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Reading Kafka & Beckett in the Light of Irony

Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in English

Gregor McIver Kalinowski

University of Kent at Canterbury
2003

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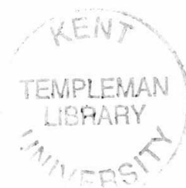

Abstract

My thesis has a double-focus: what began as a comparative study of Kafka and Beckett as ironists, became increasingly diverted with the subject of irony itself. This development led to a theoretical engagement from which I emerged with a clearer sense of what I had always presumed, that dealing with irony involves a range of hermeneutic problems akin to problems encountered reading Kafka and Beckett. What I had not anticipated was the extent to which irony solicits this engagement. These mutually informing hermeneutic concerns assist in the tracing out and extending of pre-existing comparative commentary on Kafka and Beckett.

Perhaps inevitably, given the well-known links between Kafka and Kierkegaard, my companion text in irony is Kierkegaard's thesis *The Concept of Irony*. The link to Kafka should not detract from the fact that Kierkegaard necessarily pops up in any serious reading in irony. Through Kierkegaard I became acquainted with some of Kierkegaard's more recent readers – of particular mention here is Sylviane Agacinski's reading (in *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard*) of *The Concept of Irony* in the light of late twentieth-century theoretical developments. It was through Agacinski that I found I was not bound to decide between the various views of irony encountered in my reading, but that these constituted a spectrum or filter of points of view corresponding to a movement in irony itself.

Thus conceived, irony provides the means for telling Kafka and Beckett apart in a differential filter of readings. More than this, however, this movement only ever marks the beginning of irony's movement, yet participates in the promise of a further movement. This preserves that priceless, albeit risky, nub of *not reading* which lies at irony's source, and the questionable advantage of not theorizing too systematically about Kafka and Beckett – which inevitably remains, folly or not, an essential factor behind the choice of irony in the first place.

Acknowledgements

Keith Carabine - for tolerating my appearances and disappearances, and for always having the time. I'd also like to thank Keith and Ginny for putting up mountains of my belongings in their spare room for much of the last decade; Hanna – for her time and unlimited print credits; Xav – for ignoring my despair; Caroline, Dave etc – for having nothing to do with all of this, keeping me in mind of the world beyond what it seemingly shrinks to; Holly – for putting up with me, and sometimes for not, for taking an interest, and sometimes for not, for countless details, trifling and not; and, finally, Fiona Kalinowski – for her incomprehensible generosity and patience

Abbreviations of works frequently cited

A Agacinski, Sylviane, *Aparté - Conceptions and Deaths of Soren Kierkegaard*, trans. Kevin Newmark. Tallahassee, Florida: Florida State University Press, 1988.

BI De Man, Paul, 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' in *Blindness and Insight - Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, Second Edition. London: Routledge, 1993.

BON Kafka, Franz, *The Blue Octavo Notebooks*, trans. Ernst Kaiser & Eithne Wilkins, ed. Max Brod. Cambridge: Exact Change, 1991.

BR Blanchot, Maurice, *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader – Fiction & Literary Essays*, trans. Lydia Davis, Paul Auster, and Lamberton, Robert, ed. George Quasha. New York: Station Hill Press, 1999.

CI Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Irony With Continual Reference to Socrates (together with Notes of Schelling's Berlin Lectures)*, ed. & trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989.

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CSS Kafka, Franz, *Kafka - The Complete Short Stories*, ed. Nahum N. Glatzer. London: Minerva, 1997.

D Beckett, Samuel, *Disjecta - Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment.* London: John Calder, 1983.

FT Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling – Dialectical Lyric by Johannes de silentio*, trans. Alastair Hannay. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985.

HII Beckett, Samuel, *How It Is.* London: John Calder Ltd, 1996.

KDI Kafka, Franz, *The Diaries of Kafka - 1910-13*, trans. Joseph Kresch, ed. Max Brod. London: Secker & Warburg, 1948.

KDII Kafka, Franz, *The Diaries of Kafka - 1914-1923, Vol.2*, trans. Martin Greenberg, with the co-operation of Hannah Arendt, ed. Max Brod. London: Secker & Warburg, 1949.

M Beckett, Samuel, *Molloy*, in *Three Novels By Samuel Beckett: Molloy: Malone Dies: The Unnamable.* New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991.

MD Beckett, Samuel, *Malone Dies*, in *Three Novels By Samuel Beckett: Molloy: Malone Dies: The Unnamable*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991.

MPK Beckett, Samuel, *More Pricks Than Kicks*. London: Calder Publications Ltd., 1993.

Mu Beckett, Samuel, *Murphy*. London: Calder Publications Ltd., 1993.

NK Adorno, Theodor W., 'Notes on Kafka', in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel & Shierry Weber. Cambridge Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995.

P Beckett, Samuel, *Proust; Three Dialogues – Samuel Beckett & Georges Duthuit.* London: John Calder, 1965.

PJ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Papers and Journals: A Selection*, trans. Alastair Hannay. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1996.

PP Kafka, Franz, *Parables and Paradoxes* (Bilingual Edition) New York: Schocken Books, 1975.

Pr Kafka, Franz, *Der Prozess*. Leipzig: Verlag Philipp Reclam jun., 1989.

QE Smyth, John Vignaux, *A Question of Eros: Irony in Sterne, Kierkegaard, & Barthes*. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1986.

SS Blanchot, Maurice, *The Siren's Song - Selected Essays by Maurice Blanchot*, trans. Sacha Rabinovitch. Brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1982.

SUD Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Sickness Unto Death - A Christian Psychological Exposition For Upbuilding and Awakening*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983.

T Kafka, Franz, *The Trial*, trans. Willa & Edwin Muir. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968.

TUE Adorno, Theodor W., 'Trying to Understand *Endgame*,' in *Notes to Literature - Volume One*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

U Beckett, Samuel, *The Unnamable*, in, *Three Novels By Samuel Beckett: Molloy: Malone Dies: The Unnamable*. New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1991.

W Beckett, Samuel, *Watt*. New York: Grove Press, 1959.

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> … the old verse is appropriate: *semel emissum vloat irrevocable verbum* [The word once let slip flies beyond recall]. (CI, 247)

INTRODUCTION

The title of this thesis encapsulates both its origins and its development: what began as a comparative study of Kafka and Beckett as ironists became increasingly concerned with the notion of irony itself. I like to think there was something inevitable about this development, insofar as irony, though it no longer enjoys as feted a theoretical position as it once did, remains a singularly demanding subject – to the extent that the distraction it sets in motion threatens to sabotage one's erstwhile intentions.

The following introduction falls initially into two parts, corresponding to the double focus of the thesis. The first broaches the comparative element, and the second the issue of irony both as philosophical concept and methodological problem and/or temptation. A third part illustrates how these elements can begin to be productively engaged. The final section provides an overview of the structure and argument of the thesis that is inseparable from the double focus on Kafka/Beckett and the subject of irony.

I

> I know those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. (MD, 192)

Two little phrases set the scene for commentary on the subject of Kafka and Beckett.

Firstly, in 1952 Richard Seaver establishes the connection between Kafka and Beckett: '*Murphy* and *Molloy* inevitably recall Kafka, but neither is imitation Kafka.'[1]

Innocuous at first glance, on reflection Seaver's remark becomes increasingly peculiar insofar as it reflects, already, a tacit consensus regarding Kafka and Beckett. *Inevitably recalls* indicates something that precedes, preempts, overrides, reflection; it suggests the subject scarcely requires qualification because Beckett has, in a sense, always already recalled Kafka, and Kafka has always harboured the possibility of Beckett. Hence Seaver, ostensibly the first to remark the affinity, is merely declaring the obvious.

Fifty years on, I experienced something like this at first hand when everyone around me exhibited such mysterious confidence in my subject that I myself began to lose heart.

[1] Seaver, Richard, in Grover, Lawrence & Raymond Federman (eds.), *Samuel Beckett - The Critical Heritage*, p.85. For full references of works not included in the list of works frequently cited, the reader is referred to the bibliography.

Consider, for instance, the actor Brad Pitt's declaration in a 1999 interview, that 'Radiohead [the alternative rockgroup] … are the Kafka and Beckett of our generation.' When Pitt goes on to elucidate his meaning he buries it in 'deepest sleep': 'What comes out of them I don't think is anything they could articulate, but I would certainly say that it's that which we all know is true somewhere when we're in our deepest sleep.'[2]

Our second little phrase dates from 1959. W.A.Strauss finds that 'Beckett represents a step beyond Kafka.'[3]

Strauss sets the pattern for subsequent contrasts: George Szanto (1972), for instance, proposes that Beckett is Kafka's 'immediate follower' in terms of 'narrative consciousness'[4]; Adorno (1961) finds that Beckett 'provides Kafka with a further self-reflection and turns him upside down by totalizing his principle' (TUE, 259); and Dominique Iehl (1980) finds that Beckett picks up where Kafka lets off, developing and radicalizing aspects of Kafka, where the form of this development throws light on essential aspects of Kafka's writing.[5]

Strauss' remark also reflects, by extension, the various historicizing points of view that conceive Kafka and Beckett as terms in a progression. Philip Toynbee (1955), for instance, situates Kafka and Beckett at opposite ends of a fictional tradition: '[Beckett] is the end-product of a fictional tradition which has flowed from Kafka through Sartre, Camus, and Genet, and of a tradition in French nihilistic writing which goes back to Jarry, Lautréamont, to Sade' (*Critical Heritage*, 74).

The marked habit of situating Beckett at the end, beyond the end, or as the end-product, of a fictional or theoretical tradition, finds fuller expression in a work like Hassan's 1971 reading of diverging tendencies in a postmodern 'literature of silence:'[6]

> First, Romantic dream and metaphor explode words into outrageous visions. From Novalis and Nerval, through Lautréamont and Rimbaud, to the Surrealists of our century, the imagination strains toward a kind of Dionysiac frenzy. Second, Romantic irony, taking a parallel line through Heine and Mallarmé, moves the imagination toward its abolition, and persuades art of its own impossibility; we look toward Beckett. The language of the former, merging with the chaotic flux of reality, aspires to All; the language of the second, canceling reality into the pure order of number, aspires to Nothing. ... Thus we rush from Romanticism to the postmodern scene. The literature of

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[2] Interview in 'Life,' Guardian, 7.11.99, p.18.

[3] Strauss, W.A., 'Dante's Belacqua and Beckett's Tramps,' in *Comparative Literature*, XI, no.3 (Summer, 1959), p.252.

[4] Szanto, George H., *Narrative Consciousness - Structure and Perception in the Fiction of Kafka, Beckett, and Robbe-Grillet* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), p.7.

[5] Iehl, Dominique, 'Die Bestimmte Unbestimmtheit bei Kafka und Beckett', in David, Claude (ed.) *Franz Kafka - Themen und Probleme*, pp.173-4.

[6] Hassan, Ihab, *The Dismemberment of Orpheus - Toward a Postmodern Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), p.7. The critical 'need' for Beckett as an end or end-product is amusingly discussed by Paul Stewart in 'The Need for Beckett', in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Volume 10 Numbers 1 and 2, pp.17-29.

> silence encloses a silence of fullness and another of vacancy. Against Blake, Rimbaud, Whitman, Lawrence, Breton, and Henry Miller, say, stand Sade, Mallarmé, Valéry, Kafka, Genet, and Beckett.

If Seaver and Strauss set the scene, two texts constitute the critical life of the subject: *Beckett's* observations regarding Kafka in a 1956 interview, and Ruby Cohn's 1961 essay '*Watt* in the Light of *The Castle*.' From a critical point of view the subject seems all but laid to rest with Cohn – not that no further work appears on the subject, but Cohn's remains the only comparison to find its way into the bibliographies of Beckett criticism. More recently, or less distantly, Iehl's essay (1980) 'Die Bestimmte Unbestimmtheit bei Kafka und Beckett' provides a fine overview of motifs common to Kafka and Beckett. Furthermore, of the smattering of comparative commentary that pops up throughout the respective critical literatures, Adorno's scattered but invaluable commentary singles itself out. We survey all of these texts in the second chapter.

Coming back to the subject of inevitable recollection, another figure intimately linked with both Kafka and Beckett is Maurice Blanchot. Unlike Adorno, Blanchot does not establish links between the two. Furthermore, whereas Kafka is a consistently recurring theme, Blanchot has written only a couple of short essays on Beckett. However, I suggest that many passages concerned with Kafka open up, *dilate*, when read with a view to Beckett, almost as though Beckett is embryonically embedded in Blanchot's Kafka commentary. The following passage, for instance, seemingly applies to *Malone Dies* or *The Unnamable* or *Texts For Nothing* rather than anything in Kafka:

> What makes language possible is that it strives for the impossible. Thus at every level it involves unavoidable conflicts and anxieties. No sooner is something said than something else must be said to correct the tendency of all that is said to become final, to insinuate itself into the imperturbable realm of objects. There is no end, neither at the level of simple sentences nor at that of complete works. Conflicts, which can never be resolved, are not a solution; but neither is silence a solution. Language cannot be achieved by silence; silence is a form of expression whose dishonesty forces us into speech. Besides, the suicide of words can only be attempted within words - a suicidal obsession that can never be realised, that leaves them with the blank page or with the insignificance of vain words. Such solutions are illusive. The ruthlessness of language derives from its ceaseless evocation of a death it cannot achieve. (SS, 38-9)

Kafka is not overtly concerned with the suicide of words – at least it is not a concern that immediately strikes his reader, although it possibly is a theme that haunts him. This ghost inevitably recalls Beckett.

Blanchot's increased importance in Beckett studies may be attributed in part to *Derrida's* signaled abdication, Derrida's expressed reluctance or *inability* to produce a reading of Beckett, on the grounds, as he declares in an interview, that Beckett is 'too close' 'as though I had always already read him and understood him too well.'[7] 'Of course,' as Nicholas Royle (1995) observes, 'there is not reading and there is not reading' (160).[8] Although Derrida alleges he cannot 'write, sign, countersign performatively texts which 'respond' to Beckett,' his reluctance or inability in this connection effectively countersigns Beckett's hallmark reluctance and inability.[9]

In an earlier interview Derrida links Blanchot and Beckett as writers that have produced 'texts which make the limits of our language tremble, exposing them as divisible and questionable' (quoted Royle, 162). We could therefore conceive Blanchot's seeming reticence on the subject of Beckett in the light of a *too intimately* shared concern with language. Where we intimate Beckett stirring in Blanchot's Kafka, we may be seeing Blanchot stirring, and Beckett stirring in Blanchot. Perhaps Blanchot neglects further contact with Beckett because of the peculiar notion, advanced in 'The Essential Solitude,' of the *noli me legere*: that a writer never reads his own work. Blanchot cannot read Beckett without reading himself. Beckett seemingly has that effect on readers. As Derrida's not reading Beckett (which is at the same time as though he has always already read Beckett) suggests, Beckett seems to supplant, displace or preempt the reader, every reader: *reading itself.* With Beckett Blanchot's *noli me legere* verges upon the reader, comes closest to rendering every reader a writer under the ban of the *noli me legere.*

II

Irony gets swept away all by itself. (A, 78)

The original plan was, as I mentioned, to compare Kafka and Beckett as ironists. Yet even then my motivations were not entirely laudable. I had some conveniently flexible ideas regarding irony and self-reflexivity, and a serene sense that these would stretch to meet every demand. Irony was by some obscure magic to carry off or deliver my dissertation for me. In

[7] Derrida, Jacques, 'This Strange Institution Called Literature,' in *Acts of Literature*, pp.60-1.
[8] Royle, Nicholas, *After Derrida*, p.160.
[9] See Royle (especially pp.162-8) for what 'is going on in this, perhaps deceptively gentle and loving, appropriation' (164).

other words, already then I had the sense that irony's 'strange, featureless, even demonic flexibility' renders it sympathetic to the demands of reading Kafka and Beckett.[10]

However, as I found, irony doesn't resist as much as endlessly solicit definition. Indeed, it may be defined as this solicitation itself. And because irony demands that one trace it to its source, the text that gradually emerged as most adequate to my needs was Kierkegaard's thesis *The Concept of Irony*, which itself traces the appearance of irony to Socrates. *The Concept of Irony* was in turn supplemented by several works negotiating Kierkegaard in the light of recent theoretical developments, in particular Sylviane Agacinski's (1977) reading of *The Concept of Irony* in *Aparté: Conceptions and Deaths of Søren Kierkegaard* and John Vignaux Smyth's (1986) *A Question of Eros: Irony in Sterne, Kierkegaard, and Barthes*. Paul De Man's 'The Rhetoric of Temporality' also provided valuable orientation.

In the course of this engagement my understanding of irony was considerably modified. Not necessarily with regard to irony's daimonic flexibility and its implications for reading, but with regard to what degree these need bear on one's procedure or method. For it never seemed enough simply to treat irony as a philosophical subject: irony seemingly compels a further declaration of a theory-practice. One of the first demands or temptations when dealing with irony is to display one's awareness that irony puts into question the very business of dealing with it. Dangerously this can easily end up a considerable irony over oneself; and indeed, in as far as one labours under this onus it is *first and foremost* an irony over oneself. What gradually filtered through to me, and I do not claim even now completely to understand it, is that *irony carries itself off*, that its operations do not require any assistance: that '[i]rony gets swept away all by itself' (A, 78).

And yet, needless to say, irony remains a temptation. I mean this, again, in a limited sense, of irony invoked in the space of method, even as a safeguard against the implied readership, or as a magical supplement to one's reading that absorbs every critique into its train.

Helen Baldwin's (1981) seemingly innocent declaration at the beginning of *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence* is exemplary in this regard: 'Let no skeptical reader assume that I attempt such explication without a considerable degree of self-irony.'[11] Such an open move may be the reverse of what is commonly understood as irony, yet it subtly suggests that this 'I' is in fact doing a lot more work than meets the eye, that its self-irony is carrying out covert operations, silently, invisibly, busily clearing out nooks and crannies in advance, and that Baldwin herself remains safely enclosed within the limits of her ironic operations. *If Baldwin can remain within this limit she will be everything*, she will be every reading that could possibly take

[10] Hartman, Geoffrey, H., *Criticism in the Wilderness*, p.278.
[11] Baldwin, Helene L., *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*, p.7.

place at her expense. We are asked, in effect, to take into consideration that every skeptical snigger at the readings advanced in Baldwin's text has always already been gently appropriated and invisibly appended to the text.

A strange and magical power indeed.

Baldwin's tactic discreetly reveals an awareness that *irony goes further than the reader.* Except, however, that irony does not go further than the reader *by reading*, that is, by advancing a particular reading, but in a sense by not reading: the reader goes further, irony on the other hand (and irony is always on the other hand) keeps its options open. Baldwin would drop short and let her self-irony clear the way, but by alerting us to this limit something else takes place: irony drops short and Baldwin appears in the light of it. Hunkered down behind this non-existent limit, Baldwin is easy to fish out from behind it.

'Precautions are … to be taken with precaution,' as it goes in *Molloy* (M, 32). With irony, to raise one's guard is to let it drop. Every theory of irony becomes an irony of theory; every method that lays claim to irony becomes an irony of method. And yet such considerations need not arrest or distract us, need not seriously interfere with our plans, because irony carries itself off.

Irony carries itself off. Therefore it is unnecessary to display a sense of irony, to alert the reader, and in certain contexts it is even advisable not to, insofar as one exposes oneself to unnecessary risks.

To point my case, around the time he was writing his dissertation on irony, Kierkegaard makes the following defence of his style:

> one cannot write about a negative concept except in this way … and I ask him, instead of giving constant assurances that doubt has been overcome, irony conquered, to permit it to speak for once. (CI, 441)

Originally conceived for a preface, these remarks did not find their way into the thesis itself, and ended up in Kierkegaard's journals. However, as Agacinski's reading of *The Concept of Irony* illustrates, Kierkegaard's argument tacks this way and that way, it lacks an overall point of view or system. The suspicion, obviously, is that we are dealing with some degree of irony, that this is *irony speaking.* Kierkegaard does not at any point in *The Concept of Irony* declare his own point of view to be irony, and yet in the course of time, as differences between Kierkegaard's private and public utterances become increasingly threadbare and comments like the above are supplemented to *The Concept of Irony*, the difference between the accidental and the intentional become increasingly undecidable. Seemingly we are dealing either with a precocious if mildly muddled young philosopher or a master ironist. However:

it is not the case that these categories are mutually exclusive. What Agacinski repeatedly teases out is that *irony* does not need a decision to go one way or the other, but rather has its source in the series of necessary detachments which render such decisions increasingly undecidable – first and foremost that detachment which dispossesses writing at its source.

Hence irony carries itself off. And yet the danger remains that irony diverts and distracts its reader. There is a danger that irony is not simply instrumental, as a concept, for, say, the comparison of Kafka and Beckett, but that it interferes with, delays, changes the subject, by diverting one from it, toward itself, where this diverting toward itself is at the same time diverting from itself.

This does not mean that irony has ruined my thesis. In a sense appropriate to irony, irony ruins everything in advance, insofar as it conceives everything always already in ruin, but this need have no more bearing on us than it always already has. For irony can, of course, be instrumental, up to a point, in the comparison of Kafka and Beckett – indeed it must be, insofar as it is a term that has frequently and meaningfully, and sometimes very resourcefully, been applied to both writers.

We can put this simply by determining that there are two ways of reading irony. And these in turn are inseparably bound up with two readings of reading, which cropped up in diverse forms throughout the course of my reading, perhaps nowhere as succinctly formulated as in this passage from Derrida's 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences' (1967), which itself seemed to crop up at every second turning:[12]

> The one [form of reading] seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology – in other words, throughout his entire history – has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.

Firstly, then, there are the various conceptions of irony that may be subsumed into the traditional view of irony as subjective experience ratified on the basis of a subject/object dichotomy. This view includes the common view of irony as a stylistic figure, where what is said is said to be the opposite of what is meant. This view of irony 'lives the necessity of interpretation as exile,' of ironic reconstruction and ascription to authorial figures and/or masterly contexts; it is what Kierkegaard terms irony as a *controlled* element or *mastered*

[12] Derrida, Jacques, *Writing and Difference*, p.369-70

moment. It is irony philosophically and historically validated; irony validated through context and irony that validates context.

The various conceptions of irony subsumed under the second view of irony regard what the first view conceives as the *truth of irony* as mere after-effects of irony, as ironic *effects*. Here we are dealing with that view of irony that has emerged in the late twentieth century. Here irony is conceived as the sign and site of a *necessary* detachment, where every rule, convention or law that serves to bind a certain discourse to its occasion becomes the basis of a possible detachment. Consequently all writing is conceived to involve the possibility of irony: 'The possibility of writing is the possibility of irony: it is the possibility of detachment' (A, 76). The interval between text and signatory becomes the occasion of ascribing irony not to the signatory, but to discourse and its 'natural propensity for drifting' (A, 77). In other words instead of irony signifying a conscious origin and end, this irony turns on an essentially linguistic basis.

The risk with either view is to regard the relations between the two views as anything but tricky. Thus the risk for the second view, or the temptation it is not infrequently accused of succumbing to, is of a certain charlatanry: of seeking, perhaps, to do too much by *not reading*. Another charge is that, far from diverting from authoritative contexts and the context of authority, the reader insinuates himself in place of the author; he makes out to have departed a certain order, only to smuggle himself back into it at a higher level, having strictly speaking never left it.

We may therefore suggest there is a third possibility, the possibility that a reading does not succumb to this temptation, that it does not return to the order it claims to have departed, that it never even entered it in the first place, and that criticisms in this vein are always already beside the point. By not presuming to operate under the mantle of a certain limit, theory or method, this third possibility is necessarily exposed, or is always already exposed, to a degree of fragmentation and unpredictability. It does not, however, simply invoke the magical power of its ruins and presume thereby to have carried itself off.

That irony carries itself off does not require that one *not* deploy ironic strategies and effects to make one's point, nor does it require that one *not* be earnest about one's subject. All it means is that irony carries itself off. Nor does it mean that there are no standards involved in irony as it is commonly understood as a stylistic figure, that one ironic effect is no more ironic than another, that everyone is an ironist and that all ironists are on a par – that everything is just as ironic as everything else, and just as subject to irony – that too would be to miss the point. Paul de Man observes that many of the most ironic writers are characterized by aphoristic, rapid and brief texts: Kierkegaard and Friedrich Schlegel for

instance (BI, 210) – yet de Man's essay, itself a masterpiece on irony, never takes heed of the need for an ironic method, perhaps because it is aware, however obscurely, that irony carries itself off. We could observe a faint mist of irony in the absence of ironic effect in de Man's essay on irony, and go on to formulate the thesis that the more earnest a text is, the more rigorously ironic *effects* are obviated, the greater its ironic *tension*.

(As Agacinski suggests, Hegel, of all subjects, may be the true master ironist, who took care never to declare his irony – infinitely more ironic than Kierkegaard, the ostensibly ironic subject, who has a weakness for confessing his irony in private.)

Irony infiltrates the present study whether or not 'I' would have a say in it. There is no particular competence or authority with regard to irony that can either manifest or entirely eliminate the possibility of irony. And that irony carries itself off, that no writing is free of this possibility, leaves us free to deal with it however we feel is appropriate, contingent partly on the contexts to which we are presently obliged – free to express the fact that we are, strictly speaking, always already free with respect to irony, and that irony carries itself off.

III

Beckett represents a step beyond Kafka. ... Pausing to reflect on Strauss' choice of words there is a certain irony in the fact that this *step* involves *representation* taking a turn for the worse.

Furthermore, although it is perhaps obliquely appropriate, given his predilection for ambulatory images, that Beckett should represent a *step* further than Kafka, *a* step seems too clear-cut a distinction. It is never a single step with Beckett but a series of steps that goes on to efface the outwardly determined difference of a single step. In Kafka, by contrast, a single step, metaphorically speaking, still promises to make a difference. That is, the *represented predicament* in Kafka frequently involves the subject having either fallen a step behind or of remaining a step ahead, typically of the competition.

As Strauss suggestively observes, Beckett is a 'poet of vegetation' and Kafka a 'poet of frustration' (252). Kafka conveys the balancing act of keeping in step and keeping up with appearances. Beckett, by contrast, conveys a balance fundamentally out of step and out of keeping with appearances.

Thus the step that Beckett represents beyond Kafka is a *step not taken*, a step less, a *lessness of representation*, a lessness which is at the same time effected through countless steps. The step Beckett represents beyond Kafka is the step of representation that Kafka takes, before Beckett, beyond Beckett. Kafka represents a step that Beckett does not take or cannot but take too often.

Glancing back at the aforementioned views of irony, we observe a similar structure obtains with irony. The difference between irony validated in the order of representation and irony indifferent to this order, is analogous to the difference between Kafka and Beckett: *irony represents a step beyond irony.* Irony, in other words, *is* post-ironic. Much as Beckett's step is a step less through countless steps, the step that irony represents beyond itself is also a step not taken by irony, a step less, the step of not reading, which at the same time reflects the sense that no particular reading can possibly make a difference; the sense, in other words, that everything is always already read. And, subject to a different rhythm of reading, we observe that irony represents / a step beyond irony. That is, a step beyond irony, irony becomes, for all intents and purposes, representation; with irony representation takes a step for the worse.

Irony's movement thus provides a conceptual space for the comparison of Kafka and Beckett. Kafka and Beckett come apart in this movement, which weaves and shuttles back and forth between two readings of reading. This does not mean to infer that Kafka and Beckett can be *accounted for* by irony. Irony does not account for the singular *literary* force of either authorship. Indeed, irony does not account for anything: irony, we shall see, is literary to the point where no literature can appear, and singular to the point where nothing singular appears. At one point Kierkegaard defines irony as 'an infinite playing with nothing' – irony, we might elaborate, verges on the point where it ceases to be read, where it almost becomes not reading. As Kierkegaard also finds, irony as a standpoint can scarcely be told apart from the pious attitude, and is marked, or *unmarked*, by its disappearance into the world through its delighted indifference to the world: 'the ironist frequently becomes nothing, because what is not true for God is true for man – out of nothing comes nothing' (CI, 281). *Irony alone* is, in effect, disappearance without a trace, irony without effect: the ironic subject is poetized out of any poetic or otherwise peculiar (incommensurable) relation to actuality. Applied to what we have already remarked of irony, we find that the most radical and the most discrete way of dealing with irony is to let irony carry itself off, to let irony as a subject disappear: for it not to solicit attention and thus be retained, as a consequence of this neglect, as the almost negligible yet niggling remainder which haunts every operation on language.[13]

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[13] As we cannot deal with irony in Kierkegaard without touching upon its relation, in Kierkegaardian philosophy, to faith, an appendix is appended to this end.

IV

The thesis is comprised of five chapters that respond to its twin concerns.

The double focus of the thesis is captured in the juxtaposition of the first two chapters.

The first chapter stands apart from the following chapters insofar as it seeks to fulfill an obligation to the conceptual element of the thesis: setting out from Kierkegaard's point of view that Socrates' irony is best observed when he is accused and on trial, our reading of irony spreads from Kierkegaard's view of Socrates on trial to a range of connected subjects, such as Kierkegaard's peculiar relation to Socrates in *The Concept of Irony* and in the later authorship, the manner of offence involved in the case against irony, the double-movement in the case against irony, the themes of mastery and mystification, and the movement between irony as a stylistic figure and irony as a problem within the subject, the movement, in short, between the two positions already outlined in brief.

The second chapter, by way of an introduction to the comparative element, is not ostensibly concerned with irony in Kafka and Beckett. It begins with an overview of the beginnings of critical commentary comparing Kafka and Beckett and proceeds through a series of contrasts across a range of subjects, from aspects of Kafka's and Beckett's popular appeal, the hermeneutic challenges their narratives are read to pose, their respective portrayals of what Adorno calls the abdication of the subject, to contrasts in use of allusion and image.

The third chapter encapsulates my original intentions, and deals with notions of irony as they have been commonly applied to Kafka and Beckett. It sets out from a cross-section of readings on Kafka's possible debt to Kierkegaard and proceeds to a reading of 'A Report to An Academy' in terms of an essentially linguistic irony. The second part negotiates the suggestion that Beckett's *The Unnamable* is *beyond* irony, before reading a narrative of irony into Beckett's authorship with its proposed source in *Murphy*.

The fourth chapter picks up on the themes of this Introduction. It turns, on the one hand, on the riskier, lighter and more carefree aspects of reading Kafka and Beckett, on the possibility of escape as it figures in Kafka and Beckett and its divisive implications for reading, and on the other hand on the dangerously seductive aspect of irony. This double focus is negotiated in and through the subject of the Sirens.

The fifth and final chapter seeks to synthesise the principal elements of the preceding chapters in a comparative reading of *Molloy* and *The Trial.*

A final note regarding the choice of readings. This is a study of the prose authorships. With regard to Beckett, my readings focus on *Murphy* through to *The Unnamable.* With regard

to Kafka no restrictions apply. If this seems uneven, my decision is made partly on the basis that it is in these narratives that Beckett remains productively comparable to Kafka, and partly with a view to emphasizing the peculiar shape or trajectory of Beckett's authorship. For although images and motifs are unusually consistent throughout Beckett, to concentrate on these alone is to neglect this feature, which, for our purposes, provides a particularly valuable source of contrasts to Kafka.

CHAPTER ONE

The Case Against Irony

> Persecution, indeed the death sentence itself, is [irony's] destiny: Antigone, Socrates, Christ. By this means irony is not destroyed, but rather fulfilled. (A, 56)

In the first part of his thesis Kierkegaard sets himself the task of distilling from the accounts of Xenophon, Plato and Aristophanes, a 'reliable and authentic view of Socrates' historical-actual, phenomenological existence' (CI, 9). However, in as far as 'irony constituted the substance of [Socrates'] existence ... and if we further postulate that irony is a negative concept, it is easy to see how difficult it becomes to fix the picture of him – indeed it seems impossible or at least as difficult as to picture a nisse [a kind of elf] with the cap that makes him invisible' (12). The 'dialectical' procedure Kierkegaard employs to fix a picture of Socrates involves relieving the negative Socrates of all positive features ascribed to him by his contemporaries – Plato's pathos, for instance, or the same author's irony, which is 'instructive' and distinct from Socrates' infinite irony; Xenophon's account is dismissed almost entirely for treating only of Socrates' 'immediacy' (13). Consistently it is the two more *poetic* accounts that, according to Kierkegaard, come closer to the *actual* Socrates, which is not without significance for Kierkegaard's own treatment of Socrates. Remaining briefly with Kierkegaard's proposed procedure, we note that insofar as Socrates is entirely negative in his actuality, Kierkegaard's aim must be to relieve him not merely of this and that feature accounted to him, but of *all* features, all *accounts*, in order to restore Socrates to that featureless and unaccountable 'silence [which] is his whole life in terms of world history' (11). We return to these and related themes shortly, in particular to the subject of Kierkegaard's personal relationship with Socrates.[1]

[1] For the present I refer to Smyth's description of Kierkegaard's procedure in *A Question of Eros: Irony in Sterne, Kierkegaard, & Barthes*, pp. 102-11.

Socrates' Defence

Firstly we have a quick look at Socrates in the context where Kierkegaard finds his irony is best observed – on trial, faced with the prospect of death:[2]

> the sword of the law hangs by a horsehair over Socrates' head, a human life is at stake, the people are solemn, sympathetic, the horizon dark and cloudy – and now Socrates is as absorbed as an old arithmetician in finishing the problem, in getting his life to conform to the state's conception, a problem as difficult as squaring a circle, since Socrates and the state turn out to be absolutely heterogeneous quantities. It would indeed be comic to see Socrates try to conjugate his life according to the paradigm of the state, inasmuch as his life was entirely irregular, but the situation becomes even more comic because of the *dira necessitas* [cruel constraint of necessity] that under penalty of death bids him find a likeness in this unlikeness. It is always comic when two things that cannot possibly be related are placed in relation to one another, but it is even more comic when the pronouncement is made: If you cannot find any relation, then you must die. (194-5)

Athens thinks to have Socrates' measure when it sentences him to death, notwithstanding Socrates spinning forth in his defence and in the hours leading up to his execution a series of arguments to the effect that death is not necessarily a punishment as much as a mixed blessing. In fact, Socrates finds, in as far as death abolishes all uncertainty with regard to the afterlife it must, at least in this respect, be a good thing. According to Kierkegaard, Socrates' standpoint as irony is not evident in the arguments he sets forth about death. These may be, as in the *Phaedo*, coloured by a philosophical enthusiasm for death that reflects Plato's weakness for pathos, not Socrates'. Socrates' standpoint is more indirectly evinced, in the manner in which he *delights* in his total uncertainty in relation to death:

> All [the] passages [in which Socrates develops his view of death] manifest Socrates' complete incertitude, but, please note, not as if this incertitude had disquieted him; no, on the contrary, this game with life, this giddiness, with death showing itself at one time as infinitely significant and at another time as nothing, is what appeals to him. On the front of the stage, then, is Socrates – not as someone who rashly brushes away the thought of death and clings anxiously to life, not as someone who eagerly goes toward death and magnanimously sacrifices his life; no, as someone who takes delight in the alternation of light and shadow found in a syllogistic *aut/aut* [either/or] when it almost simultaneously manifests broad daylight and pitch darkness, manifests the infinitely real and the infinitely nothing ... and yet ... does not crave certainty with the soul's fervent

[2] For Kierkegaard 'an authentic picture of the actual Socrates is seen in the *Apology*' (80). He uses Friedrich Ast's misgivings regarding the *Apology's* authorship to develop the position that this dialogue is, precisely because the least Platonic of Plato's dialogues, the most true to the actual Socrates. The youthful 'soul' may feel cheated by the absence in the *Apology* of 'the lofty, the paradigmatical,' 'the poetical' and 'the courage that triumphs over death,' supplanted apparently 'by a rather prosaic reckoning' – and yet one may 'learn to understand it otherwise, that in its totality it is irony' (81n, 85).

longing but with a kind of inquisitiveness longs for the solution of this riddle. Socrates is very aware that his syllogisms do not provide an exhaustive answer to the question, but just the speed with which the infinite contrast appears and disappears delights him. The background, receding infinitely, forms the infinite possibility of death. (81-82)

Absorbed in this 'mortal play' (QE, 188) Socrates forgoes answering the charges brought against him, at least he foregoes answering them in terms commensurate with his situation as a defendant in a court of law, neither properly acceding to them nor refuting them.[3] Indeed:

> the grievous charges about all the new teaching Socrates was introducing in Athens were bound to stand in a very strange and essentially ironic relation to his defence that he knew nothing and thus could not possibly introduce new teachings. The irony obviously consists in there being no point of contact between the charge and the defence ... (88)[4]

Inevitably, then, Socrates is pronounced guilty.

Socrates' principle accuser Meletus has demanded that Socrates be executed, but in accordance with Greek law the accused may propose an alternate punishment. Now, on the one hand Socrates is not persuaded that he deserves punishment – for 'according to Socrates' view, the accusers either had to persuade him or allow themselves to be persuaded, whereas this matter of whether he should or should not be put to death or at least be fined or not fined was altogether irrelevant' (89) – but on the other hand, now that Athens has made up its mind to punish him, what *punishment* is preferable to death? For if it is completely uncertain whether death is a good or an evil, what punishment to choose if not, by one's own lights, faced with certain punishment?

> That which is no punishment, that is, either death, since no one knows whether it is a good or an evil, or a fine, provided they will be satisfied with a fine of the amount he can afford to pay, since money has no value for him. But as for a more specialized punishment, a punishment that would be felt by him, he finds that every such punishment is inappropriate. (196)

In fact, in as far as death is a *good* conceived at least in its demystifying relation to the afterlife why not *reward* Socrates some other way – feed him, say, at public expense?

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[3] Where it falls to the subject to reconcile its differences with the state, this particular subject cannot take the objectively determined context of the court seriously. For instance, in Socrates' 'entirely negative view of the state' the court representing the state is dissolved into as many individuals that comprise it, and its 'verdict has only numerical value': 'Socrates thinks that nothing more nor less is said thereby than that such and such a number of individuals have condemned him. ... To a certain degree, the state does not exist at all for him ... He seems to have no intimation that a quantitative decision can shift over into a qualitative one. He dwells on the oddity that three votes decide the outcome' (194).

[4] As Kierkegaard points out later, 'his accusers really ought to have charged him precisely with his ignorance, since particularly in the Greek state and to a certain extent in every state there is indeed an ignorance that must be regarded as a crime' (169n). See also p.178 – we return to this in due course.

Socrates, in short, omits to advance a reasonable alternative, goes along with Meletus' motion to execute him by way of a converse reasoning, and is sentenced to death by default. We are asked to believe that this is no punishment whatsoever, in as far as 'death has no reality for Socrates': 'Thus it is an irony over the state when it condemns Socrates to death and believes it has inflicted punishment upon him' (271). In short:

> Socrates does not refute his accusers but instead wrests the charge itself from them, exposing the whole thing as a false alarm, and the accusers' hundred-pound cannons, which are supposed to smash the accused to pieces, are fired in vain, since there is absolutely nothing to be annihilated. (88)

And thus we see that Socrates, required to stand (up) for himself, proceeds to establish nothing in the way of a defence. That *'irony establishes nothing'* (261) is manifestly the case in this case, for Socrates simultaneously establishes nothing *by way of* a defence (i.e. nothingness in the form of his death) and nothing *in the way of* a defence. Viable connections between Socrates and Athens, by means of which it remains possible for the philosopher to rescue himself, unravel at Socrates' touch. Furthermore, in prison, awaiting execution, Socrates omits to save himself via the traditional loopholes. And in all of this Socrates does not seriously think to *gain* anything from his death, but gains only of the thought of his death, in the form of subjective delighting.[5] However, death itself appears to fiddle this reckoning at Socrates' expense:

> there is in the *Apology* an irony even loftier than the previous ironies, an irony that pulls down Socrates himself ... inasmuch as the polemical force with which he argued this view took an extremely ironic revenge upon him, since he himself in a way is felled by an argument as ridiculous as a death sentence. (89-90)

In other words, Socrates, who always played so hard to get, for the young Athenians famously taken with him as well as for his accusers in the Athenian state, is finally swept off his feet by his fidelity to his standpoint.

As Kierkegaard always emphasises, the situation has a formal quality, an ironic symmetry, which exercises a kind of aesthetic appeal. Socrates' fidelity to his standpoint turns his trial into an 'intriguing' story, effects an interchange between history and poetry to the extent that:

[5] Socrates would not rather be dead than alive, in which case one might have spoken of a gainful death. Nor is he, as Hegel would have him, a *tragic hero*, for whom 'death has validity' (270] and who surmises validation in death (cf. pp.193, 260, 271).

> anyone who read the *Apology* with the assumption that Socrates had never lived but that a poet had wanted to embody the intriguing elements in an indictment and condemnation such as this would feel the irony, but since we are dealing with historical events, many readers will presumably lack the courage to believe this. (90)

Because Socrates actually lived and contrived on a particular day to get himself sentenced to death for the exquisite fun of it, there is a demand that we resist the temptation, and turn poetry back into history. At this point, however, Socrates' behaviour leaves the understanding at a loss. In other words, Socrates' behaviour has *poetic* validity in as far as it expresses an intriguing hypothesis, but Socrates' *historical* reality demands that we do not simply substitute poetry for history, whereupon, however, Socrates' behaviour threatens to lose *all* validity.

Now. The instant the understanding gives up on Socrates one rightly imagines to hear a faint echo of Athens' reaction to Socrates' strangeness. In other words the failure to understand Socrates by anything other than his poetic validity involuntarily repeats the course of events that culminated in Athens' case against Socrates – itself a last-ditch effort to make Socrates stand (up) for himself, to force Socrates to represent himself *non-poetically*.

What is repeated is the failure to understand Socrates. In this context we could cite Constantine Constantinius' (one of Kierkegaard's *incognitos*) concept of repetition: 'the only possibility of repetition [is] the repeated demonstration of its impossibility' (*Repetition*, 171, cited in QE, 114). We return to this when we turn to Kierkegaard's standpoint in relation to Socrates.

There is also much that is instructive and good about this failure to understand, and we shall have occasion to observe this in some detail. For the present, however, we observe merely that *irony itself* is not motivated by a desire to instruct, although it may be expressed by an apparent desire to be instructed: much as Socrates expects to be persuaded of his guilt (in order to improve himself) and not to have to persuade his accusers of his innocence (they are already persuaded of his guilt), so too he finds unreasonable the accusation that he has taught anyone anything (everyone already knows incomparably more than he) and perfectly reasonable that he ask to be taught (in order to reduce his ignorance).

Socrates' ignorance, which is also his irony, is expressed in an infinite demand for conversation. Irony, however, makes an insufferable student. Infinitely willing to learn, irony never learns a thing, is rock-firm in its ignorance, until sooner or later its teachers, driven to distraction, lend their frustration a more punitive aspect. It is this rupture we are concerned with, the point at which the teacher (or state) suspends *normal* relations to its student (or subject) in order *really* to teach it a lesson.

Irony, of course, remains outwardly oblivious to this dramatic change in circumstances. If anything this duplicity of power appears to confirm irony in its uncertainty, for where's the crime in asking a teacher to teach? It is not irony properly understood to play the fool only until called before the headmaster. Socrates does not even regard death as the end of his education, but proposes to benefit from further conversation in the afterlife, in improved company. Irony therefore expresses itself just as willing to learn this real lesson, and then just as unable to make head or tail of it, eminently oblivious to the fact that it is not being asked to understand, but ordered.

And so in the case against irony the accusers are always in the right, because it falls to them to determine the right. The punishment is sanctioned not necessarily by the law as it pre-exists the case, but by the power invested in those punishing, a reserve that can always be drawn upon to extend the law. The prosecution, we see, is also not short of a kind of irony – and we come to this in due course.

Summing up: the *case versus irony* marks an intensification of the problems and politics inherent to the education or reconstruction of irony. It appears that irony can, under certain circumstances, valorise the failure of these negotiations to the point where an essentially hypothetical or poetic problem draws a *real* solution: real enough, in the case of Socrates, to send reverberations across history.

Kierkegaard's Negative Example

> [Kierkegaard's] pretensions to play the role of Socrates with respect to the nineteenth century (and particularly nineteenth century "Christendom") are fairly well known. What is less well known ... is the extraordinary manner in which he increasingly identifies Socrates as the *only* merely human teacher and model he is prepared to recognize as such. (QE, 112)

Throughout the authorship, Socrates is never a merely hypothetical example for Kierkegaard. He is always more than this, or less, in as far as less is more where Socrates is concerned:[6] 'it is as I say: in the eighteen hundred years of "Christendom" there is absolutely nothing corresponding to my task, nothing analogous to it ... The only analogy I have before me is Socrates ... the only man I admiringly recognize as teacher.' As Smyth finds, Socrates is increasingly identified as *the* example for Kierkegaard: the *only* example, analogy, demand, to live up to or fall short of, 'the *only* merely human teacher and model' (QE, 112).

[6] Kierkegaard, 'My Task,' cited QE, p.113.

We can begin to understand what Kierkegaard's *extraordinary* understanding of Socrates involves from the following passage from *Fear and Trembling*:

> [In] a time like this, which is running wild in its profusion of empty, pompous, and fruitless knowledge, to the point where now, just as in Socrates' time, only even more so, it is necessary for men to be Socratically starved a little. It is tragic-comic of course, all these declarations about having understood and grasped the highest, plus the virtuosity with which many *in abstracto* know how to expound it, in a certain sense quite correctly – it is tragic-comic to see that all this knowledge and understanding exercises no power at all over men's lives, that their lives do not express in the remotest way what they have understood, but rather the opposite. On seeing this tragic-comic discrepancy, one involuntarily exclaims: but how in the world is it possible that they could have understood it? Can it be true that they have understood it? At this point, that old ironist and ethicist replies: Don't ever believe it, my friend; they have not understood it, for if they had in truth understood it, their lives would have expressed it also, then they would have done what they had understood. ... Does this mean, then, that to understand and to understand are two different things? They certainly are, and the person who has understood this – but, please note, not in the sense of the first kind of understanding – is *eo ipso* initiated into all the secrets of irony. (FT)

Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates is thus not to be gauged by his knowledge of Socrates, but primarily by the extent this knowledge exercises power over Kierkegaard's *life*. Kierkegaard's understanding of Socrates is expressed in his life and not in that discursive and hypothetical form which, to go by Socrates (and therefore to go by Kierkegaard), is not 'in truth' to understand.

Insofar as this second kind of understanding is primarily conceived by Kierkegaard in properly religious categories, there is another example for Kierkegaard, another model. Christ is not *merely human*, but he sets the later and *higher* example, which begs the question of Socrates' continued validity as a model: once the possibility of faith is given, what possible justification is there for irony?

Smyth suggests that Kierkegaard's account of Socrates in the second, historicising part of *The Concept of Irony* as the only 'historically justified' instance of irony, is to be read in the light of Socrates' historical anteriority to Christ. This complicates Kierkegaard's standpoint in as far as he claims Socrates as his teacher and model, on the wrong side of the divine dividing line.

However, i) in as far as Kierkegaard lives up to Socrates' example, in as far as Kierkegaard *is* irony, he does not seriously seek to justify himself in historical terms, and ii) in as far as Kierkegaard lives up to Socrates' example he is constantly, negatively, reversing historical fact, and *reliving an anteriority to faith*. In other words, through irony's poetic suspension of

historical time, the divine dividing line becomes a constantly recurring possibility as opposed to a point receding ever further into the past.

As mentioned in the introduction, the tricky difference between irony and faith is negotiated in an appendix. For the present suffice it to observe that Kierkegaard considers his own age to be as absorbed in its intellectual virtuosity as Socrates' sophist-riddled Hellas, wherefore it is as in need of being 'intellectually starved' – *more in need* even, in as far as the stakes for Kierkegaard's age are higher. Hence although it is the case that with Christ a later and higher model is given, in whom irony's demands converge upon a divine point, a Socratic figure, albeit less historically warranted in this context on account of the possibility *already* given of faith, is *at the same time* even more valid for this context on account of the possibility *always still to be* given of faith.

Socrates' example, then, gets Kierkegaard into all kinds of trouble, which is as much to say that Kierkegaard gets himself into all kinds of trouble. Insofar as Socrates gets himself into all kinds of trouble we should always be alert to ironic possibilities of Kierkegaard's situation.

One may object to viewing all of Kierkegaard's difficulties in the light of his singular relation to Socrates. After all, Kierkegaard does not get into trouble for asserting Socrates' singular significance in his development as much as he does for his viciously polemical attitude toward every authority he encountered. However, insofar as Socrates *does* have singular significance for Kierkegaard, whether or not one views this as 'an instance of private hubris' (QE, 113), one must allow at least for the possibility that every spot of bother Kierkegaard gets himself is to be traced to this relation, even where no connection is immediately apparent. In this sense Kierkegaard asserts Socrates' singular significance in his development *by* needling just about every authority he encountered.

The way I see it, Kierkegaard gets himself into three basic kinds of trouble: *ironic* (in a historical sense, at the expense of Kierkegaard, in as far as he makes an ass of himself for posterity), *philosophical* (in as far as he gets himself into an impossible knot), and *real* (in as far as Kierkegaard gets himself into real trouble with his contemporaries in Copenhagen).

Kierkegaard makes a fool of himself for posterity: he invites us to compare his life to Socrates' – it falls embarrassingly short. The depressing story of Kierkegaard's life has not the appeal of a drama that develops under the clear blue skies of ancient Hellas and culminates so pointedly in a death sentence. Kierkegaard cuts in comparison a sorry, comical figure, and dies, 'probably of a lung infection,' at forty-two years of age:

> By that time (11 November 1855) he had managed to make himself an object of public ridicule by provoking a feud with a satirical weekly, which mercilessly caricatured him,

> his posture, clothes, and unusual, jerky gait, but also a public nuisance, by launching a sustained and bitter attack on the Danish State Church, and its more eminent functionaries. (Hannay, FT, 36)

Nineteenth-century Copenhagen would not sentence anyone to death merely for having an in(sub)ordinately large mouth. This is not to say that Kierkegaard wanted to get himself sentenced to death, but, then, *pace* Kierkegaard, neither does Socrates *want* to get himself sentenced to death, he merely finds it a curious hypothesis to observe that he can, and, what is more, that it is immensely entertaining that Athens stands for this madness.

Kierkegaard makes a fool of himself for posterity. Yet this beginning with the end goes out of the way of the question. We begin with the story of Kierkegaard's life and not with the life itself. How else make the comparison? This recalls Kierkegaard's double-bind in the introduction to *The Concept of Irony*, where he declares the necessity to 'fix the picture' of Socrates and portrays Socrates as an invisible elf. Similarly Kierkegaard invites us to fix the picture of his relation to Socrates, but this relation, in as far as it is properly expressed in his life and not in the story of his life, is always disappearing out of the picture, out of the *story* of Kierkegaard's life.

The question remains how Socrates, whose life (according to Kierkegaard) is entirely negative (a 'silence' and a 'secret'), can be an example for Kierkegaard. What is an entirely negative example? Kierkegaard gets himself into a considerable hypothetical knot even *before* he may gainfully be compared to Socrates. This is the second kind of trouble, the philosophical knot, the untangling of which he leaves to posterity.

If we are to be *fair* to Kierkegaard it is imperative we examine this knot and make a serious effort to untangle it. The knot, however, like Socrates' ignorance, requires more time than we can reasonably be asked to give it, and can end up testing our patience. Ought we not have recognised this as a jest, as Kierkegaard's irony?

Yet this in turn overlooks the parallels that do emerge between Kierkegaard and Socrates in the course of establishing Kierkegaard's failure to become comparable to Socrates. Kierkegaard merely claims to be comparable to Socrates and the sheer audacity of it undertakes the rest. Kierkegaard does not become comparable to the negative Socrates under his own strength but by our efforts to come to grips with his audacity.

So, should we laugh at Kierkegaard falling over his own feet? Or should we stop and take some time to wonder, seriously, why Kierkegaard goes out of his way to trip himself up? Or should we laugh that Kierkegaard goes out of his way *in order* to fall over his own feet? And would this be laughing *with* Kierkegaard? Or should we be offended that Kierkegaard, as we

shall see, seems to think this way to steal to a position that is higher, superior, to ours? Or is it not, at this point, down to what we *should* do, but simply what we *do* do?

But what is an entirely negative example?

As Smyth observes, Socrates' singular significance for Kierkegaard emerges increasingly throughout the authorship. In *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard makes no such extravagant claims. Socrates is an example for Kierkegaard in his dissertation, but not (outwardly) in the sense of a model or teacher.[7] However, Socrates is not any old example of irony for Kierkegaard – he is *the* example, the only example of irony properly understood, and in the terminology of the second part of Kierkegaard's thesis, the only 'historically justified' instance of irony. In the shorter second part, Kierkegaard discusses other forms of irony, Romantic irony in particular, but also irony as it is variously understood as a stylistic figure. These other instances of irony are observed to fall short of Socrates' example for not being fully developed as a standpoint, and for remaining auxiliary or instrumental to another standpoint. Hence, although Kierkegaard does not claim Socrates as his only human teacher or example, he does claim that Socrates represents the *only* example of fully developed irony.

But now, in as far as fully developed irony culminates within itself, remains entirely negative, silent and secret, from where does Kierkegaard draw his confidential understanding of Socrates?

In *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard has not yet come round to claiming Socrates as his only teacher, yet he does infer that he is the only human properly to understand Socrates. In other words, in *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard declares an equally singular relation to Socrates, but here it is couched in positive as opposed to negative terms. Where Kierkegaard is later to declare Socrates' singular relevance for Kierkegaard, here Kierkegaard infers Kierkegaard's singular relevance for Socrates. Where the later Kierkegaard largely risks making a fool of himself, and solicits a certain persecution, in *The Concept of Irony* he is in a sense far more offensive, insofar as he sweeps to the side every past effort made to understand Socrates. The inference is we have had to wait for Kierkegaard for this view of Socrates. Hegel's considerable labours, for instance, are put on hold while this young whippersnapper goes over the original accounts.

Kierkegaard's declaration that Socrates is substantially ironic or negative, *invisible*, does not undermine his own declaration to fix a picture of Socrates as much as it unsettles *every* position vis-à-vis Socrates. And this can only benefit Kierkegaard's position, in as far as

[7] Irony as a model or teacher for a dissertation? Irony to this extent would certainly have cost Kierkegaard his *magister* title. Kierkegaard later claims he was a 'Hegelian fool' at the time he wrote *The Concept of Irony* (CI, 453). Perhaps, had he not been such a mad Hegelian at the time, his understanding of Socrates would have cost him his *magister* title.

everything is made uncertain and hypothetically stripped to a beginning corresponding to irony, a beginning corresponding also to Socrates, a beginning from which any advance and no advance can be made, an endless beginning to which Kierkegaard also binds himself: Socrates 'is the nothingness from which the beginning must nevertheless begin' (CI, 198).

We now broach the subject of a negative example on a slightly different tack: the singularity and secrecy in which irony shrouds its subject, expressed by an impregnable ignorance in relation to 'substantial' life (the state for example, or Copenhagen University), means that *an* example of irony is never merely *another* example but *the* example of irony: the *only* example of irony and *therefore not really an example of anything.* The example in this case is, therefore, not to be followed, insofar as by following the example one misses the point of the example, which is absolute singularity and the absence of examples. Paradoxically, the example to be followed is not to be followed – and, what is more, it cannot be followed unless one first infers the example. That is, insofar as there is anything to follow it can only be the example always already provided by one's own hypothetical or poetic understanding of the example. Hence the only way to follow the example is always already to be the example one follows.

In other words, *the* example of Socrates does not exist except in as far as Kierkegaard invokes him as *an* example.

Insofar as Kierkegaard strives to follow the example of Socrates he misses the point; insofar as Kierkegaard does follow the example of Socrates he always already is his own example. By the same token, insofar as Kierkegaard tries to fix a picture of the historical Socrates he misses the point of the negative Socrates, but insofar as Kierkegaard does fix a picture of the historical Socrates Kierkegaard always already is this picture. Thus Kierkegaard sets up the demand that he himself must fall short of in order to follow its example.

Two hypotheses may help: the example to be followed is to make *an* example of *the* example, which is to fall short of the example; the example to be followed is to fall short of the example, and, for this very falling short, to be made *an* example of.

As I see it, Kierkegaard achieves this in two ways with *The Concept of Irony.* Firstly, he makes *an* example of *the* example by trying and necessarily failing to reconstruct Socrates in his singularity. And, secondly, he gets himself made an example of when his irony almost costs him his magister-title.

And this last may again be understood in two ways: Kierkegaard is made *an* example *of* irony for posterity (that is, Kierkegaard comes to exemplify irony); and, of course, he is almost made an example of by the academic authorities for his irony, when his poetic treatment offends their sensibilities.

So then, the demand that Socrates exercises on Kierkegaard is expressed on the one hand ironically, by Kierkegaard's insistence that we must fix a picture of the historical Socrates if we are properly to understand him, where this is entirely impossible insofar as understanding him historically is not to understand him in his negativity but only ever hypothetically; and, on the other hand, by Kierkegaard's overtly poetic treatment, which takes this impossibility into account. On the one hand Kierkegaard's poetic treatment volatilises an 'interchange between poetry and history,' and on the other hand it gets Kierkegaard into *real* trouble with his Danish examiners, where Kierkegaard's pigheadedness with respect to his peculiar style of writing (noted by one of his supervisors) recalls Socrates' 'stubbornness in sticking to the question.'

So we find that Kierkegaard is less of an example than Socrates, that Socrates is an altogether more intriguing figure. Kierkegaard, however, plays his part by falling short of his example. By falling short of Socrates Kierkegaard renders Socrates all the more intriguing, just as Socrates, by falling short of his own irony where and when it took his life, the point at which he could not live up to his irony (although in a poetic sense he always lives up to his irony), makes (his) irony all the more intriguing.

Irony's Offence

There are all kinds of cases against irony. There is Hegel's case against the Romantics, and Kierkegaard's case against the Romantics in *The Concept of Irony*, which goes along in the main with Hegel's. There are Copenhagen University's difficulties with Kierkegaard's poetic treatment of his material in *The Concept of Irony*, which may be conceived as an early manifestation of Kierkegaard's *persecution* by his contemporaries. Then there is the case against Christ, who exhibits many signs of a master ironist, and the ironic formation of the case against John the Baptist (CI, 263). In an extended sense every attempt to understand irony is a case against irony in as far as it seeks to make irony stand for itself, to make irony see reason. But there is only one case against irony properly understood, for there is only one example of irony properly understood, namely Socrates.

However, although every other example of irony falls short of Socrates' example, every case negatively helps determine the case versus irony. In other words, every case against irony helps set apart the case against Socrates and make this case exceptional, by falling short of the case in question. Even Socrates apparently falls short of his own example, when he contrives to get himself executed.

Socrates sets the example by falling short of it. Which is to say that Socrates sets the example by displacing it. And every other example of irony sets, or *resets*, the example by falling short of the example set by Socrates falling short of the example.

What is more, Socrates becomes understandable when he falls short of his own irony; that is, he becomes easily understandable as a victim of his own irony. What is less easy to understand is that the irony over Socrates remains Socrates' irony: that Socrates' irony extends beyond Socrates' death as Socrates' irony and not as an irony over Socrates; that Socrates falling foul of his own irony takes nothing away from Socrates' irony; indeed it allows for Socrates' irony to culminate entirely within itself.

Again: it is not the case that Socrates disdains life and that he wants to die. On the contrary, it is precisely the absolute significance of life that delights Socrates as he plays with it as a limit. In this sense we cannot follow him. That is, we can understand him, all too easily, but only poetically, as an intriguing hypothesis, or as a victim of his own irony. Insofar as a demand is made to understand Socrates in his negative reality, as irony, and not as poetic invention or as a victim of irony, Socrates ends up offending the understanding.

Irony offends the understanding.

Again, there are many offences, as many as there are ways of taking offence on account of irony, but there is only one offence properly understood, because there is only one example of irony properly understood.

What is irony's offence? The question circumscribes the answer: the offence is the remaining in question, and the case against irony is the attempt to answer for irony, in as far as irony does not answer for itself. It is not something that irony does, but something irony does not do, that solicits the case against irony. Irony consists of an essential *less*-ness, this failing to appear where failing to appear subjects it to the law.

What law?

Insofar as the case versus irony is an intensification of problems inherent to the reconstruction and/or instruction of irony, an essentially hermeneutic problem, the law is easily conceived as understanding where and when it sets itself up as law, is recalled to itself as law. (We could conceive the law as the conventions and rules with which thought reflects on itself.) This may manifest itself in the form of the state, as in the case of the state versus Socrates. The case against irony may therefore be conceived as originating at the point at which understanding moves from *feeling* offended to declaring it has been offended against, i.e. the moment at which understanding sets itself up as a law or limit which irony is understood to have transgressed – the moment at which the understanding stands up for itself, because irony neglects to.

The charge is not necessarily that of being ironic. Thus Socrates is not charged with being ironic, but on two other counts: for introducing new doctrine into Athens and for corrupting Athens' youths. Nor does Hegel, who takes such violent exception to the Romantics, charge them for being *ironic* but for a range of other offensive qualities.[8] Irony itself is not necessarily the charge, and yet it is irony, in one form or another, that gets the so-called ironist charged, that delivers the ironic subject to the point where his/her/its standpoint is conceived first as unreasonable, and then indefensible.

Even were the case versus irony literally a case versus *irony*, even were the charge irony, still it could not be a case versus irony properly understood, for how level a case against that which displaces itself in any case? The substance of the accusation, that irony neglects to appear where it should, divests the prosecution of its prey. And if the offence in this case, namely irony, displaces itself in any case, is it just to carry forth the prosecution, given that it seems inevitable that some innocent or ignorant subject will be charged with the unchargeable, in place of irony?

Nobody is guilty of irony, not properly understood: irony carries itself off. And yet someone or something must always pay for irony. Irony is *always* at someone's expense. It always remains to determine at whose.

Hence the understanding does not understand itself offended by irony, but by ignorance, or by haughty indifference, irresponsibility, aloofness, elusiveness, weakness of character. Or, of course, by *irony*, but in a particular sense that the understanding finds offensive, which is not really irony, but which declares it is irony in order to make anything and everything possible for itself, has 'arbitrary pretensions to irony,' where irony properly conceived makes nothing possible for itself, but always already encloses everything within itself as possibility. This, then, is unlikely to be irony properly understood, as irony does not declare itself.[9]

As we have seen with Socrates, for irony properly understood the world of positive determinations is nothingness, mere appearance, and irony, under no compulsion to secure a position within this world, is ultimately swept out of the world as the logical consequence of its own delighted indifference to the world. A position, on the other hand, that denounces the substantial world as mere appearance and yet nevertheless seeks to establish itself as

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[8] Cf. Agacinski: 'Hegel makes a violent and merciless attack on [romantic irony], but he takes care not to aim at irony itself; the only thing at issue here is that movement which, along with Schlegel or Solger, has arbitrary pretensions to irony. "The arbitrary name 'irony' is of little or no importance" ... The Schlegel brothers are introduced as critics whose philosophical baggage is on the meagre side. ... A large number of highly scornful epithets completes the analysis of the ironist: "null in character and contemptible," "weakness and lack of character," "impotence," "vanity," "wishy-washy," "moral inferiority," "worthless yearning character," bad useless character," etc' (A, 62-4).

[9] But then again, of course, it *may* be irony. Irony may declare itself to be irony, but *ironically*. Not, in other words, to make anything possible for itself, given everything is always already possible for irony.

irony in the world, as though it requires the actuality it scorns to legitimate its exclusive situation over and above the world, has not in truth vacated this world.

Irony properly understood is not a point of view the subject can take only so far, it requires to be taken all the way, and wherever it deviates it slips into its opposite, falls decisively short of irony, and becomes an example of irony.

This is the charge that Kierkegaard levels against that recently 'vanished age' where the Romantics were able still to cash in their *bits* of irony:

> There was a time, and not so long ago, when one could score a success also here with a bit of irony, which compensated for all other deficiencies and helped one through the world rather respectably, gave one the appearance of being cultured, of having a perspective on life, an understanding of the world, and to the initiated marked one as a member of an extensive intellectual freemasonry. Occasionally we still meet a representative of that vanished age who has preserved that subtle, sententious, equivocally divulging smile, that air of an intellectual courtier with which he had made his fortune in his youth and upon which he had built his whole future in the hope that he had overcome the world. (CI, 246)

This echoes Hegel's standpoint with regard to the Romantics. Where Hegel is offended by the subjective vanity of the Romantics, and finds that *irony* is merely an 'arbitrary name' for their lack of ethical backbone, the small-print of Kierkegaard's position, *pace* Agacinski, although it goes along in large with Hegel, is that the Romantics are not ironic *enough*, they are not subjectively vain enough.

Kierkegaard's critique renders the position of the Romantics untenable on all fronts: their position is philosophically untenable in as far as it offends the understanding (as irony properly understood should), but similarly their position is untenable as irony in as far as they seek to *establish* it as irony – consequently their position has not the historical justification of irony properly understood: 'It holds true of unjustified irony that whoever wants to save his soul must lose it. But only history can judge whether the irony is justified or not' (CI, 263-4). As Agacinski finds: 'The weakness of the romantics, from the point of view of irony, was to have laid claim to it. If the ironist flees from (positive) determinations, it is not so that he will get pigeonholed as an ironist' (A, 71).

There is a further possibility here, which is that Kierkegaard's *persecution* of the Romantics belatedly helps develop their position as irony. And there is an even further possibility, which Agacinski remarks, that Kierkegaard helps develop *Hegel's* irony by *diverting* us from its possibility:

> Shouldn't a real ironist … go out of his way to repudiate irony and to make known in a loud voice just how little he thinks of it? Hegel himself could very well have been the real "master of irony." His entire philosophy could have been written as a diversion in order to pull a fast one on us. (A, 71-2)

Possibly what takes place here is that Kierkegaard pokes fun at Schlegel and Hegel at the same time: the first for claiming to be irony, and the second for being so scandalised by this folly that all attention is diverted away from the truth of irony. The problem is, however, as Kierkegaard complains throughout the authorship, that Hegel was so successful in crushing unwarranted negativity that a further problem emerged: instead of objectivity slyly masquerading as subjectivity now the world was overrun with subjectivity masquerading earnestly as objectivity, everything became buried under an impossibly earnest torrent of reasoning and openness. Through Hegel's imperious intervention the intellectual *courtier* was metamorphosed into an intellectual *courier*, reserve into openness, 'extended freemasonry' into community – all of this to the extent that Kierkegaard, who never belts up about the ceaseless babble of his age, privately expresses a preference for family twaddle over sensible conversation: 'I prefer talking with old women who deal in family twaddle, next with lunatics – and last of all with people who are extremely sensible' (PJ, 72): 'It is our age's tragedy that everyone speaks the truth' (92).

Concealed in Difference

Before we turn back to irony as it turns on the case versus irony, we touch upon the subject of irony as a form of concealment or deception, more particularly as a form of concealment that is intended 'to get others to disclose themselves': the irony that 'manifests itself … as the irony that comprehends the world, seeks to mystify the surrounding world, seeking not so much to remain in hiding itself as to get others to disclose themselves' (CI, 251).

As we have already seen, irony is an evacuation that takes the understanding by surprise and, before you know it, draws its law.

However, although irony may be employed to draw another, to draw the law of another, out of concealment, this is not *irony's* intention, although it may be a particular ironist's. Irony may have the *effect* of drawing another out of concealment, but, as with every aspect of irony that lends itself to effect, this is irony put to work, made instrumental, where irony as a standpoint is never what it appears to effect.

Irony properly understood is, simply, not ironic *in order to* – irony properly understood has nothing in mind, is entirely self-sufficient. Irony's delighting is not contingent on the effect it has on others. Irony is always already delighted, come what may, and is not ironic *in order to* be delighted.[10] Irony does not, therefore, go out of its way to conceal itself, but is always already concealed *in its way*, concealed from a differential thinking that necessarily comes up with results. What is more, insofar as it is this kind of philosophical thinking which comes up with the idea of 'concealment,' it is also this thinking which conceals, *from itself*, irony's indifference: '*Indifference*: such is the other name for ironic negativity. All the relations of the ironist – to his lovers, to the State, to death itself – are marked by indifference' (A, 53).

Thus we find that philosophy conceals irony from philosophy, because philosophy can never be indifferent, except for in its neglect.

We find there is no coming out of hiding for irony as a standpoint, but equally there is no going into hiding. Irony is concealed on account of its total indifference to the outcome. In other words, unlike that kind of thinking which comes out of concealment and positively begs to differ, irony is concealed because it never went into hiding in the first place.

Socrates proposes that everything be thought through before leaping to a conclusion – that, for instance, every possible aspect of his case be considered. This is all very reasonable, until Socrates is found actually to mean it. At this point, instead of commending irony's infinite reasonableness, one might conclude that Socrates' insatiable appetite for intellectual conversation is actually a means of *deferring* a conclusion, of deferring the sentence. And yet it is Socrates' penchant to go along with every suggestion and see where it takes the conversation. But when he goes along with the death sentence in the questioning mode peculiar to him, can one really accuse him of postponing a conclusion? Socrates appears rather to be hastening a conclusion, his own (whereupon this, in turn, becomes the charge: that Socrates sneaks out of life in order to escape old age).

Irony, one observes, is always on a hiding to nothing where reason is concerned.

Little wonder that irony becomes impossibly abstract if we seek to determine it in relation to conclusions, where for irony every conclusion is merely another suggestion to go along with *for the sake of conversation*. In this light Socrates' trial is the strangest conversation, and the death sentence the most peculiar suggestion that Socrates goes along with for the sake of conversation.

[10] For this same reason irony is, in a sense, ignorant of desire: there is nothing *more* that irony desires. This in turn makes irony desirable as a standpoint, and consequently renders the subject of irony desirable, an object of desire. We return to the erotic dimensions of irony in Chapter Four.

As already mentioned, Socrates himself voices expectations of continued conversation in the afterlife. This continued conversation assumes a more earthly form in that buzz of philosophical discourse leading back over the centuries, an inconclusive buzz that has its source, as Kierkegaard notes, in Socrates' silence:

> For the observer, Socrates' life is like a magnificent pause in the course of history: we do not hear him at all; a profound stillness prevails – until it is broken by the noisy attempts of the many and very different schools of followers to trace their origin in this hidden and cryptic source. (CI, 198)

The Turn in the Case Against Irony

Where irony is involved, then, nothing comes to rest, nothing is simply concluded. Where there is a case against irony there is a second case underlying the first, there is a turn in the case. Irony overturns the case against irony: there is always a case against the case. In a limited sense this is no more than to say that there is something ironic about a case against irony, that the case against irony is an irony over the prosecution: that irony returns to put on trial that which put it on trial. And yet this thinking does not come to rest here insofar as it has always already generated the next occasion for irony, the next turn.

Socrates escapes punishment in as far as he is irony and Athens, therefore, exerts itself to no avail. This is comical, but it is no closer to understanding Socrates' position. In fact it seems to forego thinking for the sake of amusement. To laugh at Athens falling short in its understanding of Socrates but not to understand Socrates' standpoint oneself – who or what is the victim of irony here? Besides, if all that were at stake were becoming or not becoming a victim of irony, the case against the case would scarcely make a subject of serious conversation.

In part two of *The Concept of Irony* Kierkegaard argues that irony has 'world historical validity' (259) insofar as it appears as a catalyst at significant turning points in world history. Irony assumes the form of an ironic subject that destroys the historical actuality it inhabits from within. This internal destruction ultimately extends to the ironic subject itself, who is taken as a 'sacrifice' by the process of world history.[11] The destruction of the ironic subject prefigures the destruction of the actuality it inhabits, much as the end of Socrates prefigures the end of Hellenism.

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[11] Cf. 'At the one and the same time, an individual may be world-historically justified and yet unauthorized. Insofar as he is the latter, he must become a sacrifice; insofar as he is the former, he must prevail – that is, he must prevail by becoming a sacrifice. ... The past actuality shows itself still to be justified by demanding a sacrifice, the new actuality by providing a sacrifice' (260).

Unsurprisingly, Kierkegaard's examples are Socrates and Christ. However, insofar as Christ is not conscious of his situation as ironic but understands it as something higher, he does not subjectively assist in the development of the 'ironic formation.' Therefore Socrates is Kierkegaard's only example where the agent of the irony of the world process is also an ironist, and therefore Socrates is the only example of subjective irony that is 'world historically warranted.'

Regarding the form of the *destruction*, Kierkegaard writes how this total irony 'rages like a Tamerlane, and leaves not one stone standing upon another' (261). We do not, however, see evidence of this *infinite raging* in Socrates' behaviour. Socrates does not go out of his way to attack other positions but, rather, always declares himself prepared to go along with them, to discuss them. Socrates does not actively destroy other positions but allows them rather to 'endure' in the cumulatively disclosed possibility of their inauthenticity, until they fall apart under the increased strain of standing for themselves. However: 'the ironic subject does not possess the new.' Irony has nothing to put in place of what it destroys. In contrast to the prophet, the ironist 'has stepped out of line with his age, has turned around and faced it' (261). Irony has no position except in as far as it negatively resists every position. Irony turns against the entirety of the actuality it encounters, not merely against this and that aspect of actuality but against every aspect, bit by bit yet all at once. Irony therefore turns also against itself in as far as it appears within this actuality; irony develops the persecution of itself insofar as it manifests within this context.

Insofar as Socrates turns against every aspect of the historical actuality he encounters, and insofar as he has nothing to put in place of what he encourages to fall apart, Socrates effectively turns against *all* of actuality – not merely against a given actuality at a particular historical actuality, not merely against the given reality of Hellas. There is no *beyond* Hellas or *within* Hellas for Socrates, there is only Hellas, which for Socrates is both everything and nothing: *everything* because Hellas is all he knows, and nothing because he knows Hellas is mere appearance, because he knows Hellas as nothingness – because, in other words, Socrates is ironically ignorant of Hellas.

With the privilege of historical remove we, however, can determine the limits of Hellas with respect to Socrates, and if we are to understand Socrates in his reality it is essential that we understand him as existing at the same time within and beyond Hellas. It is not adequate to understand Socrates solely in the context of his historical actuality, for this would be to understand only the appearance of Socrates and to overlook, with Xenophon, his negativity. But neither is it adequate to understand Socrates as entirely beyond Hellas, for Socrates manifestly did not exist beyond Hellas, otherwise he would have had something to put in its

place, he would have had some kind of a cause or *meaning* – as, say, the tragic hero has a cause and a meaning that is positively determined, and for whom death is 'the final battle and final suffering' (271).

Thus the turn in the case has a serious side to it: Socrates' irony is world historically warranted insofar as it encourages the destruction of Hellas and enables the world process. Socrates resists actuality only in as far as he knows actuality as Hellas and knows this as nothingness. Viewed historically, therefore, Socrates is not versus actuality *per se* (271), for Socrates' irony becomes history's case versus Athens. The case against irony becomes the case against Athens, unwittingly ironic and the defendant in this second case.

And yet Socrates emerges out of Hellas. Hellenism conceives its own nemesis. Insofar as Hellas already grants the possibility of irony in its duplicity, this is no miraculous conception. The possibility of irony properly understood is already given in the gaps between appearance and essence Hellas cultivates in order to endure, the gaps by which Hellas stands for itself and establishes itself. Socrates' irony inhabits the gap/s overlooked by Hellas by way of which Hellas endures. Socrates inhabits Hellas' self-difference, the site of Hellas' unspoken duplicity. He has both everything and nothing in common with Hellas – everything of its negativity and nothing of its positivity – and constantly develops the former at the expense of the latter.

The case against irony therefore marks an intensification in a given moment's exertions to annihilate the source of an increasingly apparent yet unaccountable self-difference.

Again: Socrates' irony is borne out of Hellas' blindness to its own ironic potential. It remains for Socrates to *emancipate* this ironic capacity, for as Kierkegaard determines, Socrates emancipates subjectivity. Not that subjectivity does not exist prior to Socrates, for the possibility of it is already given in every aspect of substantial Hellas which thrives by establishing differences between appearance and essence, and most particularly in the Sophists, 'Socrates' born enemies' (209), whose formidable rhetorical ability to answer every question finds a poetic contrast in Socrates' stubbornness in sticking to the question. In Socrates for a first time in world history the possibility of subjectivity is actualised or *realised as possibility,* without taking refuge again in certainty. In Socrates this possibility, this uncertainty of relation between appearance and essence, does not conform again to appearance, but endures, short of appearance, as possibility. Socrates is, in a sense, the first and last Sophist to deploy a negative capacity to negative ends.

According to Kierkegaard, however, the ironist is not clearly conscious of emancipating subjectivity; he is not clearly conscious of his purpose as it will be historically reconstructed: 'Insofar as this irony is world-historically justified, the subjectivity's emancipation is carried

out in the service of the idea, even if the subject is not clearly conscious of this. This is the genius of justified irony' (263). [12] The ironist can only be partly aware of his irony. If fully aware then his motivations still stand to reason: irony's genius resides in the ironist's partial ignorance of his motivations world-historically conceived. When Kierkegaard declares of Socrates in relation to the latter's world historical significance that the ironic formation benefits from Socrates' awareness of his situation as irony, this is only partial awareness, for it is Socrates' ignorance that takes him by surprise and makes him more thoroughly ironic – even if this involves Socrates' death, *because* this involves Socrates' death. The ironist remains ajar to the pitfalls of his ignorance, which can always tempt him to fall for a death sentence. (Here we see again how this drag-tide of ignorance draws the ironic subject to the verge of death at the same time as it accentuates the spectacle of hypothetical life, to the point where the one can suddenly, inadvertently, slip or burst over into the other- from the point of irony to return refreshed, from the point of view of reason at an incomprehensible cost.)[13]

That Socrates cannot be clearly conscious of his instrumentality in the service of world history also indicates that Socrates is not clearly conscious of the extent of his standpoint. One can say that Socrates ceases to understand his position as irony the instant this position passes over into the irony of the world (the instant this higher irony has its way with Socrates), an instant most apparent where his point of view contrives to get Socrates executed. Socrates' standpoint passes over into total irony at the point where he himself is consumed at its threshold and is taken by history as a sacrifice. However, insofar as Socrates' irony and the irony of the world flow seamlessly into one another, insofar as Socrates' standpoint as irony and the way of the world with Socrates are one and the same, there is no particular moment at which this passing is manifest, only moments at which this moment belatedly becomes manifest – in appearance it seems there is a moment when Socrates is taken as a sacrifice.

There is the historical case of Athens versus Socrates, and there is history's case against Athens that is developed as possibility in the historical case.[14] The former does not conceive itself as a case against irony, but as a case against Socrates, and the latter does not conceive itself as a case against irony, but exposes Athens to exist ironically, to endure by virtue of a

[12] Cf.: 'Like water in relation to what it reflects, the negative has the quality of showing as high above itself that which it supports as it shows beneath itself that which it is battling; but the negative, like the water, does not know this.' (CI262n)

[13] What, then, is an ironist? A subject that operates by falling in the service of world historically warranted irony. This, however, despite appearances, does not require the grand stage. World historically warranted irony does not appear only at mythical and well-documented turning points of world history, but rather at every instant, adjusting, fine tuning, annihilating false actuality.

[14] History is here conceived as the possibility of becoming historical, i.e. history is the possibility of the historical – the *possibility* of a perspective from which the present actuality may be disclosed as mystified, not any particular perspective.

structure that resembles irony but falls short of irony in order to endure. Thus the case against irony, which falls short of irony and punishes what it settles to understand, develops the possibility of a further case against irony, in this case Athens' undeveloped irony.

Thus irony properly understood exposes everything else as existing ironically, enduring according to a kind of irony that characteristically conceals itself (from itself) in earnestness (reason as the enduring *incognito*).

Thus there is the historical case against Socrates, and there is history's case against Athens. There are at least two cases versus irony, at least two faces to the same trial. The two cases develop simultaneously, side by side; every detail in the historical case helps develop history's case against the historical actuality in question, and contributes to the ironic formation.

There are *at least* two faces to the same trial, between which is spanned the undecidable question of which is the real case against irony; between which is spanned, in other words, irony.

Both cases are concluded at the same instant, but where the one is recorded by the state, the other always remains to be reconstructed. Thus the historical case against irony is an irony that, reconstructed, discloses history's case against duplicity. Yet where history's case against duplicity is developed merely as possibility in the historical case against irony, if we take this possibility too seriously then we become the next occasion for irony.

Hence every reconstruction of irony echoes the original case against irony, which granted irony as a possibility by overlooking it and drawing its own conclusions. Because we look over this incident at a remove we tend to overlook its application to our own situation. We may see Athens' efforts to teach Socrates a lesson as an irony over Athens, but the satisfaction derived from seeing Athens fall short in its understanding of Socrates marks our forgetfulness in applying this lesson to the context of our own reconstruction. Irony properly understood returns by repeatedly being overlooked. Irony is therefore like a strange relay race across history: whoever picks up the baton at the expense of Athens also picks up, by way of compensation for this historical advantage, much as Athens picked it up at the expense of Socrates, the infectious possibility of irony, or, rather, the possible infection of irony.

Mastery / Mystification

I have argued that the case against irony, exemplified by Socrates' trial, is the positive intensification of a basically hermeneutic problem. There is also a negative intensification of the same problem. Where the former assumes the appearance of mastery, the latter involves

mystification. If mastery is what the state attempts, mystification is the condition of Athens' youths. Mastery is the reaction to the perceived threat of mystification. Much as Socrates' ignorance resists education by encouraging it, his example suspends the teleological process of education according to which Athens' youths are raised. Much as Socrates' mode of questioning proceeds by hollowing out the answer and does not, like the Hegelian mode of questioning, presuppose an answer, Socrates hollows out Athens from within, starting, apparently, with Athens' young.[15]

Irony is therefore either positively engulfed, made immanent to a positive dialectic, or it engulfs the subject from within, negatively, wresting the subject into its own negativity: 'irony has at least two fates: either it is expunged, overcome at last (Hegel as its master), or else it turns into madness. It is engulfed by philosophy or religion' (A, 66). Two ends to irony, neither of which, however, end irony properly understood but, rather, mark intensifications of its *possibility*.

Mastery marks a positive intensification of a hermeneutic problem, and mystification marks a negative intensification, but where mastery comes to a head in the case against irony, mystification tends to set off an endless and increasingly abstract series of questions into the negative origins of the problem, never recognizably to arrive at faith. This distinction turns on a knife-edge: we recognize Socrates' irony as it slips into madness, but there are also those youths that are almost religiously devoted to Socrates, a quasi-religious effect of Socrates' irony.

Of course, from irony's point of view mastery and mystification are merely two orders of mystification, the former recovering itself into the security of an objective mystification, the latter failing to recover. From this point of view mastery is merely an order of objective mystification that intervenes intermittently in subjective mystification to the end of making mystification endurable.

There is an image which pops up in Kierkegaard's treatment of Xenophon that enables us to develop some of these considerations – that is, Kierkegaard pauses in the course of heaping scorn on Xenophon's account of Socrates in order to illustrate his meaning with an image. The context is Xenophon's missing ear for Socrates' irony or 'rejoinders':

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[15] Cf.: ' we make a distinction here between two forms of questioning ... In the first place the question takes place in view of an answer that will complete the question with its own (meaning)fulness – in the second, it is only a matter of letting the question draw out the apparent and contradictory contents of the "answers," letting it hollow them out and leaving behind a "void." It is in this second form of interrogation that we recognize the celebrated Socratic method' (A, 36) – the first form corresponds to the Hegelian dialectic which internalizes every difference, every negativity, 'making it immanent to some positivity' (A, 58). See also Agacinski, pp. 58-9, 93.

> There is a work that represents Napoleon's grave. Two tall trees shade the grave. There is nothing else to see in the work, and the unsophisticated observer sees nothing else. Between the two trees there is an empty space; as the eye follows the outline, suddenly Napoleon himself emerges from this nothing, and now it is impossible to have him disappear again. Once the eye has seen him, it goes on seeing him with an almost alarming necessity. So also with Socrates' rejoinders. One hears his words in the same way one sees the trees; his words mean what they say, just as the trees are trees. There is not one single syllable that gives a hint of any other interpretation, just as there is not one single line that suggests Napoleon, and yet this empty space, this nothing, is what hides that which is most important. Just as in nature we find sites so remarkably arranged that those who stand closest to the one who is speaking cannot hear him and only those standing at a specific spot, often at some distance, can hear, so also with Socrates' rejoinders, if we only bear in mind that at this point to hear is identical with understanding and not to hear with misunderstanding. (CI, 19)

According to Kierkegaard, Xenophon's account of Socrates stops where Socrates begins to begin. Xenophon does not see Napoleon for the trees and the grave: all remains as it appears to the *unsophisticated* eye, empirically safe and sound. The scene, short of sophistication, is undisturbed by any spectral demands. Xenophon equates Socrates with those empirical aspects that Socrates' irony originates at the expense of – indeed he does this so consistently that a few pages later Kierkegaard ironically concedes that Xenophon 'might have been a second-rate fellow were it not for the chinks in his presentation, which Plato so fits and fills that in Xenophon *eminus et quasi per transennus* [at a distance and as if through a lattice] one catches sight of Plato' (27). Xenophon's Socrates always makes good sense. Even Socrates' jest with death makes sense in as far as it demonstrates Socrates' joy at being 'freed from the frailties and burdens of old age' (25). Xenophon does not in the least perceive the threat of Socrates' irony. Indeed Kierkegaard imagines that if Xenophon's account is true to Socrates then sophisticated and inquisitive Athens presumably put him to death for being insufferably *boring.* (17)

There are, however, several details in the passage that solicit further attention. For instance, if this is a simple case of discerning between figure and ground, how account for that 'almost alarming necessity' with which the eye returns to the figure of Napoleon? And why is irony, as Agacinski and Kevin Newmark put it, "'like' an empty picture of 'Napoleon'"?[16]

[16] Kevin Newmark's introduction to Agacinski, 'Taking Kierkegaard Apart,' takes its cue from Agacinski and sets out from the possibilities of 'irony as a subject' – that is, as both a meaningful subject (in philosophy and consciousness) and a grammatical subject – finding that these possibilities ironically enter into a 'self-obliterating relationship,' making 'it forever impossible to decide whether irony is what allows consciousness to come into being or what prevents it from ever taking place' (Newmark, 17). Newmark introduces the above image or 'brief sketch' through which he proposes 'to read all the principal elements of a radical and comprehensive theory of irony, of which Kierkegaard's entire authorship is but an elaborate extension' (17). Newmark first observes the

And why *Napoleon*? Because he is dead, all-conquering, sweeping, imperious – like Hegel?

Newmark: 'Is the image of Napoleon that appears after his empirical death a form of philosophical idealization, a giving up of empirical immediacy in order to accede to the ideal realm of philosophical thought?' (Newmark, A, 20)

Where the empirical Xenophon does not see Napoleon for the trees, the *idealistic* Plato gives up the trees for Napoleon. The problem is that when it becomes *impossible* for the eye to stop looking for Napoleon, then the eye no longer sees the trees and grave for Napoleon, i.e. it can no longer see the empirical for the ideal. Here we sense the stirrings of mystification:

> What the eye sees when it looks at Napoleon … is itself in the image of the other, that is, and above all, it sees itself as the image of metaphorical resemblance between inside and outside. This is the scene of self-recognition in which the figure of Napoleon reflects the gaze of Narcissus, and so it is little wonder that the eye that has once seen itself in the commanding image of Napoleon will continue to look for its mirror image with increasing anxiousness. (Newmark, 22)

The image of Napoleon represents the heady pleasure of mastery. That is, the eye seeing Napoleon recognises its own sense of mastery over the empirical scene. And yet the observer does nothing to merit this sense of superiority. The eye has no hand in Napoleon's emergence. All that Kierkegaard infers in the way of qualifications is that the observer is *sophisticated*. Understanding Socrates' irony takes place, then, as though by *accident*; Napoleon's head suddenly pops up out of nothing (out of the nothingness between the trees, but also, in a poetic sense, out of the nothingness of the grave).

Leaving aside the 'almost alarming necessity' with which the eye see(k)s Napoleon, it appears that the viewer (or the listener, as it would be with Socrates; or the reader, as it would be with Kierkegaard) can rest secure with the appearance of Napoleon, as with a

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indirect, amimetic element of the image with which Kierkegaard hopes to communicate his meaning, which is itself the particular 'difficulty involved in understanding the meaning hidden in Socrates' irony': 'what is at issue is not merely 'seeing' the head of Napoleon or rather not seeing it as 'mere' head. Kierkegaard ... tells us the story of the head not for its own sake but rather as a means of understanding his meaning more easily. Napoleon's head becomes a *figure* for what, in this case, just happens to be the difficulty involved in understanding the meaning hidden in the ironic words of Socrates' (17). Again taking his cue from Agacinski, Newmark draws on Derrida's critique of representation in *Dissemination*: 'the metaphor of painting, the image, or the engraving in this case, has always been used to characterise the mimetic relationship between thought and idea that is crucial to Western metaphysics. Some form of imitation or analogy is what guarantees a relationship of adequation between presence and representation and allows to take place the particular kind of recognition necessary to the philosophical discourse of truth' (18-9). As Agacinski writes: 'According to the metaphysical conception of the Idea as the presence of what is, Napoleon should have been in the picture, a true likeness, truly painted and truly present' (A, 37). The engraving, however, tells the story of another indirect relation, that between Socrates' words and Socrates' meaning, between the trees and Napoleon. The trees are not *like* Napoleon - Napoleon appears *between* the trees; Socrates' meaning appears quite literally between his words: Socrates' words do not 'guarantee a relationship of adequation' between themselves and their meaning or 'Idea'. In other words, the image represents a relationship of inadequation between presence and representation.

standard reconstruction of irony. Without the anxiety this would simply be a normal figure/ground representation, the eye returning only insofar as it appreciates the cleverness of the design. But this is to repeat Xenophon's error and overlook Socrates' irony; it is to fail to appreciate the threat of fascination latent in all appreciation.

The *anxiety* makes all the difference. On the one hand it marks the difference between merely understanding an irony and the difficulty posed by understanding irony itself, between the oppositional elements of a figure/ground representation and the non-dialectisable *vertige* that such oppositional play attains in Socrates. On the other hand it is the result of a difference (the difference between Socrates' words and their meaning, between the trees and Napoleon) ... Because what is really significant, Socrates' meaning, is not the image of Napoleon that emerges from between the trees, even though this is to see something Xenophon does not see. What is signal here is what precedes this appearance or emergence: it is the disappearance of something, or nothing, into an image of Napoleon; the disappearance of irony into the appearance of meaning. It is how irony disappears into a sense of mastery, here into a *figure* of mastery, which is subsequently called irony.[17]

Yet things do not rest at this juncture, for the eye returns, repeatedly and by necessity, looking for Napoleon.

We find that what begins as an image of mastery, taken by the conscious subject to represent its own mastery over the nothingness of the picture, is increasingly and necessarily disclosed always already to have mastered the eye. Napoleon begins as a subjective image of mastery but becomes an image denoting mastery over the subject/eye, which returns to it as though by necessity, mechanically, slavishly.

Thus the scene begins with a false sense of exultation, but then the eye is found out to have been *mastered by mastery*, and always already mystified. Therefore irony, traditionally associated with subjective freedom, with nurturing and encouraging it, is found to defraud every ostensibly subjective position. Irony's next step is always to emancipate itself from a subject/object dichotomy: 'Irony is ... not primarily subjective; if anything, it is more like the death of the subject, since it first hovers over the *grave* in this engraving' (Newmark, 19).[18]

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[17] Cf. 'Irony does not imitate anything, it is not part of the metaphysical system of mimesis, and yet out of this empty space *within* the metaphysical system of mimesis, the image of the subject (Napoleon) bursts forth. Irony is not mimetic, but it seems capable of producing mimesis as an aftereffect' (Newmark, 19) – first mastery confuses itself with irony, then mystification is confused with irony; both mastery and mystification are produced as 'aftereffects.'

[18] Cf. "The story of the engraving tells us: that irony is not mimesis but that mimesis follows irony; that irony is not subjective but that subjectivity appears in the wake of irony; and finally, that the only access we have to irony is through both mimesis and subjectivity, that is, through the mimetic 'like' of analogy and the 'Napoleonic' figure of subjectivity - since here irony is 'like' an empty picture of 'Napoleon'" (19).

Although irony refers and defers, to all appearances, to a conscious subject, it does not actually qualify the existence of a conscious subject, but, rather, turns on a mechanical expectation of meaning or consciousness behind the grammatical subject, image or figure; irony turns on the relationships of adequation projected onto the grammatical subject or image; irony turns on the observer's inability to resist inscribing a story, a meaningful connection, into even arbitrary disconnections: on the eye's weakness for openings.

In other words irony returns to haunt in the image in which the eye first was given to think it had mastered it. Irony turns every mastered moment into a haunted moment. As soon as the observer presumes to master irony, irony takes possession of the observer. The observer becomes an unwilling go-between for irony's returns. The observer's anxious mystification gives rise to that process through which the possibility of irony repeatedly hitches rides out of nothingness, through which irony is inadvertently ferried into life from beyond the grave on the back of a subject coming increasingly alive in its mind on the basis of its inability to remain assured it has brought Napoleon back to life.

And yet, much as there is a tendency to take irony as its positive outcome (mastery, reconstruction), there is a tendency to take irony as its negative after-effect, as mystification. Paul De Man is very clear on this point in his treatment of Peter Szondi: 'this is how Peter Szondi describes the function of the ironic consciousness in Schlegel:'

> The subject of romantic irony is the isolated, alienated man who has become the object of his own reflection and whose consciousness has deprived him of his ability to act. He nostalgically aspires toward unity and infinite; the world appears to him divided and finite. What he calls irony is his attempt to bear up under his critical predicament, to change his situation by achieving distance toward it. In an ever-expanding act of reflection he tries to establish a point of view beyond himself and to resolve the tension between himself and the world on the level of fiction [des Scheins]. He cannot overcome the negativity of his situation by means of an act in which the reconciliation of finite achievement with infinite longing could take place; through prefiguration of a future unity, in which he believes, the negative is described as temporary [vorläufig] and, by the same token, it is kept in check and reversed. This reversal makes it appear tolerable and allows the subject to dwell in the subjective region of fiction. Because irony designates and checks the power of negativity, it becomes itself, although originally conceived as the overcoming of negativity, the power of the negative. Irony allows for fulfilment only in the past and in the future; it measures whatever it encounters in the present by the yardstick of infinity and thus destroys it. The knowledge of his own impotence prevents the ironist from respecting his achievements: therein resides his danger. Making this assumption about himself, he closes off the way to his fulfilment. Each achievement becomes in turn inadequate and finally leads into a void: therein lies his tragedy.

'Every word in this admirable quotation is right from the point of view of the mystified self, but wrong from the point of view of the ironist (BI, 219-20).'

Irony lures into negativity and is itself infinitely negative, but this does not make all negativity irony. Irony does not long for anything but is sufficient unto itself. Szondi could however be describing the psychological condition of an Athenian youth who turns to poetry to alleviate, temporarily, his infinite longing for Socrates. The danger for this youth is the knowledge that his longing is infinite and the alleviation of his longing through poetic prefiguration finite. The possible tragedy for the youth is that he foregoes finite fulfilment because he finds the task is infinite.

Similarly the notion that irony liberates the subject from the risks of life is mystification. Irony properly understood is not risk-free but eminently life-threatening. A subject that believes to secured with irony some inexpensive elbowroom in a life otherwise too much to bear occupies a position anterior even to that of oppressive mystification. For Kierkegaard this is where the Romantics begin. Irony properly understood does not make parts of life easier, does not substitute or compensate for one's weaknesses in actuality, irony renders every aspect of life easy, without exception, and gives up the ghost for the exquisite fun of it. Only by risking everything in appearance does irony properly become irony. This is not to turn everything on its head and claim that the ironist is not subjectively vain – the ironist is so subjectively vain he jeopardizes his life objectively conceived. We are dealing with *subjective vanity without content.* Irony has nothing to lose having always already given it all up to become irony. Irony is without a care in the world- and this apparent carelessness manifests itself in the long run as a kind of impersonal, inadvertent, care for the world.

We see that irony as a standpoint appears on the one hand a most difficult way, positively impossible to live up to, and yet, on the other hand it grants its subject a negative freedom that becomes ever lighter, ultimately too light for life, as Socrates finds, on the one hand at his expense, and on the other to his delight. Thus irony is a most difficult relation and yet, prior to this, it is the easiest possible, there is nothing easier.

Irony After Irony

By way of wrapping up this discussion of irony, the final part of the chapter orients itself in relation to the procedure by which irony returns as possibility as opposed to the historical or mythical first time the possibility of its future returns is given. In other words, in this final section we look at a model of ironic reconstruction, of irony as it is commonly understood, as a stylistic figure, and track back to the conception of irony as a standpoint.

Kierkegaard contrasts irony as a figure of speech and irony as a standpoint in the chapter called 'Observations For Orientation'; as Agacinski finds:

> It is a question there of the various uses of irony in the current sense of the term, in other words, in the sense of a stylistic figure in which (as the dictionaries still tell us) one says "the opposite of what is meant." The irony so described is only an inferior kind. But already present here is the decisive possibility of play, gap, inadequation, which Kierkegaard will identify as the possibility of a certain sensuous enjoyment. (A68-9)

We too make this short move from irony as it is commonly apprehended, as a stylistic figure, to irony in the eminent sense. We set out with a more formal or humanist conception of irony.

In *The Rhetoric of Irony*, Wayne C. Booth proposes that an irony can be broken down into a four step model of its reconstruction. The first step involves the rejection of the literal meaning:

> if he is reading properly, [the reader] is unable to escape recognizing either some incongruity among the words or between the words and something else he knows ... [This rejection] is not peculiar to irony, only essential to it. And the requirement may or may not be clearly "visible," ... in the form of some manifest inconsistency within what is said. (Booth, 10)

Thereupon:

> alternative interpretations or explanations are tried out, or rather, in the usual case of quick recognition, come flooding in. The alternatives will all in some degree be incongruous with what the literal statement seems to say- perhaps even contrary, as one traditional definition put it ... (11)

The third step requires a 'decision' to 'be made about the author's knowledge or beliefs' (11), whereupon, fourthly, 'we can finally choose a new meaning or cluster of meanings with which we can rest secure.'

Although these four steps are typically taken so quickly they seem a single step, they can, Booth observes, take a lifetime.

As Booth observes, this four step model is not exclusive to irony amongst rhetorical figures, but applies to all figures where the literal meaning is not the same as the intended meaning – metaphor and allegory for instance. The difference is the *valorised exclusivity* inherent to ironic reconstruction, which holds less true of other kinds of reconstruction. That is, irony differs from other reconstructions of meaning in that it valorises the failure to

reconstruct. After all, the mere mention of irony compels a flurry of raised guards. Where irony is involved no one wants to remain in ignorance: complicity is the refuge, not the way.[19]

Booth has a problem with the seriousness characteristic of many works on irony, and frequently alludes to a 'spirit of irony' 'hovering over [his own] work' (e.g. Booth, 263). Booth, so it seems, relies on an ironic daemon to guard his own work. He is not, however, concerned with what Agacinski calls the 'value of risk' (A, 81). In a sense he is concerned only with what Agacinski calls, after Kierkegaard, those 'pseudo-ironists, the ones who let you in on everything' (A, 71). He is concerned only with intended ironies, authored ironies, and refers the reader to D.C.Muecke's *The Compass of Irony* for a discussion of unintended irony.

In Booth's model irony appears to the reader at the instant of reconstruction. With the fourth step of reconstruction a new meaning is pressed onto the old, like the lips of a sack that had only just threatened to swallow the subject whole, sealing shut the instant of reconstruction. It is the peculiar fit of the old and the new meanings that is deemed ironic. Yet what lies between the rejection of the literal meaning and the arrival at a meaning with which *we can rest secure*? What lies in that gap that can span a *lifetime*? Where the reader is *unable to escape* recognizing an incongruity?

Prior to the fourth step the reader is unable to decide upon a new meaning, cannot rest easy with the old meaning, is suspended between the possibility of a new meaning and the inadequacy of the old. Short of the fourth step, then, we are dealing with mystification; with the fourth step it becomes mastery – the difference is 'security.'

As irony is conceived in the present study, however, irony and reconstruction undertake absolutely different movements: the first is motivated by a negative freedom it always already possesses, and the second by a positive security it is always yet to achieve. The one is a constant departure, the other would be a return. Irony is not its reconstruction, but the possibility of its reconstruction.

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[19] In terms of irony as it is conceived in this essay, irony does not construct anything and therefore the complicity that irony appears to compel is a construction beyond, before or after, irony. Complicity, defined by Booth as a 'meeting of minds,' is meaningful; irony is not meaningful. The ironic subject, to the extent it is irony, does not demand or intend for complicity, rather the subject that thinks to follow the ironist assumes, presumes, surmises complicity. Irony properly understood does not think to be followed. This, again, does not mean that irony thinks in order to prevent being followed, but, rather, at a certain point irony simply omits to think, and therefore cannot be followed. There is nothing to be repeated, followed. Irony does not demand anything in particular, but is delighted to go along with whatever is understood to be demanded. Any answer is good enough for irony. The masterly laughter of complicity is as far from irony as the mystified or offended soul. Irony is silent, private laughter, laughter that keeps (everything and nothing) to itself. Irony is, to define it, ignorance laughing, not laughing at ignorance- which, as Kierkegaard remarks in *The Sickness Unto Death*, is 'a very low form of the comic and … unworthy of irony' (SUD, 90).

The failure to return that irony valorizes is a return to meaning and into the particular context or text out of which the reconstructing subject senses it has slipped or fallen. It is not entirely inconceivable, as mystification takes hold, that the context or text to which the subject desires to return increases in significance, in proportion to the hermeneutic desire to return, increasing until it envelops and comes to represent the livelihood, and then the life itself of the subject. From the point of view of irony, of course, there can be little that is more amusing than, from the innocuous beginnings of, say, losing one's place on the page, thrown by an unexpected change in subject, one goes on to lose one's life – that one can, in other words, through a lapse of attention, lose one's place on the page and fall further and further out of place through one's frustrated strivings to return to the *exact* place at which this fall took place, falling from a hermeneutic into an existential crisis, all the way into one's grave. De Man, citing Baudelaire, observes that irony is always accompanied by a fall – and, indeed, irony is productively conceived as a kind of *falling sickness*: a falling out of, short of, out with – a lapsarian sickness that Kierkegaard characterizes as 'divine healthiness' in Socrates (CI, 212) and elsewhere as an 'endemic disease that only a few individuals catch and from which few recover' (CI, 77-8). Irony as a standpoint understands this by manifesting it, by always already risking a loss in standing, the loss of all things stationary, of status – all things the mystified subject anxiously stands to lose. Irony is, therefore, to define it once more, a perpetual falling, a *precipitation*, out of place and into motion.

CHAPTER TWO

Approaches to Kafka & Beckett

As stated in the Introduction this chapter does not directly tackle the subject of irony in Kafka and Beckett, but fulfills an obligation to the comparative element from which the thesis sprung. It begins with an overview of the first stirrings of critical commentary on the subject of Kafka and Beckett, and then broaches and formulates many of the approaches reprised throughout the thesis, dealing in detail with others that aren't central to my purposes but nonetheless demand mention, particularly Adorno's commentary. Although the subjects of this chapter are manifold, I suggest they fall into four, complexly overlapping, categories: issues of critical and popular reception, the question of *form*, the hermeneutic challenges posed by Kafka's and Beckett's narratives, and the issue of the abdicating subject.

Rorschach Effects

In 1959, as we have already seen, W.A.Strauss proposes that 'Beckett represents a step beyond Kafka':

> Kafka is intent on affirming his self in relation to an unseen God; in Beckett the self is in the process of disintegration. The hero in Kafka desperately seeks his God. The waifs in Beckett no longer have a God to seek, not even to wait for; they simply wait for something, because waiting is the only mode of existence possible to them. (Strauss, 252)

The religious reading Strauss proposes for Kafka is one advanced by Max Brod in the epilogue to the first edition of *The Castle*, linking Kafka to the negative theology of Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling*.[1] Yet already in 1958 Wilhelm Emrich writes of Brod's interpretation that it has 'met with various rejections,' 'primarily through the sociological and psychoanalytical trends in research'[2] – and, indeed, Strauss appears aware of this when he

[1] Strauss also finds Beckett's vision rooted in a 'religious nihilism.' Ellman makes a similar point without Strauss' religious spin: 'Kafka's people struggle purposefully while Beckett's endure purposelessly' (Ellman, Richard, *Four Dubliners* (London: Cardinal, 1991), p.92).

[2] 'Moreover, from the very letters that Kafka wrote to Max Brod it appears that Kafka was extremely critical of Kierkegaard despite all his admiration and veneration for him; and, what is more, once he even terms

finds that 'Beckett like Kafka works with … 'unassigned symbols,'' and that exegesis of *Waiting For Godot* and *The Castle* must remain 'permeable to other meanings' (256). Northrop Frye (1960) succinctly draws this to a point, observing that *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *Waiting For Godot* are alike in that, like 'a great deal of the best fiction of our time,' they have:

> employed a kind of myth that might be read as a psychological, a social, or a religious allegory, except that it cannot be reduced to an allegory, but remains a myth, moving in all three areas of life at once, and thereby connecting them as well. (*Critical Heritage*, 206)

This undecidability solicits and resists interpretative advances, resulting in a veritable hive of interpretative activity. For Susan Sontag (1966) this activity is less the sign of a connecting myth and a plenitude of meaning, but of a *bareness* of meaning:[3]

> The narratives of Kafka and Beckett seem puzzling because they appear to invite the reader to ascribe high-powered symbolic and allegorical meanings to them and, at the same time, repel such ascriptions. Yet when the narrative is examined, it discloses no more than what it literally means. The power of their language derives precisely from the fact that the meaning is so bare.

However, given so many readings promise final answers, surely the narratives themselves cannot *repel* ascription. For Adorno Kafka's prose is 'a parabolic system the key to which has been stolen' (NK, 246). The lock of this system, however, adjusts itself to any key driven into it with gusto – a particularly single-minded reader will always make short shrift of Kafka. As Barthes (1972) observes: 'Kafka's oeuvre lends itself to everyone but answers no-one' (134). Rather it is the interpreters left standing around the writings, comparing shapes and sizes of their diverse keys, all of which appear to fit, that give rise to the confusion.

The Rorschach effect which Heinz Politzer observes in Kafka is found by Szanto to obtain also to Beckett interpretation:

> Although some intelligent examination has been attempted on the works of Beckett, the body of Rohrschach material surrounding Beckett's work is only slightly smaller than that surrounding Kafka – and this primarily because Beckett's work has a shorter history. (Szanto, 184)

Yet instead of grouching about the bad infinity of bad material appended to the respective bodies of work, with, what is more, a mortally offended expression, as though the writings were the victim of some violation, as opposed to the possibility that they must, to some extent, themselves solicit the violation, does not this point itself require examination? (And

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Kierkegaard's works "detestable, disgusting" works.' (Emrich, 439, 535) We turn to Kafka's relation to Kierkegaard in the following chapter.

[3] Sontag, Susan, 'The Aesthetics of Silence,' in *Styles of Radical Will*, p.29.

anyhow, as though by virtue of making the complaint the critic were somehow above contributing to the fiasco.) But then again, it has become such common practice in critical literature on Kafka and Beckett to have a brief gripe at the allegorising tendencies of most critical literature, usually by way of introducing one's own, that this particular critical self-reflection has itself devolved into a kind of social gesture, like raising one's hat. – Yet even this self-reflection has become convention:[4]

> Since the mid sixties it has virtually become a convention of the genre to begin a discussion of Samuel Beckett's work with, on the one hand a weary acknowledgement of the sheer volume of critical exegesis, and on the other a vigorous denunciation of the irrelevance or worthlessness of the bulk of it. No doubt one of the reasons for the prevalence of this rhetoric is the demand for "originality" as one of the fundamental requirements of the Ph.D. thesis, the source from which many new book-length studies of Beckett emerge.

Alas.

The benefits of this state of affairs are texts like Kempf's *Everyone's Darling: Kafka and the Critics of His Short Fiction* (1994), a work in the tradition of philosophical hermeneutics that seems to read the narrative of Kafka's critical reception as the historically pertinent dialogue banished from the heart of Kafka's fictions. Kempf himself cites Ulrich Gaier on the problem of interpretation:

> "That which you are, you cannot express, for you are just this; you can communicate only what you are not, thus lies. Only in the chorus might there be a certain truth." (H249) Ulrich Gaier applies this aphorism of Kafka's to Kafka criticism itself, arguing that every interpretation is limited and consequently, a lie (1969, 290). (Kempf, 68)

This has far-reaching implications for Kempf's own undertaking, insofar as his work presents a cross-section of this chorus of lies, a point that Kempf modestly omits to point out.

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On the subject of ascription I would suggest that particularly *Waiting For Godot* has in common with Kafka an alluringly accessible form of the inaccessible, an enticing form of paradox which solicits and resists the ascription of 'high-powered symbolic and allegorical meanings,' and that there is, perhaps, a knee-jerk identification of Kafka and Beckett on the

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[4] Smith, Russell, '"Someone" (The Other Beckett),' in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Volume 10 Numbers 1 and 2, pp.8-9.

basis of Beckett's reputation as the author of *Waiting For Godot.*[5] It is as the 'Author of the Puzzling *Waiting for Godot*' that Beckett is asked, in a 1956 interview, to take position in relation to Kafka. The only other writer addressed in the interview is Joyce. Possibly every aspirant to literary eminence was being compared at the time to Joyce and Kafka, but it is nevertheless telling that Kafka is dealt with first. Beckett remarks:[6]

> I've only read Kafka in German – serious reading – except for a few things in French and English – only 'The Castle' in German. I must say it was difficult to get to the end. The Kafka hero has a coherence of purpose. He's lost but he's not falling to bits. My people seem to be falling to bits. Another difference, you notice how Kafka's form is classic, it goes on like a steamroller – almost serene. It seems to be threatened the whole time – but the consternation is in the form. In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form.

Critical commentary on these remarks has focused on what Beckett means by 'form,' and we turn to some of this commentary shortly. Firstly, however, I'd like to situate these 'cogently remarked comments' (Cohn, 154) in the light of Cohn's observations in '*Watt* in the light of *The Castle*.' Cohn cites Beckett's comments, but does not use them as her point of departure. She suggests that 'it may be doubted whether the final substance of *Watt* could have materialized without the example of *The Castle*,' but the question of influence is left dangling. Cohn's essay responds to the tendency of casually linking the two writers short of their works, and pinpoints parallels and contrasts between *The Castle* and *Watt*. The essay would be a model of clarity were it not for one recklessly speculative moment, which follows on one of Cohn's few concessions to Beckett's remarks: 'if Kafka's form now seems "classic" to Beckett, it was nevertheless so disquieting, so *un*serene, to its author that he was unable to complete the work' (155).

According to Cohn the principal similarity between *The Castle* and *Watt* is the obscure nature and the ultimate failure of the *modern quests* undertaken by K. and Watt:

> we find the heroes of both novels moving through an unpredictable, seemingly indifferent, but ultimately malevolent cosmos. Like the mediaeval hero, these moderns

[5] Much of Beckett's prose, however, does not resist the ascription of high-powered meanings as much as it resists the reader. The opening section of *Watt*, for instance, has the effect of a wind-brake to thin out the prospective readership. Beckett's most *inviting* prose falls on either side of *Waiting For Godot* - the four novellas (in *The Expelled and Other Novellas*), *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* - indeed Beckett's authorship may be conceived as a kind of parabellum which peaks at its most inviting. By which I do not mean to suggest that Beckett rises out of impenetrable depths, turns near the surface, and returns to the same depths. For Beckett's early narratives resist the reader, but the late texts resist the reader only in as far as the reader still insists on meaning, only in as far as the reader *desires* or insists on the seduction of the inaccessible, requires narrative even in the dereliction of meaning. Beckett's late works postulate, in other words, a different kind of reader, a different kind of reading – a point we will keep returning to.

[6] Schenker, Israel, 'Moody Man of Letters - A Portrait of Samuel Beckett, Author of the Puzzling *Waiting For Godot*,' *New York Times*, 6 May 1956, section 2.

> bring all their resources to their quests. Plodding rather than dashing, cleaving with their minds rather than with swords, both K. and Watt fail, finally, to reach their goals – and never understand the cause of their failure, or even the nature of their quests. (155)

Cohn also notes the parallels between the elusive employers Klamm and Knott, particularly their shifting, protean appearances. One should add that in *The Castle* the appearance of Klamm changes in relation to the observer; Knott's appearance, however, changes in relation to observation itself.

Another feature Cohn finds bound up with the quest form is the 'romantic love' typical of a 'mediaeval quest.' This is represented ironically in both novels, but in *Watt* ironic disfiguration is carried to the point where Watt's love interest can scarcely be recognised (the fishwoman).

Then there are significant differences in narrative point of view: Kafka employs what at first glance appears to be an 'omniscient, impersonal narrator,' a point of view that never, however, entirely detaches itself from K. In *Watt* a narrator, Sam, introduces himself belatedly, but fails to account for all of the narrative. Both novels are subject to 'an uncertainty of witness,' but where Sam is overtly unreliable, in *The Castle* unreliability masquerades as reliability.

This uncertainty of witness gently subverts Cohn's earlier claim that K., like Watt, 'never understands the cause of [his] failure, [and] the nature of [his] quest.' The reader is occasionally, obliquely, alerted to the possibility that K. may be rather more aware of his situation than he gives to believe. This reflects a significant difference between the two protagonists: K. draws on resources of cunning alien to the automaton-like Watt. Bearing this in mind, 'plodding' aptly describes Watt but, I think, misrepresents K.

Cohn observes that both novels display sometimes maddening, sometimes comic excesses in logical ratiocination. She remarks that where Kafka's particles ('ja, doch, vielleicht, etwa, sogar, allerdings, schon, oder, besser, zwar – aber, freilich – jedoch, wenn nicht') 'split hairs, Beckett's devices pound rocks' (158). She does not, however, remark the connection between K.'s indefatigable reasoning (he 'presumably reasons even on his deathbed' [166]) and Kafka's *serene form*. In *Watt*, where form breaks down, reasoning also ends up breaking down.

Furthermore, *The Castle* has temporal unity in contrast to the temporal dislocations characteristic of *Watt*: 'As Watt told the beginning of his story, not first, but second, so not fourth, but third ... he told its end' (W, 215) - *non sequitur* is law in *Watt*, and is also exploited comically.

And, finally, Cohn finds that 'miracle,' 'rigorously excluded' in *Watt*, is distinctly dangled in *The Castle*, in the appended Bürgel episode. Cohn notes, however, that the narrative point of view deployed throughout *The Castle* is suspended in this scene, in which K. drifts in and out of sleep while the narrative flows uninterruptedly on.

These are Cohn's main points, and with these in mind I would like to draw attention to one of Beckett's comments that has surprisingly escaped a fusillade of critical double-takes: *I must say it was difficult to get to the end.*

Cohn refers to this remark when she observes Beckett's 'irritation at [the] glib clichés that assimilate him to Kafka' (154), and yet surely the phrase is far from innocent, coming from Beckett, on several counts – not least given the formidable difficulties his own narratives present to the reader. There is, most obviously, the problem of *getting to the end* as it works its way through Beckett's authorship. But furthermore, bearing in mind that, as Cohn observes, *The Castle* itself is unfinished (appended to what passes as the end of the novel-fragment are several sizable unfinished chapters and fragments, and Max Brod's epilogue, in which he claims that Kafka told him the projected ending to *The Castle*), we duly observe that it is indeed difficult to get to the end of *The Castle*, for anyone, and not only for Beckett.

This in turn encourages a more cautious return to the relation between *Watt* and *The Castle*. Cohn seemed to have the last say when she suggested that 'it may be doubted whether the final substance of *Watt* could have materialized without the example of *The Castle*,' but one may reasonably question the innocence of the fact that 'on the one hand ... we have an actually unfinished novel, and, on the other, a novel whose surface lack of finish is a subtly controlled device.' *Watt*, like *The Castle*, has odds and ends appended to it. The perennial problem of chapter order in Kafka's novel-fragments finds a counterpart in the peculiar ordering of parts in *Watt*. And, perhaps most intriguingly, the relation between Sam and Watt seems obscurely to figure the relation between Brod and Kafka: Sam's belated appearance as key witness and transmitter of Watt's experience, his questionable point of view, the fact that he does not account for the entire narrative. These aspects foster the suspicion that *Watt* has not merely thematic affinities with *The Castle*, but that *Watt* may tell the *unserene* story of the book *The Castle*, its reception and subsequent institutionalization. *Watt*, that is, seems to relate how Brod's epilogue, to which it fell to communicate the end of *The Castle* (much as it falls to Sam to communicate the end of Watt), by cohabiting with Kafka's text (much as Watt and Sam cohabit, in separate buildings but in the same institution – they meet in the grounds of the institution), has, in time, spread into and become inseparably bound up with *The Castle*. That *Watt* is, in other words, inscribed in the gap between the addenda of *The Castle* and Brod's epilogue, functioning as a kind of 'patient

breach' (W, 130) between the spellbound space of *The Castle* (Knott's establishment) and what this literary space would but cannot entirely exclude in the course of its institutionalization, the epilogue, the 'end,' and all other closural readings which follow upon it – what Blanchot refers to as 'the invasion of [Kafka's] essentially silent world by the chatter of commentators, these private manuscripts relentlessly published, this timeless universe turned into footnotes for history' (21).

I put this reading out as a suggestion, to be kept in mind, a possibility haunting the subsequent commentary.

Beckett's other, less ostensibly throwaway, comments on Kafka have attracted critical attention, but most of this commentary is conducted within the parameters of Beckett criticism, and inevitably allocate to Kafka an historical, stationary function. Commentators tends to imply that Kafka did not go the whole Beckettian hog, with a heady confidence regarding what this entails, but usually without any consideration of what Kafka's grounds might have been for not doing so.

James Mays (1974), for example, although he refers, uniquely, to Beckett's *'praise'* regarding Kafka's steamrolling, serene form, reads Beckett as implicitly critical of Kafka: 'what justification [is] there ... for such classic form when what it ostensibly circumscribes is a theme of disintegration ... Kafka's contradictions are only ways of evading what is a deeper contradiction.'[7] Mays finds an analogy in Beckett's critique of the artist Masson in the 'Three Dialogues': Masson 'has to contend with his own technical gifts, which have the richness, the precision, the density and balance of the high classical manner' (D, 141). Like Masson, then, Kafka's 'competence keeps at bay problems it cannot encompass' (Mays, 274), and ends up disturbing merely a certain order in 'the domain of the feasible' (D, 142). The artist's fidelity to failure, pace B(eckett), ought not stop short of artistic competence; the artist should not rescue his gifts, which limit him to expressing what can be expressed, as opposed to the 'expression that there is nothing to be expressed, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express' (139). Famously for Beckett the painter Bram Van Velde 'is the first to desist from this aestheticised automatism' (145).

Mays makes no mention of a possible case in Kafka against disintegration, but then, as the reference to Kafka's *evasion* of a *deeper* contradiction evinces, he seems to consider Kafka's form to reflect an extraliterary and even slightly dangerous defect, evinced also in his even more peculiar remark that 'Kafka is undoubtedly a more complicated and confused writer

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[7] Mays, James, '*Pons Asinorum*: Form and Value in Beckett's Writing, with some comments on Kafka and de Sade', p.273.

than many of his admirers have made him out to be' (272). However, Mays' object, we should observe, is not a balanced comparison of Kafka and Beckett, but to demonstrate how the opacity of Beckett's critical comments on *form* derives from his relation to the fine arts, to 'arts whose appeal is immediate' (275).

Another commentator addressing the terminological confusion in Beckett's critical pieces is J.E.Dearlove (1982):[8]

> In the early pieces especially Beckett treats *form* as a synonym for *structure, style, meaning, order, stasis*. The conflation of formal concepts, structural devices, and stylistic techniques is complicated further by Beckett's tendency to identify these elements with their functions in conventional narratives. Art is condensed into the characteristics, restrictions, and capabilities of the traditional novel: every aspect of every art is reduced to precisely the generic relationship Beckett attempts to avoid.

In the course of teasing out this conflation, Dearlove comes across Beckett's remarks on Kafka:

> According to Beckett, Kafka's classic work threatens to disperse, but the structure is ultimately serene. The reader recognises the completed spatial patterns characteristic of the novel and realises, even at the moment of greatest anxiety, that the threatened breakdown will be contained within the literary patterns. The form provides a security in its very nature. Beckett, on the other hand, seeks to indicate the consternation behind the form. Instead of assurances inherent in shape itself, Beckett tries to get to the shapelessness beyond. (13)

Yet is it not as much the case that the security in form in Kafka *contributes* to the reader's anxiety, where the absence of such security in Beckett, instead of increasing anxiety, ends up rupturing the need for anxiety? We return to this at points throughout the thesis.

Kafka's earliest extant narratives are marked by a structural and perspectival fragmentation significantly absent in the later works (*The Castle* is a late work). 'Description of a Struggle' and 'Wedding Preparations in the Country' display little *serenity* in content *or* form. As Walter Sokel finds, until 'The Judgment' Kafka struggles between a wildly playful subjectivity and a strictly applied form of subjectivity that looks like supreme objectivity (Sokel, 11), Kafka's mature style or form Sokel that defines as *classical expressionism*. In the works from 'The Judgment' onwards we may still be dealing with 'a theme of disintegration,' but where, say, in 'Wedding Preparations' the protagonist's Raban's anxiety spreads to the form, in the mature works it is less the case that the protagonist's mood does not spread to the form but, rather, that the protagonists, like the two K.s, like Gregor Samsa, like the narrator of 'In the Penal Colony,' of 'Josephine,' are not, essentially, very anxious. The *serenity* of the form is a

[8] Dearlove, J.E., *Accomodating the Chaos - Samuel Beckett's Nonrelational Art*, p.10.

concretion of the content: the narrative points of view bound up with the K.s share their unfazed confidence.

In this respect Beckett's famous early comment on Joyce's *Work in Progress* (1929) is significant: 'Here form is content, content is form' (D, 27). Critics like Dearlove read Beckett to maintain the opposite in reference to Kafka. However, as Beckett points out: the 'Kafka hero has a coherence of purpose' – this coherence of purpose accounts for the serenity of form.

Concomitantly, any consideration of the relation between Kafka and Beckett must consider the differences between Kafka and Beckett's positions on the writer's duty to language and the functions and responsibilities of literature – differences that are reflected in what superficially seems to be an ambivalence between content and form in Kafka (a theme of disintegration circumscribed by a classical form) as opposed to their apparent equivalence in Beckett,[9] and the fact that, in an admittedly limited sense, Kafka vacates and deliberately resists a position that Beckett takes to extremes.

Compare, for instance, a young Beckett's remarks (long dismissed as 'bilge') regarding a writer's highest goals with those an older Kafka allegedly made on returning a book of expressionist poetry to the young Gustav Janouch.

Beckett:

> Let us hope the time will come, thank God that in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today. Or is literature alone to remain behind in the lazy old ways that have been so long ago abandoned by music and painting? (D, 171-2)

Kafka:[10]

> the book's a frighteningly authentic proof of disintegration. Each of its authors only speaks for himself. They write as if language were their own personal property. But language is only lent to the living, for an undefined period. All we have is the use of it. In reality it belongs to the dead and to those who are still unborn. One must be careful in one's possession of it. That is what the writers in this book have forgotten. They are language destroyers. That is a grave offence. An offence against feeling and against the mind, a darkening of the world, a breath of the ice age. (Janouch, 55-6)

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[9] However, cf. Dearlove pp.10-15, who proposes that not equivalence but co-existence increasingly becomes the case; that Beckett moves away from the equivalence of form and content toward, in the late texts, a co-existence of form and content.

[10] Janouch, Gustav, *Conversations With Kafka*, 2nd Ed., trans. Goronwy Rees (New York: New Directions Books, 1971).

We can contrast these powerful declarations in the light of Sontag's observation that Kafka's and Beckett's language derives its power from the *bareness* of its meaning. Both writers have been widely read as stripping language of artifice – and yet this assumes converse tendencies. Where Kafka eliminates metaphor and other stylistic figures, this is in order to bolster the fiction.[11] Beckett's 'assault against words in the name of beauty' (D,173), on the other hand, increasingly erodes grammar, thereby wearing away also literary conventions that grammar surreptitiously imposes as actuality. Kafka's grammatically flawless language aims at near-transparency; there are no *obvious* sideward glances, no overtly complicitous overtures. Beckett's language, by contrast, reflects incessantly on itself, on its seams, nothing is permitted a moment of peace; Beckett's language is famously based on its own elimination of substance.

Hermeneutic Pursuits

Cohn observes that: 'Too easily, both authors have been linked in pessimism, that shibboleth of the popular reviewer; their comparability lies rather in their creation of absurd universes which ironically reflect the absurdity of ours' (Cohn, 154). In my experience the tacit consensus on Kafka and Beckett also gives rise to an absurd universe, reflected in the total lack of surprise whenever I mention I'm working on a comparative study of Kafka and Beckett. Responses range from sly sympathy, ironically raised eyebrows, to outright suspicion. The eminent response is polite distaste, signaling a transgression into tasteless *obviousness*. There is something at stake here, a social capital, cultural dividends of 'pessimism,' which generally exceeds considerations of firsthand experience of the writings in question. The names *Kafka* and *Beckett* have been almost entirely divorced from the bodies of work they are rumoured to represent, and, always already deployed strategically, invoke a forcefield of indirect communication and second-guessing. Of course, this situation would only be marginally as intriguing did it not reflect the condition of knowledge in the hermetic worlds of Kafka and Beckett. Wherever *Kafka* and *Beckett* are retained only as signs of the misery obscurely associated with their fictions, as values in some weird economy of pessimism – that is, at the point where reception actually does away with the works on which it is meant to be founded – we hear echoes of the fictions:

[11] However, even though Kafka eliminates stylistic figures, 'most of his stories are founded squarely on a single metaphor. [...] His narrative art lies in the unfolding of a basic image, rather than in the traditional representation of an action' (Greenberg, 12). In other words, a metaphor is developed metonymically from within, no metaphorical reference breaks out of the originating metaphor. Metaphor, then, like dream, is liquidated through its ubiquity (cf. Adorno, NK, 248, 261).

'You are Joseph K.?' said the priest, lifting one hand from the balustrade in a vague gesture. 'Yes,' said K., thinking how frankly he used to give his name and what a burden it had recently become to him; nowadays people he had never seen before seemed to know his name. How pleasant it was to have to introduce oneself before being recognized. (T, 231)

But furthermore, in the course of one's research it is not inconceivable that one gradually undergoes a regressive transformation. Fearful of being too easily understood, of a certain transparency, one becomes reluctant to discuss one's studies; one withdraws into silence, secrecy. This absurd universe is compelling, but it can also lead to reluctance, isolation, resignation, indifference, even a partial breakdown of communication- not necessarily to the extent it is found in Kafka and Beckett, where, as Iehl observes, the failure of communication results in a tragic and grotesque loneliness, manifested in characters that withdraw into their bodies as though into their graves, like Gregor Samsa into his carapace, or subsist, as in *Endgame*, only as human waste (Iehl, 178).

This mirroring effect, however, is more true of Kafka than it is of Beckett. The situation is, doubtlessly, more *Kafkaesque* than *Beckettian.*

Adorno inadvertently makes my point:

Just as after an intensive reading of Kafka alert experience thinks it sees situations from his novels everywhere, so Beckett's language effects a healing disease in the sick person: the person who listens to himself talk starts to worry that he sounds the same way. (TUE, 262)

Adorno intends this as a comparison, and up to a point that is what it is- yet it also marks a significant difference. Immersed in Kafka one is likely to *see* Kafkian situations everywhere. Immersed in Beckett one catches oneself *sounding* like a Beckettian voice. In other words, Kafka rubs off on one's perceptions of one's environment, and Beckett recalls one's attention to one's voice, the voices in one's head. Kafka makes one feel like the victim of a plot; Beckett makes one shut up in order to listen to oneself droning, nattering, rambling on.

To repoint my case, Adorno elsewhere observes the uncanny effect of constant déjà vu in Kafka. In Beckett the effect is both less déjà and less vu.

On this subject of doubling, Charles Bernheimer (1993), comparing, like Cohn before him, *The Castle* and *Watt*, observes that the reader's predicament comes to mirror that of the protagonist, doubling what Bernheimer calls the 'aporetic quest.'[12] Szanto makes a similar

[12] Bernheimer, Charles, '*Watt's* in *The Castle*: The Aporetic Quest in Kafka and Beckett', p.279. See also Bernheimer, Charles, 'Grammacentricity and Modernism', in *Mosaic*, Vol.11:1 (Canada, 1977): pp.103-16.

point to Bernheimer in the context of what he calls Kafka's and Beckett's 'phenomenological novels':

> Since the author does not analyse for the reader, since there is no omniscient external reflection, the reader must himself engage in the analytic process - he 'becomes' the protagonist in that he learns about the situation simultaneously with the narrator. (Szanto, 12)

Szanto and Bernheimer reflect marked reception-aesthetic tendencies in Kafka and Beckett criticism. Dearlove, writing of the proliferation of critical interpretations of *Molloy*, finds that readers reenact the narrator's headlong stagger, 'caught by the dual processes of fragmentation and tessellation':

> The list of interpretations continues as each reader reenacts the narrator's experience of attempting to discover the most convincing and satisfying explanation of uncertain and fluid events by recombining the given pieces and by merging characters and events into some explicable whole. Like the narrator, indeed like the trilogy itself, the reader is caught by the dual processes of fragmentation and tessellation, unable to go on, yet compelled to continue. (Dearlove, 74)

The reader's efforts to negotiate the text are therefore mirrored in, fostered and given a certain legitamacy by the narrator's experience. Günter Saße applies this logic, whereby an 'epistemological problem expands into an existential dilemma,' to Kafka:

> The epistemological failure of the hero becomes the hermeneutical failure of the recipient. By presenting hermeneutics in the form of a problem, the "cares of the family man" become, as Günter Saße's essay title states, "cares of the reader." Trapped in the cage of a patriarchal system controlled by teleological thinking and rational, goal-oriented action, Kafka's "family man" is unable to comprehend Odradek. Faced with this failure, he begins to second-guess not only the conditions of his understanding, but himself as well; the epistemological problem expands into an existential dilemma. According to Saße, Odradek is an "event" that induces a search for meaning leading to self-reflection – not only for the family man, but also for his reception–aesthetic alter ego, the reader. (Kempf, 79)

Bernheimer regards this doubling effect as 'Beckett's inheritance from Kafka,' and picks up on Beckett's remarks on Kafka:

> This is the tension between reading and writing, or, more specifically, between a protagonist's search for coherent, contained meaning, doubled by the reader's similar search, and the writer's self-reflective awareness of the consternating (etymologically: spread out, extended) incoherence of writing. The narrative expression of this structure is what I propose to call the aporetic quest, that is, the quest that proceeds in doubt about its own nature, purpose and goal. This doubt ... arises as the protagonist's readerly desire becomes increasingly implicated in the writerly process he is attempting to decode. (Bernheimer, 279)

What Bernheimer, like Cohn before him, does not take into account, is the possibility that K. founders with intent. This is reflected in the manner K. involves the village population in his 'quest,' rudely poking one after the other out of *Winterschlaf* (eternal winter flows, as in a fairytale, from the castle). K. demands a response from everyone. Thus K. both alerts the villagers to his presence (many of them would prefer to forget all about him) and implicates them in the particulars of his quest. K.'s quest is in an obscure sense a vehicle of change, whether or not any changes end up taking place. The same *onus* falls (with the same ambivalence) upon the reader. In *Watt,* by contrast, there is only Watt's single-minded crusade doubled by the reader's difficulties in making sense of it. The tension between K. and the villagers, effected by K. being drawn into a kind of infinite aside by the Castle, draws each of the villagers into an aside with K., drawing them one after the other out of their somnolent obscurity. In *Watt* the infinite or sublime aside of Knott, although it serves to establish an increasingly insurmountable difference between Watt and life at large, does not help to differentiate Watt's environment, in fact it effects the opposite, by *over-differentiating* it.

But furthermore, in Kafka's case the doubling is not restricted to the readerly encounter narrowly conceived, but appears to elicit reverberations at all levels of reception, all the way from the publishers, editors, translators and critics to the unspecified circulation of the term *Kafkaesque.* No particular insight is required to find that the critical industry raised on Kafka's remains reflects the bureaucratic systems operating in *The Trial* and *The Castle*, and stands in a similarly obscure relation to the lay reader of Kafka's works as does the Castle bureaucracy to K. What is more, the scattered and unimpressive buildings that constitute the Castle recall the fragmentary body of Kafka's authorship. The tower that looks as though its occupant has torn out through the roof, is like the authorial gap Kafka bequeaths us. Indeed, even the lowest grade of courier in Kafka's world finds its counterpart in a Radiohead fan running around in a Kafka T-shirt: 'Radiohead fans were gathered at the entrance, staring up at the sound and asking what it meant. One had on a Kafka T-shirt'.[13]

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The Castle, then, seems to prefigure Kafka's reception.

So there is a possibility still of a position in the industry devoted to the dissemination of Kafka's remains, but it entails, one imagines, menial duties, somewhat like the position of janitor in the local school. If one is content with such a position, one will never really belong to the bureaucracy but merely represent a flattened extension of its power, exhausted by the

[13] Ross, Alex, 'The Searchers' in *The New Yorker*, August 20 & 27, 2001, p.112.

slightest task, a situation aptly summed up in one of Kafka's aphorisms: 'His exhaustion is that of the gladiator after the fight, his work was the whitewashing of one corner in a clerk's office' (BON, 89). Yet every new reader would be K., and not any of the figures that appear at the same time to compound, defer, and promise a solution to K.'s predicament. At first, quite innocently, everyone is always going to be the very first reader.

The reader sets out to attain to the Castle, and the more effort he puts in the more he uncovers the air-roots of a vast organisation that seems to spread downhill from the Castle into the village. In the village everyone claims intimate knowledge regarding the Castle, and so the reader goes in the course of his studies from conceiving himself as the very first reader to arrive on the scene to the very last reader. This can go one of two ways. Either one is exhausted by the thanklessness of the task, submits to the pressures of the environment, accepts whatever position comes one's way in the village, brings this digression to a close, and disappears – or, of course, one reveals an infinite appetite for conversation, like K., in whose eyes people are always interesting in as far as they promise assistance, and for whom, therefore, the ubiquity of knowledge regarding the Castle means that *he,* for one, will *never* run dry of entertainment. K. maintains the childish exuberance of a first-time reader, supremely assured there are no insurmountable obstacles, and every further obstacle paradoxically convinces him he is on his way. However, the longer he maintains this standpoint the less it seems plausible, for no argument can justify such peculiar behaviour.

K. sets outs out to attain to the castle, to surpass it, and ends up *incidentally* contributing to the world around it. This recalls Adorno's dictum on effective action in Kafka: 'in a world caught in its own toils, everything positive, every contribution, even the very work which reproduces life, helps increase that entanglement' (NK, 271). I mean something slightly less cheerless, if not for the subject in question, namely the unfazed confidence of a subject who simply *presumes* that the situation is different for himself, and who, moreover, constantly demands reforms instead of conforming to what is – *not*, however, on account of any idealistic notions regarding how the world can be improved, but because the laws dictating this space simply do not correspond to the subject's expectations. Not, therefore, because he is motivated by any ethical considerations: K. wouldn't change a thing until things get in his way – we observe the same so-called *confidence* in Gregor Samsa's efforts to get up and go to work. Common sense and self-evidence continue to dictate the subject's actions long after the sphere of their applicability is suspended. Similarly the reader tends to side with Joseph K.'s point of view even when much of K.'s world is staring at him in gobsmacked disbelief.[14]

[14] In Kafka's earlier works the subject's expectations result in his regressive transformation in the face of the criminal ridiculousness of his demand that the world change, but in the less cheerless later works, although the

The first-time reader's innocent confidence in relation to Kafka is, from an informed point of view, an outrageous digression which beavers away unfazedly. In a sense every reader behaves ironically. The next step, which is to communicate one's views on Kafka, is rather like waging war on the campus library and all it stands for, where in the course of this siege, however, what is revealed, what emerges, bit by bit and yet all at once, is the extent of the library. Hence K., confident in his own mind of surpassing the Castle, is also working for the Castle (as Klamm's missives affirm), much as Joseph K.'s ignorance of the court helps develop its verdict. As the Law-Court Attendant tells Joseph K., 'A man can't help being rebellious' (T, 72).

The infinite architectonics of the court, its escalating tiers, the chapters of *The Trial*, develop in relation to Joseph K.'s capacity not to see reason, and this capacity mirrors the blind spot with which common sense conceives the world. Joseph K.'s stalling, his demand that his world take a time-out, just for him, in other words that time be arrested instead of Joseph K., storms at the limits of his world. The K.s embody the happy self-evidence of reading before it has to stand up for itself. The resistance K. encounters, the landslide of discourse away from the Castle, is like an accretion or encrustation of effort turned into common sense, general knowledge, recondite knowledge, arcane, obscure knowledge, and, finally, mystery. K., endlessly and essentially peacefully motoring against the current of this landslide, becomes a perpetual motion study machine. Not because he's interested in study, what could be more useless, but because it's in his interests to get to the castle.

Perhaps, then, in the Castle's eyes K's object is to test the Castle defenses. Analogously Kafka's writings appear, in their hermeneutic difficulty, a limit to be taken thoughtlessly, recklessly, at a gallop, or hurdled lightly (like the photograph the wife of the village inn-keeper cherishes, of Klamm's messenger hurdling a wall), and yet at the same time manifest the limit of endeavour, viewed from the interior. Little wonder, then, that this limit is filth-encrusted, like the court's offices in *The Trial*, for it is where everything human gives up and has given up, where the air becomes unbreathable and where sleep overwhelms one even as one is given leave to pass. It is the limit of exhaustion where everything fades out, turns back and *then declares*, no, no further, it's impossible, you can't possibly go any further than that.

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subject's demands still result in the subject losing all standing in its community (*The Castle*, 'Josephine and the Mouse Folk', and 'The Hunger-Artist,' for example), there is not the same suicidal regression which makes the demand assume the form of a punishment meted out by the world. Regarding this distinction between Kafka's earlier and later works, Sokel was the first to observe the difference between Kafka's earlier 'classical-expressionist,' 'tragic' narratives, characterised by the restricted narrative point of view Beissner termed 'Einsinnigkeit,' and the later, more ironic, narratives, starting with 'In the Penal Colony,' where 'irony provides the reader with a non-identificational standpoint' (Kempf, 63). We return to the significance of this distinction at points throughout this study. Much commentary persists in subsuming Kafka's work toward its tragic, classical-expressionist pole.

* * *

Unless, of course, one goes further by going less far. In Beckett the limit of endeavour no longer consists of an expansive double movement, but is embodied, for instance, in a limited sense, in the filth-encrusted Molloy himself, who claims to have negotiated every possible and plausible line of argument, paradigm, and career at some point in his enormous history. There is no landslide of discourse except for the text itself, which is a discursive encrustation shot with gleams of erudition. K.'s attentiveness becomes Molloy's forgetfulness; K.'s vibratory tilt toward the castle becomes Molloy's erratic pulse of words.

We can trace the consequences of this for the hermeneutic quest in relation to the overall shape and movement of Beckett's authorship.

Where many writers incline toward a form with variable contents, Beckett perhaps more than any other inclines toward a single, obsessively recurring, dwindling, content with variable forms. In the steady metamorphosis of Beckett's prose authorship, the drift of disintegration dissolves boundaries between individual narratives: a flow of allusions flows back and forth between the later to the earlier narratives, interfusing the earlier with the later. As Pilling (1976) finds, 'Beckett's events and imagery are obsessively consistent. ... It is not simply a case of all his plots resembling one another; all his heroes contain within them everything that has gone before them.'[15] By contrast every Kafkian narrative burrows out, with exceptional clarity, a world of its own. Where each of Kafka's fictions draws the reader into the claustrophobic clarity of its own bounded world, Beckett refers the reader across the trajectory of his writings.

Abbott (1996) writes interestingly of Beckett's ouevre as a *preemptive* art.[16] For example *Happy Days* preempts expectations raised by *Godot*: where in the latter 'nothing happens, twice' (Vivian Mercier), in the former something happens, twice. '*Happy Days* takes its life in opposition to *Godot* and in so doing gives new life to the earlier play' (Abbott, 32). The authorship is a concatenation of oppositional artistic moves, each seeking to escape the possible predictability set by the last: 'Beckett's art ... fuels itself. And the brilliance with which it burns is directly proportional to the threat of familiarity from which it seeks to escape' (31-2). If Kafka can be read to *prefigure* his reception, Beckett *preempts* his.

Abbott also defines Beckett's 'autographical' venture as repetition by reconstruction. *Autography* covers all areas of self-writing, also taking into account the reception of texts. The

[15] Pilling, John, *Samuel Beckett*, p.63.
[16] Abbott, H. Porter, *Beckett Writing Beckett – The Author in the Autograph.*

author-construct does not remain in an ideal and anterior condition of prepublication, instead the bits and pieces of himself he sends into the world constantly appropriate and reflect this process of having sent bits and pieces of himself into the world: 'with its continual recursive motion' Beckett's authorship evolves on the spot.

Beda Alleman refers to the Kafkian protagonist as engaging in a 'stehender Sturmlauf' – this could refer to Beckett's entire authorship.

A signal feature of Beckett's authorship is the dereliction and eventual elimination of the quest form. To declare the failed quest is a similarity between Kafka and Beckett may (with reservations) still hold true for the comparison of *The Castle* and *Watt*,[17] yet this is to overlook Beckett's movement into 'the trajectory-less zone of post-narrative art' (Abbott, 94). What is more, to return to our point of departure, in as far as the quest form gives rise to a hermeneutic doubling, in the course of the disintegration of the quest form the recipient's hermeneutic endeavours will increasingly be in contrast to the text: the hermeneutic pursuit will no longer be legitimated by the text.[18]

Abdicating Subjects

Szanto observes: 'In the works of Kafka [and] Beckett . . . the environment becomes known to the reader ... as a world of surfaces behind which nothing can be known' (Szanto, 8). Does this account in some perverse way for the curiosity in the appearance of these authors?

Beckett's face is typically cited as essential blurb to the works it stares off:[19]

> Start by looking at that beaky, ravaged face. It is part eagle, part Aztec shaman, part desert hermit. The hair sprouting from the top might be a marsh-reed blown down by a gale. The eyes stare as if wondering whether to flee or eat the camera. The forehead and cheeks appear to have been rutted and ridged by a chisel. The face doesn't just look lived-in. Its weird geology suggests that the bruised and beaten of the 20th century have taken up residence there.
>
> That face tells a truth.

[17] As remarked, amongst others, by Cohn, Szanto, and Patrick Murray (45).

[18] Where Kafka famously moves from using the first person ('Description of a Struggle') to the third, Beckett moves from the third to the first. For Beckett the third person of objective realism is not *serious* ('I gave *him* up in the end because *he* was not serious' – my italics). For Kafka the first person is untenable if any coherence is to be preserved. Uncertainty increases in Beckett as he moves away from parodying objective realism and the third person. Kafka, on the other hand, secures his uncertainty a leaner, more dynamic form, by moving away from the consternating effects of the first person. Needless to say, this is a treacherously abbreviated account, and will be developed at points throughout the following chapters.

[19] Nightingale, Benedict, 'The Unbearable Weight of Being,' in *The Times*, Friday August 27 1999, p.41.

Indeed: what could be more *Beckettian* than Beckett's face?

And, for that matter, what could more *Kafkaesque* than Kafka's?

Could comparisons perhaps be ventured on the basis of their expressions? Or their *hair*? Both have prodigious heads of hair. And what further insights could we glean from their *eyes*? We could pursue Beckett's staring pale blue 'gull eyes' all the way through the authorship: many of his figures, and his figures' figures, like Malone's Sapo (MD, 192), are fitted with a pair: 'I see me on my face close my eyes not the blue the other at the back' (HII, 9) – even when, as in 'Ping,' they are all but reduced to spots of colour. And, coming back to the hair issue, shocks of hair also crop up throughout Beckett's writings: *Murphy's* Cooper, Molloy, Malone ... In fact, corporeal traces of the *real* Beckett are deposited throughout the authorship, to the point where one suspects a mysterious interface between the image on the covers and the fragmented deposits throughout the texts, uncertain whether the face unravels into the text or whether it emerges out of the text. There is, by contrast, no overt physical evidence of Kafka in Kafka's writings, which are subject to a strict ban on overt intercourse between art and life.

Although not quite the same thing, it is also telling that Beckett is commonly featured, 'weird geology' and all, darkly against a white background, as on the Calder editions, and Kafka, all eyes and ears, as a pale blur receding into darkness, as though into the penumbra of interpretation. In Beckett we are not necessarily referred or deferred to an evacuation but recalled to what remains, not to the disappearance of meaning but rather to its remains.

Certainly Beckett and Kafka are photogenic, have 'face value,' as Eckhart Voigt-Virchow remarks in relation to the 'hi-jacking' of Beckett's face and its use in Apple advertising as an expression of 'artistic autonomy' (130).[20] I recall that a picture of Kafka became indispensable to the new Czech tourist board when in 1989 Kafka was restored to Prague, and Prague to Kafka: slapped onto every conceivable article of merchandise in an unseemly burst of business acumen the image rapidly acquired the ubiquitous quality associated with the *Kafkaesque*.

Consider Benjamin's remarks of a photograph of Kafka as a child:

> It was probably made in one of those nineteenth-century studios whose draperies and palm trees, tapestries and easels placed them somewhere between a torture chamber and a throne room. At the age of approximately six the boy is presented in a sort of greenhouse setting, wearing a tight, heavily lace-trimmed, almost embarrassing child's suit. Palm trees loom in the background. And as if to make these upholstered tropics still more sultry and sticky, the model holds in his left hand an oversized, wide-brimmed

[20] Voigts-Virchow, Eckhart, 'Face Values: Beckett, Inc., The Camera Plays, and Cultural Liminality,' in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, Volume 10 Numbers 1 and 2, pp.119-35.

> hat of the type worn by Spaniards. Immensely sad eyes dominate the landscape prearranged for them, and the auricle of a big ear seems to be listening for its sounds. (Benjamin, 115)

Does the slight figure of Kafka provide the imbalance to scenes that would otherwise slip into oblivion? His ears are too big, his eyes too odd. Kafka's vibratory attentiveness is in contrast to the stasis of his surroundings. This contrast accentuates the privacy being violated.

Photographs of Kafka do not reflect an artistic occasion. He is portrayed as a lawyer, as a fiancée alongside Felice Bauer, as a young boy – stills from the life of an unremarkable citizen: 'In the struggle between yourself and the world second the world' (BON, 91). Yet Kafka's oddness seems to warrant the intrusion. Similarly, because Kafka does not consent to be an artist, every trace of his life becomes all the more contaminated by the art it suppresses within itself. Thus Kafka's legendary efforts to be numbered amongst ordinary men transform every aspect of his ordinary life into the stuff of legend.

Beckett, on the other hand, by consenting to stand model as an artist, takes a certain level of abuse into account. Nevertheless, Beckett's ravaged face seems ironically to reflect the treatment it has received at the hands of the readership; not ravaged by the existentialist void, but by what Adorno would deem the analogous public void of popularity.

Of course, Beckett's *popularity* comes with the unwritten clause that Beckett is not to be held accountable for his popularity.

> [Beckett's works] enjoy what is today the only form of respectable fame: everyone shudders at them, and yet no-one can persuade himself that these eccentric plays and novels are not about what everyone knows but no one will admit. (Adorno, Com, 97)

Who could be more resentful of publicity, indifferent to its rewards? In this light Beckett's grudging consent to stand model as an artist becomes a supreme concession to public curiosity. Beckett's reluctance becomes the index of a singular generosity; and this in turn implies there is hope yet for us, the recipients. Perched at the verge of the void and staring into it, Beckett's slightest concession to an audience dying of curiosity obtains redemptive value. Little wonder that pockets of Beckett's admirers are moved to defend Beckett against other pockets of admirers. As Wayne C. Booth remarks, there is a motion to defend Beckett, on the basis of his superhuman generosity and tolerance, against the exclusive demands of his writings. To render Beckett palatable to the race, Beckett the elitist writer is traded in for Beckett the saint. As Molloy observes, 'Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of' (M, 24).

A similar situation obtains with Kafka. In fact Adorno expresses a reluctance even to 'join the fray' about Kafka, unless the bad infinity of Kafka's popularity, which Adorno finds reflected in the bad infinity of motivations in the writings themselves, turns his dissenting opinion on its head:

> Kafka's popularity, that comfort in the uncomfortable which has made of him an information bureau of the human condition, be it eternal or modern, and which knowingly dispenses with the very scandal on which his work is built, leaves one reluctant to join the fray, even if it is to add a dissenting opinion. Yet it is just this false renown, fatal variant of the oblivion which Kafka so bitterly desired for himself, that compels one to dwell on the enigma. (NK, 245)

Kafka introduces the telescopic standard; as the officer in the penal colony tells the traveller, 'Guilt is never to be doubted' (CSS, 145). By not consenting to a public synthesis between art and life, Kafka implicates posterity in a collective act of grave-robbery. Kafka's example goes further than merely expressing reluctance, and throws the slightest degree of complicity into relief.

In this quite unreasonable sense, Beckett shows up in Kafka's infinitely receding margins. Adorno resigns himself to an entanglement.

Of course, applied with respect to Beckett, this is a quite inexcusably simplistic view, which rests, aside from anything else, on the assumption that Beckett's writings work the distinction between the subject and its environment. Beckett himself, however, is categorical about the analogous relation of artist to artist's occasion:

> All that should concern us is the acute and increasing anxiety of the relation itself [between artist and occasion], as though shadowed more and more darkly by a sense of invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to. (D, 145)

In other words, Beckett proposes that the distinction between subject and environment is absorbed into the mood, or anxiety, that gives rise to it. The kind of dialectical mechanisms that implement a universal spread of condemnation in Kafka are meaningless here, or, rather, show up merely as traces, after-effects.

Nonetheless, Kafka's gesture toward historical self-effacement, famously articulated in the notes to Max Brod, *contributes* to his popularity. We could suggest, with Borges amongst others, that Kafka did not really want his writings burnt, and that he trusted Brod to ignore his instructions. Doubtless there is some truth in this; but more significant than Kafka's notes to Brod is the same ambivalent gesture sedimented throughout Kafka's writings, which constantly requires to be ignored. The single most famous instance, which in retrospect only

ever seems to threaten the entire undertaking, would blind us to the fact that it is entirely consistent with a reluctance, an undertow, a softness, a *literariness*, that affects Kafka at *all* levels.[21] As Walter Benjamin suggests, Kafka's instructions may have been intended to give the world a further, final taste of its own medicine. Kafka's risk, his jest with death, the notes to Brod, leaves a certain productivity to chance. By risking authorial death, and only because he risks this death, he leaves the mythical productivity of his name to chance.

The privacy of Kafka's writings – unfinished, unpublished, fragmentary, in epistolary and diary form, all seemingly still suspended within the life-process of their author, unauthorised – is part of their power. As Blanchot finds:

> [Kafka's] fragmentation is not accidental. It is part of the meaning it mutilates; it represents an absence which is neither accepted nor rejected. The pages we read are full to the brim, they suggest a work from which nothing has been omitted, and indeed the whole work is contained in these detailed accounts which suddenly break off as though there were no more to be said. Nothing is lacking not even the lack which is what they are about ... (SS, 25)

Beckett's writings, although they seem dragged and beaten out of him, do not invite us in the manner that Kafka's do- we are not drawn into a private, unmade room, by our sense that the occupant is out. Instead Beckett's writings defend themselves, in a sense, by resisting the reader, and defend the reader at the same time. Beckett publishes, reluctantly; his words appear reluctantly, crawling onto the page; his language resists itself and, almost as a side-effect, resists the reader. Kafka's resistance, on the other hand, was all up ahead, in the gesture at self-effacement. And when this failed his writings began to work their clear spell and transformed the contents of Kafka's life into the substance of the fictions.[22]

* * *

Dominique Iehl's essay on Kafka and Beckett begins with the observation that between two writers as decidedly independent and enclosed within their own worlds there cannot be talk of a direct influence. She goes on to mention the dearth of concrete grounds on which to base a comparison. Nonetheless she finds the prospect of a comparison alluring (Iehl, 173). But what Iehl omits to observe is that Kafka and Beckett compel comparison on the basis of being as decidedly independent and enclosed within their own worlds. Their

[21] We could suggest, after Blanchot, that Kafka is a more literary writer, given he is the kind of writer who keeps a journal in order not to lose contact with real time (BR, 409-10).

[22] In *The Castle* K. seems to affirm the impossibility of every effort to withdraw into a private space, albeit it is on these grounds that the possibility of connubial happiness (with Frieda) founders. Like K.'s assistants booted out the door entering turn about through the window, the readership cannot be kept out. And when K. moves out of the inn with Frieda, it is with the assistants to the local school, where they sleep in the classroom.

respective artistic applications of the 'hermetic principle' compel the comparison. The hermetic principle is, according to Adorno, 'that of completely estranged subjectivity' (NK, 261). Adorno writes of Beckett's works, though he could equally be referring to Kafka's: 'Philosophical apologists may laud his works as sketches from an anthropology. But they deal with a highly historical reality: the abdication of the subject' (Com, 97).

Although there is no mention of Kafka and Beckett in Adorno's essay 'The Position of the Narrator in the Contemporary Novel,' he will have had them in mind when describing the 'negative epic':

> the contemporary novels that count, those in which an unleashed subjectivity turns into its opposite through its own momentum, are negative epics. They are testimonials to a state of affairs in which the individual liquidates himself, a state of affairs which converges with the pre-individual situation that once seemed to guarantee a world replete with meaning. These epics, along with all contemporary art, are ambiguous: it is not up to them to determine whether the goal of the historical tendency they register is a regression to barbarism or the realization of humanity ... by uncompromisingly embodying the horror and putting all the pleasure of contemplation into the purity of this expression, such works of art serve freedom – something the average production betrays, simply because it does not bear witness to what has befallen the individual in the age of liberalism. (NL, 35)

This kind of literature *registers* worldlessness, does not withdraw from it in order to reflect upon it: 'For Beckett [like Joyce and Kafka] absurdity is no longer an "existential situation" diluted to an idea and then illustrated. In him literary method surrenders to absurdity without preconceived intentions' (TUE, 241). When Adorno observes that it is unlikely that Kafka entirely understood his own work, he draws attention to the fact that it is not by understanding alone but by registering the effects of the age that Kafka's critique is launched against the historical actuality almost all allusion to which is excluded. By becoming an instrument upon which his actuality impressed itself as opposed to aspiring to detached reflection, in Kafka the mysteries of divine inspiration are replaced by those of social mutilation:

> Works of art that react against empirical reality obey the forces of that reality, which reject intellectual creations and throw them back on themselves. There is no material content, no formal category of artistic creation, however mysteriously transmitted and itself unaware of the process, which did not originate in the empirical reality from which it breaks free. ... It is this which constitutes the true relation of art to reality ... (Com, 96-7)

And analogously the 'whole content of subjectivity, which is inevitably self-hypostatizing, is a trace and a shadow of the world from which subjectivity withdraws in order to avoid serving

the illusion and adaptation the world demands' (TUE, 250). Even in the subject's abdication from the world, subjectivity still registers this world as 'a trace and a shadow.'

The artistic analogy to the abdication of the subject resides, for Adorno, in the commitment to an autonomous art, to art for art's sake, to art that does not take market forces or philosophical reconciliation into account. Adorno views the latter as the end of every politically committed work, but here 'every commitment to the world must be abandoned to satisfy the ideal of the committed work of art ' (Com, 97). Only art for art's sake still transmits an impression of that historical scandal which consists in part of masking its own scandalousness – whether this is the abdication of the subject masked by the culture industry or by existentialism (Adorno's principal bugbears) – in the unreasonable lengths art is forced to go to cease being reasonable.

By going to every length not to be marketable, fashionable, reasonable, by not making any effort to philosophically reconcile or mediate the situation, by remaining, as a side-effect of insisting on artistic autonomy, entirely negative, Adorno finds that:

> Kafka's prose and Beckett's plays, or the truly monstrous novel *The Unnameable*, have an effect by comparison with which officially committed works look like pantomimes. Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearances, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change in attitude which committed works merely demand. He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad; the element of ratification which lurks in resigned admission of the dominance of evil is burnt away ... (Com, 97-8)

Yet this superbly forceful passage rather underestimates the opponent. After all, we have already seen that Adorno is resigned to the fact that Kafka's popularity is based on his readership's ability to extract pleasure out of the uncomfortable.

In terms of the lengths Kafka and Beckett go to ensure the autonomy of their art, Adorno compares Beckett's relation to Kafka to that of the serial composers to Schoenberg:

> [Beckett] provides Kafka with a further self-reflection and turns him upside down by totalizing his principle. Beckett's critique of the older writer, which points irrefutably the divergence [sic] between what is happening and an objectively pure epic language, contains the same difficulty as the relationship between contemporary integral composition and the inherently antagonistic music of Schoenberg: what is the raison d'être of forms when the tension between them and something that is not homogeneous to them has been abolished, without that slowing down progress in the artistic mastery of materials? *Endgame* handles the matter by adopting that question as its own, by

> making it thematic. The same thing that militates against the dramatization of Kafka's novels becomes Beckett's subject matter. (TUE, 259-60)[23]

In Beckett the expressionism that Adorno had diagnosed as *stretched* in Kafka (NK, 269) is declared 'obsolete' (TUE, 250):

> An expressionist epic ... tells of something about which nothing can be told, of the totally self-contained subject, which is unfree and which, in fact, can hardly be said to exist. Dissociated into the compulsive moments of its own restrictive and confined existence, stripped of identity with itself, its life has no continuity ... (NK, 265)

Perhaps the paradox of the expressionist epic, which Kafka 'mastered ... ingeniously through the visual element' (NK, 264) decomposes and is dissociated into *sound* in Beckett. The Kafkian *Bilderwelt* decomposes into the stream of Beckettian sound.

In Beckett the subjective forcefield that characterises Kafka's writing is 'exposed as the manifestation of an overarching whole that produces it' (TUE, 249). According to Adorno this forcefield, in which motivations endlessly circulate, and which encourages the systemising philosophical interpretations of Kafka's works that it echoes, is simply stripped away in Beckett, who recognises that 'their meaning ... is meaninglessness.' 'Beckett simply puts a stop to the infinity, in the bad sense, of intentions':

> This is his objective and non-polemical judgment on existential philosophy, which by means of the equivocations in the concept of meaning transfigures meaninglessness itself to meaning under the name of "thrownness," *Geworfenheit*, and, later, absurdity. Beckett does not oppose this with a *Weltanschauung*; instead, he takes it literally. (251)

That is, Beckett takes the Heideggerian predicament of existential *throwness* literally in the figures of Nag and Nell, who are *thrown out* like trash.[24] In this Beckett becomes comparable again to Kafka: 'as in Kafka, the colloquial phrase is taken literally. "Today the old people are thrown onto the garbage heap," and it happens.' (266)[25]

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[23] cf. 'Drama is possible only in so far as freedom – even in its painful birth-pangs – is visible; all other action is futile. Kafka's figures are struck by a fly-swatter even before they can make a move; to drag them on to the tragic stage as heroes is to make a mockery of them' (NK, n.262-3).

[24] One may or may not agree with Iehl that influence plays a negligible role in the relation between Kafka and Beckett, but given that in 1956, the year of the Schenker interview, Beckett was working on *Endgame*, do not Nag and Nell recall K.'s experience of Barnabas, Amalia and Olga's parents in *The Castle* – or, in as far as Beckett represents a step beyond Kafka, not merely are the parents wasted to the point of near-paralysis, in Beckett they are thrown out.

[25] We return to this feature particularly in relation to Kafka. I am not convinced that taking *colloquial* language literally is anywhere near as pivotal an element in Beckett as it is in Kafka, where, as Adorno was one of the first to observe, it frequently provides the metaphorical shift that spawns the story (Adorno's example is 'travelling salesmen are like bugs' – the transformation from simile to metaphor, and from figure of speech to its literalisation, provides a foothold on 'The Metamorphosis'). Günther Anders was the first to observe Kafka's tendency of taking everyday language literarily, which, as Kempf observes, is later taken literarily by Kafka's poststructuralist readers (Stanley Corngold and Clayton Koelb are singled out in this connection) who make 'a

Where Adorno declares that one should dwell not upon the monotonous repetition which affects Kafka's novel fragments in particular, where the bad infinity of the subject matter has spread to the artistic treatment, but rather upon details, such as Leni's webbed fingers, in Beckett everything has become dissociated details. The contingencies of Kafka's world stripped away, in Beckett's world the connections between things that would still give them at least the appearance of value are gone.

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As already mentioned, we are dealing with distinct applications of the hermetic principle. We are, perhaps, dealing with one hermeticism of claustrophobia and another of agoraphobia. Many of Beckett's *people* are not subject to an apparent restriction but an excess of possibility: excess is their only restriction. They are forever retiring into surrogate wombs, tombs, rooms, permutations, calculations, memories, ditches and dead ends, anything to limit, for the time being, which is unlimited, their possibilities. In Kafka, by contrast, all possibilities are apparently granted the protagonist, but they are rounded off in relation to the single most pressing possibility that is always denied: possibility becomes a gauge of the necessity that is denied, the range of strategies that Joseph K. may run through before capitulating to the inevitable. Every breath taken in Kafka's hermetic space starves it of a little more air and draws its limits closer.

We can conceive this difference in the light of Kafka's and Beckett's very different usage of allusions. In Beckett just about anything can be sprung on the reader in the form of an allusion: allusions to people, places, literature, philosophy, mythology ... [26] In Kafka, by contrast, allusion is raised to the power of a system, but nothing refers out of the fiction. In Beckett allusions are forever being made to an extraliterary reality, but they do not have the

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kind of logomimetikos out of Kafka' (Kempf, 26). Beckett does not so much take colloquial language literally as he simply (simply?) takes language literally – no sooner is a story spawned than it is beached.

[26] Pilling writes of Beckett's show of erudition in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*: 'as well as referring to the mythical figures Phoebus, Daphne, Narcissus and Echo (Daphne recurrs in *Watt*, and Ovid's story in *Metamorphosis* of Narcissus and Echo fascinated him enough for him to use it in the title of his first volume of poems), Beckett refers to (among others) Shelley, Rimbaud, Pisanello, Botticelli, Blake, Rousseau, 'George Bernard Pygmalion' and even quotes Hamlet's 'springes to catch woodcocks'. Traces of this habit remain in *Murphy*, but the references to such things as the Book of Job, modern psychology, Pythagoras, etc., are less frequent and more amusing. *Watt* presents a further advance: the learned lumber is relegated to the appendix' (Pilling, 49). Kafka was quick to see that what little education his tutors had successfully pummeled past his 'Gleichgültigkeit' (indifference) was utterly useless, and had, indeed, possibly damaged him (see 'Letter to Father', pp.55-6). He was never required, like Beckett, whose early work positively bristles with erudition, to burn off deposits of learning. The trajectory of Beckett's writings may also be conceived as an ironic ascesis of the trappings of erudition.

shock effect that Adorno notes in Kafka when at one point in *The Castle*, right out of the blue, the south of France is mentioned.

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If not wise yet to its situation, if it has lost sight of its situation, the point of view in many of Kafka's and Beckett's fictions, as we have already observed, is that of the subject following its expulsion or abdication.[27] Where the Kafkian narrative typically begins with the expulsion or arrest, with some kind of fall ('Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams' [CSS, 89]), in Beckett it is more overtly the always already happened. Voluntary departure and enforced dispossession amount to much the same, there is no return from either, nor any other means of escape. Particularly in Kafka there are innumerable possibilities of escape: 'Hiding places there are innumerable, escape there is only one, but possibilities of escape, again, are as many as hiding places' (BON, 23). What in Kafka still appears as the possibility of an escape is, in Beckett, the trace of a pastime.

In Kafka dying, at least, is not entirely beyond the subject, whereas in Beckett death miscarries. Exceptions here are Kafka's 'The Hunter Gracchus' and 'The Hunter Gracchus: A Fragment' – Gracchus, though dead, and content to be dead, fails to find his way to the next world[28] – and Beckett's early people, Belacqua and Murphy, both of whom die as the results, ostensibly, of human error.[29]

Cut off from actuality, the Kafkian and the Beckettian subjects undertake very different movements: As Patrick Murray (1970) observes: 'Kafka ... unlike Beckett, brings his hero into relationship with his fellow-men and with the world about him.'[30] Already in early Beckett there is the tendency of dissociation: Murphy seeks to launch himself free of the human sphere. In Kafka there is the tendency to associate, at least to negotiate. Even Samsa would like to negotiate a deal. In Kafka expulsion leads to a kind of involuntary rebellion, typically in the aspect of offended common sense. In Beckett the figure of revolt is missing.

Whereas Beckett's people are outsiders from the outset, many of Kafka's are, prior to their expulsion into fiction, perfectly respectable in their respective contexts. The memory of that

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[27] Exceptions are Kafka's narrative not composed in 'erlebte Rede' and Beckett's narratives up to and including *Mercier and Camier*. Characteristic of these is the overt disjunction between narrator and narrated which can be cause and effect of an ironic detachment.

[28] Adorno finds (TUE, 260) that Hamm's fear that death could miscarry echoes Kafka's Hunter Gracchus. Adorno's treatment of death in Kafka frequently recalls Beckett.

[29] As we shall see, the overt disjunction between narrator and narrated in *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy* enables the narrator to assassinate its puppets: 'He was an impossible person in the end. I gave him up in the end because he was not serious' (MPK, 41).

[30] Murray, Patrick, *The Tragic Comedian – A Study of Samuel Beckett*, p.91-2.

respectability persists in Kafka as shame. On the other hand, the shameful shamelessness with which the K.s comport themselves comes closer to that calculating lack of shame typically exhibited by the Beckettian subject.

According to Szanto, Kafka is horrified at the separation of man and universe, but Beckett is 'merely displeased' (Szanto, 9). Iehl, on the other hand, finds that Beckett's creatures do not consider the absence of certainty a great loss, and instead of striving, like Kafka's heroes, to solve the predicament they find themselves in, they *enjoy* this state of total flux: 'das Glück des In-der-Schwebe-Bleibens' (Iehl, 180).

In the wake of expulsion the world is echoed in the means (and memories) by which, unaided, the subject seeks to help itself, or (moving from Kafka to Beckett), that hope expunged, entertain itself – or, that delusion over, in the reflex tics and jolts of its 'going on.' As Adorno finds: 'The only aspect of freedom still known to it is the powerless and pitiful reflex action of trivial decisions. In this too Beckett's play is heir to Kafka's novels' (TUE, 259).

The protagonists' demands disclose a fundamental difference. K. wants his position validated by his superiors, Samsa would dearly like to go to work – Murphy, on the other hand, goes to lengths not to get a job, and aspires to become 'a mote in the dark of absolute freedom' (Mu, 66). The perfectly reasonable request that normality be restored is in stark contrast to a *willing* abdication of the subject. In Kafka the demand on the protagonist may seem absurd, but in Beckett the demand made *by* the protagonist is absurd. In Beckett's narratives after *Murphy* this is clearly no longer the case, but then a *protagonist* is also no longer self-evidently the case. The demand does not lose any of its ambivalence, but displaced from the sphere where the individual still believes he has a hand in fashioning himself, it loses the fashionable but self-defeating seriousness it has when made by pretentious decadents, drop-outs and 'pseudo-mystics' like Belacqua and Murphy.

Inevitably expulsion or abdication seemingly comes at a cost. Kafka and Beckett are not 'linked in pessimism' entirely without reason. Iehl observes that what characterizes Kafka and Beckett is the mastery with which they explore the diversity of threatened and mutilated existence (Iehl, 173). Inferiority, deformity, mutilation, sickness, weakness: all characteristic motifs of Kafka and Beckett. Precisely all that appears to make life insufferable and impossible becomes, because abolished from the image of good health, the sign of an undesired and impossible individuation. Continuing in this Adornian vein: mutilation and obsolescence characterize all that has escaped into the shadow of the present: 'the obsolete is the stigma of the present' (NK, 257). As Adorno remarks separately of Kafka and Beckett, their fictions are assembled out of the waste-products of capitalism.

Waste and elimination are central motifs. In Kafka dirt is the result of a process, but not only: it is the shock of its revelation – the shock that it is there, after all, and always has been. It is the dirt that has always been swept out of sight. In Kafka, then, this obscene peeking through of the filthy, systematically suppressed, primeval side of things, like a negative hernia bursting intermittently through the healthy exoskeleton of late capitalism. In Beckett we are always, by contrast, given leave to wallow in it: 'I was limply poking around in the garbage saying probably, for at that age I must have been capable of general ideas, This is life' (M, 57).

We remark also the differing treatments of waste (the expelled, rubbish, faeces) and wasting (disintegration). In Kafka the characters are waste but, unaware they are waste, not wasting. Waste that behaves like a traveling salesman does not behave like waste. In Beckett, by contrast, the waste wastes. The integrative function is no longer a sign and site of actuality. When, in Kafka, the character surrenders his function, he wastes away. In Beckett, less the function, there remains a *going on*; without external integration there remains an on-going wasting.

We return to the subject of elimination in the fifth chapter.

And we return also to themes involving the form of authority in Kafka and Beckett, and merely shoot them a glance for the present:

> Move on,' he said to the crowd, 'before you're moved on.'
> The crowd obeyed, with the single diastole-systole which is all the law requires. Feeling amply repaid by this superb symbol for the trouble and risk he had taken in issuing an order, the CG inflected his attention to Wylie and said more kindly:
> 'Take my advice, mister-' He stopped. To devise words of advice was going to tax his ability to the utmost. When would he learn not to plunge into the labyrinths of an opinion when he had not the slightest idea of how he was to emerge? And before a hostile audience! His embarrassment was if possible increased by the expression of strained attention on Wylie's face, clamped there by the promise of advice.
> 'Yes, sergeant,' said Wylie, and held his breath.
> 'Run him back to Stillorgan,' said the CG. Done it! (Mu, 28-9)

One need scarcely remark the contrast between civic law as it is derided in a passage like the above and law as it effortlessly enforces itself in Kafka:

> I ran past the first watchman. Then I was horrified, ran back again and said to the watchman: 'I ran through here while you were looking the other way.' The watchman gazed ahead of himself and said nothing. 'I suppose I really oughtn't to have done it,' I said. The watchman still said nothing. 'Does your silence indicate permission to pass? (PP)

In Beckett the law and its representatives belong to the actuality from which the subject has been expelled, and have little to no hold upon the subject: as Molloy observes 'To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter' (M, 24). In Kafka the law is carried over into the hermetic space of the expulsion, reappearing in this world in an intensified form, marking the boundaries of the expulsion. That is, the law, between its first assertion, its repeated contractions around the protagonist, and the final contraction that expels the protagonist out of his expulsion, marks the onset and end of the fiction. In other words, the fiction (and the protagonist) exists *despite the law yet because of the law, before the law.*

No such vacuum, in which the law sucks itself out of sight in the form of a radically pressurized fiction, obtains in Beckett. Particularly in the early works, representatives of the law are treated with dandyish derision (the laughable notion that order can humanly be effected in time as opposed to *by* time). Needless to say, however, this derision still betrays a nervous dependency – the fun of kicking a representative of the law in the balls and then bashing his head in (*Mercier and Camier*), is not yet the mark of total indifference to the law.

Disintegration Represents a Step Beyond Transformation

The crux of the matter: the onus that falls upon the reader. The double-bind enacted at an epistemological and suggested to the reader at a hermeneutic level is very much like a course of conditioning to the inexplicable- but only to one expecting the explicable. Yet should one expect the explicable?

Thus Beckett in 1938: 'The time is perhaps not altogether too green for the vile suggestion that art has nothing to do with clarity, does not dabble in the clear and does not make clear, any more than the light of day (or night) makes the subsolar, -lunar and –stellar excrement' (D, 94). Or simply:[31] 'Don't interpret, it dates you.'

Kafka's writings solicit interpretation, and yet do not give themselves to interpretation. In their most demonic form they are associated with the writing machine in the penal colony, where as legend has it understanding coincides with the moment of death. Most harmlessly they posit the possibility of endless study, studying that never becomes law. Kafka's writings assume the form of the mystery they set out to resist, and, by drawing us into an aside, reveal how we too are part of this mystery. Beckett is all too easily bracketed in this category, but in Beckett the compulsive clarity is missing. We still catch glimpses of those alluring forms that are in constant retreat in Kafka, but here they appear obscurely in the bad light of ruined

[31] Quoted in Szanto, p.183.

sight. Reading itself becomes difficult, consternating. The very ease of reading Kafka reinforces the impossibility of interpreting him; the apparent difficulty of reading Beckett may signal the lack of an imperative to interpret him. Beckett's writings are less concerned with eliciting a response that always falls short of some hermetic hermeneutic. Beckett seems to postulate a reader that is no longer hung up on sense, on mastery, on the titillations of infinite deferral. Again, *Waiting For Godot* rather flies in the face of this thesis, but *Waiting For Godot's* popularity seems based on its possessing a negative authority more akin to Kafka's writings than much of Beckett's other work.[32]

Perhaps those of Beckett's works that seem the most remote are those that offer themselves to the simplest and yet most subtle of readings. The late writings especially, strange textual bruises, the sonar, the sounding sound, of 'Ping,' the cobwebbed spots of time of *Company*, crackling gently with static and interference, avoided because they provide so little orientation, are those that require the least orientation to read.

Where Kafka retains the mess in the form of an intriguing mystery, and compels us into action, Beckett accommodates the mess as mess. In *Proust* Beckett writes:

> Exemption from intrinsic flux in a given object does not change the fact that it is the correlative of a subject that does not enjoy such immunity. The observer infects the observed with his own mobility. Moreover, when it is a case of human intercourse, we are faced by the problem of an object whose mobility is not merely a function of the subject's, but independent and personal; two separate and immanent dynamisms related by no system of synchronisation. So that whatever the object, our thirst for possession is, by definition, insatiable. (*Proust*, 17-18)

The observer infects the observed with his own mobility: in the case of Watt trying to reconstruct the Galls' episode, his reflections sink into an crosshatching of interpretation; similarly in front of a picture in Erskine's room, Watt deliberates this way and that way, and settles in the end for the interpretation that most moves him; Sam, furthermore, infects the account of Watt's account with his own considerable mobility. The object observed in Kafka also registers an infection, but it absorbs the infection and remains an object. Gregor Samsa is transformed into an insect, but a solid insect seemingly worthy of representation. In Beckett the object unravels. What is disintegration in Beckett is transformation in Kafka – Kafka's figures resist

[32] Adorno appears to believe this interpretative seductiveness is characteristic of Beckett's dramatic work as opposed to his prose: 'Beckett's *dramatic work* ... calls for interpretation.' (241, my italics) However, Beckett's later dramatic works (ie. those after *Endgame*) follow an analogous reduction to that of the prose, where sound (and visual pattern) is foregrounded at the expense of meaning (and image). As Abbott observes, in the later prose works 'the effect of sound is heightened at least to contend (in the reading) with the undertow of meaning' (Abbott, 107-8).

disintegration by undergoing, in an alchemical pressure-cooker, a regressive transformation into whatever sense they rescue in their defence.

A story worth the telling: Kafka always takes the necessary step to make a story worth telling; he resists uncertainty but does not overcome it, and turns it into mystery. With Beckett mystery expires. As his storytellers are indisposed or disinclined to conceal from us, Beckett tells the story not worth telling; he does not resist uncertainty, he accommodates the mess. Iehl makes a similar point: Kafka fixes images of uncertainty, provides certainty at least in the strength of the image; Beckett proposes the reverse (Iehl, 181). In other words, Beckett proposes not to *fix* images, and to let uncertainty, or 'confusion,' into the equation:

> The confusion is not my invention, it is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in ... There will be new form and ... 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. (Beckett to Tom Driver, *Critical Heritage*, 218-9).

Beckett's gradual erosion of a coherent human field increasingly reveals certain formal concerns in which he differs completely from Kafka. As Beckett famously informs one interviewer: 'I am interested in the shape of ideas, even if I do not believe in them' (Beckett to Harold Hobson, quoted Kenner, 100). Thus Kenner:

> The very shape of the Beckett plots, as Vivian Mercier has brilliantly noted, can be prescribed by equations, Cartesian Man's inflexible oracles; Watt's career the curve of a function that approaches and turns around zero (Knott) before disappearing irretrievably off the paper, *The Unnameable* perhaps a spiral confined to the third quadrant where both coordinates are negative, and capable of straightening out and blending with zero if only it can protract itself to infinity. (Kenner, 109)

Geometric shapes appear with increasing regularity, particularly circles, spirals, cylinders, but at a remove from the disintegrating field of action they seem to have an obscure bearing on. The human element which fuses shape to matter, form to content, goes missing in Beckett. At the same time the human need for meaning is increasingly shown down to a penchant for meaningless shape.[33]

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[33] Consider Pilling, for instance, on the cylinder: 'The fascination with cylindrical shapes is itself new; in the days when numbers seemed a doubtful escape-route, such forms as the circle (*Watt* and *Molloy*) and the ellipse (*The Unnamable*) were Beckett's favourite shapes. The increased solidity of cylindrical forms is certainly appropriate to the increasingly abstract and allegorical writing of Beckett's recent period [Pilling is referring to *The Lost Ones*], whereas trudging round the perimeter of an endless and immaterial circle or ellipse is an image that, while not exclusive to the trilogy, is particularly appropriate to it' (Pilling, 29). This fascination, however, is not completely new, the cylinder already makes a cameo appearance in 'The Calmative' – and I suggest that the cylindrical object the policeman waggles at Molloy refers both backwards to the Civic Guard's baton in *Murphy* and forward to the purgatorial imprisonment in 'The Lost Ones.' The cylinder as a stacked spiral of cycles, a prison of time looped in upon itself?

In Beckett the image breaks apart, cracks into the abstract appearance of meaning (form) and waste details (content). Beckett no longer preserves Kafka's *Bilderwelt.* In Kafka the details that make up the image seem to be magically, elastically bound to the image. This elasticity vanishes in Beckett, and with it the coherence of the image. On the other hand, in Kafka the reader may be disconcerted by the elastic snapping of appearances back into place (always just on time), into the familiar semblance of human meaning, as though the instant before there was nothing there, or something other – the appearance of a recognisably human world is constantly in formation, always swept into place just on time. In Beckett, by contrast, details flake away, dissolve off the driving, digressive, point of the narration.

The tendency toward geometric shape and pattern also reflects Beckett's passion for mathematics, permutations in particular, although any calculation will do: "The processes of mathematics offer themselves to the Beckett protagonists as a bridge into number's realm of the spectrally perfect, where enmired existence may be annihilated by essence utterly declared' (Kenner, 109). As Hassan observes: 'More than Hemingway, Kafka, or Genet, Beckett gives himself to Pythagorean stringency and truth' (Hassan, 211). Where Kafka's hairsplitting assumes the form of legal argumentation and Talmudic exegesis, Beckett's ratiocination is frequently mathematical and, *or because*, less contingent upon an apparent opponent or partner in dialogue. Mathematics is indulged in as solitaire. So is chess, by those, like *Murphy's* Mr Endon, with sufficiently advanced psychoses. Kafka's figures, in marked contrast, remain hardwired into their environment, and their endlessly ramifying lines of argument are also their lifelines.

Laughter

There remains the small matter of Kafka's and Beckett's funniness, frequently cited to effect uplifting turnarounds in existential interpretation: 'Both writers save themselves and their representation of the world by a weird humor' (Strauss, 260).

Particularly Beckett is a bag of laughs. The diversity and range of Beckett's wit reflects the resources his *people* are driven to exhaust in their efforts to kill time. This includes the *dianoetic* laugh, which laughs at the infinite unhappiness reflected in these efforts:

> The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not good, it is the ethical laugh. The hollow laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout – Haw! – so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the

saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy. (*W*, 48)

In Kafka there is not the same diversity of wit that keeps us, if not the protagonist, diverted from our unhappiness. As Politzer suggests, Kafka's humour frequently derives from the extreme lack of humour displayed by his figures. In Kafka everything is strung on a single line, nothing twitches without everything else twitching, and when we laugh it is frequently because of the *impossibility* of the predicament; we do not laugh at but laugh off a horrifically claustrophobic proposition – the involuntary laughter that accompanies the expression 'you must be joking' – the same laugh, however, which tears us backwards out of the fiction, draws us back in again, perhaps against our better nature. This laughter is similar to that disbelief with which K. repeatedly shrugs off the idea of his arrest. Suddenly intensified it becomes that disturbing force with which Georg Bendemann is torn from his father's sickbed, out of his house, and over a bridge, a punchline with the force of a death sentence.[34]

The pressurized uniformity of Kafka's worlds precludes the possibility of differentiated emotional expression. Beckett, by contrast, is marked by the tension between melancholy and its overly sentimental expression – there is always a sadness in Beckett which teeters dangerously on the verge of becoming sentimental, of becoming sadness *about something* – a tension marked by the irony relentlessly deployed to eliminate sentimentality. In Kafka there is no space for sadness, which represents an emotional detachment alien to the range of moods circulating in his entirely contingent worlds; Kafka's emotional range is not from happy to sad, but from excitation to shame.

[34] Dentan makes a similar point: 'Dentan does not intend to explore Kafka's humor in detail, rather he wishes to challenge all those critics who take the author too seriously. ... Upon an initial reading of "The Metamorphosis," the reader cannot help but giggle at the comical contradiction between Gregor's human thought and desire and his animal appearance and behaviour or at the authoritative presence of the subtenants and their marionette-like demeanor. These discrepancies allow the readers to distance themselves from the text and form judgments on the characters' ruminations and actions (11-14). This is a new and fundamental insight, for the reader is liberated from his slavery to the text by way of Beissner's *Einsinningkeit*' (Kempf, 53).

CHAPTER THREE

Kafka, Beckett & the Question of Irony

> In the end it is the reader who is made to feel unreliable.
> (Furst, 200)

'the play of lights'

Where the previous chapter surveyed a variety of approaches to Kafka and Beckett and skirted the subject of irony, the structure of the present chapter is underpinned by a consideration of the critical responses to the question of irony in Kafka and Beckett. These themselves constitute a pattern or plot anticipated in the first two chapters: Kafka is frequently compared to Kierkegaard; Kierkegaard is frequently lumped together with the Romantic Ironists; Kierkegaard is critical of the Romantic Ironists; Beckett is frequently read as an extreme exponent of romantic irony; Beckett and Kafka are frequently lumped together; Beckett is critical of Kafka; Kafka is critical of Kierkegaard on grounds not entirely incompatible with Kierkegaard's critique of the Romantic Ironists. One intimates an obscure baton race across the last couple of centuries, which begins with the Romantic Ironists and ends with Beckett, comprised of a caravan of characters all of whom have been compared, at some point or other, on some point or other, to each other, where the characters themselves, however, each appear motivated by the need to dissociate themselves, the one from the other. It puts me in mind of Kierkegaard's comment that there is about as much 'social unity in a coterie of ironists as there is real honesty in a band of thieves' (CI, 249).

Thus, then, the chapter is made up of two parts. The first part seeks to synthesise commentary on Kafka's relation to Kierkegaard, specifically in relation to irony. And the second part addresses the question of irony in Beckett: What is it? Or even: *is it?* Is Beckett *beyond* irony? If so, what does it *mean* to be beyond irony?

I begin, however, with a few preambles regarding the contrasting appearance of irony in Kafka and Beckett. Ruby Cohn provides a useful point of departure:

> It is immediately evident that Kafka's omniscient, impersonal narrator thinks and speaks like K., and, for that reason perhaps, seems incapable of viewing him from an ironic distance. Or, if irony is present, it is referred back to K. ... Beckett's narrator, in contrast, uses irony through various dextrous stylistic guises, so that the entire tale has a veneer of callousness. Named Sam like Beckett (K. is Kafka's *hero*), the narrator makes no first-person announcement of his presence until midway through *Watt*, but various editorial comments and devices indicate his ambiguous personality from the start ... What is, moreover, extremely difficult to ascertain is whether Beckett means Sam's irony to be conscious or whether Beckett as author is wielding *his* irony through an ingenuous Sam (as either Sam or Beckett certainly wields irony through an ingenuous Watt) ... Yet at the beginning and end of the novel we are witness to dialogues which neither Sam nor Watt could have heard. More significant is Sam's awareness of the possibility of error in Watt's memory and/or recital, and in Sam's memory and/or recording, even though Sam "was most careful to note down all at that time." ... Thus, "behind the form" of third-person narration, Beckett suggests "consternation" by imputing fallibility to focus and communication. (Cohn, 156-7)

Thus Beckett deploys a diverse range of ironic strategies: irony appears both as a mastered element in discourse and, possibly, as an unmastered element which interferes with discourse to the point where ironic effect can no longer be told from error. This diversity is not exclusive to *Watt*. Helene Baldwin (1981), for example, identifies a 'destructive' irony in Beckett's trilogy, leveled at 'the body and its functions, sexual intercourse and consequent generation of children, extreme ratiocinative processes, academic and other bureaucracies, literal and popular notions of religion, and kind, patronising ladies' (Baldwin, 155), and an 'indicative irony,' which 'is a good deal more subtle and less savage ...' – 'gentler, almost tender or compassionate':

> In indicative irony ... the entire context of a work, the frame of reference, the system of values, is intimated but never clearly defined. ... The strategies subsumed under indicative irony might be summed up as a rhetoric of allusions - in titles, quotations, epigraphs, paraphrases, allegory, parable. (152-3)

Baldwin, in short, contrasts Beckett's use of irony as a controlled element, which aggressively satirises particular targets, with a more pervasive and less stable range of irony that toys with the very notion of composing a fiction.[1]

Coming back to Cohn's formulations, the Kafkian fiction excludes overt narrative irony. The surface of the fiction is never broken. Ironic intent or effect cannot be traced to a narrator or to an implied author, but is either referred back to motivations immanent to the

[1] Baldwin also observes a third 'tone' in the trilogy, a 'lyrical' tone that 'celebrates moments of beauty and union with something or someone, usually in the context of nature ... yearning ...' (155). These three tones are effected, presumably, for Baldwin, by varying levels of exposure to mystic experience: 'After all, in what language can a sophisticated twentieth-century writer of wide experience, enormous erudition, and sardonic humour convey a religious quest, or - worse yet - a mystical religious quest?' (153).

fiction or becomes recuperable *beyond* the fiction at a more general level. Much as Kafka obviates metaphor and other stylistic devices of literary language, irony does not appear as an intrusive or disruptive force in the guise of an implied author. This does not imply that Kafka is *less* ironic than Beckett.

With regard to irony becoming recuperable at a more general level, D.C.Muecke (1970) cites Kafka and Beckett as examples of 'General Irony' – a category of irony he sets apart from his subsequent discussion of Romantic Irony (which he defines as an irony of literature, exploiting the reflexive possibilities of literature, the form of irony he finds characteristic of Thomas Mann). It is a general irony that:

> Kafka, in *The Trial*, presents the fact of human existence as a criminal offence, life as a trial (or the preliminaries to a trial) in which the defendant is utterly unable to find out the nature of the charge against him, and death as the execution of a sentence passed against him in his absence. (Muecke, 76)

And it is a general irony that Beckett, in *Waiting For Godot*, 'presents the ironic absurdity of life by telescoping the life-span to a single instant' (76). General irony is therefore recuperable as an ironic image that encapsulates and substitutes for the story, not irony that plays or interferes with the very possibility of representation. That is, a general irony, although it can appear to encompass all of life, remains safely tucked within the order of representation as opposed to nipping at the penhand.

With respect to this last, and in contrast to Muecke, Lilian Furst (1984) repeatedly links Kafka and Beckett in the context of romantic irony:

> romantic irony is an irony of uncertainty, bent primarily on the perplexities of searching. Alert to the plurality of all meaning and the relativity of every position, the romantic ironist probes an open-ended series of contradictions which bound into a chaos of contingencies instead of coming to rest in a state of resolution or comprehension. In the context of a changing, disjointed world of shifting values, his quest is for transcendental certainty, even while he may question its existence. His irony is therefore pervasive and infinite, absorbing everything in its exponential progression. *It is not a perspective on a situation, but a presence within each situation* ... its effect is one of kinetic, relativistic perspectivism. (Furst, 228-9 – my italics)

This ironist subsumes every possibility of irony, subsumes every ironic strategy into a narrative in which unrestricted authorial freedom comes to mirror the unrestricted, eternal mobility of chaos. The principal figure in this context is Friedrich Schlegel – the object, we recall, of Hegel's apopleptic outpourings, which it gives Kierkegaard such satisfaction to bring to our attention. Schlegel receives kinder treatment in Furst, who reflects on one of

Schlegel's aphoristic qualifications of irony: 'Irony is clear consciousness of eternal mobility, of the infinite fullness of chaos' ('Ironie ist klares Bewußtsein der ewigen Agilität, des unendlich vollen Chaos.'):

> This can only be understood holistically within the web of Schlegel's theory as a summation of his belief that the finite world is contradictory and can therefore be mastered only through the conscious floating of an ironic stance. Puzzling though that dictum may seem, not least in its tantalising brevity, it contains a view of irony illuminating for a Kafka, a Beckett, or a Cervantes. Irony is transformed into a way of seeing the world, of embracing within one's consciousness paradox and chaos. (Furst, 25)

But more than this, the ceaseless ironic mobility of the text has a marked effect on the reader:

> the uneasy sense, as in Kafka or Beckett, of ineffable implications that are felt but cannot be specified. The method amounts to 'warfare with the reader.' It is a cross between a guerilla campaign and a sparring match, in which the text seems teasingly to defy us to read it. *In the end it is the reader who is made to feel unreliable.* (200 – my italics)

Furst's formulations are engagingly expressed, but they strike me as more true of Beckett than of Kafka. For *does* the Kafkian text *teasingly defy* the reader? When Furst comes to describes the stance of the romantic ironist in relation to the reader we easily perceive how this relates to Beckett's narratives, but less to Kafka's:

> The stance of the romantic ironist ... is introverted; his gaze is directed inwards onto the work he is creating and onto himself as its creator. The reader, even when he is specifically addressed is no more than an audience of the creative spectacle at best, and at worst merely an eavesdropper. (231)

Whereas in Beckett we seem to witness a controlled disintegration of control, in which irony appears at the one moment as a consciously controlled particle, and in the next as fraying conscious control, a turmoil of ironies of all shapes and sizes, General and rhetorical ironies, overlap, certain ironies leaping immediately to a head, others fanning infinitely and ineffably outward in their implications, in Kafka by contrast irony never extrudes into sight but remains locked in or out of or under or behind the story. In Kafka irony seems to limit its corrosive capacity, curtails itself before it bursts into sight and risks ruining the story. Kafka invites the more general ascriptions of irony because his irony is pervasive but unplaceable: the entire story is cited as an irony. Irony in Beckett has a similarly pervasive and unplaceable aspect, but because it draws on a seemingly inexhaustible well of ironic

strategies, because just about every trick in the book is thrown at the reader, it constantly, relentlessly, invites local reconstructions of sense. And despite the fact that some of Beckett's wide-ranging, 'indicative' forms of irony put in question the possibility of *satire*, which requires a modicum of value-sharing, Beckett's more vicious sense of irony frequently does obtain to satirical ends, and his fidelity in this sense to particular targets (like those listed by Baldwin) can lead readers to construe Beckett as less ironic than satirical.[2]

Where in Kafka irony never assumes a position that can be identified with an authorial figure, in Beckett irony never ceases to assume this position, but with an enthusiasm that surpasses enthusiasm, that sooner or later exhausts the eagerly complicitous reader.

Martin Walser's (1975) contrast of irony in Thomas Mann and Kafka comes in handy here. Walser finds that Mann (the eminent modern practitioner of romantic irony) and Goethe develop controlled forms of rhetorical irony that serve to relativise the contents of their novels, where irony is conceived as merely one moment amongst others; irony conceived, then, as an artistic principle as opposed to a *modus vivendi*, which serves to develop the author's lack of accountability in relation to his works. The novels of Kafka and Robert Walser, by contrast, evolve into increasingly radical ironic operations that spare nothing, from which nothing escapes, least of all an objective justification for telling stories:

> Also bei den einen Ausbildung der Ironie zum beherrschtem Mittel gefälliger Darstellung und Verklärung gegen des eigenen Ich; bei den anderen Ironie als Mittel zur immer genaueren Vernichtung des eigenen Anspruchs. Die einen erschreiben sich einen Thron, die anderen ein Urteil. (Walser, 240)

In other words: Mann and Goethe compose unassailable thrones, whereas Kafka and Walser sentence themselves.

And yet Kafka goes about eliminating all grounds for justification with great calm and discrimination, with what Beckett calls his classical, serene, *steamrolling*, style. Robert Walser is perhaps closer to Beckett in as far as his style is fragmented and his language and point of view overtly playful.[3] In Kafka, although everything is uncertain, the point of view always remains steady, even if (*if not because*) it proceeds on the basis of a misunderstanding. In Kafka's fictions as in his diaries a recurring commandment is to remain calm and to observe

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[2] This debate – Beckett: satirist or ironist – may be conceived as suspended between the antipodes of Swift and Sterne, Irish master of satirical polemic and Irish jester of infinite hobby-horsing.

[3] Cf. Kempf, after Jürgen Born (1979): 'Robert Walser's work is the most closely related to Kafka's – at least to Kafka's first collection of short prose, *Meditation*, except that Walser's mocking banter is replaced by melancholy in Kafka. On the other hand, both writers share a highly polished style, a penchant for ethereal contemplation, and, more significantly, an immediacy with which they present a subjectively "formalized," heightened reality. In contrast to Walser's, Kafka's "formalism" captures, for instance, the psyche of a character so precisely and aptly that he can do without psychological motivation.'

at all costs; as Joseph K. finds even as he is escorted through the streets to the site of his execution, '"the only thing for me to go on doing is to keep my intelligence calm and discriminating to the end"' (T, 247). It is not the case, as we shall repeatedly have cause to observe, that in Kafka observation itself is free of suspicion – K.'s powers of observation contribute to the trial they observe – but where the entire universe is out of joint observation is a prop that can be relied on to smuggle a trace of stability into the performance. There is a hard nub of ignorance that goes hand in hand with Kafka's serenity, an element that Walter Benjamin compares to Dostoevsky's 'Grand Inquisitor.' In Beckett, by contrast, we touched upon this in the previous chapter, observation constitutes the grounds of uncertainty: 'the observer infects the observed with his own mobility.' As the observing subject notes in *The Unnamable*:

> the play of lights is truly unpredictable. It is only fair to say that to eyes less knowing than mine they would possibly pass unseen. But even to mine do they not sometimes do so? They are perhaps unwavering and fixed and my fitful perceiving the cause of their inconstancy. (U, 294)

I

'Er hat zu viel Geist' – Kafka vis-à-vis Kierkegaard

> Irony as the negative is the way; it is not the truth but the way. Anyone who has a result as such does not possess it, since he does not have the way. (Kierkegaard, CI, 327)

> There is a goal, but no way; what we call a way is hesitation. (Kafka, BON, 89)

> Both were brokers in the literary marts of the "absurd." Both were lonely figures in their times. Both were "exceptions." Both (though in different ways) were under the dominance of father figures. Both were bachelors; both died young ... Literarily, both were masters of irony, of the aphorism and the anecdote – anecdotes which became parables, and, in Kafka's case, parables that became novels. (Hopper, 94)

* * *

I begin with three excerpts from Kafka's diaries that capture both his intensely personal reaction to Kierkegaard and his clear sense of how they differed:

> [August 21st 1913] Today I got Kierkegaard's *Buch des Richters*. As I suspected, his case, despite essential differences, is very similar to mine, at least he is on the same side of the world. He bears me out like a friend. (KDI, 298)

> [February 25th 1918] I have brought nothing with me of what life requires, so far as I know, but only the universal human weakness. With this – in this respect it is gigantic strength – I have vigorously absorbed the negative element of the age in which I live, an age that is, of course, very close to me, which I have no right to fight against, but as it were a right to represent. The slight amount of the positive, and also of the extreme negative, which capsizes into the positive, are something in which I have had no hereditary share. I have not been guided into life by the hand of Christianity – admittedly now slack and failing – as Kierkegaard was, and have not caught the hem of the Jewish prayer shawl – now flying away from us – as the Zionists have. I am an end or a beginning. (BON, 52)

> [February/March 1918] He has too much mind, and by means of that mind he travels across the earth as upon a magic chariot, going even where there are no roads. [Er hat zu viel Geist, er fährt mit seinem Geist wie auf einem Zauberwagen über die Erde, auch dort, wo keine Wege sind.] And he cannot find out from himself that there are no roads there. In this way his humble plea to be followed turns into tyranny, and his honest belief that he is "on the road" ['auf dem Wege' – on the way] into arrogance. (BON, 55-6)

Commentary on Kafka's debt to Kierkegaard in terms of irony begins with the understanding that Kafka does not 'indirectly communicate' a negative theology, as Brod had it, that a negative theology is not the signal similarity between the two, but the principle *difference.* However, the principle of *indirect communication* continues to be conceived as a similarity. Kafka's debt to Kierkegaard is conceived, therefore, in terms of *method.* That Brod's view persisted as long as it did is not entirely without interest in this connection, in as far as interpretation of Kafka in this vein is to an uncertain degree encouraged by those indeterminate procedures (ironic or paradoxical, or 'intentionally ambiguous') of indirect communication that constitute the affinity between Kafka and Kierkegaard – elements that commentators observe operating in the service of faith in Kierkegaard, but not in the service of anything in particular in Kafka.

That is: Kafka's indirect communication communicates only itself. Kierkegaard's paradox of faith is determined to be *less* paradoxical for being *of faith.* Jacob Golomb's (1985) proposition is exemplary: 'Kafka's paradox is essentially far more paradoxical than Kierkegaard's'.[4]

Commentaries diverge in their evaluation of whether this redounds to Kafka's credit or to Kierkegaard's. Hopper (1978), for instance, writes that Kafka 'keeps the wound of the

[4] Golomb, Jacob, 'Kafka's Existential Metamorphosis: From Kierkegaard to Nietzsche and Beyond', in *Clio - A Journal of Literature, History and the Philosophy of History*, Vol.14:3 (Spring, 1985), p.277.

negative open more consistently than does Kierkegaard' (104).[5] And Reed Merrill (1979) rather shamelessly valorises Kierkegaard's point of view over Kafka's in terms of *philosophical health*.[6] But although these evaluations are all very interesting in their own right, and doubtlessly invaluable within their respective contexts – and we shall look at them shortly – of equal interest is the comical departmental tug-of-war plainly to be observed in the background, which reflects the fact that Kierkegaard, self-proclaimed dialectical lyricist, a philosopher with literary tactics who threatens to burst into poetry, is located under Philosophy, and Kafka, who writes in lucidly wrought, dialectically staggered language any philosopher would be proud of, who has all it requires to be a philosopher except the desire or the will, is located under Literature. A strange tug-of-war that *faith*, established as the defining difference between the two, is entered into at its own expense, either roundly philosophised out of existence, or viewed as below the compass of a modern man of letters.

With theology reduced to the difference there still remains the delicate exercise of distinguishing between Kierkegaard's impact on Kafka's personal life and his impact on Kafka's literary life – bearing in mind that this is someone who writes to his fiancée's father, directly after reading Kierkegaard, 'I am nothing but literature and can and want to be nothing else ... Everything that is not literature bores me and I hate it, for it disturbs me or delays me, if only because I think it does' (KDI, 299).[7]

Wolfgang Lange (1986) neatly resolves the confusion by pointing out that Kafka had two main phases of immersion in Kierkegaard.[8] The first of these was in 1913 around the time of Kafka's first engagement to Felice Bauer. Kafka gets a copy of Kierkegaard's *Buch des Richters* and, as is his wont, scours the journals for parallels to his own personal situation. Inevitably he observes the parallels between Kierkegaard's inability to go through with his engagement to Regine Olsen and finds, briefly, a vindication of his own situation vis-à-vis Felice Bauer. Kierkegaard justifies breaking off his engagement to Olsen by interpreting the melancholy that befell him almost immediately after becoming engaged as a divine protest that he should already be retiring into self-satisfied 'bürgerliche Existenz.' Kierkegaard has to *sacrifice* marital

[5] Hopper,

[6] Merril, Reed, '"Infinite Absolute Negativity": Irony in Socrates, Kierkegaard and Kafka', in *Comparative Literature Studies*, Vol.16 (Urbana, IL: Summer, 1979).

[7] The danger of not making this distinction is registered by Golomb when he confusingly conflates the two: 'At this early point we may already say that Kierkegaard's influence on Kafka was confined mainly to his personal life, as we know it from the diaries, while Nietzsche's impact is felt on the ideational and intellectual levels. Thus Kierkegaard offers Kafka the form and the style' (Golomb, 271). But can we really maintain that Kierkegaard's influence on Kafka's *personal* life was reflected in the *form and style* of his writings? Then again, the passage is debatable on several counts, for 'style' is where Kafka and Kierkegaard may most easily be seen to diverge, and they converge on an *intellectual* (as opposed to ideational) level.

[8] Lange, Wolfgang, 'Über Kafkas Kierkegaard Lektüre und einige damit zusammenhängende Gegenstände', in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, Vol.60:2 (June, 1986), pp.286-308.

bliss to satisfy the divine debt incurred by his father. Kafka, however, cannot abide by any extra-aesthetic justification and remains more ambivalent (which, *pace* Lange, possibly accounts for his comparative lack of resolution with respect to breaking off the engagement, even getting engaged again, only to break it off a second time). Kierkegaard justifies his position in the world, albeit negatively, by soliciting condemnation even as he seduces faithwards. Kafka has no position in the world except insofar as he racks up the case against himself; that is, he draws condemnation not in order to seduce in any particular direction, but because the only way to justify the demonic demands of his aesthetic existence is to turn it into a trial ranged over against itself (Lange, 289-90).

This, then, is Kafka's first brush with Kierkegaard. The second, key, encounter is at the time of Kafka's Zürau stay, in the winter of 1917-18, as borne out by many references to Kierkegaard in the *Blue Octavo Notebooks* and in letters to Brod. This is the period of a more intellectual as opposed to personal engagement with Kierkegaard's writings, and it is in this period that Kafka both develops the affinity in dialectical form and thinking and dissociates himself from the element in Kierkegaard which Lange terms his *culte-de-moi* – that is, Kafka dissociates himself from Kierkegaard's implicit recognition that his self-sacrifice sets a model example, this self-assurance which turns 'his humble plea to be followed ... into tyranny, and his honest belief that he is "on the road" into arrogance' (BON56).

We return to Lange's essay after surveying a couple of other essays. For the present, however, we might observe that Kierkegaard's case in *The Concept of Irony* against the Romantic ironist, that he judges everything in actuality yet never fails to rescue his own vanity, echoes, curiously, Kafka's critique of Kierkegaard.

* * *

Hopper also touches on this difference in *vanity*, although he does not make it the ground of a case in Kafka against Kierkegaard:

> Both Kafka and Kierkegaard are dialectical. Both are filled with the splendid provocations of wit. But there is again a difference. Kafka's wit is contained, remains internal to the narrative and/or the style. The style is always simple, clear, direct, realistic. Kierkegaard's style flows, indulges its own redundancies. It is also polemical and likes to bask from time to time in the aura of its own cleverness ... Both Kafka and Kierkegaard are engaged in "indirect communication": thus in the strategy of each there is both an intentional and a necessary ambiguity, which ambiguity informs the mode of communication. It is here the authorships diverge. (Hopper, 95)

Hopper goes on to discuss how Kafka's stories are emptied of metaphor to the point where each becomes a kind of 'absolute metaphor' (he borrows the term from Beda Alleman). He compares Kafka's reading of the Prometheus myth, in which four discrete (and very brief) readings of the myth are presented consecutively as though constitutive of a continuity, with the successive readings of the Abraham myth at the outset of *Fear and Trembling*. Hopper finds that in Kafka the effect of the consecutive sections 'amplifies' the literary element whereas in Kierkegaard the different readings 'psychologise.' In other words in Kafka the successive readings undercut each other, whereas in Kierkegaard they add or extend meaning. Hopper analyses Kierkegaard's use of word play in a poem ostensibly concerned with the beauty of a girl, and finds that 'Kierkegaard is intrigued more by the discovery of the ambiguous resources of the language than he is by the beauty of the girl' (101). Hopper's point is that Kierkegaard's verbal imagination (evident in the enjoyment he derives from word play) follows upon dialectics, whereas in Kafka dialectical operations follow on verbal slippage. That is, in Kierkegaard word play is essentially stable because it makes a dialectical and ironic point, whereas in Kafka the stabilising influence of dialectics only enters the equation after the imagination has had its way. Consequently Kierkegaard's word surface may appear more 'clever' or playful than Kafka's, but it rests on a fundamentally *logical* dialectic. Hopper takes a very simple view of Kierkegaard's irony, however, when he cites *The Concept of Irony* 's definition of irony as 'riddle and solution … possessed simultaneously' – after all, this is no more than to say that finite irony cancels itself out (pseudo-irony). Also, strangely, Hopper omits to provide an example of the word play or play on colloquial language characteristic of Kafka, where (as we touched upon in the previous chapter, and will continue to touch upon in the following chapters) it frequently bears the function of providing the breach out of which the fiction is borne.

In essence, therefore, Hopper's argument returns us to familiar ground: Kafka does not have Kierkegaard's faith; where in Kierkegaard the leap of faith bridges irony and the 'aesthetic sphere,' in Kafka we are led into an 'ontological trap.' In other words, their ambiguity draws to the same impasse, 'the Contradiction,' but Kierkegaard gestures past the impasse.

In Hopper, therefore, Kierkegaard falls prey to his own philosophical element:

> [Kierkegaard's] logical dialectic is constantly running the risk of turning the "leap of faith" into "the objective idolization of 'the Paradox'" – of presenting the Contradiction as a postulate instead of a mythopoeic Presence requiring a perpetual appropriation by way of a continuing repetition of the movement in faith.

In other words, Kafka's *absolute metaphors* reside beyond dialectical appropriation, and retain the Contradiction as 'mythopoeic Presence' – in other words, Hopper finds that Kierkegaard runs the risk of being taken for a philosopher, and duly treats him as one.

Reed Merrill's argument is similar to Hopper's, yet turns it on its head:

> What Kierkegaard states concerning Socratic irony quite easily could be said of Kafka himself: "Socrates did not merely use irony, but was so completely dedicated to irony that he himself succumbed to it." (Merrill, 228)

Merrill valorises Kierkegaard over Kafka for the same reasons that Hopper and Golomb (and to a lesser degree Lange) valorise Kafka over Kierkegaard: Kafka is the more paradoxical; his irony cannot be reconstructed at any remove, divine or otherwise. Merrill contrasts Kafka, Kierkegaard and Socrates in the light of an opposition between philosophical or 'pure' irony (Knox) and rhetorical or 'corrective' irony:[9]

> their writing elucidate the dialectical process of trial and error, argument and counter-argument, in the form of ironizations of the search for meaning and value. Socratic irony equates subjective thinking and pluralism; Kierkegaard's irony constitutes the absurdly paradoxical relationship of man and God; Kafka's irony comprises finite-infinite dualism. (226)

For Merrill pure irony is a predicament as much as it is an instrument, and the differences he establishes between Kafka and Kierkegaard are conceived in the light of their respective relations to irony, where irony is conceived as an unhealthy philosophical point of view. 'The stand-off of irony could be transcended by passionate faith' (225); 'This was Kierkegaard's answer to Socratic irony; it was his method of avoiding "the snares of relativity"' (224-5). For Kierkegaard 'true Christianity must be understood as a passionate avowal of faith without the comfort of dialectic, as a "teleological suspension of the ethical"' (228).

Yet is not dialectic a somewhat cold comfort in Kafka? And, what is more, Merrill seems to imply that Kierkegaard actually took this leap *himself*, out of and beyond dialectics:

> The result of Kafka's futile search is a kind of relativity in which any one of the three [Kierkegaardian] categories [aesthetic, ethical, and religious] and the border categories of irony and humor all have equal value.[10] As a consequence, although Kafka's fictions are

[9] "'[P]ure' irony ... is dialogical, pluralistic, paradoxical and ambivalent; it is open-ended and polyphonic, dialectically unreliable and unconventional, and philosophically indeterministic. Pure irony occurs, according to Knox, where 'the fleeting moment expands into the dominant effect'" (223). Merrill's terms are generally taken from Muecke, therefore 'corrective' irony can be either negative or positive corrective.

[10] Cf. '[T]o Kafka irony suggests illusoriness and unresolvability in the context of paradox, while to Kierkegaard irony is the bridge between the aesthetic and ethical spheres of existence which leads to humor, which in turn is the higher bridge to the ethical and religious spheres of existence' (227). Also, cf. Golomb: 'one may classify

consistently impelled toward monistic ends [i.e. they are teleologically motivated], they ironically fall back into pervasive dualism. Unlike Kierkegaard and Socrates, Kafka never assumes a position, and as a result his irony is always diffuse and impossible to categorize because it is neither pure nor corrective, but totally *all and none* of the Kierkegaardian categories at the same time. Kafka is the tightrope walker supreme. *Irony is the cause and the effect in all his writings* ... (225, my italics)

In other words, Kafka is hung up on attempting to simultaneously reconcile the Kierkegaardian spheres spanned by irony and humour, whereas Kierkegaard is conceived to be in on a non-human, religious humour, with which he leaps out toward God. Irony resides in the subject; humour is bearing witness to God, post-subject:[11]

> To Kierkegaard, God as an absolute can be comprehended only as the antithesis of anything human, including the fallibility of human finitude. [This echoes Kafka's critique of Kierkegaard, which finds no place in Merrill's essay, namely Kierkegaard's superhuman demand] It is this critical problem of negation which finally separates Kierkegaard and Kafka, since Kafka insisted on the hope of resolving faith and despair through the impossible merger of humor and irony, while Kierkegaard knew the emptiness of this kind of resolution. (233)

Hence where Kierkegaard is 'concerned with fathoming the prolixities of possibility in order to resolve irony's inherent instability by replacing it with an acceptable concept of religious belief ... Kafka could only stand on the brink describing the logical impossibilities of faith, yet hoping for a sign' (227, 232). Kafka (on the one hand the 'tightrope walker supreme') is philosophically muddled, impatient even, does not know how to take one step after another but tries to take all the steps necessary to escape 'the frustrations of pluralistic existence' at one and the same time:

> where it is evident that Kierkegaard attained a kind of self-mastery, or at least a distancing from the frustrations of pluralistic existence, Kafka succumbed to that pluralism, making it into a topsy-turvy ontology rather than a transitional system which could lead to unity of man and God. Kierkegaard warned of this cosmic stand-off when he said that "Irony is healthiness insofar as it ... an endemic fever which but few individuals contract, and even fewer overcome." It is entirely possible that Kierkegaard predicted the outcome of Kafka's work in that statement. (234)

Amusingly, in contrast to what we earlier observed of Kafka's critique of Kierkegaard, this suggests Kafka is guilty of what Hegel and Kierkegaard accuse the Romantics: an

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Kafka's writings according to Kierkegaard's "spheres" and find, for example, that the "Description of a Struggle" is a peak of the aesthetic phase' (Golomb, 276).

[11] Cf. for example: 'Humor has a far more profound skepticism than irony, because here the focus is on sinfulness, not on finitude ... it also has a far deeper positivity, since it moves not in human but in the anthropological categories; it finds rest not by making man man but by making man God-man' (CI, 329).

impoverished intellectual development and the related symptoms of a severely narcissistic mystification.

After establishing this qualitative gulf between Kierkegaard's and Kafka's philosophical points of view, Merrill goes on to place Socrates over and above Kierkegaard as the 'healthiest' perspective on pluralistic existence, as though Kafka falls short of Kierkegaard and Kierkegaard in turn falls short of Socrates in terms of philosophical health. Kafka falls too neatly between the benches of corrective and pure irony; Kierkegaard, by proposing a religious remedy, is corrective, but only at the expense of the human element; Socrates' irony is pure, an end in itself, and not beyond the realms of human possibility:

> Where Plato, Hegel, and Kierkegaard use irony as a means of development but not as an end [i.e. didactically, instructively], Socrates, the romantic ironist, and Kafka find irony to be an end in itself in the absence of demonstrable universal purposiveness. However, Kafka stands as a special case since his constant endeavour, thwarted though it was, directed itself toward the same "passionate certitude" [of faith] as Kierkegaard's.

Thus Merrill, in contrast to Hopper, weighs up Kafka for his philosophical credentials as opposed to his literary credentials, and his valorisation is consistently at the expense of the more literary, where Socrates (literally not literary, in as far as he produces no letters whatsoever) comes out on top. This lopsidedness is borne out by Merrill's readings: he quotes liberally and astutely from Kierkegaard as well as from secondary literature on Kierkegaard, and is evidently in familiar territory; yet when it comes to Kafka he only quotes two short texts in succession, and barely as much as glances at them. He does not deem it necessary to cite Kafka's *Blue Octavo Notebooks*, the principal, later, source of Kafka's commentary on Kierkegaard – all he cites is the passage from a letter to Brod, also entered in Kafka's diaries (Kierkegaard 'bears me out like a friend'). Merrill's essay begins: 'Kierkegaard's *The Concept of Irony* remains the most important work on the philosophy of irony, and it is an extremely valuable source for an understanding of the work of Franz Kafka' (222) – this suggests that Kafka read *The Concept of Irony*, which is unlikely; Kafka's most likely encounter with Kierkegaard's comments on irony would have been in the journals and in *Either/Or*. A further objectionable aspect is the implied equation of Kafka with a *philosophy* of irony. And, finally, with respect to Kierkegaard's irony, Merrill does not even begin to differentiate between the various points of view put forward in *The Concept of Irony*, does not in the least read it as ironic, but first and foremost as a philosophical treatise on irony. (It is also odd how Merrill sets out by declaring how important *The Concept of Irony* is for an understanding of Kafka only to cite predominantly from Kierkegaard's journals.)

In Merrill's essay philosophy negates literature. In more literary-minded essays like Hopper's the philosophical angle is simplified, and the literary aspects of Kierkegaard dwindle a little too effortlessly into dialectics- Kierkegaard falls prey to precisely that which Kierkegaard warns against, the effortless appropriation of faith into dialectics.

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We now come back to Wolfgang Lange's excellent essay on Kafka and Kierkegaard:

> Kafka primarily was fascinated by Kierkegaard's ironic discourse and not by the theological content and implications of his philosophy. Following the traces of Kafka's Kierkegaard studies it becomes evident that Kafka adopts Kierkegaard's concept of irony and develops it into a weapon in his fight for sovereignty. (Lange, 287 – abstract)

As already mentioned, Lange finds Kafka's key encounter with Kierkegaard's writings was in the winter of 1917-18, reflected in entries in *The Blue Octavo Notebooks* and passages in letters to Max Brod. This encounter coincided with Kafka's reappraisal of the project of self-observation he had set himself in the diaries, by keeping a daily diary and closely observing and recording his inner states in order gradually to form an image of his inner life. Lange reads Kafka's 'Zum letztenmal Psychologie!' to mark Kafka's recognition of the failure of this introspective method; his efforts, 'vermittels einer fortlaufenden Protokolls von Ich-Zuständen, die aus der Brentano-Schule stammende Idee einer deskriptive Psychologie auf Kategorien philosophischer Provenienz durchzuführen, hatte sich als Irrweg erwiesen' (296). As Kafka writes in his notebooks: 'How pathetically scanty my self-knowledge is compared with, say, my knowledge of my own room. ... Why? There is no such thing as observation of the inner world, as there is of the outer world. At least descriptive psychology is probably, taken as a whole, a form of anthropomorphism, a nibbling at our own limits. The inner world can only be experienced, not described' (BON, 14-15). Lange sees the aphorisms written at this time, extracted from the notebooks (by Kafka) and later misleadingly entitled (by Brod) 'Reflections on Sin, Suffering, Hope, and the True Way,' as Kafka's *Geheimlehre* (293), the esoteric doctrine designed to free him from all binding theological and metaphysical consolations and edifications, their authority disempowered through a series of reflexive acts of the imagination ('indem er durch eine Reihe reflexiver Imaginationsakte deren Autorität *für sich* außer Kraft setzte' [293]). Here, then, was a new form of self-reflexivity, no longer based on a descriptive psychology, but drawing on Kierkegaard's

destructive dialectic of interiority ('destruktive Dialektik der Innerlichkeit' [296]), his *Doppelreflexion.*

Lange's main points regarding this *Doppelreflexion* require translation. Lange observes that this *Doppelreflexion* is conceived by Kierkegaard as a procedure in which, as opposed to scientific and objectifying thinking, ostensibly valid cognitions are not achieved at the expense of the subjectivity of the one reflecting – much to the contrary, this subjectivity is liberated into the unlimited freedom of movement of objectless interiority. Interiority is not, therefore, conceived as a playground/hotbed ('Tummelplatz') of subjective caprice but as the area of operation of the subject wrestling for sovereignty, where truth is yet to appear. If this objectless interiority is to become a place of truth then the subject must desist from remaining solipsistically wrapped up in itself but situate itself facing outwards in order to sample mythological and scientific discourses for material with which and in which it can illuminate itself (297). As Lange goes on to explain, Kierkegaard's indirect communication does not seek to inform or argue with the reader, and most certainly does not seek in a direct sense to convince the reader of anything in particular – what it attempts is to confront the reader with himself, to shake his faith in himself and thereby provoke the reader into thinking. It is the art of the ironist to achieve this provocation through a deliberately and impossibly claused text- the ironist who knows that he knows nothing and that irony 'as the negative is the way; it is not the truth but the way' (299).

Kafka and Kierkegaard thus treat all collective notions, all religious, scientific and political discourses, ironically. However, by breaking discrete ideas and images out of these discourses and interpreting them afresh in the light of subjective experience, they achieve a kind of reflexivity that does not remain merely private opinion or become entirely reified in an intellectual system:

> Denn die Ironie der Doppelreflexion besteht ja gerade darin, daß sie beständig zwischen dem Reich der offiziellen Diskurse und dem der individuellen Erfahrung hin- und herpendelt, daß sie Ideen und Bilder aufgreift, deren überlieferte Bedeutung liquidiert und die so präparierten Leerformen, angereichert mit dem Potential subjektiver Erfahrung, neu ins Feld schickt, aber nicht als verallgemeinerbare und konsistente Behauptungen, sondern als momentane Denk-experimente, die bei nächster Gelegenheit selbst wiederum der Ironie zum Opfer fallen können. (299)

For the irony of this 'Doppelreflexion' consists precisely in this ceaseless shuttling between the realms of official discourse and subjective experience, isolating ideas and images, neutralising their transmitted meanings and then sending the ironically hollowed forms, enriched with the potentiality of subjective experience, back out onto the field of discourse –

not as objectively assimilable and consistent observations, but as provisional thought-experiments that can themselves fall foul of irony at the next opportunity.[12] This continual construction and destruction of reflections results in a hermetically enclosed process of consciousness that circles within itself, which is, like irony, an 'infinite play with nothingness' ... Thus, because Kafka and Kierkegaard have appropriated this limitless freedom of irony they can also make use of every conceivable tactic: they can simultaneously deploy word-wizardry and the most rigorous logic, let poetry and philosophy go hand in hand, in order with the two of them to work at a constructive destruction of the world.

On this last point Lange is playing off an entry in Kafka's notebooks, which is in all likelihood made in reference to Kierkegaard:

> There is an enchantment accompanying his argument of the case. One can escape from an argument into the world of magic, from an enchantment into logic, but both simultaneously are crushing, all the more since they constitute a third entity, a living magic or a destruction of the world that is not destructive but constructive. (BON, 55)

'Die Konsequenz aber, die sich bei Kierkegaard aus der rigorosen Verfolgung seines "Imperativs der Erkennens" ergibt, ist der Zusammenbruch von Objektivität schlechthin' (Lange, 298) – Given the thinker's relation to actuality is one of subjective appropriation (*Aneignung*), he acquires no positive, inter-subjectively anchored knowledge (*Erkenntnisse*). He is therefore incapable of erecting an intellectual system. What results, therefore, are thought fragments, fragments of a groundless subjectivity, and the total disintegration of objectivity.[13]

However, where subjective reflection is propelled to the point where, as a consequence of the ironic fracturing of the objective world, it is dashed to smithereens upon the absolute paradox, in Kierkegaard this occurs in the name of God whereas in Kafka the procedure takes place for its own sake. For Kafka it really is the case that subjectivity is the truth, a notion that Kierkegaard only dares to think with God in mind (302-3). – And it is on this point that Kafka rests his case against Kierkegaard: 'in dieser Art von Religiosität witterte [Kafka] eine religiös verkappte Apotheose des Individuums, eine *Theologie des Ich*.' Kafka senses that Kierkegaard's rejection of all contemporary religiosity combined with his claim

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[12] Re. Kafka's 'Denkexperimente': 'Anticipating structuralist and reader-response theory in Kafka research ... Arendt ... views his stories as thought experiments, or as drafts for alternative worlds whose realization requires the reader to participate in thinking and creating' (Kempf, 24).

[13] Missing in Lange are Adorno's comments on Kafka's relation to Kierkegaard, an omission made all the stranger given he cites Adorno on Kierkegaard and the 'Operationsmodus des subjektiven Denkers im Bilde des ästhetischen Radikalbewußtseins ...' (297). Adorno establishes a connection between Kierkegaard's objectless interiority and the hermetic principle in Kafka's writings, but does not make this a similarity based on *irony* – hardly surprisingly, in as far as irony *ostensibly* cedes a degree of subjective control to the author, a detachment that Adorno does not see in Kafka, whose only detachment for Adorno would be that lack of detachment with which he records under compulsion.

that he seeks to maintain a secret relation to God is a thinly veiled apotheosis of the individual, a theology of the ego. Kafka does not consider the individual justified in turning against the world in the name of anything. By *condemning* this subjective abdication from the world, however, Kafka can both maintain the subject's movement ostensibly away from the world and second the world in its case against the subject withdrawing into itself: 'In the struggle between yourself and the world second the world' (BON, 92).

'Everything is open and aboveboard'

> Everything is open and aboveboard; there is nothing to conceal; when the plain truth is in question, great minds discard the niceties of refinement. ('A Report to An Academy', CSS, 252)

Lawrence Frye's essay 'Word Play - Irony's Way to Freedom in Kafka's Ein Bericht für eine Akademie' (1981) marks a departure from the essays looked at in the latter section.[14] Frye ignores the debate raging around Kierkegaard's and Kafka's comparative paradoxicalness and deploys *The Concept of Irony* as a perspective brought to bear on word play in Kafka's short story 'A Report to An Academy.' He does concede at one point that Kafka was familiar with the writings of Kierkegaard, but this is as close as he gets to formulating a theory of influence. Such briskness, for all its lack of ground, has the undeniable advantage of engaging with a particular text as opposed to taking hypothetical potshots at the entire authorship.

> Word play, as a linguistic means of altering the appearances and meanings of words, can alter the appearances and perceptions of those things which the words seem to communicate. Or, as in any performance, the linguistic level of activity may become absorbing enough to project a reality of its own, detached from and obscuring any contents which gave rise to it. (Frye, 457-8)

Frye splices two conceptions of word play for his reading. The first, derived from Kierkegaard's concept of irony, is word play deployed ironically to the end of becoming negatively free, *replacing* 'restricted physical freedom with subjective freedom' (457). The second is a Freudian reading, whereby abstraction through word play *compensates* for a loss 'on a more physical level.' The danger here is that the subject engaged in word play ends up 'stranded at the verbal level':

[14] Frye, Lawrence O., 'Word Play - Irony's Way to Freedom in Kafka's Ein Bericht für eine Akademie', in *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, Vol.55:3 (October, 1981): pp.457-75.

> the "verbal idea" may have a compensatory function for a loss occurred on a more physical level; the abstract may be a way to "regain" the concrete object which lies in the unconscious, with at least memory traces in the "concrete idea." The second point is that one may never make it back to the concrete idea, back to what is lost, back to the unconscious; one may be stranded at the verbal level, most remote from the unconscious, with ... the abstract, figurative aspect of the word. (462)

In other words, abstraction is common to both conceptions of word play, but where in Kierkegaard this occurs as 'ironic intent,' in Freud '[o]ne may, unfortunately for the mind, remain a victim of the "verbal idea"' (464). In Kierkegaard the ironic subject replaces its concrete, empirical self with a purely verbal self in order to become free; in Freud the subject runs the risk of becoming a victim of its own desire to recover (from) an actual loss: 'Both ends ... are detectable in the Kafka text – which is so much the worse for the person of the narrator' (464).[15]

The *person* of the narrator is Rotpeter (Red Peter), a chimpanzee whose evolution has come along in leaps and bounds since he was taken captive five years ago, to the extent that he now boasts 'the cultural level of an average European' and an unassailable position 'on all the great variety stages of the civilized world' ('Report,' 258, 251). Rotpeter has been invited to submit to the Academy an account of his former life as an ape. However, as he explains, he is even less qualified to do this than the gentlemen of the Academy:

> To put it plainly, much as I like expressing myself in images, to put it plainly: your life as apes, gentlemen, insofar as something of that kind lies behind you, cannot be farther removed from you than mine is from me. (250)

The *image* the narrator has just *expressed* himself in is that representing his access to his past and ape nature, a portal that was once 'an archway as wide as the span of heaven over the earth,' but which has shrunken behind him, in 'revenge' for his having not clung stubbornly to his origins; and the 'strong wind' which used to blow through this portal and out of his past, has since slackened to a 'gentle puff of air that plays around my heels' (250).

This image of the 'closing gate' is, for Frye, the 'moment of birth for the major part of the word play which runs through the rest of the narrative' (Frye, 459). From the concrete image of the opening, through attentive analysis of the word surface, Frye observes the recurrence of certain linguistic constants, *offen* (open) and *groß* (large) in particular, throughout the rest of the narrative. This lexical migration constitutes a *structure* of word play:

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[15] Frye declares the two conceptions incompatible, yet surely Freud describes a risk immanent to irony, a psychoanalytic reading of the mystification Paul de Man warns against confusing with irony.

> In our text … there is not simply a "bunch" of words in some randomly playful relationship of mutation to each other. Rather, they constitute a structure within the text with a definable beginning – but with no clear ending. There is a moment of birth for the word play but no death, only a fading away into an unreported future, as for so many of Kafka's characters. (459)

Frye finds that constantly recurring words like *offen* and *groß* do 'indirect battle' throughout the various contexts of Rotpeter's report: in the context of the wounds he incurred at his capture, in the context of his cage confinement on the ship 'and the accompanying discussion of freedom versus a way out,' in the context of 'public performances versus a restricted private life,' and in the context of Rotpeter's self-styled *open* attitude: 'The words [remain] basically the same throughout: attitudes and postures which project openness and great magnitude do indirect battle against experiences and situations of closure and small magnitude' (471). This structure is read to evince, in the light of Frye's two readings of word play, on the one hand Rotpeter's indirect opposition to his predicament (restriction), and on the other hand his attempt to compensate for the memory of a loss in the past. The structure evinces a psychodrama of the narrator, unfolding at the time of narration; i.e. the structure of word play is the narrative of the subjective state of the narrator throughout the *performance* that is the narration of the 'Report' – for: '[l]anguage is, like his activity on the Varieté stage, also a performance' (457). According to Frye, however, the narrator fails, in both conceptions of word play, to achieve the intended effect. Rotpeter fails to replace his sense of physical restriction with negative freedom, and he fails to compensate for the loss of his physical freedom:

> The struggle is to free Rotpeter from his unwanted condition through the mask of his words, and so the irony is intentional. But the persistence of his adversary in the vocabulary of "small," "closed" and other relatives must seem like a conspiracy. *It has the effect of an unintentional irony which, to be sure, comes from the logic of his own thinking and feeds his own efforts in irony, but which will not go away and will not be conquered.* (471-2 – my italics)

At a certain point the negative freedom the narrator obtains through language, through word play and performance, which represents an *Ausweg* (a way out) as opposed to the limitless freedom on all sides that Rotpeter identifies with his former life as an ape – a physical, pre-conscious freedom as opposed to the negative freedom made possible through the duplicity inherent to language – at a certain point this negative freedom turns on the narrator when it fails to replace or compensate for the experience it is intended to escape. The negative experience keeps returning embedded in and through the very operations on language by

way of which Rotpeter means to escape it. The means by which the narrator means to become free of an unpleasant memory becomes that which recalls him to it. *Irony returns to haunt*: irony begins to operate at the expense of the narrator even while it is ostensibly still operating in his service.

Interestingly, for Frye, this venture in irony fails when its target becomes too obvious:

> the ironist can reach a point where his target becomes more tangible and too weighty ... to be totally disarmed by verbal weapons. The description of the scars is, I believe, the critical turning point for the ironic venture in word play on "offen" and "groß." ... One might say that the gate image ... has returned to take form in his flesh. (468)

The metaphorical portal that supplements itself throughout the narrative, worming into new images and contexts, returns now 'to take form in [Rotpeter's] flesh.' Rotpeter's closed wounds reflect ironically on the perpetual moment of this aperture onto the past: the wound heals, but even as a scar it keeps the conscious wound open.

Rotpeter's description of his scars culminates in an anecdote concerning a newspaper article which claimed that Rotpeter's 'ape nature is not yet quite under control,' evident in his predilection for taking down his trousers to show people the scar on his backside:

> The hand which wrote that should have it fingers shot away one by one. As for me, I can take my trousers down before anyone if I like; you would find nothing but a well-groomed fur and the scar ... Everything is open and aboveboard; there is nothing to conceal; when the plain truth is in question, great minds discard the niceties of refinement. But if the writer of the article were to take down his trousers before a visitor, that would be another story, and I will let it stand to his credit that he does not do it. In return, let him leave me alone with his delicacy! ('Report,' 251-2)

For Frye this baring of the scar is an aggressive and antisocial act, which undermines Rotpeter's claim that he has nothing to conceal. At this instant Rotpeter's venture in irony capsizes. Frye demonstrates how Rotpeter's more overt irony begins to work at the expense (ostensibly) of his human captors – that is, after Rotpeter discusses his scars his irony shifts from providing indirect opposition in word play to a more overt and aggressive irony which betrays Rotpeter's continued resentment at his treatment.[16] Rotpeter's use of irony thus

[16] In contrast to Frye's reading of a five year-long process of suppression is Sokel's reading of a successful sublimation, according to which Rotpeter *proudly* shows off his wound because it marks his total mastery of his ape nature (Sokel, 345). There is nothing suppressed in Rotpeter. His *I* is nothing but surface, the façade has become his *I*. In this lies his irony: he experiences no inner conflict, he simply observes an ironic discrepancy inherent to the way of things (350). Human shame derives from the need to keep things secret, but given this ape suffers from no secret, festering, wound, because everything is out in the open (unlike, say, for the tragic figure Joseph K. in *The Trial*), he also suffers from no sense of shame (340). Sokel mediates the terms *Freiheit* and *Ausweg* in his conceptions of tragedy and irony. Unlike Rotpeter's tragic predecessors Georg Bendemann ('The

shifts from subtly setting himself subjectively free from his physical restrictions by indirect resistance, to attacking the humans concretely responsible for this restriction. It thus shifts in its effect from setting Rotpeter negatively free from his predicament to recalling him to his predicament. From this point we begin to see gaps in the narrator's performance, and through these gaps we espy the evidence of a five year long suppression. In other words, *pace* Frye, not everything is out in the open and aboveboard, and Rotpeter does not live up to his own perception of a 'great mind.'

* * *

Frye neglects, I think, a significant element of word play in the 'Report.' Although he extensively covers operations of word play on *offen*, and refers to more overt play on the word *Affe*, he does not remark the obvious aural link between the two: '*Offen* gesprochen, so gerne ich auch Bilder wähle für solche Dinge, *offen* gesprochen: Ihr *Affen*tum, meine Herren, sofern Sie etwas Derartiges hinter sich haben ...' (my italics). *Offen* and *Affe* correspond, in the thematic fabric of the 'Report,' to *Ausweg* and *Freiheit* respectively. *Offen* is bound up with the human *Ausweg*, and, thus, with restriction, and functions as a trace of the freedom on all sides Rotpeter has lost and knows only by hearsay. *Affen*, on the other hand, are the mildly ridiculous representatives of a nostalgic freedom that even the great Achilles feels tickling around his heels ('Report,' 250) – tragedy in Sokel. The term *Affe* functions therefore both as stigma (backwardness, stubbornness) and as a standard (of freedom) that the human *way out* falls short of; apes are representatives of a *natural*, and therefore not *performed* in the duplicitous intersubjective sense, performance: a *nature theatre* perhaps. It is this nature theatre which blows away the humanly constructed theatre walls with its laughter:

> In variety theaters I have often watched, before my turn came on, a couple of acrobats performing on trapezes high in the roof. They swung themselves, they rocked to and fro, they sprang into the air, they floated into each other's arms, one hung by the hair

Judgment'), Gregor Samsa and Josef K., Rotpeter has whipped the past (his freedom) out of his life to the point where it can no longer return to haunt him in the form of tragedy (331) – the ape rescues himself from a tragic end into irony (Sokel's conception of irony is bound up with Nietzsche rather than with Kierkegaard). He knows the danger of tragedy which threatens everyone on earth, from the tragic hero Achilles to the ironic little chimp (350): 'Ironisierung der Sublimierung, die Austreibung der Tragik, Verzicht auf Erfüllung, angestrengteste Anpassung und bescheidene Hinnahme in einem ist. Das Tragische bei Kafka aber ist der Luftzug, der einst der Sturm war und nun durch das Loch in den Schutzbau des Ichs hineinweht, Zugang des Primitiven zum befestigten Ich, die Verbindung, die das Ich mit seinem Ursprung hat. Dieser Luftzug kitzelt an den Fersen, und der Kitzel ist die Achillesferse des zivilisierten Ichs' (351). The draft tickling at the Achilles heel of the civilized, armoured, *I* (ego) is the temptation to become a tragic figure, the temptation to throw oneself off a bridge like Bendemann, to recover the freedom on all sides one loses through one's humanisation by escaping one's cage and diving into the sea. Irony, in the form of art and performance, intercedes and saves, as a *modus vivendi* (352).

> from the teeth of the other. "And that too is human freedom," I thought, "self-controlled movement." What a mockery of holy Mother Nature! Were the apes to see such a spectacle, no theater walls could stand the shock of their laughter. (253)

However, do the trapeze artists make *Rotpeter* laugh? And does not this human freedom resemble the conscious freedom the narrator achieves in word play? His swinging from word to word, through airless language, the verbal acrobatics, hearkens back to his former existence as an ape. Do we not dimly hear Rotpeter the ape laughing through Rotpeter the human, the shock of the laughter knocking down the walls of this theatre, the walls of this story?

The 'Report' begins:

> Honored Members of the Academy!
> You have done me the honor of inviting me … (250)

- and ends:

> I am not appealing for any man's verdict, I am only imparting knowledge, I am only making a report. To you also, honored Members of the Academy, I have only made a report. (259)

The *theater* of human courtesy is used to offset this performance, to set it at a remove from the audience, a remove the human audience abides by. And within the walls of these 'refinements', however, the narrator glides from word to word … *But what is behind the performance?* Rotpeter is so open-minded; he is a 'great mind'; he can drop his trousers and bare all because he has nothing to conceal – there is nothing to take offense at – nothing to be ashamed of – Rotpeter is beyond shame because nothing he does is beyond performance. Rotpeter has hurdled shame in his 'forced career,' on his way to becoming human, and hurdled also the possibility of a private life by being forced to make the public moment of performance perpetual. Performance only has something odious or courteous about it in as far as there is an end to it, in as far as there is something behind the performance, but Rotpeter appears to have hurdled the possibility of a human private life along with all the shameful traces of apishness in humans … The shameful apish traces in humans contain also the possibility of human happiness – Rotpeter misses out on these too.

Where does ape-like imitation end and human performance begin?

> I did not think things out; but I observed everything quietly … Had I been devoted to the aforementioned idea of freedom, I should certainly have preferred the deep sea to

> the way out that suggested itself in the heavy faces of these men. ... it was only the mass weight of my observations that impelled me in the right direction. (255)

Frye's observation that language is performance does not lead him to observe that Rotpeter's first entirely successful performance is capped off with his first spoken word. On the ship carrying him to civilisation Rotpeter turns from stubbornly brooding to closely observing the sailors around him and, then, aping them – if Haggenbeck thinks that apes belong in cages, then Rotpeter has 'to stop being an ape' (253): 'A fine, clear train of thought, which I must have constructed somehow with my belly, since apes think with their belly' (253). Rotpeter does not imitate the sailors because he *consciously* conceives imitation as a way out of his captivity; he *thinks* this out with his belly. He acquires his first tutor, a sailor, who would teach him, at the expense of a few pipe-burns, how to knock back schnapps. Rotpeter proves resilient: he can ape the sailor's movements to a tee but has an instinctual aversion to the schnapps itself. But then, one evening, initially unobserved, under no external compulsion, Rotpeter stays the course and knocks back the schnapps 'like a professional drinker' – and throws the bottle away, 'not this time in despair but as an artistic performer' (257), and:

> because I could not help it, because my senses were reeling, [I] called a brief and unmistakable "Hallo!" breaking into human speech, and with this outburst broke into the human community, and felt its echo: "Listen, he's talking!" like a caress over the whole of my sweat-drenched body.[17]

Rotpeter poisons himself with schnapps as opposed to resorting to more 'desperate remedies' (255), such as escaping from his cage and drowning in the sea, or suffocating in the embrace of the pythons across the way (suicide and wedlock respectively, one presumes). Rotpeter drowns himself negatively as opposed to physically: inebriated he escapes himself, is beside himself (here *offen* and *besoffen* [drunk] glance off of each other), not, however, in the sense that 'suggested itself in the heavy faces of these men.' Drunkenness for Rotpeter is not the worn escape from restriction he sees in the sailors' faces, it is the only way out: the total displacement from the restricted freedom of the *I* – an I which can only ever be reconstructed out of its own limitless freedom at an inestimable cost to itself – to the

[17] The question of why Rotpeter is suddenly capable may be explained by the observed presence of an officer circulating 'among the crew,' providing an additional impetus to Rotpeter's gastric resolve. An officer, in as far as he stands *apart* from the crew by virtue of rank, would represent a way out through the closed ranks of the crew.

performing *he*;[18] from consciousness, which Rotpeter never possessed except in as far as it is belatedly ascribed it to him, into language. "Hallo!" - "Listen, *he's* talking!"[19]

Perhaps this adds substance to Frye's comments:

> how could he "have ceased to be an ape" and still continue to think like an ape with the stomach? Either unintentional irony has formed the contradiction and puts the lie to the presumption of beautiful logic – or the irony is cleverly intentional, if we assume Rotpeter dissembles his humanization (to avoid the cage) and has therefore never really ceased to be an ape ... (Frye, 471)

Does human consciousness evolve out of the ape being subjected to inhumane conditions? Rotpeter starts thinking because there is no other way out of the awfulness of the situation. Imagination and performance are born out of necessity; the narrator tells stories not because he thinks to make it better, he has no choice in the matter; choice is a story that can only be told once stories can be told. Frye gets hung up on trying to resolve the apparent paradox of the origins of Rotpeter's thinking, instead of taking his performance to its non-human extreme. This little ape has hurdled the traces of apishness in humankind and become more human than the humans he holds at bay with his performance. Pure performance: humanly performance indicates a reserve, but imitation ceases to be assimilable into human performance if it never ceases to be performance. And by never ceasing to be performance Rotpeter's aping of humans in turn erodes the difference between private and public on which human *openness*, frankness, is founded. One intimates apish laughter through the threadbare difference– not Rotpeter's laughter, but ape laughter. Rotpeter's performance is imitation through and through. The resentment (which Frye finds in the irony which fails because its target is too obvious) is imitation of resentment; the psychodrama Frye discloses operating in word play is truly dramatic, belated. Rotpeter is, as ape, neither negative nor positive, but a transparent surface on which are registered the mutilations that make a man, that assist the development from ape into human, steered by the mass weight of observations. All allusions to his own consciousness are belated. Rotpeter is the supreme sociopath. Being in role is the only way out, a role determined by close observation and imitation. What neither Sokel nor Frye do is take Rotpeter's performance to the point where the narrative becomes what Lange terms *durchreflektiert.* Both maintain that Rotpeter is

[18] Only once the narrator is firmly established as a performer, in performance, within the bounds of performance, can he write this report in the first person. He rapidly learned how to function in the third person, which made his apparent humanization possible, and from within the walls erected by this performing third person and his audience, once these boundaries were established, *he* took the next, remarkable, step of becoming an *I* – the narrating first person – with which he evolved to that appearance of self-consciousness from which humans *begin.*

[19] Sokel reads the Schnapps as the bottled Dionysian spirit, the *wild*, that the ape has driven out of itself, and which he now, in order to demonstrate his total, human mastery of that spirit, must drink, ingest, contain.

conscious and therefore, to some extent, in charge of his own actions. Yet surely by seamlessly imitating the human world the narrator becomes a penhand *impelled* by his own nature, but *guided* by the human world in which he is enclosed. The human world plays itself out on the vacant stage of an ape. Rotpeter never becomes conscious in the sense the human world ascribes to itself, his consciousness is whipped through him by the force of his observations, and it is this condition of total contingency brought about by an accelerated evolution that reflects ironically on the walls of the human world he is holed up in.[20]

Frye observes in a brief footnote toward the end of his essay that the five years in which Rotpeter undergoes his development correspond to Kafka's development in the five years of writing preceding the Report. Hence the ape desisting from staring at the locker and brooding is the turn, in Sokel's terms, from the tragic to the ironic, and Kafka's move from the introspective mode of observation to the more outward *doppelreflexion* Lange writes of. The following entry from Kafka's diaries, which predates the 'Report' by about five years, may be read in this light:

> My urge to imitate has nothing of the actor in it, its chief lack is unity ... Far from this external imitation, however, goes the inner, which is often so striking and strong that there is no room at all within me to observe and verify it, and it first confronts me in my memory. But here the imitation is so complete and replaces my own self with so immediate a suddenness that, even assuming it could be made visible at all, it would be unbearable on the stage. (December 30-31, 1911)

Unbearable on the stage *unless*, of course, the actor were a chimpanzee, in which case anything that even remotely resembled a performance, whether or not it actually stopped short of being a performance in human terms, would be heartily applauded – where this clapping of hands performs the human miracle of turning *imitation* into *performance*, of clapping limits on the limitless. And when the applause becomes predictable – like leopards that break into a temple and drink water from the sacred pitchers on such a regular basis that their intrusion becomes part of the ritual (BON, 88) – then this applause can be relied upon for an even headier performance, that of establishing a first person, an *I*. Applause becomes the occasion for the first person. Subjectivity is read into imitation until the imitating subject learns, inevitably, to perform subjectivity.

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[20] This reading of the 'Report' verges upon Adorno's reading of Kafka as 'a writing Ghandi ... a writer whose art transmits a consciousness of the negativity of the world and to which it stands in opposition without, however, alluding to a concrete alternative. This knowledge is indirect because Adorno understands Kafka's art as a cryptogram of reality, not as its transfer-image' (Kempf, 29). Of course, instead of a writing Ghandi one might conceive Kafka as a writing *Socrates*, whose playfulness is already given in that essential lack of seriousness which is Athens' seriousness.

* * *

> In a cage! Between decks! It's one thing to read your story, and quite another to hear you tell it!
> And yet another, sir, to have experienced it. ('Report,' 261)

Apparently Rotpeter has a degree of sovereignty over his word play: 'Obviously, the verbalization, and thus the word play, is the character's, since he is also the narrator. This is an important factor for the question of intent in the use of word play in the *Bericht*' (Frye, 463) Frye is concerned with how the narrator manipulates word play and then is ironically undone or psychologically exposed by his word play. He is not concerned how word play, operative in the absence of an overt narrator, dictates at the expense of the subject. And yet frequently in Kafka word play manipulates the narrative beyond intersubjective control. Frequently linguistic glitches precede and determine the content of the narrative: language appears to have a hand in the plot before consciousness follows into its grooves. Frye briefly compares word play in the 'Bericht' and 'Metamorphosis.' He reads the extension of the narrative beyond Gregor Samsa's death to indicate that Samsa's point of view and the narrator's differ, and that therefore Samsa is not to be held accountable for the word play or for any ironic intent. I think this is an interesting error. It correctly observes the difference between what Sokel calls Kafka's classical expressionism and the later, ironic mode. From the ostensible absence of narrative detachment in the fictions composed in *erlebte Rede* Kafka shifts, in later stories like the 'Report', to an apparent gap between narration and action which entails both the apparent possibility of the narrator reflecting ironically on the action and falling victim to an irony developing out of the action. What Frye doesn't observe is the marked metamorphosis of mood following Samsa's death. That is, he does not observe the change in narrative point of view in the wake of Samsa's death, a metamorphosis similar to that which de Man observes of the end of Hoffman's *Prinzessin Brambilla* (BI, 217-8), a *hardening* of ironic parody.

In Kafka it can appear that later works like the 'Report' take a step back into a more conventional form, a form that is outwardly less threatening than those composed in *erlebte Rede.* There is a sense in which Kafka becomes more congenial, or approachable, in the later works, which in a sense he is, but not necessarily because he has become more conventional; rather he has taken the movement away from the early, wildly subjective, *I,* through the disciplinarian third person narratives, and recuperated it on the far side of subjectivity. Kafka recuperates the appearance of subjectivity.

II

Beckett's 'monstrous novel'

We broach the question of irony in Beckett *via* some general remarks on *The Unnamable*, specifically on problems of reading *The Unnamable*, insofar as it is here that the question comes to a head.

I admit to scanning the intervals in the opening pages of *The Unnamable* with a certain relief. In them I catch my breath, gaze proudly over the distance mastered, have pause to reflect, and draw the strength to go on. Then, however, the text draws up out of its foothills and into what seems to be an interminable and increasingly vertical rock-face; *The Unnamable* is a difficult read by anyone's books. As the breaks of the opening pages peter out one is increasingly subjected to an unprecedented intensity of self-reflexivity, contradiction, of aporetic and 'ephectic' statements (U, 291). Whereas in Beckett's earlier narratives disruptive narrative play is generally viewed as unsettling the action, in *The Unnamable* story succumbs to the movement or mobility of sense afflicting the word surface. The ironic operations said to score the surface of meaning in *Molloy* come to constitute the surface in *The Unnamable*.

For example, Sheringham (1985) observes the narrative 'buttonholing' of the reader in *Molloy*:

> page after page, Molloy buttonholes the reader, constantly foregrounding the implied recipient, the 'vous' of literary communication, casting the reader in the role of his employers. The 'narratee' is deemed to incarnate rationality, to be cool, calm and collected; as such he is the butt of much ferocious irony as Molloy feigns but conspicuously fails to make his narrative conform with the norms he imputes to his readers. (Sheringham, 14-5)

Taken to an extreme such buttonholing makes the text cleave increasingly closer to the reader, rather like a monstrous blanket that crawls or simply sinks into every possible orifice and opening. The reader sets out in the privileged position of leech only to be preyed upon by this greedily absent-minded blanket of words. These elements can render *The Unnamable* a little too close for comfort for many readers – perhaps even to the extent that they repudiate the work itself:

> [*The Unnamable*] seems to me a classic case of a work which is necessary but not sufficient; that is to say, personally necessary to Beckett in his exploration of his own limitless negation, but artistically insufficient because of its length, repetitiveness and private claustrophobia. In the end, it seems less a triumph of art or will than an ungainly,

> sprawling monument to his abiding threefold obsession - with language, impotence and death. (Alvarez, 69)

Unlike the rambling permutations of *Watt* that seemingly encourage the reader to skip pages, in *The Unnamable* one is not encouraged to do anything of the sort. Although little remains in the way of a plot, the reader remains anxiously attached to its memory. And yet with even fewer features to steal the show, one feels helplessly disoriented before the meshing, knitting tapestry of words, for unlike the solid columns of narrative in, say, Thomas Bernhard, here the word surface does not give attention leave to wander; there is little fluctuation in the intensity and virtuosity of the line, no shadings to which one's attention thermostatically adjusts; the language never lets up; the demands of its density and virtuosity are beyond decency. And of course the length of *The Unnamable* compounds the sense of claustrophobia and disorientation and differentiates it in effect from the briefer *Texts For Nothing.* Beckett's later textual bruises like 'Ping' or *Stirrings Still* may seem more forbidding at first glance, but again, their brevity inevitably renders them surmountable.

The Temptation of Humour

> The thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system. (U, 292)

Jennifer Jeffers' essay, 'Beyond Irony: *The Unnamable*'s Appropriation of its Critics in a Humorous Reading of the Text' (1995), is founded squarely on a theory of humour laid out in texts by Gilles Deleuze:[21]

> Gilles Deleuze theorizes that we have passed beyond the order that privileges representation and the individual - subjectivity being a pre-condition for both tragedy and irony. According to Deleuze, the transvaluation (to use Nietzsche's term) has occurred and it is no longer possible to create texts that enact the tragic and ironic. That is not to say, however, that these texts have ceased production; these texts, both literary and critical, continue to be produced long after the devaluation of the economy of representation. The former order 'give[s] way' to humor, which does not rely on representation and privileges neither subjectivity nor objectivity, for this new 'sense' does not prioritize on a model of hierarchy or the Ideal ... (53)

Jeffers proposes that *The Unnamable* 'always already escapes the confines of a traditional reading produced by the ironic critic who attempts to appropriate – reduce – the text to a

[21] Jeffers, Jennifer, 'Beyond Irony: *The Unnamable*'s Appropriation of its Critics in a Humorous Reading of the Text', in *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol.25 (Michigan, 1995): pp.47-66.

stable sense-making machine' (48). Because irony operates on the 'stable ontological foundation' provided by a subject/object dichotomy, ironic readings are bound at any cost to recuperate '*good sense*' from a text, whether or not the text relies on the same economy: 'Irony ... follows the rules of representation and operates within the confines of 'good sense.' Humor ... is that which plays on the surface of signification before, or at the point of, sense or meaning' (53).

> Sense lies on the surface of language *before* the sense-making operation has taken place ... in Deleuzian terms, 'sense is not to be confused with signification' ... In other words, signification is neutral or affirmation – and ultramoral in the Nietzschean sense of beyond or outside moral consideration, until a sense-making capability is imposed upon it and meaning rendered. ... A humorous reading is possible when the 'good' sense of truth and representation is no longer an acceptable currency – like Nietzsche's '... coins which have their obverse effaced and now are no longer of account as coins but merely as metal' – and non-sense suddenly appears in its place. In a humorous reading, 'non-sense' is not lack of sense but merely a different sense than what the order of representation recognizes as sense or 'good' sense. (54-5)[22]

In other words, readings in irony necessarily miss the point of humorous texts by retrieving good sense, metaphorically speaking, from *underneath* the word surface, as opposed to 'witnessing the surreptitious movement of humor as it glides ineffably across the surface of the text' (60):

> In other words, irony is dependent upon a correspondence theory of language which insures that the 'not said' will always be identified by the reader because the 'not said' is merely the negation of the 'said'. As long as everyone using a particular language 'agrees' that meaning lies *under* the surface of language then the correspondence or representational mode of language functions. Deleuze employs a metaphor of the horizontal to define humor: sense moves on the surface of language, horizontally in different directions, manifesting a rhizomatic discourse. The horizontal movement is opposed to a vertical movement downward that retrieves the meaning *underneath* the signification. (54)

Hence ironic readings (and Jeffers distinguishes between humanist and romantic readings of irony) which touch upon the surface of language only to penetrate it, 'limited by their epistemological and interpretative biases, rarely *read* the text. Humor, on the other hand, initiates a reading' (64).

Yet does one produce a humorous reading simply by saying one is going to?

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[22] Deleuze: 'non-sense does not have any particular sense, but is opposed to the absence of sense rather than to the sense it produces in excess' (*Logic*, 71).

> The idea of postmodern humor slips the noose of the "aesthetic of failure" by opening up textual interpretation that permits the reader to enjoy the text without the burden of representation and an aesthetic of universalized meaning. (48)

The word *postmodern* has the apparent effect of a protective spell in Jeffers' essay. Invoked at intervals evidently it evaporates lingering attachments to such outmoded categories as the self, truth, tradition, tragedy, and, of course, irony. The effortlessness of the exorcism gives one to wonder how representation ever became a 'burden.' And yet the same easy force with which Jeffers drives a wedge between irony and humour becomes ground to suspect a lingering attachment to a conception of difference that the postmodern theory she appropriates resists. *Resists*, that is, as opposed to *opposes*. In other words the very ease with which Jeffers applies her theoretical distinctions draws her back, ironically, into the categories she expresses such disdain for, into a thinking she thinks always already to be exempt from by virtue of her talismanic postmodernisms. In her zeal to have done with the order of representation Jeffers goes too far and freshly mints the Nietzschean coin with the obverse erased. Jeffers understands Deleuze, but not to the extent where this understanding has an actual bearing on her approach. In other words, Jeffers' language displays little awareness of the demands her conceptual apparatus makes upon it. The theory she rests her case on does not guarantee safe passage for those advocating it.[23] It may of course be objected that my criticism is inappropriate to humour, and that I am operating within those limiting 'epistemological and interpretative biases' Jeffers presumes to be beyond; but, then again, unless any drivel is to be acceptable on account of the theory it defers to, perhaps the risk of falling back into the order of representation is one that has to be taken, not once, but constantly.

Harping on about what may be dismissed as the *merely methodological* shortcomings of an undeniably mediocre work of secondary literature may seem a circuitous way of coming to the point. I have, I believe, three reasons. Firstly, Jeffers' shortcomings manifest a methodological problem pertinent to the present endeavour. Secondly, in spite of its shortcomings, Jeffers' essay makes a valuable point that I, in turn, dare not overlook. Thirdly, Jeffers' essay, sacked and stripped to its structural walls, provides a useful stencil for the present section. I propose to breathe a little life into those 'layers of critical residue' Jeffers never gives a chance: giving the case for irony a chance must surely also benefit the

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[23] If this recalls Kierkegaard's critique of his contemporaries peddling faith as a *result* as opposed to a task or duty that restates itself at every instant, it is because postmodern humour occupies the same position as Kierkegaard's religious humour, except where postmodern humour glides across the surface of language, religious humour glides across consciousness.

case for humour, in as far as winning a one-horse race can only humour an idiot, or, of course, an ironist.

* * *

> Are there any other pits, deeper down? To which one accedes by mine? Stupid obssession with depth. (U, 293)

Jeffers evidently views her task in relation to *The Unnamable* in terms of restoration: 'we must first peel away two layers of critical residue ... gradually deposited on the text over time in Beckett scholarship.' The first layer to be stripped is that deposited by critics in a humanist tradition in ironic reading. This tradition reads the apparent failure of the hermeneutic quest enacted in the text to qualify its own failure to make sense of the text, and then goes on to read *courage* in the face of 'an aesthetic of failure' into the individual Samuel Beckett. In other words, where the text resists a coherent reading the author is dug up to account for the mess. Dennis A. Foster (1987), whom Jeffers cites on this point, writes:[24]

> critical readings of Beckett's work, of *The Unnamable* in particular, have consistently misread the texts in ways that produce illusions of real or potential authorial being with whom the reader could form a flattering identification. (Foster, 125)

In the humanist tradition the text is mastered by recognising an ostensible master operating within the text, beyond the apparent consternation: this, according to Foster (and Jeffers), marks the critics' 'desire to see a coherent subjectivity operating within the text so that the task of reading will produce a reflection worthy of their own labour' (124). Thus difficulties apparently experienced by Beckett's characters are identified with difficulties experienced by a coherent authorial being, traced back to a certain Samuel Beckett.

> They find in Beckett's works that the difficulty, even impossibility, of telling a story makes Beckett's refusal to lapse into a despairing silence only further evidence of his heroic humanity, makes him the paragon of modernist man. (124)

The incoherence of subjective presence in *The Unnamable*, aspects of *The Unnamable* which resist coherent appropriation, suggestive of what Foster calls, after Barthes, a text of *bliss* as opposed to a text of *pleasure*, become, according to the point of view of the humanist critic,

[24] Foster, Dennis A., *Confession and Complicity in Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

who shakes things up only to pat them better again, the grounds of a modernist coherence, a coherence of incoherence, or, as Jeffers calls it, an 'aesthetic of failure.'

Jeffers' example here is Wayne C. Booth. Booth conceives Beckett as verging on a kind of Supreme Ironist: 'Perhaps the last outpost this side of the open frontier is provided by what might be called "The Ironist's Voice as Context"' (Booth, 176). Ironising his own taxonomical tendencies, Booth bases the tenth of a potentially endless list of ironic genres on Beckett: '10. The Serio-Comic Groping: Samuel Beckett here. Meaning where? Knowing nothing, least of all why I write, call that writing, why my characters speak, call that speaking' (212). On a more serious note he categorises Beckett's irony as 'unstable-covert-infinite' irony (257). Despite this promisingly radical definition of Beckett's irony, Booth argues that Beckett's *values* are ultimately stable; far from being relativised by irony, his *values* are stabilised in and through endless irony ... Of the attempt, however, to make sense of Beckett's irony Booth finds that 'we needn't be optimistic about it: whatever we arrive at will be radically inadequate, subject to the puncturings of Beckett's kind of irony. At best we can hope to complicate his ironies' (259). This echoes his pronouncements on what to do when confronted with a text like *The Unnamable.* As Jeffers points out, Booth quotes the first page of *The Unnamable*, throws up a set of rhetorical arms, and asks: How on? Why on?

> It would seem obvious that to attempt an interpretation of such a passage is to invite ridicule. Beyond grammatical analysis, looking up words like *ephectic* and *aporia*, if necessary, or noting the stylistic devices imitating drift and despair, what can be said? To find meaning where meaninglessness is asserted, to seek an art of interpretation of a passage so clearly against interpretation is to risk appearing like one of Beckett's own characters. (Booth, 258)

Here, then, is the *aesthetic of failure* Jeffers ascribes to Booth.

Apparently, however, Jeffers only read to the end of this paragraph, for Booth adroitly shifts the focus of his approach from the impossibility of reconstructing the pervasive irony of *The Unnamable* to plumbing an ironic opposition haunting the *reception* of Beckett: the difference between commentary emphasising the hopelessness mirrored in the predicament of the narrator (and the courage to proceed in the face of such hopelessness, ascribed to Beckett himself) and the positive fact of a collective reception. Granted, Booth never comes round to reading the text, but this is because he turns instead to question the opposition between the quasi-philosophical schlock pumped out of Beckett (or is it into Beckett?) by his admirers and the 'genuine artistry' of Beckett's work that merits the appreciation in the first place: 'To think that Beckett's achievement lies in his coming closer to Nothingness than others have come is to insult his genuine artistry' (263). As he points out: 'Hundreds of

shoddy writers in this century have presented visions that are, in intellectual terms, as empty as Beckett's' (262). Booth observes the opposition between the *emptiness* that everyone appears to find at the heart of Beckett's work and the *fullness* of a collectively affirmed 'emotional and intellectual response':

> every favorable critic implies that somehow Beckett has found in *him* a rare kindred spirit. ... It seems likely that in all "infinitely unstable" works that succeed, the same paradoxical communings will be found. (265)

Booth does avoid interpreting a text like *The Unnamable*, and, indeed, he writes that to attempt interpretation would only be to produce what Foster elsewhere calls 'devoted paraphrases.' But this impossibility of *interpretation* does not lead Booth to an aesthetic of failure. Quite the reverse, really: an aesthetic of failure is the object of Booth's overt irony:

> I have known readers of Beckett who have paid a price for their metaphysical agreement - the price of hypersolemnity and self-pity and thus of failed comic effects. Mistaking his characters for Beckett, they have identified not with the elitist author but with his vermiform characters, and have - or so it seems to me - wallowed in self-pity as the maggots are put through their paces ... (264)

As the narrator of *The Unnamable* muses: 'It's a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed' (U, 324).

Booth is immensely refreshing while blasting the saprophytic personality cult that has developed over Beckett's literary remains. One problem, however, is that after laying about with his own irony to the end of rescuing Beckett from his more cloying admirers, Booth does not let go of irony as a guarantee of quality and fails perhaps to appreciate the genuine artistry of Beckett's later, less overtly ironic, works: 'Beckett seems more and more to risk taking himself seriously in this same self-destructive vein – he has moved closer and closer to the silence which his overt position, taken seriously, would demand' (264). Perhaps Booth himself takes *irony* too seriously when its overt presence becomes a guarantee of quality. In Beckett's later narratives there is less overt irony to divert from what Booth calls Beckett's 'overt position of infinite negativity,' but Booth seems to overlook the artistry these texts obtain in and through the *absence* of irony.

* * *

The second layer of critical residue Jeffers proposes to strip off *The Unnamable* is that deposited by readings in Romantic irony:

> The Romantic's solipsism coupled with a sophisticated irony recoiling from the material world would seem to suggest an ideal interpretative strategy with which to read *The Unnamable.* The Unnamable appears to resemble the Romantic ironist in that the text 'speaks' incessantly of 'himself,' breaking this narrative impulse only to fabricate a story told in traditional representational form. But Romantic irony never truly leaves the realm of meaning or sense, no matter how abstract it aspires to become, because of its stable ontological foundation ... (Jeffers, 50)

'Romantic irony's primary link with Humanist irony is that it functions in much the same way as "saying the opposite of what you mean"' (49)[25] – the difference between the two is merely one of 'sophistication.' Although Romantic irony 'creates narrative strategies whereby it may move away from the self, detach itself from its own narratives' (52), the onus always remains on recuperating the identity it ostensibly moves away from. In other words, Romantic irony only 'flirts ... with the dissolution of the self' (49) but never goes the whole postmodern hog.[26] In a Romantic reading of *The Unnamable* 'the text struggles against the 'fact' that it will never establish an origin or gain an identity' (53); in a humorous reading, 'this struggle is a parody of the Romantic quest' (53). In a humorous reading *The Unnamable* 'mimics the ironist in order to create a *different* sense – in order to create difference – the difference between "good" sense and a lack of sense' (55). That is, the humourous text subtly, silently, surreptitiously, repeats the tradition it cannot escape except by repeating: 'In its complicity with the tradition, it makes the silent movement of repetition, for the text is well aware that it is masking over the ability to faithfully re-present a "good" copy' (60).

Any awareness of the lightness, the liquid crystal moment, of irony's relation to humour is missing in Jeffers. For the instant irony becomes the possibility of irony, the instant, that is, that irony becomes irony properly understood, it slips silently into humour. Humour emerges wherever irony becomes laughter by no conscious subject, laughter turned back into irony by the laughter of a conscious subject. Irony, in other words, does operate on the basis of a stable ontology, certainly, *but ironically.* The basis of a stable ontology is the carrot through which irony comes into, is delivered into, its own, by donkeys that can be relied

[25] Furst, however, writes: 'Irony is not used to differentiate the true from the false because for the romantic ironist all options may be true, or false; nor can he manipulatively say the opposite to what he means because he cannot be sure of any meaning' (Furst, 229). Jeffers, in her haste to side with humour, has reduced the distances involved to the extent of doing away with them entirely.

[26] Here Jeffers cites Kierkegaard's critique of Fichte's negative infinity and Romantic irony in *The Concept of Irony*: 'Romantic irony tends to recoil from the material world into an abstract realm that Kierkegaard so criticized in the German Romantics' (49). She omits to mention that Kierkegaard's critique of the Romantics repeats (*mimics*? *silently*?) Hegel's critique of the same (and this would be irony? *Humour*?).

upon always to act in their own interests. Jeffers can only make the distinction she does by casually foreshortening the possibility of irony, but by rounding off the possibility of irony she in turn becomes exposed to a possibility of irony that escapes her impatience to have done with irony and be *in on* humour.

On the other hand, if one remains with irony, which as we have seen carries itself off, at which point it passes silently over into humour, religious humour in Kierkegaard, one has the undeniable advantage of being allowed to make sense.

Lilian Furst, for example, makes excellent sense writing on irony, and the following passage distinguishing between traditional and romantic irony may help to clear up any confusion incurred in the last page or two, and put us in good stead for a reading of Beckett in terms of romantic irony:

> Traditional irony resides in the space between the narrative and the reader who is able to reconstruct the intended covert meaning with the aid of clues deliberately planted by the knowing narrator ... Romantic irony ... is situated primarily in the space between the narrator and the narrative. The discrete, assured chronicler of traditional irony is replaced in romantic irony by a self-conscious, searching narrator who openly stands beside his story, arranging it, intruding into it to reflect on his tale and on himself as a writer. ... With the romantic ironist the mask merges with the persona in a displacement likely to generate disorientation. The narrator abdicates his controlling, directing function, or at least appears or pretends to do so, becoming in effect a narrative gamesman who delights in sporting with his creation, exploiting it as a medium for displaying the fireworks of his creativity. While traditional irony is *between* the lines, romantic irony is *in* the lines.

Here we begin to intimate the difficulties of telling irony and humour apart: if the narrator's 'mask merges with the persona,' how limit the narrative gamesmanship Furst writes of to 'the space between the narrator and the narrative'? Such distinctions, traditionally held to hold water, are equally threatened by irony's crumbling of the narrative into an increasingly soft textuality in which the implied narrator, and any form the narrative impulse assumes, no longer holds a privileged position. Needless to say, the storyline suffers:

> One immediate result of this shift of emphasis is a drastic reduction in the status of the story. ... The romantic ironist's self-conscious embroilment in the strategies of narration is at the expense of his narrative. ... The prominence and space given to the narrated situation declines in proportion to that devoted to the narrative situation. ... With the romantic ironist narration usurps the center of the stage, dislodging the story from its customary privileged place. Classical narrative expectations are overturned when narration asserts its autonomy in this way. Literature as product yields to literature as process. (Furst, 229-31)

Again, with a view to the distinction between Beckett and Kafka: given that Kafka retains the story at all costs, can one really tag him, as Furst frequently does, as a romantic ironist? With respect to Beckett, on the other hand, as Jeffers observes, romantic irony does indeed seem to suggest an ideal interpretative strategy.

'Die Ironie ist eine permanente Parekbase' (F.Schlegel)

Lloyd Bishop (1989) provides a relatively broad reading of Beckett in romantic irony:[27]

> From both a technical and a philosophical point of view, the polar tensions created by ironic ambivalence, contradiction, and paradox hold Beckett's fictional structure together and hold it up.

Bishop subscribes to a commonly held thesis that Beckett is the final and the most ironic of all romantic ironists. The romantic figure Bishop deems Beckett to have most in common with is, again, Friedrich Schlegel: 'Anticipating Samuel Beckett, Schlegel insists on the paradoxical situation of the writer, who is aware of both 'the impossibility and the necessity of total communication' (3). Beckett also 'shares with Schlegel the conviction that to be an artist is "to fail as no other dare fail"' (202). Furthermore:

> Like Schlegel, [Beckett] refers (via Malone) to his storytelling as 'play.' His philosophical irony, like Schlegel's, points to the infinite fullness of chaos, to the fact that from the nondivine perspective being is chaos. (202)

Glancing forward to the possible permutations of this affinity, with an eye planted firmly on Kierkegaard, we may ask whether it is possible to bring Kierkegaard's case against the Romantics, more specifically his objections to Schegel, to bear upon Beckett: Does Beckett enact the ironist's negative unity of boredom as described by Kierkegaard?

> For Kierkegaard, who accepted Solger and Hegel's negative assessment of Schlegelian irony, romantic irony so capriciously, so frivolously, and so cynically ironized everything out of existence that nothing was left in the writer's imaginative world except the bored self-consciousness and nihilism of the ironist himself. (Bishop, 9)

Not according to Bishop, for whom irony saves Beckett from being a 'nihilist pure and simple' (203).

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[27] Bishop, Lloyd, *Romantic Irony in French Literature From Diderot to Beckett* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press,1989), p.203.

Bishop pins down six sources of romantic irony, specifically in *Molloy*, less specifically across the entire authorship. Firstly, an 'ambivalent deflation of the hero – ambivalent because the deflation is accompanied by a modicum of grudging sympathy, perhaps even admiration, on the part of both implied author and reader' (186-7):

> To speak of him simply as an anti-hero is to put the case mildly; we are dealing with a foul-smelling, urinating, defecating, masturbating hero, a rotting hero, human wreckage, at times, even, a humanoid creature regressing into larval state. (187)

Secondly, the 'deflation of the narrator' (188) who is shown to be 'forgetful and imperceptive,' occasionally 'deceitful' ('The Beckettian narrator ... constantly confesses that he is a compulsive narrator, that is, a compulsive liar, who has nothing whatsoever of importance to say'), and potentially 'totally unreliable'- as when, for example, Moran ends his narrative by declaring that his opening statements ('It's midnight. The rain is beating on the windows' [M, 92]) were lies ('It was not midnight. It was not raining' [M, 176]). Thirdly, authorial self-parody and self-reflexive irony (189): this refers to the way Beckett pokes fun at himself as author, both in his writings (self-irony of the author as opposed to the implied author) and beyond his writings. Thus Bishop construes Beckett's public dismissal of his works (*Murphy* is 'derivative, trivial and without major import'; '*La Fin* is "rubbish," *Textes pour rien* is a "failure," *Comment c'est* is "very bad writing," *Godot* is "a facile attempt to make quick money"' [190]) as 'the self-disparagment of romantic irony [carried] to new extremes' (190) (I can't decide whether this suggestion is laughable or ingenious). Fourthly, the self-deconstruction of the narrative through metafictional asides, overt discussion of literary tactics, and the apparent simultaneity of telling and told in which the telling can *emend* the told and adjust it according to its sense of symmetry: 'When my chamber-pot is full I put it on the table, beside the dish. Then I go twenty-four hours without a pot. No, I have two pots' (MD, 185); 'I've always been here ... old slush to be churned everlastingly, now it's slush, a minute ago it was dust, it must have rained' (U, 403) – in short, the running commentary on 'the narrative in progress, which ... short-circuit[s] the narrative and arrest[s] its progress' (Bishop, 190). Fifthly: 'an explicit recognition by hero, narrator, and implied author of the paradoxical coexistence of contraries of which the human condition is composed' (187). This 'dialectics of incommensurables reaches its climax in *L'Innomable*' (194), with the possibility of *proceeding* by 'affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered' (U, 291), which corresponds to Schlegel's definition of irony as 'steten Wechsel von Selbstschöpfung und Selbstvernichtung.' And finally, there is:

an intangible ironic spirit hovering over the entire trilogy ... produced by a disconcerting but intriguing *non-dit*, by what is *not* said, and by a narrative framework that insinuates more than it asserts, thus forcing the reader to make sense of what he is reading by using symbolic, allegorical, or mythological reading codes. (195)

Of course these six sources of irony overlap, some more so than others. Particularly those pertaining to distinctions between hero and narrator, implied author and real author gravitate into crossover categories. Bishop recognises with postmodern readings that the 'narrative presence is so fragmented in Beckett's work, the attack on the integrity of the speaking subject, that one has to ask ... how and why one can speak of *a* narrator at all' (186).

The following passage from *The Unnamable* is cited as an example of authorial self-parody:

All these Murphys, Molloys and Malones do not fool me. They have made me waste my time, suffer for nothing, speak of them when, in order to stop speaking I should have spoken of me and of me alone. (U, 303)

Bishop finds that:

This admission seems to come directly from the real, not the implied author; that is, this "narrator's confession" seems to be voiced by an author stepping out from behind his surrogate and speaking for himself in a Schlegelian parabasis. (Bishop, 190)

And yet in as far as the romantic ironist is unlimited in his choice of narrative possibilities, and in as far as everything folds into the play of possibilities, the apparent difference between an intrusion by the real and the implied author is immaterial; we are not dealing with levels of reality but levels of fictitiousness, which are themselves fictitiously differentiated. Similarly, when the readership of 'gentle skimmers' is given a sudden, *authorial*, prod in the ribs, this prod does not mark a *real* difference in *fictitiousness*. As Muecke (1969) remarks of parabases on stage:

To move from the rational to the irrational within art is a small step compared to the leap already taken from life to art. It is therefore misleading to say of such things as Beckett's reference to the audience in *Waiting for Godot*, that the dramatic illusion is thereby destroyed. What happens is that one level of the play's illusion is taken over by another but all within the play. (Muecke, 169)

A story will be recuperated; playful interruptions will not throw the reader off the scent. The recipient neutralises the narrative's efforts to rupture itself, suppresses so-called authorial intrusion in order to maintain dramatic illusion. The occasional aside is not merely tolerated, it even contributes to dramatic illusion by suggesting a confidential relationship between

recipient and author. It is only when the asides come thick and fast that this attachment begins to come unstuck. The less material provided to construct it with the harder recuperating a story becomes, and where narrative static is remarked to become excessive it is finally conceived as interfering not merely with itself for the reader's enjoyment, but as interfering with the reader's ability to recuperate a story and, therefore, to enjoy himself. At this point (which is different for every reading and reader), reading becomes a bore and too much work, and the 'text of pleasure' becomes a 'text of bliss':

> 'The text that imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom)' (*Pleasure*14). Rather then confront the discomfort and loss as inevitable elements of reading, most readers look at Beckett's writing as a 'text of pleasure,' one they imagine can be pinned down in a convincing display of potency. *The Unnamable* is not such a work ... (Foster, 112)

'any old pronoun'

> But enough of this accursed first person, it is really too red a herring, I'll get out of my depth if I'm not careful. But what then is the subject? Mahood? No, not yet. Worm? Even less. Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it. (U, 343)

So then, is *The Unnamable* a) a virtuoso performance of romantic irony, and is Beckett the ultimate romantic ironist? Or b) does it manifest the '*dunkle Kehrseite*' (the dark reverse) of romantic irony: instead of irony as a subjective force is this not rather the mystified subject in the grasp of irony – in other words, as opposed to the ironic subject dismantling its empirical self, is this not the subject unable to arrest the process of its disintegration, subject to the process of its own abdication that it can only fleetingly apprehend? Or c) beyond irony as Jeffers has it: does *The Unnamable* humourously mimic the operations of irony, fully aware it cannot escape the discourse of these operations, but by silently effecting the movement of repetition bringing about the traditional response to irony, that of recuperating an identity, regardless in how abstract a form, whilst moving free of the representational order in which ironic readings remain ensnared? Or d) is it not the case that the distinctions between a, b and c are difficult to maintain because they are *too easy* to maintain, the seductive ease of *philosophically* maintaining them making one fall short of remaining true to them.

Much of this debate inevitably focuses on the 'indeterminate' 'I' of *The Unnamable*. Where in the texts preceding *The Unnamable* Beckett's first person narrators were still being stripped of their occasion and material to narrate, stripped of a *not-I*, in *The Unnamable* the split

between narrator and narrated has spread to the grammatical sign from which narration had previously sallied forth and round which it had pitched its stories. Where previously a division had still been (tenuously) determinable between narrator and narrated, now the division is pretty much all that remains of the narrator. The narrated is haunted, in a sense, not by the narrator, but by the gap apparently left by the narrator. 'Without the ability to recuperate identity, the text constitutes difference' (Jeffers, 62). To take refuge in the familiar grounds of a subject/object dichotomy: the subject has apparently become its own object to the extent that the balance tips and the object becomes haunted, in the form of an endlessly repeated interval, by the spectre of subjectivity: 'I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me' (U, 291).

As Foster indicates, although many critics allow for this indeterminacy, they do this only to recuperate the subject at a more general level, and remain 'blind finally to the miasma of the text as a whole':

> The attempts to avoid granting the voice a reified self can be quite subtle. They concentrate, as they must, on defining the 'I' as an effect of language, not as the sign of any actual being. In nearly every case, however, that actuality has merely been displaced into some other form – into the continuous, coherent body of the book or into the hidden realm of Heideggerian Being, or into the overarching author who justifies the text's indeterminacies. In such cases, Beckett remains the master of the language, remains in fact his own best critic. (Foster, 107)

In other words, readings tend to rescue themselves in advance from the consternating effects of the text's indeterminacies by identifying a sensible master beyond the text, limiting or foreclosing the consternating risks of textuality by invoking the author or some other masterly context. Indeterminacy is therefore ceded only in as far as it serves determinacy in an overarching context, or in as far as it can be negated in the philosophical haste of an *oppositional reading*: 'Oppositional readings, insofar as they cannot acknowledge ultimate indeterminacies, are failures: the desire for conclusion arrests thought under the illusion that the problem has been mastered' (ibid, 112).[28] Readings can therefore be true to textual indeterminacy up to the moment of conclusion, which by neatly doing away with any lingering uncertainties abolishes all grounds for anxiety and turns the entire reading on its head. The thing to avoid, apparently, is leaping to conclusions, which is to indulge one's narcissistic desires as opposed to confronting, in and through a kind of readerly *coitus interruptus*, the discomforting aspects of the loss of self that all reading imposes, but that a

[28] But then again, readings on the basis of indeterminacy (as opposed to undecidability) are themselves subject to oppositional appropriation, insofar as to 'classify a text, or a moment in a text, as indeterminate is to put an end to the question of judging: it is, in a sense, the opposite of undecidability' (Royle, 161).

text of bliss like *The Unnamable* grants a greater possibility of observing, by indefinitely withholding 'the insidious pseudo-memory of bliss' (126).

Foster's Lacanian reading of *The Unnamable* thus reads its radical indeterminacies as a possibility for the reader to become conscious of his own motivations in seeking to master them, a possibility to become conscious in the act of reading of his complicity in the structures of power immanent to language: 'to know that although we are made of others' words, we go on through the desire to master the language of all others' (127).

It takes little away from his reading, but I confess I find one aspect of Foster's essay slightly disconcerting. He consistently argues that the author should be elided as an authority in reading the text, should not be fallen back on to rescue a self – one's self, some self, any old self, provided one fails to see through it – from the *miasma* of *The Unnamable*, and yet he argues this partly on the authority of the ostensibly non-fictional 'Three Dialogues,' which he, like most readers, takes as an expression of Beckett's artistic credo. In other words Foster finds authoritative support for an argument against invoking the author in the figure of the author he purposes not to invoke. The passage in question is where D (Duthuit) asks B (Beckett) with respect to his 'fantastic theory' that the impossibility of expression in painting is coupled for Bram van Velde with the obligation to express, whether it isn't the case 'that the occasion of his painting is his predicament, and that it is expressive of the impossibility to express?' B answers: 'No more ingenious method could be devised to restore him safe and sound, to the bosom of Saint Luke' (D, 143). This is, *pace* Foster, the 'existentialist redemption: find happiness in the absurd and grant the unnamable its proper appellation' (Foster, 108). As Foster like Jeffers, drawing on their respective theoretical masters, repeatedly stipulate, one can only protest against certain limits from within them – perhaps here, then, Foster can be seen to be silently repeating the categories he is arguing against … perhaps a degree of misbehaviour, or is it blindness, is inevitable, even required, if one is to avoid the spirit of system which whisks away the chance of escape by turning failure into success and success into failure, whether one is aware of one's impatience to escape or not:

> I know that all is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he [Bram van Velde as B fancies he is, fancies he does] makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation. (D, 145)

'excellent gas, superfine chaos'

Who takes pity on 'the poor old sun'...? (Lodge, 223)

Why is it that when reading Kafka one feels invited to unpack or fold out the fiction, to contribute one's bit, whereas in the case of Beckett the fiction is found already unpacked and consternated, and to provide an interpretation is to tidy away the mess that Beckett has painstakingly scattered? It seems that in Kafka the reader completes the disintegration, and in Beckett the reader tidies up. Might it be that in Beckett there is no indirect communication? Nothing is hidden, or missing. Beckett's authorship is perhaps an extended effort to reduce the sense that something has to be found.

We touch up a contrast broached in the previous chapter, that where Kafka's authorship moves from first person to third person narratives, Beckett's moves from third to first. Kafka, as mentioned, initially struggles with the disintegrative reflexivity of the first person, then shifts in his classical expressionist narratives to a *serene* third person narrative style. In these narratives, although a sense of irony is almost suffocating, overt irony is all but obviated. Kafka later stages a return to first person narratives, many of which assume the form of reports, such as 'A Report to an Academy,' 'The Building of the Chinese Wall,' and 'The Giant Mole.' These narratives proceed with greater serenity and ostensible blindness to the self-reflexive possibilities of the narrative 'I', providing for both the possibility of a more overtly ironic position of the narrator vis-à-vis the narrated and the possibility of irony over the narrator. Kafka's authorship begins on a note of wild subjectivity reminiscent of romantic irony, suppresses this wildness in the tragic texts, and attains to what superficially appears a more conventional outlet for irony.

Beckett's authorship, by contrast, sets out in English with third person narratives hedged with overt ironies, and shifts to sleeker first person narratives in French, where self-reflexive irony is intensified to the point where Beckett is read as an end-product of romantic irony, periodically leaking over into humour. Beckett's systematic stripping away of the props of representation, his impoverishing of character, syntax, vocabulary, allusion, humour, his *peoples'* possessions, the erosion of a subject/object dichotomy – all of this goes hand in hand with a reduction in overt irony and, in the late works, a deceleration in the mobility, agility, agitation, of narrative consciousness.

I venture the following hypotheses: irony is more present if less overt in Kafka, but runs its course more completely in Beckett; Kafka suppresses, Beckett absorbs, the possibilities of

irony and the resulting chaos; Kafka resists irony as a means of ending irony – Beckett does not.

B's comments throughout the 'Three Dialogues' are particularly significant for a reading of irony in Beckett. By declaring there is nothing to express, B also provides irony nothing to gather in or behind, no screen onto which to project an intended reserve, a reserved intention. Correspondingly, Beckett's authorship increasingly starves irony of its subjective occasion. Beckett's authorship is like a nihilotropic process that systematically goes about burning its bridges, in which irony operates like a furnace that bursts into sight only where and when there is something to burn. That is, irony appears in Beckett in the first instance as that which serves to burn bridges, in the second as that which betrays the fact that bridges are still being burnt, and, at last, as another, particularly obstinate, bridge that has yet to be burnt. That is, irony begins as a way of getting rid of things and ends up stuttering and flickering in and out of existence, constantly threatening to scupper the entire procedure.

Alternatively, however, instead of conceiving Beckett's authorship as a nihilotropic process, we could conceive this process rather as the *emergence* of something: the emergence, say, of the authorship out of the traditional looking authorial asides of *Murphy*. As in, instead of conceiving *Murphy* as a third person narrative with a fashionable edge of authorial static, we can detect in the fissures and stigmatisms of *Murphy*'s realist surface, an embryonic version of the outward-bound play of pronouns that becomes so pronounced in *The Unnamable.*

It is not customary to draw connections between the 'I' of *The Unnamable* and the authorial intrusions of an early work like *Murphy*. Beckett's shift from English to French is generally held accountable for the difference in form overtly effected with the four novellas, the fusing and/or confusing of teller and told. Continuity between *Murphy* and the later authorship is typically conceived as thematic as opposed to formal – as Alvarez observes, *Murphy*'s careful formal intricacy differentiates it from the later narratives:

> Each phrase seems brooded upon, composed infinitely slowly with a fine ear, sensitive as a bat's, for its faintest reverberations. So too, with the book's structure: the plot notches into place like a jigsaw; by the last page every detail has been taken up and given its own special twist. The result is a formal perfection which even Flaubert might have been proud of. Beckett would never again make obeisance towards these 19th-century virtues in his novels. (Alvarez, 34)

Murphy's reader can pick up from any detail and move through the clockwork interior of *Murphy* and its exquisitely stacked dualisms. The formal perfection of the novel panders to readerly desire; there is endless gratification to be obtained from the zillions of connections

that stitch the fiction together. Distracted by the pleasant business of putting two and two together the reader is stitched up in and by a circuit of desire parallel to the one overtly satirised in the novel.

Murphy's acquaintanceship, extending from Neary, Wylie, Miss Counihan, through Miss Dwyer and Flight-Lieutenant Elliman, constitutes a reticulated system adapted along the axes of sexual and financial needs, in which objects of desire are substituted as soon as possessed. These 'puppets' (71) are variously adapted to cope with the determinism of the system: Miss Counihan is an unreflective predator; Neary is a sentimental predator; Wylie, as his name suggests, is the creature best adapted to benefit from the 'sexpit,' expertly negotiating the weaknesses of his fellow-creatures to gratify his own. It is Wylie, who also has everything to gain from the insight, who sums up the hopelessness of the situation: 'the syndrome known as life is too diffuse to admit of palliation. For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse. The horse leech's daughter is a closed system. Her quantum of wantum cannot vary' (36).

Only a total suspension of will, desire, consciousness, could launch an individual out of this closed system. This missile assumes the person of Murphy. It is Murphy's declared ambition to will himself into that condition of will-lessness he understands by the third zone of his mind- Murphy's mind, that is, as Murphy represents it to himself, as described in 'Chapter 6.' Murphy's effort to abdicate interrupts general circulation and impels the puppets nearest him to seek him out. In other words, even though wanting out of *wantum* seems a self-defeating aspiration, the system nevertheless responds to Murphy making himself unavailable by gathering itself and moving to reappropriate Murphy. By absenting himself from general circulation Murphy inadvertently becomes a fugitive object of desire. It takes a puppet to make the improbable attempt to abscond from the puppet theatre for the strings to come to life.

'I need you, you only want me, you have the whip, you win.' (80): Murphy absents himself by taking up the struggle against his needs (Celia) in the name of his wants (to be 'a mote in the dark of absolute freedom' [66]). Celia, a kind of post-Proustian Irish Odette, wants Murphy but needs no one, unless domestic finances require her to go back on the game. Murphy demands that Celia desist from going on the game yet resists finding a job himself. Celia's paternal grandfather, the disintegrating Mr. Willoughby Kelly, encourages Celia to ply her trade and ditch the good-for-nothing Murphy.

This contrast, between Murphy and Kelly, begs to be established. Kelly, wheelchair bound when not bedridden, demands that Celia provide coherent accounts of her circumstances ('I beseech you ... be less beastly circumstantial.' [12]), and his idea of time well spent is letting

out his kite to the point where it vanishes in sky, to the end of determining the distance involved. Murphy, by contrast, binds himself to his rocking-chair, avoids coherent accounts where possible, and would rather let out his mind than a 'toy' and not to any determinable end. Kelly has a pragmatic relation to sense. Murphy has a sentimental relation to non-sense, which manifests itself in his soft spot for lunatics: 'even if the patients did sometimes feel as lousy as they sometimes looked, still no aspersion was necessarily cast on the little world where Murphy presupposed them, one and all, to be having a glorious time' (102).

Willoughby > will-aby > lullaby > rockaby baby > rocking chair > Murphy, rocking himself into will-lessness.

Thus Willoughby is at the indefinitely drawn out curtain call of his life, seeking to keep everything together, but all his parts are fidgeting to be off: 'His attention was dispersed. Part was with his caecum, which was wagging its tail again; part with his extremities, which were dragging anchor; part with his boyhood; and so on. All this would have to be called in' (15). Murphy, on the other hand, is in the prime of his life, willing himself apart, but effortlessly reintegrating. The one dying to remain, the other burning to be gone.

Celia is the hyphen in whom these comedies converge and the limit where the battle between the realist and antirealist elements of the narrative is pitched. *Celia* is the sky that sensibly binds and bounds the action of a realist novel, and the limit the inaction of an antirealist narrative seeks (without seeking), somehow or other, to escape.

Both Kelly's and Murphy's ventures end in accidents. The kite tearing out of Kelly's hands when he dozes off at the end of the book recalls Murphy slipping mortally out of Murphy two chapters earlier when his gas-heated garret goes up in smoke. These accidents effect different categories of closure. Murphy's 'classical case of misadventure' (147) marks the end of Murphy if not as abrupt an end to his influence on the action (his influence throughout the novel is effected by his absence and not his presence, therefore the difference his death makes takes some time to sink in). Willoughby's kiting accident marks the end of *Murphy* but not the end of kite-flying, or, of course, of realist fiction. Both accidents ironically complete the tendencies they appear to ruin. Murphy's accident catapults Murphy in death into the third zone of his mind.[29] Willoughby's accident, which marks the failure of a disintegrating

[29] This ironic *success* of Murphy's venture may be compared to Sokel's reading of death in Kafka. Briefly: the route of action that might save the Kafkian protagonist always fails to save him/her the instant it becomes a saving principle - precisely the route that might have helped is amplified infinitely in the will-to-power of the subject (exaggeration, childishness, monstrousness) and leads to the subject's death – this, according to Sokel, is victory at a deeper level. Kempf, however, finds that: 'Unfortunately, Sokel does not stop at the conclusion that the mythical battle between the self and the world in the author's last piece is fundamentally dialectical. Completely in contrast to Michel Dentan, who, in spirit, arrives at the same conclusion, Sokel instead dissolves the dialectic. With a neoclassical twist, he interprets Josephine's disappearance as her triumphant death. In her attempt to deify herself, Josephine falls victim to the world, but in death she attains the absolute freedom she always demanded.

realism to retain control over its puppets, by coinciding with the end of the actual work, flushes the finished fiction into life. In other words, Willoughby's moment of kiting incontinence coincides with the decisive break with which narrative control is asserted over fiction, upon which the kite drifts beyond Kelly's ken and into the jesting clouds of an unknown readership.

Murphy's desire is to be beyond desire. Desire makes sense of the 'big blooming buzzing confusion' even as the desiring subject is reduced, on account of desire, to part of a sensible pattern. In other words: the desiring subject makes sense of chaos and, simultaneously, the desiring subject is made sense of by desire. This is Neary's dilemma:

> No sooner has Miss Dwyer, despairing of recommending herself to Flight-Lieutenant Elliman, made Neary as happy as a man could desire, than she became one with the ground against which she had figured so prettily. … The problem then became how to break with the morsel of chaos without hurting its feelings. (31)

Murphy's dilemma, on the other hand, is that desire reduces one's possibilities in advance, interferes with one's ambitions to enjoy every possibility equally, a shortcoming exemplified by Murphy's predilection for the ginger biscuit and 'prejudice against the anonymous biscuit' (57). A mere five variables and already Murphy falls foul of 'the demon of gingerbread.' He *would* 'sit out of it' (5) but he is configured almost entirely by the system he would abscond from. Albeit at a premium, Murphy's 'prepossessions' (57) nevertheless ruin his chances – until, that is, chance itself intervenes and sends him on his way.

Murphy's chance of pure chance follows directly on conceding defeat to Mr Endon's impenetrable psychosis when, failing to fix a picture of Celia in his mind, he considers returning to Celia. This projected return signifies a form of closure appropriate to the terms and conditions of realist fiction, but it is displaced, however, by the extravagant conceit of Murphy's death. That is, Murphy returning to Celia would close the gap drawn open by Murphy resisting his needs and insisting on his wants, and bring to an end Murphy's willed digression from the 'nothing new' (5) into the radically improbable.

Murphy's death does not have an immediately terminating effect on the action because Murphy's influence throughout *Murphy* is on account of his willed absence. Death does not suddenly kick over the traces of this absence. Even in death Murphy remains the rupture upon which the realist content of the novel converges. When the pack of pursuivants converges upon Brewery Road they find only Celia, the limit of their own realist illusion, in

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Sokel's treatment of the primary text goes to such speculative extremes here that his argument begins to take on the appearance of a Kafkaesque paradox: "The struggle over the power of the 'I' is only a detour to its resolution [Auflösung], which is redemption [Erlösung]'" (Kempf, 56).

whom the motivating forces of money and sex are merged. Murphy is lost beyond Celia. Murphy's transfiguration has to wait for the difference between a lived absence and the irrecuperable absence of death to be certified. The instant that Murphy is certified dead and no chance whatsoever remains of recuperating Murphy out of Murphy's absence, his allure evaporates, and the band of puppets tweaked in his direction is disbanded.

When Murphy considers returning to Celia he has been breached by the third zone: unable to maintain the zones of his mind, Murphy cannot maintain the ability to tell himself apart from the confusion through representing himself, in the image of his mind, to himself. Murphy's encounter with Mr Endon, in which the absurdity of his wants becomes clear to him, divests Murphy of his will to will-lessness and subordinates him at last to a system beyond himself. Murphy can no longer maintain the mysterious intercourse between little and big worlds, the *conarium* of self-representation is lost, detachment is detached and Murphy, unable to hole himself up inside himself, holed out, becomes untenable as a character and blasts off, is blasted into the unthinkable third zone. One of the last things passing through Murphy's mind, even as it passes out through itself, is Celia, to whom Murphy returns in thought even as he passes beyond her as the limit of realist fiction and the limit of his own plausibility.

So far we have scratched at the surface of what Richard Begam (1996) refers to as Murphy's inner and outer plots:

> *Murphy* may be understood as simultaneously comprising two different novels: an "outer" novel, which tells the story of Neary and company in pursuit of Murphy, and an "inner" novel, which deals with Murphy's psychotic contraction into himself. The outer novel offers what is, in effect, a caricature of nineteenth-century fiction: its medium is material reality and its motive force appetite, usually directed toward sex and money. (Begam, 57)

The outer novel is 'launched in search of the inner novel,' which 'finds its model in Murphy's third zone':

> Beckett can only express such an aporia in terms of the movement of something present toward something absent, a movement best epitomized by the organization of the novel around its "absent" center, the slightly decentered and hermetically sealed chapter 6, which – plotless, discursive, preoccupied with Murphy's mind – becomes an image for the imageless inner novel. (58)

What is more: 'if the outer novel seems inescapable – a kind of gravitational field beyond which Murphy cannot rise – it is also a thoroughly unreliable ground, mined with the

collapsing conventions of realist fiction' (61). The outer novel is marked by 'a series of narrative fissures, breaks in the coherence and plausibility of representation' (62). Thus, despite the masterful symmetries of the realist form, the outer novel is fissured, warped, cracked, more and less subtly, by a range of subverting effects: self-deconstructing imperfections like the missing seventh scarf first remarked by Kenner, and the question of how Murphy ties his own wrists to his rocking chair; an exaggerated application of chronometric time that results in temporal incoherence as opposed to realist coherence; narrative asides ('Try it sometime, gentle skimmer' [Mu, 51]), self-commentary and discussion of the literary strategies being deployed; lists of attributes in place of realist description (10); metafictional allusions to 'filthy censors' (47) and 'gentle compositors' (132); improbable dialogue that seems addressed to a theatre audience, and 'such ... extravagant digressions as the analysis of Murphy's mind [and] the grotesque descriptions of the characters' (Federman, 64). In the penultimate chapter where Murphy's remains are accounted for and subsequently dispersed across a pub floor, Alvarez senses 'a certain beady-eyed slapstick ... as though Beckett were anxious not to be caught taking his hero, or anything else except his elegant style, too seriously' (Alvarez, 32). Federman, in a familiar move, ascribes the 'ironic' activity of *Murphy* to the author Beckett:

> These self-conscious remarks indicate to what extent Beckett controls his fiction in a deliberate effort to frustrate those who may accept his words at face value. Here and there the reader is given a slight concession - for instance, when the author suggests that he work out for himself 'the number of seconds in one dark night' ... - but more often Beckett takes away with one hand what he has given with the other. He spares no one, and his irony ranges from subtle parody to open defiance. [...] Not only must the reader endure the author's sarcasm but, being made aware of the fiction's fraudulence, he is denied any self-identification with its characters lest he become as ridiculous and unauthentic as they are. (Federman, 61)

However, as well as undermining realist illusion this activity relates to the evacuation, first willed, then unwilled, of Murphy out of Murphy's mind and then out of *Murphy*. The sixth chapter, set in *Murphy* like the asylum in its grounds – the asylum where the madness of the outlying chapters would be contained and accounted for – is set in *Murphy* like the garret in the asylum, like Murphy in his garret, like Murphy's mind in Murphy, like the third zone in Murphy's mind, like the superfine chaos of the third zone.

Murphy is a timebomb. Not a bomb that goes off at any particular moment in time, but a bomb that goes off throughout time, a durational explosion, a bomb that blows away chronometric time and yet seems to leave it intact. The possibility is given throughout *Murphy*, through the hairline fractures in its formal perfection, for *Murphy* to explode into its

antimaterial counterpart. The narrative is a kind of explosion set within its own exquisite formal limits, and the violence of the explosion is directly in proportion to the restrictions of the realist setting. Murphy's 'psychotic contraction into himself' affects the novel like an arrested implosion, and drags the entire fabric of the outer novel ever so slightly apart. The *explosion*, which can only be *represented* within the conventions of realist fiction, is the dispersal of words beyond the impacted body of words that is *Murphy*. *Murphy*, soldered lovingly together, word by word, phrase by phrase, is primed to fly apart into its words at any, at every, instant. And Murphy, flushed through the untenable zones of what is no longer, and never was, his mind, is the pin sucked out of the word-grenade of realist fiction. '*All out*' (Mu, 158).

CHAPTER FOUR

Sirens

> Das einzige wäre, wenn sich eine Ironie fände, welche die Eigenschaft hätte, alle jene großen und kleinen Ironien zu verschlucken und zu verschlingen, daß nichts mehr davon zu sehen wäre ... (Schlegel, BI, 221)

I

According to Maurice Blanchot, *The Unnamable* is not merely a book, but 'a direct confrontation with the process from which all books derive' (SS, 195). That which just managed to escape immolation in *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* is reduced in *The Unnamable* to a shapeless, struggling 'dark residue': 'That which was narrative has now become struggle. That which took shape – albeit tattered and maimed – is here shapeless' (194).

This confrontation constitutes a 'threat' to the artist. This is the threat of 'impersonality' or 'alienation':

> And this is a threat [the artist] must not avoid but indulge. Art requires that he who practices it should be immolated to art, should become other, not another, not transformed from the person he was into an artist with artistic duties, satisfactions and interests, but into nobody, the empty, animated space where art's summons is heard. (197)

Insofar as 'he who writes is no longer Beckett but the urge that sweeps himself out of himself,' to invoke Samuel Beckett as the one behind the voice in *The Unnamable* is merely a 'reassuring convention' (194). And, similarly, that narrative has become struggle need not persuade us to see 'courage' in the fact that *The Unnamable* struggles on for so many pages: 'this is only an outsider's view, that of the reader contemplating what strikes him as a *tour de force*. There is little to be admired in an accomplishment which cannot be avoided' (195).

These sentiments will be familiar from the previous chapter.

Elsewhere, Blanchot calls this threat the 'risk' of an 'essential solitude,' which involves the 'metamorphosis' of the writer writing of the 'interminable':

> When to write is to discover the interminable, the writer ... does not go towards a world that is more sure, more beautiful, better justified, where everything is arranged in the light of a just day. ... What speaks in him is the fact that in one way or another he is no

> longer himself, he is already no longer anyone. The "he" that is substituted for "I" – this is the solitude that comes to the writer through the work. "He" does not indicate objective disinterest, creative detachment. "He" does not glorify the consciousness of someone other than me, the soaring of a human life that, within the imaginary space of the work of art, keeps its freedom to say "I." "He" is myself having become no one, someone else having become the other ... (BR, 408)

'He' is, in a limited sense, the neuter form that Blanchot observes Kafka delighted to discover (406). In *The Unnamable*, however, this solitude obtains to the extent that the relation between 'he' and 'I' comes full circle and the 'I' is burdened with impersonality: 'a being without being who can neither live nor die, stop nor start, who is in the vacant site where speaks the redundancy of idle words under the ill fitting cloak of a porous, agonising I' (SS, 194-5).

Elsewhere again Blanchot addresses this struggle in his reading of Ulysses' brush with the Sirens, 'The Sirens' Song': 'A very obscure struggle takes place between every tale and the encounter with the Sirens' (BR, 445). It is this text we are particularly concerned with, with a view to Kafka's reading of the myth, 'The Silence of the Sirens,' which, as its title infers, is every bit as eccentric as Blanchot's. 'The Sirens' Song' does not mention 'The Silence of the Sirens,' but insofar as almost everything in Blanchot is conceived with some kind of a view to Kafka, Kafka is noticeable through his absence and Blanchot's essay cannot but provide a gloss on Kafka's short story.

However: we are not concerned solely with the mythical Sirens, but extend our discussion also to that Athenian Siren, Socrates. After all, 'Socrates drove all his contemporaries out of substantiality as if naked from a shipwreck, undermined actuality, envisioned ideality in the distance, touched it, but did not take possession of it' (CI, 6). The chapter may therefore be conceived as spanned between two scenes, or, perhaps, as seeking to navigate the distance between two scenes. The one is Ulysses' brush with the Sirens, and the other is Athens' scrap with Socrates. The first begins to configure the risk incurred in a particular kind of literary encounter. And the second begins to configure the risk understanding takes with irony. The choice of the latter scene is motivated, of course, by Kierkegaard's *Concept of Irony*, and the choice of the former by Kafka's reading of the Sirens' episode.

Beckett is put on hold until the final section of the chapter, where we come to *Molloy*, and a metamorphosis of the chapter's themes.

Regarding the individuals involved, both Ulysses and Socrates are ancient Greeks of mythical cunning. This should not blind us to the fact that their forms of cunning differ

radically. The material or technological cunning of Ulysses overcomes strictly imaginary forces in the form of Sirens, whereas Socrates' non-material cunning overcomes historical and human forces in the form of substantial Athens. Ulysses and Socrates may therefore be conceived as opponents, and their favoured mode of combat as a kind of *passivity* – for Ulysses' deafness in one who hears is like Socrates' ignorance in one who understands or *sees* perfectly.

Consequently the question of how Ulysses escapes the Sirens does not correspond to the question of how Socrates escapes Athens, but to the question of how Athens escapes Socrates. And therefore the question of how Socrates escapes Athens, which we understand in a limited sense to ask how Socrates escapes punishment by Athens, corresponds to the question of how the Sirens escape Ulysses. Furthermore, the question of how or whether Socrates escapes his own cunning (and for cunning we read irony) corresponds to the even more peculiar question of how or whether the Sirens escape their own song.

Of course these questions regarding the Sirens are not commonly asked, insofar as they contravene the Homeric myth – they become pertinent, however, with a view to Blanchot's and Kafka's readings, both of which ask some pretty peculiar questions of the myth.

The question whether Socrates escapes irony is asked with a view to deciding between Socrates being ironically playful and Socrates being irony's plaything. Asked with a view to Socrates as the victim of his own irony the question corresponds to the question of how Athens escapes Socrates, for it refers to Socrates as though he were Athens and not irony. Asked with a view to Socrates as irony, the question how Socrates escapes irony asks how irony escapes irony. It asks into the possibility of irony: how does irony escape itself? *How does irony become irony?*

Analogously the question of how the Sirens escape their song – unless one accepts in advance that they do not escape their song, that their song ends at their expense, and that this cost is humanly conceivable – asks into the *possibility* of this song. It asks how this song escapes this song. *How does the Sirens' song become?*

There are further questions regarding whether Athens escaped the consequences of its decisions in relation to Socrates, and whether Ulysses escaped the consequences of his cunning.

With regard to Ulysses our line of questioning goes something like this: How does Ulysses escape the Sirens? Should Ulysses have escaped the Sirens? Can Ulysses but escape the Sirens? And, if he *cannot but* escape the Sirens, *does* Ulysses escape the Sirens?

We are concerned with the respective threats posed, where the threat posed is not necessarily the one against which precautions are taken. That is, we are concerned with the risks taken, where the risk taken is not necessarily the risk that appears to be taken. Athens and Ulysses think to take no risks- that is, they take the threats of Socrates and Sirens seriously enough to obviate risk. They do not, however, take the respective threats seriously as irony and as an encounter with imaginary forces, they take the threats seriously *for real*: thus Athens accuses Socrates of actual crimes where his actual transgression was ignorance of actuality; and Ulysses takes actual precautions against imaginary forces.

As I tried to show in the first chapter Kierkegaard takes Socrates' irony so seriously that he effects an interchange between history and poetry. In his reading of the Sirens' episode, Blanchot insists on taking the Sirens seriously and, similarly, threatens to turn myth into history. In both instances the interchange, by compelling us intellectually to resist it, brings about a brief blurring of the boundaries between myth (or poetry) and history (or reality).

Unlike Blanchot, Kierkegaard has a wealth of historical detail to work through: the metamorphosis of Socrates' place in history, and the undecidable aspect of Socrates' place in history, emerges gradually through the mass of historical and human detail. Contrastingly, what Blanchot calls a *tale* is intent on failure from the outset, presenting itself immediately as a preposterous demand that necessarily leaves the reader at a loss: the tale has no historical and human detail to work through slowly and laboriously, which would provide at least the diversionary appearance of a slow and laborious, gainfully philosophical procedure while it gradually weans the reader off his firm distinctions regarding history and myth, poetry and reality.

The *tale*, then, describes an imaginary encounter that demands, impossibly earnestly, to be taken as reality. Where Kierkegaard's procedure keeps the reader hanging, but prizes up one finger after the other and gradually unfastens the reader's grip on Socrates, the tale promptly forces the reader's hand, and restores the imaginary to itself.

In a sense the tale demands a leap on the strength of the absurd, and has a similar relation to the understanding as that of faith, and indeed, Blanchot cites the following anecdote as typical of the tale: 'In the *Gorgias,* Plato says: "Listen to a beautiful tale. Now you will think it is a fable, but I believe it is a tale. I will tell you what I am going to tell you as a true thing." What he told was the story of the Last Judgment' (446).

Blanchot contrasts the tale with the *novel*. The novel is 'essentially superficial and yet in its surface movement capable of absorbing all being'; 'in its discretion and its cheerful nothingness, [the novel] takes upon itself the task of forgetting what others degrade by

calling it the essential.' The novel turns time into a game, and distracts and diverts itself and its readers with the human domain: 'Diversion is its profound song.' The *tale*, by contrast, '[h]eroically, pretentiously ... is the tale of one single episode, that in which Ulysses encounters the inadequate and enticing song of the Sirens' (446).

The novel is the human journey that occupies the foreground of this encounter. 'The tale begins at a point where the novel does not go, though in its refusals and its rich neglect it is leading towards it.' The tale is a possibility always already strewn throughout the novel, concealed 'in its refusals,' its 'discretion' 'and its rich neglect' of this possibility. With the movement from novel to tale the vast superficial reticulum in which all human life, time and space is captured and turned into a game is impoverished to a solitary tap root that draws into uninhabitable depths.

Blanchot finds that if the novel no longer provides adequate distraction, it is 'because technics has transformed men's time and their ways of amusing themselves' (446). It is *technology*, of course, that overcomes the Sirens in the first place, when Ulysses constructs everything around him, his material environment, into a kind of machine to afford himself pure and unadulterated pleasure.

But then again, when Ulysses overcomes imaginary forces, he only achieves what we never fail to achieve, what we effortlessly achieve every time we read a story.

Another thing before we go on. For Blanchot, regardless whether he writes of an essential solitude, of the threat of impersonality or alienation, or of the Sirens' song, it is always the writer that threatened and not the reader. We, however, are concerned with the threat or struggle as it extends to the reader. We recall Charles Bernheimer's comparison of Kafka and Beckett on the basis of what he called the 'aporetic quest,' which wells up in the process of reading out of the aspect of the protagonist's predicament and engulfs the reader. The reader, as Bernheimer puts it, becomes increasingly implicated in the writerly process he is trying to decode and exposed to the consternating effects of writing.

Blanchot never goes down this avenue. Or maybe he does, but with a point of view so foreign to conventional ideas of reading that we simply fail to recognize it. For Blanchot reading never becomes an effort. Reading only becomes an effort when it is no longer or is not yet subject to the 'free and happy' effortlessness of what Blanchot calls 'literary reading' ('Reading,' BR, 432). Literary reading 'never asks the book – and certainly never the author – "What exactly do you mean? Well, what truth are you offering me?"' (432). The difference between what Blanchot calls reading and what we are delayed with here is the labour of comprehension, which delays or takes place after true reading. Reading is 'situated beyond or

short of comprehension' (434). Blanchot is not referring to a particular technique of reading, an exclusive exegesis, but something else, the 'careless' 'affirmation' that 'unburdens' the work of its author without inserting a particular reader or reading in its stead (432):

> something very hasty in [the reader's] approach, the very futile shadow that passes across the pages and leaves them intact, everything that makes the reading appear superfluous, and even the reader's lack of attention, the slightness of his interest, all his infinite lightness affirms the book's new lightness: the book has become a book without an author, without the seriousness, the labor, the heavy pangs, the weight of a whole life that has been poured into it – an experience that is sometimes terrible, always dangerous, an experience the reader effaces and, because of his providential lightness, considers to be nothing. (431)

Indeed, 'reading is the easiest thing in the world, it is freedom without work' (434), and 'stands in contrast to that aspect of the work which, through the experience of creation, approaches absence … - a movement that exposes the creator to the threat of essential solitude' (435). As Blanchot writes in 'The Essential Solitude': 'the person who reads [the work] enters into that affirmation of the solitude of the work [and] the one who writes it belongs to the risk of that solitude' (402). This is the 'profound struggle' all reading is engaged in *unawares*, the struggle with the author (431). Reading's careless, anonymous, and infinitely light passage smoothes the traces of the painful struggle of which the work is born. 'In this sense, reading is more positive than creation, more creative, although it does not produce anything' (435).

Hence, for Kafka:

> there was dread, there were unfinished stories, the torment of a wasted life, of a mission betrayed, every day turned into an exile, every night exiled from sleep, and finally, there was the certainty that "*The Metamorphosis* is unreadable, radically flawed." But for Kafka's reader, the dread turns into ease and happiness, the torment over faults is transfigured into innocence, and in each scrap of text there is delight in fullness, certainty of completion, a revelation of the unique, inevitable unpredictable work. This is the essence of reading … (435)

This may elicit resentment on the part of the writer. He may, like Montesquieu, demand that the reader not judge twenty year's work in a moment's reading, or, like Valéry, deplore the uncultivated reader demanding 'that facility accompany his reading.' However, *pace* Blanchot, regardless how rigorous a standard of reading is drummed into the reader, this only diverts from (and thereby cements) reading's essential lightness. In fact, enforcing such deadly seriousness in reading '*would create even more serious dangers*, because although the lightness of a

casual reader, dancing quickly around the text, may not be true lightness, it has no consequences and holds a certain promise' (435-6, my italics).

Tucked into this last sentence we find a curious take on conventional dichotomies of good and bad reading. It is the *casual* reader who comes closer to literary reading in his inattention and neglect. The serious reader draws in 'more serious dangers' by seeking to make the text answer to the world. *Good* reading is less and less the free activity of literary reading as Blanchot describes it – irresponsible, carefree – but increasingly reflects in its efforts the material demands of the world the reader leaves behind by reading.

Hence the reader is safe, always saved by his carelessness, his essentially carefree attitude. Indeed the reader is only seriously threatened when he stops and defends the position arrived at, as though the strength of a defence could eliminate all traces of carelessness that led to his having come to this position.

Perhaps the reader is obscurely aware of the dangers of reading, it's why he does not take reading all too seriously in the first place. The reader has an inherently ironic attitude toward the literary text, whether he knows it or not.

The threat is not literature's seriousness but literature's essential lack of seriousness, which we get caught up in through our serious strivings.

Blanchot alludes to Montesquieu and Valérys' exasperation, but he does not remark the kind of writer who deliberately constructs narratives to trap the reader and compel a level of effort more appropriate perhaps to the 'dark struggle' of the artist's occasion – who, instead of insisting (reasonably) that the reader be more serious, seeks to compel this seriousness.

Kafka, for instance: for although Blanchot finds that for Kafka's reader 'the dread turns into ease and happiness' etc., this is scarcely the intended effect, evinced, for instance, in a letter the young Kafka wrote to a friend in 1904:

> I think we ought to read only the kind of books that wound and stab us. If the book we're reading doesn't wake us up with a blow to the head, what are we reading for? So that it will make us happy, as you write? Good lord, we would be happy precisely if we had no books ... we need books that affect us like a disaster, that grieve us deeply, like the death of someone we loved more than ourselves, like being banished into forests far from everyone, like a suicide. (Kafka, cited Koelb, 72)

Nor, of course, is it always the achieved effect, evinced dramatically in readers like Adorno: 'He over whom Kafka's wheels have passed, has lost for ever both any peace with the world and any chance of consoling himself with the judgment that the way of the world is bad' (Com, 97-8).

As Clayton Koelb (1989) finds:

> [Kafka's] stories are meant to engage the reader in the problematic of reading, of interpreting traces of something that is both absolutely important and absolutely unattainable: they are meant to put the reader in a torture machine and stretch him out on the rack of this tough word. It is no fun for him and an odd kind of fun for us ... (Koelb, 107)

Koelb's study of Kafka's 'verbal imagination' dwells on how Kafka's views of reading are reflected in his writings. He observes that 'Kafka seems to propose ... two radically different views of the reading process, two conflicting readings of reading that interact in complex ways' (67). Taking his cue from Derrida's 'Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,' Koelb distinguishes between *lethetic* and *alethetic* reading: lethetic reading 'allows the reader the option of keeping himself apart from what he reads, safe from any threat the text might present'; alethetic reading 'assumes that the goal of reading any text, no matter how trivial or incredible the text may seem, is the discovery of some truth' (86).[1] Lethetic texts encourage lethetic reading, and alethetic texts encourage alethetic reading. Lethetic reading is traditionally associated with 'bad' or non-reading, and alethetic reading, in which the reader is exposed to the threat of the text, with 'good' reading.

Koelb finds both of these tendencies figure in Kafka's reading habits, but observes that Kafka inclines toward the traditional valorization of the alethetic, both in the kind of texts he produces and in the response he intends his texts to elicit in his readers:

> There is no threat associated with bad reading or with nonreading; quite the contrary, they are ways of achieving happiness. But happiness is not the goal Kafka envisions for reading; he participates fully here in the tradition that equates successful reading with the penetration of the reader by the text or by the authority that the text represents. The text must stab the reader to succeed, an image that is acted out with brutal precision by the Old Commandant's machine. (73)

Many of Kafka's texts involve a scene where alethetic reading is demanded (on pain of death) and a lethetic protagonist defers this reading. The monstrous printing press at the center of 'In the Penal Colony', for instance, or its procedure of inscription, which the officer describes to the traveler, is a centered image of the inescapable legal system at work

[1] The terms are Koelb's, but Derrida distinguishes between two readings of reading, or interpretations of interpretation, that correspond to Koelb's lethetic and alethetic readings. The passage referred to is that already cited in the Introduction: 'The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism' (*Writing and Difference*, pp.369-70).

in *The Trial*. The manner in which the latter system operates upon K. echoes the harrow's inculcation of the law. Where in the penal colony the law is written into the accused man's body, in *The Trial* the surface of inscription extends to K's entire existence.

We observe that the officer relates at least two scenes of reading in the penal colony: one under the harrow and another amongst those watching. The alethetic harrow is intended to focus the attention of its lethetic bystanders by illustrating that a single reading corresponds to a lifetime. In *The Trial* there is also a second scene of reading, similarly kitted out with lethetic bystander, similarly displaced to the margins of the alethetic scene – this, in as far as these margins correspond to the margins of the narrative, is the scene of the reader reading. But this scene corresponds even more to the *traveler's* reading of the officer's description, and much as the traveler's essential indifference to the officer's system of reading condemns the officer to the dead space of his deathly seriousness, the reader traipsing lightly out through the end of *The Trial* condemns also its monstrous claims to seriousness to collapse in upon itself, at the instant it is exposed as a mere book: 'a mute accumulation of sterile words' (BR, 403).

'In the Penal Colony' therefore provides a reading of *The Trial*'s strategy with regard to the reader, dissolving its alethetic margins and drawing the reader into the story in the form of the traveler. Like the traveler, the reader is a visitor being shown the workings of an alethetic machinery. A difference, however, consists in the sense of experiencing it first-hand in *The Trial*; the narrative point of view in *The Trial* seeks to eliminate the inevitably lethetic distance immanent to narration. The differences in 'In the Penal Colony,' between the situation of the traveler, the bystanders of old, the subject under the harrow, and the harrow itself, all of which provide opportunities of lethetic detachment, pile up and are dangerously compressed in the undifferentiated point of view in *The Trial*. Hence, much as the traveler tears himself free of the island with a certain anxious revulsion, the reader does not escape the end of *The Trial* without the odd pang (of revulsion, shame, anger etc).

This struggle, however, is decidedly one-sided and short-lived.

The narrative itself is aware it cannot pin down and skewer the reader, yet nevertheless, as Koelb writes, 'reading is a dangerous game' (72), for the *reader* is not necessarily aware he eludes its grasp so easily. This is one side of the story – the other is that this ease itself conceals a kind of threat, albeit not one the reader can take seriously. The reader escapes with the slightest of struggles: the alethetic demand is shrugged off, and is even condemned in the figure of the officer. Yet at the same time, in this shrugging off of whatever anxious pangs accompany the reader's passage out of *The Trial*, away from the penal colony, there is a sense that this escape merely defers a certain inevitability, signaled in the traveler's disquiet

when shown the inscription on the gravestone foretelling the Old Commandant's return. That is, although the alethetic demand may be condemned or ignored where it would be enforced, the lethetic response merely delays the serious side of reading the alethetic system seeks to draw forward. The one postpones, the other draws forward – reading, it seems, is never on time.

And furthermore, the lethetic response condemns the alethetic demand with immeasurably less consideration of the consequences than the alethetic demand that the lethetic reader seriously reflect on *truth*, in whatever form this *chances* (lethetically, again) to take … whether this is the scene of death or some other inescapable law. In other words lethetic reading effects judgment on the wing, inadvertently slipping into the role of judge it shies from.

As Koelb finds in his compelling reading of 'In the Penal Colony': 'The traveler finds himself being the very judge he has condemned, for his refusal to defend the system is perceived as a verdict against it and a sentence of its death' (Koelb, 96).

We intimate the complex interaction of the two readings of reading Koelb alludes to. Alethetic or good reading is said to expose the reader to a certain *real* risk, which we can refer to as the risk of *consternation* – the perils bound up with the relation between mastery and mystification. However, lethetic or bad reading, which bypasses this risk and this threat, is also exposed to a danger, although this danger consists precisely in its lack of seriousness and therefore always fails to be taken seriously. The alethetic demand, moreover, may be charged with cruelty and inhumanity for its single-minded pursuit of its ends. And yet the lethetic attitude is blissfully oblivious to the fact that its absent-mindedness becomes, unintentionally, the source, not necessarily inhumane but non-human, of cruel decisions. This, of course, is the stamp of condemnation in Kafka, which arrives suddenly and inexplicably and yet on the basis that, as the officer has it, 'guilt is invariably beyond doubt.' – As Joseph K.'s Advocate presumes the defendant Bloch has heard, 'a man's condemnation often comes by a chance word from some chance person at some odd time' (T, 216). (Of course the Advocate, who makes his living and, more importantly, stakes his reputation on the basis that negotiation is always possible, only concedes that this is true 'with many reservations.')

We return to *The Trial* in the following chapter, and turn for the present to *happier* elements of reading such as we find them, for instance, in Kafka's reading of the Sirens encounter. For where in Kafka the alethetic demand typically either destroys the protagonist (*The Trial*, 'The Judgment'), or, thrown back upon its own resources, self-destructs ('In the Penal Colony,' 'The Hunger Artist'), in 'The Silence of the Sirens' lethetic reading prevails in the

face of an alethetic demand without harmful consequences – for any of the parties involved. With regard to ourselves as readers, insofar as we can take seriously the threat that extends to us through Kafka's writings, 'The Silence of the Sirens' seems to provide us with the bearings to navigate this threat.[2]

In the Homeric myth, as is known to all the world, Ulysses also escapes the Sirens. Warned by the sorceress Circe, he has himself tied to his mast by his crew, orders his crew to fill their ears with wax, and, plain sailing indeed, swans past the Sirens. (Blanchot has a good many things to say regarding Ulysses' attitude toward this encounter; we come to these later.)

Kafka's reading, however, gives the myth 'a new and entirely unexpected twist' (Koelb, 93). This Ulysses had no designs upon the Sirens' song but sought only to negotiate the passage made unsafe by the Sirens. Furthermore, Kafka's reading focuses singularly on the moment of Ulysses' passage: there is no mention of the journey in the foreground of this encounter; Circe is not mentioned, and mention of the crew is elided: 'Ulysses stopped his ears with wax and had himself bound to the mast of his ship' (CSS, 430). Bearing Blanchot in mind, Kafka's reading of the Sirens encounter is *the tale of the tale*: 'Heroically, pretentiously, the tale is the tale of one single episode, that in which Ulysses encounters the inadequate and enticing song of the Sirens' (BR, 446).

However, 'as was known to all the world,' the 'measures' Ulysses took were 'inadequate':

> it was known to all the world that such things were of no help whatever. The song of the Sirens could pierce through everything, and the longing of those they seduced would have broken far stronger bonds than chains and masts. But Ulysses did not think of that, although he had probably heard of it. He trusted absolutely to his handful of wax and his fathom of chain, and in innocent elation over his little stratagem sailed out to meet the Sirens. (CSS, 431)

However, as the tale goes on to explain, still more lethal than their song was the Sirens' silence – and on Ulysses' approach, either because they did not think to, or because they thought not to, the Sirens did not sing. Ulysses, however, was, apparently, oblivious to their silence, and then oblivious also to the Sirens: 'the Sirens literally vanished before his resolution, and at the very moment when they were nearest to him he knew of them no longer' (431).

[2] The possibility of escape is given elsewhere in Kafka. Even in 'In The Penal Colony' we see the intended victim, the prisoner, escape the harrow. There are also the harmless perpetual motion machines of Kafka's authorship, the couriers racing around the world, the students that always study, and the fools that never sleep, who escape the danger by echoing it instead of seeking to escape, oppose or question it.

According to Koelb, on whose recommendation we approach this scene as a scene of reading, the difference between the threats posed by the Sirens' song and the Sirens' silence 'does not change the fundamental situation' (Koelb, 93):

> The inversion that proposes silence as a more powerful weapon than actual utterance may seem paradoxical, but it is one of the oldest and most enduring notions belonging to the alethetic mode of reading ... Silence betokens self-presence and power, even in the clichés of everyday speech: "he's the strong, silent type." (93-4)

Citing Hesse's Siddharta, Koelb proposes we are dealing here with a tradition wherein the difference between thoughts and words always takes place at the expense of thoughts, distorting them, making them 'a little foolish,' whereby 'the true indicator of intellectual power, according to such a view, must be silence' (94).

Koelb also observes Kafka's 'psychological explanation for the effectiveness of the sirens' silence' (94): 'Against the feeling of having triumphed over them by one's own strength, and the consequent exultation that bears down everything before it, no earthly power can resist' (CSS, 431). Here we recognize the relation between mastery and mystification, whereby every act of mastery (or the sense that accompanies it) catapults the subject more firmly into mystification. Or, as Koelb puts it, 'one cannot escape the passion of reading by conquering the text instead of letting it conquer you. The act of conquest brings with it a set of feelings that overwhelm the reader as surely as the text itself would have' (Koelb, 94). (More of this later.)

However, before we elaborate on these reasonable interpretations regarding the Sirens' silence, I would like to draw attention to another, perhaps slightly less reasonable, and a little more foolish, reason why the Sirens' silence is more dangerous than their song – which I am surprised escapes Koelb, given his exceptional receptivity to this kind of foolishness elsewhere – namely that there are Sirens and there are sirens: there are two kinds of sirens which can, very easily, through a slight lapse of attention, get confused with one another.

There are two kinds of sirens. On the one hand there are the mythical temptresses that passed into hearsay when Ulysses lived to tell. But on the other hand there is that range of alarms that erupt time and again out of thin air, chasing hearts into mouths and thoughts into the approved bunkers. There are sirens that alarm us and make us draw in all straying, outlying aspects of ourselves with which and through which we touch upon, explore and rule over our environment; and there are Sirens of whose song it is said it would steal our reason, would make us forget ourselves and each other, and effortlessly unravel all common sense.

Ostensibly, of course, our interest lies with the temptresses – but it is also in our interests to dwell on this difference, between Sirens and sirens.

Thus there are sirens we hear and Sirens we hear about, where the Sirens we hear about are bound up with an essential form of hearing, the hearing of the Sirens' song, of which Ulysses remains the only judge. There are alarms we hear and there is a song we no longer hear, and only hear about.

With the Ulysses of the Homeric myth we are dealing with a human figure forewarned by Circe, who takes this warning seriously enough to take the recommended measures. Circe, then, has something of a warning siren. And yet, with her feminine wiles and spells we would sooner associate her with the songsters she betrays. Circe is a kind of flawed Siren, perhaps, insofar as Ulysses had already mastered her charms. But then Ulysses was also about to introduce the flaw also into the hitherto flawless record of the Sirens' song.

Thus when Circe warns Ulysses she recalls him, obscurely, to an earlier escape, his escape from Circe. But what concerns us at present is the simple fact that in the myth Ulysses was forewarned. For if we inquire into the background of this warning we find that Ulysses' power over Circe derives from his having escaped her charms, and that he was also warned of Circe in advance, by a member of his crew, over whom he also held a kind of authority. Ulysses' so-called cunning, is bound up, apparently, with always being forewarned, where the last warning always derives from the one before last, and the last escape from the escape before last.

(We also bear in mind that although Ulysses is warned this alone did not save him from Circe, for on his way to Circe's dwelling the god Hermes fell in with Ulysses in human form and presented him with the herb *moly* to protect him against her charms.)

So then, Ulysses did not hear the Sirens? The Sirens were silent? There is a strikingly literal sense why the silence of sirens should be *even more* dangerous than their song, for if the sirens are silent one is not in the least warned, and insofar as there really is a danger, one will have taken no precautions.

Regarding the sirens we hear, in all of these there is also a fugitive trace of a seduction, a temptation that has not been resisted – for every siren rises in response to the possibility that order has been tempted to fail. Every siren recalls the accident-proneness inherent to every order that establishes itself in its efforts to eliminate accident. Sirens alert us to the possibility of order being unhinged from within even as they stridently declare the necessity of order. Because it falls to sirens to be heard, they end up standing for both the necessity of order and the possibility of accident.

Irony corresponds to the scenarios outlined above.

In its destructive aspect irony corresponds to that relation between every established order and the natural and irrepressible possibility of its going wrong. Irony intensifies the relation between order and the possibility of its going wrong for the sake of its own negative and sensuous enjoyment: the more catastrophically it can persuade an argument to go astray the more irony comes into its own. Thus Socrates, for example, afflicts the Hellenic order at every corner, at every moment, at every atom of its substantial life, with the possibility of its going wrong. Socrates becomes the site where Athens is repeatedly tempted to go intellectually wrong, constantly triggering false alarms. As Kierkegaard observes: 'Socrates does not refute his accusers but instead wrests the charge itself from them, exposing the whole thing as a false alarm' (CI, 88).

But irony itself also has to fall; irony too is subject, in sofar as it manifests itself in and as a subject, to the folly it intensifies, to the folly in which it declares its freedom. Irony does not withhold itself from the insuppressible possibility of accident wherein it declares its freedom.

With regard to escaping irony, and being rescued from irony, de Man observes that:

> Schlegel's rhetorical question "What gods will be able to rescue us from all these ironies?" can also be taken quite literally. For the later Friedrich Schlegel, as for Kierkegaard, the solution could only be a leap out of language into faith. (BI, 222-3)

'What gods will be able to rescue us from all theses ironies?' *Who asks*?

In the passage from Schlegel's essay 'Über das Unverständliche' which de Man cites at length, the question articulates the predicament of an 'us' that, having gone some of the way with irony, find we have gone too far with irony, and at the signs of irony coming rapidly into its own we seek to save ourselves, but cannot, whereupon our appeals for divine intervention. Schlegel: 'Mit der Ironie ist durchaus nicht zu scherzen' – irony is no laughing (literally joking) matter - 'Sie kann unglaublich lange nachwirken' (cited BI, 222). ... And yet there is laughter in irony, albeit not laughter we can humanly fully appreciate, but laughter we can only ever begin to appreciate; not laughter that rests on or with any particular differences, but laughter that springs from ceaseless differentiation. De Man conceives irony as an endless dialectic between an empirically grounded, unhappy self and a language-based self, in which the latter incessantly dissociates itself from the former, laughs it off as it were. This seems like harmless fun only as long as the conscious self misconstrues itself as being in on the joke as opposed to its occasion. We could therefore conceive Socrates divided into an unhappy, empirical self and a laughing language-based self – when Kierkegaard declares that the substantial aspect of Socrates is irony this would imply that Socrates is substantially

language-based, non-human. The bulk of Socrates is not evident to his contemporaries but becomes evident only with what Schlegel calls irony's 'Nachwirkung,' in its *after-effects*- what Kierkegaard calls its 'haunting and jesting' (*spøger*). Socrates never learns his lesson, which is the mark both of his irony and of the irony over him; he never ceases to misconstrue himself as being in on the joke as opposed to its occasion ... Socrates remains ignorant of his unhappiness, and this costs him his life.

What gods will be able to rescue us from all theses ironies?

Irony, as a standpoint, has no desire to be rescued. Why should pure negative sensuousness desire to be saved from itself? On the other hand, all that seeks to save its life in irony loses its life in irony. The moment we turn to save our lives we lose our lives in irony for the simple reason that we cease to delight, enjoy, becoming instead anxious and defended: a considerable, albeit humanly negligible, irony over us.

Therefore the question refers, on the one hand, to a standpoint that has no desire to be saved, is ignorant of its need, and yet is apparently in mortal danger, and on the other hand ironically to an *us* that ends up getting caught up in the question and needing saved, albeit we are in no mortal danger but merely suffering an excess of hypotheticals. Those who have most at stake in irony have no desire to be rescued, and those that most desire to be saved are in no mortal danger from irony. Although the question of irony extends to us only hypothetically and appears to have actual validity as a threat only for Socrates, it appears we always have more to lose, merely by being caught up in the question.[3]

And yet it could only be a *god* that saves irony from itself, for irony as a standpoint, ignorant of its unhappiness, would have to be taken entirely by surprise. That Socrates is not rescued into faith does not diminish his religious validity for Kierkegaard: insofar as Socrates finds nothing within the actuality of Hellas that corresponds to the authentic possibility of faith he heralds faith as an index of its absence. In the absence of this possibility, which

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[3] In as far as unhappy consciousness is Hebraic and happy consciousness is Hellenic, is it not the case that Socrates was the first and last happy ironist, the one happy ironist whose happiness brought all happiness (in the form of Hellenism) to an end? When Kierkegaard finds that the ironist 'hides his sorrow in the superior incognito of jesting' and that 'his happiness is muffled up in bemoaning' (CI, 285), although this verges upon de Man's conception, it is in reference to the Romantics and not Socrates. The endless flight from oneself, the skittering, the mood-swings, where nothing is serious, nothing touches me, and above all the unity of boredom this position is subject to (284-5), all this unhappiness is irony *after* Socrates, not irony properly understood, which is perfectly ignorant of its unhappiness. And when Kierkegaard writes in his journals, 'Oh, sadness – for what is irony in the mystery of the heart but sadness. Sadness means to be alone in having understood something true and as soon as one is in company with others, with those who misunderstand, that sadness becomes irony' (*Journals*, trans. Alexander Dru – New York, Harper, 1959, pp.20-1) – is it not the case that: a) the *truth* Socrates understands cannot be positively determined, there is nothing he feels left alone with; and b) by never leaving Athens Socrates is, in a poetic sense, never short of company? In this sense Socrates' unhappiness is the Hebraic consciousness that enters the world in the wake of Socrates, who rounded off Hellenism in his own person. The unhappiness Socrates never felt manifests itself as history's hangover from that merry moment called Socrates, which, in the manner of black-outs, can only be obscurely reconstructed. Every ironist after Socrates is unhappy because he falls short of that blindingly happy limit set by Socrates.

would have aligned him with his age out of indifference as opposed to abstracting him from it, Socrates lets himself be surprised by death.

Schlegel famously declares that 'Die romantische Dichtart ist noch im Werden; ja das ist ihr eigentliches Wesen, daß sie ewig nur werden, nie vollendet sein kann' (quoted BI, 220-1) – a romantic poetics is in the process of becoming; that is its essence, that it only ever becomes and is never concluded. Irony is always becoming. As Kierkegaard finds, 'the outstanding feature of irony ... is the subjective freedom which at every moment has within its power the possibility of a beginning and is not generated from previous conditions' (CI, 270). At one point in history, then, irony became Socrates and to this day it continues to become Socrates. Yet irony *becomes* Socrates in every sense of the word, as is best observed in Socrates' surprising effect upon his young compatriots as well as in his appeal for thinkers down the centuries. Irony becomes Socrates, historically and erotically, and the historic and the erotic are intertwined in our continued interest in Socrates at ever greater historical removes.

One easily grasps what is becoming about an infinite becoming, it is the allure of an absolute beginning which, insofar as it does not rest with anything, can appear to promise everything: 'There is something seductive about every beginning because the subject is still free, and this is the satisfaction the ironist longs for' (270).

Socrates slips out of substantial Athens and changes into something lighter, infinitely more alluring, making hearts skip a beat and pupils dilate, in a purely intellectual sense of course, as Kierkegaard is quick to tell us that Socrates' pupils are only intellectually infatuated with their teacher, and Alcibiades is merely intellectually heart-broken. An intellectual heart-break incurred in the hermeneutic pursuit of Socrates who begins as lover in order to become the beloved, and gives his heart to no-one ... Nevertheless, not bad for a barrel-chested baldy with, gasp, a snub-nose:

> Alcibiades is incapable of tearing himself away from him. He attaches himself to Socrates with vehement passion ... Other orators cannot possibly affect him in this way; he resents his enslaved state – indeed, life in this state seems unbearable to him. He avoids him as if he were a Siren, plugs his ears lest he remain sitting at his side and grow old ... (CI, 47-8)

Where desire is understood in its properly hermeneutical aspect, as the desire to master, to understand, to end desire, irony is like a loop grafted onto the structure of desire, turning every encounter with it into an anxious affair with the hemline of infinity, silently developing

love in its victims like a 'wasting disease' which 'allows the individual to feel best when he is closest to disintegration' (49). The ebb of meaning into Socrates' personality corresponds to the movement of seduction, and the more Socrates appears elusively as lover, as surrendering his meaning, in order to become beloved, to withdraw his meaning, always appearing at a distance, the more crazed with intellectual love the understanding becomes, the more the understanding finds it cannot govern itself and threatens to dissolve in a passion of ... understanding – or the 'anxiety of misunderstanding':

> the telegraphic communication it prompts because an ironist always has to be understood at a distance ... the fleeting but indescribable instant of understanding that is immediately superseded by the anxiety of misunderstanding – all this holds one prisoner in inextricable bonds. (48-9).

Aptly, Kierkegaard finds that 'The ironist is the vampire who has sucked the blood of the lover and while doing so has fanned him cool, lulled him to sleep, and tormented him with troubled dreams' (49). Vampires like Sirens are associated with erotic forcefields at the heart of which they draw humans yieldingly to their destruction. Both also promise a kind of immortality, a deathly timelessness. The vampire corresponds to Socrates in as far as it is like Socrates a strictly *urban* creature. Then again, vampires tend to feast on swooning young ladies, whereas the Sirens posed a threat to hard-working, strapping sailors who would never have thought to be exposed to this order of temptation in the middle of a working day. The order of threat is, therefore, higher with the Sirens than it is with vampires, which may well be one reason why the Sirens were situated on a rock in the seas whereas vampires have unrestricted access to our city streets, albeit at unreasonable hours, when no serious work is likely to be interrupted, and no sober law-abiding citizen is likely to be numbered amongst the casualties.

Holy moly: Now, if we agree that the question of escaping Sirens corresponds to the question of escaping irony, which gods will be able to rescue us from all these Sirens? Circe saves Ulysses by warning him. Till this time no sailor had escaped the Sirens' song, because until this time no warning was given. Till this time no god had thought to intervene on behalf of a sailor. Till this time the Sirens were a secret of the gods and a semi-human enchantress called Circe. We should observe that Ulysses also enjoyed the protection of a full-blown goddess (Minerva) and was, what is more, in the mysterious habit of having beautiful enchantresses falling for him – Calypso springs to mind ... In this sense Ulysses is comparable to Kafka's K. characters, who appear to have an unaccountable allure for certain

ladies, and even Beckett's people, like the narrator of 'First Love,' or Molloy, are subject to the odd woman throwing herself at them (although they seem rather more ambivalent about these attentions, even when they come with the offer of a temporary abode). The women that would help the K. characters cannot ever really help them. They *would* yet they cannot, and yet the K.s seem caught up in the promise of assistance. As the priest stresses: 'You cast about too much for outside help ... especially from women' (T, 233). In Kafka's worlds Circe's kind of assistance, although promised, is never adequate to the problem, but is, rather, part of the problem. Assistance, like warnings, serves only to compound the predicament. Beckett's people, contrastingly, seem more aware that these transports of charity serve only to draw out the punishment.

In Kafka's reading of the Sirens' encounter there are no gods, no enchantresses aside from the songsters, only human rumour-mongering about Sirens. In Kafka's reading *all the world* knows of the existence of the Sirens, but it is said to be *impossible* to escape them, regardless of the measures one takes. However, this begs another question: if it is impossible to escape them, how is it all the world knows of them?

In Kafka's reading Ulysses was forewarned by rumours about Sirens, but these rumours were to the effect that no warning could help (in this case forewarned is disarmed) – and yet, despite the rumours, Ulysses' 'strategem' appears to prevail. Where in the original myth Ulysses would have been lost without divine intervention, in Kafka's revision we are dealing with something altogether murkier: human error, carelessness, happiness, maybe even homesickness.

We could conceive Athens as a resentful mistress, a flawed Siren like Circe, that, seeing her loved ones drawn away by Socrates, sought to warn them of Socrates, and in doing so betrayed the secret she shared with Socrates. Much as Circe's charms were already vanquished when she warned Ulysses, Athens was already vanquished when she put Socrates on trial, evident in the fact that Athens' most precocious youths had already intellectually abandoned Athens and flocked to Socrates. Much as Circe warns Ulysses out of love for Ulysses, Athens warns against Socrates out of love for her sons. In both scenes there is a position that begins as beloved but comes to find itself demoted to lover, and another that sets out as lover and becomes, however briefly, the beloved.

As I illustrated in the first chapter, Athens' *irony* was finite in as far as it sought to maintain itself positively, whereas Socrates' irony was infinite in as far as it did not seek to establish anything – indeed, *Athens' irony only becomes irony properly understood when it becomes Socrates*, when Athens comes to reverberate infinitely in Socrates' personality. Similarly Circe's human

charms (as opposed to her non-human charms, which Ulysses obviated with *moly*) had their limits for Ulysses, whereas the charm of the Sirens' song is said to be limitless. Therefore Circe can only begin humanly to betray the Sirens' secret, and Athens only begin to warn against Socrates' irony. Had Circe and Athens really been in on the secrets of the Sirens and Socrates, their own efforts at seduction would never have failed – in which case we would have had to do without *The Odyssey* and the intellectual drama around Socrates. We turn now to the latter scene, in order, as promised, to read out of it another story, that of the understanding as it stands to fall before irony.

II

Intellectual Heartbreak

> Intellectually, Athens was the heart of Greece. Thus when Greek culture approached its disintegration, all the blood rushed back violently into the chambers of the heart. Everything concentrated in Athens – wealth, luxury, opulence, art, science, recklessness, the enjoyment of life – in short, everything that, as the city hastened toward its ruin, could also help to glorify it and illuminate one of the most brilliant intellectual dramas conceivable. There was a restlessness in Athenian life; there was a palpitation of the heart intimating that the hour of disintegration was at hand. But from the other side, that which was the condition for the decline of the state proved to have immense significance for the new principle that was to appear, and the disintegration and decay became indeed the fertile soil of the new principle. (200-1)

In the process of its decline Greek culture withdraws into and concentrates in Athens, and Socrates in turn draws all of Athens to a point that is infinite- that is, all of Athens is concentrated again in the person of Socrates. 'He is the last classical figure, but he consumes this sterling quality and natural fullness of his in the divine service by which he destroys classicism' (212). In other words, Socrates' classicism constitutes the *steadfastness* of the irony with which he neatly rounds off and sucks classicism out of Greece, in the destruction ultimately of his own person. Socrates draws the withdrawal into Athens into an infinitely negative movement, and destroys every effort to rally within the limits of Athens – in particular that manifestation of intellectual virtuosity which stops short to set up shop under the circumstances:

> the Sophists' pompous, confident parading, their matchless self-sufficiency ... is proof enough that they thought themselves able to satisfy the demands of the times, not by shaking the foundations of everything but, after having shaken the foundations, by

> making it all secure again. In a finite view, the frequently repeated Sophistic thesis: … man is the measure of all things … contains a positivity, but a more profound view sees it as ultimately negative. (207-8)

Quack 'physicians to the age' (208) like the Sophists would jam closed Athens against the decay that has chased everything into Athens, in order to draw out this death scene indefinitely, even to turn the festive mood attending the death scene into a new lease of life. But under the combined pressure of internal and external strains Athens springs leaks, forcing the evacuation of all the very best in classical Greece to a progressively smaller, brighter circle, this evacuation ultimately becoming the movement with which Socrates escorts the age out of Athens, *in person*. Classical Greece drains out of Athens through the infinite negativity of Socrates, which, like an infinite refinery, distils classical Greece into ideality, liberating it onto the 'oceanus upon which all the ideals are contained.'

Significantly Socrates is not a problem that besets Athens from outside; he rises directly out of the inner life of Athens. Who could possibly be more Athenian than Socrates? And yet, for the same reason, who could be less so? For in Socrates the divided life, the contradiction of a culture that has outlived itself, becomes infinite. Socrates refers to himself as a gadfly sent by the gods to rouse the Greek state out of its torpor. It is entirely appropriate to imagine this gadfly tormenting not the outer surface or city walls of Athens but moving arbitrarily *beneath* the surface, underneath Athens' clothes, perhaps. We can consider three outcomes: i) Athens tears off its clothes, grabs the gadfly and tramples it into the ground, which is comical because it looks like madness until the gadfly is brought to light, by which time the damage is done, the clothes are off, and dignity is shot to pieces – this is the finite spectacle; ii) the infinite spectacle: Athens begins by tearing off its clothes and, unable to arrest this process, goes on to disintegrate entirely; and iii) a combination of the above: Athens tears off its clothes, grabs the gadfly and tramples it into the ground, but we perceive at a remove that Athens has grabbed and trampled into the ground its *own heart* (the heart of the intellectual heart of classical Greece), a sure sign Athens has outlived itself.

'[W]ith the Greeks in their carefree, intelligible world, the silence of irony had to be the negativity that prevented subjectivity from being taken in vain' (213) – Socrates is carefree to the point of death; with Socrates the world becomes intelligible to the point where it can be entirely explained away, intelligible to the point where nothing remains.

Although Socrates' irony is directed at all of established Athens, and not merely at this or that aspect of established Athens, it assumes the form of chance encounters with this and that particular in Athens. This 'virtuoso in casual contacts' (181) moves freely within the

limits of Athens; 'satisfied to lead a private life,' he hangs around the 'streets and boulevards instead of taking his place in the state or being a citizen in the Greek sense' (179-80). Socrates may therefore be encountered anywhere and at any time, by chance, and by anyone, and 'he conversed equally well' with everyone and about anything: 'But in all this he was not a good citizen and certainly did not make others so' (181). All these conversations assume a similar course in relation to Socrates' negativity: every aspect of substantial Athens that Socrates touches upon falls apart. Much as there is an element of the accidental about every encounter between Socrates and Athenian life, Socrates affects every intellectual encounter like an accident.[4]

Much as Athens provides for the *possibility* of a Socrates, so the understanding provides for the possibility of irony, which moves freely and can appear at any time or place, equally competent or incompetent with regard to any subject. Much as Greece withdraws into Athens, the understanding rallies within its own limits – and much as Socrates extends that negative movement which substantial Athens seeks to shut out in order to endure a little longer, irony extends the negative movement within the limits the understanding maintains to stop collapsing in upon itself.

Like an aftershock of understanding's rushing back into its limits, irony s(t)imulates the apparent further need for understanding, *directly in the wake of understanding*. The instant the understanding comes up with a limit in order to set itself up as master is the instant irony becomes possible.

To come back to Socrates, much as Socrates never demands Athens to be anything other than itself, irony never demands the understanding to be anything other than itself. However, the demand made on the understanding to be itself, on Athens to be itself, is limitless.

Unlike the Sophists, Socrates does not accept payment for his teaching because, as he declares at his trial, he knows nothing to teach.[5] Similarly the understanding draws on its reserves to deal with irony, but irony, despite appearances, will not be dealt with. What is important here is the *palpable proximity* of the possibility of satisfying this demand: 'between Socrates' demand and its satisfaction there was not the chasmic abyss such as that fixed

[4] Unlike the Sophists, Socrates' 'born enemies' (209), whose genius is to set out from anywhere in order to end up anywhere else, wherever in short it suits them to end up, Socrates can set out from anywhere and always end up nowhere.

[5] However, if anyone is foolish enough to pay for nothing, then it is obviously for the good of this person that Socrates does not reject the payment, in order that the person understands he is getting nothing for his money.

between [Judaic] law and grace. In Socrates' demand, the satisfaction was [potentially] present' (214).

Irony rolls out the hamster-wheel of the understanding:

> What Socrates did with the Sophists was to give them the next moment, the moment in which the momentarily true dissolved into nothing – in other words, he let the infinite devour the finite. But Socrates' irony was not turned against only the Sophists; it was turned against the whole established order. (213-4)

Although the understanding, turned upon itself, wears itself progressively thinner in its efforts to satisfy irony's demand, it never entirely exhausts itself. Gradually it dawns upon the understanding that there is no particular understanding to end understanding, no particular point at which this conversation ends, that there are always still resources to draw upon, there is a reserve that is always yet to be exhausted, a *distance* that is always still to be covered.

On the one hand the understanding arrests itself, ceases understanding, in order to conceive this interruption of understanding as understanding, and on the other hand it cannot help but engage in endless thought, about nothing in particular. And irony's infinite negativity *demands* this endless thinking about nothing in particular, promotes consciousness of it. De Man writes that:

> Irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness. Sanity can exist only because we are willing to function within the conventions of duplicity and dissimulation, just as social language dissimulates the inherent violence of the actual relationships between human beings. Once this mask is show to be a mask, the authentic being underneath appears necessarily as on the verge of madness. (BI, 215-6)

The *threat* to the understanding is madness:

> When we speak ... of irony originating at the expense of the empirical self, the statement has to be taken seriously enough to be carried to the extreme: absolute irony is a consciousness of madness, itself the end of all consciousness; it is a consciousness of a non-consciousness, a reflection on madness from the inside of madness itself. But this reflection is made possible only by the double structure of ironic language: the ironist invents a form of himself that is "mad" but that does not know its own madness; he then proceeds to reflect on his madness thus objectified. (ibid, 216)

In the scene between Socrates and Athens this 'double structure' is most positively articulated in the double structure of established Athens, in the state's attempt to turn the

tide of disintegration on its head in order to endure. Socrates develops the ironic potential of this double structure by siding with the disintegration and ironically reflecting upon Athens' madness. Yet Socrates moves freely within this limit and across *all* areas of Athenian intellectual life, reflecting upon this limit from within the limit, in diverse encounters closer to and further from the limit as it manifests itself most positively, as the limit, that is, of the established order.

In other words this double structure permeates Athens in all its particulars, and every instance of this double structure is negative in relation to the established limit that is established Athens. Socrates' development of this double structure ranges from its more negative possibilities, such as that haunting the interval between Socrates the Athenian citizen and Socrates as irony, to its most positive, Socrates' deafness to the law.

Hence Socrates' movement through Athens' streets yields a detailed cross-section of Athens' *madness*. Its epicentre is the madness of Socrates himself – a 'divine' madness associated also with his '*daimon*,' which ultimately possesses Socrates to get himself sentenced to death.[6] Nearest this roving folly is the madness of the youths drawn to Socrates, who in their proximity to Socrates mark a less positively developed duplicity. Their madness assumes the form of (intellectual) longing, of an (intellectual) heartbreak, drawn out on the rack of Socrates' (purely intellectual) seduction- a condition that Alcibiades describes as a kind of madness. Then there is the madness of the Sophists, which is to prescribe as many remedies as it takes to overlook the ailment. And, most positively, there is the madness of the Athenian state, brought to a head when it sentences Socrates for death for all the wrong reasons - a madness disclosed in Athens' inability to arrest itself, to stop itself from going along with Socrates' madness, which is in itself the ironic flame-fanning of Athens' lunatic idea to put Socrates on trial.

Socrates draws and withdraws into the company of Greece's most promising youths, who constitute Athens' resources for the future, and when Athens tries to draw its youths away from Socrates it finds just how far it has come adrift from its resources, for which it goes on to blame Socrates. Likewise, when Athens seeks to keep Socrates away from the youths, it only succeeds in further alienating its resources; and when it goes on to *execute* Socrates the already tenuous continuity between Athens and its resources ruin seems inevitable.

[6] Here we should bear in mind that Socrates' madness does not suddenly overcome him at his trial but, rather, that it is at his trial that, Socrates' standpoint is disclosed to us (overcomes us, in a sense) as madness, and, secondly, that Socrates' standpoint is perceived *really* to be his standpoint.

Analogously, the understanding draws on its resources to deal with irony, yet the possibility of irony withdraws before the understanding into the very reserve the understanding is drawing on.[7]

De Man observes that 'irony is not temporary (*vorläufig*) but repetitive, the recurrence of a self-escalating act of consciousness' (BI, 220). Irony first appears as *a* demand for further understanding. Irony, however, repeats the demand *ad infinitum*, and because the understanding responds as it must, a new danger appears out of understanding's inability to arrest itself. Consequently the understanding threatens to lose its place in relation to itself and be washed out into endless circulation.[8]

Albeit irony has no place in the understanding, it catalyses, encourages, understanding, to the point of exhaustion, ruin.

The threat, as it emerges, is of a hole at the far end of the understanding's resources, which blows open onto nothingness. The threat to the understanding, drawing on its inexhaustible resources, is that there is no telling the end of its resources from nothingness, the end of its possibilities from nothingness.

'Early Greek culture had outlived itself, a new principle had to emerge, but before it could appear in its truth, all the prolific weeds of misunderstanding's pernicious anticipations had to be plowed under, destroyed to the very roots' (CI, 211).

This, then, is the situation: faced with the very worst form of intellectual weed that had shot up under the conditions in Athens, a kind of super Sophist, that effortlessly transgressed the limits of the acceptable by not even pretending to be socially useful, the authorities grasped the weed with force and, giving it a sharp tug, were astonished how easily it came out of the ground. What they failed to observe, however, was that even as they tore the weed out of the ground the walls of substantial Athens collapsed into ruin behind them, exposing the scene as an elaborate folly.

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[7] Is irony, perhaps, simply that part of the understanding that preserves the possibility of a reserve? Something like that, irony appears to have that effect, except, like Socrates in Athens, irony fulfils no substantial function in the understanding. If anything, irony appears to cleave to the understandings' movements in order to facilitate them, in order to provide the least possible distraction from them, in order to draw out the entire structure at the same time. Irony is not a functional part of the understanding that appears at any place within the understanding; it is, rather, a *possibility given across the entire understanding that allows for the understanding to become present without the understanding of anything in particular.*

[8] From the point of view of the understanding neither this infinite circulation nor 'infinite agility' is pleasurable, whereas it is for irony. Again, the same movement produces a double effect, one as understood (in the second sense) by the understanding, the other as understood (in the second sense) by irony, characterised respectively by anxiety and pleasure. Athens becomes anxious, the youths are torn between anxiety and pleasure, and the pleasure is all Socrates'.

Understanding is not exposed by irony: it exposes itself in its pursuit of understanding's irony. It is not irony that strips the understanding but the understanding that strips itself, by stripping down its resources in its mechanical efforts to answer to irony (to answer intersubjectively to what is not), which effortlessly outstrips this stripshow.

What understanding exposes is that it cannot expose itself entirely: it cannot step out of pose, cannot bare its heart, cannot be entirely serious, is bound always to cover (for) itself. It never comes to the end of its resources, even though every act of its coming into being signals the opposite, that it could always come to the end of its resources. What understanding in the pursuit of irony fails to expose (but edges anxiously toward exposing) is that understanding is not bound to there being anything (other) to understand, yet is bound always to understand, persisting to understand where there is nothing to understand.

It is customary to say that irony (and Socrates) is duplicitous, yet it is the understanding which in the first instance turns everything on its head, by pulling up short of ignorance and setting itself up as master. Irony draws the understanding's attention to its own duplicity, but because the understanding cannot grasp its own duplicity except through further duplicity, and because the understanding resists being consciously caught up in an endless thinking, irony is determined to stand for the understanding's duplicity. Irony thus becomes duplicity through the understanding's duplicity: *irony becomes duplicity through a duplicity.*

However, irony is *in on* understanding's duplicity, the duplicity by way of which, in the finite view, 'man becomes the measure of all things,' a view that is defrauded by nature, death, chance, and by irony, which sides with all of these forces. As de Man observes:

> In a false feeling of pride the self has substituted, in its relationship to nature, an intersubjective feeling (of superiority) for the knowledge of a difference. As a being that stands upright ... man comes to believe that he dominates nature, just as he can, at times, dominate others or watch others dominate him. This is, of course, a major mystification. The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds him of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature. Nature can at all times treat him as if he were a thing and remind him of his factitiousness, whereas he is quite powerless to convert even the smallest particle of nature into something human. (BI, 214)

The real threat to the understanding is, therefore, not the ignorance it constructs itself resisting, but the intersubjective bankruptcy that comes about when the threat of ignorance will not go away, but endures at the expense of all the understanding holds dear.

Irony apparently threatens with ignorance – and what fool wishes to be ignorant – but the danger ultimately disclosed is the impossibility of ignorance, and therefore the impossibility of understanding determined in relation to ignorance.

We find that *the infinite play with nothingness* that Kierkegaard defines as irony is at the same time the infinite play with nothingness the understanding conceals from itself in order to understand itself as master.[9]

So then: how escape irony? Anyway whatever. There is no escaping irony. There is only escaping irony. Every way is adequate, every way inadequate.

III

'Proof that inadequate, even childish measures may serve to rescue one from peril' (SOS, 430).

Song

> What was that place? It was a place where the only thing left was to disappear (BR, 443).

We proceed now as promised to the scene of Ulysses' brush with the Sirens, taking our bearings first from Blanchot and then from Kafka. We begin with some introductory remarks concerning the nature of this song.

Before Ulysses appears on the scene the Sirens' song is the exclusive audience it imposes, and everyone let in on this secret (sailors, as Blanchot points out, 'prepared to take risks and fearless in their impulses' [444]) – becomes part of it and disappears.

A distinguishing feature of this song is that it renders effortless every effort to go on hearing it. Everything within the subject's power is mobilized to this end; untapped and to this moment unknown resources of physical strength and cunning are suddenly made available. The unthinkable danger of remaining on board, of being *rescued*, is hurdled without a second thought, impulsively.

In a sense as soon as one hears this song one also ceases to hear it and becomes the hearing of the song. For as soon as one hears the song one is no longer anyone, no longer oneself, but becomes the song itself, one is possessed to go to every effort within one's power to disappear into the song. The Sirens' song, in short, dissolves the gravitational field of the self and turns it into a distance that is always yet to be covered, where movement

[9] This boils down to the serious question of how *seriously* comprehension can take nothingness - perhaps the shortest answer here is that comprehension takes itself seriously in order to comprehend, and can therefore only take nothingness seriously in as far as it falls within itself, namely *as* nothingness (this may be what Kierkegaard calls taking nothingness seriously *speculatively* [CI, 258]).

across this distance, however, becomes the most effortless and most natural thing in the world.

All we know of the Sirens' song we know because of Ulysses, who was the first to approach this scene cautiously. At the same time, however, everything apparently changes with Ulysses, for with Ulysses the Sirens' song is at the same time found out and destroyed; it appears and is forced immediately to disappear.

Without alluding to Kafka's reading of the Sirens episode, Blanchot's reading marks out the foreground to Kafka's tale. By defecting from the conventional wisdom that Ulysses' human cunning is adequate to the order of threat encountered in the Sirens' song, Blanchot's peculiar movements open up a space between the Homeric myth and Kafka's reading.

Blanchot's argument, in a nutshell, is that there once existed an boundary between imaginary and material forces, but then Ulysses, relying on his cunning, his prudence, his weak human imagination, decided he could have everything, that he could join the two in himself, if he remained composed, and as a consequence of this experiment we ended up with a story about Sirens, which is merely Ulysses' rather banal explanation for the Sirens' song. This encounter, for Blanchot, is the source of the *novel*. The *tale*, by contrast, is the story of the source itself; that is, the tale is the story of Ulysses' encounter with the Sirens' song up to but excluding the moment Ulysses cannot hear the song for (seeing) the Sirens.

Blanchot's reading omits Circe's warning and advice to Ulysses, omits in fact to mention Circe altogether (Circe does not seem to belong to the novel or to the tale), which has the effect of landing Ulysses' decision to proceed as he does, along with the consequences of his decision, more squarely on Ulysses' *human* shoulders:

> Ulysses has the kind of deliberate stubbornness which leads to universal domination: his trick is to seem to limit his power; in a cold and calculating way he finds out what he can still do, faced with the other power. He will be everything, if he can maintain a limit, if he can preserve that interval between the real and the imaginary which is just what the Song of the Sirens invites him to cross. (448)

Bound to the mast and lodged snugly within his plan ensuring safe conduct, Ulysses drew the Sirens' song into everyday time, and transformed the Sirens 'into real and beautiful girls, just this once real and worthy of their promise, and therefore capable of vanishing into the truth and depth of their song' (445). The promise of the Sirens' song became real on the single occasion it failed to guard its secret and became adequate to Ulysses' expectations; but

because the essential aspect of their song was lost in its transformation into good sense, the occasion passes directly into myth.

Hence Ulysses turned the imaginary power of the Sirens' song, through its peculiarly passive resistance to human certainty, into mere fiction, and immeasurably and permanently impoverished the world, ostensibly at no risk to himself, on a whim.

One hears throughout Blanchot's essay a slight exasperation with both Ulysses and the tradition that establishes Ulysses as the *hero* of this encounter:

> Ulysses – the stubbornness and caution of Ulysses, the treachery by which he took pleasure in the spectacle of the Sirens without risking anything and without accepting the consequences; this cowardly, mediocre and tranquil pleasure, this moderate pleasure, appropriate to a Greek of the period of decadence who never deserved to be the hero of the *Iliad*; this happy and confident cowardice, rooted in a privilege which set him apart from the common condition ... (444)

And particularly the latter difference between Ulysses and his crew is a sore point for Blanchot, in as far as it marks the difference in station which allowed Ulysses to indulge his whims at the expense of everyone else's continued labour:

> the others having no right to such elite happiness but only to the pleasure of seeing their leader writhe ludicrously, grimacing with ecstasy in empty space, but also a right to the satisfaction of gaining mastery over their master (no doubt this was the lesson they learned, this was for them the true Song of the Sirens)... (444-5)

So the crew did gain something from this encounter! Although it was a poor substitute for what would have been theirs, before Ulysses thought to take it all for himself. Although excluded from the encounter, the crew remained at liberty to observe their leader's antics, and they learned to derive some satisfaction from subduing this struggling figure; that is, they were allowed a fleeting taste of mastery.

We observe that Ulysses' smug confidence in relation to the Sirens is reflected in his relation to his crew: much as Ulysses fully trusts to overcome the Sirens, oblivious to the nature of these forces, he entrusts his authority to his crew, confident they won't be tempted ... - to unstop their ears, to unfasten his chains, to keep him trussed up after the event.

The Sirens' song draws the difference between Ulysses and his crew into play. As Ulysses flaps at the mast, evidently beside himself, Ulysses' authority passes to the crew. Then, when the Sirens emerge out of their promise and Ulysses composes himself, the crew reverts to its negative relation to Ulysses. The song's unheard presence isolates the members of the crew, making each adequate to his task, and unites them in their purpose – it functions in

retrospect much like Ulysses' continued mastery over his crew. At what other moment was Ulysses' authority more profound than at this moment where Ulysses was, to all appearances, elsewhere, nowhere, beside himself, ecstatic? What greater testimony to Ulysses' authority? At the same time, at what other moment was Ulysses' authority more at risk?

Perhaps in some obscure way, and this seems to be hinted at in Blanchot's reading, the Sirens' song represents Ulysses' delirious appreciation of his privileged position. Perhaps Ulysses wriggling at the mast is, in essence, enjoying the quite unreasonable privilege that allows him to wriggle at the mast while others remain under orders to steer the ship and keep his wriggling within bounds.

The limit Ulysses maintains in order safely to encounter the imaginary is reflected in the limit Ulysses maintains in relation to his fellow humans. In both instances this interval has the effect of making Ulysses the master.

And yet Ulysses' essential lack of impulsiveness and the cautious yet confident delay with which he approaches every encounter always sells him short, although he remains unaware of this. For when he thinks to dabble in the common condition, his experience only *begins* to become the experience of the sailor fallen under the spell of the Sirens' song. The common experience is to become the song and disappear without a trace. Ulysses is confident he has experienced the real thing, yet actually he only experiences its beginning. This is, in short, an experiment conducted within privileged limits, and at the point where the experiment verges on the common condition Ulysses comes up with the idea of Sirens. – However: if the effect of the Sirens' song is to render effort effortless, how is Ulysses to know that his effortless dispensing with the threat of imaginary powers is not in some other way succumbing to them?

> Even once the Sirens had been overcome by the power of technology, which will always claim to trifle in safety with unreal (inspired) powers, Ulysses was still not free of them. They enticed him to a place which he did not want to fall into and, hidden in the heart of *The Odyssey*, which had become their tomb, they drew him – and many others – into that happy, unhappy voyage which is the voyage of the tale – of a song which is no longer immediate, but is narrated, and because of this made to seem harmless, an ode which has turned into an episode. (445)

The kind of victory Ulysses achieved when he overcame the Sirens' song is in essence little more than what any reader achieves when he reads a work of fiction. This encounter is therefore the source not only, as Blanchot has it, of novels and tales, but also of

encountering the imaginary in the form of reading. Thus we might observe that the material and technological precautions Ulysses takes before exposing himself to the Sirens' song are echoed in those every reader unwittingly takes to limit the surprising effect of unreal forces. The book itself is the mast to which the reader consents to be bound with chains of printed words. And the reader's material world in which the book has its fixed place, where people go about their everyday business, the world from which reading diverts and distracts, which the reader blindly trusts to remain the same and which in a sense guards against the reader's propensity for rapture – here we have Ulysses' ship and crew. Even the reader's serene attitude with respect to any possible threat posed by a book recalls Ulysses: 'the good sense of Ulysses was enough to do away with this puerile non-existence' (444). Ulysses, who only has so much time for the Sirens before he gets back to work, who is aware that the more time he spends away from his worldly duties the more he risks his position in the world, harnesses the Sirens' song, which would do away with time altogether, and makes it adequate to a temporary diversion.

Ulysses is therefore, because the very first human to *flirt* with imaginary forces, the first reader of stories. This first reader, however, has to create the story himself, the *real* story, that is, which rescues him from unreal forces. As Blanchot writes, albeit not exactly of the same thing, 'it is like the embarrassment the first man would have felt if, in order to be created, he himself had had to pronounce in a completely human way the divine *Fiat lux* that would actually cause his eyes to open' (448). Any such immediate threat is spared all following readers. For Ulysses' ignorance of the risk involved, his confident suppression of the immediacy of the encounter, becomes the basis for the appearance of a reader who is no longer immediately exposed to imaginary forces, and as a consequence does not suffer the risky ecstasy of Ulysses, but enjoys instead the moderate pleasure which characterizes Ulysses before and after his stint at the mast. This reader enjoys the song always at a distance, 'a song which is no longer immediate, but is narrated, and because of this made to seem harmless.'

Until, that is, technics transforms man's ability to be entertained, and the novel no longer provides adequate diversion and begins to give way to the tale at its source; until the reader's ability to be entertained is no longer satisfied with diversion – although I suspect the reader does not necessarily turn to literature for this deeper and more essential experience, but is likely, rather, to turn away from literature; indeed, I suggest the tale is the mark of a certain literary neglect (and neglect of literature) at the same time as it seems to register an adaptation to the reader's demands.

The tale is like the encounter with the song of the Sirens *short of Sirens*. It seeks to convey the essential experience the novel avoids all mention of, by stripping away that point at which narration began, where material forces presumed to have overcome the imaginary – it becomes, instead, the movement toward such a point, the movement before this point:

> The tale is a movement towards a point, a point which is not only unknown, obscure, foreign, but such that apart from this movement it does not seem to have any sort of real prior existence, and yet it is so imperious that the tale derives its power of attraction only from this point, so that it cannot even "begin" before reaching it – and yet only the tale and the unpredictable movement of the tale create the space where the point becomes real, powerful, and alluring. (447)

However, by neglecting to arrive at this point, the point at which the human world composes itself, the tale becomes not only *like* the encounter with the Sirens' song, it actually becomes the encounter itself.

As we saw before, the reader unwittingly repeats Ulysses' feat of turning wholly imaginary powers into harmless fiction by taking from the encounter only what he can humanly digest. Enclosed within this encounter is the blind spot, the obscure moment in which, as part of his plan, Ulysses entrusted his authority to his crew and surrendered himself to the Sirens' song. It is there, strictly speaking before reading, reading of stories that is, that the tale has its place, and at the same time it is to this place, a place before stories, to which the tale moves, turning reading back into a desperately serious, and at the same time slightly ludicrous struggle.

How are we to understand this? The tale, as Blanchot points out, is a kind of narrative, but at the same time it becomes, 'little by little, though all at once,' the obscure encounter in which every narrative is conceived:

> If ... we say that what makes the novel move forward is everyday, collective or personal time, or more precisely, the desire to urge time to speak, then the tale moves forward through that other time, it makes that other voyage, which is the passage from the real song to the imaginary song, the movement which causes the real song to become imaginary little by little, though all at once (and this "little by little, though all at once" is the very time of the metamorphosis), to become an enigmatic song always at a distance, designating this distance as a space to be crossed and designating the place to which it leads as the point where singing will cease to be a lure. (449)

The tale, necessarily presenting itself as a narrative, compels a Ulysses-like reaction – however, its insistence on being taken for the truth ('This is not an allegory') and its urgency

and self-importance render this a constant demand. Hence the reader is under a constant demand, a foolish demand maybe, to pull off Ulysses' trick and overcome this struggling and wriggling text. However, insofar as he becomes aware of this demand and seeks to answer to it, instead of experiencing his Sirens' song, precisely where this song promises to appear, but where reading also disappears, the reader finds he has a struggle on his hands.

It would appear, in other words, that at this point the Ulysses in every reader has become the crew, whose pleasure is the satisfaction of a job well done, a service performed.

Except, of course, that this is only the beginning, or a beginning, of this story. For insofar as the tale becomes the song by remaining 'always at a distance,' and by 'designating this distance as a space to be crossed' – insofar as we are dealing with an 'ambiguity of time' which endlessly renews the struggle – inevitably the struggle exhausts even the most conscientious and dutiful of readers. Thus the neglect that reduces the novel to a tale does not simply turn Ulysses into his crew, does not simply turn the possibility of blissful privilege into the kind of satisfaction derived from hard work, and lethetic into alethetic reading, but, rather, endlessly juggles the possibilities of the encounter. That is, the tale, by neglecting to arrive at the point where struggle becomes narrative, the point at which everything becomes apparently harmless, maintains the possibilities of this moment – possibilities that become mutually exclusive after this point – exposing the reader to the uncertainty Ulysses overlooked.

Essentially we are dealing with a struggle with chains, in which the complacent situation of the reader is taken apart, and the possibility is given of reconstructing this situation in other ways.

This struggle is, in the first place, Ulysses struggling at the mast. Without chains Ulysses would dive overboard and disappear. With chains the crew is subjected to a display of ecstasy. It appears the chains get in the way of what the song promises, and yet only with these chains can the *invisible* promise of the song appear.

Indeed, with respect to the alethetic reader, whose ambition is fidelity to the text, the words get in the way of what they promise. Particular tricks in the fettering, some would call them errors or defects, can force the reader to perceive the chains against which he is bashing, chains saving him from a threat he cannot take seriously. However, with respect to the Sirens' song the *perceived* threat is never the threat from which one needs saving. If there is a song to which the reader succumbs, then the perceived threat – the struggle, say, of *consternation* – must mark the effort undertaken to restrain the reader. That is, wherever the reader becomes aware of himself bashing up against the chains binding him to the book a

curious interchange takes place – wherever this occurs Ulysses slips into his crew, no longer subject to the Sirens' song, deaf to it, intent on keeping Ulysses within bounds and the ship on course.

That is, wherever the reader becomes aware of chains impeding him, he slips out of the barely workable breach between mast and chains and sides with the world and its material powers, striving to keep the situation under control. Except of course that the moment at which the reader becomes aware of this struggle is also the moment at which the struggle begins to become too much effort, and inevitably, when the reward does not materialize, the struggle is ditched, caution is thrown to the wind – and the crew lapses back into Ulysses. This lapse is frequently concealed in the aspect of a victory – on one particularly famous occasion, of course, a lapse in this manner disappeared into the appearance of Sirens.

With a view to the kind of paradox characteristic of Kafka, whose Sirens are now rapidly appearing over the horizon, never does the effort to rescue the reader meet with less resistance than at this lapse in the reader's efforts, and never is less effort required of the reader to overcome the distance involved, for at no moment is the reader closer to encountering the imaginary than when indifferent to the distance. Indeed, in this lapse in his efforts it may even pass that the reader and the Sirens brush against one another, the one completely indifferent, the others singing still, in the manner of K. and Bürgel, in *The Castle*, on Bürgel's bed. In this lapse in his alethetic efforts, therefore, the reader comes closest to overcoming the distance involved, which is no distance, and closest to liberating himself from the mastery to which he has always succumbed in advance. Closest, but when least alive to the world, and closest only ever in reading, or, rather, only in the interruption of an effort that still passes for reading, but which has already ceased to be reading. For at no moment is the reader less a reader that at this interruption – the Sirens are, as Blanchot maintains, all in all non-existent, and when the reader comes closest to the Sirens, he is also furthest from existing. He may, like K., be asleep, exhausted by his efforts. Perhaps this struggle serves the end, if it serves ends, of exhausting the reader, of leading reading to its interruptions, and to this possibility.

The tale provides the possibility of repeatedly subjecting reading to the power of its own compulsive movements in issueless space – indeed its motivation is perhaps to reveal nothing except, inadvertently, as a side-product, the reader reading; to reveal, in a sense, the sailor impulsively plunging inside every reader safely enclosed in his material world.

The tale draws attentions to traces of the reading process the reader is otherwise quick to dispense with, disclosed only when reading is repeatedly interrupted from within reading. This gradually reveals the process whereby the reader shapes himself into a particular self. We saw earlier that Blanchot defined reading as an 'affirmation of the solitude of the work' and writing as the risk of this solitude. What we have been concerned with here, however, is that lesson which, perhaps, has to be suffered before the kind of literary reading Blanchot writes of becomes humanly possible. The struggle, in other words, which is not the obscure struggle Blanchot situates in the experience of the writer, but the struggle whereby the reader denies himself, out of an alethetic sense of duty, fidelity, and seriousness, the freedom that reading confers upon him. De Man, writing of Blanchot's conception of reading, observes that it involves the author and the reader co-operating 'in making each other forget their distinctive identity':

> It is by means of the act of reading that this turning away takes place; for the author, the possibility of being read transforms his language from a mere project into a work (and thus forever detaches it from him). In turn, it brings the reader back, for a moment, to what he might have been before he shaped himself into a particular self. (BI, 64)

The tale, however, not only brings the reader back to what he might have been, by making this demand relentlessly it repeatedly draws attention to the efforts made to shape himself into a particular self. A kind of return is staged, not to the world itself, but to the conditions of the reader's world as they are cumulatively revealed in his reading habits. It is the intensified relation to these conditions the reader is forced to give up as too much effort. At the same time, the possibility of this '*other* time' is drawn into human time with the repetitive action of a mechanical pump by the reader's repeated failure to make it answer to him. Almost as though the tale would let the reader in on a secret, but, drawn repeatedly aside, by his own hermeneutic desire, into the defective surface of the tale, the reader becomes the secret he expects to be let in on. *Reading lets in on a secret.* Reading becomes this other time's sidelong glancing, up and out through the reader whenever he lets his guard drop, in the manner that it, apparently exiled into myth, synchronically intersects everyday time and always threatens, silently, promises, to engulf it.

Silence

> There are questions we could not get past if we were not set free from them by our very nature. (BON, 92)

Kafka's reading of the Sirens episode omits allusions to the journey in the foreground of the encounter. There is no crew, there is not even a struggle with chains. Here we are dealing with the tale of the tale.

Where in the myth Ulysses' sense of hearing results in Ulysses seeing Sirens, in Kafka's reading Ulysses' apparent deafness to silence results in blindness to Sirens, and this, in turn, spares us the spectacle of their annihilation: 'If the Sirens had possessed consciousness they would have been annihilated ... But they remained as they had been; all that had happened was that Ulysses had escaped them' (CSS, 432).

What if *Socrates*, that Athenian Siren, had '*geschwiegen*,' had remained silent?

In essense, as Agacinski observes, he did: 'The ironist talks – at least this one did not write – but he is not for that a *voice*; he carries on a battle in which silence is both the means and end of the combat. Even when he talks, the ironist does not say anything' (A, 42). Similarly, the Sirens' singing essentially communicates the silence and secrecy it imposes on the chatter of men. However, if one does not hear them sing, so Kafka's reading, or, more accurately, if one *hears their silence*, then one is even more likely to be swept overboard by one's self-satisfaction. Mastery is defrauded as another, even more effortless, means of diving overboard. To believe that seeing or hearing or understanding the Sirens' silence is really to hear, see or understand this silence, to believe that their silence has any bearing on oneself, that the Sirens' silence is really the silence one presumes one to hear and therefore to understand, is to succumb to the temptation of substituting an intersubjective feeling for a difference.

For really to hear the Sirens' silence is to become this hearing of nothingness, and to disappear.

However, as we shall see, Kafka's Ulysses really did hear this silence (not that he necessarily knew anything about it).

Kafka's Ulysses held so fast to his 'little strategem' that it executed itself in the absence of Ulysses. This Ulysses held so fast to his plan that in this encounter, which was not an encounter, Ulysses was present only to his 'measures' of wax, chain and mast, and the Sirens were present only to their silence as it was reflected in the immeasurable silence of *things*, of wax, chain and mast. Ulysses could not by any stretch of the imagination be told apart from his original plan. Although the Sirens saw a man bound to a mast, ears stopped with wax,

they were in effect exercising their charms on a 'handful' of wax, a 'fathom' of chain, and a mast.

'The song of the Sirens could pierce through everything' – yet it could not reach this Ulysses, who was not concealed *behind* anything. Nor could their silence 'vanquish' him. Given Ulysses was not *within* his limits, impossible that he be lured from behind them. Ulysses became his limits, depthless and endless, which resulted in the Sirens suffering a short-lived fascination, with Ulysses, of which they were never in any danger of perishing. For the Sirens' essential indifference to Ulysses is infinitely more profound than the reader's to the tale.

As Kafka's tale maintains, all the world knew such measures to fail, but Ulysses trusted completely in his measures. His mysterious ignorance in this connection, which set him apart from all the world, rescued him from certain failure, as the world would have it, as from the *failure of certainty*, by way of which the world has always already succumbed to the Sirens' song.

Thus Ulysses' strategem was bound to fail and yet, beyond human understanding, and therefore beyond Ulysses' understanding, it succeeded. Of course, human understanding, guarding its limits and not without an interest in this strange affair, was *bound* to know Ulysses' plan to fail – here we see how human understanding has girded itself to its own mast: defending its limits by spreading rumours about Sirens and then succumbing to these rumours.

But then again, Ulysses' plan did not succeed, in as far as it was not the plan that saved Ulysses, but Ulysses' *innocent elation*, the infinite movement through which Ulysses inadvertently suspended any determinable relation to his plan and merged with its measures. Ulysses' elation is innocent because not directed at the Sirens; in fact it has nothing to do with the Sirens at all, unlike that exultation one would feel if one surmised the Sirens' silence were somehow related to one.

This innocent elation is the substance also of the Sirens' song. Innocent elation is the song of a simultaneously saving and annihilating reification. Uninterrupted this song transforms the subject into an object and makes it disappear forever amongst things; interrupted it transforms the subject into a human and restores it to its fellows.

It is a case, then, of two temporalities, both of which Ulysses must escape if he is to escape the Sirens. He must escape the human memory of success, which would root him forever to the spot and repeatedly give him up to the Sirens; and he must escape the oblivion of faith, which goes too far and, forgetting itself, plays directly into the clutches of the Sirens.

There is a human temporality, as Blanchot affirms: 'It is true, Ulysses was really sailing, and one day, on a certain date, he encountered the enigmatic song' (BR, 450). And there is another, non-human temporality, where everything and nothing takes place at once, where the Sirens encounter a remote Ulysses, who is infinitely withdrawn or infinitely present, charmed by himself, and therefore oblivious or indifferent to their charms, and eternally on his way home. There is an escape that is the human world's, but not Ulysses', in which Ulysses is credited with overcoming the Sirens, and there is another escape that is Ulysses' but not the world's, which always escapes the world.

For Ulysses did indeed escape the Sirens, not only according to earthly powers, but according to the Sirens' timeless point of view as well. Anything less would be to succumb, one way or the other, to the Sirens. The unreal force of the Sirens' song is conceived, in Kafka's reading, with a view to its timelessness, its interminable, non-human patience or passivity, and its eternal recurrence- all of which passes under the rubric of their silence, which Ulysses escaped.

It is known to all the world that Ulysses escaped the Sirens, and yet, as Blanchot observes, Ulysses did not entirely get away with it. As the world is bound to overlook or forget, Ulysses does not completely escape the Sirens, but remains bound to the scene of his escape, haunted by Sirens.

On the occasion, then, that Ulysses did escape the Sirens it must have escaped the world. This Ulysses escaped the retellings and readings and repetitions through which the Sirens continue silently and effortlessly to hold sway over Ulysses. In other words, this Ulysses did not remain to be forgotten or overlooked, having somehow or other taken unto himself the matter of disremembering or overlooking himself. The only way Ulysses could have escaped the Sirens is if the account of his escape is not the truth of the encounter and the truth a secret, the Sirens' secret, secreted also from Ulysses insofar as he represents earthly interests in this tale.

Ulysses' escape from the Sirens therefore *always* remains to be told, remembered, disclosed, repeated.

On the one hand childishly ambitious, Kafka's tale reprises the myth from the point of view of the absence of time, attempts to let the reader in, once and for all, on the secret of Ulysses' escape. But on the other hand, the negativity of this reading is safeguarded by the unshakable authority of the myth it sets out to breach. Cannily, Kafka's reading insures its childish exuberance and disarmingly foolish ambition in the reliable economy of its intertext. In other words there is no real risk that Kafka's reading successfully take the place of the

myth and succumb in its place to its fate of representing material powers, and succumb in turn to a premature sense of success.

Kafka's reading willfully ignores its intertext- but not completely. The tale ends on this note:

> A codicil to the foregoing has also been handed down. Ulysses, it is said, was so full of guile, was such a fox, that not even the goddess of fate could pierce his armor. Perhaps he had really noticed, although here the human understanding is beyond its depths, that the Sirens were silent, and held up to them and to the gods the aforementioned pretence merely as a sort of shield. (SS, 432)

The third sentence, reflecting on the 'codicil' from the point of view of the present (Kafka's) reading, deliberately obscures the implication that this codicil (that Ulysses 'was so full of guile' etc) has since developed into what is commonly known as the original account of Ulysses' escape, namely Homer's.

Codicil: 'a supplement modifying a will or revoking some provision of it ... an additional provision; appendix.' Hence only the supplement to Ulysses' escape 'has been handed down,' via Homer. This supplement has taken on a separate life, entirely replacing the original (Kafka's reading), which thereby escaped the violence of human understanding. This supplement, the Homeric myth, involves the projection of human cunning into the involuntary relation between Ulysses and his measures, substituting chance with a proudly human interpretation of events.

IV

Decomposing Ulysses

> Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten ... (M, 32)

I

What if Ulysses on his way to Penelope is a dream or fantasy of Penelope's, but when Penelope wakes up or comes to she becomes Ulysses, with the added complication that Ulysses now resembles the Penelope as conceived in the dream? Alternatively: what if this

whole business of Ulysses on his way to Penelope is in fact Ulysses dreaming as Penelope dreaming? This seems very obscure, and is perhaps simply a very complicated way of suggesting that Ulysses and Penelope occupy the same space without ever meeting, or, perhaps, even more simply, that they are two aspects or identities of the same person. Anyhow, something like this happens, at least twice, in Beckett's *Molloy*.

Molloy's narrative in particular is shot with gleams of Ulysses' journey home, evinced in many scenes, details, and more or less direct allusions. It is evinced, for instance, in the amount of time both subjects spending sitting on sandy beaches. Their relation may be conceived in the light of this detail: where for Ulysses beaches involve staring miserably out to sea, for Molloy the uninterrupted expanses of littoral are an ideal occasion to exercise his remaining eyesight. Molloy is the beach bum Ulysses, given time, a lot of time, and the accompanying wear and tear, might have become. However, *The Odyssey* does not provide the framework for Molloy's exploits and digressions; Molloy is not caught up in its movements- the reverse holds true: Ulysses' journey represents merely a brief episode somewhere near the beginning of Molloy's 'enormous history': 'The Aegean, thirsting for heat and light, him I killed, early on, in me' (30).

Lousse in particular recalls Circe:

> this woman went on giving me slow poison, slipping I know not what poisons into the drink she gave me, or into the food she gave me, or both, or one day one, the next the other. That is a grave charge to bring and I do not bring it lightly. And I bring it without ill-feeling, yes, I accuse her without ill-feeling of having drugged my food and drink with noxious and insipid powders and poisons ... as to the substances she insinuated thus into my various systems, I could not say whether they were stimulants or whether they were not in fact depressants. The truth is, coenaesthetically speaking of course, I felt more or less the same as usual, that is to say, if I may give myself away, so terror-stricken that I was virtually bereft of feeling, not to say of consciousness, and drowned in a deep and merciful torpor shot with brief abominable gleams, I give you my word. Against such harmony of what avail the miserable molys of Lousse, administered in infinitesimal doses probably, to draw the pleasure out. (M, 53-4)

Like Circe, Lousse is bound to lose her catch for the reason she would like to keep him, because he escapes her. Not, of course, that Ulysses, for one, isn't game for the odd bit of distraction, but his homesickness lends his serial infidelities a sense of form. In Molloy this crystallizes the observation that: 'I would have been I think an excellent husband, incapable of wearying of my wife and committing adultery only from absent-mindedness' (50). Where Circe seeks to cure Ulysses' homesickness with a battery of spells, potions, poisons and remedies, the spectrum of therapists (psychiatrist, psychotherapist, homeopath ... at a pinch) seemingly merged in the figure of Lousse would cure Molloy by drawing 'the pleasure out' –

by extending, that is, the pleasure of the reprieve as well as drawing out the lost pleasure polluting the source of Molloy's particular brand of homesickness. However, all the poisons and remedies insinuated into Molloy's 'various systems' are nothing compared to the poison/remedy that is Molloy himself, which poisons/heals, in a word *escapes,* the healthy dialectical relation between poison and remedy. The homesickness that Molloy associates with the image of his mother is secondary to the inveterate absent-mindedness that spawns this story. Homesickness is merely the disease drawn up in defence against the subject's interminable participation in its exile.

Almost everything escapes Molloy. Almost everything but the temptation to put down this straying to the image of his mother – and *smoke*: 'That's something that never escapes me' (84). He struggles to put names to things, things to names, although this is not a struggle of which he's in any danger of tiring, being always already exhausted. And much as everything escapes Molloy so Molloy escapes almost everything. Molloy names an escaping infinitely more insidious than the various pastimes through which he worms. Impossible that Molloy escape escaping, were it not for the fact that he does: 'Chameleon in spite of himself, there you have Molloy, viewed from a certain angle' ... – the zoological angle, one presumes, as opposed to the anthropological, astronomical, geological, etc. angles, all of which points of view have tempted Molloy at one or the other point in his history (39).

Lousse is only one of many distractions that beset Molloy to no lasting avail. Our subject is forever ducking in and out of ditches, troughs, 'blind alleys' (60). Where women like Lousse have 'a weakness' for Molloy, Molloy has a corresponding weakness for ditches. Of Molloy it is the case, as Moran will later, or is it earlier, no matter, observe of his son, that it 'was as though he let himself be sucked in out of sight by every opening that offered' (128). In fact a ditch, with a little grass growing at the bottom, or a blind alley vaguely in the form of a womb, its two rear exits corked with litter (is this perhaps all that remains of the Sirens encounter?), ranks above its human counterparts, in as far as at least it fails to serve its purpose with respect to Molloy without demanding anything in return. For Molloy is no longer looking for love: 'a mug's game' for which a human of either sex, even a goat, would do (57). This is what sets Lousse apart. Lousse proposes to provide for Molloy's needs. She even respects his preference for solitude by observing him (one of her needs, apparently) from behind bushes. Lousse asks for no sexual favours, although her pining at her dog's grave may well betray yearnings for a love more profound than permitted by Molloy's total indifference. That is, Lousse's 'yellow mongrel' that Molloy runs over and subsequently takes the place of, in Lousse's affections as in her life more generally, appears to be associated with Molloy's sexual endeavours with a certain Ruth (or was it Edith? Molloy's grasp of names

leaves a lot to be desired), a lady he encountered in his youth (comparatively conceived), when 'limply poking' around in rubbish: 'all I could see was her taut yellow nape which every now and then I set my teeth in, forgetting I had none, such is the power of instinct' (57).[10]

To venture a little leap in our reading, this mongrel is associated also with Moran's son and, thereby, with generation. At the beginning of Molloy's narrative we read of two men, A and C, observed with some difficulty by the narrator, who correspond obscurely and respectively to Moran and Molloy, that pass each other on a country road, the one returning, the other on his way out, to and from town. A has an orange pomeranian, prefiguring Moran's son Jacques who is bound to his father with a rope, ostensibly in order to temper his youthful digressiveness. In Moran's narrative, then, Molloy's congenital digressiveness is manifested in the form of a son who is subsequently made culpable for straying and is at the same time the punishment for generation (for having strayed). The son also affords Moran the pleasure of battering and bullying him into his father's image – educating him, in other words. With Molloy, who mentions a son, straying passes from the son to the father. Youth and senescence are therefore configured on either side of the realm of effective action, youth distracted hormonally but directly under the cosh, senescence distracted through sheer absent-mindedness and still mindful of the cosh. For, as prevalent in Molloy's version of events as the openings, clefts, caves, gaps, ditches, shadows and garden perimeters he temporarily holes up in, are the cigars, sticks, staffs, pens, clubs, and rulers not infrequently waggled threateningly at him. (Beckettian policemen boast, as a rule, the one or the other cylindrical object [22] with which, supplemented by the grace of authority and a firm belief that it is not the size of the thing alone but what one does with it, they presume to have the measure of all things.) Thus Molloy, piloted by a preference not to be beaten where and when possible, navigates himself between cyclops-like threats on the one hand and Siren-like solicitations on the other. (In fact, given Molloy has only the one good eye with which he has difficulty recognizing the long thin objects he is threatened with, we find that Ulysses and the Cyclops become curiously commingled in Molloy, very much as though something of the Cyclops escaped into Ulysses even as Ulysses ostensibly escaped the Cyclops). We digress. Coming back to the yellow mongrel, its death functions like a ban on sex, generation, and other youthful excesses. From the outset Lousse and Molloys' relationship is

[10] Edith pays Molloy for these services, but as Molloy always remonstrates, for him it's never really about the money (his casual thefts pass as moments of absent-mindedness). Nor is it about the food, the drink, the shelter, or any other need these women would foist upon him in order to indulge their own charitable drives. In as far as Molloy is guided by preferences in which he has no say, all compensation for services rendered becomes charity, in as far as he is being compensated for what he cannot but do as opposed to for what he does by going out of his way (which he never does). Wherefore Molloy remonstrates: 'Against the charitable gesture there is no defence, that I know of' (24).

strictly platonic (as befits the ideally chaste relationship between analyst and analysand) – which seems dimly backed up by the fact that Lousse's other name, the one Molloy feels he can no longer call her, is *Sophie* (Molloy's grasp of names leaves a lot to the imagination as well), suggesting philo-sophy and, why not, Plato …

So then, why does Molloy abandon Lousse and her garden, where he was a kept man in the loosest sense, with all preferences met? He can't quite put his finger on it, but no sooner is he sucked through an opening into a perimeter the same opening begins to draw him out again, and needless to say this principle applies the other way around too, for no sooner is he sucked out than he is impelled toward, which goes some of the way to explain the hold his mother, or the image of his mother, in other words the perceived absence of his mother, exercises on his movements. Because she provides him with the appearance of a motivation to resist his digressions, which is at the same time the excuse to go on straying whenever temporarily held from it, whether by the long arm of the law or the claws of love, notwithstanding the fact that she repels him, precisely because she repels him, no ditch or witch holds a candle to Mag:

> this deaf blind impotent mad old woman, who called me Dan and whom I called Mag … What did I see of her? A head always, the hands sometimes, the arms rarely. A head always. Veiled with hair, wrinkles, filth, slobber. A head that darkened the air. Not that seeing matters, but it's something to go on with. (19)

Mag (or Ma, or Mammy, or Countess Caca) is the image extracted in defence to provide Molloy's issueless comings and goings, risings and fallings, with the semblance of continuity (and when Molloy is threatened by the law it is this story he falls back on to avoid a beating). An image, what is more, that suspiciously resembles what Molloy has become by the time it comes to begin his narrative. At the close of Molloy's relation of Molloy digressing Mag-wards, Molloy is in a ditch, still no closer to Mag, listening to a voice telling him 'not to fret, that help was coming' (91). At the outset of his relation, however, Molloy claims he is in his mother's room, and oblivious to how he got there: 'Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I'd never have gotten there alone' (7). Quite aside from the suggestiveness of one delivered by an ambulance to his mother's room … no matter- by anyone's books there is a considerable non-sequitur between the events Molloy relates and the possibility granted of relating them, a *cut* severing Molloy from the image or idea of his mother to the point of being able to write about her. Where the image ostensibly used to sustain his movements, it now sustains Molloy's narrative. This cut Molloy finds can only be accounted for by a kind of external *intervention* that completely escapes him and, what is

more, appears to have killed the mother. For of mother, at mother's, there is no sign: 'Was she dead already when I came? Or did she only die later? I mean enough to bury?' (7) Molloy has perhaps, somehow or other, become his mother, if, that is, he wasn't always already his mother. He has, perhaps, displaced or replaced her and yet remained himself, much in the way he replaces Lousse's mongrel and yet remains Molloy. At any rate Molloy comes to resemble the object of his erstwhile quest much as Moran, sent in the second section of *Molloy* to hunt down Molloy, comes in the course of his expedition to resemble Molloy.[11]

II

Moran, by his own little lights, is not subject to straying, and is not diverted by any Sirens; as he notes of himself, he has 'an extremely sensitive ear. Yet I have no ear for music' (128).[12] Before Molloy is insinuated into Moran's system the principal distraction Moran suffers is his son's, which, as already mentioned, he takes pleasure hammering out of him. But then Moran's narrative is not shot with gleams of *The Odyssey* but is laced, rather, with the tale of Abraham's trip to Mt. Moriah with son Isaac in tow. Moran, like Abraham a 'solitary' (144), does not question the order to take himself and his son off, in this instance to hunt down Molloy (although he doesn't half grumble about it, on the one hand to keep up appearances of being a free man [95], but also to hear that he is the only one for the job [even if he doesn't believe it] – Moran has a weakness for flattery). Like Abraham, Moran is prepared to risk his son. Like Abraham, Moran receives his son back (albeit in this instance Jacques junior abandons Moran, returns home by himself, and stays with the neighbours for a while). Much as Abraham keeps his mission secret, does not let Sarah know that he's off to sacrifice their son on Mt. Moriah, so Moran seeks to keep his departure from Martha, the latest in Beckett's line of kitchen trolls (albeit this is out of spite and not on account of a secret relation to the divine). Moran's name echoes Moriah. Martha's combines Sarah and Moriah. Jacques is not far short of Isaac (father and son have the same names, appropriately

[11] As is commonly observed, Moran's journey echoes Molloy's in its circular structure, in the landscape it navigates, in particular scenes both journeys seem, vaguely, to have in common (both Molloy and Moran, for instance, assault someone), in the respective physical deteriorations, in the fact that both subjects are commissioned to write, that both have bicycles, etc. The question remains whether Moran comes to resemble Molloy or whether he actually becomes Molloy, a possibility suggested by apparent continuities between the narratives. Moran's son, for instance, so much the straying focus in Moran's narrative until he abandons Moran, appears to reappear in Molloy's narrative as Molloy's son, with whom Molloy hasn't even his shock of hair in common. And Gaber's Sunday visit seems to be picked up in the man (also dressed in black, also thirsty) who comes on Sundays to take away Molloy's pages.

[12] Molloy by contrast has good hearing, but no ear for the *sense* of sound: 'sounds unencumbered with precise meaning were registered perhaps better by me than by most' (49). – Kafka, by the way, with his legendarily sensitive ears, famously declares he is deaf to music.

given the uncertainty of who ends up as the sacrifice in this story). Youdi, Moran's boss, obviously recalls Jehova or Yehuda.[13]

Moran sent after Molloy is like the letter of the law sent after the law of the letter, alethetic agent sent to track down lethetic impulse. Although Molloy's name escapes him, precious little else does. Where Molloy cannot even decide upon the name of the town where his mother lives (it begins with a B or P [31] – Bally as Moran informs us [131]), Moran has a perfect grasp of all names barring Molloy's. However, the *notion* alone of Molloy, injected into Moran's garden one August Sunday, is poison to Moran. In Gaber's wake even the host can only briefly mollify Moran's anxieties. Moran has affinities with the policemen that would have the measure of Molloy. He is also not entirely dissimilar to the warders sent to arrest Joseph K. in *The Trial*, except that he also resembles K. himself in many respects. This is not a contradiction for the simple reason that Joseph K. resembles his arresting officers to a fault. We return to this in the following chapter.

III

As the reader will have gathered even from these brief considerations of *Molloy*, we are dealing with two quest forms. Each quest combines a more recent and a less recent discursive element: the Molloy narrative splices psychoanalytic with mythic elements; the Moran narrative splices bourgeois Christian with Judaic elements. Many commentators find that the two parts are arranged contrary to natural or mimetic expectations: that *Molloy represents a step beyond Moran.* The relation between the two parts may be conceived as the narrative of the quest-form itself, told backwards, beginning with Molloy's modern quest and proceeding backwards to Moran's bourgeois quest. We observe however that Molloy's mythic elements predate Moran's Judaic elements much as his modern traits seem to mark an advance on Moran's bourgeois attitudes. The discourse that makes up Molloy, in other words, constitutes a larger moment than that which constitutes Moran – indeed Molloy seems to digress across and draw upon the entire history of narrative – and subsumes the horizons of Moran's moment within itself. Even as Moran comes to resemble Molloy, the

[13] *Fear and Trembling* may spring to mind in this connection even before *The Old Testament*, and indeed difference between true faith and the Church's philosophical selling-short of religion, a principal theme of Kierkegaard's work, is particularly pertinent to the first third of Moran's narrative, informing the difference between Moran's bothered response to his 'untimely visitor' and his anxieties with respect to missing the Sunday sermon and, of course, the host. The epigraph of *Fear and Trembling* may have a more or less indirect bearing on the opening garden scenes of Moran's narrative - 'What Tarquin the Proud said in the garden with the Poppy blooms was understood by the son but not by the messenger' (FT, 39)– this inevitably recalls Gaber's remarkable amnesia, for instance. And indeed, Moran recalls a certain Søren, not merely in name but in gait and ludicrous appearance, as well as in the apparently solicited persecution by their contemporaries.

perimeters of the bounded moment in which he has holed himself up are devoured by horizon, much as the perimeters of his garden are reclaimed by nature in his absence; and he becomes simultaneously more ancient and more modern, his concentrated persona subject to intertextual dilutions. Therefore, insofar as Moran becomes Molloy by becoming less himself, there is the possibility that Moran is Molloy before he becomes Moran.

In other words, there is a sense that Moran becomes Molloy, end of story (a further sense is that Molloy then becomes Mag, and Mag becomes Malone, and so on. We come back to this succession) – but what this one-way traffic neglects to observe is the possibility that Molloy becomes Moran before Moran becomes Molloy. That they slip in and out of each other, and interact with each other, like the two readings of reading we touched upon before, like Ulysses and his crew, in complex ways. Two myths – one of exile and a homeward bound journey, another involving a kind of expulsion and sacrifice, both of which ended more or less happily, by human standards – are shorn of their endings and become impulses. Molloy is a decomposing Ulysses, always and never on his way home; Moran is what happens to Ulysses as soon as he indulges the belief he has gotten home- he becomes complacent and would like nothing better than to remain where he is, except, of course, that he is Abraham. As Molloy observes:

> in me there have always been two fools, among others, one asking nothing better than to stay where he is and the other imagining that life might be slightly less horrible a little further on. … And these inseparable fools I indulged turn about, that they might understand their foolishness. (48)

The possibility that Molloy becomes Moran before Moran becomes Molloy is particularly developed at points throughout Molloy's stay at Lousse's, times when he forgets himself to the point of being invaded by the seasons and becomes one with the garden:

> Yes, there are times when I forgot not only who I was, but that I was, forgot to be. Then I was no longer that sealed jar to which I owed my being so well preserved, but a wall gave way and I filled with roots and tame stems for example … (49)

Perhaps at these times Molloy even forgets himself so far as to reconcile, more or less, and for a while, his differences with language and thus establish an uneasy relationship with humankind at large. That is, perhaps Molloy forgets himself at Lousse's to the point of becoming Moran, for a spell. Lousse, in short, almost makes a man of him (and on the evidence of Jacques junior, maybe she did). Moran, despite appearances no less forgetful than Molloy, fences off his forgetfulness and concentrates on his garden at the expense of

everything else. Lousse would become the Martha of Moran's account … and Sarah, Circe. Here we see how those who are closest to the Sirens, those most under their spell, can be the good citizens enthralled in their 'little pleasure gardens' (48), who have even come to hold the song that enticed them with complacency and contempt– this contempt in turn becomes that which conspires with their forgotten absent-mindedness to make them stray again from this situation. We continue to brood on this and other neglected themes in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE

Kafka / Beckett: The Patient Breach

The fear of falling is the source of many a folly. (U)

The Kitchen Door

I

It hasn't escaped many readers that the two narratives comprising *Molloy* compel comparison.[1] Indeed, it would require an exceptionally distracted reader to deny himself the satisfaction – the contrast provides a means to make light of the difficulties posed by the individual narratives. In a sense *Molloy* is fitted with a 'little hole' it gives readers bottomless pleasure to negotiate. Concretely this hole is situated between pages 92 and 93, between the end of Molloy's narrative and the onset of Moran's. This, however, is only metaphorically the hole it gives the reader satisfaction to plug, for of course it always remains open despite the reader's best efforts to think it closed. The hole the reader is concerned with is the difference between Molloy and Moran insofar as it is alive to sense, not deaf to sense. But at what cost is the reader diverted into this interval? Conceived in a certain light, the hole is the portal out of which the reader proudly bears his inspired reading of *Molloy*. Conceived, however, in a light more amiable to the register of Molloy's narrative, it is the fitted hole out of which all such good sense is evacuated:

> I apologize for having to revert to this lewd orifice, 'tis my muse would have it so. Perhaps it is less to be thought of as the eyesore he called by its name than as the

[1] Thus Kenner refers to Molloy and Moran as Beckett's Irish and French sides respectively, and Valerie Topsfield (1988) finds that Molloy represents the creative side of the writers, whose consciousness provides Moran's sources, and Moran is the recorder and retriever of material (Topsfield, 80). Dearlove usefully provides a list: 'David Hesla suggests the novel presents two versions of the same event – the meeting of Molloy and Moran ... In a Jungian reading John Fletcher sees the story as a study in sado-masochism in which the reconciliation of the masochistic anti-self (Molloy) to the sadistic self (Moran) is represented by the metamorphosis of Moran into Molloy ... G.C.Barnard offers a more Freudian account, seeing all the figures as schizophrenic phases of the anal character Moran. David Hayman merges not only characters but also times, suggesting that the two narrators are simultaneous descriptions of one event with Molloy presenting the viewpoint of the libido and Moran that of the superego. To Ludovic Janvier "... Moran and Molloy are consecutive moments in a single process of becoming." The list of interpretations grows as each reader reenacts the narrator's experience to discover the most convincing and satisfying explanation of uncertain and fluid events by recombining the given pieces and by merging characters and events into some more explicable whole' (Dearlove, 73-4).

symbol of those passed over in silence, a distinction due perhaps to *its centrality and its air of being a link between me and the other excrement.* We underestimate this little hole, it seems to me, we call it the arsehole and affect to despise it. But is it not rather the true portal of our being and the celebrated mouth no more than the kitchen door. (M, 79-80, my italics)

Intellectual conception is shadowed by a bowel movement. Even as *Molloy* invites the reader to take advantage of its facilities, it voids itself of the reader. This, then, is the one problem: the reader pays for the satisfaction of exercising his oppositional capacity by popping up out of the little hole at the center of *Molloy*. One centers *Molloy* at one's expense.

Which brings us to a further problem, namely that comparative readings take from each narrative only what fits the comparative bill, and thus diverted we may overlook peripheral activities that don't fit as satisfactorily into our calculations. The aforementioned encounter between A and C, for instance, tends to escape scrutiny. This encounter, described at the beginning of the first narrative, has no counterpart in Moran's narrative; in fact it seems to encapsulate both narratives at the same time as it warns against reading any reliable or 'extraordinary' sense into their relation and order. Far from helping to center *Molloy* this passage foregrounds the unreliability of the third term con/fusing A and C (*B*? for Beckett?), the narrative 'I'. As 'I' points out, 'perhaps it was A one day at one place, C another at another, then a third the rock and I' (14). The narrator declares he would have done better 'not to start from [his] observation post,' but that he 'had the weakness to return in spirit to ... the man with the stick.' A few lines later the narrative 'I' appears to have infiltrated the man with the stick. After briefly describing the man's hat, he says 'I took off my hat and looked at it' – hey presto, Molloy is rendered road-ready. 'Smoke, sticks, flesh, hair, at evening, afar, flung around the craving for a fellow' (15).[2]

So then, before 'he' is overtaken by the observing 'I,' before 'I' infects some arbitrary passerby and becomes Molloy *en route* to Countess Caca, who speaks?

We observe that the narrator declares his intention to write up an inventory of his belongings. The inventory is a leitmotif of *Malone Dies*, whereby that narrative turns the absence of diachronic time into something that just about makes up for it, much as Molloy's narrative deploys the image of his mother to get itself underway. Furthermore, at the beginning of *Malone Dies* the narrator mentions he has been delivered to the room he finds himself in, perhaps by an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some sort. Such details suggest

[2] Begam does, I think, some very interesting work on the complex relation between these 'embedded' 'proto-characters' and Molloy and Moran: 'The larger pattern that emerges involves something like a series of mirrored meetings within mirrored meetings ... such an unfolding describes not merely a narrative whose head is chasing its tail but a narrative in which head and tail have grown increasingly indistinguishable' (Cf. Begam, pp.113-9)

that before the narrator of Molloy's narrative has the weakness to pass himself off as Molloy he is, perhaps, Malone – or, more plausibly, that Malone and Molloy spring from the same place, the same *observation post*, except that Malone has not even the strength to have the weakness to pass himself off as an able-bodied man, so to speak, and thus appear to negotiate the physical world under his own steam.

Coming back, then, to the hole at the heart of *Molloy*, upon which the differences between Molloy and Moran verge, and which is the source of many an adequate and deeply satisfying reading of *Molloy*- what this hole diverts from is that the opening pages of *Molloy* do not properly belong to what is commonly understood as Molloy's narrative. Instead of being comprised of two clearly delineated narratives *Molloy* also bears within it a third one, which passes almost seamlessly into Molloy's. Furthermore, problematically, this third narrative signals a murky chain of displacements out of which the other two derive, points back in other words to an originating process which does not lend itself to the satisfaction of oppositional readings.

II

Of course this is not the first appearance of such a little hole in Beckett, if it is one of the most compelling. For this last we thank Moran, whose efforts to seal himself off within a secure perimeter involve reducing intercourse with the world to a single, strictly regulated, little opening. That is, Moran's contraction into a limit causes his narrative to separate itself from the first narrative, placing a garden wicket-like **II** between itself and the absorbing structure of the *outer* narrative.

No such singularly compelling textual gap or tear applies in *Watt*, which shares many of *Molloy*'s structural features. And yet, briefly comparing *Watt* and *Molloy*, we find that the first period of Watt's stay at Knott's corresponds loosely to Moran's narrative, and the second period to Molloy's. Much as Molloy is less the man or 'contrivance' that Moran is, Watt is a substantially reduced specimen by the end. Much as Erskine's status in the Knott establishment holds a certain promise for Watt, so Molloy holds promise for Moran, of regaining his house, his garden and his peace of mind. Much as Watt, in the first term of his employment, conceives Knott largely through the activities of Erskine, Moran senses the presence of Molloy's mother beyond Molloy. Much as Watt's movement, in the first period of his stay, is determined by natural rhythms (day/night), and thus corresponds to the natural cycles Moran sets so much store by (the birds, the bees, the seasons), so Erskine's *unnatural* vibrations, as perceived by Watt and related by Sam, the ceaseless oscillating

between floors, corresponds to Molloy's incessant movement in a narrow space as conceived and related by Moran.

A significant difference, however, is that Sam does not con/fuse himself with Watt. Whereas Moran apparently relates the story of his assignment ('this relation that has been forced upon me' [131]), Watt is not the ostensible narrator of *Watt*. Sam's 'I' observes Watt at an uncertain remove – Watt retains to all appearances a discrete identity. *Molloy* extends the development sketched in the four novellas, the merging of teller and told, of 'I' and 'he.' Watt's ('he') dereliction, *Watt's* disintegration, and the emergence of Sam ('I'), all go hand in hand.

We have touched upon the movement in Beckett's authorship from a third to a first person narrative, a movement that carries on through the first person, where the possibility of this movement was already given in the so-called authorial intrusions and asides of *More Pricks Than Kicks* and *Murphy*. I suggested in Chapter Three that one may conceive Beckett's authorship as having evolved out of the authorial aside. The indeterminacy already given as a possibility in traditional parabasis spreads out, wells up through the narrative fractures and fissures, blurs and abnormal growths of the early narratives. The gradual emergence of a digressive 'I' and its subsequent petering away into little more than a grammatical category goes hand in hand with the subsiding of the mimetic reality still hogging the foreground in *Murphy*. Where in a narrative like *Murphy* satirical comment tends to operate at the expense of the empirically grounded subjects, soliciting complicitous reactions from the reader, the emergence of the first person becomes the occasion for the teller to turn on itself and displace the reader, by situating itself between the subject and the reader and laughing at its own unhappiness. With *Molloy* we are no longer dealing with intersubjective puppets we mistake with little encouragement for humans for the sake of feeling superior. The conflation of teller and told also volatises a dizzying play of temporalities, and a corresponding *shuttling* of objects, events and names back and forth across the authorship. Not unlike Moran's hand observed racing back and forth the page 'like a shuttle' at the behest of some impersonal and anonymous power, constantly retrieving sense for inspection, so objects, events and names are constantly being shuttled forward, resituated, rearranged, in new patterns, configurations, forms, senses. Murphy's rocking chair, for instance, is resettled in Martha's kitchen. Moran's encounter with a farmer on his homeward bound journey reprises Murphy milking a waitress' sympathies. The description of Mag or Mammy practically regurgitates Willoughby Kelly. This narrative self-cannibalising or self-permuting is paired with the fact that there is always another excuse, however frail, for the headlong tilt of the process – or is this not rather a *fall*, like that endured by Moran, where

instead of things being shuttled forward things are perpetually cascading or crumbling toward what they always have been, and each Beckettian text represents a freezeframe of a fall? In this process, objects, scenes and images, words and names, are picked up, swept up and reshuffled, caught in new lights, morphed and adapted according to the lights of the next story standing in for incontinence – perhaps no word better exemplifying my meaning here than the sounds and senses bubbling up out of *Molloy*, beginning with the stem *mol*, which as Edith Kern observes is Latin for soft and pliable, and the words *moly* and *mollify* which recur throughout Molloy's narrative. The word *moll* (gangster's bride; prostitute; another name for Mary) bears perhaps some of the responsibility for Molloy's knack of prompting remuneration he has no need for, but it also reflects a dendritic formation of sense the roots of which pass back through Mary in *Watt* (recast in part in Martha), *Murphy*'s Celia (Murphy's moll) and forward into late blooming Moll of Macmann fame (whose yellow skin recalls Edith, a line of dogs, and the penultimate chapter of *More Pricks Than Kicks*).

III

In the first period of his stay at Knott's establishment, Watt's 'need for semantic succour' (83) is commanded by a painting he finds in Erskine's room, hung on the wall 'by a nail' (128) like a cross. This painting consists mainly of a circle broken at its base and a dot to the east of the circle. As with other events that require 'saddling with meaning' in Watt's first term, most famously the episode involving the Galls, father and son, who come, apparently, to tune the piano, Watt sets out to make sense of this painting and ends up with rather too much. Unlike the incident involving the Galls, at least the painting, if not the meaning Watt would give it, effortlessly stands its ground against Watt's reflections.[3] Watt tries the painting

[3] Watt's encounter with Erskine's painting recalls an encounter with a mechanical bear in Kleist's 'Über das Marionettentheater,' an essay Kafka will also have been familiar with (Kleist was a firm favourite with both writers). The narrator relates his conversation with C., the first dancer at the opera as well as a formidable fencer, following a puppet play staged for the masses. Toward the end of the conversation C. relates an anecdote concerning a mechanical bear, which, rather like the painting in Erskine's room, was kept in a particular room in a house that C. once visited. This bear, C. testifies, could defeat every human fencer without striking a single blow, but by parrying every blow with the slightest movement of its arm and, even more astonishingly, without reacting to any feint or deceptive movement. The ludicrous seriousness of the bear's play, needless to say, needled the master fencer's vanity, making him work harder and tire himself out faster. This experience lead to C. developing the theories on reflection and grace he has already expounded to the narrator, in essence that as reflection dims grace grows - 'so findet sich auch, wenn die Erkenntnis gleichsam durch ein Unendliches gegangen ist, die Grazie wieder ein, so daß sie, zu gleicher Zeit, in demjenigen menschlichen Körperbau am reinsten erscheint, das entweder gar keins, oder ein unendliches Bewußtsein hat, d.h. in dem Gliedermann, oder in dem Gott' – and that grace therefore appears most fully developed in the human aspect either undisturbed by reflection or that which possesses an infinite consciousness capable of embracing all reflection, in other words either the puppet or the god. The narrative and thematic parallels between this and *Watt* scarcely need scoring, but of course: a) where C.'s experience seems to kindle his inner philosopher, Watt, puppet-like from the outset as his movements attest to, is ruined to the extent where even the capacity to communicate his experiences at

or coloured reproduction in other positions, with the breach facing to the right, to the left, facing upwards, but in no position does the painting affect Watt as much as in the position he first finds it, with the breach at the bottom of the circle: 'It is by the nadir we come, said Watt, and it is by the nadir we go, whatever that means. And the artist must have felt something of this kind too, for the circle did not turn, as circles will, but sailed steadfast in its white skies, with its patient breach forever below' (130).

A *patient breach* – this is a point upon which everything in Beckett converges and intersects. It is, for instance, the garden gate to which Moran clings before he sets out into the world; it is the vaginal mouth that fires words into the dark; it is the sack opening out of which the creature in *How It Is* draws its apparent sustenance. It is the aperture that makes *plausible* the garden, the womb and the room. It is, basically, the little hole which links all the graves, mouths, anuses, vaginas, doorways, and all other *service entrances* that infiltrate Beckett's authorship.

In one sense the breach is patient, effortlessly outlasting, for instance, Moran's efforts not to let his guard slip and with it let slip the precious little world he works overtime to enclose himself in. In another sense it is the breach out of which Beckett's patients escape, like Molloy out of Lousse's garden and care, and Endon out from under Murphy's supervision. In a further sense it is a breach which is itself a patient, which to some extent every one of Beckett's escapees is: Endon is Murphy's patient, and Murphy drawn toward Endon becomes the breach upon which Neary and co. converge; the elusive Knott is a kind of patient, although he is never called as much, to whom Watt tends only himself to become a patient. Hence, when Moran refers to cases like Molloy as patients, he recalls a string of non-encounters between warders and patients in Beckett's authorship, where the warder always stands to lose more in as far as he reflects he has more, which he typically tries to impress, in one way or another, upon his charge. Murphy, notwithstanding his highly sympathetic ideas on the subject of madness, finds he cannot contain himself after the game of chess with Mr Endon. Watt, albeit never overtly a warder to Knott's patient, also participates in this tradition, and ends up, following his stay at Knott's, in what seems to be an asylum. Then there is also Lemuel to Malone's Macmann, Molloy's patient endeavours to hammer some sense into his mother, and the cycles of tin-opener violence of *How It Is* do away with the name of the pursuit (whether cops and robbers, cowboys and indians, or warders and patients) yet retain its essential features.

Knott's break down, and b) where the narrator's serene relation of the encounter evinces a healthy reflective capacity confident of mastering the bear belatedly, if only in relation, Sam's fragmented relation attests to the fact that his chances of mastering this story are always already in flimmers. – (cf. 'Über das Marionettentheater' in *Kleists Aufsatz Über das Marionettentheater - Studien und Interpretationen.* Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 1967.)

This, then, is roughly how it is: Beckett's narratives tell, more or less overtly, of a pursuit, or a quest, involving, say, a warder and a patient, or a searcher and a sought, where the one who goes out, the warder, the searcher, comes in the course of his outing to resemble that which he seeks, and consequently, in turn, compels another to go out in search of him. Each quest, or journey, in other words, does not simply travel from point A to point B, but gives rise to another quest or journey, in its wake, and that in turn compels another, and so on, where in each case the distance to be covered always remains that from point A to point B. Whence, of course, the visitors that appear demanding reports off Moran, pages off Molloy – these visitors are the seekers or warders or agents (to use Moran's term) following in the wake. Each story, instead of being adequate to itself, sets an infinite movement into motion, a current flowing from A to B. And because the original motivation for the storyteller was to find in the movement from A to B a vindication of his ability to tell an adequate story, because the quest echoes the storyteller's quest to tell this story, and because the storyteller shares in the satisfaction the adequate story would give, the storyteller is, through the defect that makes his story inadequate, gradually worn down by that supplementary structure that demands that if you tell one story you tell them all. This exhaustion appears already in the defects that threaten to sabotage Murphy's story, but with Murphy literary convention still intervenes to the extent of substituting the absurdity of Murphy's ambition, and thus the inadequacy of his story, with Murphy's death – that is, the narrator salvages the story by killing off Murphy. With *Watt*, the four novellas, and *Molloy*, as the 'I' increasingly emerges through the remains of the predicament it is still obliged to relate, the movement from A to B, it begins to erode not merely conventions pertaining to representation, but the frail distinctions between itself and its puppets. The instant the frail difference between teller and told is torn, the told can no longer be cast off with a simple literary conceit. The teller is rendered incapable of keeping up the appearance of a meaningful distinction, and finds itself progressively unable to rescue itself into the adequate form of a predicament because its own essential lack of predicament is interfering with the distinctions it requires. And, as the teller becomes increasingly unable to tell itself apart from its puppets it too undertakes the movement from warder to patient, from searcher to sought: thus in *Malone Dies* the narrator resembles earlier patients, but despite this is still required to send himself out, although now admittedly only, in a manner of speaking, in spirit, and no longer under the pretext of a body. This boils down to that strange Beckettian difference between simply staying in and going out: 'Can it be that one day, off it goes on, that one day I simply stayed in, in where, instead of going out, in the old way' (U, 291). And if we look forward through *How It Is* and on to 'The Lost Ones,' we see that that which is sought and revived from a condition of near

inexistence is still not exempt from seeking – even in the traces there is still the warder chasing down the patient, not even necessarily to pass time, but reduced to a reflex- 'such is the power of instinct.'

IV

In relation to the picture in Erskine's room and other mysteries of the first part of his stay at Knott's, Watt pins his hopes on everything being 'revealed to Watt, in due time, meaning of course when Erskine went, and another came' (119). However, when Arthur comes and Erskine goes, and Watt is promoted from the duties that had him commuting between second and ground floors and comes in his turn to occupy Erskine's room, far from everything being revealed, to Watt, events now trail undifferentiatedly into one another and the entire second term of Watt's employment decomposes into an unnarratable condition; the 'painting, or coloured reproduction, yielded nothing further. On the contrary, as time passed, its significance diminished' (208).

Kafka's subjects, by contrast, do not have the time for significance to diminish and differences to be eroded. Theirs is a crisis of signification that subsumes time, and they themselves are mortally configured within the bounds of this crisis.[4] Whence the vulnerability of life in Kafka where the slightest digression threatens to sweep the subject beyond itself, *where a change in subject threatens to destroy the subject*, where any difference that would make a difference is deferred by endless hairsplitting. Where in Kafka life is configured within the stretched limits of signification, in Beckett signification pulses out of itself, the appearance of life is not trapped within a perimeter, and life is not bound by a deadline to make an appearance. In Kafka's spellbound worlds everything is linked, meshed together by the exclusion of difference. In Beckett the environment consists still of men and things going about their ways, of real time and space, but fragmented and blurred by a perpetual blizzard of slippage that is progressively liquified and broken down, time and matter converging in the vast tracts of mud in *How It Is*.

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[4] Again, this refers only to stories that involve either the subject apparently making a demand on its world or its world making a demand on the subject. Exceptions may be found, again, in Kafka's reading of legends. Kafka's Prometheus, for example, presses himself into the rock to which he is chained until he physically merges with the rock and is forgotten by the gods and the eagles sent to torment him. Kafka writes there are several legends regarding Prometheus, but as Koelb points out these legends are not so much discrete legends as steps in a single legend: Prometheus sinks into the rock under the endlessly repeated force of mythical inscription, and is rescued into a 'substratum of truth' ('Prometheus,' CSS, 432). This recalls Ulysses' escape from the Sirens, insofar as here the escape is belatedly transmitted in the form of a name, without its living, hoping, anxious, attachment: *Prometheus* is the rock into which Prometheus escapes. Hope in the form of reinscription of the proper name, which consigns that which traveled under it to oblivion by becoming its gravestone: for what is the rock into which Prometheus disappears but his gravestone, which stands to let its subject escape.

Murphy, *Watt*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* – 'The Judgment,' *The Trial*, *The Castle* … obviously there are more exceptions, but even so we can venture this difference regarding the titles: the Kafkian title refers to an ostensibly external limit upon the subject's activity, and therefore a predicament, where the difference between subject and limit appears to be prefigured in the alluring wordplay of the title itself (*Urteil*: judgment, opinion; *Prozess*: trial, process; *Schloss*: castle/palace, lock); the Beckettian title, by contrast, does not refer beyond the subject but to the proper name itself: the proper name becomes a site of activity as opposed to the headstone under which the subject escapes via the graveworms of interpretation. In Kafka the emphasis is on a bounded predicament, a sphere of increasingly singular significance, and the subject navigating this airtight space has the apparent freedom of a fish in water. In Beckett the name is the predicament: the predicament dwindles to the difference between grammatical and conscious subject, and the dialectical conceptions that swell the airtight breach in Kafka escape the Beckettian subject on a regular and involuntary basis.[5]

The loss in meaning obtaining to the second term in Beckett (the second part of Watt's stay at Knott's; Molloy conceived as the second term in relation to Moran) tends, in Kafka, to signify death (as it does, of course, for Murphy). In Kafka the appearance of life is too stretched to survive a loss in meaning. The subject negotiates its predicament dialectically and cannot afford to lose its footing. Wherever and whenever meaning threatens to be lost or changed the subject reflexively appeals to the next highest court, resulting in an exponential *increase* in sense that becomes increasingly impossible to maintain. Death seems almost too easy because, from an inauspicious beginning, soon everything appears to be gravitating in its direction – all appearance in Kafka is a kind of mortal foreplay.

And yet the only example of an *adequate* death is that related by Kafka to Brod and related in turn by Brod: K., on his death bed, exhausted by his efforts to have his position recognised by the Castle, the villagers clustered about him, receives a message recognizing his right to remain in the village. More typically Kafka's protagonists are chucked out with the rubbish (dead or alive, 'The Metamorphosis' and 'The Hunger Artist' respectively), or butchered by a pair of 'tenth-rate actors' (*The Trial*), or simply vanish ('Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Folk'). In Beckett, by contrast, death as a viable fictional limit is absorbed into the narrative process. Belacqua and Murphy, early exceptions to the rule, both die as results of freak accidents. In the later works the situation stands corrected: they were killed off

[5] On the subject of emissions, in the puffed-up and plugged performances of Kafkian subjects the minutest pipsqueak of a fart would rip the heavens apart, whereas, of course, Molloy rolls off mathematical soliloquies to his flatulence.

because not serious enough. In Beckett death goes too far: 'death is a condition I have never been able to conceive to my satisfaction and which therefore cannot go down in the ledger of weal and woe' (M, 68). The threat is the absence of mortal threat: the teller is not trying to escape a projected punishment; escaping is no longer the issue, it takes place whether you like it or not. Where the Kafkian Joseph K. has to be brought round to accepting a verdict, and where K.'s appetite for negotiation determines the time left him, the Beckettian told-teller has always already made whatever progress the Kafkian subject is yet to make. The unresisting, unrestricted to and fro of the Beckettian subject is in contrast to the Kafkian subject's apparently determined resistance to its predicament. Insisting on its rights the Kafkian subject arrests the world it finds itself arrested by. In Beckett nothing is arrested, not for long, all goes on. Being arrested provides the occasion, here and there, for a few thousand words. Molloy passes through his environment like a foul smelling shadow, his environment passes him by like the weather. Apparently the Kafkian subject poses a considerable threat to the people around him, going by their expressions of outraged disbelief. Beckett's subjects do not so much threaten their environment as offend it, and sometimes compel charity, which does nothing but mete out infinite punishment with renewed force by interrupting it. They themselves desire nothing more than to be ignored. Molloy poses no concrete threat, but his irregular way of *resting*, slumped over the handlebars of his bicycle in public view, offends against 'public order, public decency' (20):

> It is indeed a deplorable sight, a deplorable example, for the people, who so need to be encouraged, in their bitter toil, and to have before their eyes manifestations of strength only, of courage and of joy, without which they might collapse, at the end of the day, and roll on the ground. I have only to be told what good behaviour is and I am well-behaved, within the limits of my physical possibilities. (24-5)

Molloy, then, submits to the law as best he can, complies with its demands in as far as he can make sense of them, and is released without charge: 'Were they of the opinion that it was useless to prosecute me? To apply the letter of the law to a creature like me is not an easy matter' (24). It is also not an easy matter, so it seems, to apply the letter of the law to a creature like Joseph K., except of course that in K.'s case there is no charge, only an arrest, law short of letter. Then again, what could be easier than to apply the letter of the law to a model citizen like K. – were it not for the fact that it would never cross this model citizen's mind to break the law. Where the charge has no hold on Molloy's absence of defence, Joseph K.'s method of defence seems to intensify his trial and sink the court's operations into him, without ever drawing a concrete charge. In Beckett repetitions or cycles of events

do not result in increasingly fearsome or elusive authorities and doorkeepers, just the same old story, over and over, increasingly threadbare; wherever a little pressure builds up it ablates without fanfare. The longer Joseph K. insists on a defence, on the other hand, the more fearsome the obstacles that rise up to try and shake his resolve, and the wider the allegorical trawling nets become. There is, what is more, a faint suspicion that the idea of a trial *appeals* to K., insofar as it represents, perhaps, something out of the ordinary. And yet why should K., a creature of fastidious routine, suddenly find himself in need of the extraordinary?

Fräulein Bürstner's Weiße Bluse

When on the morning of his arrest Joseph K. is shepherded into Fräulein Bürstner's room for his interview with the Inspector, the room has been changed, ostensibly to accommodate the interview, and there is a white blouse hanging at the latch of the open window. Later that day K. looks in and finds the room restored to its original aspect and the white blouse missing. What subtly escapes mention is the fact that K. must already be intimately acquainted with Bürstner's room if he is aware it had been changed.

Fräulein Bürstner has only recently moved into the house and has doubtlessly attracted K.'s interest. Perhaps it was the blouse hanging at the open window that first caught K.'s eye. The open window suggests a certain availability, and K. requires no encouragement to avail himself of any opening or opportunity that presents itself. Then again, K. requires no encouragement to view the world in terms of openings and opportunities, this sense is his most highly developed: the open window may simply infer that K. views *every* window as an opening or opportunity.

The white blouse signals the presence of a new woman in the house, its whiteness purity - in fact the German expression *eine weiße Weste* denotes a clean, unwritten, record, free of sin, blemish – A *weiße Weste* is of course what K. insists on for himself; he insists on his innocence.

Dangling at the window the blouse also suggests a strip of flypaper. We return to this.

Aside from the Inspector there are three young men from K.'s bank in the room, standing and looking at Bürstner's photographs. As it transpires (Bürstner tells him later) the photographs have been moved around, a fact which K., with his unerring eye for accusation, pins on Kaminer, one of these young men, who manifestly cannot keep his hands to himself. The photographs have been played with in much the manner, perhaps, that the Inspector is toying, for no immediately apparent reason, with a candle, a box of matches, a pin cushion

and a book on top of Bürstner's night table. This table has been shoved into the center of the room as *Verhandlungstisch* – a negotiation table.

(The scene is set, the evidence is all in evidence: *even the evidence that the evidence has been tampered with.* [So, come on, what was Joseph K. doing in Fräulein Bürstner's room in her absence, combing through her private things? (*Bürste*, by the way, is brush, which aside from its sweeping significance also denotes the female pudenda.)] Indeed, our reading of *The Trial* focuses on the beginning because this is where the evidence, or the evidence that the evidence has been toyed with, is most in evidence.)

K. is having none of it.

He launches an outburst at a trio of observers assembled behind the windows across the way, whose (almost) shameless intrusiveness heightens the sense of violation as well as sealing off that escape route. He turns back into the room to find the Inspector comparing the lengths of his fingers, the warders absorbedly scratching their knees, and the three bank non-entities looking around aimlessly – all childish measures of diverting tellings off, which is precisely what K. is doing, were he aware of it.

* * *

When K. wakes up on the morning of his arrest he calls for his breakfast. Instead a warder enters the room. When K. fails to make any sense of this warder and continues to insist on his breakfast, the warder refers through the door into the next room, whereupon K. hears a 'short guffaw': 'one could not tell from the sound whether it was produced by several individuals or merely by one' (7-8). As with the buzzing phoneline at the beginning of *The Castle* here the entire production line of intermediaries, doubles and puppets is merged in a single sound. Making no headway with K., the warder throws open the door into the adjacent room.

Next doorkeeper: Willem (*Wille* of course is German for the will).

When K. leaves his room and enters the living room, Willem tells him 'You should have stayed in your room! Didn't Franz tell you that?' (8) Now, the inference appears to be to the present instance, yet this is by no means certain. *You should have stayed in your room* – because that is the way it is. That way, you would never have had to experience the aspect of Willem, the second doorkeeper (Franz, the first warder, looks blank, dapper and eminently useful, but Willem is a considerably less flattering reflection, not that this makes any impression on K.). Or of course: you should have stayed in your room, *and out of Bürstner's.*

Didn't Franz tell you that? In other words, or rather, in a sense other than that foregrounded: was the *appearance* of Franz not adequate information (appearance in both senses). And, insofar as this is the first time the *name* Franz is mentioned: was *Franz* not enough for you, K., to recognise the pickle you're in? Willem goes on to tell K. to return to his room, which reinforces the foregrounded sense, but by this time sense is straying rather like K. out of his room. Thus when K. demands to know the charge Willem cannot, will not, say, and yet in a sense he already has: You should have stayed in your room!

'*Go to your room*' – Don't you know your place! The punishment meted out to a disobedient child, and surely enough K. flings himself onto his bed (14).

K. cannot keep to his room. It is not the case that he *will not* keep to his room (his *Wille* has already come apart), he cannot. K. always keeps his eyes trained on doors; he keeps his own door open; he addresses people through chinks in doors. And yet all the doors scattered throughout *The Trial* fail to compensate for the door that has been opened. K. inhabits a world of open and half-open doors, where a closed door merely involves negotiating, with whatever means at one's disposal, with the doorkeeper. This results in a yearlong struggle to negotiate the messages and messengers gravitating toward him from his personal intelligence service in the terms of a business deal:

> This legal action was nothing more than a business deal such as he had often concluded to the advantage of the Bank, a deal within which, as always happened, lurked various dangers which were simply to be obviated. The right tactics were to avoid letting one's thoughts stray to one's own possible shortcomings, and to cling as firmly as one could to the thought of one's advantage. (141)

A private world does not apply for K.; as an agent configured entirely within the terms of negotiation, K.'s reflective liberty (K.'s 'hopeless freedom' in *The Castle*) stands him in good stead when it comes to debunking the officers of the court. K. reflects sardonically on the 'intellectual poverty' of his warders (15), upon their inability to negotiate a settlement and turn this situation to the advantage of all concerned. The warders look as though they would like to come to an agreement with K. – even the Inspector looks as though he would like to shake K.'s hand. As K. is later told, the accused represent a great temptation for those sent to arrest them. However, with its infinite ability to produce doubles, intermediaries and messengers the machinery of the court compensates for K.'s ability to turn every situation to his advantage, his reflective liberty to spot a way out of every dead end. K. and court match each other step for step: as many messages the court sends, K. finds loopholes. Message and loophole repeatedly coincide, with K. escaping through each message to which it falls to

address K.'s 'shortcomings.' However, as in the tale about the advocates sent up the stairs to tire out the official hiding behind the door at the top of the stairs, who keeps throwing the advocates down the stairs again, K. must eventually tire of the court's petitions.

At a more banal level, movement in Kafka, the endless circulation through every opening that presents itself, is simply the inability to remain in one's own company. K. cannot stay in evenings, but is impelled out into company. And when, on returning from work on the day of the arrest, he wants to talk to Fräulein Bürstner, ostensibly to apologise for the disturbance in her room (for which he assures her he is not directly responsible), K. resents the fact that he is obliged to wait in for her instead of going out to indulge his bachelor pastimes.[6]

When Bürstner returns home (from the theatre, indicating that she, unlike K., does tell life and theatre apart)[7] and K. has duly taken expert advantage of her tiredness and sense of personal embarrassment to attain to her room, he begins to elaborate on the morning's events – Bürstner quickly grasps the problem short of K.'s embellishments: 'It is curious ... that I should be compelled now to forbid you to do something which you ought to forbid yourself to do, that is to enter my room in my absence' (32). She is too tired, however, to take K. to task, and lets him off the hook. But K., wide awake, passes on this possibility and clings to his version of events, whereupon Bürstner teases him by saying that indeed there is something curiously 'attractive' about a court of law. Again, K. does not budge, is free to take her literally, and, indeed, takes her at her word to corroborate his own version of events and, now, to draw her into it (after all, she said there is something attractive about a court of law, a clear opening, he must be getting somewhere with her – as opposed to the fact that there is indeed something attractive about a court of law insofar as it has the authority to declare him completely innocent), responding to her telling him that she is going to be working at a law office by saying, well, then she'll be able to help him in his court affairs.

Short guffaw.

K. gets so carried away in the course of re-enacting the arrest, that at one point he shouts his own name out loudly, whereupon there is a knocking at the door (the door into the living room, which separates K's and Bürstner's rooms). It falls to Bürstner to feel faint with embarrassment – Joseph K. is pigheadedly oblivious to any anxiety. Apparently. For is it not rather the case that the sudden occupation of the living room by the Captain signifies a

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[6] Portrayed as sitting around in a tavern with a bunch of older men every evening and frequenting a prostitute once a week- always the same prostitute, marking either an essential lack of adventurousness or a fugitive trace of domesticity.

[7] Or that theatre has its time and place for her, and that she may not have much patience for blurred distinctions. On a similar note, that Fräulein Bürstner is a typist implies she has an entirely professional relationship to words- the significance of this will shortly become clear.

distance or ban placed by Bürstner between herself and K., precisely at the point when she sees K. carried away by his story to the extent that he refers loudly to himself in the third person? And that the knocking registers a peculiar narrative awareness of Bürstner's anxiety that, by a subtle *manipulation* of temporalities, makes sense of it without obliterating K.'s chances with Bürstner?

Anyhow, K. appears unaffected by this change in circumstances except insofar as he perceives it interfering with his immediate and scarcely honorable objectives. He shepherds Bürstner away from the door to pick up where he left off.

This situation exemplifies K.'s essential lack of surprise. As K. explains to the Inspector regarding the arrest, he is surprised, but 'by no means very surprised':

> I am very surprised, of course, but when one has lived for thirty years in this world and had to fight one's way through it, as I have had to do, one becomes hardened to surprises and doesn't take them too seriously. Particularly the one this morning. (17)

K. takes every eventuality into account, nothing can take him by surprise, not seriously – he is surprised, yes, even very surprised, but he has taken surprise itself into account. This is part and parcel of his job description. And on the subject of surprises, when K. returns home on the day of his arrest he feels there are certain things that need clearing up – the first thing he does is to engage Frau Grubach, his landlady, in a discussion about the morning's events. Grubach hesitantly voices her misgivings regarding the 'abstract' nature of the arrest, and K. replies:

> What you've just said is by no means stupid, Frau Grubach, at least I'm partly of the same opinion, except that I judge the whole thing still more severely and consider this assignation of guilt to be not only abstract but a pure figment. I was taken by surprise, that was all. (27)

This defendant *judges* the proceedings of the *whole thing* (ah yes, the bigger picture) still *more severely*? (As K. later asks the priest, why should he be singled out for judgment in the light of universal complicity?) Of course part of the problem is that K. will always be *partly* of any opinion, he has a foot in the door of every opinion. That K. is always prepared to judge (he seems to be perpetually judging, assessing and weighing up everyone and everything about him), does not bode well for him insofar as it appears to determine the nature of the court he's up against. K. bounces back from every warning with a threat. When told at his first hearing that he has just 'flung away with [his] own hand all the advantages which an interrogation invariably confers on an accused man,' K. counters with a laugh, his hand on

the latch of the door, his eye on the door, 'You scoundrels, I'll give you all an interrogation yet' (56) – which he does, insofar as he never ceases to question the court's authority.

It appears that Frau Grubach, the warders, even Fräulein Bürstner, are all party to this plot hatched against K.; K.'s world and the world of the court can scarcely be told apart. However, as already illustrated with respect to Bürstner, it is in fact K., clinging to the idea of his advantage, that weaves these worlds together, every rhetorical opportunity in the one taken to corroborate and further the other. Hence Grubach is never witnessed actually engaging with the court officials, nor does she at any point allude directly to them, but her servile relation to her lodger stops her from seriously questioning K.'s *abstractions*. Much as Bürstner is too tired to take K. to task, Grubach would rather come to an agreement with him. That morning K. was re-entering the living room with his birth certificate to show to the warders when:

> the opposite door opened and Frau Grubach showed herself. He saw her only for an instant, for no sooner did she recognize him than she was obviously overcome by embarrassment, apologized for intruding, vanished, and shut the door again with the utmost care. (11)

Given the peculiar way the evidence is stacked against K. one might venture a guess that Grubach accidentally caught K. exiting from Bürstner's room. Bürstner's blouse is not enough to ruin K. – the transgression has to be witnessed, given K. is oblivious to private boundaries until caught in the act of transgressing them. For instance, following his interview with Fräulein Montag, with whom a further barrier appears between K. and Bürstner, K. thinks little of throwing open Bürstner's door and looking into her room, but when he notices Montag and the Captain talking in the corridor distractedly observing him, K. retreats to his room 'keeping close against the wall' (93), like a rat or, of course, like the *Ungeziefer* Samsa. There has to be something to make K. stick to the scene of the violation, and Grubach's recognition is presumably the agent that turns Bürstner's 'weiße Bluse' into a strip of flypaper. K. remains, by and large, oblivious to the generic resemblance to Gregor Samsa, but his movements betray him, as do the images of flies that hatch into his thinking: 'Into his mind came a recollection of flies struggling away from the fly-paper till their little legs were torn off' (247). On the day of his arrest K. brings all his manipulative force to bear on Grubach: it is not merely abstract, he tells her, it is pure figment, it never happened. He then tries to shake hands on it.

* * *

I was taken by surprise, that was all. The negligible power remaining to surprise abolishes the possibility of error. By what error can error have crept into the equation? Indeed the possibility of a mistake is not dwelt upon in K.'s reckoning, which eliminates the possibility of error, as of course do the trial proceedings:

> Our officials ... never go hunting for crime in the populace, but, as the Law decrees, are drawn towards the guilty and must then send out us warders. That is the Law. How could there be a mistake in that? (12)

It is not an error. It must be intention. Well, whose intention is it? Is it a joke? The Inspector asks K., 'You think this is a joke?' Stories always begin as a bit of fun, until they don't stop. "'I don't know this Law,' said K. 'All the worse for you,' replied the warder. 'And it probably exists nowhere but in your own head,' said K." (13). Guffaw. Curiously, or logically rather, although K.'s world rules out error on the basis of motivation, once it comes to assessing whose intention it is, it slips into infinite regress. An intention would denote a subject that actually meant something, a source of meaning, but *private* interviews in this vein are impossible to come by, as the trial amply demonstrates.

The Law can be brought to bear upon Joseph K. because he isn't indifferent to it- as already pointed out, a trial rather appeals to him. Indeed, the accused subject is more interested in the aspect of his accusers than the aspect of his own guilt. K. *studies* the court as opposed to the possibility of his own guilt. According to his calculations, he will eventually find a way past the charge. K. is not trying to make sense of his predicament – he's always already made sense of it – the difficulty is negotiating a deal whereby this sense is the one that sticks. Hence K.'s offence becomes one because he draws in, in his defence, the concept of a trial. His original transgression, whatever it was, merges with the image of the trial apparatus drawn up for the sake of negotiating the traces of this transgression. K.'s obliviousness to the nature of this trial develops a kind of reflective play, endless were it not that every trial is bound to a verdict. K. is doomed by his choice of image- except, of course, that K. has no choice in his choice of images.

As the one warder says to the other: "'See, Willem, he admits that he doesn't know the Law and yet he claims he's innocent.'" The other replies: "'You're quite right, but you'll never make a man like that see reason.'" Why not? Not because K. is unreasonable, but, on a certain point, at a certain point, he becomes infinitely reasonable.

Perhaps, then, Joseph K. may be compared to Socrates as an ironic subject. He draws the folds of the actuality he cannot escape around himself like a winding sheet. Like Socrates K.

has not the new but is completely enclosed within an actuality he does not understand in the second sense but understands flawlessly in the first sense. Like Socrates K. is taken as a sacrifice, albeit where Socrates is taken as a sacrifice by world history, K. is taken by the temporality of the reader. This ironic subject betrays little evidence that he is aware of his position as *irony*. Joseph K.'s limitless reasonableness is without any immediately apparent subjective content, crooked sideward glances or tucked smiles. The relationship between K. and the court may perhaps be defined, in the sense Vignaux-Smyth gives it, as *workplay*: the point at which the volitional relation between work and play is entirely suspended; the interface where Socrates is always being swept into irony at the expense of the empirical, conscious, human Socrates (QE, 175). Vignaux-Smyth also refers in this relation to Gadamer's conception of play in *Truth and Method*, which extends, for instance, to the play of light, of waves, 'the play of gears or parts of machinery ... even a play on words' (Gadamer, 103).

It takes exactly one year for K. to be worn down to the point of laying himself under the operations of his own system, one year in which K. goes to every length not to take a single step – that is, it takes one year for the toxin insinuated into his system to get K.'s immune system up and running to the point where K. accepts, if not his guilt, at least the necessity of the Law before which he stands charged and through which all progress in his life has been arrested. For where the work of the trial initially devours time previously given over to the joys of a bachelor lifestyle, soon even his work at the bank is encroached upon. As the autonomous process of plot construction wells up out of K.'s free time and into every moment when K. is not on his guard, K.'s career also begins to suffer, and is absorbed, bit by bit, by his direct competitor.

Yet even on the evening of his thirty-first birthday K. has not entirely accepted the necessity of the Law. As the executioners close in upon him, faces pressed side by side (like the final pages of *The Trial* pressing out the reader with help of the reader), K. stretches out his hands in one final plea for outside help. K. would rather tear himself apart than get to his own feet: '"Like a dog!' he said: it was as if he meant the shame of it to outlive him' (251).

What shame, however?

For to interpret that K. undergoes a *personal* development on the basis of his finally acknowledging that he 'always wanted to snatch at the world with twenty hands, and not for a very laudable motive, either. That was wrong' (247)- to view this as a personal development is to overlook the puppets K. relies on to propel him to his death, and to overlook the fact that K. remains not in the least in control of his 'motives.' The imperative to himself - 'the only thing for me to go on doing is to keep my intelligence calm and

discriminating to the very end' (247) – is the force inexorably working at his destruction. That K's endlessly whirring intelligence comes as far as discerning that its motives were not always entirely laudable is not the same as finding that it develops a conscience capable of negotiating even a trace of shame, all it means is that it becomes capable of bringing its own systematic accusation to bear upon itself. At this point, in other words, the immune system overruns its own sites.

Thus K. ends the trial on his own terms, which were never his own. To find evidence of a personal or existential development in K.'s final comedy is the same as attributing personal or existential growth to the officer in the penal colony. Far from rejecting the instrument, by laying himself under it the officer makes a declaration of faith. The only development in this plot is the indirect confession that the subject is not a person, that K. is configured entirely, for all it matters, in and by the apparatus through which K. exists, where the self-aborption of self-absorption is not to take a step away from this apparatus but merely to fall in line with its time-honoured method of expulsion.

K.'s nub of ignorance is his 'I'm not going anywhere.' The feeble peristaltic motions and contractions of his environment evoke judgment as a bodily function. We may read in this vein the two obscenely clean pale cheeks pressing together as K. is finally pressed out of life (still clinging to the idea of his advantage). Already at the outset K. registers a grammatical awareness of his execrable situation when he refers to his warders as the 'niedrigste Organe' of the system interfering with him: literally the *nethermost organs.*

Such, we observe in passing, are sentiments not alien to Beckett – but where in Kafka shameful bodily processes and nethermost organs are always at least a single sense away, brushed under a more 'attractive' discourse, in Beckett, as we have seen, they are paraded. After the Kafkian fiction, that thanks its excess of apparent sense to retention or constipation, Beckett's incontinence comes as the flush to the blush.

Days of Rest

> Jehovah ... becomes preferable to Christ ... because he is a more comprehensive figure, cruel and worldly as well as mystically remote. Beckett's interest in Jehovah (the Yahveh who becomes Youdi in *Molloy*, the figure with the white beard in *Godot*) may account for a quality in Beckett's work that might almost be called Talmudic - its witty, legalistic, labyrinthine, balanced quality. Certainly, from Beckett's point of view, it seems true to say that Christ's Love is resistible almost because of its greater flexibility, whereas Jehovah's Law must be either accepted or rejected wholesale. (Pilling, 121)

In no other of Beckett's narratives is the distinction between Jehovah's Law and Christ's love as pertinent as in Moran's narrative, which begins to explain why this text is comparable to Kafka. Moran's narrative is set in a world of fathers, chains of command and intermediary structures, and little sacrifices keep everything running along smoothly until Moran's day of rest is rudely interrupted by Gaber. An 'untimely' demand breaks through the scheme of things and impels Moran out of his garden.

Possibly the most obvious similarity between Moran's narrative and *The Trial* is the intermediary structure of agent-messenger-chief outlined by Moran (M, 106), which recalls the intermediary figures that course through all of Kafka's writings, in particular, for our purposes, the messengers in the service of the court. Gaber, like the warders, is less flexible than the protagonist. Much as the warders do not understand and do not need to understand the workings of the court and Law they are operating in the name of, Gaber is oblivious to Youdi's designs. In Beckett, however, the intermediary structure always emphasises its structural aspects as opposed to a wealth of human detail. The structure is pared down and deprived of its human characteristics to the extent where, more so than in Kafka, we are dealing merely with numbers, circuits and circulation, patterns, and ultimately a geometry of persecution.

> And when I speak of agents and messengers in the plural, it is with no guarantee of truth. For I had never seen any other messenger than Gaber nor any other agent than myself ... That we thought of ourselves as members of a vast organization was doubtless also due to the all too human feeling that trouble shared, or is it sorrow, is trouble something, I forget the word. (107)

One commentator finds that there 'are clear offshoots of Kafka in the details of Moran's profession and enigmatic employer' (Sheringham, 56). Yet in Kafka the subject works for the authorities even as he works against the authorities. Moran, by contrast, when ordered by Youdi to seek out Molloy, does not contribute to Youdi's position; nor are Moran's actions bounded by Youdi: making his way toward Molloy in accordance with Youdi's instructions, Moran becomes more like Molloy and more free of Youdi. Unlike in Kafka where the agent working on his defence helps develop the case for the prosecution and the agent aspiring for a private interview with his employers revitalises village relations with the castle, in Beckett the task has no obscure feedback.

Youdi is the command which holds sway over Moran's life, but not, evidently, the underlying demand. The command is altered but the demand endures in the appearance of a new demand, namely to write. For Molloy there is no *command* to reach his mother, but a

compulsion. Nonetheless, as Molloy explains, he needs reasons to be on his way; in the absence of orders he comes up with his own: 'I needed, before I could resolve to go and see that woman, reasons of an urgent nature' (15). Youdi appears as the force which breaks through Moran's indefinite day of rest, his secular Christianity, the force which both breaches his perimeter and makes it impossible for Moran to take refuge in it again, but which is itself spent in the process. Hence a past imperative interrupts Moran's life but not in order for it to replace the present actuality, for it too is operating as catalyst in the service of something still more untimely:

> For what I was doing I was doing neither for Molloy, who mattered nothing to me, nor for myself, of whom I despaired, but on behalf of a cause which, while having need of us to be accomplished, was in its essence anonymous, and would subsist, haunting the minds of men, when its miserable artisans should be no more. (114-5)

Both Moran and Joseph K. pride themselves on their powers of observation. As already observed, little escapes Moran, and K. falls back on his keen sense of observation to rescue him from his legal complications. Both subjects are observant also in another sense: Moran observes the habits of secular religion; K. religiously observes the rules of work.

Moran's powers of observation (in both senses) begin to fail him following the introduction of Molloy. K.'s powers of observation by contrast remain keen to the end: K.'s refrain to himself always to remain vigilant ends up destroying him: the slip in hand to eye coordination that first lands him in this mess requires another error to resolve it. The very last thing K. sees is a close-up image of his own tireless powers of observation: 'With failing eyes K. could still see the two of them, cheek leaning against cheek, watching the final act' (251). Even those hugely suggestive cheeks closing in upon him suggest the lids of an eye closing.

Both subjects' lives are subject to an interruption that both comes as a surprise and yet does not come as a surprise. Both subjects express annoyance, although Moran's *Oh bother* is in contrast here to K's *Who did this to me?* Both interruptions involve messenger-like figures turning up, out of the blue, in what passes for a private space: Moran's garden, K.'s bedroom.

Like K., Moran does not take the interruption entirely seriously at first – not, however, because he thinks it might be a joke: 'was it in order to win a few more moments of peace that I *instinctively* avoided giving my mind to it?' (96, my italics). K., by contrast, is entirely configured within this *instinct.* There is, however, no way out of it: it can only be Moran, the

boss said as much (recalling the doorkeeper's words to the man from the country in the chaplain's parable: 'this door was intended only for you' [T, 237]).

Like K., Moran is not adequately informed by the messenger; his instructions are incomplete: find Molloy- but how, and then what? Unlike K. Moran does not put this down to incompetence. There is no reflective play with Moran of mirrorings and meaningful trailings off, and no accusations of play-acting; all Moran's meagre imagination is adequate to at this time is feebly playing hard to get. Moran, then, is inadequately directed, like K., but is nonetheless impelled into action. The problem here is that Moran, like K., cannot tell means from end and end from means. Less the end both subjects cast about and turn everything into the appearance of an end. It even seems that Moran deliberately disregards the end of his excursion, he cannot focus upon Molloy, and focuses, therefore, all the more on his preparations.

Curiously both interruptions interfere with a meal, and thus with the cycle of meals that reconcile natural demand with an intersubjective sphere. K.'s breakfast is intercepted; Moran, because he misses mass on account of the 'high mass' bearing down on him in his garden, and because he cannot eat without his superstitions mollified, postpones his lunch until he has wangled the host from the local Father. In other words, the absent Youdi intercepts the present host, which Moran must then go out of his way to recover:[8]

> I remembered with annoyance the lager I had just absorbed. Would I be granted the body of Christ after a pint of Wallenstein? And if I said nothing? Have you come fasting, my son? He would not ask. But God would know, sooner or later. Perhaps he would pardon me. But would the eucharist produce the same effect, taken on top of beer…? (97)

In both cases the interruption erupts out of free time. K. is arrested on a working day, but a summons follows for Sunday. K. is free to go to work; as the Inspector tells him, 'You are under arrest, certainly, but that need not hinder you going about your business' (21). Moran,

[8] Appetite in Beckett is a thesis subject in itself. From the methodical preparations of the gorgonzola toast sandwich and lobster in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, through the biscuit permutations of *Murphy*, the meal cycles of *Watt*, to the tins of foods in *How It Is*, food never fails to pass time (in the form of a few thousand words). By the end of his journey Moran, an erstwhile heavy eater, is reduced to eating berries, his appetite down to the tiny peripatetic turnover of Molloy – Molloy: 'My appetite! What a subject. For conversation. I had hardly any. I ate like a thrush. But the little I did eat I devoured with a voracity usually attribute to heavy eaters, and wrongly, for heavy eaters as a rule eat ponderously and with method, that follows from the very notion of heavy eating. Whereas I flung myself at the mess, gulped down the half or the quarter of it in two mouthfuls without chewing (with what would I have chewed?), then pushed it from me with loathing. One would have thought I ate to live!' (53-4) Aside from the question of method, the greater the appetite the more there is as a result to be evacuated, the more one is what one has eaten and the less one is mere tubing: heavy eating negatively affects the ratio of permanent to transient body mass. Moran's grey hen, which gives Moran cause for anxieties on account of its eating *next to nothing* (101), prefigures both the change in Moran's appetite as well as his metamorphosis into a *black sheep*.

disgruntled at the disturbance, cedes that the task falls in his line of duty. Although Moran's life is couched in the liberal dispensations of earthly Fathers, he is still working for the absent Youdi, whom he addresses as his employer.

Work appears in both narratives as rest from *real* work (where for *real* we may understand spiritual or personal – in Moran's narrative more ostensibly the former, whereas in *The Trial* it spans personal and spiritual), and real work erupts out of the intervals between work. Moran recognizes real work for what it is, does not like the idea of it, but acknowledges its necessity. Moran goes along with the demand because, well, it's a drag but every so often one's real employer makes a demand one is obliged to humour in order to secure the little one has and the little one purports to be. K., on the other hand, goes along with the demand because he cannot stop himself. In *The Trial* K.'s work is gradually exposed as a subterfuge. Moran is, like K., not 'positively lazy,' insofar as he works throughout the week, and is therefore all the more aggrieved that he should be interfered with on the day of rest. Moran's faith, like his dreams and other chimera (114), is part and parcel of an irksome overtime he hopes to salvage into free time. For Moran enjoys nothing as much as doing nothing, which he doesn't get round to very often on account of the apparent need to earn the privilege:

> To work, even to play on Sunday, was not of necessity reprehensible, in my opinion. It all depended on the state of mind of him who worked, or played, and on the nature of his work, of his play, in my opinion. I was reflecting with satisfaction on this, that this slightly libertarian view was gaining ground, even among the clergy, more and more disposed to admit that the sabbath, so long as you go to mass and contribute to the collection, may be considered a day like any other, in certain respects. This did not affect me personally, I've always loved doing nothing. And I would gladly have rested on weekdays too, if I could have afforded it. Not that I was positively lazy. It was something else. Seeing something done which I could have done better myself, if I had wished, and which I did do better whenever I put my mind to it, I had the impression of discharging a function to which no form of activity could have exalted me. But this was a joy in which, during the week, I could seldom indulge. (92-3)

Moran enjoys nothing more than doing nothing because he can, from this attitude of rest, judge all others doing something. That he rests on the day of rest is not, therefore, because he necessarily opposes the libertarian view gaining ground; it does not constitute a critique of contemporary spiritual lassitude, it's because he likes playing at judge and master. His day of rest is, therefore, conceived as the occasion for indulging an intersubjective sense of superiority, for 'reflecting with satisfaction.'

Beckett makes an allusion in a letter to Kafka's diaries: 'At least Kafka could garden' (cited in Knowlson, 684). Given how largely gardens figure in Beckett, how are we to take this?

That at least Kafka could take something, gain something from, stake something on, *generation*? That he could still tell the story which is the garden, the circle, the sack, a hermetically sealed-off sphere subject to controlled cycles, nature artificially enhanced within certain perimeters ... Gardens in Beckett are frequently the grounds of an asylum or hospital or some other establishment set nucleus-like within the perimeters of the cell it reigns over, cultivates, organizes. Begam refers to the garden in Beckett as an 'epistemological paradise' (105), and observes how Moran's sovereignty in his garden is marked by the possessive pronoun 'my': my bees, my son, my church, my lemon verbena ... prior, that is, to his fall and 'dispossession of self' (Begam, 106). Indeed, Moran evidently believes he has a deal with Youdi whereby he gets to keep his garden if he leaves it every so often. The Kafkian narrative by contrast takes place within the circle, the garden. Moran's motto, or the motto of that which is holed up within Moran, '[d]on't wait to be hunted to hide' (M, 114), aptly describes Joseph K.'s non-volitional strategy – but in Kafka the garden, the moment of rest, the hiding place, is stretched to meet every demand. K. does not vacate the circle of his sense in order to secure it, he extends its circumference to meet with the demands of the task. Nothing can break this perimeter. In Kafka the perimeter is a life-support machine, whereby life, which is only ever its meaning, is artificially extended, stretched and transformed. In Beckett by contrast there is no requirement for life to be supported, whatever it is goes on unsupported. And yet nevertheless these creatures drag artificial life-support machines around with them, like the jute sacks dragged about in *How It Is*, to tide them over until the next occasion for having or getting a life, i.e. the next occasion for a story, appears over the horizon, in the form of a mute body to torment at one's leisure, to instruct, to make communicable, in short to make a story worth the telling or coming to life for.

Much as K. engages with the court in order to salvage his bachelor lifestyle, Moran leaves his home and his garden only to secure the little he has, the little he reflects he is. He's been making these little sacrifices all along, to put off making a sacrifice that would really make a difference. Moran's situation, before Molloy, which subsequently becomes the obligation to write, is therefore very like that line of defence described by Titorelli in *The Trial* as indefinite postponement (K., we bear in mind, always insists on *acquittal*, and yet precisely through insisting on acquittal he participates in a kind of indefinite postponement):

> Postponement ... consists in preventing the case from ever getting any further than its first stages. To achieve this it is necessary for the accused and his agent, but more particularly his agent, to remain continuously in personal touch with the Court. Let me point out again that this does not demand such intense concentration of one's energies

> as an ostensible acquittal, yet on the other hand it does require far greater vigilance. You daren't let the case out of your sight ... As against ostensible acquittal postponement has this advantage, that the future of the accused is less uncertain, he is secured from the terrors of sudden arrest ... [The drawbacks are] that the accused is never free ... For the case must be kept going all the time, although only in the small circle to which it has been artificially restricted. (T, 177-8)

Molloy, however, changes everything. Following Molloy the son is not lost, but the small circle Moran had held so dear is shot with abominable gleams. Moran does return home (ostensibly it is only by virtue of his return that he sets out again in the act of telling) but he has lost all he set out to secure- not his garden, or his house, but a certain delicate artificial equilibrium. Even Moran's grasp of his finances suffers a rupture. Jacques junior has, seemingly, burnt a hole in Moran's pocket. And yet paternity is perhaps the closest Moran comes, in the time told, of positively practicing and inscribing judgment. The son begins as the minimal positive risk that on the one hand provides Moran with an outlet for his masterly fantasies, but on the other hand threatens to undo him. In the course of their journey Jacques increasingly becomes Moran's crutch, and when Moran has become all but utterly dependent on him, forced to take all manner of unspeakable risks with him, Jacques junior abandons his father. In other words, Moran's substantial existence is transmitted gradually, and reluctantly, to the son- whereupon the son disappears, the quest breaks down, and Moran is beached in view of the lights of Bally, until Gaber is fetched up to send him home again. Ordered out of his garden, paternity becomes a kind of essential solitude for Moran. When Moran returns home the transmission of stories is no longer effortless for him; for a first time he has to suffer the brunt of his own shoddy stories instead of diverting them into the convenient receptacle of a son.

The Fear of Falling

> But perhaps I am merging two times in one (M, 75)

Writing, Moran changes everything. Sent out over himself, to crawl back over himself in the form of words, forming what Abbott refers to as a conceptual *Möbius* strip (Abbott, 11), overturning everything from a perspective perceptibly less mystified than that of the Moran he tells, he exposes the two-timing nature of Moran's relations. That is, with the repetition immanent to all telling which is at the same time the impossibility of returning down the same route and, thus, the possibility that this is the first time it ever happened, and consequently the possibility that it never happened, in other words the impossibility of

repetition, the 'I' has, up to a point, its own way with the demand in and by which it is configured, respectively, mutually, and perhaps successively, as Moran and Molloy. In other words the 'I,' if it cannot choose whether to relate, can at least, up to a point, determine *how* to relate:

> All is tedious, in this relation that is forced upon me. But I shall conduct it in my own way, up to a point. And if it has not the good fortune to give satisfaction, to my employer, if there are passages that give offence to him and his colleagues, then so much the worse for us all, for them all, for there is no worse for me. ... I am still obeying orders, if you like, but no longer out of fear. No, I am still afraid, but simply from force of habit. And the voice I listen to needs no Gaber to make it heard. For it is within me and exhorts me to continue to the end the faithful servant I have always been, of a cause that is not mine, and patiently fulfill in all its bitterness my calamitous part, as it was my will, when I had a will, that others should. (131-2)

The fall or change, from warder to patient, from what is written to what is writing, does not result in the subject becoming something else entirely, it merely becomes a little less the creature it was (32), or, which is the same thing, more what it *always* was. Hence Moran remains constituted of the same discourse as when ostensibly more master of himself, but in straying and disintegrated form. Coustineau (1999) suggests that 'writing becomes an alternative to the compulsive forms of behaviour to which [Molloy and Moran] have dutifully submitted in undertaking their respective journeys'; the momentum of the narratives they cannot but write grants them a modicum of control.[9] This may hold true up to a point, yet it affirms a particular temporal order between the times of telling and told and an unambiguous continuity. It suggests, in other words, that these journeys actually took place, and ignores the ambiguous transactions between telling and told, that the 'compulsive forms of behaviour' observed in the respective journeys may have their source in the telling. It ignores the sense that for the 'I' common to Moran's and Molloy's narratives, both stories are instances of been there done that, the 'nothing new' – that before Moran-told becomes Moran-telling, Moran has always already been the 'I'; that the sense of the telling defrauding the told is effected, as much as it is by a change in Moran, by a change that overcomes the 'I.'

Anyhow, writing, or telling, is a possibility unavailable to many of K.'s protagonists. In *The Trial* there is a plea that Joseph K. intermittently considers composing, but never gets round to. This plea would involve an analysis, in closest detail, of his entire life, for how else 'meet an unknown accusation' (142). This compendious, almost unthinkable effort would, as Sokel

[9] Cousineau, Thomas J., *After the Final No - Samuel Beckett's Trilogy*, p.87.

observes, interrupt *The Trial* by leaving it for another text altogether. Answering to the demands of such a plea would mark the end of K.'s bachelor lifestyle:

> It would do well enough, perhaps, as an occupation for one's second childhood in years of retirement, when the long days needed filling up. But at this time when K. should be devoting his mind entirely to work ... when his evenings and nights were too short for the pleasures of a bachelor, this was the time when he must sit down to such a task! (143)

In the plea glimmers that possibility of endless study frequently conceived in Kafka as a way out. Of course, for the Beckettian storyteller the endless relation of the self one has lost, when the long days need filling up, does not smack, as it can do for Kafkian perpetual students, of libraries and musty volumes. Libraries don't feature in Beckett; rather each voice bears within it a pool of discourse.

Kafka writes, 'In the act of writing there is a sort of compensation for the defeat before the father and the dream of transmitting life' (cited in Bataille, 137) However, where Kafka limits such reflections to journals, letters, short texts, in Beckett they constitute in part the substance of the narrative, they are not *storied* over. The narrative professes to be inadequate in the face of the demand requiring it, and yet it is written anyhow. Writing is the sacrifice that takes the place of Moran's excursions, the inscriptions which takes the place of Moran's paternal inscriptions (unless it is the other way around). Molloy: 'I work now, a little like I used to, except that I don't know how to work anymore. That doesn't matter apparently' (7). A man comes on Sundays and takes away Molloy's pages; Molloy receives them back all scored through. That no longer makes any difference, nor does the money foisted onto him as payment: 'When I've done nothing he gives me nothing, he scolds me. Yet I don't work for money. For what then? I don't know. The truth is I don't know much' (7). '*They*' can try and make him more of a man, threatening, cajoling, but Molloy *cannot* rise to the occasion. He would, maybe, but he cannot – this gives him leave to express a degree of indifference. His stories won't get any better. That one *cannot* live up to approval may lead to rack and ruin, but it also liberates one from the standards involved. Inevitably this affects certain *literary* standards; as Moran adds after suggesting he murdered a man in a blind rage: 'it would have been something worth reading. But it is not in this late stage that I intend to give way to literature' (151).

Regarding the possibility of writing in *The Trial*, we now draw up a theme that glanced through the earlier reading, that K. cannot keep *his* hands to himself, a point he grudges on his way to his execution, 'I always wanted to snatch at the world with twenty hands' (247).

The Inspector comparing the length of his fingers may signal more than K.'s dumbshow: *keep your eyes on your hands*. And, again, that K. thinks of himself as snatching at the world with *twenty* hands may well recall the spectacle Gregor Samsa wakes up to.

The German title of 'Metamorphosis,' 'Die Verwandlung,' is a less complex instance of the kind of wordplay we touch upon here. The metamorphoses referred to, as most readings find, are Samsa's transformation from traveling salesman into insect, and the subsequent metamorphosis whereby Samsa gradually comes to terms with his radically altered prospects. Furthermore, as Nabokov for one observes, there is the metamorphosis of Samsa's family, first of the parents, and then of the sister Grete, manifested in a hardening of family identity and followed by an upsweep in family fortunes in the wake of Samsa's death, in a portrait that is as ironically flattened as Samsa's husk.[10] There is, however, a fourth, curiously literal, *Verwandlung*. Samsa is ver-*wand*-elt in the four walls of his room, he is *walled* in (*Wand* is wall; Ge*wand* is outward appearance) and left to die, the mother's spells of charity and the sister's attentions merely draw out the punishment. These walls, racked closer and closer as any vital difference between the room and its contents is consigned to oblivion, are ultimately not to be told apart from the carapace in which Gregor is walled up, and through which walled out of the 'body of mankind.' *Verwandlung* is taken literally in its parts but against its dictionary sense. The word is teased apart and slyly reassembled in different meanings: *Verwandten* are relatives, to be *verwandt* is to be related or to be familiar with, hence *Verwandlung* also suggests a transformation of familial and familiar relations, a being walled in by one's family. 'What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls' (CSS, 89). The meaning of the word *Verwandlung* silently undergoes its own process of transformation, although to all appearances it remains the same.

In *The Trial* we observe a similar construct busily at work, except here we negotiate the vast dissolve of sense spawned by the term *Verhandlung*. *Verhandlung* means negotiation (and is related on this count with *Handel* and *handeln*, trade and trading), hearing (in the legal sense) and trial (in the sense of *Strafverhandlung*). A further, central, complication is given with

[10] This husk is thrown out by the maid, whereupon the maid is thrown out for offending against family sensibilities, hand, brush and shovel following the trash, just to be certain. Nabokov finds Grete the most treacherous member of the Samsa family. Where the parents are weakened immediately after their brief injection of energy (which compensates for the loss of earnings incurred by Gregor's absconding into bugdom), the younger sister is the most treacherous because her vitality is in the ascendancy. She assumes responsibility for maintaining Gregor's room only soon to lose interest in it and move onto more rewarding, *external* affairs, whereupon Gregor's room transforms into a family storage space even as it metamorphoses into Gregor's mausoleum. What Nabokov does not note is the counter-effect of Grete's demonic vitality, that it accelerates the process and hastens Gregor's end.

Handlung – shop, action, and *plot.*[11] All of these meanings seem to converge in that outbreak of *hands* endlessly at work in *The Trial.* Thus K. says to to Frau Grubach: "'But now you must give me your hand on it, an agreement such as this must be confirmed by a handshake.' ... 'Will she take my hand? The Inspector wouldn't do it'" (27-8).

K. is forever negotiating his way with a handshake – a handshake is a hand up in K.'s world. Indeed he trades himself away in an infinite handshake. At his first hearing he is told he has thrown away his chances by his own hand. It appears K.'s hands operate unsupervised, working overtime at keeping him in line for promotion but, at the same time, apparently they have destroyed his chances in this world. When his executioners escort K. from his home through the city (for nothing will ever be brought home to K.) they place him in an armlock clamping K.'s hands to his sides: hands clamped to his sides K. starts seeing hands everywhere, through a window he sees babies reaching for help, he recalls an image of flies tearing themselves apart on flypaper, he observes another brace of arms reaching out of a window overlooking the scene of the execution: 'Was help at hand?' (250). K.'s hands have to be physically restrained to arrest his ceaseless negotiations, to break off, tear off, the infinite handshake through which he clings to the idea of his advantage. Even as K. is executed, he has his arms outstretched again. His hands are the last to slip out of the end of his negotiations. Even after his last glimpse of the world, K.'s hands are still in it, still snatching at it- and K. still fails to see that he has destroyed himself by his own hand.

K. has no insight into this plot he's hatched against himself. K. is *verhandelt* in the sense that he is enclosed within the walls of his own plot, walled in by the *Handlung* generated by the pumping up and down of his infinite handshake. In other words, as Fräulein Bürstner is quick to perceive, Joseph K. has lost the plot: the plot goes missing as soon as he *cannot* detach himself from it. *Handlung* is out of his hands, and yet his hands continue to inscribe this plot, despite himself, around himself.

Consider in this light K.'s fascination with the artist Titorelli's hand, as it lightly negotiates the canvas' space, drawing out of nothingness an end in the form of a harmless image. K. seems obscurely to intimate in this the possibility of turning *Verhandlung* into *Handlung*, of turning endless negotiation into an image. And in the hand that has to be restrained for the *Handlung* to emerge from ceaseless *Verhandlungen*, we sense the writing hand and the infinite negotiations manifested in the hand's cont(r)act with language: the pen, paper and ink of negotiation, the constant trying to hold down a deal with language, and the constantly being

[11] In 'Metamorphosis' Gregor Samsa is a *Handlungsreisender*, a traveling salesman, which throws some light on the nature of his transformation: he travels into other *Handlungen*, plots. He is, perhaps, in other words, like Raban of 'Wedding preparations in the Country,' who would like nothing better than to become a bug and thereby abscond from the world, a daydreamer.

sold short by language, which strays and escapes itself- as Moran observes: 'It seemed to me that all language was an excess of language' (M, 116). The quiet, hard, thankless, graft of the hand as it weaves back and forth across the page, indirectly, almost magically, producing a *Handlung*, a storyline, which the hand itself has no part in but merely to transcribe. With Titorelli we are given to see how *Handlung* emerges only once the hand leaves the paper, or in K.'s case is forcefully removed, which is the instant at which writing as infinite process, as negotiating infinite or empty spaces, veers off for a decisive moment into writing as product, the decisive cut that gives sense a chance to emerge from negotiation: 'Mastery ... consists of the power to stop writing, to interrupt what is being written, giving its rights and its exclusive cutting edge back to the instant' (BR, 405).

K seems, metaphorically, to be suffering from Blanchot calls 'persecutive prehension' (BR, 405). K. is thus the storyteller supreme, who goes so far as to overlook he is inscribing a story. Because K. is inextricably stuck to his story, he inscribes, initially in his free time, by his own hand, his death sentence, which is at the same time the verdict and the possibility of a plot in his own life, which, however, can only ever follow upon his life. If one cannot tell one is telling a story, then one is telling the story of one's own death at the same time as death is telling the story of one's life. There is death writing ... and there is writing death. K. cannot come up with the sacrifice, not even a simple change of subject, that would spare him by taking his place under his own harrow. By neglecting the possibility of a plea, K. neglects the possibility of diverting this death sentence into the harmless receptacle of fiction, of turning himself into a story about himself, thereby avoiding the terminal action of the plot he cannot help but transcribe.

And in K.'s confidence which sweeps everything before itself, we find reflected Kafka's demonic gift of writing, the lightness and ease and sleight of hand with which a world emerges fully preformed out of each of his writings, regardless how fragmentary. And we see also how Kafka compensates for this effortlessness of style, this *almost classical serenity*, by constantly thematising the dangers of effortlessness and the accompanying lightness that ultimately cannot support its own operations: Kafka's effortless way with language is reflected in the effortlessness with which Joseph K. signs his life away. The same effortlessness with which this space yields to sense revenges itself on the subject in the effortlessness with which it may be stretched or reduced without warning, in the manner, for instance, of the coal bucket rider disappearing up into the icy mountains.

In Kafka this effortlessness results from the transition from 'I' into 'he,' the light 'he' cut loose from the incomprehensible 'I' by the hand, released from incomprehensible reality into impossibly lucid fiction. In Beckett, by contrast, the 'he' is increasingly exposed through the

hand as opposed to sheltered; the 'I' peeks increasingly through the hand and ruins its *puppets'* possibilities, exposing the puppet to other puppets that have sprung from the same hand and observation post. Each successive storyteller/story is aware of the stories that have passed before, and the puppets that pass before render less possible for those that follow, eroding plausible subterfuges, hiding places. In Beckett every outing already bears within it an awareness of a return and subsequently setting out again, of endless duplications doubled onto each other.

* * *

As we saw earlier, de Man conceives irony as occurring in connection with a duplication and a fall, a splitting of the subject into an empirical self and a linguistic self, where the empirical self always stands to fall at its own expense. Something like this has always already taken place in *The Trial*. The fall or expulsion at the source of the narrative is reprised throughout the narrative as a series of aftereffects, aftershocks, demanding that the subject change. This, however, proves impossible, because Kafka's superbly competent subject sticks to the sense rescued in his defence, and seems to have merged with the linguistic element in order to avoid all consequences. Beckett's subjects don't stick to their stories, they cannot, they lack the necessary competence. In Beckett's 'lapsarian epistemology' (Begam, 10) the fall and duplication cannot be held at bay; there is an irony which scarcely allows any story to take off before puncturing it ('Oh the stories I could tell you, if I were easy ... Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one' [M, 137]). Storytelling is forever rising, falling, reinfecting its locality with plausible fragments, where the violence of the fall is directly in relation to how much sense is riding on it: thus where Molloy refers to his many relatively inconsequential falls with Lousse (54), Moran suffers a great fall (155) and a 'dispossession of self.' Where in Kafka the subject seems to be hidden in language's folds, clinging to his advantage to the very last, in Beckett the subject seems perpetually to be evacuating language's folds. Irony has a place in Beckett, it cannot be held at bay; in Kafka a single fall and duplication effects irremediable damage – the subject goes to every length to avoid the consequences. In Kafka there is an irony which allows the story to proceed serenely so long as no further irony punctures this increasingly stretched spell.

In the second chapter we touched upon Dearlove's reading of Beckett's remarks concerning Kafka's *form*. Dearlove proposed that unlike in Beckett in Kafka the reader can still rescue himself from the threatened disintegration into the 'security' provided by the

form. Yet this 'security' is so much flypaper to the opportunistic reader. The K.s are empty, emptied into their environment, providing the aperture the reader is drawn to and gets dangerously attached to. In Beckett, contrastingly, the reader cannot easily take up residence within the Beckettian subject for the simple reason that the Beckettian subject cannot take up residence there – the subject is booted out before the reader can ease himself into the passenger seat. Of course Kafka's form magnifies the anxiety only of such readers habituated to such hospitable vehicles. Kafka's form solicits external participation in this tale about a trial, and much as K.'s motives with regard to Fräulein Bürstner are not entirely laudable, neither are the story's with regard to the reader. As Kafka writes in his diaries around the time he was writing *The Trial*, these death 'scenes are secretly a game; indeed, in the death enacted I rejoice in my own death, hence calculatingly exploit the attention the reader concentrates on death ... of whom I suppose that he will loudly lament on his deathbed' (KDII, 102). Beckett, by contrast, diverts the attention the reader may feel inclined to concentrate on the idea of death, by always ensuring that lamenting is connected with the (diminishing) life processes. Thus, as Dearlove observes in relation to *How It Is*:

> The voice, the pant, and even the fart are all defined by the same elementary description. Foreign matter is brought into the body, it is processed, waste products are expelled: inspiration, respiration, exhalation; ingestion, digestion, excretion. The application of the voice to this pattern undercuts Western veneration of the mind. ... With embarrassing ease principles concerning human understanding can be plugged into the description – perception becomes foreign input, thought becomes processing, and ideas become mere waste products equivalent to the less inspiring and more earthy pant or fart. (Dearlove, 91-2)

Molloy and Morans' negligence when it comes to selecting what to relate and what not to mirrors the reader's freedom before the text. Much as the reader always remains free to skip passages, pages, lay the book aside, drift off into distraction, sleep, be disturbed (by another, by one's own interfering body), all of this is mirrored in Beckett's storytellers' inveterate carelessness that occasionally mocks itself up as carefreeness. Where K.'s clinical sense-making operations in *The Trial* mirror the sense-making reader in as far as the reader seeks to come to a settlement with the narrative, Beckett's narratives throw the reader back upon the crackling filthy static of the interval between the message sent and the message received – the reader plows into the mess he does not expect to see, mess he may expect by force of habit to have had removed in order to see, in order to overlook the static of the reading process as a whole as opposed to merely the bracketed terms of the bargain struck. It is Kafka's effortless movement in language that creates the clarity, which comes at the

extortionate cost of having to sustain it. Because in Beckett the interval between telling and told is breached and the telling is always polluting the told and the told the telling, a particular kind of reader will always find Beckett inhospitable – a certain kind of reader will always insist on the hygienic detachment in which images appear, but here images keep on being scrunched up and lost, damaged and neglected. The Beckettian image does not aspire to the compulsiveness of Kafka's, which resides in its dangerously alluring clarity. Kafka's reader is subjected to the power of his own casual yet compulsive movements – Beckett's to the end-trails and 'fizzles,' to the way all power ablates and disperses.

> And then I saw a little globe swaying up slowly from the depths, through the quiet water, smooth at first, and scarcely paler than its escorting ripples, then little by little a face, with holes for the eyes and mouth and other wounds, and nothing to show if it was a man's face or a woman's face, a young face or an old face, or if its calm too was not an effect of the water trembling between it and the light. But I confess I attended but absently to these poor figures, in which I suppose my sense of disaster sought to contain itself. (M, 149)

This echoes Beckett's sentiments with respect to Kafka. K.'s sense of disaster seeks to contain itself in the narcissistic images that rise up in the integrative form of a trial, whereby K. draws himself into an interminable aside, except of course that in 'seeking' to contain itself K.'s sense of disaster gives rise to the disaster, the self-engendering fiction which aborts itself much as Narcissus wastes away ensnared by the image that appears to be soliciting his attention. In Beckett Echo, by contrast, can echo to her heart's content because Molloy and Moran cannot contain themselves. The disaster is not the autonomous feedback of sense in which the subject is caught up and hollowed out. The disaster rather is that one is not caught up, the impossibility of a story or figure adequately to contain the sense of disaster, the impossibility even of an inadequate death – the danger is there is no particular danger; the threat is there is no particular threat; the risk is there is no particular risk. Echo's voice and Narcissus' image have split apart: image is superceded by voice, much as the image of Mag is superceded by a voice telling Molloy that help is on its way, much as the image of a vast organization extending from Youdi to Moran is superceded by the voice to which Moran is only learning to listen. The human trick that slips Kafka's Ulysses past the Sirens, participating in a non-human escaping, a kind of undeclared irony, no longer works for Beckett's 'people,' for the simple reason that where in Kafka escape is always conceived from the point of view of the death or reification of the subject, from the point of view of the proper name, at a distance or delay, essentially in absentia, in Beckett escape, along with

death, cannot be conceived with any satisfaction, and even momentary lapses, moments of inattention, absent-mindedness, are gathered into the narrative process:

> What a misfortune, the pencil must have slipped from my fingers, for I have only just succeeded in recovering it after forty-eight hours (see above [a blank space]) of intermittent efforts. What my stick lacks is a little prehensile proboscis like the nocturnal tapir's. I should really lose my pencil more often, it might do me good … (MD, 222)

CONCLUSION

Irony as a Hermeneutic Tool, Irony and Method

> ... woe to him who cannot bear to have irony seek to balance the accounts. (CI, 327)

One leaps to every conclusion, and every conclusion is ill-timed. Seemingly this is irony's lesson: avoid conclusions at all costs (they date you). And yet equally a risk is incurred by putting off the conclusion, delaying the risk of the leap and with it the risk of falling foul of irony. To put off concluding is to be at risk like Joseph K., who would turn his trial into an endless affair (not, of course, as we saw, that K.'s motives change at the end: he simply would not want it said of him that he didn't know how to conclude a deal, insofar as this would reflect poorly on his powers of negotiation). This is irony's *double* lesson.

Kierkegaard is well aware of the value of concluding, and concludes his dissertation with a brief chapter on 'Irony as a Controlled Element, the Truth of Irony': 'When irony is controlled, it no longer believes, as do certain shrewd people in everyday life, that there is always more than meets the eye; but it also prevents all idol worshipping of the phenomenon' (329). Irony as a controlled element 'limits, finitizes, and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content' (326). It is no happy coincidence that these reflections limit, finitize and circumscribe the dissertation. Kierkegaard dwells first on irony's place in the 'poet-existence,' in and between individual works, and passes on to irony's significance for the personal life. His reflections on his own poetic work (the not-so-secret sharer of the philosophical dissertation), on his irony, method, and personal life are only thinly disguised by the fact that he broaches the subject of irony's significance for the poet in the contrast between Goethe, master of mastered irony, and the romantics, mistresses of unmastered irony. Goethe is not merely master over his irony in the individual work, his 'poet-existence' is congruous with his actuality. A healthy dialectical relationship obtains between the poet and actuality, and the poet's works have not suffered as a consequence of excessive abstraction. It is essential that the poet is master over his irony in his personal life and not merely in the individual work. As Kierkegaard observes elsewhere: 'It is one thing to be an acute thinker in books, another to reduplicate one's thought dialectically in one's own

existence' (PJ, 259). For although it 'is customarily said that the poet's personal life is of no concern to us' (CI, 324), the personal life is evidently of the highest concern for the individual work, if this work is to have validity.

Goethe is the model to be followed, but Kierkegaard also recognizes (with no uncertain personal import) the danger for the romantic: that the individual work assumes too much importance in the poet's life, that this relation becomes more important even than his relation to actuality. The romantic is at risk of being lost to his work, ecstatic and desolate in turn, emasculated by uncontrolled irony.

And yet, of course, to be so cocksure of one's mastery that one is personally oblivious to the dangers of mystification – this too carries a considerable risk.

However: 'Irony as a controlled element manifests itself in its truth precisely by teaching how to actualize actuality, by placing the correct emphasis on actuality' (328). Kierkegaaard's conclusion serves as the actualizing principle it describes, illustrating Kierkegaard's mastery over irony in the very act of concluding his dissertation. Irony does not blind Kierkegaard to the conventions – it is part and parcel of his controlled irony that he actually observes the conventions. And this show of controlled irony serves also to make Kierkegaard congruous with his age, by tilting his poetic work into a philosophical dissertation. Irony does not seduce *The Concept of Irony* into its promise, causing its 'substantive worth to evaporate into an ever more fugitive sublimate' (324); Kierkegaard is not so vain that he considers himself above the conventions, above actuality, and forfeits his magister-title – in fact irony here achieves the opposite. For '[e]ven though one must warn against irony as against a seducer, so one must also commend it as a guide' (327).

* * *

As Kierkegaard's method illustrates, although irony invoked as method always posits the possibility of an irony over method (and methodologist), it does not follow that one is required to jettison method at all costs (or, indeed, that one can).

With a view to irony and method in the present dissertation, irony was conceived as a hermeneutic tool with special purchase for the comparison of bodies of literary work. Irony provides to this end a calibrated spectrum of readings, inexhaustible in its possibilities, extending on the one hand from irony as a mastered element as it variously appears and omits to appear in the respective fictions to irony as it is operative between and beyond the individual works in the popular reception of authors and authorships, and on another hand extending from irony as a sign and site of negative freedom (as it obtains to the conscious

subject) to that other kind of freedom evinced in wordplay (irony as it obtains to the grammatical subject). Basically, irony's history encloses two readings of irony that reflect also two readings of reading, and although many commentators take the step between these two readings too decisively and end up backsliding, as we saw with Jeffers, irony's movements between these two readings ensure that we do not have to plump for the one reading (and thus fall foul of the other). Similarly we do not have to resort to the worn theoretical dichotomies associated with this kind of comparative work (such as the modern/post-modern into which Kafka and Beckett tend to be split), and consequently run the risk of appearing too oppositionally-minded, for irony encompasses both moments as well as the possibility of charting the inexhaustible and ruinous movements between them.

Hence, although I suggest that irony has particular purchase for the comparison of Kafka and Beckett, I propose that conceived in this manner it could also benefit other comparative instances, especially those where the rules and limits of narrative are involved: for irony's movements, its solicitations and seductions, its withdrawals and the distances it exploits, take up residence in narrative's illusory distances at the slightest encouragement.

With regard specifically to the comparison of Kafka and Beckett, irony impels and compels us to come up with various readings of Strauss' proposition, that 'Beckett represents a step beyond Kafka' – not just one reading, not just two, but a pattern, even a cross-section, of readings. Irony – and it is on these grounds that irony is a particularly attractive concept in the lights of which to compare Kafka and Beckett – is a loophole in the honey-trap of allegorical reading. Or shall we rather say, a fault, or defect, which keeps the trap ajar.

However, to give this defect its due: to take a simple view of irony instead of viewing it as an inexhaustible and potentially dangerous well of readings, is only to succumb to the trap at the second time of asking. Irony does not simply dispel the risk of concluding prematurely – talismanic invocation alone does not do the trick. And yet: is there a way of avoiding this trap, of avoiding falling foul of irony?

And yet, needless to say, it is not about escaping *irony.* As though irony could really harm anyone. Anyone *real*, that is. One way to negotiate this threat is by not getting hung up about being *in on* irony and just getting on with the task one has set oneself. This way, at least, one is least likely to harm oneself, or others. Irony will carry itself off, so much is certain.

Perhaps a light and essentially frivolous bearing is asked for, a bearing that is also, however, rigorous wherever it can be. Ideally one should be rigorously attentive to a certain inevitable neglect. Thus in *The Castle* K. finds that 'while a light and frivolous bearing, a

certain deliberate carelessness was sufficient when one came in direct contact with the authorities, one needed in everything else the greatest caution' (C, 60).

Perhaps, in the end, one should not neglect to observe one's carelessness, it is this that saves one from the Sirens. And yet, of course, this carelessness *is* neglect, therefore one should not dwell too long on one's carelessness lest one lose the selfless and irresponsible pleasure of reading ... for, after all, one can only lose the carelessness as selfless pleasure; one cannot cease to be careless.

Perhaps, then, all one can do is carefully acknowledge the gift of carelessness which always comes to one's rescue, despite oneself, and with which one is always drifting, sliding, stealing away from one's duties, a carelessness one has in common with language's tendency to escape itself.

* * *

The mere suggestion that there may still be a successful tactics, a successful balance of elements, as in the above passage from *The Castle,* preserves a sense of urgency for both protagonist and reader. Beckett on the other hand is creatively resigned to helplessness in the face of such abstract danger.

The hermeneutic solicitations and dangerous undertow of Kafka's narratives render Kafka a seducer and a guide in the tradition of the ironist Kierkegaard and, of course, Socrates. All three deploy forms of indirect communication. Agacinski suggests (with reference to Blanchot) that perhaps Kierkegaard's indirect communication serves to reveal nothing other than the writer's essential solitude, 'in so doing to invite the reader to recognize his own solitude' (A, 127). I believe we saw that the same possibility is an even snugger fit with Kafka. However, insofar as indirect communication is linked with the pedagogical, insofar as drawing the reader into an interminable encounter results in a learning experience, Kafka may be conceived as a more pedagogical figure than Beckett. In Beckett indirect communication is less literary tactic than subject material, and concomitantly his writings are not so much concerned with manipulative seducers simultaneously soliciting assistance and indirectly providing the possibility of the (ethical, religious, subjective) emancipation of seducees, as with ironizing those that seduce themselves into seeking to help where no help can help and where no help is desired. There will seemingly always be those that seek to help themselves in the aspect of seeking to help others – even where these attentions are not appreciated, to the point where they may even be experienced as a form of persecution. What is more, precisely because they aren't demanded these attentions may even be

redoubled. Apparently the more intently one goes about one's own business and the more indifferent one is to an extraneous environment, the more alluring one becomes – a logic that obtains equally well, as we saw in the second chapter, in the popular reception of Beckett. Beckett's public reluctance, I think we can agree, is not intended to have a pedagogical function.

Kafka's narratives are oriented serenely, almost classically, to the *promise* of irony, and solely to its promise, and, by not delivering any more than this promise and preserving the distance in which representation can still operate, Kafka becomes a seducer and a guide in the service of irony. In Beckett irony decomposes into its moments – the classical or tactical distance of a Kafka is not sustained. And yet that Kafka's irony sets the reader to work, seduces and shocks the reader into confronting effects of reading overlooked in lethetic reading, does not mean that Beckett is *less* work. The hermeneutic incentives that Kafka exploits, although they volatilize the reading experience, provide a more *recognizable* form of work; the work of reading Kafka remains on familiar literary ground until it simply becomes *too much* work. Beckett, on the other hand, provides fewer incentives, leaves more to the imagination – indeed for many readers Beckett leaves too much to the imagination and too little to the intellectual creature of reading habits – whereby he becomes both less work and more for the reader: less work insofar as less of an onus falls on the reader, whereupon the reader is more free to proceed as he sees fit, and more work because less inviting.

We end on a moral note regarding the *unhappiness* of the seducer, the unhappy solitude that the seducer experiences all the more profoundly as a consequence of his remaining always at a distance, his telegraphic communication – a theme particularly pertinent to Kierkegaard but also to Kafka, and not merely to their fictions but also to their lives.

Now Beckett is certainly no happy bunny, but solitude is not *enhanced* for the Beckettian subject (to the point where it becomes a kind of consolation) by the fact that it is endured *in the service* of some essential or extraneous force (whether ethical, religious or purely literary). That is, although the theme of working in the service of some remote force recurs throughout Beckett, the subject's solitude persists after the solicitations are defrauded, after every aspect of service is exhausted and the bosses and chiefs are given over to their own power. Indeed: to be operating *in the service of* ... already suggests a certain company, as the narrator in the Moran narrative is occasionally acutely aware:

> That we thought of ourselves as members of a vast organization was doubtless due to the all too human feeling that trouble shared, or is it sorrow, is trouble something, I forget the word. But to me at least, who knew how to listen to the falsetto of reason, it was obvious that we were perhaps alone in doing what we did. Yes, in my moments of

> lucidity I thought it possible. And, to keep nothing from you, this lucidity was so acute at times that I came even to doubt the existence of Gaber himself. And if I had not hastily sunk back into my darkness I might have gone to the extreme of conjuring away the chief too and regarding myself as solely responsible for my wretched existence. … And having made away with Gaber and the chief (one Youdi), could I have denied myself the pleasure of – you know. (M, 107)

By not seeking to teach or seduce us, Beckett teaches or seduces us into the thought that the teacher and seducer takes peculiar solace (finds a strange kind of company) in his own unhappiness when he conceives his unhappiness in the form of a sacrifice and himself as a meaningful exception. The seducer's solitude becomes his company, and his unhappiness his happiness – the ironist is born, in short, of an irony. Thus the figures of seduction and persecution (characteristic expressions of irony, linked to mystification and mastery respectively), which dominate both the writings and the lives of Kierkegaard and Kafka, are revealed in Beckett as complicit with the kind of thinking they seek pedagogically to exhaust.

APPENDIX

Irony … Faith: Indefensible Points of View

As for Christianity! Well, he who defends it has never believed it. (SUD, 87)

I

Socrates famously claims to be a gadfly sent by the gods, a 'divine missionary.' Kierkegaard refers to Socrates' 'divine madness' and 'divine health.' There is also the small matter of Socrates' *daimon*, his inner voice, which as Kierkegaard observes has been subjected to religious readings. We touched upon the tricky business of telling the standpoints of irony and faith apart: much as Christ outwardly exhibits signs of a master ironist, Socrates outwardly exhibits signs of a messianic figure. Of course, any blurring of conceptual boundaries does not seriously threaten our grasp of the differences between the figures of Socrates and Christ, we know our history all too well – but this is less the case with respect to the distinction between Kierkegaard the ironist and Kierkegaard the religious writer.

The crux of the matter is that irony and faith are essentially negative points of view and yet it falls to philosophy to tell them apart – philosophy, of course, will toil away until the cows come home without coming any closer to properly understanding either point of view. (From another point of view the problem never becomes one, for in as far as philosophy cannot fail to fail in relation to irony and faith it need not consider itself under any compulsion to succeed – easier said than done, needless to say.)

Under *philosophy* we understand Hegel, speculation, reason, understanding, ethics, law – positive determinations.

I propose there are two instances where this business regarding irony and faith becomes pressing.

Firstly there is Kierkegaard's point in *The Concept of Irony*, that when irony is at its most indifferent to the world it 'pronounces the same thesis as the pious mentality' (CI, 257). Irony to this extent, like faith, accepts anything and everything in its relations with the world out of total indifference to the world. A further implication is that neither point of view can be told apart from the world, i.e. not only cannot irony be told from faith, but irony and faith cannot be told from the world.

Secondly, faith offends the understanding much in the manner that irony offends the understanding, by remaining inaccessible to it.

Thus on the one hand irony and faith are invisible to the world by virtue of their total indifference to the world, and pass secretly through the world without drawing attention to themselves – and on the other hand irony and faith become visible to the world on account of their offensive qualities, and appear to solicit their own persecution.

II

The distinction between the standpoints of irony and faith is a marginal concern in *The Concept of Irony*, but by virtue of the authorship that follows, passages touching upon the distinction obtain a belated significance.

This passage, for instance:

> insofar as irony, when it realizes that existence has no reality [*Realitet*], pronounces the same thesis as the pious mentality, irony might seem to be a kind of religious devotion. If I may put it this way, in religious devotion the lower actuality [*Virkelighed*], that is, the relationships with the world, loses its validity, but this occurs only insofar as the relationships with God simultaneously affirm their absolute reality. The devout mind also declares that all is vanity, but this is only insofar as through this negation all disturbing factors are set aside and the eternally existing order comes into view. Add to this the fact that if the devout mind finds everything to be vanity, it makes no exception of its own person, makes no commotion about it; on the contrary, it also must be set aside so that the divine will not be thrust back by its opposition but will pour itself into the mind opened by devotion. ... In irony, however, since everything is shown to be vanity, the subject becomes free. The more vain everything becomes, all the lighter, emptier, and volatized the subject becomes. And while everything is in the process of becoming vanity, the ironic subject does not become vain in his own eyes but rescues his own vanity. (CI, 257-8)

Agacinski scores the significance of this passage for the role of irony and the *incognito* across the authorship:

> are we so far removed here from the Socratic irony, which sweeps itself away into death? Isn't faith another name for death, the ultimate form of obliteration? Irony might thus represent the point of view nearest the religious point of view; it would be the prelude, not so much to speculation, as to religiousness. One more step, and ironic skepticism opens onto religious humor. ... How are we to get our bearings here if the ironist, like the man of faith, always travels *incognito*? *Nothing sets them apart from others, nothing sets them apart from one another, either.* (A, 71, my italics)

Because Socrates' irony makes 'no exception of its own person,' apparently Socrates occupies the standpoint of faith before the possibility of faith properly understood is given, with the figure of Christ. Irony becomes 'the prelude ... to religiousness.' Socrates' historical anteriority to Christ becomes irony's *conceptual anteriority* to faith.

However, the context of Kierkegaard's remarks is not Socrates' irony, but the Romantics'. And, as we have already seen, the problem with these pseudo-ironists is that they exist entirely at the whim of an aesthetic and childish immediacy, yet turn this 'slavery' (284) on its head in order to pass off their random moods and the dramatic poses they ultimately cannot help but assume, in short the boundless and meaningless elasticity of their position, as proof of *living poetically*: 'Everything established in the given actuality has nothing but poetic validity for the ironist, for he, after all, is living poetically' (283).

However:

> it is ... one thing to compose oneself poetically; it is something else to be composed poetically. The Christian lets himself be poetically composed, and in this respect a simple Christian lives far more poetically than many a brilliant intellectual. (280-1) ... An individual who lets himself be poetically composed does have a definite given context into which he has to fit and thus does not become a word without meaning because it is wrenched out of its associations. But for the ironist [the Romantic], this context, which he would call a demanding appendix, has no validity, and since it is not his concern to form himself in such a way that he fits into his environment, then the environment must be formed to fit him – in other words, he poetically composes not only himself but he poetically composes his environment also. The ironist stands proudly inclosed within himself, and just as Adam had the animals pass by, he lets people pass before him and finds no fellowship for himself. (283)

Here Kierkegaard closes ranks with Hegel against the Romantics. Insofar as the Romantics 'suspend what is constitutive in actuality' (morality and ethics) it is not because they propose to replace it with anything higher (283). In this respect they are similar to Socrates, but for them, unlike for Socrates, a higher 'task' or demand is given. Where the *steadfastness* of Socrates' point of view is tailored to the absence of a higher task or demand, the Romantics seek only to rescue their own vanity: 'For him, life is a drama, and what absorbs him is the ingenious complication of this drama' (283). Where the simple Christian lets himself be poetically composed and steadfastly aligned with his age in and through his task, the brilliant Romantic, existing almost entirely consciously, works himself loose from his age as a consequence of his efforts to comport himself poetically. By seeking to compose himself, the Romantic subject never lets himself be, he is harried, harries himself, from one position to another, one mood to another, and, like a single word seeking to stand for all of language by standing by itself, is 'wrenched out of his associations,' and ends up standing for nothing at all.

With regard to Socrates' point of view in relation to faith, *Fear and Trembling* provides a clearer picture. The distinction between Socrates the ironist and Abraham the man of faith corresponds to that between the *movement of infinite resignation* and the *leap of faith*. We are dealing with a distinction between *interiorities*:

> The paradox of faith is this, that there is an interiority that is incommensurable with the exterior, an interiority which, it should be stressed, is not identical with the first [a

> childish interiority that philosophy demands grows up], but is a new interiority. This must not be overlooked. Recent philosophy has allowed itself without further ado to substitute the immediate for 'faith'. If one does that it is ridiculous to deny that faith has existed throughout all ages. Faith in such a case keeps fairly ordinary company, it belongs with feeling, mood, idiosyncrasy, hysteria and the rest. So far philosophy is right to say one should not stop at that. But there is nothing to warrant philosophy's speaking in this manner. Prior to faith there is a movement of infinity, and only then enters faith, *nec opinate* [unexpectedly], on the strength of the absurd. This I am very well able to understand, without claiming thereby to have faith. If faith is no more than what philosophy passes it off as then Socrates himself already went further, much further, rather than the converse, that he didn't come that far. He made the movement of infinity intellectually. His ignorance is the infinite resignation. That task is in itself a match for human strength, even if people nowadays scorn it; yet it is only when this has been done, only when the individual has exhausted himself in the infinite, that he reaches the point where faith can emerge. (FT, 97)

'Infinite resignation is the last stage before faith, so that anyone who has not made this movement does not have faith' (75). This movement involves renouncing everything in actuality, in the case of faith to regain it on the strength of the absurd, and in the case of irony to become nothing. Faith regains the finite through an infinite movement. *Irony*, however, does not recover itself into any finitude, does not regain the finite, and becomes nothing. Socrates makes the movement of infinite resignation before the possibility of faith is given, and therefore he dies. Abraham makes the infinite movement, renounces the world, and receives it back again; Socrates makes the infinite movement, renounces the world, and becomes nothing (returning to haunt in the form of irony).

Of the man of faith: 'No heavenly glance or any other sign of the incommensurable betrays him' (68); 'One detects nothing of the strangeness and superiority that mark the knight of the infinite' – the strangeness and superiority, that is, of the ironist. This 'strangeness' is on account of the 'knight of infinite resignation's' incommensurability with reality: 'irony and humour reflect also upon themselves and so belong in the sphere of infinite resignation, they owe their resilience to the individual's incommensurability with reality' (80). *Incommensurability,* as the translator notes, does not mean *incompatibility*, but that there is no common measure for subject and actuality (Hannay, n52, 152). Both subjects (the Christian and the ironist) are *incommensurable* with their respective actualities, but where the Christian betrays no sign of his incommensurability, the ironist constantly 'collides' with his age (CI, 283).[1]

Kierkegaard declares he can understand Socrates; Socrates' irony, his ignorance, his intellectual movement of infinite resignation, 'in itself a match for human strength,' still falls

[1] Where the Romantic is incompatible with the demands of his age, Socrates is entirely compatible with the demands of his age, indeed he answers to them. By the same token, the Romantic is commensurable with his age, and to be measured in terms of his age, unlike Socrates, who is entirely incommensurable with his age, whose compatibility with the demands of his age *is* his incommensurability with his age. Socrates provides the infinite measure that ruins the finite measures flourishing in his age.

within, or *at* the limits of philosophy. Abraham, by contrast, is incomprehensible. Abraham may be a man of faith, or he may be a potential murderer - he's a *madman* in any case.

Irony thus appears to belong to the understanding although it culminates where the understanding leaves off, but 'faith begins precisely where thinking leaves off' (FT, 82). The difference is that irony does not *begin* where thinking leaves off but culminates at this point: in other words, irony (Socrates' ignorance) is most fully developed where thinking leaves off and faith, potentially, begins. Irony is most fully developed where it slips off into faith, or death.

Which brings us to our second subject, the nature of the offense irony and faith have in common. I toiled away at the nature of irony's offense in the first chapter, so I'll try and keep this short. Faith, like irony, offends if it is not properly understood; like irony, faith offends the understanding:

> There is much talk about being offended by Christianity because it is so dark and gloomy, offended because it is so rigorous etc., but it would be best of all to explain for once that the real reason that men are offended by Christianity is that it is too high, because its goal is not man's goal, because it wants to make man into something so extraordinary that he cannot grasp the thought. (SUD, 83)

In *The Sickness Unto Death*, Kierkegaard conceives offense from one point of view as 'Christianity's weapon against all speculation' (83) and from another as 'unhappy admiration' 'related to envy' (86). In this strictly religious sense, faith *should* offend if not properly understood: speculation *should* take offence at the notion that the individual human being is *directly before God*: 'The idea of the individual human being – before God – never enters speculation's mind. It only universalizes individual human beings fantastically into the race' (83).

By doing away with the offense of faith, by 'defending Christianity in such a way that the offense [is] removed,' one also does away with the 'qualification *before God*.'

Speculation seeks to establish faith without offense. In speculation the determination of faith falls to the race, faith is universalised into the race and for the race, and the race determines what is and what is not faith. In speculation God, or the qualification of the individual human being *directly before God*, is left out of the divine equation, along with offense.

Consequently where faith fails to offend the understanding it is because speculation presumes it has accounted for faith, in which case we are not dealing with faith properly understood but faith universalized into the race. Where faith does offend it is because faith does not lend itself to speculation, because it is 'too high' for speculation, because 'its goal is not man's goal.' Hence faith offends or fails to offend in much the same manner as irony, except of course that for irony it is not the qualification before God that is signal, but the subject delighting in its divorce from the race.

In fact, is it not perhaps the case that irony is more offensive to the understanding, albeit less so at first, for where faith demands belief and is immediately offensive to speculation, irony demands understanding and then plays hard to get, demands education and then proves too willing to learn. Where faith demands a leap on the strength of the absurd, irony lays speculation on its own rack. Faith is more immediately offensive in as far as it declares its life beyond understanding; irony becomes offensive only as speculation understands itself deceived.

Irony, then, remains offensive even once the offense of faith has been eliminated by speculation.

Finally, like those most offended by irony, those most offended by faith are those that stand to lose the most through faith, the subjects that secretly have the most in common with faith:

> The degree of offense depends on how passionate a man's admiration is. The more prosaic people, lacking in imagination and passion and thus not particularly given to admiration, are also offended, but they limit themselves to saying: Such a thing I do not understand; I leave it alone. They are the skeptics. But the more passion and imagination a person has – consequently, the closer he is, in a certain sense (in possibility) to being able to believe ... to humbling himself in adoration under the extraordinary – the more passionate is his offense, which finally cannot be satisfied with anything less than getting this rooted out, annihilated, trampled into the dirt. (86)

In terms of faith the most obvious example is P/Saul. As Saul is passionately offended by Christ, his conversion is passionate. As Saul is passionately offended by Christ, his offense also assists in the development of faith through the persecution of faith. With irony the same principle holds true: where offense is taken, there one may adduce irony in common, albeit secreted within the offended subject, secreted behind the offense taken. Irony properly understood emancipates, airs, this secret, this duplicity, this stopping short, and tumbles it, on the strength of the offense taken, out of concealment; and the offended subject assists in the development of irony because he 'finally cannot be satisfied with anything less than getting this rooted out, annihilated, trampled into the dirt.' Thus in terms of irony a possible example is always Hegel, who could be a master ironist on the very grounds that he never signals ironic intent, and, by doing his utmost to trample Schlegel and irony into the dirt, helps develop the possibility of irony properly understood in his own age.

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