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SAMUEL BECKETT'S TRILOGY: A STUDY
IN CIRCLES AND CIPHERS

Director

Ed. Chappell

Examining Committee

James Allan

By

Linda Scher *Linda Scher*

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Approved by

Director

Fred Chappell

Examining Committee

Jim Ellis

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Samuel Beckett

The country of Samuel Beckett's trilogy, Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable is a neither-world limbo precariously balanced between the world of mind and that of matter. It is a world of shadows of Descartes, Berkeley, Hume and a host of less-distinguished academic philosophers, each of them still engaged in resolving the problems of the human situation. Each thinks that he has found a satisfactory explanation of the relationship between the mind which thinks and the body which is thought.

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He parodies the academician's search for truth with the same diligence and devotion with which he approaches the important. He creates a circular world in which all things have the same degree of significance and are, therefore, equally and endlessly insignificant. The Trilogy offers the reader a guided tour around a circular maze. This paper will attempt to trace its progress from the significant passage to the no less edifying cul de sacs.

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The country of Samuel Beckett's trilogy, Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable is a nether-world limbo precariously balanced between the world of mind and that of matter. Across its grounds flit the shades of Descartes, Berkeley, Hume and a host of less-distinguished academic philosophers, each of them still engrossed in resolving the paradoxes of the human situation. Each thinks that he will find a satisfactory explanation of the relationship between the mind which thinks and the body which acts, between man's perceptions of the real world and his communication of these perceptions, and between the specifics of experience and their organization into generalities.

Samuel Beckett rescues these queries from the phraseology of a musty philosophical dissertation and translates them into the language of the vaudeville promptbook. He transforms them from the stilted verbiage of the pedant into the patter of the stand-up comedian. He parodies the academician's affectation of profundity by treating the trivial with the same diligence and devotion with which he approaches the important. He creates a circular world in which all things have the same degree of significance and are, therefore, equally and endlessly insignificant. The Trilogy offers the reader a guided tour around a circular maze. This paper will attempt to trace its progress from the significant passages to the no less edifying cul de sacs.

The Beckettian preoccupation is not with the Nativity, but with the nonentity. His art is not one of creation, but of destruction or

more frequently equivocation of the metaphysical and ontological questions which have plagued the artist since the beginning of history.

The brilliance of Samuel Beckett's Trilogy is that it takes these questions and begs, bends, and teases them into gag lines, but poses them with such skill that they elicit not only momentary laughter, but a deeper and more frightening disquiet as well. They describe the tragicomedy that is the human situation.

Beckett is the virtuoso of the void. He refuses to admit that there is anything to say and makes this denial a subject of significance. The Unnamable advises man to "overcome . . . the fatal leaning towards expressiveness," while he informs the reader later that, "if it begins to mean something, I can't help it." But the question of significance is exactly the query which Beckett's works do pose. Where is meaning in a world without God? What is value in a world devoid of absolutes, and what solids can be found in an amorphous substratum much like the mud through which the Unnamable crawls.

Though Beckett does not answer, he asks these questions with unusual precision and clarity. To appreciate the subtlety of his interrogation, one must first become acquainted with the philosophy of Rene Descartes, for Descartes acts as the devil's advocate in Beckett's cross-examination of the modern world.

Descartes defines man as a thing which thinks. "Thought," he states, "is an attribute which belongs to me; it alone is inseparable

from my nature."¹ Man is the only animal who is not only conscious, but aware of this consciousness. He is both mind and body. His body exists in space subject to the same physical laws as the machine, and divisible into its component parts as a wheel can be divided into rim, sprocket, and spokes. The body rots and decays, as the parts of the wheel rust or wear out. The human mind, however, is indivisible or unitary.² Unlike the body, it is not governed by any mechanical laws. It is immortal and continues to exist long after the body has succumbed to its infirmities.

Beckett's characters are ideal cartesian homunculi. They are continually losing fingers, toes, arms and legs, but the voice, the interlocutor of the mind, never loses its integrity. In accordance with the Cartesian system, the voices never cease, though the bodies which they inhabit decay at an amazingly rapid rate.

A human being, according to Cartesian reasoning, has two separate, but collateral histories. One takes place in the body, the other in the mind. "The first," states Descartes, "is public, the second, private."³ Since Cartesian rationalism posits no common means of

¹ Rene Descartes, Discourse on Method and Meditations (New York, Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1960), p. 84.

² Gilbert Ryle, The Concept of Mind (New York, Barnes & Noble, 1949), p. 11.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

acquiring knowledge, this acquisition is a strikingly asocial activity. Unlike religion it assumes no communality of understanding through universal belief in God or divine guidance. The human mind, as Descartes depicted it, was an insulated field in which there was ". . . no direct causal connection between what happens in one mind and what happens in another."⁴

Modern man has inherited both an awareness of his consciousness, and an awareness of the solitude which accompanies it. Indeed, "absolute solitude," according to Descartes, "is the ineluctable destiny of the soul. Only our bodies can meet."⁵ The primacy of consciousness in the Cartesian system is also the privacy of consciousness. The human mind does not exist in space. It does not, therefore, have any identifiable physical properties. The body can relay sense impressions to the mind, but the human spirit cannot be seen, heard, or touched. For this reason, the existence of the human soul in the body of another cannot logically be acknowledged.

The Cartesian system can be depicted as a circle in which the mind is the center, equidistant from all parts of the circle, but inescapably circumscribed by it. Descartes had, however, an escape mechanism from the rationalistic huis clos. His belief in God or what

⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

he described "a positive idea of the actual, real, and infinite" was his consolation for the solitary confinement of the human mind. The concept of God is the only portion of the Cartesian system which man can accept without empirical evidence of its existence. God is an innate idea in the mind of every man. It is the only visitant to the otherwise isolated residence of the mind, and without God man faces only the negative idea of nothingness or not-being,⁶ as the outcome of the logical denial of an external world. Descartes could escape the subjectivism which was to plague later thinkers by claiming other ways of knowing which do not depend on perceptions of the outer world, but are, rather, necessary truths imparted by God.

Beckett is not so readily convinced of the existence of God as was his mentor. The solitude of the human mind without the certitudes of religion is absolute. It is surrounded only by the "negative idea of nothingness." With Beckett, it becomes more a question of ranking irrelevancies than ordering a hierarchy of essentials.

In the Age of Reason, it had not yet been doubted that there might be neither anything meaningful to say nor a meaningful way to say it. Descartes had, however, posited the problem of language by making a distinction between man's perceptions and sensations and his means of communicating them, words. Rationalism in the next

⁶ Descartes, p. 96.

three centuries detached itself more and more from metaphysics to become a purely epistemological and dehumanized inquiry.

Berkeley and Locke also attempted to define the relationship between the body and the soul. The Bishop of Cloyne argued that the mind precedes the body, while Locke believed that the body generates the spirit. Hume extends the problem with a pervasive skepticism which denies that man can know anything on the basis of sense perception beyond the contents of his own consciousness, and more importantly, that he cannot use his perceptions as a basis for inferences about anything beyond them. As is seen later in this paper, Beckett's characters freely adapt the mind-matter hypotheses of Berkeley, Locke, and Hume throughout the Trilogy to an infinite number of modernistic arrangements. Although some of them scarcely resemble the prototypes from which they come, the imprint of Cartesian thinking is, nonetheless, apparent.

With this circumlocution, we end to begin again with Samuel Beckett and Rene Descartes. Hugh Kenner has observed that Beckett's fictional trilogy is a work which "carries the Cartesian process backwards, beginning with a bodily je suis and ending with a bare cogito."⁷ Although the Cartesian myth still asserts its primacy, God

⁷ Hugh Kenner, Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study (New York, Grove Press, 1961), p. 128.

has become the joker, and Reason is no longer the reigning Muse. She has been replaced by the "arsehole," a deity far more appropriate to a world in which "what matters . . . is to eat and excrete. Dish and pot, dish and pot, there are the poles." In Molloy, the mind is still allied with the body, but the relationship becomes increasingly more tenuous as the trilogy progresses.

The setting for the first novel is ostensibly the Irish countryside or what Beckett calls Molloy country. The landscape is more accurately defined as an interior one. Though the names of the characters who occupy the central position in this landscape vary, the voice which emanates from these bodies remains the same. It is that of a mind writhing in the agony of an intense consciousness and imprisoned by the logical order his language has imposed on an existence which is fundamentally both orderless and meaningless. The voice is obsessively compulsive. It begins its endless soliloquy calmly, becomes more urgent, and at last is unable to stop itself. The persona changes as does the setting, but the voice is omnipresent.

I have my faults but changing my tune is not one of them. I have only to go on, as if there was something to be done. Something begun, somewhere to go. It all boils down to a question of words.

The mind encased in the body has infinite freedom according to Cartesian logic. The character or quality of this freedom cannot be

described since it is by definition limitless. But having everything to do, and nothing to be done, is exactly the dilemma that Beckett's characters confront. The mind is free to turn inward, but introspection in itself is problematic. Descartes believed that a perception cannot take place without the mind's awareness of the fact that it is perceiving. Accordingly, the act of thinking requires an awareness on the part of the thinker that he is thinking which in turn requires an awareness of that thought and so on ad infinitum. The chain that is established is one of infinite regress, which like the circle has neither beginning nor end and is ultimately self-defeating. Infinite regression becomes one of Beckett's leitmotifs, as in the song which Vladimir in Waiting for Godot frequently repeats.

A dog came in the kitchen and stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with a ladle and beat him till he was
dead.

Then all the dogs came running and dug the dog a tomb
And wrote upon the tombstone for the eyes of dogs to
come:

A dog came in the kitchen, etc.

The voice in the Trilogy is that of consciousness chatting with both itself and the outer world, but unable to garner any substantial meaning from conversations about a meaningless world. As Molloy observes:

. . . free yes, . . . to do what, to do nothing, to
know what, the laws of the mind perhaps, of mind,

that for example water rises in proportion as it drowns you and that you do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes in words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery.

This peroration early in the first book will become a variation on the theme which accretes meaning as it is picked up, reworded, alternately denied and then affirmed throughout the novels. Speechless misery is that of a voice compelled to speak, if only to reassure itself that it exists, and conscious of its consciousness, but unable to find anything to say or a way to stop saying.

The Cartesian man had the rationalists' assurance of a naturally correct and orderly arrangement of the universe. He believed in a natural law which functions in the cosmos and which every man can discover if he uses right reason. Beckettian man is deprived of both a religious determinism and a belief in the infallibility of reason. Right reason becomes for him a question of point of view, and absolute certainty a fiction.

Reason driven to its logical extension is solipsism. Consciousness bounded by matter cannot prove the existence of other beings much less of an external world. Beckettian characters can only hope to pass the time by orally twiddling their thumbs. They do exercises in verbal non-communication to prove that they, at least, do exist.

Their choice is that of being silent and uncertain that one does exist or speaking though one has nothing to say. Beckett's voices ultimately opt for the latter, for it, at least, brings some assurance that one is still alive. The Unnamable finds neither choice, particularly inviting and spends much of his time ruminating on it and his insular existence.

Yes, in my life . . . there were three things, the inability to speak, the inability to be silent, and solitude, that's what I've had to make the best of.

Beckett's voices are sound without fury. Rather than rage against their sorry state of affairs, they simply drone on in style and rhetoric which emphasize the quotidian and therefore endless nature of their sufferings. The language is not elevated, because the condition which it describes is not an uncommon one. It is non-dramatic, because going on in a meaningless world implicitly denies that there are any events or acts which have particular significance. All is equally tedious.

Beckett's comedians are denied even the solace of a coherent tale to tell. With the exception of a few less than glorious attempts on the part of Malone to tell a story, there is no traditional form to the trilogy. The voices are denied the semblance of order that fiction imposes on the otherwise random and undifferentiated data of sense perception. Stripped of what are considered to be the minimal requirements for storytelling, plot or characterization, the voice is

often reduced to uttering meaningless tautology, with nothing but the most arbitrary beginnings and conclusions. This arbitrariness could not be otherwise. Story, characterization, and plot imply order, and in effect some degree of meaning in terms of the priorities in selectivity. In a world of issueless, senseless chaos, coherence would be dishonest. The non-sequitur is the only verity. Without absolutes, it is difficult to find a criterion for selectivity, thus the sometime writer Molloy is given to observing that "saying is inventing," and in writing "you must choose between the things not worth mentioning and those even less so." When only relative statements can be made, the fictive account is of such an arbitrary nature that Moran, the detective in Molloy can write the same paragraph any number of ways. None are more valid than any others.

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.

In a cosmos of speechless, solipsistic misery, the traditional fictive furnishings are unnecessary. The macrocosm of town, country, and continent is replaced by a small vacant room and thus, in turn, is replaced by a jar. The microcosm is so utterly devoid of objects that at times Malone cannot decide whether it is a "plenum or a void" that he inhabits. The traditional landmarks of nineteenth-century realism have vanished. Becket eschews the "wealth of filthy

circumstance" that Flaubert practiced and all the "ballsaching poppy-cock about life and death." Rather than rely on a scrupulous attention to the minute details of human sense perception, Beckett prefers to create his picture of reality through a form of literary sensory deprivation.

The existential dasein which normally defines the contingencies of being in the world with concrete situations and specific objects is replaced by ". . . no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names." Proper names ultimately become no-names or unnamable. Naming is ordering, and classification is impossible in an orderless world.

All that remains of stylistic precision in Beckett's works is a formal brilliance, logically precise, but signifying nothing. Molloy expresses his disgust with the inaccessibility of such language to any meaning as he observes:

All I know is what the words know, 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.

Occasionally a chair, a bicycle, a window or a piece of clothing will make an appearance, but because things are only a question of appearances and may vanish when the eye closes, they are seldom described and never with enthusiasm of a realistic writer.

The Beckett landscape is not the traditional one, because there are admittedly some difficulties in describing a void. Beckett is able to do just this, however, in the final novel of the Trilogy, as he depicts Worm's life in a Leyden jar. Interior space becomes opaque as the persona begins to approximate absolute zero. In the following passage, space is objectified and becomes almost as tangible as a wall:

Space hemmed him in on every side and held him in its toils, the moments streamed away in a great chaotic conflux of oozings and the trapped things changed and died each according to its solitude.

The image of the circle is again useful. The "old foetus" as Molloy describes himself, is fond of observing that his subject of discussion is "life from spermatorium to crematorium." Womb and tomb imprison the body, as the mind is the prisoner of the body. Both womb and tomb are as circles tangential to life, but neither are coincident with it. Malone's hospital room and Worm's jar are enclosures often compared to a vault or a coffin. All condemn their inhabitants to solitary confinement, on the perimeter between being and non-being.

Color is another interesting aspect of Beckettian flora and fauna. Contrary to initial expectation, things are not colorless, but, rather, they are gray. This is no world of blacks and whites or of absolutes, and equivocation is perhaps best colored gray. It is a nether-world hue more like the shadow than the substance and indicative of the

elusive distinctions Beckett's persona make between life and death, consciousness and its absence. Malone describes his appearance and that of his hospital room with a certain degree of affection. "I myself am very gray, I sometimes have the feeling that I emit gray."

The author could choose no better shade for a world without significance. If all things mean nothing, then judgment is an absurdity, or rather, an irrelevance. Equivocation is the only valid value judgment. After all, black and white may be either colors or the absence of any color. In world where sense perception can be and is often deceptive, it is better to choose the best of neither shade.

All that remains to make the description of the Beckett landscape complete is to give its geographic location. Bounded on one side by conscious life and on the other by death, Beckett's comedians are not underground, but peripheral men. Like Dostoevski's anti-heroes, Beckett's personae have little regard for society and a strained relationship with it, but unlike their Russian counterparts, they have an equally unsatisfactory relationship with their own interior world. Their quarrel is not only with an outer world which imposes meaning where none exists, but with being itself. Their sufferings are the pains of a fetus too far from the womb to get back in, and lacking the necessary impetus to be born. For this reason, they are best located on the periphery of the external world, but equally distant and alienated from the interior world of the mind.

The Unnamable describes his habitation quite appropriately:

. . . Perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside I'm the tympanium on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either.

To a cosmos without common sense, logically constructed nonsense provides diversion in the Pascalian manner. The permutations which can be made with the mind-matter relationship are numerous. There is, for example, the possibility that one exists only in other people's minds. A thought which is food for Worm, a character in The Unnamable:

His senses tell him nothing about himself, nothing about the rest Feeling nothing, he exists nevertheless, but not for himself, for others, others conceive him, as if there could be no being, but being conceived, if only by the beer.

Or a second possibility, equally unrewarding, is that the mind may have died without bothering to inform the body. This is a logical possibility, if it is remembered that the mind and the body have separate histories and function independently of each other according to Cartesian hypothesis. Malone in a moment of indecision remarks:

"My body does not yet make up its mind," and in a more serious mood:

I shall not speak of my sufferings, cowering deep down among them I feel nothing. It is there I die, unbeknown to my stupid flesh. That which is seen, that which cries and writhes, my witless remains.

Another alternative in the solipsistic calculus is that things exist only when they are discussed. Here again it is a logical extrapolation of the skeptic's argument. The only reality is the mental one, and words are assumed to be identical with the mind's conceptualization rather than the physical experience to which they more ordinarily refer. Such is the situation which the Unnamable imagines as he sits, bodiless, in his jar, pure mind, little matter:

I felt the cang, the flies, the sawdust under my stumps, the tarpaulin on my skull when they were mentioned to me. But can that be called a life which vanishes when the subject is changed.

The arrangements of the mind/matter equation are as numerous as Molloy's possible placement of sucking-stones in his greatcoat, and finally the only feasible solution to his mental gymnastics is the same as that of Molloy to his sucking-stone dilemma. Molloy throws all but one stone away and that he later loses. The Cartesian riddle prompts a similar solution by exclusion when the Unnamable can draw only conclusions such as the following:

I was grievously mistaken in supposing that death in itself could be regarded as evidence . . . in support of a preliminary life.

Perhaps the suggestion in this last passage is not only that of the frustrations of the Cartesian dualism, but also the more familiar, modern premise, that life is a waking death as well. Thinking is dissociated from feeling, and therefore being alive as an intellectual experience

is different from the emotional and sensual experience in which the body participates. The mind is devoid of any useful indicator of its own existence without the sensitivities of the body.

Under the rubric of "senseless, speechless and issueless misery," then, is found mind in matter and life in death. Chaos is further confounded with a third paradox, stasis in motion, or what in Beckettian parlance may be described as issueless misery.

The comings and goings in Beckett country are legion. Molloy sets out on a journey to his mother's home, and Moran to find Molloy. In Malone Dies, Sapho leaves home to make his way in the world and in the course of his excursion becomes Macmann, who crawls on through life's muck in the way of his predecessors, Molloy and Moran. The Unnamable primarily narrates from his jar, but both Worm and Manhood are given to various forms of circumlocomotion. Characters in the trilogy go around, by, and toward one another, but never up to each other. They begin full-bodied, upright, and mobile and conclude sans bicycle, sans torso and sans everything, but consciousness. Walking, limping, creeping, or crawling they, nonetheless, present a picture of motion, of flux and flow, and implicitly of dynamism. The fact that they usually have a particular goal in mind, e.g., Moran is looking for Molloy or the turdy Madonna, is even more encouraging. That it is purposive movement rather than aimless wandering seems heartening, at first glance.

Malone, however, knew better when he observed, "I have pinned my faith to appearances, believing them to be false." The continual motion functions as an ironic device to indicate the futility of the human condition. Motion which is derived linguistically from the same Latin and French roots as motive normally indicates purposive action. It indicates both a point of departure and one of arrival. Circles, however, have neither beginning nor end, and thus the paradox of motiveless motion. Walking around a circle, one can travel forever and never arrive anywhere one has not been before. Beckett's characters not only traverse the same space, they repeat the same phrases and utter the same tautologies, for there is no terminus, when there is no issue.

The compulsion to move which the characters indicate is essential to the condition which Beckett is trying to illuminate. It is like enforced labor on a termless sentence, and is, in many ways, similar to the penitential waiting which other Beckett characters undergo in a godless universe. This discrepancy between the dynamic quality of movement and its lack of actualization or accomplishment reinforces the basic futility of the situation. It is far more effective to state the predicament in terms of "having nowhere to go, I went," than assuming limitless possibilities for action which remain unexplored. When there is no biological excuse for the futility

of the mobile persona, the outlook is, indeed, ominous, for it indicates that the paralysis is not physical, but situational. The perimeter of one's cell is so remote, that it is obviously nowhere, but impinges upon one's freedom everywhere.

Movement which is no movement has its counterpart in an active inertia. While the characters in Molloy and Malone Dies are for the most part victims of movement which goes nowhere, Malone and the Unnamable are preoccupied with dynamic inanition. Nobody comes, nobody goes, everything changes, and remarkably everything remains the same. It is as though time has stopped, but the minute hand of the clock continues to circle, repeating the same sequence of sixty minutes ad infinitum. This is the active stasis which Molloy refers to as the "mythological present." It has a superficially dynamic quality, because the scene changes, and the names of the characters change, which ostensibly precludes some chronological development through time; but as it becomes clear that the subject will remain the same and the identities of the characters will be interchangeable, it is even more apparent that it is a timeless present. It has neither precedent or antecedent, because almost all activities are identical and have little, if any, causal relationship to one another. The Unnamable describes it as "unchanging future into unchangeable past," remarkably uniform and unvarying.

Here again recognition of the non-dramatic quality of Beckett's prose is necessary to an understanding of his use of time. In a

quotidian existence in which all events are equally meaningless, little, if anything, happens which differentiates one day from the next. After all, as Molloy points out, "what are crises compared to all that never stops, knows neither ebb nor flow." The characters do not act, they endure. This duration is unrelieved by any of the events which could invest it with meaning, and unlike Proust's concept of time has no backlog of memories from which to draw. It has neither richness nor depth. It is quantitative, not qualitative. Having no particular purpose, it simply passes, giving a tempo to the tedium, but little sign that it will ever cease. The characters are not even permitted to die of boredom, consciousness denies them even this diversion.

The Beckettian time sequence is identified by its repetitiousness and its lack of variation rather than by the quality of its contents. The stultifying nature of the activities in which the characters engage is a singularly important aspect of his time concept. "Memory and Habit," Beckett states in his monograph on Proust, "are attributes of the Time cancer."⁸ Habitual activities are those which occur and reoccur without variation from one performance to the next. Like the rote recitation of a parrot, they require little thinking and an even more minimal amount of feeling. Not the ordinary, but the extraordinary activity excites emotion.

⁸ Samuel Beckett, Proust (New York, Grove Press, 1931), p. 7

Habit is the compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities Habit is the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit. Breathing is habit. Life is habit.⁹

The ennui which is everywhere apparent in the trilogy, and which the comedians with the letter M do not fail to acknowledge with the observation "what tedium!" is a necessary and sufficient condition of their existence. It imparts some routine to otherwise formless living, and numbs the pain of the meaningless misery by decreasing awareness and promoting trance-like performance. Habitual activity renders existence more palatable by decreasing the time one must be aware of it.

The creature of habit turns aside from the object that cannot be made to correspond with one or the other of his intellectual prejudices, that resists the propositions of his team of syntheses, organised by habit on labor-saving principles.¹⁰

In his book on Proust, the author regards suffering as the incorrect performance of the tasks of living, while habit and its corollary, boredom, are signs of the job well done. Daily life, then, becomes the continual struggle between suffering and stupor.

The pendulum oscillates between these two terms: Suffering-that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience, and Boredom . . . that must be considered the most tolerable because the most durable of human evils.¹¹

⁹ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 11

¹¹ Ibid., p. 16.

This last passage requires a further qualification, if it is to be applied to the works of Beckett, however. While with Proustian characters it might be supposed that they are occasionally released from the ravages of the time cancer by the power of involuntary memory, Beckettian persona are allowed no such palliative. They seldom eat at all, and when they do, it is no confection so rich as a petite madelaine. Their remembrance of things past is identical with their activities in the present and their anticipation of the future. It never escapes time or becomes extratemporal, but is always intratemporal or deeply mired in time.

Again, their situation is like the old fetus who can neither return to the womb nor enter into life. It is what the Unnamable terms prehistory. This dynamic waiting implies the arrival of someone or something which will give meaning to this activity, and for this reason, it is endless potential without, however, the possibility of actualization. Preface without beginning, active inanition is a major source of irony in the trilogy. Noone has described its function more effectively than the Unnamable:

Is not a uniform suffering preferable to one which by its ups and downs is liable in certain moments to encourage the view that perhaps after all it is not eternal.

Time seems to pass, but it is only a literary illusion. Malone tells himself stories, takes stock of his possessions, and makes notes

in his diary. All of which give the appearance of passing the time. But such business is deceptive. The central situation, the human condition, retains its devastating sameness. It is rather as Malone observes, "the forms are many in which the unchanging seeks relief from its formlessness." One may choose to pass the time in various ways, but merely rearranging the sequence neither diminishes nor increases its significance.

The concept of the mythological present has some interesting corollaries. Beckett's space-time is the present, and as such, is one-dimensional. Meaning and depth are a function of the accretion of previous experiences and past associations which make present experiences significant. If, however, as Molloy says, "some of my memories have their roots deep in the immediate past," it is doubtful that many associations would be stored there. Without memory or history to impute meaning to new situations through their relationship to previous experiences, all remains on a single-dimensional level. The surface of existence is flat, opaque and superficial without some reference to the past.

The memoryless status of Beckett's unfortunates is a reminder of Dante's reference in the Divine Comedy to the river Lethe, for like Dante's disembodied souls the Beckett personae are oblivious to the past, but unlike the inhabitants of Purgatory, their destination is not paradise, but an inferno of infinite sameness.

A second corollary of a time-sequence which is without memory or history is that it makes language almost an impossibility. The sentence which is temporal and takes place in time depends upon the retention of what is said at the beginning for comprehension of the end. Words assume meaning through their relationship to other words or their relation through time, and such contextual meaning is impossible without memory.

Time, or the mythological present, not only reinforces the feeling of futility and obstructs communication, it aids in the isolation of the mind in the body. The sensory deprivation from which the personae, particularly the Unnamable, are suffering is that in which the thought is separated or alienated from the act. It is as though the synapse between the brain and the nerve ending had been extended indefinitely. It is not simply a pause, but a complete cessation. The mind-body lesion is illustrated by such statements as Molloy's objective commentary on his own infirmities:

And at first I did actually seem to feel a little better, but little by little I acquired the conviction that such was not the case,

and the Unnamable's annoyance at the "infinitesimal lag between the arrival and departure of (words)". A more serious statement of this same problem in terms of language is the Unnamable's frustrated query:

. . . how can you think and speak at the same time, without a special gift, your thoughts wander, your words too, far apart . . . between them would be the place to be, where you suffer, rejoice, at being bereft of speech, bereft of thought, and feel nothing, hear nothing, know nothing, say nothing, are nothing.

This last passage reflects the schism not only between the mind and the body, but the equally serious and more modern separation of the spoken word from both speaker and listener or the written word from both writer and reader. It foretells a return to the cul de sac to which the deification of Logos unfailingly leads.

Language is built upon words which are commonly assumed to have a referent in the real world of experience. Communication is likewise based upon the assumption that there are certain experiences common to all people which can be referred to by means of arbitrary signs or words. Each mind, however, and hence each person's experience of the world is wrapped in the "ineluctable solitude of the soul" as Descartes has stated and is, in no way, identical to the experience of any other individual. Communication through language is, therefore, impossible. When the solipsistic circle is correctly drawn, it leaves no room for any voices other than one's own.

In a world such as Beckett has created, language as communication is a futile gesture. It is the vestigial remains of Cartesian rationalism. By definition solipsism is the theory that the self can

know nothing but its own modifications. The language of the self is intelligible only to the self. It is private and opaque, having neither analogical or metaphorical possibilities. Nothing can be like anything else, it can only be itself. The lover may be like a red rose, but only to Robert Burns. The modern sensibility is more inclined to agree with Gertrude Stein's definition of this flower.

Language in the solipsistic system has no mediating purpose, for it does not serve to express the experience of the speaker to listener. It is, however, not completely dysfunctional. Molloy finds that it gives him some aesthetic pleasure:

. . . I had quite a sensitive ear, and sounds unencumbered with precise meaning were registered perhaps better by me than most.

In fact, sounds unencumbered with meaning become the only catechism one can recite in a world without absolutes. For this reason, Beckett makes several references to the speech of parrots both in the trilogy and in other works. The parrot captures the sound, but not the sense of human speech. He is therefore an ideal mimic for the phrase Malone's friend, Jackson, attempts to teach him. The parrot is taught to repeat "nihil in intellectu," but has never learned the remainder of the phrase. It is probable, however, that if he could learn it, the quotation would be similar to the observation of the Belgian Occasionalist Geulincx, whom Beckett admired: "ubi

nihil vales, ibi nihil velis, where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing."¹²

To speak like the parrot is to gain momentary asylum from the sufferings of the present, for thoughtless speech allays the fear of solitude by producing sound, but does not force one to be aware of the vacuity of the words one utters. The Unnamable was certainly aware of this fact when he said, "If I could learn something by heart, I'd be saved. I have to keep saying the same thing, and each time it's an effort."

Beckett voices this breakdown in linguistic confidence most pessimistically in his monograph on Proust:

There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication. Even on rare occasions when words and gestures happen to be valid expressions of personality, they lose their significance on their passage through the cataract of the personality that is opposed to them. Either we speak and act for ourselves - in which case speech and action are distorted and emptied of their meaning by an intelligence that is not ours, or else we speak and act for others - in which we speak and act a lie.¹³

Descartes, it must be remembered, distinguishes man from other primates by virtue of his ability to speak. When this is no

¹² Ruby Cohn, "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett," in Samuel Beckett, ed. by Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 170.

¹³ Beckett, Proust, p. 47.

longer possible or rather when verbal communication becomes suspect, the foundation of modern western tradition is threatened. Modern man has become compartmentalized man. He belongs in the jars, closet-like rooms, and crevices to which Beckett has relegated him. The Cartesian dualism has reproduced itself several times over, and its offsprings are equally as frightening as the progenitor. Mind and matter, thought and act, intellect and feeling, and substance and symbol are some of the ways into which the progeny may be divided. The original sin, however, is that of divorcing rationality from perception and sensation. The confident unity of the Enlightened mind becomes the shrapnel of the twentieth-century self and makes integral functioning impossible.

The Cartesian thinking man has become no man, but only a fragment of the whole. The Unnamable's voices in the concluding sections of the Trilogy are the garrulous pieces of self trying frantically to talk themselves into a whole. The ominous "they" to which the Unnamable is constantly alluding are all facets of his own personality which a well-meaning rationalist has set free to wander aimlessly through the labyrinthes of the mind.

If coherence in the outer world is reliant on the systematization and classification of experiences in a commonly accepted order, coherence in the inner world requires the union of intellect,

will, and emotion. If things fall apart, if they become discrete phenomena without relation, then the center does not hold. Beckett does more than simply re-echo Yeats's theme, he subjectifies and humanizes it, and leaves the reader with no illusions about a second coming.

The Cartesian dualism posits the separation of thought from act and the Unnamable's voices graphically describe a logician's nightmare. The Freudian abnormal becomes in the Beckett cosmos the modern everyman, the prosaic voices of a self so definitively splintered that they are no longer even aware of their lesions. The voices are the thought performing the unending penumbrum of acknowledging that the personae is alive, the infinite regression that the Unnamable observes Worm performing. "Perhaps," muses the Unnamable, "he won't be able to bear any more, of not being able to bear any more, of not being able to bear any more."

Consciousness goes on showing no way out, and dualism goes on showing no way in. Silence, then, becomes the ultimate goal. As all else in Beckett's work, its possible explanations are numerous. It can mean cessation of consciousness and death, which is the only escape from an absurd universe. It may mean the unification of the self, which would allow the voices to stop speaking at cross-purposes to one another. Silence is perhaps

neither of these things but rather the complete separation of the mind from the body. This would allow it to escape from the mechanics of existence into a Nirvana of Nothingness. The solution to the problem is unclear not only because there is no simple or even ample answer, but also because the main purpose of the Trilogy is to illuminate the human condition, not to rectify it.

It would be comforting to be able to say that the Trilogy concludes on even a modestly affirmative note. It does not, however, conclude at all. It simply terminates. It could continue ad infinitum, the same things happening not twice as has been said of Waiting for Godot, but an infinite number of times.

The Unnamable ends with an agony of words the way Molloy began. Its exodus is reminiscent of strangely mangled genesis, a mocking reminder of a sacred world in which religion imposed order and provided the substratum upon which act and the meaning of the act could be based. In the End is the Word, and the Word is with Naught and the Word is Naught.

The circle ends where it began, with words. It is not, however, only one circle, but a series of concentric circles. Beckett's enigmas are modeled after the chinese puzzle, a nest of boxes each one smaller and more perplexing than the one that encloses it, not only macrocosmic, but microcosmic chaos. Man alienated not only

from his environment, but from other men, and most important from himself. Like the subdivisions of a fraction which come closer and closer to approximating zero, but always failing to reach it, each division the comedians posit leading to another equally insoluble. All of humanity separated from divinity or divine Logos, individual men separated from one another by the diversity of their experiences, and the inner splintering of personality, which separates man from himself.

Beckett's vision may be tragic, but, if so, it is the suffering of a Chaplin rather than an Oedipus. The Aristotelian purpose, passion, and perception are all present, but they do not follow one another, at least not any formation Greek decorum would allow. There is no causal relationship between the act and the passion, which climaxes in the perception. The Beckettian comedians are all too aware of their situation and their sufferings; however, they do not learn from them. There is no Aristotelian perception, because there is nothing to be learned from experience. Absurdity is not especially edifying. Beckett's conception of tragedy is best stated in the following passage from Proust:

Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of an expiation, but not the misera-expiation of a codified breach of a local arrangement The tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin . . . the sin if being born. ¹⁴

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 49.

It is difficult to assess a work which seeks to describe the expiation for the sin of being born. For a man who practices the art of the cipher, his works are amazingly well-supplied with ambiguities and complexities of meaning. The magnitude of Samuel Beckett's genius becomes quite clear, when the simplicity and facility of his language is compared to the profundity and the complexity of his vision. Objection of spiritual emptiness and human solitude and characterization of an extraneous man both require an extraordinary talent. The author must make the ordinary interesting. In a series of dialogues with artist-critic Georges Duthuit published in Transition in 1949, Beckett discusses modern painting and the purposes of artistic creation. He states that he is searching for an art which turns from traditional forms of expression to:

The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, together with the obligation to express.¹⁵

He describes this new aesthetic further as an art ". . . unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving."¹⁶ If one accepts the author's own criterion for art, he fails brilliantly. Beckett's self-imposed pensum is like that of his

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 18.

characters who act, unable to act, and obliged to act. Beckett the artist creates where no creation seems possible. He chooses the plotless story, the tale not worth telling and tells it with such an astounding virtuosity that the reader is not even disappointed at being denied an ending, much less a happy one. His comedians commit every error of which the second-rate novelist is guilty. They are verbose, repetitious, and incapable of following any narration to a coherent conclusion. They are almost tedious. It is Beckett's skill only which prevents them from being so. He succeeds because he gives the reader a dual vision. He describes men who want to be machines, who describe walking or crawling as if it were a matter of levers and cogs. He depicts humans who yearn to be sines and co-sines, who speak in syllogisms and revel in making algebraic computations out of the most prosaic sums, but whose bodies break down and reveal their frailty and whose perpetual matter-of-factness, frequently is betrayed by a slightly frenzied shrillness, the anguish of the trapped and solitary mind.

Beckett's clowns succeed because the author describes both the antic comedian and the man behind the make-up. His characters never prophesy. There is no wailing about alienation and no dreary peroration on the sociological factors responsible for their wretched state of affairs. The comedians make jests of their

jeremiads, and so they gain the heart, while they entertain the head.

Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable are outstanding works of contemporary literature, because they do the impossible. They take nothing and make it humorous, terrifying, and even edifying. In his book on Proust, Beckett describes art as the "apotheosis of Solitude."¹⁷ According to this definition, the Trilogy is art of the highest form, but the universality of such a definition for art must be questioned. While the solipsistic circle is art in the works of a man of Beckett's genius, it is not certain that the art of the cul de sac has ultimately a particularly interesting or useful role in literature. It is, indeed, a dead end, a literary hari-kari for less-talented writers; for while it destroys sometimes obsolescent fictional traditions, it does not normally replace them with any more creative concepts. It poses valid questions and sometimes quite successfully depicts modern problems, but it must be asked if this alone is sufficient. If language is to be denied the function of communication, then its sole purpose becomes that of self-expression. This is, perhaps, permissible for the man of genius, but otherwise it leads only to a cult of egoism with most subjectivists not really

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 19.

having any sentiments better left unpublished in his private diary. It is not ultimately possible to make an art of failure that lasts, because literature needs not only negative assertions to free it from unnecessary restraints, but positive expressions which can utilize this freedom in ways other than bewailing the fate of man. There can be no such thing as value-free literature without eventually degenerating into the mauve decadence like that of the 1890's; neither can there be a continuing fidelity to nihilism which does not eventually become narcissistic self-immolation.

The works of Samuel Beckett show a brilliant artistry and freedom from restraint. They show the creative potential of the novel both as comedy and as tragedy in ways in which it has never before been demonstrated. They replace the bourgeois novel with vaudeville. Beckett's comedians depict for the reader the pathos and the comedy of a negative humanism with all the dexterity of the sleight-of-hand man. Samuel Beckett has expanded the circumference of the circle, and has made open spaces of an enclosed place.

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