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James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and the Confines of Autonomous Language

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A final nod to Joyce and Beckett for creating bodies of work that defy easy categorization and continue to give readers headaches years down the line.

- DMV [04.08.2009]

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I. Introduction

The act of communication is one contingent upon successful translation. Drawings, gestures, and speech are all approximations used in order to convey ideas and information. For the most part, these methods of communication serve their purpose, but there are certain ‘things’ (for lack of a better word) which cannot be communicated through any conceivable language. Each person has their own unique set of experiences and memories. Each individual mind is unique in how it interprets a word, an action, a color, a smell, etc. If a hundred people hear the word ‘dog,’ each one will envision a different image in their mind. Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello suggests this concept via the Father in his acclaimed *Six Characters in Search of an Author*:

Each one of us has within him a whole world of things, each man of us his own special world. And how can we ever come to an understanding if I put in the words I utter the sense and value of things as I see them; while you who listen to me must inevitably translate them according to the conception of things each one of you has within himself. We think we understand each other, but we never really do. (927)

Language also acts as a social constraint, having been previously established, to mold our ‘individual’ perceptions and consciousness from the moment we are birthed. Despite being aware of these failures and shortcomings, language continues to function and spread, remaining the most efficient method of communication we possess. However, certain authors in the twentieth century chose to examine language in and of itself, choosing to ignore the accepted utilitarian function of language as a communicative medium. These authors did not do this to be ‘difficult’ or ‘pretentious;’ they wished to acknowledge the inescapable limits of communication and see how they could attempt to work around those limits. This brought a revolutionary change in literature that had been slowly brewing since the days of Flaubert.

In order for art to remain relevant, it must change with the times. A landscape painting by Frederic Edwin Church, while aesthetically pleasing and technically brilliant, seems extraneous in this era of modern photography. This advancement forced twentieth century painters to look inward rather than outward for their subjects, giving way to the dream paintings of the Surrealist movement and the personal freedom of Abstract Expressionism. In a 1929 article on Joyce and language, Eugene Jolas acknowledges that modern painting “has done away with the classical perspective” in order to “attain the purity of abstract idealism,” leading to a world of “wondrous new spaces.” He then asks, “should the art of the word remain static?” (82). Much like these abstract painters in question, writers of the early twentieth century began to realize that words could be just as pliant and autonomous as paint. Both modernism and postmodernism rejected the stale use of language and clichéd themes inherent in their more immediate literary predecessors. The writers of these movements favored textual innovation and experimentation over formula. The language, in spite of its hegemony, exudes a certain air of autonomy.

‘Autonomous language’ as a concept could be most easily defined as the self-governing nature of language to grow and evolve over time. Words are free to change. Grammar and syntax are boundaries imposed upon language by man. Language is always changing, never stagnant. This is the root of philology. Writers who believed in the autonomous quality of language refuted the classical idea that words are secondary to the world, the idea that language is merely a reference tool.

The contradiction of something that is simultaneously free and confined is at the heart of Modernist and Postmodernist literature. In his introduction to *The New*

Literature, Claude Mauriac coined the term *aliterature* to describe this then-burgeoning canon. He defines aliterature as “literature freed from the hackneyed conventions which have given the word a pejorative meaning” and describes it as “a never-reached pole” and that “honest writers have been going in its direction ever since there have been men, and among them, men who write” (11). Despite the obstacle of a “never-reached pole,” writers have continued to push the limits of the written word, grasping closer and closer to said pole.

In this essay, I will analyze two of the twentieth century’s most revered and adventurous writers (James Joyce and Samuel Beckett) and their opposing methods of reaching towards the metaphorical pole; striving for aliterature. Joyce was a literary virtuoso who shattered the statutes of the novel and pushed the written word to its omnibus inclusive limit. Beckett, a disciple of Joyce, was aware of Joyce’s linguistic accomplishments and chose to tackle language from an opposing angle, breaking down words and reveling in their failure and impotence. Both changed literature forever and remain steady subjects of criticism. I will focus primarily on Joyce’s *Ulysses* (specifically the Proteus episode) and Beckett’s *The Unnamable*. Before diving into those works I will discuss the concept of autonomous language, the climate of change, and the achievements of Modern/Postmodern literature. I will also briefly summarize multiple ideas of “space,” history, and the view of language in post-structural philosophy, relating it to literature and the self.

II. Autonomous Language

“Most people don’t pay attention to such things. They think of words as stones, as great unmovable objects with no life, as monads that never change.”

“Stones can change. They can be worn away by wind or water. They can erode. They can be crushed. You can turn them into shards, or gravel, or dust.”

(Auster 74)

In Paul Auster’s 1985 novel *City of Glass*, Peter Stillman is an old man who has been searching for true representation in language (the language of God) for the majority of his life. In his first conversation with writer-turned-detective Quinn, he proposes a new language “that will at last say what we have to say. For our words no longer correspond to the world.” (76). Stillman has witnessed change and feels that whenever man tries to speak of what he sees, he is false and his meaning is ultimately distorted. He uses a broken umbrella as an example to show Quinn what he means. An umbrella, like practically every other object, serves a function. In this case, its function is to protect its operator from rainfall. A broken umbrella, however, does not serve its function, yet we still call it an umbrella. Stillman concludes that “Unless we can begin to embody the notion of change in the words we use, we will continue to be lost.” (77)

Auster’s fictional call for linguistic amendment echoes a critical call from nearly sixty years prior. In 1929, the European literary journal *transition* published “The Revolution of the Word,” a proclamation favoring a freshness and revitalization of the written word. It begins by declaring that the list of signatories are “tired of the spectacle of short stories, novels, poems, and plays still under the hegemony of the banal word, monotonous syntax, static psychology, descriptive naturalism,” and are, “desirous of crystallizing a viewpoint” (Jolas 13). This is followed by an irreverent twelve-pronged

list of statements and demands, emboldened in the darkest black and capitalized with force:

1. **THE REVOLUTION IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE IS AN ACCOMPLISHED FACT.**
2. **THE IMAGINATION IN SEARCH OF A FABULOUS WORLD IS AUTONOMOUS AND UNCONFINED.**
3. **PURE POETRY IS A LYRICAL ABSOLUTE THAT SEEKS AN A PRIORI REALITY WITHIN OURSELVES ALONE.**
4. **NARRATIVE IS NOT MERE ANECDOTE, BUT THE PROJECTION OF A METAMORPHOSIS OF REALITY.**
5. **THE EXPRESSION OF THESE CONCEPTS CAN BE ACHIEVED ONLY THROUGH THE RHYTHMIC "HALLUCINATION OF THE WORD".**
6. **THE LITERARY CREATOR HAS THE RIGHT TO DISINTEGRATE THE PRIMAL MATTER OF WORDS IMPOSED ON HIM BY TEXT-BOOKS AND DICTIONARIES.**
7. **HE HAS THE RIGHT TO USE WORDS OF HIS OWN FASHIONING AND TO DISREGARD EXISTING GRAMMATICAL AND SYNTACTICAL LAWS.**
8. **THE "LITANY OF WORDS" IS ADMITTED AS AN INDEPENDENT UNIT.**
9. **WE ARE NOT CONCERNED WITH THE PROPAGATION OF SOCIOLOGICAL IDEAS, EXCEPT TO EMANCIPATE THE CREATIVE ELEMENTS FROM THE PRESENT IDEOLOGY.**
10. **TIME IS A TYRANNY TO BE ABOLISHED.**
11. **THE WRITER EXPRESSES. HE DOES NOT COMMUNICATE.**
12. **THE PLAIN READER BE DAMNED.**

Signed by some of the major literary proponents of experimental art (Eugene Jolas, Hart Crane, Stuart Gilbert, and thirteen others), "The Revolution of the Word" became an apex of Modernist thought; a culmination of the feelings of frustration and creative yearning that had been building since the turn of the century. Intelligent readers grew bored of the formulaic nature of popular literature and felt its presence obsolete, especially in an era where the burgeoning art of cinema rendered standard literary description in story-telling redundant and pointless. In his essay "The Function of Words," Stuart Gilbert compares words to pictures, calling them "emotive signs." He designates the Revolution of the Word as "a movement to explore the secondary, non-utilitarian function of language" (204). Literature is an art form, not a mode strictly confined to pellucid communication (it "IS NOT MERE ANECDOTE"). Words are and

still should be used as practical conveyors of meaning, but this utilitarian function should not govern a work of art. Words are autonomous and can be molded, fattened, deconstructed, ripped and regulated regardless of acceptable grammar and syntax. The writer must *express* (“**HE DOES NOT COMMUNICATE**”), and in order to freely express oneself, one must exercise the freedom of total control over one’s tools. Philosopher James Feibleman believed that “every artist strives toward an ideal language of his own devising” and that “[u]nless an artist speaks a new language he is hardly worth listening to” (141). One can write anything and be called a writer. To be an artist, one must dig deep and express his or her self in an individual manner. The familiarity of common repetitive relationships between words leads to “creative abortions” (Jolas 28), unfaithful representations of ourselves that are comprised of conventional language. Artists of the New Word had to seek out innovative ways to use words in sculpting their work.

Littérateurs like Gilbert and the other *transition* contributors equated literature more closely with the plastic arts, such as painting and sculpture, than any previous generation. A few of the guidelines in the manifesto (particularly numbers 6, 7, 10, and 11) push the writer and the written word far away from their preconceived notions and pulls them closer to the realm of spatial art. Gilbert relates the words in a writer’s consciousness to the paint on a painter’s palette, writing that “their forms and colors may be blended according to the instinctive talent of the artist” (204). While paint can be an applicable metaphor for this new method of language use, there are stark differences between the way one looks at a painting and the way one absorbs a work of literature. A painting is typically viewed spatially, the piece evaluated as a whole in a simultaneous

instant. Literature, on the other hand, is viewed sequentially, over a period of time. One cannot look at every word of a novel at the same time and absorb it all. This observation harks back to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's 1766 *Laokoon oder Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie*, one of the first major attempts "to define the limits of literature and the plastic arts" (Frank 221). Lessing uses the terms *Nacheinander* ('one after the other') and *Nebeneinander* ('co-existence') to explain the processes for reading poetry and viewing paintings, respectively, declaring "In the one case the action is visible and progressive, its different parts occurring one after the other... in the other the action is visible and stationary" (Gifford 45).

Lessing's theory on literature and the plastic arts became the critical reference point in one of the most significant essays pertaining to autonomous language: Joseph Frank's "Spatial Form in Modern Literature." Frank begins his essay by summarizing Lessing's argument, acknowledging the "necessary limitations" (223) in viewing and creating works of art. Frank then proposes his thesis: an application of Lessing's method to the realm of modern literature, suggesting that "modern literature... is moving in the direction of spatial form" (225). Time and space classically pertain to the *Nebeneinander*, towards visual art and far away from sequential media like music and the written word. Frank argues that several modern writers (namely Eliot, Pound, Proust, and Joyce) created works that were intended to be apprehended spatially, "in a moment of time, rather than as a sequence" (225). This is crucial to the belief in autonomous language and artistic freedom in literature. With time and space (not *literally* but *figuratively*) annexed by the modern author, a whole new world of expressive possibilities opened up for literature. I emphasize *literally* and *figuratively*

for there is no current method in which one can look at all three-hundred-or-so pages of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* simultaneously and retain all of its meaning. The true vaulting of space and time in literature depends on the reader just as much as the writer. Frank suggests that the writer must break up the "temporal sequence" in order to approach the simultaneity of perception and, on behalf of the reader, that it is "necessary to undermine the inherent consecutiveness of language, frustrating the reader's normal expectation of a sequence and forcing him to perceive the elements of the poem [or, in our case, the novel] juxtaposed in space rather than unrolling in time." (227)

Joyce's *Ulysses* is the perfect example of this style. Over the course of around eight-hundred pages, it embraces "an infinite number of references and cross-references which relate to one another independently of the time-sequence of the narrative; and, before the book fits together into any meaningful pattern; these references must be connected by the reader and viewed as a whole." (Frank 232) This presents an interesting challenge to the reader; one that allows him or her to connect seemingly inconsequential meaning among distant phrases and episodes of the novel. This also makes the rereading process much more rewarding. A popular adage among literary enthusiasts is "You don't read Joyce, you reread Joyce." This is also applicable to Samuel Beckett, whose *Trilogy* can be read and read and read again, with new meaning clarifying it each time. Both of these authors and their relation to autonomous language will be dissected in their subsequent sections.

Throughout this section it appears that I've placed language atop a lofty, ever-rising pedestal. In truth, language is flawed. Words are symbols that can be

manipulated and misinterpreted. While language continues to strive towards true representation, it remains a goal which will never be achieved. Many prominent writers and philosophers of the twentieth century pondered and probed language through the schools of linguistics, semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism, and deconstruction. It was their goal to get to the very roots of language and analyze its workings and its relation to people (more particularly, the human mind and the unconscious). Before plunging into *Ulysses* and *The Unnamable*, a brief summary of these philosophers and their ideas is necessary to understand the spectrum of language more absolutely.

III. The Confinement of Language

The ineffable lies beyond the frontiers of the word. It is only by breaking through the walls of language that visionary observance can enter the world of total and immediate understanding.
(Steiner 283)

Critic and philosopher George Steiner viewed language as a severely confined method of expression; one that was incapable of conveying truth. In his essay “The Retreat from the Word,” he calls for destruction of the “walls of language” in order to properly promote understanding and the sharing of truth. Language, however, isn’t going anywhere in the foreseeable future. The fact Steiner wrote his argument in a series of coherent words is a testament to language’s unchallenged claim to the throne of human expression. While oppressive and flawed, language remains our chief vehicle of communication. Over the course of this chapter, I will define the linguistic sign, review the theories of a few major twentieth-century philosophers and situate these ideas within the two major dilemmas of language: the impossibility of accurate representation and the tyranny of history as a governor of consciousness and expression.

In one of his many treatises on symbolism and semiotics, Italian philosopher Umberto Eco loosely defined symbols as “signifiers that convey imprecise clouds or nebulae of meaning that they leave continually unexploited or unexplainable” (8). He cites Goethe, who wrote of symbolism, interpretation and the transformation of ideas into images as early as the eighteenth century. Semiotics (a study that analyzes sign processes, symbols, meaning and apprehension) questioned language as a means of conveying truth and, through its eventual splintering into smaller disciplines (structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction), changed the way we look at language.

Traditional linguistic theory viewed words as a sort of adhesive; a uniting force connecting things and actions through names and modifiers. This dates back to classical Western philosophy and even to the biblical Adam. Modern linguistic theory grew out of the increasing awareness of the inadequacy of these traditional models. Modern linguistics essentially stems from the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, a late-19th/early-20th century linguist. It was Saussure who set out to define the linguistic sign and its relation to the concept it is struggling to signify, which he attempted in his famed posthumous lecture collection *Cours de linguistique générale*. According to these lectures, “the linguistic sign unites, not a thing and a name, but a concept and a sound-image” (842). He later amends this classification, replacing the terms ‘concept’ and ‘sound-image’ with ‘*signified*’ and ‘*signifier*’ (843). In a pictorial diagram, Saussure illustrates a circle divided in two, diametrically. The ‘signified’ occupies the top half while the ‘signifier’ is lodged in the bottom. A horizontal bar segregates the two. The signified and the signifier run parallel to each other, sharing a relationship but ultimately never making contact. This idea was adapted and later converted into the algebraic algorithm “*S/s*” by psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan.

Further in his lectures, Saussure noted that “[l]anguage is a system of interdependent terms in which the values of each term results solely from the simultaneous presence of the others” (845). In plainer speak: words depend on each other in order to function. You can only define a word by using other words. On top of that, one can only understand a word’s intended meaning by its location within a set of words (i.e. context). This led Lacan to assume that “there is no existing language whose ability to cover the field of the signified can be called into question” (*Écrits* 415). The signifier

can never accurately express the signified. This opens the first of two major dilemmas in language: the gap between a word and what it is trying to convey.

Lacan's algebraic appropriation of Saussurian observation depicts a bar resting as the dividing sign between signifier and signified. This bar is a "barrier resisting signification" (415), one that cannot be defined, yet which simultaneously represents a level of importance above signification. This bar is translated into a "space" which holds a different meaning amongst the top theorists of twentieth century language (for these purposes: Lacan, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida). According to Art Berman's study of post-structuralist theory, this reliance on a "space" provides "the room for subjectivity to *generate* meaning" (177). This space "cannot be a scientific concept" because labeling it as one would place it in the realm of the signified instead of being an essence outside of the S/s trap. The space must be viewed and analyzed skeptically (187). As we will see, this "space" is a concept which has generated numerous meanings and interpretations.

Lacan labels the gap between signifier and signified as a multipurpose space, one with more psychological significance than any of the other major theories. Aside from the obvious split between language and what it signifies, this "space" represents an area "between subjectivity as desire and its image of unity, ...between desire and its object that has been rendered unobtainable (the mother [in Freudian theory])...[and] also between language and the world (and proposed "objective reality")" (Berman 187). Desire plays a more important role than intellect in Lacanian theory. Subjectivity (a synonym for 'consciousness' in post-structuralism) is present in an individual before language sets in. In this pre-linguistic state, desire is the driving force. Once language is

grasped by the individual, names and ideas are assigned signs (words), thus thwarting this primal desire. When the pressure for an individual to conform to the confines of language clashes with the urge of primary desire, a “space” forms (Berman 186). Lacan believes that the self (subject, ego, etc.) is created within this space, a space synonymous with the previously discussed multi-tiered space. As a result of language’s oppression, desire is ousted from consciousness and is responsible for the formation of the unconscious. The self is subsequently based on a lack rather than a presence, which is a total shift from traditional theory. Since language is an attempt to replace that initial desire, it initiates a chain of substitutions in an attempt to compensate for the lack. The compensation can never be completely satisfying due to the distance between base desire and language. One can never fully say what one means. Lacan’s association of the psychological confines of language with the natural limitations of symbolic representation adds a more multi-faceted layer of thought to linguistics and the concept of “space.”

In a more sociological/historical approach, Michel Foucault surmised that modern “man” was created in the space between language and representation. In his 1966 book, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, Foucault outlines the evolution of thought, intellectual acquisition, and language throughout humanity’s history. Where Lacan and Derrida related the metaphorical post-structural “space” to the individual, Foucault emphasized the collective “man” (mankind). This space where mankind has been placed is restrictive and devoid of faith. Berman condenses one of the major observations on Foucault’s study:

[T]he opening of a linguistic “space” that is presented as an event in the *history* of philosophy and language theory is rhetorically transformed into an *epistemological* “emptiness” or “vacancy,” which once was filled by the ground of knowledge (God, perhaps) and the soul, essence, or self of the individual. Within that space is now “Desire, Law, and Death, which outline, at the

extremity of analytic language and practice, the concrete figures of finitude” (*OT* 378). (Berman 184)

The emptiness that Foucault refers to is the social equivalent of Lacan’s ‘lack.’ Instead of the repression of initial desire that Lacan speaks of, Foucault’s space is formed by a lack of knowledge and faith. For Foucault, the open-endedness of religion and faith has been replaced by finite principles. The space between language and representation renders truth unobtainable and untranslatable; the only veritable essences being desire, law, and death.

“Space” finds a new name in the works of Jacques Derrida. In *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, Derrida talks of a “rupture” within structure and the concept of the ‘center.’ ‘Structure’ is a utilitarian classification for ordered parts working together functionally. When viewed philosophically, ‘structure’ organizes and characterizes life and humanity. However, since (according to Foucault) truth is unobtainable, our attempts at structuring humanity and the intangible are futile. Derrida notes that structure “has always been neutralized or reduced...by a process of giving it a center or referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin” (*SSP* 915); the giving of names and the substitution of metaphors. The ‘center’ has always acted as a rational tool for structure, being “the point at which the substitution of contents, elements, or terms is no longer possible” (915). It is an indefinable crux that has been labeled by different metaphors throughout the course of history. The “rupture” Derrida refers to occurred when “language invaded the universal problematic;” when “everything became discourse” (*SSP* 916). This came through the realization that “the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences” (916), which recapitulates Saussure’s reflection on language being an

incessant chain of signifiers. Language is comprised of signifiers. Our consciousness is formed by language, so we cannot truly know what there is outside of these signifiers. Since “language cannot transcend itself to explain itself” (Berman 202), we can never comprehend what is external to discourse.

In an attempt to give a name to what is essentially unnamable, Derrida coined the term *différance*, though he maintains that it “is neither a *word* nor a *concept*” (*Différance* 933). The verb *différer* holds two meanings in French: “to differ” and “to defer.” It is in the combination of these two denotations that Derrida sites/cites *différance*. Language functions as a result of signs differing and deferring. Linguistic signs are effective through difference: a word is what it is by what it is not. This accounts for the existence of different words. Linguistic signs also defer meaning. In his speech, Derrida labels the linguistic sign as a “deferred presence”:

Signs represent the present in its absence; they take the place of the present. When we cannot take hold of or show the thing, let us say the present, the being-present, when the present does not present itself, then we signify, we go through the detour of signs. (*Différance* 937)

The attempted meaning is always deferred from the signified through a chain of signifiers that differ.

Différance, which Derrida later describes in *Positions* as the “systematic play of differences, of the traces of differences, of the *spacing* by means of which elements are related to each other” (Berman 204), is an attempt to view meaning and its relation to language and the inexpressible. Near the end of his speech, Derrida ardently claims that there is no real name for what he is trying to describe; that even the term ‘*différance*’ is “not a name...not a pure nominal unity” (949). If it were a name, it would fall under the category of signifiers. If it were a concept, it would fall under the category of signifieds.

The unnamable thing that has resisted classification for so long is “the play that brings about the nominal effects, the relatively unitary or atomic structures we call names, or chains of substitutions for names” (949).

Through Saussure, Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida, we have seen how language is a limited resource in conveying truth. This is evidenced by the metaphorical “space” existing between the signifier and the signified. Ignoring the technical make-up of the linguistic sign, we approach our second major dilemma in language: the burden of history and tradition.

In a letter to one of his friends, James Joyce wrote that he could not express himself in English without “enclosing [him]self in a tradition” (Ellmann 397). Language is a relic one acquires through the development process, a hand-me-down recycled from generation to generation. It is made up of past words and connotations that pre-exist the individual psyche. This amalgamation of words forms the individual conscious. Art Berman writes, “[T]he self (the subject, mind, ego, cogito) is not a Cartesian-like entity but is constituted, and that this constitution is by and in language” (174). The ability to rationally think outside of language is thus impossible. This also points out one of the inherent paradoxes of structural linguistics: how is one supposed to study language when one cannot objectively step outside of language in order to observe it? Along with the domination language has over our thought processes, history colors the language we inherit. We speak the words of those that came before us, leaving the realm of original expression practically unobtainable.

As previously stated, Jacques Lacan viewed language as a device that thwarts desire in early human development. In *Écrits* he writes that “the subject, while he may

appear to be the slave of language, is still more the slave of a discourse in the universal movement of which his place is already inscribed at his birth, if only in the form of his proper name” (413). From the moment we are born (and subsequently named), we become subject to the domineering leash of language.

The issues of history and tradition as a linguistic leash was brooded over by many twentieth century philosophers, but none addressed it more succinctly than Roland Barthes in his first treatise, 1953's *Writing Degree Zero*. Throughout the course of his argument, Barthes positions the linguistic burden of history in relation to literature, which has been an observed conflict since Flaubert and the problematics of language (relative to Derrida's "rupture"). Barthes argues that literature has become its own language, one that carries simultaneously "the alienation of History and the dream of History" (87).

Literature before Flaubert's time did not incorporate form with content in the way modern writing has done. The language in classical literature attempted to be representational and nothing more; "it *was* language, in other words it was transparent, it flowed and left no deposit, it brought ideally together a universal Spirit and a decorative sign without substance or responsibility" (Barthes 3). Once the emphasized "space" opened up in the mid-nineteenth century, a more self-aware writing was born. Writers became aware of the confines that language and history have placed on expression.

Barthes wrote that since the theoretical awakening,

[E]very mode of writing has thus been an exercise in reconciliation with, or aversion from, that objectified Form inevitably met by the writer on his way, and which he must scrutinize, challenge and accept with all its consequences, since he cannot ever destroy it without destroying himself as a writer. (4)

Writers (philosophers included) who are discouraged by the restrictive futility of language as expression must either come to terms with their grief or give up writing and

speech completely. Some have tried to exorcize literature by “dislocating” it, using a “chaos of forms” and a “wilderness of words” to remove their work from the realm of history, yet they all ultimately fall victim to the tracks and laws of inherited language (Barthes 74).

Barthes spends a good deal of time focusing on the plight of the writer and the tools that must be utilized in order to create literature. He identifies the universality of language in a given period (its phrases, dialect, references, etc.) as “a kind of natural ambience wholly pervading the writer’s expression” (9). The writer’s vocabulary, his knowledge of available words to signify, “is not so much a fund to be drawn on as an extreme limit; it is the geometrical *locus* of all that he could not say without” (10). This places a writer’s range of ideas and images to express within the narrow confines of his or her personal lexicon. The limitations of language seem enough of a burden before even considering the hand-me-down aspect of history, which leaves writers “unable to pen a word without taking a pose characteristic of an out-of-date, anarchic or imitative language” (Barthes 84). This is the major flaw that the signers of “The Revolution of the Word” overlooked. They posed their argument in the words they rallied against. They assumed the Romantic sentiment of writing being solely an expressive act, where theorists like Barthes believe that the creative act is more of an ‘impression’ than an ‘expression.’ Language and culture leave their imprint upon the artist and this imprint pervades the work of art.

The unexplainable will to create art has been a part of mankind since its inception. In order for a literary work to be perceived by others, it must bow to the parameters of established language, thus compromising the artist’s base will and desire. This is a tragic

element of writing for Barthes. The “ancestral and all-powerful signs” that have formed the artist’s consciousness have relegated literature to “some ritual, not like a reconciliation” (85). Even if a writer tries to invent language (Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, for example), it ultimately ends up fabricated due to the pressure of those who cannot comprehend what the artist is trying to convey. This led Barthes to declare that “Writing...is a blind alley, and it is because society itself is a blind alley” (87). Since a writer cannot express himself or herself completely, he assumes that a modern masterpiece of literature is impossible.

If it is impossible, why do serious writers continue to strive for it? This brings us back to Claude Mauriac and his concept of aliterature. While true representation can never be conveyed through language, human effort continues to stretch the word to greater distances, allowing it to evolve and find new capabilities in order to bring language closer to that “never-reached pole.” In the final sentence of *Writing Degree Zero*, Barthes declares that “Literature becomes the Utopia of language” (88). A utopia is an ideal or perfect state, derived from Thomas More’s book of the same name. A true utopia has never been realized, yet that hasn’t stopped people from trying to achieve it. In a similar sense, language has never realized true representation, yet through literature, writers are still trying to attain it.

Referring back to George Steiner, whose words compose this chapter’s epigraph, there is one writer who has “no genuine successors...in English.” While realizing the confines of language, this writer still sought to expand its capacities. In Steiner’s words, “the most exuberant counter-attack any modern writer has launched against the diminution of language is that of James Joyce” (301).

IV. James Joyce

More than any other writer in the English language, James Joyce (1882-1941) believed in the all-encompassing freedom of the written word. I use the term ‘English language’ loosely, for Joyce’s omni-linguistic prose is constantly injected with bits of other languages, local dialects, dense allusions, countless word combinations and neologisms. His style became increasingly abstract (at least in regards to conventional literature) throughout his career. His modest literary output (three novels, a play, a collection of short stories, and two petite books of poetry) is a testament to his meticulous nature as a literary craftsman. His final masterpiece, *Finnegans Wake*, reads like it was written in its own language, bearing only a scant resemblance to proper English. If Joyce had lived past age 58, surviving the atrocities of the Second World War and witnessing an age of rapid technological advancement, who knows what he would have published next. Could he have taken the language any further than he had with *Finnegans Wake*? Arguably, literature and the written word reached an apex of autonomy in the major works of James Joyce. This skill was not, of course, propagated overnight. Years and years of study, observation, and inquiry compounded into a mind and pen primed to capture and express what had never been previously translated to the page.

Joyce’s fascination with language began at a very early age. Reading the first page of his semi-autobiographical bildungsroman *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, one can witness the development of sensory perception from infancy to early adolescence. The tale of baby tuckoo, the “*O, the wild rose blossoms*” song and Dante Riordan’s guilt-ridden chiasmus “*Pull out his eyes, / Apologise, / Apologise, / Pull out his eyes*” (6) contribute to Stephen Dedalus’ penchant for wordplay, storytelling and song

(which, when combined, generally come to represent Joyce's compositional technique throughout the majority of his career). This reflection on the infantile-to-pubescent stages of the mind indicates the importance of the intellect for Joyce's protagonist. Like Stephen Dedalus, the young James Joyce was also dedicated to absorbing as much knowledge as he could. According to Richard Ellmann's biography, he "set himself to master languages and literatures, and read so widely that it is hard to say definitely of any important creative work published in the late nineteenth century that Joyce had not read." (75) He began composing poems at age nine and was a published literary critic by the time he turned eighteen. By this time, the young intellectual already held strong views on aesthetics, the artist, and what art should be.

Someone so well read and with such clear attitudes early on is bound to be explicitly critical, and Joyce was clearly no exception. He praised the then-scandalous plays of his hero Henrik Ibsen for being "so packed with thought" (*Critical Writings* 67) while scorning modern English writers, namely Thomas Hardy, for "always...beating about the bush" (*Letters* 136). He even chastises his own country's writings in a letter to his brother Stanislaus, scoffing, "Of course do not think that I consider contemporary Irish writing anything but ill-written, morally obtuse formless caricature." (*Letters* 70) When Stephen Dedalus says to Professor Deasy, "History...is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (*Ulysses* 28), the word 'history' could be easily replaced with the bromidic state of contemporary English literature. If, as quoted previously, an artist must speak a new language in order to be worth listening to (Feibleman 141), Joyce would have to develop the craftsmanship of a literary Daedalus and become an artificer of the word.

Joyce's inventive use of language stems from two of his strongest beliefs: the sanctity of the artist and the necessary struggle of overcoming boundaries. In the surviving pages of Joyce's failed *Stephen Hero*, Stephen ruminates on the essence of the artist more thoroughly than in the relatively compact *Portrait of the Artist*. His definition falls in line with Joyce's exaltation of the artist:

The artist, he imagined, standing in the position of mediator between the world of his experience and the world of his dreams --<< a mediator, consequently gifted with twin faculties, a selective faculty and a reproductive faculty. >> To equate these faculties was the secret of artistic success: the artist who could disentangle the subtle soul of the image from its mesh of defining circumstances most exactly and <<re-embodiment>> it in artistic circumstances chosen as the most exact for it in its new office, he was the supreme artist. (77-78)

The artist is a secular cleric, one who receives a divine calling to create, similar to that of a priest. In *A Portrait of the Artist*, while contemplating his namesake in relation to the mythological Daedalus, Stephen has an epiphany and realizes his true calling as an artist. The narrator relates, "This was the call of life to his soul not the dull gross voice of the world of duties and despair, not the inhuman voice that had called him to the pale service of the altar" (148). What drives people to create art is intangible; an inexplicable urge where language and scientific theory ultimately fall short in trying to explain. Stephen Dedalus was raised a strict Catholic and even considered the priesthood before ultimately rejecting it in favor of his true calling. While Stephen is a fictional character and shows a few dissimilarities with Joyce, he is ultimately a product of Joyce, a demonstration of the author's mastery over the restrictions of his upbringing. These passages revolving around the Catholic Church and artistic epiphanies were based on actual events pertaining to Joyce in his adolescence. After more personal affirmation of his new life purpose, Stephen (as well as Joyce) "would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing, new and soaring and

beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.” (149) In order to create this ‘new’ and ‘impalpable’ thing, Joyce would have to rely on his ‘freedom’ and ‘power’ in order to overcome the obstacles of the past.

Throughout the entirety of his life, James Joyce faced confinement. Whether it be from his restrictive Catholic upbringing or the obscenity trials that plagued the international publication of *Ulysses*, Joyce met hurdles that had to be surmounted in order to attain his goals. One of the most famous lines of the Joycean canon comes from Stephen Dedalus, directed towards his nationalist pal Davin: “You talk to me of nationality, language, religion. I shall try to fly by those nets.” (179)

Joyce, along with his entire oeuvre, is inherently Irish. Irish politics (most specifically, the persecution of Charles Stewart Parnell) pervade his works, and it would be impossible not to recall at least a few Dublin landmarks after reading one of his books. He even went so far as to say, regarding *Ulysses*, “I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (Budgen 69). However, Joyce did not believe in nationalism in the least bit. On the political, personal, and artistic fronts, he was destined to be an outcast. One of Stephen’s main problems in *Ulysses* is his lack of acceptance among the budding Irish literary community, a feeling also shared by Joyce. In a letter to Lady Gregory postmarked 8 August 1922, he distances himself from those who have shunned him:

...I shall feel very much obliged if you will omit from your forthcoming book, which I understand is largely a history of the Irish literary movement, all letters of mine and all mention of me. In doing so you will be acting strictly in accordance with the spirit of that movement, inasmuch as since the date of my letter, twenty years ago, no mention of me or of my struggles or of my writings has been made publicly by any person connected with it. (*Letters* 290)

This literary shunning segues into national ideas of uniformity and an insider-outsider mentality, giving way to racism and other forms of bigotry. This is especially evident in the stereotypical provincialism of the proud Irishmen he portrays in *Portrait* and *Ulysses*. In their dialogue, Davin casts doubt upon Stephen's nationality by saying he heard Stephen "talk against English literature" and "talk against the Irish informers." He ultimately concludes by questioning, "What with your name and your ideas. . . . Are you Irish at all?" (177). Questioned of his Irishness, Joyce takes these accusatory notions further in *Ulysses* by way of a misinformed educator (Professor Deasy) and a cyclopic tormentor (the Citizen). These men staunchly value national pride over human compassion and are ultimately painted by Joyce as the fools they are. In a letter written to his wife Nora from 1909, Joyce writes, "How sick, sick, sick I am of Dublin! It is the city of failure, of rancour and of unhappiness. I long to be out of it." (*Letters* 163) While he would ultimately escape the overbearing nets of Dublin physically, he would never venture far from it on the page. With the net of nationality under his control and the hurdle of religion transferred from sacred to secular via his epiphanies, the biggest net for Joyce to ultimately vault was that of language.

Even though he was one of the greatest writers the language has ever had, Joyce was not satisfied writing in English. Despite an immense vocabulary and sheer proclivity towards language in general, Joyce was often frustrated with the rules, regulations and constructs of his mother tongue. In a 1918 letter to French writer Fanny Guillermet, Joyce confesses that, "Writing in English is the most ingenious torture ever devised for sins committed in previous lives" (*Letters* 230). This quote is more of a jab at the English literary audience than the language itself, but his dissatisfaction with English words soon

becomes evident. Joyce's will was strong and he would not let popular opinion sway his work. Joyce confides to his brother Stanislaus, "The struggle against conventions in which I am at present involved was not entered into by me so much as a protest against these conventions as with the intention of living in conformity with my moral nature" (*Letters* 70). This penchant for undiluted thought and expression partly explains Joyce's initial difficulty in getting his works published and sold to the public, as well as his exile from the Irish literary community.

Joyce saw the English language as a hand-me-down steeped in history and tradition, comparable to the ritualistic blind alley discussed by Barthes in *Writing Degree Zero*. As a matter of fact, Joyce's struggles with the confines of language and history were a major influence on philosophers like Barthes, Derrida, and Lacan, who attempted to theorize the ideas and concepts that Joyce had demonstrated in his writings. In his correspondence with Stefan Zweig, Joyce's dream of a universal language becomes evident: "I'd like a language which is above all languages, a language to which all will do service. I cannot express myself in English without enclosing myself in a tradition" (Ellmann 397). He wants desperately to avoid being caught in this net, one that has molded his mind since his infancy; the leash of the English language. This is yet another instance where Stephen's "History...is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" is applicable.

Regardless of his negative feelings towards it, Joyce could not alienate himself from English. Living abroad for most of his adult life, a substantial portion of Joyce's income was derived from teaching, mostly as a language tutor. While instructing the Bliznakoff sisters (the daughters of a Bulgarian consul) in Zürich, Joyce illustrated one of

the shortcomings of the English language in a manner that bears a strong resemblance to Peter Stillman's speech on the failures of language from *City of Glass* that was mentioned at the beginning of this essay's second section. The following comes from Ellmann's biography:

He sometimes used *Ulysses* to demonstrate that even English, the best of languages, was inadequate. 'Aren't there enough words for you in English?' they asked him. 'Yes,' he replied, 'there are enough, but they aren't the right ones.' He had to make neologisms. 'For example, take the word *battlefield*. A battlefield is a field where the battle is raging. When the battle is over and the field is covered with blood, it is no longer a *battlefield*, but a *bloodfield*. (397)

This pushes the Icarian Joyce to new heights in relation to the net of language. His reworking and re-imagining of English, the unavoidable leash and social constraint, is his ticket to coming closer to achieving Mauriac's aliterature. Ellmann abridges Joyce's "systematic attacks upon conventional English" with a short list that includes "fragmenting its sentences, compounding its old words into new ones, parodying its standard styles, and in general dosing English prose with slang, archaisms, the rhythms of learned texts strangely mingled with those of ordinary speech, and a compressed poetry", (*Letters* 214) among other facets not listed.

One could write volumes on a single Joycean paragraph. There is so much built in to each word that the scholars have kept themselves busy scrutinizing his works for almost a century, and there's no clear end in sight. To illustrate how Joyce brought language to new levels of expression and autonomy, we will now take a look at the [Proteus] episode of *Ulysses*, arguably his most important work. Isolating any single episode of *Ulysses* for analysis certainly gives way to undermine much of the interconnectedness of the novel as whole, yet for purposes of duration I have chosen to focus on the episode that best pertains to the subject at hand.

[Proteus]

[Proteus] is the third episode in *Ulysses* and the last to take place inside the hyper-intellectual quandary of Stephen Dedalus' mind. It is the shortest chapter in the novel (a mere twelve pages in the Gabler edition), yet it remains one of the most important in terms of language use and character study. This episode contains barely any corporeal action outside of Stephen walking along the strand and a dog pissing on a rock. The true "action" is the workings of Stephen's mind. One of the primary achievements of *Ulysses* is Joyce's ability to replicate the human thought process via the stream-of-consciousness technique. Aside from Molly Bloom's legendary soliloquy that comprises the [Penelope] episode, Joyce's technique reaches its apex in [Proteus].

In Greek mythology, Proteus was a deity of the sea who was capable of transformation. He maintains the power of prophecy and acted as the herdsman for his father Poseidon's seals. As it pertains to Homer's *The Odyssey* (Joyce's source for the allusive loose skeleton of *Ulysses*), Menelaus (friend of Odysseus) was journeying home from the Trojan War when he ended up stranded on the island of Pharos. In order to continue his voyage, he had to hear Proteus' prophecy. Proteus would not speak unless he was held down, which proved difficult because of his ability to change into beasts, water, or any other tangible matter. Menelaus succeeded in holding Proteus down and received the information necessary for his escape from Pharos.

The [Proteus] episode of *Ulysses* is named so primarily because of the Protean-like metamorphosis of the human thought process. In addition to his shape-shifting capabilities, Proteus inhabited the sea, a flowing mass that is in constant transition. Stephen walks alongside the sea throughout the episode. The flowing water is a mirror to

his flowing thoughts. As with everything else in the novel, there are multiple reasons behind the words and meaning, but thought remains the most relevant to this episode. Thoughts morph from one idea into another fluidly. This morphing process is not always consciously rational, but (as emphasized throughout *Ulysses*) associations, images, sounds, smells, and tastes can trigger thoughts to spiral in an infinitely intangible number of directions. Through his detailed portrayal of Stephen's mind through the stream-of-consciousness interior monologue (appropriated from Édouard Dujardin's pioneering style), Joyce paints thought in ways unrivaled by his peers and past masters. Stephen's mind is an intellectual dilemma: a cluttered attic of philosophical inquiries, multi-lingual frustrations, critical observations, and an astonishingly vast bank of allusions.

The episode begins with Stephen contemplating thought and perception: "Ineluctable modality of the visible: at least that if no more, thought through my eyes" (31). This is a reference to Aristotle, who argued that the eye, unlike the ear and the taste bud (which both require an "intermixture of substance and form" in order to be perceived), cannot modify what it sees (Gifford 44). This spirals into minute contemplations on German mystic Jakob Boehme (who believed that everything tangibly exists through its opposite) and Irish bishop-philosopher George Berkeley (who believed that objects themselves are not seen, just colored signs we take to be objects) (Gifford 44-45) before returning back to Aristotle and the "limits of the diaphane" (31). This all occurs within the first four lines of text. Historical figures undergo protean transformation and morph into one another with ease. *[It should also be noted that Joyce doesn't outright mention any of these figures. Dedicated researchers and supporters like Don Gifford, Robert Seidman, and Stuart Gilbert have helped bridge the gap between the*

normal reader and the encyclopedic academian.]

This whole episode (most of the novel, actually) could be analyzed to show how Joyce mimics thought through his neuro-cerebral language. For purposes of duration, however, we will only study a few brief passages.

One of the best examples of thought-shifting occurs during Stephen's walk, after his imaginary trip to Aunt Sara's house:

He halted. I have passed the way to aunt Sara's. Am I not going there? Seems not. No-one about. He turned northeast and crossed the firmer sand towards the Pigeonhouse.

- *Qui vous a mis dans cette fichue position?*

- *C'est le pigeon, Joseph.*

Patrice, home on furlough, lapped warm milk with me in the bar MacMahon. Son of the wild goose, Kevin Egan of Paris. My father's a bird, he lapped the sweet *lait chaud* with pink young tongue, plump bunny's face. Lap, *lapin*. He hopes to win in the *gros lots*. About the nature of women he read in Michelet. But he must send me *La Vie de Jésus* by M. Léo Taxil. Lent it to his friend.

- *C'est tordant, vous savez. Moi, je suis socialiste. Je ne crois pas en l'existence de Dieu. Faut pas le dire à mon père.*

- *Il croit?*

- *Mon père, oui.*

Schluss. He laps.

(p. 34-35, lns. 158-173)

Following his scenario of the would-be goings-on had he visited his aunt and uncle, Stephen realizes that he has passed their house. He continues his stroll and catches sight of the Pigeonhouse, a former military barracks that had been recently converted to the Dublin electricity and power station. The name Pigeonhouse triggers a quote regarding pigeons from M. Léo Taxil *La Vie de Jésus*. The quote is from a dialogue between Joseph and Mary. Joseph, questioning the verity of the Immaculate Conception, asks Mary, "Who has put you in this wretched condition?" to which she responds, "It's the pigeon, Joseph." The quote is written (remembered) in the original French. As we will soon find out, Stephen had lent his copy of this book to Patrice Egan, son of Kevin Egan, an Irish exile in Paris. This triggers memories of the two together. Stephen and Patrice had

“lapped warm milk” in the MacMahon bar, named after former French president Marie Edmé Patrice Maurice de MacMahon. MacMahon was a descendant of the Wild Geese (Gifford 52). According to the Gifford notes, the Wild Geese are “Irish who have purposefully become expatriated rather than live in an Ireland ruled by England” (52). Patrice Egan’s father Kevin is a ‘wild goose.’ The following line is ambiguous. It could be that the thought of his acquaintance’s father reminds Stephen of his own father, “a bird” but not a wild goose. It could also be Patrice’s acknowledgment of his father’s birdhood as a wild goose. The most accurate conjecture is that Stephen was thinking of an unknown father as a bird (“a winged hawk-man” according to *A Portrait of the Artist*), especially after the quote from Taxil’s book a few lines earlier. Stephen, who abhors his own father (Simon Dedalus), may feel like his true father is an unknown ‘bird,’ an immaculate force rather than Simon. The ambiguity of paternity is one of the most important recurring themes throughout *Ulysses*. The bird-father comment is followed by a description of ‘him’ (most likely Patrice) lapping the *lait chaud* (French for ‘warm milk’) with a “plump bunny’s face” (34). The word ‘lap’ makes up half of *lapin*, the French term for ‘rabbit,’ which ultimately prompts the bunny visual. The next line (“He hopes to win in the *gros lots*.”) could definitely apply to Stephen’s father, who regularly played the numbers and gambled with whatever little money he had. Not enough is known of Patrice to know whether or not this quote is applicable to him. Either way, thoughts inevitably shift back to Patrice and his reading of French historian Jules Michelet’s *La Femme*. Remembering Patrice’s reading of this French writer reminds Stephen of lending his copy of Taxil’s *La Vie de Jésus* to Patrice, thus bringing these interconnected thoughts full-circle. *La Vie de Jésus* was extremely controversial and was

viewed as blasphemous by the Catholic Church. Thinking about the heretical nature of the book, Stephen recalls a conversation in which Patrice admits his atheism, but insists that Stephen not tell his father Kevin, who is apparently a believer in God. This section of thought concludes with “*Schluss.*” (35), a German phrase that is used to signify a conclusion or be spouted as a mild exclamation, most relatable to “enough!” in English (Gifford 53). Take a breath.

Upon the initial reading, [Proteus] seems incoherent and obtuse. It is not meant to be easily digested. It is through alert reading and rereading, as well the ability to allow one to let one’s guard down during the reading, that the true magic of the writing is manifest. This is a portrait of a human mind. Each person’s thoughts work in a different way (this is evident in the varying styles of the stream-of-consciousness interior monologues of Leopold Bloom and Molly Bloom later in the novel) and there is no way for one to be able to understand all of the associations one makes in the thought process. Seeing how much meaning and relation is unspoken and buried deep inside the words of these mere sixteen lines allows the uninitiated and the novice to see just how truly brilliant Joyce was at holding the mirror to his own mind and trying to convert unbridled thought into literature. Despite being unable to absolutely depict the thought process, Joyce’s attempt brings to mind Barthes’ Utopia of language.

The previously quoted section is a good example of the author’s employment of the protean transformation of thought, but his most blatant experiment with the notion comes via a line near the end of the episode. Stephen, still on the beach, thinks, “God becomes man becomes fish becomes barnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain.” (p. 41-42). At face value, this sentence reads like nonsense. However, after further analysis,

this sentence maintains sense while adhering to the protean themes of the episode. On a surface level, the physical shifting of matter is evident in each item of the sentence. In relation to the thought process, on the other hand, lies a far more creative and valuable explanation. “God becomes man” is pretty straight forward, referring to God’s transformation into human form as Jesus Christ. “[M]an becomes fish” is not as blatant. This brings to mind the ichthys (Greek for ‘fish’), more commonly referred to as the “Jesus fish” in contemporary culture. The ichthys came to be used as a symbol for Christ and Christianity in an era where Christians were persecuted for their beliefs. “[F]ish becomes barnacle goose” is much more abstract. Eating meat on Fridays during Lent is prohibited, yet fish is an acceptable meal. Medieval Christians, in an extraordinary loophole, postulated that barnacle geese were born from barnacles, not eggs, and therefore could be classified as a fish rather than a mammal or poultry (Gifford 65). “[B]arnacle goose becomes featherbed mountain” relates the feathers of a goose, which are used in the production of featherbeds, to Featherbed Mountain, a mountain in Dublin (Gifford 65). These five seemingly unrelated entities are capable of fluid and coherent transmigration through the protean nature of human thought; as God, the greatest abstraction, transforms into the greatest embodiment of material reality (a mountain) through the workings of language.

While focusing heavily on transient aspects of thought in this episode, I do not wish to neglect the other protean elements of the text: the primary three being the shifting of language, of animal references, and of reality.

Like every other episode in the novel, [Proteus] has a specific art prescribed to it by the Gilbert and Linati schemas. The art for [Proteus] is appropriately ‘philology’ - the

“branch of knowledge that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationships of languages or language families; the historical study of the phonology and morphology of languages” (OED). In his analysis of this chapter, Stuart Gilbert writes, “Language is always in a flux of becoming, ebb or flow, and any attempt to arrest its trend is the folly of a Canute. Moreover, by the study of language we can often diagnose the processes of change operating in the world about us; for the written signs remain” (p. 129). The morphology of language plays an important role in this episode. Words combine, break down, change language and share new associations. For instance, Stephen thinks, “You were a student, weren’t you? Of what in the other devil’s name? Paysayenn. P.C.N., you know: *physiques, critiques et naturelles*.” (p. 35). Phonetic spelling, abbreviation, and French elaboration are all used to signify the same thing. Further down the page, signification fails at the result of incorrect spelling. Through human error, language shifts from truth to ambiguity. Rather than saying ‘Mother,’ the telegram Stephen receives reads, “Nother dying come home father” (p. 35). Signs are capable of failing their signifiers. One letter can change many things. Speech, like the written word, can also fall short of the mark in terms of translation. In his recollection of a Parisian morning from his time in self-imposed exile, Stephen remembers an interaction with a waitress: “*Il est irlandais. Hollandais? Non fromage. Deux irlandais, nous, Irlande, vous savez? Ah, oui!* She thought you wanted a cheese *hollandais*” (p. 36). “Hollandais” refers to someone who is Dutch, while *hollandaise* is also a sauce. Homophones and homonyms, as well as the inaccuracy of auditory reception, allow connotation and interpretation to shift in an undesirable protean flub.

In addition to stylistic language transformation, literal language transformation

floods this episode. In [Proteus]'s 505 lines, Joyce writes in English, Italian, German, Scottish, Ancient Greek, Latin, Indian, French, Swedish and Irish. He also employs multiple onomatopoeias, popular songs, slang, and scores of neologisms. Even the sea has a language ("wavespeech") that speaks in slops, flops, and slaps with cries of "seesoo, hrss, rsseeiss, [and] oos" (p. 41). Joyce's previously quoted goal of "a language which is above all languages, a language to which all will do service" (Ellmann 397) comes damn close to fruition here in the protean language of the mind.

Comparable to Proteus' mythic transmigrations, animal references permeate this episode. While not claiming to have ascertained all of them, here is a list of the animals referred to (often as nouns, sometimes as verbs and adverbs, mostly as adjectives) throughout the chapter: seahorse, steed, beetle, mare, serpentine, whale, shipworm, pigeon, goose, bird, bunny, *lapin*, dog [appearing numerous times], mammoth, "froggreen," "wormwood," "flyblown," canary, buck, zebra, mole, weasel rats, turtlehide whales, "blubbery whalemeat," drowned man, hare, gull, buck, seamorse [walruses], "serpented," "bearish fawning," wolf, calf, pard, panther, "vulturing," "peacocktwittering," "serpentplants," seasnakes, "rearing horses," fishes, porpoise, minnows, and cockle. Oftentimes, these animals are used to describe the actions of others, in particular, a dog Stephen sees on the beach. For instance:

The dog yelped running to them, reared up and pawed them, dropping on all fours, again reared up at them with mute bearish fawning. Unheeded he kept by them as they came towards the drier sand, a rag of wolf's tongue redpanting from his jaws. His speckled body ambled ahead of them and then loped off at a calf's gallop. The carcass lay on his path. He stopped, sniffed, stalked round it, brother, nosing closer, went round it, sniffing rapidly like a dog all over the dead dog's bedraggled fell. Dogskull, dogsniff, eyes on the ground, moves to one great goal. Ah, poor dogsbody! Here lies poor dogsbody's body. (p. 39)

Much like Proteus, the dog's changes come full circle. It metaphorically changes form

from its natural canine state to bear, to fawn, to wolf, to calf, and ultimately back to dog. These bestial allusions add another layer to Joyce's complex application of the Greek myth into modern literature with the help of language that is free to change shape and form.

One more important layer of fluidity and transformation occurs in the realm of reality and imagination within the context of the novel. Stephen's hypothetical trip to visit his aunt and uncle changed the supposed 'illusion of reality' in fiction. Fiction itself is not real, nor is language, so why should a novel have to conform to an idealized illusion of realism? The scene in question is played out as if it was comprised of real events, yet it is revealed that it exists only in Stephen's mind. The Aunt Sara scenario goes on for more than two pages before the reader realizes that Stephen is still walking on sand and shells. Through this interweaving of imagination and "reality," Joyce forces the reader to question reality in literature and whether it even matters. He found the unconscious to be very intriguing and went on to explore themes of dreams and imagination more fully in *Finnegans Wake*. These transmutations between reality and imagination put a final cap atop the previous acknowledgements, essentially surrounding the layered protean themes of the episode.

By the end of the episode, Stephen has grown weary of language. He reflects, "Dead breaths I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour a ruinous offal from all dead" (42). Language, as Stephen (and Joyce) knew it, was a mere resuscitation of the aged words of those long dead. Joyce did not want to enclose himself in tradition so he undertook the arduous process of forming his own language out of the remnants of every conceivable source. He knew this method would not be easily accepted and that it would

bring much critical backlash, but it had to be done. Joyce summed up this unshakable auteuristic attitude through one of Stephen's final thoughts in the chapter: "For the rest let look who will." (42)

Joyce after *Ulysses*

After completing *Ulysses* in 1922, Joyce spent the next seventeen years composing what would become his *pièce de résistance*, the legendary *Finnegans Wake*. Published two years before his death (after years of being published serially in *transition* as "Work in Progress"), *Finnegans Wake* took the inventive styling of *Ulysses* and multiplied it ten-fold. While being a complicated novel, *Ulysses* still manages to read, for the most part, like it was written in rational English. In *Finnegans Wake*, however, Joyce's desire for a representational language above these established languages became even closer to a reality, practically scraping literature's outlying pole. For exemplary purposes, here is a brief excerpt from its "Anna Livia Plurabelle" section:

Tune your pipes and fall ahumming, you born ijypt, and you're nothing short of one! Well, ptellomey soon and curb your escumo. When they saw him shoot swift up her sheba sheath, like any gay lord salomon, her bulls they were ruhing, surfed with spree. Boyarka buah! Boyana bueh! He erved his lille Bunbath hard, our staly bred, the trader. He did. Look at here. In this wet of his prow. Don't you know he was kaldt a bairn of the brine, Wasserbourne the waterbaby? Havemmarea, so he was! H.C.E. has a codfisc ee. Shyr she's nearly as badher as him herself. Who? Anna Livia? Ay, Anna Livia. (723)

Viewed visually, this block is dense. However, there is an intrinsic musical quality in these words. The peculiar spellings and combinations become more clear when read aloud. They flow with a fluid rhythm like the river Liffey, perhaps the most important symbol in the novel. John Cage's sound collage *Roaratorio: an Irish circus on Finnegans wake* adapts certain passages of the novel and places them atop sounds described in the

words, bringing their musical quality to life. In his apologia “Dante...Bruno.Vico.. Joyce,” Beckett writes, “Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read - or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*” (*Disjecta* 27) Joyce has blurred the line between poetry and prose, between music and literature; the ultimate exercise of language’s autonomy. French Critic Marcel Brion observed Joyce’s linguistic talents pertaining to *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*, referring to their writing as “the birth of a world” which, out of chaos and the charred remnants of conventional concept and vocabulary, created language by mixing phonetics, foreign forms, and the “wholesale manufacture of words...which are not to be had at second hand” (29).

What is most striking about *Finnegans Wake* is its dream-like quality. Whereas *Ulysses* was a novel of the eighteen-hour waking day, *Finnegans Wake* is a novel of the night. Joyce’s attempted to “put language to sleep” (Ellmann 546) and in doing so, furthered the autonomous capability of words. In correspondence with Max Eastman, Joyce commented on his reasons for this language of dreams:

‘In writing of the night, I really could not, I felt I could not, use words in their ordinary connections. Used that way they do not express how things are in the night, in the different stages - conscious, then semi-conscious, then unconscious. I found that it could not be done with words in their ordinary relations and connections. When morning comes of course everything will be clear again...I’ll give them back their English language. I’m not destroying it for good.’ (Ellmann 546)

As Lacan stated, desire is thwarted by language and relegated to the unconscious. Consciousness is ruled by the hegemonic nature of language. If Joyce wanted to take language to untapped realms of representation, he would have to submerge consciousness and explore the world of dreams. This submerging into dream language accounts for

much of the negative associations regarding unintelligibility. People typically fear what they don't understand and, even though we all dream, our dreams are primarily quarantined to the vicinity of sleep. Artists who delve into dream study in other artistic mediums (Cage in music, the Surrealists in visual art, Fellini and Lynch in cinema, etc.) are frequently lauded by the intelligentsia while being ignored by the general public. *Finnegans Wake* (and *Ulysses*, to an extent) met critical cries of meaningless abstraction and unintelligibility, against which revered author Anthony Burgess argues, “[n]o important and difficult work of art is permanently unintelligible, since great writers create both the sensibility of the future and the language of the future” (265). Burgess acknowledges our anxiety when words are ambiguous and/or contradictory. In dreams, however, we let our guard down and just let things happen. According to Burgess, “[w]hen life is freed from the restrictions of time and space...the mind makes less effort to sort out contradictions, or gentler ambiguities, and a word may wring freely, sounding all its harmonics” (266). These harmonics can result from things buried deep in the subconscious, such as a conversation you overheard on the bus a few weeks ago or a poster you saw when you were five years old. This openness to ambiguity and the unconcrete is something that has yet to be accepted by the populace, making Joyce's later writing still feel ahead of its time. Reflecting on the state of the novel in the mid-1960's, James Feibleman writes, “There is hardly a contemporary novel that does not owe something to *Ulysses*, but the effect of *Finnegans Wake* will probably be the more tremendous for being delayed” (393). This effect, I feel, is still being delayed all these years later.

George Steiner likened James Joyce to a warrior, leading “great battalions of

words” (301) in his valiant fight against fault-ridden language. Always aware of the inherent limitations of language, Joyce used pioneering techniques and a revolutionary approach to words in order to make an effort in reaching the “never-reached pole” of aliterature. Through *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce’s language drifted farther and farther from English and moved into its own unique category. His words “are not the polite contortions of 20th century printer’s ink. They are alive” (*Disjecta* 28). These words come from Joyce’s true and dissimilar successor in modern/postmodern English literature: Samuel Beckett.

V. Samuel Beckett

While Joyce's work was championed as a harbinger of the "Revolution of the Word," Samuel Beckett's work can itself be seen as a Revolution of the Unword. Where his mentor explored the capabilities of expression available through an ever-evolving artistic idiom, Beckett (1906-1989) stressed the impotence and tragicomic futility of language in his novels and plays. A continuing struggle between speech and silence was at the core Beckett's work through the majority of his career.

As a young intellectual, Beckett (akin to Joyce) held lofty artistic standards and looked upon commonplace writing with derision. In his biography, James Knowlson remarked that "[c]oherence, artifice, and unity were regarded by Beckett as belonging to the "chloroformed world" of Balzac's novels" and that "living creatures are too complex and mysterious, and unknowable to be classified or controlled" (145) in the manner of conventional character mechanics. It comes as no surprise that a young man as bright and critical as Beckett would gravitate to Joyce's works.

Beckett was first introduced to Joyce through Thomas MacGreevy in 1928. At the time, Beckett had just been appointed as an English lecturer at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and was very eager to meet the author of *Ulysses*. Already dedicating most of his time to the composition of *Work in Progress*, Joyce (with his notoriously faulty vision) appointed Beckett to aid his progress on the work through research and dictation. This term of assistance greatly widened Beckett's literary and philosophical scope, introducing him to the obscure linguistic philosophy of Fritz Mauthner and the classic texts of Italian philosophers Giordano Bruno and Giambattista Vico, leading ultimately to his publication of "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . Joyce" in 1929. He was right

on track for a literary career, but needed to beware of following his mentor's footsteps too closely.

James Feibleman once wrote that “[a]bject discipleship is a betrayal of the master” (Morse 419). Beckett had the wit and ingenuity to become a great writer, but first he would have to ‘fling away the crutches’ of Joyce’s influence. Reading the first page of his posthumously published first novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, one is immediately struck by the blatantly Joycean style:

Behold Belacqua an overfed child pedaling, faster and faster, his mouth ajar and his nostrils dilated, down a frieze of hawthorn after Findlater’s van, faster and faster till he cruise alongside of the hoss, the black flat wet rump of the hoss. Whip him up, vanman, flickem, flapem, collopwallop fat Sambo. Stiffly, like a perturbation of feathers, the tail arches for a gush of mard. Ah . . . ! (1)

Despite this excess pointing more towards playful parody than literary thievery, it is still indebted to Joyce. In the same year of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*’s composition, 1932, Beckett wrote to a friend: “I vow I will get over J.J. ere I die. Yessir.” (*Letters* 108). Despite being unaware of his faculties at the time, certain passages of this early novel prophesize Beckett’s famous writing style that would come to fruition in the coming years. The novel’s protagonist, the young intellectual Belacqua Shuah (an alter ego of the author), wants to write a book:

I shall write a book . . . tired of the harlots of earth and air - I am hemmed in . . . on all sides by putes, in thought or in deed, hemmed in and about; a great big man must be hired to lift the hem - a book where the phrase is self-consciously smart and slick, but of a smartness and slickness other than that of its neighbours on the page. The blown roses of a phrase shall catapult the reader into the tulips of the phrase that follows. The experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement, between the flowers that cannot coexist, the antithetical (nothing so simple as antithetical) seasons of words, his experience shall be the menace, the miracle, the memory, of an unspeakable trajectory.” (138)

This ambition is Joycean in amplitude, yet it points away from that writer’s encompassing path and moves toward a barren, silent void. Beckett would seek solace in

silence and empty space, a seemingly paradoxical task for a writer.

Much of Beckett's philosophy on silence and the 'unword' is revealed in a 1937 German letter to friend Axel Kaun. In this letter, Beckett vents his frustrations on the English language and its role in expression. He compares English to "a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it" (*Disjecta* 171). Grammar and style are in the same standing, rendered "as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman;" ultimately, "[a] mask" (171). Beckett's idea of a linguistic utopia relies upon the belief that "language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused" (171). He prescribes a particularly violent "assault against words in the name of beauty" through the repeated boring of holes into language's cadaver. This is to be done until what is truly contained in words "begins to seep through" (172). Beckett declares this aggressive inquisition as the ultimate goal for a modern writer.

In the same letter, Beckett distances his yearning for a "literature of the unword" from Joyce's "apotheosis of the word" (173), saying that unless the ascent to heaven and the descent to hell are "somehow one and the same," they have nothing to do with each other. This ascent/descent analogy seamlessly encapsulates my reasoning for comparing these two authors for purposes of the confines of autonomous language: Beckett believes that his work and Joyce's work cannot be compared because they employ opposing methods; however, in relation to *aliterature* and the struggle to force language to express more than it is capable of, Beckett and Joyce act as bilateral reflections from the mirror of language. They exist at equidistant points in polar hemispheres, using linguistic impotence and virility, respectively, to stretch the bounds of language closer to true

expression.

In Joyce's work, the artist is a hero, an exalted secular cleric. Titles such as *Stephen Hero* and *Ulysses* exude epic sentiment, propelling the artist to lofty levels of importance and power. Beckett's protagonists are antiheroes at best. He considers the artist a failure; a failure that must continue despite the confines of art. The inherent need to create propels the artist, even when his tools are inadequate. In *3 Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, Beckett admits to preferring "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Proust* 103). These humorously pessimistic and insightful 'dialogues' give Beckett a forum to discuss his views on painting, which can easily be applied to the written word as well. He makes numerous references to the artist as failure. In the final dialogue, he foreshadows the repetitive ramble of *The Unnamable* by using this submission and admission of failure to generate "a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, [the artist] makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation" (125). As the Unnamable's voice suggests in its famed final words, the artist must go on. This outlook never left Beckett's writing. In his 1983 piece *Worstward Ho*, he writes: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better" (471). Writing will always be a failed method of conveyance, but that shouldn't stop the writer (who has no choice, but is forced to write by the inexplicable pull) from striving toward the unobtainable. This is aliterature in a nutshell.

These artistic quandaries and frustrations brewed within Beckett's mind for years and finally accumulated into a frenetic period of monumental achievement in the late

1940's and early 1950's. Most Beckett followers attribute his well-known 'revelation' in 1945 as the catalyst for this period. This 'revelation,' loosely dramatized later in *Krapp's Last Tape*, freed the Joycean weight and propelled Beckett into his own (now instantly recognizable) style, one of inversion and isolation. In a late conversation with James Knowlson, Beckett recounts:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding. (Knowlson 319)

To ultimately elude Joyce's influence, Beckett had to discard the language Joyce had truly mastered: English. Beckett felt that the English language was "overloaded with associations and allusions" (Knowlson 323), and one need not look past his early work to see this statement justified. Living in France, it seems obvious that Beckett would opt for writing in French rather than in his mother tongue, yet location and accessibility held little weight upon his reasoning. Since his prime goal was an attempt to destroy words through the use of words (with grammar and style as his adversaries), French was the logical choice. Beckett praised the ability to write without style in French, something that is next to impossible to accomplish using English. The French language is more direct and concise than English, allowing stricter precision in word choice and arrangement. Adopting it as a second language also aided this exactitude, giving the writer "a greater simplicity and objectivity" (Knowlson 324). In a prophetic description, 1932's *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* contains an excerpt in which Belacqua praises the French language for the same reasons cherished by Beckett:

The uniform, horizontal writing, flowing without accident, of the man with a style, never gives you the margarita. But the writing of, say, Racine or Malherbe, perpendicular, diamanté, is pitted, is it not, and sprigged with sparkles; the flints

and pebbles are there, no end of humble tags and commonplaces. They have no style, they write without style, do they not, they give you the phrase, the sparkle, the precious Margaret. Perhaps only the French can do it. Perhaps only the French language can give you the thing you want. (48)

The stripped-down nature of the French language was an appropriate vehicle for Beckett's themes, yet the inescapable problem of translation for the international market was not to be ignored. As a scholar of many languages (he was fluent in five and at least partially familiar with scores of others), Beckett was aware of what can be lost or obscured in the translation process. Because of this, Beckett trusted only himself as the translator of his works into English.

During his prolific period of the late '40's/early '50's (which spawned the popular classics *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*), Beckett composed a trilogy of novels: *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt*, and *L'innommable* (in their English translations: *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*). This trilogy explores the dilemma of language and the plight of those plagued by the inherent need to create. From the opening writings of *Molloy* to the seemingly out-of-breath conclusion of *The Unnamable*, language and conventional narrative completely fall apart. Its gradual deterioration from somewhat coherent sentence structure to pages and pages of unpunctuated logorrhea parallels the desperate themes of language, expression, truth and being. This trilogy (particularly *The Unnamable*) is the polar opposite of Joyce's major works in the spectrum of aliterature, delving into contraction and disintegration rather than expansion, creation, and exuberance.

The Unnamable

Reading *The Unnamable* is an experience that can be likened to no other in the realm of literature. There is no action. There is scant mention of location. There *may* be characters (it is hard to say exactly what Mahood and Worm really are). It is a claustrophobic rant of repetition and contradiction. What starts off as a short paragraph form quickly turns into a giant, seemingly incessant block of text. In an early review of the novel, critic Rayner Heppenstall described the block portion as “a single paragraph [which] occupies 112 closely printed pages, during the course of which even full stops are gradually abandoned.” He finishes his review with humorous frustration: “Holding on to one’s sanity as to a hat in a high wind, one’s sole consolation lies in commas” (98). What is to be gained from a book comprised of nothing and laid out in such a headache-inducing form? A pure work of art that attempts to discard all that came before it; an attempt to kill language with language; ultimately, “an art expressive of nothing but the resources it discovers in its own poverty-stricken autonomous existence” (Bersani 53). The opening lines set the tone for the entire novel: “Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on” (285). Right off the bat, we have a narrator who questions unquestioningly, who is suspect of his own Cartesian-like existence, who looks upon words with skepticism, and who must persist. The numerous contradictions act as a sort of reverse erasure, using added words to result in a literary silence, a blank page full of words. Since a literature of the unword is paradoxical in nature, Ruby Cohn noted that Beckett “groped toward the unword through a density of words” (*Disjecta* 12). The

novel's narrator even describes the writing as a "wordy-gurdy," a pun recalling musical drone while ringing symbolically of the artist's place in society as one who cranks and churns out 'entertainment' for mere pocket change.

Beckett's tragicomic use of skeptical contradiction can be tied to two ancient philosophers: Heraclitus and Democritus. Dubbed the Weeping Philosopher and the Laughing Philosopher, respectively, both are subtly alluded to in *The Unnamable*. Heraclitus' main achievement was his doctrine of change, stating that everything in the universe is in a constant state of flux. This is more commonly known through the analogy of the river: while stepping in a river multiple times, we both step in the same river and don't step in the same river, for the constant flow of water renders the river different every passing moment of time. He emphasized the harmony of opposing factors and held a poor opinion of human affairs. Democritus, on the other hand, was generally cheerful. His grand contribution was atomic theory, surmising that everything in the universe is composed of various indivisible and indestructible particles called *atoma* (atom). These atoms exist in an indefinable void. The void, that which doesn't exist, is purported to exist in this theory; a logical contradiction. Sensory perception is a subjective experience and the only realities are atoms and the void. Beckett's writing in *The Unnamable* is a veritable combination of the miserable and the exultant philosophies. At one point in the "wordy-gurdy," the narrator admits, "At no moment do I know what I'm talking about, nor of whom, nor of where, nor how, nor why" (332). This recalls Heraclitus' doctrine of change and universal flux. One cannot, with utmost truth, affirm anything for all is changing. The words flow like a river; constant movement, some resurgence of the previous water, circular in nature and confined to linear delivery. Democritus' labeling of

a non-existent void (which, by consequence, forges its existence) is a prototype of the novel's struggle: the naming of something of which does not exist and the affirmation of a reality in which nothing truly exists other than atoms and the void. The philosophies of Heraclitus and Democritus provide an established framework for Beckett's explorations into language, silence, and nothingness.

Despite the hope of freeing himself from influence and allusion, Beckett still alludes. This is only one of many purposeful contradictions. This is not a novel of success and clarity, it is one of struggle and perseverance despite constant unavoidable failure. One of the most significant passages in the novel is buried closer to the front of the giant block, with the one-legged narrator recounting:

Often the cry went up, He's down! But in reality I had sunk to the ground of my own free will, in order to be rid of my crutches and have both hands available to minister myself in peace and comfort. Admittedly it is difficult, for a man with but one leg, to sink to earth in the full force of the expression, particularly when he is weak in the head and the sole surviving leg flaccid for want of exercise, or from excess of it. The simplest thing then is to fling away the crutches and collapse. That is what I did." (314-315)

This can be seen as an optimistic giving-up, the final abandonment of what came before. These crutches can come to represent Joyce's influence. They can stand for language. They can stand for conventionally acceptable novel structure. It can be a myriad of things. The 'flinging away of crutches' metaphor mirrors the gradual deterioration of the trilogy thematically and stylistically. The independence from crutches is a declaration of artistic freedom, yet since it results in an incapacitated being, it also comes to represent an acceptance of limitation, impotence, and failure. The trilogy begins with Molloy, whose person (and prose) is slightly handicapped, yet still mobile. In the next book, Malone (and the writing style) is generally incapacitated, though still capable of slight movement. By the time we reach the crutch-less Unnamable, the being and the words are

totally immobile, prostrate on the ground, the words trickling like blood and saliva. This brings to mind Beckett's description of Joyce's style of writing in *Work in Progress*, that "form *is* content, content *is* form" (*Disjecta* 27). According to Ludovic Janvier, the latter two novels of the trilogy serve "as the place for a kind of mutation of speech or pulverizing of superfluous syntactic elements in which the reduction of the sentence's essential segments and the weakening of the rhythm play the most active part" (86).

The feeling of decrescendo amidst the drone is augmented by the arbitrary role of time and space for the speaker. Near the end of the novel, the speaker admits that it "understand[s] nothing about duration" (400). Right from the start, the Unnamable posits the contradiction that it has been "here" forever while not having been "here" forever. It says, "...here there are no years. What matter how long?...A short time, a long time, it's all the same" (302). Time is an abstract concept, one that cannot be captured through language. Out of obligation, the speaker reflects,

...it's every second that is the worst, it's a chronicle, the seconds pass, one after another, jerkily, no flow they don't pass, they arrive, bang, bang, they bang into you, bounce off, fall and never move again, when you have nothing left to say you talk of time, seconds of time, there are some people add them together to make a life, I can't, each one is the first, no the second, or the third, I'm three seconds old... (388)

Time is ultimately irrelevant in this book, for the reader can open it up to any page and not detect any momentum in terms of plot or delivery. It is stagnant prose. It evokes the feeling of a reel of audio tape that has been cut at two ends. This is an extract of something much, much larger, which has been trimmed on both sides for purposes of digestion. However, one could attach both ends of this hypothetical tape together to make a tape loop, with the length of the text repeating itself *ad infinitum*. This is a circular novel, avoiding all linear regulations other than its inalienable *nacheinander*.

Along with any conventional sense of time being thrown out the window, Beckett's obscure setting suits the narrative. Where the duration of the novel could take place in the span of a second or over a million years, the Unnamable's being may be contained in the space of an atom or in a giant hollow box the size of our solar system. The place "may well be vast, as it may well measure twelve feet in diameter" (289). Space and time, two of the major limitations of literature (see Lessing and the Joseph Frank article addressed in this essay's second chapter), have been figuratively abandoned by Beckett in *The Unnamable*. The next major hindrance facing Beckett, one that he couldn't transcend in the novel, was the influence of history and the inherited nature of language.

Throughout the course of the novel, the speaker makes references to a group, an unidentified 'they,' that taught the speaker everything it knows. It is 'they' who gave the speaker the tools, the language which encapsulates its dilemma. The speaker recalls these teachers with scorn, calling them "[l]ow types" with "pockets full of poison and antidote" (292). Beckett's protagonist, much like James Joyce and his idea of language as tradition, resents being associated with those the language represents and is derived from. The speaker defines language as "a poor trick that consists in ramming a set of words down your gullet on the principle that you can't bring them up without being branded as belonging to their breed" (318). While Joyce's protagonist and artistic self flew beyond the nets of language, nationality, and religion, Beckett's speaker has been reduced to "a pig, dumb, uncomprehending, possessed of no utterance but theirs" (362). It uses the concept of reason, taught to him by these teachers, to "scratch [its] arse with" (292). It vows to "fix their gibberish" despite being relegated to using only the so-called gibberish.

The speaker compares itself to a parrot (329), a creature that thoughtlessly mimics whatever it hears. This comparison brings to mind a surprisingly applicable quote from Lorenzo in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, who states, "...every fool can play upon the word! I think the best grace of wit will shortly turn into silence, and discourse grow commendable in none only but parrots" (1158). The Unnamable accepts the role of a parrot out of the necessity to speak, symbolic of the inherent need to create. It bemoans, "I can't say it, I have no language but theirs, no, perhaps I'll say it, even with their language, for me alone, so as not to have not lived in vain, and so as to go silent" (319). Existence in this vacuous void (the physical location and the flowing of speech) is futile, yet the speaker continues on. It strives, without confidence or hope, to reach the inexpressible. For the time being, there is no way to speak (and be understood) outside of the hand-me-down nature of language. This is a precursor to the theories of Roland Barthes and Jacques Lacan discussed in this essay's third chapter. The frustration stemming from one's inability to remove himself/herself from this tradition is an important trait in the Unnamable. The main goal of the speaker is to achieve silence, the end of language. It wants to be free of the burden of history and linguistic consciousness in order to revert back to Lacan's silent pre-linguistic state of pure desire. This is painfully evident near the end of the novel:

...how can I say it, that's all words, they're all I have, and not many of them, the words fail, the voice fails, so be it, I know that well, it will be the silence, full of murmurs, distant cries, the usual silence, spent listening, spent waiting, waiting for the voice, the cries abate, like all cries, that is to say they stop, the murmurs cease, they give up, the voice begins again... (406)

Another source of vexation for the speaker is the quest for the right word, echoing Flaubert's insistence on *le mot just*. The speaker trips over words, stumbling towards a more accurate description while never achieving it. For example: "...they want to be

entertained, while doing their dirty work, no, not entertained, soothed, no that's not it either, solaced, no even less, no matter" (365) or "seeking, exclaiming, Ah yes, sighing, No no, crying, Enough, ejaculating, Not yet" (378). The act of grasping hopelessly for the right word echoes the plight of the author, Beckett himself, who has to scrutinize the placement and appropriateness of each word. Beckett even uses the speaker in a thinly veiled jab at himself: "...I nearly got stuck. Help, help, if I could only describe this place, I who am so good at describing places, walls ceilings, floors, they are my specialty, doors, windows, what haven't I imagined in the way of windows in the course of my career" (392). Self-reference and meta-fiction crop up numerous times throughout the novel. The speaker refers to past Beckett characters such as Watt, Murphy, Molloy, Moran, and Macmann in an unspoken acknowledgment that this work of failure is just a continuation in the long line of past artistic failure. All of these M characters (W itself is an upside-down M) compound into the Mahood and Worm (which closely resemble 'manhood' and 'word' the two things at odds throughout the novel). This constant use of M and its inverse is no accident. Word choice is an integral part of speech and composition, but how does one know what the most applicable word is? Going back to Saussure, we know that the linguistic sign itself is arbitrary. This sentiment is echoed by *The Unnamable's* speaker, who reiterates, "there is no great difference here between one expression and the next, when you've grasped one you've grasped them all" (381). It later questions, "Would it not be better if I were simply to keep on saying babababa, for example, while waiting to ascertain the true functions of this venerable organ?" (302), assuming that there is an untapped method of expression far superior to the linguistic sign. Throughout the novel, the speaker never settles on the right word and never

achieves true silence. It acknowledges that even if it were to have found the right word, it wouldn't know it.

Much of the novel (as well as the trilogy as a whole) is rooted in contradiction. On page 392, the speaker outright says, “[H]ell, I’ve contradicted myself, no matter.” The speaker describes itself as an egg “with two holes no matter where to prevent it from bursting” (297). The egg itself is an apparent contradiction. It is something that exists, something born, that hasn’t been born yet. It straddles the line between life and non-existence. In Paul Auster’s *City of Glass*, Peter Stillman says that “all men are eggs, in a manner of speaking. We exist, but we have not yet achieved the form that is our destiny” (80). If the speaker in *The Unnamable* could achieve that true silence, attaining the untouched destiny, perhaps it could escape the void once and for all by hatching into a human form.

Being a nonexistent-yet-existent being, the speaker has much to say about names and the concept of ‘I.’ The introductory inquisition by the novel’s narrator follows with “I, say I. Unbelieving” (285). Modernism and Postmodernism both encouraged skepticism and nothing could be more skeptical than self-doubt. In 1932, Beckett signed the Verticalist Manifesto, a declaration made by *transition* editor and ‘Revolution of the Word’ proponent Eugene Jolas. Under the title “Poetry is Vertical,” the manifesto emphasizes “the hegemony of the inner life over the outer life” and “the final disintegration of the ‘I’ in the creative act” through an invented hermetic language (Arp 148). *The Unnamable*’s language is hermetic to say the least, and at times, vows to avoid the word ‘I’ (to no avail, obviously). Halfway through the book, the speaker says, “I shall not say I again, ever again, it’s too farcical” (348). It goes on to use ‘I’ immediately in the

next two sentences.

The 'I,' in Cartesian terms, is a confirmation of reality; *cogito ergo sum*. *The Unnamable's* speaker casts doubt upon this affirmation of self, claiming that it can speak of no one other than itself, which it ends up deciding it can't even do:

...you speak of yourself, someone speaks of himself, that's it, in the singular, a single one, the man on duty, he, I, no matter, the man on duty speaks of himself, when speaking of others, when speaking of things, how can I know, I can't know, if I've spoken of him, I can only speak of me, no, I can't speak of anything, and yet I speak... (397)

The speaker, unable to speak of anything, speaks. It knows that it will never achieve the successful silence but, in the same way that writers know they'll never convey true reality, it continues the struggle. According to the speaker, "[t]he search for the means to put an end to things, an end to speech, is what enables the discourse to continue" (293). It must put intellect aside and rely on intuition, a recurring Beckettian theme.

The *Unnamable's* struggle with silence mirrors the contemporary author's struggle with language. Barthes' literary Utopia comes to mind when the speaker says, "if there is only one, like me, he can depart without fear of remorse, having done all he could, and even more, to achieve the impossible and so lost his life" (371). The last page of the novel acts as a call to arms devoid of vitality, advocating relentless steadfastness in the face of adversity despite the ignorance of any sort of purpose, knowledge, or expectation: "you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on" (407). There may not be any sort of gratification or reward, but one must endure the pain and sin and ultimately continue the unnamable struggle. The final words, "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on," indicate that the speaker doesn't conclude despite the novel being technically *over*. The narrative is circular and, like a *da capo* in music, prompts the reader to go back to the beginning

and start reading all over again.

The infinite time and space, the failure of words, the contradictions, the assignments and the perseverance are all tools in Beckett's attempt to "bore holes" through language and achieve a "literature of the unword." Like an inverted Joyce, he stretched the limits of literature and language to new levels of expression to the point where a density of words could manage to portray a feeling of silence and absence of words. *The Unnamable* was a relatively early Beckett work. Some of his later dramatic writings (such as *Act Without Words I*, *Act Without Words II*, *Breath*, and *Film*) are totally devoid of any sort of speech, consisting solely of directed movement and carefully placed sound. The struggle with language was one Beckett fought for the entirety of his six-decade career as a writer, never ceding to language's inalienable constraint.

VI. Conclusion

It has been seventy years since James Joyce's final publication and twenty since Samuel Beckett's and we are still mired in the dilemma of language. The hopeful forecast of the *transition* contributors and other proponents of the literary avant-garde came true to a certain extent by way of select gifted authors like Joyce and Beckett, yet there is still an untapped realm that we have yet to conceptualize. Language is autonomous and must remain so in order to survive and proliferate, yet we have seen (through the studies of Saussure, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes) that there are certain limitations inherent in language as well as restrictions imposed on us by language. Insistence in the face of adversity is what pushes the written word to stretch beyond its accepted confines. Claude Mauriac's concept of aliterature, along with Roland Barthes' Utopia of language through literature, places the conscious author in a David vs. Goliath match against language. Unlike the biblical tale, it is uncertain whether it is even possible for the underdog to come out victorious, yet these artists continue to strive for the unobtainable.

James Joyce's three novels show the evolution of a writer whose mastery of languages was turned into a weapon to be used against them. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* chronicles the evolution of consciousness and intelligence through an evolution of language and conation. *Ulysses* manages to fit an entire world into a single novel that spans the course of a day and, through episodes such as [Proteus], uses language to represent reality more successfully than any other work of fiction. *Finnegans Wake* turned language inside out in order to achieve a dreamlike expression free from many linguistic confines. Joyce used words in innovative ways and inspired an entire generation of writers and thinkers to experiment with the conventional form. He remains

unsurpassed in his pushing of language to the brink of its confines, closer than ever to aliterature.

Samuel Beckett, feeling the weight of Joyce's influence directly, had to overcome the natural inclination to imitate his mentor and ultimately forge his own path. His novels, plays, poems, short stories, and criticism address themes regarding the futility of humanity and art, all while continuing the struggle onward. Opposing Joyce's style, Beckett yearned for silence and the violent metaphorical puncturing of words in order to get at what was kept inside of them. His trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* thematically and stylistically portrays the slow death and decay of life and language by using an abundance of words in an attempt to put an end to them.

Beckett's letter to Axel Kaun reveals the author's belief that his works cannot be compared with Joyce's unless the ascent to heaven and the descent to hell are "somehow one and the same" (173). Joyce and Beckett pushed the established boundaries of language and literature in completely different directions but, if we look at language and literature as if it were a mirror, the two authors would appear at equidistant points from the center. Polar counterparts share similar conditions and, like the concept of absolute value in mathematics, these opposites can be compared equally. Through expansion (by the former) and contraction (by the latter), both Joyce and Beckett used the autonomous quality of language as a tool against its inherent confines and, in doing so, inspired writers of the current generation to continue the struggle with and against language.

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Title: James Joyce, Samuel Beckett, and the Confines of Autonomous Language

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Abstract:

Language, while being humanity's unchallenged method of communication, is fraught with limitations and impositions upon human consciousness. Ferdinand de Saussure's scrutiny of the linguistic sign led to many philosophical inquiries regarding the dilemma of language throughout the twentieth century. Literature, the art of written language, faces these same burdens and must attempt to overcome them in hopes of adequate expression. The intrinsic and inexplicable will to create must be strong enough to overlook said boundaries. Certain writers of the Modernist movement were tired of the stale trends of nineteenth century literature and published "The Revolution of the Word," a call for experimentation and innovation of the English language. This 'revolution' viewed language as an autonomous entity, a free being despite its unavoidable confines. Claude Mauriac coined the term 'aliterature' to describe writing that attempted to reach the unobtainable through language; it is a "never-reached pole." Two authors, James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, used completely different techniques to push the limitations of language and literature further. Through Joyce's *Ulysses* (namely 'Proteus') and Beckett's Trilogy (particularly *The Unnamable*), words got closer to the "never-reached pole" than ever before.