

THE RETROSPECTIVE HYPOTHESIS

THE RETROSPECTIVE HYPOTHESIS: A STUDY
OF THE PURSUIT OF IDENTITY IN SAMUEL
BECKETT'S TRILOGY.

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I

INTRODUCTION

"Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving." The first words of The Unnamable¹, these questions of identity and circumstance are revolved and qualified, repeated and re-phrased throughout 179 pages of tense, urgent, aggravated monologue, uttered by a disembodied voice in a luminous void. In the uncertain hope that the discovery of an adequate formulation of his predicament may release him therefrom into a condition of silence, the speaker struggles on under the compulsion to speak. At times he even doubts that the words he speaks are his own, or that the use of the first person singular is in any way justified by the ambiguous impressions he has of his situation. "I, say I." To continue at all, and he is compelled to continue, incapable of silence, he must submit provisionally to the assumption of identity that the grammar of speech forces upon him. But the assumption does not go unquestioned. The chief and pervasive preoccupation of the nameless speaker is with the search for a basic and irreducible essence of the Self, which may speak of itself as "I" without fear of qualification. Indeed, as Vivian Mercier says, "This search for a self — sometimes combined with the urge to annihilate it when found — is explored and exploited . . . to the exclusion of almost everything else that we normally expect from a novel."²

The preoccupation is not a new one in Beckett's works, but

1 The Unnamable, p.3. (Quotations from the trilogy are from the following editions: Molloy. New York: Grove Press, 1955., Malone Dies. New York: Grove Press, 1956., The Unnamable. New York: Grove Press, 1958. Hereafter identification will be made in the text, by volume and page number, e.g. (III,3).)

2 V. Mercier, "S.B. and the Search for Self", New Republic, (Sept. 19, 1955), p.20.

it has never, before The Unnamable, been treated so exhaustively or so stringently. This concentration is achieved, largely, by the shift, on the part of the narrator, to direct speech. In his earliest books Beckett adopted the technique of the omniscient author, distantly commenting on the mental processes of his characters. Molloy and Malone Dies are in a more intimate relation with the minds of the protagonists, being, quite explicitly, the conscious and careful productions of the pens (or pencil stubs) of three of them. Even the Unnamable speaks of himself as writing: "How, in such conditions, can I write, to consider only the manual aspect of that bitter folly? I don't know. I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee." (III, 17). The canons of plausibility are briefly acknowledged, but their demands are unfulfilled. In the endless and fevered attempt to isolate an autonomous self, the Unnamable is listening to himself speaking about himself speaking. References to the process whereby these cogitations are conveyed to the reader, so plentiful in Malone Dies, rapidly disappear. In How It Is the explanation is volunteered that the "murmurs to the mud" are overheard by a certain Kram, who relates them to a scribe named Krim. No such compromises with credibility are offered by the Unnamable. We are in the very presence of the self exploring itself through language.

A characteristic of Beckett's work is the assimilation by each new book of the material of the preceding ones. The Unnamable in particular incorporates much of the first two books of the trilogy, and in so doing alters radically the perspectives in which they may be viewed. Malone, whose death apparently coincided with the end of his narrative, is reduced to the ranks of a whole crowd of earlier Beckett fictions, dismissed as inventions of the present narrator. In this connection a crucial point is made by Ruby Cohn in her essay on Beckett's translations of his own books.³ Comparing

3 R.Cohn, "S.B., Self-translator", P.M.L.A., LXXVI (Dec. 1961), 613-21. (Reprinted and expanded in her book: S.B.: The Comic Gamut.)

the openings of the French and English versions of Molloy⁴, she observes that while the French text has: "Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense", the English is significantly altered, thus: "This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it'll be over." From this she argues that Beckett did not originally conceive a trilogy, and that The Unnamable, with its re-workings of earlier material, constitutes an important afterthought, reshaping all three books in a retrospective design. This hypothesis, which is fully borne out by closer study, may be taken as the starting point of this thesis, in which it is proposed to examine the theme of identity in the trilogy, from the position adopted, in relation to the first two books, by the narrator of the third.

In its various aspects this theme is one which can be traced through Beckett's work from the beginning. In the 1931 monograph on Proust he treats of a subject that is to be one of the major concerns of the trilogy -- the dislocation of the personality affected by Time. We are not the same person we were yesterday, and for two reasons. The intervening stretch of time has added to our experience and made yesterday's personality the object of today's consciousness. "There is no escape from yesterday because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us."⁵ Despite its occasional eruptions of wry wit Proust is written in a vein of urgent seriousness. In The Unnamable, over twenty years later, the seriousness is still present, but the problem of the elusiveness of coherent and continuing personality has shifted out of the realm of the conventional novelistic manner into a frantic epistemological farce.

Murphy (1938) introduces another important element into the quest for personal identity. It is a loosely organized book, ostentatiously clever, and narcissistic in its enjoyment of its own wit. Murphy himself is pursuing the satisfactions of self-sufficiency while being pursued in turn by a swarm of nuisances

4 The French version was published in 1951 by Editions de Minuit, (Paris).

5 Samuel Beckett, Proust, New York: Grove Press, 1957, p.2.

who require Murphy to complete their own various satisfactions. But aside from these external hindrances Murphy's attempts at withdrawal into himself are increased in difficulty by the problem of finding a self into which to withdraw. In his manner of perceiving himself he is the first of Beckett's practical Cartesians. His mind to him a kingdom is. Samuel Mintz has made a thorough study of this aspect of Murphy⁶, but a few quotations from the book may be made here to indicate the early and more explicit expressions of a conception of self that will permeate the later novels. Murphy senses his mind to be "a large hollow sphere, hermetically closed to the universe without." (p.107)⁷. He is not, however, an idealist. He recognizes the reality of physical sensation but has no understanding of how it is related to mental experience. "Thus Murphy felt himself split in two, a body and a mind." (p.109). That there should be a "partial congruence" between their unrelated worlds is ultimately to be explained by some supernatural intervention. As Mintz points out, this rationale links Murphy with the Occasionalists, a breed of philosophers whose piety was stronger than their sense of the ridiculous. Later in the book reference is made to Arnold Geulincx, a seventeenth century Occasionalist, who makes another appearance as a surprising morsel in Molloy's promiscuous erudition.

Like the protagonists who are to follow him Murphy opts firmly for the life of the mind. His rocking-chair ritual is his method of being laid asleep in body and becoming a free-floating mind. And we are told of this mind that it is divided into three zones, "light, half light, dark, each with its speciality." (p.111). The first contains images of actual existence which Murphy is at liberty to rearrange to his own specifications. In the second are "forms without parallel" and the pleasures of pure contemplation. The third zone is an endless flux of images among which he is "not free, but a mote in the dark of absolute freedom." (p.112). It has

6 Samuel Mintz, "Beckett's Murphy", Perspective, No.11(Autumn '59),156-65.
7 Samuel Beckett, Murphy, New York: Grove Press, 1957.

become a commonplace in Beckett criticism to consider the trilogy as a massive expansion of this, the sixth chapter of Murphy. It is not an illuminating comparison on the whole, but an interesting parallel does exist to be drawn with a brief passage in The Unnamable where the narrator is casting about for some sense evidence of his own existence. In the treatment of the dualistic self-perception of Murphy's mind we are given the example of "the kick in intellectu and the kick in re." (p.109). They appear to him as unrelated events, neither one of them being an infallible promise of the other. The Unnamable, choosing for a moment to accept his sense data as a proof that he exist, desires "some kind of assurance that I was really there, such as a kick in the arse, for example. . . the nature of the attention is of little importance, provided I cannot be suspected of being its author." (III, 77). Predictably he is not long satisfied with this mode of investigation.

In the Age of Psychology the Cartesian split is no longer a tenable hypothesis. In exploring it in his novels, however, Beckett is in no sense anachronistic. Although the idea of the self as "a substance whose whole essence or nature consists in thinking"⁸ is so much nonsense to the psychologist, it is, nonetheless, the inevitable experience of the man who reflects on his own nature. The dualism of mind and body, with the former as the seat of identity, is the inescapable assumption of consciousness. Equally, in considering the mechanisms of one's own body, one habitually thinks of it as a subordinate creation, serving more or less adequately the requirements of the controlling mind, and occasionally frustrating pre-conceived intentions through its physical limitations. Thus the heroes of the trilogy, from time to time, comment on the readiness or otherwise of the members to fulfil the purposes of the head. In following a Cartesian system Beckett is, in fact, exploring the ancient division of body and 'soul'.

Prefigurations of trilogy themes do not end with the early

8 Descartes, "Discourse on Method", Discourse on Method and Other Writings, (tr.Arthur Wollaston), London: Penguin Books, 1960, p.61.

Murphy. Watt, written during the war but not published until 1953, was Beckett's last novel in English. In general it may be said to deal with the tendency of experienced phenomena to "vanish in the farce of their properties" (p.74)⁹ when systematically explored by linguistic analysis. Since, for Beckett, the only meaningful thought is verbalized thought, this exploration is an important aspect of the pursuit of identity. Watt's sojourn with the curiously inexplicable Mr.Knott, in itself an ambivalent metaphor for human life, defies all his attempts to reduce it to convenient formulation. "For Watt considered, with reason, that he was successful . . . when he could evolve, from the meticulous phantoms that beset him, a hypothesis proper to disperse them . . . For to explain had always been to exorcise, for Watt." (pp.77-8). But his experience at Mr.Knott's house defeats all his struggles to frame it in the verbal sequence that would allow him to say of it, "Yes, I remember, that is what happened then". (p.74). Unable to master contingent phenomena with "a pillow of old words, for a head" (p.117), He is consequently unable to retain any assurance of his own relation to the interplay of external happenings. Shortly after the incident of the Galls, Piano Tuners, for example, Watt discovers that the everyday objects of Mr.Knott's kitchen are beginning to slip out from under the habitual names that had held them down safely in his understanding. The more he gazes at a pot, and pronounces its name, "Pot", the less it seems to be circumscribed by its old title. "Then, when he turned for reassurance to himself . . . he made the distressing discovery that of himself too he could no longer affirm anything that did not seem as false as if he had affirmed it of a stone." (p.82). The name "man", which had once seemed appropriate to his condition, is now no more than an empty sound.

To be driven out of the pastures of received nomenclature into that wasteland where, as Molloy says, "there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names", (I, 41),

9 Samuel Beckett, Watt, New York: Grove Press, 1959.

is a pre-eminently Existentialist situation. A strikingly exact parallel can be drawn between Watt's confrontation of "nameless things" and Roquentin's anguish in the face of the obscene obtrusiveness of sheer objects in La Nausée. For Sartre, L'Absurde is to be found, not in the nature of the existing world, but in man's relation, or rather his lack of relation, to that world. "It means nothing less than man's relation to the world. Primary absurdity manifests a cleavage, the cleavage between man's aspirations to unity and the insurmountable dualism of mind and nature."¹⁰ Watt's aspirations to unity, sadly frustrated at every turn, are the material for Beckett's frantically systematic farce. The unity he seeks is that imposed by language, whereby experience displays its syntax and submits to being spoken of. When he fails to achieve it, as in the case of the Galls, he is left in an anguish of ungraspable forms. When he succeeds he holds in his hands an assemblage of inanimate parts of speech, devoid of real coherence.

The early French reviewers of Beckett's novels were quick to bracket him with the Existentialist writers. They were right to do so, up to a point. Beckett is concerned with the basic condition of man's existence in a world to which man is essentially irrelevant. He assumes none of the bourgeois preconceptions or values, and his heroes are patently Absurd men, gratuitously alien. Their existence has no meaning, even to themselves, and their presence in the midst of a world assured of its own significance is a wild incongruity. When this incongruity intrudes upon Jacques Moran, Sr., -- a prime type of the Sartrean salaud -- it drags him at last into the wilderness where "every existing thing is born without reason, prolongs itself out of weakness and dies by chance."¹¹ Released into a more elemental state, he must endeavour,

10 J.-P. Sartre, "An Explication of L'Etranger", (tr. Annette Michelson), reprinted in Camus, ed. Germaine Brée, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1962, p. 109.

11 J.-P. Sartre, La Nausée, (tr. L. Alexander), New York: New Directions, 1959, p. 180.

with the intellectual weapons at his disposal, to articulate the basic formula of his mortality.

On the other hand, while he writes within the tradition of the Absurdist predicament, Beckett is in no sense a text-book disciple of Existentialist philosophy. He aligns himself with no school, employs no jargon, fashions neither an ethic nor a metaphysic. Frank Kermode calls him "a metaphysical allegorist"¹² but his metaphysics are not those of the professional philosopher. As for Ethics, Beckett never embarks upon the perilous course of attempting to derive from Absurdity a set of stringent moral imperatives. If his protagonists are tenaciously honest, it is out of habit. The rest of their behaviour mocks at every turn the obsessions with conduct that preoccupy the meticulous French. Abundantly troubled by the problem of what they are, they have little time for the subtler refinements of Ought. Probably the most profound difference between Beckett and the gentlemen of Les Temps Modernes is the sardonic anti-Humanism of the unrepentant Irishman, reducing the great questions of Being to vulgar comedy.

One more correspondence, however, between Beckett and the Existentialists remains to be mentioned. This is the consideration of Freedom. Beckett's characters, vagrant and solitary, are free. And the pursuit of irreducible identity is in itself a quest for an interior personal freedom. The Unnamable struggles endlessly to distinguish himself from "the other" — from all, that is, that he can make the object of his consciousness. He senses that the thoughts which rise in his head, if he has a head, and the words that utter themselves through his mouth (same qualification), are in some way not of his own creation, and that he is the victim of a stream of dictation. His search for an 'I' which can confidently utter itself is thus a search for an autonomous zone in which he is free and self-directing.

12 Frank Kermode, "Beckett Country", New York Review of Books, II (March 19, 1964), p.10.

It is proposed in this thesis to treat of the theme of identity in the trilogy under three main headings. These three chapters will be followed by a concluding chapter, making five in all. The first main division will deal with the dualistic assumptions entertained by the four narrators of the trilogy, and with Beckett's use of this convention in narrowing the hunt for the self. The second will explore his re-examination of the Descartes certainty -- "Cogito, ergo sum." In the third attention will be paid to the complex structure of the surrogate characters and to the 'fictions' of previous personalities, as perceived by each succeeding one. The title of the whole has particular reference to this section (Chapter Four), and is taken from Beckett's book on Proust, (p.4).

At this point two qualifying remarks should be made. Firstly, with regard to the chapter divisions outlined above, it must be said that this proposed fragmentation of the theme is a necessary artifice. As explored in the three books the theme is, of course, not systematically broken down in this way. In The Unnamable particularly the stream of aggravated, articulate thought integrates considerations that could be treated separately into a close, continuous texture. In this Beckett is truer to mental experience than any subsequent analysis can be. Extensive quotation from the novels, however, will serve as a constant reminder and partial correction of the distortion effected by critical dissection. It will help to convey also the relentless comedy that solemn exegesis is in danger of suppressing.

Secondly, the study of Beckett to be offered here need not stand in contradiction to other, and very different, interpretations. An examination made from the standpoint reached by The Unnamable does not necessarily challenge studies of Molloy, taken by itself, even though they may reach conclusions far removed from those presented here. Edith Kern, for example, finds in Molloy a pattern closely akin to that of the ancient myths of homecoming and rebirth. She lays stress on Molloy's search for his mother and the fact that

his half of the book is composed in his mother's room, and compares this with the descent to the "Mothers of Being"¹³. Although this account is largely irrelevant to the present thesis, dealing as it does with the formal structure of a single book, not taken as a unit in the larger construction, it need not, if valid, refute another account of the part Molloy plays in the trilogy as a whole. Both Molloy and Malone Dies, while open to treatment as individual works, are later subsumed by the narrator of The Unnamable into a disturbing and complex retrospective hypothesis.

13 E.Kern, "Moran - Molloy, The Hero as Author", Perspective, No.11 (Autumn '59), p.190.

II

THE FLIGHT FROM THE BODY

"The Unnamable", says Hugh Kenner, "is the final phase of a trilogy which carries the Cartesian process backwards, beginning with a bodily 'je suis' and ending with a bare 'cogito'".¹ It is a process of attenuation, a reduction to essentials, in an effort to discover a necessary minimum in which man can recognize himself. The existences are explored of a series of creatures, each of whom is more grotesquely poor in human attributes than his predecessor. At the same time the process is duplicated by the creatures themselves. Malone in particular occupies his time manipulating the lives of creatures of his own, while the Unnamable is plagued by fictitious personages who constantly threaten to become indistinguishable from himself. As is often the case, this last narrator expresses clearly a theme of which Beckett himself may not have been fully conscious until the final volume. "Faith that's an idea, yet another, mutilate, mutilate, and perhaps some day, fifteen generations hence, you'll succeed in looking like yourself, among the passers-by." (III, 37).

From this retrospective viewpoint the trilogy appears, among other things, as a gradual withdrawal from the life of the body on the part of its characters. The territory in which the self-perceiving self should be hunted for is discovered, by a wholesale casting-off of redundancies, to lie within the mind. The disease of self-consciousness, having instilled the poisonous awareness of self and other, proceeds to diminish the former, to the latter's gain, until nothing but a fragmented chaos remains. Descartes divided soul and body and commented thus: "Thus the self, or rather the soul, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body, is indeed easier to know than the body, and would not cease to be what it is,

1 Hugh Kenner, Samuel Beckett, London: John Calder, 1962, p.128.

even if there were no body."² In the trilogy a series of bodies, variously incapacitated, ends in a creature with no stable physical body at all, whose self, nevertheless, has apparently not ceased "to be what it is"; to say that this self "is easier to know than the body" would, however, be something of an exaggeration.

The disintegration begins with Jacques Moran. His painful banishment from the context in which he knew himself, out into a fearful penumbra where he knows less and less, is the necessary first stage. The manner of his narrative faithfully mirrors his decline and fall, for, as he says, he writes with such an exactitude that he is "far more he who finds than he who tells what he has found", (I, 182). Thus, at the outset, he is firmly rooted in bourgeois certitude, confidently assured of his prerogatives and full of proprietary complacence. In his own eyes he is the sum of the statements that could be made about him — a prosperous householder, a punctilious Catholic, a severe but enlightened father, a man of liberal views, smugly selfish. His limited self-knowledge is benevolent and forgiving. He looks indulgently on his admitted faults, but resents the thought of his neighbours' criticisms. He is particularly well established in the midst of his possessions, constantly subordinating the objects of house and garden to the governance of the possessive adjective: "my desk", "my bees", "my son", "my beloved church", "my Beauty of Bath".

To a very great extent Moran's self, insofar as he is aware of it, consists of a set of relations with his environment. Names like 'father', 'Catholic', 'liberal', all presuppose a context and a relation with external categories. 'Catholic' as a descriptive label connotes adherence to an organization. 'Liberal' has no meaning unless the word 'illiberal' is relatively well understood. And a man is a father only by virtue of having a son. To know oneself in such terms is to submerge the particular in the general and to be content with superficialities. It is to perpetuate the fatuous

2 Descartes, "Discourse on Method", *op. cit.*, p.61.

cliché that "No man is an island", and to seek for one's identity in one's identification.

When Moran sets out to track down Molloy he undertakes an enterprise that will result in his being, in his view, "dispossessed of self", (I, 204). What actually happens is that he is driven out of his context, away from the circumstances and possessions that had allowed him to assume an identity, into a state of isolation. The success of his mission is equivocal. At least two critics maintain that Moran kills Molloy in the forest³, but a less inattentive reading will discount this idea. In fact the search results not in Moran's finding his quarry but in his coming to resemble him almost to the point of their merging. (The complex problem of the Moran-Molloy relationship will be examined in Chapter Four. Suffice it to say that at least two interpretations are possible which do not contradict each other.) Stripped of all the trappings by which he had previously defined himself, Moran finds beneath the good citizen of Turdy a poor, bare, forked animal, unaccommodated man. Formerly, in making the distinction between self and other, he had assumed as an extension of his personality his possessions and status. Deprived of both, he has reached the point where further fragmentation can commence.

The effect of the first inroad of Molloy into Moran's consciousness is a general perturbation. He plans his journey "into the Molloy country" over-hastily, rashly allowing irrelevant considerations of pleasure and convenience to affect his decisions. When he dwells in thought upon the object of his quest he is taken with a disturbing uneasiness. An image exists in his head of a dark, hulking, misshapen figure, stumbling furiously onwards in no apparent direction, an irruption of the formless into the formal. Hugh Kenner most cleverly demonstrates how Molloy is described in terms of the irrational numbers, the Pythagorean Unnamables, of whose disruption of the ordered universe it was forbidden to speak.⁴

³ A.J. Leventhal, Jean Pouillon.

⁴ Kenner, op. cit., pp. 107-8.

And this is no fanciful observation. Molloy's very existence is a challenge and a threat to the circumscribed order of Moran's world, of which he is the unsettling complement. His image, says Moran, ". . . came to me, at long intervals. Then I was nothing but uproar, bulk, rage, suffocation, effort unceasing, frenzied and vain. Just the opposite of myself, in fact." (I, 155). Yet this almost terrifying figure, "demizen of my dark places" as Moran calls him (I, 156), has a strange appeal. "And when I saw him disappear" (from the mind's eye), "I was almost sorry." (I, 155).

The quest for Molloy is ordered by the mysterious Youdi, an unseen superior power, alternately the object of fearful obedience and pathetic trust. Yet he may be no more than an element of Moran himself, an almost moral compulsion to seek out and redeem the dark, anarchic drives that he feels somewhere within him. Early in his mental preparations for the coming journey he speaks of "him who has need of me to be delivered, who cannot deliver myself." (I, 151). But, in the event, far from retrieving this lawless barbarian from the darkness and taming him to the light of day, he is himself engulfed. His complacent rationality begins to desert him, he is given over to senseless violence, his physical condition deteriorates rapidly. He is possessed by a sensation of "darkness and bulk" — words which he had used of his mental image of Molloy — and he comments:

And what I saw was more like a crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that always protected me from all that I was always 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. (I, 203).

Very late in his decline, in a state of extreme dilapidation which is paralleled by an approach of his manner of narration to that of Molloy, he refers to "the Obidil" whom he had long sought and never found, and whose existence he now doubts. Little ingenuity is required to detect in this oddly explicit anagram the instinctual drives that Freud termed the 'Libido'.

It would be inappropriately solemn to decode Molloy in the

text-book jargon of Psychoanalysis. Perhaps the best term is that of Patrick Bowles, the co-translator of the book, when he describes it as a "psychological picaresque".⁵ One may read it as a farcical metaphor for the super-ego's loss of control over untutored human nature. Moran becomes brutish and amoral, careless of the artificial constraints that social observance had previously imposed upon his life. Moreover, as he is gradually released from a lifelong conditioning that had deafened him to the calls of his instinctive being, he begins to hear voices directing him from within, and in their intermissions "the silence of which the universe is made". He speaks of these voices in words that almost exactly repeat those of Molloy on the same subject:

I have spoken of a voice telling me things. I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one. So that at first I did not know what it wanted. But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, I understand it, all wrong perhaps. (I, 241).

Here is Molloy:

. . . the small voice . . . which I had taken so long to understand, for I had been hearing it for a long time. And perhaps I understood it all wrong, but I understood it and that was the novelty. (I, 80).

And a final aspect of his new state, possibly the most important, is that he senses himself to be freer than before. It is not a welcome sensation, for it is the freedom of the exile. He feels an immense regret for the loss of the secure constraint of his old life in the herd, a regret expressed most poignantly in the description of his encounter with the flock of sheep, (I, 217-19). (In this context it would be well to remark the extraordinary and delicate virtuosity of Beckett's writing at this point.) Moran has been driven into the condition of freedom. Henceforth he is alone and unrelated, not governed any longer by the conditioning that previously deputized for self-determination. He is condemned to "the long anguish of vagrancy and freedom". (I, 181).

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5 P. Bowles, "How S.B. Sees the Universe", Listener, LIX (19/1/58), p. 1101. (June 19, 1958), p. 1101.

The saga of vagrancy and freedom is taken up in Molloy's own narrative. He may or may not be Moran at a later stage — the correspondences are ambiguous — but his condition is certainly the same one that Moran had been left in. The state of isolation is maintained, and as physical decrepitude advances towards the point where it will leave the next narrator, Malone, almost totally incapacitated, the withdrawal into the mind commences. Molloy cycles, hobbles, crawls and rolls through his little region, an utter incongruity, virtually unmolested by a social order to which he is quite incomprehensible. The one attempt by the forces of law to encompass this grotesque anomaly ends in failure. No category, not even that of malefactor, will fit him for long. His existence is a scandalous affront to all right-thinking citizens, challenging as it does all their settled notions of civic propriety and the human function, but as long as he has the means of subsistence there is no way of suppressing him.

Molloy, for his part, is equally uncomprehending of a society in which he is an alien. His every act has the air of being an honest imitation of a ritual whose significance is not fully understood. The result is a series of ludicrous parodies of human behaviour, absurdly robbed of dignity and meaning. His account of his experience of Love with Ruth-Edith-Rose, (his memory is not all it might be and the name forever engraved on his heart has become illegible), is a horribly funny caricature of an act that some writers in this century have celebrated as the highest human fulfilment. With a mixture of vulgar directness and elegant circumlocution, and with ingenuous frankness, he describes the grotesque liaison that succeeded in dispelling some of his earlier misconceptions, but that left him unconvinced as to the ultimate value of the proceedings. "A mug's game in my opinion and tiring on top of that, in the long run." (I, 76). In an essay that relates Beckett's treatment of sex to an Irish body-horror that he describes as 'Manichaeism', Vivian Mercier comments: "One laughs in self-defence against the uneasy suspicion that sex has betrayed everyone

into at least remotely comparable absurdities."⁶

To experience situations in innocent ignorance of their customary significance is essentially an Absurdist condition. It is the view of life from the far side of the glass partition that Sartre speaks of.⁷ Human behaviour becomes a parade of nonsensical gestures and communication an illusion. Molloy, not surprisingly, finds the effort of communication a great strain and avoids it whenever possible. "Not that I was hard of hearing, for I had quite a sensitive ear, and sounds unencumbered with precise meaning were registered perhaps better by me than by most." (I, 66). But the conditioned understanding that voluntarily extracts coherent sense from spoken sounds has left him. Similarly he has difficulty in discovering any meaning in much of what he himself says, when engaged in conversation. He is in a state of dissociation from the habitual assumptions about the intelligibility of human action. Names of things and the meanings of events are slipping away from him. In a kind of primeval innocence in which life can be experienced afresh, undistorted by the preconceptions embodied in language and acquired through conditioning, the search for identity can proceed.

At this point mention should be made of two pairs of complementary responses to experience that seem to be deeply embedded in Beckett's imagination. One is the Apollonian-Dionysian polarity of which he is quoted as speaking explicitly in an interview with Israel Shenker.⁸ The distinction, explored by Edith Kern,⁹ is between 'knowing' and 'not-knowing', between an intellectualized mastery of the conditions of one's living and an instinctual immersion in them. In Molloy Beckett is examining the latter response, existence unformalized by intellectual synthesis. Molloy does not live according to any kind of code, nor has he any clear

6 V. Mercier, "S.B. and the Sheela-na-Gig", Kenyon Rev., XXIII (Spring 1961), p. 324.

7 Sartre, "An Explication of L'Etranger."

8 I. Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters", N.Y. Times, (May 6, 1956), sec. 2,

9 E. Kern, op. cit.

expectations regarding the behaviour of others. His most common reaction is uncritical surprise. He does not readily perceive the relation between cause and effect, intention and action.

The second polarity threaded into Beckett's work is that drawn between Democritus and Heraclitus, the laughing and weeping philosophers. Both responses are equally appropriate to the Absurdity of existence, and Beckett seems to alternate between the two. Moran, in the latter stages of his descent into the Dionysian, despite his miserable condition is moved to "guffaw" at the sight of the lights of Bally, expressive in their clustering of the inane purposes of civilized men. Molloy writes of the terror and anguish that he feels at the "senseless, speechless, issueless misery" (I, 16), but the manner of his narration is essentially Democritean in tone. It is not a carefree laughter, but the wry grimace offered in response to something too absurd for words. As the trilogy wears on, however, the laughter fades. The Unnamable weeps copiously, as do his creatures, at the bitter senselessness of an impossible predicament. Malone, in a transition stage, is troubled by an incursion into his consciousness of a Democritean pronouncement — "Nothing is more real than nothing" — which no longer seems to provoke a comic response. The situation is becoming too desperate.

The retreat from the body and the sense of a dualism begin with Molloy. At first he traverses his narrow region mounted on an antique bicycle. The bicycle motif is given lengthy treatment by Hugh Kenner, who styles it "The Cartesian Centaur".¹⁰ It is a model of the relation of mind and body, a complex machine controlled by a guiding intelligence. An entity that calls itself 'Molloy' relies on this mechanical contraption both for movement and for stationary support, and is patently in at least partial control over its erratic motions. When the bicycle is no more, the 'Molloy' entity discovers itself to be in similarly dependent control over a trunk and four limbs, two of which function with regrettable

10 Kenner, op. cit., p.121.

inefficiency. Thus commences the process which will end with The Unnamable's rejection of the whole idea of the self's dependence upon a physical correlative.

Much of Molloy's attention, as he experiences the life of "unaccommodated man" on Beckett's behalf, is given to the disintegrating body that he drags about with him. He speaks of it with a measure of detachment, occasionally ascribing to it a kind of independent volition. "And I had been under the weather so long, under all weathers, that I could tell quite well between them, my body could tell between them and seemed even to have its likes, its dislikes." (I, 68). He dwells at great length on the course of "the body's long madness", and is anxious to convey with some precision his physical state at each stage of his little Calvary, (the comparison is his own). These physical descriptions vary considerably in tone, from the genially coarse to the delicately euphemistic, but they are important contributions, in Molloy's view, to the truth about himself, which it is his prime object to relate. In the bed-ridden condition which he has announced at the opening of the book he seeks to describe the sensation of being a man, at a period when the term 'I' still vaguely included his corporeal frame.

With Malone the retreat has gone a stage further. His body is little more than a secondary aggravation of his fevered mental state. In an introductory summary of his creeping impotence he concludes:

All my senses are trained full on me, me. Dark and silent and stale, I am no prey for them. I am far from the sounds of blood and breath, immured. I shall not speak of my sufferings. Cowering deep down among them I feel nothing. It is there I die, unbeknown to my stupid flesh. That which is seen, that which cries and writhes, my witless remains. 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. It too cannot be quiet. On others let it wreak its dying rage, and leave me in peace. (II, 9).

Thought's dying rage is in fact wrought on the creature of Malone's own imagining, reverting only occasionally to the witless remains that seem hardly to belong to him any more. His control

over them is vestigial, and his dependence upon them slight. His brain is incessantly active despite the enfeeblement and growing remoteness of his body. He is not particularly concerned, in the way Molloy was, with its condition, and remarks on it only in passing and with some contempt. Growing more conscious of himself as a "thinking thing" in the Cartesian sense, whose association with a body is a matter of contingency rather than of necessity, he is inevitably more conscious also of the Occasionalist mystery. Withdrawn into his head, "for that is where I am fled" (II, 61), he is more readily aware of the imponderable coincidence that a hand or a foot should move at the same time as he wills it so to do.

In preparation for his impending death Malone is concerned to gather about him the remnants of himself for inspection and inventory. These remnants include the few humble possessions that he has salvaged from the wreck of days. They are part of his identity and he defines them much in the same way that he would define himself. "For only those things are mine the whereabouts of which I know well enough to be able to lay hold of them, if necessary, that is the definition I have adopted, to define my possessions." (II, 77). His stick, in particular, functions as an extension of himself; it would be difficult to make any descriptive statements about its relation to the mind which were not found to be equally applicable to one of the limbs. When he uses it to locate or shift one of his possessions sensation is transmitted along its length which the mind interprets according to its preconceptions. When he loses it, as a result of a misguided attempt at self-propulsion, he is robbed at a blow of all those objects with which it had been his only link. "In the meantime nothing is mine any more, according to my definition, if I remember rightly," except for the few things he keeps in bed with him. (II, 83). Would there be any point in speaking of 'my guitar', for example, if one had no hands? Would there be any point in saying 'my hands' if one had entirely lost the use of them?

The Unnamable at last is little more than a mind operating

in a void. Slipping in and out of identity with his surrogate characters, struggling to detach some certainty of self from the endless encroachments of 'the other', he has virtually no physical existence at all. Early in the book he mentions that he is seated, and offers, as evidence, the physical sensations that lead him to this belief. He talks also of seeing and hearing, but it is not long before the solipsism attendant upon all self-reflection overtakes him, so that the distinction between the physical eye and the eye of the mind becomes blurred and unimportant. The body has ceased to count, yet a conscious entity continues to say 'I' of itself, and continues to be perplexed by the impression that it is speaking of someone or something else. The subdivision of consciousness into self and other, like any process of subdivision, is capable of infinite protraction.

Through the fictions into which he projects himself, however, The Unnamable can go on exploring, vicariously, the sensation of having a body. The protagonist of these little tales -- all of them grotesque to a degree that makes the stories of Malone seem moderate and credible -- is introduced as Basil. The Unnamable prefers to call him Mahood, for no apparent reason, thus bringing him within the canon of Beckett's M's. Speculation on Beckett's choice of nomenclature is rife but seldom profitable. Maurice Nadeau's suggestion that the M's are all projected fictions of 'Moi' seems to be a reasonable one.¹¹ If, as is frequently suggested, 'Mahood' is meant to stand for 'Manhood', the 'everyman' implications should be treated with the utmost circumspection. Investigations of Mahood's curious adventures in terms of allegories of human life do not lead very far.

As a self-perceiving consciousness The Unnamable is now so far from the life of the body that the idea of flesh-and-blood existence seems only a ludicrous fiction to him. Yet in his attempt to discover what he is and to isolate himself for perusal,

¹¹ M. Nadeau, "S.B., ou le Droit au Silence", Les Temps Modernes VII (Jan. 1952), p. 127⁸. Nadeau also suggests that 'Lemuel' in Malone Dies might be 'Samuel' in the third person, singular.

he enters into the experience of being vestigially 'human'. That is to say, he allows himself to be identified with creatures who have some kind of existence beyond that of the restless mind.

It isn't enough that I should know what I'm doing, I must also know what I'm looking like. This time I am short of a leg. And yet it appears I have rejuvenated. That's part of the programme. Having brought me to death's door, senile gangrene, they whip off a leg and yip off I go again, like a young one, scouring the earth for a hole to hide in. A single leg and other distinctive stigmata to go with it, human to be sure, but not exaggeratedly, lest I take fright and refuse to nibble. (III, 38).

So, sometimes saying 'I' and sometimes 'he', he lives the crippled life of Mahood, at first spiralling homewards on crutches and leg, then encased, limbless, in a large jar outside a restaurant near the shambles. He is profoundly suspicious of both stories and is careful to insist, from time to time, that his self-immersion in them is provisional only.

The first absurdly monstrous tale situates him in an enormous compound through which he stumbles and staggers in ever-decreasing circles towards the central rotunda where his family wait to greet him. Some time before his arrival the whole clan is carried off by sausage poisoning. His final converging steps are taken through their decomposing corpses. This, says The Unnamable, is not, in his view, an improbable circumstance. What does cause him to doubt the truth of the story is the suggestion that some access of pity or horror assailed him and caused him to turn back. That he should have experienced anything more than "a purely physiological commotion" is more than he can believe. It smacks too much of the conventionally human. Yet such is his desire "to have floundered however briefly, however feebly, in the great life torrent streaming from the earliest protozoa to the very latest humans" (III, 47) that he almost gave credence to this improbable tale. It had sounded for a time as though it coincided with his impressions of what it is like to be alive, as the saying is.

The second of Mahood's tales, that of the jar, offers an altogether more satisfactory representation of mind incarnate. The Unnamable becomes so far immersed as almost to believe that this

might actually have been his life. If a species of existence must be foisted upon him, if he must be dragged from the chaos of disembodied thought and made to inhabit a corpse, before the frenzy can be allowed to finish, then the life in the jar seems to be just endurable. It is, after all, yet another expression of the dualism that haunts Beckett's characters. After the addition of the cement collar round his neck the creature in the jar is utterly impotent. He is a mind immured in a physical prison. He is able to believe in the tale, temporarily at least, because it approximates to the impression he has, as narrator, of the nature of the self, a bodytight entity, as Murphy might have said.

His chief aim in submitting to the fictions about his physical existence seems to be the attainment of non-existence. He is seeking a truth about his being that will allow him to abandon it. "But say I succeed in dying, to adopt the most comforting hypothesis, without having been able to believe I ever lived, I know to my cost it is not that they wish for me." (III, 76). And so, to placate the mysterious tormentors, he identifies himself with Mahood in the jar, hoping that by fulfilling the bare requirements for being 'human' he may die to everybody's satisfaction. But the jar episode becomes less and less convincing to him. "No, . . . as long as I am not distinguished by some sense organs other than Madeleine's" (his protectress, otherwise called Marguerite), "it will be impossible for me to believe, sufficiently to pursue my act, the things that are told about me." (III, 75-6). Some evidence is needed, some unquestionably independent testimony, if he is to be persuaded that the physical manifestations assigned to him are not illusory. He does not doubt that the jar is where it is said to be. "No, I merely doubt that I am in it. It is easier to raise a shrine than bring the deity down to haunt it." (III, 78). Ultimately he withdraws his adherence from this attempt to bestow human life upon him. Both parties have acknowledged that the experiment has failed. "The stories of Mahood are ended. He has realized they could not be about me, he has abandoned, it is I who

win, who tried so hard to lose, in order to please him, and be left in peace." (III, 80+81).

By the time that the Mahood episode has been abandoned, however, another 'personage' has been introduced, namely, 'Worm'. Of Worm the least possible is predicated so that he may correspond more adequately to the silent, bodyless, observing consciousness that lies in the dark centre of the self. The identification with this new arrival does not last very long, but while it does there is some careful formulation of the self's perception of itself. It is an account of an entity that senses itself, or, more accurately, is unable to sense itself, as a closed and isolated germ of being, utterly unrelated to the body and its processes. "The one outside of life we always were in the end, all our vain life long. . . The one ignorant of himself and silent, ignorant of his silence and silent, who could not be and gave up trying. Who crouches in their midst who see themselves in him . . ." (III, 82-3). This is reminiscent of Malone's "Cowering deep down among them"(his sufferings) "I feel nothing." (II, 9). The rest of the book is taken up with the attempt to say something about this essence of the self that will not be automatically nullified in the saying.

However, briefly to reiterate the progress so far: four narrators, successively assumed into an ambivalent continuity, have become increasingly conscious of the division of self and other. Moran was reduced from social incorporation to personal isolation. Molloy was further reduced to physical incapacity, which condition is taken up in Malone Dies. Malone's physical existence is of the most basic kind, and he has reached the point of considering the body as almost irrelevant to the question of self. For him, the self-and-other distinction has entered the mental realm of his story-telling, in which the characters are only dubiously separable from himself. The Unnamable has withdrawn into a dark and silent void. He tries to convey some idea of what he feels by using images of bottomless pits and limitless deserts, with himself always in the very centre, the furthest possible point from the circumference. It is the condition that one might succeed in inducing

if one were to deprive oneself as nearly as possible of all physical sensation, and then to search in the turmoil of one's mind for the meaning of the word 'I'. One would feel almost nothing. One would see only the pictures in the mind's eye, hear only the hum of one's own inner voice endlessly forming phrases, as if of its own accord. The solipsistic temptation would offer itself, and as time went on one's memories and the idea of bodily existence would become increasingly like illusions, impossible to credit. 'I' would seem to be nothing more than the words churning the silence. Release into that silence, or, alternatively, re-absorption into the body and its absurd performances, would appear equally unattainable, though urgently desired. In this state, an exhortation such as: "But my dear man, come, be reasonable, look, this is you, look at this photograph . . ." (III, 125), would be so much gibberish.

Crudely expressed, this is the predicament of *The Unnamable*. Words circle and flow, phrases form and re-form, chains of aggravated reasoning are initiated, pursued and lost, fleeting fictions emerge and disappear. The tone ranges through anxiety, disgust, sardonic humour, extravagant desperation, gentle wistfulness and fury. The progress of the book, if progress is the right word, is a descent. The opening pages, with their paragraph divisions and their comparatively systematic approach, have much in common with the tone of *Malone Dies*. There is passing mention of the business of writing, (III, 17), and the act of writing presupposes that one retains some confidence in one's identity. The subsequent movement of the book is into a chaos where the 'I' of the writer splits into fragments, and where the syntax of written composition gives way to the syntax of urgent monologue. Yet syntax it still is. And this may be the undoing of *The Unnamable*. He is trying to hit upon the key formulation of his predicament that will release him from it. He is trying, by the imposition of syntax upon the formless conditions of his existence, to know them in words, to know them in a verbal formula that he can revert to occasionally for

confirmation. The impression left by the close of the book is that the undertaking might be ~~protr~~acted to infinity without hope of any conclusion. Possibly the material on which The Unnamable is imposing language is not susceptible to verbal formulation. Hugh Kenner's parallel with the irrational numbers, the 'unnamables' of Pythagoras, again suggests itself. The attempt to 'fix' an irrational number in a final expression will lead only to the endless recurrence of an approximative decimal.

III

THE 'COGITO' RE-EXAMINED

The structure of The Unnamable is not unlike the symbol of the Olympic Games -- a series of interlinking circles. Circular progressions of thought, usually leading either to their starting points or to an abrupt negation, appear and reappear from time to time, often heralded by a variation of a keynote refrain. Thus the theme of embodiment in a projected fiction of the self, (to be taken up in Chapter Four in relation to the time dimension of the trilogy), makes several appearances, and is seized by the narrator with a little spurt of energy each time. The hope, delusively entertained, is "the hope of being proven in the swim, that is to say, guaranteed to sink, sooner or later". (III, 121). Another major theme is a hope for the opposite release, the release into a condition of silence. For the narrator of The Unnamable is possessed by the feeling that the words which are destroying the silence are all false, that they do not originate from him, and that, far from leading to a discovery of the self, they are forever preventing it. He is thus caught in a fearful impasse. Coherent thought can be carried on only in words, yet The Unnamable is so far self-dissected that he has become conscious of a split between the speaker and the spoken. He has submitted "I think, therefore I am" to fresh examination and has lost confidence in its incontrovertibility. Moreover, he has lost this confidence not through a process of philosophical logic but through an exploration of mental experience.

The first statement of this preoccupation occurs on the opening page of the book. "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me." (III, 3). From the point of view of tracing continuity in Beckett's work it is interesting to note that a variant of this idea is incorporated into How It Is as one of the

dominant repetitive refrains: "I say it as I hear it".¹ After the initial formulation of the idea in The Unnamable, however, the problem is left in abeyance for some time. Choosing to ignore the caveat he has previously issued the narrator says 'I' most blithely, as though he were an integrated whole. Yet in a complex passage in the "exordia" he makes an effort to explain that, if he can speak of himself at all, he can speak only of the past or future self (III, 18), presumably because the present self, unless it remain silent, is involved in the very process of speaking and cannot be both subject and object. It is a truth not far to seek that speech obliterates the intuition of self that it is engaged in formulating. As is remarked later in the book, (it becomes increasingly difficult, incidentally, in writing about The Unnamable, to say "as he remarks", "as he says", and so on): "How can you think and speak at the same time?" (III, 121).

In a less tricky situation Molloy has already observed this chronic difficulty at the heart of speaking of oneself. Towards the end of his narrative he catches himself transcribing in elegant sentences the dim intuitions that passed for thoughts during his crawl through the forest. He pauses to comment at some length on "the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace" (I, 119), when it comes to describing the wanderings of the mind. In fact, he would prefer to describe the sensation of thought as "something gone wrong with the silence". He rephrases carefully: ". . . there arose within me, confusedly, a kind of consciousness, which I express by saying, I said, etc." (I, 119).

The Unnamable's task is far harder. As Milton Rickels remarks: "The method of creating the work as pure voice is a metaphor of how Being knows itself. Man cannot speak until he knows his thought, and he cannot fix his thought except in words."² Added

1 Samuel Beckett, How It Is, New York: Grove Press, 1964, passim.

2 Milton Rickels, "Existential Themes in Beckett's Unnamable", Criticism, IV (Spring, 1962), p.138.

to this is the complication that what struggles to be expressed is a pervasive doubt of the authenticity of the thought-cum-speech that is finding utterance. And added again is the ultimate frustration that the only possible rest from this torment is the exorcism that may be effected by adequate verbal formulation. Not surprisingly this tangle -- surely one of the most involuted prescriptions for a novel ever planned -- leads to outbursts of desperation:

This voice that speaks . . . 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. It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know, its (sic) round that I must revolve, of that I must speak, with this voice that is not mine, but can only be mine, since there is no one but me, or if there are others, to whom it might belong, they have never come near me, I won't delay just now to make this clear. (III, 26).

This is an inextricable predicament. The words that issue from him, the words that sound in his hearing, do not seem to be his, neither do the words in which he denies authorship of them, nor the words in which he comments on this denial, and so ad infinitum. The book is continually negating itself, rather in the way that Moran negated his half of Molloy by his final admission of perjury. The Unnamable is listening to himself thinking, making thought the object of thought. In so doing he is paring away the substance of the self and augmenting the stock of all that can be perceived as distinct from the self, the not-self. For as soon as one attends objectively to the activity of one's mind, one withdraws from identity with it and discovers it to have a curious autonomy of its own. Phrases continue to form themselves and one realizes that one has absolutely no understanding of the process of verbalization. When, for example, one gropes for a word, temporarily out of reach, and suddenly the word materializes -- what has happened? One cannot claim to have 'found' it. Similarly, in a state of detachment, when the demands of conversation or rapid composition have abated, one can become aware that the whole fabric of articulate thought is a kind of chemistry, the spontaneous sep-

aration of a precipitate of words from the opaque liquid of the mind. There is still an entity capable of distinguishing itself from this process, an attenuated First Person Singular. The Unnamable is on the verge of this condition throughout the book, separated for a moment from his own thought, then reabsorbed into it, inevitably. His struggle is to grasp this realization, to fix it in words that will deprive it of its mesmeric elusiveness. "Labyrinthine torment that can't be grasped, or limited, or felt, or suffered, no, not even suffered..."(III, 36).

The character of the not-self in The Unnamable is portrayed mainly as being hostile to the self. It is usually personified, and its aim seems to be to deceive and dupe. The major deception that is being practised, according to the narrator, is that of leading him into a false identification with various fictitious personae. Although he veers between the desire to be re-integrated into a persona and the desire to go silent -- both of them ways of ceasing to 'be' -- he wishes also to avoid being duped into a false position. "Not to have been a dupe, that will have been my best possession, my best deed, to have been a dupe, wishing I wasn't, thinking I wasn't, knowing I was, not being a dupe of not being a dupe." (III, 36). He wishes to maintain the precarious consciousness of the otherness of his own thought. But the hostile not-self, referred to as 'they', is blamed for filling him with words that are not his own, in order to deceive him into assuming authorship of them. "It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed." (III, 51). But he sees an escape in the fact that he neither understands nor remembers the words that are presented to him as his own. "Dear incomprehension, it's thanks to you I'll be myself, in the end." (III, 51).

"Now, however, that I have supposed the presence of a supremely powerful -- and if I dare say it -- malignant genius, whose resources and diligence are all directed towards deceiving

me, what am I to say?"³ This is not The Unnamable speaking, but René Descartes. In a process of "methodical doubt" he is examining the degree to which his assumptions about himself may be deceptions practised upon him by the "malignant genius". Almost all of them are found to be fallible. All the evidence of his senses may be illusory and all the apparent truths about himself false. Thus far The Unnamable would agree with him. But Descartes limits the power of his "malignant genius" when his systematic reduction of man reaches the notion of thought. "For thought is the one attribute which cannot be wrenched from me. I am, I exist: that is certain."⁴ No demon can dissuade him of this. He is "a thinking thing", and "thinking" is understood to include doubt, affirmation, denial, willing, and feeling. "It is impossible, he says, to distinguish any one of these faculties from thought, or to describe any of them as separate from the self. "It is so obvious that it is I who doubt, understand, and will, that no further explanation is required."⁵

At this point The Unnamable would demur. The anguished struggle to "say what I am" (III, 53) leads him to sense that the mind's activities can indeed be described as separate from the self. An unprecedented effort of self-consciousness makes him deny the interchangeability of "I think" and "I am". Or rather, it makes him question whether "think" and "am" are necessarily governed by the same subject. It is the crucial "therefore" in Descartes' dictum that is in dispute. Thought is taking place, the words rattle on, but is this inevitably indistinguishable from "me"? There is thought, therefore what am I? Thus he separates in the Cartesian incontrovertible the elements of demonstration and description. The self's knowledge of its own existence cannot be refuted, but knowledge of its own nature does not automatically

3 Descartes, "Second Meditation", ibid., p.110.

4 Ibid., p.110.

5 Ibid., p.112.

follow this primary awareness. The Unnamable is fleetingly sensible of an insubstantial shadow of consciousness that dumbly knows itself in the first person singular and which is aware of its alienation from all thoses spaces "where thought and feeling dance their sabbath", to quote Molloy (I, 11). .

If the account offered at the end of Chapter Two⁶ of The Unnamable's situation is a valid one, the following passage at the opening of Descartes' Third Meditation will be of interest:

Now I shall close my eyes, stop up my ears, still all my senses, and even the images of physical things I shall either delete from my mind, or, since that can scarcely be done, count them not worth a straw, as being vain and misleading fancies; and so, holding converse only with myself, delving ever deeper within me, I shall endeavour to become little by little better acquainted and more familiar with myself.⁷

One is less hesitant in suggesting that The Unnamable is, in part, a deliberate repeat performance of this mental exercise, when one recalls that Beckett wrote a thesis on Descartes for his M.A. at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1931.⁸ (He did not go on for his Ph.D.).

Having disposed of his deceiving elf, Descartes elected God as the guarantor of the truth of his impressions. The Unnamable, however, has some difficulty in distinguishing between these two personages, and tends to confuse them. The hostile and deceiving other is frequently referred to in terms comparable to those employed of a deity. The situation is always highly ambiguous, for the speaker is trying to cope with a nebulous external power that he can treat only in images more or less appropriate to his impressions. Recurrent among these images, however, is that of a "master". This master, as perceived by the narrator, embodies both deity and demon, and, far from being the guarantor of truth, is usually the source of deceit. He is also an incomprehensible tyrant, responsible for placing his creatures in a life which they do not understand sufficiently to live it according to his arbitrary specific-

6 pp.24-25.

7 Descartes, "Third Meditation", *ibid.*, p.117.

8 This information comes from Ruby Cohn's book, previously cited.

ations. They can do no more than they were created to do, all that they can say or do was, so to speak, programmed into them, yet they are required, for the greater glory of their creator, to act in the right manner as though of their own spontaneous volition.

Warmth, ease, conviction, the right manner, as if it were my own voice, pronouncing my own words, words pronouncing me alive, since that's how they want me to be, I don't know why, with their billions of quick, their trillions of dead, that's not enough for them, I too must contribute my little convulsion, mewl, howl, gasp and rattle, loving my neighbour and blessed with reason. But what is the right manner, I don't know. It's they who dictate this torrent of balls, they who stuffed me full of these groans that choke me. (III, 67).

He feels that he is required to conform to certain pre-established specifications which he cannot grasp, and, moreover, to appear to do so wholeheartedly. He must take over the words that he knows to be foreign to him and make them his own.

But the difficulty he has in understanding what is required leads him to suspect that the whole purpose of the operation is the issueless torment of the creature. Enraged by the problem of whether even the lowly-named Worm, introduced as the self that lies behind all the surrogate fictions, might be himself a fiction, the speaker declares: "The essential is to go on squirming forever at the end of the line, as long as there are waters and banks and ravening in heaven a sporting God to plague his creature, per pro his chosen shits." (III, 71). When Mahood is finally disposed of, "they" cause the idea to occur to the speaker that he might now be Worm, that he might have found the aspect of the self from which no further withdrawal is possible. But the frenzy continues: "Do they believe I believe it is I who am speaking? That's theirs too. To make me believe I have an ego all my own, and can speak of it, as they of theirs. Another trap to snap me up among the living." (III, 81). The dilemma remains, however. It is impossible that he is Worm, since he knows it: ". . . if I were Worm I wouldn't know it . . . I'd be Worm." (III, 83). So it continues, only to be totally negated. "Ah if only I could find a voice of my own, in all this babble, it would be the end of their troubles, and of mine." (III, 84).

A few pages later he resolves to abandon the use of the word 'I' as being "too farcical". (III, 94).

Removed to the third person, as befits an identity that has become the object of consciousness rather than the subject, Worm continues to be spoken of at length. A complex fantasy is projected in which Worm is brought by stages out of his formless inertia to a recognizable level of humanity. When this is achieved "the master" demands that the creature be brought before him: "He's lacking to my glory." (III, 113). The quasi-divine nature of this personification of the other is here explicit. Yet earlier in the book, and again later, God is discarded as the base invention of a moment's mauvaise foi. "Organs, a without, it's easy to imagine, a god, it's unavoidable, you imagine them, it's easy, the worst is dulled, you doze away, an instant. Yes, God, fomenter of calm, I never believed, not a second." (III, 23). More to the point, in connection with the Cartesian deity, is a sudden wariness introduced into the investigation of "the master". If he were examined too closely "he'd turn out to be a mere high official, we'd end up by needing God, we have lost all sense of decency admittedly, but there are still depths we prefer not to sink to." (III, 122). The Unnamable is not, after all, examining the nature of God considered as an existent being, but the nature of the demands made by the not-self upon the self -- demands which resemble those formerly made by the deity. God, the master, Youdi, even Mr. Knott are convenient personifications of the intrusion of some incomprehensible influence upon the self.

A feature of The Unnamable is constant recapitulation in an effort to light upon some expression of the narrator's impressions of himself. So, attempting once again to convey the sensation of first-person consciousness, he explores delicately precise images of mental experience that might approximate to his condition. He tries to describe the words that are filling his awareness and yet which are not his words in terms of the silent recitations that one might practise "in the underground, or in bed" -- "the

words are there, somewhere, without the least sound." (III, 133). But the image does not satisfy him, so he moves to what may be one of the most crucial statements of the book. In essence he feels nothing except the ability to feel. It is a state of pure consciousness: ". . . perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two . . . I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either." (III, 134). The effect of consciousness is thus to inaugurate an irreparable split, a manner of knowing that destroys the innocence of unconscious participation in one's own life. In Milton Rickels' words: "Consciousness . . . is like a disease in that it infects the purity of the condition."⁹

It is at this point in the book that a larger and more frantic reiteration of all the major themes commences. The tone has become markedly more urgent and less ceremonious. Sentences are inclined to run on for several pages, affirming, denying, repeating, qualifying and negating. The images tend to be more violent, and the voice is more frustrated and desperate in response to a situation in which the inescapable alternatives are, literally, that he must either remain silent or lie. For to remain silent is to be unable to know, with the kind of knowledge that words give; while each panting formulation is bound to perpetuate the falsehood it tries to clarify. Each momentary certainty is nullified by the next moment's renewal of questioning.

At last, on page 141, it appears as if an irreducible statement has been achieved, one from which further definition can proceed and to which it can return if it loses direction. If it can be maintained it will stand, like the Cartesian "thinking thing", as a self-evident proposition, to underpin any tottering fabric that may be erected over it. "Let me now sum up . . . there is I, it's essential . . . there is I, on the one hand, and this noise on the other . . . now that I'm there it's I will do

9 Rickels, op. cit., p.140.

the summing up." (III, 141-2). But the question is positively craved and is not long in being given. Another building on sand meets its fate. For "it has not yet been our good fortune to establish with any degree of accuracy what I am, where I am, whether I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence." (III, 142).

It is no accident if the book appears to be maddeningly repetitive and circular. The narrator himself is as maddened by the hopeless lack of progress as any reader could be. One gathers that he set out originally to tell his story somewhat in the way that Moran, Molloy and Malone told theirs, only to find that his autobiographical aspirations were fatally weakened by the defection of meaning from the word 'I'. He is condemned never to escape from the preliminaries. There is little doubt that he would agree with a critic like V.S.Pritchett, who declares the book to be unreadable -- "all significance and no content".¹⁰ He might add that from his point of view the book was also 'unspeakable'. Coping with what Pritchett calls "the unwearying little talker in the brain"¹¹ is no fun for him who copes.

With the air of one who resigns from a task against his better judgment, The Unnamable briefly resolves to leave off questioning, to close his mind to the disabling doubt and plunge into assumptions that he knows to be unjustifiable. There will be no more talk of a division between the speaker and the spoken. It will be assumed that he is speaking his own words. Abandoning his numerous reservations he will pretend to be human. "Equate me, without pity or scruple, with him who exists, somehow, no matter how, no finicking, with him whose story this story had the brief ambition to be. Better, ascribe to me a body. Better still, arrogate to me a mind." (III, 144-5). It is a despairing fling, he cannot believe in it. It will be a fiction before long. And the qualification is not long in coming. "Something has changed

10 V.S.Pritchett, "An Irish Oblomov", New Statesman, LIX (Apr. 2, 1960), p.489.

11 Ibid.

nevertheless." (III, 145). We are a step further away from the truth of the matter.

The attempt in the direction of human embodiment having failed, The Unnamable turns his attention towards silence. The idea re-appears of a key phrase or formula which will release him from the compulsion to speak. He even wonders, at one stage, whether perhaps he has already said "the thing that had to be said, that gives me the right to have done with speech." (III, 149). But it would not appear so, since the speech continues unabated. The idea, however, of escape into a kind of nirvana attracts him powerfully and he takes pains to convey an impression of the nature of this silence. It appeals to him as a haven, a promised land where he can be at peace in himself.

To describe this silence is a difficult task, for him and for the commentator. First of all it is not to be confused with death. He makes the distinction explicitly himself when he says, having spoken of death: "I should have liked to go silent first." (III, 153). It is a state of undisturbed consciousness, with nothing to be conscious of, a state to be passively enjoyed. His desire is "to enter living into silence, so as to be able to enjoy it, no, I don't know why, so as to feel myself silent." (III, 153). There is also the sense of being reunited with himself, in a unity of subject and object, knowing his own being and nothing else. Wistfully he says how he would relish the silence, "so as in the end to be a little as I always was and never could be", and even resorts to images of not wishing to die "a stranger in the midst of strangers". (III, 153-4). But it is not a dream he puts much faith in, he does not allow himself to believe in it for very long. The idea is part of him, but so is the opposite idea, that the only end to that aggravated consciousness full of words is sudden extinction. "As to believing I shall go silent for good and all, I don't believe it particularly, I've always believed it, as I always believed I would never go silent, you can't call that believing . . ." (III, 154).

In obedience to what has become almost a routine he swings back to an abortive consideration of more surrogate personae that he might be able to lose himself in. Fleeting fictions emerge briefly and are abandoned. He rejects them as "stories" — "all these stories about travellers, these stories about paralytics," (III, 176).— and reverts yet again to his weary solipsisms. The recurring decimal of his division of himself is getting more and more minuscule. As division continues the area within which the irrational number can exist steadily dwindles, but it can never be reduced to nothing. The Unnamable does not end, it simply moves out of the reader's hearing, to continue endlessly on its own. There is talk of an end, devoutly to be wished, but it is despairing talk. Adopting the third person, as is occasionally his wont, he makes yet another attempt to say something definitive:

... . it's his turn again now, he who neither speaks nor listens, who has neither body nor soul, it's something else he has, he must have something, he must be somewhere, he is made of silence, there's a pretty analysis, he's in the silence, he's the one to be sought, the one to be, the one to be spoken of, the one to speak, but he can't speak, then I could stop, I'd be he, I'd be the silence, I'd be back in the silence, we'd be reunited, his story the story to be told, but he has no story, he hasn't been in story, it's not certain, he's in his own story, unimaginable, unspeakable, that doesn't matter, the attempt must be made . . . then it will be he, it will be I, it will be the place, the silence, the end . . . (III, 177).

The final lines of the book, hopeless, resigned, yet still agitated, contain the ultimate, insoluble dilemma: "in the silence you don't know". If he were ever to achieve that silence in which he would be free from the sound of the words instilled into him, he would be unable to know that he had found the core of himself. For the silence would be an absence of consciousness. The vicious circle of The Unnamable's experience is that the self is inseparable from consciousness and that consciousness is inseparable from the sense of alienation from the self. It is endlessly circular and inescapable. "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." (III, 179).

IV

TEMPORAL DISJUNCTION

Whether or not one accepts Ruby Cohn's suggestion that The Unnamable is an afterthought¹, it is indisputable that a reading of the final book of the trilogy throws the preceding pair into a distinctly new perspective. In particular it binds all the personae, real or 'invented', into a curious and fascinating continuity, and makes a consistent scheme out of their strange inconsistencies. Moreover, it incorporates also nearly every other major character from Beckett's earlier work, including those from some unpublished material, and subordinates them in the same relation to the last narrator of the trilogy. The effect is to introduce a time dimension into the great quest for the self, and to reshape what has gone before, in the way that each new present reshapes the pattern imposed upon the past. It is the purpose of this chapter to examine in detail the relation that exists between the narrative and surrogate personae of the three books, and the relation of these characters as a group to The Unnamable.

For a starting point one may go back to one of the very earliest of Beckett's works, the 1931 essay on Proust. The remarkable continuity of Beckett's development has been noticed already, but it is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the applicability of certain sections of Proust to a study of the trilogy. In the opening pages he is dealing, as anyone must who writes on Proust, with the effect of Time on the human personality. In one of his carefully tailored phrases, typical of his early years, he speaks of the "poisonous ingenuity of Time in the science of affliction", which results in "an unceasing modification of the personality, whose permanent reality, if any, can only be apprehended

1 See Chapter I, footnote 3.

as a retrospective hypothesis."² In the trilogy the little modifying phrase, "if any", takes most of the load. The idea of a real and continuous personality, a consistent self-regarding self extended through Time, is subjected to bizarre attack.

One assumption that has so far been avoided in this study is that Moran, Molloy, Malone and The Unnamable are all in fact the same person. Similar care has been taken to refrain from treating Sapo, Macmann and the long-suffering Mahood as further "phases of the same carnal envelope", as The Unnamable would say. (III, 60). The justification for this assiduity is the calculated and complex ambiguity which Beckett throws over the relation that exists among his creatures and his creatures' creatures. He has deliberately forestalled the conclusion that any two personages are one and the same by sprinkling among the numerous correspondences that can be found to link them a handful of discrepancies to undermine one's hard-won certainties. As will be shown, The Unnamable incorporates these latent ambiguities into the wider preoccupation with the pursuit of identity.

In Molloy the theme is only latent. A rational, law-abiding bourgeois sets out on a mission to find a wild tramp named Molloy, and ends up either by becoming extremely like his prey, or by actually turning into the creature he is pursuing. In the latter case it would be better to say that the book is simply two fragments of an autobiography, placed in the wrong order. And there are numerous correspondences between the two narratives to encourage this view. Moran's physical deterioration leaves him in very much the same condition that Molloy of the travels has to contend with. Both characters have recourse to the bicycle in their distress, and they appear to ride their respective mounts in similar fashion. Moreover, in a minor key, there are many small details to hold the theory together. Molloy, for example, mentions that he may once have had a son, (I, 8). There is not

2 Proust, p.4, (my underlining).

much doubt either that the man who takes his papers away is old friend Gaber, of Youdi Enterprises Inc. He is said to be always thirsty and to come only on Sundays, which is circumstantial evidence of some weight.

More important is the great similarity of tone that links the later Moran with the standard Molloy. The simple technique of putting Molloy's narrative first allows the reader to realize more vividly the gradual change in manner that overtakes the good citizen Moran. His measured sentences give way to the rambling, disjointed style of one who has lost his mastery over experience and become an uncomprehending outcast. The opinionated pompousness of the father and Christian change to something very like humility, a humility that recognizes that all opinions are equally worthless. When Father Ambrose comes to speak with him after his return home, Moran remarks: "He began to talk. He was right. Who is not right? I left him." (I, 240). Given a little more time to overcome his sense of loss he will learn the shambling geniality of Molloy.

But if it is easy to believe that Moran becomes Molloy, it is almost impossible to convince oneself that Molloy was ever Moran. Molloy gives the impression of having never been other than he is. Only a complete loss of memory, (not, by any means, out of the question), could account for the discrepancies that obtrude into his narrative. After his release from the police station, for example, he ponders the reason for his arrest and mentions his willingness to learn respectable behaviour if only someone will teach it to him.

And if I have always behaved like a pig, the fault lies not with me but with my superiors, who corrected me only on points of detail instead of showing me the essence of the system, after the manner of the great English schools, and the guiding principles of good manners, and how to proceed, without going wrong, from the former to the latter, and how to trace back to its ultimate source a given comportment. For that would have allowed me, before parading in public certain habits such as the finger in the nose, the scratching of the balls, digital emunction and

the peripatetic piss, to refer them to the first rules of a reasoned theory. (I, 32).

Is this the Moran we once knew, the man who was so rigorous in educating his son? The book conveys very strongly the impression that the narrators are two separate people, one from Turdy, one from Bally, as well as the contradictory impression that the Molloy that Moran knows as a distinct living creature is really only a submerged aspect of himself.

However, the calculated ambiguity of this relation is not of the same order as that which encompasses the characters later in the trilogy. If Molloy was once Moran there has been a total break in that continuity of the self that allows one to recognize a clear progress from youth to age, and unhesitatingly to say 'I' of the person one is no longer. But this theme is not developed in Molloy. As part of the theme of personal identity it must wait until The Unnamable for explicit, detailed examination. Such continuity as there may be from Moran to The Unnamable, in terms of a single narrative voice, is almost entirely denied by the latter when he comes to consider those identities which may have some claim to be earlier manifestations of an enduring self.

In Moran's narrative there is the first appearance of a technique that is to be important later on in extending the complexity of the trilogy's character relations. It is the habit of introducing figures from earlier works, published and unpublished, and speaking of them as having the same degree of 'real' existence as the characters of the work in progress. Moran, for example, tells of earlier missions that he was called upon to carry out and mentions, as similar cases to that of Molloy, the names of "Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others". (I, 188). Murphy and Watt need no explanation; Mercier is one half of the double-act featured in the unpublished Mercier et Camier, (to which Hugh Kenner and Ruby Cohn, to mention only two, have had access); Yerk is unidentifiable. They are all in his head, the whole "gallery of moribunds", and if he were easy in his mind he

could tell the stories of how he dealt with them. In this he could be compared to a writer -- for that matter to the writer, S.Beckett, M.A. -- speaking of the various fictions he has tracked down in the past.

The analogy is an important one and part of the conscious design of the trilogy. Some critics indeed have gone so far as to consider it the basic theme of the three books. Anthony Hartley, for example, calls The Unnamable, "one of the profoundest studies of the relation between a writer and his characters".³ In Malone Dies the narrator is deliberately making up stories, and commenting on the process of writing as he does so. Many of Moran's comments about Molloy could easily be taken as portraying the manner in which a writer struggles to understand and grasp the image of a new character in his imagination. This is particularly true of the passage in which Moran describes his early knowledge of the dark intruder in his mind. Moreover, one could read the whole of his narrative as a particularly agonizing case of an author's self-identification with his protagonist, to the point where he loses his grip on his own identity. Thus Hartley's comment might be taken as being applicable to all three books.

But this would seem to be to mistake the shadow for the substance. A more satisfactory approach is to regard the sustained metaphor of the writer's relation to his fictions as an expression of the self's view of previous and present identities seen as fictitious impersonations. Any projection of the self, whether into a social personality or into an invented fiction, will appear equally and indistinguishably false to the alienated self of The Unnamable. The image of the writer and his characters, containing as it does the complexities of the writer's partial identification with, and involvement in, his creatures, to the extent that they are all in some respects, though never in all, representations of himself, is especially apt for the purpose. Equally valid is the parallel drawn between the self's attitude to its engagement in earlier personae, and the writer's view of past fictions. In both

3 Anthony Hartley, "Samuel Beckett", Spectator, (Oct.23, 1953), p.459.

cases the connection between these derelict and abandoned identities and the present self-regarding self is a difficult and ambiguous one.

Malone's literary activities are more than a pastime. They are part of a process of self-definition, comparable to The Unnamable's experiments with the grotesque surrogate, Mahood. Kenneth Rexroth calls the process an attempt "to find his own existence by, as it were, describing his anti-self, by describing a hero who will be progressively differentiated from Malone."⁴ And Malone himself, at one point, remarks in reference to Sapo: "Nothing is less like me than this patient, reasonable child . . ." (II, 17). The paragraph ends: "And on the threshold of being no more I succeed in being another. Very pretty." But if his aim really is to create a personage clearly distinct from himself, he does not by any means succeed. The Sapo-Macmann saga shows an alarming tendency to become a fragment of autobiography, and even at the best is little more than a fantasy of Malone in imaginary circumstances.

With the increasing number of Beckett's M's the problem of correspondences and discrepancies grows more complex. Integrated, continuing personality, as Moran once possessed, is involved in a process of fragmentation into a series of mutually super-intending consciousnesses-- like the scores of heads that peer at each other down the vistas of a double mirror. As in the double mirror it becomes difficult to determine what is reflection and what is substance. Malone could well be a later phase of Molloy -- there is much to support the idea. Macmann too displays curious affinities with Molloy, but there are some awkward inconsistencies. Possibly the life of Macmann consists of the same cards as the life of Molloy-Malone, shuffled and re-dealt. One is reminded of the first zone of the mind of Murphy in which "the elements of physical experience (were) available for a new arrange-

⁴ Kenneth Rexroth, "The Point is Irrelevance", Nation, CLXXXII (April 14, 1956), pp.326-7.

ment", and in which Murphy permuted the uncomfortable facts of his life into a more satisfying pattern.⁵ It is hard to see, however, how the story of Macmann could be considered "a radiant abstract of the dog's life".⁶

That Malone should be a continuation of Molloy is not improbable on the face of it. Malone has occasional fleeting memories of an existence that resembles Molloy's, and in general adopts much the same tone and manner. He wonders, at one point, whether in fact he is not already dead, having "expired in the forest, or even earlier". (II, 45). When he introduces himself by name, which is not until nearly half way through the book, he adds an odd parenthesis: ". . . Malone (since that is what I am called now)." (II, 48). As a small original contribution to the great debate on Beckett's names it may be suggested that 'Malone', usually interpreted as 'Man Alone', might be in deliberate opposition to a 'Molloy' that rhymes with οἱ πολλοί -- a reduction from life among the teeming throng to life in isolation. Certainly it would appear to the outsider that, despite one or two discrepancies, Malone and Molloy are the same person.

But this happy conclusion does not take into account Malone's view of the case. For it would appear that Molloy, grouped now with Murphy, Mercier and Moran, is counted as no more than a fiction by Malone, a creature of his own imagining to be manipulated at will. Speaking of the M's that have preceded him, he asks:

How many have I killed, hitting them on the head or setting fire to them? Off-hand I can only think of four, all unknowns, I never knew anyone. A sudden wish, I have a sudden wish to see, as sometimes in the old days, something, anything, no matter what, something I could not have imagined. There was the old butler, in London I think, there's London again, I cut his throat with a razor, that makes five. (II, 63).

Here is the present self making no distinction between previous lived experience and previous imagined experience. Both were pro-

5 Murphy, p. 101.

6 Ibid.

jections of the self, appearing retrospectively to be at the disposal of the present identity. Malone subordinates them all to his own will, as *The Unnamable* will later subordinate Malone. As for the five deaths, Murphy died by fire, the old butler occurs in the same book, Moran clubbed a man in the forest, and the other two are probably to be found in the unpublished pieces. The "wish to see . . . something I could not have imagined" is surely a wish to distinguish from among these retrospective fictions of the self, in which Murphy and ~~Mallory~~ are equally remote from the present identity, some experience that he can believe in as his own.

The stories about Sapo-Macmann do not fulfil this wish. They are ■ stories about a Malone that might have been, perhaps in part about a Malone that actually was, but they are only stories, recognized as second-hand. They are a way of detaching a portion of the self for inspection, projecting onto a screen a part of his life so that it may be viewed from a distance. In *The Unnamable* the technique becomes still more involved as each surrogate figure, "my vice-exister" (III, 37) becomes ~~becomes~~ a grotesque extension of the insubstantial self into living matter. For Malone, however, the object of the projection is not so clear. He, after all, retains some physical existence himself. He speaks of making "a little creature in my image" to hold in his arms, and continues: "And seeing what a poor thing I have made, or how like myself, I shall eat it. Then be alone a long time, unhappy, not knowing what my prayer should be nor to whom." (II, 52). Again, when he rediscovers Sapo-Macmann: "I slip into him, I suppose in the hope of learning something." (II, 52). And when, in his search for the lost pencil, he has time to reflect on his invention of a story to be co-terminous with his life, he discovers:

. . . the solution and conclusion of the whole sorry business, I mean the business of Malone . . . and of the other, for the rest is no business of mine. And it was, though more unutterable, like the crumbling away of two little heaps of finest sand, or dust, or ashes, of unequal size, but diminishing together as it were in ratio, if that means anything, and leaving behind them, each in its own stead, the blessedness of absence. (II, 48).

A phrase from The Unnamable seems to offer some explanation of Malone's proceedings. The Unnamable is speaking of all the previous characters, whose pains, he says, are as nothing compared with his own, "a mere tittle of mine, the tittle I thought I could put from me in order to witness it." (III, 21). Malone, the writer, projects from himself a half-imaginary story in order to know himself better.

In examining the story of Sapo-Macmann one discovers a curious set of correspondences with the experiences related by Molloy, although there are as many contradictions interwoven to forestall a hasty identification by the reader. In appearance Macmann has much in common with the club-carrying man who begs for bread from Moran in the forest. There is the same long snow-white hair, the same pale nobility of countenance, the same unbending gait. But the intruder on Moran is reminiscent of A (or is it C ?) observed by Molloy. The club and the indescribable hat proclaim the man. And Malone himself counts among his possessions a blood-stained club ! It seems very nearly superfluous to remark that the identity of Macmann and his relation to his colleagues among the M's is a delicate and complex affair.

What, for example, is one to make of the little silver knife-rest? Molloy, on leaving the abode of Lousse, stole some silver — "oh nothing much, massive teaspoons for the most part, and other small objects whose utility I did not grasp but which seemed as if they might have some value. Among these latter there was one which haunts me still, from time to time." (I, 85). This unidentifiable object, for which Molloy comes to feel a kind of veneration, so impregnable is its incomprehensibility, resembles, we are told, a tiny sawing horse. He is certain that it must have "a most specific function, always to be hidden from me." (I, 86), and he cannot bring himself to part with it. The attentive reader, already armed with his suspicions as to the nature of Molloy's little silver thing, is likely to be thrown into some perplexity by the following, from Malone Dies, just after Macmann's

admission to the House of St. John of God: "With regard to the objects found in the pockets, they had been assessed as quite worthless and fit only to be thrown away with the exception of a little silver knife-rest which he could have back at any time." (II, 87). Now the natural assumption would of course be that Macmann is one and the same as Molloy, but any attempt to verify this identification will be confronted by the fact that Molloy was already on crutches when he stole the knife-rest from Lousse, while Macmann, after a brief convalescence in the asylum, is able to roam unaided throughout the grounds.

The conclusion to be drawn from this deliberately planted ambiguity has already been roughly outlined. It is that the story of Macmann consists of a retrospective re-working of the situation experienced by Malone when he was Molloy. A good example of this is the Macmann-Moll liaison, reminiscent of Molloy's association with his variously-named paramour, Ruth-Edith-Rose. It may be assumed with some confidence that Molloy and Malone are the same person, except that Malone has 'disowned' his earlier personality, and no longer recognizes the continuity that links them. The effect is repeated in The Unnamable where the speaker disowns all the preceding personae, though he himself is presumably a later stage of the self that called itself Malone. Thus the power of Time, discussed in Proust, to alienate today's self from yesterday's, is given the bizarre treatment of Beckett's matured, detached intelligence; while the "retrospective hypothesis" of the permanent reality of personality is found to be untenable.

The end of Malone Dies is quite extraordinary. The account of life in the asylum moves further and further into nonsense, culminating in the surrealist horror of the violence on the picnic trip. If, as seems likely, Macmann is an imaginary representation of Malone himself, it is hard to see why he should be led through such peculiar situations. It is possible of course, as has already been remarked, that Malone Dies was originally planned as the end of the story, in which case Lemuel, the Samuel of Maurice Nadeau's

suggestion,⁷ could be an authorial intervention, to close the proceedings. This Lemuel, a keeper in the asylum and the bully of the assorted inmates, finally kills two sailors and leads his charges out to sea. One might suggest for him the dual role of pilot of a ship of death and author's minion disposing of his creatures. The frenzy and absurdity of the final pages can be accounted for by the fact that Malone is hoping to make the last word of the story and his own last breath coincide. His intention, stated earlier, is to deal alternately with his present agony and the saga of Macmann, then to launch into a "mixture of Macmann and agony as long as possible". (II, 99). The effect of the mixture, in the concluding lines, is to make a strange identification of himself with Lemuel.

The setting is reminiscent of the haunts of Malone's youth. A reference to "the hammers of the stone cutters" in the hills (II, 117), recalls an earlier passage (II, 31) in which Malone speaks of the barking of the stone cutters' dogs on the hill-sides at night when he was a child. Finally, in the last incoherent scribblings, there is Lemuel with upraised hatchet, of whom Malone writes that he will not hit anyone with it —

or with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with
his fist or in thought in dream I mean never he will never

or with his pencil or with his stick or . . . (II, 119).
— and the book trails away into silence. Lemuel, Malone, Macmann, Beckett himself, are all apparently gathered and frozen into a timeless tableau.

One of the first points registered by the reader of The Unnamable is that the narrator is not Malone, in any sense meaningful for him. He sees Malone pass before him, at regular intervals, and views him distantly. The possibility that it might be Molloy in borrowed hat is quickly rejected, but Molloy is not far away. "To tell the truth I believe they are all here, at least from Murphy

7 See Chapter II, footnote 11.

on . . . (III, 6). All the discarded personae are there to be reviewed by a self that is now so attenuated as to be approaching its impossible zero. Of himself the narrator says that he has always been "here", "ever since I began to be, my appearances elsewhere having been put in by other parties." (III, 7). This is an inevitable impression. Whenever a deeper layer of consciousness is unearthed, from which it is possible to view the shallower layers as fictions, the discovery will be accompanied by the illusion of greater permanence in this underlying self. It will be retrospectively realized that this 'truer' self, though newly discovered, has been present all along, eternally giving the lie to the spurious impersonations that masked it.

As some explanation appears to be necessary of how the discarnate, alien self in The Unnamable has any knowledge of 'human' experience, the solution offered is that the "other parties" conveyed their little gleanings back to the unmoving observer who lay behind them as they acted their roles. It was from them that he received information about his mother and his fellow creatures. They also gave him "the low-down on God" and informed him of his dependence upon that awful power. But this explanation of the wealth of knowledge wherewith he is equipped introduces another problem. It is a curious version of the old Occasionalist mystery which has previously disturbed the mental comfort of Beckett's people. In this case the question is not so much how physical experience should correspond with mental, ("the kick in intellectu and the kick in re"⁸), but the related problem of how the self that knows itself to be utterly distinct from the outer superficial identities, successively assumed, can nonetheless receive word from ^{them} about 'life'. "But when, through what channels, did I communicate with these gentleman? Did they intrude on me here? No, no one has ever intruded on me here." (III, 12). "Here", of course, means the remote centre of the self where The Unnamable

⁸ Murphy, p.109.

is now located.

It is a problem that could not have occurred to any of the characters before The Unnamable, for he is the first to deny entirely the continuity that might link him to the others. Where Malone was able to refer to his period in the forest, implying some recognition of a link with Molloy, The Unnamable treats references to his 'past' as sheer falsehood. Thus, in connection with the information conveyed to him about God, he remarks: "They had it on the reliable authority of his agents at Bally I forget what, this being the place, according to them, where the inestimable gift of life had been rammed down my gullet." (III, 13). Bally was the town that Molloy hailed from -- the "I forget what" of the quotation refers to the local habit of adding the suffixes "-ba" and "-baba" to indicate town-plus-environs and environs-minus-town -- so The Unnamable is here explicitly denying that he was ever Molloy. Or, to put it with the care that The Unnamable demands of its commentators, the consciousness that is currently saying 'I' of itself is to be distinguished from the 'I' that answered to the name of Molloy.

Nevertheless there remain some shreds of continuity, even though they are chiefly noticeable through the speaker's denial of them. It is remarked, for example, that "the days of sticks are over" (III, 17), recalling the extra limb wielded by Malone. A little later he mentions the possibility of his having "to invent another little fairy-tale" (III, 27), which implies a continuation of the series of fictions that commenced with Saposcatt-Macmann. But "these Murphys, Molloyes and Malones do not fool me." (III, 21). The retrospective design of the trilogy has reduced them all to surrogates of the Mahood variety, entered into as an extension of the self into living. In this there is a development from the attitude held by Malone. Malone viewed the previous selves, actual and fictional, as identities that belonged to him no longer. He may once have been Molloy, he may once have experienced the life of Murphy, but they are retrospectively seen as

alien to his present self. The Unnamable, on the other hand, has discovered a self that is not so much another in a series but rather the one that lay behind the series as a whole. This self entered into those identities in the same way and under the same compulsion as it proceeds to enter the Mahood identity, a created fiction similar to Macmann. He refers to these other identities as "delegates", "vice-existers", "puppets", his "Punch and Judy box", "these sufferers of my pains" enlisted to share them. If this description of an underlying self seems to belie the previous assertion that there is no continuous reality of the personality, two points should be remembered. First, the self of The Unnamable is not a personality -- as soon as it becomes one it is being false to itself. Secondly, precisely because it is not a personality but merely a state of awareness, it is impossible to find. As soon as it is perceived and observed it joins the ranks of the surrogates. "But once again the fable must be of another, I see him so well . . ." (III, 156).

It might be as well at this point to issue a general apology for the near incoherence that Beckett's books force upon their impertinent exegetes. In the first place it is an incoherence of sense, for to discuss the themes of The Unnamable systematically one is compelled to make arbitrary and distorting separations of elements that are really woven together in a forbidding tangle. The reader is warned, of course, at the outset: "The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system." (III, 4). In the second place it is a syntactical incoherence. The resources of English grammar are pushed to their limits. In a book devoted entirely to a voice talking about itself, pronouns tend to become involved. Moreover, the voice speaks of "the other" sometimes as "he", sometimes as "they", and is inclined also to slip in and out of the use of 'I' for the various surrogates. Tense, too, is difficult, as Beckett himself knows. Here, for example, is Molloy: "My life, my life, now I speak of it as something over, now as of 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?" (I, 47). And here is The Unnamable: "To elucidate this point I would need a stick or pole, and the means of plying it, the former being of little avail without the latter, and vice versa. I could also do, incidentally, with future and conditional participles." (III, 16). Beckett is working in an area where thought equals language and where the subject-matter of language is thought. It is a tricky business.

On the question of the master, or of the mysterious "they" who seem to be his minions, there is an interesting point made concerning "his" or "their" insistence upon the narrator's assuming some sort of living identity, a point relevant to the problem of correspondences among the various personae. Mention was made in Chapter III of the way in which The Unnamable is repeatedly drawn into the stories that he tells, as part of the master's design to foist identity on him. He begins each time by narrating a fiction, and ends by saying 'I'. When this happens he forgets how the story should continue, and he blames this lapse on the powers who are tormenting him: "This in fact is one of their favourite devices, to stop suddenly at the least sign of adhesion from me, leaving me high and dry, with nothing for my renewal but the life they have imputed to me." (III, 59). Seeing him stranded, however, not sufficiently immersed in the fiction to carry it on himself, they pick it up again for him, usually at a point some distance further on from where they left off. Thus there are a number of curious lacunae in the saga, and even some downright reversals, as, for example, when Malone is apparently allowed to die without the story coming to an end. But, says The Unnamable, "perhaps all they have told me has reference to a single existence, the confusion of identities being merely apparent and due to my inaptitude to assume any." (III, 59)

In the latter half of the book the named surrogates have been finally abandoned. Even so there are still the occasional brief emergences of other little stories. These momentary fict-

ions are quickly stifled, but the manner of their appearing offers a clear display of how new identities arise to tempt The Unnamable out of his insubstantial void. The first occasion is the hilarious passage in which he redounds the hectoring attempts that "they" make to get his assent to a continuous identity. "But my dear man, come, be reasonable, look, this is you, look at this photograph, and here's your file, no convictions, I assure you, come now, make an effort, at your age, to have no identity, it's a scandal. . . ." (III, 125). It is reminiscent in a way of Molloy's unprofitable interview with the police sergeant. The attempt to frame The Unnamable within a set of credentials, to give him a bundle of characteristics and to say "This is you" is foolish and forlorn. The self is too elusive.

On later occasions he embarks on metaphorical descriptions of his condition, as he perceives it, and we see the germs of stories that could easily be expanded into full-blown narratives. The formula, like that of a novelist, is a variant of "Just suppose". One of the longest of these embryonic tales is the one about the water-carrier, which begins: "If instead of having something to say I had something to do, with my hands or feet, some little job, sorting things for example, or simply arranging things, suppose for the sake of argument I had the job of moving things from one place to another, then I'd know where I was, and how far I'd got." (III, 154). Pursuing the idea further he envisages in greater detail the task of transferring water, by the thimbleful, from one container to another, until the situation has acquired a life of its own. But he is not so readily deceived as once he was: ". . . what's this story, it's a story, now I've told another little story, about me, about the life that might have been mine for all the difference it would have made . . ." (III, 155-6). It is true it would have made little difference if it had been about him. In retrospect there is little to choose between memories of one's actual and one's fantasy past. The present self stands in the same relation to both, and it is often disturbing to realize how

many of one's ideas of oneself derive from the situations one has only imagined taking part in.

From The Unnamable's point of view, of course, real and fictitious memories are not equally true but equally false. Whenever he discovers impressions that look like memories -- "the same words recur and they are your memories" (III, 152) -- he rejects them as being foreign to him. Thus he unburdens himself at one point of memories of a bay and stars and beacons and a mountain burning, recollections, clearly, of the end of Malone Dies, only to comment: "I knew I had memories, pity they are not of me." (III, 158). The word to emphasise is "me". Wherever the memories come from, whatever they are about, they are not part of "me". In this respect The Unnamable constitutes a denial of Proust's belief in the continuity of the self as revealed by the sensation of "temps retrouvé".

The last fiction to be dealt with here hardly has a chance to get started before it is quashed as false. Nonetheless it displays with some clarity the surrogate technique of the trilogy. The narrator speaks of creating a little world, describing a little room and finding an inhabitant for it: ". . . a little world, try and find out what it's like, try and guess, put someone in it, seek someone in it, and what he's like, and how he manages, it won't be I, no matter, perhaps it will, perhaps it will be my world . . ." (III, 166). This is similar to Malone's comment on Macmann: "I slip into him, I suppose in the hope of learning something." (II, 52). It is similar also to a novelist's way of extending his imaginative experience by exploring the life and circumstances of his own creature, projecting his sympathies into situations outside himself and living them vicariously. The image of the writer is a dominant motif of the trilogy because the four narrators gradually discover that the self is a lone consciousness in an empty room, endlessly composing fictions, unable to believe in any of them. They explore the muddy depths of themselves and learn, in Ruby Cohn's words; "that words are thoughts are emotions, that fiction is our

only knowledge and all knowledge a fiction written in a foreign tongue."⁹

9 Ruby Cohn, "Still Novel", Yale French Studies, No.24 (1959), p.52.

V

THE GALLEY SLAVE

Running through Samuel Beckett's trilogy there are three recurring motifs which are crucial to a comprehensive understanding of the essential tone of the work. Like many contemporary writers Beckett takes for granted a serious attention on the part of the reader and studiously avoids over-explicitness wherever possible. Hence, when he has established a motif in the text, he will revive it only allusively and in such a way that it is in danger of being missed. It is also increasingly true that he presumes a knowledge of his earlier works for the understanding of each new one. This is particularly the case with How It Is whose extreme elliptical compression contains numerous allusions to incidents from the rest of the Beckett canon. In fact, as will be shown presently, the most important of the three motifs in the trilogy recurs, in disguised form, in the story of life before, with and after Pim. For the sake of convenience in the discussion that follows, the motifs will be referred to as "the pensum", "innocence" and "freedom".

The first of the three, that of life considered as a pensum, makes its first appearance, like so many of Beckett's themes, in Proust. And in its course from that early essay to the mature trilogy it suffers an interesting transposition, indicative of the author's personal education sentimentale. Half way through Proust he pauses to mention the complete moral detachment that typifies A la Recherche du Temps Perdu, and proceeds to make an equation with tragedy, which, he says, "is not concerned with human justice". "The tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his 'soci malorum', the sin of having been born."¹ In the final sentence of the mono-

1 Proust, p.49.

graph the notion recurs, this time incorporating the key-word of the trilogy's motif. He is closing the book in a flourish of rhetoric and speaks of Proust's "'invisible reality' that damns the life of the body on earth as a pensum and reveals the meaning of the word: 'defunctus!'"² It is remarkable that this high tragic seriousness should keep its theme even when it has surrendered its pomp and self-importance and turned into comedy.

The pensum of the trilogy takes the form of an exercise that has to be completed before the powers-that-be will grant a release to their prisoner. With its connotations of school-room impositions it is seen by the narrators as a lesson to be learned satisfactorily, or a correct answer to be reached. They feel themselves to be 'in detention', labouring to complete the task imposed, a task which they can neither understand nor remember. For The Unnamable particularly the task is bound up with his struggle to define himself and to discover the magic formula that will deliver him over to lasting peace. Life is treated as something to be endured; it has the feel of an arbitrary punishment meted out by an incalculable authority and designed to expiate a load of guilt. Yet the guilt is not understood by the guilty. They live in fear of exacerbating the evil caused, apparently, by their very existence, for which they are paying the penalty. Here is Malone describing Macmann in the rain. Macmann is spreadeagled on his face, being steadily saturated, and the idea of punishment, not new to him, comes 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, as if there could be anything but life, for the living. 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. And this again he could not see as his true sin, but as yet another atonement which had miscarried and, far from cleansing him from his sin, plunged him in it deeper than before. (II, 67).

2 Ibid., p.72.

Molloy's reference to his pensum is in a slightly different context. He is considering the limitations of language and the limitations of thought. In a brief insight that anticipates the long purgatory of The Unnamable he concludes that what might appear at first hearing to be the invention of his own brain is no more than the repetition of words implanted in his head long before. "You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept. To hell with it anyway." (I, 41). All his talk, despite its illusion of personal authenticity, is part of the rigmarole given to men to redeliver to their taskmaster.

As usual it is left to The Unnamable to draw into the retrospective design the strands that have been left untied in the preceding books. The tone of his whole narrative conveys the feeling that he is compelled to continue endlessly in a wearying drudgery that is, at one and the same time, the only means of achieving release and the only factor preventing it. Of the formula that might conclude his struggle he says: "And what it seemed to me I heard then, concerning what I should do, and say, in order to have nothing further to do, nothing further to say, it seemed to me I only barely heard it, because of the noise I was engaged in making elsewhere, in obedience to the ⁱⁿunintelligible terms of an incomprehensible damnation." (III, 27). As distilled through the understanding of this sour old creature the human situation appears to be the objectless waiting of inanimate matter, with the additional blessing of consciousness that enables the sufferer to count the hours and look forward to the end. Man, unlike the stone or the tree, is able to wonder what he has done to deserve such an affliction and what he should do to placate the author of it. "There at last is a fair picture of my situation. 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." (III, 30).

Related to the notion of the pensum to be performed and of the feeling of uncomprehended guilt that it imparts to the performer is the notion of innocence. Beckett's heroes, for all their unsavoury and disreputable behaviour, are essentially innocent. They do not know good from evil and so cannot choose the latter. The exception in the trilogy is perhaps Moran, before his exile into "vagrancy and freedom". As Jacques Moran Sr., householder in the town of Turdy, he is a complacent, unkind and selfish hypocrite. He inflicts suffering upon those within his power, and he is not innocent because he knows he is doing so. He abuses the power to hurt, calculatedly and maliciously. Because he himself is not morally indifferent, neither are his actions; he knows himself guilty.

Molloy's innocence, by contrast, consists of not knowing. He does not savour an awareness of his capacity to hurt, nor does he suspect malice in others. The behaviour of others is a simple phenomenon, often a cause for surprise but never for judgment. Similarly his own actions are phenomena with no relation to the calibrated scale of good and bad. Even when he belabours the charcoal burner in the forest with heel and crutch there is a guilelessness about him that exempts him from blame. Moreover, part of the metamorphosis of Moran into Molloy (if that is what it is) is a process of exchanging the role of the hunter for that of the hunted, which means, also, the role of judge for that of defendant. The defendant is innocent but fearful. He is afraid of the law which prosecutes him and which he is liable to transgress unwittingly. From his cranny in the rocks, at the opening of his narrative, Molloy sees a lonely, aged wanderer with a stick, a figure not unlike himself, and says of him: "Yes, night was gathering, but 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." (I, 11-12).

Macmann, while an inmate of the asylum, repeatedly suffers the persecution that is often the lot of the innocent and the guileless. He is in the hands of an authority whose arbitrary requirements give no clue to the general plan that they might derive from. Never wishing to give offence, eager in fact to give satisfaction, he nevertheless incurs the vicious wrath of his overseers, notably when he innocently tampers with the plant life of the institution. He is cruelly beaten for using a dead branch for a walking stick, and nearly beaten again for uprooting a hyacinth. On the other hand, when he half demolishes a laurel bush in order to rest in it, he goes unreprieved. "This is not necessarily surprising, there was no proof against him. Had he been questioned about it he would naturally have told the truth, for he did not suspect he had done anything wrong." (II, 106). It is not easy, in the House of Saint John of God, to know when one is contravening the regulations, for no notice of them is ever given. It would be preferable, remarks Malone, if some guidance were available, "so that the sense of guilt, instead of merely following on the guilty act, might precede and accompany it as well." (II, 106-7).

The third and most important of the motifs of the trilogy is the recurrent metaphor for limited human freedom that makes intermittent appearances. As The Unnamable predicts, with conscious irony: "The problem of liberty too, as sure as fate, will come up for my consideration at the pre-established moment." (III, 70). The problem of liberty, as was noted in Chapter One, is actually at the core of the search for identity. If identity, in this context, can be understood to mean that inalienable, self-determining 'I' whose autonomy is not invaded by external compulsions, it will be evident that the pursuit of this mode of self-hood is coincident with a pursuit of freedom. Thus, as The Unnamable's hunt for his essential identity ends inconclusively, so there is no final solution to the quest for personal liberty.

The image embodying the limited freedom pursued through the trilogy is that of the galley-slave, derived from Beckett's

obscure Belgian philosopher, Arnold Geulincx. Its first appearance, in Molloy, explicitly acknowledges its origin. Molloy is pondering the eternal problem of necessity and free will:

Now as to telling you why I stayed a good while with Lousse, no, I cannot. That is to say I could I suppose, if I took the trouble. But why should I? In order to establish beyond all question that I could not do otherwise? For that is the conclusion I would come to, fatally. I who had loved the image of 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. Which, as it bears me from no fatherland away, bears me onward to no shipwreck. A good while then with Lousse. (I, 68).

Carried inexorably Westwards by the ship of his physical compulsions the slave is free at least to make a gesture of refusal. Though he cannot reverse the direction in which he is being swept, he can still maintain a contrary direction and refrain from participating in the progress not of his choosing which propels him onwards. That is the conclusion of Geulincx, that man is free in his mind, in his imagination. But Molloy suspects that if this were examined further it would be proved unduly optimistic.

In The Unnamable there are at least three recurrences of this image, not to mention other fleeting allusions which may or may not be associated with it. The image is crucially relevant since The Unnamable's efforts are all directed towards the salvaging of some small measure of autonomy from the mass of words drummed into him from an outside source. Malone has already experimented with the freedom of his imagination to create a fiction around Macmann, but his success was doubtful. Macmann had a penchant for mirroring Malone himself. Even so he was able, in his descent towards death, to deny the direction and write about a life. Now The Unnamable is filled with the fictions of Mahood, but he begins to doubt that he is the author of them. If he cannot find a single thought to call his own, then even the freedom that Geulincx granted him will be illusory.

The character of the galley-slave image, as it occurs in The Unnamable, would seem to have been significantly altered since Molloy had recourse to it. The first time it appears is in answer to the preoccupying question: Who might 'I' be? "The galley-man, bound for the Pillars of Hercules, who drops his sweep under cover of night and crawls between the thwarts, towards the rising sun, unseen by the guard, praying for storm." (III, 68). A stronger note of servitude and difficulty seems to be present here, compared with Molloy's reference to this nautical regress. The next allusion to it, only a few pages later, maintains the impression of pain and struggle: "I am he who will never be caught, never delivered, who crawls between the thwarts, towards the new day that promises to be glorious, festooned with lifebelts, praying for rack and ruin." (III, 72). This time there is a note of defiance too, as though this freedom is being wrested from him. The defiant tone, pathetically asserting a freedom that neither the reader nor the narrator can believe in any longer colours the final allusion to Geulincx's slave, not very far from the book's petering out. The Unnamable is embarking on the tale of "this latest surrogate", evolving a new fiction and claiming it for his own. "Now it's I the orator, the beleaguers have departed, I am master on board, after the rats, I no longer crawl between the thwarts, under the moon, in the shadow of the lash . . ." (III, 147-8).

Before leaving the subject and considering very briefly some of the general criticisms made of Beckett's work, it might be interesting to quote the passage from How It Is in which the trained eye can recognize an old refrain amongst the rattle of breathless, unpunctuated utterance. The continuity of ideas from The Unnamable is clearly perceptible:

astern receding land of brothers dimming lights mountain if
I turn roughening he falls I fall on my knees crawl forward
clink of chains perhaps it's not me perhaps it's another
perhaps it's another voyage confusion with another what isle
what moon you say the thing you see the thoughts sometimes
that go with it it disappears the voice goes on . . .⁵

3 How It Is, p.86.

With its three-part account of an existence face-down in mud, in which the nameless 'I' alternately torments Pim and is tormented by Bom (who was himself being tormented by another when 'I' was with Pim, just as Pim was tormenting another etc.), How It Is has the tiniest hint of a prefiguration in The Unnamable: "I've nothing to do, simply wait, it's a slow business, he'll come and lie on top of me, lie beside me, my dear tormentor, his turn to suffer what he made me suffer, mine to be at peace." (III, 131). But that's another story.

What then, ultimately, is Beckett worth? It is not a question that is often asked, since it is not one that can be readily answered. The task of subjecting him to what used, in the good old days, to be called Literary Criticism is an arduous one; to emit evaluative noises in public requires that one have at least some minimal notions of one's criteria. Exposition and interpretation can carry one a long way, and Beckett is a particularly fertile little plot for scholarly cultivation, but sometimes a little voice intrudes, "now low, a murmur, now precise as the headwaiter's And to follow? and often rising to a scream" (I, 11), which enquires; "But is the man any good?" Beckett himself, when told by an admirer that he (the admirer) would be proud to tell his grandchildren of his meeting with the author of Waiting for Godot, expressed a modest doubt as to whether the grandchildren would ever have heard of him.⁴

Many people, notably the reviewers on the staff of Time, profess not to understand Beckett; John Coleman, in a Spectator review of the trilogy, says frankly that he does not like him. The heroes, he says, "fuse into a collective mask for something unpleasantly private, because shrill and deformed."⁵ He implies that the psychotic obsessions and frequent beastliness of the books are the direct expression of a diseased subconscious in the author. This

4 In conversation with Albert Halsall, M.A. (McMaster University).

5 John Coleman, "Under the Jar", Spectator, (April 8, 1960), p.516.

at least is a charge that can be confidently rebutted. All fiction, needless to say, is to some extent a reflection of the writer's subconscious preoccupations, but the degree of intellectual control and manipulation that may be exercised varies considerably. That Beckett can bring himself to be outrageously revolting where another author could not does not prove that he is sick. He is often grossly irreverent, not to say irreverently gross, but his writing is the product of an intellectual discipline and a control of language that could not be sustained by a man who was simply giving vent to an obsessive disgust. Moreover, his characters, Molloy especially, are so disarmingly nice. Their behaviour, it is true, would tend to exclude them from polite society, but they themselves are not revolted by the way they live. To be truly repulsive a man must disgust himself.

If it is said of Beckett that he mocks at sex, one might very well ask what else there is to do with it. Lady Chatterley's Lover is a most noble attempt to be reverent about it, but it comes very close to being ludicrous in places. Lawrence, of course, is aware of the danger and allows Connie to share for a moment the appalling suspicion that, viewed from a certain angle, the whole performance is slightly amical. Her doubts are quickly cleared, however, and she succumbs to the solemnity of the occasion. Beckett, on the contrary, to puncture a few lofty notions, prefers to suggest that it is rather a farce, on the whole. The suggestion need not be incurably destructive of marital bliss. Indeed one might add that to adopt the ribald Democritean laughter at almost everything, as Beckett does, is not an unhealthy tendency. It is one way of dealing with the Absurd, and, as Claude Elsen remarked, in an early review of Molloy: "Rire de l'Absurde, c'est faire un peu plus que l'accepter, c'est déjà en faire une valeur."⁶

Frank Kermode, who writes intelligently and sympathetically on Beckett, declares that in the final analysis the books must be

6 Claude Elsen, "Une Epopée du Non-sens", La Table Ronde, (Jan., 1951), p. 137.

judged "almost entirely unsuccessful".⁷ This is an important charge since Beckett is primarily a writer who is employing his skill, as opposed to his sensibility, to explore experience. Thus one does not ask, as one would with Lawrence, to take an obvious example, about the delicacy and sensitivity of his intuitions, but about the effectiveness of his technique. True the two aspects can never be separated for long, but the distinction is an inconvenient one as long as it does not get out of hand. Beckett is exploring a philosophical dilemma through a series of enormously complex metaphors, and the question to be asked is whether these metaphors work. In Molloy they do. The polarities of the book are convincingly personified in two vivid and subtle characters. What Beckett attempts in Molloy is still within the scope of the novel to achieve, and it is probably the most successful of all his books. Malone Dies moves further into the uncharted area of literature. The Unnamable attempts something so impossibly difficult and demanding — the expression of a mind analysing its own processes — that its failure is not to be wondered at. For it must be admitted that it does fail. If it had contented itself with merely reporting descriptively on the mental crisis that it deals with it would have been an easier book to write — and to read. But in attempting to reproduce directly the sensation of issueless impasse it becomes a book to be explained rather than one to be experienced. One can understand and demonstrate what Beckett is trying to do, but one cannot honestly assert that he has done it.

7 Frank Kermode, "Beckett, Snow and Pure Bverty", Encounter, XV (July, 1960), p.75.

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