Shock and the Poststructural in Watt and Murphy

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SHOCK AND THE POSTSTRUCTURAL IN WATT AND MURPHY

by

EMILY DAVIS

Under the Direction of Calvin Thomas, PhD

ABSTRACT

In Samuel Beckett’s early novel Watt, a servant’s stay in a manor house becomes the site of a great confrontation with the origins and limits of meaning. Murphy and Watt wearily engage with the Enlightenment rationalism that courses through many of his modernist contemporaries, only to subvert those ideas via processes of philosophical negation. This thesis argues that the novels’ negative, even abject gaze into the heart of anti-foundational truth – that reality is bound by subjectivity, and language is but a hollow vessel – leads to regressive disorder of speech and perception. A theoretical concept of shock, on a continuum with trauma, addresses this duality in the gaze between epistemological damage and the helpless onset of belief. Finally, a close examination of Beckett’s symbolic systems in the novels reveals the true limits of this dialectic well-ahead of its time.

INDEX WORDS: Beckett, Postmodernism, Theory, Philosophy, Dialectics, Language
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EMILY DAVIS

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DEDICATION

To Christina Gora, for lifelong guidance, who took me to see *Endgame* in grade school.

To my parents Phillip and Cynthia, who have always instilled a love of ideas, the Apollonian and Dionysian in concert. And to my sister Nika, for all your support of my most far-flung creations.
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1 INTRODUCTION

We cannot imagine Beckett’s work without its reactivity against Joyce’s god-like “apotheosis of the word” (1984: 171-2). Murphy centralizes this living decline of modernist projects of knowledge, showing the threadbare nature of pattern and meaning in the accumulation of sense. Stephen Dedalus’ confidence in his “significance as a conscious rational animal proceeding syllogistically from the known to the unknown” has fled, leaving only that which it had protected against, a reality “ineluctably constructed upon the incertitude of the void” (Joyce 1922/1990: 650). Though also a rationalist, Murphy is an avowed non-reader (as if in direct reply to Dedalus) who relies on horoscopes and desires primal states of will-lessness. The initial “nothing new” (1936/2010: 3) under the sun of Murphy indeed conjures the Joycean paternal, implying that his mentor “had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more” (1984: 171-2) of the conscious conditions of reality, and that for all the daylight nothing is here illuminated.

Murphy’s and Watt’s engagement with modernism’s persistent radiation must be seen through Beckett’s deep connections to the period’s raw history. Theodor Adorno writes that Beckett gives us the only fitting reaction to the war, “a situation he never calls by name, as if subject to an image ban. What is, he says, is like a concentration camp” (1966: 380-1). By Murphy’s 1938 publication, Beckett had spent much of the previous two years touring Nazi Germany as an art expert, with private aims to document modern art facing imminent destruction. Rather earlier than the 1953 of its final publication, Watt was written on the run in the late ‘30s from France’s Vaucluse mountains. Some have omitted that Watt’s confounding phase of code-talking speaks to the encoded messages Beckett tapped for the French Resistance, but the work of theory must here encompass history as deftly as philosophy. History always
informs the “rupture of the lines of communication” between subject and object (1984: 70), producing the “nomansland” that gives rise to Beckett’s aesthetic (German Diaries, 19 Nov 1936).

Inevitably you will also find me guilty of Anna Teekell’s charge that “Critical studies of Watt typically offer poststructural interpretations” (2016: 249) that silence its war-time status in favor of philosophical questions. We can relate this tension to a dilemma Jacques Derrida terms archive fever, an activity he believes reached its height during the Holocaust as private histories and public records disappeared, and not coincidentally as Beckett was writing the conspicuously archival Watt. Claire Lozier examines this spectral kind of preservation in Watt, which signals not only the desire to extend meaning but the “destruction drive drilling and emptying it” (2013: 36). Correspondingly, I hope to preserve the early novels’ historicity even as formal constraints toward clear argument turn us away from war and toward philosophy. Sublation refers to a process of assimilation of contradictory claims which both maintains and cares for, but also removes or cancels the ideational object. “The circle that remains self-enclosed and . . . holds its moments together” (1807/1977: 59) — ie. which resists knowing in Hegel’s metaphysics — may thus perpetually dislodge a “separate freedom” (1807/1977: 59) in its contradictory negative, a subject-object relationship represented in Watt by the circle-dot drawing that transfixes the eponymous Watt in Erskine’s room. Rather than undermine my arguments, this early work of historical sublation should help us see in full the context surrounding the early novels.

Paradoxically, Hegel conceives of this negative recognition, of and by the other, as the spiritual life (“livingness”) (1807/1977: 239) of the individual, though a “life” whose brave
deconstruction of the self may “look like death” (1807/1977: 239). This metaphorical hierarchy is crowned by death itself as negator-in-chief, and always some sense of lost safety must linger in the successes of the spirit. That spirit, entwined with a method of knowing that valorizes squaring up with contradiction, does much to predict Nietzsche’s model of recreating the order and aesthetic conditions of God following our unmaking of the transcendental. But I argue that the means by which Watt’s monastic drive tries to recover the old ritual transparency of language reflect a poststructural condition that challenges the human altogether.

Jean-Michel Rabaté’s exploration of Beckett’s early turn in the 1930’s toward a “postwar antihumanism” (2016: 19) points to the lingering reactivity of late-modernists to previous war, to their loss of faith and portents of war’s return. Beckett’s inclination, writes Rabaté, was to overcome the naturalism “underpinned by age-old humanism” and to develop a writing “capable of reaching a hard core whose model was the inorganic essence of the earth” (2016: 39). This inorganic essence is in part literal — the author was fascinated by the mineral quality of organic life — but fascism’s rise following World War I had already raised the stakes for the senselessly elemental, for the human as a pliable illusion masking stonelike limits to feeling. The Gordian Knot of concurrent change, of philosophy shaped inseparably (through force) by historical surroundings, is the background-noise of Murphy and Watt, and this knot cannot be unraveled.

\[1\] By contrast, the repressive immediacy of ‘self-enclosure’ is “not yet a livingness” (1807/1977: 239), but when deployed by the twentieth century’s various fascist regimes, lead to states which appeared to merge immediacy (here, nationalistic exclusion) with vitality and truth. In other words, fascism grows by constricting the circle of a nation’s rhetorical unity around ever-narrowing definitions of its ideal individual. Prevention of relations between that ideal citizenry and national or ethnic ‘outsiders’ requires both passive repression and active thought suppression; such forms of motivated forgetting — the rejection of honest thought — allow for the kinds of self-satisfied immediacy described by Hegel.
In this thesis, I will engage in a poststructural questioning and review of Beckett’s early separatism from the Joycean, such that both novels will be seen to take on the labor of knowing dialectically, while their protagonists reveal the anti-dialectical limits of perception. The undeniabes, of material phenomena and language, bring to the surface the unnameable: dual meanings of surface here help explain the two-way street of my argument as well. Formal repetition and the appearance of rational habit offer a kind of spectral skin of the missing absolutes forever sought by language and rational dialectics, while yet bringing the symptomatic truth to the surface over time.

This seductive process qua Jean Baudrillard precludes a vital epistemology and ironizes the work done in its name. For Baudrillard, seduction is a process of almost sanctifying reification (a “sacred horizon of appearances”) by which “truth effects [are changed] into surface effects which act like a mirror absorbing and engulfing meaning” (1988: 150). Derrida reminds us, in discussing Claude Levi-Strauss, that the seductive allure of structural interpretation risks a similarly invasive anti-dialecticism of “[interest] in the figure itself to the detriment of the play going on within it metaphorically” (1978: 16). Without paying too much attention to Beckett’s “figure itself” (of which we cannot know anything) I will explore the incredible nuance by which all figuration is fundamentally ‘not itself’ and must be perpetually ‘transcoded’ as in Jameson. In the overflow of signs which sets this tenor of the regular, the sub-traumatic assault leads to reparative and/as repressive motion.

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2 The philosophical questions posed by poststructuralism will ground the later stages of my argument, in which the relations of difference to negation (ie. Hegel’s “activity of dissolution”) (1807/1977: 59) will contribute to our understanding of Beckett’s metaphysics.

3 Christopher Norris writes that “Jameson agrees with Levi-Strauss in so far as he treats interpretation as a process of perpetual ‘transcoding’, a rhetorical activity conscious of its own operations and never coming to rest in a single, determinate ‘truth’” (1982/2002: 78-9).
2 VACANCIES IN THE SYMBOLIC ORDER

2.1 Shock and Epistemology in Watt

“This fragility of the outer meaning had a bad effect on Watt,” ‘Sam’ writes, “for it caused him to seek for another, for some meaning of what had passed, in the image of how it passed” (1953/1993: 64). The “bad effect” of a meaning “fragile” to difference comes through the surface image or sign, of sense reproducing itself against knowing. Jonathan Boulter understands this anti-epistemological strategy as Watt’s “reading by deferral, or reading by simulacrum . . .predicated in the void” (1997: 152), the absence that requires the reference of other images to fill itself in series. The precarious state of our communal, normative, and relational reality can dissolve into the void of its own social construction, leaving only the arbitrary image, only “associations which bear the stamp of collective approval” (Saussure 1959: 15) and thus require the surrogate reader. Beckett’s “parodic hermeneut” (Boulter 1997: 149) who actively pursues meaning under impossible parameters, who looks in the image for the non-imaginary, tracks a movement away from foundationalist truth and toward the sensual. This kind of “perception so sensuous that in comparison the impressions of a man buried alive in Lisbon on Lisbon’s great day seem a frigid and artificial construction of the understanding” (Beckett 1953/1993: 43) summarizes the kinds of metaphysical claims made comically empty by their linguistic expression.

Watt’s fragile “bad effect” responds to an early encounter with the Galls, a piano-tuning father and son who exemplify the novel’s parodic hermeneutic. The doubt of Sam’s narrative conjecture here doubles Watt’s own hypotheses and performs the same discursive experiments
upon its protagonist as Watt does upon his surroundings. This early moment of both Sam’s and Watt’s unease suggests the Galls have initiated a formal disruption, a “fugitive penetration” of mind (1953/1993: 70). Questioning the encounter becomes Watt’s “[labour] to preserve his peace of mind” (1953/1993: 78) just as it addresses the narrative’s unease in delimiting its subject. Jennie Skerl shows Watt subjected to the problem of “man” studied by philosopher Fritz Mauthner, that a human “cannot rid himself of the desire to know and speak with absolute certainty; he cannot accept that nothing had happened” (1974: 479). The outer word cannot be the thing. Mauthner reacts against a rationalist metaphysics which entrusts language with dialectical self-policing. Atop Wittgenstein’s ladder — its logic rendered useless by the climber’s final awareness that language has overstepped the boundaries of the metaphysical to make its case, so that many ladder-climbing continental philosophers turned instead to mystical silence — Mauthner finds the insatiability of language so crucial to Watt. Skerl argues for the primacy of Mauthner over Wittgenstein, but that both converge in Beckett’s “solipsism, the realm of the unspeakable, the ladder to be left behind” (1974: 485).

The piano here hammers at the semiotic dreams of language: Leibniz’s ‘real’ characters, Saussure’s positive signification, meaning natural to its form and as algebraically uniform as notes. The Galls’ labor involves Watt’s first, literal critique of speech’s circling of the piano-

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4 “Add to this the notorious difficulty of recapturing, at will, modes of feeling peculiar to a certain time, and to a certain place, and perhaps also to a certain state of the health, when the time is past, and the place left, and the body struggling with quite a new situation. Add to this the obscurity of Watt’s communications, the rapidity of his utterance and the eccentricities of his syntax, as elsewhere recorded. Add to this the material conditions in which these communications were made. Add to this the scant aptitude to receive of him to whom they were proposed. ” (Beckett 1953/1993: 75)

5 Whereas written and spoken lexemes (the smallest unit of communicable information in Western linguistics) have for Leibniz a virtual character, the piano key corresponds to the real character whose sign comes packaged with its conceptual meaning, as in the ideogram. Because of the piano’s linear (one row of keys, as opposed to multiple strings) and geometric repetition of
like ambitions of Enlightenment rationalism: “The piano is doomed, in my opinion, said the younger. The piano-tuner also, said the elder. The pianist also, said the younger” (1953/1993: 72). The vignette condemns all possible efforts at self-preservation via instrumental reason. By Max Horkheimer’s definition,

Instrumental reason has two opposing elements: the abstract ego emptied of all substance except its attempt to transform everything in heaven and on earth into means for its preservation, and on the other hand an empty nature degraded to mere material, mere stuff to be dominated. (1974: 97)

The contradiction therein — the Godless anxiety of the “mere material” that yet must seek a simulation of sovereign awareness — recurs throughout Watt. In the description of Mr Knott’s suspiciously symbolic piano-room, we find a summation of the West’s “abstract ego,” the possessive and imperial functions of instrumental reason.

The music-room was a large bare white room. The piano was in the window. The head, and neck, in plaster, very white, of Buxtehude, was on the mantelpiece. A ravanastron hung, on the wall, from a nail, like a plover. (1953/1993: 71)

Relics of the earthly span of reason hang perfectly commodified, as literal hunting trophies (“like a plover”). The piano centers this visual equation of the “large bare white room,” suggesting a binary in which the “white” of the rational impulse might combat the novel’s “stumbling in the dark” (1953/1993: 203) of negation, toward the ordered arrangement of black with white key. But perceptibly, this mode of thought leads to an insatiable desire for the possession of meaning as physical commodity. This desire becomes the drive behind the science and technology of the notes within octaves (ie. the alternating groups of three and two black keys that go unchanged), each key signifies the conceptual structure that leads to chords and their modes.
piano’s assemblage, and also behind Watt’s clutches upon the substance in words.⁶ Reproductions accumulate the seductive image as separation (beheaded, even) from the sublime, with Baroque composer Buxtehude’s “head, and neck, in plaster, very white” reduced to “mere stuff to be dominated” alongside the imperially-devoured Indian ravanastron. This hypnotic and possessive white of rationalism thus becomes — for Adorno, Horkheimer, and Beckett alike — the *instrument* of reason constantly exceeding its own limits to compatibilize and compartmentalize the other.

Beckett’s early novels don’t treat the failure of knowledge as foregone conclusion, but as materials for a reader who could resist conclusions per se. They narrate the attrition of the Enlightenment toward the extremes of Humean skepticism, finally landing upon the cold skeptical core of hard solipsism as a more gradual process.⁷ What begins in *Murphy* as the lucid orchestration of a menagerie of secondary characters, whose dimensionality suggests a reality which ironically does exist outside Murphy’s consciousness, has by *Watt* come to subject the narrative itself to the anti-real pull of solipsism. Isolation of knowledge is such that one may wonder of multiple incidents “related by Watt as separate and distinct, if they are not in reality the same incident, variously interpreted,” which seems to support Murphy’s belief that a perceiving mind is all one can surely say to exist.

⁶ A piano requires levers of mechanical exchange between key, hammer, and string, but this startling structure is hidden beneath a lid which simulates the normal, much like language does through the soothing ‘lid’ of its habitual use within a culture. Our colloquial human tapping upon the keys of language, now overly familiar, accesses in reality a system of jarring mechanics. Rare among instruments, most of which the musician learns to tune her or hisself, pianos usually require a tuner’s professional skill even for expert players.

⁷ Humean philosophy takes empiricism (that knowledge comes from sensory experience) to its most rigorous and skeptical application. Rather than the innate and presuppositional ideas of rationalism - i.e. dualism, reason, causality, etc. - Hume thought ideas form largely from empirical evidence, but also that reason and experience are notoriously unreliable, deceived by the passions of subjectivity.
Indeterminacy compels a host of “most delicate questions” (Beckett 1953/1993: 79) which damage the epistemological subject. Damage comes from a growing awareness of the absence of absolute knowledge and from the hermeneutical compulsion itself; as in Baudrillard, “The havoc interpretation wreaks in the domain of appearances [ie. the pleasure of presence] is incalculable” (1988: 149). Watt’s epistemological failures “have to do with events that resisted all Watt’s efforts to saddle them with meaning, and a formula, so that he could neither think of them, nor speak of them, but only suffer them, when they recurred” (1953/1993: 79). It’s not without effort that the subject refuses to mean (as “all Watt’s efforts” are monumental) but because of it. As in the case of Mr. Knott’s pot, an obsessive desire to “saddle” the subject with a fixed meaning which may in vain lead one to say “Pot, pot” reflects a hope that doubling the sign might bring us closer to the thing itself (1953/1993: 81). But the “hairbreadth departure from the nature of a true pot,” of which “one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted” (1953/1993: 81), points only to the perpetual distance from language’s formally “well-defined object” (Saussure 1959: 14).

Principles of accumulation and recursion here work against rationality, as an idea “whose usefulness had come to an end” may, from another of these accrued hypotheses, “[recover] its virtue” (Beckett 1953/1993: 78) out of order in a rational series. Rather than rationalist dialectics in which the unjustified is resolved and dissolved, thought proceeds non-linearly with fleeting regard for probability, interpretive crabs in a barrel. These disordered dynamics bring to mind Deleuze and Guattari’s assemblages and the condition of heroic schizophrenia required to

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8 “[P]leasure of presence” in the sign’s image to me suggests both our origins as infant humans who delight in the will-less presence of a parent’s actual totality, and the symptomatic adult that flees the pains of demystification toward such reparative images. This pathology animates Watt’s endless lists and branching series, as we will explore.
interface with them epistemologically (a subject to which we will return).\textsuperscript{9} Watt parodies this sort of heroism, however, in that his thoughts suggest another kind of rhizomaticity: the unkillable weed that spreads not senselessly but beyond the margins of intent.\textsuperscript{10} Fully allowing such contradiction in thought requires heroism (ie. Hegel’s deathly stoicism of negation) because even Watt’s limited exposure leads to a condition indistinguishable from madness.

In this context, the unspeakable leads Watt “only [to] suffer” his own alterity within language’s “frigid machinery of a time-space relation” (1953/1993: 21). His shocked response to this mechanical frigidity thus involves the patterns of thought which delay the apprehension of a truth, which pacify surface and yet reinforce suffering.\textsuperscript{11} Importantly, Jameson himself has conceived of a theoretical shock, writing of truth’s perception as always “accompanied by the shock of defamiliarization and demystification, and of the revelation of repressed or forgotten realities” (1991: 369). And I have drawn partly on the physiological model as well: the fabricated calm which masks a crisis for an unknown duration. Meaning’s unintegrated plurality marches on, its host unaware of the sharpening point of contradiction. As the athlete’s shattered bone can

\textsuperscript{9} Their theoretical schizophrenia attempts to capture the disorder’s conditions of cognitive ‘simultaneity’ and synesthesia: the electrical activity and regional connections in schizophrenic brains follow a radical, diffuse spatial logic. In Freud’s view, without the development of an ego, a \textit{me}, the schizophrenic evades the Oedipal or other obsessions of the unconscious and is “somewhere else, beyond or behind or below,” which for Deleuze and Guattari makes them already versed in the mechanics of alterity, in the eternal disjunction of material and semiotic representation (1983: 23).

\textsuperscript{10} Difference animates the rhizome, a network of signals traced by reference, in which any single site or sign must defer to the assemblage. This extends Saussure’s central claim of the arbitrariness of signs, that “in a language-state everything is based on relations,” but pushes their shared condition of decentralization to a visual extreme.

\textsuperscript{11} By this I mean, in part, the patterns which tempt and preoccupy his thoughts, and which play out literally as linguistic series. As such, the novel’s many logical arguments and counterarguments often function more as narratives for the kinds of being affirmed by repetition, in light of and \textit{against} the novel’s damaging core truths of perception and language. Important to my argument, pattern feeds a helpless hunger for order, selfhood, and conceptual fixity.
be dismissed and toyed with as a sprain for a seeming eternity (under the crosstalk of endorphins with optimism, ego, and memory itself), shock is a reactive condition, working against understanding but disguised as normalcy. One could say that I haven’t dislocated the concept from its traumatic origin so much as outlined a diminutive companion at the margins which can receive the imperceptible and the acceptable.

The theoretical relationship between shock and trauma prove important to this discussion, and to the intersections between the novels’ philosophy and silent history of war. The events which resist meaning thus disrupt even the sensory substrate of their perception in ways that can’t be understood themselves without reference to the development of trauma studies.

“Yes,” Sam narrates,

Watt could not accept, as no doubt Erskine could not accept, and as no doubt Arsene and Walter and Vincent and the others had been unable to accept, that nothing had happened, with all the clarity and solidity of something, and that it revisited him in such a way that he was forced to submit to it all over again, to hear the same sounds, see the same lights, touch the same surfaces . . . (1953/1993: 76)

To suffer in such ways brings to mind Cathy Caruth’s foundational *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Trauma for Caruth constitutes “an event whose force is marked by its lack of registration” (1995: 6) and an amnesiac quality to faculties of the sensate self. Though she makes clear that possibilities for constructive exploration and integration remain, the acute difficulty therein is itself quite distressing. In Watt’s case, this very line of rehabilitative

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12 Caruth ventures that “imaginative literature - or figurative, rather than literal language — can ‘speak’ trauma when normal, discursive language cannot” (1996: 334). But while Watt can *volubly* identify the terms of his shock, the novel remains silent toward its own historical wounds, in firm denial that art can transcend the bounds of speech. Lacan reminds us that *lack* of the real founds human use of the symbolic order upon inherent instability and delusion. And for Beckett, the grounds of our participation, the habits that mask the void between signifier and
interest in “what [events] might be induced to mean, with the help of a little patience, a little ingenuity” is its own source of traumatic recurrence, as he is again “forced to submit” to the negation within perception.

Removing nearly all reference to history or war allows the novel to proceed in Watt’s own servile calm, the open secret gnawing at its acceptable surfaces. In shock, however, we see a more casual approach toward the source of one’s pain, a fixed gaze upon lesser — and thus more common, more systemic — troubles. Whereas trauma implies the grievous material origin (ie. death, exile, abuse, war, or grievous injury) shock comprises a diffuse reactive state toward the excess of difference in daily subject-object relations. Rather than the erasure of trauma’s early models, in shock we see efforts even to hyperarticulate, as with casual speech, the distressing phenomena.

But a speech paradox also centers many developments in trauma theory, helping us to understand how trauma and shock occupy similar territory. Clinician Judith Lewis Herman writes that “people who have survived atrocities often tell their stories in a highly emotional, contradictory, and fragmented manner which . . .serves the twin imperatives of truth-telling and secrecy . . .The story of a traumatic event surfaces not as a verbal narrative but as a symptom” (1997: 1). In a case study cited by Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, the clinicians must resolve their sense of trauma’s “speechless terror” (1995: 172) with their patients’ clear retellings. Terror’s “failure to arrange the memory in words and symbols leaves it to be organized on a somatosensory or iconic level: as somatic sensations, behavioral reenactments, nightmares, and flashbacks” (1995: 172). The implications for Beckett’s broken bodies, whose referent (and which enable both shared meanings and social order) leave us less coherent, our trauma even less articulable.
sensations and behaviors seem to echo the silent pleading of injured soldiers on the field, are
stunningly clear. But their traumatized patient also speaks her reenactment in literary detail.

She brought a glass to the lips of an imaginary person, she cleaned her mouth, she talked with
this person: “But open your mouth, drink something, answer me.” She climbed into bed in order to
arrange the body, then she cried: “The corpse has fallen on the ground and my father who is drunk,
who vomits on the bed, cannot even help me.” (1995: 162)

Both trauma and shock remain at the mercy of language, fluctuating between functions of
repression and desperate revelation. Such textual conditions, while tending to suffer as cohesive
or ‘healthy’ narratives, yet offer literal representations of the unrepresentable — the allure
behind Watt’s endless summoning of signs, and behind their general refusal to reward (Obourn
2005: 222-3).

The truthful speech of trauma and shock becomes a confrontation with the abject.

Naming, lists, and tics must fill the exposed void opened by a negativity of thought. Julia
Kristeva conceives of the abject as a form of perversity that hints at the symptomatic exposure of
repressed material. In the abject “there is an effervescence of object and sign—not of desire but
of intolerable significance; they tumble over into non-sense or the impossible real” and thus we
should “keep it under control” (1982: 11) with the sublimated reaction of disgust and repression
(i.e. abjection). Kristeva has theorized that direct confrontation with the abject is itself inherently
traumatic, which helps explain Murphy’s and Watt’s eventual subjective collapse into the abject.
Willing perception of the excluded parts of ourselves, as we will see, performs a lasting cut as
well as bridges a divide.

We can’t dismiss the certain therapeutic effects of submission and repetition. Clinics for
traumatized veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan use such methods of “habituation,” by
which “repeating the story of a traumatic encounter over and over again acclimates one to the
pain its telling entails” (Pederson 2014: 343). While compulsory articulation may aggravate Beckett’s endlessly flawed characters, it can offer the savvy reader or trauma survivor a kind of numbing agent against its own inevitable recurrence. Such states in which “Even the mute . . . can communicate the nature of deep-set pain—and speak hurriedly, at length” describe the speech paradox common to shock and trauma (2014: 343). Repetitive speech, for Watt, serves as the “ancient labour” of attempting to create something (stable concepts and identity) from nothing, each permutation of a series exacting and compulsory like our daily “labour” (1953/1993: 136). When alive, as he learns early on in a ditch, one is not “the time and the place and the loved one already” (1953/1993: 136): without unity, he must mine for each concept’s solid according to its own separate variations. A full visual schema of the sequence between the frog notes “Krak!, Krek! and Krik!” follows, reminding us in strict musical time that permutation determines identity (1953/1993: 136-8). Without any old authority, this almost scientific study of the change in signs serves as “the time taken to be proved true,” a lesson imparted at great length upon the reader (1953/1993: 136). Any repairs to knowledge occur with long work in dangerous mines, and with much scornful laughter.

Because of the recursive quality of language with the memories referenced by it, negative feedback loops help explain the inescapability of early trauma models. Greg Forter examines how Freud, the progenitor of trauma theory, comes to interpret “present suffering in terms of a transfixed, compulsive repetition of past events . . . [which] has the effect of homogenizing and dehistoricizing the experience of time itself” (2007: 269). This does much to explain Watt’s domestic ahistoricism, a myopic mode of living that seems culturally complicit in the repetition of past suffering. Forter too conceives of trauma as, to some degree, “ontologically ineradicable”
(2007: 269). The difficulty in reinterpreting the abject continues into the present critical models of trauma, and into language’s structural denial that presides *a priori* over *Watt*.

Human facial expressions always show an asymmetricality that seems to betray our equilibrium. Pleasant social experiences thus hide from mind that will to negation moving always in the depths. So too with the study of history, which depends upon one’s *limited* awareness of the many conflicting forces operating upon a historical moment. This loosely encapsulates ideas from Freud to Jameson, that the forces of reification and repression control the postmodern moment, against the competing flux of subversive difference in desire and *demystification* in knowing.\(^\text{13}\) These efforts of coherence at work, of which the thinker may be otherwise unaware, gesture to the facial containment of non-traumatic trouble.

Where Jonathan Boulter interprets the anti-linguistic nature of trauma existentially — as Watt’s reaction to the abject, animal limits of his comprehension — he universalizes against a historical reading, a space which Teekell fills persuasively with historicism. The novel’s “purgatorial stimulus” which issues its “interminable chase for meaning” (2016: 251) resides for Teekell in imposed silences both individual and national. Ireland, which Beckett admitted was the *omphalos* of which he thought much during the novel’s writing, had enacted strict limits on political speech as part of a policy of forced neutrality in Europe’s growing crisis. The passive

\(^{13}\) This movement between *reification* (the removal of the traces of production from the subject in the creation of a commodified object) and *demystification* (the reappearance of such socially repressed contradictions) relates to Watt’s incessant push for instrumental reason against a creeping awareness of the symbolic arbitrary. The toy, in a classic example, moves from its ahistorical and iconic status as a pure function of one’s own enjoyment to an accumulation of jarring global-political narratives. This often strips ideas and signs of their contained pleasure, as demystification confronts the tendency of mysticism to *entrust* various claims and suppositions with one’s belief. Embedded in the term’s moving away from the supernatural and the false totality is the possible loss of a divine ecstasy without questions, that the movement toward a more decentralized knowledge also moves away from the joys of centralization.
wound of national silence doubles the suppression of individual speech, which manifests as 
aphasia, a condition in which lack of speech doubles as lack of comprehension. This signifies 
the author’s own physical status, submissive to the demands of silence both literal to the decibel 
(while secreted along Nazi-occupied routes) and figurative to the code-talking in which Beckett 
was thence employed. The absence of all reference to national hostilities in Murphy or to war in 
Watt certainly recommends historical critique of this traumatic aphasia, to which philosophy 
must cede the motion of history.

From this lack of terms for the damaging regularity of modernity — which I argue 
effaces itself not via repression but via repetition and the normalizing semblance, as in 
Baudrillard’s “sacred horizon of appearances” — shock shows some conceptual utility (1988:
149). This repetition for Beckett is never casual or purely ludic, though it seems so, as it cannot 
withhold the damage to its subject, which I argue manifests as more familiar problems of 
debility, disfigurement, and the effacement of bodies.\footnote{Murphy and Watt, trudging stoically for ages, undergo sudden and inexplicable collapses of coherence, without precursor: both epistemological ‘widowmakers’. Increasing disfigurement and bodily dysfunction (universals among Beckett’s post-Murphy characters) — and their comic efforts to know the parameters of said dysfunction, as with Watt’s precision in walking relative to the cardinal points of the compass — shows the conjoined mortal anxieties of knowledge and the corpus itself.} Indeed, permutations and repetition 
(both subtle agents of dissolution) carry an active threat against ‘knowledge’. Beneath the 
threshold of repressible offense, the writhing multiplicity yet ‘gets through’ to take its pound of 
epistemological flesh.
2.2 *Murphy* and the Perverted Cogito

We need look no farther for Baudrillard’s seductive crisis than *Murphy* who, in his quest for release from the bodily burden, seeks a decadent undoing even of his reason. He speaks of Cartesian dualism as the nagging damage of a “non-mental Kick from all eternity, dimly revealed . . . the kick in intellectu and the kick in re” (1936/2010: 77). Beckett’s engagement with Enlightenment philosophy has been considered extensively since Samuel Mintz’s 1959 “Beckett’s *Murphy*: A ‘Cartesian’ Novel,” John Fletcher’s “Beckett and the Philosophers,” Hugh Kenner’s perennial *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* and others, but we should better understand his treatment of Descartes and Liebniz in order to see our ideas in full view. That kick into the *res cogitans* and *res extensa* upon our dualistic birth is, after all, another violent separation that preoccupies Beckett’s symbolic order, the depths of which we have as of yet only circled around.\(^{15}\)

With *Murphy*, Descartes’ theory of mind isn’t conjured as any faculty of reason, but rather as desire to extinguish reason. In this context, Murphy functions as failed- or anti-Cartesian, in whom the legacy of ‘I exist’ — the epistemological zero-point for *methodical doubt* — becomes perverted twofold. First, and most obviously, by Murphy’s Thanatos (the death drive). But he also fails to push solipsism (that the thinking mind is the only thing which can be determined to truly exist) toward the strict adherence to evidence which facilitates a rational flow outward from the mind’s central point. Thus, we find his own reason eclipsed by the return of superstition and Humean *passions*. Baudrillard insists that

> All appearances conspire to combat meaning, to uproot meaning, whether intentional or not, and to convert it into a game, according to some other rules of the

\(^{15}\) In Descartes’ substance theory, the *res* (Latin for ‘thing’) *cogitans* describes the non-corporeal substance of a thinking mind, while the *res extensa* defines its ‘extension’ within an unthinking corporeal body. Both substances are guaranteed by the third, God.
game, arbitrary ones this time, to some other elusive ritual, more adventurous and more seductive than the mastery of meaning. Discourse must struggle not so much against the secrets of the unconscious as against the superficial abyss of its own appearance. (1988: 150)

So we see in the horoscopes which dictate his every (in)decision, and in Neary’s passions of the humors. In both cases, arbitrary and “elusive ritual[s]” disrupt the phenomenology of objects, the constellations of stars and organs, and mythicize them with a spiritual animus. Murphy’s credulity toward the snake-oil of universal forces violates the rational with the return of the inductive, that good feeling in reasoning that the premises of an argument supply their own evidence.

Hume critiques this inductive trust in causality as not innate but as a holdover from those ancient customs which always answer natural coincidence with teleological answers and creation myths. Murphy’s bending toward his astral alignment signifies a regressive motion down, beneath the Enlightenment, to the iconized image, the sorcerous sign. And my own discourse here, fated to this same struggle against the mythicization of the image, risks dismissing the historical in favor of my own universals. We can barely escape this tendency to proceed toward rhetorical dichotomies, familiarizing metaphor, and other devices that contain (and falsify) the subject.

Alongside the death drive, a little Leibniz should add to our understanding of both modernism’s Enlightenment claims and shock in Beckett.16 Providing a molecular analogue for transcendental rationalism, Leibniz built upon Descartes’ notions of universal design to propose that

This interconnection, or this adapting of all created things to each other.

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16 For a complete study of Beckett’s noted interest in Liebniz, see Naoya Mori’s “Beckett’s Windows and the Windowless Self.”
one, and of each one to all the others, brings it about that each simple substance has relational properties that express all the others, so that each monad is a perpetual living mirror of the universe. (1714/2015: #56)

In keeping with the pre-Socratic Atomists, Leibniz conceives of an indivisible “simple substance” without parts per se, but which continues to be via certain discrete qualities. A variant of the “corpuscles” in Descartes’ Mechanical Philosophy, monads operate from unique instruction sets which span from the mineral’s dumb force of substance to the human monad’s symbolic reasoning. Like Watt’s “same incident, variously interpreted,” Leibniz offers the monad as paradox of subjectivity involving “many different universes” which are nevertheless only “perspectives on the same one, differing according to the different points of view of the monads” (1714/2015: #57). In both examples, what appears as fixed is reducible to atomized interpretation, worlds and words apart.

Marshall McLuhan notes Leibniz’s resolving “mystic elegance of the binary system of zero and one” in which “The unity of the Supreme Being operating in the void by binary function would, he felt, suffice to make all beings from the void” (1964/1994: 114). This frames Joyce’s own deterministic elegance, such that Stephen Dedalus — a “conscious rational reagent” who plays artistically upon incertitude (1922/1990: 650) — and Leopold Bloom — a “conscious reactor” against it — become two reflections of a universal will to remap the world against the void. Deleuze doesn’t hide his praise for Liebniz, who balances Descartes’ “principle of representation as good sense” with the incessant language of the virtual:

Every time Leibniz speaks of Ideas, he presents them as virtual multiplicities made of differential relations and singular points, which thought apprehends in a state close to sleep, stupor, swooning, death, amnesia, murmuring or intoxication ....However, that in which Ideas are actualized is rather conceived as a possible, a realised possible.

(Deleuze 1995: 213)
Whereas Watt (the virtual character) clearly exists in this intoxicated “murmuring” of ideas worming their way just beyond his perception, and fails to understand difference meaningfully in the void’s radical alterity, the novel itself can treat the questions he confronts dialectically and productively as “realised possible[s].”

Beckett’s parodic movement through this terrain still engages, however, with the weary epistemological optimism of high modernism. In an early quibble between Murphy and his lover Celia, she takes the hard structuralist position that “I am what I do” (1936/2010: 26). Murphy replies that no, “You do what you are, you do a fraction of what you are, you suffer a dreary ooze of your being into doing” (1936/2010: 26). Opposed to being as a condition of its material parts, Murphy — and indeed the novel — are haunted by failures of knowledge to obtain an essence which is still presumed to exist. He understands his own rituals of attempted nonbeing as “practice, faith, and intention,” and this critical enterprise occurs within further efforts to know, as he is “Inspected, palpated, auscultated, percussed, radiographed and cardiographed” (1936/2010: 4). Indeed, everything in Murphy’s existence is framed by the labor toward a symbolically coherent epistemology, from chess to the constant “celestial prescriptions of Professor Suk” that guide his hand (1936/2010: 26).

The confines of the thinking mind, the only self-justified epistemological starting point, already reveal in early Beckett the site of a perverse dialectic. I don’t foreground perversity’s sexual connotation, but rather a nearly asexual pleasure in the contrary, the subversion and/or inversion of desire.¹⁷ Lacan’s assertion that “the moment at which desire is humanized is also

¹⁷ I do admit that perversity, against this constellation of signs, still points always to the procreative and generative subtexts of normative desire, without which the perverse as separatist term ceases to exist. Presentations of Eros and Thanatos are, in the psychoanalytic model, difficult to distinguish. Albeit not a traditional moment of jouissance, one yet wonders at the suggestion in Murphy’s straps for the chair, in the rocking motion itself, if the erotic signifies.
that at which the child is born into language” (1966/2006: 262) prepares us for Murphy’s own attempts at a posthuman ‘rebirth’ into bodiless language. Desire exceeds our humanicity (again, it must be “humanized”) while language, as for Mauthner, remains inescapable at the limit. Perversity also extends to the Enlightenment’s utopianism, the bourgeois politics that extend ethically from the mandate both to materially flourish and to deduce mechanically the qualities of a thinking self moving in reality. Utopianism runs on a humanist desire to preserve the body, a desire which Murphy pleasurably inverts.

The relationship between post-dualistic ontology and material space itself brings to mind Walter Benjamin’s reaction to the mirror-lined vendor rooms of the Parisian arcades. The proliferating image remains

. . .ambiguous, double-edged. It blinks, is always just this one - and never nothing - out of which another immediately arises. The space that transforms itself does so in the bosom of nothingness. In its tarnished, dirtied mirrors, things exchange a Kaspar-Hauser-look with the nothing: it is an utterly equivocal wink coming from nirvana. And here, again, we are brushed with icy breath by the dandyish name of Odilon Redon, who caught, like no one else, this look of things in the mirror of nothingness, and who understood, like no one else, how to join with things in their collusion with nonbeing. (2002: 878)

Doubling of the image via mirrors expands space artificially, much like Watt’s symbolic repetition (“pot pot”) provides a symbolic doubling but not the satisfaction of a semiotic doubling. Language is another “space that transforms itself . . .in the bosom of nothingness,” whose reifying echoes of the material build only upon its desiring absence, as in Lacan.¹⁸ Multiplicity as void of the absolute signifier, of the thing itself, and of centered human desire shows Beckett, Benjamin, and other late modernists moving in tandem against Enlightenment

¹⁸ Lacan asserts that “the symbol first manifests itself as the killing of the thing, and this death results in the endless perpetuation of the subject’s desire” (1966/2006: 262).
metanarratives. The commercial repetition of signs, through visual illusion and language alike, is “how [we] join with things in their collusion with nonbeing,” to rid ourselves of dualism’s bodily thingification in collusion with signs themselves.

Descartes’ “Cogito ergo sum” (I think therefore I am) and the similar core truth of solipsism express, respectively, a degree of optimism and cynicism. While both accept consciousness as the only starting point for methodological knowledge, the cogito pressures the thinker forward, without satisfaction by itself, but only as method and motion by which the human faculties proceed by process (thus his foundational influence on modern process philosophies). The cogito’s implication of an eventual mastery over the clamor and error of inductive sense drove much of the Enlightenment toward stronger knowledge-claims. Solipsism, on the other hand, in both its ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ variations, suggests an ambivalence toward the act of proceeding reliably (or at all) from the zero-point of consciousness, and in fact denotes its own epistemological terminus. The solipsist tends to mistake their apathy for skepticism, and uses evidentiary standards cynically. In this way, Murphy represents the fetishized rejection of both Cartesian process and the Nietzschean interpretive will that guarantees the human.

Thus, Murphy fosters a perverse sort of dialectic with the premises of Western philosophy. He remains unaware of the damage done to his perception by the encroachment of superstition in part because it mollifies his suffering from animal being. Our early introduction to the horoscope pamphlet, written by “Ramaswami Krishnaswami Narayanaswami Suk” (also known as “The Goat”)(1936/2010: 22) shows Murphy already unraveled by a comic hustle.

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19 Indeed, at the time of his death, The Arcades Project had supposedly overflowed any physical bounds of modernist textual containment - Benjamin’s intent often changing under Adorno’s critiques - and his dialectics within it had looked well past the divisions between Marxian philosophy and critical theory.
whose name itself (thrice-swami, the teacher) parodies the desperate attempt to signify legitimized knowledge. Murphy cannot answer Celia as to the pamphlet’s bizarre black envelope with rainbow letters, except to say that “Mercury . . . god of thieves, planet *par excellence* and mine, has no fixed color” (1936/2010: 22). The envelope combines the visually imbecilic with the anti-rational perversity of astrology, a field dominated by poor inductive reasoning. Astrology attempts its own validation via nominal relation to a bona fide evidentiary starting-point, *astronomy*. And moreso, seekers of astrological insight see their recent lives echoed in a horoscope and (inductively) mistake connection for causality.

Much of Beckett’s work considers the states of abjection which result from perversions of the cogito, and *Murphy* is no exception. We can think of this interpretive abjection as a state of atavistic suffering, which yields its own atavistic comforts, both the curse and the decadent cure requiring an epistemological loss. Superstition mixes with a bizarre kind of ‘country medicine’, taught by Murphy’s depressive friend Neary, which I argue recasts their aversion to that ontological (and *autonomically affective*) pain of being as another form of primal mysticism. Murphy wishes for a little of the older Neary’s folkways because his own “irrational heart” wavers between extremes of “ebullition” and affect which Neary variably calls the “Apmonia,” the “Isonomy,” and the “Attunement” (1936/2010: 4). Note how openly Beckett represents violations of the rational as states of ontological stress and as degraded simulacrum of methodical doubt (in this case, Neary’s sham medical diagnoses). Neary’s belief in Pythagorean philosophy conveys the simultaneity of mathematical demystification with the arcane religiosity of *metempsychosis* — made Joycean by *Ulysses* — which *Murphy* satirizes. Neary tells his

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20 *Metempsychosis* (less commonly called *palingenesis*): transmigration of the soul following death. A term held over from the Orphic religion and popularized by Pythagoras, which held that the soul is locked in a wheel of rebirth similar to *samsara*. Much of the
pupil “do not despair. Remember there is no triangle, however obtuse, but the circumference of some circle passes through its wretched vertices” (1936/2010: 213). In consoling Murphy, Neary seems aware of his dual meaning (Murphy’s and Watt’s minds are obtuse indeed) but the geometry of “all life is figure and ground” here literalizes the Baudrillardian seductive surface. These are signs coded in a mask of ‘common sense’ and ‘the obvious’, the methods of reason presumably written into their signature, but which become more iconic by virtue of our free trust. Pythagoreanism leverages the common face of the mathematical universal seductively against “despair.” Thus “some circle” centering even “wretched” triangles marks a seductive defense of metaphysical claims via the aura of numeric perfection.

I argue that the novel dialectically explores the anti-essential nature of interpretation through Murphy’s regression from deductive reasoning back toward an Aristotelian concept which Descartes strictly refuted, the peripatetic axiom. *Nihil est in intellectu quod non prius fuerit in sensu*, or “There is nothing in the understanding that was not first in the senses,” serves as the foundation for empirical science itself. While this inductive attitude of drawing conclusions from experience and limited data — ie. *a posteriori* truth — has yielded innumerable victories in ‘hard’ science, in Descartes’ view the same hubris required of these leaps of inductive faith often attempts to proceed without the established truth of all logical premises. Thus peripatetic empiricism can achieve only claims of probability, not truth. But for Beckett, a probabilistic method suggests the danger of accumulative possibilities, and remains vulnerable to the usurpation of knowledge by sense.

Asceticism of the pre-Socratics can be sourced to belief relating to metempsychosis, of self-denial and ritual as arational plea to Dionysus for liberation. Of great thematic importance to *Ulysses* (and it’s Leopoldian echo “met him pike hoses”), metempsychosis handily predicts the nature of sigla in *Finnegan’s Wake* (607).
Even Murphy’s Thanatos registers foremost as the attempted *science* and inductive practice of pleasurable release from his mind-body alienation. Perverse knowledge and mysticism signify the shocked state, as atavistic reparation for the burden of our permanent self-separation. Throughout his work, Beckett thematizes the sensation of pleasure itself as product of an animal ontology, in this sense an atavistic regression from the trajectory of the human, which for the author seems to arc, like the universe, toward an ever-colder, less hospitable, and more inert state. The pleasure of non-self and anti-knowledge eases the suffering of being as change and loss, a dialectic further shaped by the global near-annihilation that would begin just months after *Murphy*’s publication. “If we start yearning nostalgically, especially these days, for a revitalized “symbolic order,” Baudrillard forewarns, “we should have no illusions. Such an order once existed, but it was composed of ferocious hierarchies; the transparency of signs goes hand in hand with their cruelty” (1988: 136). As we now look toward the wider theoretical view, the dull pains of an arid symbolic order will continue to require ointments of superstition and perverse desire.

### 2.3 Obstructions

Beckett’s own “breakdown of the relationship between words and things” is not Hegel’s ultimately rational “happy fall” (1807/1977: 139), but Jameson’s critique yet illuminates the novels’ progressive conditions. This “breakdown is reexperienced over and over again as a process,” Jameson writes, “a temporary runoff between the habitual onset of linguistic belief and the inevitable degradation of the signified into its material signifier or the sign itself into a mere image” (1991: 139). Rather than friction, *Murphy*’s Wylie describes these semiotics of the human as “a well with two buckets, one going down to be filled, the other coming up to be
emptied” (1936/2010: 58) and never quite making point of contact. Fletcher notes the resemblance of this statement to the occasionalism of Heraclitus (favored by Neary after he grows tired of Pythagoras), and even that of Geulincx himself. Without Descartes’ pineal connection to bridge dualistic separation, Geulincx offers — apart from the remote, unknowable causes of God — a more hopeless revision which closely mirrors Wylie’s buckets. Rather than the ‘encouraging’ command to reason in Geulincx’s dialectical “ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis,” and without even a Nietzschean feeling of the transcendental signifier remaining, we can see how Beckett’s understanding of Geulincx plays its part in the novels’ processing of shock.\(^{21}\) Geulincx’s removal of Descartes’ pineal resolution hastens that degradation of the signified of which Jameson speaks to continually drain the well.

But the hunger for essence still hits that old tautology of ‘wherever you go, there you are.’ It remains bound to us: a drive toward the sedimentation (ie. burial) of contradiction, to make the sign more transparent, remains a key method by which human society promotes mental stability. History must contend with the reifying capacity of its academy to quiet non-static facticity, while the theoretical monoculture of Beckett studies risks adhering to the author’s own tendency to strip the human to a core phenomenology of anti-historical difference. Self-distressing synthesis (not one of these methods of transparency) does yet protect against Balkanization, but strains under poststructural doubts of the mutual nobility of opposing ideas in a binary dialectic.

\(^{21}\) “Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis” translates roughly to “where you are worth nothing, there you should want nothing.” Note the self-sufficiency (even in powerlessness) implicit in the double meaning of want: both lack for nothing and desire nothing. Geulincx thus suggests that where reason is “worth nothing” and cannot penetrate, we need not desire a causal explanation, because the inaccessible divine remains.
Thus I have submitted a theoretical condition, with its poststructural echoes, as answer to the critical dilemma of *Watt*, in which trauma undeniably moves across the sky from great distance, but the novel foregrounds a phenomenology of domestic dysphoria. Modernity forces a deconstructive gaze at the subject-self (and the text itself) that requires no active violence. The rhythmic and trance-like stare, endlessly (we must remember that many think *Watt* interminable!) trying to recover the ritual transparency of language, also allows the primal to ideationally erode the human from beneath. Thus Watt’s eerie insight of the circle and dot (the dialectical nature of which will ‘center’ the second chapter) refers to both body and knowledge: “It is by the nadir that we come . . . and it is by the nadir that we go” (1953/1993: 105).
3 LITTLE BLACK BOXES

3.1 The Materials of Not-Madness

Each step in the process of perceived normalcy we’ve been considering — the center which becomes violated, and the re-centering reactivity — relies on the self-creating technologies identified by Foucault. He writes that “Through these different practices — psychological, medical, penitential, educational — a certain idea or model of humanity was developed, and now this idea of man has become normative, self-evident, and is supposed to be universal” (1988: 15). The machinery that stabilizes belief reveals that humanism is strategic (not essential), and that belief gives rise to the self rather than follows from it. In this sense, the self may be conceived as the limits of these processes of containment, mimicry, and discipline, a concept also familiar to Foucault’s teacher Althusser.

My own emphasis, atop such strong groundwork, is the cynical approach to psychological outcomes, both within Beckett’s novels and as may result from the common state of ‘postmodern’ ambivalence toward interconnection and deterritorialization. The constant immunological reactions of ideology and institutional belief against the threatening pull of difference, Murphy and Watt affirm, may eventually suffer some deficiency or failure. We may pay a price for all that maintenance of our sewage lines of animal disorder, which (for the most part) goes thankfully unperceived by said machinery. As with the old cellular paradox — that the replication which is synonymous with life of the organism makes cumulative mistakes of genetic transcription which become indistinguishable from the process of dying — so too the ideological matrix which stabilizes the conceptual self is a limiting response to difference’s vital ruptures of coherence. Such multiplicities, for the unfortified, can destroy. As Foucault riffs upon a truism in
*Madness and Civilization*, “a knowledge too poor in . . . sensuous relations, too free with regard to the immediate, provokes a tension of the brain alone which disequilibrates the whole body . . . Knowledge multiplies, no doubt, but its cost increases too” (1965/1988: 218). In Beckett, the implications here blanch whiter still, toward multiplicity synonymous with the negating void which Foucault observes in the final stages of his madman, the “night of incessant devouring” of signs (1965/1988: 218).

But to proceed further with respect to our terms, we must return to Deleuze and Guattari’s schizoanalysis, which keenly understands the pre-institutional human, unregulated by capitalist order. For sake of concision with the duo’s often indescribable language, let me offer Jameson’s description of their schizophrenic’s

almost drug-like dissolution of the bonds of time and of logic, the succession of one experiential moment after another without the organization and perspective imposed by the various kinds of abstract orders of meaning . . . schizophrenia is something like a flux which is then, in the various social forms, ordered into some more elaborate, but also clearly, in one way or another, more repressive structure . . . [which] organizes it into ordered hierarchical meanings of one kind or another, makes the hallucinatory landscape suddenly fall into meaningful perspectives and become the place of work . . . (1975: 11)

The remains of instrumental reason, meaning in series, and capitalist structure all enable Watt to continue working, until the “drug-like dissolution” triggered by the merge with Mr Knott. Deleuze and Guattari (via Jameson) have covered a few such theoretical links in my argument. Their connection between perception of the set of anti-foundational truths beneath reality and the reaction of a stabilizing, but flawed and eventually symptomatic, structure (such as is central to *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*), provides a strong basis for our reading of Beckett.
Theirs remains a modified *process philosophy*, which considers change as the foundation of reality and becoming as the nature of being. Our brief mention earlier of rhizomaticity prepares us for their claim in *A Thousand Plateaus* that “Lines of flight or deterritorialization, becoming-wolf, becoming-inhuman, deterritorialized intensities: that is what multiplicity is” (1987: 32). A key feature of the rhizome is its spatial relations, its dimensionality, by which categories of thought (these signs, social relations, things, and desires for change) occupy relative positions in a referential matrix. The old servant Arsene relates the servant’s archetypal experience with an ontology knowable through servitude: Watt’s “being what he has become, and the place being what it was made” (1953/1993: 40) parallels both the cultural materialism and the movement in signs crucial to the accumulative moment of the Deleuzian model.

When the worker “will be in his midst at last, after so many tedious years spent clinging to the perimeter” (Beckett 1953/1993: 41), the visual language of proximity begins to eclipse the binary of embodiment / alienation. Arsene’s reverence for a certain period of his employment, one which shines briefly against his larger sorrow, speaks directly to the spatial relations of the schizoid model:

I was in the sun, and the wall was in the sun. I was the sun, need I add, and the wall, and the step, and the yard, and the time of year, and the time of day, to mention only these. To be sitting, at so pleasant a conjuncture of one’s courses, in oneself, by oneself . . . (1953/1993: 42)

We shouldn’t think of his ontology as comically arbitrary or hallucinatory, but rather as a highly specific turn against the immiserating isolation of the mind. To be more explicit, Arsene’s peace

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22 The relationship in Beckett between process philosophy and the Buddhist doctrine of *anātman* (the ‘not-self’), that no timeless or unchanging self or soul exists, could take up a much longer study. The illusory nature of language and reason in Watt’s desire to fix just such a self leads to the repetition of suffering (*duhkha*).
springs from a new return to sense, the suspension of rational thought within an almost pagan release of bodily space. “With what sudden colours past trials and errors glow, seen in their new, their true perspective” (1953/1993: 41), he speaks of the synesthesia by which cerebral “trials and errors” replay in the body. Of course, such marriages of man’s conscious being with the physical and natural environment as “I was the sun” date older still to the universal monisms of Buddha and the Bhagavad Gita, but critical efforts to understand structurally how the shaky vessel of language could interpret said states add roundness to the frame. Schizoanalysis conveys just such a valence between the hallucinatory and the hard structural that we require to thoroughly experience the novels. After all, Arsene’s speech combines a sermonistic zeal — which reveals in Nietzschean lightning much of the conceptual clarity Watt lacks — with an equally predictive survey of the strict semantic confines which give flesh to the schizoid model. Within the expanding signifier I, the physical space in which a body feels submits to its signed equivalent on the conscious stage.

 Arsene’s bitter visions do a great deal to predict Watt’s struggles, both the lows and brief ‘high’ of a oneness in which the surfaces of labor, title, or spatial presence can infuse and satisfy the demands of being. Even the final vision which dispels the totality is forged in this same language of a hopeful poststructural instinct to map the experience of a sensate self in new (and nondualistic) ways.

 There is a great alp of sand, one hundred metres high, between the pines and the ocean, and there in the warm moonless night, when no one is looking, no one listening, in tiny packets of two or three millions the grains slip, all together . . . a little wind from the sea may come, and blow them one from another far apart, or a pedestrian scatter them with his foot . . . (1953/1993: 43)

The dialectic of process ontology with anti-foundationalism in the vision helps us to understand its disquieting power upon Arsene. Inarguably symbolic, the tower of sand’s scattering of self
occurs between “the pines and the ocean,” or between the opposed paradigms of separation and undifferentiated unity. As in ‘can’t see the forest for the trees’, these trees only signify in isolation, and further so as pines which, usually denuded at their base, present emptier forest floors more ‘interrupted’ by each tree. By contrast, the ocean — an equal multitude, in theory — exists as visual singularity from any human angle. And figuratively, we have imbued the ocean with ideas of an integrative personal for millennia through the present, as Jung’s collective unconscious and the oceanic feeling conceived by Romain Rolland and developed by Freud. The infant cannot perceive itself as a subject separate from its oceanic mother: always approved of and its desires always met by the mother, the infant is unconstrained by language’s displacement of desire (which begins in Lacan’s mirror stage) and ensuing separation of an unconfirmed self.

Between them, the shifting sands never register for Arsene as beach or strand, continuous and relational with land or sea, rather only as an “alp” of small accreted changes. The natural tendency here is a slow dispersal, whose only meaning runs vertically against the symbolic binary of our opposed philosophies, between dualism and an oceanic monism which both signifies and transcends nonbeing. Our nature, one could say, desires us swept in nonlinear directions but we, the assemblage of such small clustered state-changes, also move helplessly in the shadow of cultural binaries which yet seem so simply natural. Interestingly, Arsene’s model bears upon the concept of shock. The opposed philosophical pillars contain the shifting self, and the movement of sand toward either gives ‘positional’ meaning to experience more accessible to language; but as with the stabilizing repair of shock this positioning proves only temporary, as movement toward either actually leaves the center further dissolved. I argue that this vision of conceptual space illuminates the key relations between epistemological paradox and ontological suffering, which still readily confound in Beckett. Our “pedestrian” scatters the metaphysical
site, subjecting understanding to further entropy. Sand itself signifies the paradox, both in the absolute categories that it joins and by its granular transitional status that forces the rejection of easy structure. The presentation of such an abstract model, which bids us to reconsider the binarism of language as abstract medium for metaphysical reality, shows Beckett shaping the premises of poststructuralism long before its formal inception.

A longer study would turn here to Derridean semiotics, which shares in Beckett’s helplessly dialectical process of difference, but reference for Derrida speaks in the aporia and the trace, rather than in the direct and unlimited “lines of flight” of Beckettian paradox and the implications therein of multivocality, of screaming simultaneities. Deleuze and Guattari conceive of humanicity as a thinking assemblage moving along these lines, by which nothing exists in singularity, but rather as the collective force and motion of perpetual becomings. The nonphysical body-without-organs is such an assemblage which functions apart from our conscious mediation; it shares features with the psychoanalytic unconscious, yet the concept also reacts against what the authors perceive as Freud’s totalizing method. The body-without-organs centers their schizoid model of perception and self, “permeated by unformed, unstable matters, by flows in all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities” lacking in Freud’s “organizing” principle.

Deleuze and Guattari’s pathological frame (schizotypal) for the negotiations of mind in the unstable signifying environment of (post)modernity — which somewhere along the way results in a loose feeling of ‘self’, one whose desire to become anything is further reifying — captures the uncanny connection which I too hope to examine in Beckett, between poststructural examinations of the subject-sign and becomings whose structure evinces the touch of disorder. The dis-orga-n-izing principles of schizoanalyis, among other ‘deconstructive’ methods, convey
in psychiatric terms that efforts to articulate the repressive and exclusionary limits of discourse seem a genuine madness when compared to the presumptions of social relations. Reintegration of what remains more or less irreconcilable appears as (and possibly enacts a sort of) disintegration.

We see recognition of this in the developments of depth psychology and philosophy before the language of poststructuralism.\(^{23}\) Carl Jung warned that “progressive development and differentiation of consciousness leads to an ever more menacing awareness of the conflict and involves nothing less than the crucifixion of the ego, the agonizing suspension between the irreconcilable opposites (1959: 44). To that point, Jung worried that he would suffer a cognitive fate similar to Nietzsche’s, who also saw the self as consumed by a nearly insurmountable, oppositional difference. When Nietzsche writes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* that “The human is a rope, fastened between beast and Ubermensch - a rope over an abyss” (1896/2019: 13), he conceives of the thinking self as a similar motion of indeterminate becoming, as well as a product suspended over the negating void implied by its own artificial production. Nietzsche’s eventual collapse followed the tearing down of his ideals — Wagner, Lou Salome — and his own perceived failure to mean virtuously, or coherently in the self-mastery of internal opposition. Nor could he harden himself sufficiently against the ‘bad effect’.

The desperation implicit in the Ubermensch’s late revelation, in a flash out of total darkness, shows the diminishing ability of ideological repair characteristic of shock. Nietzsche manifests what Jung above suspects, and which Deleuze and Guattari convey in the schizoid naming of one of their primary models of mechanical philosophy: that an *inverse* correlation may

\(^{23}\) Depth psychology refers to collective studies of the unconscious and those aspects of cognition which reflect its motives or operations. The term remains flexible to both ends of the Oedipal divide, between Freudian psychoanalysis and Jungian psychology, as well as others such as Alfred Adler who also moved away from the determinance of libido in psychoanalysis, toward the individual’s capable will to self-improve despite the unconscious.
exist between mental ‘progress’ and mental ‘health’, between courageous gazing at dialectical
contingency and the utility of belief (or self). Nearest to Beckett, we find Joyce’s own treasury of
communicable knowledge scattered to the wind in *Finnegans Wake*: its simultaneities of living
and dead, its scrambling of world philology and semiotics making it another strong contender for
schizoanalysis. Indeed, Joyce thought that he and his schizophrenic daughter Lucia were
“submerged in the same waters,” but Jung (see the 1934 interview with Richard Ellmann) and
Lacan (see “The Joyce Trial” in Seminar 23) both believed that writing the *Wake* provided
necessary ‘order’ and sublimated the author’s signs of psychotic difference.

Schizoanalysis’ multiplicities attempt to bridge sense and understanding in meaningful
ways, a way of thinking and defining the organism which might absorb both epistemology and
ontology within more diffuse structures of desire, belief, and culture. But the mutations which
perception must undergo to fully ingest alterity also registers for Murphy and Watt as the
undoing of form as such. Thomas Warger identifies Murphy’s final gaze into Mr. Endon’s
impassive eyes as the effort to find in their form the “proverbial gateway to the mind” (1986:
16), and therein some merger of one’s self-alienated parts. But hope is shuttered by his own
reflection in the enticing void of Mr. Endon’s pupils, his bodily interface a static projection in
another’s also-inexpressible subjectivity, without becoming. And Murphy’s “Belacqua fantasy”
of purgatorial indifference to desire, Warger writes, misses “the crucial detail that the purgatory
he admires can only be reached through death” in Mr. Endon’s mindlessness (1986: 17).
Murphy’s last words, “the last at last seen of him/ himself unseen by him/ and of himself”
(1936/2010: 150), dissolve the bodily boundaries of Murphy’s and Endon’s respective hims, as
the visual logic of Murphy’s shrinking into insignificance within Endon’s eyes is itself
ontologically confounding. Both title characters dissolve into such forms of semantic
entanglement which, like black holes or runaway reactors, compulsively expand the scope of their own negation as subject and narrative collapse.

Like a final disinhibition of Thanatos, Murphy’s blind solipsism ultimately engulfs even his animal awareness of the burning lamp. Unlike the more modernist *Murphy*, which continues coherently after his death, we sense that Watt touches a more ultimate negation which requires no physical death, but which causes the narrative which bears his name to expire. The feeling of his failed body resolving into the very semantics of the narrative, whose train station both first describes and ends him, requires no death. As per our schizotypal model, the anti-novel’s failed efforts to ascertain it’s character’s failures to ascertain himself — or to know anything at all — seem to ritualize failures of symbolic being, like the seeding of Watt’s broken body across the physical text, even birth and death only lines of flight (or train tracks) into or out of the temporal text.

The novels make a strong case for another link that I suggest controls the mechanics of multiplicity and the proximity to madness: compulsion. When anything is just a thought away, the stakes of repetition can be disastrously high. Most of us avoid ‘negativity’ in implicit recognition of this fact, and many fears proceed from the same concerns over the ‘spreadability’ of abnormal signs and states of consciousness. From mental hijacking via propaganda, to our fractious hold of language upon the bounds of knowledge, fears of madness play out largely through linguistic anxieties. And even the most sane know how language can anchor and fester in the mind with the purely memetic force of cancer. Most of us know the distinct displeasure of a shocking phrase or sign taking up roost and intruding upon our thoughts, violating our moral composure. This phenomenon alone can nearly drive one mad: though modern methods of cognitive-behavioral therapy and mindfulness can assist in the release of this malignant
(linguistic) waste, mindfulness itself proceeds from an initial acceptance that language stampedes through all possibility of conscious containment, and misguided efforts of such lead to suffering. Importantly, a lesson concurrent in these related studies is that of negation’s thorny duality. Repression’s simultaneity of absence with presence relies on the binary and compulsive nature of language, which like clockwork summons the unnameable as name in the very motions of its denial. In other words, active efforts of exclusion fall prey to the memetic or reproductive strength of their language, a maddening condition for a chaotic mind. I don’t suggest that Watt’s late condition is aphasic, or that his language is ephemeral, but rather that the uncontrollable memetics of language tend to force moments to their crisis.

Watt’s utterances from the asylum thus begin to look more familiar. A sense of the folly of rational inquiry and meaning per se does not free him from the machine-habits of language, but rather turns these same inquiries toward the very letter-structure of language itself. Language is the medium of his progressive deterritorialization, and thus also the ultimate frontier for such questions. This awareness will help us see beyond the exhausting humor of Watt’s cryptographic madness, to better understand the connection of apparent negation to total structure, or Beckett’s dialectic between the semantic and the philosophical. Encryption’s simultaneity of concealed

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Among Watt’s late inversions we find a parody of negation that cannot yield a “determinate nothing” (Hegel 1807/1977: 53). For example, “Lit yad mac, ot og. Ton taw, ton tonk. Ton dob, ton trips. Ton vila, ton deda. Ton kawa, ton pelsa. Ton das, ton yag. Os devil, rof mit” (Beckett 1953/1993: 167). After following Sam’s instructions to decode (in this case, reverse both the letters within words and sentence order), the lines read: So lived, for tim. Not sad, not gay. Not awak, not aslep. Not aliv, not aded. Not bod, not spirt. Not wat, not knot. Til day cam, to go. Quite the opposite of the many servants’ brief visions of immediate presence, of thing and self as indivisible, one is not quite anything. Even the haunting binary of “bod” and “spirt” melts under the anti-real conditions of language, until letter removal and shuffling (“aded”) become just another symptom of individual practice within artificial constraints. The antithesis of the divine that Watt seeks in Mr Knott cannot but surface as the linguistic “devil” that possesses him throughout the novel, a scientific attention to branching series and method that doesn’t add up to satisfying inductions.
and revealed sign, of image with referent in a deterministic manner that transmits one-to-one interpersonally, hints at a bridge across the solipsistic divide. Of course, we must remain aware of the structural irony, that encryption’s perfect capability of both interpretive parties is well out of Watt’s control, reliant on Sam’s own inductions, and doubly fails in the reader’s likely apathy towards a colossal, nearly indecipherable mass.

But returning to madness, both men have crossed that threshold which Deleuze describes, that the “Something in the world [which] forces us to think . . . is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter” (Deleuze 1995: 139). Framed thus as the forced removal from our default homeland of sense-compatible data (ie. “recognition”), one must confront conceptual unknowns always waiting behind the repeating play of things, for Deleuze their only source of identity. Mr. Endon, the medium for a perfect abstract system of which he bears no recognition (or meta-cognition), predicts the similar, reverse-perfect automatism of Watt’s breakdown. Their paradox of dissolution and totalism describes clinical madness. The schizophrenic’s loss of a managing self that the senses defer to — literalized by symptoms such as synesthesia — reconstitutes in new order, fantastical but rigid. This we find also literalized by the rigidity of Mr. Endon the catatonic, whose ties between social practice and the bodily territory have been fully severed, but for his helpless “chessy eye” (1936/2010: 144). Such cases provide the prototype, in extremity, for the deterritorializations of schizoanalysis.

In Mr. Endon lies all such challenges which Murphy and his modernist novel attempt to face, and from which both self-consciously run. First, that the logical, structural absolutes which chess signifies could be trapped by the sensate self, and thus severed from a metanarrative of functional progress. Mr. Endon has fully undergone the Cartesian disjunction that Murphy toys with in the rocking chair, and which Watt’s dissociative episodes strongly suggest. The scene is
transformative as both pathology and epiphany, in which such extreme separation of thought from sensate being can only register knowledge as the degradation of the neurological body, as presented by Foucault. Critic John Wall notes that Beckett’s attraction to Proust’s method “makes available to perception the Schopenhauerean Idea — that is, the proper object of art — perceivable only when the subject abandons itself to a state of will-less contemplation” (2002: 535). Beckett’s characters, of course, require more extreme forms of self-renunciation, but the model holds true. Classical dualism, as flight into epistemology against the deceptive materials of nature, can here only be resolved for the isolated monad by death or the schizoid model. The binary effects upon the structure of thought from this and other primal dyads remain an increasing problem for Beckett’s early characters.

The schizoid desire we see in Murphy’s response to the game and the gaze, and its attack upon binary interpretive relations with the perceived subject, seems to ‘ingest’ Mr. Endon’s condition as Murphy’s last words ingest him into language’s arbitrary, anti-physical “him.” Murphy’s final run toward his ritual does repeat this hint at dissociative ecstasy or communion (“to join with things in their collusion with nonbeing”), conditions that initially mistake Watt for “a roll of tarpaulin,” “scarcely to be distinguished from the dim wall behind it” (1953/1993: 16). The non-ness of Watt is just what so intrigues Mr. Hackett and company, that the man soaks up reference to the object space around him, without agency and indeed presenting a certain catatonia (“He does not move, said Tetty”) (1953/1993: 17). Already we find Jean-Paul Sartre’s negative ontology saturated in the bodily environment, the being of the object of thought already displaced, separated from us as readers by so many layers of remove. Watt’s lost connection with the sensuous requires the deconstruction marked by Mr. Endon, the formal and historical break with the positivism and reparative rituals of modernism.
The conditions of shock and its trajectory toward the schizoid model must be considered in all these terms. As per Cartesianism, which conceives of epistemology as a kind of separatist reaction against sensuous empiricism, Murphy pursues the adequacy of consciousness in isolation via ritual therapy. But the immediacy with which Mr. Endon’s catatonia acts upon Murphy suggests the latter’s weary lack of defenses as disorder of being and meaning finally conjoin. The repressive releases of Thanatos, literal in Murphy and only figuratively required of Watt, both lead to a tipping point where semantic and material faithlessness manifest the schizoid model, and attending problems of personality and neurology.

3.2 Negative Capabilities

The oceanic principles at one pole of Arsene’s metasymbolic vision, his gesture of departing wisdom, come to pass again in Watt. Monadic belief develops first from the house’s history and the linguistic culture of its workers,\(^\text{25}\) until Watt becomes convinced that nothing could be added to Mr. Knott’s establishment, and from it nothing taken away, but that as it was now, so it had been in the beginning, and so it would remain to the end, in all essential respects, any significant presence, at any time, and here all presence was significant . . . nothing came or went, because all was a coming and a going.

Watt seemed highly pleased with this tenth rate xenia. Spoken as he spoke it, back to front, it had a certain air, it is true. (1953/1993: 131-2)

In such moments, we can begin to see the synthesis occurring between the text’s various metaphysical absolutes. The Freudian oceanic merges here with the Kantian *noumenon* (the

\(^\text{25}\) Returning to philosophical monism, three branches exist, but our oceanic feelings concern the second and third. *Existence monism* contends that a universal constant renders artificial all our categorical divisions; Spinoza’s *substance monism* posits that all things share a single substance (ie. matter or mind) though they diverge in attributes. The latter’s claims lead toward the cultural materialism and structuralism that have informed our discussion (Marx and Engels, for example, viewed all being as the substance of thought).
absolute *house-in-itself* beyond Watt’s knowing) in Beckett’s dialectic with the many process ontologies we’ve discussed. Mr Knott also exists as signifier of a remote but “sempiternal” God (1953/1993: 248), through his and the house’s totality of being from “the beginning” of creation “to the end.” Of his master, Watt later murmurs “Of nought. To the source. To the teacher. To the temple. To him I brought. This emptied heart. These emptied hands. This mind ignoring. This body homeless” (1953/1993: 166). His imagery speaks clearly of worship, from a fallen state of mind and body, which illuminates that the monadic “source” also functions as the absolute truth of the “teacher.” Though many faiths suggest the renunciation of desire, Buddhism uniquely considers emptiness a primary feature of existence (a subject I will return to in a moment). The passage tips us to the novel’s conceptual overlap with the teachings of Buddhism, whether intentional or not, and that Watt is approaching that mad kind of enlightenment available to the novel.

As with Hegel, the dialectic ends in the knowing of a totality or universal that emulates, via a logical science, the perfect understanding of God. And the negativity of thought, which for Hegel pries loose one’s “sensuous-certainty” (1807/1977: 62) and adapts to the insufficiencies of all thought, dissolves the conceptual object in the process of its illumination. He readily admits that the dialectic proceeds from a fear of God (and death, etc.), the “alien essence before which [man] trembled” (1807/1977: 116) and must synthesize via his metaphysical rationalism. Thus, the process of sublation reenacts the sublime like a golden ladder, and yet language enforces its own stricture, that “it is . . . not possible at all that we could say what we mean about sensuous being” (Hegel 1807/1977: 62). This underpins Jean-François Lyotard’s critique of the same

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26 To look back, process ontology refers to philosophy that views the world as the ordered but relational whole of its components.
“pretention to universality” in the “operators of scientific knowledge” (1979: 30) that order ourselves as conscious subjects.

Of all Watt’s “suppositions,” the xenia proves “the only one to be confirmed” (1953/1993: 131). His nearing upon the novel’s dialectical core also returns to a kind of womblike presence. Presence as undifferentiated being, as sensuous-certainty’s presumed timeless essence, lacks that skeptical mediation of the “determinate nothing” which arises only out of reference. Like Hegel, Beckett understands that the dialectical method can torment such that one could find respite, even mysticism, in presence. Thus, dissociation within the phenomena which occupy the stage of sense (“I was the sun . . .and the wall, and the step, and the . . .”) suggests spiritualism, but one which semantically can only seem to signify the transcendent as dissolution. Likewise, states of presence, being for Hegel a pure abstraction, approach the antithesis of perception and threaten to “yield the most abstract and the very poorest truth” (1807/1977: 60).

Unlike Arsène’s synthesis of a semi-dialectical self, one ever shifting between opposed models of belief, Watt’s self-satisfied stumbling into the “tenth rate xenia” does more to satirize the dialectical process. The xenia — cross-pollination of foreign seed — addresses his hybrid perception that “nothing came or went, because all was a coming and a going.”27 This paradox adapts the ideas of negation and multiplicity, which provide the continuity of Knott’s house from “beginning . . .to the end,” to the meager language-desires of immediacy. In a tenth rate throwaway he has hybridized presence toward a kind of schizoid understanding of the universal, but one which emphasizes language’s failure with such nuance.

27 “Xenia, n.: A supposed direct action or influence of foreign pollen upon the seed or fruit which is pollinated . . . [1901 Nature 12 Dec. 126/2] the crossing of the plant by a foreign pollen, exhibited in some peculiarity which appears in the seed itself” (OED Online).
The picture in Erskine’s room, which Watt finds just before his xenia, centers the conceptual matrix we have developed.\textsuperscript{28} Initially attracted to its “illusion of movement in space” (1953/1993: 128), he investigates the picture’s relations of a circle, open at the bottom, to a dot, the sole occupants of the frame.

\ldots or a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time (Watt knew nothing about physics), and at the thought that it was perhaps this, a circle and a centre not its centre in search of a centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time, then Watt’s eyes filled with tears that he could not stem, and they flowed down his fluted cheeks unchecked, in a steady flow, refreshing him greatly. (1953/1993: 129)

Lost amidst the passage’s many convolutions, the metaphysical structure behind these relations is tightly coordinated. Choice of directional alignment that enables the open circle’s genital significance of “It is by the nadir that we come” helps explain the rare, primal emotion Watt experiences in response. Our binary categories seem to adhere if we wish them to — circles and centers, sign and substance, body and mind, mother and child, creator and created souls — yet have been ‘drained’ out the bottom. They become exposed as products of the gravity of a subject with a “not its centre” to mean serviceably. Choices of reference and representation of the real in favor of our human interest in relational continuity, belief that enables the sensation of harmony (aesthetic and spiritual) and desire for reproduction alike, all remain only hopeful interpretive motion.

More than coincidentally, the Zen Buddhist concept of śūnyatā (Sanskrit for emptiness, variously interpreted as the void) also addresses the conditioned nature of experience without essence, and uses the same visual language. Śūnyatā is represented by the symbol ensō, the

\footnote{The drawing existed in the novel’s iterative manuscripts from an early stage. For textual analysis of its development, see Chris Ackerley’s “An “Other Object of Note”: Circle and Point in Samuel Beckett’s “Watt.”}
iconic image of Zen enlightenment, a single brushstroke in a circle often left open to suggest our state of incompleteness in the pursuit of self. Uncannily, a great many ensō also remain open near their nadir, suggesting a common symbolism for the choice to create within the emptiness of all form. To close the ensō, the calligrapher makes a bold statement on perfectability that should give us pause. Perception (samjna) and representation (sankhara) make up two of the five groups of clinging, the summation of all sensory and conscious activity collectively referred to as śūnyatā: the many delusive formations of the empty self. Without acceptance of the unknowable (met through the silence of meditation), and our structural limitations, so recurs the suffering — but also literature. Beckett adapts the visual language of the open ensō to the full ejection of the object from the subject, that the devoted processes of self-creation resemble another self-dissolving ladder that (like Mauthner) must still proceed in language.

Dichotomy, between the alluring gains of multiplicity and the emptiness as grievous loss of the Enlightenment’s very light — “in boundless space, in endless time” — dictates the picture’s spatial arrangement. Due to the circle’s “receding” foreground, Watt wonders expectantly “how long it would be before the point and circle entered together upon the same plane” (1953/1993: 129). The fundamental state of division and dichotomy occurring across time becomes “simply a manner of paradigm . . .like the centuries that fall, from the pod of eternity,” more birthing imagery which also conceives of time as monadic womb of eternal recurrence (1953/1993: 130-1). All culminating, of course, in our final rejoining of time’s dichotomies and dualistic burdens, “by the nadir that we go.”

For the Pythagoreans and many ancient Greeks, the circumpunct (the circled dot) represents the monad, or God; and we cannot avoid the picture’s suggestion that the point, origin of the circle’s reach of creation, has been ejected from those semiotic boundaries. No longer
omnipresent within material reality to anchor its metaphysical claims, transcendental unity is revealed as the construct of a viewer’s third-party perception, dependent on belief in the alignment of sign with substance. Therefore, the kinds of *symbolic* unity which all too readily provide a visual language for the totality of God (i.e. the circumpunct’s mathematically-perfect, compass-drawn circle) become for Beckett the site of material contest, lines both culturally and locally drawn. In a letter to Thomas MacGreevy dated 10 March 1935, Beckett speaks of efforts to reimagine devotional practices within himself, to retrace the limits of the circumpunct as the creative viscera of the mind.

An abject self-referring quietism indeed . . . but the only kind that I, who seem never to have had the least faculty or disposition for the supernatural, could elicit from the text, and then only by means of a substitution of terms very different from the one you propose. I mean that I replaced the plenitude that he calls ‘God’, not by ‘goodness’, but by a pleroma only to be sought among my own feathers or entrails. (*German Diaries* 51)

The need for such a repurposing of the “pleroma,” or the span of God’s spiritual universe, in the construction of self comes from a primal “diseased condition” rooted in fear of nihilism. Quietism, a tranquility so secure in its alignment within the will of a creator that it summons the unbroken circle, reaches Beckett only through metaphors of isolation, the artist-mondad’s figurative universe- unto- itself of abject “feathers or entrails.”

The picture condenses a dialectical motion in Beckett’s work, which expresses the generation of meaning as poststructural game. With God seemingly unavailable, we try to angle the center back in with the mechanics of rationality, seeking the stimulation in a sign’s totality. The ludic quality of Beckett’s work has been well documented, and here it manifests as a visual hope of ‘tilting’ the picture via shifts in perspective, such that the ball of purest blue could return
to and secure the unity of circle via its nadir. As Watt’s encounter with the picture allegorizes all interpretive acts, the reading viewer will also sense this constant flow of the “innocent little game”’s (1953/1993: 38) hopeful motion amidst our maladaptation to the terms of contradiction.

While Watt trods on toward impairment, Beckett passes us the puzzle that offers a revision or synthesis of the visuals of Hegel’s logic in part through its negative laugh. Visually, Hegelian synthesis mirrors the circumpunct: an original moment of creative understanding is the center, which must undergo negation in its antithesis (the dot’s “circumference was black”) toward the sublation of both in a repeating process (Beckett 1953/1993: 128). The wider and more universal understanding encompassed by successive revisions of concepts becomes a ‘circle of circles’ toward its Absolute form. But the endless motion of Watt’s opposing terms can never fully coalesce, continually assailing each other like “ships in the night” without center (1953/1993: 129). It laughs at the philosophical cliche of a circle of circles, the subject created by desire squeezed out unceremoniously from the grasp of perception. Calvin Thomas establishes the two poles of necessary revision to Hegelian structure that we need consider here: Derrida’s generous “affirmation that determines the non-center otherwise than in the Oedipal terms of castration and without any guilt over ‘broken immediacy’ with mother/nature or any nostalgia for some lost ontological homeland of the real” (2013: 210). In the picture (as sublation of Watt’s many thought-games) we see Derrida’s inclusive play within the symbolic exclusion from the real, indeed enabled by the notable lack of guilt in Watt’s thoughts. And yet, psychosexual language of the abject suffuses the symbol: the trauma of our birth into life and

29 See Ayten Tartici, “Ludic Limbos: Beckett’s Belacqua and Intertextual Subversion in Molloy”
language from a universal of “mother/nature” occurs via the “nadir” which also signifies death and excrement and which leads to the *symptom*.

Watt settles on Saussure’s early ground: that the dot’s signifier of the circle’s larger unity exists only as a fundamentally *arbitrary* relation. “[In] this long chain of consistence,” he relays to Sam, “a chain stretching from the long dead to the far unborn, the notion of the arbitrary could only survive as the notion of a pre-established arbitrary” (1953/1993: 134). Both circle and center search, through this allegorical movement “in space, and it almost seemed in time” (1953/1993: 128), for more Platonic terms to express the hierarchical and transcendent relations of ‘a point’ to ‘a circle’, a semiotic claim always just out of reach in Beckett. Iterations of “Tom, Dick, Harry” (1953/1993: 134) to the formal concept of Mr Knott’s manservant are not bound to each other by essence, but by social arrangements.

Thus Watt can only settle on the reassurance of repetition and negative signification, signs meaning only through difference from others, such that “Tom is Tom, and Dick Dick, and Harry Harry, and that other that other” (1953/1993: 134). The network of relations implied by the circle’s structural whole now lacks a center, only arbitrary associates hurtling alongside each other, mutually transforming through a contingent time-space. Ironically, despite its semiotic claims, the picture embeds symbolic unity in the coherence of its poststructural concepts. The command to artfully recreate the conditions of God gets satisfied even in Watt’s hobbled take on the picture’s aesthetic and epistemological convergence, evident in his streaming tears. The relations of humans to the bluest meaning we seek from signs all attempts to repair that (w)hole.

But the embedded philosophical conditions within utter normalcy — and what more passive a vehicle than circle and dot? — here lead to new becoming and/as epistemological derailment. Within a short time of his encounter, Watt’s representation of signs within a
conceptual matrix has undergone a sudden shift that defines the book’s remainder. The
structuralism implicit in his xenia’s “long chain of consistence” (1953/1993: 134) which passes
fragments of culture among servants, must make new accommodations. Kristeva writes of just
this effect of facing abject contradiction *without shame*:

The symptom: a language that gives up, a structure within the body, a
nonassimilable alien, a monster, a tumor, a cancer that the listening devices of
the unconscious do not hear, for its strayed subject is huddled outside the paths
of desire...In the symptom, the abject permeates me, I become abject.”
(1982: 11)

Erskine’s picture seems to make permanent the “nonassimilable” mechanics of neurosis against
which Watt fought, alongside Beckett’s own years of psychoanalytic therapy under Wilfred
Bion. The novel’s sustained gaze into its abject epistemology, and Watt’s language that
eventually becomes fully alien to himself and the reader (without Sam’s outside role as ‘analyst’
to decipher) reinforce the possibilities of its Freudian readings.

As per our expectations, shock’s reactive becoming bears the mark of primal regression.

Against the welter of threatening conflicts within signs, Watt draws closer to his master:

But to Mr Knott, and with Mr Knott, and from Mr Knott, were a
coming and a being and a going exempt from languor, exempt from fever,
for Mr Knott was harbour, Mr Knott was haven, calmy entered, freely ridden,
gladly left. Driven, riven, bidden, by the storms without the storms within?
(1953/1993: 135)

Here Mr Knott, receptacle for the novel’s displaced transcendental semiotic, comes to signify the
*full range* of such unions. Predicting the following ‘affair’ with Mrs Gorman, Watt’s desire for

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30 Of being as fluid motion of becoming which yet reflects an underlying structure: “... every going, every being, every coming consisting with a being and a coming, a coming and a going, a going and a being, nay with all the beings and all the comings, with all the comings and all the goings, with all the goings and all the beings, of all the servants that had ever served Mr Knott, of all the servants that ever would serve Mr Knott.” (1953/1993: 133)
metaphysical unity can only express itself as a sexual unfixing of material hierarchy altogether. Mr Knott thus becomes not only the sovereign “harbour,” but also the sexually submissive subject “freely ridden” by Watt. Likewise, “riven” signifies both the Biblical rending of earth and the crude mechanics of domineering sex. As signification turns toward schizoid multiplicity, Watt’s top-floor union with Mr Knott collects many adjacent nodes of meaning. This collapse of individual being within a cultural amalgam of the transcendental semiotic (ie. with reference to nation-states and sexuality) seems to inhabit simultaneous inversions of hierarchy, a bizarre simulacrum of ‘oneness with God’. Indeed, the “ataraxy” (1953/1993: 208) which overcomes Watt in Mr Knott’s presence itself suggests both the Epicurean’s kinetic pleasures (including sex) and the Stoic’s serenity of the mind which comes from the transcendence of material passions.31

Watt’s triste with Mrs Gorman ironizes its own lack of sexual fulfillment via these signs of metaphysical union. Like most of the seemingly arbitrary locomotion in Beckett’s work, the pair’s ritualized positions remind us that physical movement contains a narrative for relative distance to the sublime. Their habit of “sitting on” (1953/1993: 140) each other reduces sexual intimacy to position within a symbolic hierarchy, an order totalized by the squashing of the individual. Watt’s “post-crucified position” (1953/1993: 140) leaning against her breast equates (pseudo)sexual satisfaction with proximity to Christ as both crucified adult and infant cradled by the madonna. His position reflects shock’s repetitive simulation of the signs of a reassuring

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31 Ataraxia: a term in multiple Hellenistic philosophies that refers to states of tranquility and the removal of displeasing states of arousal, in which we find close analogues in both Buddhist ideas of enlightenment and Freud’s pleasure principle. Skeptical suspension of belief in the conflicting input of sensory data and unconscious dogma that together forms the phantasai (the surface appearance of reality) leads a Pyrrhonist to ataraxia. Since Pyrrho himself wrote nothing, see Sextus Empiricus’ “Outlines of Pyrrhonism” and “The Skeptic Way.”
totality, of surface with *being-as-it-is*. Facing the structural impossibility of coupling the source of our desire with the symbolic that constricts it, he returns to the position which could unify the fallen, an ecstatic repetition that might summon the signified as real, like any other desperate calling of God’s symbolic names. The scene only further confirms the message of circle and dot, the truth that follows the insights of Saussure, Lacan, et al. In the linguistic separation from any essential value (ie. the replacement of transcendental verticality with the horizontality of a shared network of “possible relations”), desire enters language (1953/1993: 136). Here, the semiotic of sex (“twelve, or even thirteen, changes of position were found necessary” before they could finish)(1953/1993: 141) becomes repurposed for their interest in the monadic echoes which might induce *ataraxia*. But as with circle and dot, such unions are structurally beyond reach, and so Watt anxiously regresses to the infantile, the Lacanian lack of subjectivity and thus lack of symbolic *need* to ‘perform’.

I argue for the atavistic quality of this language, not because of its simplicity (parsing this release of repression proves more challenging) but because it reflects a more nonspecific and animal matrix of symbols for non-dualistic unity.\textsuperscript{32} Watt’s and Mrs Gorman’s temptation toward the “cloaca of clonic gratification” points to this primeval direction of the sexual union their postures signify. Not without a tone of disgust, the metaphor also addresses our continuum of symbolic relations. A feature of ancient vertebrates - reptiles, fish, etc. - the cloaca’s orifice combines genital with excretory functions. Our biological dichotomy, whose primitive taboo

\textsuperscript{32}The oldest polytheistic religions trace the sublime through the most animal of sensations and metaphors. Opposed to dualistic cosmology and Cartesian philosophy, which conceive of the sensory body and its earthly habitat as fallen creation, the many polytheisms derisively called *pagan* (also *ethnikos*, which traces the racial animus that aided the consolidation of Judeo-Christian monism in early Hellenic cultures) understand animal nature as divine manifestation.
assigns the genital a generative and sublime context *against* the anus’ abject, animalizing self-abasement, is thus idealized by the pair’s stoical restraint. But the metaphor also enters dialectically, through sexual desire, the onto-epistemological temptations of shock: both a natural defense which temporarily recouples a fragmented semiotic whole, and a shameful regression into the uselessness of visual coherence not philosophically justified. These desperate unions, via primitive ritual, offer relief that cannot last under the poststructural truths revealed by Erskine’s picture.

Beckett thus conveys anxiety and revulsion toward shock’s primitive efforts to repair the rifts of negation and anti-foundationalism, and toward the impossible demands of dialectical thought itself. We can feel it in the states of increasing abjection that consume parts three and four, such as when Watt and Sam later come “nearest to God” in violent subversion of natural hierarchy.

Robins, in particular, thanks to their confidingness, we destroyed in great numbers. And larks’ nests, laden with eggs still warm from the mother’s breast, we ground into fragments, under our feet, with peculiar satisfaction, at the appropriate season, of the year.

But our particular friends were the rats, that dwelt by the stream.

(1953/1993: 155)

Because they are committed in a facility, this tempts the reader to think their actions the symptoms of psychosis, and indeed they do reflect the cumulative effects of schizoid becomings. Though both are founded upon methods of difference, the rational *narrowing* (as well as unfolding) of meaning toward Hegelian absolutes cannot coexist with the perpetually alien difference of poststructuralism.

With a ritual ecstasy, Sam and Watt play many such ‘games’ that attempt to simulate both religious certainty in natural hierarchy (ie. the Great Chain of Being), and the power of God
to assign value and give or take life freely. But their inverse valuation of birds and rats again exposes the arbitrary and highly unnatural quality of signs, fixed only to the degree that their relations are shared among members of a culture, here a culture of two. Without the specific conditions that led to Europe’s great plagues, rats lack this stigma in much of the world and are a common part of the human diet. The advent of cultural relativism as the means of determination of animal hierarchy, rather than divine mandates, seems to guide their hands. While challenging the contingency of our disgust, Beckett uses the wretchedness of their methods to address the limits of dialectics which praise servility’s sublation of desire, by suggesting that we will yet seek to repair the circumpunct — the unity of servant and master — in possibly monstrous ways.33

The condition of poststructural abjection first laid out in Murphy progresses until, by Watt’s end, its mark overtakes the signifying body, which then becomes the target of public punishment and shame. After knocking him down by accident, Mr Gorman and Mr Nolan inexplicably dump upon the dazed Watt a bucket of slime into which Mr Gorman “spat violently” (1953/1993: 240). This symbolic violence couples with their casual dismissal of his “Blood [which] now perfused the slime” (1953/1993: 241) to suggest the chilling hint of the historical traumas wrought on those perceived as the abject other, processes which proceed through language toward such ends. His sliming signals a progression in collective urges to shame and exclude radical difference, through highly institutionalized punishments for those

33 Hegel conceives of servitude as closer to the dialectical state of consciousness, writing that “servitude has this truth of pure negativity and of being-for-itself in fact in servitude in its own self, for servitude has experienced this essence in servitude” by sublating one’s own desires through labor (1807/1977: 114).
who lose the singularity of the sign, as Watt awaits the train that will take him to part three’s mental hospital.

Among those present in the station for the text’s final moments, the only one to recognize Watt’s true condition is, predictably, the also-wretched Cack-faced Miller, who “never greeted anyone, orally or otherwise, and few people ever greeted Cack-faced Miller. He knelt down beside Watt and inserted his hand under the head” (1953/1993: 243). The abjection rendered in the cloaca — the circle’s nadir which ejects both human dialectics and the terminal condition of multiplicity — is also written into Miller’s excrement-covered face. A physical outcast cradles his metaphysical and semiotic counter, and “in this touching attitude he remained for some time” (1953/1993: 243). The conditions of a life’s creation are synonymous with its abjection, from the intended meaning of our words and desire, and from the undifferentiated “source” of the maternal or deific in which one wants nothing that is not provided. The “blue, but blue!” of the soul or Murphy’s free play of consciousness is itself encircled — confined — by the “[black] circumference” (1953/1993: 128) of sensate bodies prone to mechanical failure and the self-deception understood by Hegel and Descartes alike, the long separation of individual perceptions from absolute truths. Like Watt’s friendship with Sam, which involves their brow-to-brow (also “pubis-to-pubis”) (1953/1993: 167) touch and rare embrace, or Mrs Gorman’s aspirational embrace of Watt like the madonna, only Miller’s holding of Watt’s damaged mind allows the human to stand again.

With a longer analysis, and one less transfixed upon the “essential incompleteness of interpretation” of Nietzsche to Foucault, we could more closely tether the historical to our universal concerns (1967/1998: 64). The transmissions of ever-increasing encryption that define Watt’s last temporal segment still attempt, tirelessly, the “little bridge” (1953/1993: 155) of
communicability across the wasteland’s encroaching “dark absence of color” (1953/1993: 249). The requirements of war closely match the individual’s clutch upon moments of the universal, tapped out in desperate repetition, while subjected like cattle to extreme methods of institutional authority and false normalcy. Crucially, Watt’s final break occurs after a bad turn with the razor wire fencing that surrounds the building’s vast gardens. The long passage ruminating upon the many ways this fence could perhaps lead one to “bleed to death, or be eaten alive by rats, or perish from exposure, long before their cries were heard” (1953/1993: 160) speaks to the horrific risks of attempting escape from concentration camps, and to the mass animal containment signified soon after by the ‘boar and bull’ passage. Procured by the train to the end of the line, animals spend their lives but to crash a small hole through a section of fence, or to pass on an understanding of a simple picture almost of nothing at all, to resist the danger of pure Hegelian presence. Against the linguistic repression which becomes the principle subject of state repression, the animal crosses a divide, toward the synthesis of a freer terrain of self, one that can break through the alienation inflicted by binaries. That is, until one’s semi-heroic (indeed Christ-like) exhaustion and institutional punishments meet.34

But the movements we have considered show a reactivity away from awareness of the conditions of being or perception and toward reparative investigations, language, or ritual belief which hold as simulacra of coherent epistemology — until they don’t. And the sheer forces of habit and repetition, the simulacra of language’s missing referent, themselves grow in Watt from fixation to crisis. These macro-trends, played out by Beckett in so many symbolic vignettes, reveal the search for a poststructural model of understanding amidst the early twentieth century’s

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34 Watt’s “face was bloody, his hands also, and thorns were in his scalp. (His resemblance, at that moment, to the Christ believed by Bosch, then hanging in Trafalgar Square, was so striking, that I remarked it.)” (1953/1993: 159).
brutal execution of old truths. I have shown where Beckett’s cynicism belies a perennial humanism, but that individual nobility seen in his many eponymous novels is also perception’s shambling cage of contingency, in unreason capable of both playful and genocidal contradiction.
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