

Entering the Literary Field

Joyce and Proust: Involuntary Epics

Samuel Beckett was a profoundly postwar writer. Although he began writing in the late 1920s, his major fiction—the *nouvelles*, the so-called Trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, and *Texts for Nothing*—was written in a remarkable five-year period immediately following Beckett's return to Paris in 1945. By the mid-1950s, he had become, as Kenneth Rexroth called him in a 1956 review of the Trilogy, an "international public figure like Lollobrigida or Khrushchev" whose reputation was (and still is) based almost exclusively on the critical success of the Trilogy and *Endgame* (1957) and the more popular success of *Waiting for Godot* (1953). While Beckett's cryptic declarations about an aesthetic of "failure" have been taken to refer to everything from the universal human condition to a postmodernist dissolution of the writing subject, the more mundane meaning of failure should not be overlooked. At the beginning of the 1950s, the two books of fiction Beckett had published in the 1930s, *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy*, were virtually unknown, while his third novel, *Watt*, finished during the war, had been repeatedly rejected by publishers.¹ Put bluntly, Beckett had failed to establish himself as a recognized or economically self-sustaining writer.² After the war Beckett managed to take stock of this failure, chose a new language and audience (French), and developed both a new narrative point of view and a significantly different attitude toward writing as a communicative act. In so doing, he transformed failure into a stunning success.

Of course, it is hardly unusual for a great writer's youthful work to fail to measure up to mature masterpieces. Yet what strikes the reader familiar with the span of Beckett's career is the degree of sophistication and complexity of much of his interwar writing, not its immaturity. The failure of Beckett's interwar fiction is rooted in a particular form of artistic growing pains: his ambivalent and often self-contradictory attitudes toward the "literary field"; that is, the set of aesthetic and literary values of the early twentieth century in relation to which Beckett, as a young writer, shaped his own vision of literary art.³ Beckett's earliest fiction reveals conflicting allegiances to a number of incompatible ideas about language and the social function of art. These wayward allegiances hold a key to understanding Beckett's development as a writer; for what appears as self-contradiction in Beckett's early writing becomes, in one way or another, explicitly thematized and incorporated into the narrative form of his postwar fiction. His early works are contradictory; his later works are intentionally "about" contradictions.

Criticism devoted to Beckett's oeuvre has dealt with the earlier work generally in two unsatisfactory ways. For some, the early writing reveals in embryonic form the themes and techniques of the postwar work, which is acknowledged as the ultimate achievement. Others take an approach analogous to the museum retrospective of an artistic genius: every scrap of writing is a unified and significant object in its own right and deserves extended admiration. The first approach distorts the early work by imposing upon it the necessity of leading up in a linear fashion to an inevitable telos; the second suspends critical judgment. My approach takes something from both.⁴ My interest in Beckett's very first published works, written between 1929 and 1934 before his first novel *Murphy*, lies chiefly in how they reveal Beckett's attempt to negotiate the competing claims of the literary field, a *mélange* of beliefs and techniques which included: aestheticist notions of artistic genius and the autotelic work of art, a "Joycean" experimentation with radical stylistic diversity and the creation of a synthetic literary language, "Eliotic" ideas about the value of myth and literary tradition, the surrealist fascination with automatic writing and the creative resources of the unconscious, an *avant-gardist* hostility to the bourgeois institution of art and the commodifiable artwork, and various forms of anticapitalism, left wing and right, populist and aristocratic.⁵

Beckett's career got its first important push in 1929, when James Joyce asked the twenty-three year old literary scholar and aspiring poet, who had recently arrived in Paris to teach in an exchange program between Trinity College, Dublin and the Ecole Normale Supérieur, to submit a piece to a collection of essays promoting the forthcoming publication of *Finnegans Wake* (then called *Work in Progress*). While both this piece, "Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce" (*sic*) and an extended essay on Marcel Proust, commissioned by a London publisher and published in 1931, are significant works in the Beckett canon, they are difficult to read as serious attempts at criticism or aesthetic theory. Beckett makes little attempt to engage in a recognizable critical discourse—journalistic, scholarly, or belletristic. He exploits ellipticism, parody, provocation, and an idiosyncratic set of terms and allusions, in a mode much closer to the *avant-gardist* manifesto than to literary exegesis. Neither criticism distanced from its object nor direct declarations of his own artistic stance, these writings and their elliptical arguments demonstrate, more than anything else, Beckett's earliest attempts to smooth over a set of conflicting, contradictory ideas and claims about modernist literary art.⁶

The earlier essay discovers in Joyce's "Work in Progress" an ideal of aesthetic autonomy: "Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*" (*Disjecta* 27; emphasis in text). Joyce's writing has no communicative function; or rather, it only communicates self-referentially. In one sense, this statement echoes the philosophical tradition that defined the specifically aesthetic experience as that which transcends the cognitive or critical faculty's division between the general and the particular, or as that which fuses form and content. Joyce merely

brings the aesthetic to its fruition. Yet Beckett goes on to specify “the formal structure raised by Mr. Joyce after years of patient and inspired labour” (31) in terms of the artistic material of *Work in Progress*, Joyce’s created language. Beckett justifies Joyce’s invention of a language no one else speaks or writes, an aesthetically autonomous language, through analogy with Dante’s provocative innovation in literary language, the adoption of Italian over Latin:

If English is not yet so definitely a polite necessity as Latin was in the Middle Ages, at least one is justified in declaring that its position in relation to other European languages is to a great extent that of mediæval Latin to the Italian dialects. Dante did not adopt the vulgar out of any kind of local jingoism nor out of any determination to assert the superiority of Tuscan to all its rivals as a form of spoken Italian. . . . His [Dante’s] conclusion is that the corruption common to all dialects makes it impossible to select one rather than another as an adequate literary form, and that he who would write in the vulgar must assemble the purest elements of each dialect and construct a synthetic language that would at least possess more than a circumscribed local interest: which is precisely what he did. He did not write in Florentine any more than he did in Neapolitan. He wrote a vulgar that could have been spoken by an ideal Italian . . . but which in fact was certainly not spoken nor ever had been. Which disposes of the capital objection [to Joyce’s work] . . . that at least Dante wrote what was being spoken in the streets of his own town, whereas no creature in heaven or earth ever spoke the language of *Work in Progress*. (31)

For Beckett, the creation of “a synthetic language” is a response to both an officially prescribed, dominant literary language—Latin or standard English—and the corrupted forms of spoken dialect. The ideal literary language also resists the regional and national identities encoded in everyday speech. Beckett views the process of “formal innovation” (31) in literature not so much in terms of an internal transformation of technique, taking place from one literary generation to the next, but in terms of distinguishing the literary from ossified standardization or merely “local” spoken language.

Walter Pater, in his essay on “Style” (1888), had already made a similar case in defense of literary prose. Like Beckett’s, Pater’s defense of aesthetically autonomous prose described literary language as a unique type of discourse that distanced itself from science, history, “analysis,” and the “vulgarity in the actual world” (Pater 14); the artist, wrote Pater, “opposes the constant degradation of language” (17). While science deals with “fact,” and history is on the “border of science,” artistic prose writing expresses “sense” (4–6). Language, for artists, is a raw “material,” a medium like the “sculptor’s marble” (9). Good writing aims at a “unity or identity of mind” (19). Music becomes “the ideal of all art . . . because in music it is impossible to

distinguish the form from the substance or matter" (35). Yet the tone of Beckett's defense, and of Joyce's work, is far from Pater's aestheticist notion of art as a "cloistered refuge" for the "select few" (14): "Here is direct expression," Beckett exclaims, "and if you don't understand it, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is because you are too decadent to receive it" (26). Pater ends his essay with an appeal to the "matter" of art, the "dignity of its interests . . . devoted further to the increase of men's happiness, the redemption of the oppressed . . . the glory of God" (36). While Pater argues for the "beauties of prose" (2), Beckett argues for other qualities: "Shakespeare uses fat, greasy words to express corruption. . . . We hear the ooze squelching all through Dickens' description of the Thames. . . . This writing that you find so obscure [in Joyce] . . . is the savage economy of hieroglyphics. Here words are not the polite contortions of twentieth-century printer's ink" (28). The surprising reference to Dickens in itself marks, in relation to the tenor of the rest of the essay, an uneasy attachment to the autonomy Beckett espouses. While maintaining a concept of autonomy that shares much with Pater's aestheticism and its idealization of unity of form and content in the autotelic work, the appeal is to disruption rather than refuge, provocation rather than cloister, contortion rather than beauty. Beckett inflects his Pateresque defense of literary language with a surrealistlike antiaestheticism. "Beauty shall be CONVULSIVE," André Breton, the founder of the Surrealist movement, had claimed some years earlier, "or it will not be at all" (Breton 160).

This uneasy mixture of aestheticist purity and avant-gardist provocation is elaborated in the essay on Proust. Beckett describes Proust's writing as a break with rationality in terms similar to the surrealist program of automatic writing, which demanded that the writer cede all conscious effort in the process of composition. Chance, spontaneity, and the unconscious could then break through the barrier of social convention, to access a deeper poetic truth.⁷ At the same time, Beckett's admiring interpretation of Proust centers on a set of oppositions—subject/object, fact/feeling, the real/the imagined, intellection/sensation, surface/essence, classical/romantic—that were common in theories of aestheticism and modernist impressionism, from Pater and Proust himself to Ford and Woolf.⁸ Beckett generalizes these oppositions in terms specific to Proust's fiction: voluntary as opposed to involuntary memory. The devalued term is the first: "Voluntary memory (Proust repeats it ad nauseam) is of no value as an instrument of evocation, and provides an image as far removed from the real as the myth of our imagination or the caricature furnished by direct perception. There is only one real impression and one adequate mode of evocation. Over neither have we the least control" (*PTD* 15).

Voluntary memory is a form of conscious control that blocks the perception of the "real." It is similar to "habit":

When the object is perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family, when it appears independent of any general notion and detached from the sanity of a cause, isolated and inexplicable in the light of ignorance, then and then only may it be a source of enchant-

ment. Unfortunately Habit has laid its veto on this form of perception, its action being precisely to hide the essence—the Idea—of the object in the haze of conception—preconception. (23)

Like bourgeois morality, or the disenchanting rationality of the modern, industrial world, “Habit is a compromise between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability” (19). Beckett’s emphasis is not, however, on *conscious* innovation that dislodges knowledge or perception of the object from conventional thought, but on the cessation of rational control altogether:

Involuntary memory is explosive . . . in its flame it has consumed Habit and all its works, and in its brightness revealed what the mock reality of experience never can and never will reveal—the real. But involuntary memory is an unruly magician and will not be importuned. It chooses its own time and place for the performance of its miracle . . . the first [miracle of involuntary memory]—the famous episode of the madeleine steeped in tea—would justify the assertion that his entire book is a monument to involuntary memory and the epic of its action. The whole of Proust’s world comes out of a teacup. (33–34)

Beckett further emphasizes the irrational by referring to the objects that spark off involuntary memory “by some immediate and fortuitous act of perception” as “fetishes”—the madeleine or “the noise of a spoon against a plate” (36–37). Yet this access to “the real” is also described by analogy to the technology of representation. Shocked out of his habitual mode of perception by the sight of his dead grandmother, Proust’s narrator is given access to a vision of reality: “The notion of what he should see has not had time to interfere its prism [*sic*] between the eye and its object. His eye functions with the cruel precision of a camera; it photographs the reality of his grandmother” (27). Again, in reference to the image of Albertine: “Albertine is multiple, and just as the most modern applications of photography can frame a single church successively in the arches of all the others thus decomposing the illusion of a solid object into its manifold component aspects, so the short journey of his lips to the cheek of Albertine creates ten Albertines, and transforms a human banality into a many headed goddess” (49). Beckett presents the characteristic quality of Proust’s writing as a direct recording of impressions without the imposition of rational thought or agency. He formulates this in several variations—“He is almost exempt from the impurity of will . . . will, being utilitarian, servant of intelligence and habit, is not a condition of the artistic experience” (90); “we are reminded of Schopenhauer’s definition of the artistic procedure as ‘the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason’”—(87) and develops it as a principle of narrative, contrasting it with “the grotesque fallacy of a realistic art” (76) and classicism. “The classical artist assumes omniscience and omnipotence. He raises himself ar-

tificially out of Time in order to give relief to his chronology and causality to his development. Proust's chronology is extremely difficult to follow, the succession of events spasmodic, and his characters and themes . . . are presented and developed with a . . . contempt for the vulgarity of a plausible concatenation" (81-82).

This view of Proust's writing, however, cannot be sustained, because the "involuntary" allows only a negative definition of the artistic work—"the artist is active, but negatively" (65)—instinctual, will-less, by accident, detached, inexplicable. The only positive element in Beckett's account is the distorting or interfering power of reason and will, the instrumental forces that involuntary memory overcomes. But Beckett is far too attached to the notion of the writer as the conscious creator of a new language—Joyce's "years of patient and inspired labour"—and of literature as an autonomous activity with its own set of rules and logic, to be satisfied with relegating art to the unconscious and the agentless. The similarity between his characterization of Proust and the surrealist notion of automatic writing suggests the contradiction in Beckett's argument. As Raymond Williams put it in his discussion of Surrealism,

One can look back on "automatic writing," for all the meagerness of its actual results, with a certain respect for its ambitions of practice. . . . For language was being simultaneously identified with the blocking of "true consciousness" and, to the extent that it could emancipate itself from its imprisoning everyday forms and, beyond that, from the received forms of "literature," as itself the medium of the idealized "pure consciousness" . . . most writers stayed in the double position and then of course at once encountered the obvious and ominous question of "communication". . . . There [was] an emphasis . . . on the experience itself, rather than any of the forms of embodying or communicating it. (*Politics* 73)

In the Joyce essay, language was "the experience itself" rather than its communication. Yet Beckett's defense of Joyce's language through analogy with Dante's Italian implied, at the same time, an "ideal" communicability, a pure language assimilating "all the dialects of his country" (*Disjecta* 30). In the Proust essay the emphasis is not directly on language, but on involuntary memory which, like automatic writing, serves to access "real" consciousness. If, for the surrealists, language was both what blocked access to the real and the means of reaching it, for Beckett's Proust, the act of narrating—ordered, willed and active composition—blocks access to the real, but must also, somehow, be a means of representing the real. Beckett's solution to this double position follows a formulation from the last volume of *A la Recherche*:

Now he [the narrator] sees his regretted failure to observe artistically as a series of "inspired omissions" and the work of art as neither created nor chosen, but discovered, uncovered, excavated, pre-existing within the artist, a law of his nature. . . . The conclusions of the intelligence are merely of arbitrary value, potentially valid. "An impression [writes

Proust] is for the writer what an experiment is for the scientist—with this difference, that in the case of the scientist the action of the intelligence precedes the event and in the case of the writer it follows it.” . . . The artist has acquired his text: the artisan translates it. “The duty and the task of a writer (not an artist, a writer) are those of a translator.” (84)

The opposing terms are familiar, though here not only is the artist distinguished from the scientist, but the artistic process is conceived as the reverse of the scientific, strengthening its claim of autonomy. Intelligence, formerly banished from the artistic in the essay, now reappears as a secondary feature. But the separation is maintained by the untenable dichotomies: art and artisan, artist and writer. The implication is that art itself is essentially an experience, while the actual work of art is a secondary phenomenon. Beckett's choice of “artisan” (in the place of Proust's “translator”), like his image of Joyce's labor, recalls Pater's vision of Flaubert as “the martyr of literary style” (24); as Flaubert himself put it, “my labour like a true working man, who . . . beats away at his anvil” (qtd. in Pater 26).

When Beckett reiterates the dichotomy a few pages later, contradictions within and between the avant-gardist and aestheticist attitudes becomes glaring: “For Proust the quality of language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics. Indeed he makes no attempt to dissociate form from content. . . . The Proustian world is expressed metaphorically by the artisan because it is apprehended metaphorically by the artist: the indirect and comparative expression of indirect and comparative perception” (88). Somehow, “quality of language” is separate from “aesthetics” (which now seems linked with “ethics”). The semantic distance between artist and artisan is maintained, but only by the further polarization of perception and expression, both of which are metaphorical, “indirect and comparative.” Neither of these terms supports the claim for the nonrational or “involuntary” nature of the creative process and access to “the real.” The oppositions that centered on the distance between “voluntary” and “involuntary” necessarily collapse when Beckett attempts to account for Proust as a writer.

The avant garde's stance against the constraint of rationality involved an antagonism to the *work* of art itself, the commodifiable object valued by the bourgeois institution of art. Ideally, dada and surrealism would not create artistic objects, but would break down the distance between art and life. Beckett takes a position close to surrealism concerning the constricting role of rational and conscious composition, but maintains a contradictory aestheticist emphasis on the work of art as an end in its own right. Toward the end of the essay, the pressure to account for Proust as an active creator of the “epic” of involuntary memory leads Beckett to situate him in a number of well-established literary roles: visionary romantic (“art is the apotheosis of solitude” [64]; “He is a Romantic in his anxiety to accomplish his mission. . . . He does not seek to evade the implications of his art such as it has been revealed to him” [81]); amoral aesthete (“Proust is completely detached from all moral considerations” [66]; “his complete indifference to moral values and human justices” [89]); symbolist

("Proust's point of departure might be situated in Symbolism" [80]); impressionist ("By his impressionism I mean his non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception" [86]). The last paragraph evokes the Pateresque trope of music as the aesthetic ideal: "Music is the Idea itself, unaware of the world of phenomena, existing ideally outside the universe . . . untouched by the teleological hypothesis. . . . Music is the catalytic element in the work of Proust" (92).

While devoid of the argumentation that the essays provide, Beckett's often-referred-to "German letter of 1937" concerning his own work stages the same instability:

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. . . . As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. . . . Or is literature alone to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have been so long ago abandoned by music and painting? . . . so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights. . . . At first it can only be a matter of somehow finding a method by which we can represent this mocking attitude towards the words, through words. . . . An assault against words in the name of beauty. (*Disjecta* 172–73)

Language is both the "veil" and the means of tearing it apart; words must be "mis-used" so that "literature" may approach "music and painting"; words are both non-communicative and nonrational, "a path of sounds" which nevertheless need to "represent this mocking attitude," and all of this "in the name of beauty." The letter demonstrates an apparently urgent attempt to define a position within a set of attitudes that cannot cohere.

"It Is Not": Juxtaposition and Ethical Judgment in "Dante and the Lobster"

Like his early critical writing Beckett's earliest fiction reveals an attempt to reconcile a set of conflicting cultural attitudes. As its title suggests, Beckett's second published story, "Dante and the Lobster," which appeared as the leading story in his first published book of fiction, *More Pricks than Kicks*, employs the surrealist technique of juxtaposition. Breton had advocated a poetic image based on Lautréamont's jarring juxtaposition of objects from divergent spheres of everyday life—"the fortuitous encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissecting table" (qtd. in Lippard 2).⁹ Beckett's juxtaposition depends on a different type of contrast that the story goes on to exploit: the young hero's immersion in translating Dante is disrupted by his obligation to run an errand for his aunt, buying a lobster for dinner. The two sides of the contrast—the study of classical literature and the "obligations" (10) of everyday life—are for the hero antithetical; however, by the end of the story—a

collagelike parodic presentation of an afternoon in the life of the juvenile, artistic-bohemian protagonist in Dublin—the omniscient narrator attempts to mediate high art and mundane life with a third element: a moral or ethical judgment about suffering and justice.

The story begins with the hero's head in a book: "It was morning and Belacqua was stuck in the first of the canti in the moon. He was so bogged that he could move neither backward nor forward. Blissful Beatrice was there, Dante also, and she explained the spots on the moon to him" (9). The first paragraph extends this motif. Belacqua (the protagonist's name is an allusion to a character in Dante, canto four of the *Purgatorio*, and his "legendary torpitude" [Kenner 18]) is immobilized by a literary problem. "He pored over the enigma, he would not concede himself conquered, he would understand at least the meanings of the words" (9). Literature appears as a closed system: just as the story assumes the reader's familiarity with Dante, understanding *The Divine Comedy* is presented as internal to Dante's work itself. Belacqua the reader is presented on the same plane with the figures in the poem, the poet Dante and Beatrice. Yet the third-person narration breaks the hermeticism of the literary realm. The storytelling voice, although focalized here through Belacqua, is on a separate diegetic plane. While the story represents literature as a unidimensional, closed-off realm, Beckett's omniscient, parodic narration—which relies on distance, on one perspective reflecting on and contrasting with another—emphasizes a discontinuity between literary tradition and the world from which the story is narrated.

The theme of literary culture as an hermetic system is expanded in the next two paragraphs, which also delineate the story's controlling juxtaposition:

He was still running his brain against this impenetrable passage when he heard midday strike. At once he switched his mind off its task. He scooped his fingers under the book and shoved it back till it lay wholly on his palms. The *Divine Comedy* face upward on the lectern of his palms. Thus disposed he raised it under his nose and there he slammed it shut. He held it aloft for a time, squinting at it angrily. . . . Nothing could be done until his mind got better and was still, which gradually it did and was. Then he ventured to consider what he had to do next. There was always something one had to do next. Three large obligations presented themselves. First lunch, then the lobster, then the Italian lesson. (9–10)

Belacqua "switched his mind" from Dante to "obligations," from literature to everyday life. While the transition is presented as absolute, as "switch" implies, his mind needs to become "still" before the transition can be effected. The literary landmark, *The Divine Comedy*, becomes materialized as an object, which he slams shut and considers "angrily." The transition between art and life involves a hostile gesture toward one realm or the other. The narrative style also registers the switch, from an

allusive beginning in which the protagonist is viewed as inside the literary system, along with Dante and Beatrice, to the quotidian list: lunch, lobster, lesson.

In modernist visual art the collage achieves its effects by linking diverse materials usually considered functionally distinct—a painted surface and a scrap of newspaper, for example, in a work by Picasso. In the story, however, the controlling contrast seems not only to juxtapose culture and everyday life, or art and obligation, but to reverse their functions. The hero's frustration and immobility when immersed in Dante unsettle his mind. Yet "lunch," first appearing as the disruptive "obligation," is presented in the terms of isolation, sensation, and passion usually associated with a romanticist aesthetic:

He must be left strictly alone, he must have complete quiet and privacy, to prepare the food for his lunch. (10); Toast must not on any account be done too rapidly. . . . Otherwise you only charred the outside and left the pith as sodden as before. If there was one thing he abominated more than another it was to feel his teeth meet in a bath of pith and dough. (11); He would snap at it [the sandwich] with closed eyes, he would gnash it into a pulp, he would vanquish it utterly with his fangs. Then the anguish of pungency, the pang of the spices, as each mouthful died, scorching his palate, bringing tears. (13)

Of course, this is parody. But the lunch of charred toast, "Savora, salt and Cayenne" (12) and "Gorgonzola cheese" (13) is also another juxtaposition and an affront to bourgeois taste, in its most literal sense: "He didn't want fragrance, he wasn't a bloody gourmet, he wanted a good stench" (14). Nor is it free from literary allusion: "gorgonzola" is the petit bourgeois Leopold Bloom's lunch as well. The story emphasizes both a separation of art and life, Dante and the lobster, and a parodic type of unification. The humor of the lunch comes from the aestheticistlike emphasis on sensation over a trivial and definitely antiaestheticist object: "a good stench." In *Molloy*, Beckett will pose culture (in the sense of the cultivation of manners and taste) as the source of both the hero's suffering and the effective articulation of his misery. Here, however, there is neither suffering nor causal identification. Instead, there is bohemian indignation.

The figure of Belacqua is himself a juxtaposition of art and social life, both an allusion to Dante and, as he is referred to in another story from *More Pricks than Kicks*, a bohemian "dirty lowdown Low Church Protestant high brow" (172). Since the middle of the nineteenth century the figure of the bohemian in European culture symbolized an attempt to make the celebration of everyday life the focus of art; Belacqua's aesthete-bohemianism emphasizes this attempt and, at the same time, the distance between the everyday and the properly artistic.¹⁰ While he devotes his attention to Dante and the sensations of his grotesque lunch, his indignation is directed at domestic life. He burns a hole in the wallpaper of his cheap room—"This

was hooliganism pure and simple. What the hell did he care? Was it his wall?" (12). His walk to the grocer stresses his isolation: "Now the great thing was to avoid being accosted. To be stopped . . . and have conversational nuisance committed all over him would be a disaster" (13). He despises his connection to family, "his lousy old bitch of an aunt" (16). He is antibourgeois, bohemian poor, an aesthete of the grotesque, but like Pater a lover of Dante.

When focalized through Belacqua, the omniscient narrator shares with him the clashing attitudes of the aesthete, bohemian, and classicist. However, there are moments when the narrative focus shifts and the voice has no apparent relation to the characters, especially when there is an ethical evaluation made or suggested. On one hand, there seems to be an attempt to portray the juxtaposition of attitudes and tastes as itself an ethical stance. On the other, the ethical suggestions cannot be made through the techniques of collage, nor through Belacqua's contradictory assemblage of attitudes and tastes. In order to suggest, as the story does, that the bohemian-aesthete is somehow superior to his surroundings and sensitive to suffering and injustice, Beckett needs another type of narrative voice and a more integrative story structure. An aesthetic resolution or epiphany that would bind the elements in the story seems at variance with the principles of collage, though not in any absolute sense (a good collage is harmonious regardless of its disparate, "nonorganic" character), but as a matter of degree and emphasis. Thus, Beckett tries to resolve the juxtapositions through a nonfocalized (i.e., independent from the consciousness of the characters) ethical realization at the end of the story. This attempted resolution is set up through the story's minimal, but necessary, plot.

The plot revolves around a trivial problem. The story takes place in Dublin and begins with Belacqua alone in his room, immersed in a translation problem in Dante. He hears "midday strike" (9) and mechanically switches his mind to the "three large obligations" (10) that will take up the rest of his afternoon. While making his grotesque-aesthete lunch, he notices a photo in the *Herald*, which he is using as a tablecloth. "The rather handsome face of McCabe the assassin stared up at him." He makes his toast with "real skill" to ensure the desired "bathos of pith and dough" (11). The narration of the toast making is interrupted by a brief reflection, relating back to the passage in Dante, but allusively presented: "The spots were Cain with his truss of thorns, dispossessed, cursed from the earth, fugitive and vagabond. The moon was that countenance fallen and branded, seared with the first stigma of God's pity, that an outcast might not die quickly" (12).

The "outcast" in Dante is structurally related to the condemned assassin McCabe in the newspaper, but Beckett does not make the connection explicit. The connecting evaluation is embedded in the reflection on Dante and the disapproving attitude toward a religious morality that exalts suffering over forgiveness. Belacqua continues to make his toast, and then ventures out to the grocer to buy his cheese. He is careful to avoid others, since the enjoyment of his lunch depends on isolation. He enters "a little family grocery. In the shop they were not surprised. Most days, about this hour, he shot in off the street in this way" (13). Although the action is habitual,

and Belacqua feels that the family “were very decent obliging people” (14), there is no personal interaction between the customer and the grocer. Because the cheese is not the “stenching rotten lump” Belacqua desires, he becomes indignant, but storms out with the cheese anyway, while the grocer remains impassive. Significantly, for the first time in the story there is a shift in narrative point of view:

The grocer, without closing his eyes or taking them off the receding figure, blew his nose in the skirt of his apron. Being a warm-hearted human man he felt sympathy and pity for this queer customer who always looked ill and dejected. But at the same time he was a small tradesman, don't forget that, with a small tradesman sense of dignity and what was what. Thruppence, he cast it up, thruppence worth of cheese per day, one a tanner per week. No, he would fawn on no man for that, no, not on the best in the land. He had his pride. (15)

The portrait of the grocer is isolated. It seems both sympathetic and condescending. His “sympathy and pity” for the “ill and dejected” Belacqua is neutralized by his “small tradesman sense of dignity.” This paragraph is closer to the Dublin of Joyce's *Dubliners*—a book that rendered the paralysis and indifference of a rigidly moralistic, petit bourgeois Dublin community in an almost naturalist tone, usually focalized through the consciousness of its isolated characters—than to the rest of the story.¹¹ The narration immediately shifts back to Belacqua, the grotesque aesthete who is equally isolated, but willfully so. The problem of the plot, in all its triviality, is explicitly stated as Belacqua sits alone in the pub eating his lunch. It revolves (like a plot from Dickens or Balzac) around time, money, and the city:

At a quarter to three he was due at the [language] school. Say five to three. The public closed, the fishmonger reopened, at half-past two. Assuming then that his lousy old bitch of an aunt had given her order in good time that morning . . . so that her blackguard boy should on no account be delayed . . . it would be time enough if he left the public as it closed, he could remain on till the last moment. Bennisimo. He had half-a-crown. That was two pints of draught anyway . . . he would still be left with coppers enough to buy a *Herald* and take a tram if he felt pinched for time. Always assuming, of course, that the lobster was all ready to be handed over. God damn these tradesmen, he thought, you can never rely on them. He had not done an exercise but that did not matter. His Professoressa was so charming and remarkable. (16)

Beckett needs to lay out the plot explicitly because the collagelike presentation does not allow the reader to infer relations among characters, motives, or actions. Dublin and the “tradesmen” appear as an obstacle course between Dante, beer, and the charming Italian teacher. While, in *Dubliners*, moral obligations take on tragic

dimensions, here moral obligation itself appears unimportant. For Belacqua, struggle takes place only over cultural mastery (Dante) and an antiaesthetic (slamming the book closed angrily, making lunch). The rest is blind necessity, measured in minutes, coppers, and pints.

Morality, however, is not absent from the story, but rather has no integral relation to the narrated events. A moral psychology of character necessitates a more integrative structure than juxtaposition, which does not allow for the cause-and-effect relations of ego formation. The plot confirms the story's impersonal moral homelessness. After musing on his "professora" in a passage full of a male-adolescent's aesthete judgments ("Manzoni was an old woman . . . Pellico was another . . . the 19th century in Italy was full of old hens trying to cluck like Pindar" [16–17]), he heads to the school. He is surprised that the cheese was, after all, to his liking:

Also his teeth and jaws had been in heaven. . . . It was like eating glass. His mouth burned and ached with the exploit. Then the food had been further spiced by the intelligence . . . that the . . . murderer's petition for mercy, signed by half the land, having been rejected, the man must swing at dawn in Mountjoy and nothing could save him. . . . Belacqua, tearing at the sandwich and swilling the precious stout, pondered on McCabe in his cell. (17)

The earlier moral suggestion, embedded in Dante, concerning mercy and suffering, and the photo of McCabe glimpsed in the paper, are now narratively joined. Yet these elements do not combine into a moment of meaning or judgment. This juxtaposition of narrative data neither invites the reader to make an evaluation (as Jauss [42–45] claims for the function of modernist free indirect discourse) nor expresses an avant-gardist contempt for the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality through images of cruelty (as in Artaud or Lautréamont, or even later Beckett). The earlier moral suggestion is sincere, but the conflicting styles and aims in the story give it no functional or coherent role.

There is a complex relation of culturally and morally inflected themes: Dante's purgatory and McCabe's prison, prolonged suffering and execution, divine and democratic (the petition "signed by half the land") mercy. This complexity is built up through juxtaposed moments, not a series of interrelationships. The last pages of the story, however, attempt to integrate the themes, to create a kind of epiphany. The conflicting styles and intentions, however, defeat any symbolic resolution, and the ending is simultaneously sincere and parodic. Following the structure of the controlling juxtaposition, the moral-social problem of purgatory that begins in Dante and moves to McCabe ends up with the lobster. Despite Belacqua's fears, the lobster is ready, and the man at the fish market assures him it's "'Lepping fresh . . . fresh in this morning.' Now Belacqua . . . supposed the man to mean that the lobster had very recently been killed" (18). This sets up the story's mock-epiphanic ending.

The lobster in a bag, he goes to his Italian lesson, where he asks the *Professoressa*

about the difficult passage in Dante. She suggests that for practice he “might do worse than make up Dante’s rare moments of compassion in hell” (19). As he walks to his aunt’s house he sees in the “yellow light” of early evening an injured horse, and then a “poorly dressed couple . . . in the bay of a pretentious gateway, she sagging against the railings, her head lowered, he standing facing her . . . his hands dangled by his sides” (20–21). These images, like the momentary image of the grocer, have the feeling of a naturalist study. They compel the walking Belacqua to reflect: “Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together? A little mercy in the stress of sacrifice, a little mercy to rejoice against judgment. . . . Poor McCabe, he would get it at the neck at dawn” (21). He reaches his aunt’s and they go to the kitchen, where he gives her the lobster and is shocked to discover that it is still alive. The story ends with a judgment:

It [the lobster] shuddered again. Belacqua felt he would be sick.

“My God” he whined “it’s alive, what’ll we do?” . . .

“Boil the beast” she said, “what else?”

“But it’s not dead” protested Belacqua “you can’t boil it like that.” . . .

“Have sense” she said sharply, “lobsters are always boiled alive. They must be.” She caught up the lobster and laid it on his back. It trembled. “They feel nothing” she said.

In the depths of the sea it had crept into the cruel pot. For hours, in the midst of its enemies, it had breathed secretly. . . . Now it was going alive into the scalding water. It had to. Take into the air my quiet breath.

Belacqua looked at the old parchment of her face, grey in the dim kitchen.

“You make a fuss” she said angrily “and upset me and then lash into it for your dinner.”

She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.

Well, thought Belacqua, it’s a quick death, God help us all. It is not. (21–22)

The ending is perhaps the least parodic part of the story, and the moral-ethical problem of mercy and pity is given a blunt objectification. Yet the surrealist juxtaposition, the bohemian antiaestheticism, the high cultural allusions, and even the naturalist moments, are simply left behind. There are moments of lyricism—“In the depths of the sea . . .” “her face, grey in the dim kitchen”— which suggest an epiphanic mood, but epiphany would require that the lobster (like, for example, Michael Furey at the end of Joyce’s “The Dead”) be a multivalent symbol. But symbolism is an

aesthetic strategy that most of the story seems to reject. The story ends in juxtaposition, even though the mood seems the opposite of avant-garde provocation.

The contradiction of aesthetic modes is most strongly revealed in the last line: "It is not." It is the only line of the story that is purely omniscient narration. It expresses a moral stance: pain must never pass unexpressed. The relative unimportance of the pain, in relation to McCabe's (or his victim's, or Cain's), strengthens the absolute refusal to ignore even the smallest signs of unfeeling. Rabinovitz, in his study of Beckett's early fiction, concludes that the story's ending shows that "Beckett's main concern is his protagonist's moral equivocation" (47), but the last line is not a judgment directed at the hero. Rabinovitz accounts for this by claiming that "Beckett's method in these episodes [in *More Prick than Kicks*] is to introduce recurring details which call attention to subjects that the narrator tries to avoid" (43). The question this raises is directly related to the story's contradictory structure: how can an author supply details in a third-person narration that "the narrator tries to avoid"? The voice that delivers the last line does not fit well with either the parodic omniscient narrator who hovers above the narrative material, nor with any character's consciousness: a third voice—the author's point of view?—must be introduced because the story has no organizational structure to integrate such a judgment. Nevertheless, the judgment is made.

This judgment out of nowhere is a sign of Beckett's conflicting attitudes and concerns. In fact, the appearance of an attempt toward some kind of unification or epiphany is perhaps the only thing that holds the story together and prevents it from becoming an indeterminate collage of contradictory aesthetic modes. But the last line merely suggests an overarching intention. That the suggestion is made through an ethical judgment seems to indicate an overall aesthetic confusion. The only thing that could bring "Dante" and the "lobster" together in a meaningful way is the very thing that the parodic and juxtapositional structure of high culture and crustacean cannot create: a meaningful judgment.¹²

Versions of Modernism

Beckett's first professional recognition arrived not on the crest but in the wake of the modernist and avant-garde movements that have come to define our ideas of innovation and experimentation in the modern arts. *Finnegans Wake*, in defense of which Beckett propelled himself into the literary arena, was itself one of modernism's most eccentric and problematic works. The contradictory clash of aesthetic values I have described in Beckett's earliest writing was, in part, a consequence of the accumulated iconoclastic effects of the modernist era that had peaked in the 1920s. By the 1930s, the innovations of successive modernist and the avant-garde modes—from Zola's "experimental" naturalist novel, futurist paeans to speed and violence, and dada's celebration of nonsense, to Woolf's intense depictions of intersubjective identity formation—along with the rapidly growing technologies of mass-disseminated cul-

ture, had created an historically unprecedented plurality of aesthetic possibilities and combinations. While arguments for an overarching singular aesthetic, like those advanced at the end of the nineteenth century (for example, Zola's argument for naturalism or Pater's for aestheticism), no longer held much force by the end of the 1920s, the political urgency of the 1930s would soon inaugurate a new set of cultural prescriptions.

Although I have claimed that the attitudes Beckett inherited from various modernist movements implied contradictory cultural-political positions, more often than not the basic tenets of high modernism and avant-garde experimentation have been viewed as congruous, not contradictory. Cultural critic Franco Moretti's essay "The Long Goodbye: *Ulysses* and the End of Liberal Capitalism," an incisive account of the cultural politics of high British modernism, offers a somewhat alternative account of the plurality of conflicting values at the end of the modernist decade.¹³ Central to Moretti's argument is a duality in the modernist use of myth. While T. S. Eliot's famous essay on Joyce's use of myth in *Ulysses* claimed a congruence between Eliot's own project and Joyce's, Moretti convincingly argues the opposite:

In Eliot[']s discussion of the "mythic method", there is a clear distinction: on the one hand myth ("controlling, ordering, giving a shape and a significance"), on the other, history ("immense panorama of futility and anarchy"). Myth must mold history: it is the active agent of the pair, *form* to history's *content*. In Joyce, myth and history are *complementary*: they presuppose and neutralize each other, and it is impossible to establish a formal or ideological hierarchy between the two. In Joyce, myth is not identified with the aesthetic *form* (as in Eliot), and therefore cannot be the starting point for a new *cultural hegemony*. (192; emphasis in text)¹⁴

Eliot's agenda is constructed on a conservative premise: it locates value in the cultural icons of the past, and devalues his own social present. Joyce's position, in contrast, is "structurally ambiguous: neither an 'apology' for nor a 'criticism'" of liberal, capitalist society (190–91).

According to Moretti, Joyce used the world of the present and the cultural landmark which the *Odyssey* represented in his own cultural milieu as counterparts—"to parody Bloom with *Ulysses* and *Ulysses* with Bloom" (192). Contra Eliot's description of the mythic method, Joyce's use of myth did not—could not—argue for any form of "cultural hegemony." In fact, Moretti argues that the lack of any hierarchically ordered principle of organization in *Ulysses* is its most significant feature:

The most peculiar aspect of Joyce's novel is that it uses a plurality of aesthetic forms that lie at opposite extremes. . . . In *Ulysses*, then, the world goes to pieces not because it is a text prolific in apocalyptic visions, but, rather, because in it every idea of a cultural system goes awry. Joyce's

novel is irreducibly opposed to the hierarchical principles of the great bourgeois culture of his time. By rendering any "organic" pretension of the work of art vain, Joyce also declares the impossibility of "deducing" from it an idea of a cultural system capable of restoring order to society. (204)

Moretti's description provides a relevant framework for understanding Beckett's relation to the literary field at the end of the 1920s. Given Beckett's personal and professional ties to Joyce, the preeminence of *Ulysses*, as well as the excitement generated by the portions of the very different *Finnegans Wake* being published in *transition* (where Beckett also published, discussed in the following chapter), the very idea of what constituted literary prose must have appeared radically indeterminate. Already in *Ulysses*, as Moretti argues, the "plurality of styles" precludes the possibility that any one style dominate. "In Joyce, when one episode is presented in two or three or fifty different styles, the procedure is not based on any codified literary motivation," as it is in James's or Conrad's use of multiple point-of-view, motivated by the shifting psychological states of their characters. "It is pure technical exploration." All the styles in the novel "therefore, are equally *irrelevant* as interpretations of reality or formalization of literary language." Because of this, "Joyce does not found a school . . . [to] imitate one of *Ulysses* many styles betray[s] the fundamental intention of his novel: the systematic refusal to assume *one* style as the privileged vehicle of expression" (206).

The juxtaposition of aesthetic modes and intentions in Beckett's early work is, in part, due to the enormous influence of Joyce's experiment, and also to the conflicting values that appeared, at the time, complementary, as evinced in Eliot's remarks on the mythic method. But while Moretti's analysis is exemplary when untangling the ideological strands of Eliotic and Joycean myth, he falters when he then attempts to take the implications of Joyce's ambivalence toward cultural hegemony outside the realm of high modernism. Having distinguished, correctly, between the implications of Eliot's and Joyce's use of myth, Moretti conflates Joyce's project with that of the avant garde. It is worthwhile to examine Moretti's claims, because they help clarify the diversity of the literary field.

Moretti asserts that in *Ulysses* "Joyce dismantles the ideology of 'organic' art" (205); that "there is no qualitative distinction between 'elite' and 'mass' culture" in the novel (206); and that "Joyce's indifference to any criterion of functionality or truth in cultural forms brings him close to Dada" (206). All of these claims are interrelated, since the organic work of art, with its unity of form and content, was a self-defining feature of high art, and avant-garde movements such as dada and cubism had already created the collage and juxtaposition techniques that exploited discontinuity of themes and materials, thereby violating the norms of aesthetic organicism. As Peter Bürger has argued, the specificity of the "historical" avant garde resided in the attempt to transform the *function* of art. Reacting to aestheticism's heightened value of aesthetic autonomy, the avant garde was the first art movement that was able

to understand art as an *institution* functionally divorced from everyday life and therefore unable to effect social transformation. Williams concurs: “almost the only distinguishing feature, and even then incompletely, is less a matter of actual writing than of successive formations which challenged not only the art institutions but the institution of Art, or Literature, itself, typically in a broad programme which included, though in diverse forms, the overthrow and remaking of existing society” (*Politics* 67).

From this perspective, Joyce’s project, like that of Eliot or Woolf, seems much closer to an “aestheticism [that] merely rejects the means-end rationality of everyday life” (Bürger, *Theory* 49) than to dada, Surrealism, Italian futurism, Brecht, Constructivism, etc. While “elite” art and “mass” culture may be *represented* in *Ulysses* without “qualitative distinction,” the book’s own status as an autonomous art object, meticulously brought to perfection by an artistic genius and to be interpreted and appreciated by a classically educated elite, is not at issue. It was modernist novels such as *Ulysses*—following a development that traced its beginnings to Flaubert in France, and Pater, James, and Conrad in England—that gave the novel, a genre always associated with popular literary culture, the status of high culture. As Ernst Curtius put it, *Ulysses* was a novel dependent for the unfolding of its layered meanings on the “entire wealth of philosophical and theological knowledge, [the] power of psychological and aesthetic analysis, [and the] culture of the mind educated in all the literatures of the world” (qtd. in Moretti 204).

At a moment when the European novel, in the search for a universal, aesthetically autonomous language, had ironically severed itself from all but the most specialized readership, as Joyce did in *Finnegans Wake*, Beckett found himself in his earliest fiction and critical writing responding uncertainly to the conflicting agendas of modernist art and literature. By the time he wrote his first publishable novel, a very different situation was influencing the task of the writer. In *Murphy* Beckett attempts to fuse a novel about a “mind” striving to shut out the outer world with the story of a man and a woman failing to communicate or to find love and companionship. Most other writers of the time, however, were crying out that the literary exploration of the inner mind was a game that, for better or worse, had played itself out: the outer world—from the agitation for socialist revolution to the rise of fascism—could no longer be ignored.