Beckett Re-Membered

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After the Centenary

Edited by

James Carney, Leonard Madden,
Michael O'Sullivan, and Karl White

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INTRODUCTION

Beckett is dead right: "my day my life so they come back the old words always."[1] Remembering Beckett is the most recent stage of Beckett's death. Of course, Beckett was always dying, or giving us "dying words," throughout his life but it seems that he has continued to die, somewhat self-effacingly, up to and beyond his centenary year. The notion that one might be able to outdo death by learning to die so proficiently in life that the boundaries blur is one that Beckett's characters, if not Beckett himself, seem better able to embody than most. Such a state of existing, such being-towards-death, as phenomenology might describe it, even in its raucously humorous and life-affirming Beckettian form, is always closely aligned with habit and suffering. Despite all the weakness and pain and the protests against the regular course of mundane existence, Beckett's characters cannot do without the humdrum. The voice is the most edifying and most visceral marker of this mundane humanity. The choking of the voice is the privation the Beckettian character dreads the most. B laments its passing in *Rough for Theatre I*—"We'll never hear the human voice again"—only for A to protest farcically at its redundancy: "Have you not heard it enough? The same old moans and groans from the cradle to the grave."[2] Even when it grows more silent and A, B and C in *That Time* share a voice, the breeze that turns the leaves is itself described as "the old breath."[3] When stage direction and motion might seem to be taking over, May in *Footfalls* reminds us: "No, Mother, the motion alone is not enough."[4] Despite the lambasting of various rituals and painful physical conditions, Beckett relies on the voice. It is the ground zero of his stage productions and it is the principal character of his fictions. The speaker must be heard in all her misery. The attention to the voice also calls attention to the physical and to the experiential moment of living. Beckett moves away from Joyce's nurturing of the stream of consciousness and the inward language of the mind. He recognises in such a technique, as he did with the Proustian memory, a tendency to discount the voice's mediation of the body's endless routines—"making yourself all up for the millionth time."[5] In the plays, stage directions take the place of Joyce's interior monologues and Proust's involuntary memories as wordless repetitive actions become a prelude for the human voice that follows. The viewer witnesses the body of the protagonist moving in the space of her own making, living out the mundane.

Because of the different nature of the voice in Beckett we also have a very different body. In his early study of Proust, Beckett describes the Proustian characters as victims of time. Their subservience to the rhythms of Proustian time leaves their bodies swirling as immaterial temporal appendages. Beckett argues that the "immediate joys and sorrows of the [Proustian] body and the intelligence are so many superfoetations."[6] They are an accretion of one thing upon another, the superimposition of various memories and lived realities that must mediate the overarching work of Time. Even the lover is prone to this process of dispersion. Albertine, Beckett argues, is also transformed by the work of the involuntary memory. Beckett describes how Proust "decompos[es] the illusion of a solid object into its manifold component aspects, so the short journey of his lips to the cheek of Albertine creates ten Albertines, and transforms a human banality into a many-headed goddess."[7] Beckett realises how important the drawing out of the "human banality" is; he therefore never gives us the "many-headed goddess" but instead the body that is shorn of limbs, or the body that is paralysed and waiting. Even though he shares with Proust a deep concern for the "gouffre interdit a nos sondes," or for what he describes himself as, the "inaccessible dungeon of our being,"[8] he sees in the sufferings of the body a means for laying siege to a language that will only later also be defined in terms of a "prison-house of language." The "name of the diver" he sends into this inaccessible region where dwells the "essence of ourselves"[9] is not involuntary memory but a more somber and yet enlivening descriptive force that is consistently pinned to the present through the sufferings of the body it describes.

As early as his study of Proust, Beckett recognised what was to be gained from suffering. Suffering and boredom are the two extremes of the vast plane of Habit. It is only suffering that represents the "omission of that duty" to Habit; it is "Suffering" "that opens a window on the real and is the main condition of the artistic experience."[10] But Beckettian suffering is not a Joycean interior monologue that laments the passing away of a son, or that recounts the terror of a cuckold. Neither is it a Proustian deliberation sparked by an involuntary memory that details the moment of apprehension of the death of a grandmother. Beckettian suffering tries to distil the essence of all such instances of suffering and then apply it to an unreal and surreal universe. Why does Beckett persist in detailing that which will itself become almost habitual? It may be because he realises that suffering too is one of the "enchantments of reality." It cannot be assigned to a cause, or to a narrative that smacks too readily of recognisable causes and ends such as filial piety or matrimony. He wishes to look "to a deeper instinct than the mere animal instinct of self-

preservation." In seeing suffering as another of the essential "enchantments of reality"[11] he is attempting to isolate it in its glorious objectivity: "But when the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchantment."[12]

Oscar Wilde, another Dublin-born dramatist, whose work might at first glance seem far removed from such Beckettian speculations, came late to his own philosophy of suffering. Writing from his Reading jail, Wilde discovered a newfound "humility" in the suffering he had never committed to his art. It is only fleetingly evident in *Dorian Gray*, as it is always threatened by the salvation to be found in the picture or portrait; and even though the stripped, blind statue of "The Happy Prince" tells the Swallow that nothing is more marvelous than the "suffering of men and of women," God does appear at the end to call off the waiting. Beckett gives us the narrative of the eternally stripped down statue of the Prince with the Swallow always at his side. If the parallel of these rather unlikely bed-fellows can be taken a stage further, then we might even read Beckett as fulfilling the prophecy of suffering that Wilde in his cell knew had to be taken further than he had presented it. Wilde knew that every work of art "is the fulfillment of a prophecy: for every work of art is the conversion of an idea into an image."[13] And in his insertion of his own suffering into his last great work of art, we might see the stirrings of the imagination working towards the Beckettian stage space or *lieu vague*: "And exactly as in Art one is only concerned with what a particular thing is at a particular moment to oneself, so it is also in the ethical evolution of one's character. I have got to make everything that has happened to me good for me. The plank bed, the loathsome food, the hard ropes shredded into oakum till one's finger-tips grow dull with pain, the menial offices with which every day begins and finishes, the harsh orders that routine seems to necessitate, the dreadful dress that makes sorrow grotesque to look at, the silence, the solitude, the shame—each and of all these things I had to transform into a spiritual experience."[14] If Wilde had had the time or the opportunity to write a play around such experiences, how close might it have been to Beckett? Although it would take Beckett another fifty years and the experience of a far greater atrocity to mediate the "spiritual experience" that suffering can bring, it is to the potency of such a shared realisation that *Beckett Re-Membered* speaks today.

This collection is divided into four sections—Philosophy, Poetry, Drama, Fiction —in an attempt to do justice to the breadth of an aesthetic achievement possibly unmatched in the twentieth century. The inclusion of

a section devoted to "Beckett and Philosophy" responds to the current state of Beckett scholarship that has experienced something of a "philosophical turn" in recent years with the publication of such titles as Anthony Uhlmann's *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image*, John Calder's *The Philosophy of Samuel Beckett*, and Pascale Casanova's *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*. The recent publication of the first two volumes of Beckett's letters is another milestone in Beckett scholarship that will inspire new takes on Beckett's voice; it enables us to return, with renewed "fire," to "[a]ll that old misery," secure in the knowledge that "[o]nce wasn't enough for you."[15]

James Carney
Leonard Madden
Michael O'Sullivan
Karl White

Notes

[1] Samuel Beckett, *Comment C'est How It Is and/et L'image*: *A Critical-Genetic Edition* (London: Routledge, 2001), 53.
[2] Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1990), 230.
[3] Ibid., 395.
[4] Ibid., 401.
[5] Ibid., 394.
[6] Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: Calder, 1999), 13.
[7] Ibid., 49.
[8] Ibid., 31.
[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 28.
[11] Ibid., 22.
[12] Ibid., 22-3.
[13] Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis and other writings* (London; Penguin, 1973), 172.
[14] Ibid., 155.
[15] Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Embers* (London: Faber, 1959), 19.

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SECTION I:

PHILOSOPHY

INTRODUCTION: BECKETT AND PHILOSOPHY

Beckett's relationship with the philosophical tradition remains one of the most alluring and fruitful lines of investigation for critics and commentators on his work. His deep knowledge and wide reading in philosophy from the Pre-Socratics onwards has ensured that a rich vein of reference and allusion stretching from Parmenides to Sartre runs throughout his oeuvre.

Beckett's interest in the writings (as well as the lives) of philosophers has inevitably led to the temptation to seek out an explanatory key or set of beliefs that will somehow unlock the "hidden meanings" of his work. At all times, however, we should be mindful of Beckett's own injunction: "The danger lies in the neatness of identification." As a writer with an astonishingly broad awareness of the many strands of philosophical thought, Beckett deploys many references and allusions that are often no more than playful gestures and reminders that "the mess" still remains opaque to human rationality and the endeavour to construct an all-encompassing system of reference and classification. Nevertheless, many of Beckett's personal philosophical interests are continuously visible in his writings.

Although it is well-trodden ground, it is worthwhile to review the trajectory of Beckett's engagement with Western philosophical thinking. The genuine depth of his interest in the subject may be gauged from the evidence we possess concerning his own private reading, which he pursued diligently. Philosophy not being a part of his official academic curriculum at Trinity, Beckett felt compelled to undertake his own exploration of the territory.

Beckett's first port-of-call was Descartes and his immediate intellectual descendants and it is the Cartesian tradition that provides the bedrock for much of the preoccupations of his protagonists. The division between body and mind, the epistemological uncertainty that characterises all of our knowledge, the nature of language and indeed the doubtful ontological status of the world itself are perennial obsessions that, try as he might, the Beckettian hero cannot free himself from.

While studying in the École Normale, Beckett immersed himself in Baillet's *La vie de Monsieur Descartes* and a twelve-volume collection of Descartes' writings. The fruit of this reading manifested itself in

Whoroscope, Beckett's prize-winning poem of 1930. Although the knockabout style of that piece may suggest that Beckett viewed philosophy as little more than a source of humour and satirical material, this is belied by the frequency of philosophical motifs in the subsequent works. As the philosopher who more than any other sought to safeguard the integrity and indubitable self-identity of the rational, thinking ego, Descartes stands at the still centre of the Trilogy. His claims for the inviolability of the *cogito* as being the ultimate guarantor of the existence of a benevolent, rational deity haunt the mature protagonists of the Beckettian universe.

Having begun with Descartes, Beckett delved further back into the history of Western thought, as is attested by the very strong presence in *Murphy* of issues first investigated by the Pre-Socratics. However compelling Beckett may have found the Cartesian emphasis on the sovereignty of the mind and the jurisdiction of reason, the dissolution of the body and the attendant decay of our mental faculties ending in the inevitable dissolution of consciousness in death were facts that Beckett found unavoidable. Once consciousness is viewed as a process supervening on material interactions, epistemology yields to ontology, and the very ground of being itself becomes a pressing concern. This is reflected in his great interest in the earliest of the Greek thinkers and, in particular, the Atomists.

Unable to find any compelling evidence for belief in a transcendental deity, Beckett was drawn to the central thesis of Socrates' predecessors, namely that the universe as perceived was the result of the fluctuating rhythms and patterns of matter. Whether that matter was ultimately fire, air, earth, or water was irrelevant. The key consequence was the exposing of humanity as being no more than an ephemeral manifestation of nature, destined to dissolve back into its constituent parts. This grim realisation is illustrated by the fate of Murphy's mortal remains. Having striven all of his life to achieve a Cartesian sovereignty in his private mental realm, Murphy ends by becoming a pile of ashes intermingled with the dust and vomit of a barroom floor as mindless matter reasserts its supremacy and the indifferent cycle of life continues.

Beckett's next major work, *Watt*, is a matchless exposition of the severe limitations of our epistemological capabilities. The protagonist carries Cartesian scepticism to its hilarious (and terrifying) extremes. Unable to accept any given situation without considering the apparently infinite counterfactual possibilities, Watt becomes a prisoner of his quest for absolute certainty and knowledge, as he is buffeted relentlessly by the

"contingencies of the contingent world." Having set out to find certainty, Watt ends in chaos and what may be insanity.

However much Beckett may have doubted the central tenets of Rationalism and Occasionalism (having read the central texts of their various schools throughout the 1930s) he could never escape their compelling intellectual interest. The questions posed by thinkers such as Geulincx, Spinoza, Leibniz, Kant, and Schopenhauer (to name only the most obvious examples) haunted Beckett as he moved closer to a position where, in almost Socratic fashion, the only thing he could be certain of was the lack of certainty.

The Trilogy is replete with epistemological conundrums that are the inevitable lot of a consciousness that is able to reflect upon itself and vocalise its bewilderment and ignorance. From the very beginning, Molloy finds himself unable to make a statement that is not qualified by an admission of doubt and uncertainty. His wanderings in a nameless landscape, and his eventual floundering in a wood, are punctuated by questions concerning the nature and apparently highly limited reach of his rational capacities that make a mockery of the aspirations of a sovereign reasoning *cogito*. More self-aware and resentful than the helpless Watt, Molloy and Moran are only too conscious of their shared humiliating status as ephemeral mortal creatures.

However much the minds of Molloy, Moran and Malone may let them down, they are at the very least assured of their bodily existence. In *The Unnamable*, however, even this last certainty is dispelled. Cartesian doubting is taken to its logical conclusion, and the body is gone. What is left is a voice, alone and unknowing, its only capacity being that of giving expression to a boundless epistemological ignorance and to the terrifying consequences that follow from such a predicament. Although the later works are less explicit in their treatment of philosophical dilemmas, the same issues continue to sound albeit more obliquely and in a more resigned tone of voice.

Those obsessions, and much more besides, are amongst the subject matter dealt with in the papers in this section. Julia Jordan's paper focuses on the nature of chance and contingency as explored in perhaps the most explicitly philosophical of Beckett's works, *Watt*. Whereas prior to Beckett the role and representation of chance in the novel had been associated with hopeful possibilities and an affirmation of human freedom, Jordan argues that chance in the world of Beckett reflects the fundamental contingency of all existence, and in the absence of any transcendental validation leads only to despair.

Benjamin Keatinge examines the quest-narrative of *Molloy* through the framework of the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari to demonstrate how the concept of schizoid analysis may yield a new reading of that novel. Arguing that while an examination of the work that postulates a complete breakdown of the self is appealing and substantive, Keatinge suggests that this is too simplistic a reading and that the character of Molloy still possesses many aspects of the traditional egoic self.

Sinéad Murphy examines an aspect of Beckett's critical engagement with Kant that focuses on the nature of the aesthetics of the sublime. Contrary to the orthodox view that Beckett's private aesthetic is deeply at odds with the Kantian notion that art aspires to represent adequately a non-human ideal of beauty, Murphy argues convincingly that Beckett's aesthetics of impoverishment and the inadequacy of representation he foregrounds still functions very much within the parameters laid down by Kant.

Karl White examines Beckett's treatment of suicide, a key idea in traditional existential thought, through the prism of the work of Arnold Geulincx, a philosopher whose influence on Beckett has often been acknowledged, but rarely examined in any great detail. White argues that the possibility of suicide remains an ever-present spectre in the Beckettian universe, one that is refused but never ignored.

Daniel Watt explores the influence of Berkeley's theories of perception in Beckett's writing, arguing for the long-term and ever-recurring influence of that philosopher's thinking from *Whoroscope* onwards. Watt demonstrates that Berkeley's preoccupation with the ontological status of objects in regards to the perceiving eye of either man or god is shared by Beckett's protagonists, who continually hope that their sufferings are observed in order to grant them validity and meaning.

Garin Dowd performs a close reading of the divergent approaches of Gilles Deleuze and Alain Badiou to Beckett in order to illuminate the differences between the two and to suggest possible pathways for further explorations.

Taken together, these essays offer a further contribution to the ongoing exploration concerning Beckett's relationship with the central streams of Western philosophical thought.

POSSIBILITY IN BECKETT'S *WATT*

JULIA JORDAN

Richard Rorty argues in *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* that the modern individual is modern precisely because of the impress of chance. We must, he writes, make "an effort to achieve self-creation by the recognition of contingency,"[1] or by the acceptance of our status as uncertain, fitful, and inconsequential. This idea of chance as a uniquely modern epistemological category brings with it an association with a sense of permissive, limitless possibility. Possibility is usually perceived as being positive, simultaneously representing an openess to what is undecided and implying an easy ability to switch course or to go with the flow. An awareness of possibility also inculcates a sceptical, non-committal wisdom brought about by an awareness that literally anything can happen: this brings both disillusionment, which is wrought by mess—which can be seen as the manifestation of an acceptance of possibility—and a sense of permissive, limitless potential.

A novel that was accommodating to possibility, therefore, would communicate an openness to that which is not yet decided: of plot, of structure and possibly of character too. The work would incorporate an inconsequential, meandering sense of what may come that is not normally deemed to be the proper subject of the novel; the greater the predominance of possibility in the novel, the greater the disregard for plot, and for the mechanisms of cause and effect. Leland Monk has linked this quality of undecidability with the impress of chance: a whimsical, flirtatious sense that events, even those committed to the page, have not yet been determined.[2] The literature of possibility, then, is that which replaces traditional determinisms of plot with its own dynamic of uncertainty. In as much as it works against those aspects of the novel that have traditionally helped to define the genre, chance has always been the "unrepresentable Other of narrative."[3] The novel of possibility, contrastingly, works to undo the neat teleological determinisms of an overarching plot, so that it might allow chance to operate; or rather, so that it might represent chance more successfully. Novels of possibility are messy, disordered, and often oddly passive—characters must wait and see what, if anything, comes up.

The mid-twentieth century novel had a unique opportunity to explore novelistic indeterminism, as the influence of existentialism, the Second World War, and a scientific culture that seemed defined by its preoccupation with redefining concepts of uncertainty and randomness,[4] all made themselves felt. In this essay, I argue that the eponymous protagonist of Beckett's *Watt* (written between 1945 and 1953, *Watt* was published in French in 1953, and in English in 1963), is perhaps the mid twentieth-century character most defined by the idea of possibility, but that in stark contrast to the idea of a novel that embraces possibility as simultaneously embracing mess and disorder, Watt actually hates mess and all forms of epistemological uncertainty. The novel follows Watt's labyrinthine contortions of consciousness as he runs through possibilities of everything that might happen in minutely ordered lists: the scope of possibility is his preoccupation, and his anxiety: what "might" happen needs to be conceived well in advance, to allay fears and to prepare himself for any eventuality.

This organisational exactitude was not, apparently, reflected in the novel's construction, and Beckett's comments on its composition can be linked to the idea that a novel engaged with the idea of possibility will manifest a willingness to embrace mess and disorder: "it was written as it came, without pre-established plan."[5] David Hesla argues that *Watt* as a whole can be related to this first impulse—to give voice to, but, crucially, not shape to, the mess and confusion that he found surrounding him.[6] The sense of limitless possibility as mess, confusion, and uncertainty, is one of the defining tropes of his novelistic oeuvre. In the course of an interview with Tom Driver, Beckett stated:

> The confusion is not my invention. We cannot listen to a conversation for five minutes without being acutely aware of the confusion. It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess. It is not a mess you can make sense of … One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that now is simply a mess.[7]

And later on in the same interview:

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

> accommodates. To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.[8]

Beckett's increasing disquiet about the notion of the "form itself" is evident on reading *Watt*, which consciously seeks to counter the domination of chance by narrative that makes a representative fealty to experiential chance impossible. It is this primacy of Beckett's formal experimentation with novelistic chance as expressed by an engagement with possibility that I take to be at the heart of the novel, and would like to form the basis of my reading of *Watt*. *Watt* defeats the "literature of possibility" in the end, as it becomes a novel of possibility only in an ironic, circumscribed way. It is a novel about the limits of possibility even while it evokes its potential range, and the usual, positive interpretations of possibility, and its association with hope, are cruelly and relentlessly satirised by Beckett. Possibility, in the shadow of the Second World War, has become a bleak thing, and Beckett's interrogation of its limits can be read as a commentary on this, and perhaps any, narrative's eventual failure to fully represent chance. *Watt*, in its obsession with possibility as a futile, self-defeating expansion of choice in a world where choice has been rendered meaningless, is perhaps the period's best example of this failure.

Throughout the novel Watt exudes a solipsistic, essentially inactive view of the world. This passivity, which had been leavened by wit in Beckett's 1938 novel *Murphy*, is depicted as a kind of nihilism in *Watt*. We first meet Watt on his way to the house of a Mr Knott, whose servant he is to become, and quickly get the sense that he is unusually susceptible, through his passive acceptance of what befalls him, to the form of chance known as luck. Things just happen to Watt, for obscure, perverse, or merely unelaborated upon reasons (described as "imprevisible" happenings in the novel).[9] In fact, uncertainty is the primary mode of Watt's existence: "his progress, though painful, and uncertain, was less painful, less uncertain, than he had apprehended, when he set out"[10] and "all he desired was to have his uncertainty removed."[11]

In order to achieve this amputation of his all-encompassing uncertainty, Watt neurotically, or perhaps more accurately, autistically, orders his perception into rigorously maintained lists of possibilities:

> The only other object of note in Erskine's room was a picture, hanging on the wall, from a nail. A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture … Watt wondered how long it would be before the point and the circle entered together upon the same plane. Or had they not done so already, or almost? And was it not rather the circle that was in the

> background, and the point that was in the foreground? Watt wondered if they had sighted each other, or were blindly flying thus, harried by some force of mechanical mutual attraction, or the playthings of chance. He wondered if they would eventually pause and converse, and perhaps even mingle, or keep steadfast on their ways, like ships in the night, prior to the invention of wireless telegraphy. Who knows, they might even collide. And he wondered what the artist had intended to represent (Watt knew nothing about painting), a circle and its centre in search of each other, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of its centre and a circle respectively, or a circle and its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively.[12]

The personification of the circle and the point thus sees them figured as an allegory of man's position in relation to forces beyond our understanding. Their blindness to the root causes of their situation remains the same whether they are blind to some force of "mechanical mutual attraction" or to the fact that their relationship to chance mirrors that of a fly to a wanton boy. We are all, Beckett seems to imply, similarly blind to the causes of our situation, and the ensuing pathos is both deeply felt and ironic. The prose is repetitive and mechanical, and yet could be firmly suggestive here of a kind of joyful linguistic inclusiveness—as usual, no possibility ("two or less than two or even more than two") is ever shut down, but this perhaps leads not only to an *impasse* in the normal order of cause and effect, but also to an exponential increase in irrationality between one thing and another: there is, we could say, a cause, and then infinite possible effects. This dislocation of cause and effect in Beckett's writing leads to obfuscation, necessarily; to the unexpected and poetic beauty of surprising and illogical correspondences; and also to a—wilful, I think—embracing and celebration of the contingent, the pointless, and the exhilaratingly voluble. To rule nothing out is not merely, Beckett sometimes seems to suggest, to let any old thing in; it is also to allow possibility its fullest rein.

And yet, this interpretation, that the introduction of possibility to the very novelistic form that would seem to repel it as having a positive, expansive effect on the narrative, seems inaccurate for most of the book. The long lists of possible happenings, or the "demented pondering" of the novel, as Al Alvarez puts it,[13] dominate the narrative, whereby Watt, seemingly never-endingly, runs through every scenario that may form the outcome of any, usually banal, day-to-day event in his life. After these lists of the mathematically figured, minutely altered calculations, which resemble the workings out of an equation, what we are often left with is bathetic and inconclusive: "it seems probable she was not."[14] The prose itself in these cases can be seen to represent an understanding of the world

as specifically contingent, and at every turn expresses a fraught relationship between this arbitrary, unpredictable reality and the confines of narrative. If every possible outcome is listed, then perhaps chance will be extinguished; or, in other words, perhaps the unpredictable will be predicted. The language is uncertain, digressive, and attempts to cover every possibility: "the possibility, if not the probability, is not excluded of our finding two or less than two or even more than two men or women or men and women as little bony and so on as fat and so forth eternally turning."[15] Beckett is unwilling to allow his prose to take the easy route of providing "the illusion of fixity,"[16] of stating that something is a particular way because something else made it so, and in this unwillingness we can see an implicit critique of the easy lies upon which fiction so often relies. Fixity is an illusion, and yet narrative "fixes" reality. There should be no conclusions to be drawn about life, *Watt* insists, because all is uncertain, and all is up for grabs.

It is the anxiety that this realisation induces that is encoded in the very sentence structure of the novel. Through the failure of Watt's attempt to catalogue reality, we are shown the impossibility of escaping chance and possibility:

> But Tom's two years on the first-floor are not *because of* Dick's two years on the ground-floor, or of Harry's coming then, and Dick's two years on the ground floor are not *because of* Tom's two years on the first floor, or of Harry's coming then, and Harry's coming then is not *because of* Tom's two years on the first-floor, or of Dick's two years on the ground-floor, and Dick's ten years on the first-floor are not *because of* Harry's ten years on the ground-floor, or of the other's coming then, and Harry's ten years on the ground-floor are not *because of* Dick's ten years on the first-floor, or of the other's coming then, and the other's coming then is not *because of* (tired of underlining this cursed preposition) Dick's ten years on the first-floor, or of Harry's ten years on the ground-floor, no, that would be too horrible to contemplate, but Tom's two years on the first-floor, and Dick's two years on the ground-floor, and Harry's coming then, and Dick's ten years on the first-floor, and Harry's ten years on the ground-floor, and the other's coming then, are because Tom is Tom, and Dick Dick, and Harry Harry, and that other that other, of that the wretched Watt was persuaded.[17]

The "cursed preposition" he is tired of underlining, the fact that one event is not "*because of*" another, is once again a refutation of the efficacy of cause and effect in the novel, and, indeed, a similarly damning refutation of causal explanations for the linkages between events in real life. That these events are unconnected, outside the teleological order that would provide the solace for Watt's psychopathic need for reassurance, is what

has damned him. So are we supposed to accept that each action and event is unrelated, and yet is accorded identical narrative weight, worthy of equal and passive reportage? Things are as they are, we are told, simply because "Tom is Tom, and Dick Dick, and Harry Harry." So will individuals always reject a rigid psychological or causal determinism, one that would seek to explain away their actions? And if things exist as they are because "Tom is Tom," does that not imply that Tom is determined through his nature to act as he does, thus ambiguously embracing that very determinism?

These sorts of inconclusive formulations, typical of the novel, are distinguished by a prose that stumbles and retraces its steps at every turn. It goes round and round a subject with miniscule alterations, until every possibility, even of linguistic or semantic difference, has been stymied. Watt's neuroses, and the style of the prose that reflects them, are both reminiscent of the desire that Richardson identifies in Moran in *Molloy*—"there is a frantic urge to eliminate the random and deprecate the inexplicable."[18] Alvarez notes the same impulse in *Watt*: "More simply, Watt's demented pondering is a defence against the dangerous unpredictability of life."[19] Hugh Kenner, meanwhile, excuses the style as "deliberately witty pedantry." [20] In fact, the narrative obsession with possibility in *Watt*, as I have argued, is intimately connected to Beckett's anxiety about unpredictability, and the ensuing style has a deeper internal coherence and logic than previously argued. It represents a formal engagement with the same ideas that *Watt* examines thematically: namely, possibility and contingency. As Hesla points out:

> [*Watt*] is Samuel Beckett's version of the human experience which Jean-Paul Sartre in *Nausea* and Albert Camus in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* defined as the sense of the absurd. Existence off the ladder is Beckett's phrase for what Sartre calls "contingency" and what Camus describes as life after the "stage sets collapse."[21]

Existential absurdity thus appears as an ally of chance, of the uncertain, and of possibility. It also stands as the existential revelation that accompanies the realisation that the universe is meaningless, or, that we live in a world ruled by chance. Yet again we can see that although existential conceptions of possibility are unlikely to have influenced Beckett directly, we can nevertheless trace a literary and philosophical confluence of ideas: namely Beckett's belief, as expressed in *Watt*, that possibility need not—indeed, perhaps, cannot—be allowed to equal an easy and fallacious optimism.

Part of the mid-century fixation on possibility and chance, and the distrust of deterministic modes of thinking, came from the existentialists. Although Beckett denied vehemently any specific alliance to any philosophical movement, idea or practitioner[22] (and went as far to disavow the existentialist theories of being: "When Heidegger and Sartre speak of a contrast between being and existence, they may be right, I don't know, but their language is too philosophical for me. I am not a philosopher. One can only speak of what is in front of him, and that is simply a mess"[23]), he nevertheless anticipated the later Sartrean attack on the notion of cause and effect by frequently arguing against the domination of narrative by, as he saw it, overly simplistic causal explanations for behaviour and events, as well as, I would argue, attacking its dominion in the novel in general by downplaying its function in the machinery of his fiction.[24] Sartre's definition of possibility, as "an option on being"[25] provides us with a reminder, grimly well suited to the immediately postwar period, that life itself is profoundly contingent. As Roquentin says in *Nausea*: "the essential thing is contingency. I mean that, by definition, existence is not necessity."[26] If existence is not necessity then neither is it necessary, and our whole being is based on chance, an awareness of which brings with it the spectre of non-being: "For the future dimension is ignorance, risk, uncertainty, a wager" Sartre states, continuing: "if each human being is a risk, humanity as a whole is a risk. The risk of no longer existing." Sartre's disquiet at the centrality of non-being is apparent when he contends "that the world is suspended in not-being as the real is suspended in the heart of possibilities."[27] Possibility for Sartre, therefore, is an almost physically conceived space, analogous to not-being: "a sort of geometrical place for unfulfilled projects, all inexact representations, all vanished beings or those of which the idea is only a fiction."[28] This sense of possibility casts it not in the future realm of what could happen, but in the present realm of what might have happened, and thus brings with it an elegiac sense of loss for vanished possible lives.

There is a parallel, and related, neurosis about language in *Watt*, and, similarly to Edith Kern's comment on the presence of Class in *Watt*: "certainty prevails only among the 'they': the Hacketts and the Lady McCanns."[29] It seems that certainty about language, too, is a privilege available only to those for whom every choice is not agony, as Edith Kern notes: "the realisation of the purposelessness and absurdity of the universe turns the certainties … into inanities. It affects the value given to facts, their explanation, and their expression."[30] This suspicion of certainty and purpose extends to Watt's apprehension of language:

> Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, at one of Mr. Knott's pots, of one of Mr. Knott's pots, it was in vain that Watt said Pot, pot. Well, perhaps not quite in vain, but very nearly. For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all ... he could always hope, of a thing of which he had never known the name, that he would learn the name, some day, and so be tranquilised. But he could not look forward to this in the case of a thing of which the true name had ceased, suddenly, or gradually, to be the true name for Watt. For the pot remained a pot, Watt felt sure of that, for everyone but Watt. For Watt alone it was not a pot, any more.[31]

This inability to call a pot a pot, here, is still extraordinarily disquieting. Is reality, here, becoming arbitrary, or is it merely a disjunction between reality and the linguistic tools we have to describe it? Beckett had met Axel Kaun in 1937 and, under his influence, decided that rationalism was "the last form of animism" and that chaos was a preferable alternative. Beckett wanted an assault against words (and specifically against the English language)[32] as they were getting in the way of what he wanted to say: "It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it."[33] The dislocation of things and their names experienced by Watt amounts to a randomising of perception, and reminds one of Sartre's protagonist Roquentin in *Nausea*, who says to himself "'It's a seat,' a little like an exorcism," but the word fails to do its job of naming the object: "it refuses to go and put itself on the thing." The seat, he finds, "called a seat … is not a seat. It could just as well be a dead donkey, tossed about in the water."[34] This is the terrifying obverse to the cool rationality associated with chance in its early twentieth-century incarnation, that of the arbiter of a statistically ordered universe. If we can talk about chance in terms of probability then we have effected, in Ian Hacking's famous phrase, the taming of chance.[35] The excruciating arbitrariness of Watt's relationship with language, contrastingly, shows a keen awareness of the idea of chance as a lack of knowledge, and of the ancient Greek chaos that existed before the world came into being. Experience, for Beckett, is now analogous to this terrifying sense of anarchy, of words and meanings cut free from their age-old tethers. Chance, here, is the enemy of meaning.[36]

Further evidence of the meaninglessness of the novelistic universe in which Watt is operating comes from the mindless violence in which Watt and Sam (a character who may or may not exist inside Watt's mind, and may or may not be a narrative manifestation of Samuel Beckett) engage

enthusiastically. After they have forced a rat to eat its own offspring, we are told: "it was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came nearest to God."[37] In the essay "Situation of the Writer in 1947" Sartre says "they [French writers of the earlier generation] were all fascinated with violence, wherever it might come from; it was by violence that they wanted to free man from his human condition."[38] He returns to the chance/violence relationship in *Notebooks for an Ethics*:

> all violence, beginning where force leaves off, implies a certain confidence in chance (taken as unknown laws). If I hammer harder and harder on a nail, there is no violence. But a moment arrives when I am no longer in control of my gestures. At this moment, I count on statistics: twenty blows of the hammer will fall somewhere by chance, but one will come that will strike the nail. I do not count on what is known but on what is unknown, there is *hope* in violence and *certitude* in a lawful operation. Recourse to magic.[39]

The link between danger and chance is overt. We are reminded of Thomas Kavanagh's observation, in his seminal work on chance and the Enlightenment, that:

> There is, consciously or unconsciously, a link between any meditation on chance, the less than certain, and the gamble of death. The truly fortuitous event, the event outside any causal chain through which we might control it represents an unacceptable scandal in the same way that the reality of our own death, the ultimate unthinkability of that death, is antithetical to any true living of life.[40]

This link between death or despair and possibility, mirrored in the existentialist ideas, is present in Watt's paradoxical statement that he was closest to God whilst committing acts of violence, and is key to my argument. In the insistent refusal of the text to let the linguistic inclusivity brought about by its attempt to represent possibility equal hope, Beckett ironises the easy association of possibility with optimism. As we are told overtly, Watt "abandoned all hope … while continuing to believe in the possibility."[41]

In the middle of one of his many streams of consciousness, Watt says:

> And if I could begin it all over again, knowing what I know now, the result would be the same. And if I could begin again a third time, knowing what I would know then, the result would be the same. And if I could begin it all over again a hundred times, knowing each time a little more than the time

> before, the result would always be the same, and the hundredth life as the first, and the hundred lives as one. A cat's flux.[42]

Chance, and therefore possibility, are here marginalised, and made impotent. Nothing will ever happen that is not already laid out for us. This is, however, not a hopeful meaningfulness, one adjacent to ideas of destiny and purpose—there doesn't seem to be anyone to lay them out—but rather, a hellish vision of, and version of, a Nietzschean eternal return: "a cat's flux." Where chance's operation is thus curtailed, but not replaced by ideas of hope, purpose or religious meaning, we see a stasis in human endeavour: what is the point of existence if, by the force of your will, you cannot effect change on your surroundings? Beckett's concern with possibility and contingency has become embedded in the sentences themselves. *Watt* doesn't have to be about chance; by its very being it demonstrates at every turn a neurosis or anxiety about chance's very existence. In *Watt*, the narrative doesn't move toward anything as much as it circuits itself, and, by doing so, erases the very possibilities it has so carefully and minutely built up. Buttner, one of Beckett's best critics, concluded that "In face of the emptiness and spiritual aridity of existence, hope is always kept alive in Beckett's characters."[43] But it is this very assumption, the easy linkage between possibility and hope, that I hope I have shown to be fallacious. Leland Monk argues that Joyce's *Ulysses* marks the cut-off point of chance's, and therefore possibilty's, representation in literature because it "rejoices in things that happen by chance" and the resulting "undecidability of pleasure" that is celebrated is an aesthetic that has:

> a certain *pleasure*, the expression of a capricious whim, a vagary that is erratic and unmotivated … It is finally undecidable whether such a "throw beyond" is the function of a pleasure that transgresses the authorial will or the function of a will that legislates its own pleasures.[44]

Beckett throughout his career distanced himself from Joyce's very "authorial will" ("He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance")[45] and on the topic of chance this was no different. Joyce's exposition of chance as a manifestation of the "undecidability of pleasure" has perhaps become, under Beckett, in his novelistic examination of possibility, reversed.

Thomas Kavanagh has depicted the history of chance's relationship with literature as follows:

> against a vision of the world as a potentially finite series of knowable and ultimately controllable determinisms, chance implied a resolutely tragic vision. To recognise chance was, more than anything else, to recognise our inability to reason toward and become part of any natural order. Chance speaks of the limits of reason as a faculty that, finally, reflects only its own presuppositions.[46]

Chance as a "resolutely tragic vision" is the vision of possibility as expressed in the universe of *Watt*, peopled by those with an "inability to reason toward and to become part of any natural order": of Watt obsessively categorising reality until it barely exists other than in a series of equally meaningless options. Chance is not a Joycean *voluptas*, an eroticised undecidability, but a painful taxonomy of being. What should be an image of exhilarating volubility, of fulfilment of possibility, of filling up life to its very seams, turns out to be the reverse. If every possibility is mooted, it is simultaneously stymied. The exploration of possibility, then, becomes its death, cancelling itself as it reproduces. When we hold *Watt* in our minds as a coherent achievement, we see possibilities expanding exponentially like dividing bacterium; but in a stark echo of the times, it has become an image not of hope, but one of panic.

Notes

[1] Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 25.
[2] Leland Monk, *Standard Deviations: Chance and the Modern British Novel* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993). Monk argues persuasively that James Joyce's *Ulysses* represents the cut-off point in terms of chance's possible accommodation within narrative, and that subsequent, "post-modern" attempts to deal with pure chance are doomed to failure.
[3] Monk, *Standard Deviations*, 10.
[4] Quantum Mechanics, which took hold as the dominant mode of explanation in physics in the nineteen thirties and forties, in one fell swoop invalidated whole swathes of the previously predominant deterministic worldview in physics.
[5] Letter to Gottfried Buttner Dec 4, 1978, Quoted in Gottfried Buttner, *Samuel Beckett's Novel* Watt, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), xi.
[6] David Hesla, "The Shape of Chaos: A Reading of Beckett's *Watt*," *Critique* 6 (1963): 85-105.
[7] Tom F Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," *Columbia University Forum*, IV (Summer 1961): 22.
[8] Driver, 23.
[9] A favourite Beckettian word, *imprevisible* is Spanish for unpredictable.
[10] Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Calder, 1976), 222.
[11] Ibid., 225.

[12] Ibid., 126-7.
[13] Al Alvarez, *Beckett*, ed. Frank Kermode, *Fontana Modern Masters Series* (London: Fontana, 1973), 45.
[14] Beckett, *Watt*, 138.
[15] Ibid., 60-1.
[16] Ibid., 207.
[17] Ibid., 132.
[18] Richardson, Brian. "Causality in Molloy: Philosophic Theme, Narrative Transgression, and Metafictional Paradox," *Style* 26. 1 (1992): 67.
[19] Alvarez, *Beckett*, 45.
[20] Ibid., 44.
[21] David Hesla, *The Shape of Chaos: An Interpretation of the Art of Samuel Beckett* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1971), 83–4.
[22] Edith Kern has made a useful summary of critical linkages made between Beckett and philosophy: she argues that although he defies philosophical pigeonholing, his work abounds with references—if mocking ones—to philosophy. See Edith Kern, *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique: Kierkegaard, Sartre, Beckett*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970), 167.
[23] Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," 22.
[24] Richardson also argues this, but for *Molloy*: he suggests that by deferring the causal connections, Beckett leaves us with a "mere collocation of fragmentary episodes" (Richardson, "Causality in Molloy: Philosophic Theme, Narrative Transgression, and Metafictional Paradox," 71).
[25] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2002), 99.
[26] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (London: Penguin, 1965), 188.
[27] Sartre, *Nausea*, 191.
[28] Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 19.
[29] Kern, *Existential Thought and Fictional Technique*, 90.
[30] Ibid., 189.
[31] Beckett, *Watt*, 78.
[32] This is obviously, for an Irishman, not a purely philosophical position.
[33] John Pilling, *Beckett before Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 153. Pilling is quoting from Beckett's German notebook 4, entry for 15 Jan 1937.
[34] Sartre, *Nausea*, 169.
[35] Ian Hacking, *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).
[36] Kavanagh's conclusion to his analysis of Voltaire's *Candide* also elided an awareness of the power of chance with the failure of language: "Pangloss's defence of a liberty compatible with necessity enunciates the ultimate cacophony of language, the bankruptcy of man's attempts to represent reality, to offer anything more eloquent than silence as a way of making sense of what happens in the world." Anything else will be "a fragile crust of language proclaiming its categories of good and evil, knowledge and ignorance, causality and rationality,

over a volcano of chance poised to contradict and abolish them." Kavanagh, *Enlightement and the Shadows of Chance*, 168.
[37] Beckett, *Watt*, 170.
[38] Jean-Paul Sartre, "Situation of the Writer in 1947," in *What Is Literature?* (London: Methuen, 1950), 145.
[39] Jean-Paul Sartre, *Notebooks for an Ethics*, trans. David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 171–2.
[40] Thomas Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth Century France* (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1993),, 27.
[41] Beckett, *Watt*, 145.
[42] Ibid., 46.
[43] Buttner, Gottfried. *Samuel Beckett's Novel* Watt (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1984), 151–2.
[44] Monk, *Standard Deviations*, 151–2.
[45] Shenker, Israel. "Moody Man of Letters." *New York Times*, 6 May 1956, 1–3, 1.
[46] Kavanagh, *Enlightement and the Shadows of Chance*, 4.

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