

“NOTHINGNESS IN WORDS ENCLOSE”: A STUDY OF

BECKETT'S *WATT*

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By

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BECKETT'S *WATT*

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ABSTRACT

Samuel Beckett's novel, *Watt*, represents one of the most significant attempts of a twentieth-century writer to find an artistic form that can "express the inexpressible" and "enclose nothingness in words." It is a profoundly philosophical novel, examining the existential crisis of meaning confronting modern man and embodying in its form the chaos that Beckett sees as the ultimate reality. This thesis examines the major philosophical and religious themes that are central to *Watt*, the relationship between the novel's content and form, and explores some of the parallels between Beckett's worldview and that of Taoist philosophy.

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I

Samuel Beckett's novels reflect his deep interest in the questions religion and philosophy have traditionally addressed concerning the relationship between knowledge and uncertainty, the mind and body and subjective consciousness and the objective world. *Watt* is so rich in philosophical and religious themes that John C. Di Pierro, in his study *Structures in Beckett's Watt*, asks "Why didn't Beckett write a philosophical treatise?"¹ One possible answer seems to be that, if Beckett found the form of the novel so confining that he had to create virtually an "anti-novel" to express his worldview, he would have found the creation of a religious or philosophical "system" even more confining. Di Pierro's question also assumes that Beckett is ultimately more of a philosopher than a novelist. The attempts to place Beckett in a certain category – "philosopher" or "novelist" or "playwright" - are misguided, as are the efforts to peg him as an "existentialist", or a "nihilist." As we shall see when we examine the text of *Watt*, Beckett is informed by an extraordinary range of ideas, from pre-Socratic philosophy to Hindu and Buddhist mysticism, from Taoism to twentieth-century physics, and they have influenced not only the content of *Watt*, but its form. While he would rather avoid these categories, it is evident from some of his interviews and from his own critical writings about other writers that he still feels compelled to

acknowledge such distinctions, and work within them. It is important to realise that, for Beckett, form can be more important than content. In an interview with Tom Driver, he said:

What I am saying does not mean that there will henceforth be no form in art. It only means that there will be new form and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos *and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else*. [My emphasis] The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. That is why the form itself becomes a preoccupation, because it exists as a problem separate from the material it accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.²

Although he is familiar with the major philosophical systems, Beckett subscribes to none of them. As the quotation above suggests, he distrusts any system that “says that the chaos is really something else.” As we shall see, one of the few intellectual traditions that does not say that the “chaos is really something else” – Taoism – bears many similarities to Beckett’s thought, and is compatible with it. However, characteristically, religious and philosophical belief systems do deny the reality of chaos, typically asserting that the chaos we see around us is merely an illusion, and that everything is actually in some kind of order, and proceeding according to a pre-arranged plan that will benefit mankind, if we only knew it. The urge to create what psychologists have called “belief systems” is a very strong part of human nature. Such systems are not always religious or philosophical. Marx, for example, developed a system purporting to explain all human social behaviour in terms of economics, while Yeats, rejecting traditional Christianity, developed his own highly elaborate system based on occult knowledge. Beckett is unusual in having little

tolerance for such systems. He insists, in common with Taoist thinkers, that chaos is as fundamental to reality as order. Both have always co-existed and one cannot be subordinated to, or destroyed by, the other. Raymond Federman sees *Watt* as a demonstration of the futility of the human “pursuit of meaning.”

In *Journey to Chaos*, he writes:

On the level of plot, Beckett (through the narrator) pretends to be unable to control the narration; on the aesthetic level, he shows how the novel form is inadequate to gain an understanding of reality; and on the philosophical level, through Watt’s absurd quest, he points out the failure of rational thought as a means of acquiring absolute knowledge. Whatever process has been adopted to produce a coherent novel, and whatever method the hero employs to apprehend reality, these are doomed to failure.³

While *Watt* may be about failure, and may even be considered a failure as a novel, it can hardly be considered a failure as a meaningful work of art. If *Watt* fails as a novel, it is because the traditional novel form is wholly inadequate to express Beckett’s vision. One can only admire an artist who undertakes an admittedly impossible task, and who employs such consummate skill in the attempt to “express the inexpressible”. As Di Pierro writes,

The artist’s task is to think, speak, write, exorcise, and fail, continually and inevitably. The act of writing is essentially one of lying, of endless hypothesising about the incomprehensible, alien, and chaotic universe – to describe the impossibility of describing life.⁴

John D. Erickson describes *Watt* as “a closed house with a thousand doors. It invites us to walk in, but when we enter one of the doors we find ourselves on the outside.”⁵ Other critics have compared the novel to a hall of mirrors, containing innumerable reflections of reality, but no glimpse of the

original source of the reflections. These are apt analogies. No matter how many ways we approach this novel, we will always remain on the outside, and the reason is simply that we can never know what it is to be on the inside of what eastern philosophy, for lack of a better term, has called “the void.” It is as unknowable as the experience of death. In the same way, distracted as we are by the constant bombardment of sensory “reflections,” how can we ever know that what we are experiencing is the ultimate source of these reflections, rather than just another reflection? How can we separate reality from illusion? Is the world perhaps nothing but illusion, with a meaningless nothingness at its center - just one series of mirrors after another? Questions like these are Beckett’s constant pre-occupation in *Watt* and in his other works, and his success as a writer can be measured not by how well he answers them, but by how effectively he evokes them in us. His goal is to make us question everything, not to supply us with answers – answers that are only too readily available from philosophies or religions. If the quest is doomed to failure before we even start, Beckett’s comic genius ensures that the “journey to chaos” is well worth the reader’s effort.

Religious concerns are evident in *Watt* from the opening pages of the novel. Mr. Hackett, a relatively “normal” member of “normal” society, uses the phrase “As God is my witness.” This is merely a conventional phrase, spoken by a conventional man, a cliché, but by having the policeman respond with “God is a witness that cannot be sworn,” Beckett makes us think,

probably for the first time, about the meaning of this phrase, or, to be more accurate, about the meaningless way it is commonly used. Eugene Webb writes, in *Samuel Beckett: A Study of his Novels*,

These are people who speak comfortably of the traditional God as though He were a combination mascot and presiding magistrate . . . God's place, for these people, is in His heaven, where He serves merely as a comfortable excuse to evade having to face the real absurdity of the universe.⁶

Beckett's phrase "God is a witness that cannot be sworn" forces the reader to ask the question 'What is the point of using God as a witness if he cannot be sworn?' If Hackett is relying on such an unreliable witness, what can his account of reality be worth? More importantly, the more we think about the fact that God cannot be sworn, the more we begin to have serious doubts about his existence. It can be seen how, with a single, highly concise phrase, Beckett raises a series of probing questions and reveals the superficiality of most people's religious faith.

Where religious belief for a conventional man like Mr. Hackett is essentially a prop to support a comfortable bourgeois existence, for the highly cynical Mr. Spiro, it is a way to make money out of "suckers." The question about the rat eating a consecrated wafer, to which he replies "at length, quoting from Saint Bonaventura, Peter Lombard, Alexander of Hales, Sanchez, Suarez, Henno, Soto, Diana, Concina and Dens,"⁷ is a witty satire on the discipline of theology which also serves to underline the discrepancy between man's animal nature and his spiritual pretensions. Rats are to figure again in the novel in a

religious connection. In the third chapter, when Watt and Sam go out for walks in the grounds of the mental institution, one of their favourite activities is feeding frogs and birds to the rats. It includes a reference to God that is shocking in its brutality:

... seizing suddenly a plump young rat, resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to its mother, or its father, or its brother or its sister, or to some less fortunate relative.

It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came nearest to God.⁸

Beckett, who rarely uses the word “God,” emphasises the importance of this sentence by setting it off in its own paragraph. He underlines the huge discrepancy between the theoretical discussions about rats eating consecrated wafers, which symbolise the body of Christ, and the reality of nature, “red in tooth and claw,” where there is no morality, only the brutal imperative – eat or be eaten. The cruelty of nature is further emphasised by Watt’s betrayal of the young rat, which he had just pampered, and by its being eaten by its own “mother, father, sister or brother.” This is not the natural world as we would like to think of it, but as it actually is. Beckett was also well aware that such examples of cruelty were not confined to rats, having witnessed first hand the methods of the Nazis in wartime Paris.

When Watt enters Mr. Knott’s house, typically by a method he was never to understand, he encounters the character Arsene - whose “short statement” summarises many of the philosophical themes in the novel. One first notices the extraordinary style in which his statement is written. It is

heightened, poetic language, carried to an absurd extreme. It is also highly religious, carrying biblical echoes in its tone. Beckett undercuts this high tone by interjecting coarseness. For example,

How it all comes back to me, to be sure. That look! That weary and watchful vacancy! The man arrives! The dark ways all behind, all within, the long dark ways, in his head, in his side, in his hands and feet, and he sits in the red gloom, picking his nose, waiting for the dawn to break.⁹

Arsene's speech soon shifts to a discussion of ideas that owe a great deal to eastern religious traditions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism.

Without some awareness of these traditions, the following sentences, which are at the heart of Arsene's statement, would be difficult to understand:

The sensations, the premonitions of harmony are irrefragable, of imminent harmony, *when all outside him will be he* [My emphasis], the flowers, the flowers that he is among him, the sky, the sky that he is above him, the earth trodden, the earth treading, and all sound his echo.¹⁰

The phrase "when all outside him will be he" refers to the state of nirvana in which the distinction between the individual and the external world dissolves. Of course, such a blissful state can not last long in the Beckettian world. The inevitable day comes for Arsene when "something slipped."¹¹ This is perhaps the most important part of Arsene's statement, and yet Arsene is unable to say precisely what he means by "something slipped":

What was changed, if my information is correct, was the sentiment that a change, other than a change of degree, had taken place. What was changed was existence off the ladder ... As when a man, having found at last what he sought, a woman, for example, or a friend, loses it, or realises what it is. ... in my opinion, it was not an illusion,

as long as it lasted, that presence of what did not exist, that presence without, that presence within, that presence between¹²

John Di Pierro believes that what “slipped,” for Arsene, was his sudden realisation that the universe is a place of perpetual flux and, as such, will never allow the individual to “rest” in a state of harmony. Di Pierro feels that Beckett was strongly influenced by the Greek philosopher Heraclitus, who maintained that the universe is a place of unceasing and permanent change. This explains why Arsene would despair of ever achieving a permanent state of harmony, and would cynically maintain that “It is useless not to seek, not to want, for when you cease to seek you start to find.”¹³ In other words, Arsene’s viewpoint is that, in a world of perpetual change, man could never be content to arrive at any goal, no matter how lofty, for such a condition would soon become an intolerable bore, and the resulting frustration would be even worse than the perpetual frustration of falling short of our goals.

Eric P. Levy, in his study *Beckett and the Voice of Species*, offers an alternative explanation of “what slipped.” He believes that what slipped was the relation between Arsene, as a “center of consciousness,” and the external world. For him, the enigmatic picture on Erskine’s wall of a broken circle occupying one plane and a blue dot hovering outside it on another, symbolise just this relationship between the subjective and the objective. As Levy puts it, “How are we to know to which circle each center belongs? ... How horrible for a thinking center to find itself suddenly in the wrong circle, or, worse, in no circle at all, and to know that it can never rest until reaching the right one.”¹⁴

In reality, the situation is even worse than Levy implies, for Beckett, through the character Arsene, stresses that the “thinking center” will *never* find the “right circle,” or, at least, it will never find it for more than a few blissful moments. Levy’s theory does not conflict with Di Pierro’s, but rather complements and elucidates it. Arsene had certainly been in a mystical state of harmony in which he, as a center of consciousness, corresponding to the blue dot in the picture in Erskine’s room, felt itself to be at the very center of the circle. I believe a parallel can easily be drawn between the blue dot and circle of the painting and the hub and circumference of the Buddhist “wheel of suffering.” In the Buddhist tradition, the individual generally feels himself to be spiralling in wild gyrations far from the hub of the wheel of suffering. As Di Pierro implied, it is the dizzy pace of our experience of life in the world that causes us to feel a strong sense of alienation from the hub of the wheel, and this is the source of suffering, of the “unhappiness” Arsene mentions. Only when the individual reaches the very center of the hub can he or she find stillness, and wholeness, and an end to suffering. This corresponds to the blue dot finding itself in the center of the circle in the painting. Coming “down the ladder” is another way of saying that the individual fell from the still hub of the wheel of suffering back onto the spinning rim. To put the idea in the terms of the painting, Arsene’s center of consciousness, having experienced complete harmony within the circle of external reality for a short period, was expelled from the circle to become “The old thing where it always was, back again.”¹⁵

Why does Arsene fall from his state of grace? Di Pierro stresses the Heraclitian idea of perpetual change – Arsene fell simply because it is a basic law of the universe that nothing can remain as it is for long before changing into something else. This can be compared to another well-known wheel – the wheel of fortune, which, for medieval man, frequently raised the individual up only to throw him down again. Levy describes the nature of the change, from an individual in complete harmony with the world, to one who is profoundly alienated from himself and the world, as Watt is. But neither Di Pierro nor Levy can explain what is a puzzle to Arsene himself. The most important thing about the circle in the painting is that it is *broken*. The break in the circle allows the center to leave it, but it also allows the center to enter. It permits a kind of communication between the individual and the world, and also between the real and the ideal. The circle traditionally represents perfection, and, therefore, a break in the circle represents the imperfect world that we actually inhabit. It is the exact nature of this communication that, for Beckett, remains highly doubtful, uncertain and inherently unreliable.

Arsene's story about Mr. Ash serves as an excuse to undermine everything he has just related to Watt. Mr. Ash, an admiralty clerk and "sterling fellow," confidently gave Arsene the wrong time of day, and, like Mr. Hackett, concluded with the hackneyed phrase "as God is my witness." However, the reader is already well aware of the unreliability of that particular

witness. John Di Pierro believes that the incident with Mr. Ash is more than simply an example of the inaccuracy of human information. He writes that

The scene with Ash and the different times on the two clock pieces is actually a metaphorical reworking of a celebrated section of Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity. There Einstein discusses the idea of "simultaneity" with reference to two clocks.¹⁶

By saying "But I am worse than Mr. Ash," Arsene cast doubt on his whole statement, which ends in utter bitterness and cynicism. He goes on to completely repudiate the eastern philosophical idea of spiritual progress through reincarnation. Not only is there no hope for progress in understanding one's present life, there is no hope of doing so in the future, no matter how many lives we may project into it. Beckett repudiates one of the fundamental ideas of both western and eastern philosophy – that of spiritual progress. This is not to say that the character, Arsene, fully and completely expresses his creator's worldview, but, rather, to say that he expresses one of Beckett's best thought-out philosophical positions. Di Pierro takes the position that Watt's madness is actually a sign of spiritual progress along Hindu and Buddhist lines. He writes:

The character structures of Watt and Knott which eventually merge through synthesis suggest strongly ... that in this union with Knott he has experienced something overwhelming. It is significant that all this occurs during his final stay in Knott's house when he is subject to "fancies" and his speculations have virtually stopped. Isn't it likely that Knott as the "basic principle" or "the one" also represents Brahmin or Nirvana? We can now understand, thanks to this analysis, what Sam eventually understood in Watt's sounds and gestures. Watt was trying to indicate through his God-like mantic sounds that he was reaching the highest levels of existence.¹⁷

Here I must disagree with Di Pierro. Beckett makes it very clear that Watt's entire time in Mr. Knott's household has been wasted. He writes, just before Watt is replaced by Arthur,

What had he learnt? Nothing. What did he know of Mr. Knott? Nothing. Of his anxiety to improve, of his anxiety to understand, of his anxiety to get well, what remained? Nothing.¹⁸

This does not sound like a man "reaching the highest levels of existence." Rather, it sounds like a man who, psychologically fragile to begin with, is rapidly descending into madness. I mentioned the power of the human need to create belief systems. It could be argued that they are almost indispensable as a way for people to "make sense" of existence. Di Pierro's attempt to make *Watt* correspond to the paradigm of spiritual progress, against all the evidence in *Watt*, and in Beckett's whole body of writing, is, I think, a measure of how deeply-ingrained and cherished this idea is in both western and most eastern thinking. This may help explain the deeply negative reaction of many people to Beckett's work – he directly, forcefully and, most disturbing of all, *convincingly* contradicts and mocks our need to believe in a system, a philosophy, a religion, or simply "progress."

The second chapter begins with Watt entering Mr. Knott's service. Watt's mental deterioration begins almost immediately. This process has important philosophical implications. In particular, the visit of a piano-tuner and his son is interesting for the problems it raises concerning Watt's ability to distinguish between hallucinatory experiences and reality. What especially

upsets Watt is the way the incident keeps troubling him – the more he tries to understand it, the less he understands. This is a model for all forms of knowledge seeking, according to Beckett's worldview. The more he tries to "foist" a meaning on it, the more it resists meaning:

Thus the scene in the music room, with the two Galls, ceased very soon to signify for Watt a piano tuned, an obscure family and professional relation, an exchange of judgements more or less intelligible, and so on, if indeed it had ever signified such things, and became a mere example of light commenting bodies, and stillness motion, and silence sound, and comment comment.¹⁹

Why does Watt find this incident so disturbing? One clue might be in the dialog between the father and son:

The strings are in flitters, said the younger....
The piano is doomed, in my opinion, said the younger.
The piano-tuner also, said the elder.
The pianist, also, said the younger.²⁰

If we see the piano as a fitting symbol of order, then the meaning of this rather morbid dialog becomes clear. Order is merely an ephemeral, almost accidental state in a universe that, by nature, is largely, although not completely, chaotic. Man attempts, by his activity, to maintain and increase order, but all the forces of entropy conspire to destroy whatever order man has been able to create. Life seems little more than a brief interruption in what Raymond Federman termed "the journey to chaos." The visit of the Galls, and their conversation, brings home to Watt the meaninglessness of all human activities conducted in the brief span of time between the void of non-existence before birth, and the void of non-existence after death. Watt begins to sense that his own quest for

knowledge and meaning, which is the reason he came to work for Mr. Knott, is, *in itself*, meaningless. In other words, even the search for meaning can have no meaning, purpose or value once we accept the utter meaninglessness, purposelessness and valuelessness of the universe we inhabit. Of course, it is still perfectly possible to go on living as any animal instinctively desires, but such a life has no meaning, and therefore no intellectual foundation. This is disturbing, especially to intellectuals. Since Watt's whole *raison d'être* is to find meaning, this revelation is devastating to his mental health, which was never too good. According to Rubin Rabinovitz, Beckett was strongly influenced by Schopenhauer, who believed that, since "the need to know – like any other desire – originates in the will; attempts to satisfy such needs are always frustrating."²¹ Watt's problem is that he is unable to accept the nothingness that he sees at the heart of reality. However, it is not his problem alone. None of Knott's servants was able to accept this fact:

Yes, Watt could not accept, as no doubt Erskine could not accept, and as no doubt Arsene and Walter and Vincent and the others had been unable to accept, that nothing had happened ... that a thing that was nothing had happened. ²²

While the phrase "a thing that was nothing had happened" refers to the visit of the Galls, a trivial incident from daily life, it can also refer, by extension, to life itself. Life, a thing that is essentially nothing when seen from the perspective of the whole universe, simply "happened" on Earth for no particular reason. An asteroid could just as easily destroy it for no particular reason, but by pure chance.

All of Knott's servants had been engaged in the same quest, though proceeding by different methods. Arsene represents the intellectual-mystical quest for knowledge that ended in failure when he "slipped." Watt, on the other hand, represents the pragmatic principle of scientific positivism, based on the philosophy of Descartes. Cartesian philosophy, the basis of the scientific method, breaks the world up into distinct "things" which interact with each other like wheels in a machine. This explains why Watt avoids the abstract principles with which Arsene was so concerned, and is obsessed with concrete things. Watt, whose name may derive, according to Rabinovitz, from the French term "wattman", or tram-driver, is an extreme and absurd parody of scientific positivism. He "thinks" in rigid steps that are flawlessly logical, but completely absurd. His mind, like a tram on its track, can never deviate from strict adherence to logical cause-and-effect reasoning. The best example of this is the dog-feeding episode. Watt and Arsene could also be said to represent the two major types of temperament identified by Aristotle – the active and the contemplative. Watt clearly corresponds to the active temperament – constantly searching, analysing, thinking, while Arsene is an example of the contemplative type. In this dualism, Arsene is clearly far more intelligent than Watt, but, even so, his knowledge amounts to no more than "useless wisdom, dearly won." For Beckett, both approaches, the active, and the contemplative, end in futility.

In taking up his duties in Mr. Knott's "house and grounds," Watt's instructions are simple – "To give what Mr. Knott left of this dish, on the days that he did not eat it at all, to the dog."²³ This is very straightforward. The only problem is that there *is* no dog. Rather than simply pointing out that, since there is no dog, his instructions make no sense, Watt continues with a long-established scheme to have someone bring a "suitably famished" dog to Mr. Knott's house each day. This necessitates, in a *reductio ad absurdum*, the introduction of the infamous Lynch family. This scheme is a parody of the scientific method of reasoning, which Beckett develops to an extraordinary length in order to emphasise very clearly the absurdity of a method of reasoning that has lost all common sense and purpose. Like a schoolboy, Watt even makes lists of each possible solution, together with the number of possible objections to them. What critics seem not to have noticed is that the introduction of the Lynch family is a sly satire on the affluent class, which depends on poor families like the Lynches to show their generosity, as well as on the poor, whose only aim seems to be to produce as many children as possible. The "feeding-of-the-dog" incident has a very different effect on Watt from the incident of the Galls. Whereas the incident of the Galls disturbed Watt because he could never succeed in explicating it, the matter of the dog "greatly interested and even fascinated" him because he "had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, he had made a pillow of old words for a head. Little by little, and not without labour."²⁴ The essential difference

between the two experiences is that, in the visit of the Galls, Watt is merely a passive spectator, and an auditor of a morbid conversation, while in the matter of the dog, Watt is very much an active agent. He is able to formulate a plan and put it into action, and it is precisely this intellectual effort that makes it meaningful, if only to him. Unfortunately, it amounts to a great deal of effort to satisfy an absurd end. The comparison of “old words” to a “pillow for a head” is an important comment on man’s dependence on language in constructing meaning, which I will discuss in more detail in the second chapter, on language and characterisation.

I have been focusing on the themes of religion and philosophy in *Watt*, but so far I have not discussed how the two are related. Rubin Rabinovitz writes that, though influenced by a variety of religious and philosophical sources, Beckett relied primarily on the works of Descartes and Schopenhauer for the intellectual framework of the novel. He believes that Watt goes mad because he embraces Cartesian scepticism and methodology, while forgetting that they were necessarily based on a firm belief in God. Where Descartes or Newton could answer unsolvable problems with the phrase “God only knows,” this no longer seems to be acceptable to most people. Watt, as a kind of “everyman,” is no exception. He represents the modern triumph of reason over faith, but, as Beckett shows us, this “triumph” is really more of a tragedy. As Rabinovitz puts it,

Lacking a theistic core, Watt’s scepticism is transformed into an intractable nihilism that leaves him intellectually destitute. He does not

believe in God, but retains his faith in rationalism; he is sceptical about everything he learns, but never questions the viability of his method. The ironic aspects of this situation never occur to him.²⁵

Schopenhauer rejects the Cartesian idea that the mind can know itself, believing instead that the mind is divided within itself between that which knows and that which is known. However, as we have seen, it is possible, not only for the mind to know itself, but for it to feel at one with the universe – Arsene achieves this state. The tragedy is that such a state, at least in Beckett's world, can only be transitory, after which man falls again into the despair of nihilism.

Schopenhauer believed that art could present an alternative to intellectual activity, but it is not an alternative that Beckett finds satisfactory. We have seen how he felt that conventional art was little more than lies to support the status quo. Beckett is equally critical of his own work. At his most cynical, he feels that all art, even the best, amounts, in the end, to just another way of passing the time in a futile existence. In this connection, names are always significant in *Watt*. In naming the two identical twins in the Lynch family "Art" and "Con," Beckett is likely drawing attention to what he considers to be the fraudulent aspect of art, in the way it attempts to make existence meaningful.

Beckett values, perhaps more highly than any other quality, the humour that is possible in art, but rarely in philosophy or religion. Whatever else they may be, philosophy and religion are not known for being particularly funny.

Indeed, for some reason, humour is considered by many to be incompatible with serious intellectual activity. Beckett is one of the few writers who is able to combine an encyclopaedic knowledge of the history of both western and eastern thinking with an acute sense of the comic. Beckett even makes a joke of the seriousness of our age, in *Waiting for Godot* Vladimir says to Estragon:

Vladimir: Suppose we repented

Estragon: Repented what?

Vladimir: Oh. ...*(He reflects)* We wouldn't have to go into the details.

Estragon: Our being born?

Vladimir breaks into a hearty laugh which he immediately stifles.

Vladimir: One daren't even laugh anymore.²⁶

Watt's lack of a sense of humour is striking. This is not surprising, since he is not meant to be a realistic character, but rather a kind of Cartesian "puppet." Humour is indispensable to Beckett, on both a practical and a philosophical level. On the practical level, it is the primary way he engages and retains the interest of the reader and convinces him to continue listening to what is, frankly, a bleak and morbid message. On the philosophical level, humour is a psychological response to the horror of existence. Arsene identified three kinds of laughter –

The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. But the mirthless laugh...is the laugh of laughs ... the laugh that laughs at that which is unhappy.²⁷

Why should unhappiness be a laughing matter? Perhaps it is because the very idea that a being as complex and self-divided as man, existing for no apparent reason in a meaningless universe, should aspire to "happiness," displays such a

profound ignorance of man's true condition of existence as to leave the "mirthless laugh" the only possible response. Towards the end of this chapter, I will discuss in some detail the influence of Taoism on Beckett, but it is worth noting here that the Taoists also see the absurdity of man's quest for happiness. They recount a story of a man who, being a good Taoist, is indifferent to the good fortune he experiences one day, and the bad the next. At every turn in his luck, his neighbours either congratulate him or commiserate with him as the case may be, but he simply remarks "Who knows what's good and what's bad?" The story shows how, since seemingly bad things lead to good, and seemingly good things lead to bad, it is impossible for the individual to know whether or not some event is "good" or "bad". This explains why, for Beckett, unhappiness is a supreme joke. Of course, the corollary is also true – happiness under such conditions is also a joke, given its tendency to wither into unhappiness. Life is neither a comedy nor a tragedy, but a "tragicomedy," because what is usually regarded as tragic is, to Beckett, comical, and what is usually regarded as comical is, to him, tragic.

If *Watt* can be referred to as a "hall of mirrors," the mirror analogy is also very revealing for the light it sheds on the problematic relation between subject and object. As we have seen in the discussion of Arsene's "short statement" and the painting in Erskine's room, this philosophical problem is undoubtedly the key to the whole novel, and something of an obsession for Beckett. It encompasses the mind's relation to the body, the mind's relation to

itself, Watt's relation to Knott, and Sam's relation to Watt. Eric Levy believes that the identification of Watt with Sam is made explicit in the scene where Watt and Sam lean towards one another until their brows touch. He writes, "the detailed description of their embrace makes it obvious that the narrator is dancing with his reflection."²⁸ It could imply that, in his madness, Watt himself created the character "Sam" as a kind of alter ego. Alternatively, it could imply that Sam is the "real" narrator who made up the character "Watt" from his own past experiences. The reader cannot help but wonder about the relation between the narrator (whoever he might be), and the real creator, "Sam" Beckett. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that Sam, the narrator, is Samuel Beckett, just because of the coinciding names. Ultimately, it is not necessary to arrive at any firm conclusions about the narrative structure of *Watt*, because Beckett's purpose in creating such a convoluted narrative scheme (and it would be difficult to imagine a more convoluted scheme) is to stress the unreliability and incompleteness of all human knowledge.

During Watt's time in the asylum, he begins to speak in inverted order. In fact, he begins to perform all normal actions in inverted order, even going so far as wearing his clothes back to front. Raymond Federman interprets this as Beckett's way of indicating that Watt is

trying to retrace his mental and physical steps to the origin of things, to that moment before he penetrated the Knott illusion. Watt's reversed speech and motion can be interpreted as a need to return to the primary source of his own self, as a wish to return to a prenatal condition.²⁹

I feel this interpretation is more convincing than that of Di Piero. Di Piero was correct in asserting that Watt is on a spiritual quest, but wrong, I think, in believing that his quest could be considered anything but a failure. Of course, “failure” according to conventional standards might well be considered “success” by Beckett’s paradoxical standards. As Di Piero put it, “One must remember...that Beckett’s failure is essentially epistemological.”³⁰ At the most pessimistic level, since all human activities are pointless in his world, all human quests are doomed to failure even before they begin. The only way in which the concept “success” might apply is in the eventual achievement of this realisation of our ignorance. This is what Beckett meant by “failing better” – to experience each time more fully and more completely the utter impossibility of making the human experience coherent or meaningful. The only “progress” possible in *Watt* is progress-in-reverse. This is the real meaning of Watt’s beginning to do everything in reverse order. It is not that he is trying to “retrace his steps to the moment before he penetrated the Knott illusion.” Rather, the encounter with nothingness, symbolised by Knott, has disillusioned him so thoroughly that any retreat to his pre-Knott condition has become impossible. Beckett poses the question of whether this can be considered a kind of progress:

Of his anxiety to improve, of his anxiety to understand, of his anxiety to get well, what remained? Nothing. *But was that not something?* [my emphasis] He saw himself then, so little, so poor. And now, littler, poorer. Was not that something? So sick, so alone. And now. Sicker, aloner. Was not that something? As the comparative

is something. Whether more than its positive or less. Whether less than its superlative or more.³¹

By the end of his time in Knott's house, Watt has not even reached the same position as Arsene, who had at least acquired "useless wisdom, dearly won." He has been left without a single illusion, with no remaining hope of finding meaning in life. One senses that he had undertaken the quest to Mr. Knott's house as a last, desperate measure. It is therefore not surprising that the next stop for him can only be an insane asylum. The essential question, which Beckett asks, not once, but three times, is whether Watt's encounter with nothingness is something which is to be valued for its own sake. To put it in Arsene's terms, if knowledge is useless, and only dearly won, is it worth pursuing at all? Of course, this too is a paradox, for if one knows that one knows nothing, then one knows at least one thing, and that a very important thing. Beckett offers a rare glimmer of hope, and a possible solution to this conundrum in *Molloy*, where he writes:

To know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker.³²

This passage is not, however, characteristic of Beckett's worldview. His characters almost never achieve "peace" (except for brief periods such as Arsene experienced before he "slipped") and the use of the word "soul" is, like the word "God", rare in Beckett's work. It is not like any of his characters to "be beyond knowing anything." On the contrary, they are all engaged on a feverish quest to find meaning, or else "waiting" for "meaning" (in the form of

Godot, for example) to find them. Much more characteristic is Arsene's bitter vision of man perpetually frustrated in his wish to achieve peace, and only "happy" when he has not achieved the satisfaction of all his desires. The central question remains, however. Is it not something to be aware of one's ignorance and to realise that wisdom consists not in the accumulation of knowledge, but in the gradual elimination of one's mental falsehoods and illusions? If one can no longer believe in something, is it not better to believe in nothing than to believe in anything? Of course, this is something of an idealist position – it is one thing for intellectuals like Beckett to face the nothingness of existence with sardonic "mirthless" laughter, it is quite another for ordinary people.

Beckett has often been accused of nihilism. It is true that he believes in no religion or belief system, no philosophy or political position. Neither does he believe in the scientific method as a road to truth. In fact, Beckett does not even accept the *possibility* of distinguishing fact from fiction, reality from illusion. In spite of this, I believe he is not a nihilist, for he believes in one thing – his obligation to express his vision of the world, whether we like it or not. A true nihilist would not bother to go to the enormous intellectual effort of creating a work such as *Watt*. Perhaps it was this sense of obligation that saved him from Watt's fate.

While some mention has been made in this discussion of the distinction between subject and object as a theme in *Watt*, it could be argued that the

subject's pursuit of itself as though it could be both subject and object simultaneously is the very essence of *Watt's* meaning and of the philosophical problem which Beckett sets out to explicate. *Watt* can perhaps best be understood as a repudiation of Descartes' famous philosophical starting-point – "cogito ergo sum" (I think therefore I am). For Descartes, no matter what else may be doubted, the presence of the self, the existence of an independent self-centred consciousness as the defining characteristic of an individual, cannot. Descartes assumes that the thinking self knows itself as a subject and looks out on the external world which is the self's object. Beckett, influenced by modern philosophy, anticipates much of post-modern criticism, especially that of Derrida, by refuting this assumption. For Beckett, the self cannot simply know itself as a subject – it must first become divided into two parts – the thinking mind, and the mind being thought about. In other words, the self can only think about itself by turning itself into an object. In the process of turning itself into an object, the self must construct a model of itself just as it constructs a model of the external world. But what relationship has this model that we construct of ourselves with what we call "truth" or "reality?"

Descartes simply assumed that the self must be able to know itself, but modern psychology and philosophy have demonstrated that such a view is no longer tenable. Since the self cannot know itself intuitively, except at rare moments such as Arsene experienced before he "fell off the ladder," then it follows that we have all constructed a mental model, both of ourselves and of the world,

which allows us to function in the world, in much the same way that a novelist “constructs” a novel. This is exactly what Watt is busily engaged in throughout this novel as he “foists meaning” on events and “make a pillow of old words.” We have seen how Watt is not concerned with finding “truth” or “reality,” but is content with artificially-constructed meanings that allow him to continue to function (at least for a while). This corresponds precisely with the post-modern conception of the self, which constructs, rather than discovers, a model of itself. Indeed, according to Beckett, there is no “self” to be discovered – there is only a void, a blank page, on which we are free to write whatever we choose. It follows from this that there is no “truth” or “reality” in any absolute sense at all – only an infinite series of different versions of truth that may or may not coincide. Beckett makes this point explicitly when Sam reflects on the knowledge Watt might have gained of Knott from the servants that went before him:

For Erskine, Arsene, Walter, Vincent and the others had all vanished, long before my time. Not that Erskine, Arsene, Walter, Vincent and the others could have told anything of Watt, except perhaps Arsene a little, and Erskine a little more, for they could not, but they might have told something of Mr. Knott. Then we would have had Erskine’s Mr. Knott, and Arsene’s Mr. Knott and Walter’s Mr. Knott, and Vincent’s Mr. Knott, to compare with Watt’s Mr. Knott. That would have been a very interesting exercise.³³

This passage indicates the relativity of truth and the unreliability of any particular version of truth. Why, Sam asks, should I believe only Watt’s version of Mr. Knott? Perhaps Arsene’s version is very different and

incompatible with other versions. We already know that Mr. Knott has no concept of himself, but exists in a kind of animal-like unselfconscious state. Unlike Cartesian man, Mr. Knott does not “think,” and therefore only “is” in so far as he is “witnessed” by his servants. This implies another idea that has become a cornerstone of post-modern criticism – that the self is socially-constructed from the surrounding society and does not exist in the absence of culture, and culture’s pre-eminent creation – language. As Richard Begam, in reference to the theories of de Man, writes in *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*

... de Man does not conceive of the self as a form of “pure” presence or consciousness, existing apart from culture or language, which means that subjectivity is “not a substance but a figure” (170), not “selfhood but ... a structure of tropes” (186). In the final analysis, then, the self can be known only as a linguistic effect, the words that are generated out of the attempt to look “within.” At its “core”, the self has no existence – it is nothing.³⁴

It would be a mistake, however, to think that “Watt’s Mr. Knott” and “Arsene’s Mr. Knott,” and so on, are all versions or approximations of the “real” Mr. Knott. Mr. Knott represents the principle of negation, and functions in the novel somewhat like a black hole in space – he attracts a multitude of seekers who are constantly revolving around him to discover his true nature, without realising that he has no “true nature” to be discovered. Knott is “not” there except as an object of futile quests. Mr. Knott exists primarily in the minds of his servants. Beckett carries this idea further in *Godot*, when Godot never appears, and therefore exists exclusively in the minds of other characters.

Like God, Godot is “a witness that cannot be sworn,” with the implication that he does not exist. Beckett draws the logical conclusion that if our selves are socially- constructed linguistic artefacts, then they are also arbitrary, mutable and basically illusory. As Begam points out, Beckett’s use of the words “premises” and “grounds” in reference to Mr. Knott’s establishment are witty puns indicating that there are no “premises” or “grounds” to reality, and that everything that we consider “real” is, in fact, primarily a creation of the mind, rooted in the nothingness from which the mind evolved. It is ironic that, in order to “look within” and construct what we think of as “ourselves,” we find it necessary to use the tools – language – that come, not from ourselves, but from our culture. This is exactly where Watt encounters problems after his “loss of species,” when he is no longer sure that the word “man” applies to him.

The parallels with religious ideas concerning the self are notable in *Watt*. We have seen how Beckett’s philosophical concerns about the self’s relation to itself are closely related to the eastern philosophical traditions. In common with modern western philosophy, the eastern tradition has long believed that the self is an artificial construction. Buddhist thought, in particular, arrives at the same conclusion as Beckett – that if one probes deeply enough into the nature of the self, one finds only nothingness, the void. However, where Buddhism posits the possibility of overcoming the subject/object dichotomy in a meditative state of nirvana, Beckett sees the encounter with the void only as a confirmation of the horror of existence.

There are many passages in *Watt* that have been strongly influenced by Christian thinking as well. One of the most important is the biblical reference to *I Corinthians 13.12* – “For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even also as I am known.” There is little doubt that Beckett had this passage in mind when he discussed Watt’s difficulty in seeing Mr. Knott at the end of Chapter Two.

... little by little Watt abandoned all hope, all fear, of ever seeing Mr. Knott face to face ... Add to this that the few glimpses caught of Mr. Knott, by Watt, were not clearly caught, but as it were in a glass ... ³⁵

The image of the glass not only echoes the Corinthians passage, but also relates to the mirror imagery we have seen throughout the novel. Of course, while the biblical passage is referring to the difficulty of man apprehending God in the present moment, it assures the believer that, although we only see God “through a glass, darkly” in this life, we will meet God “face to face” in the afterlife. Beckett flatly denies this, saying that Watt “abandoned all hope, all fear, of ever seeing Mr. Knott ‘face to face.’” This is not to say that the parallel is exact; Mr. Knott does not represent God, but a projection of Watt’s own futile quest to know. In a sense, Mr. Knott is an “anti-God,” representing not completeness, but emptiness, not meaningfulness, but the absence of meaning. This is why Watt’s quest (and Arsene’s, Walter’s, Vincent’s, etc) is absurd – Knott cannot even provide meaning for his own existence, let alone the existences of others. However enfeebled, Knott is all that is left for spiritual questors in a post-Nietzschean world.

While Watt never does meet Knott “face to face,” it would be wrong to assume that he never establishes any connection at all with Knott. In fact, Watt does establish a close connection, and one that suggests that he has succeeded in transcending self-consciousness. In a sense, he achieves, with Knott, the kind of oneness of subject and object that Arsene achieved before him. While the problem for Arsene was the impermanence of this state, for Watt the problem is its nothingness. The result of his “union” with Knott is not a face-to-face encounter in which a sense of meaning and fulfilment flow from Knott to Watt, as Watt expected, but rather a depressing scene of two isolated men, not looking at each other or talking to each other, staring into the void. Unlike Arsene, who was a brilliant talker, Watt cannot even communicate this barren and sterile experience without resorting to cryptic language. The backwards language in which Watt communicates this experience to Sam is a kind of “mirror-image” of normal language, which fits very well with the mirror symbolism throughout. It is details like these that make us appreciate that *Watt*, far from being a loose and chaotic novel, is, in fact, highly structured and carefully thought out. The most significant of Watt’s mirror-image communications can be translated as follows

Side by side, two men. All day, part of night. Dumb, numb, blind, Knott look at Watt? No. Watt look at Knott? No. Watt talk to Knott? No. Knott talk to Watt? No. What then did us do? Niks, niks, niks. Part of night, all day. Two men, side by side.³⁶

This description is similar in tone to *Waiting for Godot*, in which Vladimir and Estragon sit side by side with absolutely nothing to do, except that they attempt to fill the void with conversation. Beckett moved from a passage in *Watt* describing the lack of communication between individuals, to one in *Godot* in which the characters do nothing but talk, but the point is that it amounts to the same thing – one can encounter the void in silence, or attempt to fill it with conversation, but it remains the void.

If reality is “constructed” rather than “given,” then there can be no such thing as a “realistic” novel. The novelist is no mere copyist, taking down his impressions of the culture around him in some kind of “objective” way. For this reason, Beckett likes to remind the reader that fiction is artificial, and that the novelist is free to create whatever situations he desires. To go further, according to reader-response criticism, no two individuals read a book in the same way. Just as Sam reminded us that we could have Watt’s version of Knott, and Arsene’s version, and so on, we will have as many versions of *Watt* as there are readers. This is especially true of a novel like *Watt*, which makes considerable demands on the reader owing to its style and narrative complexity. There are several passages in *Watt* in which Beckett makes the arbitrary nature of fiction obvious. For example, he writes, “Haemophilia is, like enlargement of the prostate, an exclusively male disorder. But not in this work.”³⁷

I have discussed, in a general way, the influence of ideas from the eastern philosophical and religious traditions on Beckett's work. We have seen how, like Beckett, the Hindu and Buddhist traditions stress the illusory nature of the self. Of these traditions, however, none offers more striking parallels to Beckett's worldview than the philosophy of Taoism. This is not to say, of course, that there are not fundamental differences, for there are. Beckett is not a "Taoist," whatever that may mean. But, as we shall see, Beckett's philosophy of life closely corresponds to the Taoist view in its insistence on the void, or emptiness at the center of life, in the radical inhumanity of nature and natural laws, in the relativity of all moral and aesthetic values, in the constant mutability of life, and, above all, in its radical scepticism about the possibility of using the rational mind to achieve knowledge.

According to Patrick T. Burke, in his study *The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts*,³⁸ the Tao is the name given to the force which, though empty, formless and motionless, is the source of all that is not empty, has form and moves.

There is a thing formless yet complete.
 It existed before heaven and earth.
 Motionless and fathomless,
 It stands alone and never changes.
 It pervades everywhere and never becomes exhausted.
 It may be regarded as the Mother of all beneath heaven.
 We do not know its name, but we call it Tao.³⁹

Beckett's view accords with Taoism in that nothingness is the ground of all existence. Just as Taoism stresses the impossibility of the human mind grasping the Tao, together with our need to call it "something" – "We do not know its name, but we call it Tao" - Beckett's narrator (Sam?) says "... the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something."⁴⁰ To be sure, Beckett has a different conception of nothingness than that conceived of by Taoism. For Beckett, the void is simply that - a void, empty of all qualities, and, as such, the antithesis of existence. He cannot explain how existence arose out of nothingness – it is as though there can be no relation whatsoever between the void and our world of everyday existence. As the break in the circle in Erskine's room implied, there must be some relation between the subject and the object, however problematic the nature of that relation may be. Largely because of the difficulty of determining the nature of this relationship, Beckett feels that existence is characterised by horror, suffering and absurdity. If existence arose for a reason, then it would be fair to assume that that reason might justify the suffering and evil in the world, and that life could have a value imparted to it from this purpose. But if existence arises out of nothing, then it seems reasonable to conclude that its value is also nothing. If all values are relative to each other, which both Taoism and Beckett believe, then there can be no absolute value by which to judge our existence, and it can be regarded as either having, or not having, value, depending on the individual's temperament. Human existence can be seen as

an infinitely complex accumulation of sensory data in time and space. Beckett regards the lack of any ground of meaning with horror; for him, it implies the utter emptiness at the bottom of all human experience, when one sees beyond the superficial set of relative meanings that we use to cope with life.

The Taoist view of the void is radically different. It sees the same emptiness as Beckett at the bottom of human existence, but chooses to regard the negative, paradoxically, in a positive light. Precisely because it is empty of ego, the Tao is full of potential. Just as music needs a “ground” of silence in which to exist, or a painting needs the “ground” of a blank canvas, the Tao provides the “ground” for the existence of the universe, the absolute value against which all other values may be judged. This is precisely the “grounds and premises,” as Beckett punningly put it, that Mr. Knott’s establishment failed to provide Arsene and all the other seekers of wisdom. Of course, there can be no proof for the “existence” of the Tao because, by definition, it does not “exist,” since it is the antithesis of existence. Just as the kind of scientific rationalism that Watt personified cannot prove the existence of God, it is incapable of proving that “the Tao” is anything more than an abstract concept created by the human mind. In short, there is no way to say which version of the void – Beckett’s or the Taoist’s - is correct. However, if one accepts the Taoist version of the void, then it is possible to see a relationship between the void and existence, although we cannot understand the exact nature of that relationship – the Taoists use the analogy of the Tao being “the mother of all

beneath heaven,” but this is not meant to be taken as any more than a rough analogy. On the other hand, if one accepts Beckett’s version of the void pure and simple, then it still raises the question of how existence could arise.

Ultimately, it is simply not possible to know – and in this, Beckett is in full agreement with the Taoists. How existence can arise out of nothingness, and then fall back into nothingness – these are questions for which rational explication of the kind that Watt is forever pursuing is useless, and which Taoism rejects as being the result of faulty dualistic thinking. Dualistic thinking is faulty precisely because it is profoundly ignorant of the underlying unity of opposites. This is why questions such as “how did the Tao arise?” are not meaningful.

Taoist might argue that all speculation regarding the relationship between existence and the void is beside the point. Just as light, *by definition*, cannot exist without dark, or good without evil, existence cannot be separated from non-existence. It is impossible to formulate a definition of light or good or existence without reference to their opposites. We are familiar with these dualisms in western thinking. But the Taoists go a step further. If dualisms cannot be separated from each other, this suggests that the “opposites” must actually be aspects of the same thing. “The void” necessarily implies existence, and existence necessarily implies the void. As Chuang Chou writes in the *Chuang Tzu*,

Everything has its “that,” everything has its “this” ... so I say, “that” comes out of “this” and “this” depends on “that” – which is to say that

“this” and “that” give birth to each other. But where there is birth there must be death; where there is death there must be birth. Where there is acceptability there must be unacceptability; where there is unacceptability there must be acceptability.⁴¹

This statement describes the dependence of any state on its opposite. The Taoist then makes the logical conclusion – if a state “depends on” or “gives birth to” its opposite, are they not then really just opposite poles of the same thing?

He too [a Taoist] recognises a “this”, but a “this” which is also “that”, a “that” which is also “this”. His “that” has both a right and a wrong in it; his “this” too has both a right and a wrong in it. So, in fact, does he still have a “this” and “that”? Or does he in fact no longer have a “this” and “that”?⁴²

A seemingly paradoxical passage in Arsene’s “short statement” refers to the same unity of opposites. Arsene says,

... for the coming is in the shadow of the going, and the going is in the shadow of the coming.⁴³

Arsene then asks the key question

Or is there a coming that is not a coming to, a going that is not a going from, a shadow that is not the shadow of purpose, or not? For what is this shadow of the going in which we come, this shadow of the coming in which we go, this shadow of the coming and the going in which we wait, if not the shadow of purpose, of the purpose that budding withers, that withering buds, whose blooming is a budding withering? ... And what is this coming that was not our coming and this being that is not our being and this going that will not be our going but the coming and being and going in purposelessness?⁴⁴

The “shadow of the going in which we come” is death, while “the shadow of the coming in which we go” is birth. In the same way, the shadow of the void

is existence and the shadow of existence is the void. One of the qualities of existence is a sense of purpose, but its opposite - purposelessness - is one of the qualities of the void. Our sense of purpose, then, is constantly “budding” and “withering” – in other words, our quest for meaning in life is never stable, but is subject to constant expectations and disappointments. “Meaning” itself cannot be absolute, any more than existence can be. Neither can meaninglessness and non-existence be absolute. The only thing that can be absolute is that condition which is the “ground” for, and transcends all dualisms, that in which “this is also that; that is also this” – the Tao. Any quest for absolute or transcendent meaning is, in Beckett’s words, “doomed to failure,” precisely because such a quest fails to include its opposite pole – meaninglessness. To put it another way, chaos is as necessary as order in the overall accounting of the universe. This was Arsene’s problem – his quest for meaning did, in fact, “bloom” into a brief fulfilment, but, inevitably, it could not last long before “withering” into its alter ego – meaninglessness. To continue with the garden imagery that is pervasive in *Watt*, only “waxen lilies” can bloom perpetually, but they are merely dead imitations of real flowers. While they may never “wither,” neither can they be said to have ever “bloomed.”

It is apparent that Taoist values are radically different from the conventional religious values that Beckett satirised in *Watt*. The Taoist recognises that the world is both orderly and chaotic, both good and evil, and

that too much stress on striving for good, for example, is likely to lead to even more evil by drawing attention to its opposite. Taoism advocates harmony with nature; but only if one understands by “nature” a force that is absolutely ruthless and indifferent to human concerns. There are no moral standards governing the Tao, and it is not designed to facilitate human happiness. This corresponds to the moral climate of Beckett’s works, in which man is profoundly alienated from a hostile and indifferent natural world. Also, the complete absence of anything like a “compassionate God” is underlined throughout Beckett’s works. No matter how long we may wait, or how much we may need him, Godot will never appear.

Of the many ways in which Beckett’s thought corresponds to Taoism, none is more important than in his scepticism concerning human knowledge. We have seen throughout *Watt* how Beckett has stressed the fallibility of all human knowledge, and, indeed, the impossibility of our ever knowing anything with certainty. Beckett is in absolute agreement with the Taoists that one of the most important things most people do not know is that they do not know anything. We are ignorant even of, and perhaps especially of, our own ignorance. This was the point of the story about Mr. Ash, who positively asserted to Arsene that the time was “seventeen minutes past five exactly, as God is my witness”⁴⁵ when the time was actually six o’clock. It was the point of Beckett’s having the story told backwards, by one insane character to another in a mental institution, and also of his satire of the academic committee

in Arthur's story. This scepticism is also at the very core of Taoism. When a friend asked Chuang Tzu "Do you know what all things agree in calling right?" he replied

How would I know that?
 Do you know that you don't know it?
 How would I know that?
 Then do things know nothing?
 How would I know that? However, suppose I try saying something.
 What way do I have of knowing that if I say I know something I don't really not know it? Or what way do I have of knowing that if I say I don't know something I don't really in fact know it? ⁴⁶

This directly addresses one of the philosophical questions posed at the beginning of this study – how do we “know” that we “know” something? Is there any way we can be certain of what we know, or is there no way we can be certain of what we “know”? Part of Beckett's purpose in having Watt go through so many exhaustive lists of possibilities for every situation is to suggest the hopelessly complex and fluctuating nature of even the most ordinary daily events – like the incident of the Galls. This is also an example of the human tendency to give too much meaning to a situation where it is not warranted. That people construct elaborate rational explanations for every conceivable situation is not a measure of their intelligence, as they think, but of their ignorance and willingness to delude themselves. Or, to put it more accurately, it is a measure of the human mind's ability to create or invent meanings that do not correspond to reality, but which are then widely accepted as an accurate model of reality. The imaginative power of the mind to “foist

meaning” on events can lead to completely false and delusional thinking. Beckett’s refusal to accept any religious or philosophical system is fully compatible with Taoism, because it too rejects all systems as worthless, or, even worse than worthless, as dangerous. Dangerous because, as many examples have shown, people who are convinced that they have certain knowledge are likely to be intolerant of opposing views. Should Taoism, then, reject itself as just another system? Only if it is, in fact, a “system,” but it seems to be no more systematic than Beckett’s worldview. With Beckett, Taoism sees the rational mind as more of a hindrance than a help in the apprehension of the nature of existence. The reason is simply that the rational mind can so easily convince itself to believe in a certain system of knowledge, but the Tao can never be apprehended by man.

Although the Tao cannot be moulded into a rational system, it does not follow that it is completely irrational. In this, again, it is like Beckett’s works, which, though ostensibly chaotic, are in fact highly structured. It transcends the rational/irrational dichotomy, itself a product of simplistic reasoning. To put it in Beckett’s words, the Tao resists all attempt to “foist meaning” on it, because, as we have seen, *“meaning” is one of the qualities of existence, not of the void.* This is not to say that the Tao is meaningless, since we have seen that the void and existence are, in fact, one. Rather, the Tao encompasses and transcends both meaning and meaninglessness. The language describing Taoism is necessarily paradoxical, just as Beckett’s is. This is because

language is based on dualistic distinctions which do not exist at the deepest levels of reality. That is why Taoists say “he who speaks does not know; he who knows does not speak”. Beckett says the same thing through Arsene:

What we know partakes in no small measure of the nature of what has so happily been called the unutterable or ineffable, so that any attempt to utter or eff it is doomed to fail, doomed, doomed to fail.⁴⁷

Of course, the humour in this quotation is evident as Beckett makes fun of the rules of grammar – “any attempt to utter or eff it” to show how ill suited language is, based as it is on relative differences, to describe the void. Just as the Tao is referred to as “nameless”. Beckett titled the last novel of his trilogy “The Unnamable”.

Many commentators have pointed out the linguistic brilliance of *Watt*. Leslie Hill describes it as “an intricate cartography of language, a fictional inquiry into what constitutes the foundations of language and the real world, language and human subjectivity.”⁴⁸ A deeper understanding of his use of language must be the next step in this inquiry.

II

We have seen how Beckett examines and rejects conventional religious and philosophic systems of belief and meaning. Beckett is no less radical in his use of language, and, indeed, it is Beckett's language that is the chief source of his attraction, and also difficulty, for his readers. Passages of great poetic beauty are interspersed with pages of extreme repetitiousness which almost compel the reader to skip – it is as though Beckett is testing the reader's patience, and, indeed, he had little patience for readers who were not prepared to do the hard intellectual work that is required to read his novels. On the other hand, as a kind of compensation, *Watt* contains some of the funniest passages in literature for those attuned to his sardonic humour. In any case, Beckett's use of language is strikingly original and unforgettable. Leslie Hill says of Beckett's language:

Language, it is sometimes claimed, is what constitutes humans as subjects, as creative and reflexive agents. In a similar way, language in Beckett's work would seem to trace a precarious limit between the human and the non-human, articulateness and engulfment. Words in Beckett's books are vulnerable, subject to dislocation and uncertainty, never really sure of what they are nor of what it is they signify. As a result, Beckett's fiction lives on in a state of constant self-doubt and textual perplexity. But Beckett's writing draws from its dilemmas, both private and public, an extraordinary textual energy and it is this which gives Beckett's work its unmistakable and provocative singularity, its unique signature.⁴⁹

Language, for Beckett, serves as a metaphor for human consciousness. Most of Beckett's characters are compulsive talkers, like Arsene, or writers,

like Molloy. They use words to stave off their fear of the void, in an attempt to prove, if only to themselves, that they still exist. Language is also, of course, the primary means of communication between individuals. We have seen in the previous discussion that, for Beckett, the relation between the subjective consciousness of one individual and others is highly problematic. So much so that it is a fair question whether real communication between individuals is even possible in Beckett's world. To be sure, the characters in *Watt* do speak, but it is more to themselves than to each other. Typically, they do not listen carefully, and they fail to understand one another, or even make the effort to understand. For example, in the "dialogue" between Watt and Arsene when Watt first arrives in Mr. Knott's house, the two do not really communicate at all. Arsene's "short statement" is an extraordinary rant occupying twenty-four pages of breathless monologue. Watt's only role is to be a captive auditor. Arsene seems to know everything about Watt, or at least he assumes he knows, and therefore has no interest in asking him anything. Arsene is intelligent enough to know that Watt has understood nothing of what he said. He says, "But that and all the rest, haw! the rest, you will decide for yourself when your time comes, or rather you will leave undecided, to judge by the look of you."⁵⁰ Arsene is not really attempting to communicate any information to Watt, but is essentially talking to himself, like a deranged person. Watt, for his part, makes no effort to understand what Arsene is saying. Reflecting on Arsene's speech,

... He wondered what Arsene had meant, nay, he wondered what Arsene had said, on the evening of his departure. For his

declaration had entered Watt's ears only by fits, and his understanding, like all that enters the ear only by fits, hardly at all. He had realised, to be sure, that Arsene was speaking, and *in a sense*, [my emphasis] to him, but something had prevented him, perhaps his fatigue, from paying attention to what was being said and from enquiring into what was being meant.⁵¹

The words "Arsene was speaking, and *in a sense*, to him" demonstrate how careful and precise Beckett is in his use of language. By using the phrase "in a sense, to him," he strongly suggests that Arsene is really talking to himself. The question of who exactly is aware of this fact – Watt, or the narrator, Sam – is very difficult, if not impossible, to determine. The words "in a sense" could reflect Watt's awareness, or the narrator's awareness, or both. What is certain is that Watt and Arsene remain trapped in their respective, solipsistic worlds. Where characters do appear to communicate "normally" in the novel, a closer examination reveals that this so-called communication is so tritely clichéd as to be essentially the reflexes of unthinking automatons. The phrase "As God is my witness" is an example of how the highly conventional characters in the opening pages of the book use shop-worn expressions to avoid real thinking and communication. Tetty's description of the day she gave birth to Larry is a good example of how Beckett mocks such tired dialogue:

Well, said the lady, that morning at breakfast Goff turns to me and he says, Tetty, he says, Tetty, my pet, I should very much like to invite Thompson, Cream and Colquhoun to help us eat the duck, if I felt sure you felt up to it. Why, my dear, says I, I never felt fitter in my life. Those were my words, were they not?⁵²

The last sentence is certainly meant ironically, since Tetty never uses her “own words”, but speaks only in a series of clichés. One of Beckett’s stylistic techniques is to make standard phrases like “As God is my witness” and “Those were my words, were they not” draw ironic attention to their own self-contradictory nature. Characters like Tetty and Goff are oblivious of all but surface meanings, and, consequently, are unaware of the irony that the sensitive reader will recognise. They are also in the habit of expressing what is painfully obvious – “Night is now falling fast, said Goff, soon it will be quite dark. Then we shall all go home, said Mr. Hackett.”⁵³

The style of *Watt* could be described as finicky, pedantic and ironic. It mocks its own convoluted complexity. John Di Pierro feels that, in *Watt*, Beckett was

trying to revive a language that to him appeared to be exhausted just as the novel form had become exhausted. This laudable attempt was not successful as discussed earlier even though, theoretically, it nearly succeeded.⁵⁴

I feel that Di Pierro is on the wrong track here. Beckett is not “trying to revive a language” but, on the contrary, is trying to show in every conceivable way just how irredeemably exhausted the language of the novel form has become in this century. In spite of his many other valuable insights, Di Pierro makes the mistake of applying conventional standards – such as “reviving,” “improving,” “making progress,” or “achieving success” - to a writer for whom such

standards simply do not apply. Raymond Federman is much closer to the spirit of Beckett's style when he writes:

The language in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, *Murphy*, and *Watt* is primarily academic and scholarly, even though it tends to jest about its own pedantry. It remains Joycean in many ways, and offers flagrant examples of superabundance and self-consciousness. Beckett delights in abusing the vocabulary, distorting the syntax, torturing the diction, *until linguistic complexities are made to demonstrate the inadequacy of language as an intellectual and artistic means of communication* [my emphasis] ⁵⁵

There are many examples in the novel of the kind of linguistic complexities Federman refers to. One of Beckett's main stylistic techniques is to include exhaustive lists of every possible outcome to demonstrate Watt's Cartesian thought process. The arrangements for Mr. Knott's meals are an example:

Twelve possibilities occurred to Watt, in this connection:

1. Mr. Knott was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that he was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that such an arrangement existed, and was content.
2. Mr. Knott was not responsible for the arrangement, but knew who was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that such an arrangement existed, and was content.
3. Mr. Knott was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that he was responsible for the arrangement, but did not know that any such arrangement existed, and was content [and so on] ⁵⁶

Watt is full of such lists. While they have a comic effect at first, this tends to wear thin by the end of the novel. Beckett's purpose seems to be to force the reader to experience through the model of his writing the banality and repetitiousness of life. Intellectually, his point is valid – if a novel really were

to accurately “mirror” life in all its complexity, it would have to show that most of human existence consists in an endless round of precisely these routine, Sisiphean activities. Artistically, however, these techniques must be regarded as unsuccessful, even in Beckett’s idiosyncratic sense of the word, and it is probably significant that he avoided such long passages of pure repetition in later works.

For Beckett, and, indeed, for twentieth-century philosophy, questions of meaning are intimately connected with language; it is impossible to separate the two, since language is our primary mode of giving meaning, however relative, to external phenomena. Before anything can “mean” anything, it must be described and communicated through language. We have already seen the difficulties Arsene had in communicating his experiences to Watt, and the lack of real communication between the conventional characters. In a passage describing Watt’s whole experience in Mr. Knott’s house, the connection between language and meaning is made explicit:

... But what was this pursuit of meaning, in this indifference to meaning? And to what did it tend? These are delicate questions. For when Watt at last spoke of this time, it was a time long past, and of which his recollections were, in a sense, perhaps less clear than he would have wished, though too clear for his liking, in another ... Add to this the obscurity of Watt’s communications, the rapidity of his utterance and the eccentricities of his syntax, as elsewhere recorded. Add to this the material conditions in which these communications were made. Add to this the scant aptitude to receive of him to whom they were proposed. Add to this the scant aptitude to give of him to whom they were committed.⁵⁷

Watt was deeply disturbed by the incident of the Galls because he “had been

unable to accept that nothing had happened, that a thing that was nothing had happened.”⁵⁸ What is so disturbing about it is that, to Watt, it becomes a model for all his subsequent difficulties in “foisting a meaning there where no meaning appeared.”⁵⁹ But this “foisting of meaning” is inextricably connected with our dependence on language, as the following passage makes clear:

... to elicit something from nothing requires a certain skill and Watt was not always successful, in his efforts, to do so. Not that he was always unsuccessful either, for he was not. For if he had been always unsuccessful, how would it have been possible for him to speak of the Galls father and son ... No, he could never have spoken at all of these things, if all had continued to mean nothing ... For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man⁶⁰

The problem confronting Watt in trying to attribute meaning to the incident of the Galls is precisely the problem confronting Beckett in writing *Watt* – how to “express the inexpressible?” Or, more accurately, how can one express the inexpressible without transforming the inexpressible into the expressible, and therefore creating a completely false impression of the inexpressible? Clearly it is not a logical possibility, as mystics who have rejected language for direct experience have long maintained. The result is that language is simply not up to the task of discussing the deepest layers of reality; in fact, language inevitably distorts reality by “foisting” meaning where there is none. This should not be surprising. Language is a set of symbols which, in their interaction, produce a meaningful structure – how could such a system depict its antithesis? Certainly the words to depict it exist – meaninglessness,

nothingness, the void - but they are still meaningful concepts in a language-system. They are not meaninglessness itself. Beckett is making an important point here about the power of language to transform reality into something that it is not - it is impossible to describe reality in language without the language itself creating a meaning that may not correspond to reality. This is a problem for Beckett, because he is engaged, above all, and however hopelessly, on a quest for "truth" (even if it turns out that there is no one thing corresponding to the word) and the seriousness of his quest demands a similar seriousness from his reader. How can he, as a writer of unusual integrity, communicate his absolute conviction of the nothingness at the heart of existence in a language which he clearly knows subverts and negates his efforts? Leslie Hill is correct in writing that *Watt* is

a novel which probes the precarious foundations of meaning by showing clarity and stability to be provisional effects of a larger network of inconsequence, arbitrary coincidence and self-defeating discontinuity.⁶¹

Language is one of these "provisional effects," and it creates the illusion of meaning within "a larger network of inconsequence."

Following the incident of the Galls, Watt feels a steadily increasing need for "words to be applied to his situation."⁶² He wants these "words," not in order that he might arrive at the truth of his situation, but simply to have the necessary tools to explain his situation to himself, "For to explain had always been to exorcize, for Watt."⁶³ Beckett stresses in several passages that Watt is

not seeking truth: "Not that Watt desired information, for he did not."⁶⁴ Rather,

he would be more than satisfied with a comfortable explanation. Watt

was obliged, because of his peculiar character, to enquire what [the simple games that time plays with space] meant, *oh not into what they really meant, his character was not so peculiar as all that*, [my emphasis] but into what they might be induced to mean, with the help of a little patience, a little ingenuity.⁶⁵

The most meagre, the least plausible [meaning] would have satisfied Watt, who had lived, miserably it is true, among face values all his adult life.⁶⁶

The dog-feeding incident offers a good example of Watt's need to use language in an effort to explain the apparently meaningless, without bothering to arrive at the real truth of the situation. The real truth, of course, is that the enormous effort involved in continuing with the scheme to find a dog, and a family to care for the dog, to eat Mr. Knott's scraps, is a complete waste of time and effort to fulfil a set of ridiculous and outdated instructions in a meaningless cause. Watt is operating as a machine such as a computer would in taking instructions which may have once made sense – to give the leftovers of Mr. Knott's meals to "the dog," and trying to carry them out in a situation where they no longer make sense. The problem with Watt is that he operates as though in a vacuum, without a human context, and, consequently, with a complete lack of judgement or wisdom. As he personifies the principles of the scientific method on which our technological society is based, his lack of judgement, his failure to see that an absurd end does not justify elaborate means is Beckett's comment on our society's dependence on elaborate

technologies in the service of often trivial ends. Watt's indifference to truth reflects our materialistic society's indifference to, and indeed contempt for, everything that is not expedient. Watt is well aware that he has not really understood all of the implications of the dog-feeding problem:

Not that for a moment Watt supposed that he had penetrated the forces at play, in this particular instance, or even perceived the forms that they upheaved, or obtained the least useful information concerning himself, or Mr. Knott, for he did not. But he had turned, little by little, a disturbance into words, *he had made a pillow of old words, for a head* [my emphasis].⁶⁷

In a sense, Watt occupies a kind of middle ground between characters like Mr. Hackett and Tetty, who are very contented to operate “among face values” all their lives, and Arsene, who, like Beckett himself, is a true, (and therefore disillusioned) intellectual. Unfortunately for Watt, his main tools for “foisting meaning” on situations, or deducing meaning from situations – words, or the whole structure of language - begin to fail him shortly after the incident of the Galls. He “now found himself in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance.”⁶⁸ The use of the conditional clause “if they consented to be named” with regard to inanimate objects is characteristic of Watt's mentality. We saw before how he used anthropomorphism in attributing feelings to the key he covers with a piece of cloth on a cold night. I believe it can be read as a sign of the highly deteriorated condition of Watt's will, which has become so weak he believes that he needs the consent of objects before he can dare to name them. Not only

is Watt rapidly losing his will by this point, he is even beginning to suffer from what the narrator calls a “loss of species.”⁶⁹ In what does this “loss of species” consist? There can be no question that it is primarily the loss of language.

Words no longer mean for Watt what they mean for everyone else:

Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, at one of Mr. Knott's pots, of one of Mr. Knott's pots, it was in vain that Watt said Pot, pot. Well, perhaps not quite in vain, but very nearly. For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all ... Watt preferred on the whole having to do with things of which he did not know the name, though this too was painful to Watt, to having to do with things of which the known name, the proven name, was not the name, any more, for him --- For the pot remained a pot, Watt felt sure of that, for everyone but Watt. For Watt alone it was not a pot, any more.⁷⁰

Leslie Hill believes that what is at issue here “is the capacity of language to move from the singular to the general, the concrete to the abstract. For Watt, the fundamental relationship between sign and referent is found to be incommensurable.”⁷¹ I would go further than Hill, and argue that, for Beckett, there is no logical, meaningful relationship between sign and referent, between an object and its name. A pot is one thing, the word “pot” is a completely different thing, and the relation between the two merely reflects the arbitrary nature of language. In other words, we cannot look to language to supply meaning to real-world objects. As Hill points out, whether or not we call a pot a pot is not a very serious matter, but when Watt begins to question the words he and others have applied to himself, it becomes a very serious step towards his ultimate mental deterioration, and a decisive step in his “loss of species.” Underlying this whole sign-referent dichotomy is the Cartesian mind/body

split. The human mind creates the symbol “pot,” but what has this to do with the reality of a pot? Similarly, how is Watt’s puzzle-spinning and word-engendering mind related to the flesh-and-blood Watt? If language is a system of relative meanings articulated by differences, where is the stable center of all meaning that can keep the house of cards from collapsing? For Descartes, the answer was clearly God. It was his belief in God that provided a stable foundation to all meaning systems such as language. But, as Leslie Hill puts it, in Beckett’s world “reality, like language, becomes a closed system, capable of endless permutations, but sustained by no cause outside of its own gyrating movement.”⁷²

In chapter III, we discover that Watt has left Mr. Knott’s house and is living in what appears to be a mental institution. For the first time we are introduced to the narrator of Watt’s story, Sam, who is also an inmate of the institution. Up to this time, it appears that Watt had been telling Sam the story of his time in Mr. Knott’s house in a more or less conventional way, but when Watt is transferred to another “pavilion,” Sam notices changes in his behaviour that are disturbing. Watt now walks backwards, stumbling frequently as he goes. He also wears his clothes back to front. Most disturbing to Sam, however, is that Watt begins to speak cryptically, going through various stages in which he inverts the order of words and the order of letters within words. Leslie Hill believes that Watt’s use of cryptic language is a sign of his loss of identity, or the absorption of his identity into that of Mr. Knott. Mr. Knott is

also an idiosyncratic dresser, who wears his dressing gown back to front, and his summer clothes in winter and winter clothes in summer. As well, Mr. Knott does not communicate in normal sentences, but only in catches of songs and “solitary dactylic ejaculations of extraordinary vigour” such as “Exelmans!” and “Cavendish!”⁷³ Hill believes that “what Watt’s cryptic words to Sam stress is the desire for fusion with Knott.”⁷⁴ But if Knott represents the source of “naught,” or nothingness, then Watt’s desire for fusion with Knott can be read as the desire for extinction, for death. Di Pierro sees Watt’s cryptic language as a kind of reversal of the whole process of civilisation. He writes:

The super-rationalistic language of the 20th century has reached the point where the “reflux” to barbarism has set in. The Viconian language cycle starts afresh with primitive sounds and gestures. This is the theocratic and sacred historical stage where seers who are mad communicate the language of the gods which is incomprehensible except to the few. The “mantic” language ... Watt is turning into a simple-but healthy-barbarian. He walks backwards now, but this mirrors the entire backward movement, the reflux, of an exhausted rational Western civilisation.⁷⁵

Di Pierro also feels that the theories of R.D. Laing are anticipated in the sense that it is not so much Watt who is mad here, but western civilisation. Both critics may be reading too much into the text. What is clear is that the only result of Watt’s service in Mr. Knott’s establishment are that his connections with the “normal” world are severed and he is increasingly like Mr. Knott, a figure completely alienated from reality. The stages in his “loss of species” correspond closely with the stages in the corruption of his language because

Watt, with his “arms full of waxen lilies” has no hold on reality other than language.

Many critics have commented on the influence of the satirical tradition on Beckett’s writing. As we have discussed, for all its preoccupation with the most serious issues in religion and modern philosophy, and for all its cynicism and despair, *Watt* contains some of the funniest passages in modern literature. One of his greatest appeals to the reader is his extraordinary ability to fuse the most difficult and serious ideas with genuinely funny satire. Beckett’s debt to Sterne and to Swift is especially evident. John Chalker, in *The Satiric Shape of Watt*, points out how Beckett uses many of the same typographical techniques as employed by Sterne in *Tristram Shandy* and Swift in *Tale of a Tub*. These include such pedantic elements as footnotes, lacunae in the text, and addenda. These techniques serve three major purposes – to amuse the reader, to call attention to the text as fiction, and to underline the unreliability of the narration. The unreliability of the narrator, Sam, is revealed in many ways throughout the novel. For example, Sam relates many incidents that, logically, he could not have known. The most obvious is that Sam tells us about the conversation between Hackett and the Nixons when neither he nor Watt were there. At the beginning, the novel seems to have an omniscient narrator, and we learn of Sam only after the first third of the novel. Another is when Sam makes the comment, “As Watt told the beginning of his story, not first, but second, so not fourth, but third, now he told its end. Two, one, four, three, that

was the order in which Watt told his story.”⁷⁶ But, as critics have pointed out, this is not the order in which the story is presented to the reader, which is, in fact, one, two, four, three. The implication is that Sam has either confused the order in which Watt told the story in his own mind, or he is correct and has decided to arbitrarily re-arrange the story to his own liking. There are several possibilities. The first is that Watt told the story in normal (one, two, three, four) order, but Sam *thinks* he told it in the order two, one, four, three. The second is that that Watt told the story in the order Sam reports, but Sam re-arranged it into the order presented to the reader. The third is that Watt actually told the story in the order presented to the reader, and Sam is incorrect in saying it was told in the order two, one, four, three. Of course, this is all Beckett playing a game with the reader and his or her expectations of logical consistency in a work of fiction. It is quite possible that Watt is nothing more than a figment of Sam’s imagination. If the reader steps back completely from his engagement with the novel, he will remember that both Watt and Sam are purely fictitious inventions of Beckett, who, as we have seen, can say whatever he pleases without making it true. It has been said that the success of the theatrical experience depends on the ability of the artist to make the audience suspend their disbelief. It is typical of him, as in so many other areas, to reverse this process and actually *provoke* his reader’s disbelief. One can almost imagine Beckett smiling as the reader tries to figure out exactly what the character “Watt” told the character “Sam,” in the same way that the reader

smiled at Watt continuing in the absurd scheme to feed a non-existent dog. It is no wonder that Beckett, in reference to critical evaluation of his work, wrote:

I feel the only line is to refuse to become involved in exegesis of any kind My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.⁷⁷

One of the characteristics of satire is a tendency to verbal excess, to a “*reductio ad absurdum*,” and this is evident in the many passages in which Watt lists every possible combination of outcomes to a given situation. Like Sterne, Beckett also makes use of the technique of digression to comic effect. Arsene’s “short statement,” expanded to a length of nearly thirty pages, is itself an absurdity, given that it was supposedly delivered in a conversation with Watt. Perhaps the best example of digression in *Watt* is in the story Arthur tells about Ernest Louit in order to illustrate the efficaciousness of a fictitious product – Bando. The Louit story is an entirely superfluous digression of twenty-five pages without any other purpose than to satirise academic life.

In *Samuel Beckett: A study of his novels* Eugene Webb points out how *Watt* represents a significant departure for Beckett from his previous novels, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, and *Murphy*. The difference is especially evident in the way Beckett handles characterisation. As Webb puts it:

Belacqua and Murphy were odd, but they were odd in a credible way, and the world they lived in would seem recognisably realistic to any reader. In *Watt* and in the novels that follow it, the world will often seem quite normal for a time until suddenly something appears that is obviously pure fantasy ... As befits his archetypal role, the

characterisation of Watt is much more general in outline, less individualised, than were those of Belacqua or Murphy.⁷⁸

Watt is the most unlikely “hero” imaginable. Throughout the novel, he is strikingly passive, almost inert. It is as though he is not a full human being, but a dehumanised object. In fact, his “loss of species,” wherein Watt became unable to connect the word “man” with himself, is foreshadowed in the first description of him when he gets down from the tram:

Then [the tram] moved on, disclosing, on the pavement, motionless, a solitary figure, lit less and less by the receding lights, until it was scarcely to be distinguished from the dim wall behind it. Tetty was not sure whether it was a man or a woman. Mr. Hackett was not sure that it was not a parcel, a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin, wrapped up in dark paper and tied about the middle with a cord.⁷⁹

In this first description of Watt, every word is significant. Watt first appears on the scene by *being disclosed* from behind the tram rather than by actively entering, and he is motionless when we see him. Beckett stresses his passivity in a comic reversal of the normal role of a hero engaged on a quest. Mr. Nixon remarks of Watt that “a milder, more inoffensive creature does not exist. He would literally turn the other cheek, I honestly believe, if he had the energy.”⁸⁰ When we first see him, Watt is a “solitary figure” and, indeed, his isolation from the society of his fellow humans is stressed throughout the novel. Watt lacks all the normal attributes by which we habitually categorise people. Dualistic distinctions, which Watt loves to indulge in, do not seem to apply to him. Tetty cannot tell if Watt is a man or a woman. Mr. Hackett is not even

sure if Watt is alive, or merely a roll of tarpaulin. In every way, we can see how Beckett mocks and undermines the hero of this novel. In fact, the picture that we get of Watt is so exaggerated that it becomes clear that Watt is not meant to be a realistic character at all, but, like Mr. Knott, is a fictional archetype for a set of ideas. Watt is not so much a character as he is a stereotype, very much like the “characters” of medieval mystery plays, who embodied established moral categories such as “vice” or “virtue.” Watt, as his name implies, symbolises man’s need to question, to rationalise and to “foist meaning” on phenomena which are actually meaningless. He personifies the perpetual existential question – “What?” At the same time, Watt certainly evokes the name of James Watt, the inventor of the steam engine, and a leading example of the scientific reductionism of which Watt is a parody. Watt’s status as a stereotype rather than a fully-developed character explains why Mr. Nixon cannot be sure how long he has known Watt. He says, “I seem to have known him all my life, but there must have been a period when I did not.”⁸¹

One of the most interesting consequences of Watt’s status as a stereotype rather than a character is his tendency to merge with the other “characters” in the novel. Early in the novel, Mr. Nixon makes the following enigmatic statement:

The curious thing is, my dear fellow, I tell you quite frankly, that when I see him, or think of him, I think of you, and that when I see you, or think of you, I think of him. I have no idea why this is so.⁸²

Later, Watt is closely identified with Sam. In the following passage, the implication is made that Watt and Sam may simply be mirror-images of each other:

... we began to draw ourselves forward, and upward, and persisted in this course until our heads, our noble bulging brows, met, and touched, Watt's noble brow, and my noble brow. And then we did a thing we seldom did, we embraced. Watt laid his hands on my shoulders, and I laid mine on his ...⁸³

This passage is similar to one describing Watt's encounter with Mr. Knott:

One day Watt, coming out from behind a bush, almost ran into Mr. Knott ... Mr. Knott's hands were behind his back, and his head bowed down, towards the ground. Then Watt in his turn looked down ... So there for a short time they stood together, the master and the servant, the bowed heads almost touching.⁸⁴

Toward the end of his period in Mr. Knott's house, Watt becomes more and more closely identified with him. Just as Knott does not speak (excepting occasional ejaculations), Watt's speech suffers a severe deterioration with the implication that it will end in Knott-like speechlessness. Richard Begam, in his study *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, argues that the close connection between Watt, Mr. Knott and Sam can best be explained in terms of Beckett's exploration of the questing subject's attempt to know itself. He writes,

I have argued that the subject's self-negating attempt to know itself finds expression in Watt's efforts to encounter Knott. Matters are complicated, however, by the fact that Watt not only pursues Knott but is himself pursued by the novel's narrator, Sam. Indeed, all three of these characters are linked with each other through an imagery of self-

reflection or *mirroring* (my emphasis), which first identifies Watt with Knott, and then identifies Sam with Watt. As a result, the subject's pursuit of itself is no longer presented as merely epistemological; through the intervention of Sam it has also become narrative.⁸⁵

While most novelists try to make their characters as fully realised as possible, Beckett strives for just the opposite effect - to deliberately weaken characterisation. In so doing, he is pointing out the artificiality of all characterisation in literature in order to remind the reader that a novel is not reality, and characters are not real people. By doing so, he emphasises the essentially fraudulent nature of even the most "realistic" novels. At a deeper level, Beckett's characterisation reflects his intense preoccupation with the philosophical distinction between subject and object discussed in the first chapter. It is neither desirable nor even possible to create strong individual characters when the very idea of the distinction between the subjective individual and the objective world, or between one subjective individual and another, is so problematic. We are left with a series of questions – is Watt really just another foolish, conventional person like Mr. Hackett in spite of his ostensible status as the "hero" of a novel? In this case, a parallel could be made between Watt as a fumbling "everyman" and Joyce's Leopold Bloom, the "hero" of *Ulysses*. Arsene would then correspond to Stephen Dedalus as the character embodying the intellectual principle. But if Watt and Bloom are both, in a sense, "everyman" characters, the differences between them greatly outweigh the similarities. Is Watt merely a figure in the mad narrator, Sam's

imagination, created by Sam in an attempt to make sense of his own experience? If so, then are not all of these characters simply “puppets” created by Beckett to try to make sense of “the mess” of reality? If all of these characters originated, as they literally did, in the mind of their creator, Beckett, then we begin to understand Beckett’s purpose – to remind the reader that novels, while pretending to describe the world, or objective reality, actually describe nothing more than the author’s mind, or subjective consciousness. The novelist is, then, like Watt, who seems to be on a quest for truth, but is actually just making “a pillow of old words.”

The relation between Watt and Knott is quite clearly meant to parody the relationship between man and God. We have already seen in Arsene’s monologue how Knott is habitually described in highly wrought religious language. It can be seen in the following passage that Knott, as much as Watt, is not a “character” in the normal sense, but is an archetypal figure representing the goal of Watt’s quest:

And Mr. Knott, needing nothing if not, one, not to need, and, two, a witness to his not needing, of himself know nothing. And so he needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease.⁸⁶

Here we have a typical Beckettian paradox. Knott has only two needs, but these two needs are not logically compatible. Knott needs “not to need.” One can either need something, or not need something, but one cannot need not to need. Or, to be more accurate, one can need not to need, but this will result in

a stalemated situation of perpetual frustration – which is exactly how Beckett sees the human condition. Knott is, therefore, as his name implies, an impossible “knot” to unravel. He is also “not” in the sense of having no answers to Watt’s question – what? Knott’s need to be witnessed in order that he “might not cease” is characteristic of all Beckett’s characters. From Murphy to Watt to Molloy to Vladimir and Estragon, they are frightened of “ceasing to exist” – not so much in the sense of dying, as in the sense of being left alone in a terrifying and senseless universe. The fear of being alone is amplified by these characters’ extremely fragile sense of themselves. Like Mr. Knott, they all need someone to “witness” their existence in order that they might not cease to exist. The irony, of course, is that, in this complex web of interdependency – Watt and Arsene and all the rest needing Knott, Knott needing not to need and to be witnessed - there is no firm foundation or principle which is self-sufficient and stable enough to give meaning and coherence to reality. In a universe where even God is “a witness that cannot be sworn,” what does it say about Mr. Knott, that he chooses as poor a witness as Watt?

But what kind of witness was Watt, weak now of eye, hard of hearing, and with even the more intimate senses greatly below par? A needy witness, an imperfect witness. The better to witness, the worse to witness. That with his need he might witness its absence. That imperfect he might witness it ill. That Mr. Knott might never cease, but ever almost cease.⁸⁷

Beckett implies that Mr. Knott is actually insane. He goes “barefoot and for boating dressed, in the snow, in the slush, in the icy winter wind” and in the summer is “charged with furs.”⁸⁸ His “conversation” consists of absurd ejaculations. His appearance changes every day. He has no memory of yesterday. Each major character in *Watt* needs another simply in order to feel they exist, but, as there is no stable and self-sufficient center, the cumulative effect is that of the blind leading the blind.

While Watt and Mr. Knott are clearly the most important characters in terms of the novel’s overall metaphorical structure, with Watt representing the eternal question “What?” and Knott representing the question’s negation, a more complete understanding of *Watt* requires an investigation into the function of some of the “minor” characters, who, as we shall see, play an indispensable role in the intricate structure of the work. Richard Begam, in *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, offers an analysis of the role of Hackett and of Larry Nixon. We have already seen how Nixon associates Hackett with Watt, for reasons he does not understand. Begam argues that Hackett, like Watt, has “fallen” (with its biblical implications) into “existence off the ladder,” as Arsene put it, into the fragmented world of Cartesian dualism. Hackett even bears a physical mark – his hunched back – as a sign of his fall. According to Begam, Hackett is also associated with Sam in the sense that, as he puts it, “Watt comes swimming into Hackett’s consciousness in much the way it was popularly imagined that realist novelists conceive their

characters; he appears from nowhere, in a sense out of nowhere....”⁸⁹

Further, Begam argues that the name Hackett is meant to evoke “Hack,” and Hackett seeks the kind of conventional information about Watt that one would expect a “hack” writer to be interested in – his “nationality, family, birthplace, confession, occupation, means of existence, distinctive signs”⁹⁰ As well, he argues that it is Hackett who sets the plot in motion. To be sure, Hackett is only a metaphorical author, not an actual storyteller, like Sam. While I believe Begam’s argument has some merit, as I have already argued, Hackett seems to be a very unlikely figure to be an author, even if only a “hack” one. He epitomises the dull, unimaginative and conventional type of man who would be horrified at the suggestion that he was a kind of “artist.” Sam, on the other hand, is exactly the type of character one would associate with the word “artistic.” He is creative, irrational and, above all, a natural storyteller who loves to embellish every detail of “Watt’s story.” In fact, when one considers the personalities of Watt and Sam closely, it becomes clear that it is not “Watt’s story” at all, but Sam’s. Watt’s is a dull, superficial intelligence that could never create the extravagant “yarn” that is presented to the reader. Watt hardly even speaks. It is quite possible that Watt never even existed, but that the half-mad Sam created him, along with Knott, Hackett, Arsene and all the rest.

Begam associates the metaphoric “birth” of the character Watt with the description, at about the same time, of the birth of Larry Nixon. In fact, he

argues that, as a character who is entirely absent from the novel, and only briefly mentioned, Nixon can be seen as the perfect character on which to center a novel about absence. This is similar to the idea of the absent Godot being the central figure of *Waiting for Godot*. Begam argues that Larry Nixon's birth can be seen as Beckett's parody of his own birth:

This identification [of Beckett with Nixon] is made through the description of Larry Nixon's birth, which parodically re-enacts the account Beckett has given of his own birth ... what is most striking about this episode is the way it repeats, in all its important details, Beckett's celebrated tease about his own birth: 'My memories begin on the eve of my birth, under the table, when my father gave a dinner, and my mother presided.'⁹¹

Begam feels that Beckett is deconstructing the autobiographical novel by extending the memories of characters like Hackett to the time before and during birth. Hackett claims to remember his umbilical cord being cut:

That is a thing I have often wondered, said Mr. Hackett, what it feels like to have the string cut. For the mother or the child? said Goff. For the mother, said Mr. Hackett. I was not found under a cabbage, I believe.⁹²

Begam concludes that all the characters in *Watt* are, as he puts it, "emanations of one character, although that one character lacks the self-identity and self-presence that would enable us to refer to him as an individual. And so we call him, for the sake of convenience, Sam Beckett."⁹³ Many critics besides Begam have made the same point, and it should come as no surprise. Every character in every novel is an artificial creation, existing at

first only in the mind of the writer, and later in the readers' minds. We are so habituated to studying "characters" as though they were real people, that we often forget this. In deconstructing the novel form, Beckett is, in effect, deliberately crossing the boundary between fiction and non-fiction. He is also blurring the distinction between the autobiographical novel and the non-autobiographical novel. Beckett wittily plays with, and transgresses against, these conventional forms to create a work that is not a novel, nor a biography, nor a philosophical treatise, but an original work that both contains, and transcends, all of these. His purpose is to demonstrate as clearly as possible how fiction is, at bottom, based on creating an illusion of reality, whereas he is interested, not in creating illusions, but in articulating the truth as he sees it. That this quest for truth is doomed to fail is not Beckett's fault, but is due to the complexity of the human experience. The best he can do, then, is to admit the impossibility of the task and to arrive at the same conclusion as the Taoists and Socrates – "I only know that I don't know." This is the "quite useless wisdom, so dearly won" ⁹⁴ to which Arsene refers, but, as I have tried to indicate, we cannot accept Arsene's statement at face value. Such wisdom is rare in a world where nearly everyone is fully convinced of what they know and the superiority of their own particular worldview.

I began this study with a series of philosophical questions regarding the mind's relation to the body, the relation between subject and object, the nature of language and communication, and whether we can be sure we know what

we think we “know.” In *Watt*, we have seen how Beckett explores these questions extensively, without coming to any conclusion except that no conclusion is possible. Definitive conclusions would be contrary to the spirit of Beckett’s writing. As he said to an interviewer in 1961, “There is no key. If the subject of my novels could have been expressed in philosophical terms, I would have had no reason to write them.”⁹⁵ While *Watt* goes well beyond the limits that a philosophical treatise would impose, I feel this study has shown just how deeply philosophical a work it is. The “characters” of *Watt* are either philosophers themselves, like Arsene, or are thinly-constructed linguistic artefacts that blend into one another to reflect the philosophical interests of their creator – Sam Beckett. Aside from its humour, the major interest in any reading of *Watt* must be in its philosophical explorations.

Watt seems to be a novel about failure and ignorance, but if *Watt* is a failure, never has a novel failed so brilliantly, and if it professes ignorance, it is not the ignorance of those who simply do not know, but of those like Socrates and Lao-Tzu, who have learned, after a lifetime of intellectual effort, that neither they nor anyone else *can* know. In this work, I have tried to argue that such wisdom is dearly won, but *not* useless. As Beckett put it in *Molloy*,

To know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker.⁹⁶

Notes

[“Nothingness in Words Enclose” from *Watt*, *Addenda* (1), 247.]

- ¹ John Di Pierro, *Structures in Beckett's Watt* (York, South Carolina: French Literature Publications Co., 1981) 65.
- ² Tom Driver, “Beckett by the Madeleine,” *Columbia University Forum*, 4 (Summer 1961), 23.
- ³ Raymond Federman, *Journey to Chaos* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1965) 132.
- ⁴ Di Pierro, 2.
- ⁵ John D. Erickson, *Structures in Beckett's Watt* (York, South Carolina: French Literature Publications Co., 1981 [Preface] vii).
- ⁶ Eugene Webb, *Samuel Beckett: A Study of his Novels* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1970) 58.
- ⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959) 29.
- ⁸ Beckett, *Watt*, 156.
- ⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, 39.
- ¹⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, 40.
- ¹¹ Beckett, *Watt*, 42.
- ¹² Beckett, *Watt*, 44-45.
- ¹³ Beckett, *Watt*, 44.
- ¹⁴ Eric P. Levy, *Beckett and the Voice of Species: A Study of the Prose Fiction* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes and Noble Books, 1980) 33.
- ¹⁵ Beckett, *Watt*, 44.
- ¹⁶ Di Pierro, *Structures* 86.
- ¹⁷ Di Pierro, *Structures* 92.
- ¹⁸ Beckett, *Watt*, 148.
- ¹⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, 73.
- ²⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, 72.
- ²¹ Rubin Rabinovitz, *The Development of Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1984) 134.
- ²² Beckett, *Watt*, 76.
- ²³ Beckett, *Watt*, 91.
- ²⁴ Beckett, *Watt*, 117.
- ²⁵ Rabinovitz, 127.
- ²⁶ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954) 8.
- ²⁷ Beckett, *Watt*, 48.
- ²⁸ Levy, 36.
- ²⁹ Federman, *Journey*, 127.
- ³⁰ Di Pierro, 2.
- ³¹ Beckett, *Watt*, 148.
- ³² Beckett, *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1955) 85.
- ³³ Beckett, *Watt*, 126.
- ³⁴ Begam, Richard, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).

- ³⁵ Beckett, *Watt*, 147.
- ³⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, 168.
- ³⁷ Beckett, *Watt*, 102.
- ³⁸ Patrick T. Burke, *The Major Religions: An Introduction with Texts* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1996)
- ³⁹ Lao-tzu, *Tao Te Ching*, in Burke, 136.
- ⁴⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, 77.
- ⁴¹ Chuang Chou, *Chuang Tzu*, in Burke, 138.
- ⁴² Chuang Chou, *Chuang Tzu*, in Burke, 138.
- ⁴³ Beckett, *Watt*, 57.
- ⁴⁴ Beckett, *Watt*, 58.
- ⁴⁵ Beckett, *Watt*, 46.
- ⁴⁶ Chuang Chou, *Chuang Tzu*, in Burke, 141.
- ⁴⁷ Beckett, *Watt*, 62.
- ⁴⁸ Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction in Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 20.
- ⁴⁹ Hill, x.
- ⁵⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, 45.
- ⁵¹ Beckett, *Watt*, 80-81.
- ⁵² Beckett, *Watt*, 13.
- ⁵³ Beckett, *Watt*, 16.
- ⁵⁴ Di Pierro, 103.
- ⁵⁵ Federman, *Journey*, 139.
- ⁵⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, 89.
- ⁵⁷ Beckett, *Watt*, 75.
- ⁵⁸ Beckett, *Watt*, 76.
- ⁵⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, 77.
- ⁶⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, 77.
- ⁶¹ Hill, 20.
- ⁶² Beckett, *Watt*, 81.
- ⁶³ Beckett, *Watt*, 78.
- ⁶⁴ Beckett, *Watt*, 81.
- ⁶⁵ Beckett, *Watt*, 75.
- ⁶⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, 73.
- ⁶⁷ Beckett, *Watt*, 117.
- ⁶⁸ Beckett, *Watt*, 81.
- ⁶⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, 85.
- ⁷⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, 81-82.
- ⁷¹ Hill, 28.
- ⁷² Hill, 30.
- ⁷³ Beckett, *Watt*, 209.
- ⁷⁴ Hill, 35.
- ⁷⁵ Di Pierro, 83.
- ⁷⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, 237.
- ⁷⁷ Alan Schneider, "Waiting for Beckett," *Chelsea Review*, No. 2 (Autumn, 1958), in B. Gail Chevigny, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), p. 17.
- ⁷⁸ Webb, 57.
- ⁷⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, 16.
- ⁸⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, 20.
- ⁸¹ Beckett, *Watt*, 18.

- ⁸² Beckett, *Watt*, 19.
- ⁸³ Beckett, *Watt*, 155.
- ⁸⁴ Beckett, *Watt*, 145-146.
- ⁸⁵ Begam, Richard, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity*, 81.
- ⁸⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, 202-203.
- ⁸⁷ Beckett, *Watt*, 203.
- ⁸⁸ Beckett, *Watt*, 203.
- ⁸⁹ Begam, 85.
- ⁹⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, 21.
- ⁹¹ Begam, 94.
- ⁹² Beckett, *Watt*, 14-15.
- ⁹³ Begam, 96.
- ⁹⁴ Beckett, *Watt*, 62.
- ⁹⁵ Gabriel d'Aubarede, 'En attendant ... Beckett', *Nouvelles Littéraires*, (16 February, 1961) 7, in James Acheson, *Samuel Beckett: Artistic Theory and Practice*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997, 14.
- ⁹⁶ Beckett, *Molloy* (New York: Grove Press, 1955) 85.

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