

NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN SAMUEL BECKETT'S TRILOGY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this thesis is to consider how one can approach the unusual fictional world of Samuel Beckett without being lost in its strangeness, because the medium through which we perceive this world is the voices of the various narrators, familiarization with the appearance and roles of these narrators would seem a good place to begin such a study. This thesis begins with a consideration of the philosophical concepts from which the Beckettian narrators might have sprung. I refer to the notions of Schopenhauer, a nineteenth-century philosopher, and those of Genette and Barthes, both modern critics. After setting up a critical paradigm based on the works of these people, I then move on to a discussion of the individual works which compose the trilogy Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable. In this section of the thesis I discuss a transition in the countenance and role of each narrator throughout the work. Finally, in the last chapter of the thesis, I discuss the comic effect achieved by the narrators as they are used, and again, the transition which occurs throughout the work in this comic tone relative to the narrators.

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Chapter 1

Esse est Percipi

Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried. While within me the wild beast of earnestness padded up and down, roaring, ravening, rending. I have done that. And all alone, well hidden, played the clown, all alone, hour after hour, motionless, often standing, spellbound, groaning. That's right, groan. I couldn't play. I turned till I was dizzy, clapped my hands. Ran, shouted, saw myself winning, saw myself losing, rejoicing, lamenting. Then suddenly I threw myself on the playthings, if there were any, or on a child, to change his joy to howling, or I fled, to hiding. The grown-ups pursued me, the just, caught me, beat me, hounded me back into the round, the game, the jollity. For I was already in the toils of earnestness.¹

When the reader of fiction picks up the trilogy² of Samuel Beckett, he enters a strange world. In these novels there are no stationary landmarks, there are no objects which do not suddenly seem absurd, there are no relationships between friends or lovers which we might recognize as psychologically healthy or even vaguely normal. In fact, none of the characters or narrators we encounter in this work seems quite human - and a narrator who sits crouched in an urn, suspended

¹Samuel Beckett, Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1955, 1956, 1958), pp. 194-5.

²These three novels are conventionally regarded as a trilogy. My discussion of them will be limited exclusively to the English versions, considering them as autonomous works.

in his own death, can scarcely be considered human at all. There is, in fact, very little in this trilogy to suggest that it is intended to reflect in any way society as we are familiar with it. It is not unusual for an author to distort his vision of the world to some degree for dramatic effect, as when James Joyce described Stephen's world in the opening pages of Ulysses, where shaving becomes a mystifying ritual; Beckett, though, gives us a fictional world where everything and everyone is awkward and alien. I can recall that the nursery rhyme about the crooked man in the crooked house always struck me as quite an uncomfortable notion when I was a child, and I feel much the same way when I read Beckett's work.³

The difficulty with reading Beckett is that one tends to feel rather lost in the midst of what might appear to be a chaotic and weird work; however, there is sense to be found within the trilogy and, though the packaging may be odd, the ideas contained within are consistent with a sophisticated model of logic. The purpose of this study is to provide a frame of reference in which the events, characters and ideas of the trilogy cohere. I do not regard this exercise as the unlocking of a puzzle, but rather as a consideration of why the pieces fit at all. In order to do this I will be relying heavily on structuralist notions, particularly those of Gerard Genette. One concept which underlies structuralist thought and is essential to this paper is

³I have chosen to focus on Beckett's fiction rather than his drama. Although Beckett is best known for his plays, I feel that his novels, equally important and interesting, deserve analogous critical scrutiny.

that no text is absolutely unique, but can be understood relative to other works or through poetics, wherein a paradigm of literary theory is established relative to the text to facilitate a heightened understanding of it. As Beckett's work is so different from much of existing literature, I think that it is more fruitful to choose the latter course.

One of the effects Beckett achieves with his refusal to allow anything in his text to seem ordinary is to draw attention to the act of narration itself. The events which make up the stories he relates may be bizarre but not completely alienating. Instead, it is the text itself and the language it contains which creates this effect of strangeness; thus I have chosen to focus on the act of narrating in this paper, as I believe it is the key to understanding the world of the trilogy, strange less in its parts than in the way they are perceived. In order to approach the way that language is used in the text, it is necessary briefly to consider language itself.

Language has, for centuries, largely been assumed an adequate means of expression and communication, for what else could take its place? So the overriding concern of the author was the search for the mot juste and the definition of and adherence to proper literary decorum. In contemporary literature though, the concerns of the author are more fundamental: are the words and structures of language adequate to delineate and illuminate human existence, or do they comprise a futile, almost self-parodic means to such an end?

Structuralists like Saussure asserted that meaning in language was made by difference; that is, "car" is not "bar" or "can" so we see through deduction that it is "car". There is a basic flaw in this way of thinking though, for if words have meaning only relative to the meaning of other words, then language is based upon non-meaning. That is, words essentially mean nothing within themselves, only saying something because they are not saying something else. Even if, as Saussure postulates, the meaning of signs lies in the relationships between signs and is not innate in them, this still presupposes some degree of consistent meaning; for, it would seem logical that non-meaning posed in relation to non-meaning will not produce meaning through differentiation. Despite the fact that there are endless possible shades of colour in the world, they are all composed of some combination of three primary colours. I think that in the same way, while language allows many meanings to be signified by each signifier, there must be some meaning inherent in the sign, or at least a conventionally recognized meaning.

This does not, however, place limitations on language, for the possibilities of expression are unlimited. This is because language remains fluid due to its temporal ontology. Because the context in which a sign is used is always changing, each sign never

signifies in exactly the same way twice. As Roland Barthes, the French literary theorist saw it, a "healthy" sign always conveys a sense of fluidity along with its meaning. While the critic might rejoice in this concept, as it allows for endless interpretive possibilities, there is a more prevalent response to this idea. People do not like to feel uncertain all the time, nor can we function competently in a practical sphere if one of the chief structures of our world, language, is regarded as an endless regression of meaning, every word being at once every aspect of its potentiality. Language would become a many-headed monster, awkward and frightening in this untamed state.

In response to all of this, one fears that humankind would heave one great sigh of futility and grow silent forever, perhaps losing the ability to speak altogether. This fear is not unreasonable, and yet it is precisely the antithesis of this which seems to occur; because silence, like death, is frightening in its incomprehensibility, we search in despair for a manner of averting our eyes from the dreadful calm. And the much-maligned victim of our retreat from silence is the tattered shreds of what is left of our faith in language. To nullify the silence we throw up a wall of words. Newspapers, magazines and especially advertising are all forms of literature which reflect society's need to escape nothingness by filling up the void with everything available; our attention is focused on consumption in a vain attempt at satiation,

and reading becomes simply another aspect of this process. This notion has been with us from the time of Swift's satirical comments on Grub Street until today. There is no time to savour quality of expression, only time to assimilate information which is quickly and easily accessible for everyone. The result of this in the bulk of literature - for the sheer weight of such literature must, as in The Battle of the Books, overwhelm the puny output of "scholarly" tomes - is a general movement toward reassuringly common speech. English is filled with clichés and is scarcely able to raise itself above the pervasive mediocrity of an expedient society. And still, within this cacophony of hollow utterings, the perceptive reader is aware of the echoes of emptiness behind the bombardment of words. As George Steiner expresses it, "Language can only deal meaningfully with a special, restricted segment of reality. The rest, and presumably the much larger part, is silence." When it attempts to express what exists beyond its boundaries, language becomes an "infinite regression, words being spoken of other words," thus causing us to wonder if all that language reveals to us is actually "a veil spun by language to shroud the mind from reality."⁴

When confronted by the conundrum of authorship - that is, that language is the only tool of the writer's trade, but a tool which is neither accurate nor sure - one might expect that the writer's response could only be an attitude of defeat which would end his words.

⁴Language and Silence (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1969), p. 41.

And yet, they write; even those like Beckett, whose work is charged with an awareness of the writer's dilemma. If we try to imagine a work which contains a recognizable awareness of both the multiple possibilities for the meaning of each word along with the understanding that clichés are necessary on some levels, we are then imagining precisely what the trilogy is. Language must not lose itself in potential meanings, nor lose its potentiality in comfortable clichés. To answer why he chooses to write against all odds is difficult, perhaps impossible. In a conversation with Georges Duthuit, Beckett describes his compulsion to write as "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."⁵ However, when asked exactly why the compulsion he describes exists, Beckett replies simply, "I don't know".⁶ This compulsion to literary expression, for Beckett at any rate, does seem to be linked to one of Beckett's favorite philosophical notions, the expression of Berkeley which Beckett quotes in his general remarks preceeding the film script Project 1: "Esse est percipi [existence is to be perceived]."⁷ These words are of course

⁵Martin Esslin, ed., Samuel Beckett (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1965), p. 17.

⁶ibid., p. 19.

⁷This statement is, of course, the most widely recognized of Berkeley's ontological axioms.

double-edged, embracing both the idea that because we exist we perceive ourselves and conversely, because we perceive ourselves we know we exist. Rubin Rabinovitz discusses this statement at some length in The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction, putting it primarily in relation to Descartes and Schopenhauer. Berkeley questioned whether external reality actually existed; Descartes asserted that it did exist, but as a realm separate from the mind, though interaction between the two was made possible through the functioning of the pineal gland. The manner through which the Cartesian mind becomes familiar with the external, physical world is through scientific examination of data: one questions everything and then contemplates intensely that which can be deduced with certainty, something insignificant and easily grasped, until one has mastered it. With sufficient practice in the empirical arts, one may advance to larger questions, until ultimately one can prove the existence of God. This discussion of Descartes is scant but adequate, for clearly we can see the problem this argument poses for the modern mind: that is, not even on the most basic level of empirical thought, that of mathematics, can we deduce answers with full comprehension and certainty. And disputing the Cartesian logic, if the cogito collapses at its primary level, then all arguments supported on this level up to the argument proving the existence of God, must collapse in consequence. Beckett clearly reacted against this flaw in logic, and often in the trilogy dissects empirical reasoning with obvious glee:

Yes, I once took an interest in astronomy, I don't deny it. Then it was geology that killed a few years for me. The next pain in the balls was anthropology and the other disciplines, such as psychiatry, that are connected with it, disconnected, then connected again, according to the latest discoveries. 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. But my ideas on this subject were always horribly confused, for my knowledge of men was scant and the meaning of being beyond me.

(Molloy, p. 39).

Beckett inverts Cartesian logic here, claiming not that because he can deduce the certainty of his own existence he can deduce the existence of God, but rather that because science negates all things relative to man, it ultimately negates both man and God. And thus, the eponymous protagonist of this novel goes on to describe his knowledge and perception of self as "the thing in ruins," wondering also "whether it is not less a question of ruins than the indestructible chaos of timeless things" (*ibid.* p. 52). Clearly, Cartesian thought is an inadequate tool to solve questions of human existence. And, as several prominent critics have discussed Descartes' influence on Beckett's work a great deal (including Hugh Kenner, Rubin Rabinovitz and J. D. O'Hara), I have chosen to focus on another thinker.

A more appropriate and satisfying philosophical approach - and one that all critics of Beckett's work would agree to be a significant one - is that of Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer also

recognizes the split between the external world and the inner world of the mind, but he did not hold that the understanding of physical phenomenon would facilitate a corresponding understanding of metaphysical noumenon. While Descartes proceeded under the assumption that the mind can know itself, Schopenhauer pointed out the impossibility of this: the mind which thinks is the subject and that which it thinks of is the object, and because the mind cannot be simultaneously subject and object, it can never know itself. It is not possible to perceive how we perceive, thus, the words "Esse est percipi" acquire a second level of significance: to know you exist is to exist, but without a conscious grasp of that process of self-knowledge. This impossibility of self-knowledge and thus inviolate self-identity is a constant source of fascination in Beckett's work.

I will return to these philosophers at greater length in a later chapter, but at this point I want to delineate the topic of this paper, and that is the problem of coming to terms with the unique and elusive narrators of Beckett's trilogy, narrators who are painfully and bitterly self-aware, but completely uncertain of their identities. They are self-conscious creators of narrative, and it is through this almost adolescent self-consciousness that we must approach and identify them.

Perhaps it might be best to cite some examples of narrators who differ from those which Beckett creates, in that they are consistent with what the reader is probably used to in the shape of a narrator. These "traditional" narrators can be categorized quite readily under the headings of first-person, third-person and omniscient narrators. Wayne C. Booth discusses these terms very competently in The Rhetoric of Fiction (1961).

I shall briefly delineate each type of narrator and then provide examples of them, in order that it may be seen how they differ from Beckettian narrators. First, there is the first-person narrator, this is basically the narrator who tells the story from his point of view. Briefly, he refers to himself as "I." The second sort of narrator one traditionally encounters is the third-person narrator, who tells the story from the point of view of another character: that is, the narrator speaks of "he", not "I." Finally, there is the omniscient narrator. This is a particular type of third-person narrator, one who is able to see into the consciousnesses of all the characters. This last type of narrator is the kind we find most often in nineteenth-century novels. Dickens, Thackeray, Trollope and Eliot all created omniscient narrators; these authors also shared the tendency to employ authorial intrusion. That is, the implied author frequently intrudes in the novel to make some commentary (often moralistic) about the fictional world, rather

who do indeed know their roles but perversely question them. Instead of the unwavering control over the narrative that one sees in the omniscient narrator, in Beckettian narrators we have almost the antithesis of omniscience. Beckett creates narrators who question their own roles, their own identities - they even question whether or not they exist. While Wayne Booth's work is an excellent basis for a preliminary discussion of Beckett's narrators, their complex natures require the addition of a somewhat more sophisticated theory of narratology. To answer this need, I have turned to several structuralist theorists who focus on narratology.

Beckett's method of narration in the trilogy is one of self-consciousness. Not only are his narrators aware that they can never express the process of self-perception, and thus never fully delineate their existences, but they also know that telling always entails selection and discrimination. Any aspect of external reality is seen through the biased and thus limiting perceptions of the viewer, for one simply cannot absorb and consequently give voice to every detail of every moment. Clearly, seeing and telling are two separate acts, the act of telling, which primarily concerns us here, can be broken down into various structures. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan describes the narratives of fictional works as composed of three

elements in an echo of Gerard Genette: story, text and narration.⁸ Story consists of the events in the fiction, which may be removed from the fictional context and arranged in chronological order, it may be abstracted from the style, language and medium of the work, although it is of course dependent on these things to some degree in its genesis. The story itself exists at two levels: that of "surface structure" which is syntagmatic, and that of "deep structure", which is paradigmatic. The latter level is discussed at great length by Claude Levi-Strauss in his work Structural Anthropology. The second aspect of fiction delineated by Rimmon-Kenan is text, which is the "written discourse" (p. 3) which tells the story: that is, what we read. The narration is the "process of production" (p. 3) by which the text emerges. It is this feature in the trilogy on which this discussion will focus. Obviously the text itself is the only tangible object for the critic to work with; the study of narration can only be pursued by implication, and yet it is the process of making fiction which obsesses Beckett and indeed, obsesses his narrators as they tell their stories. The narrator feels compelled to tell his story, but feels thwarted by his inability to tell the whole truth and nothing

⁸Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics (London & New York: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1983).

but the truth. As Molloy expresses it, the narrator feels both trapped and driven:

Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition.

(Molloy, p. 28).

This passage presents a characteristic which all of Beckett's narrators share, and that is self-doubt. Truthfulness would seem to demand the inclusion of every possible means of narrating each event, yet the physical limitations of discourse do not allow this. There is no truly omniscient narrator, for such a narrator would have to be omnipotent as well to convey all his knowledge.

Rimmon-Kenan suggests, again with reference to Gerard Genette, that the division between first-person narrator and third-person narrator is not essential except on the surface of the text; instead, the significant qualities of the narrator are determined through a consideration of the degree of his participation in the text, the perceptibility of him as a presence in the text, and the reliability of his narration. While I agree that these aspects of the narratology are important tools in identifying the individual narrator, it seems wrong to dismiss the more traditional terms of first and third person altogether. While there is no critic who defends the use of these

terms (as they were always assumed a given prior to Genette) I think that their relevance is related to the question of dramatic immediacy. As Schopenhauer pointed out, only men can be both subject and object simultaneously and thus man is unique and each man an individual; or, as a post-structuralist might express it, we can be signifier and signified simultaneously. Ultimately though, as I have already suggested, this dual existence is frustrating because while we can contemplate our navels thus, we can not ever grasp how we do it: we can never perceive how we perceive. The point I wish to make here is that it is impossible for the third-person narrator to express directly this conundrum, the immediate and intense frustration which the first-person can express. Only the first-person narrator can be subject and object at once, and that is why I think Beckett moved from the use of a third-person narrator in his earlier works (Watt, Murphy) to the first-person in the trilogy. I will return to these notions further, exercising them on specific narrators in the trilogy. For the moment though, I think it would be useful to discuss the relationships between narration and text.

Wayne C. Booth, in his Rhetoric of Fiction, does consider the problem of authorial bias, which I have alluded to previously. While Booth recognizes that neutrality is impossible for the author, he must caution himself against the tendency to "pour his

untransformed biases into his work"⁹ If the author does not avoid this pitfall, he will alienate many of his readers. However, the importance of the author's unique insights can not be denied; thus the author creates a skeleton of ideological norms through which he filters the narrative:

As he writes, he creates not simply an ideal, impersonal 'man in general' but an implied version of 'himself' that is different from the implied authors we meet in other men's works...it is clear that the picture the reader gets of this presence is one of the author's most important effects. However impersonal he may try to be, his reader will inevitably construct a picture of the official scribe who writes in this manner - and of course that official scribe will never be neutral toward all values.

(ibid., pp. 70-71)

It is important to recognize, however, that the narrator through whom narrative is filtered is a unit separate from the implied author; often it will be clear in a work of literature that the norms of the implied author are different from those of his narrator, and thus there are varying degrees of reliability of narration. Basically, Booth identifies four participants in the fictional discourse, the implied author, the narrator, other characters, and the implied reader (for

⁹Rhetoric of Fiction (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968)
p. 70.

again, the author can only assume to appeal to the norms of a widely varied readership). The relationships between these participants vary to achieve certain literary effects. For example, a concurrence between the implied author and the implied reader which excludes the narrator creates unreliability and perhaps irony. The implied author created by Mark Twain and the implied reader might agree that Huckleberry Finn's morals are questionable, and thus we find his commentary unreliable; we may also find it ironic that Jim is Huck's social inferior when his moral values are superior, and hopefully more closely aligned with the implied reader's. What is especially interesting in Beckett's work is that he often explicitly points out the unreliability of his narrators, avoiding the literary delicacy of ambiguity which Booth refers to: "Sometimes it is almost impossible to infer whether or to what degree a narrator is fallible; sometimes explicit corroborating or conflicting testimony makes the inference easy" (Rhetoric of Fiction, p. 160). When reading Beckett, one is always aware that the narrator is telling a story, not living a fiction, and that he is completely unreliable. In Malone Dies, the narrator determines that before his death he will tell some stories, and begins with the story of Saposcat, or Sapo:

Sapo loved nature, took an interest

This is awful

Sapo loved nature, took an interest in animals and plants...

(Malone Dies, p. 191).

Not only does this narrator distance himself sufficiently from this tale to indicate that it is fiction, but he also raises the question of his ability to record it. And as this tale of Sapo is a story within the story of Malone, the reader is forced to wonder in consequence if Malone is able to tell his own story - the point being that he is not. But degree of reliability is not the only relationship between the narrator and the text to consider. Beckett also toys with the narrative aspect of degree of participation, as is also exemplified in the passage quoted above. The narrator Malone directly participates in the story of his pressing death but is a distanced observer in the story of Sapo - however, in both cases Malone is the narrator. Thus we see the partial validity of the comment that the difference between first-person narration and third-person narration is not significant - this narrator has made it clear that he is reliable in neither case. When he speaks as Malone in the first person he is just as aware that he fictionalizes his own life as when he speaks in the third person of the more obviously fictional life of Sapo. However, we can also see that when he speaks as Malone

his voice is filled with the greater frustration of the first-person narrator. And, this uncertainty about the narrator's ability to express his own story authentically suggests that the implied author questions his ability to produce the entire text. And thus the narrator of The Unnamable describes the difficulty of differentiating between the implied author and his narrators in the following passage, which refers to narrators in other works of Beckett's canon:

I am neither, I needn't say, Murphy, nor Watt, nor Mercier, nor - no, I can't even bring myself to name them, nor any of the others whose very names I forget, who told me I was they, who I must have tried to be, under duress, or through fear, or to avoid acknowledging me, not the slightest connexion.

(The Unnamable, p. 326).

Of course, the least reliable authority in this model is by extension the author himself; his comments on the work are permissible because he, like the other critics of his work, is allowed his comments. However, he must be allowed only a limited authority on his own work: he is perhaps a particularly insightful commentator to be considered, but his notions must not be assumed to be consistent with those of the implied author, and certainly not those of the narrator.

And finally, one must consider the degree of perceptibility of the narrator. To use the terms of Seymour Chatman,¹⁰ the narrator may be either covert or overt to varying degrees. His overtness may be perceived through certain indicators, such as the description of setting, the identification and definition of characters, reports of things which characters have not thought or said and authorial commentary. It is quite clear that Beckett employs extremely overt narrators in the trilogy, who are very conscious of their roles and wish to indicate that self-consciousness to the reader. These narrators are aggressive, volatile and intrusive, but above all doubtful as to their own authority. They aspire toward the end of a silence which comes from having said all with the knowledge of never being able to say anything definitively:

¹⁰Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film (London: Cornell University Press, 1978).

...none will ever know what I am, none will ever hear me say it, I won't say it, I can't say it, I have no language but theirs, no, perhaps I'll say it, even with their language, for me alone, so as not to have lived in vain, and so as to go silent, if that is what confers the right to silence, and it's unlikely, it's they who have silence in their gift, they who decide, the same old gang, among themselves, no matter, to hell with silence, I'll say what I am, so as not to have been born for nothing--.

(The Unnamable, pp. 325-6).

Having now established what is impossible for the narrator, it is now appropriate to turn our sights to what is possible, and to do this it is necessary to undertake a detailed examination of the various narrators in the trilogy.

Chapter 2

One of the first things which the critic interested in narrative structure will notice in Beckett's canon is that the first two novels written by the author, Murphy in 1935 and Watt in 1943, are written in the third person. However, by the time Beckett wrote the trilogy (1947-1949) he was writing in the first person. Beckett himself has given a rather dramatic account of how this transition in his writing occurred; during one of the drunken midnight prowls for which he was famous, Beckett had a revelation in which it came to him that "all his writing would henceforth begin from within himself, with his memories and dreams, no matter how ugly or painful; second, that no clearly defined fictional character would be needed to tell these stories, as no distancing is necessary between the teller and the tale."¹¹ Regardless of how the revelation came about, the change engendered in his work by this change in narrative has dramatic ramifications. With regard to the first-person and third-person division, we find an increased dramatic immediacy emerging in the later works, as the narrators express their anguish at their own inarticulacy. In the trilogy, the narrators must see and speak but there is always a sense of frustration at not knowing for certain why or how one sees and speaks.

¹¹ Deirdre Bair, Samuel Beckett: A Biography (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 351.

Yes, in my life, since we must call it so, 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.
(The Unnamable, p. 396).

While in the third-person narrative the narrator may comment on his inability to write well (as Malone does when he tells his stories), he can not convey the urgency of tone that we find in the narrator who speaks of himself. This is not, of course, the only aspect of narrative structure which is worth considering. As I have already indicated with reference to Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, the typology of narrators is contingent upon the degree to which they participate in the story, the degree to which they are perceived within the story, and the degree to which they are reliable (Rimmon-Kenan, Ch. 7). Having established these criteria for dealing with various narrators, it might now be helpful to discuss the discrepancies between the first person narrator and the third person narrator in terms of these criteria.

The degree of participation of the narrator ranges from his being completely involved in the events of the story to his simply reporting the tale from a completely uninvolved standpoint. Clearly, the first person narrator is going to be more involved in the events of the story, he is a character, and whether he simply repeats the

tale or becomes directly involved in the events, he is more deeply imbedded in the fictional world than the narrator who knows all and sees all. This does not necessarily mean that the implied author will be more closely aligned with the third person narrator who hovers on the edge of the fictional world,¹² despite this narrator's lack of identity which makes him appear at times to be simply the voice of the author. The author may create instead a first person narrator who is part of the fictional world and thus immediately removed from the author, but also possessed of characteristics sympathetic to the author, making him distanced but analogous to the author's voice. In Beckett's work it is clear that he feels closer to the text when he uses the first person voice, and I believe that it is from this closeness to the text that much of the peculiarity of the Beckettian style emerges. With the movement from the third person voice to the first person voice there is an implicit loss of narrative power; the narrator no longer sees everything - he limits

¹² Rimmon-Kenan uses Gerard Genette's terms to identify the relationship of the narrator to the story: an 'extradiegetic' narrator is above or beyond the story he narrates while an 'intradiegetic' narrator is one who tells the story in which he has already participated. Similarly, a narrator who participates in the story is termed 'homodiegetic', while one who does not is 'heterodiegetic'. I think, however, that these terms are unnecessarily complicated for my purposes here. (Narrative Fiction, pp. 94-105).

himself largely to what can be seen through his own eyes. In Beckett's work this loss of control and distance over and from the fictional world becomes immensely significant, for he plunges into the work which his narrative stance no longer bars him from and seems to lodge his own voice in the narrator's. For many authors the creation of a first person narrator/character is a means of playing narrative tricks: for example, in James' The Turn of the Screw the story is related through a lengthy letter given to a gentleman who reads it to the narrator. The narrative layering of this tale simultaneously makes its verity dubious but removes it far enough from the cosy parlour of the narrator to make it oddly plausible. On the other hand, an author might create a narrator who is unreliable. A narrator may be made unreliable because he has limited knowledge, is personally involved in the tale or upholds a problematic value scheme (Rimmon-Kenan, pp. 100-103). An example of such a narrator is the narrator of Huckleberry Finn, whose prejudiced views are clearly not shared by the author thus rendering much of Huck's commentary ironic.

In both of the examples cited, the author is employing the first person narrator as a rhetorical tool and does not wish to be directly associated with this voice. However, in Beckett's trilogy the narrators are not simply a part of the author's repertoire of

of rhetorical skills, but rather they are a passageway into the fictional world where he no longer distinguishes between himself in the "real" world and himself in the fictional world. In the biography Bair quotes Beckett as having stated that he "was doomed to spend the rest of my days dragging up the detritus of my life vomiting it out over and over again.. I shall always be depressed, but what comforts me is the realization that I can now accept this dark side as the commanding side of my personality. In accepting it, I will make it work for me" (p. 352). Beckett has recognized the great irony of first person narration: although it allows the greatest degree of participation in the fictional world, it is also the most limited and biased point of view. Thus it is in a sense the view closest to the fictional reality but the view least qualified to deal this reality full justice by perceiving its wholeness. This dilemma extends beyond the world of the novel too: there are countless fields of vision in the world, and yet each individual may know the world only through his own perceptions and even insights into the thoughts and ideals of others must be filtered through this individual consciousness. How then can one ever achieve an authentic view of humanity and and the human condition? To the serious author for whom truth of vision is imperative, this must surely be an insurmountable source of aggravation.

This terrible frustration lies at the core of Beckett's work, and it engenders the strange and awful tone of his voice, for he is certain only that one can never be absolutely certain of anything. Thus, one needs no "clearly defined fictional character" (Bair, p. 351) for no voice is clearly defined - they all exist in a twilight of innumerable unexpressed voices. And so Beckett says of his narrators in The Unnamable:

All these Murphys, Molloy's 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 of me alone. But I just said I have spoken of me, am speaking of me. I don't care a curse what I just said. It is now I shall speak of me, for the first time. I thought I was right in enlisting these sufferers of my pains. I was wrong. They never suffered my pains, their pains are nothing compared to mine, a mere tittle of mine, the tittle I thought I could put from me, in order to witness it. Let them be gone now, them and all the others, those I have used and those I have not used, give me back the pain I lent them and vanish, from my life, my memory, my terrors and shames. There, now there is no one here but me, no one wheels about me, no one comes towards me, no one has ever met anyone before my eyes, these creatures have never been, only I and this black void have ever been.

(pp. 303-4).

There are several important aspects to this passage. Firstly, it is essential to remember that despite the frustration expressed with regard to these Beckettian narrators, the voice which speaks is still that of another narrator, the unnamable. In the first two lines of the passage we are given an insight into why this narrator is not named: in naming the others, the implied author became separated from them to a certain degree. Before they are named they remain elusive, but once named they are explicitly individual and explicitly agents which function within the fictional arena. Thus they become somehow false and irrelevant to the 'real' world, only relatively significant by analogy. But, the unnamed narrator, who wishes to speak "of me and me alone" is not so clearly in either world. There is no doubt that he is expressed through the medium of text and thus is a fiction; yet, he also speaks of other fiction, even that which is part of the same trilogy¹³, making it clear that he is conscious of the fictional quality of his own existence. This narrator then becomes more germanely analogous to the 'real' world Beckett saw. For, to paraphrase one aspect of Schopenhauer's

¹³ Beckett insisted that all three of the novels be published together as a volume. Although this was initially prevented by publishing difficulties he was adamant, and this format was eventually achieved (Bair, pp. 408-9).

notions of the process of perception,¹⁴ man may study anything outside himself as object while he is subject. When man studies himself though, he becomes both subject and object, and it is this double-edged existence which makes the individual. Just as one views the rest of the world through a scope of limited, individual focus, so too must one regard oneself through this same scope. It is only in the act of regarding, the act of perceiving, that a person might truly know himself, and yet we can not become conscious of our consciousness. It is the act of perceiving which defines man and yet he can never fully comprehend this act, the parallel conundrum for the author is that if he wishes to create a work of universal verity, the very creation of narrator/characters forces a chasm between himself and the fiction - they are objects and he is subject. However, when he removes the subject/object barrier, refusing to name and separate his narrator from himself, he finds that his narrator, like himself, is caught in this trap of wanting to express and thus know himself but never quite comprehending the process of expression. Thus, characters once named are never quite real but characters unnamed are ultimately rendered unintelligible and impotent. Beckett creates what appears to be a brief dialogue between himself and his narrator near the end of The Unnamable:

¹⁴ Beckett read Schopenhauer at several points in his life, and considered him to be one of the most important philosophers he had studied (Bair, pp. 79, 193, 260).

...you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said one already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.

(p. 414).

The narrator we find in this passage does not fall neatly into either the third person or first person categories; he is not speaking in the third person voice because he uses the pronoun "I", and yet he is not speaking in the first person voice because he sees into the minds of all the characters and admits to having created them. In a sense, he is the antithesis of the third person, for he claims to know nothing and questions everything that he sees. Despite this pervasive uncertainty, he can not stop his voice for he can not stop his need to know himself, to be "carried to the threshold of my story." This "threshold" is "the silence, where I am," and this "silence" is the point at which the voice originates, the point at which the innate but inviolate knowledge of the process of self-perception begins. This narrator, who longs for a profound silence, comes the closest of the narrators in the trilogy to reaching this state; there is a progression in the typology of the narrators which can be mapped in transition from Molloy to The Unnamable.

1. Molloy: Confusion of Identity

As I have already suggested, a theme which recurs throughout the trilogy is the problem of identity; the question is not simply "Who am I"; but rather "How do I know who I am?" For Beckett, the question also seems to extend to a consideration of who the author is relative to in his work. This theme can be found in each novel of the trilogy, but it emerges most persistently and completely in Molloy. In this novel there is frequent and intentional confusion of characters and even of narrators, the point being that one can not regard the world and its population with any more certainty of vision than one can watch a play where all the characters are played by actors, or better still, a film where the characters are played by actors who are suspended in the illusion of life night after night in the movie theatre. Beckett's characters and narrators are likewise suspended in text, and he makes no attempt to create a world in his text which is easily recognized as reality. And yet, I think he achieves something authentically mimetic in his work, for reality itself is always elusive in both its temporal and physical aspects. For creatures who exist physically only in the present moment, it is a perennial source of frustration that the present is fleeting and can not be grasped; our greatest part of experience is the past,

which remains physically intangible. Our greatest source of knowledge is reflection on the past, and yet it can be grasped only as a shadow of what has been. What is particularly interesting about time in terms of fiction is that it is "not only a current theme in a great deal of narrative fiction, it is also a constituent factor of both story and text" (Rimmon-Kenan, p. 44). That is, the text can only be encountered in a time-space but is also a form in which time is manipulated, ideally, the realistic novel would require precisely the same amount of time to depict an event as the event required to transpire. However, as happens in all modes of perception, events in fiction are portrayed in a temporal context which is distorted - many tedious details are deleted, while significant events (such as a description of an important character's initial entrance on the scene) may be expanded beyond a brief glimpse. In reality, time is similarly distorted. When we recapitulate experiences, we generally dwell on what has been most interesting to us, while ignoring or often forgetting the greater part of experience, the mundane countenance of daily existence. In Beckett's work there is a continuing emphasis on banality which is directly related to his obsession with the relationship between object (or experience) and

subject (or the medium of perception). That is, his narrators do not delete the ordinary and even boring events of story from their narrative, and thus they become somewhat removed from the completely fictionally oriented narrator. The scenes they portray are not created simply to entertain the reader but rather to render text in a more authentic manner.

In the novel Molloy, very little actually happens - and yet, it is not a particularly short work. The narrator and protagonist appears initially in a room. He does not know how he has arrived there, nor why he is there, he is there and he writes for "this man who comes every week" who "gives me money and takes away the pages" (p.7). There is no sense of duration here, only of endless repetition. Indeed, there is no sense in any point of the novel of how long any of the events require. Molloy decides to visit his mother (whose room he may already be in, and who may already be dead) and on the road to this visit he encounters a policeman, a dog (which he runs over), a woman named Lousse (who becomes his keeper), and, finally, he finds himself face down in a ditch having apparently achieved nothing. His journey is timeless, with certain events highlighted and others overlooked in a seemingly arbitrary fashion. The temporal confusion does not end here. In the section of the novel narrated by Moran there is a narrative circularity which

achieves the same end as the narration of events without reference to duration in the first section. The latter part of the work, narrated by Moran, begins with the lines "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows" (p. 92), after which Moran embarks on his own journey. He is in search of a man, Molloy, and he travels with his son through an endless pasture - although we are not certain that he is not merely travelling in circles. At the end of his journey he has killed a man (is it Molloy?) and then returned to his home, where he sits to write his report; it begins (and the novel ends) with these words: "Then I went back to the house and wrote, it is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (p. 176). Thus, he not only makes it clear that all we have read is a fiction, but also that it is suspended from time and held in text. The rain has stopped, but it still rains in the text - in fact, it will always be raining in the first lines of the text. So, fiction is timeless, as it preserves events; and yet, the events will never achieve the physical reality of the present moment in experience.

At this point one may well wonder what the connection is between the difficulty of rendering temporal existence with a literary realism and creating a narrator with a consistent identity. The problem in both cases is the same; while both being and time are constituents of human reality, both are in an endless process of change and thus even in the present - the one point at which being and

time are realized in the most tangible sense - any meaning which is realized through them is incomplete. Thus, there are no absolutes in the physical world. In response to this knowledge, Beckett creates a physical world in which both being and time are made transient (and thus the confusion about the identity of the narrator and the length of time spanned by the work) and so more truly mimetic of existence. This truthful portrayal only seems "unreal" because in order to function successfully on a practical level, one can not wander around in a state of confusion and distrust of one's existence. Interestingly, Beckett spent much of his own life terribly impoverished and unable to work, and while to his mother it seemed that he was simply lazy (and this was not an unreasonable conclusion) I suspect that his problem was this distrust of an existence which was incomplete and not absolute in any way, and thus not worth spending a great deal of energy on. Intriguing speculations aside, Beckett clearly wanted to create a world in Molloy which did not inspire any certainty or faith in probability in his readers, and he clearly succeeded. However, it is inadequate merely to point out that the world represents only an image of solidity, and thus the author made the logical movement toward what is created in the second novel, Malone Dies.

II. Malone Dies

If one assumes that the physical world can not finally be a means of discovering any certain truths about existence, then it would seem that the next place to search for such truths would be the mental world or spiritual world, depending upon how one approaches it. Indeed, interest in the dichotomy between the world of the body and the world of the mind has existed since philosophy began, and Beckett did not except himself from considering this issue. Before he directs his attention to the problem, however, he makes it clear that he will not be employing any traditional form of logic to arrive at an answer. In what is perhaps the most hilarious dismissal of empirical logic as a means of considering human problems, Molloy leads the reader through a six-page discussion of the difficulty of having sixteen sucking stones and only four pockets, when it is important to give each stone equal sucking time. The absurdity of even considering the unappealing and unrewarding pastime of sucking on stones at such lengths, and the arrival at a complex system of stone rotation which is practically impossible to understand, is finally made fully ridiculous when the narrator confesses at the end of this tedious mental exercise that:

...deep down it was all the same to me whether I sucked a different stone each time or always the same stone, until the end of time. For they all tasted exactly the same. And if I had collected sixteen, it was not in order to ballast myself in such and such a way, or to suck them turn about, but simply to have a little store, so as to never be without. But deep down I didn't give a fiddler's curse about being without, when they were all gone they would be all gone, I wouldn't be any the worse off, or hardly any. And the solution to which I rallied in the end was to throw away all the stones but one, which I kept now in one pocket, now in another, and which of course I soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed.

(Molloy, p. 74).

There are several points to be made about this passage: first, mathematical logic can not be applied with success to problems which are essentially human, second, once answered, philosophical questions may be revealed as irrelevant to human satisfaction and tend to obscure more pertinent questions - for Molloy was more interested in the mental gymnastics of the question of rotation than the actual sucking of the stones. Indeed, I think that it is largely in keeping with these two ideas that the dual narrators Molloy and Moran are created, the latter is concise and logical but really is no more able to deal with life than Molloy, who "deep down" doesn't "give a fiddler's curse" (p. 74); in fact, one twist which Beckett works into Molloy is the possibility that Moran's search for Molloy is allegorical on one level, being the search of reason for practical, human understanding, and that within the circular

structure of the work Molloy actually is writing the story of himself and Moran (his past self) in his room.¹⁵ However, the most interesting aspect of this passage is that despite the apparent madness of Molloy throughout the novel, a madness which seems evident in this rambling argument about the stones, Molloy does seem capable of weird insights into existence. This is because while the recognition of the dichotomy between an inescapably false outer world and a potentially more real inner world leads to an elevated understanding of human existence, it also leads to an inevitably schizophrenic existence, where the worlds of the body and the mind are irreconcilable. This is the entry-point into the world of Malone Dies.

Beckett was very interested in madness, and it is the subject of much of his work. Indeed, when writing Watt, in which the protagonist ends up in an asylum, "Beckett suffered a very real breakdown ... probably his most serious - one directly related to the schizophrenic form and content of much of Watt" (Bair, p. 327). Beckett's own breakdown seems to be a case in point: when made too much aware of the inherent falsity of the outer world, one's vision must surely become distrustful, even paranoid, and the world of the

¹⁵ There is support for this reading: Moran begins to suffer the physical ailments which cripple Molloy; Moran buys a bicycle which may be the one Molloy already owns; Molloy alludes to a previous life as a scholar. However, in order not to render this work a puzzle with a pat solution, Beckett makes this only one possibility of several: for example Molloy may be a separate character, the man who Moran kills.

mind must gain equal or even greater significance than that of the outer world. This is what madness is - a suspension of belief in reality. In Malone Dies, the narrator is again in a room alone, yet unlike Molloy he does not venture beyond its walls. His only contact with the outside world is "the peaceful sounds of men at large, getting up, lying down, preparing food, coming and going, weeping and laughing, or nothing at all, no sounds at all" (Malone, p. 183). While Malone sits in his room, he determines that he will write "three stories" (Malone, p. 182), for he is dying and these are the number for which there is adequate time. It is as though this narrator has been removed from contact with the world, and thus creates his own world of fiction. This movement away from the outer world is not so much physical as it is philosophical, the sounds he hears place him in the world, and yet his madness (by which term I mean his orientation of self being chiefly in his mind or inner world) removes him some distance from this world. For this narrator certainly is mad, the evidence of this being not only the tone of the prose but certain structural clues as well. Malone tells us there will be three stories, and he tells first the story of Sapo and then the story of the Lambert family. In these two tales the separation between the narrator, Malone, and the stories is definite. The author comments frequently on his stories, often on how tedious they are becoming, and never allows them to continue for a significant length of time for the reader or the narrator to become lost in the tale.

Already it begins to be clear that even an attempted capitulation to the inner world is a vain effort, for a person can never completely lose a sense of himself as defined by the outer world, relative to objects. Thus Malone can not finally give himself up to the world he creates in his mind, the world of his fictions, for once written even these fictions become text and thus objects, distant from himself, the subject. And once they become objects in the physical world, they are lost in the transience of space and time and are as untrue as all physical entities. Even in the third and final tale, that of MacMann, there is a sense of failure. In this story there is a much more ambiguous relationship between the narrator, Malone, and the protagonist, MacMann. It seems possible, even likely, that the story of MacMann is really that of Malone. This is the only story which is not clearly introduced as one of the stories to be told, and the asylum in which MacMann finds himself seems much like the place in which Malone lives. Malone becomes closely involved in this story, losing himself to the point that he says, "Moll. I'm going to kill her" (Malone, p. 264), sounding as much like an explosion of anger as the comment of the author stating his plot intentions. He even begins to refer to himself in the third person when he envisions his death and imagines the words "Here lies Malone at last, with the dates to give a faint idea of the time he

took to be excused ..." (Malone, p. 271). And then further on he confuses MacMann with himself during what seem to be hallucinations before death, saying:

Yes, my last gasps are not what they might be, the bellows won't go down, the air is choking me, perhaps it is a little lacking in oxygen. Macmann pygmy beneath the great black gesticulating pines gazes at the distant raging sea.

(Malone, p. 274).

But even this, which seems like the sought-after loss of the incomplete, individual self in a mad union with the protagonist, or the merging of text and narrator, is doomed to failure. In an unpublished essay written around 1938-9, called "Les Deux Besions," Beckett wrote that "art results from the artist's quest to rid himself of extraneous knowledge in order to refine his perceptions into a clear, distilled vision of the fundamental inner being" but that finally "man is doomed to failure, for he can never commit or abandon himself completely to his inner voice" (Bair, p.p. 294-5). This is ultimately the dilemma of the narrator Malone, and by extension the author: in Molloy it becomes evident that mere recognition of the split between the inner world and the outer world is unsatisfactory. In Malone Dies, we are shown that even an attempt to abandon oneself to the inner being (the creation of a fictional world in which one becomes absorbed being only one

mode of this) will fail, for the outer world can not be escaped completely - not even in madness. And thus Malone tells us early on that he will "tell three stories... Then I shall deal with my possessions" (Malone, p. 182). Near the end of this novel, the narrator is forced finally to admit that the inner world is inherently more real than the outer:

All is pretext, Sapo and the birds, Moll, the peasants, those who in the towns seek one another out and fly from one another, my doubts which do not interest me, my situation, my possessions, pretext for not coming to the point, the abandoning, the raising of the arms and going down, without further splash, even though it may annoy the bathers. Yes, there is no good pretending, it is hard to leave everything.

(Malone, pp. 276-7).

"The point" referred to here is that Malone is about to die, and he finds that "it is hard to leave everything." This is not because "everything" is luxurious and wonderful in his life - Beckett has made sure that we do not make this error - but because he has not yet found some way of coming closer to the reasons for living. Thus Malone dies a failure in a sense, his final words tapering off into a cry of futility, of concluding nothing important through all his words.

...i mean never he will never
or with his pencil or with his stick or
or light light i mean
never there he will never
never anything
there
any more

(Malone, p. 288).

However, the achievement of this narrator (or of the author through the narrator) is not so inadequate as it first appears, for it opens the way for the narrator of The Unnamable. This final narrator of the trilogy does not arrive at a solution to the question of the meaning of life, but he does come to an understanding of his relationship to the text as an object in the world, one which allows him to utter most fully a fictional world, and thus he constructs a vision of how the narrator (or reader) may come closer to an understanding of human existence.

III. The Unnamable

In order to begin a discussion of this work, it is necessary to restate points made earlier in the paper. First, it is important to remember here that the situation of the narrator in the fiction is analogous to that of a person in the world, as both are defined relative to the structure surrounding them (the novel or the world), and both are responsible to some degree for shaping that structure which in turn shapes them as a context for being: for as the narrator creates the story guided by the author, we create our lives and worlds through private biases and discrimination, and thus individual perception. The difference seems to be, of course, that we do not know what guides us, but in the fictional realm, the narrator does not know what guides him. Fiction could not exist without this assumed ignorance. So, fiction is the perfect paradigm to express the problems of man's being in the world. While many authors employ narrators as a means of simply telling stories, rather like a mother giving advice to her child, Beckett employs his narrators to the much more complicated end of fabricating a world parallel to the "real" world, and considering the question of human existence in this controlled environment.

The second point I wish to repeat is that there is one thing which Beckett seems to be quite certain of, and that is that words are somehow linked to the deciphering of human existence, and thus he is compelled to write in order to exorcise the demon this obsessive quest has become for him. As structuralist critics have quite rightly pointed out, language does structure reality,¹⁶ and in this way the fictional worlds of text are as relevant as the physical world, for they exist in relationship to each other, and structure each other. This brings us back to the quotation with which this paper began: "Esse est percipi." Not only do subject and object exist in relation to one another, creating each other on a mutual reciprocal relationship of perception, so too do words and reality create and define each other. As we have already seen, choosing between subject and object, or inner world and outer world, simply reasserts the relative aspect of these parts of existence, rather than determining quite what existence means. And, choosing between self and language, or narrator and his story/author and his canon, is

¹⁶ Perhaps the most succinct (and lively) critic to address this notion is Roland Barthes, the interested reader might enjoy his book of essays in English translation, Mythologies (St. Albans: Granada Publishing Ltd., 1973). Or, for a very helpful commentary on Barthes' work, one could turn to Terry Eagleton's Literary Theory: An Introduction (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Publisher Ltd., 1983).

no more rewarding, finally. Beckett does suggest a way of gaining insight into existence which is not so much a choice as an inversion of entire structures - but to show how he does this I must first return to Schopenhauer.

While Schopenhauer generally asserts that the only way in which we can possibly understand the world is through the recognition that objects (phenomena) which are presented to our perceiving consciousness are motivated by the noumena, or the innermost force of existence, simply put, this force is the life-force, the inexplicable will to live against all odds. The philosopher is content to rest his case here, recognizing but not defining this force, only suggesting that it is present in all things, animal and mineral. Beckett wants to define that force or will, and although Schopenhauer eludes definition by saying we can not know what makes us because it is always making how we know simultaneously, he does give a hint as to how to carry the case further, a hint which Beckett clearly picked up:

What is universally assumed as positive, what we call being, the negation of which is expressed by the concept nothing in its most general significance, is exactly the world as representation, which I have shown to be objectivity, the mirror of the will. We ourselves are also this will and this world...The form of this representation is space and time, and so...everything that exists must be

in some place at some time. Then the concept, the material of philosophy, and finally the word, the sign of the concept, also belong to the representation. Denial, abolition, turning of the will are also abolition and disappearance of the world, of its mirror. If we no longer perceive the will in this mirror, we ask in vain what direction it has turned, and then, because it no longer has any where and any when, we complain that it is lost in nothingness...

...the nothing as that which exists, can be known and expressed by us only negatively...¹⁷

And thus we find the key to Beckett's obsession with silence and nothingness. Having concluded that neither the study of subject and object or fiction and narrator themselves will help him to understand the will, or the unshakable need to continue to be, he turned to that darker side of existence which Schopenhauer saw but recoiled against, for the dichotomy between being and nothingness is the suprastructure under which all other dichotomies exist. And it seems that the only way to access this nether world of existence is logically the complete inversion of being. Thus this novel creates a fictional world where the narrator is not alive but dead, not linguistically defined but unnamable, not striving for expression but for silence.

¹⁷ 19th Century Philosophy, ed. Patrick L. Gardiner (New York: The Free Press, 1969), pp. 123-4.

This narrator continually negates himself: "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me" (The Unnamable, p. 291). He tells us that he is not in the real, physical world but in one which is radically different: "And things, what is the correct attitude to adopt towards things?" (p. 292). He seems to assume responsibility for all the narrators and characters of Beckett's canon, and then dismisses the lot: "Why did I have myself represented in the midst of men, the light of day? It seems to me it was none of my doing...I can see them still, my delegates. The things they have told me! About men, the light of day. I refused to believe them" (p. 297). And finally, he denies language repeating over and over again his dream of silence, final and absolute, representing his final step toward nothingness. And once there, once done with being, perhaps he will discover why there is being.

This motion toward nothingness is not the equivalent of nihilism, it is simply assumed to be a plane of greater truth, for there is no space or time, as these are aspects of being. Thus, the two chief causes of falsity in the outer world are removed:

For I am incapable of measuring time, which in itself is sufficient to vitiate all calculation in this connexion, but also of comparing their respective velocities.

(The Unnamable, p. 299).

Method or no method I shall have to banish them in the end, the beings, things, shapes, sounds and lights with which my haste to speak has encumbered this place.

(*ibid.*, pp. 299-300).

...these creatures have never been, only I and this black void have ever been.

(*ibid.*, p. 304).

There is no time, no space, no others - no objects in any form - to be found in the void of nothingness. And this is the ultimate form of contentment, to exist without being, for all of the diversions of being (talk, love, food), offer no clues to existence but only avert our eyes from the terrifying prospect of abandoning ourselves to nothingness. And yet Beckett seems eager to assure us that this is a positive release from the false security of assuming the outer world - or even the inner world - to be the only reality. Finally, in this novel the distance between the unnamed narrator and the author becomes indistinguishable, because the relationships themselves which have been discussed have finally been abandoned, and so the paradigm must be altered so that narrator and author are no longer separate, when time and space are dissolved into nothingness, all of the relationships they engender are dissolved, including the relationship between author and narrator.

Only one obstacle remains between the author and nothingness and that is the object of the text itself: Beckett can not finally remove this obstacle, for it is already here in our hands, but he can suggest an escape too from the text:

You must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps its done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.

(The Unnamable, p. 414).

But ultimately, while there is life there is no absolute silence, and men must rely on language to know themselves.

Chapter 3

The Narrator as a Comic

Having thus far considered with great seriousness the terrible position of the narrator who is obsessed with the need to express and define himself, but who is also fraught with doubts of his ability to do so, the reader of the trilogy might also begin to feel some frustration. If one agrees that the ability of expression makes men unique but can never itself be grasped because it can not know itself, then one might be inclined to ask, why bother? It seems quite logical that if we agree that the literary process is ultimately futile, then it must be a vain endeavour to write at all. This accusation is most telling when applied to someone like Beckett, who is so obviously aware of the conundrum with which literature is confronted. It seems at times that all that is expressed in the trilogy is the terrible failure of the act of expression to achieve authenticity. I think that it is perfectly legitimate to suggest that if a piece of literature attempts nothing more than self-condemnation, then it is indeed a work of hypocrisy, almost insultingly self-conscious. However, as might be suspected, I think that Beckett attempts something more than this.

Briefly put, the question we must obviously ask at this point is, why write? While with many works this question is asked merely from curiosity about the author (we all know that Dickens wrote for money)

or about the artistic process (we all like to believe that Coleridge wrote in a state of hallucinatory ecstasy), in Beckett's case the question seems fundamental to an understanding of his work. Most authors and critics defend literature, whether suggesting that it is therapeutic, inspired or didactic they generally regard it positively. Beckett seems to want to annihilate it.

Perhaps a good place to begin to consider this question is with the author himself. Although we must not assume that the author is an infallible commentator on his own work, and is actually of less significance than the implied author or narrator in terms of studying the structure of the text, I think it is well worth considering him in terms of this question which falls outside of the text. There are some obvious answers to the question of why someone writes: most obvious is that he does it for the money. While this may be true in some cases, it does not appear to be in Beckett's. He lived in poverty for many years, until his late forties, and when he did achieve a comfortable income he continued to live in a simple way, investing his money and then apparently ignoring it. While his wife filled her space in their home with various luxuries, his own space remained like a cell, stark and austere. Another possibility might be that he wrote for fame, but again, in Beckett's case this seems unlikely. He was a notoriously unenthusiastic guest at society soirees, preferring good whiskey among close friends to champagne

with society's elite. And of course, he did live in obscurity for twenty-five years before he received any recognition at all. If he did not write for either fortune or fame, then perhaps he wrote from the simple pleasure of the act of writing. Well, although this is a rather agreeable conclusion, it too seems unlikely. Beckett seems to have suffered terribly when he wrote. He suffered from writer's block, self-doubt and even physical ailments such as terrible boils which seemed linked to the stress he felt. He did not approach anything like nirvana through his work; indeed, he often seemed to loathe it. One must assume, then, that he was somehow compelled to write, but, as is no doubt becoming clear, it is nearly impossible to locate what in his life compelled him. Again, I think that we must return to the text to attempt to answer the question of why he writes.

Firstly, I think that to a large degree the trilogy can be viewed as an elaborate game on several levels, and like most people, Beckett was extremely fond of games. He was a great player of chess, and in fact named one of his plays, Endgame, after a term from chess literature:

...a chess game has three parts: first is the opening, in which pieces are brought out and strategies instigated. In the next section, or middle game, the two opponents organize their moves. In the last part, the

endgame, there is either a conversion of the advantage into a win, or else an attempt to nullify the disadvantage incurred in the middle game - also in search of the win.

(Bair, pp. 465-6)

Endgame was written between 1956 and 1957; although the trilogy emerged between 1955 and 1958, it does not seem unreasonable to conclude that the notion of game playing might be found in part in the trilogy. In the game of chess, at the point of endgame there are not enough men left on the board to defend the kings, so they are left to confront one another with the limited moves left to them; the pleasure in the game (as in any game) is not in winning, but in the extension and ingenuity of these final moves. In the play Endgame, the two kings are quite obviously represented by Hamm and Clov; in the trilogy the players are not nearly so obvious, nor is the game so clearly like chess. Let us return our attention to the novels to pursue this notion further.

Again, I will begin with the first of the three novels, Molloy, because I think that a parallel can be drawn between the transitional movement of the narrator from the relatively distanced focus we find in Molloy to the dramatically immediate focus of The Unnamable, and the transition in the meaning of game-playing in the trilogy. In Molloy games appear at many levels; most obvious and

dramatic is the game wherein Moran searches for Molloy. Despite the fact that these two may be viewed in a sense as the same character, as long as Moran believes that he searches for Molloy, the game is being played. At this level, the game-playing most clearly resembles chess. The next level at which the game is played is on the rhetorical level: that is, much fun is had with the manipulation of literary clichés. For example, the Oedipal complex, a serious literary theme employed from Oedipus Rex to Sons and Lovers, is quite hilariously parodied in Molloy when the narrator reminisces on his various grotesque lovers, and then comments:

And God forgive me, to tell you the horrible truth, my mother's image sometimes mingles with theirs, which is literally unendurable, like being crucified, I don't know why and I don't want to.

(Molloy, p. 59).

This passage is clearly intended to be a parody of a familiar theme, as indicated by the double entendre of the word "literally."

We encounter a similarly parodic scene in the second part of the novel when we witness the bizarre relationship between Moran and his son. Moran's son accompanies him on the search for Molloy, and in preparation for the trip, Moran forces an enema on him, they argue about his son's lunch: "He protested he had had his lunch. You ate nothing I said. He said nothing more. I had scored a hit" (p. 119).

A little further on a pain shoots through Moran's leg, and this exchange follows: What's the matter, papa? he said. I let myself fall on the stool, pulled up the leg of my trousers and examined my knee, flexing and unflexing it. Quick the index, I said. You're sitting on it, he said. I stood up and the leg of my trousers fell down over my ankle. The inertia of things is enough to drive one literally insane" (p. 119). After further bickering, Moran feels a fatherly remorse and affection: "I drew him to me. What do you say to that? I said. He said to it, Yes papa. Did he love me then as much as I loved him? You could never be sure with that little hypocrite" (pp. 119-20).

There are two points that I wish to make about the narrator of this passage: firstly, he is participating in a parody of the filial relationship and secondly, he is extremely funny. For many readers, Beckett seems simply bleak and depressing and thus too hard on his readers, I think that it must be apparent by now that there is a great deal of humour in his work. This comic aspect of the work suggests that on some level Beckett enjoys writing in fact, and that is one reason that he writes. But the parodic element of the work suggests another reason why he writes which seems more significant; he wants to share the joke. To return to the analogy of game-playing, much of the pleasure of the game comes from the fact that it is shared with others, be they players

or fans. The structure of parody requires that it is shared: otherwise, it can not exist. In order for parody to work, there must be a model which includes the implied author, the narrator or other characters and the implied reader.¹⁸ There must be an assumed complicity between the implied author and the implied reader which excludes either a character or characters, or as in this case, the narrator. In other words, the implied reader and implied author are intended to be sharing a laugh over the idiocy of Moran.

The point that I am making is that while the narrators of this trilogy are able to contemplate the futility of their own existence and their inability to bear out their metier with any degree of success, they are not simply destructive and self-absorbed, for these narrators, whether intentionally or not, share the irony of their existence with their audience. As I have stated, I think that a transition occurs in the humour throughout the trilogy. Initially, in Molloy, we find humour in which the narrator is excluded from the joke shared by the implied author and the implied reader. In Malone Dies we see a transition from this. In this novel we gain a double-edged humour with the appearance of the narrator who stands more noticeably between the influence of the implied author and his existence in the fictional realm.

¹⁸ This model is delineated in "Impersonal Narration" in The Rhetoric of Fiction by Wayne Booth, a work already cited.

Malone is both creator and creation of fiction. Thus, he (as narrator of a fiction he does not participate in) makes ironic statements about the characters he creates. Of Sapo he says:

At the age of fourteen he was a plump rosy boy. His wrist and ankles were thick, which made his mother say that one day he would be even bigger than his father. Curious deduction. But the most striking thing about him was his big round head horrid with flaxen hair as stiff and straight as the bristles of a brush.

(Malone Dies, p. 190).

The requisite description is thus drawn, replete with clichés which become ironic because they are not at all flattering. Malone becomes, in a sense, the implied author here, sharing a joke on his character Sapo with the implied reader. This is much like the ironic humour we find in Molloy, however there is a difference to be noted in Malone Dies. The narrator, Malone, does employ the sort of irony which makes him superior to the joke, however, when he makes the transition from implied author of a third-person narrative to first-person narrator, he is no longer able to exclude himself from the joke.

I feel it coming. How goes it, thanks, it's coming. I wanted to be quite sure before I noted it. Scrupulous to the last, finical to a fault, that's Malone, all over. I mean sure of the feeling that my hour is at hand. For I never doubted it would come, sooner or later, except the days I felt it was past.

(Malone Dies, p. 233).

The butt of the joke is now himself; the irony remains, the double entendre of "to the last" and "all over" do not go unnoticed, but the tone has changed. It seems that while the humour does not lessen when it is directed toward oneself, the laughter becomes more bitter. And yet, this humour seems more profound and significant than the humour directed outside: it is fun to laugh at Moran and his son or Sapo, but the much more self-aware humour of Malone brings both pleasure and pain. And so we turn to The Unnamable, the most absurd and most serious work of the trilogy.

Here we have the story of a man in an urn, perhaps a metaphor for the human condition of being born into a graceless, cramped motion toward death. But the urn is funny. The unnamable speaks of his "master," for whom he speaks, and says:

There he is, ever since I came into the world, possibly at his instigation, I wouldn't put it past him, commanding me to be well, you know, in every way, no complaints at all, with as much success as if he were shouting at a lump of inanimate matter. If he is not pleased with this panegyric I hope I may be -- I nearly said hanged, but that I hope in any case, without restriction, I nearly said con, that would cut my cackle. Ah for a neck!

(The Unnamable, pp. 312-3).

The tragedy of The Unnamable is that the narrator can never exclude himself from the joke, for he is alone and there is no-one to laugh at or with but himself. But still he has not "cut [his] cackle." Perhaps the implication is simply that as long as one refuses to take oneself too seriously, dignity can never be entirely lost in a frequently demeaning existence. The "master" of the unnamable may be God or may be an imagined deity: it doesn't matter. And ultimately the question, why write? becomes almost irrelevant, or at least the answer becomes cyclical. Although the unnamable yearns for silence, he can not have it, as the final lines of the book reveal: "I can't go on, I'll go on." So the reason for writing is that one can not cease to express, and the only way to express human questions properly is with humour and thus dignity - for humour suspends us above the despair. The unnamable laughs at no one else, but when he laughs at himself, his laughter is aimed at his folly, or his despair; thus he is rescued from it and suspended above it. Even when he speaks of his final desire for silence, the unnamable laughs, enjoying the game:

I may go, make my escape, give myself up, come to the place where the ax falls, without further ceremony, on all who come from here, I'm not the first, I won't be the first, it will best me in the end, it has bested better than me, it will tell me what to do, in order to rise, move, act like a body endowed with despair...

(The Unnamable, p. 411).

In this passage there is fear of nothingness, of meaningless ceremony and of being bested. At the same time, death is made less threatening by the irreverence of "where the ax falls," empty ceremony is parodical with the reference to the ability to "act like a body endowed with despair," and the concern with losing the "game" is reduced by the alliteration of others who "it has bested better."

This trilogy is not an opus of despair, it is a work which recognizes fear and what generates fear, but finally asserts, through the medium of its intriguing narrators, the pleasure of living life (and writing literature) purely for the pleasure of the game. Beyond this, it is difficult to define in a coherent thesis what Beckett's work amounts to. In this paper I have tried to create a model by which the reader may find his bearings in a world of fiction which constantly asserts that it is illusory. As a philosopher Schopenhauer saw

the same thing, and felt the terror of his uncertainty of existence; Beckett, however, takes the game one step further. He perceives the parts of the illusion - the frailty of language, the frailty of society, the frailty of our bodies - and creates a gestalt of an indeterminate but wonderfully changeable human existence. The beauty of the game lies in the movement between potential configurations in relationships and by extension, in language. And yet, his attitude is not the somewhat frivolous one of Barthes, who seems to feel that the lack of determinate meaning in existence creates an arena for games of mocking absurdity or mere parody. Beckett, like any good chess player, respects the game as an exercise which does not yield reward through ridicule, but win or lose, through the ability to play it well.

It is because of the sense of humour which Beckett persistently displays in his work that I think he makes a significant and positive departure from the vision of Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer saw man as a being suspended in the void between the noumena which comprise the outer world and the phenomena which we create in our inner worlds of perception to render the outer world coherent. He regarded time, space and causality merely as human notions created to allow us to understand noumena; thus, he felt, existence was an exercise in futility, for men can never actually conceive of anything beyond their self-created phenomenological worlds:

The vanity of existence is revealed in the form existence assumes: in the infiniteness of time and space contrasted with the finiteness of the individual in both; in the fleeting present as the sole form in which actuality exists; in the contingency and relativity of all things, in continual becoming without being, in continual desire without satisfaction, in the continual frustration of striving of which life consists. Time and that perishability of all things existing in time that time itself brings about is simply the form under which the will to live, which as thing in itself is imperishable, reveals to itself the vanity of its striving. Time is that by virtue of which everything becomes nothingness in our hands and loses all real value.¹⁹

It is an easy matter to find many occasions throughout the trilogy where Beckett makes similar statements about the humbling effect of time, and the inability of men to be certain of any phenomenon as existing in a recognizable form outside of one's inner world. This question extends, of course, to the self: because of the transient nature of time, does one's perception of self become phenomenological as soon as it is recognized, for at the moment of recognition immediate perception has passed:

¹⁹ Schopenhauer, Arthur. Essays and Aphorisms. (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970), p. 51

I who am here, who cannot speak, cannot think, and who must speak, and therefore perhaps think a little, cannot in relation only to me who am here, to here where I am, but can a little, sufficiently, I don't know how, unimportant, in relation to me who was elsewhere, who shall be elsewhere, and to those places where I was, where I shall be.

(The Unnamable, p- 301).

Unmistakably, Beckett shares Schopenhauer's sense of frustrating uncertainty and inability to know anything authentically. And while the question which arises relative to the author at this point is "why write?", the question which arises relative to the philosopher is "why live?" The two questions, in the cases of Beckett and Schopenhauer, are closely related; both men considered both questions. I will deal first with the latter query.

Schopenhauer determined that men lived, despite the terrible insignificance of their existence, because they were driven to life by an inescapable will - the same will that causes trees to grow and rocks to roll downhill. This "will" was demeaning because it was senseless and overwhelming. The only possible route to dignity was the attempt to resist or annul this will, although ultimately only death is a true escape:

World Spirit This then is the task of all your labour and all your suffering: it is for this that you exist, as all other things exist.

Man But what do I get from existence? If it is full I have only distress, if empty only boredom. How can you offer me so poor a reward for so much labour and so much suffering?

World Spirit And yet it is proportionate to all your toil and all your suffering, and is so precisely on account of its meagreness.

Man Indeed! That passes my comprehension.

World Spirit I know it does. - (Aside) Should I tell him that the value of life lies precisely in this, that it teaches him not to want it? For this supreme initiation life itself must prepare him.

(Essays., p. 65).

In an essay on writing the philosopher states that while some books do have more significance for mankind than others, because of their more profound content, he generally does not seem to regard literature as a very valuable pursuit, for "a book can never be more than a reproduction of the thoughts of its author" (Essays., p. 200). Schopenhauer further states that:

The actual life of a thought lasts only until it reaches the point of speech: there it petrifies and is henceforth dead but indestructible, like the petrified plants and animals of pre-history. As soon as our thinking has found words it ceases to be sincere or at bottom serious. When it begins to exist for others it ceases to live in us, just as the child severs itself from its mother when it enters into its own existence.

(Essays, p. 201).

While I think that Beckett would agree partly with this criticism of language and thought, I do not think he felt the same bitterness. For, although there is frustration with the process of expression in Beckett, there is definitely a tone of humour and hope:

I can't say why I should have liked to be silent a little before being dead . . . I wanted myself, in my own land for a brief space . . .
 . . . I must have wanted so many things, imagined so many things, while I was talking, without knowing exactly what, enough to go blind with longings and visions, mingling and merging in one another, I'd be better employed in minding what I was saying . . .
 . . . I'm doing as I always did, I'm going on as best I can.

(The Unnamable, pp. 396-7).

The point I wish to make is that despite the anxiety the unnamable feels about his inescapable inauthenticity and inarticulacy, he has had "longings and visions," and these have an innate quality of hope. It is just like the pleasure which the expert finds in playing a game, win or lose, there is beauty in the well-executed move. In life, even if all known experiences have been mere phenomena, there is great beauty in many of them, and, even if writing is ultimately inarticulate, there is beauty in a well-turned phrase. As Moran says of his new-found voice at the end of Molloy:

I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in turn had taught to his little one. So that at first I did not know what it wanted. But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, I understood it, all wrong perhaps. That is not what matters. It told me to write the report. Does this mean I am freer now than I was? I do not know. I shall learn. Then I went back to the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining

(p. 176).

Perhaps the narrator is freer, perhaps he is not. The point is, that for him emancipation will not take the form of accepting death as the freedom from the will to live, but rather as the first utterances of someone who begins to "understand this language."

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