Beckett’s Tattered Syntax

... the surprise to find myself alone at last no more Pim me alone in the dark the mud end at last of part two how it was with Pim leaving at last only part three and last how it was after Pim.¹

One of Samuel Beckett’s great themes, or so it is thought, is that “the maximum of corruption and the minimum of generation are identical.” Beckett pronounces it “the wisdom of all the sages.”² It is to assert that all things are reducible to the same and thus to desire no one particular unattainable thing. Hugh Kenner relates Beckett’s theme to Descartes’s “maxim,” to “change my desires rather than the order of the world,”³ commenting that it “confirms the author of Proust [Beckett] in his view of human desire” (Beckett, 82). It is the wisdom of Ecclesiastes: “One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh,” the series in Watt of “father’s” and “mother’s” and “father's father’s” and “mother’s mother’s” possessing the earth. So Murphy’s opening echoes Ecclesiastes: “The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.”⁴ As a view of history, it is a rejection of progress, an echo of “those dying generations” of Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium.”

Generation in Beckett is conceptualized through an extremely simple model: the process of like begets like. “It is obvious we have here a principle of change pregnant with possibilities.”⁵ Output is scarcely different from input: what goes in comes out little changed. The products are what Beckett’s protagonists call their “brotherly likes” (How It Is, 37).⁶ The process is reduplication ad infinitum: “and so on to no last term,” as Bloom ends the hypothetical series of Molly’s lovers in Ulysses,⁷ producing “their billions of quick, their trillions of dead” (Unnamable, 335).

This model of generation is also a theory of language. Nothing new is also ever said under the sun: “All men talk, when talk they must, the same tripe’” (Murphy, 59). So too it is a vision, post-Joyce, of “an art . . . weary of . . . doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.”⁸

Certainly Beckett repeats this wisdom on many occasions. But “the author of Proust,” Kenner fails to note, exposes it under Proust’s own analysis. For the ablation of desire Beckett attributes in his Proust to the work of voluntary memory and Habit.

ABSTRACT: Joyce and Beckett aimed to create a language which, unlike world English, is no one’s mother tongue. Joyce by exploiting the phonological and morphological principles for the production of new words, the lexicon’s open-class “dictionary.” Beckett, after imitating but ultimately resisting Joyce’s lexical inventiveness, extracted the late minimalist style from the lexicon’s nonproductive grammatical function words. / Representations 84 © 2004 The Regents of the University of California. issn 0734-6018 pages 6–29. All rights reserved. Send requests for permission to reprint to Rights and Permissions, University of California Press, Journals Division, 2000 Center St., Ste. 303, Berkeley, CA 94704-1223.
whose role, he says there, is to preserve us not only against “the cruelties” but the “enchantments of reality” (Proust, 22). It harbors the ultimate disappointment. The “terror at the thought of separation—from Gilberte, from his parents, from himself—is dissipated in a greater terror, when he thinks that to the pain of separation will succeed indifference . . . when the alchemy of Habit has transformed the individual capable of suffering into a stranger for whom the motives of that suffering are an idle tale, when not only the objects of his affection have vanished, but also that affection itself” (Proust, 25–26).

Critics dismiss Beckett’s Proust as part of his juvenalia, but its clear approval of Proust’s rejection of a theme seen as central in Beckett should caution us to accept that theme at face value. For Beckett’s work accuses this compensatory wisdom of preventing “suffering . . . [from] open[ing] a window on the real” (Proust, 28). But it is only via a conception of history, both personal and literary, that runs counter to the myth of progress—“in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation”—that all can “change utterly,” that an individual might escape the round of generation, that “the object [of desire] [might be] perceived as particular and unique and not merely the member of a family” (Proust, 22), that art can find a language to say something new.

The nexus where these projects meet links mother to language. Just as no other mother, no matter how good, would do to kiss Proust’s narrator good night, so it has to be demonstrated that languages are not substitutable for speakers. Hence the intertwining of the mother, “a neuralgia rather than a theme,” Beckett says (Proust, 35), and the linguistic experiments in which language quoad matrem, alternating presence and absence, make the bibliography a complicated fort-da game in which, like Molloy’s with his sucking stones, the sadistic urge, under the impulse of Descartes’s maxim, is finally to throw the object away. For, before both can return as something new and unique, mother and mother tongue must be subjected to this wisdom’s reduction of the individual to a member of a class.

Beckett’s linguistic crisis is hence one of the mother tongue. It is at once personal and national. The “frenzy of writing” from 1946 to 1953 out of which came the Trilogy was also the period in which Beckett began writing first in French. The novel that opens “I am in my mother’s room” “had begun on 2 May [1947], literally in ‘[his] mother’s room,’” James Knowlson writes.10 By contrast, Deirdre Bair recounts, while his mother lay unconscious and dying three years later (in the summer of 1950), he translated extracts from it and Malone Meurt (405).11 In between, then, French permitted the freedom from his mother’s fierce disapproval of his writing that had led to her banishing her son from the family house in 1931.12

The role played by French brings to mind the celebrated American schizophrenic Louis Wolfson, who wrote Le Schizo et les langues in schoolboy French. Gilles Deleuze, in his introduction to Wolfson’s book, thinks too of Beckett, although not of the relation between mother and language.13 Wolfson’s project was clearly to destroy the maternal language, Deleuze argues.14 “Everything starts from the fact

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that the author [Wolfson] can’t bear to hear his mother speak. Every word she
pronounces . . . penetrates him . . . and echoes in his head. The problem then is to
learn languages without passing through the intermediary of English.”

Beckett’s project also encompasses an attack on the mother tongue, but in it his
personal motive meets another one, the Irish crisis of the mother tongue. In the
opening of *Ulysses*, Joyce connects the compromised status of Irish art—“the
cracked looking glass of a servant” (17)—to the disappearance of Irish. For the old
crone, figure of Mother Ireland, who appears in this passage, like Stephen Dedalus,
speaks no Gaelic—“I’m told it’s a grand language by them that knows”—while
the Englishman Haines has acquired it as a learned tongue. As J. M. Synge had
written to the Gaelic League: “Irish as a living language is dying out year by year.”
“Can we go back into our mother’s womb?” Joyce had written to his brother
Stanislaus in 1906 that “if the Irish programme did not insist on the Irish language
I suppose I could call myself a nationalist.” But this does not mean he found the
use of English unproblematic. In *Portrait*, Stephen, conversing with the English
dean of studies, thinks, “His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be
for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words.” Becket must
have had a comparable sense of his linguistic otherness from English speakers.
Deirdre Bair recounts his very different experience of London as opposed to Paris:
“I hated London... ‘everyone knew you were Irish—taxi drivers called you ‘Pat’
or ‘Mick.’” The evidence for being so recognized must have been linguistic. By
contrast, a French speaker could ask him, in a famous anecdote, “Vous êtes anglais?”
to which Beckett replied, “Au contraire!” In London, as opposed to Paris, his
only choice was to betray his Irishness in one sense or the other of the word.

Some measure of the significance of the near disappearance of Gaelic for Irish
speakers is provided, surprisingly, by Jacques Lacan. In the only place in print that
Jacques-Alain Miller, Lacan’s literary executor, could point to where Lacan pro-
nounces on the mother tongue, a subject he is supposed to have had something to
say about, it is Joyce’s name that by a kind of free association he invokes. A propos
of English’s use of *do* in negation—“je m’abstiens de faire” Lacan translates as “I
don’t”—he comments “I don’t talk, je ne choisis pas de parler. De parler quoi? dans le
cas de Joyce, c’est le gaelique.” In “Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce,” Beckett finds
an “analogy” between Joyce’s solution to the linguistically orphaned Irish writer’s
predicament, with only a step-language, and Dante’s project in *De vulgari eloquentia*
to substitute for Latin not the vernacular but an “illustrious vernacular” created
by poets, which is no one’s mother tongue. Dante’s conception of the mother
tongue, “idest maternam locutionem,” glosses the link between Joyce’s old crone
and language. “What I call ‘vernacular speech,’” he says, is that which as babies
“we learn without any rules in imitating our nurse.” It is “naturalis” (1.1.4), in-
gested orally or aurally with one’s mother’s or nurse’s milk. This is explicit in
*Paradiso* 33.107–8 where Dante invokes the “speech of an infant who still bathes its
tongue in the breast [che bagni ancor la lingua a la mammella].”
Adopting Dante’s figure of the language-milk, Joyce and Beckett suggest that in the Irish case, once swallowed, it is hard to stomach, for theirs is a surrogate mother tongue. The English-speaking milkwoman in *Ulysses* with “old shrunken paps” has “rich white milk, not hers” (*Ulysses*, 15), like the cow in Beckett’s “The End,” “who must have been recently milked” by someone else. Just as she has no milk of her own for her starving children, Mother Ireland has no native language to bequeath them. Molloy shares ignorance of Gaelic with her and Dedalus: “Tears and laughter,” he says, “they are so much Gaelic to me” (*Molloy*, 37), as the listener in *Company* would not be affected by the voice heard in the dark were it “speech in Bantu or in Erse.” “I have no language but theirs,” the Unnamable laments (*Unnamable*, 325).

Since English, like the forced feeding of the hunger striker, is thrust upon the Irish speaker—“he’d ram the ghost back down my gullet with black pudding” (*Texts for Nothing*, 88)—that attack reduces the language-milk taken in against the will to an excrement: “It’s like shit, there we have it at last, there it is at last, the right word.” The cow’s udder in Beckett’s “The End” is dung-covered. Here we are returned to the theme of generation. Beckett parades down the reproductive organs over and again to the digestive processes of the most primitive and rudimentary organism, “Worm”; generation is “a question of elimination” (*Unnamable*, 365). The model is a conduit with an aperture—mouth, ear, eye, or the hole Molloy’s “muse” makes him mention—at either end, for the entrance or exit of substances: variously air, liquid, or solid. Moreover, there is no difference between entrance and exit. This gives “the anatomy the geometry” of *How It Is* (55), where the series of individuals in the mud are linked by “contact of mouth and ear” (140). Engendering is “pumping one’s likes,” the infinite series of “brotherly likes,” Murphy, Molloy, Malone, Mercier and Camier, Pim, Pam, Bem, Bom, Kram, Krim, Skom, Skum: “We are talking of a procession advancing in jerks or spasms like shit in the guts till one wonders . . . if we shall not end . . . by being shot into the open air” (*How It Is*, 124).

This same model produces language similarly via the conduit, speakers “launching their voices, through the hole, there must be a hole for the voices too” (*Unnamable*, 359). “Two holes and me in the middle, slightly choked. Or a single one, entrance and exit, where the words swarm and jostle like ants.” Words “keep pouring out of my mouth,” the Unnamable says, “dribbling,” or, alternatively, “ramming a set of words down your gullet,” you are “branded as belonging to their breed” (*Unnamable*, 310, 324).

**The Name of the Mother**

This is why in Beckett both mother and mother tongue are reduced to an excrement. When Molloy—Didier Anzieu claims the name is a version of Beckett’s
mother’s nickname “Molly”;—introduces his mother (who “never called me son, fortunately; I couldn’t have borne it, but Dan. I don’t know why, my name is not Dan”; 17), it is by the name “Mag,” for he cannot swallow “Ma.”

I called her Mag, when I had to call her something. And I called her Mag because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on it. . . . at the same time I satisfied a deep and doubtless unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma, that is a mother, and to proclaim it, audibly. For before you say mag you say ma, inevitably. And da, in my part of the world, means father. (Molloy, 17)

The question of the naming of the mother becomes “the question of whether to call her Ma, Mag or the Countess Caca.” This third substitute for “mother” is, in fact, an allusion to Proust’s Sodome et Gomorrhe, where the snob Charlus, fulminating against the provincial aristocracy epitomized by the Cambremer(s), calls them “‘tous les petits messieurs qui s’appellent marquis de Cambremerde.’” 32 Beckett, in his Proust, had appreciatively observed that the “name, as Oriane de Guermantes observes to Swann, stops just in time.” 33 So Charlus, to denigrate the Cambremer, reduces them all to one substance, or rather, two: “Que vous alliez faire pipi chez la comtesse Caca, ou caca chez la baronne Pipi, c’est la même chose.” Presumably, then, according to the Guermantes logic, the name “Ma” too “stops just in time.” And the letter g of “Mag” functions like the conclusion “an excrement” that terminates the potentially infinite series of mothers and fathers in Watt. It makes the mother indistinguishable from any mother.

Molloy’s mother is not simply the excremental mother. Can we not recognize in the title “Countess Caca” another allusion? In Molloy’s “part of the world” it recalls W. B. Yeats’s play The Countess Cathleen. Its heroine is an idealized figure of Mother Ireland because she feeds the Irish peasantry, 35 her real, baser incarnation is the old crone. 36 The milkwoman who appears in the opening of Ulysses Buck Mulligan imitates “in an old woman’s wheedling voice,” “saying—When I makes tea I makes tea, as old Mother Grogan said. And when I makes water I makes water” (14). So, the Countess Caca is Ireland itself. Excremental Mother Ireland has literary precedents. One is Yeats’s “Crazy Jane,” whose “breasts are flat and fallen now, / Those veins must soon be dry,” like the Sandyvore crone’s, in whose mouth Yeats puts his rendering of Augustine’s “inter urinas et faeces nascimur”: “. . . love has pitched his mansion in / The place of excrement.” 37 Another is Jonathan Swift’s “young female Yahoo” who “embraced” the bathing Gulliver “after a most fulsome manner”—Beckett especially appreciated this passage, according to E. M. Cioran. 38 She is an Eve in an antiparadise, Yeats’s “place of excrement,” Ireland. Swift’s Yahoo kind among rational and landed horses are the native Irish.

As Yahooland, “Molloy country” (called “Bally,” element of Irish place-names, “Ballyba” and “Ballybaba”; Molloy, 133–34) has its match in Moran’s bordering region, “Turdy, hub of Turdyba.” When Moran “went . . . outside Turdy, to get a
breath of fresh air; it was the fresh air of Turdybaba that I got” (134, 143). Moreover, Moran’s “journey from my country to Molloy’s” (132) takes on a feature of Molloy’s own trajectory in search of his mother; he is making “a pilgrimage . . . to the Turdy Madonna” (173).

Beckett’s specificity is to make the excremental mother also a figure of Irish English, mother tongue of the Irish, which becomes a Yahoo-speak. But what alternative is there? Dante and Joyce, Beckett wrote, “both rejected an approximation to a universal language.”^39 Hence, Joyce rejects world English, as Dante Latin. Yet Dante for Beckett is not the regionalist or nationalist: “Dante did not adopt the vulgar out of any kind of local jingoism. . . . On reading his De Vulgari Eloquentia we are struck by his complete freedom from civic intolerance” (“Dante,” 121). Even though Dante’s poetics, like that of the Irish, had to make up for the “forgetfulness of the former language” (“prioris oblivio”),^40 namely, the original, universal, Adamic language, there is also for Dante no return to the womb. For Synge’s metaphor holds for all speakers, who must be forcibly expelled from the maternal language. Dante’s conception is rather of a weaning. So the strange birth of “The End”’s protagonist is, in fact, also a weaning. “Clutching the dug with one hand I kept my hat under it with the other,” and so the cow “dragged me across the threshold,” but once outside the cave “I was forced to let go” of the udder (Stories, 61).

An exile from the mother tongue is obligatory, as the child must leave its mother for grammar school. The replacement for the language-milk is what Dante calls a “locutio secundaria,” “dependent on this one [the vernacular] and called by the Romans ‘grammar’” (De vulgari 1.1.3). Yet Dante’s weaned child does not leave mother for school to sit at the feet of a mother-grammar, as in the Portail royal at Chartres. Dante’s grammar shows no traces of motherliness. It would be better represented by that ferule medieval figures of grammar held, the phallic rod of grammatical instruction substituting for the maternal breast. For it is a language of men without mothers, without nurses (“vir sine matre, vir sine lacte”; 1.6.1). Grammar is the first step toward the illustrious vernacular. It is a language of learning, by contrast with the mother tongue. The modern perspective contrasts the mother tongue with colonial languages, like Irish English, imposed on a subjugated people. But the concept of the mother tongue was first defined not against such “living languages” but against a “dead language.” The OED lists the first English use of “modyr tonge” from Wyclif, c. 1380.^43 We might recall that Joyce and Beckett, as well as Synge, were, like Wolfson, “étudiant[s] de langues.” Wolfson’s project, “unit[ing] all languages against the maternal language,”^44 Deleuze connects to “a general linguistics,” to which Wolfson “assign[s] . . . the desire to kill the maternal language.”^45 Indeed, linguistics ignores what makes a particular language maternal, for any natural language can be someone’s mother tongue. Language, knowable by science even if only in the minimal sense of learnable via schooling, is thus separable from subjects. Its familiar particularity, existing only for the speaker for
whom it was “maternal,” is entirely subjective and, so, unrepresentable within a
science of language. Linguistics merely continues the process which, for Dante,
grammar begins; it sets the babbler on the road of exile from the language-breast.
The illustrious vernacular replacing the natural language is a language of art—
the art of grammar—“assembl[ing] the purest elements from each dialect and con-
struct[ing] a synthetic language that would at least possess more than a circum-
scribed local interest” (“Dante,” 122). It is radically no one’s mother tongue. Dante
“wrote a vulgar that could have been spoken by an ideal Italian who had assimilated
what was best in all the dialects of his country, but which in fact was certainly not
spoken nor ever had been. Which disposes of the capital objection that might be
made against this attractive parallel between Dante and Mr. Joyce in the question
of language, i.e., that at least Dante wrote what was being spoken in the streets of
his own town, whereas no creature in heaven or earth ever spoke the language of
Work in Progress” (122). Certainly not “the monodialectical arcadians whose fury is
precipitated by a failure to discover ‘innocence’ in the concise Oxford Dictionary”
(30–31).

So much for Beckett’s conception of Joyce’s project. What of his own? First, his
destruction of the mother tongue. Its weaned language consists in a reduction of
Joyce’s own principles, but it is also a product of science, for it can be better under-
stood in terms of current linguistics. Instead of incorporating features of many lan-
guages into one, it aims to pare language down to its “essence,” with no traces of
localization in time and space. Only then can English return, incommensurable
but shorn of its maternal affect.

Joyce’s “method of dispatch” in Finnegans Wake uses the generative processes of
language and, in particular, those for the production of new lexical items. Hence
the justness of the characterization of Joyce’s as a “revolution of the word.” Phon-
ology, morphology, and etymology underlie its lexical inventiveness. The young
Beckett imitated but ultimately resisted it as a gift inherited against his will—“what
a gazetteer I am,” the Unnamable jests. The early works show a profuse vocabulary
of learned terms and neologisms like those in 1:

1. “sublimatoria” (Murphy, 166); “echolalid,” “vomitdribble,” “tergiversator,” “wedge-
head,” “beadlust,” “snotgasp,” “snotcork,” “hiccupsobs,” “relieffilarity,” “pugnnoz-
zing up,” “ballbearing bastardpimp,” “gothly,” “Puerpetually,” “probabionary,”
“Kissmine,” “egoterminal,” “biggers description,” “Randy-gasp of ruthilarity,” “sub-
limen of blatherskite,” “szygetic,” “he reddied his nose,” “furchtbag,” “multipara,”
“caoutchouc,” “pich,” “slugging-a-bed,” “douceness,” “eburnine,” “stercoraceous,”
“elephantiatics,” “mummyfoetus,” “diademitonic,” “patibulary,” “herpetic tarantant-
arantaluntual,” “dolorific nymphae and a tic doublheureux in th’imperforate hymen,”
“beerbibbing,” “graphospasmus” (Dream of Fair to Middling Women, 68–81)

—all but the first from a fourteen-page stretch of Dream of Fair to Middling Women. “Have you spotted the style?” the text asks parenthetically after one such neolo-
gism. We have. But the results of this Joycean apprenticeship in distancing himself
from the mother tongue had finally to be ruthlessly rooted out; in the words Beckett applied to the painter André Masson, it showed “the scars of a competence that must be most painful to him.” Instead, the goal is to reverse the process of generation, to find something incommensurate in the series of generations.

Beckett abstracts Joyce’s principles of lexical productivity to stem the tide of his verbal expansiveness. First the mother tongue is shrunk to a baby talk: a series of reduplicative syllables as in 2, “mama,” “dada,” “baba” (the reiterative suffix of Molloy’s district), “caca”: 2.

Roman Jakobson notes that “the reduplication of syllables ... appears ... as a favorite device in nursery forms, particularly in parental terms.” Beckett’s aim is to reduce all utterance to the same elemental “drivel drivel” (How It Is, 61).

The nursery language shows the alternation of stops or nasals with a vowel Jakobson calls “the principle of maximal contrast” which “accounts for the constituents common to the majority of the mama-papa terms” (308)—“a good deep P and the apposite stab ... should it mean his trying all the consonants in the Roman alphabet,” How It Is will put it (71). This basic vocabulary is international and timeless. On the word caca, for instance, John Orr observes that “Latin cacare, for example, has become chier in French by a process of perfectly regular sound change (cp. pacare=payer, and capu(t)=Old. Fr. Chief, Mod. tr. chef) but the nursery noun caca has not changed since Roman times.” Like proper names in general, this vocabulary needs no translation: Ma, Mag, Da, Dan, and Caca in “the Countess Caca” are the same in the French and the English Molloy, as are all his names.

The nursery language is not the maternal language, but a reduction of it via a generalized process. The principles are set forth in How It Is. Words minimally organized into categories—“pronouns and other parts of blather” (Unnamable, 360)—are generated via simple phonological rules, beginning with a set of names: “Bom Bem one syllable m at the end all that matters.” “Call me Bom for more commodity that would appeal to me m at the end and one syllable the rest indifferent” (How It Is, 60). This rule produces a series of character names: “Pim Bim proper names” (How It Is, 80); “Pim, Pom, Bom, Bem,” “my wife above Pam Prim” (How It Is, 76); “the witness . . . name Kram . . . and the scribe name Krim” (How It Is, 80); “my spinal dog . . . Skom Skum” (How It Is, 85). The model is the name “Sam” (“I’ve named myself”; How It Is, 108), itself containing the reversal of “ma” or “Worm,” just short of the Unnamable. The series of names has its counterpart elsewhere in Beckett: There is reduplication in Murphy, Mercier, Molloy, Moran, Malone, and Mahood; Mercier and Camier; Watt and Knott; Pozzo, Bozzo, and Gozzo; Didi and Gogo; Winnie and Willie; Nell and Nagg; Watt and Knott. It is the linguistic equivalent of the series of brotherly likes. After the series of persons
comes “a possible thing see it name it” (How It Is, 31). A second noun rule—“one syllable k at the end” (105)—yields “sack.” “Say sack old word first to come.” Then minimal tenses are added: “present past future and conditional of to be and not to be” (How It Is, 38); “be with Pim have been with Pim” (How It Is, 23). A few prepositions also function as tenses: “before Pim with Pim after Pim” (How It Is, 25).

Finally came some simple rules of permutation. The order of the names can be interchanged, like that of the sadomasochist couples: “Krim to Kram roles reversed” (How It Is, 93); “We’ll have to go through it all again, in other words, or in the same words, arranged differently” (Unnamable, 370); “B to C C to D from hell to home hell to home to hell . . . Z to A” (How It Is, 79).

This simplified, “midget grammar” (How It Is, 76) produces a “pidgin bulls...”(Unnamable, 378) or “pigsty latin” (Unnamable, 329)—“in pursuance of the principle of parsimony” (How It Is, 138), as the Unnamable is pruned to a speaking ball. Its origin is the mother and the urge to name her: “It comes the word we’re talking of . . . one is enough . . . with open mouth it comes I let it at once . . . aha signifying mamma” (How It Is, 26). The urge is alimentary, for we are returned to the language breast: “mamma papa hear those sounds slake my thirst for labials” (How It Is, 108). The reproductive power of this “cacababble,” we’re continuously reminded, is excremental: “from the murmurs of my mother shat” (How It Is, 42); “you don’t know the Boms sir you can shit on a Bom sir” (How It Is, 60). It produces “heart-rending cries, inarticulate murmurs, to be invented, as I go along, improvised, as I groan along. I’ll laugh, that’s how it will end, in a chuckle, chuck, chuck, ow, ha, pa, I’ll practise, nyum, hoo, plop, piss, nothing but emotion, bing, bang, that’s blows, ugh, pooh, what else, ooooh, aaah, that’s love, enough, it’s tiring, hee hee, that’s the Abderite” (Unnamable, 408). Literature too is so much shit: The mouth “spews” stories; the Unnamable will “let down my trousers and shit stories” (380). Or, in a Swiftian figure, “I strain with open mouth . . . a fart fraught with meaning issuing through the mouth” (How It Is, 26). Even in Beckett’s account of the relation between theme in art, what he calls “the aliment, from fruits on plates to low mathematics and self-commiseration,” and form, “its manner of dispatch,” we recognize the familiar excremental model.

Excrement as the ultimate matière première of the Beckett universe makes the scatological reduction “sadism pure and simple” (How It Is, 63)—Yeats’s “savage” for Swift’s “saeva” translates as “sadistic” in Freud’s terminology, which we recall is modified by “anal.” Thus Beckett gives Vico’s theory of “the natural and inevitable growth of language” in which, Beckett says, “in its first dumb form, language was gesture” (“Dante,” 25), a sadistic twist: for Molloy communicates with his “ma” by means of thumps on the head and language is elicited in How It Is by a sadistic stab: “The hand dips clawing for the take instead of the familiar slime an arse two cries one mute” (How It Is, 48). “The cries tell me which end the head” (How It Is, 54). “The lyrical form,” Joyce writes in Portrait, “is in fact the simplest verbal vesture of an instant of emotion, a rhythmical cry.” In Beckett, song is a
masochistic response to the sadistic gesture: “The day when clawed in the armpit
instead of crying he sings his song the song ascends in the present” (How It Is, 63).
“I can’t make out the words the mud muffles or perhaps a foreign tongue perhaps
he’s singing a lied in the original” (How It Is, 56). This “savage” reduction of
the mother tongue is required to purge English of the affect Beckett, in his Proust,
associates with voluntary memory, a sentimental nostalgia fantasizing a past—“if Habit
is the Goddess of Dulness, voluntary memory is Shadwell, and of Irish extraction,”
Beckett wrote (Proust, 33).

The midget grammar of names is extended to other generative, often recursive
processes of language, for example, the series of possessives alluded to earlier and
here amplified in 3:

3. “And the poor old lousy old earth, my earth and my father’s and my mother’s and my
father’s father’s and my mother’s mother’s and my father’s mother’s and my mother’s
father’s and my father’s mother’s father’s and my mother’s father’s mother’s and my
father’s mother’s mother’s and my mother’s father’s and my father’s father’s
mother’s and my mother’s mother’s and my father’s father’s and my mother’s
father’s and my mother’s mother’s and my father’s father’s and my mother’s
father’s and my mother’s mother’s and other people’s fathers’ and mothers’ and fathers’
fathers’ and mothers’ mothers’ and fathers’ mothers’ and mothers’ fathers’ and fathers’
mothers’ fathers’ and mothers’ mothers’ and fathers’ mothers’ and mothers’ fathers’
and mothers’ mothers’ and fathers’ and mothers’ mothers’ and fathers’ and
mothers’ mothers’ and fathers’ and mothers’ mothers’ and mothers’ mothers’
mothers’. An excrement.”

So also the recursive participial modification in 4:

4. “a caged beast born of caged beasts born of caged beasts born in
a cage and dead in a cage, born and then dead, born in a cage and then dead in a cage,
in a word like a beast.” (Watt, 386–87)

What is the nature and purpose of this attack on the mother tongue? It reduces
language largely to the productive processes for the coining of new words, plus a
few minimal rules of syntax generating elemental constructions. The “productive”
or “lexical” categories, that is, those “open class” categories to which new members
can be added, are the lexical categories Noun, Verb, and Adjective/Adverb, lan-
guage’s so-called content words. These lexical items for the layperson constitute the
essence of language. This is the aspect of language exploited by Joyce’s “revolution
of the word,” which leaves the framework of the syntax largely intact. Beckett’s
cacababble is a caricature of its conception of language as contained within the
word, the content word like “pot,” which gives Watt “semantic succour” (Watt, 83).
The reduction is intended to show that language only repeats “the nothing new”
by making radically apparent its repetitive nature in carrying these processes to
absurd lengths—in example 3, the series begins anew in the plural, phonetically
indistinguishable from the singular. “Would it not be better if I were simply to keep
on saying babababa, for example, while waiting to ascertain the true function of
this venerable organ?” the Unnamable asks (Unnamable, 308).
In the meantime, Beckett was attacking the mother tongue in another way: writing in French, then translating the French into English. The experiment of translation may have given him an insight into Joyce’s project, as Beckett’s first major undertaking as a translator had been a portion of Joyce’s *Work in Progress*. But in the process of self-translation, he came to discover the true function of the speech organ. It would allow English to return like the grandmother in Proust, a “mad old woman,” become “a stranger whom he has never seen” (*Proust*, 28). It returns in 1956 under the dual sign of the mother and the mother tongue with *All That Fall*. Although Deirdre Bair describes *Krapp’s Last Tape* as “Beckett’s first post-war writing in English” (*Samuel Beckett*, 491), that play was preceded by *All That Fall*, commissioned by the BBC and written in English first. In it the increamental mother reappears behind a load of stydung as Maddy Rooney—her shapelessness bearing a likeness to a “cow pie.” “Mad” is a variant of Beckett’s mother’s Christian name “May” and Molloy’s “Mag,” and Mr. Rooney is called “Dan.” It initiates a new pattern, whereby a number of dramatic pieces are composed first in English, then translated into French, while the prose continues largely to be written first in French. *Krapp’s Last Tape*, the second work written first in English in 1958, had its source in the “mellifluous voice” of Irish actor Patrick Magee. “Beckett told Magee . . . [his] voice was the one which he heard inside his mind.” Like the voice in *Company*, with the same “flat tone unchanged” of “a mother’s stooping over cradle” (34–35) or of the grandmother on the telephone in *Proust*, “as impalpable as a voice from the dead” (*Proust*, 27), Irish English returns as to another. *All That Fall* makes clear, with its references to Grimm’s Law and dead languages like “our own poor dear Gaelic,” that Irish English is a *langue perdue* for its author, “an ancient voice in me not mine” (*How It Is*, 7) subject to the law of time, unlike the nursery “baa, baa” of the “little woolly lamb, crying to suck its mother,” which “has not changed, since Arcady.” If “for the first time since her death” Proust’s narrator “knows that she [his grandmother] is dead, . . . knows who is dead” (*Proust*, 42), so Beckett knows English not as his familiar vernacular but as one language, distanced in time and space.

The late style is the result. It exploits not language’s productive processes, but what linguists call “nonproductive” or “closed-class” lexical formatives—grammatical “function words” like determiners, pronouns, and so on, as well as inflectional morphemes like tense and plural and the bound morphemes of derivational morphology. Linguistic research on the nature of the lexicon has increasingly focused on properties of these classes of words. (A popularized aperçu of this research is given in Steven Pinker’s *Words and Rules.*) It has also located, between lexical and functional categories, an intermediate class of “semi-lexical categories.” Prepositions, for instance, do not constitute an open class, although they pattern in certain ways with nouns, verbs, and adjectives. And subclasses of the productive categories constitute closed classes of grammatical formatives, for example, the intransitive
verbs which take predicate adjectives that traditional grammar calls “linking verbs.” They are usually enumerated, which argues that they are a closed class. These would thus also be semilexical categories. See 5Bi. Further examples of semilexical categories are given in 5A, C, and D.

5. A. Grammatical nouns
   one, self, thing, place, time, way, body

B. Grammatical verbs
   i. “Linking”
      be, become, get, seem, stay, some sense verbs, e.g., feel, look, etc.
   ii. Other
      have, get, do, come, go, make, let, want, say

C. Grammatical adjectives
   other, same, different, such, good, mere

D. Grammatical prepositions
   to, for, of, with, out, up, by, etc.—actually, most prepositions

Joseph Emonds subdivides the lexicon into an open-class “Dictionary” and a closed-class “Syntacticon” (Lexicon, 10). The closed-class members lack highly specified semantic content, having only cognitive syntactic features. Hence the semilexical categories are often called (semantically) “light” nouns, verbs, adjectives, and prepositions.

We can hypothesize that the minimalism of Beckett’s late style is a result of an attempt to create an art made largely out of the syntacticon, while scarcely exploiting the dictionary—forming what Beckett calls “tattered syntaxes” or “syntaxes up ended.” A glance at Beckett’s titles indicates the evolution. After the clever verbal inventiveness of More Pricks than Kicks and A Dream of Fair to Middling Women, the prose gives pride of place to the proper name: Murphy, Watt, Mercier and Camier, Molloy, Malone Dies, and the definite noun phrase: First Love, The Expelled, The Calmative, The End, The Unnamable. Starting with Comment C’est or How It Is, it is the repertoire of the syntacticon that is exploited in titles like Pour Finir Encore; Assez; Enough; Sans, translated as Lessness; Still; All Strange Away; Stirrings Still; Ill Seen Ill Said, with its light verbs; and Worstward Ho and dramatic pieces like Pas moi or Not I, and Quoi où or What Where.

Let us proffer some hypotheses as to not only the nature of this style but its reason to be. The young Beckett had written about Proust’s “contempt for the literature that ‘describes,’ for the realists and naturalists worshipping the offal of experience . . . content to transcribe the surface, . . . behind which the Idea is prisoner” (Proust, 78–79). Beckett’s antirealism should not be understood as the shibboleth of today’s criticism. The capitalized word “Idea” suggests another, philosophical, realism. The “caricature furnished by direct perception” is “far removed from the real” (Proust, 14); for Beckett, the real comes “from this deep source” of involuntary memory from which “Proust hoisted his world” (Proust, 32). Involuntary memory
arises in Beckett under the form of “a few images on and off in the mud” (How It Is, 8), visual images appearing first in How It Is and then Company. Critics have tended to equate these flashes of light, so many sparks “in a head,” with fiction; Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit speak of a “world-devising seeing.”69 “Figments,” yes, but “if only she could be pure figment,” Ill Seen Ill Said says of the mother’s image; “if only all could be pure figment.”70 If all were, the verbal inventiveness of the dictionary, which creates fictions, might suffice. The late style aims to capture the mute image, “ill-seen”; it is the voice in which the mother tongue is “ill-heard ill-recaptured.” “A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine.” So Company opens (Nohow On, 3). Lying supine in the darkened room, the protagonist assumes the Proustian posture, which is also the Cartesian one,71 and awaits explosions from “above.” “You lie in the dark and are back in that light” (17). Each image flames up, “life in the light first image,” then “that’s all it goes out like a lamp blown out” (How It Is, 16). Going “from light to darkness to light” (How It Is, 10), they form intensely lit little scenes: “he sees things yes often no little scenes” (How It Is, 97), as in 6:

6. “Whence suddenly no knowing nor whither as suddenly gone.” (Nohow On, 51)

“But she can be gone at any time. From one moment of the year to the next suddenly no longer there. No longer anywhere to be seen. Nor by the eye of flesh nor by the other. Then as suddenly there again.” (56)

“Suddenly open. A flash. The suddenness of all! She still without stopping. On her way without starting. Gone without going. Back without returning. Suddenly it is evening. Or dawn. The eye rivets the bare window. Nothing in the sky will distract it from it more. While she from within looks her fill. Pfft occulted.” (58)

“But see she suddenly no longer there.” (81)

“Suddenly enough and way for remembrance.” (81)

The images are seen by “the other” eye, the mind’s eye. But being in a mind is not to be controlled by the mind. The suddenness of these image-memories marks their involuntariness or “adventitiousness,” Descartes’s term; their not being “dependent on my will,” he says, provides evidence that ideas of sense are not “made by myself” or “factitious.”72 From the past of the mind come things with “the impenetrability . . . of all that is not ‘cosa mentale,’” Beckett writes (Proust, 63). The past, which withholds itself at will, is thus as little figment as the object of desire. “No object prolonged in this temporal dimension tolerates possession” (Proust, 57). Hence, the appearance of the image stops the infinite generation of likes.

If the images are real because they cannot be summoned up at will, they differ from the data of direct perception in lacking precision: “Long this image till suddenly it blurs” (Nohow On, 57). “Blur yes. Shades can blur” (111).73 “Winter evening.
Not to be precise. All so bygone” (60). “Always afar.” They are “ill seen.” “Ill half seen” (54), “misseen” by “an eye having no need of light to see” (50). So lexical items expressing semantic detail are inappropriate.

But it is not simply their pastness that gives them their hazy outlines. The image escapes the reduction of all to one excremental matter because it is not infinitely reproducible in two ways. First, images are not substitutable, the same few recur throughout Beckett’s work: “Repeatedly with only minor variants the same old bygone” (Nohow On, 10). Second, they diminish with time, become “dimmer,” “dimmen” (59), but never absolutely vanish. “The already ill seen bedimmed and ill seen again annulled” (78). “Unchanged for the worse” (82). So the proposition that nothing new ever appears is disconfirmed, but only lossward, worstward. Ann Smock points to Beckett’s proposition, “back is on” (Nohow On, 109).²⁴ The new is only seized in retrospect, via an “inverted Calvary” (Proust, 60), for “our life is a succession of Paradises successively denied,” and “the only true Paradise is the Paradise that has been lost,” Beckett quotes Proust (Proust, 26). Following Proust’s “narrator’s via dolorosa” (Proust, 24), the Beckett protagonists “re-enact the stations of a diminishing suffering” (Proust, 60). “And the idea that his suffering will cease is more unbearable than that suffering itself” (Proust, 59).

Thus, when the image of one it would burden with too much meaning to call “mother” returns, “this old so dying woman” (Nohow On, 58) is never named (apart from this single definite noun phrase) but only “pronamed” by a function word, what Roland Barthes called “the third person of the novel,” with no meaning but the syntactic features of feminine gender, third person, and singular number. The novelistic “she” opens onto point of view—“From where she lies she sees Venus rise,” reads the incipit (49). So the mother is reduced to a nameless perspective. She is also observed, not by a narrating “I” but by an eye. “Seen no matter how and said as seen” (66). Lossward we encounter the mother, but less and less of her, for there are no more substitutes. See 7:

7. “She is vanishing. With the rest. The already ill seen bedimmed and ill seen again annulled. The mind betrays the treacherous eyes and the treacherous words their treacheries. Haze sole certitude. The same that reigns beyond the pastures. It gains them already. It will gain the zone of stones. Then the dwelling through all its chinks. The eye will close in vain. To see but haze. Not even. Be itself but haze. How can it ever be said? Quick how ever ill said before it submerges all. Light. In one treacherous word. Dazzling haze. Light in its might at last. Where no more to be seen. To be said. Gently gently.” (Nohow On, 78)

The word “certitude” reminds us that Beckett sees “the Proustian Discours de la Méthode” (Proust, 39) as a Cartesian project: to connect present and past, in order “from the incontroversiability of the one to win credence for the other” (Nohow On, 3). The haze of the image is what remains when all else is doubted, its faintness matching those “remains of mind” (104) that keeps the Beckettian cogito, “Yes I remember,” awake. It is the essence of what has been. “Then doubt certain” (77).
For “such [indubitable] bits and scraps” “ill seen,” then, “scraps of an ancient voice” (How It Is, 7) in “tattered syntaxes” ill said, “missaid” (Nohow On, 89). The phrase is as much a measure of the adequacy, one adequately inadequate, of the language as of its failure. “What the wrong word?” (56) is Ill Seen Ill Said’s refrain.

For the ill-seen haze, not direct sensation’s language of precision but one itself vague, semantically light, “miscalled” (63). “Any other would do as ill” (93). One not mined in the riches of the dictionary, with its adjectives of infinite shades and qualities and nouns filled to the brim with meaning, but out of the poverty of the syntacticon. For Beckett’s minimalism is a semantic slightness. “Proust does not share the superstition that form is nothing and content is everything” (Proust, 88), Beckett observes. So the late style is extracted from the lexical formatives with the least semantic content.

It is the language for a “reason-ridden imagination”—we could recall Noam Chomsky recently invoking the continuous language in the mind: “So with what reason remains he reasons” (Nohow On, 3). The class of function words are those appropriate to the lesswards reasoning, for their cognitive syntactic features are semantically abstract. If Emonds places the dictionary at the “interface with non-linguistic memory and culture” (106), the syntacticon is language’s relation to Kant’s synthetic a priori. Thus the philosophical vocabulary is drawn from the syntacticon, as given in 8:

8. “being,” “nothingness,” “person,” “quiddity” (whatness), “haecceity” (thisness—compare Bertrand Russell’s logically proper name “this”), “self,” the “I” or “ego,” the “other,” Heidegger’s “Dasein,” “cogito,” quantifiers such as the universal quantifier “all,” “meta-” in “metaphysics”75

And since the dazzling haze of the image-memory, subject itself to time, becomes ever slighter, the language must adopt the direction of the reasoning: “a certain mental activity . . . the lower the better. Up to a point” (Company, 7). “So the unreasoning goes” (61). When “she suddenly no longer there,” her chair is inspected:

9. “With what one word convey its change? Careful. Less. Ah the sweet one word. Less. It is less. The same but less . . . . To say the least. Less. It will end by being no more. By never having been.” (Nohow On, 81)

We recall the Unnamable had thought “merde” “le mot juste” (L’Innommable, 160). “Less” replaces it. It, however, is not a noun but a degree word, a quantifier. The transformation of shit into lessness unburdens it of affect along with semantic specificity. “Already that much less at least but at what cost” (Nohow On, 85). As quantifier, it can stand alongside logical terms like “all” and “every.” It functions as the comparative of “dim light” / “even dimmer light” (59); all comparatives in Beckett go in the negative direction—“worstward,” “ever briefer” (64), “fail better” (89). Even more is less, as in 10:
10. “Lengthening and fading more and more. But never quite away.” (Nohow On, 76)


“Toomuch to hope. At most mere minimum. Mere-most minimum.” (Worstward Ho, 91)

Beckett’s minimalism resides in part in these comparative terms—ever less and less but always just short of nothing. As Watt had reasoned:

11. “He saw himself then, so little, so poor. And now, littler, poorer. Was not that something?
   “So sick, so alone.
   “And now.
   “Sicker, aloner.
   “Was not that something?
   “As the comparative is something, Whether more than its positive or less. Whether less than its superlative or more.” (Watt, 148)

Linguists such as Jean-Claude Milner have observed that comparatives like these do not necessarily predicate the quality represented by the adjective. For example, to assert Watt is sicker than before is not to assert necessarily that he is sick but only that however sick he was before, he is more so now.76 This is semantic lightness, but, as Watt knew, it is not nothing. So also on the model of negative quantifiers like “nobody” or “none,” Beckett has “nohow,” not zero but the negation of “somehow.” So it is less than nothing. The goal is “with leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessenable least best worst” (106).

In Worstward Ho, the last work of the second trilogy, never translated by Beckett, the movement minimalwards is propelled by directional prepositions, a category whose close affinity to verbs is now a commonplace in generative linguistics, in particular, the English particles standardly analyzed as intransitive prepositions, as “on” in 12:


The evidence is that Beckett discovered language-particular properties of English prepositions, as of function words in general, in translation. So, earlier, in Waiting for Godot, Beckett had translated “En avant!” (En Attendant Godot, 79) as “On!” (Waiting for Godot, 32).77

In another English construction Beckett exploits, directional prepositions—out, back, away, down, up—take prepositional phrase complements, as the italicized constructions in 13:

In 14, the normally transitive preposition\textsuperscript{78} “at,” subcategorized for an obligatory noun phrase complement, is pressed to take a PP complement:

14. “At in the dim void shades.” (Nohow On, 94)

Moreover, the text strains to coin new members of nonproductive classes, as in the directional prepositional proforms in 15:


—or the new preposition “atween” in 16, using the semi-productive English prefix “a-,” which, applied to a noun, yields an adverb, or, in the case of “away,” a preposition, illustrated from Beckett in 17:

16. “Since atwain. Two once so one. From now rift a vast. Vast of void atween.” (Nohow On, 112)

17. “aslan,” “ashiver,” “afar” (Nohow On, 65); “away” (79); “adrift” (67); “agaze” (79)

Within Chomsky’s “principles and parameters” framework, it is the syntacticon which “is the repository par excellence of the language-particular” (Lexicon, 106).\textsuperscript{80} Thus, the late style isolates the language-particular, as with the prepositions in examples 16 and 17, via the contrast of the syntacticons of French and English. Translation depends not on substitutability, but on irreplaceability. The rule Beckett observes is, insofar as possible, to find the translation in the syntacticon and not in the dictionary, but to not look for it in the same place in the syntacticon. A morpheme might be translated by a closed-class category or vice versa, as when Beckett translates “dit et redit” by “told . . . again and again”; “rebroisser chemin” by “turning back”; “long à revenir” by “needs time to get going again.”\textsuperscript{81} The relation established here between the derivational morpheme \textit{re-} and the English intransitive preposition \textit{back} is one between two functional formatives; Beckett’s avoidance of an English word with \textit{re-}, as “retrace his steps,” brings out the English tendency to use the preposition where French has recourse to a bound morpheme. Beckett’s rule also avoids cognates—this follows from the fact that members of the English syntacticon (Lexicon, 106) derive from the core or primary vocabulary, what Watt calls “venerable Saxon words.”\textsuperscript{82}

The late style reaches a minimalism at the antipodes of the reduced nursery language. It is a language of old age, which Beckett had characterized as when “your vocabulary goes.”\textsuperscript{83} Already Krapp, hearing his taped younger self pronounce “vinduity,” applied to his mother, must reach for the dictionary. Age fills in with linguistic variables, like the pronoun “something something” which marks Winnie’s lapses of memory, as in 18, or uses the pronoun when the name fails.
18. “what is that wonderful line . . . laughing wild . . . something something laughing wild amid severest woe.”

For it is the proper name that fails first. Only a language weaned of such productive categories, like that of Swift’s Strulbrugs, can “back unsay” and write the elegy for the lost mother tongue in a pure grammar, accomplishing the revolution of the syntax. It produces a work of memory in which the series of mothers and fathers is replaced by a losswards history: before Mag, with Mag, after Mag, where the image comes of “an old man and child,” “hand in hand with equal plod they go” (Nohow On, 93) from paradise lost, and it produces a matchless oeuvre where literary history is changed utterly: If for Beckett there was before Jim, with Jim, after Jim, there is for us before Sam, with Sam, after Sam.

Notes

6. See also the following passage from The Unnamable: “Be a like for me, that would be lovely, my first like, that would be epoch-making, to know I had a like, a congener, he wouldn’t have to like me, he couldn’t but be like me”; ibid., 378.
11. “I don’t believe it was by chance that Beckett began to translate his French writings, as it were ‘back’ into English, only after his mother had died. It is as if a taboo upon his mother-tongue had been exorcized with her death”; Patrick Casement, “Samuel Beckett’s Relationship to His Mother-Tongue,” International Review of Psycho-Analysis 9 (1982): 35–45, here 41. Leslie Hill writes that “Beckett’s abandonment of his mother tongue is as much a liberation as a renunciation. It is a discovery of a new language and of a new position in language. Dispossessed of the familial intimacy or security of his native language, Beckett is rewritten into a language to which he is no longer bound by filial obedience”; Leslie Hill, Beckett’s Fiction: In Different Words (Cambridge, 1990), 38. On the relation between mother and language, see also Didier Anzieu, “Un soi disjoint, une voix liante, l’écriture narrative de Beckett,” Nouvelle Revue de psychanalyse 25 (Autumn 1983): 71–85.
12. See Knowlson, Damned to Fame, 130–31 ff. The French Molloy is subtitled L’Expulsé.


15. Ibid., 10–11. Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.


17. “Is it French you are talking, sir?”; ibid., 16.

18. J. M. Synge cited in Christopher Ricks, Beckett’s Dying Words (Oxford, 1995), 105. Ricks writes that “though Beckett is an Irishman, he writes in English.” Of Beckett’s title Ill Seen Ill Said, Ricks comments that “things would be even more ill seen and more ill said were it not that English and French are more alive to Beckett than Irish,” as if Beckett had had a choice in the matter (125). Of course, some Irish writers chose Irish, while Joyce and Beckett importantly didn’t. But they did not embrace writing in English, neither in an Irish-inflected English nor one showing no traces of a hostility to the medium they used. For Beckett, the passage through French was necessary before the return to an English that could then strike his ear as a “dead language.”


20. James Joyce, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man (Harmondsworth, 1944), 189. Stephen will later say to Davin that “my ancestors threw off their language and took another. . . . They allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them” (203).


22. Christopher Ricks also evokes this story, adding, “What is the opposite, the contrary, of an Englishman? Not just a Protestant from the Republic of Ireland,” in Beckett’s Dying Words, 102. I might only add that this is apparent in Beckett’s wish not to be taken for Irish. Ricks adds that Murphy quotes from Beckett’s unpublished “The Voice,” a stage toward Company: “‘No mention of accent. Indefinable. Of one whose mother tongue as foreign as the others’”; John Pilling and Mary Bryden, eds., The Ideal Core of the Onion, cited in Ricks, Beckett’s Dying Words, 105 n. 20. A language without an origin-identifying accent is then the ideal, or, barring that, one whose accent is indefinable. Ruby Cohn once assured me that Beckett’s French had no trace of an accent. The Alsatian André Bernold, on the other hand, says, “Son accent irlandais me frappe”; L’Amicité de Beckett, 1979–1989 (Paris, 1992), 20.


24. For a reading of De vulgari eloquentia that insists on Dante’s conception of language as a natural “faculty of language,” see Umberto Eco, La Recherche de la Langue Parfaite dans la Culture Européenne, trans. Jean-Paul Manganaro (Paris, 1994), 52–54. Eco implicitly makes the analogy to Noam Chomsky’s conception of language when he writes that “le lecteur contemporain pourrait voir ici la simple opposition entre la capacité instinctive d’execution (performance) et la compétence grammaticale” (53). Eco also emphasizes that the mother tongue is counterposed to the language of learning, scholastic Latin (53), De vulgari eloquentia 6.1.


27. The historical study of language introduced another meaning for “mother tongue,” in addition to “one’s native language”; it is also, according to the OED, “An original language from which others spring”; s.v. “Mother language”: 1. “One’s native language.”
2. “A language from which others have sprung.” The strange “parent” language which was Proto-Indo-European, in principle, never spoken by or native to anyone, is, yet, in this sense, the forgotten mother tongue of a people identified as the Indo-Europeans. For a nation and a people, as well as the individual, are assumed to have a mother tongue. Such, for instance, is one of the criteria for national identity of V.I. Lenin’s account of nationalism. See Jean-Claude Milner, For the Love of Language, trans. Ann Banfield (London, 1990), 77, 141. Under sense 14b of the adjective “mother,” the OED lists Beaumont and Fletcher’s phrase “your mother Gibberish” and J. Wells’s 1904 “his mother-Scotch.”

28. Samuel Beckett, Company, in Nohow On [including Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho] (New York, 1980), 3–46, here 5; all subsequent references to these individual works are to this edition. John P. Harrington points out that Company’s “image of the exterior, the other, is ‘speech in Bantu or in Erse’”; The Irish Beckett (Syracuse, N.Y., 1991), 187.


30. “Jim or Tim not Pim” introduces Joyce’s name, thus hinting at a literary generation; Beckett, How It Is, 71.

31. “Molloy, titre de son premier roman réussi, rappelle le surnom familial de sa mère Molly”; “Samuel, quant à lui, le surnomme May”; Anzieu, “Un soi disjoint,” 75 and 75 n. 3.

32. Marcel Proust, Sodome et Gomorrhe, in A la Recherche du Temps Perdu (Paris, 1954), 2:1090. Proust’s punning on the name “Cambremer” was no doubt suggested by the euphemism for “merde” in French, “le mot de Cambronne.” The source is perhaps part 2, book 1, chapter 15 of Victor Hugo’s Les Misérables (Paris, 1951), entitled “Cambronne,” which recounts in only partially mock-heroic terms General Cambronne’s supposed response to the English call to surrender: “Cambronne répondit: Merde!” (373). Hugo comments that before “cette victoire sans victorieux,” Cambronne “fait plus que cracher sur elle; et sous l’accablement du nombre, de la force et de la matière, il trouve à l’âme une expression, l’excrément” (375). Beckett could not have known not who Cambronne, whom Hugo had called a “ver de terre” or worm in this passage, was, as his apartment on the rue des Fidèles was only one street from the rue de Cambronne and a short way down it to the metro Cambronne. Cambronne also comes up in James Joyce, Finnegans Wake (New York, 1939), for example, on 9.26–27: “This is Willingdone cry. Brum! Brum! Cumbrum!” Roland McHugh comments, “General Cambronne is said to have shouted ‘merde’ at Waterloo”; Annotations to Finnegans Wake (Baltimore, 1980), 9. Perhaps he had Hugo’s phrase “spat upon it” in mind when he wrote that line of the name “mother.” Christine Brooke-Rose first pointed out this connection between “Cambremer” and “Cambronne” to me.

33. Beckett, Proust, 54. Proust describes Charlus himself at the end of the last volume as “scorned in the full strength of his terrible pride as the Duchesse de Caca or the Princesse de Pippi” (77).

34. The gesture of spitting on the parent is Proust’s, in André Gide’s anecdote, as it is also
Mademoiselle Vinteuil’s. Beckett’s peculiarity is to make the impulse take in language itself.

35. The controversy the play inspired is evoked in Joyce’s Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, chap. 5, 245: “The verses crooned in the ear of his memory composed slowly before his remembering eyes the scene of the hall on the night of the opening of the national theatre. He was alone at the side of the balcony, looking out of jaded eyes at the culture of Dublin in the stalls and at the tawdry scene cloths.” See also Matthew Hodgart, James Joyce: A Student’s Guide (London, 1978), 34, and Richard Ellmann, The Consciousness of Joyce (London, 1977), 2.

36. Cathleen ni Hoolihan lends her name to Beckett’s Miss Counihan in Murphy; see Knoweld, Damned to Fame, 212.


40. Dante De vulgari eloquentia 1.9.6.

41. Yet the Aeneid, Dante says, was his “mamma and his nurse.”

42. Dante De vulgari eloquentia 12.

43. The phrase occurs in Latin, however, in the context of a Middle English work written a hundred years earlier: Robert Mannyng’s Chronicle, composed c. 1338, is titled “Historia Britannie transumpta in materna lingua” and is written, according to Mannyng, for those who do not know Latin or French. See Robert Mannyng of Brunne, The Chronicle, ed. Idelle Sullens (Binghamton, N.Y., 1996). The text is discussed in Jennifer Miller, Laȝamon’s Brut and English Historiography (forthcoming). The OED analyzes “mother” in the phrase as “originally the uninflected genitive,” pointing to the form “mother’s tongue in 16th–17th C.” So English grammar confirms Dante’s conception of the maternal language.


45. “L’étudiant peut assigner comme motif de toute linguistique générale le désir de tuer la langue maternelle”; ibid., 10–11.

46. This does not prevent its subjective associations from being, as Jean-Claude Milner says of Jacques Lacan’s concept of la langue, “always in the process of infecting language”; Milner, For the Love of Language, 77.

47. Colin MacCabe in his James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word (London, 1978), 1 n. 1, gives a history of the phrase: “In 1929 Eugene Jolas published a manifesto entitled ‘The Revolution of the Word’ in transition, the journal which was publishing Work in Progress.” In 1933, F. R. Leavis, MacCabe goes on, “in a famous Scrutiny review, ‘James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word,’” answered Jolas’s analysis. I am placing a contrastive stress, as it were, on the word “word,” which is not customary; usually “word” is taken as synonymous with “language.” I think it could be demonstrated that Joyce’s macaronic etymologies are finally largely absorbed by English phonology, although no scholar, as John Bishop has assured me, has tried to.

(Dublin, 1992). Tony Pinkney has argued, under the partial influence of Julien Benda’s view in *La Trahison des Clercs*, that “before the rise of the modern vernaculars, the medi-
elaval intellectuals had the inestimable advantage . . . of ‘using a universal language 
among themselves’”; “the primary stylistic ambition of Beckett’s text”—he refers to *More Pricks than Kicks*—“is to reinvent this *lingua franca*, thus subverting that ‘systematic 
nationalization of the mind’ that *La Trahison des Clercs* also assails”; Tony Pinkney, 
“Nationalism and the Politics of Style: Julien Benda and Samuel Beckett,” *Literature 
and History* 14, no. 2 (Autumn 1988): 181–93, here 189. “An Esperanto of the disinterested spirit,” Pinkney calls it, a “purged language” (190); but the introduction of these 
latinisms hardly achieves the effect of a “purging.”

49. “When he [Beckett] sent his story ‘Sedendo et Quiescendo’ to Charles Prentice at 
Chatto and Windus, he had written that ‘of course it stinks of Joyce in spite of most 
ernest endeavours to endow it with my own odours.’ In June 1932, he wrote to Samuel 
Putnam ‘I vow I will get over J.J. [i.e., James Joyce] ere I die. Yessir’”; Knowlson, 
*Damned to Fame*, 159–60. See also ‘‘went Joyce in it–though he denies that it is 
Joyce’’ (132).

50. “The problems he has set himself in the past . . . by the mere fact of their solubility . . . 

51. There is, however, the “nursery language” of the Journal to Stella, which one could 
argue has to be taken into account. Cf. also Joyce’s ‘‘nice baby Tuckoo’’ in *Portrait*.

and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 305–11, here 309. I owe 
this reference to Joel Fineman.

53. “This case may be felt to be one of onomatopoeia, and it is well known that, for obvious 
reasons, onomatopoeic, imitative words are refractory to the ‘laws’ of sound change; 
for example, whatever may happen in English to the sound [u] (cp. Old Eng. hus and 
Mod. house) the name of the cuckoo will suffer little or no change, while cuckold, with 
which it is apparently etymologically associated (Fr. cocu, ‘cuckold,’ originally meant 
‘cuckoo’), will follow unresistingly the general phonetic trend”; John Orr, *Words 

54. C. K. Scott Moncrieff bowdlerizes the passage in his translation, but the hidden text 
translates “caca” by “shit”: “It doesn’t matter whether you go and p____ at Comtesse 
S____’s or s____ at Baronne P____’s, it’s exactly the same, you have compromised yourself 
and have used a dirty rag instead of toilet paper”; Marcel Proust, *Cities of the Plain*, 
trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York, 1970), 348. Terence Kilmartin emends it to 
“Whether you go and do wee-wee at the Countess Caca’s or caca at the Baroness See-
pee’s, it’s exactly the same”; Marcel Proust, *Remembrance of Things Past*, trans. Terence 

55. See also Beckett, *Unnamable*, 390.


57. The reference is to Yeats’s translation in “Swift’s Epitaph” of “saeva” in the opening 
lines of Swift’s actual epitaph: “Ubi saeva indignatio / Ulterius cor lacerare ne-
quit”; see John Unterecker, *A Reader’s Guide to William Butler Yeats* (Syracuse, 1996), 
213.

58. “The personality of the artist” is “at first a cry,” like the lamb’s or child’s for its mother; 
Joyce, *Portrait*, 214–15. English must be forcibly returned to this savage stage, which 


60. See Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, 115 and 127–28 on the translation.

62. This is also the year of the prose piece *From an Abandoned Work*, written first in English, which also reintroduces the mother.

63. *Company* was written first in English, then translated into French, although neither text is marked “translated by the author.”

64. Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 491: “Thus it seems likely that the return of English was a matter of expedience because of the English-speaking actor,” Bair writes. “If so, the choice nevertheless had important consequences. It seems to have brought on a surge of self-awareness that resulted in the autobiographical subject matter. It may also have affected the tone: comparing *Krapp* with the trilogy, which it resembles most in theme, one sees that the English play is a much gentler work; it has none of the harshness of the novels, and the despair is tinged more with sadness than with hostility.”


66. The switch from the productive to the nonproductive categories is why the verb the last work substitutes for the earlier “pour” of *The Unnamable* to designate the generation of language is “secrete”: “Says? Secretes. Say better worse secretes. What it is the words it [the mind] secretes say”; Beckett, *Nohow On*, 104–5.


75. Badiou, for instance, refers to “le ‘entre’, l’intervalle” and “un en-deça,” using prepositions to coin new philosophical terms; “Samuel Beckett,” 10. Ray Jackendoff talks of “conceptual primitives such as Object, Event, Place, Action, Property, and Amount, and principles of combination such as predication and quantification. On this view, then, thinking consists in large part of computations carried out over conceptual structures”; *Languages of the Mind: Essays on Mental Representation* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 9. This conceptual structure resides largely in the syntacticon, according to Emonds.

76. “Les comparatives . . . du type (2) [that is, the type of comparative exemplified by ‘Watt
is sicker than he was before’] peuvent fort bien impliquer qu’aucun des deux termes ne
la possède” ; Jean-Claude Milner, Arguments linguistiques (Paris, 1973), 44.
77. Traditional grammar treats “en avant” as an intransitive preposition, thus equivalent
to “on” as Beckett uses it, although generally dictionaries do not give “on” as a transla-
tion of “en avant.” Later in the same play, “On” appears in the English before “Whip!”
in Pozzo’s mouth (Waiting for Godot, 57), where only “Fouet!” appears in the French (En
Attendant Godot, 152). The later sequence “Then we go on. On!” (57) for “Nous at-
tendons de pouvoir nous relever. Puis nous repartons” (153) might have been suggestive.
78. Generative grammar treats directional adverbs like “forward” as intransitive preposi-
tions and, hence, the traditional prepositions like “at” as transitive.
80. “Language-particular syntax resides entirely in lexical specifications, namely the inherent
and contextual feature combinations associated with closed class items”; Emonds, Lexi-
con, 440.