the narrator pausing to comment on his failure of memory, his inability to describe something, or his general and overwhelming unreliability. As Wolfgang Iser puts it,

> the perceptions recorded in Molloy's monologue are constantly accompanied by
> reflections on how they took place and what conditioned the manner in which
> they took place. Thus a single act of perception often releases a chain-reaction of

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[76] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1983).

self-observation, as the narrator seeks to find out what brought about the act and why it took the form it did take. This process is sometimes taken so far that the original perception and the self-questionings that spring from it become completely dissociated.[77]

Such a dissociation between chains of reflection and their object is among the primary means whereby the perpetual metalepsis is achieved, and is a central aspect of the enactment of subjectivity performed in the trilogy. I shall turn to this subjectivity after a brief exploration of the presence in Beckett's work of what Bishop terms the 'paradoxical coexistence of contraries of which the human condition is composed'.[78]

I have touched on the subtle interplay of comic and tragic modulations in Beckett's work previously, which has the effect of, if not providing 'explicit recognition', at least in some way enacting such 'paradoxical coexistence of contraries'. This awareness of contraries is to my mind evidenced in, for example, the relationship between the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*. Despite the thoroughgoing brute facticity[79] of the existences there depicted, as well as the contrasting relationships organized almost entirely around domination and subservience (Pozzo/Lucky), solicitude for one another's wellbeing and fraternal care and concern bespeak the continued possibility of elementary forms of communion. Nagg and Nell in *Endgame* present another good example of this, and one similarly contrasted with the coercive interactions of Hamm and Clov, an element that helps account for the surprising frequency of moments of warmth and tenderness in an oeuvre that is scrupulously consistent in its adherence to an aesthetic of disenchantment.

An awareness of irresolvable contraries also seems to me a central factor in Beckett's understanding of the condition of subjectivity. As he said in an interview with Tom Driver, 'If life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no

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[77] Wolfgang Iser, *Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1974), 166.

[78] Bishop, *Romantic Irony in French Literature*, 187.

[79] I use the term in the sense in which it is employed by Jean-Paul Sartre (e.g. *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Sebastian Gardner (London: Continuum, 2009), although the Heideggerian sense is also highly applicable to the play, and much of Beckett's theatre (e.g. *Ontology: The Hermeneutics of Facticity*, trans. John van Buren (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012)).

inscrutability. If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable.'[80] The author's fondness for the line, 'Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned' [81] similarly articulates an acute sense of such irresolvable contrariety and the metaphysical absurdity that inevitably results from it, and is a crucial aspect of his attitude and response to skepticism.

The implications of this for personal experience and identity are well articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, in a passage cited by Iser in his discussion of the depiction of the self in Beckett's work:

> We know that there are errors only because we possess truth, in the name of which we correct errors and recognize them as errors. In the same way the express recognition of a truth is much more than the mere existence within us of an unchallengeable idea, an immediate faith in what is presented: it presupposes questioning, doubt, a break with the immediate, and is the correction of any possible error. Any rationalism admits of at least one absurdity, that of having to be formulated as a thesis. Any philosophy of the absurd recognizes some meaning at least in the affirmation of absurdity.[82]

For Merleau-Ponty, identity, the positing of the self to the self, rests on an originary, arbitrary, affirmation that, 'because it is anterior to revealed truth and error, makes both possible' (ibid., 296).

The trilogy, in contrast, works its way back to a moment prior to this originary affirmation, and in doing so undoes the possibility of both truth and error, opening onto an infinite skepticism. This is where I locate 'the intangible ironic spirit hovering over the entire work', the permanent parabasis of identity instantiated by precisely the subject's attempt to establish a coherent identity. I therefore turn now to a discussion of

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[80] Tom Driver, 'Interview', 220.
[81] Beckett attributed this to St Augustine, but Chris Ackerley and Stanley Gontarski claim that it comes in fact from Robert Greene's 'Repentance' (Ackerley and Gontarski, eds, *Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 2004), 31.
[82] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 295.

the presentation of subjectivity offered in the trilogy and the connection of this to skepticism, and conclude with a discussion of the relevance of the notion of Romantic irony to an understanding of this irresolvable nucleus of subjectivity and skepticism.

'as for myself, that unfailing pastime': the irony of subjectivity

Certain comments Molloy, Malone and the Unnamable make indicate that one and the same voice narrates all the stories of the trilogy (and even earlier of Beckett's novels, such as *Murphy*), steadily shedding personae in a progression toward the true self. For example, the narrator claims, 'All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and me alone. … It is now I shall speak of me, for the first time. I thought I was right in enlisting these sufferers in my pains. I was wrong' (*U*, 14). This is then continued in the course of *The Unnamable* itself, with the narrator calling himself at various times Basil, Mahood, and, finally, Worm. By the time the narrator resorts to the last of these, the self-consciously contingent nature of the designation and the process thereof is strongly emphasized: 'But it's time I gave this solitary a name, nothing doing without proper names. I therefore baptise him Worm. … I don't like it, but I haven't much choice' (*U*, 51). The idea that the various stories narrated and personae adopted over the course of the trilogy are all emanations of the same identity is further substantiated by the very beginning, where the narrator of *Molloy* says, 'This time [*Molloy*], then once more I think [*Malone Dies*], then perhaps a last time [*The Unnamable*], then I think it'll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but one but one' (*M*, 4). This would seem to indicate that each successive narrator of the trilogy is inaugurated by way of a metalepsis from the previous one, each narrative consisting in a stepping aside from the one before into a less mediated, more direct commerce with the audience. The steady reduction in traditional literary accoutrement and the apparatus of plot and scenery from novel to novel, and the increasing amount of direct narrative comment – Malone's musings, the Unnamable's attempt to establish a certain statement – also support such a reading.

There is however every indication that the narrative will never produce the self-coincidence so devoutly to be wished, and the entire project is fundamentally and inescapably impossible: 'there might be a hundred of us and still we'd lack the hundred and first, we'll always be short of me' (*U*, 52). Malone, for example, writes, 'My concern is not with me, but with another, far beneath me and whom I try to envy …. To show myself now, on the point of vanishing, at the same time as the stranger, and by the same grace, that would be no ordinary last straw. Then live, long enough to feel, behind my closed eyes, other eyes close' (*MD*, 20–1). The possibility that he is in the above passage referring to the Unnamable is strengthened by the Unnamable's claims that,

> To tell the truth I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy on, I believe we are all here, but so far I have seen only Malone. Another hypothesis, they were here, but are here no longer. I shall examine it after my fashion. Are there other pits, deeper down? To which one accedes by mine? Stupid obsession with depth. Are there other places set aside for us and this one where I am, with Malone, merely their narthex? … No, no, we have all been here forever, we shall all be here forever, I know it. (*U*, 3)

Such duplication of personae arises, it seems, from an attempt to conclude the narration by giving voice to the 'true self at last', for the speaking subject to coincide with the self that is the subject of the speech. That this goal is connected to the desire for silence and non-being is indicated by Molloy's saying, 'What I'd like now is to speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying' (*M*, 3), an attitude shared by Malone. The unidentified 'They', however – what Hugh Kenner calls the 'Committee of the Zeitgeist'[83] – 'don't want that', and the Unnamable claims, 'I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent. Never' (*U*, 1).

This can be construed as a desire for conclusion, for the self to overcome the duality, the multiplicity, of being both subject and object, of being both speaker and that which is posited by speech. (Molloy, for example, claims that, 'To restore silence is the role of objects' (*M*, 10).) The telling of stories is undertaken for the sake of finishing the

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[83] Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett, a Critical Study* (New York: Grove, 1961), 132.

story, and ending the interminable discourse of the self with the self. The failure of this to happen, though, would seem to indicate that the novels demonstrate that any positing of a conclusive identity begs the question as to who posited it, thus again opening up the question of the self. In the flight from 'shapelessness' and 'speechlessness', every invention of the self is necessarily partial and leaves a remnant of the self unexpressed, which thus leads to a further 'relapse to darkness'. The paradox is enacted by *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* in different ways: Malone's death, the ostensible subject of the narration, can by definition not be part of the first-person narrative, while the very title of *The Unnamable* names this impossible obligation of designating identity.

The self-deconstructive irony at work in these novels can thus be seen to enact the infinitely recursive relation of the self to the self that is the irresolvable nexus of identity. Asja Szafraniec discusses the depiction of subjectivity in Beckett's work with reference to Derrida's criticism of Husserl's model of consciousness as immediate self-presence. As she puts it, Derrida demonstrates that the relation of the self to the self

> is never pure, but always built on a more fundamental difference. The relation to the other and the relation to self are two inseparable aspects of the same moment, two poles between which the 'I' is suspended in endless movement. This functions just as does a mirror reflection when two mirrors are facing each other, involving not only the movement outside to the reflecting surface and back but also the other way around. I reflect myself in the other, yet at the same time I am the mirror in which the other, in whom I am reflected, is reflected in me. No constitution of the self is possible without this endless movement, but with it, no constitution of the self is absolutely originary or complete.[84]

While the structural analogy between the image here employed and the *mise en abyme* implied in the notion of permanent parabasis I have spelt out is of tangential interest, this description of the basis of subjectivity – or, as Szafraniec, following Derrida, terms it, the 'effects of subjectivity' or 'the subjectile' – perfectly captures the condition described and enacted by the narrators of the trilogy.

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[84] Asza Szafraniec, *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), endnote 31, chapter 5.

The simultaneous necessity and impossibility of existing thus is the source of the compulsion to go on speaking, to attempt relentlessly to give voice to that which cannot be named, which is also presented, in my reading, as enacting a central aspect of subjectivity. In such a vision and depiction of subjectivity, the self is always decentred, and thus engaged in a perpetual renegotiation of identity in order to establish a position of stable subjectivity. As Helga Schwalm puts it, this depiction revolves around 'the pivotal paradox of identity or self-consciousness envisaged as self-reflection. … [T]he Beckettian self/subject endeavours to see itself, to turn itself into an object. … [but in] *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* it is further and further contracted into the self reflecting on the impossibility of self-reflection.'[85]

As Beckett's 'creatures'[86] indicate, this is interminable: any identity adopted becomes eccentric to the self, and the only possible stance is one of continuous repositioning. While in many respects the trilogy appears to pursue the evacuation of subjectivity, the reduction of the possibilities of the self to nothing, its structure can more accurately be read as enacting the phenomenological implications of the ontological basis of self-consciousness. This is cast in starkest relief in situations in which one is thinking about oneself, in which the self is the object of cognition, which Wolfgang Iser's discussion of the depiction of subjectivity in Beckett's work deals with particularly well.

Iser, beginning from Nietzsche's view of mental activity as 'a selection, a simplification, an attempt at forming a gestalt … a completely active reformation',[87] argues that the process of the trilogy demonstrates the implications of this for the attempt to give expression to the self. (The etymology of the very term 'express', and

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[85] Helga Schwalm, 'Beckett's Trilogy and the Limits of Self-deconstruction', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui 6,* Crossroads and Borderlines (1997): 184.

[86] This term is used frequently in Beckett's work to designate fictional characters (who are in this sense 'created' by the author), perhaps in order to parody theological attitudes or points of view. An apposite moment is Malone's stating, 'But what matter whether I was born or not, have lived or not, am dead or merely dying, I shall go on doing as I have always done, not knowing what it is I do, nor who I am, nor where I am, nor if I am. Yes, a little creature, I shall try and make a little creature, to hold in my arms, a little creature in my image, no matter what I say. And seeing what a poor thing I have made, or how like myself, I shall eat it. Then be alone a long time, unhappy, not knowing what my prayer should be nor to whom' (*MD*, 53).

[87] Nietzsche, cited in Iser, *Implied Reader*, 164.

the metaphor of communication and selfhood it implies are worth bearing in mind at this juncture.) To think of the self, and, hence, to give expression to it, one must necessarily falsify it through such simplification and reformation; as Molloy puts it, 'you must choose, between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so. For if you set out to mention everything you would never have done, and that's what counts, to be done, to have done' (*M*, 39). The desire to express the true self is hence a contradictory one. Iser cites Merleau-Ponty's thought in relation to this: 'When I try to pass from this interrogative state to an affirmation, and a fortiori when I try to express myself, I crystallize an indefinite collection of motives within an act of consciousness. … My absolute contact with myself, the identity of being and appearance cannot be posited, but only lived as anterior to any affirmation.'[88]

The narrators' desire to give expression to themselves thus results in their creating alternative selves, and the problem they are trying to solve in doing so simply proliferating. The process is described with reference to Molloy's narration:

> This reflection is embedded in a process which Molloy would like to narrate but which he has to falsify because the convention of narration has its own laws …. Narration sets out to convey something which cannot possibly be conveyed by it, and so any narrative representation must inevitably lie. Molloy is fully aware that both the presentation and the communication of any given reality can only result in the alteration of that reality ….[89]

Molloy's recognition of this, according to Iser, leads him to want to contextualize, supplement, qualify and explain his statements, such that 'a single act of perception releases a chain-reaction of self-observation …. Thus the conscious mind turns its attention away from the interpretation of things and onto its own actual processes of interpretation' (ibid.). And because precisely the same limitations pertain to the attempt to interpret the faculties of interpretation as to interpret things, and because, crucially,

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[88] Merleau Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 295.
[89] Iser, *Implied Reader*, 166.

the self is in central ways constituted precisely by these faculties of interpretation, this leads to the infinite metalepsis of subjectivity described previously.

Iser describes subjectivity in *Malone Dies* as being 'a ceaseless dialectic that is never synthesized' (ibid.). This dialectic involves a movement between two modes of awareness the text repeatedly contrasts. For example, toward the very beginning of his narration Malone contrasts 'earnestness' with 'playing':

> This time I know where I am going, it is no longer the ancient night, the recent night. Now it is a game, I am going to play. I never knew how to play, till now. I longed to, but I knew it was impossible. And yet I often tried. … But it was not long before I found myself in the dark. That is why I gave up trying to play and took to myself for ever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wandering, darkness, long stumbling with outstretched arms, hiding. Such is the earnestness from which, for nearly a century now, I have never been able to depart. From now on it will be different. I shall never do anything any more from now on but play. No, I must not begin with an exaggeration. But I shall play a great part of the time, the greater part, if I can. But perhaps I shall not succeed any better than hitherto. Perhaps as hitherto I shall find myself abandoned, in the dark, without anything to play with. Then I shall play with myself. (*MD*, 4)

'Playing' is here synonymous with telling stories. Malone almost immediately before this passage, in an explicit explanation of the attitude and approach he has chosen to adopt toward his situation, says, 'I will not weigh upon the balance any more, one way or another. I will be neutral and inert. … While waiting I shall tell myself stories' (*MD*, 3–4). In the passage itself he refers to the elicitation of characters in which story-telling consists: 'I began to play with what I saw. People and things ask nothing better than to play, certain animals too. All went well at first, they all came to me, pleased that someone should want to play with them. If I said, Now I need a hunchback, immediately one came running, proud as punch of his fine hunch that was going to perform' (*MD*, 4). It is also well worth recalling that within the first few pages of his narration Molloy similarly says, 'What I need now is stories' (*M*, 9).

This centrality of the creation of stories is further emphasized by the repeated use of the word 'invent' throughout the trilogy. Molloy, for example, says, 'Saying is

inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept' (*M*, 29). Malone for his part claims,

> Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried. … But at each fresh attempt I lost my head, fled to my shadows as to sanctuary, to his lap who can neither live nor suffer the sight of others living. … After the fiasco, the solace, the repose, I began again, to try and live, cause to live, be another, in myself, in another. … But little by little with a different aim, no longer in order to succeed, but in order to fail. What I sought, when I struggled out of my hole, then aloft through the stinging air toward an inaccessible boon, was the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home …. (*MD*, 19–20)

An interminable dialectic such as Iser identifies seems to be clearly described here. Because, as Schwalm points out, 'language affords neither self-reference nor the flight into pure fiction',[90] the subject, desiring to be conclusively expressed, is never released from the interminable need to go on giving voice to this failure of self-coincidence in the hope, paradoxically, of achieving it.

Involved in this depiction, then, is the transposition of skepticism to a phenomenological scheme, and the exploration of the implications of this for subjectivity. As I have shown, the presentation of this in the trilogy operates on the basis of an irresolvable irony at the centre of subjectivity such that the self's relation with itself is always necessarily disrupted and opaque. Such irony is pervasive and all-encompassing, arising in the very instant of awareness, and thus colours all products of thought. The remorseless clarity with which Beckett's fiction lays this quandary bare means that those who seek to follow him, in whichever manner or means, are almost inevitably obliged to contend with it.

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[90] Helga Schwalm, 'Beckett's Trilogy and the Limits of Self-deconstruction', 184.

Chapter II: Influence and Testament

Not least among the reasons for the choice of authors considered in this study are the frequent references made by all three to Beckett's writing. In interviews, essays, speeches and editorial comment, Auster, Banville and Coetzee have all explicitly indicated the importance of Beckett's work for their own conception and practice of literature. It is important to emphasize at this point that I do not claim that these, or any other, authors' comments on their own work are uncomplicated, or even consistent. As Coetzee, with skepticism characteristic of his views on this particular point, puts the matter in an essay entitled 'Homage', 'a reader versed in the vicissitudes of autobiography will receive what I say with due caution'.[91] Nevertheless, the consistent concern with and importance accorded to Beckett's work by the three authors in question would seem to warrant an overview of their views and opinions on the significance of the former's achievement. Such an undertaking is further justified by their striking similarity, in tone and perspective. In contrast to the heavily theoretical treatment which has been the norm in academic discussion of Beckett's writing, the focus of Auster's, Banville's and Coetzee's comments and writings is often on the style, technique and emotional force of the fiction. I discuss the significance of this in the final section of this chapter, after first discussing the three writers' respective comments on Beckett's life, work and influence.

'the morality of a good sentence': Paul Auster

Paul Auster recalls having had 'the good fortune to meet Beckett a few times in Paris – several one-on-one conversations with him that lasted hours – and to have corresponded with him over the years.'[92] They chatted of this and that, but Auster singles out one memory because 'it made such a deep impression on me and it taught me so much about what it means to be a writer.' He recounts the following incident:

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[91] J.M. Coetzee, 'Homage', *Threepenny Review 53* (1993): 5.
[92] Paul Auster, 'Laughter in the Dark', *PEN America 5: Silences*.

[A]t some point during the conversation, Beckett told me that he had just finished translating *Mercier et Camier*, which was his first French novel; it had been written about twenty-five years earlier. I had read the book in French and liked it very much, and I said, 'A wonderful book.' I was just a kid, after all. I couldn't suppress my enthusiasm. Beckett shook his head and said, 'Oh no, no, not very good. In fact, I've cut out about twenty-five percent of the original. The English version's going to be a lot shorter than the French.' And I said (remember how young I was), 'Why would you do such a thing? It's a wonderful book. You shouldn't have taken a word out.' He shook his head and he said, 'No, no, not very good, not very good.' We went on to talk about other things, and then, out of the blue, ten or fifteen minutes later, apropos of nothing, he leaned forward across the table and he said to me, very earnestly, 'You really liked it, huh? You really thought it was good?' This was Samuel Beckett, remember. And not even he had any idea of what his work was worth. (Ibid.)

Auster's affection for the older writer is quite apparent here, as is his enthusiasm for the work, and the picture that emerges of Beckett – scrupulously self-doubting, humble to a fault – is very endearing. (This latter, though, is perhaps based on a mistaking of general aesthetic fastidiousness for diffidence: Bram van Velde recounts how, when he showed Beckett some of his paintings and indicated that he was rather pleased with them, Beckett replied, 'There's really no reason to be.'[93])

Of his first reading of Beckett (*Malone Dies*), Auster writes:

while I have no doubt that I am reading something important, something brilliant, a part of me resists it, and I walk away from the book feeling admiration but not love. This has often happened to me with the writers I care about most, the writers I consider to be great writers. Their work is so original, so utterly different from anything you have encountered before, that at first you don't know what to make of it.[94]

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[93] Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram van Velde*, trans. Tracy Cooke et al. (London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2009), 95.

[94] Paul Auster, Mountains to the Sea DLR Festival Address, Sept. 8, 2010, http://www.podcasters.tv/ episodes/the-beckett-address-12138461.html>.

Then he reads *Molloy*, and he is 'inside it, incredulous':

> By midsummer 1966, I have read every word Beckett has published: every novel, every story, every poem, every play. Imagine the joy, the demonic pleasure, the mad and improbable ecstasy that filled my nineteen-year-old heart when I stumbled across a passage like this one from *Watt* ['Personally, of course, I regret everything. Not a word, not a deed, not a thought …']. (Ibid.)

Auster singles out the delight occasioned by the reading of *Watt* for specific mention, with emphasis placed on the comedy of the novel. Further, he dwells on the significance of the technical and stylistic accomplishment of the writing, which so arrested his attention as a writer.

Auster claims that, 'I thought [Beckett] had solved the writing of prose' (ibid.), and the effect of this impression seems to have steered Auster away from any attempt intentionally to absorb or adopt the influence. Rather, he says that 'early on in my attempts to become a writer, I was almost crushed by him. The force of his brilliance and originality was something that I couldn't even see my way around.' While this comment testifies to Auster's admiration for the work, it may seem – made, as it is, in response to the question as to whether there is any direct influence of Beckett on his work – to lend support against concluding in the affirmative: he makes it clear that he felt it necessary to desist from trying to write before he'd sufficiently worked his way out from 'under the spell of Beckett'. Nevertheless, Auster continues, 'It was later, when I was about thirty, that I had the courage to start writing prose again, and by then I'd grown up enough not to feel intimidated. I wasn't thinking about Samuel Beckett then, or anybody else. I had my own things to say, but I think if there's any person who marked me, I can't think that it would be anyone but Beckett' (ibid.). These comments must, however, be read in light of subsequent autobiographical comments. In the collection of his correspondence with Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters (2008–2011)*, Auster makes his reluctance to accept the invitation to give the talk in which they were made clear.[95] The implication appears to be that the influence, such as it is, has been

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[95] Paul Auster and J.M. Coetzee, *Here and Now: Letters (2008–2011)* (London: Faber, 2013).

entirely subsumed into Auster's own fictional projects, and hence entirely worked through.

The influence remains apparent in the thematic concern with destitution and dismemberment, both physical and mental, and in the metafictional aspects of the cognitive games the fictions play; *The New York Trilogy* (1985–1986) displays this most clearly, but traces remain in later novels such as *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007). While not as obviously as is the case in Banville's and Coetzee's fictions, or to the same extent, Auster's prose also bears traces of the stylistic influence of Beckett's, in, for example, the spareness and uninflected tone of the narrative voice. There is a significant difference between Auster's fiction and that of the other three writers, though, in the relative absence of elements of the grotesque, to which topic I turn at a later point.

'our only duty – inexplicable and futile of attainment': J.M. Coetzee

J.M. Coetzee has consistently and frequently written and spoken on Beckett throughout his literary and academic career. This in itself is testament to the author's importance to the reclusive South African, who has displayed an increasing reluctance to give public lectures since achieving literary recognition. The fact that a significant percentage of the exceptions to this trend relate to Beckett would seem to indicate a particular affection for or interest in the Irish writer and his work.

A piece that in some ways sums up Coetzee's reception of Beckett's work and example is that published in *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett*.[96] Speculating on what might have happened had Beckett secured and accepted the position for which he applied at the University of Cape Town in 1937, and remained there until Coetzee enrolled as an undergraduate in 1957, Coetzee writes,

> Since I would have been no less resistant to adopting Professor Beckett or anyone
> else as a spiritual father than Professor Beckett would have been to adopting me
> as a spiritual son, I would in all likelihood have left South Africa once I had

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[96] James and Elizabeth Knowlson, eds, *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 74–76.

graduated – as indeed happened …. But I would certainly not have spent my time at the University of Texas labouring over a doctoral dissertation on Professor Beckett's prose style. (Ibid.)

There is something very apt about this being included in a book on Samuel Beckett subtitled 'Uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett and Memories of Those Who Knew Him': in this imagined history, Beckett might be Coetzee's very own Godot. I say that this is characteristic of Coetzee's reception of Beckett because this paradoxical affiliation by mutual refusal of affiliation – in imputing to Beckett a tendency toward dis-affiliation analogous to that he proclaims for himself, Coetzee implies a fundamental sympathy between the two – is a particularly clear articulation of a non-positionality and non-affiliation for which Coetzee takes his cue from Beckett but which, as could only be the case, he must then ultimately elaborate on in his own style. This elaboration was carried out through close study and much work, and is apparent in the development of Coetzee's early works.

Coetzee's first formal treatment of Beckett's work was his doctoral dissertation of 1969.[97] The thesis conducted a computer-based stylistic analysis of the English fiction, combining, in many ways, Coetzee's prior interests in linguistics, computer programming, and literature. While Coetzee has since questioned the method and procedures employed therein (saying of the project that 'we find precious little about Beckett that we might not have guessed' (*DP*, 21)), David Attwell identifies some of the major preoccupations of Coetzee's own fiction reflected in the aspects of *Watt* that are singled out for analysis. As Attwell puts it,

> The emphasis of Coetzee's observation, concentrating on Beckett's struggle with history – a struggle encoded in prose narrative – is characteristic of Coetzee's own work. … If history is a determining and circumscribing force, the question

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[97] J.M. Coetzee, 'The English Fiction of Samuel Beckett: An Essay in Stylistic Analysis' (PhD dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 1969).

remains, what form of life is available to prose narrative as it attempts to negotiate that determination and circumscription?[98]

Coetzee himself, though, has consistently characterized the main influence of Beckett on his writing as one arising from style, rhythm and 'sensuous' elements. As he puts it in an interview included in *Doubling the Point*, 'Beckett's prose, up to and including *The Unnamable*, has given me a sensuous response that hasn't dimmed over the years' (*DP*, 20). In the semi-autobiographical *Youth*, the protagonist John is described as finding his first reading of *Watt* 'so funny that he rolls about laughing. When he comes to the end he starts again at the beginning' (*Y*, 155). The sheer delight expressed in this statement provides strong evidence for the fact that, as Derek Attridge points out, Coetzee's immediate, and enduring, response has been not to 'the famous negativity that is so often taken to be Beckett's trademark' but rather 'the Irish author's handling of language', his style.[99]

Coetzee says, of his dissertation and other academic essays written early in his career,[100]

> Beckett has meant a great deal to me in my own writing – that must be obvious. Most writers absorb influence through their skin. With me there has also been a more conscious process of absorption. … The essays I wrote on Beckett's style aren't only academic exercises, in the colloquial sense of the word. They are also attempts to get closer to a secret, a secret of Beckett's that I wanted to make my own. (*DP*, 25)

This secret is one of style, of, perhaps most especially, rhythm ('the deepest lessons one learns from other writers are, I suspect, matters of rhythm, broadly conceived'[101]), and is something Coetzee considers thoroughgoing:

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[98] David Attwell, *J.M. Coetzee: South Africa and the Politics of Writing* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993), 10.

[99] Derek Attridge, 'Sex, Comedy and Influence: Coetzee's Beckett', in *J.M. Coetzee in Context and Theory*, ed. Elleke Boehmer et al. (London: Continuum, 2009), 74.

[100] These are, in addition to the PhD thesis, 'Samuel Beckett's *Lessness*: An Exercise in Decomposition', *Computers and the Humanities 7* (1973); 'Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style', *Theoria 41* (1973); 'The Comedy of Point of View in Beckett's *Murphy*', *Critique 12*.2 (1969).

a style, an attitude to the world, as it soaks in, becomes part of the personality, part of the self, ultimately indistinguishable from the self. To put it another way: in the process of responding to the writers one intuitively chooses to respond to, one makes oneself into the person whom in the most intractable but also perhaps the most deeply ethical sense one wants to be. (Ibid.)

This affinity is, however, restricted to specific periods of Beckett's work. Coetzee esteems the trilogy and the late prose highly, but differs in his evaluation of the work of the period between these two. His primary objection is to the increasingly 'mechanical' nature of the application of the principle of reduction: Coetzee talks of 'the corner into which [Beckett] had painted himself in *The Unnamable*' and claims that, in the works of the 1960s and '70s, 'the interrogation of the trapped, *geworfen* self ha[s] a mechanical quality, as though it were accepted from the beginning that the questioning was futile.'[102] In contrast,

with *Company* (1980), *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), and *Worstward Ho* (1983), we emerge into clearer water. The prose is suddenly more expansive, even, by Beckettian standards, genial. … [T]here is in these late pieces a sense that individual existence is a genuine mystery worth exploring. The quality of thought and of language remains as scrupulous as ever, but there is a new element of the personal, even the autobiographical: the memories that float into the mind of the speaker clearly come from the early childhood of Samuel Beckett himself, and these are treated with a certain wonder and tenderness. … The key Beckettian word 'on', which had earlier had a quality of grinding hopelessness to it ('I can't go on, I'll go on') begins to take on a new meaning, if not of hope, then at least of courage. (Ibid.)

The strength of the influence also appears clearly to wane over the course of Coetzee's career. Coetzee frames this in terms reminiscent of Eliot's attitude to

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[101] Coetzee, 'Homage'.
[102] J.M. Coetzee, 'Samuel Beckett, the Short Fiction' [2010], in *Inner Workings: Essays 2000–2005* (London: Vintage, 2008), 171.

influence,[103] describing his early engagement with Beckett's writing as involving a desire to make the above mentioned 'secret … my own …. And discard, eventually, as it is with influences' (*DP*, 25). *Here and Now: Letters (2008–2011)* is instructive in this regard. Coetzee there writes,

> I'll be attending a conference on Samuel Beckett in the UK next month.[104] Foolishly I consented to do an e-mail interview with one of the organizers beforehand, on the subject of my relations with Beckett. As he and I are discovering, I don't have anything new to say about Beckett and perhaps don't even have a relation with him. I certainly wouldn't be the kind of writer I am if Beckett had never been born, but that sort of debt – call it a debt, for want of a better word – is best not scrutinized. I'd rather simply pay my silent respects at the SB shrine or the SB temple (I've never visited the SB gravestone).[105]

In the lecture 'Eight Ways of Looking at Beckett', Coetzee compares Beckett's writing, in which alterity is largely an internal aspect of consciousness and subjectivity, and in which the world thus depicted is extensively solipsistic, with Melville's depiction of Ahab and his encounter with the natural other. There, Coetzee wonders what would have happened if someone who wrote with Beckett's 'anguished, teeth-gnashing … comedy' had had the 'imaginative courage to dream up the whale' – to, in other words, engage with the external other, 'the brain that comes from another universe of discourse, thinking thoughts according to its own nature, beyond malign, beyond benign, thoughts inconceivable, incommensurate with human thought'.[106]

Patrick Hayes argues that Coetzee is here thinking of himself, and of his combination of Beckett's mordant style with a more embodied and situated narrative voice and theme, of the 'critical assimilation in which the prose style … is brought

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[103] As described in 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Essays, 1917–1932* (London: Faber, 1932).
[104] This was the 'Samuel Beckett: Out of the Archive' conference held in York in June 2011. The interview is by Lawrence Rainey, David Attwell, and Benjamin Madden, 'An Interview with J. M. Coetzee', *Modernism / Modernity, 18*.4 (Nov. 2011).
[105] Paul Auster and J.M. Coetzee, *Here and Now*.
[106] Coetzee, 'Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui 19* (2008): 24.

together with a more expansive and politicized definition of what is at stake in the "nothing."'[107] Coetzee's antipathy to the works of the middle period is related to this: he objects to the 'disembodied' nature of the works, saying,

> Beckett's later short fictions have never really held my attention. They are, quite
> literally, disembodied. *Molloy* was still a very embodied work. Beckett's first
> after-death book was *The Unnamable*. But the after-death voice there still has
> body, and in that sense was only halfway to what he must have been feeling his
> way toward. The late pieces speak in post-mortem voices. I am not there yet. I am
> still interested in how the voice moves the body, moves in the body. (*DP*, 23)

Nevertheless, those of Beckett's works which aroused Coetzee's interest have exercised a deep and lasting influence on his fiction. In what seems a significant admission, he claims, 'As soon as I began reading Beckett I knew I was reading someone whose sensitivity to the nuances of weight, coloration, provenance, and history of individual words was superior to mine'.[108] Elsewhere he states,

> Beckett was an artist possessed by a vision of life without consolation or dignity
> or promise of grace, in the face of which our only duty – inexplicable and futile
> of attainment, but a duty nonetheless – is not to lie to ourselves. It was a vision to
> which he gave expression in language of a virile strength and intellectual subtlety
> that marks him as one of the great prose stylists of the twentieth century.[109]

The extent to which such statements are applicable to Coetzee's own work is perhaps an indication of the way Beckett has influenced it.

'not progress, optimism or delusions, but words alone': John Banville

A striking similarity between John Banville and Samuel Beckett is their shared expression of reservations about the conduciveness of their own, Irish culture and

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[107] Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, 50.
[108] Coetzee, 'Homage'
[109] Coetzee, 'Samuel Beckett, the Late Fiction', 172–3.

society to their pursuit of their art. Beckett, disillusioned by the often conservative, programmatic attitude to art in Ireland, spent most of his adult life in Paris, while Banville has claimed that the fact that he happens to live in Dublin is entirely accidental. Banville has also repeatedly rejected any claims that his writing is in some essential way 'Irish', preferring to think of himself as situated within a more cosmopolitan, primarily European, culture of letters. He has said, for example, that 'I feel part of my culture. But it's purely a personal culture gleaned from bits and pieces of European culture of four thousand years. It's purely something I have manufactured.'[110]

The question as to the extent to which Banville can be said to belong to a specifically Irish canon and tradition has been highly contested, which I will address at greater length at a later point in this study. For the moment, it is sufficient to quote the author's views on the attitude to language he considers characteristic of Irish people in order to assess the extent to which Beckett's and Banville's shared heritage plays a part in any affinity that may exist. Banville, in a talk given at Iowa University in 1981, claims that,

> The writer's problem with language, if problem it be, is nicely illustrated in the case of Ireland. … For the Irish, language is not primarily a tool for expressing what we mean. Sometimes I think it is quite the opposite. We have profound misgivings about words. We love them – all too passionately, some of us – but we do not trust them. … What I am talking about is something subversive, destructive even, and in a way profoundly despairing. Listen to any group of Irish people conversing, from whatever class, in whatever circumstances, and behind the humour and the rhetoric and the slyness you will detect a dark note of hopelessness before the phenomenon of a world that is always out there.[111]

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[110] Ronan Sheehan, 'Novelists on the Novel: Ronan Sheehan Talks to John Banville and Francis Stuart', *Crane Bag 3*.1 (1979): 76.

[111] John Banville, 'A Talk', *Irish University Review 11*.1 (Spring, 1981). The potentially essentialist slant of this statement makes for interesting comparison with Coetzee's claim that Beckett's particular brand of comedy, which he sought to imitate when younger, was finally inaccessible to him because of the 'Irishness of the whole project' (Rainey, Attwell and Madden, 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee').

The attitude to language spelt out here is highly applicable to both Banville's and Beckett's fiction, and serves as a useful point of entry into consideration of the writers' relationships to their homeland, and the effect of their homeland on their fiction.

Banville claims to have read *Molloy* '[v]ery early on', and says 'it was a great revelation to me – the idea that a writer could speak in such a completely self-absorbed way, not dealing with characters or human interests – the usual stock-in-trade of the novelist. It was great to discover that linguistic beauty could be pursued as an end in itself.'[112] Growing up in Ireland, and given the sort of fiction he would come to write, Banville would almost certainly have been aware of Beckett as a prominent literary figure from a very young age. As he puts the matter, 'for Irish writers … our literary forebears are enormous. They stand behind us like Easter Island statues, and we keep trying to measure up to them, leaping towards heights we can't possibly reach. I suppose that's a good thing, but it makes for a painful early life for the writer' (ibid.). Among such difficulties must almost certainly be counted *Nightspawn* (1971), Banville's first novel, which the author has claimed 'is very much influenced by Beckett. Much too much so.'[113]

A point related to this is Banville's comment about Joyce and Beckett expressed in interview with Hedwig Schwall. While altogether too unequivocal – and, finally, reductive – to be entirely reliable, as Derek Hand points out,[114] the attitude outlined therein serves well to highlight Banville's own conception of the lineage of his fiction. Having claimed that 'every Irish writer has to' follow either Joyce or Beckett, Banville asserts: 'I go in a Beckettian direction.'[115]

John Kenny differs with Banville on this point, arguing that the author is 'the true inheritor of two distinct Irish literary traditions represented by James Joyce on the

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[112] Belinda McKeon, 'John Banville: The Art of Fiction', *Paris Review 188* (Spring 2009), http://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/5907/the-art-of-fiction-no-200-john-banville

[113] Rüdiger Imhof, 'An Interview with John Banville', *Irish University Review 11*.1 (Spring 1981): 11.

[114] Derek Hand, *John Banville: Exploring Fictions* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2002), 12.

[115] Hedwig Schwall, 'An Interview with John Banville', *The European English Messenger 6*.1 (1997): 17. A good discussion of the question of the significance of the influence of these two forebears, as well as a thorough gloss of the prior scholarship on it, is provided in Kersti Tarien Powell, '"Not a Son but a Survivor": Beckett … Joyce … Banville', *The Yearbook of English Studies 35* (2005).

one hand and Samuel Beckett on the other'.[116] While I don't think a reading of Banville's novels supports this contention particularly well – as will be spelt out in greater detail in later sections – there can be little doubt that Joyce has been an important, and formidable, presence throughout Banville's career. Indeed, a compelling argument for a distinctly Bloomian (Harold, that is, not his 'amiable namesake' Leopold[117]) case of anxiety of influence could be made on the basis of Banville's own comments: 'When I think of Joyce I am split in two. To one side there falls the reader, kneeling speechless in filial admiration, and love; to the other side, however, the writer stands, gnawing his knuckles, not a son, but a survivor'.[118]

Banville's understanding of these two differing directions closely resembles Beckett's view of his own response and relationship to Joyce's work. Joyce, according to Beckett, aspires to an encyclopaedic completion, an art which progressively intensifies expressive significance.[119] His own work, in contrast, he considers an exercise in reduction: the work proceeds by way of a systematic stripping away of expressed content and expressive possibility. This point of view is perhaps most explicitly laid out in the much quoted 'Three Dialogues' with George Duthuit. There, Beckett articulates a vision of an art which, rather than aspiring toward 'more authentic, more ample, less exclusive relations between represener and representee',[120] takes as its starting point – and goal – the 'expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express' (ibid., 103).

Banville, similarly, claims that, while Joyce's work consists in 'a triumphant acceptance of the world, a feat of inclusivity which bestows its epiphanic glare equally

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[116] Hand, *Exploring Fictions*, 12.

[117] Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (London: Fourth Estate, 2008), 520.

[118] John Banville, 'Survivors of Joyce', in *James Joyce: The Artist and the Labyrinth*, ed. Augustin Martin (London: Ryan, 1990), 74.

[119] This, incidentally, is also Derrida's view. See *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham UP, 1997): 'I have often compared Joyce's *Ulysses* to … for instance, Hegel's *Encyclopedia* …. It is an attempt to read the absolute knowledge through a single act of memory; this being possible only by loading every sentence, every word with a maximum of equivocalities, of possibilities, of virtual associations, that is, by making this organic linguistic totality as rich as possible.'

[120] Samuel Beckett, 'Three Dialogues', in *Proust and the Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: Calder, 1965), 125.

upon the mystery of the Trinity and advertisements for Bile Beans',[121] Beckett's art depends 'not on Joycean richness and playfulness, but on deliberate shrinkage of material and elimination of literary ornament, an art that sought its apotheosis in failure.'[122] Given this, it seems only logical that '[a] large part of Beckett's inspiration was a set of technical problems, one of which was how to get the maximum effect from the minimum of means. … After Auschwitz, said Adorno, the writing of poetry is a scandal. Yes, Beckett might have added, and it was thus also *before* Auschwitz. To speak at all is to overstate.'[123]

The extent to which the sentiment of the final sentence above expresses Banville's own convictions is evidenced by his statement, in a eulogy for Beckett, that '[a]ll literary artists in their heart want to write about nothing, to make an autonomous art, independent of circumstance. (The artist, as Kafka puts it, is the man who has *nothing to say*)',[124] and accounts for the integral influence of Beckett's work on his prose. The tensions and stylistic pressure exerted by the attempt to write narrative in full mind of the implications of such a point of view – of having nothing to express, and nothing with which to express, along with the obligation to express – inform and shape Banville's work as profoundly as they do Beckett's.

Banville's early novels, until at least *The Newton Letter* (1982), must strictly be said to depict such a condition rather than to enact it, as Beckett's mature fiction does. However, a shift initiated in the Frames trilogy is completed with the novels of the 'late period' (as John Kenny characterizes it, beginning with *Eclipse*).[125] This change is largely made possible by the move from the third-person narrative, in novels such as *Doctor Copernicus* and *Kepler* (1981), to the first-person of subsequent ones, and the possibilities thus afforded for a style of narrative in which the imperative to go on and the impossibility of doing so are inextricably interwoven, in which the simultaneous need for and impossibility of narrative can be enacted through the self-reflexive, myopic

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[121] John Banville, 'Samuel Beckett Dies in Paris aged 83', *Irish Times*, Dec. 27, 1989: 18.
[122] John Banville, 'The Painful Comedy of Samuel Beckett', *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 14, 1996.
[123] John Banville, 'Waiting for the Last Word', *Observer*, Dec. 31, 1989; emphasis original.
[124] Banville, 'Samuel Beckett Dies in Paris aged 83'.
[125] John Kenny, *John Banville* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2009), xxii.

doubling backs of memory and fabrication. (It is worth remembering that in Beckett's case this particular effect was also achieved only after a number of experiments with various, similar, techniques, such as, for example, *Murphy*, and involved the significant step of beginning to write in French.) Banville's admiration for the fidelity with which Beckett engages this conundrum is obvious. As he puts it, 'The result, especially in the trilogy, in Godot and in the last, highly condensed texts from *Company* onward, is one of the most profound, sustained artistic explorations of the enigma of human life and death that world literature has yet produced.'[126]

While a number of Banville's comments about Beckett indicate that he considers the older writer's career a paradigmatic example of the committed artistic life, the above comment sheds light on the question as to which stages of Beckett's work resonate most deeply with the later writer. In an evaluation similar in many respects to that of Coetzee, Banville excludes the works written between the trilogy and *Company* (1980) from this particularly elevated praise. Of these, he writes 'After … *How It Is* (1961), the texts became shorter and shorter as the author pared down his material, until he achieved a kind of "white-out" in such pieces as *Imagination Dead Imagine* (1966), and *All Strange Away* (1976)'. [127] Unlike Coetzee, however, he does not express any particular or systematic objection to the fiction of this period. Rather, he writes,

> The effort, the concentration, the risk involved in this continuing throwing-out of literary ballast provided a rare and exemplary instance of artistic good faith. Throughout the 1960s and the 1970s devoted Beckett readers greeted each successively shorter volume from the master with a mixture of awe and apprehensiveness; it was like watching a great mathematician wielding an infinitesimal calculus, his equations approaching nearer and still nearer to the null point. Surely after *this*, we would say, the only possible advance will be into total silence at last. … Yet somehow Beckett always found an escape route, no matter how strait the tunnel or how bleak the view at the end of it. (Ibid.)

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[126] Banville, 'The Painful Comedy of Samuel Beckett'.
[127] John Banville, 'The Last Word', *New York Review of Books*, Aug. 13, 1992, http://www.nybooks.com/articles/ archives/1992/aug/13/the-last-word/. The misleading dates provided (*All Strange Away* (1964) preceded *Imagination Dead Imagination* (1965)) are Banville's own.

This is a particularly good encapsulation of the admiration mentioned above, the appreciation for the 'good faith' with which Beckett adhered to his aesthetic convictions.

Banville refers explicitly to Beckett's influence on himself and his generation of writers as 'a model of probity and tenacity which is a secret source of strength in an age when literature itself seems under threat',[128] and writes elsewhere,

> He was an example to us all – I wonder if he realized just what an example he was to my generation of writers? I hope he did. We have to struggle with him, as the son must always struggle with the father to be free, but, if he had not been there, an abiding presence, we would have found it that much harder to resist the threats and blandishments of a debased time. (Ibid.)

There are obvious similarities here to Bloom's account of literary influence in the allusion to the struggle of father and son, and the stages through which Banville's relationship to Beckett's work has proceeded – thrall, rejection, modulated relation – appear to chart the dialectic of such an engagement.[129] It is perhaps because of this that, of the three later writers considered in this thesis, Banville exhibits the most consistent and thoroughgoing influence of Beckett's work. Nevertheless, according to Banville, at least, admiration is one thing, but, '[f]or an artist to influence, in a positive, organic way, those who come after him, he must first of all be loved',[130] and it is this response (in contrast, for paradigm example, to that to Joyce discussed above), that seems the most salient aspect of the response.

Of the various stages of Beckett's work, the late prose is singled out as most strongly eliciting such a response. Banville considers the works from *Company* until Beckett's death 'the pinnacle of his art' and 'one of the most beautiful, profound, and moving testaments in the literature of [the twentieth] century.'[131] While there is still an eye on the technical ingenuity of 'finding new strategies to get around the silence' in this attitude (ibid.), Banville seems to accord these works this importance far more as a

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[128] 'The Last Word'
[129] Ingo Berensmeyer argues for this in *John Banville: Fictions of Order* (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2000), 75–6.
[130] John Banville, 'The Dead Father', *Irish University Review 12*.1 (1982).
[131] Banville, 'The Last Word'

result of their having moved beyond, or found a new way through, the process of diminution to establish a mode in which sentiments of community and belonging – however attenuated – can be voiced. In these late works, Banville contends, Beckett found 'a new access of inspiration … a final efflorescence' (ibid.). Importantly, however, Banville claims – with reference to the often overlooked lyricism of certain passages of the earlier work, and the significant fact, so crucial to the tone of the works, that 'Beckett's narrators, even in their worst extremes of anguish, profess a deep fondness for the world' – that 'the fictions of the 1980s represent no real change of direction but merely an intensification of concerns that were always present but repressed in favour of the ferocity of Beckett's sensibility in the immediate postwar period' (ibid.).

Understanding the nature of these concerns, of which the late works represent such an intensification, elucidates Banville's major debt to and inheritance from Beckett. In response to the question 'What do they *mean*, these strange, fraught, desperate fictions?', Banville claims:

> I believe that all of Beckett's work, from the fumblings of the hapless Belacqua in *More Pricks than Kicks* to the final, benighted groping for speech in 'what is the word', is first and fore-most a critique of language, of the deceptiveness of words, and of our illusions about what we can express and the value of expression, and that it was his genius to produce out of such an enterprise these moving, disconsolate, and scrupulously crafted works. (Ibid.)

The preoccupation with expression, its modes, means and ends, is one that is central to all of Banville's fiction, and relates to the salient lesson he learns from Beckett's work. Beckett's 'supreme achievement', for Banville, 'was to have shown us that the horror and cruelty of the world … can be redeemed through the beauty and power of language – language and nothing more, not progress, optimism or delusions, but words alone.'[132] This observation, I feel, goes much of the way toward explaining the extent to which the influence of Beckett's work on the writers with which this study is concerned is a matter of style.

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[132] John Banville, 'Beginnings', *Hibernia*, Jan. 7, 1977, 32.

'style makes the man'

As Coetzee has observed, much of the force of Beckett's work derives from the absurdity inherent in a dualist account of the relationship between mind and body, coupled with the impossibility of not, to some extent, ascribing to such an account.[133] In Coetzee's work too, as well as the novels of Banville considered in this study, the incommensurability of the body and its passions with the dictates of reason are central preoccupations. Auster's work, in contrast, is highly cerebral, and the concerns from which its effects are derived can most properly be said to be epistemological. (This is not to say that such epistemological concerns are not present in the other two writers' engagements with Beckett, but rather that the emphasis accorded these elements varies.)

Nevertheless, Auster's work depicts and enacts processes of undoing to as great an extent as these others, and the style whereby this is carried out functions in analogous ways. As Coetzee says of Beckett, in terms I think applicable to all the writers under consideration here, the work is comprised of 'an energy of quite a savage order, under the control of a syntax of the utmost lucidity. The thought was like a ravening dog; the prose was like a taut leash.'[134] (Banville describes the narrative register of *The Newton Letter*, in terms applicable to his entire oeuvre, and especially the late period, as 'a very poised voice, a perfectly controlled tone relating something that's completely chaotic.')[135] To some extent, this effect derives from a contrast between substance and style, which allows the processes of stripping away and undoing performed by the works to be carried out without sentimentality or melodrama. There is however another sense in which the technique enacts precisely that which it describes, or rather, in Beckett's work, the enacting is precisely that which is enacted; style is substance.[136] Although the nature of the chaos figured forth in Auster's work, the locus of the destitution, may

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[133] J.M. Coetzee, 'Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett'.

[134] Coetzee, 'Homage'.

[135] Fintan O'Toole, 'Stepping into the Limelight – and the Chaos', *Irish Times*, Oct. 21, 1989.

[136] I derive the particularly apt term 'undoing' from Stanley Gontarski's *The Intent of Undoing in the Dramatic Works of Samuel Beckett* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985).

differ from that of these other authors, such a juxtaposition plays as central a role in his prose as it does in Beckett's, Banville's or Coetzee's.

Furthermore, the metastylistic lesson Auster learns from Beckett's prose has much in common with Coetzee's assertion, quoted above, about the way in which influences become, in some ways, part of the make-up of the self. For example, Auster claims that Beckett's work evidences 'the morality of a good sentence, the dignity of a good sentence, the effort it takes to write a good sentence, and the truth that has to be radiating inside you in order to do it well.'[137] In this sense, it is clear that the influence extends beyond matters of theme and style to encompass something akin to the notion of comportment alluded to above.

This is further substantiated by Auster's understanding of the trajectory of the development of Beckett's fiction. He claims, for example, that,

> Beckett, who begins with little, ends with even less. The movement in each of his works is toward a kind of unburdening, by which he leads us to the limits of experience, to a place where aesthetic and moral judgments become inseparable. This is the itinerary of the characters in his books, and it has also been his own progress as a writer. (Ibid.)

Such an inseparability of aesthetic and moral judgment is implicit in the style itself, in the principals of reduction of means and renunciation of ornament. Thus, while Beckett's influence on Auster is that of style at a second degree – because, as he, and other writers, put it, Beckett's is 'a style so distinctive that it resists all attempts at imitation' (ibid.) – it is nevertheless, by his own admission, present, in similar ways and to similar effect as in the fiction of Coetzee and Banville: in the sense of the almost ethical significance of style, in the commitment to an art that eschews delusion and false hope in favour of a stringent and thorough interrogation of the act of narrative itself, and

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[137] Auster, Mountains to the Sea address.

in the taut, sparse, essentially humble narrative voice which is at all times certain only of its own uncertainty.[138]

The emphasis Auster, Banville and Coetzee place on the question of style in discussing Beckett's influence may seem ironic when Beckett's own claim that he chose to begin writing in French because it is a language 'without style'[139] is borne in mind. While there is, as Auster points out,[140] an element of playfulness in this comment, the development of Beckett's prose from *Murphy* to *The Unnamable* nevertheless consists largely in a conscious and consistent eschewal of the resources of conventionally poetic language in an attempt to attain as thoroughly prosaic, non-associative a register as possible. Such a project, in fact and in practice, actually coincides by and large with the attempt to write without style, and it is thus, at first glance, peculiar that these later writers single this out as among the most significant of Beckett's legacies.

There is something profoundly paradoxical about this. Various comments Beckett made on his decision to write in French support the contention that it involved an escape from the figural resources of language: he is recorded as having said that the problem with English for him was that he 'couldn't help writing poetry in it',[141] and, coinciding as it did with his realization that his preferred mode, in contrast to Joyce's hyper-referential intensification, lay 'in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding',[142] the shift can thus also be understood to be a way of bringing this about. While such would probably be the case for any writer choosing to work in any non-native language, the specificity of French with respect to this is foreshadowed in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932):

> The uniform, horizontal writing, flowing without accidence, of the man with a
> style, never gives you the margarita. But the writing of, say, Racine or Malherbe,

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[138] Beckett's own early views on style in the novel, expressed in his lectures on French literature at Trinity College Dublin in 1930 and '31, make for fascinating comparison with these statements (as recorded in Brigitte Le Juez, *Beckett before Beckett*).

[139] Cited in Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 324.

[140] Auster, Mountains to the Sea address.

[141] Beckett to Richard Coe, cited in Sinead Mooney, 'Beckett in French and English', in S.E. Gontarski, ed., *A Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 196.

[142] Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 352.

perpendicular, diamanté, is pitted, is it not, and sprigged with sparkles; the flints and pebbles are there, no end of humble tags and commonplaces. They have no style, they write without style, do they not, they give you the phrase, the sparkle, the precious margaret. Perhaps only the French can do it. Perhaps only the French language can give you the thing you want.[143]

A useful way into an understanding of what I take these writers to be talking about in this regard is Coetzee's comment, quoted above, about the ethical dimension of the question of style for an author. Coetzee equates 'style' with 'an attitude to the world',[144] which I see as corresponding to an idea of Adorno's, often repeated in *Aesthetic Theory*, and thereby to Beckett's, Kafka's and Banville's assertions about the artist being someone with nothing to say. Adorno writes, 'Although art in its innermost essence is a comportment, it cannot be isolated from expression, and there is no expression without a subject. The transition to the discursively recognized universal by which the politically reflecting particular subject hopes to escape atomization and powerlessness is in the aesthetic sphere a desertion to heteronomy.'[145]

I take Adorno here to mean by 'comportment' something analogous to Coetzee's 'attitude to the world', an orientation of subjectivity toward others and objects. The definitive feature of aesthetic comportment, for Adorno, lies in the way it differs from instrumental rationality's *telos* of domination: aesthetic comportment is a bearing that does away with the 'principle of the I, that internal agent of repression' by undermining the strict polarities of subject and object (ibid., 246). However, because art 'cannot be isolated from expression', the work of art and the artist are thus re-inscribed in, and re-inscribe, the discourse and systems whereby the 'internal agent of repression' is instituted. This is why the 'transition to the discursively recognized universal', while absolutely necessary, 'is in the aesthetic sphere a desertion to heteronomy.' (This may also be a useful gloss of Beckett's credo, 'Fail better'.)

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[143] Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (New York: Arcade, 1992. Kindle Edition), chap. 2.

[144] Coetzee, 'Homage'.

[145] Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 42.

A more specifically literary articulation of this interaction is to be found in Blanchot's 'The Gaze of Orpheus'. In this essay, Blanchot characterizes the verbal artist's work as the attempt to bring something fundamentally and essentially non-discursive into discourse, to bring, as he puts it, the essence of darkness, 'the *other* night, concealment which becomes visible', to light.[146] The attempt is one that necessarily fails: 'All we can sense of inspiration is failure, all we can recognize of it is misguided violence' (ibid., 102).

> But if inspiration means that Orpheus fails and Eurydice is lost twice over, if it means the insignificance and void of the night, it also turns Orpheus towards that failure and that insignificance and coerces him, by an irresistible impulse, as though giving up on failure were much more serious than giving up on success, as though what we call the insignificant, the mistaken, could reveal itself – to someone who accepted the risk and freely gave himself up to it – as the source of all authenticity. (Ibid.)

Hence, following Adorno's and Blanchot's analyses of the operations of aesthetic creation, what demands expression is that which, by definition, cannot be expressed, and any expressive power one may hope for arises from the failure to express it. This is the sense in which 'the artist is the person who has nothing to say'. Coetzee's fiction depicts and enacts this process particularly well, in, for example, novels such as *The Master of Petersburg* (1994) and *Waiting for the Barbarians*, in which the instigating force for narration is the pressing sense of the need to give voice to that which exceeds and undermines discourse.

Style, I argue, can be conceived of as the literary manifestation of aesthetic comportment, the trace of that bearing which, fundamentally antithetical to 'the discursively recognized universal', attempts to find expression therein.[147] This is also

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[146] Maurice Blanchot, 'The Gaze of Orpheus', 100.

[147] I here follow primarily Coetzee in this use of the term ('Samuel Beckett and the Temptations of Style', 'Homage' and *Doubling the Point*, 25), applying the theoretical framework used here to expand on and extrapolate from it. The sense in which Coetzee uses the term is similar to what Roland Barthes intends by 'writing' in *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), and there is every likelihood that Coetzee's thought was directly influenced by Barthes's: he holds up 'the

the origin of those resources of figuration and, in Beckett's case particularly, disfiguration of 'ordinary' language whereby the literary achieves its effects. Something of the role this would come to play in Beckett's writing was indicated in the 'German Letter of 1937'. Here, the young writer articulated his emerging sense of the way formal innovations that had been implemented in music and the visual arts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries needed to find an equivalent in literature:

> 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. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. … To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.[148]

While it is important to note that he would later describe this as 'German bilge'[149] (an attitude not unusual among the older writers' pronouncements on his own writing), this statement of intent is indicative of the ideas that informed Beckett's earlier efforts. On a basis of a reading of the texts themselves, such a project appears to animate the work up to and including *The Unnamable* at least in part. The portion of the letter from which the above quotation is taken begins with Beckett claiming, 'It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English'.[150] Along with the claim that his decision to begin writing in French was motivated by the fact that one 'can't help writing poetry in it', the more extensive explanation he gave Lawrence Harvey of this point makes clearer the connection between such preoccupations and the

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play of signs, the endlessness of writing' as a force for good in contrast to religious fundamentalism (Anton Harber, 'South Africa: Clash of the Booker Titans', *Mail & Guardian*, May 28, 2013, http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/23/salman-rushdie-nadine-gordimer-jm-coetzee). This view links such concerns with style with Derrida's point, quoted in the introduction, about literature and democracy.

[148] Samuel Beckett, 'German Letter of 1937', trans. Martin Esslin, in *Disjecta* (New York: Grove, 1984), 202.

[149] Ruby Cohn, notes to Beckett, *Disjecta*, 201.

[150] Beckett, 'German Letter', 202.

question of literality in style: 'French represented a form of weakness by comparison with his mother tongue. Besides English because of its very richness holds out the temptation to rhetoric and virtuosity …. The relative asceticism seemed more appropriate to the expression of being, undeveloped, unsupported, somewhere in the depths of the microcosm'.[151] Beckett's attempt to write 'without style' is hence connected to a desire to eschew the figurative and rhetorical resources of language in favour of a greater and greater linguistic impoverishment and disfiguration.

The significance of such disfiguration in Beckett's writing relates to the fact that an extensive portion of its effects, both bathetic and pathetic, arise from the subversion of literary discourse and of figure and idiom that has calcified into cliché. Beckett's narrators apprehend the world and use language in a weirdly literal manner, uncanny in the ways it brings the foundations of tropes and habits of speech, and thought, taken to be perspicuous under scrutiny, thus making the familiarity of the conventions of language strange. As Elizabeth Barry puts it, Beckett's narrators' 'incomprehension or misunderstanding of this verbal phenomenon [cliché] often results in their understanding its metaphors literally and so making revealingly inappropriate use of it. This in turn disarms the cliché's rhetorical power and questions its initial premise.'[152] A result of this is that '[s]uch language no longer passes for second nature' (ibid., 20).

This technique, if that is not too mechanical a term for something the significance of which extends well beyond the strictly technical, is also central to the stylistic effects of Auster's, Banville's and Coetzee's writing. Banville's writing is saturated with a linguistic hyper-awareness of this sort that sees through habitual uses of language that pass for 'second nature' to a more uncanny double of this that shadows it (as Barry (ibid.) and Cavell (discussed in more detail below) argue a literal apprehension of language is able to do).[153] The extraordinary refinement of the phrasing, diction and rhythm contributes to it, as does his choice of intensely cerebral, self-conscious narrator-

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[151] Lawrence Harvey, *Samuel Beckett, Poet and Critic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1970), 196.
[152] Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006), 4.
[153] Stanley Cavell, 'Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*', in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: CUP, 1976).

protagonists. Among the funniest and most poignant aspects of Banville's writing stem from the potential of speech to lead its users into absurdity. The protagonist of *Shroud* (2002), Axel Vander, catching himself thinking that he has lost someone 'for good', observes 'for good: how the language mocks us' (*S*, 372). Max Morden, the protagonist and narrator of *The Sea* (2005), exhibits similar turns of thought. A portion of his narration proceeds, 'When exactly I transferred my affections – how incorrigibly fond I am of these old-fashioned formulations! – from mother to daughter I cannot recollect' (*TS*, 140), and his discourse is peppered with puns and word play: 'canine's canines' (49), 'transparent parents' (35), 'unsuitable suitor' (67).

Despite such playfulness and humour, however, Morden's relationship to language, like Vander's and that of the protagonist of *Eclipse*, Alexander Cleave, is fundamentally awkward and disoriented: he spends his day in seclusion pretending to write a monograph on Bonnard, 'about whom', he says, 'I long ago came to realize, I have nothing of any originality to say', and regularly punctuates his musings with comments, apropos of nothing specified, such as 'Plimsoll. Now there is a word one does not hear anymore, or rarely, very rarely' and 'Stangury. Nice word' (*TS*, 11 & 23).

The equivalent of this in Coetzee's work, focused to a much greater extent on the interpersonal than the intrapersonal as it is, is the attention language demands when its functions in communication – or, more commonly, miscommunication – bring it into unusual prominence and proximity. Importantly, it is precisely such proximity to language, as in the examples in Banville's writing cited above, that is the very cause of the obscurity, or obtuseness, which prevents it from passing as second nature. In *Disgrace* (1999), for example, professor of modern languages and, following the rationalization of the academy, 'communication' David Lurie thinks, in response to another character's use of the word 'benefactor': 'A distasteful word, it seems to him, double-edged, souring the moment. Yet can Petrus be blamed? The language he draws on with such aplomb is, if he only knew it, tired, friable, eaten from the inside as if by termites. Only the monosyllables can still be relied on, and not even all of them' (*D*, 129). In a similar manner, the magistrate, protagonist of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, recounts an exchange that proceeds, '"I ask", I continue, "only because if you get lost it

becomes our task to find you and bring you back to civilization." We pause, savouring from our different positions the ironies of the word' (*WB*, 12).

In both of these examples, language, or a specific language, is represented as impeding the possibility of communication and communion. This is symptomatic of an ontological fact, an inevitable consequence of what and who we are, and points to the aporia of relating to others through conceptual categories. (As Lurie's daughter tells him, 'You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can't help you' (*D*, 112).) Nevertheless, the central position language occupies in the constitution of which these are consequences means that it can be, and often is, treated as interchangeable with, or at least among the primary causes of, the estrangement it serves to indicate.

A similar process is carried out in Paul Auster's work on a slightly more conceptual, cognitive level. Here, habits of thought and perception are subjected to a scrutiny that renders the procedures whereby obscurity is ordinarily relieved themselves the source of ineluctable obscurity. The author's use of the detective novel is itself a subversion of the faith in the efficacy of reason espoused by the genre, and his protagonists' attempts to interpret the world or others flounder in a rapidly proliferating multiplicity of possible plausible meanings. Daniel Quinn, protagonist of *City of Glass*, for example, having been employed to tail a character, reviews his work after a period of time and becomes 'deeply disillusioned':

> He had always imagined that the key to good detective work was a close observation of details. The more accurate the scrutiny, the more successful the results. The implication was that human behaviour could be understood, that beneath the infinite façade of gestures, tics, and silences, there was finally a coherence, an order, a source of motivation. But after struggling to take in all these surface effects, Quinn felt no closer to Stillman than when he first started following him. He had lived Stillman's life, walked at his pace, seen what he had seen, and the only thing he felt now was the man's impenetrability. Instead of narrowing the distance that lay between him and Stillman, he had seen the old man slip away from him, even as he remained before his eyes. (*CG*, 67)

The parallels with Moran's pursuit of Molloy, as discussed in chapter one, are clear: in both cases the attempt to recuperate a meaning leads inexorably to the loss of certainty and self-possession on the part of the individual who sets off in pursuit of this meaning. Importantly, the novel presents this failure to establish a sense of order and coherence as connected to, if not actually caused by, a developing sense of the unnaturalness of language, a sense that is, as in the examples listed above, instantiated by an increasing proximity to it.

Quinn, who ordinarily earns his living writing unchallenging mystery novels (*CG*, 2), buys a red notebook in which to record his observations when he first takes on the case. His note-taking begins relatively straightforwardly, but over the course of the novel more and more of his energy and time goes toward the writing. The act of writing itself also becomes increasingly perplexing, gradually taking over all of his attention, and the capacity of language to decode and explain the world – as is the case in the detective novels he previously made his living by writing – is increasingly undermined.

A good characterization of what appears to be happening in these various disruptions of the relation to language is Stanley Cavell's notion of 'hidden literalism', coined in his discussion of *Endgame*.[154] Hidden literalism, in Cavell's reading, works through a juxtaposition of the figurative conventions and assumptions of literary reading with a starkly literal attitude to language and meaning. Cavell writes that hidden literalism works to 'unfix clichés and idioms' by 'turning its formulas into declarative utterances, ones of pure denotation', and thus both undermines an excessively conventionalized relation to language and imparts a charge of strangeness to it (ibid., 20). This is a procedure connected to Beckett's eschewal of literary ornament and paring down of expressive valence, and relates to Barry's understanding of the peculiar use of cliché in the work.

It is also a striking feature of Coetzee's style. As Attridge points out, the similarity of the comedy in the work of Beckett and Coetzee, and specifically in their treatment of sex, relies on an unusual and unexpected literal treatment of a subject that

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[154] Cavell, 'Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*', 19.

has, in literary convention, been hyperbolically figured. [155] (Obviously, it is the transgression of expectations, rather than the literality itself, that is the source of humour, which would not exist without the pre-existing register.) The effect of this is analogous to that of the humour often occasioned by category errors, with a term being discussed in a vocabulary and idiom which connotes concepts not conventionally applicable to it. Nevertheless, the confusion of categories serves to elucidate the rhetorical strategies through which the initial differentiation is achieved, and aspects that are thereby glossed over and excluded.

A particularly significant aspect of this strategy is spelt out by Patrick Hayes. Hayes, discussing the relationship Coetzee's novels establish with political and historical discourse, invokes Joyce's term, used by Coetzee to characterize Erasmus' *The Praise of Folly*, 'jocoserious'. Hayes writes that jocoseriousness instigates 'a series of textual processes that create a particularly unstable irony – one which playfully troubles prevalent rules and boundaries around what counts as the serious.'[156] Thus, rather than seeking to establish a position from which to rival 'serious' registers on the basis of the terms according to which they arrogate such a position unto themselves, the 'text offers itself jocoseriously as a disorienting and anti-foundational type of play' and thereby 'makes its own quite singular negotiation of the demands made upon the genre of the novel' (ibid., 134).

Such a strategy relates closely to Bakhtin's thesis of the novel as originating in parody of official forms. As Hayes points out, with certain forms of the novel having achieved quasi-official status themselves (through, for example, the realist tradition's relation to historiography), they have thus elicited novelistic responses, in Bakhtin's sense. *Don Quixote* is among the first and most exemplary of these, with the novel largely comprised of an extended parody of romances and picaresque novels. Beckett's novels occupy a similar position and perspective in relation to the briefer modern European novelistic tradition that recapitulates Bakhtin's more expansive genealogy, a factor that accounts for much of Coetzee's affinity for the works. I have discussed

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[155] Attridge, 'Sex, Comedy and Influence: Coetzee's Beckett', 74.
[156] Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, 144.

Bakhtin's thought in greater detail previously in relation to my understanding of influence in general and insofar as it relates to the writers under discussion; for the present it suffices briefly to outline why I consider his thinking relevant to this discussion and, perhaps more importantly, how it relates to my conception of the function of style in these texts.

In Bakhtin's thinking, the novel originates as a popular parody of official forms, related to, or even the literary equivalent of, carnival and other such officially sanctioned periods in which the rule of law is – to one extent or another – suspended. Once the novel is established as a genre in its own right, however, other genres are 'novelized', infected with the destabilizing, comic energies of this deeply self-reflexive form. As Bakhtin puts it, 'The novel parodies other genres (precisely in their role as genres); it expose the conventionality of their forms and their language.'[157] What is the effect of this process on other genres?

> They become more free and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extraliterary heteroglossia and the novelistic layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally – this is the most important thing – the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality. (Ibid., 6–7)

In terms of this characteristic, the thoroughgoing parody of almost every form of textual, literary and aesthetic authority carried out in course of Beckett's oeuvre represents something of a high-tide mark.

Bakhtin and Friedrich Schlegel express very similar attitudes about the novel as literary form in this respect. Similar to Bakhtin's understanding of the dialogism of Dostoevsky's work, Schlegel considers the novel as allowing the articulation of divergent, mutually incompatible points of view without subsuming these beneath an overarching authorial vision, and the best form for instantiating the ironic distance from

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[157] Bakhtin, 'Epic and Novel', 5.

and reservation toward narrative enunciation on the part of the narrator so characteristic of Romantic poetics.[158] A crucial element of this is a certain degree of indeterminacy and uncertainty with regard to point of view and narration: the Romantic novel prizes varying perspectives, disjunctive understandings, and the narrator's awareness of her own partiality, contingency and unreliability. This entails a degree of self-parody on the part of the narrator and/or author: the conventional basis of registers and tropes are shown up for what they are, rather than attempting to be passed off as natural, and the situated, immanent position of the narrator is foregrounded for the sake of deflating pretensions toward a transcendent, omniscient narrative pose.

The intensification of this principle of narrative self-parody is a significant aspect of the quasi-metaphysical gravity of Beckett's writing. By the end of the final book of the trilogy the unreliability of the narrative voice has become so acute that almost no statement can be made without incurring an immediate contradiction or being qualified with 'I don't know': 'it won't be I, I'll stay here, or there, more likely there, it will never be I, that's all I know, it's all been done already … it was never I, I've never stirred, I've listened, I must have spoken, why deny it, why not admit it, after all, I deny nothing, I admit nothing, I say what I hear, I hear what I say, I don't know, one or the other, or both' (*U*, 132). In the world thus presented, there is no horizon of intelligibility from which to curtail the infinite slippage of a universal irony. It is this aspect of the work that accounts for its unique blend and balancing of the tragic and the comic: the hilarity induced by a given instance of absurdity shades into horror at the dawning realization of the sheer extent of it, which veers again toward the comic when the inappropriateness of such a response – of any possible response – becomes apparent, which itself then becomes a further source of anxiety, and so on, ad infinitum. Here, irony cannot be circumscribed by any hermeneutic horizon, and the play of parody is a volatile, incessant placing in question of every assertion by each that comes after.

My contention is that this is achieved through the remarkable development of style and form that is to my mind most clearly exemplified by the trilogy and its constant intensification and sharpening of the self-undoing aspects of the prose. In

[158] Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 3 (fragment 26).

Beckett's trilogy, the instigating impulse and guiding formal strategy is a search for narrative first principles, with the means and techniques to which the narrator has access steadily deconstructed and rejected in the progression toward the kernel of narration, the elusive 'I' behind the frenzy of figuration. The trilogy thus revolves around fundamentally epistemological concerns, and the 'final' word on these is an infinitely unstable irony, a method of doubt that, once set in motion, undermines every possible certainty and position of enunciation. In the course of the trilogy, the efficacy and transparency of character, plot, metaphor, and all other 'resorts of fable' (*U*, 19) are undermined and eroded, leaving the narrator unable to give voice to anything other than his own impotence and confusion.

There is more than a little reminiscent of Descartes here, and one could quite easily read the description of the narrator of *The Unnamable* as a gruesomely literal depiction of what a 'thinking thing' might look like. In my construal, the trilogy can be read as a parody of Cartesian epistemological method, with Adorno's important proviso – made with reference to *Endgame*, but applicable to the trilogy also – borne in mind:

> In its emphatic sense, parody means the use of forms in the era of their impossibility. It demonstrates this impossibility and by doing so alters the forms. … [W]hat is the raison d'être of forms when the tension between them and something that is not homogeneous to them has been abolished, without that slowing down progress in the artistic mastery of materials? *Endgame* handles that matter by making that question its own, by making it thematic. … Exposition, complication, plot, peripeteia and catastrophe return in decomposed form as participants in an examination of the dramaturgical corpse.[159]

In light of this, the formal and thematic development of the trilogy can be read as enacting a *reductio ad absurdum* of modern epistemology, undermining the capacity of the narrating subject to achieve any certainty or clarity and instead opening onto ever broader vistas of incomprehension and ignorance.

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[159] Adorno, 'Trying to Understand Endgame', in *Notes to Literature*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991), 259–60.

It is almost impossible for such a project not to entail reflexive implications for the attempt to make sense of it. Literary interpretation involves, among other things, the application of the epistemological apparatus for the sake of eliciting meanings. While in the case of the literary this is not possible in exactly the same way as it is in philosophical or scientific enquiry, as evidenced by the impossibility of perfect paraphrase, the appreciation and discussion of literature depends to a large part on the formulation of abstract accounts of what a work signifies. This is done through the hermeneutic vacillation between particular and general, between consideration of the elements of the text and construction of theories and schemata to account for the role of these in the general organization of the work. As I have indicated, and as it is important to stress, this is not a finite process or achievable goal: no general paraphrase or abstract account of the meaning of the work is able to avoid a certain amount of injustice to its specificity; no metalanguage can account for the work without doing a certain amount of violence to its singularity. Any interpretation always, thus, necessarily fails.[160]

Beckett's work, through its foregrounding of the failure of the interpretive faculty through its depiction of the narrators' inability to make sense of themselves or their world, raises this problem in especially stark, forceful ways. From the very earliest philosophical readings of Beckett's writing,[161] those of Adorno and Cavell, and with continuing regularity, in those such as Critchley's and Rabaté's, the difficulties and

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[160] See, for example, Derrida, *Glas*, 205; Critchley, *Very Little*, 171; Blakey Vermeule, *Why Do We Care about Literary Characters?* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 100.

[161] Fully explaining the difference between what I mean by 'philosophical readings' and literary ones would entail a longer discussion than I have space for here (but which nevertheless strikes me as a point worth returning to in the future). Put briefly, I have in mind the sort of reading that approaches Beckett's work (or that of other writers) from a primarily philosophical direction, and treats his work as having important implications for philosophy itself. There are many such engagements, more often than not by professional philosophers (Adorno, Cavell, Bataille, Deleuze, Badiou, Nussbaum, Cixous, Simon Critchley, Zizek) – but not always: *Literature and the Taste of Knowledge*, by Michael Wood (Cambridge: CUP, 2005), for example, strike me as being a clear example of this sort of engagement. While the earliest literary scholars working on Beckett, such as Hugh Kenner (1961) and Richard Coe (1964), recognize the importance of, for example, Descartes and nihilism to a full appreciation of the work, they see such aspects as an exegetical key to the meaning of the text, rather than understanding the texts themselves to represent a philosophical problem. A common feature of such 'philosophical' readings, in contrast, is a meta-level meditation on literature and the literary (and often, by implication or explicitly, on philosophy and the philosophical), which Beckett's work in some respects so insistently raises. It is in this sense that I claim that Adorno's and Cavell's reading are 'the earliest' of such readings, being produced in 1958 and 1964 respectively.

contradictions involved in the paradoxical effort to make sense of a body of work that appears in many ways to contest the very possibility of making sense at all have been identified as of central significance. As Adorno puts it, 'Understanding it can mean only understanding its unintelligibility, concretely reconstructing the meaning of the fact that it has no meaning.'[162]

Such a depiction takes on a cosmic, metaphysical gravity because of its implications for what we can possibly know. Where in Descartes, for example, epistemological and metaphysical certainty are mutually reinforcing, the means whereby the subject bootstraps herself out of solipsism, Beckett's vision of our epistemological apparatus precludes even the possibility of fruitful metaphysical speculation. When Molloy, for example, unsure of his identity, location, origin or destination and able to move only by crawling, claims that certain considerations are 'ludicrously idle questions for a man in my position, though of undeniable interest on the plane of pure knowledge' (*M*, 92), the very notion of 'the plane of pure knowledge' is rendered ironic by the implicit contrast with the confused condition of Molloy's mind and the complete inapplicability of the fruits of abstract speculation to his condition. A similar incongruity is effected by Moran's list of theological questions (*M*, 174–5), which serve more to indicate the confusion of the mind able to entertain such ideas than to gesture toward any amelioration of this.

This sort of invocation of philosophical, theological, or logical methods and procedures is also, however, a crucial aspect of the comedy of the writing. Molloy, for example, who describes himself as 'a man with a passion for truth' (*M*, 32), has a clear-eyed curiosity and dead-pan earnestness that, when applied to the bizarre events that befall him and the situations in which he finds himself, produces an incongruity that is very often hilarious. His description of his mode of locomotion provides a good example of this:

> Let us try and get this dilemma clear. Follow me carefully. The stiff leg hurt me, admittedly, I mean the old stiff leg, and it was the other which I normally used as

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[162] Adorno, 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*', 243.

a pivot, or prop. But now this latter, as a result of its stiffening I suppose, and the ensuing commotion among nerves and sinews, was beginning to hurt me even more than the other. What a story, God send I don't make a balls of it. For the old pain, do you follow me, I had got used to it, in a way, yes, in a kind of way. Whereas to the new pain, though of the same family exactly, I had not yet had time to adjust myself. (*M*, 77–8)

The effect of the contrast of the concern for accuracy and the measured modulation of description with the abjection of the situation described is not only to cast Molloy as a comical figure. In line with my general construal of the philosophical parody carried out by the trilogy, the sort of qualities and capacities involved in our attempt to understand, explain and account for our existence and our world are here similarly tinged with the ridiculous. Throughout the trilogy, adherence to the imperatives of reason is presented as being, as Molloy puts it, 'like one dying of cancer obliged to consult his dentist' (*M*, 28).

Chapter III: Paul Auster

'standing watch in this interval of silence': Beckett and Auster

Paul Auster's *The New York Trilogy* pays explicit homage to Beckett's trilogy in a number of ways. As in Beckett's trilogy, a central focus of *The New York Trilogy* is the question of subjectivity and identity, explored through an analysis of the reflexive relation of the self to the self as mediated through language. *The New York Trilogy* also devotes close scrutiny to the problems of authorship and authority raised by such matters, and the fact that in Auster's work these are enacted through the use of techniques and strategies very similar to those adopted by Beckett makes the parallels rather easy to draw.

Certain aspects of work from all stages of Auster's career bespeak a Beckettian influence. The frequent use of writers or storytellers as focalizers makes possible a particularly acute exploration of questions of identity and subjectivity in and through language, as is the case in Beckett's work. Similarly, as with Beckett's tendency away from communal, political or economic schemata in favour of a concentrated focus on the individual, a recurring plot device in Auster's work is an event that leaves the protagonist independent of or cut off from family, friends, and broader society. This often takes the form of bereavement, which, with the attendant emphasis on grief and mourning, leads to a sharp delineation of the individual's experience precisely as an individual. Another means whereby this is achieved, sometimes in combination with the former, is the receipt of a windfall in the form of inheritance, which serves to extricate the character from socio-economic arrangements. Among the most recent of the author's productions, *Travels in the Scriptorium* (2007) achieves an effect in many ways reminiscent of *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, with a narrator utterly isolated from a functioning world and unified identity and stranded in a welter of stories and discourse over which he is able to wield only a modicum of agency.

This should not be taken to imply that I consider such themes and techniques to inform all of Auster's work consistently and equally. While Auster's later works do continue to explore problems and questions I have identified as typically Beckettian –

language, identity, fiction and metafiction, the subject's epistemological negotiation of the world – the tone of these is on the whole rather different, with the emphasis shifting to a more experiential, existential presentation of such matters than is the case in *The New York Trilogy*. In this sense, where the development of Beckett's work (at least that considered in this study) is toward greater and greater disembodiment and abstraction, Auster's appears to proceed in the opposite direction. *Man in the Dark* (2008), for example, in which an elderly narrator spends much of his time in bed telling himself stories, has in this sense much in common with *Malone Dies*; the clear difference arises from the former's unequivocal and explicit situation in post-911 American historical and political conditions.[163]

The New York Trilogy therefore strikes me as the most apposite example of a work informed by both Beckettian theme and Beckettian form in Auster's oeuvre, and thus the most appropriate for consideration here: the three novels' consistent concern with the nature of identity as mediated by language, and perhaps more especially writing, and the infinite disruption and disorientation that subjectivity is depicted as opening onto when this nexus of language and identity is pushed against, have strong similarities with what I have described as prominent aspects of Beckett's trilogy. Similarly, the methods adopted in the exploration of these subjects bear striking resemblances to the ironic techniques I have identified in Beckett's work, and the readerly responses elicited by the respective projects are in many ways analogous.

In light of this, it could perhaps be argued that *The New York Trilogy* is overly indebted to Beckett, an immature work that does not successfully sublimate its influences into its own voice. There is a cerebral, studiedly experimental aspect to all three of the novels, and the metafictional forays they make may be considered not yet completely incorporated in the texture of the writing. Auster's comment that he was almost 'crushed' by Beckett would offer support for such a view, but one compelling

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[163] This is not to claim that Beckett's work has no relation to the historical or political conditions pertaining at the time of their production, but rather that these relations are oblique and complicated in ways that, at the very least, place in question the relation of the aesthetic to such other realms. (These matters are discussed in Emilie Morin's *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).) The inscription of *Man in the Dark* into its time and place, in contrast, is far more straightforward than this.

reason for not subscribing to it is the strong sense of situation in place and milieu *The New York Trilogy* evokes. These novels are, perhaps first of all, about people living in New York, and the city is a constant presence and point of reference. The Beckettian mode proves in this instance to be an especially apt one, but it nevertheless still serves to convey a powerfully locally rooted and originated fictional universe.

As for the similarity, or overlap, in the matter of theme, and Auster's clear homage to Beckett's work, one would surely respond that Beckett's work by no means exhausts the possible treatments of those I above described as common to the two writers. On the contrary, in its single-mindedness and the implacable logic of its development, Beckett's work focuses more and more closely on one aspect of these themes. Much of the response of later writers, as I here try to show, and as other scholars have shown,[164] consists to a greater or lesser extent in the attempt to extrapolate the insights obtained from this zero point of absolute interiority to more exterior, communal, and historically imbricated situations. *Man in the Dark*, mentioned above, is a good example of this, as is also, as I shall argue in this section, *The New York Trilogy*.

The remainder of this chapter is organized as follows: In the following section, I discuss previous scholarship on the parallels and points of contact between the two writers' work, and touch on some clear and salient similarities and differences between these, in terms of tone, register, and rhythm. I then move on to discuss the function of authorial self-parody in *The New York Trilogy*, one of the dimensions of Romantic irony identified by Lloyd Bishop, and spell out some of the implications of this for interpretation of the text. Following that, I discuss the depictions of writing and language presented in *The New York Trilogy* and 'White Spaces', and elucidate the implications of this for the way in which the works under consideration portray subjectivity, drawing out the connections of this to the topic as treated in Beckett's work.

By far the most salient of the modalities of Romantic irony specified in Bishop's discussion in *The New York Trilogy* is that of authorial self-parody. Details of Auster's autobiography are incorporated throughout the text. The significance of these insertions is complex and multiple, but one of the clearest effects of the strategy is to draw

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[164] Patrick Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*; Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett*.

attention to the question of identity and subjectivity and its relation to the process of writing. This strikes me as the fundamental parallel between Beckett's irony, the implications of which for subjectivity were discussed at the end of chapter one, and Auster's. In this chapter I shall accordingly begin by describing the way in which authorial self-parody functions in *The New York Trilogy*, then draw out the implications of this for the work's depiction of subjectivity, and finally discuss the ways in which this entails an ontological irony – as Bishop puts it, 'an intangible ironic spirit hovering over the entire work and aimed not only at God and man but at the work itself and its author'[165] – that Auster's work has in common with Beckett's.

The perception of a similarity between Beckett's and Auster's trilogies is by no means a new one. Arthur Salzman comments on the common use of the detective genre in the respective projects, as well as the implication of this for the figuring of the author in the text ('Quinn and Moran are versions of Auster and Beckett').[166] Steven Connor considers the parallel sufficiently self-evident not to require evidencing,[167] while Aliki Vorvogli does precisely this with great detail and acuity in her *The World That Is the Book*.[168] There are also chapters devoted to Auster's work in two recent collections dealing with Beckett's influence, by Catherine Morley in *Beckett's Literary Legacies* and Julie Campbell in *Beckett at 100*,[169] and numerous journal articles dealing directly with or touching on the topic.

Varvogli and Morley both remark the absence of allusions to Beckett's work in *The New York Trilogy*. Given the many strong similarities of Auster's trilogy to Beckett's, and the densely intertextual nature of the former – Milton, Hawthorne, Melville, Whitman, and Poe are just some of the authors to whom allusion, or direct

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[165] Bishop, *Romantic Irony in French Literature*, 187.
[166] Arthur Salzman, *Designs of Darkness in Contemporary American Fiction* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1990), 59.
[167] Steven Connor, *The English Novel in History 1950–1995* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 166.
[168] Aliki Varvogli, *The World That Is the Book: Paul Auster's Fiction* (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2001), 79–88.
[169] Catherine Morley, 'The Book of Allusions: Where is Samuel Beckett in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*?' in *Beckett's Literary Legacies*, ed. Matthew Feldman and Mark Nixon (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar's Publishing, 2007); Julie Campbell, 'Beckett and Paul Auster: Fathers and Sons and the Creativity of Misreading', in *Beckett at 100: Revolving It All*, ed. Linda Ben-Zvi and Angela Moorjani (Oxford: OUP, 2008).

reference, is made – the apparent lack of a clear nod to the latter seems significant. Varvogli considers this absence a response to an anxiety of influence, and argues that it is a strategy whereby 'Auster, who at first could not see his way beyond Beckett … found a way out: Beckett has been written into the text, but he has been placed in a larger framework. Haunting *The New York Trilogy* with its conspicuous absence, Beckett's *Trilogy* is made to produce signification, even it cannot produce answers.'[170]

Morley, similarly detecting a clear resemblance between Auster's and Beckett's trilogies, draws on Genette's notion of 'architextuality' to characterize the relation between the two projects:

> Defined as 'a general sense of transcendent categories, for example modes of enunciation, literary genres, types of discourse, from which emerges a singular text', architextuality involves a relationship that is completely silent, articulated at most by a paratextual mention (such as the title or epigraph). Yet when such an architextual relationship is not articulated by the author, it may signify a refusal to underscore that which is obvious, or indeed, an attempt to reject or elude classification. In the case of Auster's relationship with Beckett, the latter is the most likely explanation for a writer self-consciously concerned with the necessary lack of meaning and textual exegesis in his writing.[171]

This seems to me a particularly good articulation of the resemblance between the two projects, and one that corresponds rather closely with my own sense of the textual relations at play between these subsequent writers' work and Beckett's, as spelt out in the earlier chapters of this study.

The mention of genre is especially intriguing. One certainly gets the sense when reading Auster's trilogy that it belongs to the same genre as Beckett's ('philosophical detective metafiction', perhaps), due to the similarity of theme, style and content. The works seem to be of a *type* in an explicit and ostensible way. Varvogli's and Morley's expositions of the parallels and similarities of the two trilogies substantiate this, spelling out commonalities of theme, structure and technique. This is a large part of the reason

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[170] Varvogli, *World That Is the Book*, 87
[171] Morley, 'The Book of Allusions',

why, despite (or perhaps, as Varvogli implies, precisely because of) the strength of Auster's avowals of influence by Beckett, I claim that his is the most superficial of the three writers' engagements with the older writer's work: the largest part of Auster's adoption or adaptation of Beckett's achievement consists in his implementation of techniques and strategies, of narrative development, characterization, and metafictional gambits, common to the latter. Auster's engagement with Beckett can hence be seen to be not so much a reformulation, development or misprision as a simple deflection, adopting the accidental and, to a certain extent, evading the essential.

The superficiality of this engagement is well evidenced by a comparison of the respective relationships between the narration of events and the events narrated in *Molloy* and *City of Glass*. Both novels represent a breakdown on the part of the protagonists such that certain social, linguistic and subjective boundaries are erased or transgressed, leading to an accession to a mode of existence fundamentally different to a prior propriety that is posited as obtaining. In Beckett's trilogy this breakdown is narrated by the character undergoing it, and a central aspect of the style arises from the tensions and complexities inherent in the attempt to portray, in language, experiences and events that disrupt and disfigure these narrators' relationship to language.

In *City of Glass*, as also in *The Locked Room*, in contrast, such events are narrated not by the character experiencing them but by one with some privileged point of vantage on the events. In *City of Glass*, the narrative device whereby this is achieved is the unnamed narrator relating what he is able to surmise from the red notebook in which the protagonist, Daniel Quinn, recorded his observations while on the case, from other people's testimony, and from conjecture. As an example of this, at the very conclusion of the narrative, this narrator claims, 'As for Quinn, it is impossible for me to say where he is now. I have followed the red notebook as closely as I could, and any inaccuracies in the story should be blamed on me. There were moments when the text was difficult to decipher, but I have done my best with it and have refrained from interpretations' (*CG*, 132).

One effect of the use of a narrator at one remove from the action is to insert an additional narratological layer between the reader and the uncanny events narrated, in the form of the mediation on the part of the narrator, and thus diminish the acuteness of

the irony it puts in play. It also means that the style of the writing is less subject to the tensions above indicated as playing so a crucial role in Beckett's work, and that the irony it engenders is not so much enacted as described, and described in a relatively limpid manner throughout. The following passage, describing the very climax of Quinn's dissolution, serves as a good example of such a contrast between turbid matter and limpid medium: 'Quinn no longer had any interest in himself. He wrote about the stars, the earth, his hopes for mankind. He felt that his words had been severed from him, that now they were part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower' (*CG*, 130). Such a severing of language from the subject, however, does not occasion a correlative tension in the language of the text itself, and comparison of a passage such as this with the one from *Molloy* provided below illustrates the difference between Beckett's treatment of such a theme and Auster's.

> And once again I am I will not say alone, no, that's not like me, but, how shall I say, I don't know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don't know what that means but it's the word I mean to use, free to do what, to do nothing, to know, but what, the laws of the mind perhaps, of my mind, that for example water rises in proportion as it drowns you and that you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery. (*M*, 9–10)

Despite such differences, there are nevertheless marked similarities in the irony the two writers achieve, as a result of similar depictions of the structure of subjectivity and the role and function of language in it. Perhaps the clearest example of such a commonality is the two trilogies' shared foregrounding of writing and narration, the imbrication of these with memory, and the emphasis on the significance of such activity in the constitution, and destitution, of the subject. As I argued in the previous chapter is the case in Beckett's work, Auster's depicts subjectivity as essentially ironic, subject to a constant slippage and repositioning. While the writers' respective trilogies proceed in opposite directions from this insight, the implications of the depiction remain fundamentally analogous.

'between things and the names of things': Auster's irony

The action of *The New York Trilogy* begins with a phone call to a wrong number from someone asking for 'Paul Auster. Of the Auster Detective Agency' (*CG*, 7). Out of curiosity Daniel Quinn, the protagonist of the novel, pretends to be Auster and takes on the case. When later in the course of *City of Glass* events overtake him, he seeks out the 'real' Paul Auster in the hope of securing some help or advice. The Auster character (hereafter 'Auster') – who, like the author, is also a writer – knows nothing about the detective agency; instead, the two discuss writing, with 'Auster' telling Quinn about an essay concerning *Don Quixote* on which he is working.

The essay itself is described as an ironic exercise – 'I suppose you could call it speculative, since I'm not really out to prove anything. In fact, it's all done tongue-in-cheek' (*CG*, 97) – on the topic of 'the authorship of … the book inside the book Cervantes wrote, the one he imagined he was writing':

> Cervantes, if you remember, goes to great lengths to convince the reader that he is not the author. The book, he says, was written in Arabic by Cid Hamete Benengeli. Cervantes describes how he discovered the manuscript by chance one day in the market at Toledo. He hires someone to translate it for him into Spanish, and thereafter he presents himself as no more than the editor of the translation. (*CG*, 97)

The theory 'Auster' proposes, inter alia, is that Don Quixote orchestrates the entire process by pretending to be mad in order 'to test the gullibility of his fellow men. … In other words, to what extent would people tolerate blasphemies if they gave them amusement?' (*CG*, 101). He considers the answer to this question 'obvious': 'the proof is that we still read the book. It remains highly amusing to us. And that's finally all anyone wants out of a book – to be amused' (*CG*, 100).

Immediately after having proposed this theory, 'Auster leaned back on the sofa, smiled with a certain ironic pleasure, and lit a cigarette. The man was obviously enjoying himself, but the precise nature of that pleasure eluded Quinn. It seemed to be a kind of soundless laughter, a joke that stopped short of its punchline, a generalized mirth that had no object' (*CG*, 100). This attitude remains enigmatic, because Quinn and

'Auster' are interrupted at this point by the arrival of the latter's wife. Ulla Musarra-Schrøder in her essay 'Cervantes in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*' raises the possibility that the pleasure 'Auster' is here described as taking in the situation is due to his being responsible for orchestrating the series of accidents that lead to Quinn taking on the Stillman case.[172] While a tantalizing possibility, this seems unlikely. 'Auster' is described as having become involved in Quinn's case 'accidentally' (*CG*, 131), and, while the unnamed narrator does, at the very conclusion of the novel, claim that, 'I am convinced he [Auster] has behaved badly throughout' (*CG*, 132), this is clarified by the earlier, 'I began to feel angry that he had treated Quinn with such indifference. I scolded him for not having taken a greater part in events, for not having done something to help a man who was so obviously in trouble' (*CG*, 131). Hence, if we assume the unnamed narrator to be in possession of the relevant facts of the matter, 'Auster's' actual involvement consists in what the novel makes explicit, and his fault is that of doing too little, rather than too much.

Musarra-Schrøder is nevertheless correct to claim that there 'is a queer and somewhat distorted correspondence' between the respective insertions of the author in *City of Glass* and *Don Quixote*.[173] As she points out, in both novels the strategy troubles and distorts the boundaries between truth and fiction, which is also a central thematic concern of both. The disruptions in *Don Quixote* and *The New York Trilogy*, however, and hence the delirium of their respective protagonists, proceed in opposite directions; where Don Quixote mistakes the world for the text, Daniel Quinn mistakes the text for the world.[174]

In an interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory, Auster claims that the strategy 'stemmed from a desire to implicate myself in the machinery of the book. … I

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[172] Ulla Musarra-Schrøder, 'Cervantes in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*', in *International Don Quixote*, ed. Theo D'haen and Reindert Dhont (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 226.

[173] Ulla Musarra-Schrøder, 'Cervantes in Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy*', 222.

[174] Musarra-Schrøder (227) spells out the many intertextual clues to this relationship: The protagonists' shared initials; the husband of the nurse of Peter Stillman, Jr. being named Michael Saavedra (after Miguel Cervantes de Saavedra); and Auster's comments in interview that 'Quinn's story in *City of Glass* alludes to *Don Quixote*, and the questions raised in the two books are very similar: what is the line between madness and creativity, what is the line between the real and the imaginary, is Quinn crazy to do what he does or not?' This last is taken from the interview with Joseph Mallia included in *The Art of Hunger* (London: Faber, 1998).

mean my author self, that mysterious other who lives inside me …. I wanted to open up the process, to break down walls, to expose the plumbing.'[175] This description indicates a desire to disrupt demarcations and renegotiate the boundaries of the fictional space, and falls very much in line with what I have previously described as irony's transgressive valence. The destabilizing and undoing of accepted or authoritative forms and conventions is a central aspect of the technique, and Auster's desire 'to break down walls' signals a close sympathy with broadly Romantic aspirations, and those specific energies attributed to irony by Schlegel and de Man.

The comment and the use of the device also bears significance for Auster's own writing. Writing on Charles Reznikoff, in terms the applicability of which to Beckett's work Aliki Varvogli has pointed out,[176] Auster claims that the 'act of writing … is a process by which one places oneself between things and the names of things, a way of standing watch in this interval of silence.'[177] In this vision, in a rather un-Beckettian gesture, the interstitial is valued for its capacity to make possible a re-evaluation of those categories between which it marks the boundary and hence a reorganization of the boundary itself: this process is one of 'allowing things to be seen – as if for the first time – and henceforth to be given their names' (ibid.). Such a sense of the capacity of language to adequate to the world, of the commensurability of thought and things, is also evidenced in the development of Quinn's relationship to language over the course of the novel, as will be discussed later in this section.

This fundamentally confident attitude seems to me to mark another sharp difference between the work of Auster and Beckett. In comparison, for example, with the attitude of the various narrators of Beckett's trilogy to their verbiage – a stain on the silence, an unavoidable excrescence – one has Quinn's euphoric,

> At a certain point, he realized that the more he wrote the sooner the time would
> come when he could no longer write anything. He began to weigh his words with
> great care, struggling to express himself as economically and clearly as

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[175] Paul Auster, *The Red Notebook*, 137.
[176] Varvogli, 79.
[177] Auster, *The Art of Hunger* (London: Faber, 1998), 35.

possible. … He wanted to go on writing about it, and it pained him to know that this would not be possible. Nevertheless, he tried to face the end of the red notebook with courage. He wondered if he had it in him to write without a pen, if he could learn to speak instead, filling the darkness with his voice, speaking the words into the air, into the walls, into the city, even if the light never came back. (*CG*, 131)

Indeed, Moran and Quinn in their respective adventures proceed in many ways in diametrically opposite directions, the former from a sense of confidence in the capacities of language and cognition and security in the world to a position of isolation, confusion and uncertainty, the latter the exact reverse. Such a difference in fundamental philosophical orientation seems to me also to account for the clear difference in the tone of the works, Beckett's characterized by an anarchic comic dimension and Auster's by detachment and calm.

A fundamental source of the difference in the comic modalities of the respective works is the treatment of the body. In Beckett's writing, the comedy arises to a significant extent from the deflation of transcendence by immanence,[178] from the inescapably – one could almost say *radically* – situated, embodied condition of the narrators and the way in which their embodiment erupts into conceptual categories, so to speak, and renders them inapplicable. Molloy's descriptions of his modes of locomotion, Malone's schedule, and the Unnamable's abstract musings when contrasted with his hellish physical condition all bring about, in addition to a comic incongruity, a vivid sense of the incompatibility of body and mind, often to comic effect. As Coetzee points out, Beckett is unable to avoid subscribing to a version of Cartesian dualism, while simultaneously unable to consider the implications of this account of the nature of the self anything other than 'ludicrous'.[179]

Further, such examples also indicate the tenuousness of the hold of reason in a world so configured. The various attempts made by such narrators to theorize aspects of

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[178] Such an imbrication of transcendence and immanence to produce irony is reminiscent of Schlegel's point that irony 'contains and arouses a feeling of indissoluble antagonism between the absolute and the relative' (*Philosophical Fragments*, 13).
[179] Coetzee, 'Eight Ways of Looking at Samuel Beckett'.

their existence, when contrasted with the chaos of their physical and mental condition, inevitably appear ironic. When Molloy, for example, discusses the '[d]ivine analysis that conduces thus to knowledge of yourself, and of your fellow-men, if you happen to have any', he is in fact referring to a series of contradictions he has been unable to resolve (*M*, 32). Similarly, the Unnamable's musings on his situation and condition serve merely to underscore the sheer absurdity of his existence and any attempt to make sense of it.

The world of Auster's work, in contrast, is perspicuous, amenable to reason, explicable. The texture of the writing in no ways bears evidence of ruptures wrought in the medium by the subject matter – so prominent a facet of Beckett's style, in contrast –, and the tone is controlled, even and sedate. A good indication of this difference is the rhythm of the writing: that of Beckett's work is characterized by contradictions, interjections, tangents, what J.M. Coetzee has aptly termed a 'rhythm of doubt' (*DP*, 40) and 'a flow continually checked by doubts and scruples' (*Y*, 155); that of Auster's is assured, fluent, steady. Where Beckett, in his own way, seems to have tried to achieve something of the formal quality he attributed to Joyce ('His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*'),[180] Auster's work is fundamentally diegetic.

Despite such contrasts of tone and rhythm, however, the structures of the respective trilogies evidence certain striking parallels. Among the most noteworthy elements of this is the imbrication of the novels through the assertion of the, somewhat obscure, identity of their narrators. As discussed previously, there are indications in *Molloy* and *The Unnamable* that the same voice narrates all three novels of Beckett's trilogy. Similarly, toward the conclusion of the final novel of *The New York Trilogy*, *The Locked Room*, the narrator claims

> The entire story comes down to what happened at the end, and without that end inside me now, I could not have started this book. The same holds for the two books that come before it, *City of Glass* and *Ghosts*. These three stories are finally the same story, but each one represents a different stage in my awareness of what it is about. (*LR*, 295)

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[180] Beckett, 'Dante … Bruno, Vico … Joyce', in *Disjecta*, 27; emphasis original.

The nature of this revelation, while in one way indicating a parallel in the structures of these respective trilogies, serves also to mark rather clearly the differences I have described above. Beckett's narrators forget the stories they are engaged in even before they've reached a conclusion, and their own identity seems more often than not wrapped in impenetrable obscurity. It is sufficiently difficult for them to remember their own names; a feat of recall and self-awareness such as achieved by the narrator of *The Locked Room* at the conclusion of his story would seem unthinkable. Similarly, the shaping and authorial agency that is here exerted over the material, marshalling disparate stories into a unified development and effectively providing the key to the interpretation of the whole, is a potentiality from another universe.

Such identity needs to be indicated or hinted at in some way – in Beckett through spectral traces and vague parallels, in Auster through unequivocal statement – because it pertains despite the absence of the markers that would ordinarily be taken to indicate it: names, continuity of memory, allusion to previous events, locality. The very obscurity of this identity, however, even, or especially, to the narrators themselves, is of central importance in the respective trilogies' depictions of subjectivity, as is well demonstrated by the ways in which *The Locked Room* extends and complicates the authorial self-parody initiated in *City of Glass*. The unnamed narrator and protagonist of *The Locked Room* is contacted by Sophie, the wife of his childhood friend Fanshawe, when the latter has been missing for more than six months. Fanshawe had been a writer, and, urged by his wife to attempt to get his work published but reluctant to do so, he struck a deal with her 'three or four months before he disappeared': if he had failed to do anything with the work in a year's time, Sophie 'was to take all his manuscripts to me and put them in my [the narrator's] hands. I was the guardian of his work, he said, and it was up to me to decide what should happen to it' (*LR*, 206). Fanshawe further specified that 'if anything should happen to him' Sophie was to give the writing to the narrator immediately. Thus it transpires that the narrator becomes Fanshawe's literary executor.

An interesting avenue into a discussion of the authorial self-parody carried out in *The Locked Room* is a story the narrator describes as being recorded in one of Fanshawe's notebooks, about 'the famous Arctic explorer' Peter Freuchen (*LR*, 254). Freuchen, trapped in a blizzard, 'decided to build an igloo and wait out the storm'. The

elements and the wolves prowling outside present a threat. The igloo itself, however, presents a problem much graver:

> Freuchen began to notice that the walls of his little shelter were gradually closing in on him. Because of the particular weather conditions outside, his breath was literally freezing to the walls, and with each breath the walls became that much thicker, the igloo became that much smaller, until eventually there was almost no room left for his body. It is surely a frightening thing, to imagine breathing yourself into a coffin of ice …. [I]n this case it is the man himself who is the agent of his own destruction, and further, the instrument of that destruction is the very thing he needs to keep himself alive. (*LR*, 254–5)

This passage bears many important implications for an understanding of the model of subjectivity presented in the novel. The significance of the title *The Locked Room* seems gestured toward in the situation here described – subjectivity as a confined, impenetrable space – along with the implication of, as Beckett puts it, the dual impossibility of being and not being oneself. The importance of the story is indicated by the narrator's comment that 'one begins to suspect that Fanshawe felt that [stories such as this] could somehow help him to understand himself' (*LR*, 254), which is lent further gravity by the novel's earlier emphasis on what the narrator describes as Fanshawe's essential inaccessibility (a topic to which I shall later return). Most significant in a discussion of authorial self-parody, though, is the fact that the story is a verbatim transcription of an earlier piece of Auster's writing, 'White Spaces'.

This is, however, just one of a number of autobiographical facts from the author's own life that are credited to Fanshawe. In an interview with Michael Wood, Auster claims,

> In *The Locked Room* … several incidents come directly from my own life. Ivan Wyshnegradsky, the old Russian composer who befriends Fanshawe in Paris, was a real person. I met him when he was eighty and saw quite a lot of him when I lived in Paris in the early seventies. The business about giving Ivan the refrigerator actually happened to me – in the same way it happens to Fanshawe. The same holds for the slapstick scene in which he delivers the captain breakfast on the oil tanker – inching along the bridge in a seventy-mile-an-hour gale and

struggling to hold onto the tray. It was the one time in my life I truly felt I was in a Buster Keaton movie. And then there's the crazy story the narrator tells about working for the US Census Bureau in Harlem in 1970. Word for word, that episode is an exact account of my own experience.[181]

Andreas Hau takes this to imply that 'Fanshawe represents Auster's past, or that part of Auster that stood in the way of a successful career as a novelist.'[182] This contention is part of a broader reading of *The Locked Room*, and the whole of *The New York Trilogy*, as an allegory of Auster's development from poet to novelist, for which Hau provides much compelling and closely observed evidence. While there is perhaps a danger of being overly reductive in claiming that 'the whole of *The New York Trilogy* can be read as an elaborate, albeit well-disguised, allegory on the author's struggle to free himself from his past as a poet and make a fresh start as a novelist' (ibid.), it certainly seems to be the case that elements of the work are best accounted for by way of this schema.

One interesting implication of this reading is, as Hau puts it, that *The Locked Room* thus becomes about Auster's need 'to put the poet in himself to rest' (ibid.): the narrator is intended to represent Auster the novelist, Fanshawe Auster the poet, and the relations between the two the interactions of two aspects of identity in some way delineated by, inter alia, the resolution, recognition or realization of the ideas espoused in 'White Spaces'. Apropos of this, and considering the depiction of Fanshawe provided in the novel, Auster's comment in an interview is revealing: 'I remain very attached to the poetry I wrote, I still stand by it. In the final analysis, it could even be the best work I've ever done.'[183]

Such doubling of identity is a feature of all the novels of *The New York Trilogy*, if to a lesser extent than is the case in *The Locked Room*. We are informed that, 'as a young man', like Auster, Daniel Quinn 'had published several books of poetry, had written plays, critical essays, and had worked on a number of long translations. But quite abruptly, he had given up all that. A part of him had died, he told his friends, and

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[181] Michael Wood, 'Interview: Paul Auster', *The Paris Review* (Fall 2003), http://www.theparisreview.org/ interviews/121/the-art-of-fiction-no-178-paul-auster.
[182] Andreas Hau, *Implosion of Negativity* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2012), 248.
[183] Paul Auster, 'Interview with Larry McCaffery and Sinda Gregory', in *The Art of Hunger*, 303.

he did not want it coming back to haunt him' (*CG*, 4); Auster has also claimed that *City of Glass* developed out of his imagining an alternative course of his life, one in which he had not met his wife.[184] The action of *Ghosts*, meanwhile, is specified as beginning on the day of Auster's birth, 3 February 1947.

The significance of such doublings of identity and authorial self-inscription, and the connection of these to Beckettian irony, is tied to the depiction of the act and process of writing these novels. Writing is prominently thematized throughout *The New York Trilogy*, a central feature of every plot and the foremost preoccupation of almost every character, and is portrayed as exerting effects that cut right to the core of identity – specifically, of opening up gaps in the unity of identity and leading to a divestment of selfhood and agency in the face of the depersonalizing dimension of language. As indicated earlier, it is this aspect of the work that strikes me as most closely analogous to the most far-reaching and disruptive effects of irony in Beckett's work. In the following section I therefore turn to a discussion of the depiction of writing in *The New York Trilogy* and the implications of this for an understanding of the portrayal of subjectivity in it. In doing so, I shall begin by devoting more extensive consideration to the earlier piece written into *The Locked Room*, 'White Spaces', which charts in fascinating ways the theoretical development that preceded and led to *The New York Trilogy*.

'wordless things and thingless words': language, selfhood and the *il y a*

A meditation on the connection between narration and experience, 'White Spaces' articulates many of the quandaries and aporia Beckett's trilogy deals with, and demonstrates Auster achieving his own perspective on matters that would come to play a central role in his later fiction. Concerned with the challenges posed to articulation by the inevitable, and necessary, incommensurability of language and experience, the piece marks an overcoming of a severe philosophical and literary impasse that had led to several years of writer's block and a sense of creative failure.[185] It also marks a crucial

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[184] Paul Auster, 'Interview: With Joseph Mallia', in *The Art of Hunger*, 306.
[185] Auster, *Hand to Mouth* (London: Faber & Faber, 1997), 119.

point of transition from the author's youthful poetry to his more mature prose works; as Auster puts it, 'It was a liberation for me, a tremendous letting go, and I look back on it now as the bridge between writing poetry and writing prose. That was the piece that convinced me I still had it in me to be a writer' (ibid., 302).

The piece was inspired by and initially written to be a spoken accompaniment for a single dancer, then printed, along with the similarly formally indeterminate 'Northern Lights' and 'The Death of Sir Walter Raleigh', in *White Spaces* in April 1980. As Hau points out, Auster's 'first book of prose under his real name' thus appeared in the same month 'as his last collection of poems'.[186] The piece has subsequently been reprinted in *Disappearances: Selected Poems* (1988), *Selected Poems* (1998), and *Collected Poems* (2004). This publication history has meant that – in some senses, at least – what was initially intended to accompany dance has been turned first into something approximating a discursive essay and then into a prose poem.

Lending credence to Auster's claim that the piece was for him a 'bridge between writing poetry and writing prose', the subject matter of 'White Spaces' bears many similarities to the meditations on language presented in *City of Glass*. Indeed, linguistic matters such as those speculated upon by Stillman Sr. and Quinn are in 'White Spaces' spelt out in a discursive and philosophically perspicuous style that provides invaluable insight into the conceptual terrain Auster was negotiating on his way to *The New York Trilogy*, and it is therefore worthwhile to discuss the argument presented there in some detail.

The central opposition on which the speaker concentrates, and seeks to reconcile, is that between the abstracting nature of language and the existence of the desiring body in space and time. The necessary disjunction between these two is crucially connected to the matter of the 'motion' of experience, which is characterized as 'the realm of the naked eye' (*WS*, 85) passing continuously before the subject. While this motion 'seems to be random', as the speaker indicates, 'randomness does not, in itself, preclude a meaning. Or if meaning is not quite the word for it, then say the drift, or a consistent

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[186] Hau, *Implosion of Negativity*, 169.

sense of what is happening, even as it changes, moment by moment' (*WS*, 82). However, while it is 'probably not impossible' to 'describe it in all its details',

> so many words would be needed, so many streams of syllables, sentences, and subordinate clauses, that the words would always lag behind what was happening, and long after all motion had stopped and each of its witnesses had dispersed, the voice describing that motion would still be speaking, alone, heard by no one, deep into the silence and darkness of these four walls. (*WS*, 82)

This consideration is supplemented by a reflection reminiscent of a paradox of Zeno: 'In the realm of the naked eye nothing happens that does not have its beginning and its end. And yet nowhere can we find the place or the moment at which we can say, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that this is where it begins, or this is where it ends' (*WS*, 83). Faced with the seamless flux of experience, the process of atomization whereby language creates discrete entities, with beginnings and ends, is an Achilles chasing an ever-moving tortoise. Therefore, 'whoever tries to find refuge in any one place, in any one moment, will never be where he thinks he is. … It is never too late. It is always too late' (*WS*, 83).

The speaker's response to this situation is to claim that 'it is sometimes necessary not to name the thing we are talking about', invoking the rarefied example of the ninety-nine names of God in Judaic mysticism, each of which is 'in fact nothing more than a way of acknowledging that-which-cannot-be-spoken … that-which-cannot-be-understood' (*WS*, 83). 'But even on a less exalted plane,' he continues, language revolves centrally around such lacunae. The speaker exemplifies this by describing the way the neuter third-person singular pronoun 'it' functions in statements such as 'It is raining' or 'How is it going?'

> We feel we know what we are saying, and what we mean to say is that it, the word 'it', stands for something that need not be said, or something that cannot be said. But if the thing we say is something that eludes us, something we do not understand, how can we persist in saying that we understand what we are saying? And yet it goes without saying that we do. The 'it', for example, in the preceding

sentence, 'it goes without saying', is in fact nothing less than whatever it is that propels us into the act of speech itself. (*WS*, 84)

This formulation and description might put one in mind of Blanchot's treatment of Levinas' notion of the *il y a*. As is evident in his reading of *The Unnamable*, in Blanchot's thought the *il y a*, conceived of as 'the neutral region where the self surrenders in order to speak',[187] is similarly that which 'propels us into the act of speech itself' through the exigencies of maintaining the identity thus undermined by it (ibid.). Similarly, Blanchot's characterization of *The Unnamable* as essaying an approach to 'the point of perpetual unworkableness with which the work must maintain an increasingly initial relation or risk becoming nothing at all' seems to echo the agenda expressed in 'White Spaces' as the goal 'to go on … as if each word were the beginning of another silence, another word more silent than the last' (*WS*, 88). However, Auster draws very different implications from the observation than does Blanchot.

Instead of seeing evidence in such an understanding of the task of literature – or at least one kind of literature – for the contingency of language, and hence of any construction of self founded thereon, as is the case in Beckett's work, the argument develops in a rather numinous direction. Observing that 'never do we ask what "it" happens to be', the speaker claims that this is because, 'We know, even if we cannot put it into words. And the feeling that remains within us, the discretion of a knowledge so fully in tune with the world, has no need of whatever it is that might fall from our mouths' (*WS*, 84). This leads the speaker to conclude that 'it says itself, and our mouths are merely the instruments of the saying of it' (*WS*, 84).

This conceptual development leads to a sense of emotional equilibrium ('Our hearts know what is in them, even if our mouths remain silent. And the world will know what it is, even when nothing remains in our hearts'), which, in conjunction with the abrupt change of direction that occurs at this point, as well as the topic of the argument, encourages an interpretation of the foregoing chain of reasoning as representing the resolution of the writer's block and the achievement of the ability to write fiction to

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[187] Maurice Blanchot, 'Who Speaks in the Work of Samuel Beckett?' in Graver and Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 116–121.

which the author has subsequently referred. In light of this, a later portion of the piece is highly revealing:

> In the beginning, I wanted to speak of arms and legs, of jumping up and down, of bodies tumbling and spinning, of enormous journeys through space, of cities, of deserts, of mountain ranges stretching farther than the eye can see. Little by little, however, as these words began to impose themselves on me, the things I wanted to do seemed finally to be of no importance. Reluctantly, I abandoned all my witty stories, all my adventures of far-away places, and began, slowly and painfully, to empty my mind. Now emptiness is all that remains: a space, no matter how small, in which whatever is happening can be allowed to happen. (*WS*, 86)

The passage is reminiscent of those in which Malone describes his literary *Bildung* (and, indeed, of Beckett's descriptions of his own). In addition, the dedication of 'these words to the impossibility of finding a word equal to the silence inside me' further emphasizes the Beckettian motifs of failure and silence, of great significance in a discussion of the presence of Beckettian irony in Auster's work.

Similarly, language and the subject's relation to it are prominently foregrounded in all the novels of *The New York Trilogy*. Quinn, much like Moran, is drawn into an endeavour that steadily brings about the loss of any and all certainty, self-possession and clear sense. Like Moran, what begins as a clear project of pursuit – of detective work, the pitting of the epistemological apparatus against obscurity for the sake of recuperating meaning – flounders in murky considerations of the possibility of significance at all, and results in the protagonist losing his bearings and falling prey to an absolute abjection. In both *Molloy* and *City of Glass*, the activity of writing plays a significant role in this process. With respect to the earlier mentioned significance of irony to the late-twentieth century Western *Weltanschauung*, Derrida's emphasis, in the more general deconstruction of Western metaphysical assumptions, of the error of insisting on the primacy of the univocity of the spoken word over the plurivocal significance of the written, is especially relevant in this context. For Moran, the process of dismemberment and the loss of proprieties he undergoes is depicted as intimately

connected to his becoming a writer, and, specifically, a writer of counterfactuals, of fictions.

Writing plays a similarly freighted role in *The City of Glass*. Quinn buys a notebook at the very beginning of the case: 'It would be helpful to have a separate place to record his thoughts, his observations, and his questions. In that way, perhaps, things might not get out of control' (*CG*, 38). His relationship to it, and, metonymically, the writing he intends to carry out within it, is from this early stage particularly charged. Quinn is '[a]lmost embarrassed by the intensity of his feelings' on purchasing the notebook (*CG*, 39), and immediately on returning home with it he

> drew the shades in the room, took off all his clothes, and sat down at the desk. He had never done this before, but it somehow seemed appropriate to be naked at this moment. … Then he opened the notebook. He picked up his pen and wrote his initials, DQ (for Daniel Quinn), on the first page. It was the first time in more than five years that he had put his own name in one of his notebooks. He stopped to consider this fact for a moment but then dismissed it as irrelevant. … For several moments he studied his blankness, wondering if he was not a bloody fool. (*CG*, 39)

Thus from the very beginning the role the red notebook – and writing – will come to play in the stripping of Quinn's faculties and identity is prefigured in his urge to undress when first confronted with it. The disruptive role it plays in relation to his identity is similarly indicated by his reversion to the initials of his real name in the course of conducting business in the guise of Paul Auster. The final sentence, with Quinn 'wondering if he was not a bloody fool', also very aptly characterizes the depiction of the effect of the activity of writing on the subject in this novel, a depiction with strong parallels in all of those under consideration.

Simply put, writing, or even simply the attempt to engage in language for the sake of narration, is presented as inevitably troubling the unity and coherence of the subject, embroiling him or her in contradictions and aporia that cannot be resolved into thetic clarity. Writing thus entails foolishness. The writer becomes the subject of language, the dupe of meaning that always exceeds or undershoots intention and words that steadily erode rather than contribute to comprehension. This last verb renders the

issue in question especially clearly: the writer's grip on herself, language and the world slips, and things are pulled apart into fragmentary incoherence rather than unified into systematic clarity. The relation to language exemplified by Quinn and Moran, and every bit as much the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which I shall discuss later in this study, is thus one that troubles identity and unity and sets in play a process over which the agent exercises little or no control. Furthermore, the intimate and ineluctable connection of language to the foundation and structure of subjectivity, and hence what the individual is able to know, feel, or be, is demonstrated in the extreme example, in many ways the centre of *City of Glass*, of Peter Stillman Jr.

Stillman Jr. is confined to a locked room by his father from early infancy for nine years in an attempt to leave him free of influence and thus able to begin speaking the 'natural' language of humankind. Such experiments, as Quinn notes, are also reported to have been carried out by the Egyptian Pharaoh Psmatik and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, and stories about individuals such as Kasper Hauser and the wild boy of Aveyron are also mentioned in connection with the case of Stillman Jr. (*CG*, 33–5). The house burns down and Stillman Jr. is freed, but the damage already done is irreversible: when Quinn meets him, thirteen years later, he speaks in a disjointed, barely coherent idiom all his own, which, anticipating the collapse of schemata of evaluation his involvement in the case will bring about, leaves Quinn disorientated and unsure of how to act. Stillman Jr.'s very presence, it is noted, is like 'a command to be silent' (*CG*, 15).

Peter Stillman Sr., the orchestrator of the experiment and the man Quinn is hired to follow, on his release from prison continues to espouse ideas about language equally eccentric to those that had inspired his earlier activities. He believes the renewal of society and the founding of the New Jerusalem will be achieved through a purification of language. His role in this, as he at one point tells Quinn, is 'inventing a new language':

> A language that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world. When things were whole, we felt confident that our words could express them. But little by little these things have broken apart, shattered, collapsed into chaos. And yet our words have remained the same. They

have not adapted themselves to the new reality. Hence, every time we try to speak of what we see, we speak falsely, distorting the very thing we are trying to represent. It's made a mess of everything. (*CG*, 77)

These ideas are connected to Stillman Sr.'s vision of history, which is crucially inflected by his understanding of the significance of the Fall and the destruction of the Tower of Babel.

Following Milton, Stillman argues that, in the Garden, Adam's 'tongue had gone straight to the quick of the world. His words had not been merely appended to the things he saw, they had revealed their essences, literally brought them to life'; after the Fall, 'Names became detached from things; words devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs; language had been severed from God' (*CG*, 43). The destruction of the Tower of Babel is simply 'a recapitulation' of this, 'only expanded, made general in its significance for mankind' (*CG*, 43).

The terminology and phrasing of this passage are significant. At the very end of the process of dissolution the case brings about on Quinn, as indicated earlier, he is described as having come to feel as if the words he uses are 'part of the world at large, as real and specific as a stone, or a lake, or a flower' (*CG*, 130), which would seem to indicate that he has, in some ways, reversed the effects of the fall of language, at least in the sense proposed by Stillman Sr. A further indication that such is the case is Quinn's increasingly paranoid attitude to the significance of Stillman Sr.'s activity.

When, after some weeks on the case, observation of Stillman Sr. renders nothing intelligible, Quinn begins to feel 'deeply disillusioned' (*CG*, 67) about his attempts to retrieve some sense from the activity, he resorts to increasingly oblique approaches. In response to his sense of the 'impenetrability' and incoherence of the object of scrutiny, Quinn adopts an increasingly tenuous and frenetic approach, drawing maps of the routes Stillman walks during the day. Doing so, he begins to see letters formed from the shapes thus constituted, which day by day spell out a phrase he comes to believe Stillman is intentionally tracing out – 'Tower of Babel' (*CG*, 67).

The referential delusion involved in this is made clear by the fact that these are all 'complicated by numerous irregularities, approximations, and ornate embellishments', which nevertheless do not prevent Quinn from continuing to interpret them as

significant (*CG*, 70). This moment seems to me to mark the critical juncture in his breakdown, as, 'clinging to a semblance of objectivity', he swings between the inability to believe and the inability not to believe the validity of what he thinks he has found:

> Perhaps he was looking for pictures in the clouds, as he had done as a small boy. And yet, the coincidence was too striking. If one map resembled a letter, perhaps even two, he might have dismissed it as a quirk of chance. But four in a row was stretching it too far. … But the letters continued to horrify Quinn. The whole thing was so oblique, so fiendish in its circumlocutions, that he did not want to accept it. … It was all an accident, a hoax he had perpetrated on himself. (*CG*, 70–1)

He then falls asleep, arriving 'in a neverland of fragments, a place of wordless things and thingless words.'

The similarity of this formulation to Beckett's 'even then, when already all was fading … there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names' seems to beg remarking on (*M*, 29). Indeed, given the respective contexts of the phrases, one might on the basis of this close similarity go so far as to question Morley's contention regarding Beckett's complete absence from the text. The meditation on the possibility of understanding and clarity in which it occurs in *City of Glass* is appositely matched by the following passage, the lexicon and phrasing of which is of profound significance in Beckett's trilogy:

> I felt sure that it began with a B or a P, but in spite of this clue, or perhaps because of its falsity, the other letters continued to escape me. … It's too difficult to say, for me. And even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate, as we have just seen I think. … I say that now, but after all what do I know now about then, now when the icy words hail down upon me, the icy meanings, and the world dies too, foully named. All I know is what the words know, and the dead things, and that makes a handsome little sum, with a beginning, a middle and an end as in the well-built phrase and the long sonata of the dead. (*M*, 29)

It seems hard, in light of this, not to read Auster's evocation of nameless things and thingless names as a direct intertextual nod in Beckett's direction. The closing description of Quinn's dream, 'which he later forgot', could perhaps also be read as furnishing a further Beckettian touch: 'he found himself in the town dump of his childhood, sifting through a mountain of rubbish' (*CG*, 72). One could well imagine a play by Beckett based on the premise.

The image provides a clue as to the nature of the activity Quinn is performing in sifting through the data he has haphazardly gathered. In imbuing the resulting patterns with an overarching significance, Quinn's interpretation becomes psychotic, in the sense articulated by Lacan: he mistakes the imaginary for the symbolic, and thus comes to believe in the possibility of unmediated access to the real.[188] This is also exactly the structure of the ideas of language Stillman Sr. spells out in his tract on the New Jerusalem. In seeking to undo the problem of language having 'devolved into a collection of arbitrary signs' (*CG*, 42), Stillman hopes to remove precisely its symbolic aspect and thus allow it to cut 'straight to the quick of the world.'

It is this dimension of the novel that leads me to claim that Auster's and Beckett's works proceed in opposite directions. Confronting the breach in the manifold of signification, characters such as Stillman and Quinn resort to paranoiac proliferations of meaning, their relations to language and the world assuming a superabundance of significance, which results, nevertheless, in a cancelling out of meaning. The development of Beckett's trilogy, in contrast, enacts a steady intensification of implications of the void that falls between sign and signified, with the narrators progressively able to know, and say, less and less, in an apophaticism with no final transcendent referent. As Molloy puts it, 'What I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless definition of man, as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he is not' (*M*, 38).

Nevertheless, the reasoning spelt out in 'White Spaces' and the development depicted in *City of Glass* both point to an understanding of language in many ways

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[188] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book III: The Psychoses – 1955–1956*, trans. Russel Grieg, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller (London: Norton, 1993).

analogous to that which I earlier argued informs Beckett's work, and the implications of this for the figuring of subjectivity similarly correspond at significant points. 'White Spaces' makes clear that a fundamental valence of this vision of language is an irony that entails that assertion and articulation inevitably lag behind, and thus misalign with, that to which they are meant to refer. While formulated in a rather more cerebral form and register than characterizes Beckett's writing, this remains fundamentally analogous to – indeed, simply a broader, less specific articulation of – the earlier writer's framing of the problem, spelt out in the previous chapter, of the impossibility of the coincidence of the self and any reference to the self. In both of these projects, therefore, subjectivity is depicted as being inherently ironic, a locus of instability linguistic constructions circle endlessly around but are never able finally to secure.

Chapter IV: J.M. Coetzee

'a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing': Beckett and Coetzee

Of the responses to Beckett of the three writers under discussion, Coetzee's most clearly demonstrates the enabling aspects of the influence. While the two writers' bodies of work are markedly different in a number of ways, I shall argue in this chapter that the ironic register Beckett achieves is adopted as a central thematic and formal resource by Coetzee. A particularly Beckettian irony characterizes Coetzee's fictional responses to political, literary and historical questions. This can, I think without exaggeration, be identified as occupying the primary place in Coetzee's understanding of literature: the disruptive aspects of this type of irony are precisely those that are referred to in 'Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: Madness and Rivalry', in which the author works out a poetics and an ethics of non-positionality.[189] Most important for my argument here is the fact that this form of irony represents an enabling of possibilities for literary – and, in this case, also ethical – activity: Beckett's work, for Coetzee, does not represent an obstacle to be surmounted or a conflict to be resolved; rather, it seems primarily to be an innovation to be adopted, adapted and explored; although, as discussed later in this chapter, it is also deflected toward slightly different concerns and orientations.

As indicated in a prior chapter, Coetzee has said that his initial response to Beckett took the form of an intentional attempt to 'get closer to a secret' of the Irish writer's style (*DP*, 25), and it is interesting to note that Coetzee only finds his voice after prolonged and systematic study of Beckett's writing, in the form of his doctoral dissertation and other academic studies. The description in *Youth* (2002) of 'John's' response to his first reading of *Watt* is revealing in this respect. Contrasting Beckett with Ford Maddox Ford, on whom Coetzee had written his master's dissertation, the narrator and protagonist John wonders how he 'could … have imagined he wanted to write in the manner of Ford when Beckett was around the whole time? In Ford there has always been an element of the stuffed shirt that he has disliked but has been hesitant to

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[189] J. M. Coetzee, 'Erasmus' *Praise of Folly*: Rivalry and Madness', *Neophilologus, 76*.1 (Jan. 1992).

acknowledge … whereas Beckett is classless, or outside class, as he himself would like to be' (*Y*, 155).

The passage indicates, in addition to an aspect of Beckett's own eluding of positionality that appealed to the young Coetzee, the relatively uncomplicated nature of his influences, which in this case is described as taking the form of a desire to write like someone else. The essay 'Homage' paints a similar picture. While it would be simplistic, and contrary to Coetzee's own statements about the writer's relation to the work, to take this purely at face value, such does seem to be the case with many of the more obvious influences on his writing: Coetzee's appropriations of and responses to prior writers often take the form of conscious, explicit engagements, as is the case with Defoe in *Foe*, Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, and Beckett in *In the Heart of the Country*. In this sense, then, the Bakhtinian, intertextual model seems the best with which to account for Beckett's influence on Coetzee.

Coetzee explicitly cites Bakhtin's thinking on a number of occasions. In an interview with David Attwell, for example, he has said, 'There is a true sense in which writing is dialogic: a matter of awakening the countervoices in oneself and embarking upon speech with them' (*DP*, 65). As Carrol Clarkson, whose study of Coetzee is organized around this notion of responding to countervoices, puts it in discussing this comment, 'Coetzee's critical engagement with the writing of others – already an explicit dialogue – proceeds to raise countervoices within himself, so that each word that he writes becomes *dialogic* in Bakhtin's specific sense of the term.' [190] Significantly, however, she indicates that, as a result of this, 'what may have started out as a discussion of some aspect of language in Bakhtin, now takes on a deeply charged ethical resonance' (ibid., 73–4). Coetzee himself has said that what he feels to be 'missing in Bakhtin' is 'a clear statement that dialogism … is a matter not of ideological position, still less of novelistic technique, but of the most radical intellectual and even spiritual

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[190] Carrol Clarkson, *J.M. Coetzee: Countervoices* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 8 (emphasis original).

courage', a point that indicates the extent to which Coetzee's literary, intellectual and ethical concerns intertwine.[191]

The ethical turn dialogism takes in Coetzee's work is a result of an understanding of subjectivity that differs in important respects from that on which Bakhtin's thinking is based, and that means that the notion is significantly qualified in Coetzee's adaptation of it. Where Bakhtin sees the possibility of speaking for others as a relatively uncomplicated one, as evidenced by his discussion of Dostoevsky's work, this becomes in Coetzee's work a central problem. Most obviously, the ethical problems inhering in the issue of speaking for another are strikingly foregrounded in many of Coetzee's novels, and the non-reciprocity of discursive authority is a matter meditated on in great depth by the author and the protagonists of his novels.

Perhaps the best example of this difference is provided by Lucy's admonition of her father in *Disgrace*. Bakhtin, discussing Dostoevsky's depiction of characters, writes, 'just as the central object for other novelists might be adventure, anecdote, psychological type, a scene from everyday life or history, for him the central object was the idea.'[192] Lucy, in response to David's attempts to draw her into dialogue and thus understand her reasoning, says, 'You keep misreading me. Guilt and salvation are abstractions. I don't act in terms of abstractions. Until you make an effort to see that, I can't help you' (*D*, 112). Given that Lucy's experience and interiority remain enigmatic to her father throughout the novel, with all his attempts to understand her proceeding via recourse to his own assumptions and values, her statement here would appear to be an argument against the possibility of the establishment of real engagement with another on the basis of abstract ideas, and hence against the possibility of an ethical dialogism based on such. Like the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians* and the medical officer in *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), it is precisely dialogue that David fails to achieve. Similarly, in the figure of Friday in *Foe* (1986) Coetzee inscribes the inscrutability of the other to authorial intention. Thus, in contrast to Bakhtin's perception of a dialogism

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[191] J.M. Coetzee, 'Dostoevsky, the Miraculous Years', in *Stranger Shores: Essays 1986–1999* (London: Vintage, 2002), 145.

[192] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1984), 23.

based on the idea, Coetzee's work appears to place in question the possibility of such, proposing instead an alternative based on a recognition of the radical alterity of the other and an attitude mindful and respectful of this.

Such radical alterity implies that the dialogical relation is asymmetrical, and it is this asymmetry that instantiates the irresolvable irony in Coetzee's novels. Because of it, the other becomes a vanishing hermeneutic horizon, from which certainty can only be recuperated by means of violence, discursive or otherwise. This in turn means that the subject of discourse is continuously displaced, the significance of any utterance and the validity of any position disrupted by its imbrications with that which finally undermines it. There are clear Levinasian echoes in the structural metaphors I have chosen to describe this question, and a number of prominent commentators have had recourse to the philosopher's ethical thinking in discussion of the author.[193] This chapter is informed by the discussion of Blanchot's response to Levinas in '*Notre compagne clandestine*', discussed in the introduction, and specifically his tantalizing claim there that 'philosophy is precisely not allegory': this is the point of departure for my discussion of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, much critical response to which has centred on the question of whether or not the novel is to be read allegorically. I shall argue that it is not, and that one can only do so by ignoring certain of the most salient aspects of the work, and others of Coetzee's, regarding the economies of human relations and the role of the understanding. Following Johan Geertsema, I shall argue that irony is the most appropriate way of conceiving of the narrative economy of the novel and ethical schemata depicted within it, and that this irony is in certain ways analogous to that instantiated in Beckett's trilogy.

Irony in Coetzee's work, I argue, fulfils a function similar to that in Beckett's, blurring, and undermining, the boundaries between the comic and tragic, proper and improper, significant and insignificant. Among the most noteworthy consequences of

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[193] Geertsema, 'Irony and Otherness'; Derek Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading: Literature in the Event* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2004); Eduard Jordaan, 'A White South African Liberal as a Hostage to the Other: Reading J.M. Coetzee's *Age of Iron* through Levinas', *South African Journal of Philosophy 24*.1 (2005); Tom Heron, 'The Dog Man: Becoming Animal in Coetzee's *Disgrace*', *Twentieth Century Literature, 51*.4 (Winter 2005); Clarkson, *Countervoices*, especially chapter two; Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible*.

this blurring is that the reader is forced to interrogate the modalities of her habitual literary responses, and the various assumptions underlying, and the implications of, certain generic, stylistic, and rhetorical conventions. Perhaps the most pronounced, or simply least subtle, example of this in Coetzee's oeuvre is his reading, when invited to give a lecture, a story about someone being invited to give a lecture. The strategy makes it impossible to give attention to the nominal content without a very pressing awareness of form, and, specifically, the contraventions of formal expectations, whereby it is presented.

My understanding of the role of irony in Coetzee's work is closely related to such troubling and interrogation of literary and aesthetic conventions and the assumptions on which they are founded. The tenor of the irony in Coetzee's writing nevertheless undergoes significant modulations over the course of the author's career. The caustic tone of *Dusklands* (1974) and *In the Heart of the Country*, for example, is rather different to the more introspective, tortured register of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which again differs dramatically from the significantly less anguished *Slow Man* (2005). I would argue, however, that running throughout the oeuvre as a central preoccupation is the question of the impossibility of relation to the other arising from the subject's situation in language. This need not be considered a characteristic drawn directly from Beckett; Hofmannsthal, Borges, or Wallace Stevens might all equally accurately be identified as precursors in this regard, and it is among the most recurrent of preoccupations of mid- to late-twentieth century philosophy and literature, Anglophone and continental. Nevertheless, almost no writer is as obsessively and rigorously preoccupied with this question as is Beckett, and in almost no other writers' work is the ironic structure of subjectivity as pervasive as it is in his.

This is not to deny the significant differences between the two writers. The intense preoccupation with questions of ethical community in Coetzee's work is very different to the solipsistic self-engagement that characterizes so much of Beckett's. Similarly, Coetzee's concerns with historical and political situatedness are very prominent, whereas these appear in Beckett's work in oblique and obscured ways. Further, Coetzee's statements on the importance of Beckett's work for his own have become steadily more qualified as his career has progressed, to the point at which, in

2011, he replied to an interviewer's question on the significance of Beckett for his own writing, 'Let us not overestimate my involvement with Beckett. There are writers who have meant more to me than he has.'[194]

Despite these differences, though, there is a strong sense in which Coetzee can be said to be working in a Beckettian tradition. Patrick Hayes describes the nature of this very well. Hayes argues that, while the unnameable other to which Beckett's work attempts to give voice − or, more accurately, enacts the impossibility of the attempt to give voice to − is an internal other, an aspect of the self occluded by discursive consciousness, and Coetzee's is an external other occluded by social and historical structures, both bodies of work are fundamentally informed by the question of speaking for the speechless. [195] In a similar vein, Gilbert Yeoh claims that 'Coetzee simultaneously transplants Beckett's metaphysical and epistemological paradigms into South African political reality, and reconfigures them into moral and political paradigms more relevant to the South African context.'[196] In Bakhtinian terms, this can be read as the attempt to overcome monologism in favour of a substantial and meaningful plurivocal dialogue. Importantly, though, as I indicated earlier, where Bakhtin sees this as a real possibility, in the work of both Beckett and Coetzee this attempt is presented as a problem, if not an outright impossibility, rather than a project effectively completed, but one we are nevertheless unable not to take up.

Among the principle ways in which I see this disruption of interpretive limits being instantiated in both Beckett's and Coetzee's work is a radically unstable irony that serves to dislocate the frames of reference and disrupt the points of view of any statement, and thus producing a narrative, and interpretive, equivalent of the impossibility of naming the unnameable. (As Patrick Hayes construes it, the failure to engage with the external other that occurs in Coetzee's work is analogous to the failure to achieve self-coincidence that occurs in Beckett's; in both writers, the linguistic and conceptual resources available to the subject fail to make possible an adequation to

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[194] Rainey, Attwell, and Madden, 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee'.
[195] Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*, 50.
[196] Gilbert Yeoh, 'J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett: Nothingness, Minimalism and Indeterminacy', *Ariel 31*.4 (Oct. 2000): 120.

either the self or the other.)[197] In Coetzee's work, the destabilizing aspects of irony come to the fore largely in response to ethical concerns, as a response to, or way of engaging with, ideological monologism and the authoritarianism it informs. The pronouncements and perspectives of narrators are rendered ironic through their inextricable situatedness in given historical, social and epistemic horizons, not in a way that admits of circumscription and understanding of these, as for example in Bakhtin's conception of Dostoevsky's poetics, but one that actually enacts such hermeneutic indeterminacy. In Beckett's work, a similar effect is achieved through the vertiginous undermining of the speaker and position of enunciation, such that any statement is immediately called into question by that which follows, and rather than any coherent picture of reality being presented, we receive an enactment of the failure of this to be achieved.

In discussing such forms of irony and the techniques whereby they are achieved, in this chapter I shall first discuss *In the Heart of the Country*, paying attention to the ways in which it bears the imprint of Beckett's influence in a far more overt way than is the case with later novels. This permits me to establish a point of reference from which to evaluate which aspects of Beckett's writing exert a lasting, integral influence, and which are dropped as Coetzee establishes the style most recognizably his own. Central among those aspects that are dropped, I shall argue, is a certain strain of comedy, and the discussion will focus on the nature of this comedy and the implication of its absence from later novels. I shall then move on to discuss *Waiting for the Barbarians*, a novel I take to be exemplary of the style and concerns of what might be called Coetzee's middle period (extending from *Waiting for the Barbarians* to *Disgrace*), in order to demonstrate that, while certain stylistic and tonal aspects reminiscent of Beckett's work present in early novels such as *In the Heart of the Country* and *Dusklands* are muted in later work, the irony I have identified as typically Beckettian continues to inform the work in fundamental ways.

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[197] Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*.

Critical consensus – with some exceptions[198] – is quite largely agreed on the very un-comic tone of almost all of Coetzee's writing. James Wood, for example, claims that, in Coetzee's novels, 'in place of comedy there is only bitter irony (this is Coetzee's large difference from Beckett, whom he so clearly admires)'.[199] There is little point in contesting the first portion of this claim; whatever the general tenor of novels such as *Age of Iron* (1990), *Disgrace* or *Life & Times of Michael K* happens to be, it would be perverse to argue for them being predominantly, or even in part, comic. (It is interesting that in the clearest exceptions to this trend, *Youth* and *Summertime* (2009), the comedy is at the writer's own expense.) Nevertheless, the second part of Wood's claim is not an obvious consequence of the first. As is clear from the argument regarding the nature and role of irony in Beckett's work offered above, the absence of comedy in no way implies the necessary absence of irony.

'so obscure as to be a prodigy': language and the other

One rather obvious difference between, on the one hand, the early novels *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country* and, on the other, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which exhibits far more clearly the style, tone and register of Coetzee's middle period, is the almost complete absence from the latter of a certain anarchic comedy that is present in the former. Later protagonists do not depart quite as sharply – or, like Michael K, do so in a markedly different manner – from the psychological middle ground as do Magda, Eugene Dawn or Jacobus Coetzee, who are all in certain respects insane. The perverseness of Jacobus Coetzee's view of himself and the world provides the basis for a rather Beckettian comedy of the grotesque. In a similar manner, Magda, the protagonist and deeply unreliable narrator of *In the Heart of the Country*, exhibits regular instances of the withering self-scrutiny that is used to such potent comic effect in *Molloy* or *Malone Dies*:

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[198] Including, for example, Patrick Hayes and Gillian Dooley, *J.M. Coetzee and the Power of Narrative* (Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2010).

[199] James Wood, 'A Frog's Life' (review of *Elizabeth Costello*), *London Review of Books*, *25*(20) (Oct. 23, 2003), http://www.lrb.co.uk/v25/n20/james-wood/a-frogs-life

a child I bore, assuming that such a calamity could ever befall me, would be thin and sallow, would weep without cease from aches in his vitals, would totter from room to room on his rickety pins clutching at his mother's apron-strings and hiding his face from strangers. But who would give me a baby, who would not turn to ice at the spectacle of my bony frame on the wedding-couch, the coat of fur up to my navel, the acrid cavities of my armpits, the line of black moustache …? (*HC*, 10)

While the caustic edge to such passages seems also to be a central principle of the semi-autobiographical works *Youth* and *Summertime*, the fact of their dealing with the author renders the effect slightly different to that achieved here.

Gilbert Yeoh considers *In the Heart of the Country* to be an immature work. He reads it as having failed fully to work through Beckett's influence, characterizing it as 'a fledgling writer's crude attempt to imitate Beckett's early prose.'[200] While 'crude' seems an overly harsh evaluation of the novel, Coetzee's own recent comments about his relation to Beckett's comedy bear out the general import of Yeoh's assessment. In an interview in 2011, Coetzee discussed how his doctoral dissertation on *Watt* was in large part intended as an exploration of the comedy of that novel.[201] 'What I failed to notice', Coetzee claims, 'was the Irishness of the whole project: not just the Irish garrulousness of its learned comedy but the Irishness of its humor too':

The comedy was Irish and to that extent unavailable to me as a writer. I might be able to learn how to make up Beckettian syntactic structures, and those structures might indeed be induced to carry their own formal meaning; but what I would have at my disposal with which to fill them would never be the equal of what Beckett had, because the language and the sensibility he worked with, the language-sensibility, was both personal and communal, Beckettian and Irish. (Ibid.)

In the Heart of the Country certainly seems to precede such a perception. The title of Paul Cantor's article on Beckett and Coetzee, 'Happy Days in the Veld', sums up

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[200] Gilbert Yeoh, 'J.M. Coetzee and Samuel Beckett'.
[201] Madden, Rainey, Attwell, 'An Interview with J.M. Coetzee', 848.

the general tenor of the work very well,[202] and Beckett's play in fact appears to be directly alluded to in the novel: 'If I had been set down by fate in the middle of the veld in the middle of nowhere, buried to my waist and commanded to live a life, I could not have done it…. I need more than merely pebbles to permute' (*HC*, 119). Various other thematic and formal aspects of *In the Heart of the Country* also align it with Beckett's work. The activity of writing occupies a prominent place in the narrative, with the framing fiction being that the text of the novel is comprised of Magda's journal.[203] This leads to various authorial interjections, amendments and intrusions, with the plot itself being interrupted and revised at various points. Indeed, Magda at one point exclaims 'What tedium!' (*HC*, 54), echoing Malone verbatim, and phrases such as, 'But to tell the truth, I am wary of all these suppositions' (*HC*, 80) ring with a disenchantment with the business of fabulation very similar to that expressed by many of Beckett's narrators. Through her writing, Magda hopes to escape her imprisonment in language ('This monologue of the self is a maze of words' (*HC*, 16)) and achieve some form of meaningful communion with her fellow beings, but such proves impossible, and, as in Beckett's work, the writing leads rather into further estrangement: like Molloy, Magda largely loses her grasp on her identity and her understanding of the world, and the course of the writing steadily opens up greater and greater reaches of confusion and uncertainty.

However, in line with Patrick Hayes's argument that Coetzee's work situates Beckett's ironic valence in specific historical and political schemes[204] – takes the inward and turns it out on the world, so to speak – such estrangement is importantly figured as a consequence of power relations rather than, as in Beckett's trilogy, resulting from aspects of subjectivity. The novel dwells at length on the impossibility of human relation

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[202] Paul Cantor, 'Happy Days in the Veld: Beckett and Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*', *South Atlantic Quarterly, 93* (1994).

[203] Although this is by no means perfectly self-evident, and the form can also be taken to reflect Magda's interior monologue: I base this surmise on Magda's statement, close to the very beginning of the novel, 'I fight against becoming one of the forgotten ones of history. I am a spinster with a locked diary' (*HC*, 3). However, she also states, toward the end of the book, 'Summers and winters come and go. How they pass so swiftly, how many have passed I cannot say, not having had the foresight long ago to start cutting notches in a pole or scratching marks on a wall or keeping a journal like a good castaway' (123).

[204] Hayes, *J.M. Coetzee and the Novel*.

untouched by patriarchal or colonial domination, and Magda's longing to escape such determination is what for the most part drives the action. Nevertheless, such a systematic distortion of relations is depicted as resulting extensively from the subject's relation to language, which implies clear parallels with my construal of Beckettian irony: 'Words are coin. Words alienate. Language is no medium for desire. Desire is rapture, not exchange. It is only by alienating the desired that language masters it' (*HC*, 26).

Such an alienation in and by language is among the central subjects of the novel. The impossibility of relations with others, one's history and the natural world is consistently dwelt on, and the desire to find a way beyond the strictures of the forms of being and thinking imposed by the language and the history bequeathed her is Magda's primary animating impulse. In this respect, she is in certain ways exemplary among Coetzee's protagonists. In an interview with David Attwell, Coetzee claims,

> Magda is passionate … and her passion is, I suppose, of the same species as the love I talked about in the Jerusalem address – the love for South Africa (not just South Africa the rocks and bushes and mountains and plains but the country and its people), of which there has not been enough on the part of the European colonists and their descendants – not enough in intensity, not enough in all-embracingness. Magda at least has that love, or its cousin. (*DP*, 61)

To this extent, Magda represents a polar opposite to a character such as Jacobus Coetzee, in whom the possibility of love is entirely thwarted by his immersion in cognitive schemata that figure the world as an object to be dominated.

David Attwell makes interesting use of Coetzee's essay 'Achterberg's "*Ballade van de gasfitter*": The Mystery of I and You',[205] published at more or less the same time as *In the Heart of the Country*, in his reading of the latter.[206] Attwell notes that in the Achterberg essay, Coetzee, in describing the intersubjective relation, draws a parallel between Martin Buber's notion of the mythical primacy of the *I-Thou* relation and Wallace Stevens's Nanzia Nunzio, 'the woman stripped more nakedly / Than nakedness,

[205] Coetzee, 'Achterberg's "*Ballade van de gasfitter*": The Mystery of I and You', *PMLA, 9* (1977), reprinted in *Doubling the Point*, 69–89.
[206] Attwell, *South Africa and the Politics of Writing*, 58.

standing before an inflexible / Order, saying I am the contemplated spouse.'[207] Both of these, Coetzee argues, 'point to a transcendence of subjectivity through union with or reconstitution of the Word.' Such a possibility is contrasted, however, with a 'darker' Sartrean view in which subjectivity is 'a hole through which nothingness pours into the world' and a Kierkegaardian understanding in which the approach to the other is 'the *via dolorosa* of an absurdist Christian knight, the consummation of whose search for the true *Thou* … is a moment in the "presence" (a presence that is an absence) of both his own nothingness and an unapproachable, infinitely remote God' (*DP*, 74).[208]

The conclusion Coetzee draws from this is that, 'All versions of the *I* are fictions of the *I*' (*DP*, 74), a deeply Beckettian position. The development of Coetzee's fiction from this position, however (as indicated above), consists in his exploration of the consequences of such a view of subjectivity for the subject's engagement with others, the world, and history. As *In the Heart of the Country* amply demonstrates, 'Neither of the Words *I* and *You* can exist pure in the medium of language' (*DP*, 74), and the subject must negotiate the relation to the other through perpetual ironic misdirection, an awareness of the fictiveness of all forms of address available to her along with a recognition of the impossibility of any other.

I here follow Johan Geertsema's characterization of irony as enabling an ethical response to alterity given such reifying dimensions of language. Geertsema argues that irony allows for a form of representation that draws attention to its limitations as representation, in order not to be mistaken for anything other than such and hence to do justice to the alterity of the other.[209] The common ground between the classical, rhetorical conception of irony and the Romantic understanding of it, claims Geertsema, lies in the invocation on the part of both of otherness: in irony, something intervenes between the stated and the implied, the said and the unsaid, to produce something new. This 'between' is that which allows language to extend beyond itself, to figure a semantic excess in the schema of a linguistic economy.

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[207] Wallace Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction: II* ('It Must Change'), viii, in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, ed. Holly Stevens (New York: Vintage, 1972), 222.
[208] This conjunction of irresolvable contraries is again reminiscent of Schlegel's view of irony.
[209] Geertsema, 'Irony and Otherness'.

Despite – or perhaps precisely because of – her passion for the other, Magda seems aware of the tendency of language to do violence to that which it seeks to represent, and is adept at disrupting it to establish some possibility of relation beyond its strictures. Magda's revisions and amendments to her story and her meditations on language serve to disrupt the illusion of a perspicuous discourse, and hence draw attention to its failure to accommodate various aspects of the world in which she finds herself. Derek Attridge discusses how *In the Heart of the Country* fits into a modernist and postmodernist tradition that attempts to 'fissure' language in order to admit that which is excluded by discourse, and Michael Marais similarly argues that Magda attempts 'not so much to "burst through the screen of names into the goatseye view of … the stone desert" as to make language *like* the stone desert it excludes'.[210]

Almost all of Coetzee's characters are depicted as coming under the sway of otherness. Magda, the magistrate, Mrs Curren, and Dostoevsky are all drawn through a material and emotional degradation by their obedience to an obscure imperative to access some other who appears in their world. This summons by the other functions, as Geertsema's treatment of the topic adeptly demonstrates, in a manner analogous to irony: 'each [irony and otherness] is potentially infinite. And each, while linguistic, escapes language. The other, even though it appears in language, can never be apprehended in that language, while irony, similarly, even though it operates in language, exhausts language or the attempt to close it off so it can mean fully.'[211] In the instance of both irony and otherness, hence, a closed economy is opened onto the infinity of a task it can neither discharge nor put off, and both bring about an analogous 'infinite *vertige*' of attempts to accommodate the excessive.

As in Beckett's and Auster's work, Coetzee consistently depicts writing as operating close to the crux of this intersection between self and other, and as an activity with a peculiar facility to bring about an interruption of closed subjectivity by alterity. *Foe*, *Age of Iron*, *The Master of Petersburg*, and *Slow Man* all thematize writing as an attempt to reach the other, as do, in slightly different ways, *In the Heart of the Country*

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[210] Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, 30; Marais, *Secretary of the Invisible*, 22.
[211] Geertsema, 'Irony and Otherness', 21.

and the section of *Life & Times of Michael K* comprising the medical officer's journal. David Lurie's composition of his opera in *Disgrace* is perhaps the most extensive and explicit exploration of this dimension of creativity, but it is tinged with a euphoria of revelation that seems entirely absent from similar considerations of writing. *In the Heart of the Country* offers no conclusions or summation, merely, like *Molloy*, a steadily intensifying derangement. Mrs Curren's letter to her daughter is written to an absence, and in *The Master of Petersburg* Dostoevsky describes writing as 'treachery without limit' (*MP*, 222). What all have in common, however, is a responsiveness to an imperative that issues from beyond the horizon of intelligibility and that leads to a self-undoing exploration of the bases of the individual's most central meaning and values.

In Magda's case, this responsiveness is figured in her 'passion' to achieve true communion with the other. As already touched on, her perception of the role of language in establishing such an inapproachable alterity is made clear throughout the text. This perception extends, in a strongly Beckettian vein, to her sense of her own self as alienated in language:

> If I am an emblem then I am an emblem. I am incomplete, I am a being with a hole inside me. I signify something, I do not know what. … There is no act I know of that will liberate me into the world. There is no act I know of that will bring the world into me. I am a torrent of sound streaming into the universe, thousands upon thousands of corpuscles weeping, groaning, gnashing their teeth. (*HC*, 9)

This is a vision exactly analogous to the Sartrean view of subjectivity as 'a hole through which nothingness pours into the world' discussed in the Achterberg essay, and it implies that any positing of a self – even in an attempt to relate to another – will be ultimately simply an arbitrary assertion of will. Like the narrators of Beckett's trilogy, Magda circles the irreducible contingency at the centre of her being, unable to identify an axiomatic foundation on which to ground her fictions.

In light of this, one might interpret her various narrative revisions as an attempt to exhaust the permutations of the constellation of terms in which she finds herself, and perhaps in this way to move beyond them. Like Molloy with his sucking stones (*M*, 69),

Magda moves her father, Hendrik, Anna and herself from one term of relation to the next, steadily working through all possible combinations. Having done so, however, she is nevertheless left with 'the voices' that speak to her from the 'machines that fly in the sky' (in quotations from Rousseau, Blake, and Hegel) (*HC*, 126), to which she continues to attempt to respond. One implication of this, and specifically the fact that Magda hears quotations taken from significant figures in the history of Western thought and literature, is that she is engaged in – trapped in – a dialogue with the history of her own culture, and that her attempt to fissure the subjectivity in which she feels herself to be bound must proceed through an opening of this history to what it excludes.

The irony of Magda's situation consists in the irresolvable relation of freedom and determination: she experiences her own essential self as an abyssal freedom, an infinite negativity, but she is able to frame this experience, and hence finally actually to experience it, only in the terms made available to her by her history. The irony that arises from this is analogous to the mathematical sublime, deriving as it does from the impossible relation of the particular with the infinite. Hence, in conjunction with the infinite demand of the other discussed by Marais and Geertsema, there is a correlative irony at work in the constitution of the self. As in the spiralling recursions of the narrative of *The Unnamable*, for example, Magda's trajectory toward the heart of the real is forever condemned to traverse her construction of that real, and then her construction of that construction, and so on ad infinitum, in an impossible surfeit of fictions. Both the interior alterity of the self and the exterior alterity of the other are excluded by language, but Magda has nothing but language with which to access them, and so she goes on narrating.

Such a concern with the constraints and implications of the forms of communication available to one, and the ways in which they impede or disrupt human relation, remain a prevalent concern in almost all of Coetzee's work. In *Waiting for the Barbarians*, this is done largely in the character of the magistrate and his encounter with the barbarian girl. Further, though, and more interestingly for my purposes here, this novel depicts certain modes of interpretation as constituting precisely such a constraint. It also instantiates an irony that, in disrupting such interpretative procedures, enacts the disruption of habits of thought it depicts occurring within the magistrate as a profoundly

ethical event or state of being. In the following I characterize the mode of interpretation thus challenged as one analogous to allegory (for reasons described below), contrasting this with the irony I see as being a central aspect of the text and demonstrating how the latter undermines the possibility of the former.

'of no interest in itself, like all that has a moral': allegory, irony, alterity

There are a number of reasons for the use of the term 'allegory' to characterize the interpretive approach I am here addressing: its use in Coetzee's texts themselves, as discussed in greater detail below, correlates exactly to the attitude or stance I seek to specify, and the prior critical literature, as also discussed below, makes abundant use of the concept. It also seems to me best to describe, in the context of literary interpretation, the abstracting, rationalizing mode of engagement that is depicted as both the essential form of one specific Western epistemological stance that is a recurrent preoccupation in the novels and the basis of a correlative posture of domination. I considered the view of this relation of interpretation to domination and the ways in which allegory and irony connect to this in chapter two, in the discussion of Blanchot's response to Levinas's thought, and Levinas's thinking on ethics is of great significance in this context: as I argue in this section, I read the anti-allegorical nature of *Waiting for the Barbarians*, which I follow previous critics in viewing as describing the contours of the ethical encounter as posited by Levinas, as instantiating an irony analogous to that achieved in Beckett's work, but oriented differently. I hence see Beckettian irony as continuing to play a significant role in the central ethical and narrative concerns of Coetzee's work after the more apparent stylistic and tonal similarities of the earlier work have been muted, and as a valid and helpful category in making sense of this fiction.

A good place to begin an analysis of the place of such allegory in *Waiting for the Barbarians* is the lengthy critical discussion that centres on it. A significant portion of the work on this novel concerns the extent to which it is to be read as an allegory of Apartheid South Africa, colonial domination and postcolonial resistance, or some other applicable historico-political fact. This is to some extent a result of the initial reception of Coetzee's work in his home country. In South African literary circles in the later

stages of the National Party regime there was much support for a Marxist mode of critical realism as the most appropriate response to the political situation then prevailing, as articulated, and practised, by Lewis Nkosi, for example. By this standard, the metafictional and experimental aspects of Coetzee's work smacked of *art pour l'art*, and meant that it was judged to fall short of the requisite commitment considered appropriate. Nadine Gordimer's 1994 review of *Life & Times of Michael K.*, which characterizes Coetzee's writing as evidencing a 'desire to hold himself clear of events and their daily, grubby, tragic consequences', is perhaps the most concise statement of this view.[212] (Such criticisms have persisted beyond the demise of official Apartheid and Coetzee's emigration to Australia: in 2012 Imraan Coovadia, comparing Coetzee unfavourably with Gordimer and Athol Fugard on the subject of such engagement, claimed 'the advanced forms of postcolonial and poststructuralist argument that Coetzee found so congenial have as distant a connection to equality as Gradgrind to real horses'.)[213] Given this climate, one of the ways in which commentators sought to clear Coetzee's work of such a taint was to read it as an oblique allegorical engagement with then-present political actualities. In this interpretation, as expounded by Bernard Levin and Irving Howe, for example, Coetzee's work transmuted the all too pressing political issues facing the country into broader moral questions.[214]

An important factor in such allegorical readings is the need to preserve some autonomy for the artist and the work of art. As Clive Barnett points out, much of the discourse about South African literature at this time was concerned with the overwhelming weight and imaginative inescapability of the political situation.[215] While

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[212] Nadine Gordimer, 'The Idea of Gardening', *New York Review of Books*, Feb. 2, 1984, 3–6. A riposte to this view that is of interest given the authors considered in this thesis is provided by John Banville in his review of *Jump and Other Stories*, where he claims that such an understanding is based on a confusion of 'the ethical with the moral' ('Winners', *New York Review of Books*, Nov. 21, 1991, http://www.nybooks.com/ articles/archives/1991/nov/21/ winners/?page=1).

[213] Imraan Coovadia, 'J.M. Coetzee's Badly Written and Sycophantic Biography', *Mail & Guardian*, Dec. 14, 2012, http://mg.co.za/article/2012-12-14-jm-coetzees-badly-written-and-sycophantic-biography

[214] Bernard Levin, 'On the Edge of the Empire', *Sunday Times*, Nov. 23, 1980, 44; Irving Howe, 'A Stark Political Fable of South Africa', *The New York Times Book Review*, Apr. 18, 1982, 35–36. A similar reading is proposed in D. Donoghue, 'Her Man Friday', *The New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 22, 1987, 1 and 26–27.

[215] Clive Barnett, 'Constructions of Apartheid in the International Reception of the Novels of J.M. Coetzee', *Journal of Southern African Studies, 25*.2 (Jun. 1999).

this latter perspective appears to provide scope for some form of aesthetic sublimation of hard reality, it frequently does so merely by eliding any of the historical or political context of the production of the works for the sake of recuperating a humanistic moral core. Hence, as Barnett puts it, such allegorical readings

> re-anchor the novels to a familiar model of South Africa as an enclosed terrain, but at the same time, and conversely, once so located they can be read as having a universal moral significance, rather than a specific political one either with reference to alternative understandings of South Africa or to the politics of writing. (Ibid.)

The dangers of Western humanistic readings' tendency to gloss historical particularities for the sake of recuperating a flattering – or less damning – significance from a text are certainly relevant in such a context. Much like the medical officer with Michael K., there appears to be a certain anxiety animating such rehabilitations of these disturbing allegories to sound moral structures.

Nevertheless, postcolonial readings of Coetzee's novels, which came after such initial reviews and were informed by more sophisticated theoretical and historical perspectives, also frequently found reason to have recourse to notions of allegory. A.R. JanMohamed and Gayatri Spivak are perhaps the most relevant in this sense,[216] but there are numerous other examples.[217] As Derek Attridge has demonstrated, however, such readings tend to have to ignore a great deal of the specificities of the texts themselves in order to make a case for the alignment of them with such pre-existing schemes.[218] Most importantly, such readings need to elide the ways in which the novels so masterfully

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[216] A.R. JanMohamed, 'The Economy of Manichean Allegory: The Function of Racial Difference in Colonialist Literature', *Critical Inquiry*, *12* (1985); G.C. Spivak, 'Theory in the Margin: Coetzee's Foe Reading Defoe's Crusoe/Roxana', in J. Arac and B. Johnson, eds, *Consequences of Theory* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991).

[217] Susan VanZanten Gallagher, *A Story of South Africa: J.M. Coetzee's Fiction in Context* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991); Dick Penner, *Countries of the Mind: The Fiction of J.M. Coetzee* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1989); Teresa Dovey, '*Waiting for the Barbarians*: Allegory of Allegories', *Critical Perspectives on J.M. Coetzee*, ed. Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (London: MacMillan, 1996) and *The Novels of J.M. Coetzee: Lacanian Allegories* (Craighall: A.D. Jonker, 1988); Bill Ashcroft, 'Irony, Allegory and Empire: *Waiting for the Barbarians* and *In the Heart of the Country*', *Critical Essays on J.M. Coetzee*, ed. Sue Kossew (New York: G.K. Hall, 1998).

[218] Attridge, *J.M. Coetzee and the Ethics of Reading*, 42–48.

enact ethical and existential ambiguity and uncertainty, the ways in which they conjure an event rather than simply making a statement – elide, that is, precisely what can be considered the literariness of the writing (ibid., 44–48). This tendency is clearly demonstrated by Bill Ashcroft's reading.[219]

Aschcroft argues that *Waiting for the Barbarians* enacts the magistrate's move from an initial postmodern ironic position to a subsequent committed postcolonial stance, and that this movement is an allegory of resistance to imperial domination. One point he cites in support of this is the magistrate's claim, on his return from the journey to the barbarians, 'I am aware of the source of my elation: my alliance with the guardians of the Empire is over, I have set myself in opposition, the bond is broken, I am a free man' (*WB*, 78). The passage that follows immediately after this, however, of which Ashcroft makes no mention, is this:

> But what a dangerous joy! It should not be so easy to attain salvation. And is there any principle behind my opposition? Have I not simply been provoked into a reaction by the sight of one of the new barbarians usurping my desk and pawing my papers? As for this liberty which I am in the process of throwing away, what value does it have to me? Have I truly enjoyed the unbounded freedom of this past year in which more than ever before my life has been mine to make up as I go along? For example: my freedom to make of the girl whatever I felt like, wife or concubine or daughter or slave or all at once or none, at whim, because I had no duty to her save what it occurred to me to feel from moment to moment: from the oppression of such freedom who would not welcome the liberation of confinement? In my opposition there is nothing heroic – let me not for an instant forget that. (*WB*, 78)

I do not mean here to simplify Ashcroft's argument: he presents a detailed and in many ways compelling case for his claims, and, as his aim is primarily to establish the non-ironic nature of Coetzee's work, or at least of his second and third novels, I shall have reason to return to his points later in this chapter. The purpose of this criticism of a rather decontextualized claim is to demonstrate how, in order for such allegorical

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[219] Ashcroft, 'Irony, Allegory and Empire'.

readings to be advanced, the vacillation and reflexive foldings of the narrative – as so clearly evidenced in the above quoted passage – need to be supressed.

As Attridge points out, the thematization of allegory within Coetzee's novels has important implications for an appreciation of the ways in which they rest on allegorical principles of composition and make themselves available to allegorical interpretation.[220] The frogs Elizabeth Costello describes to her panel of inquisitors are an exemplary instance of this. In the Kafkaesque parable that constitutes the penultimate chapter of *Elizabeth Costello* (2003), the eponymous alter-ego of the author is called before a committee to give a statement of her beliefs in order to be allowed through 'the gate'. She prepares two versions of her creed, both of which centre on her vocation as a writer and the necessities this imposes, and the piece can be read as an exploration of a certain conception of literature that appears to have much in common with that which Coetzee's novels enact and explore. Her first submission – in which she claims that belief has no place in writing, that her vocation is not about belief but rather about listening, responding – being rejected, in the second she tells a story about a species of Australian frog that hibernates beneath baked desert mud for months at a time, emerging with the infrequent rains. One of her interlocutors describes her story as an 'allegorical' assertion of her belief in the spirit of life (much as Molloy describes a given event as 'an incident of no interest in itself, like all that has a moral' (*M*, 86)), but she maintains: 'the life cycle of the frog may sound allegorical, but to the frogs themselves it is no allegory, it is the thing itself, the only thing' (*EC*, 217). Read in connection with the book's consistent concern with domination and how it is justified, the passage would suggest that an allegorization of the life cycle of the frog is only possible through a failure to engage with its specificity, through a sublation that, ultimately, does violence to the frog itself. As Costello puts it, 'it is because of their indifference to me that I believe in them' (*EC*, 217): the relation described is not one of an abstracting incorporation of the other into a known scheme, but a leaving open of any such schema to accommodate that which is other to it.

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[220] Attridge, *Ethics of Reading*, 35.

Another notable instance of such a thematization of allegory occurs in *Life & Times of Michael K*: the medical officer, disturbed and fascinated by K, resorts to increasingly desperate interpretations of him while seeking to elicit some sort of response from him. At one point in this process, the medical officer states, 'Your stay in the camp was merely an allegory … of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it' (*MK*, 228). As I shall argue is the case of almost every instance of allegory in Coetzee's work, this is a description of allegory of that which defies allegorization – of an allegory ironic about its own very possibility – and hence a thematization of allegory for the sake of illustrating its totalizing proclivities. It is also rendered ironic by the fact that it is spoken by the medical officer, whose utter failure to understand K culminates in the bathetic scene in which, running behind the vanishing figure of the escaping K, he despairingly cries, '"Have I understood you? If I am right, hold up your right hand; if I am wrong, hold up your left"' (*MK*, 229). As with almost all such pairings of westerner and other (or human and other) in Coetzee's work, the novel demonstrates how the medical officer's attempts to read K, to translate him into a schema with which he is familiar, arises from the discomfort such otherness arouses.

To the extent that the texts make use of such aspects of allegory, they more often than not do so to explore and reflect on such aspects of the technique, and to hold it in an ironic openness to that which destabilizes and disrupts it. Mrs Curren wonders at one point whether Vercueil might be the angel of death, but his importance to her, and in the novel, is precisely that he cannot be ascribed such pat ready-made labels. In *The Master of Petersburg*, Dostoevsky, musing on the mode of responsibility required to carry out the work of mourning for his son, recognizes, 'As long as he expects what he does not expect, what he does not expect will not come. Therefore – paradox within paradox, darkness swaddled in darkness – he must answer to what he does not expect' (*MP*, 80). Exactly contrary to allegorical engagement, which apprehends what is expected and expects what is known, Coetzee's fiction repeatedly emphasizes the need to explode the known to incorporate that which exceeds it, to maintain a permanent ethical vigilance.

These points, as I indicate above, have been made before by Derek Attridge. Like him, I do not want to deny that Coetzee's novels can cast any light on the time and

place of their composition or domination and totalitarianism considered in the abstract, for example; they have frequently been read as doing so. The point I am making, rather, is that such interpretations fail to take account of the central concern of these novels with the ways in which the economy of allegorical interpretation maps onto and correlates with various attitudes underlying and procedures of domination and control, insofar as both are construed as arising from an assertion of familiarity over an irreducible alterity.[221] From the explicit links between Western epistemological practice and domination of other peoples and nature that are made in Jacobus Coetzee's meditations on technology and the wild to the intricate deconstructions of Western discursive norms and practices accomplished through the Elizabeth Costello and Nobel Prize lectures, there is a persistent exploration of the ways in which epistemological and interpretive assumptions legislate specific forms of othering, and thereby of domination.[222]

As discussed toward the beginning of this chapter, there are a number of responses to Coetzee's work that read it as performing and exploring a highly Levinasian engagement with the other. Central to the textual strategies whereby this is achieved is an ironic undermining of allegory exactly analogous to the infinite dialectic between skepticism and responsibility discussed in chapter two. A certain form of allegory is elicited precisely for its habitual mode of conclusion to be interrupted, a particular motion of interpretation initiated in order to be perverted, and the sense of failed comprehension engendered thus enacts the slippage Levinas describes as the basis of the ethical attitude.[223]

Waiting for the Barbarians exemplifies this aspect of Coetzee's work especially well. The novel revolves around and interrogates the nature of the relationship between empire and its others, between civilization and barbarism, through the attempts of the

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[221] This is a point touched on in Attridge's reading (60–64), but not fully developed.

[222] Stephen Mulhall's recent work proposes something similar, arguing that Coetzee's Elizabeth Costello writings engage with the 'ancient quarrel' and demonstrate that literature, and specifically the novel, makes possible a specific mode of moral reasoning that more discursive approaches are necessarily blind to. Stephen Mulhall, *The Wounded Animal: J.M. Coetzee and the Difficulty of Reality in Literature and Philosophy* (Princeton; Oxford: Princeton UP, 2009).

[223] Levinas, *Existence and Existents*.

novel's protagonist and focalizer, the magistrate of a small town on the borders of an unnamed empire, to negotiate his position in relation to the categories imposed on him by history. Stated simply, the magistrate undergoes an ordeal, in part of torture and physical degradation but perhaps more significantly comprised of the disruption of his own concupiscent accommodations to history, that forces him to reformulate his attitudes to the world in which he lives and the others who inhabit it. Significantly, this reorientation of his ethical and epistemological compass is depicted as an open-ended, inconclusive process: having undergone drastic transformations in the course of the events of the novel, he ends it recognizing, 'I have lived through an eventful year, yet understand no more of it than a babe in arms. … I leave it feeling stupid, like a man who lost his way long ago but presses on along a road that may lead nowhere' (*WB*, 169–70). [224] It is this sensation of stupidity and lostness, of not knowing and not understanding, that the novel opposes to a sublation of the material into the sensible, of the accidental into the essential, thus achieving an irony that cannot be domesticated by allegorical interpretation. Thus thwarting understanding, this irony hence presents itself to the reader as a challenge to recognize and remain in her own stupidity, to abide in irresolvable contradiction rather than to extrapolate a significance from it. The novel thus performs this irony in a manner analogous to Beckett's texts, calling on the reader to undergo a certain failure of her interpretive capacities.

The irony instantiated in *Waiting for the Barbarians* appears to be of a different kind to that sort that seems an almost inescapable part of the modern novel. In earlier instances, such as the fiction of Jane Austen, the disjunction between the moment of narration and the events narrated (implicit in a narration in the past tense) implies an ironic framing of those events and the characters embroiled in them, a dramatic irony heightened by the use of an omniscient third-person narrator (*Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*). In a more recent form, such as used frequently by Kazuo Ishiguro, the disjunction brought about by historical events (*The Remains of the Day*, *An Artist of the Floating World*) frames the first-person narrator's memories and

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[224] The echo of *Molloy* here is clear: 'leaving me like a fool who neither knows where he is going nor why he is going there' (*M*, 88).

perspective in such a way as to render a slightly different type of dramatic irony. In both cases, distance and disjunction produce the irony, and in both a vantage from which the 'truth' of the narration can be discerned is established: in Austen via the implied social consensual view, in Ishiguro via our historical moment.

Waiting for the Barbarians prevents such a stabilizing vantage in a number of ways. The present tense narration implies that the narrator himself is not recollecting the events narrated in tranquillity, with the benefit of hindsight and the lessons learnt from them, but as they occur, while living through the ethical and existential conundrums they present. The reader is thus denied the implicit complicity with the older, wiser narrator that so frequently structures the extent of the irony of a novel, summing up ambiguities and disparities from a point of conclusion, but must instead engage with the inconclusive and often indeterminate material without the benefit of such a structuring device. The indeterminate historical and geographical setting similarly serves to remove the possibility of the sort of frame within which novels such as *The Remains of the Day* must be placed if they are to be understood at all, further estranging the experience of the text from schemata that structure interpretation of it. This is not to claim that the torture and colonial paranoia presented in the novel do not have historical precedent, or that they are not intended or expected to elicit comparison with the novel's moment of composition and publication.[225] My point is that the technique serves to diminish the authority of such references as the key to some sort of fundamental significance of the text, thus instantiating the Barthesian 'play of writing' that appears to have exerted such an important influence on Coetzee's thought at about this stage of his career (and

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[225] The novel was begun within two weeks of the death of Steve Biko at the hands of the South African security forces, and its concern with torture and the paranoia of totalitarian systems quite clearly refers to the situation then pertaining in the country. David Attwell, 'Writing Revolution: The Manuscript Revisions of J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians*', paper presented at the University of York, Nov. 26, 2013.

later),[226] and carrying out in fiction the sort of insurrection with respect to the authority of history that he proposed in 'The Novel Today'.[227]

For the protagonists of many of Coetzee's novels, like the magistrate in *Waiting for the Barbarians*, interpretation is figured in the attempt to forge a relationship with, to understand and be understood by, a member of the subservient class. For the magistrate, the barbarian girl is an enigma, a living trace of that which is occluded by the discourse into which he is born, and to which he is subjected every bit as much as those it ostensibly oppresses. His relationship with her thus represents an attempt to move beyond the position in which they are inscribed by history. The troubling ambiguity of his desire to 'read' her is signalled by his fascination with the marks of her torture; as he himself acknowledges, there is an unsettling parallel between his fixation on these marks as a key to an understanding of the barbarian girl's identity and Colonel Joll, the secret policeman and torturer's belief that physical pain guarantees the veracity of confessions.

In Bill Ashcroft's reading of the novel, the awareness of complicity the marks of torture engender in the magistrate is understood to be that which initiates his movement from an ironic (postmodern, a-political) stance to an engaged (postcolonial) one: 'the point at which irony solidifies into opposition is found in the reality of the girl's pain. The urgent material effects of colonial discourse disturb the equanimity of the ironic. … Though the magistrate's position in relation to the girl may be ironic, her pain represents an unequivocal "reality" from which he cannot distance himself.'[228] This reading of the role of the body seems correct: the barbarian girl's body, and specifically the traces of torture it bears, exercises a power over the magistrate that he cannot understand or define but which acts as a something of a summons to action.

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[226] See, for example, Coetzee, 'A Note on Writing', in *Doubling the Point*, 94–5, and the sentiments expressed in connection with the Rushdie *fatwah*: 'There is nothing more inimical to writing than the spirit of fundamentalism. Fundamentalism abhors the play of signs, the endlessness of writing' (Harber, 'Clash of the Booker Titans').

[227] J.M. Coetzee, 'The Novel Today'.

[228] Ashcroft, 'Irony, Allegory and Empire', 105.

Similarly, the magistrate repeatedly characterizes the torture and physical degradation to which he is subjected as ripping him out of discourse. The following passage exemplifies this particularly well:

> In my suffering there is nothing ennobling. … [M]y torturers were not interested in degrees of pain. They were interested only in demonstrating to me what it meant to live in a body, as a body, a body which can entertain notions of justice only as long as it is whole and well, which very soon forgets them when its head is gripped and a pipe is pushed down its gullet and pints of salt water are poured into it till it coughs and retches and flails and voids itself. They did not come to force the story out of me of what I had said to the barbarians and what the barbarians had said to me. So I had no chance to throw the high-sounding words I had ready in their faces. They came to my cell to show me the meaning of humanity, and in the space of an hour they showed me a great deal. (*WB*, 115)

Nevertheless, Ashcroft's belief that the effect of the body and its pain is to resolve the ambiguities of discursive indeterminacy by offering a non-linguistic real from which perspective can be obtained seems problematic. Rather, the non-speaking body itself is the cause of the ironic indeterminacy. Laura Wright, discussing the role of animals in the fiction, puts the point particularly well: 'Coetzee's fables cannot … be allegorical; in Coetzee's fiction, the animal body does not find one-to-one correlation with some unrepresentable abstraction. Instead, the animal body is a body, voiceless and suffering, engaged within in a social and historical milieu … characterized by its status as similarly inarticulate.'[229] The 'role' of the body, of the other, in the fiction is thus not that of a term in a totalizing system of signification, but rather a limit to, a blind spot in, any such system, which hence disrupts and necessitates its perpetual revision.

Discussing the question of the attempt to 'recover a history of … [f]orgetting',[230] of engaging with, making amends for, and undoing past political denial of specific groups the status of full humanity, Sam Durrant indicates the paradoxical task of

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[229] Laura Wright, *Writing 'Out of All the Camps': J.M. Coetzee's Narratives of Displacement* (London: Routledge, 2006), 15.
[230] Sam Durrant, *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning: J. M. Coetzee, Wilson Harris, and Toni Morrison* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2004), 6.

postcolonial literature: 'Postcolonial narrative', he writes, is 'confronted with the impossible task of finding a mode of writing that would not immediately transform the formlessness into form, a mode of writing that can bear witness to its own incapability to recover a history' (ibid.). This seems to me to articulate something of the nature of Coetzee's relationship to history and politics very well. In Coetzee's case, such a mode of writing, which does not transform the formless into form and thus avoids simply reiterating the colonizing strategies it hopes to undo, is achieved through sustained interrogation of the ethics of address.

The silent other in Coetzee's novels – the barbarian girl, Friday, animals – is precisely that which both compels and disables dialogue: the compulsion arises from a Levinasian responsibility, a summons from the other's very otherness; the fact of otherness, however, disables the possibility of actual dialogue, as discourse invariably abstracts the heteronymous out to a greater or lesser degree. Here, ought implies cannot. The responsibility that can neither be avoided nor discharged this entails is the source of the inescapably ironic nature of language and subjectivity: one is summoned to do precisely that which one cannot do.[231] Importantly, however, for Coetzee, this is exactly the basis of literature's relation to the ethical.

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[231] This is idea is discussed in detail, at times in relation to Beckett's writing, in Simon Critchley, *Very Little*.

Chapter V: John Banville

'I am like everything but myself': ironic rapture

As discussed in chapter two, John Banville's relationship to the Beckettian legacy is to my mind by far the most anxious and ambivalent of the three writers considered in this study. In a manner that rather neatly rounds out the development sketched in the introduction from early Romanticism through modernism and into the present, Banville's work seems to vacillate between a stark sense of the Beckettian irony I have discussed in the earlier portions of this study and a contrasting intuition of the capacity of the imagination, and hence of literature and the imaginative arts, that bears certain resemblances to the Kantian or Romantic understanding of the synthesizing, ordering capacities of this faculty. Banville's narrators simultaneously intuit schemata of order and beauty in the world while also remaining painfully aware of, in addition to the disorder of their own selves and the chaos on which their subjectivity appears to be founded, the fundamental alterity of such beauty to human being.[232] These two aspects are often juxtaposed in Banville's work, to poignant or comic effect, and their mutual presence accounts for a significant portion of the tone – mordant, cynical, and disenchanted, yet acutely attuned to the beauty, and pain, of the intensity and inexplicability of the fluctuating play of affect and sensation in consciousness.

This ambivalence is in some ways similar to Beckett's tragicomic mode discussed in chapter two, specifically with respect to the comic possibilities it provides, and which both writers exploit. In Banville's case this is often focused on the slipperiness of language, and the narrators' tendency revealingly to say more than they intend. Max Morden, narrator of *The Sea*, for example, often stumbles in such a way when discussing the cancer that leads to his wife's death: 'Before Anna's illness I had held my physical self in no more than a fond disgust, as most people do – hold their

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[232] While it is important to point out that I do not simply assume the views expressed by the various narrators to represent those of Banville himself, and to emphasize the importance of taking account of the various aspects of the narrators' unreliability, there is sufficient similarity amongst their observations and attitudes to support the identification of general broad concerns on this basis.

selves, I mean, not mine – tolerant, necessarily, of the products of any sadly inescapable humanity' (*TS*, 70). In this passage, as so often in Beckett's work, any possibility of the gravity of the subject being afforded what might be considered a suitably solemn treatment is undercut by the riotous intrusions of the body and the comic floundering of language trying simply to obtain a grip on what it wants to mean.

In a related manner, Banville's narrators similarly tend to undermine their own authority, by drawing attention to either their own limited or biased perspective, their flawed memory, and their general unreliability, or the ontological impossibility of an accurate description of the world or the self. Freddie Montgomery, the narrator of *The Book of Evidence* (1989) (and, it can be deduced, the other two novels of the Frames trilogy), who has much in common with Beckett's Malone in this respect, presents the clearest example of this tendency in Banville's fiction. In connection with the former of the two types of failing described above, his narration of *The Book of Evidence* is frequently punctuated by asides such as, 'Mrs Reck was tall and thin. No, she was short and fat. I do not remember her clearly. I do not wish to remember her clearly. For God's sake, how many of these grotesques am I expected to invent?' (*BE*, 79) or 'Do not be fooled: none of this means anything either' (*BE*, 93). Apropos of the latter type, connected to some sort of fundamental ontological indistinctiveness of things, he claims, in the course of the attempt to give an account of his motivations and the actions that have followed from them (most salient among which is the murder of a young woman), 'Perhaps that was the moment in my life at which – but what am I saying? there are no moments, I've said that already. There is just the slow, demented drift of things' (*BE*, 115).

Certain other prominent aspects of Banville's style seem to depart rather sharply from Beckett's, however. In a manner connected to the thematization of intuitions of order and beauty, and the attendant possibility of a subjective alignment with the world and others, Banville's prose frequently displays a sharp perceptiveness and descriptive clarity that puts one in mind of Wallace Stevens's dictum that 'Description is

revelation.'[233] All forms of sensory apprehension, as well as the motions of affective and psychological states, are presented with a precision that offers glimpses of a luminosity and transparency strenuously denied in the writings of Beckett, Coetzee and perhaps to a lesser extent Auster. Alex Cleave, for example, provides the following poignant recollection:

> The weather was wintry still. There had been a brief fall of soft wet snow, and now the sun had come infirmly out, and the sky was made of pale glass, and the gorse was a yellow flame against the whiteness, and all about us water was dripping and tinkling and covertly running under the lush, flattened grass. … [W]hen we were coming down a stony track between two walls of blue-black pines she tripped and fell over and cut her lip. The drops of her blood against the patchwork snow were a definition of redness. I snatched her up and held her to me, a bulky warm ball of woe, and one of her quicksilver tears ran into my mouth. I think of the two of us there, among the shivering trees, the birdsong, the gossipy swift whisperings of trickling water, and something sags in me, sags, and rebounds with a weary effort. What is happiness but a refined form of pain? (*E*, 76)

Such vividness of description correlates with, and frequently enacts, the possibility of establishing of some prehension on the world by means of imagination and art that constitutes so important an element of Banville's work.

Stylistically, such lucidness and detail are almost certainly connected to an aspect of the fiction that is gestured toward in the author's claims to want to write prose that is like poetry.[234] One can assume that by this he is referring, in one respect, to a certain compression, intensity, and precision of the writing, and to a gloss and polish of expression and style, to 'the kind of denseness and thickness poetry has.'[235] While this would perhaps seem an ambition diametrically opposed to Beckett's desire to write

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[233] Wallace Stevens, 'Description without Place: IV', in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 275.

[234] At least when writing as 'John Banville'; Benjamin Black's books are a rather different product, and are not discussed here.

[235] Cited in Madeleine M. Schwartz, 'Banville Creates a Parallel Universe in *The Infinities*', *The Harvard Crimson*, Mar. 23, 2010, http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2010/3/23/john-banville-the-infinities/#

without style, other of Banville's own discussions of the point link it in interesting ways precisely with Beckett's work. For example, discussing *Molloy* in an interview, Banville claims that

> it was a great revelation to me – the idea that a writer could speak in such a completely self-absorbed way, not dealing with characters or human interests – the usual stock-in-trade of the novelist. It was great to discover that linguistic beauty could be pursued as an end in itself. Beauty is … crucial to me. It's what I'm after constantly. Beauty is an almost nonhuman pursuit.[236]

This statement aptly characterizes the stylistic quality of the writing, and the reflections on beauty as an 'inhuman' quality would mark an interesting starting point for a discussion of the ways in which Banville's writing departs from Romantic and modernist aesthetic and epistemological frames. Indeed, I shall argue later in this chapter that Banville's depiction of the human relation to beauty inverts the Kantian notion of its consisting in the apprehension of order and intelligibility in the world; rather, beauty is consistently depicted as arising in an apprehension of the otherness, the non-humanness, of the world, and hence as representing an interruption, rather than an affirmation, of subjectivity.

In expanding on the implications of this notion of the significance of such poetic elements in his prose, this chapter is organized as follows: I begin with a brief discussion of Banville's attitude to the work of Rainer Maria Rilke and Wallace Stevens, poets he seems to consider in some ways exemplary, and to whom he has made telling reference at important junctures. In doing so I hope to elucidate his understanding of the imagination, to clarify the continuities of this with Romantic notions of it, and to spell out the relation of art and literature to it. This will proceed primarily via a discussion of *Doctor Copernicus*, a pivotal work in the author's development. My discussion of this novel serves a function analogous to that of 'White Spaces' in the context of Auster's work: an early novel, *Doctor Copernicus* serves to clarify many of the important aspects of Banville's understanding of the role of the imagination in mental representation, and

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[236] McKeon, 'Interviews: John Banville'.

also enacts the impasse into which this leads and from which a more fundamentally Beckettian mode arises in the author's writing. That is, I shall argue that Rilke's answer to certain problems that arise from a Romantic conception of art – the answer of praising the world to the Angel, on which Banville has throughout his career set much store – in fact simply begs the primary question, and that Banville's recognition of this leads him, in his later novels, to inflect this 'solution' with an ineradicable and irresolvable irony. Contrary to Coetzee and Auster, therefore, I see Banville's work as becoming more ironic, and more Beckettian, over the course of its development. As my intention in such a reading of *Doctor Copernicus* is primarily to sketch out the conceptual impasse that the later fiction engages with more closely, my discussion is somewhat selective, and focused to a far greater extent on the ideas I see embodied in the principal characters than a close reading of the rhetorical and figural devices of the text. Where I discuss these latter, I do so with reference to the author's entire body of work in order to delineate characteristic tropes and techniques and the implications of these for my understanding of the subjects of imagination, ethics, and art.

I shall then consider later work, focusing primarily on *Eclipse* and, to a lesser extent, *The Sea*, in light of this foregoing discussion in order to demonstrate the ways in which Beckettian irony comes to inform them fundamentally. This discussion will similarly focus on the nexus and perceived connection between the imagination, ethics, and art, demonstrating how Banville incorporates a Beckettian mode in framing these and depicting the possibilities open to the artist – to the subject – given the implications he draws from them. In this movement in his more recent work, I see Banville as gravitating toward the position he credits to Wallace Stevens, and away from that of Rilke. Stevens's view, I argue, has important links with the problematic of the inaccessibility of the ordinary, as dealt with in Heidegger and post-Heideggerian phenomenological work, as well as in the work of thinkers such as Wittgenstein and Cavell, and I spell out the ways in which such a line of inquiry sheds light on the concerns with subjectivity, memory and intersubjectivity in Banville's work. As with all the authors discussed in this study, in these later novels an emphasis on subjectivity, the structures on which it is based and the limitations it inevitably implies, is depicted as necessarily giving rise to a misalignment between the mind and the world and other

people, and hence to an irresolvable ontological irony such as is instantiated in Beckett's trilogy. I conclude the argument by linking the inversion of the Kantian view of beauty to such subjective misalignment and to the problem of the ordinary that is raised earlier in the chapter, showing how Banville's view of beauty poses it as an interruptive, uncanny force that facilitates some form of accession to an ordinary that is otherwise precluded from human apprehension.

In terms of the relevant scholarship, in the relatively young field of Banville studies, there has consistently been interest in and attention devoted to the significance of Beckett's work for the later author's. Various factors make this nigh inevitable: Banville's own assertions of the importance of Beckett's work for his; the similarities of the two writers' relationship to their homeland; and the texture of their respective writings, both so deeply inflected with a Hiberno-English mellifluousness, and both so thoroughly shot through with an anguished and anarchic comedy. The second of these factors provided much fodder for the debate that defined the first generation of Banville studies, that concerning the extent to which he is or should be considered an 'Irish' author. Rüdiger Imhof, for example, advanced the view that Banville is to be considered a cosmopolitan, pan-European postmodernist with little or no affiliation to or interest in Irish affairs,[237] while various other scholars have devoted attention to how Banville's predominant concerns relate to those of his homeland. Declan Kiberd describes him as a 'post-nationalist' writer who moves beyond the antinomies of nationalist and anti-nationalist Irish writings by exploring 'all those forces that have made the very phrases "Irish tradition" or "German culture" problematic'.[238] Richard Kearney similarly argues that Banville occupies an important place in 'the critical counter-tradition of Irish writing' initiated by Joyce and Beckett that 'sets out … to challenge the clichés of traditional [Irish] narrative'.[239] Peter Boxall and Derek Hand both identify a type of voluntary self-marginalization from any putative tradition as being an attitude commonly struck by Irish writers (Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Bowen, Flann O'Brien),

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[237] Rüdiger Imhof, *John Banville: A Critical Introduction* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1997).

[238] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), 635.

[239] Richard Kearney, *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1988), 91–2.

and see Beckett and Banville as also having this in common (a commonality that ultimately consists in the denial of commonality).[240]

On the question of thematic and stylistic parallels between Banville and Beckett, Imhof, Joseph McMinn, Derek Hand, and Elke D'Hoker all discuss the similarities between the two writers' treatments of the way the self relates to the self in the processes of memory, narration, self-perception and interrogation of identity, and all consider Banville's work very Beckettian in respect of such matters.[241] Mark O'Connell points out the two authors' shared concern with the breaking down or dissolution of identity, while Ingo Berensmeyer touches on the emphasis on authorial impotence common to the two.[242] Possible similarities between the comedy of the two writers' work have not to my knowledge hitherto received any attention, which certainly offers a compelling topic for exploration.[243] In addition to these works, three others of relevance to my discussion of the uncanny in this chapter are Hedwig Schwall's '"Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show": Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville's Work with a Focus on *Eclipse*', Romain Nguyen Van's '"According to all the authorities": The Uncanny in John Banville's *The Sea*', and Hugh Haughton's 'The Ruinous House of Identity'.[244]

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[240] Boxall, *Since Beckett*, 21–37; Derek Hand, 'John Banville's Irish Literary Connections: The Spectre of the Precursor', paper presented at John Banville and His Precursors, University of York, Nov. 9, 2013.

[241] Imhof, *John Banville*; Joseph McMinn, *The Supreme Fictions of John Banville* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1999), 162; Hand, *John Banville: Exploring Fictions*, 12; D'Hoker, 'Self-consciousness, Solipsism, Story-telling'.

[242] Mark O'Connell, *John Banville's Narcissistic Fictions: The Spectral Self* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 149; Berensmeyer, *Fictions of Order*, 62.

[243] Bryan Radley, who has conducted the most extensive work on comedy in Banville's work thus far, touches tangentially on Beckett, but does not carry out an extended comparison. Bryan Radley, 'Comedy in the Fiction of John Banville' (PhD thesis, University of York, 2012) and 'John Banville's Comedy of Cruelty', *Nordic Irish Studies, 9* (2010).

[244] Hedwig Schwall, '"Mirror on mirror mirrored is all the show": Aspects of the Uncanny in Banville's Work with a Focus on *Eclipse*', *Irish University Review, 36*.1 (Spring–Summer, 2006); Romain Nguyen Van, '"According to all the authorities': The Uncanny in John Banville's *The Sea*', *Etudes Anglaises, 65*.4 (2012); Hugh Haughton, 'The Ruinous House of Identity', *The Dublin Review, 1* (Winter, 2000–1).

'the definition of redness': the limits of simile

In a lecture delivered to the International Writing Programme at the University of Iowa City in 1980, Banville describes his vision of the role of art as following from the interaction of two aspects of awareness, for articulations of which he cites passages from Rilke and Stevens.[245] On the one hand, as Stevens observes, 'the poem springs' from the fact 'that we live in a place / That is not our own, and, much more, not ourselves':[246] works of art and literature are an attempt to relate to, and to some extent to domesticate, the otherness of the world; as Heidegger, after Hölderlin, puts it, 'poetically man dwells'.[247] On the other, Banville claims that 'the real purpose' of literature is as Rilke states it in the ninth Duino Elegy, to '[p]raise the world to the Angel':

> Tell him of Things. He will stand astonished ….
> Show him how happy a Thing can be, how innocent and ours,
> how even lamenting grief purely decides to take form,
> serves as a Thing, or dies into a thing ….
>
> Earth, isn't this what you want: to arise within us,
> invisible? Isn't your dream
> to be wholly invisible someday? O Earth: invisible!
> What, if not transformation, is your urgent command?[248]

Banville's sense of the validity and importance of this second sentiment is repeated in a review of a recent translation of *Letters to a Young Poet*, which concludes by quoting, approvingly, Rilke's, 'because truly being here is so much; because everything here /

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[245] Banville, 'A Talk'.

[246] Wallace Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, in *The Palm at the End of the Mind*, 210.

[247] Martin Heidegger, 'Poetically Man Dwells', in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: HarperCollins, 2001).

[248] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Duino Elegies: IX*, in *The Selected Poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke*, trans. Steven Mitchell (New York: Random House, 1987), 201.

apparently needs us, this fleeting world, which in some strange way / keeps calling to us. Us, the most fleeting of all.'[249]

The conjunction of these two observations on the nature and purpose of art serves to illustrate Banville's simultaneous sense of *both* the fundamental foreignness of the world to human being *and* the obscure imperative to sublate it through art, both our alienation from the world – a characteristically Beckettian point of view – and the capacity of the imagination to make something meaningful of this very alienation – an attitude strikingly reminiscent of Romantic attitudes. In articulating his perception of the implications of the interplay of these two observations regarding the task and function of art, Banville states,

> Together the Stevens and the Rilke quotations create a synthesis which is the very core of art. It is out of the tension between the desire to take things into ourselves by saying them, by praising them to the Angel, and the impossibility finally of making the world our own, that poetry springs …. Hence the note of solitude, of stoic despair, which great art always sounds. As Beckett says: *I can't go on, I'll go on.*[250]

The final word here seems to be accorded to the impenetrability, the strangeness of the world, 'the impossibility finally of making the world our own'. But the tone of Banville's work is on the whole less relentlessly despairing, and less stoic, than Beckett's. This is in large part because of his perception of the validity of the sort of 'supreme fiction' Stevens envisages, resolved to its own artifice yet finding resources therein nevertheless: 'an art which is honest enough to despair and yet go on … without delusions, aware of its own possibilities and its own limits; an art which knows that truth is arbitrary, that reality is multifarious, that language is not a clear lens' (ibid.).

This idea of a supreme fiction – by which Banville takes Stevens to mean 'an all-embracing and sustaining, and yet admittedly synthetic, touchstone created by men for

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[249] Rilke, quoted by Banville in 'Study the Panther!' *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 3, 2013, http://www. nybooks.com/articles/archives/2013/jan/10/study-panther/?pagination=false
[250] Banville, 'A Talk.'

man'[251] – is of great importance in Banville's work. The passage from Stevens quoted in the Iowa City talk is taken from *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*, as is the epigraph to, and a number of direct quotations incorporated into, *Doctor Copernicus*, the first of the novels of the tetralogy that explores the accessibility of the world to human intellection in the form of scientific enquiry. It is perhaps somewhat surprising that in the Iowa talk Banville does not make more extensive reference to the poem itself, as it is centrally concerned with the implications of precisely the sort of observations he there makes for an understanding of the attempt to forge such supreme fictions. Like Copernicus, who in Banville's depiction sets out to identify 'the deepest thing: the kernel, the essence, the true' and discovers that in the end all his efforts amount to 'merely an exalted naming' (*DC*, 207),[252] Stevens claims that 'Adam / In Eden was the father of Descartes' (ibid., 207), another of those architects of the Enlightenment, and one who similarly endeavoured to ascertain the very essence of being, the absolutely true.

This disillusionment with the possibility of knowledge, and attendant meditations on the nature of human intellection and figuration, are the central subject of *Doctor Copernicus*. The attempt to access – and hence, necessarily, the faith in – ultimate truth instigates the astronomer's attempt to replace the Ptolemaic system, which offers self-consciously expedient explanations of the motion of the planets in line with inherited orthodoxies regarding the divine mathematical harmony of the cosmos in order to 'save the phenomena'. Brudzewski, a defender of the system Copernicus seeks to replace, observes that astronomy 'does not discern your principle thing, for that is not to be discerned' (*DC*, 35). As Elke D'Hoker notes, in ascribing to Brudzewski the view that '[w]e are here and the universe, so to speak, is there, and between the two there is no sensible connection', Banville 'clearly tries to give these scholastic beliefs a Postmodern flavour by emphasising the limits of knowledge they try to observe'.[253]

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[251] Imhof, 'An Interview with John Banville', 7–8.

[252] The phrase itself is taken from Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*.

[253] Elke D'Hoker, *Visions of Alterity: Representation in the Works of John Banville* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), 29. She does also emphasize, however, that this is despite the fact that such attitudes were 'firmly grounded in faith, in religious doctrine, and dogma.' The same point is made in Hand, *John Banville: Exploring Fictions*, 71–74.

Throughout the novel two attitudes to thought and its implications for human being are consistently contrasted, the one represented by Copernicus, the other to some extent by the Scholastics, but more properly by Copernicus's older brother Andreas. In this opposition, Copernicus's longed-for transcendental knowledge, unsullied by materiality and free of its means of expression, is counterpointed by an acceptance of embodiment and a recognition of the inescapable implications of this for any possible form of knowledge. These contrasting attitudes are perhaps most clearly illustrated by their proponents' attitudes to names. For Copernicus, the arbitrariness and messiness of designation is a source of dissatisfaction and anxiety:

> It was the Vistula, the same that washed in vain the ineradicable mire of Torun –
> that is, the name was the same, but the name meant nothing. Here the river was
> young, as it were, a bright swift stream, while there it was old and weary. Yet it
> was at once here and there, young and old at once, and its youth and age were
> separated not by years but leagues. He murmured aloud the river's name and
> heard in that word suddenly the concepts of space and time fractured. (*DC*, 20)

His goal is hence to access a mode of knowing that transcends the linguistic and the ad hoc. In an argument with a fellow astronomer he states, 'I believe not in names, but in things' (*DC*, 36). Among the Scholastics with whom he disagrees, his teacher Canon Wodka expresses the opposing view most succinctly: 'I believe that the world is *here* … that it exists, and that it is inexplicable. … [A]ll theories are but names, *but the world itself is a thing*' (*DC*, 23; italics original). Ultimately, Copernicus comes to see himself as having failed in his attempt to transcend the signifier, as having merely formulated further names. However, Banville's approving citation of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* would indicate that the author's attitude to the nature of names is rather more complex, as is evidenced by the treatment of embodiment and sensation and the implications of these for subjectivity in *Doctor Copernicus* and other novels.

Indeed, the significance of the question of embodiment in this respect is signalled in the section immediately following Canon Wodka's assertion that 'the world itself is a thing': 'On Saturdays in the fields outside the walls of the town Caspar Sturm instructed the school in the princely art of falconry. The hawks, terrible and lovely,

filled the air with the clamour of tiny deaths. Nicolas looked on in a mixture of horror and elation. … Compared with their vivid presence all else was insubstantial. They were absolutes' (*DC*, 23). The physical force of the image is compounded by the implication of Nicolas's erotic attraction to Caspar Sturm: 'Nicolas watched him watching his creatures and was stirred, obscurely, shamefully', and he later ejaculates on waking from a dream in which '[m]onstrous hawklike creatures were flying on invisible struts and wires across a livid sky, and there was a great tumult far off, screams and roars, and howls of agony or of laughter' (*DC*, 24).

A connection is implied between eroticism and mortality throughout this passage, first hinted at in the polyglot pun of the hawks' filling the air with 'tiny deaths' and stated more explicitly in the description of Nicolas's ejaculation as 'a kind of exquisite dying' (*DC*, 24). This link clarifies the contrast between the two attitudes described above. The longing for the transcendent is a desire precisely for the unchanging, the deathless, whereas mortality is the inescapable condition of embodied being, and this point underpins Nicolas's motives in adopting the course of action he eventually does, as described in the following passage:

> it was all a deeply earnest play-acting, a form of ritual by which the world and his self and the relation between the two were simplified and made manageable. Scholarship transformed into docile order the hideous clamour and chaos of the world outside himself, endistanced it and at the same time brought it palpably near, so that, as he grappled with the terrors of the world he was terrified and yet also miraculously tranquil. Sometimes, though, that tranquil terror was not enough; sometimes the hideousness demanded more, howled for more, for risk, for blood, for sacrifice. Then, like an actor who has forgotten his lines, he stood paralysed, staring aghast into a black hole in the air. (*DC*, 28)

It is of more than passing interest to note that the situation described in the final sentence here is the instigating premise of the action – if one could call it such – of *Eclipse*.

The contrary to Nicolas's striving for disembodied, transcendental changelessness is provided by his older brother Andreas, who most clearly figures embodied human being in the novel. Dissolute, sensual, and impatient of theorizing,

Andreas inhabits the physical world with no longing for an absolute elsewhere, and figures to some extent as Nicolas's inverted double, as his animus. Indeed, when on his deathbed, disillusioned with his life's work and despairing of his earlier ambitions, Nicolas conjures Andreas in an hallucination, this is made explicit: 'you have said that you are dreaming me …. That is why I am here, because at last you are prepared to be … honest' (*DC*, 238). In this hallucination, the vision of Andreas points out to Nicolas, 'I was that which you must contend with. … I was the one necessary thing, for I was there always to remind you of what you must transcend. I was the bent bow from which you propelled yourself beyond the filthy world' (*DC*, 240). Providing an assessment of Nicolas's life and work, he continues:

> There had to be a little regard, yes, the regard which the arrow bears for the bow, but never the other, the thing itself, the vivid thing, which is not to be found in any book, nor in the firmament, nor in the absolute forms. You know what I mean, brother. It is that thing, passionate and yet ordinary, that thing which is all that matters, which is the great miracle. You glimpsed it briefly in our father, in sister Barbara, in Fracastro, in Anna Schillings, in all the others, and even, yes, in me, glimpsed it, and turned away, appalled and … embarrassed. (*DC*, 241)

The characterization of the prized object of the epistemological effort as 'ordinary' is an indication of how certain of Banville's preoccupations intersect with those of Wittgenstein and Cavell, for example (among many other post-Kantian thinkers), concerning the inaccessibility of the ordinary, which I shall touch on later in this chapter. The conception of the relation of embarrassment to this ordinary, however, seems to me a strikingly original insight.

Embarrassment is accorded very close scrutiny on many occasions in Banville's oeuvre, and imbued with especial force and intensity. Andreas has earlier said to Nicolas, 'It was always your stormiest emotion, that fastidious, that panic-stricken embarrassment in the face of the disorder and vulgarity of the commonplace, which you despised' (*DC*, 238). And in *The Sea*, Max Morden remarks on his and his wife's discomfort on her being diagnosed with cancer,

I realized what the feeling was that had been besetting me since I had stepped that morning into the glassy glare of Mr Todd's consulting rooms. It was embarrassment. Anna felt it as well, I was sure of it. Embarrassment, yes, a panic-stricken sense of not knowing what to say, where to look, how to behave …. It was as if a secret had been imparted to us so dirty, so nasty, that we could hardly bear to remain in one another's company yet were unable to break free, each knowing the foul thing that the other knew and bound together by that very knowledge. From this day forward all would be dissembling. There would be no other way to live with death. (*TS*, 22)

This depiction emphasizes those aspects of the emotion that, rather than relating exclusively to a relatively thin veneer of social observance, stem from some deeper, more primary of our modes of engagement with the world. Such would certainly be consistent with the references to it in *Doctor Copernicus* and *The Sea*. In both of these novels, the connection between embarrassment, on the one hand, and death and the body on the other that implies the former implies a visceral response to the abject. Significantly − given my characterization of Andreas as representing a form of embodied being from which Nicolas attempts to flee − in the hallucination scene in which the reference to embarrassment appears, Nicolas says to Andreas, 'You are death', to which Andreas characteristically replies, 'O that too, brother, that too, but that's of secondary importance' (*DC*, 237). This is only consistent: mortality and finitude are the necessary and inevitable correlatives of embodied being, its horizon and organizing principle; Nicolas's aspiration after the transcendent and absolute is also a desire for changelessness.

There is however an indication that Nicolas undergoes some transformation on his deathbed. At the very end of the book, in the formulation, 'This was dying, yes, this was unmistakably the distinguished thing' (*DC*, 237), the parallelism in the verbal formulation with the object of his lifelong preoccupation − 'the vivid thing', 'the principal thing' − is clear.[254] And indeed, this dimension of death is gestured at within

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[254] The allusion to the description of his own expected death attributed to Henry James by Howard Sturgis ('at last, the distinguished thing') is also unmistakeable (Leon Edel, 'The Deathbed Notes of Henry

the very first pages of the novel: when Nicolas's mother dies in his early childhood, she is described, in the free indirect, as being 'utterly, uniquely still, and seemed in this unique utter stillness to have arrived at last at a true and total definition of what she was, her vivid self itself' (*DC*, 5). The motif is reiterated in the scene of Nicolas's *petite morte* following his dream about the hawks, in which 'his self shrank together into a tiny throbbing point' as he is 'poised on the edge of darkness and a kind of exquisite dying' (*DC*, 24). Taken together, these descriptions imply the irony of Nicolas's project: self-coincidence consists in absolute self-dispersal, and the closest he can hope to get to the absolute knowledge he desires is in ceasing to be a subject of knowledge, in the becoming of an object.

There is in this depiction a further connection to Rilke's work, and one that is intimately tied up with the notion, so frequently quoted by Banville, of the human duty to bring the world to life within us through an aesthetic engagement with it. In *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, a central focalization of the young poet's anxiety and loathing of Paris are his meditations on the nature of death in the modern city. In counterpoint to his grandfather's death, which is intimate, familial, immediate, Malte considers death in the modern city, like life, to be commodified, inextricable from systems and technologies that render it alien and unapproachable. There is also however, in addition to such technological causes, a moral dimension to this alienation, exactly analogous to that implicit in the imperative mood of the *Duino Elegies*, and many other of Rilke's poems (perhaps most emphatically 'Archaic Torso of Apollo': 'You must change your life'): 'Who cares about a well-made death these days? No one. Even the rich, who could afford to die in well-appointed style, are lowering their standards and growing indifferent; the wish for a death of one's own is becoming ever more infrequent. Before long it will be just as uncommon as a life of one's own.'[255]

James', *The Atlantic*, Jun. 1968, http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/unbound/flashbks/james/jnote.htm). As I indicate in the conclusion, an exploration of the significance of the work of Henry James for the issues considered in this chapter, and those gestured toward in the project of the thesis as a whole, would certainly provide fascinating findings; such does, however, fall outside the scope of the current project.

[255] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, trans. and ed. Michael Hulse (London: Penguin, 2009 (1910), 4.

The notion of such a being toward death and the comportment toward the world implied by the *Duino Elegies* are analogous: both register a sense of responsibility toward the fundamentally other, and both premise a project of subjectivity on this responsibility. A just, a morally answerable, mode of being is one in which embarrassment before the abject is transformed into acceptance, and this acceptance is seen as providing the basis for a transformation of the self. When Andreas claims, 'We know the meaning of the singular thing only so long as we content ourselves with knowing it in the midst of other meanings: isolate it and all meaning drains away. It is not the thing that counts, you see, only the interaction of things', Nicolas says, 'You are preaching despair.' Andreas replies:

> Call it, rather, *redemptive despair*, or, better still, call it acceptance. The world will not bear anything other than acceptance. Look at this chair: there is the wood, the splinters, then the fibres, then the particles into which the fibres may be broken, and then the smaller particles of these particles, and then, eventually, nothing, a confluence of aetherial stresses, a kind of vivid involuntary dreaming in a vacuum. You see? the world simply will not bear it, this impassioned scrutiny. (*DC*, 239)

Such a stance – as espoused by Andreas here, as espoused by Rilke – seems to me to correspond to Stanley Cavell's idea, exemplified for him especially well by Beckett's work, of the ordinary as a goal, as something to be achieved: 'Solitude, emptiness, nothingness, meaninglessness, silence – these are not the givens of Beckett's characters but their goal, their new heroic undertaking.'[256] Cavell's attitude is in turn part of a by-now lengthy series of philosophical repudiations of metaphysics and metaphysical thinking, beginning with Nietzsche and Heidegger and perpetuated into the present on various fronts (poststructuralist, deconstructionist, ordinary language philosophy, pragmaticist) and various foundations (linguistics and the philosophy of language, physics, psychology, neuroscience), with which Banville's outlook as construed in this chapter has a great deal in common. A central aspect of such an

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[256] Cavell, 'A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*', 156.

undermining of metaphysical thinking is a rethinking of the mind-body problem, and Banville's extrapolation of Rilke's ideas, and his treatment of the question of beauty, are of great interest in this respect.

As mentioned above, beauty and the perception of it are among the most prominent and striking aspects of Banville's work, in both theme and form. The density and gloss of the writing and the acuity of perception is matched by the consistent preoccupation of the protagonists and narrators with order, harmony, and clarity. While the overt theme of the science tetralogy is epistemological, of the Frames trilogy ethical, and of later novels such as *Eclipse*, *Shroud*, *The Sea* and *Ancient Light* (2012) existential, the ultimate goals and achievements of these apparently disparate categories are all consistently depicted as being most properly conceived of as beauty. To qualify this no doubt seemingly sweeping and unhelpfully generalizing claim, I should emphasize that I take the understanding of beauty espoused by Banville's work to be fundamentally rooted in a specific perception of the nature and implications of embodied being. Simply put, beauty is depicted as a certain sensory, perceptual relation to the world and other people, a certain comportment of embodiment. While the Frames trilogy explores the ethical dimensions of this conception of beauty, and the science tetralogy the epistemological, it is implied that the paradigm example of it, at least in a contemporary Western cultural configuration, is that of art and aesthetic discourse surrounding it. The significance of Rilke's exhortation for Banville's understanding of art stems precisely from this perception: the directive to allow things to come to life within us, to perceive things in such a way that they, and we, are redeemed in the perception, is an exact analogue of the corollaries of the idea of beauty put forward in Banville's work.[257]

A passage from *Doctor Copernicus*, in which a solution to a problem presents itself to Nicolas, demonstrates this especially well:

> Calmly then it came, the solution, like a magnificent great slow golden bird alighting in his head with a thrumming of vast wings. It was so simple, so ravis-

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[257] Here also Stevens presents an opposition to Rilke: in Stevens's play *Bowl, Cat and Broomstick,* Bowl says, 'What an extraordinary effect one gets from seeing things as they are, that is to say: from looking at ordinary things intensely!' To which Broomstick replies, 'But to look at ordinary things intensely, is not to see things as they are' (*Palm at the End of the Mind*, 30).

hingly simple, that at first he did not recognise it for what it was. … He turned the solution this way and that, admiring it, as it were turning in his fingers a flawless ravishing jewel. It was the thing itself, the vivid thing. (*DC*, 83–85)

Given the earlier characterization of the hawks as 'an absolute' of embodiment, the fact that the solution is here figured as a bird is of great significance, as is Nicolas's passivity in the process. His admiration is depicted as a tactile, sensory involvement, and his initial response is also described in terms applicable to the apprehension of an object of beauty: it is 'ravishing' and 'ravishingly simple', the repetition further emphasizing the extent of the subject's passivity in the occurrence, and alluding to the notion of beauty discussed above.

Such an understanding of beauty in one respect runs directly counter to a Kantian view. While it does indeed propose a disinterested interestedness, the emphasis on embodied perception inverts the prioritizing of the mental side of the mind-body dichotomy implied by the Kantian idea of the conceptual intimations of order underpinning the phenomenon.[258] In this respect Banville's attitude is explicit: the novels consistently depict intellection, or at least certain aspects of it, as a disruptive, destructive faculty. The apparitions of beauty that suddenly illuminate the narrative occur despite, not because of, the protagonists' mental life. It is this distrust of intellection, and of a humanity defined on the basis of it, that accounts quite largely for the tinge of misanthropy and self-loathing that mark out so many of his narrators. Freddie Montgomery, for example, while determinedly getting drunk, muses,

It was not just the drink, though, that was making me happy, but the tenderness of things, the simple goodness of the world. This sunset, for instance, how lavishly it was laid on, the clouds, the light on the sea, that heartbreaking, blue-green distance, laid on, all of it, as if to console some lost suffering wayfarer. I have never really got used to being on this earth. Sometimes I think our presence here

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[258] I have in mind here Kant's idea of beauty as consisting in the pleasure that arises from the experience of the harmonious interaction of the imagination and understanding, and the way this in turn hence prioritizes the cognitive aspects of the phenomenon. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 20–32; M. Budd, 'Delight in the Natural World: Kant on the Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature: Part I: Natural Beauty', *British Journal of Aesthetics, 38* (1998), 6.

is due to a cosmic blunder, that we were meant for another planet altogether, with other arrangements, and other laws, and other, grimmer skies. I try to imagine it, our true place, off on the far side of the galaxy, whirling and whirling. And the ones who were meant for here, are they out there, baffled and homesick, like us? No, they would have become extinct long ago. How could they survive, these gentle earthlings, in a world that was meant to contain *us*? (*BE*, 24)

The painterly metaphor ('how lavishly it was laid on'), and through it the positing of an organizing agency, by way of which the narrator here engages with the scene implies a (perhaps ironic) engagement with the natural world by analogy with the modes of engagement with a work of art. Such a relation of work of art and natural world serves further to substantiate the inversion of the Kantian schematization of beauty: where for Kant the aesthetic dimension is the natural world, subsequent aesthetic discourse adopts the terms applied there, primarily beauty and the sublime, to characterize the relation to the work of art. With an attitude such as Freddie Montgomery's spelt out above, in which the natural world is posited as being *as if* a work of art in order to apply aesthetic categories to the original aesthetic object, the inversion is complete. M.'s statement in *Ghosts* (1993) sums the matter up rather succinctly: 'Nature did not exist until we invented it one eighteenth-century morning radiant with Alpine light.'[259]

The solicitude expressed for the 'gentle earthlings' bespeaks a tenderness and affection for the world of objects and the physical directly proportional to Freddie's implicit disenchantment with '*us*'. Later in the novel Freddie puts the matter more bluntly: 'Here is a question: if man is a sick animal, an insane animal, as I have reason to believe, then how account for these small, unbidden gestures of kindness and of care?'

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[259] The allusion to Oscar Wilde here is also clear: 'For what is Nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. … They did not exist till Art had invented them.' Oscar Wilde, 'The Decay of Lying', in *The Complete Writings of Oscar Wilde* (Vol. VII) (New York: The Nottingham Society, 1909), 42. While this is again beyond the scope of the present study, such allusions do provide support for the contention that Banville's work is centrally concerned with a tradition of thinking about art and its relation to other aspects of human thought and activity.

(*BE*, 43).[260] Andreas's criticism of Nicolas's desire to transcend the physical must be read with this schema in mind: his aversion to the physical constitutes an aesthetic-moral failing, a rejection of the possibility of coming to terms with the world. In light of this reading, there is a profound irony in his consistently stated credo that 'knowledge must become perception' (his alternative to the prevailing orthodoxy of formulating theory to 'save the phenomena'). The novel implies that exactly the reverse is the case, that perception must become knowledge, or rather, that perception itself *is* knowledge.

This vision of subjectivity and awareness is afforded further prominence by the striking and frequent use of simile throughout the oeuvre, as has been thoroughly demonstrated by Joseph McMinn.[261] Connected to, and very often a central aspect of, the sharpness of the observation and presentation of sensory perception, simile and metaphor function to enact the form of understanding, the form of apprehension of the world, indicated (in the implied failings of Nicolas Copernicus's life's project, for example) as being the appropriate response to our nature and condition. As McMinn puts it, in the neo-Romantic sense in which he understands simile to function in Banville's work, 'analogy is not so much a figure of speech, but a way of seeing and experiencing the world' (ibid.). Importantly, metaphor and simile serve to provide insight and understanding by way of a purely perceptual intuition of similitude and analogy, and the characters who use them are presented as obtaining some specific form of access to the world through the use of such figures.[262] For example, when Nicolas's father dies, his grief is described as being 'the shape of a squat grey rodent lodged in the heart' (*DC*, 12) and in this way – through the positing of the equivalence of a sensory with a non-sensory experience, and hence the obtaining of some purchase on the

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[260] While, as pointed out above, it is obviously important to take account of the various aspects of the unreliability of the narrators pronouncing such judgements, the tenor of the opinion expressed is sufficiently similar to those of most of Banville's protagonists to warrant the claim that it exemplifies relatively broad concerns, rather than simply the psychopathy of a specific character.

[261] Joseph McMinn, '"Ah, this plethora of metaphors! I am like everything except myself": The Art of Analogy in John Banville's Fiction', *Irish University Review,* 36.1 (Spring-summer 2006), 134–150.

[262] I do not intend here to rehearse the various positions on the relative situation of metaphor and simile in a possible taxonomy of figures. For my purposes, it is sufficient to indicate that simile works by transposition, precisely the 'carrying over' of specific attributes or qualities of one thing to another effected by metaphor, and that its facilitation of understanding by analogy is hence, in some ways at least, equivalent to that of metaphor.

inexplicable and inarticulable – some grasp is obtained on an otherwise inconceivable entity. Rather than being predicative, this procedure enacts the metaphorical carrying over of the sensory to the non-sensory, the known to the unknown; perhaps ironically, it is in this process that perception and knowledge are most closely conjoined. An apt example of the frequent density of simile in the writing, as well as its role in the subject's apprehension of the world, is provided in the following passage from *Eclipse*:

> This is how I wake now, sliding warily out of sleep as though I had spent the night in hiding. … I have a deep dislike of mornings, their muffled, musty texture, like that of a bed too long slept in. … I have come to think of my life as altogether like a morning's interminable passing; whatever the hour, it is always as if I have just risen and am trying to get a grip on things. (*E*, 28)

The specific context of the comparison – waking in the morning – is expanded to serve as an analogy of the narrator's life in general, in which his continuously 'trying to get a grip on things' proceeds by way of such an apprehension of likenesses. Precisely as McMinn claims, therefore, the function takes on a far more fundamental role in the character's cognition of himself and his world than the merely figural.

A related aspect, because similarly based on the perception and organization of qualia, is Banville's idiosyncratic use of adjectives. Perhaps the most notable of these are the strings of numerous, often unpunctuated, adjectives, which produce a quite vivid sense of the process of a character's gradual apprehension of a given thing or situation through an agglomeration of properties: 'a magnificent great slow golden bird' (*DC*, 83), 'cool and smooth and moist', 'cold and calm and distant', 'a fleeting, sidelong, faintly smiling look' (*E*, 58, 58, 71). There is also his use of obscure, technical or specialist lexemes to denote a specific quality ('velutinous', 'cinereal', 'oleaginous'), hence drawing attention to the sensory manifold and the character's inhabitation of and response to it – as well as to the characters' connoisseurship of language. This conjunction of perceptual acuity and ornate, baroque diction indicates the way in which the world is known, perhaps primarily, through language, and the extent to which the knowledge of a thing consists in the knowing of its name, as Peter Stillman Sr., and

Walter Benjamin, would attest.[263] The following passage from *The Sea* serves well to demonstrate various of these aspects, as well as the characteristic density of adjectives and adverbs and the ways in which they are linked to perceptual clarity:

> It was one of the last days of that summer's heat-wave, the air like scratched glass, crazed by glinting sunlight. Throughout the afternoon long gleaming motor cars kept pulling up outside and depositing yet more guests, heron-like ladies in big hats and girls in white lipstick and white leather knee-high boots, raffish pinstriped gents, delicate young men who pouted and smoked pot, and lesser, indeterminate types … sleek, watchful and unsmiling, in shiny suits and shirts with different-coloured collars and sharp-toed ankle boots with elasticated sides. Charlie bounced among them all, his blued pate agleam, pride pouring off him like sweat. Late in the day a huddle of warm-eyed, slow-moving, shy plump men in headdresses and spotless white djellabas arrived in our midst like a flock of doves. (*TS*, 105)

Nevertheless, however rich this faculty may be or skilled and insightful such characters in the manipulation of it, it is ultimately presented as providing insubstantial, and perhaps even illusory, succour, precisely at those moments of greatest subjective strain and import. Such a failure of simile to provide meaning frequently occurs in connection with questions of identity and selfhood. Alex Cleave, who claims to be trying to achieve 'the pure conjunction, the union of self with sundered self' (*E*, 70), when trying to explain to his wife the reason for his retreat to the seaside house in which he grew up, reaches the following impasse:

> The incident with the animal in the wintry gloaming was definitive, though what it was that was being defined I could not tell. I saw where I was, and I thought of the house, and knew that I must live there again. … Such seeming absence of human agency was proper also; it was as if …
>
> 'As if what?' my wife said.

[263] Walter Benjamin, 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writing*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

> I turned from her with a shrug.
>
> 'I don't know.' (*E*, 12–3)

More to the point, understanding based on simile or analogy is depicted as preventing any possibility of self-coincidence, of full inhabitation of one's being, and thus of any full and authentic engagement with the world and other people such as that urged by Rilke's admonitions. In *Athena* (1995), Morrow observes, 'Ah, this plethora of metaphors! I am like everything except myself', while Max Morden similarly notices 'everything for me is something else' (*TS*, 138).

Ultimately, hence, the capacity of similitudinous apperception to provide a basis for knowledge and action proves limited, and it is this limitation that leads to the prominent foregrounding of the matter of nouns and naming in *Doctor Copernicus*. As discussed above, Nicolas, considering his entire life's work as having consisted in 'merely an exalted naming', sees this as a failure, but this pessimistic view of designation can be contrasted with one that falls in line with Rilke's idea of praising the world to the Angel, and perhaps also of that proposed by Peter Stillman Sr. in *City of Glass*. In this view, naming is an act of communion, an engagement with the quiddity of a thing. The valorization of this dimension is indicated by Andreas in the deathbed scene:

> What shall we call it? – science? the quest for truth? Transcendent knowledge? Vanity, all vanity, and something more, a kind of cowardice, the cowardice that comes from the refusal to accept that the names are all there is that matter, the cowardice that is true and irredeemable despair. With great courage and great effort you might have succeeded, in the only way it is possible to succeed, by disposing the commonplace, the names, in a beautiful and orderly pattern that would show, by its very beauty and order, the action in our poor world of the otherworldly truths. But you tried to discard the commonplace truths for the transcendent ideals, and so failed. … We say only those things that we have the words to express: it is enough. (*DC*, 240)

As with the moral and redemptive valence implied in Rilke's ninth Duino Elegy ('to have been / this once, completely … / … seems beyond undoing. // *Here* is the time for

the *sayable*, *here* is its homeland'[264]), the depiction of this question emphasizes its moral aspects. Andreas's description of Nicolas's attitude as 'a kind of cowardice' outlines what such a moral dimension may consist in, but the point is made emphatically in the Frames trilogy.

The Frames trilogy details Freddie Montgomery's murder of a young woman and his subsequent attempt to atone for his act. He envisions this as an effort of imagination: understanding his murder as being predicated on a failure to fully register his victim's being – 'because … he does not see her properly' (*G*, 266) – he views his proper atonement as consisting in an imaginative revivification. 'Prison, punishment, paying his debt to society, all that was … merely how he would pass the time while he got on with the real business of atonement, which was nothing less than the restitution of a life' (*G*, 267). This does not refer, as probably goes without saying, to a literal restoration of the girl's life, nor do any of the three novels in which this process is presented operate in a magical realist mode in which some sort of equivalent might be conceivable. Rather, such resuscitation takes the form of a task of the imagination: seeing his lack of imaginative engagement as that which has made it possible for him to kill the young woman, he comes to understand the possibility of redemption as consisting in the achievement of a mode of engagement with the world and others sufficiently animated by imagination to preclude the possibility of such violence.

The solipsistic nature of this 'solution' marks its limitations, and is perhaps an intentional irony, given that the penance itself remains profoundly narcissistic. Nevertheless, insofar as it can be said to be achieved, the following epiphany may be taken to be the moment at which this occurs:

> And as she talked I found myself looking at her and seeing her as if for the first time, not as a gathering of details, but all of a piece, solid and singular and amazing. No, not amazing. That is the point. She was simply there, an incarnation of herself, no longer a nexus of adjectives but a pure and present noun. … And somehow by being suddenly herself like this she made the things around her be there too. … I felt everyone and everything shiver and shift, falling into vividest

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[264] Rilke, *Duino Elegies: IX*.

forms, detaching themselves from me and my conception of them and changing themselves instead into what they were, no longer figment, no longer mystery, no longer a part of my imagining. (*G*, 321)

The displacement of the self that allows for the other to be apprehended not as an impediment to be removed nor as a tool to be annexed to the protagonist's own purposes – Banville's characters' habitual attitudes – but as an independent and self-contained subjectivity can be read as equivalent to the requirement to fully imagine the other that is proposed at the outset of the effort. The irony, of course, is that this is made possible by her ceasing to be 'a part of [his] imagining', by his relinquishing of any attempt to shape or structure her being to his own ends or according to his own preconceptions, and simply perceiving her – a point that chimes with, and is subject to precisely the same irony as, Copernicus's dictum that 'perception must become knowledge'.

Such a depiction of the possibility of true perception as consisting in a divestment of preconfigured cognitive schemata and imaginative constructions obviously has much in common with the thinking about the question of 'the ordinary' in post-Kantian philosophical endeavour. Robert Pippin sums this up well as involving

> the appeal to a more original, less distorted experience of the human things as such, as human, not as artificially constructed through the lens of some theory. In a word, that word that has circulated so much in twentieth-century thought; in Husserl on the life-world; in Heidegger on pre-predicative experience, being-in-the-world, and the everyday; in the later Wittgenstein, Austin, Cavell (and through Cavell's insistence, found anew in Emerson and Thoreau); and recently in two books by Stanley Rosen: an appeal to 'the ordinary' as a way of bypassing, avoiding, not refuting the supposedly reductionist, skeptical, disenchanting, enervating trajectory of modern naturalism.[265]

As M. puts it here, the precise point of the experience is that it was 'not amazing', but simply itself. Stanley Cavell's position with respect to figuration and imagination spelt

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[265] Robert Pippin, 'The Unavailability of the Ordinary: Strauss on the Philosophical Fate of Modernity', *Political Theory, 31*.3 (Jun. 2003): 344.

out in his essay on *Endgame* has a great deal in common with that implied by M.'s epiphany and my understanding of the use and treatment of simile throughout the oeuvre. [266] Indeed, this concern is announced as early as the epigraph to *Doctor Copernicus*, taken from Stevens's 'Notes toward a Supreme Fiction': 'You must become an ignorant man again. / And see the sun again with an ignorant eye, / and see it clearly in the idea of it.' [267] Like Cavell and Stevens, Banville is acutely aware of the contradictory, and hence impossible, nature of such an undertaking – a contradiction perfectly exemplified in the desire that 'perception become knowledge': it involves the desire to conceive of something without conception, to know without knowledge of. While such a view would conceive of true knowledge as being ostensive – if a certain specific form of ostention, a 'thou' rather than a 'that' –, even within the moment of ostention a supreme fiction intervenes. Significantly, the closing lines of the section from which the epigraph to *Doctor Copernicus* is taken read, '… Phoebus was / A name for something that never could be named. / … // There is a project for the sun. The sun / Must bear no name, gold flourisher, but be / In the difficulty of what it is to be' (ibid.).

Among the most fundamental of such supreme fictions is that of the self. At the conclusion of the passage in which M. relates his epiphany, when he feels 'everyone and everything detaching themselves from me and my conception of them and changing themselves instead into what they were', he asks – mournfully, as the following discussion will demonstrate – 'And I? Was I there amongst them, at last?' (*G*, 321). Such meditation on the insubstantiality, absence or fraudulence of the self is a recurrent motif in the three novels, and indeed in almost all of the author's subsequent ones. Freddie Montgomery, for example, anticipating his arrest and incarceration thinks wistfully:

> First there would be panic, and then pain. And when everything was gone, every shred of dignity and pretence, what freedom there would be, what lightness! No, what am I saying, not lightness but its opposite: weight, gravity, the sense at last of being firmly grounded. Then finally I would be me, no longer that poor

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[266] Cavell, 'A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*'.
[267] Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*.

impersonation of myself I had been doing all my life. I would be real. I would be, of all things, human. (*BE*, 138)

Importantly, being 'human', and by implication fully moral, is predicated on ceasing to impersonate something, or someone, and becoming one's true self. To praise the world to the Angel, to achieve a 'saying such as things hoped never so intensely to be', one must first be able to say oneself, the first of the 'pair of lovers' involved in such communion, in such a way. But if one's self is a fiction, the best any such saying can aspire to is an exalted naming, the ministrations of a supreme fictiveness. Rilke's answer hence begs the question, and 'the thing itself, the vivid thing' remains elusive. It is this problem to which Banville's later novels, from *The Untouchable* (1997) until, most recently, *Ancient Light*,[268] devote especially close scrutiny, and from the simultaneous seductiveness and impossibility of the Rilkean solution arises an irony premised, much like that I argued to be characteristic of Beckett's writing, on the structures of subjectivity.

'intricate evasions of as': the inostensible self

As with M. in *Ghosts*, who runs up against the limits of his ability to engage with the world directly and authentically, subjectivity is the snag on which phenomenological systems seem inevitably to hitch, and come undone. Sartre, for example, seems to have been able to define authenticity only negatively, in opposition to bad faith, for which one could furnish no end of examples. Husserl's adverting to a transcendental ego to hold his system in place serves well to signify the requirement for an arbitrary line in the sand to put a stop to the potentially infinite reversions to which the search for 'the ideal core of the onion' can give rise. This seems to be the implication of the Frames trilogy, much like Beckett's trilogy: there is no authentic ground, merely further fictions.

In *The Untouchable*, *Eclipse*, *Shroud* and *The Sea*, the protagonist's life is interrupted by a revenant from his past that undermines his identity and forces him to

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[268] I would exempt *The Infinities* from this general grouping, as the tone and subject of the novel are so markedly different from those of works such as *Shroud* or *Eclipse*.

revisit its foundations. In *The Untouchable* and *Shroud* this occurs through the intervention of another person, in *The Sea* through the death of the protagonist's wife, but in *Eclipse* the dissolution occurs through an entirely interior process. Given the trajectory of the discussion in the preceding section, and my emphasis on structures of subjectivity and continuities between Beckett's work and Banville's, I shall focus primarily on *Eclipse*.

Eclipse centres on, and is narrated by, Alex Cleave, a celebrated veteran thespian who has undergone a breakdown, the nadir of which takes the form of his corpsing mid-performance. The line he describes himself as trying to deliver when he freezes – 'Who, if not I, am Amphitryon?' – is taken from the eponymous play by Kleist. The play is about Zeus's assumption of Amphitryon's identity in order to seduce Alcmene, his wife, and, like *Eclipse*, revolves centrally around questions of identity. Like Amphitryon, Cleave comes to feel as if his self has been in some way usurped. As he strikingly puts it:

> I still felt invaded, as I had that day out in the fields: invaded, occupied, big with whatever it was that has entered me. It is still here; I feel I am pregnant; it is a very peculiar sensation. Before, what I contained was the blastomere of myself, the coiled hot core of all I was and might be. Now, that essential self has been pushed to the side with savage insouciance, and I am as a house walked up and down in by an irresistibly proprietorial stranger. … I imagine it in there, filling me to the skin, anticipating and matching my every movement, diligently mimicking the tiniest details of what I am and do. (*E*, 15)

The description of feeling oneself as being 'a house walked up and down in' marks a fascinating, and vivid, formulation of the phenomenon of *unheimlichkeit*, and the novel is extensively preoccupied with the uncanny. Cleave for a long while believes the seaside house to which he returns in order to recuperate to be inhabited by ghosts – who turn out to be merely squatters (but why 'merely'? – the scrupulousness of Banville's style is catching) – and the past, that which he has returned to recuperate, is itself depicted as exerting uncanny effects: Cleave claims, 'Memories crowd in on me, irresistibly, threatening to overwhelm my thoughts entirely' (*E*, 55), while protagonist and narrator of *The Sea*, a novel remarkably similar to *Eclipse*, Max Morden remarks, 'The past beats inside me like a second heart' (*TS*, 9).

The most unsettling revenant for Cleave, though, is Cass, his daughter, who haunts this novel with her absence and whose death marks its conclusion. This haunting, this present absence, is made more poignant by *Shroud*, which Banville wrote immediately after *Eclipse* and which relates the events that occur in Cass's life during the period of time roughly corresponding to that in which the events of *Eclipse* occur; her absence from the pages of the former novel hence comes to reverberate and ramify by way of the latter. [269] Cass, who suffers from Mandelbaum's syndrome, a schizophrenic-type condition, is herself periodically inhabited by voices and alternate personalities, and Cleave describes how, 'For her I think the world is always somewhere else, an unfamiliar place where yet she has always been. This is for me the hardest thing, to think of her out there, standing on some far bleak deserted shore … with an ocean of lostness all before her and the siren voices singing in her head' (*E*, 73–4).

The very topological movement of the novel – as is also the case with *The Sea*, of which the title underscores the point –, with the action consisting in a return to a seaside home, indicates such a concern with a rather Heideggerian conception of the uncanny.[270] In various writings Heidegger links the experience of the uncanny closely to the dread felt in the face of *geworfenheit*, thrown being, and values it insofar as it represents an authentic manifestation of Dasein. In this understanding, the uncanny is a product of the disruption of an inauthentic disposition of the ordinary, and hence represents a recuperation of authentic being that is occluded in such conditions. The significance of the sea in such a reading is made clear by Cleave's description of it as follows:

> Why do I find the thought of the sea so alarming? We speak of its power and
> violence as if it were a species of wild animal, ravening and unappeasable, but the
> sea does nothing, it is simply there, its own reality, like night, or the sky. Is it the
> heave and lurch and sudden suck that frightens? Or is it that it is so emphatically

[269] This effect is further heightened by *Ancient Light*, in which Cleave is contracted to play the leading role in the film of the life of Axel Vander, the man with whom Cass spends her last days and with whose child she is pregnant when she commits suicide.

[270] I have discussed this link in greater detail in '"an *earthly* glow": Heidegger and the Uncanny in Eclipse', paper presented at Banville and His Precursors Conference, University of York, Nov. 2013.

not our medium? I think of that world beneath the ocean, the obverse of ours, the negative of ours, with its sandy plains and silent valleys and great sunken mountain ranges, and something fails me in myself, something that is mine draws away from me in horror. Water is uncanny in the way, single-minded and uncontrollable, it keeps seeking its own level, like nothing else in the world that we inhabit. (*E*, 67)

The final formulation here – 'the world that we inhabit', rather than the more economical, and formulaic, 'our world' – is a crucial touch in the depiction of Cleave's disrupted relation to things. The description of the sea implies that the return to it can be read as signifying an attempted confrontation with, or resolution of, some almost elemental uncanny dimension of existence the protagonist feels forced to carry out. There is much in the novel, not least the protagonist's name, that suggests that this is connected to some fissure in the self and a resulting doubling or inauthenticity.

Indeed, leaving the beach after this musing, Cleave notes an '[u]ncanny sensation, as of a chill presentiment' (*E*, 71), and comes across a rudimentary shelter in the dunes that sets him thinking about the virtues of an ascetic existence:

What would I require for survival except a cup, a dish, a blanket? Free then of all encumbrance, all distraction, I might be able at last to confront myself without shock or shrinking. For is this not what I am after, the pure conjunction, the union of self with sundered self? I am weary of division, of being always torn. I shut my eyes and in a sort of rapture see myself stepping backward slowly into the cloven shell, and the two halves of it, still moist with glair, closing around me …. (*E*, 70)

Cleave's breakdown is similarly described as centring on some such schism in his self (*E*, 88), which he connects to his acting, in the extra-professional sense – his continual putting on of masks and pretence. While in some respects his motivation in returning to the home of his youth seems to be to regain access to the identity he imagines preceded all the play-acting, his avowed rationale is slightly more subtle, and is connected to the notion of the uncanny that informs the entire novel, and indeed Banville's attitude to all art.

The version of the uncanny promulgated in such depictions calls for qualification. That it differs in important respects from the Freudian understanding of the phenomenon is marked by Morden's musing in *The Sea*, 'How is it that in childhood everything new that caught my interest had an aura of the uncanny, since according to all the authorities the uncanny is not some new thing but a thing known returning in a different form'? (8). There is a passage in *Eclipse* in which Cleave describes to his wife a dream he has had ('in which it was an Easter morning') about a plastic chicken into which one can insert eggs that the chicken then 'lays':

> 'How do you get the egg back into the chicken', she said, 'for it to come out again? In this dream.'
>> 'I don't know. It just … pushes back in, I suppose.'
>> Now she did laugh, sharply.
>> 'Well, what would Doctor Freud say.'
>> I sighed angrily. 'Not everything is …' Sigh. 'Not everything …' I gave
> it up. (*E*, 7)

Hugh Haughton reads the statement 'What would Doctor Freud say' as grounds for construing the conception of the uncanny adopted in the novel via a Freudian schema, but this seems to overlook Cleave's response.[271] Given its parallels with the many other moments in the novel at which he finds himself at a loss for words, mired in the inexplicable (such as touched on above when he, in a similar manner, tries to explain to his wife his reasons for returning to the seaside home), one might complete Cleave's inarticulate fumblings here with 'Not everything is explicable', a factor the Freudian enterprise, with its voracious interpretative apparatus, is less able than the Heideggerian phenomenological schema to entertain. The images of fertility (Easter, the egg) also echo the novel's frequent emphasis on the potentially productive or creative aspects of the experience of the uncanny, which falls very much in line with Heidegger's conception of it.

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[271] Hugh Haughton, 'The Ruinous House of Identity'.

In the Heideggerian conception, the uncanny is the immediate experience of untheorized being, pure throwness. Cleave's description of the sea quoted above bears all the hallmarks of an engagement with the sublime, and the explicit connection of this to the uncanny would suggest that the conception informing these depictions is in some ways analogous to twentieth-century preoccupations with the ordinary as the untheorizable nucleus of apprehension. It is this uncanny ordinariness, I shall argue, this quotidian sublime, that introduces a doubt into the confidence in the capacities of imagination to make a home for us in the world and hence necessitates the more ironic relation of mind to world, self to other, and subject to being that these later novels propose and explore.

Among the more prominent causes of this shift toward a more ironic, less stable existential or epistemological condition is an increasing attention to and emphasis on memory. A structural device common to *The Untouchable*, *Shroud*, *The Sea* and *Ancient Light* is a crisis in the recent narrative past that induces the protagonist (who is also the narrator) to revisit some event or series of events in the distant past in the course of resolving the problems he currently confronts; the two narratives, that of the working-through of the crisis of the recent past and that of the recollection of the distant past, then proceed in tandem, with the narrator's insights into his current condition allowing him to remember forgotten or repressed material from the distant past. These memories provide insight into his current condition, and this mutually-informing process leads to the dual resolution of both the current and past quandaries. While *Shroud* complicates this process by including a narrative strand involving a second character, the pattern does nevertheless hold for the male protagonist Axel Vander. The strength of this device is its acuity in registering psychological change and development, the way it enables the author to stage and explore the evasions, deceptions, delusions and fabrications of which so much of self-awareness is comprised. *The Sea*, for example, enacts with especial deftness the painful and painstaking misdirections whereby the mind approaches and comes to terms with traumatic realities.

While Alex Cleave's narration in *Eclipse* does at times dwell at some length on his childhood, and despite the fact that he even conceives of his returning to his childhood house as a work of mourning for his parents that he failed to properly carry

out earlier in his life (*E*, 50), there is not the sense in this novel, as there is in the previously mentioned ones, that such acts of recollection hold the key to the particular problems he finds himself confronting in his present; they are rather ancillary, substantiating his character and providing insight into his personality, but not necessarily bound up with some central psychological knot. Rather, his return to his childhood home is inspired by an inarticulate sense that he requires some intrusion of the uncanny to jolt him out of his habitual deception.

He claims that, on seeing what he takes to be a ghost, 'I thought at once that I must have conjured up the apparition in order that it might … make me disoriented, and alienate me from my surroundings and from myself' (*E*, 45). His desire for such disorientation is connected to what he conceives of as his purpose in returning to the house (which falls very much in line with Heidegger's attitude to the value of the uncanny): 'To be watchful and attentive of everything, to be vigilant against complacency, to resist habituation, these were my aims in coming here. I would catch myself, red-handed, in the act of living; alone, without an audience of any kind, I would cease from performing and simply *be*' (*E*, 46). In stark contrast to Copernicus's desire for the transcendent 'vivid thing', and even to Nicolas's brother Andreas's relatively unproblematic confidence in the virtues of unthinking embodiment, Cleave's concerns here, and his understanding of the solution to them – or impossibility thereof – falls very much in line the problematic of the ordinary touched on above. That is, he describes the results of his effort thus:

> Yet almost immediately I found myself settling down in these once familiar surroundings and letting them be so again, with all my plans and pledges forgotten. … *Making strange*, people hereabouts say when a child wails at the sudden appearance of a visitor; how was I to make strange now, and not stop making strange? How was I to fight the deadening force of custom? In a month, in a week, I told myself, the old delusion of belonging would have re-established itself irremediably. (*E*, 46)

As with understandings of the inaccessibility of the ordinary, Cleave has come to see the accretion of memory and habit as an impediment to engagement with the world, and his incitement of the uncanny is hence a method of disrupting this sediment. An analogous

point of view informs Heidegger's theory of poetry, and, similarly, it is the perception of the ways in which metaphysical thinking impedes access to the actual, in which the cognitive construction of the thing comes to obstruct engagement with the thing, that appears to be the central problem addressed in post-Heideggerian engagements with categories such as the ordinary or the neuter. With Cleave, dissimulation raised to an ontological fact brings about the same effect.

Importantly, the possibility of achieving such pre-constructed, unmediated engagement with the world is by no means considered a straightforward matter of doing away with certain postulates, as such a doing away will almost instantly erect itself as another such postulate, and hence another such impediment; Heidegger's hypostatization of Being. Rather, it involves the adoption of specific strategies for suspending or evading them. Art, and specifically literature, is frequently invoked as an especially privileged means of achieving such suspension or evasion: Derrida's discussion of literature's thetic disavowal is a good example of this, and Cavell and Blanchot similarly emphasize the efficacy of literature in transgressing and undermining the restrictions imposed by metaphysical systems. The extensive interaction of philosophy and literature in the twentieth-century continental tradition can to a large extent be attributed to such concerns with the potentially dangerous consequences of transcendental schemata – primarily resulting from the spectre of fascism – and the resultant attempt to think the obverse, the undoing, of such.

Banville has said that he considers the aim of all art the elicitation of the uncanny, in the sense, as described in *Eclipse*, of a force of disorientation and estrangement that hence enables a renewed engagement with the world.[272] Such an understanding similarly emphasizes the role of art in the accession to the ordinary, in, as Heidegger attributes to poetry, dismantling calcified systems and allowing an unimpeded, revivified interaction with the world.[273] Stevens is apposite here again: in contrast to Rilke, Stevens in his notion of a supreme fiction appreciates, in line with theorists who emphasize the overcoming of metaphysically inflected systems of thought, that one can only begin to

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[272] Speaking in Hugh Haughton, 'The Uncanny', *BBC Radio 4* (Jun. 28, 2012).
[273] Elke D'Hoker points out that Banville compares Heidegger unfavourably with Beckett on the subject of the actual giving expression to such matters: *Visions of Alterity*, 80.

do this by 'perceiving the idea / Of this invention, this invented world'.[274] One cannot tell the Angel of things, but only of our constructions of them, the roles they play in our fictions. The Rilkean answer thus simply recapitulates the problem, asking for an access to the real that, because impossible, runs the risk of devolving into another arbitrary ideology of the transcendental basis of the name, such as exemplified by Nicolas in *Doctor Copernicus*.

Of the two poles posited in the Iowa talk of 1980, exemplified respectively by Rilke and Stevens, the preoccupations of Banville's own fiction seems to have grown closer and closer to the skepticism he identifies in Stevens's work.[275] As indicated at the beginning of this section, this is in large part due to the emphasis that comes to be placed on the fictive ground of all human constructions, the supreme fiction of the self. In Banville's later fictions, as in the novels of all the other authors hitherto considered in this study, the protagonists are depicted in a state of breakdown, falling apart and coming to doubt the coherence of their identity and person. As with Molloy, the magistrate, and Quinn, Cleave finds himself coming apart at the seams, a physical dissolution proceeding in parallel with, and signifying, an existential unravelling: 'I suppose I was a motley sight, with my nascent beard and unkempt hair and no doubt staring eyes. … What am I here, boy, youth, young-man, broken-down actor? This is a place I should know, the place where I grew up, but I am a stranger, no one can put a name to my face' (*E*, 77).

Such a depiction of a subjectivity in disarray and breakdown is clearly signalled in the protagonists' relation to art, science and the products of human spirit. Where Copernicus and Kepler are engaged in the creation of systems of significance, Max Morden is a dilettante historian and critic of art and Alex Cleave an actor who has

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[274] Stevens, *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction*.
[275] This is not to claim that the work of Rilke has entirely diminished in importance for him: it is clear that it continues to exert a powerful interest. As recently as January 2013, in a review of a new translation of *Letters to a Young Poet*, Banville describes the ninth Duino Elegy as 'a beautiful answer' to the question why we should persist in our humanness. While the review does also dwell on what might be construed as the preciousness of Rilke's work, and personality, which might be taken to signal a slight shift in Banville's attitude toward the poet, the general assessment remains unequivocally positive: 'despite his constant urge toward transcendence, Rilke was thoroughly of our world' (Banville, 'Study the Panther!', *New York Review of Books*, Jan. 10, 2013, http://www.nybooks.com/ articles/archives/2013/jan/10/study-panther/?pagination=false).

ceased to be able to act. Direct agency is hence changed into a mediated attempt to make sense, and this attempt to make sense is depicted as being a rather fragile, vulnerable enterprise. Morden, for example, has been working for many years on 'a big book on Bonnard', 'a very great painter about whom I have nothing of any originality to say', and now sits 'pushing the paragraphs about like the counters in a game I no longer know how to play' (*TS*, 40). In *The Untouchable*, in a similar manner, Victor Maskell, an art historian and curator of the Queen's art collection, is lured into involvement with a network of Soviet spies through the gift of a Poussin. He considers this the one object of unimpeachable value in his deeply duplicitous life – 'In the ever shifting, myriad worlds through which I moved, Poussin was the singular, unchanging, wholly authentic thing' (*TU*, 343) – but the denouement of the novel shows that even this painting is in fact a fake. The revelation of the inauthenticity of that on which Maskell has, to a large extent, based his happiness and staked his professional reputation undermines the very foundations of his identity, demonstrating that the deception he imagined himself to be engaged in consisted for the most part in he himself being deceived.

The close connection established in the Frames trilogy between art and the imagination and ethical existence is of relevance in such depictions of an interrupted relation to art. The obverse of the epiphany described in *Ghosts*, such a failure to relate – to paintings for Maskell and Morden, to his character for Cleave – signifies an alienation from others and the world and a loss of subjective integrity. The novels consistently suggest that this is a result of a surplus of memory, of these characters' having been too much themselves for too long: Alex Cleave's programme of desisting from pretence indicates as much, and *The Sea*'s depiction of childhood as an uncanny immersion in the world unmediated by habit, memory and expectation provides further support for this reading. The perception underpinning this aspect of the novels is articulated as early as *Birchwood* (1973): 'We imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past.'[276] (*B*, 12), and hence, the more past we accumulate, the more convoluted become our reconstructions.

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[276] John Banville, *Birchwood* (London: Knopf Doubleday, 2009).

Such a depiction and exploration of memory functions in a manner analogous to the irony I find in Beckett's work in its exploration of the modes and limits of fiction. Where in Beckett's trilogy the attempt to speak the self produces ever more fictions of the self, in later novels of Banville's such as *Eclipse* and *The Sea* the protagonists' attempts to remember themselves produce seemingly endless inventions. I find this in the way the three novels *Eclipse*, *Shroud*, and *Ancient Light* interact, and the way in which *Ancient Light* illuminates Cleave's various failures of comprehension with respect to his daughter and her final days. These novels suggest that memory, and by implication the self, is a murky composite of fabrication and misapprehension, and the relations of humans so constituted necessarily something of a lottery. Which is why adult existence, in contrast to the barely bearable clarity of childhood, is characterized by confusion and estrangement, from oneself as much as from others, and a continual failure to apprehend a significance that lurks tantalizingly just beyond reach; in *The Sea*, such apparitions of meaning are most clearly figured in Morden's dreams (*TS*, 24, 71), where in *Eclipse* the apparitions serve a similar function. These characters' failure to make sense of art, to make art make sense, signifies not so much a failure to sublimate the world through significance, as the ninth Duino Elegy suggests is a solution, but to access the uncanny ordinariness of existence, unmediated by memory or expectation, as *Notes toward a Supreme Fiction* gestures toward.

Which is not to say that the ordinary fails to access these characters from time to time. In line with the inversion, discussed above, of the Kantian view the beautiful as an intimation of human order into one in which the force of beauty arises from its alterity, the capacity of the natural world to interrupt subjectivity and thus facilitate an inkling of such access to the ordinary is consistently emphasized. Where art fails to provide significance, the world of mute objects provides its salutary corrective to our mania for meaning:

> 'It is just, you see,' I said, 'that my wife died.'
>
> I do not know what came over me to blurt it out like that. I hoped Claire behind me had not heard. Avril gazed into my face without expression, expecting me to say more, no doubt. But what more could I have said? On some announcements there is no elaborating. She gave a shrug denoting sympathy,

lifting one shoulder and her mouth at one side.

'That's a pity,' she said in a plain, flat tone. 'I'm sorry to hear that.' She did not seem to mean it, somehow.

The autumn sun fell slantwise into the yard, making the cobbles bluely shine, and in the porch a pot of geraniums flourished aloft their last burning blossoms of the season. Honestly, this world. (*TS*, 58)

Or as Mrs Rooney has it, 'Christ what a planet!'[277]

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[277] Samuel Beckett, *All that Fall*, in *The Collected Shorter Plays* (New York: Grove, 1984), 36.

Conclusion: Back to Beckett

As Borges puts it, 'every writer creates his own precursors. His work modifies our conception of the past, as it will modify the future.'[278] To invoke Ezra Pound, making it new hence refigures what is old, too; such novelty is retroactive. Given Beckett's extensive influence on subsequent literature, such modification is in his case likely to be considerable, and, save through some sort of Pierre Menardian endeavour, it is difficult now not to approach his work without some awareness of that of later writers such as Paul Auster, John Banville and J.M. Coetzee. In this sense, then, this study has implications for our understanding of Beckett's work: the exploration of the ways in which Beckett's writing is adopted, adapted, deflected and transmuted in the work of these later writers casts it in varying lights and opens up new avenues into it.

Beckett seems, however – at least at the current historical remove – a rather different case to the precursors of Kafka that Borges discusses, who become Kafkaesque by virtue of our awareness of the later writer's achievement and the ways in which it alters our perceptions and attitudes. We see Beckettian strains in the work of Auster, Banville and Coetzee, but Beckett for the most part maintains his quiddity. Coetzee may have helped us see an ethical valence in Beckett's work that would not otherwise have been quite as apparent, Auster a manner in which his innovations can be put to generic use, and Banville the outlines of a connection with broad historical currents in the conceptions of art and the imagination, but it would overstate the case to claim that any of them have fundamentally transformed our apprehension of Beckett's work.

Nevertheless, during the research for this dissertation I have been particularly struck by two factors that might approximate to such a change. The first is what appears to be a generational shift in responses to Beckett's work. Those of Auster, Banville and Coetzee's generation, and especially those who met and knew Beckett, place great emphasis on the ethical example of his life and work (often with the former taking precedence), with the achievement hence viewed as something of a paradigm of the committed artistic existence. This is apparent in numerous of Auster's, Banville's and

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[278] Jorge Luis Borges, 'Kafka and His Precursors', 251.

Coetzee's responses cited in chapter one, and the potential for it to shade into hagiography is made clear in a work such as Charles Juliet's ('He has the gaze of a seer').[279] While the historical context of his work, as well as the obvious force of his personality, certainly contributed to such a reception, the conception of the role of art and the artist promulgated by twentieth-century avant-gardism also appears to have played a part. The single-mindedness and integrity of his work and life corresponded neatly with avant-gardist conceptions of artistic commitment on the model of political commitment, and this prior frame hence shaped initial apprehensions of Beckett's project.

One consequence of such a framing (in combination, again, with historical context) is a downplaying of the comic dimensions of the work.[280] In the wake of post-structuralism, however, we are more inclined to suspicion of neat dichotomies of authentic and compromised existence, and the movement has also introduced into the discourse on art a set of metaphors and a vocabulary that differ radically from those militaristic and politically engaged ones that governed avant-gardist modes, thus shaping a very different attitude to Beckett's work. (The extent to which Beckett's work helped bring such a change about makes for interesting consideration, given the strenuous political agnosticism of his work, the affinity numerous post-structuralists felt for it, and his living in Paris and moving in such circles at the time of the earliest flourishing of these attitudes.) Engagements with Beckett's work that follow those of second-generation readers such as Auster, Banville and Coetzee are hence in a better position to appreciate the way the comedy of the work intersects with its less ludic concerns, and connect to political and ethical questions, as is clear in a work such as Laura Salisbury's *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*.

In a perhaps related manner, John Banville's sense (such as articulated in the Iowa University talk) of the way Beckett's work arises out of a tension between two equally compelling yet incompatible possibilities gestures toward a conceptualizing of it as a moment in an ongoing cultural or intellectual dialectic. In contrast to a perspective

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[279] Juliet, *Conversations*, 23.
[280] With Coetzee representing a clear exception to this trend.

that views the work as something of an extreme – as writers such as Adorno or Deleuze do,[281] and as I in some ways also do in this thesis – this makes possible an approach that teases out the contraries it negotiates and thus the possible syntheses of or ways beyond these. Such a stance would also help clarify Beckett's place in the context of broader developments, contributing a richer sense of the ways in which the oeuvre relates to and engages with political and intellectual history and, potentially, new understandings of the works. A project such as that carried out in this thesis represents one way of approaching such questions, and further consideration of Beckett's legacy will cast light on other aspects and dimensions of it.

The reading of Beckett presented in chapter two is inevitably coloured by my sense of the legacy of his work – or, more precisely, by the specific legacy I choose to focus on. In their art, Banville and Coetzee both adopt somewhat evasive stances in relation to their countries of origin, affiliating themselves more clearly with a cosmopolitan modernism than with any national tradition. Auster's preoccupation with New York, rather than the USA, achieves a similar effect, as does, far more markedly, the almost complete lack of explicit engagement with questions of Jewish American identity in his fiction.[282] My choice of such inheritors of the Beckettian tradition means that I am inclined to emphasize the cosmopolitan and modernist aspects of the work at the expense of the local and specific. Which is not to say that the focus I adopt does not have implications for an understanding of how such writers engage with homeland and national tradition: I would be inclined to argue that Beckett's apoliticism serves as something of a model for these writers' own engagements with realms of the historical, political, and national; and as I have attempted to demonstrate in my analysis of Coetzee's fiction, it can serve as the basis for a rigorous and nuanced ethics.

An interesting question for future research would be to investigate the ways in which such attempted cosmopolitanism conceals or obscures certain modes of belonging or engagement with space, place, and history. Such enquiries have been made into

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[281] Giles Deleuze, 'The Exhausted', in *Essays Clinical and Critical*, trans. Daniel L. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998).

[282] Although he does do so in his memoirs, *The Invention of Solitude* (London: Faber & Faber 1992) and *Winter Journal* (London: Faber, 2012).

Beckett's and Coetzee's work, and tentatively in the case of Banville's;[283] a broader ranging consideration of the significance of attitudes such as these in the context of the post-colonial global Anglophone or European community would no doubt cast light on fundamental aspects of contemporary Western identity, and this would hence be an interesting direction for future research. A related question would be to what extent such attitudes persist among writers, thinkers, and artists of the generation following Auster, Banville, and Coetzee's, and whether, given the significant geopolitical changes that have occurred since the 1980s, and which continue apace, such attitudes continue to be of any relevance.

These attitudes to factors such as nation, history, and politics are fundamentally informed by the vision of human being that takes shape in Beckett's fiction over the course of the development from *Murphy* and other such early works to *The Unnamable* and *How It Is*. In the wake of post-structuralism the decentred nature of the self and the insubstantiality of subjectivity have become truisms. While these are important aspects of the development of this body of fiction, perhaps more crucial is the way in which it explores the nature and role of narration in light of them. In a novel such as *The Unnamable*, the decentring of subjectivity is taken as given, and the possibilities of and limitations to the telling of stories and their role in the negotiation of identity and attitude given such a view of human existence is in many ways the crux of the work. Beckett's trilogy is, in this respect, a meta-fictional exploration of the significance of narrative in light of a specific vision of subjectivity, and the profoundly ambivalent findings he appears to derive from this echo in the work of all three later writers considered in this study.

I have characterized this ambivalence as a particularly acute form of the romantic irony originally identified by Friedrich Schlegel, and in a more recent incarnation explored by Paul de Man. As I argued in the second chapter, such irony is inherently resistant to definition or discursive formulation, involving as it does a non-thetic holding open of the possibility of a thetic stance. It has to do with contradiction,

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[283] David Attwell, *Politics of Writing*; Emilie Morin, *Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009); Kinga Olszewska, 'The Limits of Post-Nationalism: The Works of John Banville and Mary O'Malley', *Nordic Irish Studies, 7* (2008), 135–146.

and the holding of the contraries of a contradiction in opposition, without collapsing into either/or, or neither/nor. 'I can't go on, I'll go on', as Beckett has it (*UN*, 134); or Schlegel, 'Irony is a clear consciousness of an eternal agility, of the infinitely abundant chaos.' [284] In Beckett's case, one of the primary examples of such contradictions involves the simultaneous futility and necessity of the telling of stories, the simultaneous impotence and importance of fiction, and I have attempted to demonstrate how this meta-fictional preoccupation is picked up and developed in the work of Paul Auster, John Banville, and J.M. Coetzee, and how this irony informs their writing.

The three later writers' receptions of Beckett's work do however each follow rather different contours, and each thus figures forth a slightly different Beckett. Paul Auster's initial response is by far the most anxious of the three, with Beckett's achievement appearing an imposing and intimidating barrier to the possibility of further creative output. He nevertheless overcomes this by, as I demonstrated in chapter three, recasting typical Beckettian tropes and concerns in his own idiom and voice, and in this way imports certain characteristic aspects of Beckett's work into his own. Coetzee's early engagements are almost the exact opposite, taking the form of concerted, systematic study of Beckett's writing – often of minute syntactic and formal detail – with the aim of identifying the basis of the comedy of the writing, for example, or its strange and evocative power. In this sense, then, Coetzee's initial response was not at all anxious, but rather engaged with Beckett's writing as a potential source of creative stimulus and innovation, as is clearly borne out in the early novels *Dusklands* and *In the Heart of the Country*.

For both Auster and Coetzee, the significance of Beckett's work appears to decline over the course of their careers, with an initial enthusiasm steadily giving way to greater and greater indifference, as discussed in chapter two with reference to the writers' own comments on the topic. In Auster's case, this might be taken at face value: his surmounting of the challenge posed to his own creative endeavour by Beckett's achievement was as much, or more, a psychological as an intellectual or technical feat, and even in the early novels where it is most marked the traces of Beckett's influence

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[284] Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments*, 100.

appear superficial rather than fundamental. Beckett was for Auster more a difficulty to be overcome than a potential to be engaged with. Bearing this out, the development of his work appears to exhibit increasingly little evidence of a Beckettian mode. Works such as *Travels in the Scriptorium* or *Man in the Dark*, in terms of their staging and situation potentially so similar to Beckett's fiction, adopt a markedly different tone, register, and field of investigation. Perhaps most fundamentally, the narrative voice of Auster's works does not seem at any point to be riven with the coruscating skepticism and self-deconstruction that is so characteristic of Beckett's work, and, as discussed in chapter three, I take this to mark a substantial difference between the writers' respective projects.

I am inclined, however, to be somewhat more suspicious of Coetzee's claims in this regard. While there is a clear shift in tone from *In the Heart of the Country* to *Waiting for the Barbarians*, away from a pronounced Beckettian register to one specifically Coetzee's own, the basic situation of the subject, with respect to language, the self and others, for example, remains in all of his work fundamentally analogous to that of the protagonists of Beckett's novels. Where Beckett's novels enact the impossibility of the self's coincidence with itself in – and due to – language, Coetzee explores the impossibility of engagement with another, on and in precisely the same terms. Hence, while the more marked stylistic traces of Beckett's influence are muted in the development of Coetzee's oeuvre, the project of the fiction continues to be informed at a relatively fundamental level by what can be taken to be a Beckettian vision of the situation of the self in the world and in relation to itself and others.

The case of John Banville follows yet another pattern. Following the early, largely unsatisfactory, *Nightspawn* (1971), his work appears for a time to be almost entirely uninfluenced by Beckett's: *Birchwood* engages with the Irish Big House novel, and, as discussed earlier, the early novels of the science tetralogy – *Doctor Copernicus* (1976) and *Kepler* (1981) – deal with the possibilities of knowledge and the imagination in a manner strongly marked by Romantic attitudes to them, and in diametric contrast to Beckett's emphasis on ignorance, impotence, and impossibility. *The Newton Letter* (1982) marks the first appearance of a mode that typifies his later works. Focused on the limitations to insight and imagination rather than the potentialities of these, and on

failure – ethical, intellectual, interpersonal – rather than achievement, this characterizes the emergence of a Beckettian mode that inflects almost all of the novels that follow *The Newton Letter* and that is used to such powerful effect in later novels such as *Eclipse* (2000) and *The Sea* (2005).

A large part of the efficacy of Banville's invocation of such a Beckettian mode, however, is his holding it in opposition to a Romantic sense of the redemptive capacities of beauty, the imagination and art, and generating from this opposition an irresolvable contradiction. In these later novels, the protagonists' corrosive cynicism and mordantly humorous sense of their isolation in language and estrangement from others is occasionally pierced, as if by a shaft of light, by a glimpse of beauty or the working of the imagination. Without refuting such skepticism, these moments qualify it: placed in relation to these other, almost numinous aspects of human experience and being, Beckettian skepticism is opened up to various creative possibilities, as the appropriate attitude to our embodied being, for example, or a responsible comportment given our epistemological limitations. Indeed, very early in his career, Banville claims that the impulse to literature itself springs from this co-existence of a glimpsed transcendental order and a felt inadequacy of our capacities to fully engage with such.[285] The latter of these can be understood as an ironic attitude to the possibilities of our being and doing that has much in common with Beckett's, as I have argued in chapter five, and it comes to play a more and more significant role in Banville's work as it develops.

This enquiry thus throws up three different Becketts, exercising three different types of influence on subsequent literature. Adopting a dialectical conceptual scheme, one might say that Coetzee develops Beckett's thesis, Auster adopts an antithetical stance, and Banville achieves some sort of synthesis of the specifically Beckettian with other literary and intellectual legacies and traditions. In this respect, of these three the Banvillean Beckett appears to offer the most for further development and evolution, and there is certainly much that remains to be done in the exploration of the combinations and respective influences of Romantic legacies and more experimental trends in the development of literary and cultural modernism.

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[285] Banville, 'A Talk'

The development and application of Beckettian tropes and techniques such as identified in Coetzee's work offers a more ambivalent prospect. As I have traced it, Beckett's influence provides Coetzee with a basically post-structuralist ethical stance premised on the insubstantiality of the self and a revaluation of the interpersonal relation as a consequence of this. While such certainly represented an important corrective to humanist conceptions of ethical attitudes and behaviour in mid- and late twentieth century thought, the intrinsic value of such schemes has been called into question by thinkers such as Alain Badiou,[286] which does render debatable their lasting significance and strength. This uncertainty is supported by the development of Coetzee's career itself: the works on which I focus – as well as all those I consider most compelling but do not deal with in this study – are all from the earliest stages of his career, much of the writing from 2000 on appears to lose something in the way of urgency, engagement, and substance. While the situation of narrators and protagonists continues to exhibit the self-reflexive and -interrogative destabilization characteristic of the earlier novels, in a book such as *Diary of a Bad Year* these aspects appear ludic and almost habitual, rather than, as in an novel such as *The Master of Petersburg*, driven by pressing ethical and existential concerns.

There are also signs that Coetzee is in his own thinking moving toward a less deconstructive stance, as evidenced by a comparison of the Elizabeth Costello lectures or the Nobel Prize acceptance speech with the lecture given on the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of the Witwatersrand in 2012. The former are all acutely reflexive deconstructions of discursive forms and the assumptions that inform them, with the effect of placing in question a variety of attitudes to literature, the author, and the role of the public intellectual. The latter, in contrast, makes a strong, pointed, and unequivocal case for the importance of male teachers in early education, 'because it is good for the children to sometimes have a man's hand guiding them' but also because 'it will be good for you [prospective male teachers], and good for our

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[286] Alain Badiou, *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2013).

common social life.'[287] It is certainly possible that the current prevalence of specific social problems in South Africa motivated the directness of this intervention, but this would support, rather than undermine, the perception that post-structuralist modes of engagement perhaps fall short of contemporary challenges, and that, in many instances, something different is required. The content, and indeed the very conception, of *Here and Now: Letters (2008–2011)* indicates a similar change in outlook.

The example of Auster's engagement with Beckett's work is in some ways an example of the way in which 'the Beckettian' – which has in this way become something of a critical shorthand for a vaguely defined gloom, minimalism and experimentalism – has permeated post-modern poetics and aesthetics. In the works of Auster's considered in this thesis, technical narrative devices and aspects of style that play a prominent role in Beckett's work are adapted to what are ultimately rather different ends than those of the Irish writer. Of interest, thus, is the relative superficiality or profundity of Beckett's influence on Auster's work – and, by extension, the broader field of post-modern fiction, drama and art. In the case of Auster, my impression is that the influence is relatively superficial, and indeed temporary, fading away with the development of the author's oeuvre.

As indicated above, of these three writers' engagements with Beckett's work, I consider John Banville's to represent the most vital and enduring, and most likely to lead to further development. Banville's holding of a typically Beckettian skepticism in opposition to a strongly contrary Romantic sense of the capacity of art and the imagination instigates an irony that is itself closely analogous to that instantiated in, and the effect of which is similar to some of the most poignant moments in, Beckett's work. Such a conjunction of the Romantic and modernist as achieved by Banville certainly offers significant scope for rethinking of, and renewed engagement with, various literary, intellectual and cultural legacies. His recent comments on the idea of an alternative modernism (alternative, that is, to the experimental strand generally taken to be epitomized by Joyce's work) deriving from the late works of Henry James, with the

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[287] J.M. Coetzee, University of Witwatersrand Honorary Doctorate speech, December 10, 2012. Available as 'J.M. Coetzee: One Men in Education', *Mail and Guardian Online*, December 10, 2012, http://mg.co.za/article/2012-12-10-jm-coetzee-on-men-in-education

various possibilities this offers for an understanding of the nature and role of contemporary art and literature, offer glimpses of what such renewed engagement might consist in:

> [James] may not be the greatest artist as a writer, but he is certainly the greatest novelist. If you look at the body of work that he left behind, and those last three novels, where his style becomes so opaque, and so cloudy, I think he may have found more interesting modernistic ground even than *Ulysses*. … James, in those late novels, really catches something of what it is to be conscious. That strange fuzzy sensation that we have, where we're not thinking words, we're not thinking in images, we're not thinking in feelings, but we're thinking a strange whipped-up egg white of all of these things. We seem to claw our way through this strange cloud of knowing, of barely knowing. Henry James came as close as anybody has come to what it is to be conscious, which is an incoherent state.[288]

Such a description of the task of the novel is applicable in its own way to the work of Beckett, Auster, Banville and Coetzee – notwithstanding the significant differences that obtain –, and offers something of a way into an understanding of their respective techniques, styles and preoccupations. It also achieves a synthesis of the mimetic and experimental inheritances of the form, positing a median path between naturalism and modernism that acknowledges the contribution both can make to a vital medium. The increasing application of the findings of neuroscience to literature, both the production and appreciation of it,[289] is perhaps an indication of one way in which this might occur. In the case of James, irony is again a crucial aspect of the achievement, and exploration of this would make for fascinating comparison with the matters discussed in this thesis.

Which is not to say that such an exploration of James's significance for later literature would invalidate the importance accorded Beckett in this thesis. These lines of influence and inheritance are rhizomatic, not linear, and Beckett's irony is starkly distinct from James's. While Auster and Coetzee move away from a Beckettian ironic

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[288] John Banville, 'The Powells.com Interview: With Jill Owen', April 5, 2010 <http://www.powells.com/blog/ interviews/john-banville-the-powells-com-interview-by-jill/.
[289] e.g. Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (London: Alma, 2011); Alan Richardson, 'Defaulting to Fiction: Neuroscience Rediscovers the Romantic Imagination', *Poetics Today*, *32*.4 (Winter 2011): 663–92.

mode, Banville's work, as I have shown, appears to be becoming imbued more and more deeply with the sort of skepticism and self-division that characterize the work of Beckett considered in this thesis. Beckett's unique place in literary modernism – as both culmination and augur of what comes after, both consummation and exhaustion – means that those engaging with this moment and its legacies are likely to continue to need to account for the challenges and peculiarities of Beckett's writing. The poignancy and power of these have persisted since their production, and do not appear likely to diminish.

Abbreviated References

Paul Auster

CG	*City of Glass*, in *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992)
G	*Ghosts*, in *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992)
LR	*The Locked Room*, in *The New York Trilogy* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992)
WS	'White Spaces', in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber, 1998)

John Banville

A	*Athena*, in *Frames Trilogy* (London: Picador, 2001)
BE	*The Book of Evidence*, in *Frames Trilogy* (London: Picador, 2001)
DC	*Doctor Copernicus* (London: Picador, 1999)
E	*Eclipse* (London: Picador, 2001)
G	*Ghosts*, in *Frames Trilogy* (London: Picador, 2001)
S	*Shroud* (London: Picador, 2002)
TS	*The Sea* (London: Picador, 2005)
TU	*The Untouchable* (London: Picador, 1997)

Samuel Beckett

M	*Molloy*, edited by Shane Weller (London: Faber & Faber, 2009)
MD	*Malone Dies*, edited by Peter Boxall (London: Faber & Faber, 2010)
U	*The Unnamable*, edited by Steven Connor (London: Faber & Faber, 2010)
W	*Watt*, edited by C.J. Ackerley (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).

J.M. Coetzee

D	*Disgrace* (London: Vintage, 2000)
DP	*Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*, edited by David Attwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1992)
EC	*Elizabeth Costello* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2003)

HC   *In the Heart of the Country* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982)

MK   *Life & Times of Michael K* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1983)

MP   *The Master of Petersburg* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1994)

WB   *Waiting for the Barbarians* (London: Minerva, 1997)

Y   *Youth* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2002)

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