BEYOND NIHILISM

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A Study of Samuel Beckett's satiric art
in his first two novels, *Murphy* and *Watt*.

by

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PREFACE

In shaping my inchoate thoughts I must acknowledge my especial debt to the following works: Ian Watt's, The Rise of the Novel; Wylie Sypher's, Comedy; Hugh Kenner's, Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians; Martin Esslin's, The Drama of the Absurd; and Ernst Fischer's, The Necessity of Art.

I must also note that I find further vindication of my viewpoint in Camus's, The Rebel and Myth of Sisyphus.

For J.T.W., but for whom this thesis would not have been 'reborn'.

> And that steadiness whereby a fool does not
> surrender laziness, fear, self pity,
> depression and lust, is indeed a steadiness
> of darkness.
>
> Bhagavad Gita, 18.35

To an absurd mind reason is useless and there is nothing beyond reason.

Camus, _The Myth of Sisyphus_.

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INTRODUCTION

> And if you don't understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it. You are not satisfied unless form is so strictly divorced from content that you can comprehend the one almost without bothering to read the other.[1]

> Beckett's novels (I have never been able to read more than a few pages of any of them) pile up desolation at more length and to greater heights, in endless images of mud, filth, and tedium.[2]

The basic premise of this thesis is that to fully understand what Samuel Beckett is trying to say in his novels one needs to examine the way in which he approaches the novel form, to see clearly the relationship between form and content.

To begin with we might consider how his handling of the novel form differs from that of accredited masters of the form, such as Balzac, Dickens and Tolstoi, or to put it in negative terms, what do Beckett's novels lack in comparison with the great masterpieces of the nineteenth century and the early decades of this century? There are of course the "endless images of mud, filth and tedium",

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[1]Samuel Beckett, 'Dante..Bruno..Vico..Joyce' in Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress (Paris: Shakespeare & Co., 1929), p. 13.

[2]G. S. Fraser, The Modern Writer and His World (Penguin Books, 1964), p. 63.

but in addition the range of action, and of characterization, in Beckett's novels is very limited. They involve only one main character, living a very limited, introspective life; characters furthermore whose relationship with the normal, real world of us mortals becomes more and more remote as we move from Murphy (1938) to How It Is (1964). This one character lives a very limited existence and meets a limited number of people. Again from one novel to the next there is a progression towards a more and more limited environment. To take Murphy as an example, Murphy himself is the only important character, Celia, his Irish friends (who form a sub-plot), Mr. Endon, and Ticklepenny are really only incidental to him. In addition most of the action and Murphy's life centres on one place, Murphy's "medium-sized cage of north-western aspect". In Watt the one important character is Watt himself, unless one would want to include the mysterious Mr. Knott as a character, which would be rather difficult as the reader never "sees" him, and according to Watt his appearance is constantly changing. As there is no sub-plot in Watt there is even more of a focus on one character in this novel. Again there is one main setting, Mr. Knott's house.

To some critics these are important aspects of Beckett's limitations as a novelist.

Who do we expect from a good novel? Surely the tendency is to expect truth to life, verisimilitude, a

wide range of developed characters, and a variety of setting. War and Peace is seen by many as the greatest novel because of its scope and scale at all levels of experience. It deals with a great historical event, has a wide range of developed characters, covers a great sweep of landscape and it deals at depth with a variety of subtlely realized characters.

Accepting the greatness of War and Peace the question I would raise is whether we can make a direct comparison between it and the novels of Samuel Beckett? or to put the question another way, is there only one form of the novel? There has been no thorough attempt to classify the different forms of the novel, though Northrop Frye makes some very positive suggestions.[3] Quite clearly though Wuthering Heights, Moll Flanders, The Scarlet Letter, The Castle, Gulliver's Travels, War and Peace, have similar qualities it would be wrong to judge them all by precisely the same criteria. Can we hope to fully understand Wuthering Heights within the same general critical framework as Moll Flanders? or to take another example is The Scarlet Letter written in the same literary form as Middlemarch? and furthermore where

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[3]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1966), see pp. 303-14 especially. Frye sums up his views on the differing forms of prose fiction as follows: "when we examine fiction from the point of view of form, we can four chief strands binding it together, novel, confession, anatomy, and romance. The six possible combinations of these forms all exist, and we have shown how the novel has combined with each of the other three." Anatomy of Criticism, p. 312.

do we place works like Gulliver's Travels and Brave New World. Samuel Beckett is attempting something different in Murphy and Watt from Tolstoi, his art is that of the satirist, rather than that of the writer of the traditional realistic novel, or the writer in the romance tradition of the novel (Wuthering Heights, The Scarlet Letter, Moby Dick).[4] Therefore in terms of the development of the novel we must see Beckett in relation to Swift, Sterne and Huxley rather than Tolstoi, D. H. Lawrence, Thomas Hardy, or Thomas Mann. A glance at Northrop Frye's discussion of Menippean satire in Anatomy of Criticism is of value at this point:

> We remarked earlier that most people would call Gulliver's Travels fiction but not a novel. It must then be another form of fiction, as it certainly has a form, and we feel that we are turning from the novel to this form, whatever it is, when we turn from Rousseau's Emile to Voltaire's Candide, or from Butler's The Way of All Flesh to the Erewhon books, or from Huxley's Point Counterpoint to Brave New World. The form thus has its own tradition, and, as the examples of Butler and Huxley show, has preserved some integrity even under the ascendency of the novel. . . . But while much has been said about the style and thought of Rabelais, Swift and Voltaire, very little has been made of them as craftsmen working in a specific medium, a point no one dealing with a novelist would ignore. . . . The form used by these authors is the Menippean satire, . . . The Menippean satire deals less with people as such than with mental attitudes. Pedants, bigots, cranks, parvenus, virtuosi, enthusiasts, rapacious and incompetent professional men of all kinds, are handled in terms of their occupational approach to life as distinct from their social behaviour. The Menippean satire thus resembles the confession in

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[4] See p. 304 of Anatomy of Criticism.

> its ability to handle abstract ideas and theories, and differs from the novel in its characterization, which is stylized rather than naturalistic, and presents people as mouthpieces of the ideas they represent.[5]

However, it is not merely man and his institutions that Beckett satirizes but the novel form and himself as novelist, and again we can quote Frye to show that this too belongs within the framework of the Menippean satire:

> The romantic fixation which revolves around the beauty of perfect form, in art or elsewhere, is also a logical target for satire. . . . Tristram Shandy and Don Juan illustrate very clearly the constant tendency to self-parody in satiric rhetoric which prevents even the process of writing itself from becoming an oversimplified convention or ideal.[6]

Given this quality of parody in Murphy and Watt is not at all strange that they should be so different from War and Peace, or Middlemarch any more than The Rape of the Lock is so very different from The Aeneid. One character, living in a very limited environment thus replaces the full canvas of the major nineteenth century novelist. The subtle exploration of a character's psychology found in novels of what one might call the main tradition is parodied in the chapter on Murphy's mind:

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[5] Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 308-9. Watt and Murphy are pedants, parodies of philosophers - and even novelists - in the attitude to reality.

[6] Anatomy of Criticism, pp. 233-34.

> It is most unfortunate, but the point of this story has been reached where justification of the expression "Murphy's mind" has to be attempted. Happily we need not concern ourselves with this apparatus as it really was - that would be an extravagance and an impertinence - but solely with what it felt and pictured itself to be.[7]

We have of course to wait until Chapter 6 before we get this information - in a novel which appropriately enough has thirteen chapters! A further illustration of this irreverent approach by Beckett to the novel form would be the amusingly anti-climactic death of Murphy, or for that matter the ending of Watt. However, a detailed discussion of this is of course more appropriate for the middle chapters of this thesis.

At this point I would like to try and place the early novels of Samuel Beckett more clearly within the tradition of the novel (I am using the word novel in its traditional "vague" sense, and within it including the four prose fiction forms that Northrop Frye labels novel, confession, anatomy - Frye uses this term in place of Menippean satire[8] -, romance).

As many writers have noted, what distinguishes the novel from earlier narrative forms, such as the epic

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[7] Samuel Beckett, Murphy (London: John Calder, 1963), p. 76.

[8] See pp. 311-12 of Anatomy of Criticism.

and medieval romance, is the far greater emphasis that it places on verisimilitude. (This is true even of the romance form of the novel such as Wuthering Heights or The Scarlet Letter, though I will be disregarding the romance novel form in the consideration of the central tradition of the novel form, as discussed by Ian Watt in The Rise of the Novel.) The novel is the particular literary product of the modern world, that period beginning in the sixteenth century which has placed an emphasis on rationalism, scientific or experimentally verifiable truth, and the importance of the individual:

> The plots of classical and renaissance epic, for example, were based on past history or fable, and the merits of the author's treatment were judged largely according to a view of literary decorum derived from the accepted models in the genre. This literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience - individual experience which is always unique and therefore new.[9]

In science, in religion, in the novel and in philosophy, individual experience - in the case of science, research - has replaced collective tradition as the source of truth and reality. The novel is one aspect of that modern movement which led to the pursuit of objective truth in science, led to the emphasis on the primacy of the

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[9] Ian Watt, The Rise of the Novel (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 13.

individual conscience, and an individual search for truth in the Bible, in puritanism, and to Descartes assertion "cogito, ergo sum", in philosophy. In particular we note a stress on Reason and the mind as part of this movement in Science, Puritanism and the philosophy of Descartes.[10] The novel's concern with objective truth is very much a reflection of the faith placed in Science and Reason by the modern world. As science has attempted to explain reality more and more completely in terms of physics, chemistry, mathematics, psychology, sociology, etc., so the novel from Defoe on equally has attempted to present within its pages an as true as possible copy of reality. Novelists have always been very concerned with making us believe the "truth" of their "fiction" - and not so much its aesthetic or even entertainment value. Also the historical development of the novel reflects the different scientific and philosophical theories of each age. We note the influence of Locke on Sterne, Darwin, Huxley and Schopenhauer, on Hardy, Freud, Bergson, Einstein, etc. on the various twentieth century writers. There is inherent in this relationship between science and the novel a major dilemma, for if each is trying to do the same thing, why do

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[10] René Descartes (1596-1650) is usually considered the founder of modern philosophy, see for example Bertrand Russell, History of Western Philosophy (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 10th. Impression, 1967), p. 542.

we need both?

Aspects of novelists continuing search for objective truth has been the use of autobiographical material in various forms, from Dickens to Joyce; the general disappearance of the omniscient author, and the critical disrepute that this technique has fallen into; and the development of stream of consciousness technique.

An interesting and invaluable discussion of the development of modern novelist's documentation of reality is found in Hugh Kenner's book Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: Stoic Comedians[11]. Each of these authors Kenner sees as marking an important stage in the development of the modern novel:

> For Beckett is the heir of Joyce as Joyce is the heir of Flaubert, each Irishman having perceived a new beginning in the impasse to which his predecessor seemed to have brought the form of fiction.[12]

Kenner sees Flaubert bringing the invention of the encyclopaedia to the aid of the novelist in his novel Bouvard et Péuchet:

> And the Flaubertian novel, furthermore, if it observes people being stupid and superficial, examines, embalms, their stupidities and superficialities. It finds itself, at last,

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[11]Hugh Kenner, Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett: The Stoic Comedians (Boston: Beacon Press, 1962).

[12]Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett, p. 70.

> turned into a scientific instrument, of encyclopaedic scope, an encyclopedia of the null; and at last it concerns itself with two men seeking to engorge all knowledge. The two men, in turn, were to write the second half of the novel. Compiling in the twilight of their grand illusion a classified encyclopaedia every line of which Flaubert had found for them in other books, they were to grow at last - how could they help it? - indistinguishable from their author, who had pursued every detail of their imbecile researches into books where (he knew in advance, as they did not) nothing was to be found.[13]

Behind this novel stands the 11,000 pages of Flaubert's notes! In Bouvard et Péuchet we have a parody of the novelists concern with presenting truth and knowledge - the novel form being very much the middle classes bible for social behaviour. A novel about two men compiling an encyclopaedia, the material for which was drawn from Flaubert's own Le Dictionaire Des Idées Reçues: a novel which shows, in the form of parody, Flaubert's recognition of the impossibility of his task and the absurdity of modern man's obsession with facts, and yet of modern man, and the novelist's, need for facts, and factual description, to make the world real for him.

Kenner sees James Joyce in Ulysses as moving the novel on from the impasse found by Flaubert. An impasse created by Flaubert's recognition of the scientific nature of the novelist's pursuit of truth. Joyce's solution of the problem of accommodating an infinite accumulation of

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[13] Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett, p. 71.

data, of the novelist "god" attempting to contain the infinite within a finite literary form was to narrow the basic scope of his novel to one man, one city, one day. Within this framework there is a scrupulous attention to verisimilitude as is well known. However Joyce does not bring an encyclopaedic accumulation of facts but rather numerous inventories:

> As every commentator since Stuart Gilbert has discovered, nothing is easier than to disentangle with patience, lists and more lists from the Protean text. What seems not to be dwelt upon is the fact that these lists are commonly finite, and that so far as he can, Joyce is at pains to include every item on them. What we can recover from his text is not a few samples, but the entire list. This is particularly clear in Finnegans Wake, where he had not, as in Ulysses, considerations of verisimilitude to impede him. Mr. James Atherton . . . has noted the presence in that work of all the titles of Shakespeare's plays, all of Moore's Irish melodies, . . . all the Books of the Bible, all the suras of the Koran. . . . This is the comedy of the Inventory, the comedy of exhaustion, comic precisely because exhaustive. The feeling proper to comic art, Joyce wrote is Joy, and by way of making clear what Joy is, he distinguished it from desire. Now the virtue of this exhaustiveness is this, that by it desire is utterly allayed. Nothing is missing. We have the double pleasure of knowing what should be present, and knowing that all is present.[14]

Here, Joyce, like Swift and Sterne for example, recognizes the nature of the book as an artifact, something to be put together, rather than like a story 'told':

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[14] Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett, pp. 54-5.

> Laurence Sterne availed himself of a hundred devices totally foreign to the story teller but made possible by the book alone: not only the blank and marbled pages, the suppressed chapters represented only by headings, the blazonry of punctuation marks and the mimetic force of wavy lines, but also the suppression of narrative suspense - a suspense proper to the story teller who holds us by curiosity concerning events unfolding in time - in favor of a bibliographic suspense which depends on our knowledge that the book in our hands is of a certain size and that the writer therefore has somehow reached the end of it - by what means?[15]

(Beckett quite obviously learnt a lot from Sterne, and _Watt_ in particular is full of comic typographical devices.)

What led Flaubert, Joyce and finally Beckett to their somewhat absurd contortions. Surely the answer lies in the faith that our modern, rationalistic, middle-class society has placed in science and material progress and its inherent suspicion of "fiction". If the novel is to keep pace with the society of which it is a product and not become an anachronism, it needs to develop along with other modes of scientific research:

> The realism of the nineteenth century was a comparable form of primitive experiment - this time influenced by sciences like medicine, psychology or psychiatry, and laboratory, biological, or sociological observation.[16]

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[15] _Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett_, p. 49.

[16] Wylie Sypher, _Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature_ (New York: Alfred Knopf Inc., 1960), p. xxiii.

The crisis faced by the twentieth century novelist is that other ways of presenting knowledge threaten to make the novel obsolete, for example, sociology, psychology, and the cinema to take but three major "rivals". His problem is one of finding a form for a new vision of reality. His danger is that the novel's traditional emphasis on factual verisimilitude may lead him to produce what is in effect second-rate sociology, history, psychology, etc. Thus Joyce in _Ulysses_ concerns himself a great deal with the novel form as such, with the novel as book. But for the device of the inventory would _Ulysses_ been more than a further advance on _Middlemarch_ a movement away from the novel form as such into the discipline of sociology? The problem was one of trying to create a novel rather than a scientific study.

These parodies, as examined by Kenner, reflect a dilemma in the modern, post-Cartesian world that goes beyond the novel form itself, it mirrors the crisis of the twentieth century itself. God is dead and the novel according to many is dying. Man's faith in rational, scientific thought, in the possibility of filing reality into neat boxes has been severely shaken. He witnesses a fragmentation, rather than a unification of knowledge.

> But an established authority to which one might appeal no longer existed. Theologians, scientists, politicians, sociologists, biologists, psychologists, ethnologists, economists all approached the problem from their

own viewpoint.[17]

Man replaced God with Science and now has begun to lose his faith in Science!

Where does the novelist stand in this situation, using as he does the tools of rationalism? A question which leads us to consider Samuel Beckett, a writer I feel who has "most successfully intuited the quality of human experience peculiar to" our age.[18] Beckett's attitude to himself as novelist, I feel, might well be put in terms of his own comments on the painter Bram Van Velde:

> The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint. The act of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint.[19]

The novelist's task (or for that any twentieth century artist's) is impossible because twentieth century man has no faith in any absolute system of values whether those of

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[17]Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 21.

[18]Rococo to Cubism, p. xix. "I have assumed that a genuine style is an expression of a prevailing, dominant, or authentically contemporary view of the world by those artists who have most successfully intuited the quality of human experience peculiar to their day and who are able to phrase this experience in forms deeply congenial to the thought, science, and technology which are part of that experience."

[19]Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, Three Dialogues in Samuel Beckett ed. Martin Esslin (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1965), p. 19.

religion, or one of the branches of science, yet the work of the novelist (any artist) depends on a referential use of language. Beckett explores the predicament of modern man at the limit of uncertainty, using the novel form as the medium of his exploration. No longer is the novelist an omniscient god but an incompetent, the fool - but like the clown, we note, a professional whose folly has behind it considerable artistry, like the clown he knows how to fall and can walk the tightrope as skillfully, if need be, as the professional high wire act. To appreciate Beckett's aims in Murphy, Watt and the later novels the reader has to accept the fact that Beckett approaches the novel form as fool or clown - not the omniscient god of War and Peace or Bleak House.[20] In this perspective we have to see the scale and scope of his novels Beckett's incompetent heroes are the fitting persons for the incompetent novelist. His heroes are anti-heroes because this is a parody world. Murphy's whole endeavour is to escape from the world of action into the harmony and peace of the mind; he tries to escape love and work and in the end dies because someone pulls the wrong chain. If Murphy lives somewhat on the edge

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[20]"Beckett's first strategy is a strategy of survival. If it is impossible to carry competence further, (Joyce having done this) he will see what can be done with incompetence." Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett, p. 75. The point that I am making here has its origins in Kenner's idea of Beckett as the novelist of the impasse.

of insanity, Watt is completely insane. However, strangely enough both "heroes" reflect certain aspects of the novelist. A novelist, like Murphy, sits anti-socially away in his room attempting to create an artistic, therefore self-contained and harmonious vision of the world. He too shuns "normal" work, and like Watt he too attempts to capture with words the elusive characters of his Mr. Knotts!

In terms of scale and approach to characterisation Beckett's novels differ radically from those of Dickens, Tolstoi, Doistoieveski, George Eliot, Balzac; but to compare Beckett directly with these novelists is to ignore his intention and confuse form with content. Beckett's scale and approach are essential to him as the 'wrong-end of the telescope view' of mankind is necessary for Swift in Book 1 of Gulliver's Travels. The limited means are comparable with those at the disposal of the circus clown. Murphy and Watt are modern man, at an extreme, indeed ridiculous at their extremity. We can laugh at them for they are not like us, but are they not caricatures of important aspect of twentieth-century, urban man, is there not some profound truth behind the artistic distortion? Doesn't the fool in Beckett's works have a function like the clown, the fool in Shakespeare and the scapegoat in primitive society:

> Thus in all his roles the fool is set apart, dedicated, alienated, if not outcast, beaten slain. Being isolated he serves as a 'centre of indifference', from which position the rest of us may, if we will look through his

eyes and appraise the meaning of our daily life.[21] Through such protagonists Beckett not only explores the predicament of twentieth-century man but of himself as twentieth-century man and novelist.

In critically examining Samuel Beckett's early novels we must note the ultimately comic aim of Beckett's satiric art and not judge it merely in terms of surface content. There is more, for example, to Oedipus Rex than is contained in these despairing lines:

CHORUS:

All the generations of mortal man add up to nothing!
Show me the man whose happiness was anything more
than illusion
Followed by disillusion.[22]

The tragic catharsis of the total play raises us above the disillusionment of these lines. Equally this is true of Beckett, for though his vision is frequently dark, through comedy the emptiness of disillusionment is held back. In looking at Beckett's comic vision we also need always to bear in mind the affinity that some modern critics have noted between comedy and tragedy:

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[21] Comedy ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1956), p. 234.

[22] Sophocles, The Theban Plays (Penguin Books, 1966), p. 59.

Perhaps the most important discovery in modern criticism is the perception that comedy and tragedy are somehow akin, or that comedy can tell us many things about our situation even tragedy cannot.[23]

[23]Sypher, Comedy, p. 193.

CHAPTER 1: MURPHY

> I will suppose, then, not that Deity, who is sovereignly good and the fountain of truth, but that some malignant demon, who is at once exceedingly potent and deceitful, has employed all his artifice to deceive me; I will suppose that the sky, the air, the earth, colours, figures, sounds, and all external things, are nothing better than the illusions of dreams, by means of which this being has laid snares for my credulity.[1]

> However that might be, Murphy was content to accept this partial congruence of the world of his mind with the world of his body as due to some such process of supernatural determination. The problem was of little interest. Any solution would do that did not clash with the feeling, growing stronger as Murphy grew older, that his mind was a closed system, subject to no principle of change but its own, self-sufficient and impermeable to the vicissitudes of the body.[2]

Is Murphy yet another dreary novel of urban alienation, bolstered by intellectual pretentiousness? or is it a genuine attempt to explore, through the artistic medium of the novel, the twentieth century predicament? - or indeed the human situation as such? The attitude that I adopted in my introduction clearly indicates the view-

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[1]René Descartes, Meditations on the First Philosophy (London: Dent, 1960), p. 84.

[2]Samuel Beckett, Murphy (London: John Calder, 1963), p. 77.

point that I take: Murphy is a caricature[3] of modern man at an extremity; and through the catharsis of comedy Beckett explores the real dilemmas of twentieth century man. More specifically Murphy parodies the philosophical approach of René Descartes[4]. Unlike the self-confident seventeenth-century man Murphy has no simple solution to the problem of evil and the relationship between body and mind, the self and the external world. We witness in _Murphy_ the attempt of a man to escape from the external world into the private world of his mind. Despite the very obvious philosophical allusions in this novel, however, I would wish to argue that this novel is more than minor, philosophical satire. Our world is the product of seventeenth century rationalism and individualism. Even if we have never heard of Descartes (let alone Geulinx), or Luther, our lives have to a great extent been moulded by the kinds of attitude that they and others evolved in the seventeenth century. Murphy is a comic version of the Rationalist, Puritan and Individualist - we witness in this "clown" version of modern man basic

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[3]"In his notebooks Kafka explained that he wanted to exaggerate situations until everything becomes clear." _Comedy_ ed. Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 197.

[4]I am aware of Beckett's more specific use of Geulinx, a disciple of Descartes in _Murphy_ My concern in this thesis is, however, to place Beckett in relation to the main general trends of the modern or post-renaissance world, not to study it in relation to one, somewhat obscure philosopher. In particular I am following Ian Watt's _The Rise of the Novel._

elements of our world pushed to a laughable extremity.

> To be able to laugh at evil and error means that we have surmounted them.[5]

The split between body and mind inaugurated by Descartes and Puritanism, is pushed to absurd limits in Murphy, who at the beginning of the novel struggles in his rocking chair to escape into the freedom of his mind:

> He sat in his chair in this way because it gave him pleasure! First it gave his body pleasure, it appeased his body. Then it set him free in his mind.[6]

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the majority of thinking men at least, had faith in the power of Reason, as we witness for example in one of the first novels Robinson Crusoe. By the twentieth century man's faith in external reality and the power of his Reason to comprehend it, has been shaken by the very probings of scientific rationalism. Ian Watt sees Crusoe as representative of the optimistic rationalism of the early eighteenth century. Crusoe doesn't seek isolation from society, unlike Murphy, but it is forced upon him as retribution, one might well feel, for his pride.

However, he brings the values and technology of his society to his island, there is no discontinuity.

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[5] Comedy, p. 246.

[6] Murphy, p. 6.

Solipsist Murphy, however, rejects his society and attempts to retreat within himself, to escape the problems of life within society. Both characters are the products of an individualistically orientated culture, but they stand at completely opposite ends of the modern age. Crusoe had the solid values of his society to support him in his isolation, Murphy has no such support as a twentieth-century man. Standing between Crusoe and Murphy, though obviously very much nearer the latter is Conrad's Heyst, the hero of Victory. Heyst attempts to escape society and the dualistic problems of body and mind, good and evil and personal relationships by retreating to a remote Far-Eastern Island:

> [Davidson] could not possibly guess that Heyst, alone on the island, felt neither more nor less lonely than in any place, desert or populous. Davidson's concern was, if one may express it so, the danger of spiritual starvation; but this was a spirit which had renounced all outside nourishment, and was sustaining itself proudly on its own contempt of the usual coarse ailments which life offers to the common appetites of men.[7]

Murphy is of course on a similar quest, and he fails, just as does Heyst, to escape the all pervasive force of evil (though Murphy might be seen I suppose, as ironically achieving what he is really seeking - death, oblivion). If we see Murphy as a comic version of such a twentieth-century anti-hero as Heyst we will better under-

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[7]Joseph Conrad, Victory (Penguin Books, 1970), p. 152.

stand him and his role in the novel. If we attempt to compare Murphy as a human being with major characters in the works of the major novelists, one certainly has to admit that he is a feeble specimen. However if we accept him as a caricature of the alienated twentieth-century man, if we take him as a novelistic scapegoat for the evils of our society we will be in a position to better understand Beckett's aims in Murphy:

> At this public purging or catharsis the scapegoat was often the divine man or animal, in the guise of victim, to whom were transferred the sins and misfortunes of the worshippers.[8]

It has been the tendency of modern Western Civilization over the last four centuries to stress the primacy of individual experience as opposed to tradition. This tendency gave birth to modern science, Puritanism, Democracy, the novel, the middle-class, bureaucracy, the modern urban world, the factory system of mass production, etc., etc. In Murphy individualism is pushed, albeit in comic terms, to the extremes of alienation and egotism. Indeed we might go further and say that in the twentieth century we witness the dualism of the Cartesians tending towards the madness of Schizophrenia. Heyst's pilgrimage took him first away from normal European society to the Far-East and then to almost complete isolation on an

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[8] Comedy, ed. Wylie Sypher, p. 216.

island, Murphy's attempt is even more radical, he is searching for a perpetual escape from the world of the body. He has taken the remarks of Descartes quoted at the head of this chapter to their logical conclusion in a world in which God is dead! Murphy's rejection of the world outside his mind leads to the paucity of relationships, character and action within the pages of the novel. But as I have suggested the basic form or shapes of the novel, of the form that Beckett requires for his theme dictates this, for if Beckett is to comment on what he feels to be pertinent concerns of his age he cannot use an outmoded form of the novel. Like technology the novel has been constantly changing since the beginning of the eighteenth century as it is remoulded to reflect the contemporary ethos.

A particularly significant fact, in terms of the way that Beckett handles the novel form, is the fact that he, the novelist, finds himself in a similar situation to that of his hero Murphy. It is perhaps appropriate at this point to note some similarities between Samuel Beckett and Murphy.

Born in 1906 of protestant parents in Dublin Beckett graduated from Trinity College with a B.A. in French and Italian in 1927. As he had shown considerable academic promise he was nominated by his University as its representative in a traditional exchange of lecturers with the famous Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, where he went

in 1928. In 1930 he returned to Dublin to take the post of assistant to the professor of Romance Languages at Trinity College:

> Thus at the age of twenty-four Beckett seemed launched on a safe and brilliant academic and literary career. He obtained his Master of Arts degree. His study of Proust, . . . appeared in 1931.

However,

> After only four terms at Trinity College, he had had enough. . . . Beckett embarked on a period of Wanderjahre. Writing poems and stories, doing odd jobs, he moved from Dublin to London to Paris, . . . It is surely no coincidence that so many of Beckett's later characters are tramps and wanderers, and that all are lonely.[9]

There are ample resemblances here between Murphy and Beckett.[10] Furthermore, Beckett's approach as novelist to the novel form is in perfect harmony with the character that he creates, for the novelist himself clearly can be seen as exhibiting certain characteristics of those individualistic tendencies of our age parodied in Murphy.

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[9]Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961), pp. 3-4.

[10]One could include these comments on the infatuation of Lucia Joyce for Samuel Beckett:

> "As her self control began to leave her, she made less effort to conceal the passion she felt for him, and at last her feelings became so overt that Beckett told her bluntly he came to the Joyce flat primarily to see her father. He felt he had been cruel and later told Peggy Guggenheim that he was dead and had no feelings that were human; hence he had not been able to fall in love with Lucia."

The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 5.

For example, he does not remould a traditional story but attempts to create his own original world. He attempts to "capture" the world within the pages of his novel, and claims through his art special powers of insight into the nature of the real world. From the beginning of the novel this has been so, but the emphasis placed on the truth of the novelist's portrayal of reality has grown. In the nineteenth century, and even in this age, people read novels just as in an earlier age they read Pilgrim's Progress or the Bible. There is, however, the other side of the coin, a novel is fiction. Of course each generation of novelists has emphasized truth, he could not do otherwise in a culture dedicated to the worship of Reason and Science, but have always felt the need, from Defoe on, to defend their art against the charge that it is merely entertainment, fantasy, fiction, romance. In our age the novelist has had to face a particular crisis in terms of his claim to truth rather than fiction: psychology, sociology and anthropology in their explorations of the individual and society threaten to usurp the areas in which the novel claimed to be the source of truth. This has led to the inward movement of the novel form with the modern psychological novel and 'stream-of-consciousness'. But the modern novelist is faced with multiferious versions of reality that the fragmented disciplines of modern science have given. He has to confront the dilemma raised by Descartes, without

Descartes' religious safety-net, in terms of the reality of the world that he sees and of the one that he creates. His existential dilemma is whether what he creates is anything more than pure fantasy. There can be no certainty for him in the world that we inhabit. If one no longer has faith in the power of Reason, or God or whatever, one can no longer write novels - in the nineteenth-century sense anyhow. Beckett walks a tight-rope between the impossibility of communication and the impossibility of comprehension. With a character such as Murphy, the novelist faces the challenge of trying to maintain his reader's interest, when the purpose of the character he has created is to escape from the world, striving towards silence, whether in the form of Nirvana, insanity or death. This is Beckett the novelist — clown doing the conjuring trick.

Beckett's theme certainly has its dark, despairing aspect with strong suggestions of insanity and suicide, but through Murphy and the comedy of the extremity Beckett confronts the despair arising from modern man's loss of faith, through comedy, Beckett leads his readers to recognize more clearly the absurdity and hence the folly of Murphy, and thus of certain tendencies in our world. There is no simple solution merely the healthy power of laughter and the catharsis it can bring:

Perhaps the most important discovery in

> modern criticism is the perception that comedy and tragedy are somehow akin.[11]

> There is a comic road to wisdom, as well as a tragic road. There is a comic as well as tragic control of life. And the comic control may be more useable, more relevant to the human condition in all its normalcy and confusion, its many unreconciled directions. Comedy as well as tragedy can tell us that the vanity of the world is foolishness before the gods. Comedy dares seek truth in the slums of East-cheap or the crazy landscape Don Quixote wanders across or the enchanted Prospero Isle. By mild inward laughter it tries to keep us sane in the drawing room, among decent men and women. It tells us that man is a giddy thing, yet does not despair of men. Comedy gives us recognitions healing as the recognitions of tragic art.[12]

As Beckett sees it his role as a novelist in the twentieth century is that of a skilled comic artist who makes us see ourselves through the power of laughter.

Another aspect of Murphy is that in addition to being a parody of the Rationalist and Romantic Individualist, he is also a parody Puritan, in the way in which he strives to escape from the world of his body and senses into the purity of his detached mind. This is seen for example in his relationship with Celia.

> He laid the receiver hastily in his lap. The part of him that he hated craved for Celia, the part that he loved shrivelled up at the thought of her.[13]

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[11] Comedy, ed. Sypher, p. 193.

[12] Comedy, pp. 254-5.

[13] Murphy, p. 9.

Puritanism is of course another aspect of the whole rationalistic, individualistic movement. Incidentally it prepared the way for the novel with its emphasis on Bible reading. It also emphasized the idea of a direct, individual personal relationship with God, as opposed to the more communal medieval catholic church. But in particular it emphasized the superiority of mind over body and the constant threat that the "soul" or "spirit" faces from the "flesh". In terms of Cartesian philosophy Puritanism saw the external, material world, which includes the human body, as full of devils and deception and that the individual can ultimately only find salvation through a personal relationship with God and his word in the Bible. The tendencies inherent in Puritanism, taken to a ludicrously comic extreme, but an extreme very pertinent for our age, lead to the figure of Murphy. In more serious terms it has led to alienation, sterility and fear, to an incapacity for human relationships, such as we find in Conrad's Heyst, a retreat from love and from the world. It has led to a fear of emotion and feeling, irrational forces, and thus, in the strict terms of puritanism, evil forces. But human beings are not just disembodied minds, and the dualistic escape from "wholeness" that Murphy attempts, and which I feel Beckett suggests our age is attempting, can only lead to alienation, neurosis, insanity, death. Beckett does not set out to bring us despair but with cold logic takes

to logical conclusions tendencies that he and others feel are inherent to our society. We are shown through the distorting mirror of satire the reality underlying our world; the horror is kept at a distance by the cathartic power of laughter; like Marlow in Heart of Darkness we stand with Samuel Beckett on the brink of hell, but we do not completely descend. Through our fictional scapegoat Murphy we can come to terms with the evil present in our society - which is seen particularly in terms of a post-Cartesian split between the body and the mind.

If body and mind are separate entities, parallel systems, clearly human relationships and love are impossibilities

> if love . . . is a function of man's sadness, friendship is a function of his cowardice; and if neither can be realised because of the impenetrability (isolation) of all that is not 'cosa mentale', at least the failure to possess may have the nobility of that which is tragic, whereas the attempt to communicate where no communication is possible is merely a simian vulgarity, or horribly comic, like the madness that holds a conversation with the furniture.[14]

The theme of spiritual or emotional deadness, sexual sterility is a dominant one in the literature, psychology, sociology and philosophy of this century. Beckett is exploring in Murphy at a comic extremity the sterile love

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[14] Samuel Beckett, Proust (New York: Grove Press, nd.) p. 46.

portrayed in these lines of T. S. Eliot:

> He, the young man carbuncular, arrives
> A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
> One of the low on whom assurance sits
> As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire
> The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
> The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
> Endeavours to engage her in caresses
> Which are still unreproved, if undesired.
> Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
> Exploring hands encounter no defence;
> His vanity requires no response,
> And makes a welcome of indifference.
> . . . .
> Bestows one final patronising kiss,
> And gropes his way, finding the stairs unlit -
>
> She turns and looks a moment in the glass,
> Hardly aware of her departed lover;
> Her brain allows one half-formed thought to pass:
> 'Well now that's done: and I'm glad it's over'.[15]

T. S. Eliot presents his lovers are representatives of our modern, urban, dehumanized "waste land". Murphy and Celia represent this theme of sterile love at an extremity. Never has there been a less likely pair of lovers: Murphy who strives to escape the prison of his body, and the external world, and the prostitute Celia. Yet their relationship is portrayed in terms of love, unlike the above passage from The Waste Land. Their first meeting is a delightful parody of romantic love at first sight:

> It was on the street, the previous midsummer's night, the sun being then in the Crab, that she met Murphy. She had turned out of Edith Grove

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[15]T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962 (London: Faber, 1963), p. 72.

> into Cremorne Road, intending to refresh herself with the smell of the Reach and then return by Lot's Road, when chancing to glance to her right she saw, motionless in the mouth of Stadium Street, considering alternately the sky and a sheet of paper, a man. Murphy.
>
> . . . .
>
> When Murphy had found what he sought on the sheet he despatched his head on its upward journey. Clearly the effort was considerable. A little short of half-way, grateful for the breather, he arrested the movement and gazed at Celia. For perhaps two minutes she suffered this gladly, then with outstretched arms began slowly to rotate - . . . When she came full circle she found, as she had fully expected, the eyes of Murphy still open and upon her
>
> . . . .
>
> Celia loved Murphy, Murphy loved Celia, it was a striking case of love requited. It dated from that first lingering look in the mouth of Stadium Street.[16]

Their love may well be absurd but yet the comedy also reveals the basic human need for love - even if love and friendship as Beckett seems to believe are impossible.

In a way these two characters might well be seen as symbolizing the split between body and mind: Celia with her "bodily" career of prostitution, Murphy obsessed with his mind. That Murphy is "attracted" to Celia indicates that his mind has not gained absolute control, that indeed he is still human! However, the attraction is not purely sexual (indeed this aspect seems of minor importance). Basically one feels that they are attracted

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[16]<u>Murphy</u>, pp. 13-15.

to each other because they are psychologically on the same level or equally at an extremity of human existence. It seems to be a genuine, if comic, case of love at first sight! Both the mystery, and the absurdity, and the basic human need for love are revealed in this relationship. Taking the basic tenets of Rationalism and Puritanism to their logical conclusions, as Murphy and Beckett do, love is of course absurd: the body is an encumbrance for the mind and there can be no real link between body and mind. Taking rationalism to an extreme means placing no trust in the bodily senses and thus leads to a complete rejection of the whole of external reality and the possibility of understanding it or communicating with it. In the modern world the confidence and certainty of the seventeenth-century rationalism of Descartes no longer prevails. Without a coherent system of values or religious faith the individual has no shared external structure to give him firm faith in the reality of his experiences. In both religion and love a deep faith are of paramount importance.

Before Beckett or Descartes Shakespeare in the tragic medium of <u>Anthony and Cleopatra</u> had explored this basic human problem of the nature of reality. This tragedy poses the question: is the love of Anthony and Cleopatra genuine or merely an illusion? The play opens with this view of the lovers.

Philo: Nay, but this dotage of our general's
O'erflows the measure: those his goodly
eyes,
That o'er the files and musters of the
war
Have glow'd like plated Mars, now bond,
now turn
The office and devotion of their view
Upon a tawny front: his captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights
hath burst
The buckles of his breast, reneges all
temper,
And is become the bellows and the fan
To cool a gipsy's lust.[17]

However, in direct contrast we have a speech of Anthony's such as the following:

Let Rome in Tiber melt, and the wide arch
Of the rang'd empire fall! Here is my space.
Kingdoms are clay: our dungy earth alike
Feeds beast as man: the nobleness of life
Is to do thus; when such a mutual pair
And such a twain can do't.[18]

There is no proof, neither can there be, to the reality of the love of Anthony and Cleopatra. We hear various opinions, see the actions and hear the words of Anthony and Cleopatra. Ultimately at the end of the tragedy, following the total effect of the tragic emotions generated, the playgoer or reader is left to his or her own decision as to the reality of the love within the play. All that we can say perhaps by way of generalization is that such a play as Anthony and Cleopatra gives us a rich sense of the complexity

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[17]Shakespeare, Anthony and Cleopatra, Act I, scene i, ll. 1-9.

[18]Anthony and Cleopatra, Act I, scene i, ll. 33-38.

of human life and reality, of good and evil. If Anthony and Cleopatra are destroyed by the evil within the world and themselves we cannot but believe that the love they strove for was good. But what is love? This one important question posed by Anthony and Cleopatra yet as modern man's pursuit of knowledge has shown him love, that is romantic love, is a particularly Western concept not universally accepted. Indeed its historical origins have been carefully documented to twelfth-century Provence. Is not love, therefore, merely a fictional concept invented by man having no basis in reality.

This leads us to a central issue for any novelist - the relationship between word and reality. Part of the twentieth-century dilemma has been a growing awareness that words have become devalued:

> Words strain,
> Crack, and sometimes break, under the burden,
> Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
> Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
> Will not stay still. Shrieking voices
> Scolding, mocking, or merely chattering,
> Always assail them.[19]

The misuse of words by politicians and advertisers, and the development of science has placed a great pressure on the validity of words with our world. Freud has shown us that a child's love equals sexuality; politicians that

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[19] T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1901-1962, p. 194.

freedom can mean anything one wants.[20] Equally our knowledge of other cultures, and their vocabulary and linguistic differences, have helped in creating this pressure on our sense of the validity and hence reality of the language that we use.

In particular we have become more aware in the twentieth century that words are merely concepts subject to change not platonic concepts created by God - something which is perhaps a reflection of our very attitude to the word God. These are not new insights but the contemporary crisis is a particularly sharp one and is no doubt closely related to the unprecedented growth of knowledge in the last one hundred years. Falstaff in Henry IV I has some comment on this matter:

> Well, 'tis no matter; honour pricks me on. Yea, but how if honour prick me off when I come on? how then? Can honour set-to a leg? no: or an arm? no: or take away the grief of a wound? no. Honour hath no skill in surgery, then? no. What is honour? a word. What is in that word, honour? What is that honour? air. A trim reckoning! - Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday. Doth he feel it? no. Doth he hear it? no. Is it insensible, then? yea, to the dead. But will it no live with the living? no. Why? detraction will not suffer it: - therefore, I'll none of it: honour is a mere scutcheon, and so ends my catechism.[21]

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[20]The War in Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.A. have in particular threatened to destroy the validity of the word freedom.

[21]Shakespeare, Henry IV Part I, Act V, scene i, ll. 125-141.

However, as deceptive and dangerous as language can be we need it, it is an essential part of the civilized world and a tool with which man combats the evil and chaos of the often hostile universe around him, which of course includes other men and women. The collapse of language would mean a reversion back into chaos and barbarism. Art has the primary function of resolving the tension created by the disparity between the meaning of words as concepts and the "actual reality" that they supposedly represent. For it is a simple truth that words and indeed language cannot completely represent ultimate reality; no more of course than can the novel capture ultimate reality within its pages. A dictionary can list meanings for a word but only in the actual world do the experiences linked with the word actually exist. The Dictionary was indeed the invention of our modern rationalistic world, part of its attempt to tame the irrational forces of chaos.

To go back to Anthony and Cleopatra we see in this great tragedy the complexities and ambiguities of human love presented. Cynical, materialistic, romantic and spiritual views of the human experience of love are portrayed, as is the very fragility of love in our world. In Anthony and Cleopatra love is explored at an extremity, the opposite extreme more or less to that explored in Murphy. Within the framework of dramatic art, the word love is defined at a far greater level of ambiguity,

richness and complexity than the dictionary could hope to achieve. (This isn't to devalue the very obvious value of the dictionary as a very valuable intellectual tool.) We witness love at an extreme in the sense that Anthony and Cleopatra are not normal, typical human lovers any more than are Murphy and Celia. Anthony and Cleopatra are examples of very great people, great lovers and leaders, yet they are human in their basic need for love and the frailties of possessiveness, lust, jealousy, passion and so forth. Because they live on a higher social level than we do, and in addition because they are such famous historical figures, they stand at a distance from us. There is a great love, yet at the same time we witness its weaknesses, complexities and ambiguities. Even in the death of Anthony and Cleopatra this great tragedy affirms the value and meaning of love in the face of the nothingness of death. Our doubts and tensions in face of the complex meaning and our experience of love are resolved through the catharsis of great tragedy:

> Does not art also contain the opposite of this 'Dionysian' losing of oneself? Does it not also contain the 'Apollonian' element of entertainment and satisfaction which consists precisely in the fact that the onlooker does not identify himself with what is represented but gains distance from it, overcomes the direct power of reality through its deliberate representation in art, that happy freedom of which the burdens of every day life deprive him.[22]

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[22]Ernst Fischer, The Necessity of Art, Trans. Anna Bostock (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 9.

Thus the value of tragic art is in the fact that we see characters like ourselves in their humanity, yet so different in terms of their position in life, suffering and yet glorying in being human. Their death is not an affirmation of death and chaos, but rather paradoxically life. Tragedy is a vital force attacking the dangers inherent for society in extremes of romantic thought, or cynicism. Any hardening of words into concepts that are out of touch with the reality of human experience and emotion are a threat to the health and stability of society. Empty idealism, or sour cynicism, equally prepare the way for chaos, or the decline of civilized values.

Comedy in its own way has a cathartic power, in the way it mocks man it also mocks the absurdities and rigidness of language. Like tragedy it too can be the instrument of truth. In Murphy and Celia we have lovers at the opposite end of the artistic scale to Shakespeare's famous lovers. They too are like and unlike us; they are

> inferior in our power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage frustration or absurdity.[23]

They are us at an extreme and through the power of laughter we can come to a deeper sense of the human situation or

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[23]Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism (New York: Atheneum, 1966), p. 34.

predicament within our world:

> Comedy can be a means of mastering our disillusions when we are caught in a dishonest or stupid society.[24]

Through comedy we can come to terms with the evil in the world. This is what Beckett is undertaking in his novels and plays, the darkness of his comedy cannot but be expected:

> To be able to laugh at evil and error means that we have surmounted them. Comedy may be a philosophic, as well as a psychological compensation. Whenever we become aware that this is not the best of possible worlds, we need the help of the comedian to meet the 'insuperable defects of actuality'.[25]

Alienation has been seen as a common trait of this age and Murphy's solipsism is clearly a parody of modern alienated man - he is alienated man at a comic extreme. Murphy's comic absurdity is that unlike the typical alienated hero of modern literature he does not despair of his alienation but pursues it with a religious devotion. Just as he endeavours to escape love Murphy strives to escape from work - work having no connection with the world of his mind. He sees Celia's attempts to make him work as a failure of love - she doesn't accept him as he is but wants

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[24] Comedy, p. 245. See also Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, particularly the chapter entitled 'The Significance of the Absurd'.

[25] Comedy, p. 246.

to change him. We note that Murphy shows no concern regarding Celia's prostitution, as might be expected in view of his concern with the world of the mind. This alienation from work has frequently been noted as a symptom of our modern world:

> activity appears as suffering, strength as powerlessness, production as emasculation, and the workers own physical and spiritual energy, his personal life - for what is life if not activity? - as an activity turned against himself, independent from himself, and not belonging to himself.[26]

Modern industrial and brueaucratic developments have led to modern man's alienation from his work, just as urbanisation has led to his alienation from his fellow man and from nature. In an older world man grew things and/or made things with which he had a closer relationship and identity: in the modern world work is for very many merely a means to obtain money, he can no longer have special pride in the things he makes and there is no direct correlation between what he does and the feeding of his family. Indeed in our modern welfare state he may not have to work to feed his family. Work has become for too many a mechanical chore, separated from real life, from the world of thought and feelings. In many jobs modern man is merely part of the machinery: he has become an object. The

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[26]Karl Marx, quoted by Ernst Fischer, <u>The Necessity of Art</u> (Penguin Books, 1963), p. 82.

separation of mind and body that we see in the character of Murphy is surely inherent in the modern factory system, in which the worker leaves his real life behind him when he begins his eight hours or so of mechanical labour. Murphy is a rebel against this alienating process. He rejects the Puritan (and particularly nineteenth-century) equation of work equalling virtue, for quite clearly to Murphy if one works only in order to make money to buy leisure and pleasure, work is an evil which one should endeavour to remove. He is of course striving for an idyllic womb-like existence, the self-sufficiency of the mind. Murphy the alienated clown is a rebel against the bureaucratic bourgeois world. Like the Fool in King Lear he stands outside and mocks the folly and pride of man and thus he can make clear the values and evils embedded in our society. Like the criminal he indicates the contradictions and absurdities existing in our society.

A confrontation between Capitalism and our clown hero, on a mock-heroic level, takes place in a teashop:

> On the one hand a colossal league of plutomanic caterers, highly endowed with the ruthless cunning of the sane, having at their disposal all the most deadly weapons of the post-war recovery; on the other, a seedy solipsist and fourpence.[27]

With great ingenuity our "seedy solipsist" obtains

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[27]Murphy, p. 59.

1.83 cups of tea for the price of one. In terms of the major novelists this is a very trivial episode, though it is a typical one from Murphy.

But if one recognizes that Beckett is deliberately clowning as a novelist, such an episode has its appropriate significance. The scale of events within Murphy are part of its satiric emphasis. Murphy is the appropriate 'hero' for our age as King Arthur or Sir Gawain was for the age of medieval romance. The dragons and monsters of medieval romance have been replaced by "a colossal league of plutomanic caterers", Sir Galahad, by Murphy. (A movement from Northrop Frye's Second Fictional Mode, Romance, to his fifth and final mode, the Ironic) Our depersonalized world limits Murphy's scope for heroic action. To refuse to act and the obtaining of 1.83 cups of tea for the price of one are the mock-heroic achievements of Murphy. In an earlier age man risked his life in the pursuit of food while in the twentieth century Western man no longer grows or catches his own food, even such a simple and trivial thing as a cup of tea is "manufactured". This episode thus symbolizes in comic terms the way in which modern man has become alienated from production and the basic things of life. Primitive man's direct struggle with Nature has been replaced by the Capitalist struggle: a dehumanizing of the basis of human life and relationships. Murphy's actions are symbolic of the way that the Capitalist system

works and the double standards that Capitalistic individualism has brought with it, which is mirrored by the world of crime and its increase within our society. (As a footnote to this final point I would remind you of the way Murphy cheats Ticklepenny.)

It is out of such apparently trivial episodes that Beckett creates his humour and makes his satiric comments on our world. He is a novelist working at a similar extreme to his characters, a novelist who doubts the very possibility of writing a novel. Another typical example of Beckett's mock-heroic satiric humour is the dilemma facing Murphy in eating the biscuits that he bought with his fourpence at the teashop. Not only does the buying of the cup of tea require a great deal of mental ingenuity in Murphy's world but equally there is the problem of which order to eat the biscuits:

> He took the biscuits carefully out of the packet and laid them face upward on the grass, in order as he felt of edibility. They were the same as always, a Ginger, an Osborne, A Digestive, a Petite Buerre and one anonymous. He always ate the first-named last, because he liked it best and the anonymous first, because he thought it very likely the least palatable. The order in which he ate the remaining three was indifferent to him and varied irregularly from day to day.[28]

An unsympathetic reader might well dismiss this as another piece of trivial, philosophical satire of very limited

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[28] Murphy, pp. 68-9.

relevance. That Beckett has a philosophical turn of mind and interest there is no doubt, however, it is my contention that he is not writing merely philosophical satire in Murphy. From its beginning in the eighteenth century the novel form has been concerned with the trivial, as we find for example in Robinson Crusoe:

> I got several things of less value, but not [at] all less useful to me, which I omitted setting down before; as in particular, pens, ink, and paper, several parcels in the captain's, mate's, gunner's, and carpenter's keeping, three or four compasses, some mathematical instruments, dials, perspectives, charts, and books of navigation . . . [29]

Part of the art of the novel, in all the aspects of its tradition has been the careful documentation of facts. Here in Murphy this aspect of the novel's tradition is being parodied by being pushed to the extreme with a careful, factual documentation of Murphy eating his biscuits. The humour arises out of the contrast between the careful documentation and the essential triviality of the action. It is interesting to compare the Murphy biscuit episode with the following passage from Ulysses:

> Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stuffed roast heart, liver slices fried with crustcrumbs, fried hencod's roes. Most of all he liked grilled

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[29] Daniel Defoe, Robinson Crusoe (Penguin Books, 1965), p. 82.

> mutton kidneys which gave his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine.[30]

One might well see Beckett's episode as a parody of this kind of thing in Ulysses, though it itself is no doubt a parody of the heroic feastings of classical epic: Beckett has gone one step further.

But to return to Murphy and his biscuit eating problem:

> On his knees before the five it struck him for the first time these prepossessions reduced to a paltry six the number of ways in which he could make this meal. But this was to violate the very essence of assortment, this was the red permanganate on the Rima of variety. Even if he conquered his prejudice against the anonymous, still there would be only twenty-four ways in which the biscuits could be eaten. But were he to take the final step and overcome his infatuation with the ginger, then the assortment would spring to life before him, dancing the radiant measure of its total permutability, edible in a hundred and twenty ways.[31]

Here the humour comes from the contrast between the seriousness of Murphy's concern over his choice, with the triviality of the subject of his choice. Murphy is trying to transcend the problem of choice with all the seriousness of a saint attempting to escape the temptations of the world, with the biscuits as the demons!

> Overcome by these perspectives Murphy fell forward on his face on the grass, beside those

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[30] James Joyce, Ulysses (London: The Bodley Head, 1963), p. 65.

[31] Murphy, p. 68.

> biscuits of which it could be said as of the stars, that one differed from another, but of which he could not partake in their fullness until he had learnt not to prefer any one to any other.[32]

This is all part of Murphy's attempt to escape from the world of his body and senses into the world of his mind. To escape Locke's "secondary quality" of taste for the mathematical certainty of number:

> So Locke, like Descartes, comes to identify knowledge with notions of size, figure, number, motion. These are the primary qualities of our world. The 'secondary qualities' are colours, sounds, tastes and odours, the 'sensible' impressions bodies make on us. We feel the world through the sensorium; but we know it only when ideas are disengaged from this sensed experience.[33]

The whole tendency of the modern world has been to increase the range and variety of our choice in all departments of life. The kind of choice that Murphy faces here did not bother the cave man or medieval man. But in terms of work, where we live, marriage, etc. our choices have enormously increased. Furthermore, there are numerous religious beliefs and philosophies of life contending for our attention and choice. The modern, industrial society is particularly geared to a wide variety of choice, take for example the modern department stores and supermarkets.

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[32] Murphy, pp. 68-9.

[33] Wylie Sypher, Rococo to Cubism in Art and Literature (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1960) pp. 14-15.

All this adds to the confusion and uncertainty of our world, with the decline of traditional values and beliefs and ways of living. In an attempt to escape this problem of choice Conrad's hero Heyst attempts to escape to his desert island where he will have to face the multiple choices between good and evil at all levels of life. Murphy, within his clown universe is attempting a similar retreat into the pure mathematical certainty of primary qualities, away from the irrational world of the senses and its obvious limitations, for with the removal of irrational prejudice:

> But were he to take the final step and overcome his infatuation with the ginger, then the assortment would spring to life before him, dancing the radiant measure of its total permutability, edible in a hundred and twenty ways.[34]

But of course this whole process is to dehumanize the simple enjoyment of food, for our simple enjoyment of food is connected with the sensual pleasures of taste, smell and texture. What is Murphy left with but a mathematical formula. His attempt to reduce the irrational to a simple mathematical formula is in a way symbolic of the whole process of scientific rationalism, and should be seen in relation to the wider process of dehumanization that has taken place in our society with

[34]*Murphy*, p. 68.

the growth of Capitalism, the Industrial Revolution, and so forth. As Beckett strives to rise above the "individuality" of the biscuits so at a serious level the same principle is applied in the name of efficiency so that the individuality of people is lost within the factory and bureaucratic system - their secondary qualities are expendable, for they will hinder the smooth workings of the mathematical god efficiency. Another approach to the same modern dilemma is taken by Huxley in Brave New World:

> Standard men and women; in uniform batches. The whole of a small factory staffed with the products of a single bokanovskified egg
>
> 'Ninety-six identical twins working ninety-six identical machines!' The voice was almost tremulous with enthusiasm. 'You really know where you are. For the first time in history.' He quoted the planetary motto, 'Community, Identity, Stability.' Grand words. 'If we could bokanovskify indefinitely the whole problem would be solved.'[35]

Here the ideal world would be one where everyone was identically alike; a perfect world would have been achieved by the removal of all individuality. In his very different way, using the distancing effect of comedy as Huxley uses the distancing effect of science fiction fantasy, Beckett is commenting on what he sees as a frightening tendency in our world.

However, Murphy is abruptly brought back to reality.

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[35] Aldous Huxley, Brave New World (Penguin Books, 1969), p. 18.

> Lying beside them on the grass but facing the opposite way, wrestling with the demon of gingerbread, he heard the words: 'Would you have the goodness, pardon the intrusion, to hold my little doggy?'[36]

Eventually the 'doggy' solves Murphy's problem.

> He now discovered that she had eaten all the biscuits with the exception of the Ginger.[37]

Thus the external, irrational world that Murphy so diligently tries to escape has intruded. However Miss Drew compensates him with three pence for two pence worth of biscuits.

We might also note that both Miss Drew and the sheep are fitting companions for Murphy:

> The sheep were a miserable looking lot, dingy close-cropped, undersized and mis-shapen. They were not cropping, they were not ruminating they did not even seem to be taking their ease. They simply stood in an attitude of profound dejection, their heads bowed, swaying slightly as though dazed. Murphy had never seen stranger sheep, they seemed one and all on the point of collapse. . . . They had not the strength to back away from Miss Drew approaching with the lettuce.[38]

Beckett's world is a parody "Wasteland" both in terms of this kind of action and also in its appearance. This passage (and the description of Miss Drew and her dog) is typical of the way in which Beckett mixes humour and ugliness. The sheep are in perfect harmony with characters

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[36] Murphy, p. 69.

[37] Murphy, p. 71.

[38] Murphy, p. 70.

like Murphy and Celia. Beckett is here using the cruel humour with ugliness and the mis-shapen, and we are amused to find that the sheep should so like Murphy. At a slightly more subtle level there is surely a mock-pastoral element in this episode.

At this point in our discussion of Murphy it might be appropriate to consider the sub-plots. As Murphy is on a quest, so too are the characters in the sub-plots: Murphy's friends from Dublin who come searching for him; and Mr. Kelly flying his kite (this kite flying is his form of 'quest' as I will subsequently explain).

A major theme of Murphy is of course the impossibility of communication between people and hence relationships, the absurdity of love and friendship, yet the paradoxical need that men and women have for love and friendship. The emptiness of many human relationships, a central concern of the novel since its conception, and a dominant aspect of our world, is caricatured in Neary, Wylie and Miss Counihan. The only reason that these "friends" come looking for Murphy is self-interest. Miss Counihan is a former lover of Murphy who is being pursued by Neary. However, she will have nothing to do with him because she is waiting to hear from Murphy who left her to go to London to make his fortune. Wylie's interest in Murphy is also clearly linked to his interest in Miss Counihan:

"Not know here is it," said Wylie, "when there

> is no single aspect of her natural body with which I am not familiar."
> "What do you mean?" said Neary.
> "I have worshipped her from afar," said Wylie.[39]

Miss Counihan clearly has no strong attachment for Murphy:

> Miss Counihan sat on Wylie's knees, not in Wynn's Hotel lest an action for libel should lie, and oyster kisses passed between them.[40]

She has her self-interest well in hand:

> If the worst comes to the worst, thought Miss Counihan, if my love cannot be found, if Wylie turns nasty, there is always Neary.[41]

We might well contrast this situation with the great quest of Ulysses in the Odyssey and Penelope waiting for him. The reason for this stark contrast is not so much that men like Ulysses lived in the days of Homer and that our world is populated with Murphy's, but rather that Beckett is using a different literary genre, mock-epic, one that he clearly feels is appropriate for our age as the epic was for Homer's Greece. Beckett portrays the world as worse than it is just as the epic, or great tragedy, portrays a nobler world. The ultimate irony is that they do not find Murphy until he is dead and that they then each go their separate ways, after Neary had given Wylie and Miss Counihan cheques:

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[39] Murphy, p. 33.

[40] Murphy, p. 83.

[41] Murphy, p. 91.

> Wylie having travelled twice as fast as Miss Counihan, disappeared round the corner of the main block. Miss Counihan turned, saw Neary coming up behind her at a great pace, stopped, then advanced slowly to meet him. Neary tacked sharply, straightened up when she made no move to cut him off and passed her rapidly at a comfortable remove, his hat raised in salute and his head averted. Miss Counihan followed slowly.[42]

This has led us to the death of Murphy and I will now look at this aspect of the novel and the events leading up to it. It is of course highly appropriate, completely in harmony with the mock-epic character of this novel that the Celestial City of Murphy's pilgrimage should be the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat:

> For Murphy was only too anxious to test his striking impression that here was the race of people he had long since despaired of finding.[43]

Murphy is naturally attracted to the mental patients, cut-off as they are from external reality, living, to varying degrees, in the self-sufficient world of their minds. He of course rejects the idea that the patients are cut-off from reality and is revolted by the attempts of the psychiatrists to bring them back to the world of "reality":

> All this was duly revolting to Murphy, whose experience as a physical and rational being obliged him to call sanctuary what the psychiatrists called exile and to think of the patients not as banished from a system of benefits but as escaped from a colossal

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[42] Murphy, p. 186.

[43] Murphy, p. 117.

> fiasco. If his mind had been on the correct cash-register lines, an indefatigable apparatus for doing sums with the petty cash of current facts, then no doubt the suppression of these would have seemed a deprivation. But since it was not, since what he called his mind functioned not as an instrument but as a place, from whose unique delight precisely those current facts withhold him, was it not most natural that he should welcome their suppression, as of gyves?[44]

Allowing for the fact that Samuel Beckett is writing a novel in the comic or ironic mode, rather than the epic, romance or mimetic mode, we have strangely enough in this passage a statement more or less of a novelist's traditional aims and beliefs. The novelist himself is one who claims that the world he creates, though it is fictional, is a truer picture of reality than that seen by his readers. There has been a tendency in the twentieth century to reject this kind of claim to truth, for it has an imaginative basis, not one involving proof or experiment. Therefore the vision of the novelist faces the situation of being placed on no higher level than that of an idle dreamer or even mental patient. There has indeed been a tendency to correlate genius and mental imbalance, art and neurotic fantasy this century. Equally, with this fragmented, uncertain world the novelist has to face the agony of not knowing whether or not he is merely an idle dreamer or insane. With the growth of individualism has come increased

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[44] _Murphy_, p. 123.

specialization and a growing isolation between men. The kind of world that we live in requires, on the behalf of efficiency, that everyone develops one particular skill. On the purely rational level this seems perfect, but on the human, emotional level it has led to the breakdown of communication and the fragmentation of our world into isolated groups:

> Each individual thinker gives us his own picture of human nature. All these philosophers are determined empiricists: they would show us the facts and nothing but the facts. But their interpretation of the empirical evidence contains from the very outset an arbitrary assumption - and this arbitrariness becomes more and more obvious as the theory proceeds and takes on a more elaborate and sophisticated aspect. Nietzsche proclaims the will to power, Freud signalizes the sexual instinct, Marx enthrones the economic instinct. Each theory becomes a Procrustean bed on which the empirical facts are stretched to fit a preconceived pattern.
>
> Owing to this development our modern theory of man lost its intellectual center. We acquired instead a complete anarchy of thought . . . Metaphysics, theology, mathematics, and biology successively assumed the guidance for thought on the problem of man and determined the line of investigation. The real crisis of this problem manifested itself when such a central power capable of directing all individual effort ceased to exist. The paramount importance of the problem was still felt in all the different branches of knowledge and inquiry. But an established authority to which one might appeal no longer existed. Theologians, scientists, politicians, sociologists, biologists, psychologists, ethnologists, economists all approached the problem from their own viewpoints. . . . every author seems in the last count to be led by his own conception and evaluation of human life.[45]

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[45]Ernst Cassirer, An Essay on Man (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 21.

Interestingly enough 'Murphy' makes a strikingly similar comment:

> The nature of outer reality remained obscure. The men, women and children of science would seem to have as many ways of kneeling to their facts as any other body of illuminati. The definition of outer reality, or reality short and simple, varied according to the sensibility of the definer. But all seemed agreed that contact with it, even the layman's muzzy contact, was a rare privilege.[46]

Beckett's Magdalen Mental Mercyseat is a somewhat grim and ironic parody of our world, the lunatic and the criminal being taken as people who have taken tendencies in human nature and the world to extreme limits. A modern highbrow novelist writing with great skill for a very limited audience feels, along with the bureaucrat and factory worker, his alienation.

In Mr. Endon, at the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, Murphy finds the friend for whom he has been looking, the person who can lead him in the right direction:

> Mr. Endon was a schizophrenic of the most amiable variety, . . . a psychosis so limpid and imperturbable that Murphy felt drawn to it as Narcissus to his fountain [47]

However, by the very nature of Mr. Endon's condition this relationship is very much one-sided:

> Whereas the sad truth was, that while Mr. Endon for Murphy was no less than bliss,

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[46]<u>Murphy</u>, pp. 122-23.

[47]<u>Murphy</u>, p. 128.

Murphy for Mr. Endon was no more than chess [48]
This only serves to emphasize the fact that Murphy still needs human relationships, indeed if he did not there would be no novel - imagine a novel about Mr. Endon!

Just before he dies Murphy is rocking in his rocking chair:

> Soon his body would be quiet, soon he would be free [49]

Then someone pulls the wrong chain, the one controlling the gas supply to Murphy's ingenious heating system, instead of the toilet, this leads to an explosion and the end of Murphy. He is defeated by chaos, the irrational, "And the etymology of gas? Could it be the same word as chaos." Furthermore Murphy's very need for a fire is indicative of his failure to escape from the world of the senses, he still needs his bourgeoise comforts! Equally one could see the ingenious system of connecting the gas supply with the radiator as a comical example of the marvels of science, and the ingenuity of man. Murphy's death is the final irony of the novel, for his desire to escape from his body logically enough led to death. It is ironic that Murphy's apparently rational quest ends with an accident and his encounter with the non-rational world of death.

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[48] Murphy, p. 164.

[49] Murphy, p. 173.

One does not expect to find death as the subject of comedy, but it is entirely appropriate to this novel, which sees death as the ultimate joke. In an age morbidly obsessed with Time and Death, Beckett's farcical burial of Murphy's remains has a healthy vitality: Neary gives Murphy's cremated ashes to Cooper with the instructions, "Dump it anywhere".

> Some hours later Cooper took the packet of ash from his pocket, where earlier in the evening he had put it for greater security, and threw it angrily at a man who had given him great offence. It bounced, burst, off the wall onto the floor, where at once it became the object of much dribbling, passing, trapping, shooting, punching, heading and even some recognition from the gentleman's code. By closing time the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another day spring greyened the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the matches, the spits, the vomit.[50]

This seems to me a very appropriate 'ending' for a man who regarded his physical body as an encumbrance from which his mind was endeavouring to escape.

In conclusion to this discussion of Murphy I like to consider the other sub-plot, that involving Mr. Kelly and his kite flying. While Mr. Kelly belongs very much to this grim world of human derelicts, failure and ugliness, he seems in effect to be a pimp, the kite flying brings a gentle lyric note into the novel (There is of

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[50] Murphy, p. 187.

course more beauty in Beckett's novels than some critics will give him due):

> "As you say," said Mr. Kelly, "hark to the wind. I shall fly her out of sight tomorrow."
> He fumbled vaguely at the coils of tail. Already he was in position, straining his eyes for the speck that was he, digging in his heels against the immense pull skyward. Celia kissed him and left him.
> "God willing," said Mr. Kelly, "right out of sight." Now I have no one, thought Celia, except possibly Murphy.[51]

For Mr. Kelly the kite flying is as important as Murphy's spiritual quest in the rocking chair[52], it too is a striving for infinity, an attempt to escape from the material, the earth, into the ethereal world of the sky. It appears that he identifies with the kite "for the speck that was he", or perhaps it is rather his soul. Corresponding to Murphy's achievement of nirvana in his rocking chair is the disappearance of the kite from sight for Mr. Kelly:

> Except for the sagging soar of line, undoubtedly superb so far as it went, there was nothing to be seen, for the kite had disappeared from view. Mr. Kelly was enraptured. Now he could measure the distance from the unseen to the seen, now he was in a position to determine the point at which seen and unseen met. It would be an unscientific observation, so many and so fitful were the imponderables involved. But the pleasure accruing to Mr. Kelly would be in no way inferior to that conferred (presumably) on Mr. Adams by his beautiful deduction of Neptune from Uranus.[53]

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[51] Murphy, p. 21.

[52] "He was as fond of his chair in his own way as Murphy had been of his." Murphy, p. 181.

[53] Murphy, p. 190.

There is a mingling of a number of different elements here, the senile figure of Mr. Kelly, the world of scientific endeavour, the world of childhood, with the kite flying, the suggestion of some mystical quest similar to that of Murphy. A mingling of the grand, science and mysticism, with nostalgic beauty, the world of childhood, with at its centre a senile old man. From this rises the suggestion that scientific and mystical quests are childish - what is the importance of having discovered Neptune for example? The reference to Mr. Adams is not merely a means for making us laugh at Mr. Kelly's ludicrous experiment, for as so often in the world of mock-epic, the great does not merely devalue the trivial but the trivial tends to bring the heroic down to earth. On the other hand Mr. Kelly finds Joy in what he is doing, a release from the ordinary world and its trials. He returns as it were to the happiness of childhood, this is what lies at infinity (Murphy's endeavours one remembers are more to return to the bliss of the womb). Mr. Kelly's feelings are surely like those of the young boy Celia watches flying his kite:

> She sat on till it was nearly dark and all the flyers, except the child, had gone. At last he also began to wind in and Celia watched for the kites to appear. When they did their contortions surprised her, she could scarcely believe it was the same pair that had ridden so serenely on a full line. The child was expert, he played them with a finesse worthy of Mr. Kelly himself. In the end they came quietly, hung low in the murk almost directly overhead, then settled gently. The child

> knelt down in the rain, dismantled them, wrapped the tails and sticks in the sails and went away, singing. As he passed the shelter Celia called good night. He did not hear her, he was singing.[54]

Is this what Murphy is striving for with all the futility of the adult rationalist?

The novel, of course ends with Mr. Kelly and his kite and not with Murphy or Murphy's ashes. Mr. Kelly falls asleep while flying his kite, the winch slips from his grasp and the string snaps. Mr. Kelly pursues the string:

> Mr. Kelly tottered to his feet, tossed up his arms high and wide and quavered away down the path that led to the water, a ghastly lamentable figure. . . . Celia caught him on the margin of the pond. The end of the line skimmed the water, jerked upward in a wild whirl, vanished joyfully in the dark. Mr. Kelly went limp in her arms. Someone fetched the chair and helped to get him aboard.[55]

If in the conclusion we are conscious of Mr. Kelly's "ghastly lamentable figure" and of his senility we are equally conscious of the joyful kite whirling away wildly into the night's sky. There is a sense of freedom, and from the atmosphere created by the description of wind, sky and twilight there is a note of genuine poetry. We are aware that Mr. Kelly will soon be dead yet there is a note of peace and release in the end of Murphy, not nihilism nor

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[54]Murphy, p. 106.

[55]Murphy, pp. 191-92.

despair. Is it foolish to associate the kite with youth and see here a balancing of old age and youth?

CHAPTER 2: WATT

> The nature of outer reality remained obscure. The men, women and children of science would seem to have as many ways of kneeling to their facts as any other body of illuminati. The definition of outer reality short and simple, varied according to the sensibility of the definer. But all seemed agreed that contact with it, even the layman's muzzy contact, was a rare privilege.[1]

Murphy's endeavour was to escape from the external, physical world, including his body into the world of his mind, because "Murphy felt himself split in two, a body and a mind". Watt, however, endeavours to comprehend the world around him, albeit with great difficulty. Descartes noted the unreliability of the human senses and the mental process, but he had his religious certainty. Murphy a modern Cartesian, who has no God to give him confidence in the external world, retreats with due logic into the inner world of his mind as far as he is able. In Watt, however, we have a parody of rational man's attempt to comprehend the irrational world of which he is a part, particularly post-Cartesian man's attempt to name things and thus reduce the irrational and uncertain to some kind of order. Modern man's dilemma is very closely linked with the great faith

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[1] *Murphy*, pp. 122-23. (see footnotes 46, 47 to the *Murphy* chapter).

he has placed on the ability of science and rational thinking to solve his problems and produce a veritable paradise on earth. In face of the certainty of science Beckett's theme is the impossibility of man ultimately comprehending the irrational, whether in himself, or the world in which he lives, but all the same the necessity for him to attempt, as a creature with rational faculties to understand both himself and the world. To dramatize this theme we have the clown rationalist Watt. Science endeavours to map, graph, label, name, explain, discover laws, control energy - thus to bind, especially with the tools of mathematics, the irrational, unknown, frightening universe that surrounds man. In terms of the harnessing of energy, improved modes of travel, medicine, improved agricultural methods et cetera progress most certainly has been made, but in terms of the ultimate conquest of the irrational, particularly in terms of human nature very little progress has really been made. A basic theme of Beckett's writing is the impossibility of conquering the irrational, that neither the world nor human nature can finally be reduced to a neat set of mathematical formulae.

Modern man has lost the certainty of a religious faith and now has doubts as to the value of science. He thus faces the uncertainty and irrationality of the universe alone. We might describe the irrational as the force of chaos, or evil, in the Universe: no longer can evil be

blamed on the devil. The force of the irrational is very much a destructive force in our society, for it means a break-down of certainty as to man's own nature and a growing distrust of other people - an alienation from the self and from others. In numerous ways this uncertainty is reflected in our society, for example in such things as the role of women in society; ideas of how children should be reared; whether marriage is still a useful social institution; changing views on censorship, etc. Although one must note that healthy forces are working amidst this turmoil, there is a grave social danger in the insecurity prevalent in our age: the break-down of certainty can lead down the road to insanity, chaos, the break-down of civilization:

> Turning and turning in the widening gyre
> The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
> Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
> Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
> The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
> The ceremony of innocence is drowned.[2]

Contemporary art has its value within this situation: it can make man aware of the fundamental eternal nature of the human predicament, in terms of this contemporary situation, tragedy and comedy have the cathartic power to raise man above despair in face of his irrational nature and the irrational world in which he lives. Great tragedy

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[2] 'The Second Coming' by W. B. Yeats, Collected Poems (London: Macmillan, 1965), p. 210.

is fundamentally concerned with the human dilemma of evil - of the power of the irrational in the world. We witness the power of chance, the irrational, human evil to destroy the good in the world. The irrational actions of Lear leading to the death of Cordelia; Othello's murder of Desdemona, are part of our world and lead us all to doubt the certainty of goodness, justice, morality etc. - perhaps they are fictions? But of course the paradoxical final effect of great tragedy, despite the deaths of Cordelia and Desdemona is not of despair. We are made aware, reminded, through great tragedy of the human predicament, but equally we are left with a sense of the nobility, beauty and greatness of the human spirit. Comedy through the vital health giving power of laughter can likewise reconcile us to the imperfections, absurdities, irrationality of the Universe, and bring us to terms with the basic, human predicament. It enables us to accept the evil in ourselves and the world and thus to remain in harmony both with the world and ourselves.

Modern man's sense of helplessness in the face of the irrational is mirrored in the distorting comedy of _Watt_. If the heroes and heroines of tragedy are greater than we are, the inhabitants of Beckett's world are worse, yet comedy is not necessarily inferior to tragedy.

A typical example of Watt's problems with the irrational comes in his encounter with the 'pot':

> Not that Watt desired information, for he did not. But he desired words to be applied to his situation, to Mr. Knott, to the house, to the grounds, to his duties, to the stairs, to his bedroom, to the kitchen, and in a general way to the conditions of being in which he found himself. For Watt now found himself in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance. . . . 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, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot and be comforted.[3]

It is interesting to compare this passage from Watt, with the following frequently quoted passage from Sartre's Nausea:

> I was in the municipal park just now. The root of the chestnut tree plunged into the ground just underneath my bench. I no longer remembered that it was a root. Words had disappeared, and with them the meaning of things, the methods of using them, the feeble landmarks which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, slightly bent, my head bowed, alone in front of that black, knotty mass, which was utterly crude and frightened me. And then I had this revelation.
>
> It took my breath away. Never, until these last few days, had I suspected what it meant to 'exist'. I was like the others, . . . I used to say like them: 'The sea is green; that white speck up there is a seagull', but I didn't feel that it existed that the seagull was an 'existing seagull'; usually existence hides itself. . . . Even when I looked at things, I was miles away from thinking that they existed: they looked like stage scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, I fore-

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[3]Samuel Beckett, Watt (London: John Calder, 1963), pp. 77-8.

> saw their resistance. But all that happened on the surface. . . . And then, all of a sudden, there it was, as clear as day; existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost its harmless appearance as an abstract category: it was the very stuff of things, that root was steeped in existence. . . . the diversity of things, their individuality, was only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, in disorder - naked, with a frightening, obscene nakedness.[4]

What Watt and Rocquentin are involved in, in both passages, is the realization that words are merely symbols - the letters P...O...T, quite clearly are not a pot. Equally there is no platonic pot. No two pots are the same, even mass-produced pots. They come in different sizes, shapes, colours, textures, have different smells, reflect the light differently, come in varied weights, are made of different materials and so forth. One could use all the resources of language, mathematics, physics, chemistry etc. and still not capture the essence of a pot. What Sartre and Beckett are doing is drawing our attention to the vast disparity that exists between words and reality.

The maturation of a child, and of civilization as well, is of course closely related to this human capacity for naming things. Man's technological advance has gone hand in hand with this ability to name things. Primitive man's ability to use fire must have gone with his ability

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[4]Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea (Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 182-83.

to name it, and thus communicate about it with other men. A child's ability to handle fire likewise requires a knowledge of the word and other related words, such as hot, burn, dangerous and so forth. Through language the external reality can be controlled, ordered, classified, simplified. Thus man has been able to come to terms with some of the irrational forces that surround him through his power of naming - of creating symbolic representations of things. At the same time while words and language have enabled man - and enable a child - to find order in the midst of the chaos of sense impressions, they have equally had the tendency to alienate him from reality. Words and language essentially reduce the complexity and richness of actual reality; there is a danger that words will become rigid concepts, which taking the place of actual experiences, act as a barrier to reality. Literature has a particular value in continually making us aware of the disparity that exists between reality and experience, of reminding us of the reality behind the symbols. Civilization could not of course exist without words, but equally words can be very dangerous. Comedy does not merely mock the rigidity of appearance, action, morality and so forth but the rigidity inherent in the very nature of language itself. It enables us to come to terms with the fiction of language and the reality of the ultimate unreality - the unnamable.

Beckett is concerned with the predicament of modern

man for whom the kind of uncertainty faced by Watt on the obviously absurd level of pots is very real. But if the word fails to truly capture reality, what of the novel? Watt's problems reflect the problems of Beckett the novelist in a world where words "slip, slide, perish". Novelists from Defoe have been very much concerned with presenting a true picture of reality. The accurate use of detailed description, psychological knowledge, realistic dialogue and so forth and the use of irony, and symbol and authorial comment to give a full account of reality as the author sees it. Modern developments such as stream-of-consciousness, and multiple viewpoint reflecting the continuing concern of novelists with truth and reality. In Ulysses we see the trend to more and more careful documentation taken to an extreme, whereas in Murphy and Watt we have a parody of the novelist's preoccupation with verisimilitude, a statement in comic terms to the effect that novelists are attempting the impossible. Clearly man cannot come to an understanding of himself and his world by the mere accumulation of more and more facts, more and more knowledge: he will only be left with despair at the ever retreating infinity of the irrational world.

Watt's futile attempt to explain in words Mr. Knott and his house are a comment on modern man and his world, and the necessary nature of his relationship with other people. The impossibility of really knowing the world or

another human being in fact.

Why cannot Samuel Beckett write a traditional-style novel involving normal characters living a traditional life? The answer is of course that it is impossible to do so now, Joyce, in Ulysses, has proved this impossibility. For Beckett to describe the world of London, or Dublin, as he knew it, would be to create fiction, his own limited, and hence subjective, view of London or Dublin, whereas the novel is supposedly concerned with truth and reality. The richness and variety of life could not be chained with mere words! Dickens could describe London with vibrant confidence, Beckett no longer can. Furthermore Beckett obviously cannot explore modern man's alienation from his physical surroundings with the careful accumulation of factual description (a style indicative of such an age as the nineteenth century when a materialistic philosophy held dominance). If modern man feels lost in the vast complexity of the modern city he can come to terms with his situation through, either the epic-world of Ulysses, or the mock-epic world of Watt.

Joyce faced the dilemma in Ulysses of how to write a novel in our age. Necessarily, taking the tradition of the novel at the point in history when he decided to write, he had to write a novel about an ordinary man, living an ordinary life in a modern city - realism demanded this. But how was he to conform to the demands of objective truth

and yet create a work of art? Realism taken to its logical limits equals a kind of photographic copying, equals sheer boredom for the reader. What could be more boring than the life of a modern bourgeoise, urban man. Joyce solved his problem by using the epic form. Through the use of detail Joyce conveys the variety, richness and mystery of life within a great modern city, rather than the alienating qualities of urban life. Yet are we not perhaps more conscious of words than Dublin and its inhabitants very frequently in Ulysses - does not language here serve to alienate us from reality.

Watt is further removed from the traditional novel than Murphy, though the opening section of Watt, involving the Nixons and Mr. Hackett, Watt's train journey, and return to the station at the end of the novel, involves the same kind of approach as we find in Murphy. But that part of the novel where we see things from Watt's viewpoint belongs rather to the world of Alice in Wonderland and that kind of fantasy novel - though as I have tried to suggest Beckett is rather taking the logic of realism to such an extreme that it becomes a parody. In terms of point of view this novel can be divided into, the middle section, and the beginning and end sections (including the Addenda). The beginning and end sections are present from the omniscient point of view, whereas the middle section consists of what Watt told someone called Sam - though even here the

omniscient author intrudes. Our confusion as to whether Sam is Samuel Beckett is obviously intentional, a part of Beckett's parody of the realistic tradition of the novel. Sam we note seems to be another lunatic like Watt! Confusion also arises from the transition from Section II to Section III of the novel. Section II ends with the arrival of Arthur, Section III begins as follows:

> It was about this time that Watt was transferred to another pavilion, leaving me behind in the old pavilion. We consequently met, and conversed, less than formerly [5]

And the opening of Section IV does not seem to help to clarify matters:

> 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. Heroic quatrains are not otherwise elaborated.[6]

One could attempt a solution of this conundrum of Beckett's: Sam and Watt are both patients in an asylum. Other than their very odd behaviour such remarks as follow seem to indicate this:

> And it was of course impossible to have any confidence in the meteorlogical information of our attendants.[7]

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[5]Watt, p. 149.

[6]Watt, p. 214.

[7]Watt, p. 150. (my underlining)

> No truck with the other scum, cluttering up the passageways, the hallways,[8]

> Through this hole I passed, without hurt, or damage to my pretty uniform.[9]

This all leads one to ponder whether Knott might not in fact be purely the invention of a lunatic told to another lunatic (Sam) in an asylum.[10] There is of course no way of proving this - the novel defies any logical explanation. Once again as with the character Sam the confusion has been deliberately created - the nonsense world of Watt includes the novel form itself and the novelist. One might at this point think of the great pains earlier novelists have gone to in terms of verisimilitude, the memoirs framework that Defoe gives Moll Flanders or Conrad's use of the narrator Marlowe.

It is perhaps logical, given Beckett's concern with the absurdity of the novelist's task in the twentieth century that he should move from the omniscient point of view of Murphy and Watt[11] to the first person point of view of The Trilogy. In these later novels there is no longer any division between author and character and the dilemmas of

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[8]Watt, p. 150.

[9]Watt, p. 158. (my underlining).

[10]On p. 72 of Watt 'Sam' discusses the problems that he faced with the narrator of his tale.

[11]Despite 'Sam's' claims to be merely a transcriber. There is of course more to Watt than just Watt's adventures in Mr. Knott's house, we have the episode with the Nixon's and Hackett at the beginning, for example.

the novelist as alienated human being in our world is brought more sharply into focus. In Molloy in place of Watt telling his story to Sam, we have Molloy sitting writing:

> I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I'd never have got there alone. There's this man who comes every week. Perhaps I got there thanks to him. He says not. He gives me money and takes away the pages. So many pages, so much money. Yes, I work now, a little like I used to, except that I don't know how to work any more. That doesn't matter apparently. What I'd like now is to speak of the things that are left, say my goodbyes, finish dying.[12]

In Malone Dies we have the thoughts of a man who soon expects to die, inventing stories to while away the time. And in The Unnamable the position is even more extreme:

> I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly. I know I am seated, my hands on my knees, because of the pressure against my rump, against the soles of my feet, against the palms of my hands, against my knees.[13]

Beckett is in the sequence of his first five novels reducing, as he moves from one novel to the next, the material available to him as a novelist, each time he

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[12] Samuel Beckett, Three Novels (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 7.

[13] Three Novels, p. 304.

pushes his exploration of the human condition to a more and more extreme position. His inventiveness at these extremes is surely not a mark of pure despair, but rather of the power of the human spirit even, in the face of the ultimate evil - or irrational force - of death. In face of the almost complete collapse of mind and body his characters still remain human, and through their impotence the reader gains strength. Beckett's moribund clowns bring us to terms with the imperfections of our bodies and minds and the world in which we live.

The opening section of Watt deals with Watt's departure for, and journey to, Mr. Knott's residence. His encounter with Mr. Hackett and the Nixons, in this section, is separate and somewhat distinct from the rest of the novel. In particular it is closer to the real world than Watt's experiences in Knott's house, we are not abruptly plunged into the insane, fantasy world of Watt and Knott. Equally I think that this opening section serves as a means of indicating to the reader the relationship and relevance of the central Watt/Knott episode to the real world, in which we the readers live. What dominates this opening section of the novel is a sense of characters acting in a mechanical, wooden, puppet-like manner, of a deadness of feeling, and of characters being isolated from one another. This does not represent a failure of Beckett's powers of characterisation but it is

a satiric comment, through parody, of human behaviour in the modern bourgeoise world. In Mr. Hackett we have the physical, emotional, spiritual, intellectual, rigidity of the modern urban bourgeois, the dead people of Conrad's Heart of Darkness, living in their sepulchral city, the inhabitants to T. S. Eliot's Waste Land:

> Unreal City,
> Under the brown fog of a winter dawn,
> A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many,
> I had not thought death had undone so many.[14]

A man of regular habits, out for his regular constitutional, Mr. Hackett turns the corner only to find "his" seat occupied. This intrustion of the unusual - the irrational - into Mr. Hackett's world has the importance of a major catastrophe. On approaching the bench Mr. Hackett finds that it is occupied by a pair of lovers:

> the lady held the gentleman by the ears, and the gentleman's hand was on the lady's thigh, and the lady's tongue was in the gentleman's mouth. Tired of waiting for the tram, said Mr. Hackett, they strike up an acquaintance. The lady now removed her tongue from the gentleman's mouth, he put his into hers.[15]

Beckett might well be describing a machine here and his unemotive, descriptive language makes the love making appear ridiculous. Mr. Hackett brings this 'indecency' to the attention of the law in order to get his seat. The

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[14]T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962, p. 65.

[15]Watt, p. 6.

language used here could well be a parody of legal language, or the language of science, or engineering. If Mr. Hackett represents the petite bourgeoise concern for regularity and order, and the use of the law to remove obstructions to his way of life, the use of language in this passage represents the dehumanizing tendency of science and rationalism in the post-Cartesian world. Modern science has placed great faith in visual observation, and the careful noting of observed facts; this as Beckett sees it has had the tendency to dehumanize the world, both in terms of behaviour and in terms of language. As he sees it the tendency has been for science to describe man in terms of a machine or some other sub-human analogy:

> 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 man, which to be sure he was, in a sense, for a time, and as the only way one can speak of man, even our anthropologists have realized that, is to speak of him as though he were a termite [16]

Following the 'indecent' episode, Hackett meets with the Nixons. Here the most amusing part is perhaps the description of the birth of Larry. The humour arises from two basic contrasts, firstly the fact that the Nixons should be discussing this intimate personal event with someone they hardly know - though there is the pretence

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[16] Watt, p. 74.

of being old friends - and secondly the way that the dinner party background to the birth is given equal importance with the birth:

> I continued to eat, drink and make light conversation, said Tetty, and Larry to leap, like a salmon.[17]

Tetty continues to act the perfect hostess even in the midst of childbirth. Beckett's comic genius mirrors here the essence of the middle-class's concern with respectability, and the artificiality and deadness that it produces. People are invited to dinner in the name of friendship, out of the human need for personal contact yet the most important thing that is happening is ignored. The point is further emphasized in the fact that they are telling the story to Watt. They really have nothing to say to him, they barely seem to know him, yet they feel a need to talk to him. Why should Watt be interested in the birth of Larry. Indeed this event is merely treated as another piece of trivia to maintain the conversation. As in the description of the lovers, discussed above, we see the reduction of events to a common level of triviality, a drastic reduction in emotional values, a dehumanizing of basic human acts.

The absurdity of the situation is further emphasized with the following question:

You knew she was pregnant, said Mr. Hackett.

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[17] Watt, p. 11.

> Why er, said Goff, you see er, I er, we er -
> Tetty's hand fell heartily on Mr. Hackett's
> thigh. He thought I was coy, she cried
> Hahahaha. Haha. Ha. Haha, said Mr. Hackett.
> I was greatly worried I admit, said Goff.[18]

Not only do we have the comic absurdity of the fact that a group of people are sitting eating their dinner while Tetty is about to give birth but Hackett's question serves to emphasize the alienation of husband and wife. Tetty's hand falling "heartily on Mr. Hackett's thigh" only serves to emphasize the mechanical, dehumanized figures of Tetty, Goff and Hackett.

The themes of the middle classes concern with order decency and respectability and the essential isolation of human beings within this world is continued:

> I went up those stairs, Mr. Hackett, said
> Tetty, on my hands and knees, wringing the
> carpet-rods as though they were made of
> raffia.
> You were in such anguish, said Mr. Hackett.
> Three minutes later I was a mother.
> Unassisted, said Goff.
> I did everything with my own hands, said
> Tetty, everything.
> She severed the cord with her teeth, said
> Goff, not having a scissors to her hand.
> What do you think of that?
> I would have snapped it across my knee,
> if necessary, said Tetty.[19]

I am reminded here of the middle-class independence and self-sufficiency of Robinson Crusoe on his island,

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[18] Watt, p. 12.

[19] Watt, p. 12.

building a home, making bread and generally carrying on as normally. Note the pride with which Goff says "unassisted" and Tetty's own pride in her achievement. The irony, however, is that Goff should be so unaware of what is happening and Tetty is so detached from Goff that shes does not tell him. While Tetty is giving birth the men are playing billiards!

> Cream's putting had been extraordinary, I remember, said Goff. I never saw anything like it. We were watching breathless, as he set himself for a long thin jenny, with the black of all balls.
> What temerity, said Mr. Hackett.
> A quite remarkable stroke, in my opinion, said Goff. He drew back his queue to strike, when the wail was heard. He permitted himself an expression that I shall not repeat.[20]

What we see particularly emphasized by this extract from Watt is the devaluation of experience that is at the heart of this whole section of the novel. The billiards, the dinner, the impressing of Hackett are all of more importance than the birth of Larry. Note the repetition of the word "extraordinary" and the phrase "We were watching breathless" - a choice of vocabulary, in context, far more appropriate for the birth of a child than a game of billiards. This whole tendency is further emphasized when Goff abruptly changes the direction of the conversation with Hackett:

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[20] Watt, p. 13.

> These north-western skies are really extra-ordinary[21]

In a wider context what we see satirised in this opening section of Watt is the tendencies inherent in individualism, rationalism and puritanism taken to their comic extremes. The way in which we see the irrational forces of nature, exemplified by the birth of Larry, treated in this episode, is a particular product of a post-Cartesian world - the Nixons are acting like Murphy, retreating inwardly from the evil of the body and the external world. It is impossible of course for Tetty to mention her condition, she has to keep this within her mind! Equally Goff and the guests are locked within their minds, ignoring what they see with their eyes, or incapable of seeing it. There is no sense that Tetty found the birth of her son a joy and we learn nothing of Larry himself. Describing her feelings after the birth Tetty says:

> For the mother, said Tetty, the feeling is one of relief, of great relief, as when the guests depart. All my subsequent strings were severed by Professor Cooper, but the feeling was always the same, one of riddance[22]

A desire to escape from the irrational world of emotion to a more orderly level of rational bourgeoise existence prevents any real relationship developing between people

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[21] Watt, p. 13.

[22] Watt, pp. 12-13.

in this episode. There is a desire for relationships but an incapacity to develop them. A desire to communicate but the impossibility of communication.

A little after this remark of Tetty Watt arrives on the scene:

> 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 [23]

Directly Watt appears reality beginning to break down! He now forms the centre of their conversation. However, neither Mrs. Nixon or Hackett have seen Watt before and Mr. Nixon, although he lent Watt 6/9d 7 years before, only seems to know him superficially. Thus the intensity of their interest is out of all proportion and hence absurd and amusing. Watt is treated as an object of curiosity rather than a human being, and we learn only the barest details of the kind of man he is, and the nature of the journey that he is undertaking. The way in which the Nixons and Hackett puzzle over Watt prepares the reader for Watt's own encounter with Knott:

> And what do you suppose frightens him all of a sudden? said Mrs. Nixon.
> It can hardly be the journey itself, said Mr. Hackett, since you tell me he is an experienced traveller.
> A silence followed these words.
> Now that I have made that clear, said Mr.

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[23]Watt, p. 14.

> Hackett, you might describe your friend a little more fully.
>
> I really know nothing, said Mr. Nixon.
>
> But you must know something, said Mr. Hackett. One does not part with five shillings to a shadow. Nationality, family, birth place, confession, occupation, means of existence, distinctive signs, you cannot be in ignorance of all this.
>
> Utter ignorance, said Mr. Nixon.[24]

A very direct comment on the superficial and empty nature of many human relationships in the modern world is seen here.

> Here is a man you seem to have known all your life, said Mr. Hackett, who owes you five shillings for the past seven years, and all you can tell me is that he has a huge big red nose and no fixed address. He paused. He added, And that he is considerably younger than you, a common condition I must say. He glared up angrily at Mr. Nixon's face. But Mr. Nixon did not see this angry glare, for he was looking at something quite different.[25]

Note the irony of this final remark.

The absurdity of the attempt to try and understand something from an external viewpoint - the typical viewpoint of the scientific age - is here parodied in the attempt of the Nixon's and Hackett to explain why Watt got off at the bus stop opposite to where they are talking:

> He is on his way now to the station, said Mr. Nixon. Why I wonder did he get down here.
>
> It is the end of the penny fare, said Mrs. Nixon.
>
> That depends where he got on, said Mr.

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[24] Watt, p. 19

[25] Watt, p. 20.

> Nixon.
> He can scarcely have got on at a point remoter than the terminus, said Mr. Hackett.
> But does the penny fare end here, said Mr. Nixon, at a mere faculative stop? Surely it ends rather at the station.
> I think you are right, said Mr. Hackett.
> Then why did he get off here? said Mr. Nixon.
> Perhaps he felt like a little fresh air, said Mr. Hackett, before being pent up in the train.[26]

From one angle this could be seen purely as a parody of the emptiness of much human discourse, and from another angle as a parody of philosophical discourse: in either case a mere playing with words on Beckett's part. However, the important thing to note is its relevance to our world rather than just to a limited intellectual sphere, for the word games of the intellectuals have their counterpart in the ordinary world of the Nixons and Hacketts. Equally, of course, the novelist is involved in a verbal juggling game, the pattern of questions serving to keep his story moving, serving to fill up the necessary pages. There is a more or less endless series of answers to the question why did Watt get off at that particular spot. The external viewer is faced with this series, whereas Watt knows the one answer.

Here we are at a crux of the problem facing the novelist in the modern world: how can he claim to present truth? - the traditional role of the novelist - how can he

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[26] _Watt_, p. 17.

adopt the omniscient role? what right has he to play God more than any other human being? The loss of a confident sense of self, which is a dominant aspect of our age is explored by Beckett in Watt and Murphy where the novelist drops the role of the arrogant all seeing being, becomes a clown not a god, a fool struggling like Watt to explain what he sees with words, but finding greater and greater difficulty in his task. Of course it is worth noting that the circus clown has a definitely adopted role and that to his mask he brings great skill and technique, and in his own way provides an artistic balance to the heroic and potentially tragic skill of the trapeze artist. The circus is in a way modern man's closest link with more primitive, ritualistic forms of 'entertainment' or 'art'.

So busy are the Nixons and Hackett in their verbal games that they never become involved in any genuine personal relationship, which can be seen as yet another comment on man's incapacity to understand and thus come to terms with reality, and once again perhaps a vindication of Murphy's attempt to no longer pretend but to take matters to their logical conclusion.

Not only is Watt's physical appearance, like that of the traditional clown, comical:

> Like a sewer-pipe, said Mr. Nixon. Where are his arms.[27]

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[27] Watt, p. 16.

He has a huge red nose and no fixed address [28] but he has similar problems to the clown in controlling his body:

> Watt bumped into a porter wheeling a milkcan. Watt fell and his hat and bags were scattered. The porter did not fall but let go his can, which fell back with a thump on its tilted rim, rocked rattling on its base and finally came to a stand. This was a happy chance, for had it fallen on its side, full as it perhaps was of milk, then who knows the milk might have run out, all over the platform, and even on the rails, beneath the train, and been lost [29]

Following this we have the description of Watt's smile:

> Watt had watched people smile and thought he understood how it was done. And it was true that Watt's smile, when he smiled, resembled more a smile than a sneer, for example, or a yawn. But there was something wanting to Watt's smile, some little thing was lacking, and people who saw it for the first time, were sometimes in doubt as to what expression exactly was intended. To many it seemed a simple sucking of the teeth.[30]

Here, in these two examples, we can clearly see the cruel side of comedy, the laughter that follows from seeing someone slip and fall or the laughter that arises from a physical peculiarity. This is related to our feelings of superiority in terms of the comic situation. We laugh at Watt's attempt to smile because we can control our facial expressions. Yet at the same time, although we may feel

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[28] Watt, p. 20.

[29] Watt, p. 22.

[30] Watt, p. 23.

superior to the comic victim, there must be some element of identification, for the source of the comic is in the imperfections of the human machine; the imperfect relation of mind and body, the imperfect body and imperfect mind. We laugh when Watt falls because we too can fall, we can laugh at Watt's ridiculous attempt to smile because we are conscious that we smile without spontaniety and are conscious that we too do not have absolute and perfect control over our bodies. Murphy rejects this imperfect state of affairs and we have a revolt, in Beckett's first novel, of as it were the mind against a union with the body and all its imperfections. Yet another example of the break down of normal mind-body relationship in Watt is this amusing description of Watt's way of walking:

> Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible toward the south and at the same time to fling out his left leg as far as possible toward the north, . . . So standing first on one leg, and then on the other, he moved forward a headlong tardigrade, in a straight line.[31]

This leads us to Watt's arrival at Knott's and Erskines strange and beautiful speech. The movement away from the normal world of the novel becomes extreme here (What has gone before reflects for example elements that we can find in the novels of Dickens written a

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[31] Watt, p. 28.

hundred years prior to Beckett). On a first reading Erskine's speech may appear sheer nonsense, and indeed on subsequent readings no clear, logical sense can be found, though certain themes and patterns emerge. However, Beckett does not stand alone in modern fiction, in turning away at times from the kind of clear, logical use of language that we are accustomed to find in the novel:

> Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes. Signatures of all things I am here to read, seaspawn and sea wrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boat. Snot green, blue silver, rust: coloured signs. Limits of the diaphane. But he adds: in bodies. Then he was aware of them bodies before them coloured. How? By knocking his sconce against them, sure. Go easy. Bald he was and a millionaire, maestro di color che sanno. Limit of the diaphane in. Why in? Diaphane, adiaphane. If you can put your five fingers through it, it is a gate, if not a door. Shut your eyes and see.[32]

In this passage from _Ulysses_, or in the Benjy Section of _The Sound and the Fury_, to give another well known example, we have a logical extension of the novelist's exploration of reality in the pursuit of truth, into the world of the mind. Gone, however, is the steadying framework of the concrete external world, against which characters and their actions and feelings, in the traditional novel are set, and in the stream-of-consciousness novel we are much more directly involved with the irrational,

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[32]_Ulysses_, p. 45.

illogical world of feelings. We come much more directly in contact with the minds of Bloom, Stephen Daedalus, Benjy et. This is a logical enough development in the novel, given the emphasis that the post-Cartesian world has placed on the mind. Yet we are conscious that 'our' thoughts are far more complex - that is in terms of mental 'imagery' - than those that we find in fiction. Even the thoughts, feelings and impressions of Benjy have been carefully organized by Faulkner, so that the careful reader is not utterly lost. Thus the novelist has to impose a pattern and simplify the total phenomena. But here lies the dilemma of the modern novelist and his concern with truth and reality. In this attempt to impose a structure, or order in reality, he is in competition with science and indeed is very much subject to the influence of science - and of the whole rationalistic heritage of which he is a part and to which the novel owes its birth and development. We in fact tend to justify novels in terms of sociological philosophic or psychological insights! To add to the confusion of course we have the fact that we in the twentieth century have no coherent vision of reality. In addition the tendency of modern rationalism has been to treat man as merely a superior animal and electro-chemical machine. Within this kind of atmosphere it is difficult for the novelist to function with his belief in humane values.

Furthermore we must note the effect of a middle-class dominated society which places great value on science and technology. Correspondingly the prestige of the novelist is small and his function in society seen as unimportant. What has the novelist to say that is important? a mere teller of tales that has nothing important to say unlike the physicists, psychologists, sociologists, biologists, chemists et cetera who are the ones that have the truth. The modern serious novelist and poet has thus become a specialist who like his scientific counterpart tends to write in his own very specialized language for a minority of interested readers.

Beckett in Watt retreats from the real world into a fantasy world of the imagination, yet his nonsense and that of Erskine has its relevance:

> 'Delight in Nonsense,' says Freud in his study of the sources of the comic, 'has its roots in the feeling of freedom we enjoy when we are able to abandon the strait jacket of logic.'
>
> . . . .
>
> The literature of verbal nonsense expresses more than mere playfulness. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language, it batters at the enclosing walls of the human condition itself.
>
> . . . .
>
> Verbal nonsense is in the truest sense a metaphysical endeavour, a striving to enlarge and transcend the limits of the material universe and its logic.[33]

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[33]The Theatre of the Absurd, pp. 240-42.

In the world of nonsense, or fantasy, or the imagination, the novelist is no longer competing with science but he is exploring the human situation through the power of the imagination. Whereas science has the function of attempting to conquer and order the irrational, the imaginative writer has the function of bringing man to terms with the ultimately unknowable nature of the irrational. Science adjusts and improves the human condition, conquers disease, makes life more comfortable and safe, but it can never give man a god-like knowledge and omniscience, though this may well be the Faustian dream that drives science onwards. Art, on the other hand, serves the function of bringing man to terms with these adjustments and changes, and the evolution of art must be influenced by the changes in man's relationship to the irrational brought about by scientific and technological progress. Thus Beckett's use of fantasy in Erskine's speech reflects modern man's uncertainty about the value of language and the possibility of genuine communication between people. It serves to remind us that we are human beings and bring us back to the reality of things which have been disturbed by the false pride that our scientific and technological progress may have given us.

But to look more directly at Erskine's speech. The opening of his speech creates the impression that he has been on some kind of pilgrimage or search and has

at last found that for which he has been searching:

> The man arrives! The dark ways all behind, . . . waiting for the dawn to break. The dawn! The sun! The light! . . . Then at night rest in the quiet houses there are no more roads, no streets any more, you lie down by a window opening on refuge, . . . All the old ways led to this, all the old windings, . . . the wild country roads where the dead walk beside you, . . . For he knows he is in the right place, at last. And he knows he is the right, man at last.

In case we are inclined to take Erskine's rhetoric too seriously the irony is emphasized by a sentence like the following:

> All led to this, to this gloaming where a middle-aged man sits masturbating his snout, waiting for the first dawn to break [34]

Where we have the positive, hopeful image of 'the first dawn' juxtaposed with the negative, sterile idea of masturbation. What we have in Erskine's speech is a parody of modern man's pilgrimage for truth, for meaning in his life. In particular this could very well be a parody of the overly serious treatment of this theme by T. S. Eliot in The Waste Land and The Four Quartets. T. S. Eliot's serious tone and attempt to find a way out of modern man's dilemmas is an obvious invitation to parody:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And to know the place for the first time.[35]

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[34]Watt, pp. 37-38.

[35]T. S. Eliot, Collected Poems 1909-1962, p. 222.

What Beckett's satiric comment really is, is that the searching for an answer, for a final solution to the human predicament is futile. In place of T. S. Eliot's mystical statements Beckett gives us the release of laughter.

Both Watt and Murphy, as a whole, can indeed be seen as parodies of religious quests, Murphy in the manner of a saint or yogi attempting to transcend the self and Watt on a pilgrimage. The absurdity of Murphy's quest is ironically underlined with his death, and we never know Watt's goal, unless it is that the further he progresses the less he understands. Indeed there is the implication that as the novel progresses Watt is becoming more and more insane - yet we never know for certain. All that one can say is that the futility of Watt's quest is a comment on modern man's attempt to know the unknowable.

Erskine goes on in his speech to note that the contentment of being the right man in the right place will not continue for ever:

> His indignation undergoes a similar reduction, and calm and glad at last he goes about his work, calm and glad he peels the potatoes and empties the night stool, calm and glad he witnesses and is witnessed. For a time. For the day comes when he says Am I not a little out of sorts today?[36]

There appears to be no final resting place in the world described by Erskine:

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[36]Watt, p. 40.

> The glutton castaway, the drunkard in the desert, the lecher in prison, they are the happy ones. To hunger, thirst, lust, every day afresh and every day in vain, after the old prog, the old booze, the old whores, that's the nearest we'll ever get to felicity.[37]

Erskine is here, and subsequently expressing his philosophy of life, which is expressed particularly succinctly as follows, "An ordure, from beginning to end". However, it really is not quite that simple as my discussion of the following passage will try to show:

> The crocuses and larch turn green every year a week before the others and the pastures red with eaten sheep's placentas and the long summer days and the new-mown hay and the wood-pigeons in the morning and the cuckoo in the afternoon and the corncrake in the evening and the wasps in the jam and the smell of the gorse and the look of the gorse and the apples falling and the children walking in the dead leaves and the larch turning brown a week before the others and the chestnuts falling and the howling winds and the sea breaking over the pier and the first fires and the hooves on the road . . . and the endless April showers and the crocuses and then the whole bloody business starting all over again. A turd.[38]

The important thing to note with regard to this extract from Erskine's speech is that it has different meanings depending on whether it is taken as a piece of logical prose, in which case the emphasis would be placed on the final phrase 'a turd', that is everything stated before this phrase is equivalent to a turd. But this would be

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[37]<u>Watt</u>, p. 43.

[38]<u>Watt</u>, pp. 45-6.

to read this passage as a statement and to ignore its literary form. If we place the emphasis on the passage preceding this final phrase, we are only conscious of the nostalgic beauty of the images by Erskine. In terms of emotional content there is a logical contradiction between this final phrase and the preceding passage. This is important because Beckett has often been denounced as a negative writer and if one places the wrong emphasis here - which is not to ignore the importance of the final phrase, however - one may well be left with a completely grim impression. One could illustrate this point further with the following dialogue from Endgame (Hann and Clov see themselves as the last human beings this being endgame!)

> Clov: I have a flea.
>
> Hamm: A flea! Are there still fleas?
>
> . . . .
>
> Hamm: But humanity might start from there all over again! Catch him, for the love of God![39]

Erskine, Clov and Hamm are not serious philosophers, or despairing men in the grips of angst, but rather clowns assuming the roles of twentieth century men at the limits of meaninglessness. The episode involving the flea is not a purely negative statement of despair but rather a witty parody of despair, and in this way a recognition of the

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[39] Samuel Beckett, Endgame (London: Faber, 1958), p. 27.

absurdity of despair itself: through humour despair is transcended.

The relationship between Beckett's handling of language and meaning can be further illustrated by an examination of another passage from Erskine's speech which comes just before the passage just discussed:

> An ordure, from beginning to end. And yet, when I sat for Fellowship, but for the boil on my bottom - The rest an ordure. The Tuesday scowls, the Wednesday growls, the Thursday curses, the Friday howls, the Saturday snores, the Sunday yawns, the Monday morns. The wacks, the moans, the cracks, the groans, the welts, the squeaks, the belts, the shrieks, the pricks, the prayers, the kicks, the tears, the skelps, and the yelps. And the poor lousy old earth, my earth and my father's and my mother's and my father's father's and my mother's mother's and my father's mother's and my mother's father's and my father's mother's father's and my mother's father's mother's . . . An excrement.[40]

Once again one has to note that the total effect is not equivalent to 'an excrement'. In the list of the days of the week, which at the logical level of language is a statement about the monotony, boredom and repetitive unpleasantness of a week, the use of devices more normally found in poetry create an entirely different emotional effect upon the reader. The personification of the days, 'Tuesday scowls', takes us away from the world of men that scowl, which is one kind of meaning contained in the phrase, the unpleasantness is depersonalized, distanced, there is

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[40] _Watt_, pp. 44-5.

something absurd, ridiculous, hence comical in the idea of something like a day of the week having human attributes. The negative force of the word scowl is further reduced by the fact that it rhymes with Wednesday's growl and Friday's howl. Frequent rhyme tends also to have a comical effect. Another poetic device which further anaesthetized the darkness of the verbs, is the chant like rhythm which arises from the repetition of the same rhythmic pattern and the fact that all the days of the week rhyme with each other. Thus the importance of the meanings of the words scowls, curses, yawns etc., is less important than the words as objects, and the words as sounds and rhythmic patterns. It is also worth noting the humour that arises from the mounting crescendo of the week, scowls, growls, curses, howls, followed by the snores of Saturday and the yawns of Sunday. The horrors of the proverbial Monday morning of our clock, office, factory dominated world are commented on with the witty pun 'Monday morns' (We have a rhyme here with dawn and the creation of a new verb in morns). In the subsequent section beginning 'the wacks the moans . . . ' we are more aware of the words as sounds and a rhythmic pattern than as statements about the miseries of life. This is then followed by the 'mother's mother's, father's father's' series, in which words just become objects in a verbal juggling act. The rigidity of the week is broken as are our feelings by the comedy

produced. The very rigidity or formal structure of each of the three separate sections in this passage, mocks the rigidity of Erskine's formal statements about life, We return here to the nonsensical world of childhood where words can be playthings. Serious adults tend to become trapped in the mesh of logic and meaning. Here the power of the Word is mocked. At this point it is worth noting some pertinent remarks on this subject made by Elizabeth Sewell:

> As Miss Elizabeth Sewell suggests in her fascinating study of Lear and Carroll The Field of Nonsense, one of the most significant passages in Through the Looking Glass is Alice's adventure in the wood where things have no names. In that wood Alice forgets her own name: . . . Miss Sewell comments, 'There is a suggestion here that to lose your name is to gain freedom in some way, since the nameless one would be no longer under control. . . It also suggests that the loss of language brings with it an increase in loving unity with living things.' In other words, individual identity defined by language, having a name, is the source of our separateness and the origin of the restrictions imposed on our merging in the unity of being. Hence it is through the destruction of language - through nonsense, the arbitrary rather than the contingent naming of things - that the mystical yearning for unity with the universe expresses itself in a nonsense poet like Lewis Carroll.[41]

This passage throws valuable light on both Watt and Murphy, take for example Murphy's relationship with Endon:

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[41]The Theatre of the Absurd, pp. 244-45.

> It seemed to Murphy that he was bound to Mr. Endon, not by the tab only, but by a love of the purest possible kind, exempt from the big world's precocious ejaculations of <u>thought</u>, <u>word</u> and <u>deed</u>. They remained to one another, even when most profoundly one in spirit, as it seemed to Murphy, Mr. Murphy and Mr. Endon.[42]

In his conquest of the physical world man names things but at the same time he alienates himself from the direct physical world and begins to live more and more in a world dominated by words rather than by things, actions, emotions

> No longer in a merely physical universe, man lives in a symbolic universe. Language, myth, art and religion are parts of this universe. They are the varied threads which weave the symbolic net, the tangled web of human experience. All human progress in thought and experience refines upon and strengthens this net. No longer can man confront reality immediately; he cannot see it, as it were, face to face. Physical reality seems to recede in proportion as man's symbolic activity advances.[43]

Watt's central problem of course hinges around the discrepancy that exists between the symbol - the word - and physical reality.

> For Watt now found himself in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so . . . with reluctance [44]

Watt's alienation from reality is ours, at a more extreme and therefore apparently absurd extreme, as the quotation from Cassirer suggests. The more words become names, rigid

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[42]*Murphy*, p. 127. (My underlining)

[43]*An Essay on Man*, p. 25.

[44]*Watt*, p. 78.

concepts, the more we are alienated from reality. Watt's quest can be seen as an attempt to escape the tyranny of words, an attempt to experience reality more directly, to experience it as it were, to use a phrase that has become a cliché, through the eyes of a child.

If _Murphy_ has its source in the philosophical problems promelgated by Descartes, _Watt_, Richard Coe suggests has its beginnings in the works of the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. In _Watt_ the rationalistic scientific tradition is brought, in the manner of Wittgenstein, to bear on language itself. Words are the products of our minds, we replace things, actions and feelings with them, but they are only symbols. Thus there is considerable room for error, we know the words fire, love, pot but do we have complete knowledge of the phenomena for which they are the symbol. In Watt we have a man who finds great difficulty with words and the phenomena to which they are supposed to relate. As Murphy sees no connection between body and mind, Watt pursues the break between words and reality. Watt's problem can be seen in terms of trying to find words to describe Mr. Knott:

> For one day Mr. Knott would be tall, fat, pale and dark, and the next thin, small, flushed and fair, and the next sturdy, middle-sized, yellow and ginger, and the next small, fat, pale and fair [45]

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[45] _Watt_, p. 209.

and so on in a seeming endless series. Just as any phenomena is never constant, no two pots ever exactly alike, so Mr. Knott is constantly changing. We should note though that Watt has no doubt that what he sees is Knott! Quite clearly in our terms it would seem that if the phenomenon varies that much the word Mr. Knott no longer has any meaning. As Murphy retreats from the physical world so Watt retreats from the word as symbol of the physical world. His search for truth, and freedom from the irrational, however leads to the breakdown of language, as seen in the previous passage but even more extremely in the following:

> Lit yad mac, ot og. Ton taw, ton tonk.
> Ton dob, ton trips. Ton vila, ton deda.
> Ton kawa, ton pelsa. Ton das, don yag.
> Os devil, rof mit.[46]

(Some 'sense' can be made of the above if the letters are reversed i.e. til day cam, to go. Not wat, not knot. Not bad, not spirt etc.)

Here the ultimate absurdity of Watt's quest is revealed.

The world of Knott is a bizarre combination of the absurd and the well regulated. Take for example Mr. Knott's food:

> This dish contained foods of various kinds, such as soup of various kinds, fish eggs, game, poultry, meat cheese, fruit, all of various kinds, and of course bread and butter

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[46] Watt, p. 165.

> and it contained also the more usual beverages, . . . All these things, and many others too numerous to mention, we well mixed together in the famous pot and boiled for four hours, until the consistence of a mess, or puss, was obtained [47]

One cannot doubt that this strange concoction contained a great deal of goodness but the basic sensual enjoyment of eating has been removed. We are reminded here of Murphy and his biscuits, and his concern with ordering experience. In direct contrast with constant changing appearance of Mr. Knott himself we have the mathematical regularity of his meals - both in terms of time and content.

> For he knew, as though he had been told, that the receipt of this dish had never varied, since its establishment, long long before, and that the choice, the dosage and the quantities of the elements employed had been calculated, with the most minute exactness, to afford Mr. Knott, in a course of fourteen full meals, that is to say seven full lunches, and seven full dinners, the maximum of pleasure compatible with the protraction of his health.
>
> This dish was served to Mr. Knott, cold, in a bowl, at twelve o'clock noon sharp and at seven p.m. exactly, all the year round.[48]

Each meal of the fourteen is exactly alike. Despite the elaborate care entailed in this operation Watt never sees Knott. Watt being the kind of character that he is - signified by his name - puzzles over the origins of these arrangements, and this leads to a series of twelve possibilities. Once again as is so typical of this particular novel

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[47] _Watt_, p. 84.

[48] _Watt_, p. 85.

we have a series used parodying the mathematical-like workings of the rationalistic mind. Watt's problem could so easily be solved if he just spoke to Mr. Knott once - but of course this is impossible as Mr. Knott's name likewise suggests.

The careful ordering of reality in the preparation and serving of the foods continues with the arrangements for dealing with any scraps left over:

> Watt's instructions were to give what Mr. Knott left of the dish, on the days he did not eat it all, to the dog [49]

As a dog has to be there at specific times and has to be there regularly and eat every scrap, there is an elaborate procedure to make certain that everything always conforms to a regular pattern, in fact that order always prevails against the forces of the irrational! The questioning Watt puzzles over the possible arrangements that might have prevailed and arrives at the following summary:

Solution	Number of Objections
1st	2
2nd	3
3rd	4
4th	5

Number of Solutions	Number of Objections
4	14
3	9
2	5
1	2

[50]

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[49] Watt, p. 87.

[50] Watt, p. 95.

The arrangement that however existed was as follows:

> that a suitable local dog-owner, that is to say a needy man with a famished dog, should be sought out, and on him settled a handsome annuity of fifty pounds payable monthly, in consideration of his calling at Mr. Knott's house every evening between eight and ten, accompanied by his dog in a famished condition, and on those days on which there was food for his dog of his standing over his dog, with a stick, before witnesses, until the dog had eaten all the food until not an atom remained [51]

But this dog might suddenly die and then the whole arrangement would collapse. And then the man might die. All contingencies however have been thought of and the solution arrived at:

> or better still a suitable large needy local family of say two parents and from ten to fifteen children and grandchildren passionately attached to their birthplace should be sought out [52]

And they would have in their care "the kennel or colony of famished dogs."

Naturally as this is a novel (or more specifically because it is a parody, or anti-novel) we are given a careful list of the members of this family, the Lynch's:

> There was Tom Lynch, a widower, aged eighty-five years, confined to bed with constant undiagnosed pains in the caecum, and his three surviving boys Joe, aged sixty-five years, a rheumatic cripple, and Jim aged

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[51]<u>Watt</u>, p. 95.

[52]<u>Watt</u>, pp. 96-7.

> sixty-four years, a hunchbacked inebriate, and Bill, widower, aged sixty-three years, greatly hampered in his movement by the loss of both legs.[53]

And so it continues with details of the twenty-eight members of the family, a seemingly endless catalogue of ugliness, deformity, disease and corruption. A catalogue of misery but strangely enough a humourous one. The basic source of the humour is the element of exaggeration, the fact that every member of the Lynch family seems to be diseased or deformed, it is the mathematical-like rigidity of the nature of this family which is the source of humour here as is the mathematical-like rigidity of say a Dickensian character such as Pecksniff in Martin Chuzzlewit whose whose constant rigid hypocritical approach to reality is the source of his comic vitality. Once again we find the combination of a mathematical like order and the irrational here in the form of disease and deformity. Like Murphy and Watt the Lynch's are engaged in a mock-heroic battle with the irrational. When Watt enters Mr. Knott's service the ages of the twenty-eight members of the Lynch family totals nine-hundred and eighty years (a footnote, however, states: 'The figures given here are incorrect. The consequent calculations are therefore doubly erroneous'.) If all goes well these total ages will soon come to a thousand years:

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[53] Watt, p. 98.

> Till changing changing in twenty over twenty-eight equals five over seven times twelve equals sixty over seven equals eight months and a half approximately, if none died, if none were born a thousand years.[54]

However the rational force of death intrudes and the magic figure of one-thousand is not achieved.

> This loss was a great loss to the family Lynch, this loss of a woman of forty good looking years.[55]

The irony here is that their concern is not the death of a human being but the loss of a dead mathematic total. We see once again the deadening effect of man's concern with mathematical order and his attempt to conquer the irrational. We too of course laugh at death here as we do also at the end of Murphy. We recognize through our laughter the folly of man's endeavour to resist the irrational, and learn to accept the human situation as it is.

We should perhaps now move from the subject of death to that of love, from the family Lynch to Mrs. Gorman. In the relationship between Watt and Mrs. Gorman love at the extreme is dealt with in more detail in Watt than in Murphy, for their love making is carefully described. Never has there been a more ridiculous or incompetent pair of lovers than these two. The romantic idealism of

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[54] Watt, p. 101.

[55] Watt, p. 102.

romantic love is satirised in the attraction of these two for each other:

> And were they not perhaps rather drawn, Mrs. Gorman to Watt, Watt to Mrs. Gorman, she by the bottle of stout, he by the smell of fish [56]

In an age obsessed with virility, orgasm and sexual performance Watt and Mrs. Gorman stand in humourous contrast:

> Further than this, it will be learnt with regret, they never went, though more than half inclined to do so on more than one occasion. Why was this? Was it the echo murmuring in their hearts, in Watt's heart, in Mrs. Gorman's, of past passion, ancient error, warning them not to sully not trail, in the cloaca of clonic gratification, a flower so fair, so rare, so sweet, so frail? It is not necessary to suppose so. For Watt had not the strength, and Mrs. Gorman had not the time, indespensible to even the most perfunctory coalescence.[57]

It would be easy to dismiss Beckett's treatment of Watt and Mrs. Gorman's love as obscene and as the product of unnatural disgust at normal human relationships. But is it not rather a natural reaction against the excessive romanticising, idealising of sexual love in our age? Aren't we witnessing here an example of the satirist's use of extremes in order to attack extremisms in society in order to bring man back to the sensible and civilized norm. Despair and misery arise because men lose sight of

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[56] _Watt_, p. 141.

[57] _Watt_, p. 140.

the reality of life and human nature. There can be no doubt when reading (or seeing) the works of Samuel Beckett that he has felt deep despair himself, however, what I would wish to emphasize is that his works go beyond despair that their humour, however grim, marks a surmounting of despair, and a recognition of the sources of modern man's predicament.

In both Watt and Murphy Beckett degrades man with his satiric caricatures, because he feels that man in the twentieth century is degraded. Both these novels are alike in having this common purpose and both have absurd, clown heroes engaged in a futile quest. Each hero strives to reduce existence to an ordered, rational pattern and each fails pathetically. We should note, however, that the anti-heroic nature of the genre used by Beckett requires this. However this failure is paradoxically a victory, for life and humanity against the rigid logic of mathematics, against a mechanistic and deterministic view of the universe. In particular in Watt we have a tension between mathematical form and aesthetic form. I am thinking here of the way that this novel is constructed around numerous mathematical series, permutations of words and events. This kind of tension is of course central to literary creation (indeed to life itself), for do not we talk of a successful work of literature as having life and an unsuccessful work as 'wooden', that is that it lacks aesthetic qualities, that

it has a rigid obviously patterned dead form. The use of series is basic to Watt suggesting very clearly the futile, deadening effect of the purely rationalistic approach to reality, while at the same time it is an essential device used to bring some kind of order to the chaotic world of Mr. Knott. This seeming contradiction is resolved by the cathartic force of laughter. Albert Camus sums up this situation very succinctly as follows:

> What I touch, what resists me - that is what I understand. And these two certainties - my appetite for the absolute and for unity and the impossibility of reducing this world to a rational and reasonable principle - I also know that I cannot reconcile them

Cannot we suggest that laughter in some strange way reconciles them or rather reconciles us to this basic tension in life. Reason is not thrown out by Beckett, for to do this he would have to lay down his pen as a novelist, but equally he refuses to ignore the reality and significance of Chaos. Indeed out of the tension between Reason and Chaos comes Beckett's powerful vision, which for all the absence of God certainly has very strong religious affinities. It fearlessly recognizes the power of Chaos and evil and yet strives to go beyond the spiritual impasse of our age. Beckett is true to the spirit of our age in finding no easy solutions.

CONCLUSION

> We are at the extremity now. However, at the end of this tunnel of darkness, there is inevitably a light, which we already divine and for which we only have to fight to ensure its coming. All of us, among the ruins, are preparing a renaissance beyond the limits of nihilism. But few of us know it.[1]

Within Samuel Beckett's works there is a dominant note of chaos, of crumbling values, meaninglessness, much indeed that might lead some readers to dismiss them as the products of an obscene pessimist. Yet this is to ignore the fact that the author has brought order, shape, form to the chaos of experience, for Beckett's works are not formless statements of despair but artistic forms within a very ancient literary tradition, that of the satirist. Whilst Beckett's novels offer no easy solutions to the dilemmas of modern man they do clearly point to the sources of our age's troubles and the comic element, however grim, transcends the note of despair. Man's extreme faith in his capacity to shape and dominate reality, his sense of his own godlike omnipotence has produced this twentieth century angst. In his worship of the false 'gods' of science and rationalism twentieth-century man has lost sight of truth, of reality, indeed of God. The

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[1]Albert Camus, The Rebel (Penguin Books, 1962), p. 269.

task of the satirist is to attempt to bring man back to reality. Man cannot but be unhappy if he has false expectancies of life, if he ignores both his own imperfection, and that of the world. If we have idealistic expectancies of love, friendship, the human condition as a whole we can but despair. This leads to the death of spiritual values and like peevish children we can turn from the good, the true, and the beautiful because we are not perfect.

To degrade man, to mock those things he places the highest value, has always been the technique of the satirist. Through the medium of comedy the satirist has always had the essentially moral concern of bringing man back from some obsessive form of behaviour which is ultimately dangerous to civilized order.

The satirist clearly has much in common with the man of religion in terms of his ultimate aim, and indeed there is much in Beckett that reminds us of traditional religious attitude, particularly the way in which Beckett mocks man's pride.

Unlike the man of religion, however, the satirist has no dogmas to offer. Perhaps indeed it is with the religious mystic rather than the church man of religion, that we should associate Beckett the satirist. Like the mystic Beckett has a profound intimation of the human situation, seen perhaps in its simplest terms in respect

of man's relationship to vastness of time and space, death, the void. He does not, however, reach the joyous affirmation of the mystic, all the same I find some transcendence of meaninglessness, or despair, in Beckett's comedy, it is a transcendent aesthetic as opposed to transcendent religious experience, though perhaps these categories are false, for cannot laughter contain spiritual values, and indeed belong on the path, on the way, to the pure joy of religious certainty. As religion can give us strength to face the chaos of life, so in its own way albeit a less profound level Beckett's comic art can give strength. There is no easy - return to God - solutions to the spiritual crisis of the twentieth century as Beckett sees it, however his art does not have the static quality of despair, but rather the purposive direction of a religious quest. It is indeed a dark night of the soul that we find, a sense that Beckett is working in a dark and perilous situation, but this is to be expected of a true spiritual quest, if it has any true value the soul must be risked.

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