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THE METAPHYSICAL ANGUISH OF SAMUEL BECKETT:
A STUDY OF HIS DRAMATIZATION OF THE
IRRATIONALITY OF EXISTENCE

By
Ayne Cantrell Venanzio

A dissertation presented to the
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THE METAPHYSICAL ANGUISH OF SAMUEL BECKETT:
A STUDY OF HIS DRAMATIZATION OF THE
IRRATIONALITY OF EXISTENCE

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ABSTRACT

THE METAPHYSICAL ANGUISH OF SAMUEL BECKETT: A STUDY OF HIS DRAMATIZATION OF THE IRRATIONALITY OF EXISTENCE

by Ayne Cantrell Venanzio

Since the late 1950's when the success of Waiting for Godot brought Samuel Beckett to the attention of critics, much controversy has arisen about the meaning of his work and about his artistic aims and techniques. The avant-garde nature of Beckett's writing is particularly disconcerting to critics who do not understand the philosophy behind his work and to those who attempt to judge his work by traditional literary standards. This dissertation argues that an awareness of Beckett's philosophical concerns is the only valid approach to understanding his art; that his work dramatizes the chaos he perceives the world to be; that his art cannot be judged by Aristotelian standards since he writes from different premises; and that Beckett's art is organic--his meaning is the form of the work itself.

This study defines Beckett's metaphysical and epistemological position and explores the ways that his particular

view of reality influences his writing. More specifically, the study considers how Beckett's ontological questions regarding the nature of human existence and his epistemological questions regarding the limitations of human knowledge define his concept and development of dramatic character and determine the major conflict in his plays.

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter discusses Beckett's views about the nature of the human predicament. Since Beckett neither develops a specific philosophical system of his own nor identifies himself with that of another, generalizations about his beliefs are inferred from his pertinent writings and from critical opinion concerning his work. This chapter discusses the philosophers that have most directly influenced Beckett and includes a reading of Proust, Beckett's interpretation of Proust's work, as a statement of Beckett's own epistemology.

The second chapter studies the trilogy of novels (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable). These novels elucidate Beckett's views concerning the absurdity of existence and the limitation of human knowledge and, therefore, foreshadow the major concerns of his drama.

The third chapter examines the relationship between Beckett's metaphysics and epistemology and his dramatic techniques. This chapter considers how Beckett's view of the irrationality of existence determines his aesthetics

and results in his rejection of the traditional techniques of characterization and plot. Beckett's aesthetic theory is gleaned from his critical writings including Proust and "Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce" in Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress (1929), Beckett's contribution to a collection of twelve articles in defense of James Joyce, and from his dialogues with George Duthuit (Transition, 1949). Beckett's mimes Act Without Words I and Act Without Words II, the most concise dramatizations of Beckett's view of the human predicament, are read as a general illustration of how his philosophy determines his dramatic art.

The fourth chapter studies Beckett's three major stage plays, Waiting for Godot, Endgame, and Krapp's Last Tape as dramatizations of the irrationality of existence. This chapter concentrates on the form of Beckett's plays and demonstrates that the pattern of his dramaturgy derives from his metaphysics and epistemology. The discussion is limited to the three recurring techniques that give Beckett's plays their particular quality and shape: the use of metaphor, the clown image, and the repetition of events and dialogue.

The final chapter summarizes the conclusions of the study, comments on Beckett's originality as a dramatist, and argues that his art can be best appreciated when one understands the philosophy behind it.

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INTRODUCTION

Although Samuel Beckett had been publishing poems, short stories, and novels for twenty years, he was relatively unknown until Waiting for Godot catapulted him to fame in the 1950's. The last twenty-five years have been marked by an avalanche of Beckett criticism that is remarkable both in volume and diversity. The history of Godot criticism is a case in point.

Waiting for Godot, published in 1952 and first produced in 1953, yielded an abundance of heated and sustained commentary that still continues. The most complete and current bibliography of Beckett's work, Raymond Federman and John Fletcher's Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), lists one hundred and fourteen separate items that deal with Godot alone. The play puzzles most critics. Not least among their concerns is the title itself. Who is Godot? Beckett was of little help when he told Alan Schneider, "If I knew, I would have said so in the play."¹ Yet the Godot-hunters still pursue. The majority of commentators have been concerned

¹ Alan Schneider, "Waiting for Beckett: A Personal Chronicle," Chelsea Review, 2 (Autumn 1958), 3.

with the Christian overtones of the play; others read existentialism into it. The result is that the critics fail to reach any kind of agreement about the meaning of the play. Critics do agree, however, that the play lacks the characteristics of traditional drama. In Godot the bounds of identity dissolve, action is replaced by stasis, and meaning itself is ambiguous.

Despite the abundance of Beckett criticism, the uncertainty that surrounds Godot is typical of Beckett's work in general. Considering the growing volume of commentary, one almost hesitates to add another voice, yet another voice is needed to emphasize that the meaning of Beckett's plays lies less in what is said than in how it is said--Beckett's meaning is the form of the work itself; form and message are inseparable. There is little characterization in his plays because Beckett recognizes that man's essence is elusive. Nothing significant happens because "waiting" is man's predicament. Meaning is obscure because the world-at-large is confused. In one of the few interviews permitted by Beckett, he refers to "the mess . . . the buzzing confusion" of a shattered world.² He says, "The confusion is not my invention. We cannot listen to a conversation for five minutes without being acutely aware of the confusion. It

² Tom F. Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," Columbia University Forum, 4 (Summer 1961), 23.

is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of."³

Man confronting an inexplicable "mess" is the theme of most of Beckett's work. Since the unique characteristics of his writing, including all the ramifications of its ambiguities, stem from his particular world view, it is assumed that an awareness of his philosophical concerns can lead to a better understanding of his literary intentions and techniques. Therefore, the purpose of this dissertation is to define Beckett's metaphysical and epistemological positions and to explore the ways that his particular view of reality influences his writing. Ultimately the dissertation considers how Beckett's metaphysics and epistemology determine the form of his plays.

For the purpose of this study, metaphysics is limited to Beckett's ontological questions regarding the nature of human existence; epistemology is defined as Beckett's concern for the limits and validity of human knowledge. In other words, this study emphasizes Beckett's ideas regarding the nature of Self and man's limited ways of knowing.

The dissertation consists of five chapters. The first chapter discusses Beckett's philosophical preoccupations in an attempt to uncover his views about the nature of the

³ Ibid.

human condition. Since Beckett neither developed a specific philosophical system of his own nor identified himself with that of another, generalizations about his beliefs must be inferred from his pertinent writings and from critical opinion concerning his work. The essay that is most useful in this respect is Proust (1931), an interpretation of Proust's work.

The second chapter studies the trilogy of French novels (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable) which Beckett subsequently translated into English (1946-1950). These novels elucidate Beckett's views concerning the nature of man and the limits of human freedom that he later dramatized in the plays.

The third chapter examines the relationship between Beckett's metaphysics and epistemology and his dramatic technique. Basically, this chapter considers how Beckett's view of the human condition determines his aesthetics and results in his rejection of dramatic conventions in regard to characterization and plot. The most concise statement of Beckett's artistic theory appears in Proust and in "Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce" in Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress (1929), Beckett's contribution to a collection of twelve articles in defense of James Joyce. In addition, Beckett's dialogues with George Duthuit, appearing in Transition

(1949), are helpful in ascertaining Beckett's artistic theory. This chapter also discusses the criteria that have long governed drama and demonstrates how Beckett departs from them. Beckett's mime for one player called Act Without Words I and the mime for two players Act Without Words II are read as a general illustration of how his metaphysics and epistemology determine his dramaturgy because they are the most concise dramatizations of Beckett's world view.

The fourth chapter studies the form of Beckett's three major stage plays, Waiting for Godot, Endgame, and Krapp's Last Tape, in light of the generalizations developed in the first three chapters. The consideration of form in these plays is limited to the significance of three recurring techniques: the use of metaphor, the clown image, and repetition. These techniques constitute the basic pattern of the plays and are determined by Beckett's metaphysics and epistemology.

Chapter five summarizes the ideas developed in the dissertation and concludes with a final assessment of Beckett's originality as a dramatist.

Chapter I

MAN AMID THE "MESS": THE METAPHYSICAL CHAOS OF SAMUEL BECKETT

"The thing to avoid is the system itself."
(Beckett's Trilogy)

This chapter is concerned with Beckett's ideas about man amid the "mess," the word that he thinks best describes the chaos that we call life. Many contemporary writers also hold the conviction that life is chaotic and, therefore, meaningless, but Beckett's work is somewhat unique in contemporary literature because it lacks social comment. Beckett is rarely concerned with people as pawns of political, social, or economic forces; he does not consistently attack society, civilization, culture, or class. In fact, Beckett's work does not possess "human reference" as we generally understand that phrase. His subject is man himself--man without society, not in society--and his work is descriptive, not proscriptive.

Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller correctly assess the Beckett canon when they write: "The whole of Beckett's work moves relentlessly toward the answering of

one question: What is existence? or, What is man?"¹ This question is as old as philosophy itself, but Beckett is a poet, not a philosopher. He neither develops a philosophical system of his own nor identifies himself with that of another. In fact, he resists attempts by critics to classify him as a philosopher. He told Tom F. Driver: "What is more true than anything else? To swim is true, and to sink is true. One is not more true than the other. One cannot speak anymore of being, one must speak only of the mess. When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply the mess."² When asked if his system was the absence of system, Beckett replied, "I'm not interested in any system. I can't see any trace of any system anywhere."³

Since Beckett is an artist foremost, his ideas about the human condition never approach the theoretical expression of a philosophical system. Nevertheless, generalizations

¹ The Testament of Samuel Beckett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 103.

² "Beckett by the Madeleine," Columbia University Forum, 4 (Summer 1961), 23.

³ Israel Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters," New York Times, 6 May 1956, Section 2, p. 3.

about his beliefs can be inferred from his pertinent writings and from critical opinion concerning his work. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss Beckett's philosophical preoccupations as they appear in interviews and in his critical essay on Proust.

THE INEXPLICABLE "MESS"

Despite his repeated disavowals, Beckett does have philosophical convictions concerning the nature of the human condition. He is an artist with profound interests in ontological questions regarding the nature of man and in epistemological questions concerning the limits and validity of human knowledge. Basically, his philosophy is that man cannot comprehend his world, that given the chaotic nature of things, man cannot know, yet he is driven by a compulsion to know. Within this philosophical context, his works can be classified as epistemological comedies; their tragic overtones stem from his own metaphysical anguish and from his assessment of man's dilemma.

Beckett was once asked about the battle between life and death in his plays and whether or not this life-and-death question was a part of the chaos he envisioned. He answered:

Yes. If life and death did not both present themselves to us, there would be no inscrutability. If there were only darkness, all would be clear. It is because there is not only darkness but also light that our situation becomes inexplicable. Take

Augustine's doctrine of grace given and grace withheld: have you pondered the dramatic qualities in this theology? Two thieves are crucified with Christ, one is saved and the other damned. How can we make sense of this division? In classical drama, such problems do not arise. The destiny of Racine's Phèdre is sealed from the beginning: she will proceed into the dark. As she goes, she will be illuminated. At the beginning of the play she has partial illumination and at the end she has complete illumination, but there has been no question but that she moves toward the dark. That is the play. Within this notion clarity is possible, but for us who are neither Greek nor Jansenist there is not such clarity. The question would also be removed if we believed in the contrary--total salvation. But where we have both dark and light we have also the inexplicable. The key word in my plays is "perhaps."⁴

INFLUENCE OF PHILOSOPHERS

Beckett persistently denies knowledge of philosophy. The following interview conducted by Gabriel d'Aubarède is typical of Beckett's stance:

- d'Aubarède: Have contemporary philosophers exercised any influence on your thought?
- Beckett: I never read philosophers.
- d'Aubarède: Why not?
- Beckett: I understand nothing of what they write.
- d'Aubarède: Nevertheless, one sometimes wonders if the preoccupation with the problem of Being posed by the existentialists might not be a key to your works. . . .
- Beckett: There is no key, there is no problem. If the subject of my novels could be expressed in philosophic terms, I'd have reason to write them.
- d'Aubarède: And what was your reason for writing them?

⁴ Driver, p. 23.

Beckett: I don't know anything about it. I am not an intellectual. I am only a sensibility. I conceived of Molloy and the rest the day I became aware of my stupidity. Then I set out to write the things I sensed.⁵

Despite such repeated denials, the diversity of philosophical references in Beckett's work suggests that he has made a careful study of major philosophies. His protagonists allude to philosophers and propose to hold particular philosophies above others. The general tone, however, is satirical. Furthermore, it is because philosophy generally offers false hope that makes philosophy meaningful to Beckett. It is this painful recognition, not the truth of philosophy, that makes it relevant to Beckett's concerns.⁶

Critics have established the philosophical references in Beckett's work. For example, John Fletcher in Samuel Beckett's Art (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1967) traces Beckett's thoughts, characterizations, and philosophical preoccupations to sixteen philosophers. Of these, Rene Descartes and Arnold Geulincx are most significant.

Beckett chose Descartes for the protagonist of Whoroscope, a dramatic monologue written in 1930. Evidently, aspects of Descartes' life attracted Beckett enough for him to use him as a fictional character, but more importantly

⁵ J. D. O'Hara, "Introduction" to Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 9.

⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

Descartes' philosophy appealed to Beckett's imagination, and his subsequent work abounds with Cartesian overtones. The two aspects of Cartesian philosophy that appear most often in the prose and drama are Descartes' definition of man as a thing that thinks, Cogito ergo sum, and the notion of man's duality as mind and body.⁷ These notions are explicit in Beckett's characterizations. For example, the most striking feature of the protagonists of the trilogy of novels is the incessant mind at work attempting to define itself despite the continual disintegration of the body. Molloy and Moran gradually lose mobility. Malone lies in bed unable to move from it. The Unnamable likewise is aware of his physical presence but is completely immobile. Yet all four characters cannot escape thought.

Beckett's favorite Cartesian is Arnold Geulincx, the seventeenth century Belgian philosopher and founder of occasionalism.⁸ The most important idea that Beckett borrows from Geulincx is the limitation of human freedom. Molloy, the protagonist of the first novel of the trilogy, pays direct homage to Geulincx: "I who had loved the image of

⁷ Ruby Cohn, "Philosophical Fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett," Criticism: A Quarterly for Literature and the Arts, 6, No. 1 (Winter 1964); rpt. in Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 170.

⁸ O'Hara, p. 13.

old Geulincx, dead young, who left me free, on the black boat of Ulysses, to crawl towards the East, along the deck. That is a great measure of freedom, for him who has not the pioneering spirit. And from the poop, poring upon the wave, a sadly rejoicing slave, I follow with my eyes the proud and futile wake."⁹ Ruby Cohn traces the allusion to Geulincx's Ethics where the philosopher illustrates the limitation of human freedom with the image of a ship sailing towards the west with a passenger on board who may walk toward the east if he wishes.¹⁰ This image suggests that man's freedom is restricted and that his attempts to act in the limited way that he can are futile. Beckett, however, changes the image in a way that indicates his mordant view of the human condition. In Beckett's rendition the passenger is a slave who crawls rather than walks eastward.

Beckett's obsession with the contemplative mind also comes from Geulincx. In Geulincx's Ethics, specifically mentioned in Beckett's "The End," the Calvinist philosopher emphasizes the power of the contemplative mind, the only realm in which God gave man freedom.¹¹ Beckett dramatizes

⁹ Samuel Beckett, Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable (1955, 1956, 1958; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 51.

¹⁰ Cohn, pp. 171-172.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 170.

this notion in the trilogy where the characters, unable to direct action in the macrocosm (the material world of human relations), exercise the only freedom available to them--the contemplative life of the microcosmic mind. John Fletcher sums up aspects of characterization in the trilogy that concur with Geulincx's philosophy: "that the world order is quite beyond our control, that we are saddled with a body that is liable to let us down at any moment, and that we know nothing about the essences of things or about the origin of the universe or of our minds--our ignorance entails our impotence over all things except what goes on inside our heads."¹²

In addition to his familiarity with Descartes and Geulincx, Beckett also evinces knowledge of more contemporary schools of philosophy such as Logical Positivism and Existentialism. Characters in Beckett's work are, above all else, rational beings who use logic and language meticulously. In this respect, these characters are logical positivists in the same vein as Ludwig Johan Wittgenstein, the twentieth century Austrian philosopher and author of Tractatus, who held that knowledge of reality can only be achieved through the natural sciences.¹³ Of course, Beckett

¹² John Fletcher, Samuel Beckett's Art (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1967), p. 134.

¹³ Cohn, p. 175.

ultimately satirizes the use of reason as a means of perceiving reality because the rational mind is confused by the irrationality of existence.

Beckett also explores another avenue of human awareness that bypasses logic and focuses instead upon the immediate impact of experience and existence. Ruby Cohn calls the French work existentialist because these novels and plays concentrate on the sombre aspects of the human condition--dread, despair, and death.¹⁴ However, the aspect of this work more indicative of existentialism is the emphasis on Being and Freedom. The French heroes do search for Being in an absurd world, a constant theme in the writings of Sartre and Camus, but unlike the existentialists, Beckett's heroes pursue a hopeless quest. The Unnamable begins, unbelieving in his "I," unbelieving in his beginnings, knowing only that the discourse must go on. Towards the end he asks, "Whether I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence."¹⁵ Simply put, Beckett's philosophical position lacks the existential faith in authenticity. Edith Kern astutely recognizes the difference between Beckett and Sartre: "While in Sartre's concept of the elusiveness of human reality there is the intrinsic conviction that man

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 176.

¹⁵ Beckett, Three Novels, p. 386.

must assume the responsibility of giving himself an essence, Beckett contents himself with accepting the elusiveness of Being. He has progressively stripped of subjectivity all existential affirmation of the importance of the individual as a responsible existent and witness to Being, and has replaced such subjectivity by a vision of man as an anonymous link in a meaningless and repetitive chain of suffering mankind."¹⁶

While these philosophical allusions and concerns represent Beckett's partial acceptance, ultimately Beckett rejects Descartes, Geulincx, logical positivism and existentialism. He satirizes philosophy because it offers absolutes where there are none. Considering Beckett's growing awareness of the chaotic nature of things as "the mess" and the failure of philosophy to bring order to it, it is little wonder that the poet rejects philosophy. The aversion to meaning is, in part, the meaning of his work.¹⁷

PROUST: BECKETT'S EPISTEMOLOGY

Beckett wrote Proust (1931) at the age of twenty-five. His most creative period of writing came much later, yet the

¹⁶ Existential Thought and Fictional Technique (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), p. 240.

¹⁷ Steven J. Rosen, "Samuel Beckett: A Study of His Thought," Diss. Rutgers University, 1973, p. 7.

convictions that he held at such an early age foreshadow the subsequent work. Proust is a brilliant piece of criticism, but more importantly it is a helpful introduction to Beckett's obsessions. In it he develops certain postulates about the nature of human experience. A reading of the essay helps us to understand the rationale behind his mode of writing.

"We are alone," writes Beckett. "We cannot know and we cannot be known." Beckett reaches this conclusion, a kind of epistemological zero, after a careful analysis of what he calls "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation--Time" and its attributes Habit and Memory (p. 1). Man is a victim of Time because there is "no escape from the hours and the days" (p. 2). Man's present state is fluid, not static: "The individual is the seat of a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time, sluggish, pale and monochrome, to the vessel containing the fluid of past time, agitated and multicoloured by the phenomena of its hours (pp. 4-5). As Time's victim man cannot know himself because he is constantly changing: "The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for today's" (p. 3).

¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, Proust (New York: Grove Press, 1931), p. 49. Hereafter pagination for quotations taken from Proust is noted in the text.

Born in time and doomed by Time, man suffers "the original and eternal sin . . . of having been born" (p. 49). Suffering is man's condition, but he attempts to mitigate the pains of living by Habit, "a compromise effected between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence" (pp. 7-8). Thus, Habit allows man to exchange the state of suffering for that of boredom, but Beckett argues that it is only in the state of suffering that man can transcend the beastly business of living and perceive reality. Beckett explains:

The fundamental duty of Habit, about which it describes the futile and stupefying arabesques of its supererogations, consists in a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its worlds. Suffering represents the omission of that duty, whether through negligence or inefficiency, and boredom its adequate performance. The pendulum oscillates between these two terms: Suffering--that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience, and Boredom--with its host of top-hatted and hygienic ministers, Boredom that must be considered as the most tolerable because the most durable of human evils. (p. 16)

Beckett does not recognize any alternatives to boredom and suffering (apathy and misery), yet he prefers suffering since suffering is a pre-condition of art. He calls attention to art as the result and expression of suffering when he says, ". . . the heart of the cauliflower or the ideal

core of the onion would represent a more appropriate tribute to the labours of poetical excavation than the crown of bay" (pp. 16-17). Beckett's characters, too, vacillate between boredom and suffering; many of them write to relieve the tedium of living and as a means of self-discovery.

In his essay Beckett delineates two ways of knowing, the artistic and the scientific, by calling attention to Proust's distinction between voluntary memory and involuntary memory. Voluntary memory is "the uniform memory of intelligence; and it can be relied on to reproduce for our gratified inspection those impressions of the past that were consciously and intelligently formed" (p. 19). This memory is the child of Habit, and, therefore, is remote from reality since "it has no interest in the mysterious element of inattention that colours our most commonplace experiences" (p. 19). Voluntary memory is the result of conceptual reason. On the other hand, involuntary memory is the result of intuitive and emotional responses: "It restores, not merely the past object, but the Lazarus that it charmed or tortured, not merely Lazarus and the object, but more because less, more because it abstracts the useful, the opportune, the accidental, because in its flame it has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal--the real" (p. 20). Involuntary memory

calls forth the experience of reality unencumbered by logical thought. Although these "immediate and fortuitous act[s] of perception" are too intermittent to mitigate the boredom of living, they are man's only hope of perceiving the real. These infrequent illuminations transcend Time and, thereby, may open the door to the essence of Being. Beckett writes, "Strictly speaking, we can only remember what has been registered by our extreme inattention and stored in that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to which Habit does not possess the key, and does not need to, because it contains none of the hideous and useful paraphernalia of war. But here [involuntary memory] . . . is stored the essence of ourselves, the best of our many selves and their concretions that simplists call the world . . . the pearl that may give the lie to our carapace of paste and pewter" (pp. 18-19). The trilogy is Beckett's effort to reach down into "that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being to which Habit does not possess the key," and quite fittingly the moribunds that populate these novels recall little from voluntary memory that is reliable or helpful in understanding themselves.

A knowledge of Proust is useful in interpreting Beckett's work because it indicates the concerns that he dramatizes in his novels and plays. It not only states the subject of his subsequent work; it also foreshadows the tone.

From Proust we learn that all attempts by man to understand his predicament through logical means are self-defeating, attempts to explain away not explain himself. We also learn that suffering, paradoxically, is both man's fate and salvation. It is man's punishment for the "sin of having been born," yet suffering alleviates the boredom of living and through it man may come to recognize the truth of existence. Moreover, the artistic experience gleaned from intuitive knowledge is man's only viable hope of understanding the mystery of Being.

The preceding discussion of Beckett's philosophical preoccupations demonstrates that his overriding concern is with the nature of human existence. Although his philosophical position has never been systematically stated, the ideas that occur most often in his interviews and critical writings and, thereby, most likely influence his creative writing are:

1. Man exists in an irrational and meaningless world beyond his reason and control; thus, his freedom to act is limited to the freedom to think.
2. Man consists of a contemplative mind at odds with a deteriorating body; he is a victim of Time.
3. It is man's nature to search for his own essence, but since man constantly changes, and is a composite of many selves, the search for being is elusive.

4. The human situation is paradoxical because man cannot know and cannot be known, yet he is driven by a compulsion to know, that is, understand the nature of things and of himself.
5. Due to man's ignorance and impotence, suffering is his condition.
6. Man attempts to alleviate the pains of living through habit and voluntary memory, but these merely serve to distort reality. Whereas habit allows man to exchange the state of suffering for that of boredom, voluntary memory is the logical means by which man attempts to order experience and thereby give meaning to the world and to himself.
7. Only when man is released from deadening habit and from the illusion of voluntary memory does he face up to the suffering of the reality of being and come to realize the meaninglessness of his existence.

The most significant artistic expression of these philosophical abstractions in Beckett's fiction is the trilogy of novels (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable) where the author turns inward to the microcosm of the mind to describe it in search of Being. The next chapter explores this search.

Chapter II

THE SEARCH FOR BEING: A READING OF THE TRILOGY

"This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it'll be over"--so begins Molloy's story, the first of the novels in Beckett's trilogy. Although Molloy and Malone Dies were published in French as companion books in 1951, it was not until two years later that The Unnamable was added to make the trilogy, and it was not until Molloy was published in 1955 in English that the above sentence was revised to indicate that there would be three not two stories. Hugh Kenner surmises, "This appears to mean that though L'Innomable existed in manuscript in 1951, Beckett had either not decided whether he would publish it, or at any rate not decided whether the three books made a trilogy, though he had long known that the first two made a duet."¹

Even for the reader of the most contemporary anti-fiction, Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable prove to be strange and difficult novels whose meanings appear to be almost unlimited in their ramifications. In fact, the novels are difficult to describe even at the surface level

¹ A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), p. 101.

of events because the reader experiences the doubts and frustrations at events along with Beckett's narrating protagonists. Furthermore, the novels become progressively more ambiguous as the narrators' worlds become less populated with people, places, and things and as the narrators themselves dissolve physically until in The Unnamable what is left is merely a voice speaking about itself.

Chaotic and ambiguous are words that best describe the trilogy, for it is the artistic representation of the chaos that Beckett perceives the world to be. In these novels Beckett gives concrete expression to his metaphysics and epistemology, particularly the abstractions concerning the elusiveness of Being, Time, Habit, and Voluntary Memory discussed in Proust. Only when the trilogy is read in light of these abstractions do its cast of moribund characters and its repetitious themes and events take on significance. Men crippled, crawling, and confined in jars dramatize man's impotency. Sucking stones, hats held to clothing by elastic, bicycles, bicycle horns, and broken pipes are objects that define man's habitual and dull existence. Violence without reason, punishment without cause, and sex without fulfillment convey an irrational world in which the only constant is man's suffering. Communication attempts backfire, portraying man's hopeless estrangement from his fellows. Religion, science, philosophy, and even art itself is made to look

ridiculous, illustrating man's perpetual ignorance. Foremost, the act of writing becomes a futile attempt at self-discovery. Although each successive novel rids its hero more and more of the trivialities of existence and, therefore, zeroes in more and more on the true essence of being, Self is forever evasive and ultimately undefinable.

What follows is more than a brief outline of the events in the trilogy because such a sketch would convey little of its meaning. The trilogy is not traditional in the usual sense of characters involved in action; taken as a whole, very little happens in a realistic sense. This is not to say that the events are unimportant, but what is more important is the narrators' obvious inability to find meaning in their stories and to know themselves. Geraldine Cmarada contrasts Beckett's literary technique with the more conventional method:

The life of a character in a novel usually resembles a series of eruptions with a final explosion usually occurring at the end. The circumstances of the story provide a feeding ground for the "breaking out" of the hero's points of viewing life. By the end of the novel the character knows himself differently; he has moved out of one field of judgment into another, until he finally arrives at a resting place of enlightenment. Obviously the writer of such a novel assumes that his character is justified in linking his experiences with meanings and in moving along to some conclusive point of view. In other words, he takes for granted that experience can be ordered and a future presumed on this order. When this assumption is abandoned, the conventional novel changes. Man, as Beckett sees him, is incapable of ordering his

experiences and life becomes a futile pastime, mere "play." This new premise for the creation of a character necessarily detaches him from an involvement ending in a moral enlightenment.²

MOLLOY

Molloy, the first and longest novel in the trilogy, is the tale of two quest heroes. The first story concerns the adventures of Molloy, a crippled and aging tramp who tells us that he is in his mother's room where he is to write his story for a man who comes to collect the pages once a week. He then begins the story of his journey to find his mother, a story that runs for eighty pages and is written in one paragraph.

Molloy's report begins with him on a hilltop where from the shadow of a rock he watches two men, designated A and C, walking towards each other along a country road, meeting, exchanging a few words, and then going their separate ways. Molloy speculates first on A: ". . . the man was innocent, greatly innocent, he had nothing to fear, though he went in fear, he had nothing to fear, there was nothing they could do to him, or very little. But he can't have known it. . . . Yes, he saw himself threatened, his body threatened, his reason threatened, and perhaps he was, perhaps they were,

² "Malone Dies: A Round on Consciousness," Symposium, 14, No. 3 (Fall 1960), 210.

in spite of his innocence. What business has innocence here? What relation to the innumerable spirits of darkness? It is not clear."³ Molloy is struck by A's cocked hat, and is tempted to get up and follow him "perhaps even to catch up with him one day, so as to know him better, be myself less lonely. But in spite of my soul's leap out to him, at the end of its elastic, I saw him only darkly. . ." (p. 11). As for the other wayfarer, Molloy forgets if he is A or C but notes that he was bareheaded, smoked a cigar, and "moved with a kind of loitering indolence which rightly or wrongly seemed to me expressive" (p. 11). Later Molloy confesses that the event perhaps did not occur as he reports it: "And perhaps it was A one day at one place, then C another at another" (p. 14). As for future encounters, he is also unsure: "A and C I never saw again. But perhaps I shall see them again. But shall I be able to recognize them? And what do I mean by seeing and seeing again?" (p. 13).

The episode involving A and C is important for two reasons. First it establishes Molloy's self-consciousness as a writer and his unreliability as a narrator. "What I need now is stories," says Molloy. "It took me a long time to know that, and I'm not sure of it" (p. 13). Alone in his

³ Samuel Beckett, Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable (1955, 1956, 1958; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1965, p. 10. Hereafter pagination for quotations taken from the novel will be noted in the text.

mother's room, Molloy must pass the time by writing about his past, but often his memory fails him; uncertainties about details and events and their significance abound. Molloy is a new kind of character that Beckett once described as "the narrator/narrated."⁴ Hugh Kenner says that this character is a device that Beckett uses in all his subsequent fiction, "bringing the ambient world into existence only so far as the man holding the pencil can remember it or understand it, so that no omniscient craftsman is holding anything back, and simultaneously bringing into existence the man with the pencil, who is struggling to create himself, so to speak, by recalling his own past or delineating his own present."⁵ This device enables Beckett to satirize man's attempt to know himself through the logical means of voluntary memory. In Proust Beckett says that voluntary memory serves to distort reality by ordering experiences; in Molloy failing memory and Molloy's subsequent unreliability as a narrator dramatize the chaotic reality that lies beneath the facade of ordered experience.

The other reason that the A and C episode is significant is that it indicates Molloy's alienation from others. Apparently, his failure to reach out to his fellow human beings, to be himself "less lonely," began long before he

⁴ Kenner, p. 94.

⁵ Ibid.

was confined to his mother's room. Again we are reminded: "We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known" (Proust, p. 49). Consequently, life is portrayed in Molloy as a series of painful and inexplicable experiences. Molloy often speaks of life in scatological terms. For example, on the following day after he sees A and C, Molloy craves companionship, and he resolves to go to see his mother, who he says "brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct. First taste of the shit" (p. 16).

Although apparently innocent, Molloy suffers the inexplicable "sin . . . of having been born" (Proust, p. 49). In Beckett's world both the innocent and the guilty are punished alike; no logic accounts for the state of suffering that is man's condition. For instance, Molloy begins his journey on crutches and riding a bicycle. At one point his manner of riding brings him to the attention of the police, and he is taken to the police station for questioning. The anxiety-ridden Molloy cannot remember his name and does not have the proper identification papers. He agonizes over the prospect of being beaten but at last remembers that his mother lives nearby. Upon his release, Molloy sets out once again on his bicycle. He is shaken by his encounter with the law and unable to understand why he was released without penalty: "Had I, without knowing it, favourably impressed

the sergeant? Had they succeeded in finding my mother and obtaining from her, or from the neighbors, partial confirmation of my statements? Were they of the opinion that it was useless to prosecute me? . . . If it is unlawful to be without papers, why did they not insist on getting them. Because that costs money and I had none? But in that case could they not have appropriated my bicycle? Probably not, without a court order. All that is incomprehensible" (p. 24). Molloy's inability to comprehend this situation is typical of his "long confused emotion" which he calls his life (p. 25) and of all his encounters in the world-at-large. He lives in an irrational world beyond his reason and control, and the encounter with the police is just one of many perplexities of life that he experiences. These inexplicable events dramatize the chaos that Beckett perceives the world to be.

Throughout the report, Molloy, the self-conscious narrator, repeatedly calls attention to his role as narrator. At one point he says, "Not to want to say, not to know what 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" (p. 28). The report is hampered by the narrator's memory failure and the character's confusion about time, place, and motive. Unable to recognize the fields where he lies down in a ditch to rest after his encounter with the police, Molloy remembers

that he is off to see his mother, but forgets his motive: My reasons? I had forgotten them. But I knew them, I must have known them, I had only to find them again and I would sweep, with the clipped wings of necessity, to my mother. Yes, it's all easy when you know why, a mere matter of magic. Yes the whole thing is to know what saint to implore, any fool can implore him. For the particulars, if you are interested in particulars, there is no need to despair, you may scabble on the right door, in the right way, in the end" (p. 27). Hampered by faulty memory, Molloy's persistence is amusing, but it is also thematically meaningful and dramatizes Beckett's view of the paradox of the human situation. Man is powerless to act significantly; nevertheless, he never gives up trying, for he believes that he may "scabble on the right door, in the right way, in the end."

Molloy's hope for solving his predicament and getting on with his mission is an illusion because for one thing he is incapable of making human contact even to ask for directions. For example, he is awakened on the second day of his journey (unless it is the third or fourth, he remarks) by the bleating of a herd of sheep. He longs to ask the shepherd if he is taking the herd to pasture or to slaughter, but the shepherd goes on his way without a word. Thus, Molloy renews his journey this day as every other day alone and in a fog that he says "rises in me every day and veils the world from me and veils me from myself" (p. 29).

Habit accounts much for the "fog" that prevents Molloy from understanding himself. In Proust Beckett argues that habit is the means by which man attempts to mitigate the pains of living by exchanging boredom for suffering, but it is only in the state of suffering that man perceives the reality of his being. Molloy never understands the essence of his being because he is a creature of habit. He gives us an accounting of one such habit. It is his custom in winter to wrap himself with The Times Literary Supplement which he says was so tough and impermeable that "even farts made no impression on it" (p. 30). Obsessed with numbers, he concludes after counting 315 farts in nineteen hours that four farts every fifteen minutes is nothing: "It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it. Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself" (p. 30). Not only are science and literature satirized as meaningless; man himself is ridiculed as a creature of habit so deadened by it that he is hopelessly beyond self-discovery. Acknowledging the absurdity of his predicament as "one dying of cancer obliged to consult his dentist" (p. 30), Molloy admits "even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate" (p. 31).

Much of the humor in Molloy stems from Beckett's view of the duality of man as mind and body. Molloy's contemplative mind is forever at odds with his deteriorating body.

This is nowhere more evident than in his sojourn with Lousse. When Molloy inadvertently runs over and kills Lousse's dog and risks death at the hands of a mob, Lousse rescues him and elicits his aid in burying the animal. Molloy, however, does not participate in the actual burial because of his degenerating physical condition:

Now my sick leg, I forget which, it's immaterial here, was in a condition neither to dig, because it was rigid, nor alone to support me, because it would have collapsed. I had so to speak only one leg at my disposal, I was virtually onelegged, and I would have been happier, livelier, amputated at the groin. And if they had removed a few testicles into the bargain I wouldn't have objected. For from such testicles as mine, dangling at mid-thigh at the end of a meager cord, there was nothing more to be squeezed, not a drop. (p. 35)

The digression on his physical condition causes Molloy to lament: "My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?" (p. 36).

Molloy spends some time in Lousse's house, confined to his room where he has little to do but study the moon appearing at the barred window. The single most eventful happening during this time is the loss of his toes on his left (or is it his right?) foot, the meaning of which he does not understand: "For all things run together, in the body's long madness, I feel it. But it is useless to drag out this

chapter of my, how shall I say, my existence, for it has no sense, to my mind. It is a dug at which I tug in vain, it yields nothing but wind and spatter" (p. 56). In Molloy's mad world absurdity reigns, toes drop off without reason, and it is useless trying to figure out why.

Molloy concludes his report about Lousse by admitting that perhaps she was not a woman at all--perhaps she was a man or "if she was not a man rather at least an androgyne" (p. 56). This leads the narrator to digress to another woman in his life named Ruth (or was it Edith?) whom he met and fell in love with on a rubbish heap. Their affair is described in scatological terms: "She bent over the couch, because of her rheumatism, and in I went from behind. . . . It seemed all right to me, for I had seen dogs, and I was astonished when she confided that you could go about it differently. I wonder what she meant exactly. Perhaps after all she put me in her rectum. A matter of complete indifference to me, I needn't tell you. But is it true love, in the rectum? That's what bothers me sometimes. Have I never known true love, after all?" (p. 57). Molloy admits that perhaps he is confusing Ruth with Lousse for he confesses, "There are days, like this evening, when my memory confuses them and I am tempted to think of them as one and the same old hag, flattened and crazed by life" (p. 59). It matters little, of course, whether or not the women are confused; the point is that Molloy found no fulfillment in love or sex.

After Molloy leaves Lousse, he wanders around the town, settles momentarily in a blind alley where he attempts suicide with a vegetable knife. At this point it seems that Molloy is about to act significantly and to put an end to his miserable, meaningless existence. But unlike the existentialist heroes of Camus, Molloy does not transcend the absurdity of life through suicide. Ironically for a man who has suffered great physical and spiritual pain, it is the prospect of pain that prevents Molloy from taking his own life: "But pain soon got the better of me. First I cried out, then I gave up, closed the knife and put it back in my pocket. I wasn't particularly disappointed, in my heart of hearts I had not hoped for anything better. So much for that" (p. 61). Thus, Molloy yields to his meaningless existence, an existence hampered by both a deteriorating body and a failing memory and dulled by deadening habit. By having Molloy choose such a life over death, Beckett dramatizes that life itself is the supreme Habit, "the compromise effected between the individual and his environment . . . the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning-conductor of his existence" (Proust, pp. 7-8).

Molloy passes the remainder of the time in the alley by contemplating a silver object that he had stolen from Lousse. Judging from Molloy's description, the object is a knife-rest. Molloy does not recognize this and takes

pleasure in it as something he can puzzle over endlessly: "For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker" (p. 64).

Molloy leaves town in some haste. He spends time by the seaside where he renews his stock of pebbles, or sucking-stones as he calls them, that keep him from feeling hungry. He passes the time by attempting to solve the problem of distributing the stones in his pockets in such a way as to suck them in turn without ever repeating the first until the last of the sixteen stones has been sucked. The narrator takes six pages to describe Molloy's vain attempts at the equal distribution of the stones. It is a riddle that cannot be solved, and, finally, Molloy gives up and throws all the stones away but one. All the deliberation is a waste, for Molloy admits 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" (p. 74).

Molloy's contemplation of the knife-rest and his business with the sucking stones reflect Beckett's epistemology. Man vainly seeks to know what cannot be known. His attempts to understand the nature of things and of himself through logic (as with the riddle of the sucking stones) is

particularly futile, for the world-at-large is confusing and beyond reason.

Soon his mother's image beckons to Molloy again, and he moves inland through a forest where his progress becomes slower and slower as his one good leg goes bad. Molloy is continuously victimized by his deteriorating physical condition, the punishment, it seems, for the sin of having been born. He describes his condition as "a veritable calvary, with no limit to its stations and no hope of crucifixion" (p. 78). Other ailments plague him: asthma, the loss of the rest of his toes, and kidney failure due to venereal disease (a gift from his mother). Nevertheless, he pushes on: "But it is forbidden to give up and even stop for an instant" (p. 81).

The last human encounter Molloy remembers is with a charcoal-burner that he meets in the forest. As in earlier attempts at communication Molloy cannot understand a word the man says, nor can he be understood. When the man attempts to detain Molloy, he hits him over the head with his crutch. "That calmed him," says Molloy (p. 84), and he hits him several times more to finish the job. This is but one of many instances in the novel in which violence occurs with little or no provocation. Molloy's humorous and irreverent treatment of the episode reflects Beckett's

irrational universe; even murder is insignificant and is committed without remorse.

No longer able to hobble, Molloy takes to crawling in a circle "hoping in this way to go in a straight line" (p. 85). He wishes to stay in the forest but fears that to do so would be to go against one of the "mysterious hypothetical imperatives" of the voice within him that has governed his life: "These imperatives were quite explicit and even detailed until, having set me in motion at last, they began to falter, then went silent, leaving me there like a fool who neither knows where he is going nor why he is going there" (pp. 86-87). These voices express the paradox of the human predicament: despite his inability to understand the world and himself, man continually struggles to understand.

Molloy succeeds in crawling to the edge of the forest. Lying in a ditch, he suddenly hears a voice telling him not to worry, that help is on the way: "Don't fret Molloy, we're coming" (p. 91). His story ends as he longs to go back into the forest: "Oh not a real longing. Molloy could stay where he happened to be" (p. 91). He is, after all, a great compromiser. Apparently, it is from this ditch that Molloy is rescued, returned to his mother's room, and made to write his report.

At first Moran's story, Part II of Molloy, is quite different from Molloy's. The narrator immediately identifies himself as Jacques Moran. He, like Molloy, is secluded in a room writing a report, but his report lacks the general disorientation of self that marks Molloy's. There is a certainty about time, place, and motive. However, as the story progresses, Moran's conventional style degenerates, and, as Hugh Kenner suggests, Moran's degeneration is the substance of his narrative.⁶ Moreover, Moran's degeneration parallels that of Molloy's. His story also dramatizes the absurdity of existence and as such echoes the philosophical themes about the limitations of human knowledge and about man as a victim of time and habit that are present in Molloy's story. As Moran's story unfolds, it also becomes apparent that Molloy inhabits him, that he is the subconscious aspect of Moran's personality.

The bourgeois Moran is a fastidious, proud Catholic employed to track down individuals and then deal with them according to instructions given by his mysterious boss named Youdi. Sometimes a report is called for. Moran's story is such a report of his search for Molloy.

His report begins one Sunday morning in summer when Gaber, Youdi's messenger, arrives to disturb Moran's rest,

⁶ Kenner, p. 96.

his "last moments of peace and happiness" (p. 93) with urgent instructions that he is to leave at once with his son to look for an individual named Molloy, but whose name to Moran seems more like Mollose, a man with whom he is familiar. Moran becomes anxious and troubled about the assignment: "I stirred restlessly in my arm-chair, ran my hands over my face, crossed and uncrossed my legs, and so on. The colour and weight of the world were changing already, soon I would have to admit I was anxious" (p. 96).

Moran is immediately satirized as a man of habit. The triviality of his existence is expressed in such an empty bourgeois value as church attendance. He is also very methodical, a habit that distorts his sense of self-importance. For example, before he can set off to look for Molloy, Moran must put his affairs in order: although he has already eaten, he visits Father Ambrose and partakes of communion and, thereby, profanes the sacrament; he finds his son and orders him to prepare for the journey (this is the first time the boy is accompanying him); he takes great pain that his housekeeper does not know of his mission; and, finally, he decides against taking his motorbike.

As a man ruled by habit and usually quite confident of his ability to handle his affairs, Moran is disconcerted by the mystery that shrouds Molloy. Alone in his room, Moran

attempts to rest before the departure, but his mind is filled with questions and doubts concerning himself and his mission. Perhaps Gaber had been mistaken in singling Moran out for the mission; perhaps Gaber did not exist; perhaps even the chief did not exist. The dozing Moran's thoughts turn to his quarry: "Molloy, or Mollose, was no stranger to me. If I had had colleagues, I might have suspected I had spoken of him to them, as of one destined to occupy us, sooner or later. But I had no colleagues and knew nothing of the circumstances in which I had learnt of his existence. Perhaps I had invented him, I mean found him ready made in my head" (pp. 111-112). In his mind's fancy, Moran cannot recall Molloy's face and appearance: "Between the Molloy I stalked within me thus and the true Molloy, after whom I was so soon to be in full cry over hill and dale, the resemblance cannot have been great. . ." (p. 115).

It is at this point that Moran's quest for Molloy--the Molloy he stalks within him--begins to suggest a mysterious relation between the hunter and his prey. Although Moran argues that he is quite different from Molloy, there is a similarity between the men. Molloy, too, was plagued by ambiguities. He sought his mother for reasons he could not understand just as Moran's mission is carried on for "a cause which, having need of us to be accomplished, was in its essence anonymous, and would subsist, haunting the minds

of men, when its miserable artisans should be no more" (pp. 114-115). Also like Molloy, Moran physically deteriorates throughout the course of his journey.

The first sign of Moran's deterioration is a sharp pain he feels in his knee as he is giving an enema to his son as they prepare for the journey. Nevertheless, with his hat secured by an elastic under his chin (the reader remembers that Molloy, too, had such a hat secured to his overcoat by an elastic), Moran accompanied by his son sets out in the dark to search for Molloy without knowing where he is going, "having consulted neither map nor timetable" (p. 124).

Moran tells us that he has no intention of relating all the adventures which befell him and son before they arrived in Molloy country because it would be tedious. He fears that his report will not prove satisfactory to his employer; however, if he submits

this paltry scribbling which is not of my province, it is for reasons very different from those that might be supposed. I am still obeying orders, if you like, but no longer out of fear. No, I am still afraid, but simply from force of habit. And the voice I listen to needs no Gaber to make it heard. For it is within me and exhorts me to continue to the end the faithful servant I have always been, of a cause that is not mine, and patiently fulfil [sic] in all its bitterness my calamitous part, as it was my will, when I had a will, that others should. And this with hatred in my heart, and scorn, of my master and his designs. Yes, it is rather an ambiguous voice and not always easy to follow, in its reasonings and decrees. (pp. 131-132)

Moran's voice is reminiscent of Molloy's voice of hypothetical imperatives, and he, like Molloy, follows it without question. Furthermore, Moran readily admits that he obeys orders from "force of habit." Clearly then, it is habit that prevents Moran from being his own man and from facing up to the absurdity of his situation, for as Beckett says in Proust habit distorts reality by "a perpetual adjustment and readjustment of our organic sensibility to the conditions of its world" (Proust, p. 16).

Another similarity between Moran and Molloy is Moran's self-consciousness as a narrator: "Oh the stories I could tell you, if I were easy. What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others [these are characters in Beckett's fiction]. . . . Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one" (p. 137). Earlier he had claimed: "What I assert, deny, question, in the present, I still can. But mostly I shall use the various tenses of the past. For mostly I do not know, it is perhaps no longer so, it is too soon to know, I simply do not know, perhaps shall never know" (p. 105). Moreover, like the previous narrating hero, Morgan grows steadily unreliable as a narrator. In a direct contradiction of an earlier statement concerning his ignorance of his destination, Moran describes

Moran's country, Bally, meticulously although he wonders if, perhaps, he is not confusing it with some other place.

The first part of the trip ends when Moran is again troubled by the knee which had pained him before the journey began, or was it the other knee?--"that is a thing I have never been able to determine" (p. 139). Unable to support himself, he sends his son off alone to buy a bicycle, but not until he has considerable trouble in communicating instructions to the boy: "I was only making our ideas more confused" (p. 143). In Moran's world as in Molloy's, communication is difficult; failure, not success, is the rule.

While the boy is away, Moran stays near the campfire where he experiences a continual degeneration of body and spirit:

I . . . tried to remember what I was to do with Molloy, once I found him. And on myself too I pored, on me so changed from what I was. And I seemed to see myself ageing [sic] as swiftly as a day-fly. But the idea of ageing was not exactly the one which offered itself of me. And what I saw was more like a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected me from all I was condemned to be. Or it was like a kind of clawing towards a light and countenance I could not name, that I had once known and long denied. (p. 148)

The change that Moran describes is, as he notes, more than a physical change. It represents a change in personality in which Moran's dormant subconscious Self emerges to take hold of him. This metamorphosis dramatizes Beckett's view

of the fluid state of man and man as a composite of many selves. What we see is the self-confident Moran changing into the disoriented Molloy. Moran himself confesses his "growing resignation to being dispossessed of self" (p. 149), and almost immediately commits an act that illustrates this change in character. During his vigil by himself, Moran has two visitors whose appearance echoes that of Molloy's A and C in that one carries a stick and the other wears an outlandish hat. The second of these two, whose face resembles his own, Moran murders under circumstances reminiscent of Molloy's act of violence:

How long have you been here? he said. His body too grew dim, as if coming asunder. What is your business here? he said. Are you on night patrol? I said. He thrust his hand at me. I have an idea I told him once again to get out of my way. I can still see the hand coming toward me, pallid, opening and closing. As if self-propelled. I do not know what happened then. But a little later, perhaps a long time later, I found him stretched on the ground, his head in a pulp. I am sorry I cannot indicate more clearly how this result was obtained, it would have been something worth reading. But it is not at this late stage of my relation that I intend to give way to literature.

(p. 151)

Since the man he murders resembles himself, this act suggests the death of Moran, completing his change into the Molloy of his subconscious.

When Moran's son returns after three days, the father has himself transported on the bicycle as far as Molloy

country. Soon after, the boy defects, leaving Moran little food and money and no bicycle. He suffers a fit of despair and inertia: "powerless to act, or perhaps strong enough at last to act no more. For I had no illusions, I knew that all was about to end, or to begin again, it little mattered which, and it little mattered how, I had only to wait" (p. 161). We are reminded of Molloy's compromises by Moran's new attitude, and we are also reminded of Moran's view of his own situation when Moran categorizes his view as "that of the turd waiting for the flush" (p. 162).

Moran's rest is once again interrupted by Gaber who suddenly appears to deliver Youdi's message that Moran is to go home immediately. The journey home is harrowing. It is similar to Molloy's slow and tedious trip through the forest. He was ordered home sometime in August or September, but does not arrive until spring. He tells us that during the trip he was besieged by fiends in human shape and phantoms of the dead; nevertheless, he was determined to follow Youdi's order even if it meant that he "would get there on all fours shitting out my entrails and chanting maledictions" (p. 166). To direct attention from the nightmare that he lived, Moran preoccupied himself with questions of a theological nature such as: "What value is to be attached to the theory that Eve sprang, not from Adam's rib, but from a tumour in the fat of his leg (arse?)?" and "Did

Mary conceive through the ear, as Augustine and Adobard assert?" (p. 166). And he thought of his bees, which bear a striking resemblance to Molloy's mysterious silver object in that their dance was something Moran could study all his life and "never understand" (p. 169). Moran's religious questions satirize religion as devoid of significance; his contemplation of the bees demonstrates man's ignorance. These preoccupations also suggest the dichotomy of man as mind and body. Despite Moran's physical deterioration, he cannot help thinking, but his thoughts lead nowhere and like those of Molloy are further evidence of the absurdity of existence.

Moran arrives home to discover his bees dead, the garden ruined, and the house empty. Finding life unbearable at home ("I have been a man long enough, I shall not put up with it any more, I shall not try any more," p. 175), Moran writes his report before departing, this time on crutches.

Moran's report which began, "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I am calm. All is sleeping" (p. 92), ends with a contradiction that seems to belie his whole story: "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (p. 176).

Parts I and II of Molloy coincide in many ways. Both narrators are quest heroes; Molloy searches for his mother, Moran for Molloy. However, contrary to the general

conception of the quest hero as one who goes into the darkness to achieve a meaningful existence, the protagonists in Molloy achieve deeper darkness and meaninglessness.⁷ Other obvious similarities between the two heroes are: both men are writing reports as penances ordered by unidentifiable voices, both are self-conscious narrators, both write in the first person about events they have lived through, and both suffer from faulty memories, and, therefore, are apparently unreliable narrators. A close reading of the novel reveals even more parallels in the complex Molloy-Moran relationship. To pierce the mystery that shrouds this relationship is to uncover the novel's meaning.

Several critics see Molloy as Moran's double, his opposite self.⁸ That Moran is a secret part of Molloy can hardly be doubted. Both aspects of characterization and the

⁷ David Hayman, "Quest for Meaningless: The Boundless Poverty of Molloy" in Six Contemporary Novels, ed. W. O. S. Sutherland, Jr. (Austin: University of Texas, 1962), p. 100.

⁸ Among the critics who argue that Molloy is Moran's other self are:

Martin Esslin, "Samuel Beckett," in The Novelist as Philosopher, ed. John Cruikshank (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 136.

Northrop Frye, "The Nightmare Life in Death," Hudson Review, 13, No. 3 (Autumn 1960), 446.

Edith Kern, "Moran-Molloy: The Hero as Author," Perspective, 11 (1959); rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 39.

Nathan A. Scott, Samuel Beckett (New York: Hillary House Publishers, 1969), p. 62.

novel's structure and style support this reading. Although at first the fussy and conceited Moran appears to be quite different from the disoriented Molloy, as the journey progresses he takes on many of Molloy's characteristics: there is a physical deterioration that first strikes both men in the legs; there is the growing uncertainty about time, place, and motive; there is the defecting son (Molloy, too, thinks he may have had a son); there is the preoccupation with objects (both men possess sucking-stones, have hats attached by elastic to their clothing, use crutches, ride bicycles); there is the confrontation with police and strangers (both commit murder, meet shepherds); there is the failure to communicate; there is the delight in the unknown (Moran has his bees, Molloy his silver object); there is the confusion about objects (both say they confuse two things when they are nearly identical, such as legs or bicycle wheels); there is the resignation of impotence (both acknowledge testicles which "hang a little low"); and there is the interest in bodily functions and the subsequent statement of existence in scatological terms (Moran sees himself as a turd, Molloy sees his birth as the first taste of shit). For the most part these mutual characteristics demonstrate the limitations of man to know himself, the epistemology that Beckett discusses in Proust, yet they also suggest that Beckett is not

dramatizing the separate lives of two men but the contiguous although disintegrated life of one man.

Edith Kern proposes that a reversal of the order of Parts I and II reveals the true relationship of the protagonists.⁹ Such a reversal shows that the end of the novel nearly joins the beginning. Moran at the end of his report is as disoriented as Molloy at the beginning of his report. His health at the end approximates Molloy's health at the beginning; the latter starts his journey with one stiff leg and on crutches and Moran ends up that way. Clearly, Moran degenerates into his prey, "the Molloy I stalked within me" (p. 115).

Molloy and Moran are not separate entities but different facets of the same character. The Molloy of Moran's fancy is his "subconscious antithetical self" which threatens Moran's "safe" world.¹⁰ Moran's journey "is a descent into his own subconscious--a via dolorosa into Molloy's immense universe of uncertainty and absurdity."¹¹

Moran's change in writing style also substantiates this reading. His lucid and succinct prose that marks the

⁹ "Moran-Molloy: The Hero as Author," Perspective, 11 (1959); rpt. in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 41.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

beginning of the report progressively degenerates into the rambling paragraphless monologue that characterizes Molloy's narrative. Moreover, Moran adapts a view of language that suggests Molloy's conviction that language is inadequate to convey anything of importance. Language, for Molloy, is only sufficient to describe "things not worth mentioning and those even less so" (p. 41); silence, for Moran, is the only meaningful state: "Not one person in hundred knows how to be silent and listen, no, nor even to conceive what such a thing means. Yet only then can you detect, beyond the fatuous clamour, the silence of which the universe is made" (p. 121). Consequently, both narrators ridicule language by calling attention to its inadequacies. Molloy asks, "And what do I mean by seeing and seeing again?" (p. 17); Moran apologizes for his ambiguity: "I am sorry if this last phrase is not so happy as it might be. It deserved, who knows, to be without ambiguity" (p. 170).

In light of the above observations, it is evident the quest motif of the trilogy is not two separate quests but one quest and that quest is for self-identification. By exposing the disoriented, unfortunate creature that lies behind the mask of Moran's pretentious existence, Beckett puts us in closer touch with the reality of being that he perceives the nature of man to be and, indeed, reveals that "the heart of the cauliflower or the ideal core of the onion

would represent a more appropriate tribute to the labours of poetical excavation than the crown of bay" (Proust, pp. 16-17). For what Beckett is attempting is to peel away the multifarious layers of personality to reveal the true essence of Self.

Molloy is Beckett's intuitive expression of the search for Self; consequently, it is non-logical and often mystical in its approach. For example, the Molloy-Moran quest for self-identification ultimately leads to Molloy's mother's room which is suggestive of a desire to return to the womb and to the prenatal essence of self unencumbered by the trivialities of life. The quest is carried on by two narrators because as Beckett suggests in his essay on Proust man is a composite of many selves and is constantly changing: "The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for today's" (Proust, p. 3). Moreover, the quest is not understood by Molloy-Moran; it is carried on for "a cause which, while having need of us to be accomplished, was in its essence anonymous, and would subsist, haunting the minds of men, when its miserable artisans should be no more" (pp. 114-115).

Moran's reference to "artisans" is significant because in the novel "writing is identical with existence and existence is writing."¹² Moran's mission to find Molloy,

¹² Kern, "Moran-Molloy: The Hero as Author," p. 35.

interpreted here as an attempt at self-discovery, is reported as an act of literary creation. Molloy, too, is an artist. The novel abounds with repeated references to the self-conscious storyteller. Moran says, "Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one" (p. 137). Molloy speaks of "inventing" his composition. Nathan Scott characterizes the writer Moran as "Beckett's exemplum of the artist, of the man who turns a deep disturbance into words," and he reads Molloy's search for his mother as "the artist's turning towards the dark/original source of Being."¹³ The Molloy-Moran quest for the essence of Self is, therefore, the artistic expression of the search for Being.

The protagonists of Molloy never define their elusive Self; thus, Molloy can be read as the failure of the artistic expression of the search for Being. This reading seems substantiated by Beckett's own belief that ultimately art is a failure: "The artistic tendency is not expansive but a contraction. And art is the apotheosis of solitude. There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication" (Proust, p. 47). Martin Esslin concludes, therefore, that to Beckett the novel is not an effort at entertainment, storytelling, or communication; rather "it is a

¹³ Samuel Beckett (New York: Hillary House Publishers, 1969), p. 63.

lonely and dedicated exploration, a shaft driven deep down into the core of the self. It is self-contradictory, Quixotic, but because of this an infinitely heroic and noble attempt at expressing the inexpressible, saying the unsayable, distilling the essence of being and making visible the still centre of reality."¹⁴

David H. Hesla claims that in an expressionistic sense Molloy is not a novel at all, but rather "it is an account of the way in which an 'author' (Moran) failed again in his effort to write."¹⁵ This failure is a metaphor for the elusiveness of Being. The metaphor is repeated in Malone Dies and in The Unnamable.

MALONE DIES

"I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of it all. . . . I could die today if I wished, merely making a little effort, if I could make an effort."¹⁶ Imagine Molloy-Moran isolated in a room, bedridden, compulsively writing stories while he passes the time awaiting death--this is the narrator

¹⁴ "Samuel Beckett" in The Novelist as Philosopher, ed. John Cruikshank (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 129.

¹⁵ The Shape of Chaos (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1971), p. 102.

¹⁶ Beckett, Three Novels, p. 179. Hereafter pagination for quotations taken from the novel will be noted in the text.

of Malone Dies. Unable to recall how he arrived in his room or the events that led up to his fainting, Malone tells us that he will spend the remainder of his time "playing." He will tell himself four stories: "One about a man, another about a woman, a third about a thing and finally one about an animal, a bird probably" (p. 181). After the stories he will take an inventory of his possessions and then he will die.

Malone's methodical approach to passing the remainder of life is reminiscent of Moran's methodical approach to life. As the narrators who precede him in the trilogy, Malone is a creature of deadening habit which allows him to adapt to the absurdity of existence but which also blinds him to the reality of his being. For example, before he begins the stories, Malone gives an account of his present state. He assures us that the room is "just a plain private room . . . in what appears to be a plain ordinary house" where he is cared for by an old woman who brings him his food and chamber pot. "What matters is to eat and excrete," says Malone. "Dish and pot, dish and pot, these are the poles" (p. 185). He, like the narrators before him, is a great compromiser.

Malone's program of "play" is not satisfactorily carried out. We are told nothing about either the animal or the thing, and the inventory, intended to be the last of his

diversions, creeps in at various moments as does his running commentary about himself. Fiction interrupted by periods of self-examination is the pattern of the novel; the ambiguity of what constitutes the fiction and what does not is one of its themes.¹⁷

Malone's stories are interrupted by three significant events: first, the old woman unexpectedly stops renewing his food and emptying his pots, thus ensuring that he will die of starvation; next, he loses the stick which he uses to move the bed about the room like one maneuvers a boat with an oar, leaving him completely immobile; and, finally, he is visited by a mysterious stranger (the undertaker, perhaps) who strikes him on the head. Barring these few interruptions, Malone is free to tell his stories which have one protagonist, a boy called Saposcat (Sapo for short). Sapo later becomes an old man named Macmann, who, like Malone himself, is confined to an asylum. These stories serve to dramatize the absurdity of existence and the chaos that Beckett perceives the world to be, but they also reflect Malone's own degeneration and inability to face up to the reality of his being, for the stories are full of dramatic irony. Malone is unable to see that his stories are really stories about himself, a point that is quite clear to the reader.

¹⁷ John Fletcher, The Novels of Samuel Beckett (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1964), p. 152.

The world that Sapo, the eldest child of poor and sickly parents, inhabits is a world gone mad. For example, Sapo's father is a salesman who might get more money by working longer hours but has not the strength to do so. The Saposcats' hours are filled with incessant talk about solutions to their predicament. Perhaps, if they grew vegetables, they could make a better livelihood, but the price of manure prevents them. Perhaps, they could survive better if they moved into a smaller house, but they are cramped as it is. Malone comments, "It was as though the Saposcats drew the strength to live from the prospect of their impotence" (p. 188).

It is the Saposcats' neighbors, the Lamberts, however, that best illustrate the absurdity of existence. Sapo often visits the Lamberts, a poverty-stricken peasant family consisting of an elderly but still active father who is a pig farmer, a young mother suffering from an unnamed but painful disease, and a son and daughter. Sapo lingers among the Lamberts, silent and unnoticed, but listening to Big Lambert's talk of the last pig slaughtered and listening to Mrs. Lambert's unanswered questions concerning the futility of their lives. He watches the Lamberts' incompetent burial of a mule: "Together they dragged the mule by the legs to the edge of the hole and heaved it in, on its back. The forelegs, pointing towards heaven, projected above

the level of the ground. Old Lambert banged them down with his spade" (p. 212). Mrs. Lambert's actions are equally as absurd as she attempts to sort beans into two piles and then rakes the piles together. These futile actions reflect an irrational, senseless world and cause Malone to remark, "What tedium. . . . The Lamberts, the Lamberts, does it matter about the Lamberts? No not particularly" (p. 216).

Malone constantly interrupts his stories to comment on their progress, and in this way he is reminiscent of the self-conscious narrators in Molloy. "This is awful," says Malone (p. 191). "There's a nice passage" (p. 192). As he wanders in and out of Sapo's story, we discover much about him that reminds us of Molloy-Moran. Just as fear plagued them, Malone admits that he is easily frightened. He, too, has a great need to understand his actions and motives: "And I even feel a strange desire come over me, the desire to know what I am doing, and why" (p. 194). He realizes that language is inadequate to express his thoughts and calls attention to phrases that "seem so innocuous" but which really "pollute the whole of speech" (p. 192). He is even more conscious of his growing alienation from his body than Molloy-Moran: "I shall never go back into this carcass except to find out its time" (p. 193). He, too, is obsessed with objects and finds among his possessions one boot, the bowl of a pipe, and a packet

tied up in newspaper. But due to his faulty memory, another trait he shares with the earlier protagonists, he cannot account for the last two items. In Molloy there is an indication that the narrators are aware that their reports are literary conventions, attempts at inventing. Malone is cognizant of this, too. He recognizes that Sapo is his persona: ". . . on the threshold of being no more I succeed in being another" (p. 194), and he recognizes that writing is his raison d'etre although he is also conscious of failure: "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. . . . And gravely I struggled to be grave no more, to live, to invent. . . . I wonder why I speak of all this. Ah yes, to relieve the tedium" (pp. 194-195). Nevertheless, there seems to be a greater purpose in writing than merely to escape boredom. Malone's stories, like those of Molloy-Moran's, are efforts at understanding the nature of literary creation, of things, and of himself. But like Molloy-Moran Malone understands very little: "It's vague, life and death" (p. 225) and "I shall go on doing as I have always done, not knowing what it is I do, nor who I am, nor where I am, nor if I am" (p. 226). Malone is also similar

to his earlier counterparts in that he seeks the peace of silence: "Words and images run riot in my head, pursuing, flying, clashing, merging, endlessly. But beyond this tumult there is a great calm, and a great indifference, never really to be troubled by anything again" (p. 198).

Before Malone returns to his stories, he recalls how often he failed at friendship, and we discover that he never succeeded at any meaningful human relationship: "My relations with Jackson were of short duration. I could have put up with him as a friend, but unfortunately he found me disgusting, as did Johnson, Wilson, Nicholson and Watson, all whore-sons. I then tried for a space, to lay hold of a kindred spirit among the inferior races, red, yellow, chocolate, and so on. And if the plague-stricken had been less difficult of access I would have intruded on them too, ogling, sidling, leering, ineffing and conating, my heart palpitating. With the insane too I failed, by a hair's-breadth" (p. 218). Malone's craving for human companionship but his ultimate rejection by all men dramatizes the human predicament and echoes Proust: "We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known" (Proust, p. 49).

When Malone next returns to Sapo, his name has been changed to Macmann, son of Man. He is old and homeless now and bears a striking resemblance to Malone himself. Macmann's natural state is suffering. As he lies prostrate

on the ground in a driving rain, Macmann contemplates his predicament: "The idea of punishment came to his mind. . . . And without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on. . . . And no doubt he would have wondered if it was really necessary to be guilty in order to be punished but for the memory, more and more galling, of his having consented to live in his mother, then to leave her" (pp. 239-240). Macmann's sin, of course, is a restatement of an idea found in Proust--"the sin of having been born"--and it suggests man's hopeless, inexplicable condition. Whether guilty or not, man is doomed to suffer, for suffering is synonymous with living.

Macmann next appears in "a kind of asylum" called the House of Saint John of God, the private mental hospital near Dublin which is described in another of Beckett's novels Murphy.¹⁸ Macmann's life at the asylum is irrational, violent, and chaotic but no more so than Malone's own existence or those described in Molloy. The parallel between life at the asylum and that of life in general indicates Beckett's view of life as chaos, or to use his own words "the mess."

At the asylum Macmann is under the care of a "little old woman, immoderately ill-favoured of both face and body"

¹⁸ Fletcher, p. 155.

named Moll whose most revolting features are "thin yellow arms contorted by some kind of bone deformation" and "lips so broad and thick that they seemed to devour half the face" (p. 257). There ensues between Moll and Macmann a sexual relationship that is reminiscent of Molloy's affair with Ruth. Malone writes, "There sprang up between them a kind of intimacy which, at a given moment, led them to lie together and copulate as best they could. For given their age and scant experience of carnal love, it was only natural they should not succeed, at the first shot, in giving each other the impression they were made for each other. . . . And though both were completely impotent they finally succeeded, summoning to their aid all the resources of the skin, the mucus and the imagination, in striking from their dry and feeble lips a kind of sombre gratification" (p. 260). Consequently, even love serves to call attention to man's meaningless existence. In Beckett's fiction love is ridiculed devastatingly, for sex is always difficult and the results never compensate for the effort.

One morning a man called Lemuel informs Macmann that Moll is dead and that he has taken her place. From this moment on Malone's story takes a violent turn. For example, the sadistic Lemuel has Macmann beaten for tearing a branch from a dead bush, and inflicts similar brutalities on other patients in his charge. There is no reason for the violence;

it is but one of the inexplicable aspects of Beckett's irrational world.

As Macmann's situation grows more unbearable, so does Malone's. He interrupts the story to say that he has had a visitor who dealt him a blow on the head. "Here I am back in the shit," remarks Malone (p. 269). In agony he tries to go on with Macmann's story. He can no longer turn his head. Writing becomes impossibly difficult. "Try and go on," he says as he knows that death is imminent (p. 277).

His dying effort is a description of Macmann's excursion by boat to the island, an outing organized for the inmates of the asylum and chaperoned by Lemuel. On their arrival Lemuel's violence suddenly erupts, and he slaughters two sailors with a hatchet. After sunset, Lemuel sets off with Macmann and his other charges in the boat. The last image is of Lemuel who "raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone, he will not hit anyone any more . . . never there he will never/ never anything/ there / any more" (p. 288). Malone dies. His hero is left drifting in a boat on the open sea.

The plot of Malone Dies is deceptively simple: a dying man spends the remainder of his life writing stories to fill the hours and to avert attention from his pending death. More than anything else Malone longs to lose his own persona

completely in someone else's, yet as he wanders in and out of the stories, he talks of little of anything but himself. Even Sapo-Macmann bears a striking resemblance to his creator. The point is, of course, that Malone cannot escape himself even in the act of literary creation. He admits that he writes about Sapo-Macmann in the same exercise book as he writes about himself. Most of the forgotten incidents in his life previous to his confinement appear to crop up in the stories. Although there is uncertainty as to exactly how much he remembers and how much he invents, there is little doubt that "the separation of creator and creation cannot be maintained."¹⁹ The plot, therefore, reveals that the act of literary creation is a reflection of self.

Malone tells us that he "slips into Sapo in the hope of learning." Since he is so much a part of his creation, it can be assumed that Malone seeks to learn about himself. His quest, like that of Molloy-Moran's, is a quest for the essence of Being, but also like Molloy-Moran Malone seeks an identity that eludes him: "All my senses are trained fully on me, me. . . . Somewhere in this turmoil thought struggles on, it too wide of the mark. It too seeks me, as it always has, where I am not to be found" (p. 186). In

¹⁹ J. D. O'Hara, "About Structure in Malone Dies" in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 66.

this respect, Malone is yet another phase or aspect of Molloy-Moran.²⁰

That Malone is but a latter stage of Molloy-Moran is supported by similarities in character and by events in the novels. The physical deterioration begun in Molloy progresses in Malone Dies until its hero is completely incapacitated. Malone's only recourse is the mind, and the "mind always remains, in Beckett's world, long after the body has ceased to be endurable."²¹ Malone's mind, however, like those of his counterparts, is confused about time, place, and motive. He, too, is an unreliable narrator. Nevertheless, enough specific details in his narrative coincide with those in Molloy-Moran's to suggest their parallels. Malone is linked to Molloy-Moran by such relics as a silver knife-rest, a bicycle bell, a sucking stone, and a club stained with blood. He speaks of a previous existence by the sea and in the forest. His hero Macmann was once forced to crawl through a forest as Molloy had done. Macmann's attempt at love-making is reminiscent of Molloy's. Other nuances of characterization suggesting their parallels are: communication is difficult for all narrators; all are unsuccessful in initiating any meaningful

²⁰ Scott, p. 64.

²¹ Frederick J. Hoffman, Samuel Beckett (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 129.

relation with others; the narrators express their predicament in scatological terms; they all brood over the inability to know what they are, where they are, and what they are doing; they all seek the relief of being no more; all three are self-conscious narrators troubled by efforts to express the inexpressible; and, finally, all of them comment on the irrationality of existence in an irrational world.

The metaphor of writing as existence found in Molloy also pervades Malone Dies. Malone's question of "Who am I?" is transformed in the act of writing to "Whom am I saying when I say I?" The enigma is dramatized in his characterizations--Sapo becomes Macmann. The older man is no longer the younger man yet they are the same, and the change of name suggests the composite of selves within one lifetime defined by the changing situations of living. And again we are reminded of Proust: "The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for today's." The multiplicity of Molloy's that Moran sought within his own mind parallels the duality of Malone's hero. Furthermore, just as Moran's search for Molloy is actually a search for himself, Malone's stories constitute a search for his own essence, the indefinable state of Being. Malone's quest fails, however, for as we are told in Proust man's present state is fluid, not static: "The individual is the seat of

a constant process of decantation, decantation from the vessel containing the fluid of future time . . . to the vessel containing the fluid of past time. . ." (pp. 4-5).

Being remains a mystery to Malone because it is forever elusive. He can never answer the question of what is Self. Martin Esslin places himself in Malone's role and reveals the perplexities of his search for Being: "What is Self? It is not outward circumstance--for that can change. It is not appearance--that too can change. Is it what I believe to be myself? That may be an illusion. Is it everything that I can think of and imagine, including all the vast crowd of characters I can make up?"²² Esslin concludes that "It is to scoop up all these, in all their infinite possibility, that Beckett is compelled to write."²³ Esslin's point is meaningful, for we must not forget that as Malone makes up his stories and characters he himself is made up by the author of the novel. This accounts for the many allusions to Beckett's other fiction found in the trilogy. Thus, Malone's crisis of identity parallels Beckett's and so do his stories. This crisis represents a "birth into literature."²⁴ It is a kind of literature that parodies the

²² Esslin, pp. 138-139.

²³ Ibid., p. 139.

²⁴ John Fletcher, "Malone 'Given Birth to Into Death'" in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 61.

realistic novel, for as the reader is "shunted from storyteller to story, from creator to creature, from one world to another, we are kept from settling on either one as the 'reality' of the novel, and we can make no resolution of the two."²⁵ Nevertheless, we do see the absurdity of our lives reflected in Malone Dies, and when Malone is alone unable to summon objects or characters, we feel "the full measure of human loneliness."²⁶ It is the solitude of the artist that Beckett speaks of in Proust.

THE UNNAMABLE

Malone says that when he dies "it will be all over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans, and Malones [all characters in Beckett's fiction], unless it goes on beyond the grave" (p. 236). The third novel in the trilogy, The Unnamable, suggests that the search for the elusive Self does go beyond the grave or at least beyond the limits of normal external existence. The Unnamable begins with "Where now? Who now? When now?"²⁷--all the space and time questions that man asks about himself to gain self-identification. It is as if the narrator wakes up

²⁵ O'Hara, "About Structure in Malone Dies," pp. 67-68.

²⁶ Ruby Cohn, Back to Beckett (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 100.

²⁷ Beckett, Three Novels, p. 291. Hereafter pagination for quotations taken from the novel will be noted in the text.

completely paralyzed, deaf, blind, and dumb, and suffering from amnesia. His efforts are turned toward locating himself and finding out who he is. His only recourse is to turn within the mind. The Unnamable does just that, but as he talks to himself, he longs for the "means to put an end to things, an end to speech" (p. 299). J. C. Oates characterizes the Unnamable's predicament as the "first state of being which he cannot elude, and which he cannot understand."²⁸

It is difficult to summarize The Unnamable satisfactorily because all specifications of time, place, past, present, future, causality, and relationship are obliterated in the mass confusion of the Unnamable's contradictory babbling. It is clear in the opening pages, however, that he is describing his predicament: "Can it be that one day, off it goes on, that one day I simply stayed in, in where, instead of going out, in the old way. . . . No matter how it happened. It, say it, not knowing what" (p. 291). The netherworld that the Unnamable occupies is a vast (although it may only measure twelve feet in diameter), dim zone of half-grey light where Beckett's other fictional characters like Malone (unless he is Molloy wearing Malone's hat) pass before him: "To tell the truth I believe they are all here,

²⁸ "The Trilogy of Samuel Beckett," Renascence, 14, No. 3 (Spring 1962), 162.

at least from Murphy on" (p. 293). He believes he occupies the center but "nothing is less certain" (p. 295). He sits there, hands on knees, with tears streaming down from unblinking eyes, yet "There is nothing saddening here. Perhaps it is liquefied brain. Past happiness in any case has clean gone from my memory, assuming it was ever there. . . . And yet I am troubled" (p. 293). He is "troubled" by all the questions that he asks himself. "No more questions," he asserts and immediately asks, "Is not this rather the place where one finishes vanishing?" (p. 293).

The Unnamable tells us of his "delegates" who have enlightened him about the world of men and their ways and who have given him courses on love and intelligence and taught him to count and reason. "Some of this rubbish has come in handy on occasions, I don't deny it, on occasions which would never have arisen if they had left me in peace," he remarks (p. 298). As always in the trilogy, logic is satirized because man lives in an irrational world beyond reason.

The Unnamable longs for silence: "to be able to go silent, and make an end. . . . Yes . . . to end would be wonderful, no matter who I am, no matter where I am" (p. 302). Silence, however, is not forthcoming, and the Unnamable goes on in endless repetition: "For to go on means going from here, means finding me, losing me, vanishing and beginning

again, a stranger first, then little by little the same as always, in another place, where I shall say I have always been, of which I know nothing, being incapable of seeing, moving, thinking, speaking, but of which little by little, in spite of these handicaps, I shall begin to know something, just enough for it to turn out to be the same place as always . . . which is perhaps merely the inside of my distant skull . . . ever murmuring my old stories, my old story, as if it were the first time" (pp. 302-303). These old stories include the previous fictions of Beckett: "All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking, I should have spoken of me and of me alone. . . . Let them be gone now, them and all the others, those I have used and those I have not used, give me back the pains I lent them and vanish, from my life, my memory, my terrors and shames" (pp. 303-304).

Despite the Unnamable's announcement that he alone is the subject of his narrative and that he renounces fictional devices, he slips into fiction and speaks of Basil, Mahood, and Worm--all facets of the same character whose names seem to represent three stages of man (Lord, Man and Worm, or the grave)²⁹ and whose actions define the absurdity of man's predicament.

²⁹ Jan Hokenson, "A Stuttering Logos: Biblical Paradigms in Beckett's Trilogy," James Joyce Quarterly, 8, No. 4 (Summer 1971), 307.

The Unnamable discusses Basil but briefly for as he becomes "important" he decides to call him Mahood, whom he says "told me stories about me, lived in my stead, issued forth from me, came back to me, entered back into me, heaped stories on my head. . . . It is his voice which has often, always, mingled with mine, and sometimes drowned it completely" (p. 309). The Unnamable then narrates in first person one of Mahood's stories in which he describes how he, one-legged and on crutches, circles round a small rotunda where his family is living. It takes so long to complete the spiral that the entire family dies from ptomaine poisoning before he reaches them. Before he sets out from home in the outward-moving spiral, he tramples their rotting remains with his crutches. The Unnamable offers no explanation for his hero's actions, and, indeed, there appears to be none. This is simply an irrational act beyond explanation, and as such it parallels most of the actions of Beckett's heroes. In this way, he dramatizes existence as absurd and beyond man's understanding.

Mahood's next story is even more absurd than the first. In this story the hero is an armless, legless creature stuck in a jar across from a Parisian restaurant. The jar serves as advertisement for the restaurant since its menu is affixed to the jar for passers-by to read. The owner of the restaurant is a woman who cares for Mahood and decorates his

jar with Chinese lanterns. She protects him from inclement weather by covering the jar with a tarpaulin, and once a week she takes him out so that the receptacle might be emptied of his wastes.

Like the narrators before him, the Unnamable interrupts his story to comment on its progress: "This story is no good, I'm beginning almost to believe it" (p. 330). Of course, this is not the first interruption, nor will it be the last. Earlier on, he had said, "I must really lend myself to this story a little longer, there may possibly be a grain of truth in it" (p. 321). The Unnamable never "lends" himself to his stories for long without returning to himself. He tells us of his pensum that forces him to string out words about himself: "Yes, I have a pensum to discharge, before I can be free, free to dabble, free to speak no more, listen no more, and I've forgotten what it is. . . . I was given a pensum, at birth perhaps, as a punishment for having been born perhaps, or for no particular reason, because they dislike me, and I've forgotten what it is" (p. 310). Here again the trilogy echoes Proust. The Unnamable, like Molloy, Moran, and Malone, suffers from the inexplicable sin of having been born. There is no reason for the punishment; it is merely what life is like in Beckett's irrational world.

The Unnamable's compulsion to talk never ceases and causes him unbearable pain: "It [the voice] issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can't stop it, I can't prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me" (p. 307). The voice that never stops talking, the mind that never ceases thinking--this defines the Unnamable and ridicules him as a caricature of the Cartesian man: he thinks; therefore, he is. But Descartes' proof of existence is made to appear ridiculous, for the Unnamable's chaotic thoughts define his existence as irrational, beyond reason.

As the Unnamable vacillates between himself and his stories, it grows increasingly difficult to distinguish between the "I" of the creator and the "I" of his creature: "But enough of this cursed first person, it is really too red a herring, I'll get out of my depth if I'm not careful. . . . Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it. Matter of habit. To be adjusted later" (p. 343). Language is satirized as a "matter of habit." Thus, in terms of Beckett's epistemology language becomes a barrier to knowing oneself. The act of literary creation is also ridiculed. For example, during the course of Mahood's story, his name is changed to Worm, but before his story can be told, he must be born, an event that the narrating "I" has considerable difficulty in bringing about.

Worm seems to be caught somewhere between the transition of Mahood into Worm: "But let me complete my views before I shit on them. For if I am Mahood, I am Worm too, plop. Or if I am not yet Worm, I shall be when I cease to be Mahood, plop. . . . At no moment do I know what I'm talking about" (p. 338). For ten pages we follow the effort of Worm to get born. When he finally emerges, he is a creature who lacks both body and thought. Worm, completely impotent, has one great strength, however, "he understands nothing, can't take thought, doesn't know what they want, doesn't know they are there" (p. 360).

Worm's oblivious state is envied by the narrating "I"; nevertheless, it is not long before he discards him as he discarded Mahood. The Unnamable now concentrates on the voice of the narrating "I"--the "meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing and nowhere" (p. 370). The voice requires a name, but since he has no identity, he is indefinable, the "unnamable": "No name for me, no pronoun for me" (p. 404) and "It's not I, that's all I know" (p. 406). As the words spill out with increasing frenzy and the sentences become more and more fragmented, the search for identity goes on: "Perhaps I'm a dying sperm, in the sheets of an innocent boy" (p. 379).

The novel ends as the Unnamable agonizes over the words that evade self-definition: "Impossible to stop them, I'm

in words, made of words, others' words, what others, the place too, the air, the walls, the floor, the ceiling, all words" (p. 386). He cannot define the narrating "I" but cannot be silent: "I'll never be silent, never at peace" (p. 394) and "There was never anyone, anyone but me, talking to me of me, impossible to stop, impossible to go on" (p. 395). He recognizes this predicament as one that has plagued him all his life: "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" (p. 396). Here we have Beckett's philosophy in a nutshell. Whereas these three things summarize the predicament of all the heroes in the trilogy, they also give a capsule description of the human predicament in general: "the inability to speak" (man's impotence); "the inability to be silent" (man's constant compulsion to know the nature of things and of himself); and "solitude" (man's alienation). Despite these incumbrances, the Unnamable hopes against hope that the last words, "the story of silence" (p. 413), will come to release him from his pensum.

The Unnamable never finds the peaceful silence for which he longs. The novel closes with a five-page sentence that suggests that he will suffer endlessly and that his ending is but one more beginning:

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, per-
 haps it's 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. (p. 414)

With The Unnamable Beckett gives the final concrete expression to the search for being begun in Molloy and Malone Dies; its meaning is incomprehensible without the earlier novels and their meaning is incomplete without it. A key to the relationship among the three novels is found in the Unnamable's relationship to Mahood. At one point he interrupts his story to ask: "What is Mahood doing in my domain, and how does he get here? There I am launched again on the same old hopeless business, there we are face to face, Mahood and I, if we are twain, as I say we are. I never saw him, I don't see him, he has told me what he is like, what I am like, they have all told me that, it must be one of their principal functions" (p. 315). The "they" of which he speaks are all of Beckett's fictional heroes, including Molloy, Moran, and Malone, that have gone before Mahood. "They" are characters in stories that the Unnamable claims as his own: "all these stories about travelers, these stories about paralytics, all are mine" (p. 412). Thus, the

Unnamable is the "naked voice of the being who exists, and has been existing all along, behind all of them [Beckett's fictional heroes], and who has been seeking in vain to invest himself in their rags for lack of any of his own."³⁰ He tells us himself that he is the inner core about which the others revolve. In this way *The Unnamable* looks backwards to the earlier novels.

Molloy, Moran, and Malone have been aspects of the narrating "I" of *The Unnamable*, and these fictional creations have been explorations of the Self. Just as his fictional writer-protagonists quested for the essence of Being through writing, the Unnamable seeks his Being through writing and through them. He tells us that their "principal function" has been to tell him "what he is like." It has already been shown that Molloy, Moran, and Malone are facets of the same character; the similarities in character, parallels in events, and recurrences of allusions testify to it. Furthermore, writing as a means of self-definition has been established as the prevailing metaphor of the first two novels. Their search for Being through storytelling foreshadows their creator's quest; their failure also foreshadows his failure.

The Unnamable fails at his attempt to define minimal being, the primal creating essence behind the mask of the

³⁰ Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, p. 179.

fictional heroes. The stories of Mahood and Worm are analogies for his own search, but since they have external existence, they can be "named" and, thus, do not shed light on the internal existence of the narrating "I." Whether he describes himself as a bearded egg (Worm) or projects himself into a jar (Mahood), the result is the same--an absurd and unsatisfactory analogy of his own existence.

Ultimately stripped of all aspects of physical existence and its accompanying trivia and finally rid of the fictional masks, the remaining narrating "I" is a voice in search of its own persona. However, the voice is insufficient to describe its own essence. The voice fails for two reasons: there is the problem of a multitude of voices and there is the problem of pronouns. Is the essence behind the voice the one that is speaking or the one that is listening? That essence is not one voice but several, "a multitude of voices, a complex conversation of speakers, listeners, observers, critics, some vocal, some silent."³¹ This is why the Unnamable longs for silence, the cessation of both speaking and listening. Moreover, for all its humor, the Unnamable's obsession with pronouns should not be taken lightly. Once he has chosen a pronoun for the discourse on self, he has objectified it. Is the essence "I" or "me"?

³¹ Esslin, p. 140.

It is neither because it has taken a deeper self, which itself perceived, to externalize itself in language. The regression of selves objectified is an endless labyrinth. It is an insoluble riddle, one that Schopenhauer recognized when he wrote that "the knower himself cannot be known precisely as such, otherwise he would be the known of another knower."³² For these reasons, the Unnamable arrives at no satisfactory definition of Being--the Unnamable comes to mean the indefinable.

The Unnamable is Beckett's artistic attempt to reach the "ideal core of the onion" of which he speaks in Proust. He fails because there is no definable core, "no undividable unit of continuous personality."³³ Yet the effort is heroic, a tour de force in writing.

THE UNITY OF THE TRILOGY

"Being has a form," Beckett once remarked. "Someone will find it someday. Perhaps I won't but someone will."³⁴ The trilogy of novels is Beckett's attempt at giving Being

³² J. D. O'Hara, "Introduction" to Twentieth Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies and The Unnamable, ed. J. D. O'Hara (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 14.

³³ Northrop Frye, "The Nightmare Life in Death," Hudson Review, 13, No. 3 (Autumn 1960), p. 447.

³⁴ Steven J. Rosen, "Samuel Beckett: Study of His Thought," Diss. Rutgers University, 1973, p. 60.

its form. Hugh Kenner relates Beckett's characters to this purpose: "All these personalities, with their infirmities, their difficulty in moving about, their poverty and simplicity of mind, have only been explorations of the self, attempts to divest it of accidentals, experiments designed to see what would remain of the self if it were lame and dull-witted, without status in the world, a tramp without a home, alone, unsupported, abandoned . . . sick, dying, covered in sores, half-blind. . . . What would remain? The essence and true nature of the self?"³⁵ This progressive reduction of people, places, events and things in the novels along with the characters' regression to the Unnamable, their indefinable essence, gives the trilogy its continuity. Other aspects of the trilogy's continuity dramatize many of the philosophical abstractions found in Beckett's interviews and in his critical writings. These will be noted briefly because they prepare us for reading the dramas.

Above all else, the characters in the trilogy are obsessed with the need to say but the nothing to say. It is the inadequacy of language to express meaning that accounts for the heroes' failure at communication and their subsequent estrangement from other men. Furthermore, Beckett's protagonists are much alike; they are bums, clowns,

³⁵ Kenner, p. 140.

moribunds. They possess a universal quality that suggests they are Beckett's caricatures of the Twentieth Century Everyman who seeks to understand himself and his predicament by every means possible. Beckett satirizes this effort in the trilogy; science, philosophy, logic, religion, love, art--all fail man in his attempt to comprehend the "inexplicable mess" of a world devoid of absolutes. Considering the irrationality of his existence, it is a peculiar characteristic of Beckett's man that he cannot help being coherent.³⁶ Despite man's considerable learning and a disciplined, precise, and meticulous language that reflects that learning, man is at a loss to comprehend the nature of the world-at-large, of things, and of himself. His key words are "perhaps," "may be," "I don't know."

Beckett portrays man's predicament--the need to know what cannot be known and his irrational existence in an irrational world--as a sick joke. His view is comic, not tragic. Frederick Karl explains: "When one quests hoping to find something that constantly eludes him, the result is tragic for him; but when he seeks knowing that what escapes him now will continue to escape him and he keeps seeking regardless of outcome, the result is often funny. Such a person has become a particular kind of fool, subject to

³⁶ Alfred Alvarez, Samuel Beckett (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 56.

practical jokes, cosmic ironies, paradoxical experiences; and none of these really matter. The seeker is merely playing a game."³⁷ All of Beckett's men play games to escape the boredom of living and the suffering of being.

The suffering of being is another motif that unites the novels of the trilogy. Suffering is a way of life for Beckett's heroes; it is their punishment for the "sin of having been born." Whether man is innocent or guilty is an irrelevant question; he suffers anyway. The trilogy abounds with explicit statements about the curse of birth, the misery of life, and the desirability of death.

One other significant factor unifies the novels of the trilogy. It has to do with the nature of fiction itself. Raymond Federman writes that the form and content of the novels call into question the validity of the criteria by which "fiction is rendered believable and useful. . . . Instead of creating a world which simulates reality . . . Beckett presents situations that reject all concepts of truth. The reader is faced with an illusory existence situated in a fraudulent environment: the image of a man (creator-hero) sitting in a room, planted in a pot, crawling in the mud, or simply locked in his own mind, composing, inventing, with whatever words are still available to him,

³⁷ The Contemporary English Novel (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1962), p. 22.

an absurd and totally false sub-reality."³⁸ Such a technique is necessary to Beckett's theme--his meaning is that there is no meaning. In order to probe into the nature of the elusiveness of Being, he must cut away the traditional concepts of fiction with all its circumstantial detail, for to him the truth of an irrational existence cannot be treated "realistically." He says, "I am working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. . . . My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unuseable--as something by definition incompatible with art."³⁹

When Beckett turned to writing plays in the 1950's, he found that the dramatic literary tradition was also inadequate to dramatize his message of impotence and ignorance. Thus, he developed new methods expressive of his theme. The following chapter will discuss how Beckett's view of man's predicament has led him to reject traditional dramatic conventions.

³⁸ "Beckett and the Fiction of Mud" in On Contemporary Literature, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (New York: Avon Books, 1964), p. 257.

³⁹ Ibid.

Chapter III

THE ART OF FAILURE: AN OVERVIEW OF SAMUEL BECKETT'S AESTHETICS AND HIS DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

This chapter is concerned with Samuel Beckett's artistic theory and techniques. More specifically, it will consider how Beckett's view of the human predicament determines his aesthetics and ultimately leads to his rejection of the traditional dramatic form.

In the interview with Tom F. Driver in which Beckett speaks of the "mess . . . the buzzing confusion" of a shattered world, he also discusses the tension in art between the "mess" and form and acknowledges that only until recently has art withstood the pressure of chaotic things since to admit them would be to jeopardize form. Beckett asks, "How could the mess be admitted, because it appears to be the very opposite of form and therefore destructive of the very thing that art holds itself to be?" Nevertheless, he concludes that in a time when chaos "invades our experience at every moment . . . it must be allowed in." Driver asks him: "How could chaos be admitted to chaos? Would not that be the end of thinking and the end of art?" Beckett replies: "What I am saying does not mean that there

will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be a new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. . . . To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now."¹

Beckett's artistic career has been an effort to create the form that expresses, to use his own words, "ignorance and impotence . . . that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unuseable--as something by definition incompatible with art."² Consequently, his work is a revolt against the Aristotelian literary tradition, the predictable world of Shakespeare and Balzac, that leads "the human consciousness to believe that it 'knows' a predominantly logical universe of things and beings conforming to the laws of cause and effect."³

¹ "Beckett by the Madeleine," Columbia University Forum, 4 (Summer 1961), 23.

² Israel Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters," New York Times, 6 May 1965, Section 2, p. 3.

³ Josephine Jacobson and William R. Mueller, The Testament of Samuel Beckett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), p. 61.

BECKETT'S AESTHETICS

Beckett, unlike many of his contemporaries, has written very little about his aims and ideals as a writer, but his essays on Proust and Joyce as well as other shorter pieces in defense of writers and painters whom he admires present the aesthetics that inform his own work. The four most significant ideas that constitute his aesthetics are: artistic form and meaning cannot be divorced; art must be nonlogical since world order is only an illusion; art seeks not clarity but ambiguity as it must present the meaninglessness of the human experience; and art that seeks to express the inexplicable must ultimately fail.

Beckett's notion that form and meaning are inseparable finds its first expression in his essay on James Joyce which appeared in a collection of essays published in 1929 at the same time that Joyce's Work in Progress, the future Finnegan's Wake, was being published serially. Beckett's essay entitled "Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce" outlines and defends Joyce's literary techniques in Work in Progress while it also attempts to explain the difficulty that readers were experiencing with the piece. Beckett says that much of the readers' problem of comprehension stems from their concentration on content and from their lack of sensitivity to the form in which the ideas are expressed:

And if you don't understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it. You are not satisfied unless form is so strictly divorced from content that you can comprehend the one without bothering to read the other. This rapid skimming and absorption of the scant cream of sense is made possible by what I may call a continuous process of copious intellectual salivation. The form that is an arbitrary and independent phenomenon can fulfil [sic] no higher function than that of stimulus for a tertiary or conditioned reflex of dribbling comprehension.⁴

Later in the essay Beckett makes it clear that form and content are inseparable because the work of art as a whole is its meaning:

Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff [Work in Progress] is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read--or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not about something; it is that something itself. . . . When the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep. . . . When the sense is dancing, the words dance. . . . How can we qualify this general esthetic vigilance without which we cannot hope to snare the sense which is for ever [sic] rising to the surface of the form and becoming the form itself?⁵

Thus, early in his career Beckett was formulating his own conceptions regarding the nature of literary art. Form--language, structure, and mood--should not be merely compatible with content, the appropriate dress for the ideas expressed, but it is part of the message itself. The reader,

⁴ Samuel Beckett, "Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce" in Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress (1929; rpt. New York: New Directions, 1972), p. 13.

⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

suggests Beckett, cannot perceive the full implications of the author's meaning until he has carefully studied what is said in the manner it is said.

In 1931, two years after the essay on Joyce, Beckett published Proust, his principal contribution to literary criticism. In it he shows his contempt for realism and naturalism and praises the anti-intellectual nature of Proust's work. Beckett shares with Proust the disdain for "literature that 'describes,' for the realists and naturalists worshipping the offal of experience, prostrate before the epidermis and the swift epilepsy, and content to transcribe the surface, the facade, behind which the Idea is prisoner" (Proust, p. 59). Such writers are victims of habit and work from voluntary memory; thus, the world they construct is one based on reason and, thereby, is false because it is a predictable world dominated by imagined causal relationships. Proust, however, is not content with a description of surface things. He is freed from habit and voluntary memory, from practical thought that imposes order where there is none. He pierces below the surface unrealities to what Beckett calls the Idea, the essence of things: "a napkin in the dust taken for a pencil of light, the sound of water in the pipes for a dog barking or the hooting of a siren, the noise of a spring-door closing for the orchestration of the Pilgrims' Chorus" (Proust, p. 66).

Beckett calls Proust's way of looking at the world Impressionism: "By his impressionism I mean his non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility in order to be forced into a chain of cause and effect" (Proust, p. 66). The impressionist works from intuition not from reason; he seeks to state not explain. By way of support Beckett reminds us of Schopenhauer's definition of the artistic procedure as "the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason" and gives us the example of the impressionistic painter Elstir who states "what he sees and not what he knows he ought to see: for example, applying urban terms to the sea and marine terms to the town, so as to transmit his intuition of their homogeneity" (Proust, p. 66).

When Beckett turns to the specific discussion of Proust's style, structure, characterization, and imagery, he emphasizes the nonrational aspects of his writing and discusses the relationship of form to content: "For Proust, as for the painter, style is more a question of vision than technique. Proust does not share the superstition that form is nothing and content everything, nor that the ideal literary masterpiece could only be communicated in a series of absolute and monosyllabic propositions. For Proust the quality of language is more important than any system of

ethics or aesthetics. Indeed he makes no attempt to dissociate form from content. The one is a concretion of the other, the revelation of a world" (Proust, p. 67). Here we have a statement that encompasses Beckett's aesthetics up to this point in his life and one that governs all his subsequent writing. For Beckett, authentic art is nonrational because the authentic artist's vision entails a skepticism regarding man's ability to know through rational means. Thus, Beckett's notion of the "mess," the chaos that we call life, began to inform his aesthetics long before he was to write his most significant work.

In the mid-thirties at the time he was writing Echo's Bones, a collection of poems, and Murphy, his first novel, Beckett turned to writing literary journalism. Lawrence E. Harvey (Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic, 1970) lists six book reviews and essays dealing with the works of Rainer Maria Rilke, Sean O'Casey, Thomas McGreevey, Ezra Pound, and Jack B. Yeats that Beckett wrote for The Criterion, The Bookman, and Dublin Magazine between 1933 and 1936. In these articles Beckett continues his attack on realism and draws one other conclusion pertinent to his developing aesthetics. In his review of O'Casey Beckett says that the playwright "discerns the principle of disintegration in even the most complacent solidities, and activates it to their explosion. . . . Mind and world come asunder in irreparable

dissociation."⁶ The authentic artist recognizes the falsehood of the rational man in an orderly world; thus, Beckett suggests that the artist must be capable of destroying if he is to have the power to create.⁷ The authentic artist destroys the illusion of order by creating the chaos that lies beneath the illusion.

These book reviews and essays were followed by more personal essays in the late 1930's and early 1940's in the defense of friends and fellow-artists. Most significant to Beckett's developing aesthetics in these essays is his notion that authentic art seeks not clarity but ambiguity. In response to a critic's condemnation of the painter and novelist Denis Delvin, Beckett writes in Eugene Jolas' perennially avant-garde review Transition (Spring 1938): "Art has always been this--pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric. . . . The time is perhaps not altogether too green for the vile suggestion that art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear," any more than the sun, moon and stars make "the subsolar, -lunar and -stellar excrement. Art is the sun, moon and stars of the mind, the whole

⁶ Reported in Lawrence Harvey's Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 415.

⁷ Ibid.

mind."⁸ Insisting upon the nonrational procedure of the artist that he first formulated in Proust, Beckett says that art depends "on a minimum of rational interference" and that it is a destruction of surfaces, an unveiling to bring "light . . . to the predicament of existence."⁹

Language, however, is ill-suited to be a medium of artistic expression because of its practical function and because of its arbitrary and abstract representation.¹⁰ In his awareness of language's inadequacy to express the predicament of existence, Beckett moves toward the conclusion that ultimately authentic art must fail in its efforts to express the inexpressible.

Beckett's nihilistic theory of art is stated explicitly in his dialogues with the French art-critic George Duthuit published in 1949 in Transition and reprinted in English in Martin Esslin's collection of critical essays (Samuel Beckett, 1965). The subject of these three dialogues is the abstract art of the 1940's, the paintings of Tal Coat, Masson, and Bram van Velde, yet Beckett's observations on their work are applicable to literature and reveal "his own

⁸ Reported in J. Mitchell Morse's "The Ideal Core of the Onion: Samuel Beckett's Criticism," French Review, 38 (October 1964), 26.

⁹ Reported in Harvey, p. 419.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 421.

inner and formal preoccupations more clearly than anywhere else."¹¹ Beckett (or "B") says that the revolutionary Tal Coat differs from the Italian painters who never stirred "from the field of the possible" only in that he disturbs "a certain order on the plane of the feasible." Duthuit (or "D") asks, "What other plane can there be for the maker?"

B.--Logically none. Yet I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.

D.--And preferring what?

B.--The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.¹²

Commenting on the painting of Bram van Velde, a master of disintegrated forms, as an artist of the "new order," Beckett says that he is "the first to submit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living. . . . I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission,

¹¹ Richard N. Coe, Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 2.

¹² Samuel Beckett and George Duthuit, "Three Dialogues," in Transition, No. 5 (1949); rpt. in Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 17.

this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation."¹³

Beckett concludes that in this new order of art "there is nothing to paint and nothing to paint with."¹⁴ Within this context, he dreams of "an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving."¹⁵

These comments on painting applied to literature suggest that although the writer is compelled as an artist to create, once he has realized his vision in concrete terms with words the Idea ceases to be itself and, therefore, the writer fails to express his vision. If literature in the modern world expresses anything, Beckett would say that it expresses failure, a failure at expressing the inexpressible. Richard N. Coe describes Beckett's own work in light of this view of art: "Beckett's . . . art is likewise an art of failure: it is by definition trying to do something that it cannot conceivably do--to create and to define that which, created and defined, ceases to be what it must be if it is to reveal the truth of the human situation; Man as a Nothing in relation to all things which themselves are Nothing."¹⁶

¹³ Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 18.

¹⁶ Coe, p. 4.

This "fidelity to failure," Beckett's call for a new order of art, encompasses the view that authentic art is "the elucidation of the impossible."¹⁷ It is the logical, although strange, consequence of his developing aesthetics which first took written expression in the essay on Joyce. Moreover, it is a direct reflection of his vision of the irrationality of the human experience. Beginning with the contention that form and content are inseparable, Beckett concludes that since the authentic artist's vision strikes below the surface unrealities of cause-effect to the chaotic nature of things, the form of expression itself must be anti-realistic, nonrational. Furthermore, in a world devoid of comforting values and beliefs, a world beyond understanding, practical and useful art is no longer possible; thus, the modern artist seeks not clarity and moral aim but ambiguity without moral significance. But even nonlogical art by its very nature is conceptual--it seeks to "express" through language the inexpressible--and, thereby, it fails. Ultimately, Beckett's aesthetics ask, "How, in the modern world, in the time of our great confusion--How is art possible at all?"¹⁸

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ David H. Hesla, The Shape of Chaos (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), p. 89.

Underlying these assumptions is a paradoxical epistemology that asserts that man seeks to know what cannot be known. Consequently, the ideal art "does not dabble in the clear, and does not make clear." As Steven J. Rosen's study of Beckett's aesthetics points out, this ideal art is epitomized by Molloy's unidentifiable silver object. "Here is something I can study all my life and never understand," says Molloy. The knife-rest is incomprehensible, a unique and carefully patterned work of art, but of no apparent use to Molloy. "From Molloy's remarks, one can infer Beckett's aesthetics," writes Rosen. "The purpose of art is to propel its beholder towards the sort of endless intellection Molloy describes--a stabilized confusion. The reader should be led to recognize that he is caught up amongst infinite or irresolvable considerations, but, and this is somewhat odd, enjoy that."¹⁹

BECKETT'S DRAMATIC TECHNIQUES

Considering the multifarious and often conflicting interpretations of Beckett's drama, one is tempted to quip that, indeed, Beckett's art does not fail in its attempt to bring about "a stabilized confusion." Much of the confusion, however, stems from critics who attempt to explain Beckett's

¹⁹ "Samuel Beckett: A Study of His Thought," Diss. Rutgers University, 1973, p. 13.

art from Aristotelian premises or from critics who are unhappy with the despair that pervades his vision. An example of the latter is Marya Mannes, theatre critic for the Reporter, who had this reaction to the Broadway production of Waiting for Godot: "I saw it at a matinee with the house half empty, and I doubt whether I have seen a worse play. I mention it only as typical of the self-delusion of which certain intellectuals are capable, embracing obscurity, pretense, ugliness, and negation as protective coloring for their own confusions."²⁰ The most objective critic, however, approaches Beckett's plays with two stipulations. First, he does not argue against Beckett's despair but merely acknowledges it as Beckett's unique vision. Second, he does not evaluate Beckett's art in Aristotelian terms, for Beckett's aims are not those of the traditional playwright.

Beckett shares much of his artistic vision and dramatic techniques with a group of playwrights who emerged in the 1950's and whose plays call into question basic aspects of traditional drama. Martin Esslin's definitive study of these dramatists entitled The Theatre of the Absurd argues that the drama of Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, and other avant-garde writers must not

²⁰ The Reporter, 20 October 1955; rpt. in Casebook on Waiting for Godot, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 30.

be judged by dramatic standards other than their own because their plays "pursue ends quite different from those of the conventional play and therefore use quite different methods."²¹ Esslin goes on to contrast the methods of the absurdist dramatist with those of the conventional playwright: "If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings."²²

If judged by standards of a "good" Aristotelian play, Beckett's plays in which the bounds of identity dissolve, in which action is replaced by stasis, and in which meaning itself is ambiguous, must be considered "poor" by comparison.

²¹ The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961), p. xviii.

²² Ibid., pp. xvii-xviii.

But Esslin's point is well taken. Beckett's ends are not those of the conventional playwright, and his methods which reflect those ends are not those of the conventional playwright.

Beckett's plays are organic presentations of the irrationality of existence--that is, his message concerning man's "ignorance and impotence" is dramatized implicitly in the form of the plays. Above all else his drama requires one "to face the problem of living in a world devoid of gods and devoid of the certitude and intelligibility and meaning and solace which those gods once bestowed on man and his world."²³ As such his plays deny the assumptions that underly Aristotelian drama and those that inform its techniques.

Aristotelian drama with its rationally motivated characters, plots of obstacle and resolution, and purposeful dialogue reflects a world of causal relationships discernible to rational man. Beckett's drama, however, denies causality, presents the mystery of the chaotic world as it is rather than what it "ought" to be, and ridicules man's effort to understand his predicament through rational means. Beckett accomplishes all this not by the Aristotelian method of statement of theme through "believable" characters involved

²³ Hesla, p. 228.

in rising and falling action but by characters who acknowledge that they are only players acting out their roles in a plot that does not move forward to a resolution but repeats itself ad infinitum. Whereas in an Aristotelian play, the audience is asked to suspend its disbelief and accept the characters as "real" people involved in "real" crises, in Beckett's plays the characters call attention to the fact they are playing: "This is what we call making an exit," says Clov in Endgame as he prepares to leave the stage. Moreover, the Aristotelian play does not deliberately foster confusion in the minds of the audience; Beckett's plays do. Viewing the Aristotelian play, the audience is concerned with the question: How will it end? The audience watching a play by Beckett asks: What is happening? All the "facts" that help us establish what is happening in the Aristotelian play are absent in Beckett's plays: locale and time are obscure; characters have no history or at least not any that they remember well, yet all the significant and, thereby, dramatic aspects of their lives seem to be part of the forgotten past; characters are incomplete within themselves and often come in pairs like Gogo and Didi, Lucky and Pozzo, Clov and Hamm who share some mysterious link; and what little is revealed by characters by what they say and do is often canceled out by contradictory speech and gesture. Even the allusions in Beckett's plays are misleading. Beckett's

allusions, contrary to those employed in the Aristotelian play, do not shed light on his message. For example, the audience watching Godot is uncertain as to Godot's identity just as the characters are, and it shares Gogo and Didi's hope of discovering the identity of Godot and their repeated disappointments. When the play stops (it does not end in the usual Aristotelian sense of denouement), the riddle is still unsolved. The allusions, primarily Christian, in the play invite interpretation of Godot's identity as God, but any clear and certain interpretation of Godot's identity would destroy the essence of the play which hinges on the very ambiguity that invites interpretation and is its message.

Although Beckett's plays do not conform to Aristotelian notions of the well-made play, his plays are made well. At the core of his art is a concern for form, a form expressive of the metaphysical absurdity and epistemological uncertainty that is his view of the human predicament. Beckett does not argue about the human predicament in his plays; he presents it in all its absurdity and uncertainty. Beckett calls these metaphysical farces tragi-comedies. Certainly, they do fit Eric Bentley's definition of the modern form of tragi-comedy as "comedy with an unhappy ending,"²⁴ but more

²⁴ The Life of the Drama (New York: Atheneum, 1964), p. 319.

important than the way in which the plays end is the mixed mood that pervades them. Whereas most absurdist playwrights use comedy mainly "to intensify the final tragedy . . . Beckett's tragedy is continuously dramatized by his comedy."²⁵ The juxtaposition of tone--comic and tragic--is typical of his work. As the characters engage in repetitious funny business, we are cognizant of the tragic futility of their actions, and as they repeatedly misunderstand each other, we are reminded of the tragic consequences of the inadequacy of language to express thought and emotion. After experiencing a play by Beckett, we must agree with Walter Kerr that "Comedy at its most penetrating derives from what we normally regard as tragic."²⁶

A READING OF BECKETT'S MIMES

Beckett writes in what Northrop Frye calls the "ironic mode"--that is, his protagonists are anti-heroes who are "inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity."²⁷ The best introduction to this

²⁵ Ruby Cohn, Currents in Contemporary Drama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 197.

²⁶ Tragedy and Comedy (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1967), p. 17.

²⁷ Anatomy of Criticism (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 34.

mode and one that prepares the reader for Beckett's more complicated plays is Beckett's pantomime drama. Act Without Words I, a mime for one player, and Act Without Words II, a mime for two players, were both written and produced in the late 1950's.²⁸ These cosmo-epistemological comedies are the most concise and clear dramatization of Beckett's view of the human predicament with all its tragic implications of impotence and ignorance.

In the mime for one player, a man is flung backwards upon the stage which represents a barren desert. He hears a whistle from stage right, reflects, then goes off only to be flung back immediately. The teasing whistle is heard next from offstage left, and the actor responds as he did the first time, and again he is thrown back. The whistle is heard again, but by this time man has learned his lesson; he does not respond. Next a small tree descends to offer a circle of shade that the player enjoys only momentarily because the palms quickly close up like a parasol. Then a bottle marked "Water" is hung enticingly just out of his reach, but a means of access is provided soon as three cubes are lowered one by one. After falling several times when trying to climb the cubes to reach the water, the man finally succeeds; however, the water is pulled a little

²⁸ The pantomimes, originally written in French, were translated by the author into English and included in Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (New York: Grove Press, 1958).

beyond his reach again. Meanwhile the whistle is blasting in all directions. A rope drops next, but when he begins to climb it, slack is let out and the actor drops to the ground. The torment goes on and on until the exasperated protagonist lies immobile on stage. The bottle of water dangles within easy reach about his face, but the only motion he makes is to stare blankly at his own hands. The meaning of this short mime is clear: man, tested like a laboratory chimp, is always at the mercy of some unseen force and his impotence is amusing. He is a clown tumbling and falling about the stage. The audience laughs, but when the player helplessly stares at his useless hands, the pathos is unmistakable.

Act Without Words II presents two extreme players reminiscent of the opposite pairs of characters in Beckett's longer plays. A is slow, awkward and absent, whereas B is brisk, rapid and precise. Each has an act to perform, and although B has more to do than A, the two actions have the same duration. The actions take place on a brightly lit platform at the back of an otherwise dark stage. At the opening of the mime the players are concealed in sacks lying beside each other on the platform two yards from stage left. These are the only props on the platform except for a neat pile of clothes (coat, trousers, boots, and hat) beside B's sack which is nearer of the two to stage right. The action

begins when a pointed stick, similar to ones used to drive oxen, enters horizontally from stage right and darts into sack A. The sack does not move. The action is repeated, and the sack moves. The goad exits. A, wearing a shirt, appears from the sack, broods, prays, takes a pill from his pocket and swallows it, puts on the clothes, takes a partially eaten carrot from the coat pocket, bites off a piece, chews and spits it out in disgust, then puts the carrot back. He next picks up the two sacks, carries them on his back half way to stage right. He takes off the clothes except the shirt, lets them fall in an untidy heap, broods, takes another pill, prays, and crawls back into his sack and lies still. After a pause, the pointed stick appears from stage right again but this time supported by one wheel. It goads sack B; the sack moves, and the stick exits. B, wearing a shirt, appears from the sack, consults a watch taken from his pocket, does exercises, consults the watch again, brushes his teeth, rubs his scalp and combs his hair, consults his watch, goes to clothes, puts them on, consults his watch, brushes off his clothes, takes a mirror from coat pocket and inspects appearance, returns the mirror and takes out the carrot which he bites and chews with relish. After he puts the carrot back, he again consults his watch and looks over a map and compass taken from the coat pocket. He picks up the two sacks and sets them down two yards short of

stage right. Afterwards he consults his watch, takes off the clothes except the shirt and folds them in a neat pile, consults his watch, repeats the exercises and the grooming, consults and winds watch, and, finally, crawls back into the sack and lies still. Another pause and then the goad supported by two wheels enters again from the right. It prods sack A twice before the sack moves. The goad exits. A crawls out of the sack, broods, and prays. The curtain falls as the action has come full circle with A and B now positioned at extreme stage right.

These pantomimes portray Beckett's concerns more succinctly than the more complicated and subtle plays, yet at the same time they employ the techniques (absent speech) of the longer drama. Foremost is the use of metaphor. The mimes are parables of Twentieth Century Everyman's absurd existence. We see him acting out the running joke of living. He is either impotent to act as in the mime for one player or acts routinely from meaningless habit as in the mime for two players. In either case, he is a comic figure. Comparatively, the mime for two players represents the more advanced "civilized" man, but the dual hero (A spiritual, B physical), who is goaded by increasingly complicated mechanisms, is still the absurd, meaningless man. The basic difference between the two situations is that the player in mime one accepts his impotence whereas the players in mime two repeat

their futile actions endlessly. In this respect, the latter mime is more typical of the situations in Beckett's longer drama. The futility of the repeated comic action is also its tragedy. It is not Aristotelian tragedy which suggests that man is rational and, thereby, accountable for his actions, but it is tragic in the sense that the Aristotelian tragedy is no longer possible. Beckett's man is ourselves, ignorant and impotent. As we see ourselves parodied on stage, our immediate reaction is laughter, but the pathos of the metaphysical farce remains to haunt us long after the laughter has subsided.

These mimes prepare us for reading Beckett's more subtle drama because they establish clearly that Beckett's basic dramatic technique is the metaphor, that his clown-type character is Universal Man, and that the dramatic conflict arises not from a tension created by a plot that moves forward to a logical resolution but from tension created from contradictory action that repeats itself endlessly. Ultimately when repetitious action cancels out repetitious action, a kind of uncomfortable stasis is reached where nothing meaningful happens, and thus Beckett makes his statement about the meaninglessness of existence. In the next essay these characteristics of Beckett's drama will be applied more specifically to the longer and more complex plays Waiting for Godot, Endgame, and Krapp's Last Tape.

Chapter IV

BECKETT'S DRAMAS ABOUT EXISTENCE: A STUDY OF DRAMATIC TECHNIQUE IN WAITING FOR GODOT, ENDGAME, AND KRAPP'S LAST TAPE

For one who dares to express the inexpressible and who finds language an inadequate vehicle for communication, the stage seems to be the perfect medium, or at least Beckett's only recourse, for his expression of the human predicament. Language is only one aspect of drama, and it can be, and often is in Beckett's plays, devaluated by a contrapuntal relation with action. Both acts of Waiting for Godot end with these words: "Yes, let's go," but neither of the two characters moves. Stasis, not action, defines man's predicament, and despite his desire to perform some significant act and thus give himself meaning, he is unable to do so.

Moreover, Beckett's non-discursive mode of writing is particularly adaptable to the stage, for the stage is a visual medium that can speak directly to the senses. Beckett does not debate his philosophy of the meaningless man in a meaningless word; he presents it. The plays do not defend abstractions; they portray man as an existent and explore the human situation. In this respect, Beckett's plays have been likened to abstract painting. Michael Robinson writes

that Beckett's theatre is one of situation as opposed to the theatre of events in sequence, and although what is witnessed extends over an entire evening, ideally it "should be comprehended in a single moment as an abstract painting seeks to impress the reality of an object upon the eye without its diffusion in the necessity of recognition."¹ The analogy of abstract art applied to Beckett's drama is appropriate because it implies his non-logical methods. Considering the plays in this light also explains Beckett's refusal to be interpreted and his repeated insistence that his plays are merely what they are and nothing more. "I only know what's on the page" is his usual response to questions concerning the meaning of his plays.²

Richard M. Goldman regards Beckett's drama as presentational form, a term that he borrows from Suzanne Langer's Philosophy in a New Key in which she discusses this form of communication as the non-discursive mode that is a direct presentation of an individual object which speaks directly to the senses.³ Goldman suggests that we might capture the

¹ The Long Sonata of the Dead (New York: Grove Press, 1969), p. 241.

² V. A. Kolve, "Religious Language in Waiting for Godot," Centennial Review, 11, No. 1 (Winter 1967), 106.

³ "Endgame and Its Scorekeepers" in Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame, ed. Bell Gale Chevigny (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p. 39.

special quality of Beckett's drama if we view it as an art critic might, if we describe what we see rather than analyzing it and if we attempt to "discover how it may have been made rather than how it satisfies the demands of a pre-existent form."⁴ Such an effort would emphasize the form of Beckett's drama, and since the meaning of his plays is inherent in the form, this approach would be a fruitful exploration of his drama. Furthermore, a study of Beckett's recurring dramatic methods avoids the trap of interpretations of any single play that are too specific. Such interpretations oversimplify Beckett's intentions and often lead to conflicting views. Two studies that fall into this category are C. Chadwick's and Leone J. Marinello's critiques of Waiting for Godot. Chadwick holds that Godot is an "anti-Christian play telling, allegorically, the story of mankind eternally waiting for a merciful God to bring salvation, but waiting in vain since God is a malevolent and jesting tyrant who is callously indifferent to the fate of his creatures."⁵ On the other hand, Marinello believes that the two tramps will be saved because they exercise faith, hope, and

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ "Waiting for Godot: A Logical Approach," Symposium, 14, No. 4 (Winter 1960), 257.

charity.⁶ Certainly, both cannot be right. Arnold Whittick takes such contradictory interpretations of Godot to mean that Beckett's obscure and ambiguous symbolism is ineffectual because "No definite interpretation of the play seems feasible."⁷ Whittick, however, does not understand that Beckett's ambiguity is fully intentional, that it pervades all his work, and that it is an essential part of the dramatization of his particular vision. In addition, the weakness of interpretations like those of Chadwick and Marinello is that "each author concludes by proving too much --and hence too little--because each does not grasp Beckett's method of dramatizing the problem of existence. Each critic mistakes a part of the form, a message, for the total meaning."⁸

This study of Beckett's drama takes its cue from Beckett's own aesthetics which espouse the idea that meaning and form are inseparable in art and from Goldman's suggestion that Beckett's presentational form is best understood when one describes how it takes shape rather than how it measures

⁶ "Samuel Beckett's Waiting for Godot: A Modern Classic Affirming Man's Dignity and Nobility and Ultimate Salvation," Drama Critique, 6 (Spring 1963), 75.

⁷ Symbols, Signs, and Their Meaning (London: Leonard Hill, 1960), p. 372.

⁸ John Rechtien, "Time and Eternity Meet in the Present," Texas Studies in Literature and Language, 6, No. 1 (Spring 1964), 5-6.

up to some standard form. The three recurring techniques that are the subject of this investigation and that give Beckett's drama its particular quality and shape are: the use of metaphor, the clown image, and repetition resulting in dramatic conflict which arises not from characters in action but from their inability to act significantly. Furthermore, this study will demonstrate that the pattern of Beckett's dramaturgy stems from his metaphysics and epistemology.

THE STAGE AS METAPHOR

In 1956 after he had written most of his major works, Beckett told Israel Shenker: "The French work brought me to the point where I felt I was saying the same things over and over again. For some authors writing gets easier the more they write. For me it gets more and more difficult. For me the area of possibilities gets smaller and smaller."⁹ Beckett's works repeat the same themes and employ the same techniques because the metaphysics and epistemology that inform both his aesthetics and his general vision of the human predicament have been relatively unchanging and pervasive throughout his career. The Beckettian man is a composite of all of Beckett's heroes. He lives in a world

⁹ "Moody Man of Letters," New York Times, 6 May 1956, Section 2, p. 1.

devoid of order and meaning--"a world that he did not make and that resists his efforts to make sense of it."¹⁰ Moreover, Beckett's twentieth century Everyman is ignorant and, thereby, impotent, yet paradoxically he continually struggles to give meaning to his world and to himself. Beckett's plays dramatize this struggle metaphorically, not discursively. In this respect, Beckett's drama, like the work of Proust, is impressionistic rather than realistic. For example, at the opening of Waiting for Godot Estragon, unable to put on his ill-fitting boots, remarks, "Nothing to be done."¹¹ What is true of Estragon's boots becomes true of life for Vladimir who says: "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion. All my life I've tried to put it from me, saying, Vladimir, be reasonable, you haven't tried everything. And I resumed the struggle" (p. 7). Thus, Estragon's failure with the boots takes on metaphysical significance for Vladimir. This parallels Beckett's major method of expression--the situation of his plays metaphorically represents the situation of life.

¹⁰ Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1962), p. 225.

¹¹ Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 7. Hereafter pagination for quotations taken from the play will be cited in the text.

Synopsis of the Plays: The
Waiting Motif as a Metaphor
for Existence

The plays selected for study are Waiting for Godot (1953), Endgame (1957), and Krapp's Last Tape (1958). All three plays parody man's absurd actions to give himself meaning in a senseless world. There is no character development in the plays because according to Beckett's view of man, development is impossible. This is why the characters remain essentially unchanged throughout the course of the plays and why the total action of the plays goes no farther than the basic situation. Both action and situation can be summed up in the same present participle: two tramps waiting (Waiting for Godot), a master and his servant waiting for the end (Endgame), and an old man playing tapes (Krapp's Last Tape).¹²

The tramp protagonists, Vladimir and Estragon, of Waiting for Godot take up their vigil for Godot on a deserted country road marked only by one small withered tree. They are not quite sure who Godot is, or even if they are waiting at the right place, yet they remain; and while they wait, they play games to pass the time, to alleviate their suffering, and to distract themselves from the boredom of their vigil. The identity of the mysterious Godot is only of

¹² Ronald Hayman, Samuel Beckett (New York: Ungar, 1973), p. 27.

secondary importance, for the play's real subject is not Godot but the waiting itself.¹³ Although the tramps are interrupted on two occasions by Pozzo and his slave Lucky, the wait generally is uneventful. Estragon sums up the action when he says, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful" (p. 27).

Edith Kern appropriately calls Godot "drama stripped for inaction."¹⁴ The description applies to Endgame and Krapp's Last Tape as well, for waiting is the crucial experience for the characters of these plays, too. Whereas the tramps in Godot hope that Godot will come, in Endgame there is no longer hope that anyone will come. The characters simply wait for something significant to happen. Frederick J. Hoffman considers Endgame "a step removed from Godot toward death."¹⁵ The deserted road of Godot is replaced by an unfurnished room with two small windows too high to be seen through. The room entombs four grotesque characters. Nagg and Nell, husband and wife, are confined in two garbage cans and occasionally pop up to ask for sugar plums. Their blind son Hamm, also an invalid, is completely

¹³ Jacques Guicharnaud, Modern French Theatre from Giraudoux to Beckett (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), p. 247.

¹⁴ "Drama Stripped for Inaction," Yale French Studies, No. 14 (Winter 1954-55), p. 41.

¹⁵ Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962), p. 154.

dependent on Clov, his adopted son, who is the only character able to move about the room. Clov continually changes a ladder from window to window, peers out, and reports to Hamm that "All is Zero."¹⁶ Perhaps the four are waiting for the end of the world, but whatever awaits them, the situation is clearly hopeless, for Hamm says, "Outside of here it's death" (p. 8).

Likewise death is imminent for the protagonist in the monodrama Krapp's Last Tape. The time is in the future and Krapp, "a wearish old man," passes the time listening to tape recordings of his own voice.¹⁷ Throughout a long period of time he has built up a diary on tape. Spotlit by a strong white light in an otherwise dark stage, Krapp sits at a table with the tape recorder and listens to his voice of the past. He finds little comfort, however, because he hardly recognizes the voice of his former self. The old man has lost all personal identity, so much in fact that he takes interest only in the description of the sexual encounters of the younger Krapp much in the manner of a voyeur. Consequently, the game he plays while waiting out

¹⁶ Samuel Beckett, Endgame (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 8. Hereafter pagination for quotations taken from the play will be cited in the text.

¹⁷ Samuel Beckett, Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 9. Hereafter pagination for quotations taken from the play will be cited in the text.

life is as meaningless as the games played by Vladimir and Estragon and their counterparts Clov and Hamm.

Man waiting for something significant to happen to give himself meaning is the common situation in Godot, Endgame, and Krapp's Last Tape. The major assumption of the plays is that of "existential time leading inevitably toward death. Within its passing, there are boredom and desperate strategies to give it significance, or simply to 'pass the time.'"¹⁸ This basic situation is a metaphor for the human predicament in general. The non-specific settings and the anonymity of the characters exclude the plays from any social reality or historical context that would detract attention from the general human situation that is portrayed.

Godot takes place simply on a country road. "The drama does not occur at any particular time or place, which is to say it occurs at all times and places. Likewise, the characters are symbols of men living anywhere at any time," writes Jerome Ashmore.¹⁹ Little is known about Vladimir and Estragon except that they have been together about fifty years. Their surnames are not given, and the names Vladimir and Estragon are known only to the reader. In the play they refer to each other as Didi and Gogo; however, when Estragon

¹⁸ Hoffman, pp. 157-158.

¹⁹ "Philosophical Aspects of Godot," Symposium, 16, No. 4 (Winter 1962), 296.

is asked his name, he says that it is Adam (the father of all men, hence mankind). Estragon confuses "Bozzo" for "Pozzo," and Pozzo refers to Godot as "Godet" and "Godin." Thus, names that usually give man a specific identity are shown to be untrustworthy. The characters' lack of specific biographies leads Edith Kern to remark that "Estragon and Vladimir seem quite as anonymous as A and B in Molloy. . . . Like A and B . . . Estragon and Vladimir cannot be easily distinguished from each other, nor can the beholder easily distinguish himself from them. For fundamentally, they represent all mankind."²⁰

The bare room of Endgame is otherwise non-descriptive. Clov describes the world that he sees from the windows as a desert, half earth and half sea. Like the tramps in Godot, the characters in Endgame lack biographies which establish definite identities. Nothing is known about Clov and Hamm's relationship except that Clov is Hamm's adopted son. They, too, are clearly men in general. They are abstract in "the most cruel, literal sense of the word: they are abs-tracti, which means: pulled away, set apart."²¹

²⁰ Kern, p. 43.

²¹ Gunther Anders, "Being without Time: On Beckett's Play Waiting for Godot," trans. Martin Esslin, in Samuel Beckett, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 141.

This abstractness calls for generalization, and "the reader may safely infer that Man and his Situation are the real objects of the play."²²

Likewise the solitary Krapp struggling futilely to experience himself in his memories is Beckett's Everyman. The time is simply the future; the place his den. We learn little about him except that he is an unsuccessful author and that he is all alone. Whereas Gogo has his Didi, Hamm his Clov, Krapp is completely alienated from society. "Not a soul," he laments twice in the play (pp. 14, 25).

These unfortunate creatures, trapped by circumstances beyond their control and deprived of normal comforts and pleasures due to their age, ill health, and poverty, are forced to concentrate with special intensity all their hopes on one last illusion: perhaps Godot will come; perhaps the game will end and Clov will leave Hamm; perhaps Krapp will find himself on tape. Stripped down to bare essentials, "their situation becomes a symbol of that of man as such. They are man seeking meaning in an absurd world."²³ Each seeks it in his own way, but the pattern that emerges is clearly one of playing to pass the time, and the

²² Richard M. Eastman, "The Strategy of Samuel Beckett's Endgame," Modern Drama, 2, No. 1 (May 1959), 37.

²³ Eugene Webb, The Plays of Samuel Beckett (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1972), p. 26.

impossibility of ever attaining meaning is the common theme of the three plays.

Life as Play

Speaking about his drama, Beckett told Ruby Cohn: "It's a game. You can't get away from actor and audience."²⁴ Whereas the trilogy concentrates on man writing, the plays concentrate on man acting, playing. In this way, Beckett tells us that life at best is pretense, a series of scenarios to fill the void of meaninglessness. "Aristotelian drama, which imitates an action," writes Cohn, "is crystallized by Beckett to the acting which is all we know of living."²⁵ And acting is man's habit, the compromise of which Beckett speaks in Proust, by which man attempts to mitigate the pains and tedium of living.

There are many instances in the three plays that present play as reality and reality as play. Similar to the self-conscious narrators in the trilogy, the protagonists of Godot are self-conscious actors who comment on the progress of the play and the performance of the other characters. "Charming evening we're having," says Vladimir. "Unforgettable," replies Estragon.

²⁴ Currents in Contemporary Drama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 34.

²⁵ "Acting for Beckett," Modern Drama, 9, No. 3 (1966), 237.

Vladimir: And it's not over.
 Estragon: Apparently not.
 Vladimir: It's only beginning.
 Estragon: It's awful.
 Vladimir: Worse than the pantomime.
 Estragon: The Circus.
 Vladimir: The music-hall.

(p. 23)

And when Vladimir exits, he tells Estragon to keep his seat as if he were the audience at his own performance. The tyrant Pozzo, however, is Godot's star actor in the grand tradition. He enters cracking his whip and announces, "I am Pozzo" (p. 15). His bombastic speeches are marked by theatrical gestures and affected diction: he advances threateningly (p. 15), magnanimous gesture (p. 16), hand to heart sighing (p. 19), groaning, clutching his head, and waving his arms (p. 122). Before each of his performances, he takes out a vaporizer and sprays his throat: "I am ready. Is everybody listening? Is everybody ready?" (p. 20). Later he overdramatizes about the evening.

Ah yes! The night. (He raises his head.) But be a little more attentive, for pity's sake, otherwise we'll never get anywhere. (He looks at sky.) Look! . . . What is there so extraordinary about it? Qua sky. It is pale and luminous like any sky at this hour of the day. (Pause.) In these latitudes. (Pause.) When the weather is fine. (Lyrical.) An hour ago (he looks at his watch, prosaic) roughly (lyrical) after having poured forth even since (he hesitates, prosaic) say ten o'clock in the morning (lyrical) tirelessly torrents of red and white light it begins to lose its effulgence, to grow pale (gesture of the two hands lapsing by stages) pale, ever a little paler until (dramatic pause, ample gesture)

of the two hands flung wide apart) pppfff!
finished! it comes to rest. But--(hand raised
in admonition)--but behind this veil of gentle-
ness and peace night is charging (vibrantly) and
will burst upon us (snaps his fingers) pop! like
that! (his inspiration leaves him) just when we
least expect it. (Silence. Gloomily.) That's
how it is on this bitch of an earth.
(pp. 25-26)

After his soliloquy the self-conscious actor who is anxious to please asks, "How did you find me? Good? Fair? Middling? Poor? Positively Bad?"

Whereas Pozzo's role is to play the tyrant, Lucky's role is to play the fool. He dances and thinks at Pozzo's command but does neither very well. Lucky's rambling, repetitious speech in Act I is a parody of logical thought and philosophy in general just as the play of all the characters mocks the ways that man has devised to give himself meaning: religion ("One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage," says Vladimir, p. 8); nature (When Estragon is unable to hide himself behind the tree, Vladimir says, "Decidedly this tree will not have been the slightest use to us," p. 48); and even theatre itself (At the end of Pozzo's performance, Vladimir remarks, "I have been better entertained," p. 26).

In addition to the metaphor of man as actor, man as player is dramatized through word games (such as Vladimir and Estragon's exchange of namecalling which ends with "Crritic!", p. 48), body games (such as exercising), and

routines (hats off to think, for example). Richard Schechner notes that in terms of the play's action, these games are meaningless: "They lead nowhere, they contribute to the non-plot."²⁶ Thematically, however, their very meaninglessness comments on the futile habits of men.

Endgame is also a play that is aware of itself as play and as a text performed for an audience. The dialogue is full of theatrical terms: making an exit, farce, audition, aside, soliloquy, dialogue, and underplot. There are also comments on the play made from the stage such as Hamm's criticisms, "This is slow work" (p. 12) and "Nicely put that" (p. 51) which parallel Vladimir's "I begin to weary of this motif" (Godot, p. 53) and "This is becoming really significant" (Godot, p. 44). Hamm, as his name suggests, is the ham actor. In this respect, he is reminiscent of Pozzo who plays a role that lacks any real feeling and motivation. "Me--(He yawns.)--to play. . . . Can there be misery--(He yawns.)--loftier than mine?" is Hamm's opening speech (p. 2). He performs set speeches that are scheduled to be spoken at intervals during the evening: "I'm warming up for my last soliloquy," he says near the play's conclusion. At the conclusion he throws his whistle to the audience: "With my compliments" (p. 84). Not only is Hamm an actor, he appears

²⁶ "Godotology: There's Lots of Time in Godot," Modern Drama, 9, No. 3 (1966), 274.

to be the director of the play as well. He tells Clov, "Since that's the way we're playing it, let's play it that way" (p. 84). Clov, Nagg, and Nell are his captive audience; the latter two he bribes with sugar plums so that they will watch him perform.

The theatre metaphor is only one of the dramatized metaphors for human existence in Endgame. David H. Hesla in The Shape of Chaos (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971) identifies four other such metaphors operating simultaneously in the play: stage represents the endgame of a game of chess; stage represents the throne room of a dying king; stage represents the narrator-writer's study of a creator no longer able to create; and stage represents the interior skull of a man suffering from a split personality. Of these, the chess metaphor most clearly dramatizes Beckett's metaphysics and epistemology. Cohn reports that when Beckett directed his own production of Endgame in Berlin in 1967, he described Hamm as "a king in the chess game lost from the start."²⁷ The play as the last stage of a game of chess suggests Beckett's epistemology; it is useless to attempt to arrive at a conclusion about anything through local means because chess, a symbol of logic, is made to look ridiculous. Ultimately, the play "is a static ballet of two immovable pawns,

²⁷ Ruby Cohn, Back to Beckett (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 152.

a helpless king and an aimlessly roving knight playing themselves into a hopeless stalemate."²⁸

Although Krapp acts as his own audience for the recorded tapes and subsequently "performs" for the Krapp of the future, the stage metaphor is less marked in the monodrama than in the other plays. However, existence as play is quite evident. The play dramatizes the elusiveness of being, first formulated by Beckett in Proust and later dramatized in the trilogy. Moreover, the play comments on the passage of Time, that "double-headed monster" of Proust. The tape recorder, an instrument being perfected at the time Beckett wrote the play, becomes the stage metaphor for time past. The juxtaposition of Krapp's voices, separated by thirty years, implies an ironic comment on the passage of time. Although Krapp has literally captured his younger self on tape, time still has passed him by. He is Time's victim, for the older Krapp cannot identify with the younger man (so much, in fact, that he no longer knows the meaning of words the younger man uses). The patterns of habit (drinking, eating bananas, recording tapes) that mark his "playing" at living at the age of sixty-nine grow out of the earlier life, and in this respect he is a prisoner of Time and of the man he no longer recognizes. He records: "Just

²⁸ G. E. Wellwarth, The Theatre of Protest and Paradox (New York: New York University Press, 1964), p. 47.

been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for thirty years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that" (p. 24). The irony is that now he is even worse, more a creature of habit than he ever was before. The repetitive and futile gestures mount up to zero: "Nothing to say, not a squeak," he concludes at age sixty-nine. "What's a year now? The sour cud and the iron stool" (p. 25).

Beckett's characters, players at play, dramatize the metaphysical absurdity and epistemological uncertainty of their author's tragi-comic vision of the human predicament. Man is a comic character who is also tragic. His tragedy stems from the fact that despite his repeated efforts to be meaningful, all attempts are merely futile games, habits, that bind him even more securely to his predicament; his comedy lies in the fact that he continues despite failure. The laugh which Beckett's clowns of failure evoke is "the mirthless laugh . . . the laugh of laughs, the risus purus, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs--silence please--at that which is unhappy."²⁹

²⁹ Samuel Beckett, Watt (1953; rpt. New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 48.

THE CLOWN IMAGE

In Proust Beckett writes "Opera is less complete than vaudeville, which at least inaugurates the comedy of exhaustive enumeration" (p. 71). It is from vaudeville and the circus that he takes the comic figures that dominate his plays. Clowns who provoke laughter by their calculated clumsiness and ineptitude are appropriate heroes for Beckett's dramatization of the absurdity of the human situation, for as J. L. Styan in his treatment of the comic tragedy of modern drama entitled Dark Comedy notes, the clown figure reflects "in immense variety the mixture of the comic and pathetic in man."³⁰

All of Beckett's characters are bored while they wait, and in addition to the waiting motif and the metaphor of man as a player at play, the plays portray man as a bumbling fool. The clown image serves Beckett visually, verbally, and connotatively. An important aspect of the visual effect is the clown's properties. The protagonists of Godot are Charlie Chaplin type bums complete with ill-fitting bowlers, baggy trousers, and over-sized boots. Professor of Theology and Literature at the University of Chicago Nathan A. Scott notes the appropriateness of the Chaplin Tramp for Beckett's

³⁰ The Dark Comedy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 263.

plays. He says that Chaplin's little man "best expresses man's attempt to live decently in a world of hostile objects and social groups."³¹ Yet Vladimir and Estragon are less attractive figures than the lovable Chaplin. Infested with fleas and suffering from kidney problems and swollen feet, these men are dregs of humanity. At least one of them fully understands their predicament. Remembering that Godot has never given them any kind of unequivocal promise that he will come, Estragon asks Vladimir, "Where do we come in?" and Vladimir answers, "On our hands and knees" (p. 13).

Appropriately, Vladimir's trademark is his hat, for he is the thinker of the two. His business with the hat complements Estragon's business with his ill-fitting shoes. For example, while Estragon struggles to take off his boots, Vladimir in deep thought takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again . . . takes [it] off again, peers inside it, feels about inside it, knocks on the crown, blows into it, puts it on again and says, "This is getting alarming" (pp. 7-8).

The comic team, reminiscent of a vaudeville duo, complement each other in other ways, too. Vladimir has the distinction of garlic breath (good for the kidneys) and, of course, Estragon's feet smell. Whereas the latter finds

³¹ Samuel Beckett (New York: Hillary House Publishers, 1969), p. 94.

that the more he eats carrots the worse they get, Vladimir enjoys them more, the more he eats and even uses the occasion to philosophize about the difference. He says that the trait is a question of character and that "one is what one is. . . . The essential doesn't change" (p. 14). Vladimir's reflection is generally indicative of the basic difference between the two. Whereas Gogo frets about creature comforts and is generally funnier and the more endearing of the two, Didi maintains an ironic view of himself and his situation.³² Furthermore, the duo foreshadow Hamm and Clov in Endgame; Beckett's clowns often come in pairs--Pozzo and Lucky, Nagg and Nell. Each is incomplete without the other; one represents the mind, the other the body. "What might these duets mean or be?" asks Schechner. "Each of them suggests a precarious existence, of sense of self-in-the-world so dependent on 'the other' as to be inextricably bound up in the other's physical presence. In these plays 'experience' is not 'had' by a single character, but 'shared' between them. It is not a question of fulfillment--of why Romeo wants Juliet--but of existence."³³ Yet their mutual existence is often in conflict, making life unbearable

³² Cohn, Currents in Contemporary Drama, p. 189.

³³ Schechner, pp. 269-270.

together. The prospect of a life apart, however, is also unbearable:

Estragon: (coldly). There are times when
I wonder if it wouldn't be better
for us to part.
Vladimir: You wouldn't go far.
Estragon: That would be too bad, really too
bad. (Pause.) And the goodness
of the wayfarers. (Pause.
Wheedling.) Wouldn't it, Didi?
(p. 11)

The mutual interdependence of the characters and their love and hate relationship may be explained in terms of the personality in conflict with itself,³⁴ similar to the Molloy-Moran relationship in the trilogy, but it also can be explained in terms of Habit as discussed in Proust. Gogo and Didi have become habits for each other, and in this way they attempt to alleviate the boredom and suffering of living.

Among the clown's visual bags of tricks is mimicry. In Godot imitation adds another dimension of comedy, for what the characters do mirrors in a comic manner the already farcial behavior of other characters. For instance, when Vladimir painfully hurries offstage because of his affliction, Estragon mocks him. The stage directions read: Exit Vladimir hurriedly. Estragon gets up and follows him as far as the limits of the stage. Gestures of Estragon like those of a spectator encouraging a pugilist (p. 11). At another

³⁴ Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961), pp. 31-32.

point in the play, Vladimir and Estragon mimic Pozzo and Lucky. Vladimir suggests that he play Lucky and that Estragon play Pozzo as an amusement to pass the time. The original pair is comical enough, but as Vladimir imitates Lucky sagging under the weight of the baggage, trying to think and to dance, the former burlesque is surpassed.

Of the Laurel and Hardy bits that engage Vladimir and Estragon, the business with Lucky's hat is probably most familiar. Discovering the magical hat which Lucky left behind, Vladimir replaces his own with it, and the gag ensues:

Estragon takes Vladimir's hat.
Vladimir adjusts Lucky's hat on his head.
Estragon puts on Vladimir's hat in place
of his own which he hands to Vladimir.
Vladimir takes Estragon's hat. Estragon
adjusts Vladimir's hat on his head.
Vladimir puts on Estragon's hat in place
of Lucky's which he hands to Estragon.
Estragon takes Lucky's hat. . . .

(p. 46)

The nonsense goes on until Vladimir ends up wearing Lucky's hat and throwing down his own. The business is amusing, but the nonsense is also meaningful. One ill-fitting hat is as good as another in this topsy-turvy world.

No doubt one of the most amusing of the clown's antics is the pratfall, yet in Godot the rough and tumble slapstick often turns to cruelty: Pozzo torments Lucky, Estragon kicks Lucky to avenge himself, Vladimir strikes Pozzo to

silence him, and all characters throw themselves on Lucky to stop his outburst of thought. In her consideration of the comic gamut of Beckett's work, Roby Cohn observes that "details of cruelty, comically conveyed, delineate man's metaphysical situation."³⁵ In Godot the cruel slapstick illustrates the absurdity of the human situation. For when Estragon seeks revenge by kicking the fallen Lucky, he hurts himself instead. Completely powerless to determine his own destiny, modern man's actions often backfire.

Acknowledging the metaphysical significance of the comic action in Godot, Edith Kern points out the similarities between Beckett's techniques and those of the Commedia dell'Arte, particularly the stage business called lazzi which range from simple stage tricks such as displacing hats to gestures expressing emotions.³⁶ People falling over each other, exchanging ill-fitting clothes, and scratching fleas have long been mimes of the comedian, and today, as was true with the Commedia dell'Arte, the language of mime is universally recognized. Since much of the mime depends on incongruity of action for its comic effect, the clown's act is an appropriate medium for the dramatization of an absurd world view. Like Estragon, humanity is caught with its

³⁵ Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut, p. 222.

³⁶ "Beckett and the Spirit of the Commedia dell'Arte," Modern Drama, 9, No. 3 (1966), 262.

pants down and is falling all over itself, or as one critic suggests, "Beckett's bum is everyman and his condition ours. We are all poor slobs, after all, whatever our pretensions, and all alone whatever gangs we run with."³⁷

With either "very white" or "very red" faces, the four figures in Endgame are grotesque; nevertheless, they are still clowns--clowns, not in the Chaplin genre, but more of the stylized circus type. And like their counterparts in Godot, much of their comic effect stems from stage business: Nagg and Nell continually pop up from the garbage cans; Clov covers and uncovers them; Clov moves the ladder from one window to the other and nearly falls each time. Furthermore, Clov's invalid master Hamm demands to be in the center of things, and Clov spends much time stationing the wheelchair as Hamm demands:

Hamm: Am I right in the center?
 Clov: I'll measure it.
 Hamm: MORE or less! More or less!
 . . . I'm more or less in
 the center?
 Clov: I'd say so.
 Hamm: You'd say so! Put me right
 in the center!
 Clov: I'll go and get the tape.
 Hamm: Roughly! Roughly! . . .
 Bang in the Center!
 (Clov moves the chair slightly.)
 Clov: There! (Pause.)

³⁷ William York Tindall, "Beckett's Bums," Critique, 2 (Spring-Summer 1959), 15.

Hamm: I feel a little too far to
the left.
(Clov moves chair slightly.)
Now I feel a little too far
to the right.
(Clov moves chair slightly.)
I feel a little too far forward.
(Clov moves chair slightly.)
Now I feel a little too far back.
(Clov moves chair slightly.)
Don't stay there,
(i.e. behind the chair)
you give me the shivers.
(Clov returns to his place
beside the chair.)

Clov: If I could kill him, I'd die happy.
(pp. 27-28)

Much like the characters in Godot, Clov and Hamm, slave and master, complement each other; one cannot sit, the other cannot stand, which causes Hamm to remark, "Every man [has] his specialty" (p. 10). Their relationship reeks of cruelty reminiscent of Pozzo and Lucky's relationship, but it is cruelty that provokes laughter. Discussing Clov's desire to leave him, Hamm says to Clov, "I've made you suffer too much. Haven't I?" and when Clov replies that he is not leaving because of that, Hamm is shocked:

Hamm: I haven't made you suffer too much?
Clov: Yes!
Hamm: (relieved) Ah you gave me a fright!
(pp. 6-7)

Clov repays Hamm's unkindness with a blow on the head with a three-legged toy dog. The absurdity of it all is amusing, but aware of Beckett's parody of the human situation, John T. Sheedy writes, "any laughter at Endgame laughs at his own

wounds."³⁸ The play is built on cruelty, suffering and death, and its characters recognize the terribleness of their predicament:

Hamm: (gloomily) Then it's a day
like any other day.
Clov: As long as it lasts. (Pause.)
All life long the same inanities.
(pp. 44-45)

Paradoxically, cruelty serves to alienate the characters from each other but it also binds them together. It is one way they attempt to define themselves. Their names suggest this peculiar relationship. Clov, Nagg, Nell are all four letter words which mean nail; Hamm suggests hammer.³⁹ The "blows" that ensue in the play, its cruelty, requires both, so that the characters are defined by the subject and object of cruelty. This division of the characters into subject and object helps explain the incompleteness of Clov and Hamm as individuals. Each alone is incomplete, but as a clown pair, they make up an individual, or as Allan Brick observes, they portray "the self divided into two persons."⁴⁰

Whereas Clov and Hamm require each other to be complete, Krapp in his monodrama searches for himself in memories

³⁸ "The Comic Apocalypse," Modern Drama, 9, No. 3 (1966), 310.

³⁹ Cohn, Back to Beckett, p. 141.

⁴⁰ "A Note on Perception and Communication in Beckett's Endgame," Modern Drama, 4, No. 1 (1961), 20.

recorded on tape. Rummaging among taped recordings of his own voice of years past, Krapp in oversized dirty white boots, short trousers, black sleeveless waistcoat and shirt minus collar, is the "clown turned meditative."⁴¹ His white face and purple nose, grotesque as they are, are borrowed from the tradition of the clown and so are his actions. One of the oldest gags in the clown's repertoire is slipping on a banana peel. Krapp has an insatiable appetite for bananas and much of the comic business deals with his eating bananas. In the beginning of the play before he plays a tape, Krapp finds a banana in the table drawer. He takes the banana out

turns, advances to edge of stage, halts, strokes banana, peels it, drops skin at his feet, puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him. Finally he bites off the end, turns aside and begins pacing to and fro at edge of stage, in the light . . . meditatively eating banana. He treads on skin, slips, nearly falls, recovers himself, stoops and peers at skin and finally pushes it, still stooping, with his foot over the edge of stage into pit. He resumes his pacing, finishes banana, returns to table, sits down, remains a moment motionless, heaves a great sigh . . . takes out a second large banana, peers at it . . . strokes banana, peels it, tosses skin into pit, puts end of banana in his mouth and remains motionless, staring vacuously before him.

(pp. 10-12)

Not only does Krapp like bananas, he periodically leaves the stage to drink so that by the end of the play he is quite

⁴¹ Hoffman, p. 156.

drunk. Although the audience never sees him drinking, the obvious sound effects of the cork popping, tinkling of glass, and, of course, Krapp's slurping convey the message.

The drunken Krapp is an unattractive yet pathetic creature whose past has lost all meaning. The voice on tape is a stranger's voice; his vocabulary disconcerting. For example, Krapp at age thirty-nine speaks of his mother's death after her long "viduity." Krapp switches off the recorder and stares blankly. He mouths the syllables of "viduity" without sound and finally goes off into the darkness. He returns with an enormous dictionary and looks up the word. Finding it, he reads, "State--or condition of being--or remaining--a widow--or widower. (Looks up. Puzzled.) Being--or remaining? . . . (Pause. He peers again at dictionary. Reading.) Deep weeds of viduity. . . . Also of an animal, especially a bird . . . the vidua or weaver-bird. . . . Black plumage of male. . . . (He looks up. With relish.) The vidua-bird! (Pause. He closes dictionary, switches on, resumes listening posture.)"

(p. 18). Krapp's stupidity evokes laughter, but the implication is serious and reminds one of Vladimir and Estragon's attempt to pass the time by talking. Estragon suggests that the two talk so they will not think and so they will not hear: "All the dead voices. They make a noise like wings. Like leaves. Like sand. Like leaves. . . . Rather they

whisper. They rustle. They murmur. They rustle. . . . They talk about their lives. To have lived is not enough for them. . . . They make a noise like feathers. Like leaves. Like ashes. Like leaves" (p. 40). To live is not enough for Krapp; he must relive an already meaningless existence.

Much of the humor of Krapp's Last Tape is found in Krapp's obvious delight in the pronunciation of words. For instance, he takes relish in repeating the word spool, which he pronounces as "Spoooool!" (p. 12). Again the comic effect rests with the farcial techniques of the clown, but the emphasis here is on verbal play.

The verbal play of the clown serves Beckett in many ways. At the most elementary level there are the obvious puns on names: Krapp, despite his name, suffers from constipation, and Hamm, like the ham actor, must upstage all other characters. Beckett also uses sexual puns. For instance, when Clov discovers a flea and dusts insecticide down his pants to kill it, Hamm asks, "Did you get him?"

Clov: Looks like it. Unless he's laying doggo.

Hamm: Laying! Lying you mean. Unless he's lying doggo.

Clov: Ah? One says lying? One doesn't say laying?

Hamm: Use your head, can't you. If he was laying we'd be bitched.

(Endgame, p. 34)

The music hall repartee is frequently employed in the plays, but often the humor is black. Clov asks Hamm, "Do you believe in the life to come?" and Hamm replies, "Mine was always that" (Endgame, p. 49). In addition, Beckett, although an accomplished linguist, relies only on a few words to build comic effect.⁴² The stichomythia in the following dialogue from Endgame depends on the repetition of two words for its humor:

Clov: So you all want me to leave you.
 Hamm: Naturally.
 Clov: Then I'll leave you.
 Hamm: You can't leave us.
 Clov: Then I won't leave you. (Pause.)
 Hamm: Why don't you finish us? . . .
 Clov: I couldn't finish you.
 Hamm: Then you won't finish me.
 Clov: I'll leave you.

(p. 37)

Most of the verbal play in Beckett's works functions to emphasize the impossibility of genuine communication. Krapp cannot understand himself and no one understands Lucky's jibberish, yet the blathering goes on. Estragon remarks, "Yes, now I remember, yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That's been going on now for half a century" (Godot, p. 42). The clowns' failures at communication parody modern man's futile attempts. But it is when action contradicts language that Beckett is most amusingly meaningful: "Shall we go? Yes, let's go" but

⁴² Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut, p. 37.

Gogo and Didi do not move. The incongruity of visual and verbal play is one of the clown's funniest tricks, and Beckett uses it to mock the inherent contradiction of the human predicament.

Hugh Kenner likens the antics of Beckett's clowns to Emmett Kelly's solemn determination to sweep a circle of light into a dustpan.⁴³ The comparison is fitting, for Kelly's action epitomizes the senselessness of man's actions, and so do Beckett's plays. Whether waiting for Godot or for the end of life, all the characters attempt to fill the emptiness that surrounds them. They are parodies of men caught up in a vaudeville sketch "Worse than the pantomime. . . . It's awful" (Godot, p. 23).

The clown image is most appropriate for portraying Beckett's philosophy, for "it is comedy that expresses the logic of the absurd," which postulates the illogic of existence.⁴⁴ Traditionally, comedy ends happily and functions to restore confidence in man's ability to deal with his environment whatever obstacles befall him, but comedy which mirrors man's behavior in a world devoid of order and meaning represents "a strange new mutation in the life of the comic spirit . . . which reaches down toward . . . that

⁴³ Samuel Beckett (New York: Grove Press, 1961), p. 13.

⁴⁴ Ruby Cohn, "The Comedy of Samuel Beckett," Yale French Studies, No. 23 (Winter 1959-60), p. 14.

dim world usually assigned to tragedy."⁴⁵ However, Beckett's man is too pathetic to be tragic in the classical sense. Trapped in a world that he did not make and one that defies his efforts to make sense of it, the tragedy of Beckett's clowns lies in their inability to be tragic as the protagonists of Shakespeare's tragedies are, for example. "Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps," says Vladimir, and "We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries" (Godot, p. 58). Considering Beckett's philosophy of the meaningless man in a meaningless world, the choice of the clown (He who gets kicked) seems inevitable. The victim's cries of pain and surprise do evoke laughter, but it is the mirthless laugh, "the laugh of laughs." One of the characters from Endgame appropriately sums up the effect of Beckett's comedy: "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness. . . . It's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more" (pp. 18-19).

⁴⁵ Scott, pp. 102-103.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF INACTION

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

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

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

Then all the dogs came running . . .

This old German students' song that Vladimir sings at the opening of Act II of Waiting for Godot repeats its pattern ad infinitum. The endlessness makes the song both "comic and haunting, suggesting inescapability as well as perpetuation,"⁴⁶ and, thereby, captures both the mood and situation of the play as a whole. Its nonsense also reflects the futile and repetitious actions of Beckett's tramps as they strain desperately to pass the time while waiting for Godot. Moreover, the song foreshadows the open-ended conclusion of the play. At the close of the play we expect that Gogo and Didi will come tomorrow and the day after, ad infinitum. The ballad also is indicative of Beckett's

⁴⁶ Kern, "Drama Stripped for Inaction," p. 45.

dramatic form in general; its endless pattern of repetition parallels that of Beckett's static dramas.

The tension of the conventional Aristotelian play derives from characters involved in conflict, that is, characters in action which comprises the forward progression of plot. Plot exists on "the assumption that events in time are significant."⁴⁷ This is exactly the assumption that Beckett's metaphysics and epistemology call into question and that his plays and Vladimir's song deny by their endless repetition.

In Proust Beckett argues that man's acts are made meaningless by Habit, the compromise he makes to make life bearable, but as Vladimir says in Godot "habit is a great deadner" (p. 58). From Proust we also learn that the child of Habit is voluntary memory, the logical means by which we order our experiences and thus make them meaningful. But this order is only an illusion, hence the importance of memory failure in Beckett's plays. The ability of man to know himself is constantly satirized in Godot, Endgame, and Krapp's Last Tape by characters with faulty memories. In Godot Vladimir must constantly remind Estragon about the purpose of their vigil:

Estragon: Let's go.
 Vladimir: We can't.
 Estragon: Why not.

⁴⁷ Esslin, p. 39.

Vladimir: We're waiting for Godot.
 Estragon: (despairingly) Ah! (Pause.)
 You're sure it was here? . . .
 Vladimir: What are you insinuating?
 That we've come to the wrong
 place?

 Estragon: We came here yesterday.
 Vladimir: Ah no, there you're mistaken.
 Estragon: What did we do yesterday?
 Vladimir: What did we do yesterday?
 Estragon: Yes.
 Vladimir: Why . . . (Angrily.)
 Nothing is certain when you're
 about.

(pp. 10-11)

Even the pompous Pozzo admits when he has difficulty remembering Estragon's questions that his "memory is defective" (p. 25).

The memories of the characters in Endgame and Krapp's Last Tape are defective, too. Whereas in both plays, memories are about all the characters have left, past details are blurred and confusing. Nagg and Nell remember the day they were engaged, but each interprets the events differently. Hamm has difficulty in finishing his story because he cannot remember where he last left off. Although Krapp has stored his memories on tape, he has a problem relating to them, but even when he does, he refers to the past as "All that old misery" (p. 26).

By ridiculing memory, Beckett undercuts man's ability to know himself by relating past events to the present. Memory, which is crucial to human thought, is utterly

untrustworthy; thus, human thought is dramatized as "an ephemeral farce. . . . We laugh at [the characters'] absent-mindedness, but through that laughter we come to a dismaying awareness of the futility of presence of mind."⁴⁸ Under this condition, plot in the Aristotelian sense is impossible.

Faulty memory partly explains the failure of communication which is also typical of these plotless plays. No truly dialectical exchange of thought occurs in Godot because characters forget what has been said; no event becomes significant because events are easily forgotten. After Vladimir and Estragon play the game of asking each other questions to pass the time, Estragon says, "That wasn't such a bad little canter."

Vladimir: Yes, but now we'll have to find something else.
 Estragon: Let me see. (He takes off his hat, concentrates. Long silence.) Ah!
They put on their hats, relax.
 Estragon: Well?
 Vladimir: What was I saying, we could go on from there.
 Estragon: What were you saying when?
 Vladimir: At the very beginning.
 Estragon: The very beginning of WHAT?
 Vladimir: This evening. . . . I was saying . . . I was saying . . .
 Estragon: I'm not a historian.
 Vladimir: Wait . . . we embraced . . . we were happy . . . happy . . . what do we do now that

⁴⁸ Cohn, Currents in Contemporary Drama, p. 192.

we're happy . . . go on
 . . . waiting . . . waiting
 . . . let me think . . . it's
 coming . . . go on waiting
 . . . now that we're happy
 . . . let me see . . . ah!
 The tree!

(p. 42)

In Endgame language loses its function and becomes merely a plaything. When Clov asks Hamm, "What is there to keep me here?," Hamm answers, "The dialogue" (p. 58). But the dialogue is purposeless, a game to pass the time: ". . . babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together and whisper together in the dark. . . . Moment upon moment, pattering down . . . and all life long you wait for that to mount up to a life" (Hamm, p. 70). Likewise in Krapp's Last Tape, the series of selves on tape do not add up to a complete life recognizable by the old man. Man, it appears, cannot communicate with himself let alone with others. The idealistic professions of the younger Krapp have lost all meaning and interest, so much in fact that whenever the younger man discusses his great revelation, Krapp winds the tape forward.

Failure of memory and the subsequent failure of communication are aspects of Beckett's world. His universe is one in which chaos reigns, and man's attempts to bring order to it through memory, thought, and language are futile.

No wonder then that Beckett's plays lack plot in the normal sense and are built on repetition. Instead of the linear development of action, they dramatize existence as a repetitious series of insignificant acts. The typical conflict occurs between the protagonists' meaningless states and their efforts to give themselves meaning.

Although static, Beckett's plays do create tension. Paradoxically, the tension arises from stasis, at best an uneasy equilibrium, which is achieved primarily by repetitious and often contradictory dialogue, gestures, and events. The attention in all three plays is focused on the static state of the characters, the state of isolation and boredom about which they can do nothing. Characters in Beckett's drama do not act significantly; they simply tolerate their condition and try to relieve the boredom with meaningless routines:

Clov: Why this farce, day after day?

Hamm: Routine. One never knows.

(Endgame, p. 32)

Hamm: Do you not think this has gone
on long enough? . . .

Clov: I've always thought so. You not?

Hamm: Then it's a day like any other day.

Clov: As long as it lasts. All life
long the same inanities.

(Endgame, p. 45)

Consequently, unlike the existential heroes of Sartre and Camus, Beckett's heroes are not rebels. They simply wait for something significant to happen to them, and waiting is not action at all--it is the epitome of inaction.

"What'll we do, what'll we do!" exclaims Estragon three times in Godot (pp. 44, 46, 54). "There's nothing we can do," replies Vladimir (p. 44). The time-avoiding games and routines that they perform to direct attention from the awful state of waiting for Godot bring only momentary relief, for they are constantly reminded of their predicament. Variants upon the phrase "waiting for Godot" occur thirteen times in the play, and Estragon's opening line "Nothing to be done" is repeated four times. "There's no lack of void," says Estragon (p. 44), and the more they engage in repetitive routines to fill the void, the more void there is to fill. The tension derives from their desperate need to do something in spite of their impotence to act significantly. Often this is expressed by dialogue that demands action but which is accompanied by immobility. Estragon says, "I'll go and get a carrot" (He does not move.), p. 44. Both acts end: "Shall we go? Yes, let's go" (They do not move.). Unable to muster up the strength to leave in Act I, Posso says, "I don't seem to be able to depart"; "Such is life," replies Estragon (p. 31).

Repetitive gesture and dialogue parallel the repetitive structure of Godot as a whole. The two acts roughly equal the same playing time. In both acts, the tramps are uncertain about the time and place of the present and about the events of yesterday, Estragon alludes to being beaten the

night before, they contemplate suicide by hanging, they encounter Lucky and Pozzo whom Estragon mistakes for Godot, and at the end of each act they are told by a messenger that perhaps Godot will come on the following day. Edith Kern's remark that nothing happens twice in Godot is quite appropriate.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, there is one significant difference in the setting in the second act; the bare tree of Act I has flowered, suggesting the advent of spring. This seems to be a miracle, for whereas Pozzo definitely identifies the season in Act I as autumn, the stage directions for Act II say: Next day. Same time. Same place. The flowering tree, however, does not suggest hope as some commentators imply. Rather, it is Beckett's ironic comment on the passage of time and man as a victim of time. Time within the play is both "the time of the performed anecdote and the time of 'All of Life.'"⁵⁰ Pozzo's speech about time in Act II is reminiscent of the "monster" Time of which Beckett speaks in Proust. Surely Pozzo speaks for Beckett when he says, "Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he [Lucky] went dumb, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same

⁴⁹ Kern, "Drama Stripped for Inaction," p. 41.

⁵⁰ Guicharnaud, p. 233.

second, is that not enough for you. They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more" (p. 57).

When compared to eternity, man's fleeting moment is made to seem insignificant and his repetitious gestures and routines even more absurd. Under such circumstances, "human activity shrinks, in fact, to nothingness. Its ultimate irrelevance, its qualities of repetition and habit come to the fore and deprive it of all claim to importance so that, almost, it becomes equivalent to inactivity."⁵¹ By its very inactivity, the form of Waiting for Godot is its message. Stasis, defined by the act of waiting and achieved dramatically through repetition, dramatizes Beckett's philosophy. His drama is static because he views man as an ignorant and impotent victim of Time, and thereby meaningless.

Endgame is built on what Beckett calls the "echo principle."⁵² The old questions and answers keep repeating themselves:

Hamm: Have you not had enough?
 Clov: Yes! Of what?
 Hamm: Of this . . . this . . . thing.
 Clov: I always had. Not you?
 Hamm: Then there's no reason for it
 to change.
 Clov: It may end. All life long the
 same questions, the same answers.
 (p. 5)

⁵¹ Kern, "Drama Stripped for Inaction," p. 44.

⁵² Cohn, Back to Beckett, p. 142.

Every gesture and routine that happens in the play occurs at least once again, hence, the echo principle. "Why this farce, day after day?" asks Nell (p. 14); "Why this farce, day after day?" echoes Clov (p. 32). Repetitive gesture reinforces repetitive dialogue. Clov's mime at the windows that begins the play is repeated later in the play; Hamm uncovers and covers his face with the handkerchief. In their world, nothing is left but the same old postures, the same old speeches. And this repetition makes their actions and speeches meaningless in terms of plot as action, but thematically they are meaningful, for they dramatize the absurdity of man's attempt to be meaningful.

Tension is created in the play by the ending theme in conflict with the characters' inability to end: "Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished," says Clov (p. 1); "Enough, it's time it ended, in the shelter too. And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to . . . to end. Yes, there it is, it's time it ended and yet I hesitate to--to end" (p. 3).

The characters' inability to end and their repetitive gestures and routines parallel the circular structure of the play. The characters are in the same stage position at the play's end as they are in its beginning. Likewise the question of Clov's leaving Hamm is left hanging as he stands motionless at the conclusion of the play. Stasis, which

defined the human predicament in Godot, is also the human predicament in Endgame. Consequently, the idea of man as a significant creature is satirized:

Hamm: Clov!
 Clov: What is it?
 Hamm: We're not beginning to . . .
 to . . . mean something?
 Clov: Mean something! You and I
 mean something! (Brief laugh.)
 Ah that is a good one!
 (pp. 32-33)

Likewise Krapp's attempt to mean something by organizing the past on tape is a farce. Although there is less repetition of specific speeches in the play than in Godot and Endgame, the basic situation is static, repetitious, and monotonous in itself: record and play back, record and play back. In addition, the open-endedness of the play parallels those of the earlier plays. The monodrama ends with Krapp motionless staring before him while the tape runs on in silence.

Krapp is "a perfect specimen of the Beckettian man, reduced in powers of expression to gestures and postures."⁵³ While the repetitious actions of eating bananas and drinking provoke laughter, Krapp is the most pathetic of Beckett's heroes, for he is utterly alone: "With all this darkness round me I feel less alone. . . . I love to get up and move about in it, then back here to . . . me Krapp" (pp. 14-15).

⁵³ Hoffman, p. 156.

What has happened to the Krapp at age thirty-nine who was enthralled by his vision, his opus-magnum? We are not told, but we can guess that he, like the characters in the other plays, is a victim of Time and Habit. He ends the recording on his sixty-ninth birthday: "Here I end this reel. Box--(pause)--three, spool--(pause)--five. (Pause.) Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance for happiness. But I wouldn't want them back" (p. 28). But, of course, he does want them back. Otherwise, why does he record them on tape? Krapp is impotent to recapture the past because, as we are told in Proust, "The aspirations of yesterday were valid for yesterday's ego, not for today's" (p. 3). Nevertheless, Krapp goes on with his futile attempt at self-discovery. Clearly, the repetition in the play and its open-endedness demonstrate that Krapp's Last Tape is not his last tape.

Beckett's plays repeat the same themes, characters, and methods because these are his ways of emphasizing "That this, and this only, is how it is in his world; whatever the cast, whatever the situation, there is nothing beyond habit, boredom, forgetfulness, and suffering."⁵⁴ Beckett's unconventional dramatic methods can best be understood in light of his metaphysics and epistemology because the plays dramatize

⁵⁴ Alfred Alvarez, Samuel Beckett (New York: Viking Press, 1973), p. 86.

his philosophy. Little or nothing happens in the plays, there is no development of character, and no change in situation because the human condition is one of ignorance and impotence. All of Beckett's clowns are non-knowers, and from this state of non-knowing comes their impotence to act significantly. Paradoxically, however, the Beckettian man always strives to mean something. Like Vladimir and Estragon who wait for Godot, all of the protagonists are "Champions of the doctrine that life must have meaning even in a manifestly meaningless situation. As they do not lose hope, are even incapable of losing hope, they are naive, incurably optimistic ideologists. What Beckett presents is not nihilism, but the inability of man to be a nihilist even in a situation of utter hopelessness."⁵⁵ Ultimately, Beckett's man is blind to his own condition just as the blind Hamm at the end of Endgame mistakenly thinks the game is finally ended and that he alone remains: "Old stancher! You . . . remain" (p. 84). What he does not know is that Clov has not left and that the game is not over yet.

Ultimately Beckett's plays dramatize that man's efforts to give himself meaning, primarily self-effactive habits, only perpetuate his ignorance and results in more suffering.

⁵⁵ Anders, p. 144.

In a way, Godot, that which promises to give meaning and significance to the human adventure, is awaited in all three plays, but Godot never comes, and the world in his absence is a world of triviality and insignificance. It is a world in which man's clown role is determined by his own ignorance and impotence, a world in which man is the victim of Time and must suffer "the original and eternal sin . . . of having been born" (Proust, p. 49).

The truth of Beckett's vision of the human predicament can be measured in part by the worldwide acclaim that his plays have received. Godot, for example, has been translated into more than twenty languages and has been performed in twenty-two countries.⁵⁶ Contrary to popular belief, Beckett's plays have been successful beyond academic circles. Martin Esslin reports the effect that Waiting for Godot produced at San Quentin in 1957: "It is said that Godot himself, as well as turns of phrase and characters from the play, have . . . become a permanent part of the private language, the institutional mythology of San Quentin."⁵⁷ Esslin goes on to account for the play's success at the prison and for the success of Beckett's plays in general:

[Beckett's] creative intuition explores the elements of experience and shows to us what extent all human beings carry the seeds of . . . depression and

⁵⁶ Esslin, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. xvi-xvii.

disintegration within the deeper layers of their personality. If the prisoners of San Quentin responded to Waiting for Godot, it was because they were confronted with their own experience of time, waiting, hope, and despair; because they recognized the truth about their own human relationships in the sadomasochistic interdependence of Pozzo and Lucky and in the bickering hate-love between Vladimir and Estragon. This is also the key to the wide success of Beckett's plays: to be confronted with concrete projections of the deepest fears and anxieties, which have been only vaguely experienced at a half-conscious level, constitutes a process of catharsis and liberation analogous to the therapeutic effect in psychoanalysis of confronting the subconscious contents of the mind.⁵⁸

It is through this experience, "the moment of release from deadening habit,"⁵⁹ that man simultaneously suffers the reality of being but escapes the boredom of living of which Beckett speaks in Proust.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

Chapter V

CONCLUSION

This study of Beckett's dramatization of the irrationality of existence has demonstrated that his major works reflect his metaphysics and epistemology and also suggests that his art is best understood in light of his philosophy. Although Beckett's ideas concerning the nature of man and the limits and validity of human knowledge do not adhere to any particular philosophy and actually constitute a denial of system, his view of the human predicament most nearly coincides with that of existentialism and his dramatic art is most closely aligned with what Martin Esslin calls the Theatre of the Absurd.

Beckett's sense of the chaotic and, thereby, irrational nature of human existence and his assessment of the human state as ignorance and impotence suggest the philosophy of Sartre and Camus, but unlike the existentialist heroes of their work, Beckett's protagonists are never allowed the dignity which comes from an awareness of their absurdity and from acts such as suicide that allow them to transcend it. Beckett's protagonists do not achieve this existential affirmation of the importance of man as a responsible agent

and witness to Being because Beckett sees man as primarily a creature of Habit. In Proust Beckett writes that Habit is the compromise between the individual and his environment which allows man to mitigate the pains of living. As such, Habit is the great deadener and blinds man to the reality of his Being. Furthermore, man exists in a perpetual state of ignorance because he constantly relies on voluntary memory to bring order to his experiences, but since the world-at-large is irrational and confusing, order is an illusion, a means to explain away not explain existence. For these reasons, the Beckettian man is lost unless he can find a way to face up to his hopeless predicament.

In Proust Beckett suggests that the only way man can transcend the beastly business of living is through suffering "that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience" (p. 16). Beckett's art is an attempt to open "a window on the real"; it is his personal, intuitive expression of the inexplicable "mess" that he perceives the world to be. His art explores the irrationality of existence, the reality that lies beneath the illusionary surface reality of an orderly world, not by logical and discursive means but by an integration of subject matter and form in which traditional criteria for characterization and plot are abandoned. In this respect, Beckett's plays are like those of Adamov, Ionesco, and

Genet--all dramatists of the Theatre of the Absurd. Esslin writes that this theatre strives for "a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed" and that this constitutes the difference between "the approach of the philosopher and that of the poet"--between the highly lucid plays of Sartre and Camus, for example, and the ambiguous and non-Aristotelian plays of the absurdist dramatists.¹

Beckett's concern for form as an expression of subject matter has been pervasive throughout his career and has governed his fiction as well as his drama. As early as 1929 in his essay on Joyce, Beckett argues that literary form should be a part of the message itself, and in the essay on Proust, Beckett praises Proust's nondiscursive mode of writing in which form and content are inseparable. When Beckett turned to writing fiction, he naturally sought a form that would express the chaos that he perceives the world to be. Consequently, he abandoned the "realistic" novel with its carefully motivated characters and its logically developed plot to write novels in which characters are obscure and action is almost nonexistent. The trilogy of novels (Molloy, Malone Dies, and The Unnamable) is Beckett's expression of the search for Being which ultimately concludes

¹ The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1961), p. xx.

that the essence of Being is indefinable and thus inaccessible to man. Moreover, since the trilogy dramatizes man's state as ignorant and impotent and his acts of understanding the world-at-large and himself as futile, the trilogy looks forward to the main concerns of Beckett's drama. Its unconventional techniques also foreshadow those of the plays.

In both fiction and drama, Beckett portrays man as a creature of Habit who paradoxically seeks to understand what is beyond his understanding. Thus, man is both comic and tragic. The comedy stems from man's ridiculous behavior dramatized as the games he plays to ward off the boredom of living; the tragedy stems from man's inability to act significantly despite his efforts to do so. This comic-tragic vision of man is best reflected in the fiction in Malone Dies where the narrator attempts to escape the tedium of his slow death by writing stories that are equally as tedious and absurd as his own predicament. In the plays, this comic-tragic vision is most obvious in Waiting for Godot where the tramp protagonists play all sorts of futile games to alleviate the boredom of their vigil for the mysterious Godot who most likely will never come.

It is the special quality of Beckett's genius that he is able to make use of the genre in which he writes to comment on the absurdity of the human predicament. In the trilogy, he uses the metaphor of man writing, making up

stories, to show how man's efforts to understand himself are futile. In the plays, he uses the metaphor of man acting, "playing" out a predetermined role, to show how inconsequential man's actions are.

Although Beckett's metaphysics and epistemology limit what he can do as an artist (hence, the repetition of themes concerning the uselessness of thought and communication and the alienation of man), we must admire the variety in which Beckett carries out the dramatization of his philosophy. Whereas Godot, Endgame, and Krapp's Last Tape all utilize the waiting motif and the "playing" metaphor, portray man as the clown, and are built upon the repetition of language, gesture and events, each is unique in its own right and testifies to the integrity of Beckett's art. He never falters from his conception of the irrationality of existence, and his plays never belie this vision by falling back on the traditional means of dramaturgy.

Beckett's drama is organic; its form is its meaning. As such, his plays in which identity dissolves, stasis replaces action, and meaning is ambiguous, are just as valid as traditional plays that reflect an orderly world through motivated and consistent characters in rational plots. Beckett's art, however, requires that we put aside the criteria for the "well-made play" that have so long governed excellence in drama because these criteria do not apply to

his work and because his metaphysics and epistemology deny the assumptions that are basic to traditional drama. The Aristotelian play takes for granted that events in time are significant and that human experience can be ordered. Under these conditions, it is possible for man to reach some degree of self-understanding and to become a responsible agent. Beckett's metaphysics, however, defines reality as chaos and argues that events in time are insignificant and that any attempt to bring order to reality is a distortion of reality; hence, his epistemology postulates that man is ignorant of the world-at-large and of himself. Man, as Beckett sees him, is incapable of directing his own life; he suffers the inexplicable sin of having been born. Moreover, all attempts to act significantly (love, art, science, religion, philosophy) become futile pastimes, mere "play," to ward off the boredom and suffering of living. Beckett's moribund clowns and their static situations are a result of these philosophical premises; thus, to understand his art we must understand the philosophy behind it. This study argues that this is the only valid approach to his plays.

The purpose of Beckett's art is twofold: first, he attempts to strip man of all the pretensions of an orderly world and, thereby, presents the chaotic reality that is man's condition, and, second, he seeks the artistic form expressive of the truth of this vision. Esslin claims that

Beckett's work as well as that of the absurdist dramatists must be judged by the quality of invention, the complexity of the poetic images evoked, the skill with which they are combined and sustained, and the reality and truth of the vision these images embody.² The consistency of Beckett's vision and the skill with which he dramatizes this vision make him an outstanding dramatist, perhaps the greatest dramatist of the twentieth century. The truth of his vision of reality can be judged by the extent that it speaks for our times. Although it is a very dark truth, we are compelled to believe, however reluctant we are to admit it, that it is a human truth. Despite the technological advances of our age, man has not come close to understanding himself and his fellows and to rise above the injustices that mark our daily lives. Beckett's plays require us to face up to the "mess" of our shattered world devoid of both reason and God. "All is zero," reports Clov as he looks out on the world in Endgame, and the suggestion of all humanity wiped out by nuclear war is very real to us.

When Beckett told Tom F. Driver that the world he sees is a world of "buzzing confusion," he went on to add "The confusion is not my invention. We cannot listen to a conversation for five minutes without being acutely aware of

² Ibid., p. 311.

the confusion. It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of."³ Beckett's plays do "open our eyes" to the suffering which is the reality of our Being, and in this way, his drama has contributed to the revitalization of theatre in our times. His special contribution is that he has found new ways of cutting through our illusions. His theatre allows us to break the deadly habits of our dull existence, to see ourselves for what we are, and to accept our predicament as meaningless, for finally we come to understand the words of Democritus that Beckett is so fond of quoting, "Nothing is more real than Nothing."

³ "Beckett by the Madeleine," Columbia University Forum, 4 (Summer 1961), 22.

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