

The Comic *Bildungsroman*: Evelyn Waugh, Samuel Beckett, and Philip Roth

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Eric Falci, Chair
Professor Katherine Snyder
Professor Luba Golburt

Fall 2010

Abstract

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This dissertation argues that the relationship between comedy and the *Bildungsroman* is symbiotic rather than subversive, indicative of a fundamental affinity between mode and genre. The *Bildungsroman* is a genre supremely anxious about the social, professional, and romantic definition its heroes seek, an anxiety that leaves it highly vulnerable to the incursions of comedy. Definition is about limits, ends, bounds, and stability. I argue that comedy attacks all these things mercilessly, and finds in the *Bildungsroman*'s preoccupation with definition, limits, and bounds a fertile ground for its own forces of indefinability, limitlessness, and boundlessness. Therefore, small, sometimes trivial examples of comic indefinability can be traced back to the larger definitional stakes of the *Bildungsroman* form. The comic twentieth-century novels I take up, Evelyn Waugh's *Decline and Fall* and *The Loved One*, Samuel Beckett's *Murphy* and *Company*, and Philip Roth's *Portnoy's Complaint* and *Sabbath's Theater*, feed on the *Bildungsroman*'s ever-present, latent comedy. Comic *Bildungsromans*, anti-*Bildungsromans*, parodic *Bildungsromans*: a rose is a rose is a rose. Whatever the name, the comic *Bildungsroman* doesn't so much distort the image of the *Bildungsroman* as reflect its truest form.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank those who have helped me along during my own unintentionally comic *Bildungsroman*: Mom, Dad, Eileen, Dina, Daniel, Timmy, Mickey, Rachel, and my fellow English graduate students who helped make five years fly by. Thanks also to Eric Falci for gregariously guiding me through teaching and writing, and to Katherine Snyder and Luba Golburt for being such warm, insightful readers.

Neither Fish Nor Fowl: Twentieth-Century Comic *Bildungsromans*

**Defined man is an anomaly; defined man yields satire.
(Kenner, *The Counterfeiters: An Historical Comedy*)**

Plato had defined the human being as an animal, biped and featherless, and was applauded. Diogenes plucked a fowl and brought it into the lecture-room with the words, 'Here is Plato's human being.' In consequence of which there was added to the definition, 'having broad nails.' (Diogenes Laertius: *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*)

Diogenes's demonstration of the literal inadequacy of Plato's attempt to define a human being unwittingly reveals a more suitable definition for man than a bipedal, featherless animal having broad nails: man as a defining animal who can never be adequately defined. The faulty Socratic alembic appears doomed to a potentially endless series of qualifications and distinctions which, even as they multiply, get us no closer to a satisfactory definition of either human or fowl. I begin with this little fable about comic indefinition to set up my contention that there is a seed of comedy in every coming-of-age tale. This contention supports another: that the comic *Bildungsroman* is not a variant but the essential form of novels concerned with representing the aims and prospects of human development. If man is a defining animal who can never be defined, then the *Bildungsroman*, the genre about how man defines himself vis-à-vis society, must, as Hugh Kenner mordantly remarks, yield a form of comedy: satire. More precisely, the *Bildungsroman* is a genre supremely anxious about the social, professional, and romantic definition its heroes seek, an anxiety that leaves it highly vulnerable to the incursions of comedy. Definition is about limits, ends, bounds, and stability. I argue that comedy attacks all these things mercilessly, and finds in the *Bildungsroman*'s preoccupation with definition, limits, and bounds a fertile ground for its own forces of indefinition, limitlessness, and boundlessness.¹

In its understanding of comedy as a genre of indefinition and boundlessness, my study is indebted to the theoretical framework of Stephen Booth's *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy*. Booth comes at the issue of generic definition from an etymological angle (as I will in my discussion of the comic elements in the modern *Bildungsroman*). In his essay on tragedy and the limits of Aristotelian definition, Booth argues that "'definition' (from *finis*, a limit, end) of tragedy is a contradiction in terms; and 'tragedy,' because it is a 'term' (from *terminus*, a boundary, limit, end), denies the essence of what it labels: an experience of the fact of indefinition" (85). According to Booth, "successful dramatic tragedy...makes tragedy bearable; it lets us face truth beyond categories by presenting that unmanageable and undiminished truth inside the irrationally comforting framework of the absolutely man-made, man-suited, and man-

¹ In *King Lear, Tragedy and Indefinition*, which I will discuss in more detail shortly, Stephen Booth points out that definition comes from the Latin *finis*: a limit, end.

limited order of the play (86). In that same study, Booth extends his discussion of generic definition to comedy, and notes that “the closer I felt myself coming to a definition of tragedy, the closer my generalizations came to defining comedy (74). Thus when he turns his attention to Shakespeare’s *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, Booth claims that “the largest fact of the work—its failure to reach its generically appointed end—is manifested in its smallest elements” (63). Booth’s broader point is that generic signals are “opportune scaffolds,” ready-made frameworks of “arbitrary limits” (61) which the artist manipulates.

I take a similar position in my contention that the relationship between comedy and the *Bildungsroman* is symbiotic rather than subversive, indicative of a fundamental affinity between mode and genre. I argue against the prevailing view that the modern *Bildungsroman* arises from a moment of cultural rupture, a result, so the story goes, of the “breakdown of traditional forms of identity and of normative, harmonious socialization” (Castle 5). To argue for such a stark cultural and artistic shift would be to take seriously the bloviating protagonist of *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Ignatius J. Reilly, in his claims for the unique status of his never-completed autobiography: “I am at the moment writing a lengthy indictment against our century. When my brain begins to reel from my literary labors, I make an occasional cheese dip” (6). Reilly’s contention that “once a person was asked to step into this brutal century, anything could happen” (379) is only half-right. The novel is in fact an intensification of the conflict between culture and the individual that all *Bildungsromans* dramatize, and this intensification manifests itself in an intensified combat with (in his case physical) limits; *A Confederacy of Dunces*’s comic hero is different only in degree, not kind, from other, less absurd heroes. “Forced to function” (51) in a century which he loathes, Reilly is a walking burlesque who physically represents and resists confinement, his “whole being...ready to burst” (2). The novel is one long test of boundaries: Reilly’s hunting cap “squeeze[s]” his “fleshy balloon of a head” as its earflaps fail to contain the ear hairs sticking “out either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once” (1); Reilly’s “bulging boots” struggle to contain his “swollen feet” (2); his stomach is filled with “trapped gas, gas which had character and resented its confinement” (29-30); faced with being committed to a mental hospital, Reilly fears that the effort to “fix him up” (384) will land him “crammed into a cell three feet square” (384), though he is confident he would be “able to smash out all of [the] windows” (393) of the car the hospital sends for him. *A Confederacy of Dunces*, and by extension the comic *Bildungsroman*, is ultimately less concerned with us taking seriously the contention that “with the Breakdown of the Medieval system, the gods of Chaos, Lunacy, and Bad Taste gained ascendancy” (28) than with exploring the comic possibilities of the question posed to Reilly by Myrna, his only friend: “Where will you ever end?” (248).

The explicitly comic or parodic twentieth century novels I take up, *Decline and Fall*, *The Loved One*, *Murphy*, *Company*, *Portnoy’s Complaint*, and *Sabbath’s Theater*, feed on the *Bildungsroman*’s latent tendency towards systemic incompleteness. The dominant critical explanation for the explosion of “anti-*Bildungsromans*” in the twentieth century is that since the *Bildungsroman* is a form best-suited to transmit ideology, the comic *Bildungsroman* arose to block that transmission, to challenge the production and reception of prevailing social norms. Rather than viewing genre and sub-genre as two combatants in an ideological arms race, I identify the shared comedic forces in each to argue that anti-*Bildungsroman* is a redundancy; the genre’s parodies don’t seek to refute

or work against its serious expressions, but rather opportunistically exploit the form's ever-present, latent comedy. Comic *Bildungsromans*, anti-*Bildungsromans*, parodic *Bildungsromans*: a rose is a rose is a rose. Whatever the name, the comic *Bildungsroman* doesn't so much distort the image of the *Bildungsroman* as reflect its truest form.

By tracing the ways that Evelyn Waugh, Samuel Beckett, and Philip Roth use the comic *Bildungsroman* form at different points of their careers, I wish to identify the pervasive forces of comic indefinition, demonstrate the affinity between genre and mode, and contest Henri Bergson's notion that the comic artist is incapable of *Bildung*.

Bergson's famous essay on comedy exempts the comic artist from development:

"However interested a dramatist may be in the comic features of human nature, he will hardly go, I imagine, to the extent of trying to discover his own. Besides, he would not find them, for we are never ridiculous except in some point that remains hidden from our own consciousness" (169). The comic artist is blocked from the *nosce te ipsum* [know thyself], condemned to direct his predatory comic gaze outwards but blind to a reckoning of his own ridiculousness. Using Frank Kermode's distinction between *chronos* (passing time) and *kairos* (full time), I argue that three very different comic authors undergo a kind of *Bildung* throughout their career, that their threnodic late comedies achieve an often perverse comic *kairos*.

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode sees narrative as motivated by a "hunger for ends and crises" (51) that works against the realist demands of the form.² Kermode contends that the novel is the form best suited to negotiate between apocalyptic notions of time (*kairos*)—"full time," a master narrative with a beginning, middle, and end that invests each moment with the meaning of the whole—and real time (*chronos*)—an "empty time" best represented by the meaningless, endless tick-tock of a clock. The novel balances between *kairos* and *chronos*, which Kermode associates with the demand for "realism"; in other words, the novel is the nimble form that both provides a structure of meaningful finality and reacts to the vicissitudes of lived experience. Compellingly, Kermode claims that the *kairotic* expectations of narrative are essentially regressive: "There is a pattern of expectation" in narrative "improper to maturity" (50).³ I come back

² Mikhail Bakhtin distinguishes between the medieval valorization of the epic as an "utterly finished thing" and the novel, which is associated with the present, "something transitory...an eternal continuation without beginning or end...[and] denied an authentic conclusiveness." Similar arguments make closure, or the lack thereof, the basis of broader narrative claims. For example, D.A. Miller contends that all narrative needs to be forced into maturity: "Only narratable errors can mark the 'progress' toward an increasingly definitive closural truth" (54). Discussing a seemingly trivial scene in which Emma Woodhouse continually vacillates between which fabric to buy, Miller states that "if uncorrected, the narrative of Emma's desire would turn the text into what might be called a radical picaresque: an endless flirtation with a potentially infinite parade of possibilities" (54). Peter Brooks' Freudian model also sees narrative as the "continuing need for the terminal articulation by which everything else makes sense (253), a terminal articulation that can never be fully articulated and is 'permanently defer[ed]'" (313). In the meantime, "one is condemned to playing (313).

³ "When we read a novel we are, in a way, allowing ourselves to behave as young children do when they think of all the past as 'yesterday,' or like members of primitive

to Kermode throughout my chapters because his broader argument about narrative inconclusiveness is especially well-suited to the *Bildungsroman*, a genre that is both about maturity and about the immature expectation of a *kairotic* life.

Defining the *Bildungsroman*

Studies of the *Bildungsroman* are plagued by definitional anxieties. The illusory confidence conveyed by translating the German term, “novel of development,” is belied by the intense difficulty of deriving from that translation a viable identification of the form. Michael Beddow notes that the classificatory efforts of *Bildungsroman* scholars have the “gestures, but not the substance, of an act of definition” (1). As Ellis writes in her study of female *Bildungsroman*[s], “[s]cholarly criticism of the *Bildungsroman*, like that of the female *Bildungsroman*, has been plagued by questions of definition (19). Marianne Hirsch does define the genre in terms of limitation, but only in the most unlimited terms: “Maturation requires an adjustment of vision and a recognition of personal limitation” (301). Franco Moretti demonstrates in his study (which I take up in greater detail shortly) that maturity, the goal of Hirsch’s vision adjustment and recognition of personal limitation, becomes ever-receding and illusory: “...the *Bildungsroman* was always hesitant when faced with defining maturity: in a certain sense it came into being as a literary genre precisely because the new fascination had blurred that idea, making it hard to put it back into perspective” (179). For Moretti, the *Bildungsroman* is a form that valorizes youth itself, a youth which is a “a boundless field of possibility...[a] psycho-social indetermination” (177). Against Hirsch and her notion of limitation, Moretti sees the genre as a capitalistic Dionysian cult in thrall to the boundless, which scoffs at the prospect of limitation. Thus by the end of the 19th century there arises what Moretti terms a “humorous maturity...that...doesn’t define itself as definitive and unalterable closure, but rather as an unending process of self-improvement, in which the adult subject will have to play over and over again the part of the ‘child’” (221).⁴

If Moretti contends that the form veers towards the indefinite and away from closure alongside the dynamic rise of capitalism, Marc Redfield goes one step further, questioning not only the stated terminus of the *Bildungsroman* but its very existence:

This genre does not properly exist, and in a sense can be proved not to exist: one can take canonical definitions of *Bildung* (itself no simple term), go to the novels most frequently called *Bildungsroman*[s], and with greater or lesser difficulty show that they exceed, or fall short of, or call into question the process of *Bildung* which they purportedly serve. (vii)

cargo-cults when they speak of the arrival of Jesus a couple of generations back as a guarantee of another good cargo in the near future...” (Kermode 50).

⁴ Swales has a more optimistic take on the *Bildungsroman*’s lack of “unalterable closure” in stating that there are “no definitive conclusion[s] possible” (12) because of the inherent “tension between a concern for the sheer complexity of individual potentiality...and a recognition...that practical reality...is a necessary dimension of the hero’s self-realisation, albeit one that by definition implies a delimitation, indeed a constriction of the self” (4).

In the same way that Booth exposes the term “tragedy” as a “comforting framework of the absolutely man-made, man-suited, and man-limited order,” Redfield reveals that *Bildungsroman* occupies a similarly illusory relationship to the form it seeks to describe. Robert Musil, a practitioner of the so-called genre with his *The Man Without Qualities*, discusses the slipperiness of the term from another angle. Instead of arguing (like Redfield) that every *Bildungsroman* inevitably fails to measure up to the requirements of the form, Musil contends that every novel could be considered a kind of *Bildungsroman*: “...with every true experience a cultured man educates himself. This is the organic plasticity of man. In this sense every novel worthy of the name is a *Bildungsroman*...” (Redfield 42-3). Novels are about people, those people have experiences, and because of the nature of man (their “organic plasticity”), they learn and grow from those experiences. Thus for Musil the genre is a “phantom” one not because of its nonexistence but precisely because of its ubiquity. There is a certain definitional idealism from both ends, since either *all* novels are *Bildungsromans* or *none* can meet the desirable specifications.

Each theorist circles around the key terms of definition and inconclusiveness: a form that can’t define itself, a protagonist that can’t define himself in relation to his culture, and endings which achieve not closure, but only a “humorous maturity,” a state of repeated and interminable play. In other words, some of the inconclusive forces of comedy seem to reside at the heart of the form. And yet the scholarly consensus around the comic *Bildungsroman* is that it somehow signals an end to the form. David Miles calls these “sham[s]” anti-*Bildungsromans*, and labels their heroes anti-*Bildungshelden* (342). But his contention that these represent a radical change and “directly challenge the entire western tradition of Judeo-Christian values, held religiously by thinkers from Socrates to Schiller, that knowledge—culturally-enhanced self-consciousness—leads to virtue” (348) overstates the starkness of the contrast between the comic and the classical *Bildungsroman*. Similarly, Gregory Castle’s claim that “the project of the self that began in the late eighteenth-century...exhausts itself in the failure of cultural representations to offer satisfying narratives of self-development” (63) posits that the modernist *Bildungsroman* represents an “antagonistic, interminable” (67) dialectic of self and society, which is true, but which is also essentially true of all *Bildungsromans*.

Moretti points out that the *Bildungsroman*, even its inaugural form, Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*, can only conclude by betraying its realist *bona fides*, since its meaning “lies in a finality that retroactively transforms life into an organic unity controlled by a “teleological rhetoric” (7), a finality that takes an oddly infantile form: “Perplexing conclusion: that maturity speaks the language of fairy-tales” (19).⁵ Throughout his study Moretti demonstrates the persistent contradictions that arise in nineteenth-century *Bildungsromans* because of the desire to retroactively transform life into an organic unity. But in a decisive last sentence, Moretti replicates the very artificial closure that his study so consistently and subtly exposes. Having noted Wilhelm’s dilettantish wish not to conclude his apprenticeship (178), the “unhinged” (165) endings and permanently inconclusive state of Balzac’s *Comédie Humaine* (148), the *Bildungsroman*’s hesitancy to clearly define maturity (179), Frédéric Morel’s “aversion towards all things definite”

⁵ Roth makes a similar point in *The Human Stain*: “...the expectation of completion, let alone of a just and perfect consummation, is a foolish illusion for an adult to hold” (315).

(176), and *Middlemarch*'s daring willingness "to deal with the major theme of the European *Bildungsroman*: failure" (216), Moretti declares the form officially over:

And when the new psychology started to dismantle the unified image of the individual; when the social sciences turned to 'synchrony' and 'classification,' thereby shattering the synthetic perception of history; when youth betrayed itself in its narcissistic desire to last forever; when in ideology after ideology the individual figured simply as part of the whole—then the century of the *Bildungsroman* was truly at an end. (228)

Moretti in a sense takes signs for wonders, seeing the intensification of the indefinability as an apocalyptic shift rather than an evolution.⁶ To posit that "the biography of a young individual" can no longer be "the most meaningful viewpoint for the understanding and the evaluation of history" (227) discounts the modernist, postmodernist and general novelistic fascination with (or addiction to) the form, and fails to explain why the most ambitious comic *Bildungsromans* of the twentieth century are also the most historically ambitious: *Midnight's Children*, *The Tin Drum*, *Gravity's Rainbow*, *The Adventures of Augie March*, and *Middlesex*, to name several. Regardless of the social sciences and ideological forces chipping away at the "unified image of the individual," writers all have a kind of biological imperative to churn out their own *Bildungsromans*; as Roth's Nathan Zuckerman wryly notes before visiting his literary idol in *The Ghost Writer*, he is "like many a *Bildungsroman* hero...already contemplating [his] own massive *Bildungsroman*" (ZB 3). This self-replicating novelistic instinct is simply too strong, too fundamentally useful and necessary, and possibly too (productively) narcissistic to exhaust itself as a "meaningful viewpoint."

Defining the Comic

The difficulty in defining the *Bildungsroman* meets its congenial counterpart in the difficulty of defining comedy. It is, in fact, a truth universally acknowledged that to write an essay on comedy one must first write a paragraph about how hard it is to define, and moreover how such an effort is inimical to the subject itself.⁷ Thus Alenka Zupančič's recent study of comedy begins: "...irresistible motion is one of the key features of comedy, which is why it seems so difficult to pin it down with concepts and definitions (in a much more emphatic sense than this could be said for other genres), and it is quite capable of its own definitions as material to be submitted to further comic treatment, turned upside down, or inside out... (3). Her treatise has an entire section refining some elements of Bergson's famous study, which itself begins with a similar disclaimer: "Our

⁶ Miles takes an even more apocalyptic view of the fate of the form by arguing that the "decline in the general concept of the "heroic" during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries" threatens to abolish character as well: "Indeed, the concept of 'character' itself, as some critics have suggested, may eventually prove to have been nothing more than a figment of the literary imagination during the historical period of bourgeois culture" (347).

⁷ The anxiety about scholarly definitions of the comic mirrors comedians' own anxiety about reflecting on their own art. In a typical move, Steve Martin, introducing the work of SJ Perelman, writes that "the day you start analyzing humor is the day you stop being funny" (ii).

excuse for attacking the problem in our turn must lie in the fact that we shall not aim at imprisoning the comic spirit within a definition. We regard it, above all, as a living thing” (61). Stuart Tave opens his *Lovers, Clowns and Fairies* by quoting Samuel Johnson’s struggle to define the comic—“Comedy has been particularly unpropitious to definers”—before clearly avowing the anti-definitional tendency of his own method: “We will never find the book [Aristotle’s lost study section of *Poetics*] or the definition with the essence” (xii). Aristotle presumably had no such difficulty, and in some sense modern theorists of the comic are all working either implicitly or explicitly to discredit Aristotle’s missing treatise on comedy (or at least the notion that any definition contained therein could capture comedy’s elusive essence). Kirby Olson grounds his discussion of postmodern comedy with this qualification: “As soon as any definitions are put forth, the comedian immediately sets forth to see the loophole and save the day for the anomic. Comedy is precisely *a certain freedom from definition*....what defines it is in fact its very ability to resist definition” (6).

Though Leonard Potts begins *Comedy* in the standard fashion by refusing “to define comedy in so many words” (15), several pages later he shifts from a discussion of comedy’s philosophical and psychological “end” to its defining moment: the happy ending. Potts has this to say about comedy’s aversion to conclusion: “...examine the end of any good comedy that leads up to a wedding—*Much Ado about Nothing*, *The Way of the World*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Major Barbara*. The happiness is irrelevant, though it may be present. The point is that all these comedies end in a question mark: the one thing certain is that a wedding is not the end but the beginning of a story. This inconclusiveness at the end of many comedies has an important bearing on the nature of plot in comedy” (21).⁸ The generic definitional difficulty established at the outset migrates to a formal definitional difficulty as the tidy truism about comedies ending happily collapses under the comedic forces of inconclusiveness. Frye’s structuralist definition of the force of comedy’s endings hints at the same instability of comic endings:

The movement...from a society controlled by habit, ritual bondage, arbitrary law and the older characters to a society controlled by youth and pragmatic freedom is fundamentally...a movement from illusion to reality. *Illusion is whatever is fixed or definable, and reality is best understood as its negation*...Hence the importance of the theme of creating and dispelling illusion in comedy: the illusions caused by disguise, obsession, hypocrisy, or unknown parentage. (170, emphasis mine)

All endings in comedy are supposedly happy because they break off before the establishment of new illusions, new “fixed” or “definable” restrictions, take hold. Thus

⁸ Jean Howard suggests something similar in her essay on Shakespeare’s “problem comedies.” And what Howard sees as their root is the failure to differentiate: “What is striking about *The Merchant of Venice*, considered as comedy, is how difficult it makes the establishment of definitive *differences* between characters, locales, and motives – differences upon which the creating of harmonious comic perspective must rest” (123). Thus the play’s ending is a “defensive fiction created to mask a frightening sameness,” a hallowed “comic convention...evoked to explain away the puzzling aspects of this particular text” (124).

the endings are in fact anything but. Rather, they are brief respites, flirtations with a reality that can only temporarily keep the fixating forces of illusion at bay, a fleeting period of freedom before a new attack on new limits. As Robert Torrance notes in his study, “comedy, like life, cannot come to an end without contradicting its essence” (267).⁹

One slapstick example, *The Naked Gun*, nicely illustrates this particular aspect of comedy crucial to my study: its aversion to ending. Determined to foil a plot to assassinate the visiting Queen of England during the 7th inning stretch of an Anaheim Angels baseball game, *Naked Gun*’s hero Frank Drebin (Leslie Nielsen) sneaks onto the field as home-plate umpire in order to frisk each and every player/suspect. What follows is a series of inspired bits in which Drebin gets increasingly comfortable in his umpiring, and sleuthing, role. He begins to call pitches less tentatively and more ostentatiously (punctuating one third strike with a moonwalk), graduates from sweeping home plate with a brush to using a vacuum cleaner, and pats down players with impunity even as they concentrate on catching a pop-up. But as his partner informs him before the top of the seventh inning, the fun can’t go on forever. In order to delay the impending attack, Drebin must switch from the crowd-pleasing, dancing “out” machine to a villain, an ump unwilling to send *anyone* back to the dugout. Thus he starts to call everything a ball and everyone safe, and in a last-ditch effort to stave off the third out intervenes in a rundown by emptying all the contents of his ball pouch onto the field of play. Drebin’s futile attempt to make the top of the seventh inning last forever constitutes the soul of comedy. The movie aligns the stakes of comic continuation with the serious (though admittedly silly) stakes of the movie: the plot to assassinate the Queen.¹⁰ In other words, it aligns a metaphorical murder of the comic bit with a literal one. Comedies don’t like endings, resist them *to the end*, and even when they arrive at an end still strive to counteract them. Drebin would never call the third out—that comes from the official scorer, who in superego-like fashion decides enough is enough, freeing Drebin to inaugurate yet another comic sequence, which again refuses to accept *its* logical conclusion. After the movie’s villain falls to his death from the upper deck, his painful end turns out to be just the beginning of his troubles as he is promptly run over by a bus, flattened by a stream-roller, and stomped on by a marching band.

Despite his advanced years, Drebin stumbles from bit to bit, and from sequel to sequel, steadfastly clinging to his identity as a curiously dignified figure of comic misrule. Though Frank Drebin is the epitome of a man who hasn’t developed, a man caught in a kind of comic run-down, he is not so far removed, either in his attitudes or in his actions, from the heroes of the comic *Bildungsroman*. That slapstick characters aren’t concerned with *Bildung* seems obvious enough, but if Drebin’s seventh inning heroics are a key statement about comedy’s affinity with inconclusion, then it’s understandable why

⁹ In a similar vein, Auden sees the comic as “a clash between the laws of the inorganic which has no *telos*, and the behavior of living creatures who have one” (373). The comic, then, is all about a conflict of ends, perhaps explaining why ends, anatomically, are so funny.

¹⁰ Zupančič gets at this idea more theoretically: “a comic sequence is not conclusive in itself, that is to say, it does not carry in itself its own logical or necessary conclusion...” (140).

comedy and the *Bildungsroman* are natural partners. The *Bildungsroman* is a form ideally organized around a conclusion, around a goal and an ending which allows the preceding events to be united in a coherent narrative of development. By contrast, comedy resists conclusion, has no goals except not to conclude, and often does its best to cut down confidence in any coherent narratives it can get its hands on.¹¹ But as scholars all seem to agree, ideal *Bildungsromans* don't exist, and thus, as I demonstrate in the following section, their heroes possess a muted version of the anarchic aversion to definition and conclusion of a purely comic mode like slapstick.

Ruffled Feathers

The ruffled homunculus from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* sets the comic *Bildung* on its path. In the novel's famous opening, Walter Shandy's wife interrupts their love-making to ask her husband if he has remembered to wind the clock, and in so doing "scatter[s] and disperse[s] the animal spirits, whose business it [is] to have escorted and gone hand-in-hand with the HOMUNCULUS, and conducted him safe to the place destined for his reception." The homunculus, a miniature human once believed to reside within each sperm, is, as Sterne tells us, "a BEING guarded and circumscribed with rights" (I.i.6). Yet the novel's first act is to violate that circumscription, to "ruffl[e]" its animal spirits "beyond description." Were one so inclined, one could trace the genealogy of this "scattering" all the way to Ignatius J. Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces*: "I suspect that I am the result of particularly weak conception on the part of my father. His sperm was probably emitted in a rather offhand manner" (295). More broadly, Sterne's initial violated circumscription, the foundation for "a thousand weaknesses both of body and mind," spawns a series of comic *Bildungsroman* heroes with their own ailing or misbehaving bodies: Beckett's cripples, Roth's satyrs, Toole's Ignatius Reilly's defective heart valve, Rushdie's Saleem Sinai's deteriorating corpse, Grass' Oskar's stunted growth, Junot Diaz's Oscar Wao's "tumescent horribleness of...proportions" (29), and Bellow's Henderson, who is "the type of guy who couldn't survive without disfigurement" (220).

All of these comic *Bildungsroman* heroes may trace their origin to Sterne's move from circumscription, the establishment of a proper bound, to the dissolution of that bound: a state beyond description. The shared root of *circumscribe* and *describe*, *scribere*, alerts us to the etymological link between boundaries and writing; circumscribe means "to draw a line round, encompass, limit, confine," and an archaic definition of *describe* is "to delineate, mark out the form or shape of, trace the outline of...or to mark off or distribute into parts; to map or parcel out; to apportion, assign under limits." That movement from circumscription—the effort to establish limits, form, bounds, or definition—to a state beyond description—the persistent *failure* of that effort to limit, form, bound or define—is what I identify as the central formal impact of comedy on the *Bildungsroman*. As Tave describes *Tristram Shandy*: "If one is looking for a world where

¹¹ Frye aligns this kind of comedy with satire: "The satirist demonstrates the infinite variety of what men do by showing the futility, not only of saying what they ought to do, but even of attempts to systematize or formulate a coherent scheme of what they do" (229).

there is no successful movement towards an end *Tristram Shandy* is rather more spectacular than anything we've seen" (243).

Yet in their aversion to ends, the heroes and heroines of the comic *Bildungsroman* are not alone. Their plight is shared by the famous heroes of the nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman*, who are not immune from the same definitional anxieties that plague their less serious or "mature" descendents. Balzac's Lucien Chardon, for example, is permanently "a great man in Embryo," fated to end the novel by "beginning a terrible existence all over again" (673): "He's not a poet, that young man: he's a serial novel!" (665).¹² In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester sees in Jane "the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage: a vivid, restless captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high. (158). However, that "restless captive" begins the novel "glad" that "there was no possibility of taking a walk that day" (13), rapturously retreating into a window-seat with a drawn red curtain that enshrines her "in a double retirement" (14).¹³ Rochester projects too much of Bertha Mason onto Jane, who, unlike the madwoman in the attic, is both a restless caged bird *and* a contented one. And the indefiniteness continues, as Jane's age proves as difficult to read as her glance: "It is a point difficult to fix where the features and countenance are so much at variance as in your case" (141) says Rochester. Or consider, from *Great Expectations*, Pip's appeal to Herbert after being appraised of his inheritance: "I was a blacksmith's boy but yesterday; I am—what shall I say I am—to-day?" Pip's demand for definition is met with one that is anything but definite: "Say, a good fellow, if you want a phrase... a good fellow, with impetuosity and hesitation, boldness and diffidence, action and dreaming, curiously mixed in him" (245).

Walter Scott's naming of his famous hero in *Waverley* betrays similar definitional anxieties.¹⁴ Scott informs us that he has chosen an "uncontaminated name, bearing with its sound little of good or evil, excepting what the reader shall hereafter be pleased to affix to it" (33). However, Scott soon helps the reader along, contaminating the name himself by referring to Waverley's "wavering and unsettled habit of mind" (73). Scott explains this "wavering" quality as a combination of "the vague, and unsatisfactory course of reading" coupled with "a temper naturally retired and abstracted" (73), but that doesn't clear up the confusion of whether Waverley is a contaminated name in the first place, whether the name portends a predestined wavering that affects not only the protagonist but the entire novel. The novel ultimately reveals itself to be most at home in this "wavering" state: between England and Scotland, between armies mired in civil war,

¹² "A Great Man in Embryo" is the title of Part II of *Lost Illusions*.

¹³ Fittingly, Jane is reading Bewick's *History of British Birds*.

¹⁴ Definitional anxieties go hand in hand with generic anxieties. Scott begins by trying on a series of alternate titles, each bringing with it a different generic expectations: *A Tale of Other Days*, *A Romance from the German*, *A Sentimental Tale*, *A Tale of the Times*. In the opening chapter Scott explains what kind of novel this *isn't* going to be, and in the concluding chapter, "a postscript that should have been a preface" (493), he worries that he hasn't adequately "executed [his] purpose" and admits to be "so little was I satisfied with my production, that I laid it aside in an unfinished state, and only found it again by mere accident among other waste papers in an old cabinet" (493) several years later.

between historical eras and fashions,¹⁵ between romance and realism,¹⁶ Highland and Lowland, Hanoverian and Jacobite, and finally between Waverley's dueling dispositions: "The real disposition of Waverley...notwithstanding his dreams of tented fields and military honour, seemed exclusively domestic" (369).

The variable character of nineteenth-century *Bildungsroman* heroes and heroines are thus prey to the same forces of indefiniteness that allegedly derail the form in the twentieth century.¹⁷ Indeed, a certain indefiniteness is the prerequisite for novelistic interest, the reason why we care about their development in the first place. Comic *Bildungsromans* heighten this indefiniteness, and often make it into their structuring principles, but the prevalent comic engagement with the genre of the twentieth-century in no way signals its end. Rather, these works are the full expression of the comic indefiniteness which Sterne brilliantly exploited and which was always lurking in nineteenth-century *Bildungsromans*.

Three's Company

Waugh's pitch-perfect social satire, Beckett's wry, understated and often grim existential humor, and Roth's libidinal rants represent a range of comic modes that energize the twentieth-century *Bildungsroman* rather than dismantle it. Though my grouping throws together a reactionary curmudgeon, an experimental high-modernist and a taboo-breaking *enfant terrible*, each writer tends to dramatize the very process of comic indefiniteness that drives and inspires the comic *Bildungsroman* form. When Philip Roth, the narrator of *Operation Shylock*, learns that someone is impersonating him and advocating for a reverse Zionist exodus from Israel to Eastern Europe, he thinks: "It's Zuckerman, I thought, whimsically, stupidly, escapistly, it's Kepesh, it's Tarnopol and Portnoy—it's all of them in one, broken free of print and mockingly reconstituted as a single satirical facsimile of me. (34). Beckett similarly reflects on his satirical facsimiles in *Malone Dies*: "Then it will be all over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloyes, Morans and Malones...How many have I killed? (MD 236). And in a short story, *The Expelled*, he ultimately confesses that "I don't know why I told this story. I could just as well have told another. Perhaps some other time. I'll be able to tell another. Living souls, you will see how alike they are" (60). Those indistinguishable stories, in turn, throw off an endless series of congeners such that *Company's* hearer can't even be sure the novel's voice is addressing him: "Hearing on and off a voice of which uncertain whether addressed to him or to another sharing his situation" (32).¹⁸ Waugh is perhaps the least explicit about the

¹⁵ "Thus the coat-of-mail of our ancestors, and the triple-furred pelisse of our modern beaux may, though they be different, be equally fit for the array of a fictitious character" (35).

¹⁶ "Are we in the land of romance and fiction?" (211) is the question asked by Fergus to Waverley about the latter's romantic interest in Flora, but it is also the key question for the entire novel.

¹⁷ A personal and professional indefiniteness best exemplified by Beckett's Murphy: "Has he any prospects? Has he any retrospects? Has he, is he, anything at all" (14).

¹⁸ *The Unnameable* describes such a creation of congeners: "They set great store on Worm, to coax me out, he was something new, different from all the others...that would be lovely, my first like, that would be epoch-making, to know I had a like, a congener

comic indefinition between author and character, and among the characters themselves, but his comic heroes are almost universally bland straight-men, humorless ciphers designed to showcase the comic anarchy swirling around them. Thus the succession of ingenuous heroes— Paul Pennyfeather, Adam Fenwick-Symes, Tony Last, William Boot, Basil Seal—of his early comedies constitute a muted version of Beckett’s Murphys, Molloyes, and Morans, and of Roth’s satirical facsimiles.

Furthermore, as I argue in the individual chapters, each author circles back and rewrites his early comic *Bildungsroman* later in his career, a rewriting that offers the opportunity to write a critical comic *Bilung* that shows the peculiar evolution of each writer’s comedy. *Decline and Fall*’s world is plagued by systemic incompleteness, and as a result, Waugh imposes a series of grotesque ends on his characters, deploying what I call a lethal style that sacrifices *Bildung* to violent irony. In *The Loved One*, a novel whose subject is the often grotesque ritualization of death, Waugh bequeaths his lethal style to Dennis Barlow, who callously wrests a personal and artistic significance from “his loved one’s final combustion” (164).

My consideration of Beckett begins with *Murphy*, “the ruins of the ruins of the broth of a boy,” and end with *Company*, the poignant geriatric autobiography where that broth has fully rotted: “Bloom of adulthood. Imagine a whiff of that.”¹⁹ I argue that the best way to read Beckett is through his sustained engagement with and manipulation of several central *Bildungsroman* tenets: definition, the necessary journey of self-discovery, and *kairos*. Though *Murphy* ends with its hero’s combustion, the novel’s real tragedy is that Murphy is more suited to the role of *Bildungsroman* protagonist than he would like to admit. Indefinable though he may be, Murphy can never rock himself into the blissful state of Mr. Endon, a state of cosmic comic chaos before man’s imperfect sense of humour makes a mess of it. *Company* reduces comedy and the *Bildungsroman* to its barest bones: a nameless protagonist trying to separate himself from “countless others” (46), to “confess, Yes, I remember” (10) to a series of formative memories, and to devise his best, and “most diverting” (36), self for company.

In my Roth chapter, I move from *Portnoy’s Complaint* to *Sabbath’s Theater*, Roth’s perverse take on the (already perverse) *Wuthering Heights*. *Portnoy’s Complaint* generates its comic energy through the split between Portnoy’s pathological private condition and his successful public *persona*; *Sabbath’s Theater* revisits the erotic exuberance of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, but Roth’s later hero is a comic satyr boiled down to its essence. Sabbath thrives in a constant state of sexual, theatrical, bodily exposure, and the novel is about how he maintains his essence in the face of the barrage of ultimatums threatening him. Rather than remaining trapped in the circular therapy structure of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, Sabbath’s final act of comic ingenuity is the realization that he has crafted for himself the perfect, if dystopian, home.

Each chapter pays particular attention to the particulars of comedy’s systemic assault on definitions and limits. I argue that small, sometimes trivial examples of indefinition can be traced back to the larger definitional stakes of the *Bildungsroman*

(378)

¹⁹ Perhaps explaining why Beckett increasingly turns to a literature of the unword, since as we first learn in *Murphy*, “when body odour and volubility meet, then there is no remedy” (42).

form. It's worth asking a bigger question about why comedy's staunch resistance to definition. I offer a tentative answer: comedy's aversion to endings is related to an aversion to the ultimate end, death. To speak of death's omnipresence in comedy seems to run counter to its spirit, and yet most physical comedy (Buster Keaton comes to mind) is precisely one extended evasion of death. *Tristram Shandy* is the perfect novelistic example of this comic evasive instinct. From the initial *coitus interruptus* which threatens to ensure that he never develops from a homunculus, to his nearly fatal window-pane circumcision, to his assortment of bodily ailments, Tristram attempts to write his forty volumes (of which he completes nine) under the constant threat of termination. Similarly, the comic works I take up are all "half in love with easeful death," not so much evading that threat as gravitating towards it.²⁰ Waugh's comic lethality runs wild in *The Loved One's* funeral parlor, Beckett urges himself to "get on with the stupid old threne (*TFN* 131), and Roth's Mickey Sabbath is a character whose comic immortality is defined exclusively through his novel-long flirtation with *thanatos*: "And he couldn't do it. He could not fucking die. How could he leave? How could he go? Everything he hated was here" (447). By exploding the limits of a genre all about limits, comic *Bildungsromans* often bleed, ineluctably and with varying degrees of parody, into the tragic. The threat of termination may pervade comedy, but tragedy is *the* genre of termination. As we move from *Decline and Fall* to *The Loved One*, from *Murphy* to *Company*, from *Portnoy's Complaint* to *Sabbath's Theater*, the comedy matures, flirting with *kairos* less parodically and with *thanatos* more seriously. It is almost as if the initial wound to the generic limits of both comedy and the *Bildungsroman* festers in these later works as they enter the realm of the tragicomic sublime.

²⁰ One of Dennis Barlow's defining poems in *The Loved One* is "Ode to a Nightingale."

Waugh's Lethal Style

“...we detect the cruelty inherent in comedy, which perhaps may be another form of the cruelty inherent in tragic disaster.” (Bergson, “Laughter”)

Localized Ridicule

When Prendergrast, the hapless, terrorized teacher of an English boarding school continues to wear a hideous wig that provides his rowdy students with much amusement and scorn, he offers this by way of explanation: “I daresay it’s a good thing to localize their ridicule as far as possible” (46). In an overlooked irony of *Decline and Fall*, Waugh pushes Prendergrast’s maxim to its *reductio ad absurdum*; late in the novel, the character who attempts to confine his ridiculousness to his head is himself beheaded; a grotesque amputation turns out to be the only way to stem satiric contagion. This moment is indicative not only of the systemic nature of Waugh’s satire, but also points to the novel’s central formal quality, its futile attempt to end things short of fatal violence, to rope off areas, to establish limits and bounds, to become a stable, *unridiculed* system. This quality manifests itself in a variety of ways, from unfinished foot races to unfinished texts, and from its epilogue, which is nearly identical to its prelude, to its truncated title (an abbreviation of Gibbon’s sprawling history). *Decline and Fall* is filled with “terrible ends” (266) and “lame conclusions” (215), signs of the comic mode working against the defining tendencies of developmental narrative, which paradoxically seeks to *end* narrative by defining its protagonist and leading him to a definite, socially stable end.²¹ As Grimes advises his young charge Paul Pennyfeather at one point in *Decline and Fall*: “Take my tip, old boy: never get involved in a Welsh wrangle. It doesn’t end in blows, like an Irish one, but goes on forever” (114). But Paul’s adventures are precisely a Welsh wrangle, just as endless and just as violent. This Welsh wrangle leads to what is distinctive about Waugh’s comedy, the intertwining of ridicule and violence in what I call his lethal style.

Using Girard’s notion of a sacrificial crisis of distinctions to account for the widespread violence in Waugh’s comedies, I show how Waugh’s lethal style emerges from its initial expression in his first *Bildungsroman*, *Decline and Fall* (1928), and reaches its mature expression and full flowering in his American *Bildungsroman*, *The Loved One* (1948). By lethal style I mean a method that defines itself against the pervasive comic indefinition of the world it describes by detachedly, ironically, and often cruelly disposing of the characters in that world: what happens when comedy attempts *telos* while still remaining comedy. This style implies that life can only acquire meaning by ending in a comically appropriate way, by becoming *Bildungs* with a violent or ironic culmination. While in the early comedies protagonists and supporting characters alike are

²¹ Peter Brooks’s reading of the end of *Great Expectations* is a case in point; he describes the narrative “discharge” of the novel (Pip’s comfortable London existence) as a “‘life cured of ‘plot’” (340). Moretti notes this paradox of the *Bildungsroman* as well: “narrative transformations have meaning in so far as they lead to a particularly marked ending: one that establishes a classification different from the initial one but nonetheless perfectly clear and stable – definitive, in both senses this term has in English” (7).

exclusively the victims of the lethal style, Waugh's late comedy, set in a culture of death, allows its protagonist to wield it, to effect his own *Bildung* through the grotesquely curtailed *Bildungs* of others. The resulting *Bildungsroman* is both a generic success and a generic failure, a triumphant portrait of a poet cementing his artistic and a nightmarish fable about a particularly unsentimental and inhuman aesthetic education.

A Tale of Two Texts

By way of explaining why I choose these two novels around which to center this chapter on Waugh and the comic *Bildungsroman*, consider the different kinds of written texts we find in each. During his incarceration towards the end of *Decline and Fall*, Paul Pennyfeather discovers a self-help book in the prison-library, "out of which some unresponsive reader had torn the last hundred and eight pages" (257). A self-help book without a concluding section: the perfect analogue to the comic, consistently unfinished *Bildungsroman* unfurling as Paul declines and falls. Nothing ever finishes in *Decline and Fall*, not even, as I noted, its title. The epic chronological and geographical sweep of Gibbon's history is reduced to one year in England, Roman emperors translated into flighty heirs and heiresses, and a weighty historical tome comically deflated and amputated. Waugh originally planned to call the work *Picaresque or the Making of an Englishman*.²² The present progressive tense hints at Paul's dilatory development; in the same way that Lucky and Pozzo will be forever waiting for Godot, it seems that Waugh's Englishman will be forever in the making. Moreover, Waugh's original title invokes two opposing generic modes: the "picaresque," which is discursive, and the *Bildungsroman*, which is developmental. Regardless of which he ultimately chose, Waugh is on a mission to make one title impossible, *Paul Pennyfeather*, since the entire novel is about that character's disappearance. In what could be the *defining* paragraph about the chronic *indefinition* of the comic *Bildungsroman*, Waugh describes the effect of the novel's whirl of events on its protagonist:

...the whole of this book is really an account of the disappearance of Paul Pennyfeather, so that readers must not complain if the shadow which took his name does not amply fill the important part of hero for which he was originally cast. (162)

The failure of the protagonist to materialize has its structural counterpart in the failure of certain narrative arcs to materialize. In the place of such expected materializations, we get a systemic incompleteness that undercuts everything in the novel, from the "making" of an Englishman to a book from a prison library to the novel's own organization headings.

Decline and Fall begins with a prelude, which would of course suggest a prelude to *something*. But, as most commentators note, the novel ends by circling right back to the beginning. After the mad swirl of improbable adventures that follow Paul as a disgraced Oxfordian, a hapless boarding school teacher, a fiancé cum partner-in-crime to a South American white slave trader, and as a prisoner, he ends up exactly where he was in the novel's first scene: a divinity student, returning from a meeting on the Polish plebiscites on the night of the Bollinger Club's annual party. Thus Waugh makes the prelude and epilogue interchangeable, and in so doing refutes the novel's title as well; after all, Paul cannot technically be said to have declined at all. It is precisely in the

²² *Untoward Incidents* was another possibility, which Waugh felt had the "right tone of mildly censorious detachment" (*Letters*, 27).

merger of these opposing terms (prelude and epilogue) that *Decline and Fall* generates its structuring comic principles. As neither the prelude nor the epilogue can do the narrative work assigned to it, the very formal qualities of the novels are transformed into ready-made parodic sign-posts.²³ Waugh, for example, titles the chapter after the prelude “Vocation.” In the same way that the “Prelude” implies a narrative arc that fails to materialize, “Vocation” implies a professional life shaped by a directional force other than blind fortune. In fact, Paul stumbles on his first job as a schoolmaster only after he is falsely identified as a member of a rabble-rousing Bollingers during its annual Bacchanal, scapegoated by two Oxford dons, and dismissed from his clerical education for indecent behavior: “Well, you may congratulate yourself that you discovered your unfitness for the priesthood before it was too late” (8). *Discovered* euphemistically ascribes an agency Paul never pretends to have; once the dean is through with him, it’s up to the school porter to direct Paul’s career path: “I expect you’ll be becoming a schoolmaster, sir. That’s what most of the gentlemen does, sir, that gets sent down for indecent behavior” (8).

If *Decline and Fall*’s comic incompleteness derails the *Bildungsroman* form, *The Loved One*, set between a funeral parlor (“Whispering Glades,” based on the famed *Forest Lawn*) and a pet mortuary (“Happier Hunting Ground”) in Los Angeles, puts it on a new track. The former novel is all about indefiniteness, contagion, and the failure to end; the latter, a more defined comic product unfolding at “the quiet limit of the world,” revels in outer bounds, compartmentalization, and fixing the end in a final, embalmed, grotesque, form.²⁴ And yet Dennis Barlow, the novel’s protagonist, seems destined to fall victim to the same undefined fate as disappearing Paul Pennyfeather. He doesn’t exactly make an indelible impression on his lover: “When I turn away I can’t even remember what you look like. When you are not there I don’t think of you at all” (144). And as Sir Ambrose, the snobbish ringleader of his fellow Englishmen in exile, bluntly points out, Dennis isn’t exactly a success either: “This [Los Angeles] is a hard testing ground. Only the best survive. Barlow failed” (34). The crucial difference between the two, shapeless Paul and shaping Dennis, is best exemplified in a book central to the latter’s American adventure. Instead of an incomplete self-help manual, Dennis’ *vade mecum* is the finished, anthologized product of the English literary tradition: the *Oxford Book of English Verse*, which he wields with an almost necromantic power in order to achieve his romantic and professional ends. Though certain of his fellow countrymen in exile have judged Dennis to have failed, he has failed in the way Lucifer did, “majestic though in ruin,” ending the novel by inheriting what I call Waugh’s lethal style: the almost

²³ Waugh performs a similar feat in *Vile Bodies* by classifying the final section, which tells of a sordid tryst, financial ruin and onset of world war, under the appellation “Happy Ending.”

²⁴ Waugh’s diary entry informs us of a new *kairos*-friendly compositional method: “When I began writing I worked straight on into the void, curious to see what would happen to my characters, with no preconceived plan for them, and few technical corrections. Now I waste hours going back and over my work. I intend trying in *The Loved One* to push straight ahead with a rough draft, have it typed and then work over it once, with the conclusion firmly in my mind when I come to give definite form to the beginning” (*Diary* 680).

sociopathic ability to keep preternaturally cool as the atrocities add up, to wrest a personal significance (or *kairos*) from the pervasive, absurd, and often violent forces of comic inconclusion, dedifferentiation, and indefinition.

Franco Moretti, noting the growing disjunct between narrative mastery and character in the English *Bildungsroman*, writes of *Middlemarch* that “maturity is no longer achieved within the story, but only in the disembodied universe of discourse. And the relationship between these two levels of the text is inversely proportional: the more devastating the characters’ failures, the more impressive the narrator’s self-mastery” (222). It seems odd to place Waugh next to a figure like Eliot, but it makes sense if we think of Waugh’s lethal style as an intensification of that narrative mastery, an intensification which in fact so abstracts the characters and their feelings that their world functions only to buttress that style. It is precisely this “narrative self-mastery” that Dennis inherits. In his American satire, Waugh replays Paul Pennyfeather’s adventures with a difference: Dennis Barlow masters the comic universe around him, doesn’t surrender naively to its vicissitudes, but actively confronts the comic on his own terms and thereby achieves a heartless aesthetic transcendence (he leaves it behind in Los Angeles). Thus the *Loved One* is a surprisingly successful, if slightly sociopathic, *Bildungsroman* about Barlow’s evolution from a desultory poet to “singularly privileged” (163) one.

In a letter to Cyril Connelly about *The Loved One*, Waugh claims that “there is no such thing as an American. They are all exiles uprooted, transplanted & doomed to sterility. The ancestral gods they have abjured get them in the end” (*Letters* 256). His novel, he explains, is about “the Europeans who come for the spoils & if they are lucky make home with them.” Waugh’s version of “the necessary journey” turns out to be the “necessary marauding,” a voyage of pillaging rather than romantic self-discovery. This conception of Dennis’ journey to America demonstrates the fundamentally predatory nature of Waugh’s lethal style, the way *Bildung* and self-mastery go hand in hand with a severing of any and all sympathetic bonds. Waugh’s Los Angeles is a self-contained world, part Waste Land “littered with bones and wreckage” (163), and part treasure horde which one can exploit, symbolically and materially, without any lasting emotional (or legal) entanglements.

My choice of these two texts, and the argument about Waugh’s lethal style I derive from them, runs counter to the Catholicization of Waugh’s comedy, the critical tendency to see his early satires as warming up for the “mature,” more religious and less comic, Waugh after his 1930 conversion to Catholicism. Take, for instance, Meckier’s treatment of *Decline and Fall*; noting that “one cannot grow up in the world of *Decline and Fall* nor escape from it” (53), Meckier goes on to claim that Waugh “specifically subverts the *Bildungsroman* and challenges the possibility of salvific renewal.” But subversion to what end? My problem with Meckier’s account of the comic *Bilungsroman* as subversive is that it implies that the comic has a motivating aim or alternatively viable vision for what this most social of novelistic forms should look like. Meckier claims that Waugh subverts the form becomes for an almost comically specific reason: “Replaying situations from Dickens pinpoints the disastrous changes separating the Victorian and modern eras, changes brought about in part, Waugh implies, by Dickens’ failure to support organized religion” (65). By making the novel’s satiric target Dickens (specifically his embracing the “essential secularity” (63) of the *Bildungsroman* form),

Meckier mitigates the daemonic power of Waugh's comedy by appropriating that comedy to a religious end. The novel is "implicitly Catholic" (74) in that Waugh's lucid style becomes a kind of divine presence, a "depository of positive values" that performs "the task Waugh is not yet confident enough to entrust explicitly to any organized religion" (73).

This line of thought points to the tendency in Waugh criticism, typified by Michael Gorra in "Through Comedy toward Catholicism," to read Waugh's early novels through the lens of the author's spiritual journey. Such readings locate the yearning for a "centre of rest" (*Decline* 282) to a missing Catholicism that finally flowers in *Brideshead Revisited*. Gorra states that the "Catholic shape" of this career path results from "Waugh's quarrel with his own comedy" (219), thereby implicitly categorizing Waugh's early period as a youthful indiscretion that eventually gives way to the dramatic, and serious, moment in *Brideshead* when the old roué Lord Marchmain finally accepts Catholic rites on his deathbed. More recently, Patrick Query, echoing Meckier, has argued for the "sacramental aesthetic" of Waugh's fiction, that in the "perfect equation of spare, comic style and the socio-cultural content" of Waugh's pre-conversion novels, we can detect "a subtle early indicator of the link between Waugh's art and his faith" (37). Thus the "thinness" and "superficiality" (41) of his prose becomes the perfect "corporeal" medium through which to transmit the "incorporeal" content of the sacramental.

While each critic recognizes the exquisite nature of Waugh's satire, each subordinates, or we could say sacrifices, that satire to Waugh's spiritual journey to Catholicism. Comedy exists epiphenomenally, or as a corrective force, a blunt instrument of subversion for Waugh to wield until a more refined implement, and more "salvific" worldview, comes along. Most oddly, Waugh's comedy becomes a stylistic instantiation of a divine presence.²⁵ Part of the urge to square Waugh's comedy with his religious conviction derives, I suspect, from the particularly violent nature of Waugh's comedy: its lethal (rather than sacramental) style. Each of Waugh's novels put forward at least one victim whose horrific death seems to test the bounds of comic propriety: Prendergast (decapitation) and Tangent (bullet wound and gangrene to the foot) in *Decline and Fall*, Simon Balcairn (oven suicide) in *Vile Bodies*, Tony Last (enslavement to deranged Dickens-loving chieftain) in *A Handful of Dust*, Prudence (cannibalized) in *Black Mischief*, and Aimée (suicide and combustion) in *The Loved One*. I would argue that these deaths are key to thinking about Waugh's comedy. Instead of fitting these novels into the author's own spiritual *Bildungsroman*, I write another narrative, a *Künstlerroman* that traces the formal qualities of Waugh's comedies and their effects on his protagonists, from *Decline and Fall* to *The Loved One*. This narrative culminates not with *Brideshead*'s "Catholic shape" but with a return to the comic style that caused Waugh some anxiety: "[*The Loved One*] will greatly shock many & I feel comes rather poorly after an article in *Life* in which I declared that I would only write religious books in the future" (*Letters* 255). The journey begins with a thoroughly detached narrator and a

²⁵ Meckier's treatment of *Decline and Fall*'s stock comic character, the Falstaffian Captain Grimes, as a "pessimistic symbol of useless, uninspired endurance, as pointless as anything in Beckett" (56) similarly downplays the comic force of Waugh's novels (and ignores Grimes' particular fate, which is nothing if not inspired).

thoroughly ironized protagonist, and ends in narrative isotropy; it begins with Waugh paring his fingernails and ends with Dennis Barlow paring his; it begins with Waugh sacrificing Paul at the altar of comedy, and ends by having Dennis presiding over those sacrifices as comedy's high priest in search of a profane *kairos*.

Waugh's Lethal Style

The comic ritualization of violence we find in Waugh's novels is symptomatic of what René Girard would call a "sacrificial crisis," which he defines as a "crisis of distinctions—that is, a crisis affecting the cultural order. This cultural order is nothing more than a regulated system of distinctions in which the differences among individuals are used to establish their "identity" and their mutual relationships" (49). For Girard, the failure to distinguish between pure and impure violence, to come, as a community, to ritualistically identify and expel a scapegoat, results in the greatest threat to any community: an endless cycle of reciprocal violence "engulf[ing] the whole" (49). The sacred, of which ritual violence, or sacrifice, "is the heart and secret soul," (31) is what keeps this reciprocal violence, in check: "The role of sacrifice is to stem this rising tide of indiscriminate substitutions and redirect violence into its proper channels" (10). (Our criminal justice system, and our aversion to vigilante justice, is the modern incarnation of this redirection of violence).

Girard extends his anthropological discussion of "primitive societies" to Greek tragedy, demonstrating how the tragic is nothing but a series of sacrificial and distinctive crises.²⁶ This affinity between tragedy and ritual is less surprising than his further insistence that comedy depends on the same ritualization of violence. In an essay on the similarities between tragic and comic forms, Girard equates tragedy's convulsive, cathartic tears, with the convulsive, cathartic laughter of comedy: each is a kind of *katharsis* that mimics a "ritual expulsion... inseparable from sacrifice and other forms of ritual that always refer... to an original scapegoating process... capable of restoring the order and peace of the city because it reunifies all the citizens against a single victim" (123). Girard's point about the comic is that it thrives on the same perceived threat of contagion as does tragedy; just as the sacrificial act tries to contain violence by reproducing it, laughter mimics the "attempt to establish mastery and its failure" (128). Laughter maintains the perilous balance between superiority—laughing *at* someone, a "sacrificial victim" (131) trapped in a comic pattern—and the subsequent vanishing of that superiority: "As we try to assert our independence through laughter, that laughter becomes uncontrollable and independence is already slipping away" (129).²⁷ Laughter

²⁶ "Tragedy now assumes its proper function as a verbal extension of physical combat, an interminable debate set off by the chronically indecisive character of an act of violence committed previously" (45). And later: "In Greek tragedy violence invariably effaces the differences between antagonists" (47).

²⁷ The simplest example is of a man who, while laughing at another man fall on the ice, himself falls on the ice. As Girard theorizes the threat of contagion, the comic spectator "...welcomes and rejects the perception of the structure into which the object of his laughter is already caught; he welcomes it insofar as it is someone else who is caught in it and he tries to keep it away from himself. The pattern is never an individual one and it tends to close in upon the man who laughs.... (129).

constitutes a “crisis” because in its purest, most infectious form, it flirts with a dissolution of autonomy, an unloading of the “self,” “ego,” “identity,” “superiority,” or illusory mastery over his or her environment (130-1).

Girard’s comedy, then, is a belligerent one. (At one point in the essay he likens it to “intellectual tickling,” tickling itself a form of “mock total warfare.”) Because it recognizes the latent violence in comedy, Girard’s model is particularly well-suited for Waugh, since his satires thrive on the wide-spread threat of violence. Girard’s notion of a “crisis of distinctions,” and its resultant explosion of reciprocal violence, explains the relationship between the fluid, unstable identities of Waugh’s characters and the violent collapse of the social and ethical orders of his comedies. In *Decline and Fall* (and indeed throughout most of Waugh’s comic oeuvre), characters slough off and exchange their names and identities for new ones: Paul’s striped tie misidentifies him as a Bollingerite and starts his misadventures; Margot Beste-Chetwynde becomes Margot Maltravers becomes Margot Metroland; Philbrick has too many identities, and Dr. Fagan too many bogus degrees, to count; Paul’s fake death (arranged to facilitate his escape from prison) leads him to exchange his identity for that of, well, Paul Pennyfeather, a “very distant cousin” of the “thoroughly degenerate type” expelled from Oxford.

Social gatherings, in turn, only reinforce a sense of collective namelessness, what Waugh would later call The Bright Young Things set. Here is Paul’s effort to identify the guests at Margot’s weekend party at her estate “King’s Thursday”:

Paul never learned all their names, nor was he ever sure of how many of them there were. He supposed about eight or nine, but as they all wore so many different clothes of identically the same kinds, and spoke in the same voice, and appeared so irregularly at meals, there may have been several more or less. (171)

When Waugh transfers his setting to America, an early barb indicates that the pervasive confusion remains: “English titles abounded now in Hollywood, several of them authentic” (7). And as Aimée Thanatogenetos points out about her decision to repeatedly tinker with her own name in *The Loved One*: “Once you start changing a name, you see, there’s no reason to stop” (90).

Waugh’s comedies are shot through with similar distinctive crises, and it is my contention that these crises spur on the violence in those comedies. In such an undifferentiated state, violence veers from its ritualistic function and purpose—to restore order, or to be a sign of the “sacramental”—and becomes diffused, proliferating, and meaningless. These flippant, *meaningless* sacrifices are the macabre analog to a great narrative fear that the *Bildungsroman* seeks to allay: a life without meaning. It is precisely from these fears that Waugh generates his comedic energy. The “subversion” of the *Bildungsroman* form, then, is more of an exploitation of its central anxieties, an exploitation that results in Waugh’s lethal style and which is intimately related to the comic forces of indefiniteness. In short, Waugh translates comedy’s aversion to ends into a series of violent, farcical, or cruel endings for his characters, his indefinite protagonists included. In place of a sacrifice and death as a ritual culmination, Waugh doles out to his characters deaths without dignity and without meaning.

Take, for instance, what happens during the “Sports Day” sections, when parents converge on the Llanabba campus to watch a series of athletic contests. The proceedings

quickly degenerate into farce: the school's hurdles have been burnt for firewood and the new ones Doctor Fagan orders turn out to be spiked iron railings; the decision to use Philbrick's loaded gun as a starter's pistol turns out to be fatal to one runner, Tangent; and the hired band-master tries to augment his three pound payday by prostituting out his sister-in-law. One particular failure of Sports Day elegantly demonstrates how comic indefiniteness vitiates any and all contests, themselves exercises in distinction. The race, what should be a perfect example of finite effort, extends into infinitude. This begins with the qualifying heats, which don't exactly serve their function of eliminating some athletes from the finals: "Yes, you see none of the boys came back from the first race. They just disappeared behind the trees at the top of the drive" (72). When the finals are run and the prize awarded erroneously to a runner who cheated by completing only four of the requisite five laps, no one is nonplussed except the outraged Lady Circumference (whose name indicates a bound, a series of outer limits), Lord Tangent's mother, who appeals to the school's authority: "Then clearly he has won the five furlong race, a very exacting length" (93), is the headmaster's Carrollian response. At Circumference's insistence the race is repeated, but it again ends in incompleteness as the runners simply disappear into the woods: there is no finish, not even in a judged competition. The moral stakes of a cross-country meet are low, but if we think of the race as a diminished form of the trial, so important a motif in the *Bildungsroman*, then what we see is a permanently negated trial, one where victory and defeat, like prelude and epilogue, become conflated. The uncompleted race and that race's violent accoutrements, its spiked railings and loaded guns, are not unrelated. Waugh makes the distinctive crisis, the pervasive confusion about the stakes and limits of the race, into a physical one, the death of Lord Tangent, a death that is described as if it were just as insignificant as the results of the farcical foot race that caused it.

Two Deaths

Tangent happens to be *Decline and Fall*'s first casualty, and we could say that he is the first victim of Waugh's style. We first meet Tangent during Paul's first day as a teacher at Llanaba when he tries to take roll. This is Paul's initiation into his vocation, a formal process of identifying his charges and establishing his authority as their leader. The result is predictably disastrous. At first each student claims to be a boy named Tangent; then Paul makes slight progress by identifying those students that "wouldn't be called Tangent, not on the end of a barge pole," so that by the time an exasperated Pennyfeather throws his hands up in despair "the room had been divided into two parties; those who were Tangent and those who were not (45). The inability to complete the roll-call, to nail down a name with a face, is symptomatic not only of the novel's structural incompleteness, but also of its systemic destabilization of identity, or in Girardian parlance, is a crisis of distinction. The splintering of Tangents is by no means confined to secondary characters; the protagonist undergoes the Tangent treatment himself. Just as there are proliferating Tangents, there are proliferating Pauls in *Decline and Fall*: the Paul of the novel and the "disappearing" Paul of the "Interlude" chapter, the (presumed) "dead" Paul and the living Paul resurfacing at Oxford, Paul as the putative hero of the novel and Paul as the novel's cipher.

Both Paul and Tangent, in fact, disappear over the course of the novel. Tangent is dispatched with in what we may call a *roll call narration*, his name periodically and

fleetingly popping up across the text to remind us of his deteriorating condition. After he is accidentally shot in the foot by a loaded starter's pistol before a race, he asks, his mouth full of cake in the sick-ward: "Am I going to die?" (90). No one answers, but we receive periodic updates on the progress, or rather decline, of his injury: from comic accident to gangrene to amputation to death. These are often written as afterthoughts, usually in connection to some event from which Tangent is absent but not particularly missed. Notice the placement of one such update in the sentence's subordinate clause: "Everybody else was there, except little Lord Tangent, whose foot was being amputated at? a local nursing home" (137). When we do receive the death notice, it's heartlessly buried under his mother's snobbish decision not to attend Margot and Paul's wedding: "'It's maddenin' Tangent having died just this time.... People may think that's my reason for refusin'" (198). Waugh casually disperses the Tangent updates throughout the frantically paced novel; the idea is for them to get lost, to remind the reader of a suffering character in all likelihood forgotten, a character who, despite this suffering, and eventual death, the reader *will* forget again.

The Girardian framework provides a useful way to account for Tangent's demise, which is a meaningless death played out over time. The "Tangent" narrative strategy clearly plays on both literal and figurative aspect of his name, which obliquely indicates his fate and place in the novel. Tangent is essentially the plaything of Waugh's lethal style. The updates we receive about his deteriorating health are in fact *tangential* to Paul's narrative, especially after he quits his post at the boarding school to embark on other stalled careers. But a tangent, apart from a detour, is also the line that hits a curve at one and only one point (thus to take the tangent is to travel the shortest distance). By cramming the boy's curtailed life into three or four tangential sentences, Waugh geometrically finds the shortest way to narrate a life.

Waugh's style also rears its ugly head in Prendergrast's grisly demise, which Waugh narrates in a similarly tangential manner, this time by veering off into another mode: doggerel. After Paul's arrest, the novel's main characters all wind up in the same prison: Blackstone Gaol. Grimes and Philbrick are serving time, while the Modern Churchman Prendergrast is working (under an assumed identity), as Chaplain. Prendergrast's troubles start when the warden, encouraging the prisoners to carry on with their "avocations in civilized life," furnishes a homicidal mystic with carpentry tools that he eventually uses to saw off his head. The gruesome murder, during which Prendergrast hollers for nearly half an hour, comes to us in the form of a poem: "'Who let the madmen have the things?'/ 'The Governor; who'd you think?'/ He asked to be a carpenter,/ He sawed off Prendy's head./ A pal of mine what lives next dorr,/ 'E 'eard it 'appening;/ The warder must 'ave 'eard it too,/ 'E didn't interfere... 'Damned lucky it was Prendergrast,/ Might 'ave been you or me!'" Waugh does his characteristic best to transform the most egregious act of incompetence, criminal negligence and atrocity, into a comic form that puts as much distance as possible between the gruesome event and the pathos of old Prendy. That supremely pathetic character, who breaks down in tears when Paul suggests an evening out on the town, is dispatched with a chilling flippancy, one which makes a special point of noting the extended period of suffering (Waugh's inclusion of the time detail is crucial) even as it trips along in lightly skipping verse. As with Tangent's death, no one, particularly cares, not even Paul, and in both cases a protracted demise is handled with cool narrative dispatch.

According to the unanimous voice of the community, the crisis is contained: "From all points of view it was lucky that the madman had chosen Mr. Prendergrast for attack" (248). But only momentarily. Prendergrast's real sin is not, pace Meckier, being a Churchman of "fervor without faith" (57), but rather in attempting to "localize ridicule," to set the terms for his own comic humiliation.²⁸ He can't, and Waugh makes him pay by making his death gruesomely ironic. Though the agent of Prendergrast's sacrifice is a deranged lunatic suffering under the illusions that he is "the sword of Israel, the Lion of the lord's elect," he grasps the core truth of the novel: "It's not understanding that's needed. It's vision. Do you have any vision?" (239) he asks Paul, who responds, of course, that he has not. The madman, perhaps more than Paul, grasps that *Decline and Fall*'s world is in crisis but misreads it as a sign that "the Kingdom is at hand." As Meckier astutely points out: "The cruelest religious parody in *Decline and Fall*, the insane carpenter is the only reliable prophet in the novel" (60). The madman has *vision*, and, unlike Prendergrast, the doubting non-sectarian, has a confident *kairotic* vision; he is the one character who can, in fact, make things end by bringing about an apocalyptic horror. But only in his own deranged psyche. In the novel, the degraded, monstrous sacrifice produces doggerel, not Revelations; slangy vernacular, not lofty King James English; black comedy, not prophecy; a thoroughly temporal form, not one that seeks to speak to encompass eternity. Such are the limitations of the *kairos* afforded by the lethal style.

Paul's Crimes

Prendergrast's error is the attempt to localize ridicule, to impose limits on Waugh's comic treatment of him; for this misjudgment, he is decapitated. Paul suffers a less violent fate, but he is also in a sense sacrificed to the demands of Waugh's lethal style, a sacrifice related to a power struggle over ridicule. Waugh jealously prevents Paul from developing, much less wielding, any satirical or ironical manner to handle the disasters which befall him. When Paul attempts to enter into the comic world around him, he is harshly rebuffed. Asked by the prison doctor whether he has ever been in a mental institution, he jokingly replies that he was a student at Oxford for two years. The doctor is not amused: "Don't you dare to make jokes in here, my man, or else I'll soon have you in the strait jacket in less than no time" (220). The message is clear: Paul cannot be a comic participant in the farce already underway. When he veers from the straight-man role, he is threatened with force and even more restricted confines than his jail cell. The harshness of the rebuff becomes more pronounced considering that characters can get away with pretty much everything in this novel (Grimes' repeated pederasty comes to mind). But Paul's cardinal sin is the attempt to master the pervasive irony of the world around him, to become like Waugh. This mastery would entail a kind of development, and Paul is destined to become a victim of Waugh's lethal style rather than an apprentice to it.

Waugh perpetually sacrifices Paul to the narrative demands of others: "Why was it," Paul wonders during one such life-story, "that everyone he met seemed to specialize in this form of autobiography?" (174). Waugh's voided protagonist produces a vacuum, one which needs to be filled by other peoples' stories. For example, Waugh throws Paul into the jaw of the press, his "Daily Beast," the narrative motor of Waugh's early

²⁸ Recall that he tries to focus his students' scorn exclusively on his headwear.

comedies²⁹ that ultimately chews up and spits out Paul in its own fallacious storyline: “Death of Society Bridegroom Convict” (279). Earlier, when Paul is still in prison, the “progressive” warden enlists him in his own narrative. Paul becomes a subject in this “progressive” warden’s prisoner-reclamation program, “The Lukas-Dockery Experiments,” a “system of progressive stages” (228) that is essentially an imposition of another kind of developmental narrative on the one that has stalled throughout. Paul’s previous avocations, clergyman, teacher, white slave trader, are recalled, noted, and dismissed in an interview, and Paul is rebooted so that he can follow yet another path. (His treatment, it should be noted, never finishes.) Lukas-Dockery is less interested in Paul preserving his personality than in providing him with a scientifically curious one: “It may cause you some gratification to realize that, thanks to my report, you may in time become a case of scientific interest throughout the world” (235). The report purports to offer an alternative for how best to capture the “disappearing” Paul, though all it really does is continue to criminalize Paul’s attempts at self-determination: “R.’s crime was the result of an attempt to assert individuality at the expense of community” (234). Paul’s putative attempt to become the hero of a *Bildungsroman*, to assert individuality, has now become a criminal matter.

Waugh continues to chip away at Paul’s individuality either harshly or comically. Consider Waugh’s handling of a *Bildungsroman* staple: a scene in which a protagonist must choose between self-respect and monetary gain, a moral contest that turns out to be just as meaningless as the cross-country race of indeterminate length. Before Paul can even make a choice, Waugh sacrifices his protagonist’s moral education for comic effect, thereby accelerating Paul’s descent from character to cipher. During his first moral crisis, Paul must decide whether to accept twenty pounds from Alisdair Vaine-Trumpington, the young man who got him expelled from Oxford. Vaine-Trumpington offers Paul the money to ease his conscience, but Paul is rightly insulted by the offer and it appears as if he is about to make a moral stand:

“If I take that money,” he said to himself, “I shall never know whether I had acted rightly or not. It would always be on my mind. If I refuse, I shall be sure of having done right. I shall look back on my self-denial with exquisite approval. By refusing I can convince myself that, in spite of the unbelievable things that have been happening to me during the last ten days, I am still the same Paul Pennyfeather I have respected so long. It is a test case of the durability of my ideals.” (53)

But “durability” is unthinkable in Waugh. Nothing, certainly not something so flimsy as a moral choice, survives as a stable site of reflection. Even as Paul reflects on whether to preserve his integrity (*and* his identity), Grimes, his Falstaffian coworker, the aging corrupter of youth with a fondness for drink and a predilection for sexual dalliances that perennially get him “in the soup,” has already made the decision for him and long since pocketed the money. The comedy of the scene is pitch perfect: the agonizing Paul weighing his virtues as a gentleman as the rascally Grimes, the irrepressible “life force” (269), instantly acts. And it is precisely this comedy that precludes the necessity of either self-denial or its reverse, capitulation. Accepting the money would at least be a moral

²⁹ Waugh would later center several of his satirical novels around the fourth estate: *Vile Bodies*, *Scoop*, *Black Mischief*.

choice, but Waugh renders any decision moot. As Paul and Grimes later share a drink paid for by Trumpington's buyoff, Paul proposes a toast: "To the durability of ideals!" Grimes, unable to echo the sentiment, comes up with "Cheerio" instead.

This modified toast carries an echo of Flaubertian irony. When the heretofore chaste Frédéric Moreau converts the 1848 uprising into a vehicle for his own sexual liberation, bedding La Maréchale as protestors take to the street, he sarcastically crows: "Je suis mode. Je me réforme" (353).³⁰ Frédéric comically invokes then disregards the ideals of his generation, mapping them onto a licentious personal revolution. In *Decline and Fall* the characters can't even get the mocking words out. *Sentimental Education* is echoed more directly in the scene where Paul travels to Marseilles to conduct some white-slave trade business for his fiancée. Like Frédéric's humiliating retreat from the whorehouse, in which he imagined everyone was laughing at him, Paul stumbles into a seedy Marseilles neighborhood, and after a prostitute snatches his hat and attempts to lure him into a flophouse, "all the street seemed to be laughing at him" (203). The echo is obvious, but, crucially, Flaubert has his two childhood friends, Frédéric and Deslauriers, renarrate the events, "en exhumant leur jeunesse," (literally exhuming their youth) with irony; in other words they handle it exactly as Flaubert has mercilessly handled every event in the novel. Thus, ironically through irony, the humiliation acquires a sentimental glow: "Cela fit une histoire... C'est la ce que nous avons eu de meilleurs."³¹ The last lines step back from youth and transform it, via irony, into "une histoire." Frédéric, for all his passivity, can at least do that. His consistently mocked sentimental education ends by arming him with irony, itself a kind of development. Paul, harshly rebuked after his one attempt at humor, ends up wholly cured of the ironic impulse: we last see him sequestered in his study reading approvingly about suppressions of minor heresies.³² He becomes Waugh's polar opposite, a humorless scourge as opposed to a satirical one. We have to wait for Dennis Barlow in *The Loved One* for a character capable of ironically transforming "experience" into "une histoire."

Sileni

Part of Waugh's lethal style is his monopoly on ridicule, his swift retribution against those who attempt to localize it (Prendergrast) and those who wish to deploy it themselves (Paul). Oddly, the one character who seems somehow immune from the novel's inexorably comic logic is also the most ridiculous: Otto Silenus, the avant-garde architect whom Margot, on the strength of his rejected designs for a chewing-gum factory printed in a progressive Hungarian quarterly, hires to renovate her country manor King's Thursday. Silenus is the Bergsonian comic character *par excellence*, the embodiment of the "mechanical encrusted upon the living" (Bergson 92) with a "growing callousness to

³⁰ "I'm in fashion. I've reformed."

³¹ "That was a story...that was the best time we ever had!" Brooks reads this scene pessimistically, arguing that "figure of novelizing [i.e irony] arises from failure of education and action...Frédéric and Deslauriers appear to speak from beyond any possible pertinence of narrative to life" (213).

³² "So the ascetic Ebonites used to turn towards Jerusalem when they prayed. Paul made a note of it. Quite right to suppress them. Then he turned out the light and went to sleep" (293).

social life” (Bergson 147). We first see him sitting “wholly immobile” for hours on end, robotically chomping on a biscuit in isolation as he meditates on his artistic goal of eliminating the human element from architecture. Zealous embracer of Futurist architecture, which Waugh abhorred, Otto is as disdainful of the novel’s characters (even in their need for basic architectural amenities) as the satirist who penned them:

‘I suppose there ought to be a staircase... Why can’t the creatures stay in one place? What an immature, self-destructive, antiquated mischief is man! How obscure and gross his prancing and chattering on his little stage of evolution! How loathsome and beyond words boring all the thoughts and self-approval of this biological by-product! This half-formed, ill-conditioned body! This erratic, maladjusted mechanism of his soul: on one side the harmonious instincts and balanced responses of the animal, on the other the inflexible purpose of the engine, and between them man, equally alien from the *being* of Nature and the doing of the machine, the vile becoming!’

The phrase “vile becoming” looks forward to Waugh’s next novel, a sustained look at just those “vile bodies,” and backwards to the present progressive of the original title: *The Making of an Englishman*. Otto’s jeremiad against architectural necessity transforms directional development into a picaresque vacillation: prancing and chattering instead of *becoming*. By making man’s *telos* a perpetual “vile becoming,” he dismantles the myth of individuation, and, by extension, the formal work of the *Bildungsroman*. In other words, he does what Waugh does. Thus his name begins to make more sense.

Sileni, containers whose grotesque exteriors belie their salubrious balms, date back to a long comic tradition, specifically Greek satyr plays, and appear most notably in Alcibiades’ description of Socrates at the end of “The Symposium.” Waugh goes to such lengths to paint Otto as ridiculous, pretentious, and at times cruelly inhuman better to emphasize the balm-like quality of his wisdom. Otto’s name demands that we take him seriously *despite* his ridiculousness. Silenus, like *Sileni*, breaks down distinctions; everything about Silenus points to this delirious transcendence of limitations. Like his version of King’s Thursday, which is “much more elaborate that it looks from outside” (173), Silenus is the character that manages to erase the inside/outside distinction, who sits astride the novel in way that Paul cannot. Silenus constantly yokes together contraries. He is the most complex character in the novel and the simplest, a comic caricature, yet one whose very name demands that we look for a depth belied by his apparent flatness. He is at once peripatetic, leaving King’s Thursday without even packing his bags only to turn up later in Corfu, and stationary, sitting “wholly immobile” for hours on end when we first see him. He is at once espouser of the avant-garde and disgusted at its results. He is seemingly aloof (“calloused,” to use the Bergsonian categorization of this type) presence in the novel’s social fabric, but most prescient observer of its patterns. He scorns bourgeois values, yet is the one character appreciative of its most boorish representative, Lord Maltravers: “I thought he was a very sensible old man. He was the only one who didn’t think it necessary to say something nice about the house (177).”

Precisely because he seems capable of being both inside the novel and outside of it, Waugh gives him the novel’s equivalent of the Sermon on the Mount,³³ a key speech

³³ Erasmus likened Jesus to a Silenus in *Adages*.

in which he divides the world between static and dynamic characters (Paul obviously belonging to the former category), and observes the delirious comic pattern governing the novel:

Life...is like the big wheel at Luna Park...You pay five francs and go into a room with tiers of seats all round, and in the centre the floor is made of a great disc of polished wood that revolves quickly. At first you sit down and watch the others. They are all trying to sit in the wheel, and they keep getting flung off, and that makes them laugh, and you laugh too. It's great fun...at the very centre there's a point completely at rest, if only one could find it. I'm not sure I am not very near that point myself. Of course the professional men get in the way. But the whole point of the wheel is that you needn't get on it at all, if you don't want to. (282-3)

Gorra cites this scene as the one in which Waugh tries "to force its comedy outside [its] boundaries" and into a space beyond the limits of the comic novel: "[Waugh] longs...for one spot of immobile stability from which to see the whole mechanical world revolve, a place exempt from the limitations of the life he describes—a place that is not, in itself, comic" (206). However, to divorce the idea of "center of rest" from either Silenus or the perfect comic novel of which it is part misses the point. Gorra's account treats the novel's structuring comic vision as if it were an exoskeleton to be sloughed off once it has led us to this center. But with *Sileni*, the healing balm can't be separated from its container, however grotesque. The non-comic space would be not getting on the wheel at all; the center of rest is in fact comic, the "superior" ability to encounter the threat of dissolution (the contagious laughter and expulsion) but remain firmly planted and distanced from those getting spun off, laughing all the way. It is where Silenus *nearly* is, and the point from which Waugh deploys his lethal style.

Beyond Decline and Fall

Waugh's comic *Bildungsroman* doesn't merely arrest development, but arrests it violently. The chronic indefiniteness in the novel makes the threat of such violent ends endemic, as likely to strike its protagonist as one of its tangential characters. Moreover, Waugh studiously maintains a detached distance from each instance of comic violence, establishing a mastery from which the other characters, especially Paul, are tyrannically excluded. Silenus, then, comes closest to attaining the center of rest from which Waugh executes his comic vision, the closest to being Waugh's mouthpiece, ironic because he is arguably the silliest character in the novel, but fitting because he is also the most inhuman, the most detached from his fellow man. Part of the lethal style is precisely this detachment, and thus to move from *Decline and Fall* to *The Loved One*, I suggest that Silenus, not Paul Pennyfeather, is Dennis Barlow's true ancestor. This comic ancestry explains Barlow's inheritance of Waugh's lethal style, an inheritance which allows him ultimately to claim the definite article of the novel's title as his own, to translate the generic loved one (each "client" of the funeral parlor) into a specific loved one. Over the course of the novel, "the" loved one becomes "our loved one" (160) (referring to the Dennis-Joyboy Aimée triangle) before Dennis gains sole possession in the last line as he coolly and dispassionately awaits "his loved one's final combustion" (164).

If the novel is about making the loved one into Dennis' loved one, it is also about the disappearance of anything resembling love; its subject is the love of death and the death of love, and how each is vital to Dennis' aesthetic education. Dennis Barlow is a

twenty-eight year old British veteran of World War II. Having written one volume of well-praised poetry, he moves to Los Angeles to write for the sinisterly named Megalopolitan Studios. When we first meet him, he has since quit his Hollywood post and begun working at “The Happier Hunting Ground,” a pet mortuary. The novel begins with Dennis and his mentor Sir Francis Hinsley, former head script writer at Megalopolitan and fellow “countrym[a]n exiled in the barbarous region of the world” (4), both in state of creative exhaustion. When Sir Francis hangs himself in their apartment after he is unceremoniously fired from Megalopolitan after years of service, Dennis travels to Whispering Glades, a state of the art funeral home offering a dizzying variety of options. There, he spots Aimée Thanatogenos, a promising young cosmetician, and begins a courtship that eventually leads to *her* suicide. He finally returns to his native shore, not necessarily “as a sadder and a wiser man,” but as a reenergized artistic one. Having deposited his “young heart” on the Los Angeles strand, he carries back “a great, shapeless chunk of experience, the artist’s load...the moment of vision for which a lifetime is often too short” (163-4). *The Loved One* is presumably the result.

Dennis’ acquisition of the “artist’s load” coincides with his acquisition of his lethal style, the style which allows him to shape that shapeless chunk of experience: to give definition to the death swirling around him. Taking place between two mortuaries, one of which is called “the great necropolis” (38), *The Loved One* is infused with *thanatos*; Dennis endlessly recites lines from Tennyson’s “Tithonus,” about the Greek mortal who wishes for immortality to be with his lover, the sun-goddess Aurora, but forgets to ask for eternal youth, leaving him as a “white-haired shadow” withering in the arms of his lover and wanting nothing but to be released from “cruel immortality.” Sir Francis (a Tithonus figure himself³⁴) informs Dennis early on that he is the young man’s “*memento mori*” (14), and the first poem that Dennis, “half in love with easeful death,” passes off as his own in order to woo Aimée (whose last name indicates her particular affinity for death) is Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale.” Dennis starts out having only a “vicarious intimacy with death” (35), but once he encounters Sir Francis’ hanging corpse, the sight aesthetically excites him, his mentor’s death paradoxically reviving Dennis’ artistic *Bildung*:

The spectacle had been rude and momentarily unnerving; perhaps it had left a scar somewhere out of sight in his subconscious mind. But his reason accepted the event as part of the established order. Others in gentler ages had had their lives changed by such a revelation; to Dennis it was the kind of thing to be expected in the world he knew and, as he drove to Whispering Glades, his conscious mind was pleasantly exhilarated and full of curiosity. (38-9)

When at the end of the novel Dennis is forced to dispose of Aimée’s body in the pet mortuary’s crematorium, even the “momentary unnerving” has by now vanished. He coolly reads a book as he presides over his Dido’s combustion. This pronounced apathy is a very different species than Paul’s, since Dennis’ lack of emotion, cold-hearted though it is, reflects an understanding of the novel’s symbolic rules. He becomes a sane version of *Decline and Fall*’s Revelations-spouting maniac in that he does not exist emotionally

³⁴ “The studios keep us going with a pump. We are still just capable of a few crude reactions—nothing more. If we ever got disconnected from our bottle, we should simply crumble” (14).

or morally but sees the world only symbolically (in his case through an *artistic* lens rather than apocalyptic one). So divorced is Dennis, a man of “sensibility rather than of sentiment” (38), from the emotional content of the novel that he doesn’t neglect to add a bit of black humor to the affair before departing, sending Aimée’s distraught fiancée the pet cemetery’s standard condolence card for deceased canines: “Your little Aimée is wagging her tail in heaven tonight.” Dennis intuitively grasps the symbolic value of Aimée’s death—how he can fancifully incorporate it into his *Bildung*—and immediately inscribes it within a poetic tradition. His eulogy consists solely in inserting her name into a Poe poem about Helen of Troy: “Aimée, thy beauty was to me,/ Like those Nicean barks of yore,/ That gently, o’er a perfumed sea/ The weary way-worn wanderer bore/ To his own native shore.” This is the symbolically full epitaph, one that inscribes the loved one into a literary tradition and squares her death with Dennis’s own journey, but Dennis also inserts her into a ridiculous pet mortuary template. The specific nature of the insertion, whether poignant or absurd, whether about Greek myth or a deceased canine, matters less than how each acts as an index of his control over the death of the loved one, the ability to shape it according to his own symbolic or parodic ends.

The other shaper of symbolic or parodic ends is of course Waugh. He cordons Los Angeles off both symbolically (as a land of the setting sun at the “quiet limit of the world”) and geographically: “No one in Southern California, as you know, ever inquires what goes on beyond the mountains” (160), Dennis tells Joyboy as they plot to cover up Aimée’s death. The novel’s clear geographical demarcation has an analogous demarcation of its generic boundaries. *The Loved One*’s title page identifies it as an “Anglo-American tragedy,” a generic definition qualified later in terms of a more specific sub-generic fixing: “I have become the protagonist of a Jamesian problem... All his stories are about the same thing – American innocence and European experience... The stories are all tragedies one way or another” (121). Between the title page and first chapter the mapping continues with “A Warning,” which defines the novel as “purely fanciful tale, a little “nightmare.” Waugh’s definitional insistence on just what kind of a novel this is mirrors the central preoccupation of its protagonist, which is to wrest control of the allusive apparatus from Waugh, to symbolically define the people and events of the novel for himself (starting with the loved one). Intertextuality is in the novel’s marrow, from the recurring Tithonus myth to Dennis’ plagiarized poems from the Oxford Book of English Verse (“In the dying world I come from [poetic] quotation is a national vice” (139) says Dennis), to Aimée’s “very poetic occupation” (88). Thus the novel’s central *agon* takes place on a literary battlefield. Who can coolly find the most “remarkably apposite” (163) allusion to manage *The Loved One*’s atrocities, which include a hanging, a legion of human and animal corpses in varying states of *rigor mortis*, and a final human combustion? In other words, who gets to make the deaths *mean* something?

Take for example the symbolic tug-of-war over Aimée’s symbolic status. Aimée is “one of that new race of exquisite, amiable, efficient young ladies whom [Dennis] had met everywhere in the United States” (42), but she is also a *defined* novelistic presence, a definitiveness arising both from her intrinsic uniqueness and from her symbolic value to Dennis: *the* loved one. Waugh culls her from the “standard product” (54) American woman by paradoxically likening her to a more universal character type:

...the girl who entered was unique. Not indefinitely; the appropriate distinguishing epithet leapt to Dennis's mind the moment he saw her: sole Eve in a bustling hygienic Eden, this girl was a decadent. (54)

The Eve reference sets up an allegorical structure that initially seems apposite but proceeds to collapse over the course of the novel. Dennis, the "frontier-man" (79) would in this framework be Adam, and the two, both "half in love with easeful death," would revel in Whispering Glades' reconstructed, *thanatos*-tinged Eden. But the *Genesis topos* is a feint, since Aimée operates on a broader sphere of human drives, *eros* (Aimée) and *thanatos* (Thanatogenos), a sphere that precludes the possibility of any mortal companion (Adamic or otherwise): "She was far removed from social custom and human obligations. The protagonists, Dennis and Mr. Joyboy, were quite forgotten. The matter was between herself and the deity she served" (150). Torn between two men she neither understands nor ultimately values (she forgets about Dennis whenever he's not there), her death turns out to be an Attic rather than Edenic *nostos*:

Aimée Thanatogenos spoke the tongue of Los Angeles...brain and body were scarcely distinguishable from the standard product, but the spirit – ah, the spirit was something apart; it had to be sought afar; not here in the musky orchards of the Hesperides, but in the mountain air of the dawn, in the eagle-haunted passes of Hellas. An umbilical cord of cafes and fruit shops, of ancestral shady businesses (fencing and pumping) united Aimée, all unconscious, to the high places of her race...Aimée withdrew herself into a lofty and hieratic habitation.

In the same way that Grimes evaporates out the *Decline and Fall*, morphing into an immortal satyr, Aimée gets translated into Greek myth. James Lynch notes the affinities between the warming dawn of Aimée's suicide scene and Tennyson's Aurora's "mystic change," which turns Tithonus "dewy-warm." Lynch's reading identifies Aimée as Aurora, and he is right, but Dennis needs her to be something more specific to him. After Waugh culls her from the novel's race of efficient young American women to be the sacrificial victim of his "Anglo-American Tragedy," Dennis, in turn, culls her to be the sacrificial victim of *his* particular Anglo-American tragedy, his "nautch girl and vestal virgin" (143). The novel ends as Dennis wrests control of Aimée's multi-dimensional allegorical status; he needs to make her tragedy *mean* something to him; his ironic viewpoint doesn't allow it to mean something emotionally, so he must find a way to turn it into his own "remarkably apposite" artistic inspiration: Helen of Troy, the personification of spoils if there ever was one.

Whispering Glades

The comic lethal style masters the death of the loved one by wrestling for and redefining that definite article: *the* loved one becomes Dennis's loved one and then Dennis's Helen. The particular setting on which this battle unfolds is particularly suitable for a comic battle over definition. Whispering Glades is the perfect arena for this contest over definition, since it's all surface, a deliriously artificial collection of themed mausoleums that are replicas of European edifices.³⁵ One can opt to be buried on the grounds of Lake

³⁵ Compare to the fate of Llanabba Castle, which, owing to the lord's 1760 decision to convert the manor into an emblem of enlightened feudalism, is a schizophrenic mess and

Isle of Innisfree, or a Robert Burns kirk, or Oxford's Christ Church, which, as its placard informs the visitors "...is more than a replica, it is a reconstruction. A building-again of what those old craftsmen sought to do with their rude implements of by-gone ages. Time has worked its mischief on the beautiful original. Here you see it as the first builders dreamed of it long ago" (78). The resultant ersatz structures are devoid of the rude charm of Ruskinian craftsmanship and free from the historical ravages that so haunt a structure like Brideshead: free floating signs of various cultural traditions and unmoored to any.³⁶ Just as it erects facades without history, it strives to capture "personality" or "Soul" as cosmetically achievable categories: "Should I put him down as serene and philosophical or judicial and determined?" (56) asks Aimee of one client. Furthermore, just as the European architectural tradition is flattened out in the reproductions of Whispering Glades' mausoleum, so the European literary tradition is flattened to accommodate Whispering Glades' poetic business pitches: "Realize that death is not a private tragedy of your own but the general lot of man. As Hamlet so beautifully writes: 'Know that death is common; all that live must die.'" (53). And yet despite the inherent comedy of its pretensions, Whispering Glades conjures up in Dennis a purely aesthetic feeling that is *not* "primarily satiric" (79); the American simulacrum hurls Dennis into a Schillerian "joyous realm of play" and provides him with the second crucial catalyst in his aesthetic education (Sir Francis' death being the first). *Why* this happens, I argue, has to do with comic indefinability.³⁷

If the novel's central *agon* is over definition, Whispering Glades and its chief representative, Joyboy, fail to achieve it despite their most arduous efforts. Rather than maintaining the clean definition of its ideal, a Platonic state of unchanging forms, faces, and edifices, the great necropolis continually blurs the line between the blasphemous and the holy, the permanent and the ephemeral, the defined and the shapeless, elevated diction and lapsed diction, the human and the animal, the elegant and the grotesque, and finally the serious and the comic. Whispering Glades's gloriously absurd struggle with self-definition is what spurs Dennis to cement his own self-image.

The Loved One, set at the "quiet limit of the world," is a novel of excess definition. It is full of things being fixed, firmed and inscribed. Take, for example, Megalopolitan Studio, which binds the entire life of its employees within the confines of a contract:

"[Sir Francis'] contract wasn't renewed." They were words of ill-omen to all that assembled company, words never spoken without the furtive touching of wood or crossing of fingers; unholy words best left unsaid. To each of them was given a span of life between the signature of the contract and its expiration; beyond that lay the vast unknowable. (33)

eventually becomes a film set: "From the back it looks very much like any other large country house...But from the front...it is formidably feudal (18).

³⁶ *Bridehead Revisited* turns the "mischief" time works on architecture into a virtue: "I loved buildings that grew silently with the centuries, catching and keeping the best of each generation, while time curbed the artist's pride and the Philistine's vulgarity, and repaired the clumsiness of the dull workman" (226).

³⁷ For Waugh and his readers of course Whispering Glades is almost entirely satiric.

Megalopolitan controls the span of life between the signature and expiration of a contract; Whispering Glades takes over from there and provides contractual terms for the “vast unknowable.” Offering whatever “form of final preparation” (53) one desires, Whispering Glades has plots that are “fixed-up” poetic” (82) and rooms brimming with “firming” (72) corpses made up to have a particularly “marked Soul” (88). Its chief cosmetician, Mr. Joyboy, inspires great confidence in his restorative skills since he can “fix” even the “hardest of expressions (56) on the faces of loved ones. Upon learning that Dennis is a first time visitor to Whispering Glades, the Mortuary Hostess elaborates their system: “‘The Park is zoned. Each zone has its own name and appropriate Work of Art. Zones of course vary in price and within the zones the prices vary according to their proximity to the Work of Art.’” (43).³⁸ The bizarre amalgamation of spiritual, aesthetic and economic zoning—affixing a circumscribed plot, artwork, and value to each final resting place—paradoxically launches Dennis into an *unbounded* area, a “zone of insecurity in the mind where none but the artist dare trespass” (79). “Insecurity” and “trespass”: the words connote an entry into an almost illicit space within this novel of limits and regulated zones, a space for self-definition uniquely accessible to him: “There was something in Whispering Glades that was necessary to him, that only he could find” (80-1).

And yet Whispering Glades, that firmly defined surface world of serenity built around death, is prey to the same crises of distinction that plagues *Decline and Fall*. Over the course of the novel its carefully constructed façade crumbles. Aimée realizes that the fixity of her work is disturbingly ephemeral, either “burned sometimes within a few hours” (89) or losing its tonality while deteriorating in a mausoleum. And just as the work fails to maintain its definition, the lofty, the visionary rhetoric of Whispering Glades’s mission statement—“Behold I dreamed a dream and I saw a New Earth sacred to HAPPINESS. (39)—continually falls into the profane. Once Dennis talks to a hostess long enough, she “disconcertingly” lapses from her “high diction” in her description of a recent job: They fixed that stiff...so he looked like it was his wedding day” (47). And we learn that Joyboy’s mission is to combat a general “decline of gentility” chipping away at the estate’s elevated, serene conception of itself: “There had been talk of ‘bodies’ and ‘cadavers’; one jaunty young embalmer from Texas had even spoke of “‘the meat’.” (66) Furthermore, just as the mortuary is always slipping from the sacred to the profane, Whispering Glades can’t make the distinction between the human and animal funeral parlor hold. Whispering Glades, that “mecca of replicates” and its “kinda holy” (95) aura, is dismissive of the Happier Hunting Ground’s attempts to replicate its methods for a pet clientele, which seems “kinda blasphemous” (95). The casual diction reveals the fragility of the differentiation between it and the Happier Hunting Ground, the “serious” business of interring humans contrasted with the absurdity of stuffing family pets. But *both* are absurd, doubles rather than opposites. Aimée’s death is case in point: though Joyboy finds Aimée’s corpse at Whispering Glades, temporarily keeping her in a refrigerator they use for “half-finished work” (153), she is ultimately disposed of at the Happier Hunting Ground. Dennis drives home the collapsing distinction with characteristically blunt irony:

³⁸ A double plot next to a replica of Rodin’s “The Kiss” costs \$150; the price tag for a plot next to Lake Isle bee-loud glade runs closer to a thousand.

We are happy-go-lucky people at the Happier Hunting Ground. There are no formalities. If I arrive here with a casket and say, Mr. Schulz [his boss], I've a sheep here to incinerate, he says, 'Go ahead.' Once you seemed inclined to look down on us for our easy manner. Now perhaps you feel differently. (160)

Joyboy does feel differently, because when faced with this crisis he is reduced to a stuttering child capable of only a few grunts, groans, and a "litany of mommas and poppas and babies" (154).

Mr. Joyboy, Whispering's Glades' "spirit incarnate" (143) and "true artist" (57), is professionally "successful and defined" (102) but physically, there is a telling "lack of shape in his head and body" (66). His shapelessness is key; we recall that at the end of the novel Dennis extracts a "shapeless mass of experience from America," but his abstract haul contains the possibility of future form. Joyboy's excess of professional definition renders his body an undifferentiated mass of flesh; there is something undeveloped about him, something distinctly, and sterile, American. His servile relation to his mother, combined with his regressively childish panic (a contrast to Dennis' cool, if chilling, treatment of Aimée's death) indicates his failure to develop fully, which in Waugh's world means either failing to acquire, or inevitably falling victim to, the lethal style. Perversely, development is only possible as a form of lethality. Overly affected by his loved one's death, the once defined Joyboy can't even finish a sentence. The spirit incarnate of a mecca of replicates can only replicate the semblance of maturity.

Joyboy's status as a "true artist" is as shaky as his personal and professional definition. He prides himself on the ability to transfigure the face of any corpse into an aesthetically pleasing recreation of the loved one's personality. But when Joyboy uses his artistic discretion to give Sir Francis, in full post-hanging *rigor mortis*, his trademark "radiant childhood smile," grotesquerie abounds:

...the face was entirely horrible; as ageless as a tortoise and as inhuman; a painted and smirking obscene travesty by comparison with which the devil-mask Dennis had found in the noose was a festive adornment, a thing an uncle might don at a Christmas party. (75)

The *sileni* from *Decline and Fall* reappear, but now we just get the distorted exterior empty of balm. America for Waugh is all grotesque surface; what we glimpse here is a heightened form of the inherent travesty of Whispering Glades and its architectural facades too polished to be true. Joyboy's "painted and smirking obscene travesty" bears as much resemblance to art as his name does to his stolid personality.³⁹ We do, however, get an "artistic" ancestry for Whispering Glades different from Aimée's elevated conception of her boss's embalming talents: vaudeville. When Dennis is intrigued by the sartorial ingenuity of dressing the deceased in only the front of a given outfit, he is informed that "the idea came from the quick change artists of vaudeville" (48). This

³⁹ Which is why it produces bad art, doggerel:

"They told me, Francis Hinsely, they told me you were hung
With red protruding eyeballs and black protruding tongue
I wept as I remembered how often you and I
Had laughed about Los Angeles and now 'tis here you'll lie;
Here pickled in formaldehyde and painted like a whore,
Shrimp-pink, incorruptible, nor lost or gone before." (85)

admission of the mortuary's vocational origins ironically undercuts Whispering Glades' pretentious artistic conception of itself and identifies it with the very comic treatment Dennis avoids (recall that his interest is not primarily satiric). The comic and the profane always sabotage the futile attempt to wall them out; in Hollywood horror movie terms, *The call is coming from inside the house!* The comedic, "quick-change" forces that deflate Whispering Glades' pretensions, debase its language, render its "art" grotesque, jumpstart its distinctive crises and reduce Joyboy to a sniveling child are interwoven with the "embalming" practices that seek to inflate Whispering Glades' sense of itself, elevate its language, render its "art" sublime, firmly differentiate itself from its imitators and finally allow its chief corpse "fixer" a hyper-defined professional distinction.

I began this chapter by pointing out that Prendergrast's futile attempt to localize ridicule reflected a fundamental misunderstanding of the systemic nature of comedy, its tendency to overstep bounds and limits. Joyboy's failure to grasp the systemic comedy of Whispering Glades doesn't get him beheaded, but dooms him to a regressive childhood. He treats his deathly comic profession with deadly seriousness, and as a result becomes risible muddle of man. Dennis, on the other hand, achieves definition through his equally comic profession, a *play* vocation which he uses as a source for later conversion into art. However ridiculous that vocation is (at one point he debates Aimée about the propriety of an open-casket funeral for a parrot), Dennis uses it as a jumping off point to confidently map out his career in totalizing detail: aspirations, business niche, style, and placement within a long intellectual tradition.

My dear [Aimée], you as an American should be the last to despise a man from starting at the bottom of the ladder. I can't claim to be as high in the mortuary world as your Mr. Joyboy, but I am younger, very much better looking, and I wear my own teeth. I have a future in the Non-sectarian Church...I have the makings of a great preacher – something in the metaphysical seventeenth century manner, appealing to the intellect rather than to crude emotion. (141)

It is no coincidence that Dennis, a kind of latter-day John Donne, harbors clerical aspirations, since from the beginning of the novel his status as a "poet" is based more on faith than on works. And indeed, Dennis's poetic output, like faith, remains unsubstantiated within the novel.⁴⁰ No one actually reads his poems; he profits from Aimée's ignorance to pawn off English classics as his own, and even his roommate and mentor, Sir Francis, prefers to take his poet status on faith rather than read his verses: "I should not understand them and I might be led to question the value of a sacrifice which I now applaud. You are a young man of genius, the hope of English poetry. I have heard it said and devoutly believe it." (13)

Exile to the dream world of replicates furnishes the conditions wherein one needs only have faith in appearance. Thus, to return home from his exile, to discover his own voice, he has to commit one more act of plagiarism at Aimée's funeral, his first and last non-sectarian office: "Very well. I will recite instead a little poem I have written for the occasion." When he begins to recite the Poe, Joyboy objects: "Hey, you can't say that.

⁴⁰ The closing paragraph gestures towards a future poetic output worthy of Dennis' former identity as the "hope of English poetry," but during the novel he can neither bring himself to write an elegy for Sir Francis (he comes up with a grotesque doggerel) nor woo Aimée with an original poem.

That's the phony poem." (162) Joyboy, spirit incarnate of the phony, is partly right. He is no more in a position to distinguish the phony from the authentic than to realize his own inherent comedy, but Dennis Barlow's aesthetic education *is* entirely through the phony. The phony allows Dennis to see the world as his own personal *kairos*: amoral, unsentimental, and "purely fanciful" (i) in its handling of the pervasive death around him.⁴¹ *The Loved One* isolates Dennis from the moral or sentimental, immersing him in a world so profoundly imbued with the comic that it allows him to view it with something other than satire, to find in its delirious artificiality an ideal ground to shape it according to his own personal and aesthetic needs. This ability to shape the world, often violently, out of a crisis of distinctions is what I call the lethal style, the same style that victimizes Paul, Prendergrast, and Tangent to arrest development in *Decline and Fall*. The Loved One has its protagonist develop, but the lethal style has a cost. The goal of the *Bildungsroman* protagonist is inclusion. Telling, therefore, that the novel, which ends with an artistic call-to-arms as forceful as Stephen Dedalus' vow to forge the uncreated conscience of his race, begins with an exclusionary disclaimer, "A Warning: This is a purely fanciful tale, a little nightmare produced by the unaccustomed high living of a brief visit to Hollywood...The squeamish should return their copies to the library or the bookstore unread" (i). Comic *Bildungsromans* are rated "R." Waugh's lethal style is a type of *pharmakos*, a poisonous cure for *chronos* that sacrifices the human element of the *Bildungsroman*'s developmental narrative in order to achieve a profane *kairos*.

⁴¹ Consider two examples of this complete aversion to unironized sentimentality. Remonstrating the blubbing Joyboy, Dennis enjoins him to stop intruding his "private and rather peculiar terms of endearment into what should be a serious discussion" (153). This only moments after facetiously suggesting that Aimée was poisoned by the fast-food hamburgers she and Dennis ate the previous night. Then, in the midst of extorting Joyboy, he explains his motives as the "sentimental" wish to return to England in the same style in which he came.

Comic Chaos Confined: Beckett and the *Bildungsroman*

“What a blessing nothing grows, imagine if all this stuff were to start to grow.” (*Happy Days*)

In *Happy Days*, the highlight of Winnie’s day is hearing a good solid definition. Buried up to her waist throughout the first act (her neck throughout the second), baking in the remorseless sun with Willie, her less than attentive husband, Winnie impatiently and repeatedly asks a question seemingly unrelated to her plight: “What is a hog, Willie, please!” When he finally obliges, curtly explaining to her that a hog is a “castrated male swine...reared for slaughter,” Winnie’s relief is exquisite. Gazing out onto the sere landscape with an increasingly radiant countenance, she responds: “Oh this is a happy day!” Why would a woman mired in such a Dantesque hell harp on such trivialities, and how can she translate such trivialities (and the less-than-cheerful content of the definition) into a “happy day?” Because in Beckett any definition, no matter how bleak, can turn “a disturbance into words...a pillow of old words” (*Watt* 117). I begin with this scene because it demonstrates the centrality, and fundamental comedy, of Beckett’s urge to define. This definitional urge generates a kind of degenerative content, one in which exquisite pleasure mingles freely, indeed coexists with, the utmost despair.

Definitions as clear as Willie’s are hard to come by in Beckett’s oeuvre. Be it Vladimir and Estragon debating whether the lone bit of the flora in their desolate landscape is a tree, bush, or a shrub, or Krapp desperately trying to remember the meaning of the word “viduity” (which he had confidently deployed as a younger man), systemic indefiniteness is as much a part of Beckett’s signature as his scholar tramps, who are *themselves* equally indefinite.⁴² The first sustained character of Beckett’s imagination, Belacqua Shuah of *Dreams of Fair to Middling Women*, resists definition as insistently as he resists any and all of his social, and narrative, obligations: “We picked Belacqua for the job [as protagonist] and now we find that he is not able for it” (126). He is at once a “juvenile man, scarcely pubic” (173), and a “compound of ephebe and old woman,” a “shuffling...horrible border-creature” (123), whose “botched circumscription” (186) sums up the definitional crisis all his subsequent characters face: “Thus little by little Belacqua may be described, but not circumscribed; his terms stated, but not summed” (125). In this brief statement lies the entire Beckett canon, setting up the framework of a method destined to collapse under the relentless demands of his *cacoethes scribendi*: the inability to circumscribe, the urge to circumlocution.⁴³ Despite Beckett’s acknowledgement that a character like Belacqua is destined to remain “outside the enceinte of our romaunt” (186), he never gives up the illusory quest to force him (and future protagonists) back in, to subject him to a new round of botched circumscriptions.

⁴² Take, for example, Malone’s age: “I call myself an octogenarian, but I cannot prove it. Perhaps I am only a quinquagenarian, or a quadrenarian. It is ages since I counted them, my years I mean” (185). Or consider *Company*’s ageless hearer: “You are no older now than you always were” (27).

⁴³ Belacqua calls *cacoethes scribendi*, or the urge to write, “the doom of the best of penmen” (*DOFMW* 134).

Molloy's description of his past life as a student of anthropology perfectly captures the simultaneous allure and futility of such a quest: "What I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless negation of man, relentless definition of man as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he is not" (39). Beckett's narrative version of this anthropological method gives rise to an unrelenting series of negated, undefined characters: *unnameables*.

Part of the difficulty of definition in Beckett is that the characters exist in pure *chronos*, a state of perpetual becoming without definite progress: "The mistake they make of course is to speak of him as if he really existed, in a specific place, whereas the whole thing is no more than a project for the moment" (*U* 371). Beckett's fictions wash into the hearts of their characters, cleaving them at the slightest hint of permanence in favor of a pathological conjuring of congeners: Malone spawning a succession of Malones, Molloy spawning Moran, the Unnameable spawning Worm (itself a replicating creature), and *Company*'s second person protagonist, "you," spawning "countless others." As Malone points out, "It is difficult to speak of man, under such conditions" (286), and indeed to speak of a *Bildung* under these conditions seems downright perverse. Yet I argue that Beckett's obsession with definition, and the often comic failure to achieve it, depends on the genre *par excellence* of definition: the *Bildungsroman*. As Beckett remarked to a friend about the meaning of *Waiting for Godot* in an assessment that is equally applicable to comedy and *Bildung*: "It's all symbiosis."⁴⁴

One can map the definitional crisis Beckett's characters face onto the structure of the *Bildungsroman*, which tries in the same way to force a fit, to circumscribe, sum, summarize and confine characters within the "enceinte" of their fictional societies, and in the process makes it hard to tell whether the comic grotesquerie of the characters is an underlying condition or the result of society's artificially constricting initiations. Precisely because the *Bildungsroman* is a genre all about artificial strictures, it is also conducive to comedy and its unfitted, uncircumscribed, unsummed, and unconfined energies. Similarly, Beckett's embrace of an improvisational existence for his ontologically indefinite characters depends upon working within a constricting scaffolding. In one "Text for Nothing," Beckett imaginatively projects his own structure of confinement: "My keepers, why keepers, I'm in no danger of stirring an inch, ah I see, it's to make me think I'm a prisoner, frantic with corporeality ("gonflé de présence") rearing to get out and away" (123). The French better reflects the ambivalence of this "frantic corporeality," since *gonfler* means to inflate, to fill up with wind, and thus the corporeality becomes not only a prison but also a perverse kind of inspiration.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ From a 1955 letter to Peter Woodthorpe, cited in Knowlson (380).

⁴⁵ Another passage from "Texts" depicts this perverse inspiration, here through violent ventriloquism: "And I'm in good hands again, they hold my head from behind, intriguing detail, as at the hairdresser's...and make merry with my jaws and tongue, to enable me to suffocate, but imperfectly, and to utter, for my good, what I must utter, for my future good, well-known ditty (142). It sounds totalitarian, as do many passages from *The Unnameable*, who is "obliged to speak" (291) and who produces a torrent of words having "to be ratified by the proper authority," one who receives "the verbatim report of the proceedings" and determines "the words that count (369). But Beckett is less interested in the political implications of such compulsions than in their narrative ones.

Furthermore, in an exquisite pun from another “Text for Nothing” Beckett describes his “frantic” corporeality as a *mise en corps*. The English translation renders this as “committal to flesh,” though that loses the theatrical connotation of the French, the performative obligation of the burdensome body. For Beckett’s creature, a committal to flesh is not only a confinement but also a committal to theater, to a *mise-en-scene* without a script. That it is without a script is key; the illusion of improvisation is behind all Beckett’s work, from Didi and Gogo’s time-killing “little canters” to Malone’s decision to “never do anything more from now on but play” (180) to the Unnameable, “free to say any old thing, so long as I didn’t go silent” (396), and his exhaustive search for the “statement that will dispose of [him]” (303). And yet in every case improvisational spirit only comes into being through structures of confinement, binding committals: a committal to flesh “as the dead are committed to the ground,” (142); Murphy’s adherence to his horoscope; Didi and Gogo anchored to their daily meeting place; or the Unnameable jarred on the Rue Brancion.⁴⁶

In a telling critique of Balzac from *Dreams of Fair to Middling Women*, the narrator faults the French master’s *comédie humaine* precisely because of its aversion to this improvisational spirit:

To read Balzac is to receive the impression of a chloroformed world. He is absolute master of his material, he can do what he likes with it, he can foresee and calculate its least vicissitude, he can write the end of the book before he has finished the first paragraph, because he has turned all his creatures into clockwork cabbages and can rely on their staying put wherever needed or staying going at whatever speed or whatever direction he chooses. The whole thing, from beginning to end, takes place in a spellbound backwash. We all love and lick up Balzac, we lap it up and say it was wonderful, but why call it a distillation of Euclid and Perrault *Scenes from Life*? Why *human* comedy? (DOFMW 120)

Throughout his career Beckett responds to this last question by working to put the human, which for him is an utterly unfinished thing, back in human comedy, to move from Balzac’s panoramic, God-like vision to his own telescopic, daemonic one: “No answer of his was sacred.”⁴⁷ In *Texts For Nothing*, for example, a story collection whose title blaringly advertises its aversion to narrative closure, the narrator reproaches himself for his *kairotic* leanings, for wishing to have his life take place in a spellbound backwash: “that’s the mistake I made, one of the mistakes, to have wanted a story for myself, whereas life alone is enough” (142). But though the cardinal sin in Beckett is to succumb to the temptation of a story, to have faith in Godot’s *kairotic* arrival, the stories all depend

The obligation to speak cuts both ways, since the imperative could come from within (to feel the need to say something) or from without (to be forced to say something) an ambiguity the Unnameable grasps: “I’m neither one side nor the other, I’m the middle, I’m the partition, I’ve two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that’s what I feel, myself vibrating, I’m the tympanum” (U 383).

⁴⁶ Suk’s horoscope advises Murphy to begin his job search on the “very first fourth to fall on a Sunday in 1936” and to be careful in his dealings with “publishers, quadrupeds, and tropical swamps, as these may terminate unprofitably” (23),

⁴⁷ In the *Company* section I’ll elaborate on what I mean by the daemonic, particularly in relation to that novel’s key word: devise.

precisely on such an ordering fiction. The controlling idea of Beckett's incredibly ordered fiction is that of life as a chronicle, but one which contains, even if illusory, a hidden order:

...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 who add them together to make a life. (*U* 395)

One of those people is Beckett, a master adder, the author in whose work the connection between counting and recounting, finding the *words* that count, is most explicit.⁴⁸

Though his creatures, as we've seen with Belacqua, can never be "summed," Beckett never stops adding. Life, and art, become a form of counting and calculation, from Molloy working out permutations to savor and store his sucking stones to Krapp noting the number of bananas he's eaten. As *Company* elegantly puts it: "Simply sums you find a help in times of trouble" (29). Beckett creates an extraordinary tension between his improvisational, chronicle-bound, and ontologically indefinite "creatures" and the "finished" quality, or tight formal coherence, of the total work. Despite Hamm's horror that he and Clov are "beginning...to mean something" in *Endgame*, the greater horror is in relinquishing control over how that meaningless is meticulously ordered.⁴⁹

Thus, I argue that to read his works as a sustained engagement with *Bildung* is less perverse than it sounds. Beckett generates much of his narrative and comic energy by manipulating, and even dismantling several central features of the *Bildungsroman*: self- and social definition becomes ontological indefintion, *kairos* becomes *chronos*, and the voyage of self-discovery (as I discuss shortly) becomes the "necessary staying put." Beckett is not so much critiquing the artificiality of those features as exploiting them; each transformation looks both ways, generating the indefintion through an obsession with definition, generating *chronos* through the faint but ever-present hope of *kairos*, and mapping the necessary journey onto increasingly localized movements and immobilized characters. In tracing the arc from *Murphy* to *Company*, I argue that over the course of his career Beckett doesn't subvert the form so much as refashions *his* definition of *Bildung* from a developmental one into a purifying regression: "The lower the order of mental activity the better the company" (*Company* 7).

To give a better sense of how I see this juxtaposition working, consider Beckett's treatment of the *Bildungsroman* journey of self-discovery. Meister's *Wanderjahr*, the

⁴⁸ In *Company*, for example, Beckett totals the number of times a heart beats in a lifetime, the distance covered by his protagonist throughout his lifetime of walks, the area of a "rustic hexahedron" (28) cabin, the volume of light flooding into a room. See Kenner and Mercier for discussions of Beckett and math.

⁴⁹ Take an impassioned letter Beckett writes to Simone de Beauvoir after the latter refused to publish the second half of a story titled, ironically in this case, *The End* (she mistakenly assumed that the first installment was complete): "...it is quite impossible for me to escape from the duty I have towards one of my creatures. Forgive these grand words. If I feared ridicule, I would stay silent. I have sufficient confidence in you to explain exactly what I feel. It is this. You allow me to speak only to cut me off before my voice has time to mean something. You halt an existence before it can have the least achievement. This is the stuff of nightmares" (Knowlson 360).

French and English *Bildung*'s movement from the provinces to the capital, even Frederic Moreau's compressed travels ("He traveled") in *Sentimental Education*; all of these depend on the notion of self-knowledge gained through movement.⁵⁰ In a journal entry on Hermann Hesse's *Demian*, Beckett reflects on a phrase, "Die notwendige Reise," or "The Necessary Journey," used by Walter Bauer to describe the book: "Journey anyway is the wrong figure. How can one travel to that from which one cannot move away? *Das notwendige Bleiben* [The Necessary Staying Put] is more like it" (*Disjecta* 247). Having recently completed *Murphy*, whose protagonist ties himself up to a rocking chair in order to distance himself from the sight and sounds of London's "mercantile gehenna," Beckett goes on to describe his titular hero as the embodiment of such a necessary staying-put: "That is also in the figure of Murphy in the chair, surrender to the thongs of self, a simple materialisation of self-bondage, acceptance of which is the fundamental unheroic. In the end it is better to perish than be freed" (247). And once untied perishes he does; the novel proceeds inexorably towards a soporific dissolution, towards an indefiniteness appropriate to a hero in an epic of inaction: "...how much more pleasant was the sensation of being a missile without provenance or target, caught up in a tumult of non-Newtonian motion" (66).

Able-bodied Murphy chooses to restrict himself to a state in which "only the most local movements were possible." But as Beckett's career progresses, he starts to make those choices for his characters, who degenerate into states of near-paralysis. *Dreams* begins with the "overfed child" Belacqua pedaling "faster and faster...down a frieze" (1) and each subsequent work steadily proceeds towards less mobile subjects: Didi and Gogo, feet swollen, staying put at the end of each act in *Godot*, Hamm, Nagg, and in *Endgame*, Moran's incapacitating injury and Molloy's crutch-hobble in *Molloy*, Winnie's sand bunker, etc. And yet the more paralytic the characters become, the more movement, however slight, matters, and the more narrative attention is lavished on the specifics of that movement.⁵¹ By the end of Beckett's career, the question of whether the character can even move takes on a range of theoretical, empirical, and even ethical overtones: "Can he move? Does he move? Should he move?" (*Company* 13). Beckett's journey of *Das notwendige Bleiben* applies to his own developing artistic method as well. For example, speaking from his fixed spot on the Rue Brancion, the Unnameable realizes that the principle of "The Necessary Staying Put" is valid for character selection: "When I think of the time I've wasted with these bran-drips, beginning with Murphy...when I had me, on the premises, within easy reach, tottering under my own skin and bones, real ones, rotting with solitude and neglect, till I doubted my own existence" (390). The developing artist turns inward, away from the outward thrust of the *Bildungsroman*, and takes a cue from a fellow Irishman, delving into the "foul rag and bone shop of the heart." That key move, begun during the "siege of the room" and his switch to French, culminates in

⁵⁰ In the comic vein there's the fifth book of Rabelais (an author greatly admired by Beckett), in which Pantagruel and Panurge make a pilgrimage to find the oracle of the *Divine Bouteille*, receive a bit of Socratic advice that renders the energy spent reaching the far-off oracle better spent at home: *Know thyself*.

⁵¹ Take *Molloy* for example, which dedicates long passages to Molloy and his bike, Molloy's method of hobbling along with a crutch, and his strategy for exiting the woods, in which he becomes convinced the only way to advance is to move in circles.

Company, his return to English after nearly forty years of writing in French. In that novel, a series of (largely autobiographical) boyhood memories about traipsing through the Irish countryside recollected by an increasingly immobilized recollector, Beckett dramatizes the career-long whittling down of his narrative world and arrives, “Home!” (44), in more ways than one. Now reduced to crawling, its second person protagonist, now pauses to reflect back on the countless steps he had taken in his life: “Having covered in your day some 25,000 leagues or roughly thrice the girdle and never once overstepped a radius of one from home. Home!” (44). The phrase gets to the heart of a narrative method that digs deeper and deeper into a clearly recognizable authorial self while getting closer and closer to summing up a broader, and non-chloroformed, *comédie humaine*: a sense of permanent incompleteness amidst ever-present constraints, an improvisatory existence that never ceases to test the bounds of its constricting circumstances. Thus *Company*’s protagonist has “no other choice” but to lie prone, and yet “strains to see how best he may lie prone. How most companionably” (41). Though the scope of the necessary journey has narrowed, the stakes are still clear, and still essentially comic: how to find the most “diverting” way to crawl.⁵²

“What’s the wrong word?” (*Ill Seen Ill Said* 56)

The way home starts with *Murphy*, and through a sustained engagement with the *Bildungsroman*. *Murphy* is a novel methodically ordered around the quest to find a word to describe its eponymous hero; in other words, it begins as if it were aping a classical *Bildungsroman*. Yet *Murphy* begins the novel outside the purview of language, in a state of secluded bliss which words can’t adequately describe: “Life in his mind gave him pleasure, such pleasure that pleasure is not the right word.” This is just the first of the novel’s myriad definitional failures, of which the attempt to define *Murphy* is the most disastrous.⁵³ We learn from *Murphy*’s cherished horoscope that his sign is “Mercury...god of thieves, planet *par excellence*” and that it “has no fixed colour” (22). Like Mercury’s color, *Murphy* is hard to fix in a formulated phrase. Noting that *Murphy* is a play on the Greek *morph* (form), Ruby Cohn sees his unfixity as an advantage, since “without Christian name, legitimate occupation, or fixed abode, *Murphy* is free to explore his inner being” (*Back to Beckett* 32). Yet this “freedom” is constantly attacked by an army of definers looking to shape him themselves.

⁵² Beckett uses “diverting” in its literal sense (tracing the swerve of his footsteps) and in both of its figurative ones: plot formation and amusement. Thus he dismisses one hypothetical method thusly: “Crawling in the dark in the way described was too serious a matter” (39).

⁵³ This structural indefinition is by no means confined to Beckett’s human characters as briefly following the thread of canine references through *Murphy* will show. As the narrator reminds us after Coughlin calls Wylie a cur and he calls her a bitch: “They belonged to the same great group” (118). Distinction cedes immediately to dedifferentiation. Furthermore, *Murphy* behaves like a mutt while seeking employment, ambling from pillar to post, leading “a dog’s life without a dog’s prerogatives.” He is then robbed of his lunch by an actual dog, Rosie Dew’s dachshund, which in turn is hard to distinguish its owner (Rosie and her pet share squat legs). The dedifferentiation dance continues.

Upon hearing of Celia's relationship with Murphy, Mr. Kelly, her concerned grandfather, becomes exasperated first at Murphy's lack of means, then at his lack of definition: "Has he any prospects? Has he any retrospects? Has he, is he, anything at all" (14).⁵⁴ His last piece of advice for her, to "terminate an intercourse that must prove fatal" (18) seeks to impose terms, a conclusion, on that which for Celia can be neither defined nor terminated, since as the narrator tells us, "love is wont to end in protasis, if it be love" (131).⁵⁵ As Celia tries to convince Murphy to seek employment, he accuses her of "starving [him] into terms" by throwing him into the "jaws of a job." Beckett playfully navigates amidst the ironies of the expression, which uses starvation as a metaphor for the process that would prevent Murphy and Celia's literal starvation. But "starving into terms," a negotiating expression, also relates to the definitional task she is asking Murphy to undergo: the belt-tightening effect of *terms*, which attempt to rope off and circumscribe the object to be defined. (And given the narrative attention lavished on Murphy's leisurely lunches, the painfulness of this starvation is strong.) Murphy eventually submits, but not before noting that his employment will be the *end* of them both. Celia counters that "work needn't mean any of that" (27), but then again she isn't exactly noted for her definitional prowess: "Not the slightest idea...of what her words mean. No more insight into their implications than a parrot into its profanities" (26).⁵⁶ And indeed Murphy is proved right; the imposed terms do end them, bringing the relationship, and Murphy himself, to their respective terminations.

Other characters find their elusive search for Murphy's essence futile, though not for lack of effort. The novel's first chapter recounts Neary's attempt to put a label on his former pupil's "irrational" heart, shuttling between Apmonia, Isonomy, and Attunement: "But he might call it what he liked, into Murphy's heart it would not enter" (6). As the novel progresses, (or simply "gresses"), Murphy goes by a lot of names: "a chronic emeritus" (16), "long hank of Apollonian asthenia" (32), "schizoidal spasmophile" (32), "the creepy thing that creepeth of the law" (121), "knight-errant" (33), "economic failure" (34), "a fool and a brute" (24), "a creature without initiative" (91), "Bildad the Shuhite" (44), and "the ruins of the ruins of a broth of a boy" (126), to name a few; the latter's nested structure perhaps best encapsulates the futility of the attempt, layering clause upon clause in a description that, under the guise of homing in on Murphy's specificity, actually does nothing of the kind, proceeding from definite to indefinite article, from specific case to generality: a boy.

An early discussion between Wylie and Neary about just what women see in Murphy dramatizes the definitional crisis Murphy inspires:

"It is his" –stopping for want of the right word. There seemed to be, for once, a right word.

"His what?" said Neary...

"His surgical quality," said Wylie.

⁵⁴ Celia responds simply enough, explaining that "Murphy was Murphy."

⁵⁵ "1. In ancient drama: the first part of a play, in which the characters and subject are introduced. 2. The first or introductory clause in a sentence, esp. the clause which expresses the condition in a conditional sentence" (*OED*).

⁵⁶ Celia, a prostitute, has just told Murphy to make himself decent and walk the streets for work.

It was not quite the right word. (39)

Ironically, the very definition belies the messiness of the task: “surgical quality” denotes precision, while the description of Murphy is anything but precise. Wylie and Neary’s conversation throws light on the tautological nature of the title: *Murphy* selects the eponymous character the novel will work to define, but also provides the aptest, and only possible, description of that character.⁵⁷ Celia’s attempt to change Murphy into a man who can support her is a version of Wylie and Neary’s definitional failure and a version of Miss Counihan’s conception of him as a “young aspirant to fiscal distinction” (34); each is an attempt to starve him into terms.

The futile search for the terms with which to describe Murphy is linked to the desire to make Murphy into an end, and, ultimately, to Murphy’s own end. Ironical, then, that Beckett connects Murphy’s demise to a rare moment of definitional clarity. Since his student days and garret in Hanover, Murphy has been searching for similarly charmed living quarters. However, “what passed for a garret in Great Britain and Ireland was really nothing more than an attic. An attic! How was it possible for such a confusion to arise?” (93). By a stroke of magic the apartment Ticklepenny offers him on the grounds of the MMM is not an “attic, nor yet a mansard, but a genuine garret” (91). Definitional clarity arrives at last, if only tragically briefly. There is one crucial problem with the accommodations. Murphy needs fire, and he demands said fire in a manner that starts the slide back towards indefiniteness: “Have fire in this garret before night or – He stopped because he could not go on. It was an aposiopesis of the purest kind” (94).

Ticklepenny’s jubilant solution to the problem completes the slide:

Was it not just the beauty of tubes and wires, that they could be extended? Was it not their chief characteristic, the ease with which they could be extended? What was the point of going in for tubes and wires at all, if you did not extend them without compunction whenever necessary? Did they not cry out for extension? Ticklepenny thought he would never stop, saying feverishly the same thing in slightly different ways.

Ticklepenny’s manic repetition elides the distinction between the literal and the figurative as the rapturous discussion of wires’ extensive properties threatens to extend the passage indefinitely. But extension also invades the Edenic space of the garret and links it to the world below with disastrous consequences; the wire delivers the flammable gas that ends Murphy once and for all and literalizes Miss Counihan’s misconception that Murphy is “sweating his soul out in the East End” (126) for her.⁵⁸ Ticklepenny’s speech about extensiveness is the culminating failure of Murphy’s quest to define himself—spatially, philosophically, romantically, economically—as distinct from London’s mercantile gehenna. (The chief extender, and “pentameter-per-pint poet” (93), Ticklepenny is firmly linked to exchange himself.) Though Murphy likens his mind to a sphere “hermetically closed to the world without” (63), the tragedy of this comedy is that the world keeps butting in, *extending* into his sphere.

⁵⁷ It’s the same trick that *Watt* performs, its play on words both obscures the eponymous character to be defined – What? – and illuminates him: *wattage*.

⁵⁸ Though even this definite end is obscured, since it remains fundamentally ambiguous whether the gas leak was purely accidental or a kind of suicide.

The novel's crisis of distinctions, in other words, extends to Murphy as well. He appears not to "look rightly human" (47), to be a "surd!" (an irrational number) whose infant cry "alone was off the note" (44) and whose prospects of employment are the same in all places" (44), that is, nil. And yet to accept that conception of Murphy is to succumb to what Beckett called the Aliosha mistake [from *The Brothers Karamazov*]: "There seemed to me always the risk of taking [Murphy] too seriously and separating him too sharply from the others" (*Disjecta* 102). The reality is that Murphy, inhuman looks aside, finds himself at the center of a series of intersecting love triangles; his mind might "not function and could not be disposed of according to a principle of worth (64), and yet that mind is often obsessed with questions of worth; his voice may be out of the choir, yet his nights are blissfully described in harmonious terms as a *serenade*, *nocturne*, *albada*; and finally, even the explanation for his own unemployability depends on his employability for some other mysterious post: "His own merits were so recondite, despite of the magical eye, that he obviously could not be appointed by them" (91). A side effect of Murphy's indefiniteness is the inability to detach himself fully from the world around him. Murphy is more closely connected to London's financial world than he (or his hermetically sealed mind) would like to admit. He may be in a parodic novel, but he is surprisingly effective in his role as a *Bildungsroman* protagonist.⁵⁹

Irish Virgins

Murphy is older than the protagonist of most classical coming-of-age novels. We receive hints of a former Irish life, including a prolonged education, an apprenticeship with Neary, and a love affair with Miss Counihan, that could fill out its own coming-of-age tale: *Murphy, the Dublin Years*. Given his off-key voice, his sitting outside of the sun, and his status as a surd, it is only fitting that Murphy comes of age on a delayed time frame compared to the classic *Bildungsroman* protagonist. Yet *Murphy*, despite the delay, is a supremely punctual novel.⁶⁰ Indeed, even its Fielding-like manipulations of narrative ultimately reinforce the carefully constructed timeline of Murphy's narrative world.⁶¹

Murphy is always on time, even early for most encounters. The clock that starts the novel, which Murphy hears as *quid pro quo*, is more than a minatory omen about London's capitalist drive; it sets the tone for the novel's punctuality. Murphy assiduously books his appointments with fate (as prescribed by Suk's horoscope), sometimes years in advance; he shows up to greet Celia at the same time every day after his (purposefully) futile job search; and as a male nurse, Murphy is an "Irish virgin" (135), a sobriquet he earns by completing his rounds early, the novel ends right on time, concluding with a

⁵⁹ The cock-and-bull story Murphy concocts to rid himself of his Irish lover Miss Counihan is the basic scenario of the classical *Bildungsroman*. Counihan thinks that her young man has gone to the capital (in this case to London from Dublin) to achieve "tangible success" (33), "sweating his soul out in the East End, so that [she] may have all the little luxuries to which [she] was accustomed" (126).

⁶⁰ Thus it takes the opposite approach of Flaubert's "failed" *Bildungsroman*, *Sentimental Education*, which Peter Brooks argues is all about being out of sync, ending with a "striking analepsis...as if the novel suddenly discovers that it began too late" (212).

⁶¹ Beckett read *Tom Jones* prior to beginning *Murphy*.

guard punctually closing Kensington Gardens to visitors: *All out*.⁶² The only trace of temporal irregularity is the novel's, or at least Murphy's, hero Mr. Endon, that higher schizoid who wreaks havoc with the novel's perfectly ordered timeframe and to whom Murphy is bound "by a love of the purest possible kind, exempt from the big world's precocious ejaculations of thought, word, and deed" (104). When Endon gets out of his cell and takes over Murphy's rounds, he leaves a permanent scar on the psyche of the hospital's administrator: "This unprecedented distribution of visits had a lasting effect on Bom [the head nurse] and continued to baffle his ingenuity up to and including the day of his death" (139). Endon's puzzling and unprecedented distribution of visits causes a rip in the novel's continuum, a disruption which Murphy, a creature firmly in time, can admire but never replicate. As his name demonstrates, Endon is the novel's fixed ideal, (an "end"), an entity immune from the text's extensions and indefinition. The novel's tragicomedy, then, derives not from Murphy's incapability to live in the world, but rather from Murphy's failure to be like Endon, to live outside of time. Murphy's zealous punctuality only makes his efforts to resist London's clock, and its quid pro quo, all the more doomed.

Homo economicus

Not only is Murphy a punctual figure, he is also a skilled economic one. He is at once parody and embodiment of *homo economicus*.⁶³ Surprisingly ambivalent, Murphy is tremendously attracted to the economic world he strives to avoid and frequently parodies. He lives in London, "the Mecca of every young aspirant to financial distinction" (33), with its *quid pro quo* knelling cuckoo clock. But it is important to note that while Murphy finds the ringing unpleasant, the translation of the clock into the language of capitalism is his own psychic projection. Notice the hedge: "[The sounds] detained him in the world to which they belonged, but not he, as he fondly hoped" (6).⁶⁴ One hears in "fondly hoped" the possibility that he does in fact belong to that economic world, a possibility made painfully clear later during his encounter with Mr. Endon, who truly does not. Murphy is explicit about repudiating London's financial world, "a procuring and a pimping for the money-bags...so that they might breed" (47), and yet he is particularly skilled in maneuvering in and around that dreaded world; moreover, making those money-bags breed (on a small scale) turns out to be one of Murphy's chief amusements.

For example, the relish with which Murphy defrauds a café out of .83 cups of tea points to motives beyond frugality. Murphy's lunch may be a "ritual vitiated by no base thoughts of nutrition" (48), but base thoughts of economy certainly mar its purity. First he gulps down half of his drink, then shams a violent seizure, claiming he has been given the wrong kind of tea. After the waitress rectifies her "error," Murphy promptly drinks a third of his new cup of tea and proceeds to unleash his charm (such as it is: "mingled overtones

⁶² Murphy has Celia procure him the horoscope, which informs him that his lucky years are 1936 and 1990, and indicate that the auspicious date on which to begin his job search is the "very first fourth to fall on a Sunday in 1936" (23).

⁶³ Kenner has linked the Molloy to the obsessive inventorying Crusoe, the first *homo economicus* of English fiction.

⁶⁴ The same hedge occurs to open the novel, Murphy sitting out of the sun "*as though* he were free" (1).

of gratitude and mammary organs”) to obtain a refill on the grounds that the waitress has been too generous with “the cowjuice” (i.e. milk). The end result, he gleefully calculates, is 1.83 cups of tea for the price of one. (Moreover, he saddles Ticklepenny with the bill).⁶⁵ No sooner does the defrauding occur than he exchanges mathematical for moral calculus⁶⁶:

...no matter how the transaction were judged from the economic point of view, nothing could detract from its merit as a little triumph of tactics in the face of the most fearful odds. Only compare the belligerents. On the one hand a league of plutomanic caterers, highly endowed with the ruthless cunning of the sane, having at their disposal all the most deadly weapons of post-war recovery. On the other hand a seedy solipsist and fourpence. (50)

This comic moral calculus is a reflection of the comic *Bildungsroman*’s parodic form, which itself pits the “seedy solipsist” against the impersonal forces of a high-powered, and ruthlessly sane, economy. In a novel that ends in an insane asylum, the word “sane” is carefully chosen, and by the end Beckett circles back to this initial description to *redefine* the plutomanic caterers and their like as clinically *insane*: “the manic... an epitome of all the self-made plutolaters who ever triumphed over empty pockets and clean hands”(96). This crumbling distinction between sanity and pathology applies to the distinction between plutolater and solipsist as well. The thongs with which Murphy ties himself to the chair at the beginning of the novel prove all too necessary to restrain him from London’s *quid pro quo*; he may fondly hope to disassociate himself from the world, but this “seedy solipsist” is a ruthlessly sane economic operator himself.

Murphy is an actor, seducer, and entrepreneur, and effective in each capacity. Murphy’s repeated bilking of .83 of tea not only sets up a parodic microcosm of *homo economicus*, it is more generally *play* (albeit with a predetermined end). In that the ruse demands a performance, one governed by a fairly predictable and repeatable script, it is a bit of theater; day in and day out, Murphy returns at roughly the same time to put on roughly the same show. But it is also play in the more general sense, since the stakes of the operation are only partly monetary. Murphy could be richer than Croesus and still wage tactical war against the plutolaters (as they, in fact, wage war amongst themselves); in fact, the ruse is so much fun that the narrator famously suggests that we “gentle skimmer[s]” (51) try it ourselves! Thus we have Murphy as *homo economicus* by way of *homo ludens*. In the same way that a Beckett character is always a *mise-en-corps*, he is also a *mise-en-économie*, and that participation in the economic system, in society, is always a chance to play. Murphy’s obsession with counting and value, then, indicate not so much an acquisitive nature as a narcissistic (and theatrical) one. Murphy performs at being a player in the economy, and that “play” reappears in abstracted forms all the way through the canon to *Company*, when he is still counting the volume of light, of steps, and still finding “figures a comfort” (28). Despite his assertions to the contrary, Murphy’s mind is arranged on the “correct cash register lines” (101). That he *wishes* it weren’t

⁶⁵ It is no accident that he meets Ticklepenny here, since he is the artist who has fully translated the dreaded *quid pro quo* into the realm of art.

⁶⁶ Murphy reasons that the tea costs “ten times what it cost to produce and five times what it cost to fling in his face.”

doesn't make him any closer to one of his idealized "higher schizoids," but only binds him more tragically to a system he both hates and playfully manipulates.

Murphy's Suit

Murphy has qualities, recondite and practical, which make him both distinctly fit and distinctly unfit to be the hero of a *Bildungsroman*, an ambiguity that constitutes yet another of the novel's definitional crises: just what kind of protagonist is Murphy? His peculiar suit only exacerbates this crisis. To get a job, Murphy has to dress the part; the first thing he does after being "starved into terms" is squeeze himself into a peculiar outfit, the oddity of which turns dandy fiction on its head. The *Bildungsroman* tradition (especially the European one), is one long male fashion show. In *Le Rouge et le noir*, a title, incidentally, all about suits, Julien Sorel appears in magnificent, though unearned, military rags for the king's visit to his provincial town; Lucien de Rubempré stuffs himself into the latest fashion upon reaching Paris in *Lost Illusions*, strutting through Paris in a brilliantly green suit. A key portion of Carlyle's attack on fashion, *Sartor Resartus*, has at its core a parodic *Bildung* of Teufelsdröckh, the peripatetic "clothes-philosopher." Murphy's wardrobe attracts attention the same way the dandy's does, and though his clothes are not new, that hardly detracts from the spectator's interest, or the inspired nature of the description:

His suit was not green, but aeruginous...In some places it was actually as black as the day it was bought, in others a strong light was needed to bring out the livid gloss, the rest was admittedly aeruginous. One beheld in fact a relic of those sanguine days when as a theological student he had used to lie awake night after night with Bishop Bouvier's *Supplement ad Tractatum de Matrimonio* under his pillow....No less than the colour the cut was striking. The jacket, a tube in its own right, descended clear of the body as far as mid-thigh, where the skirts were slightly reflexed like the mouth of a bell in a mute appeal to be lifted that some found hard to resist. The trousers in their heyday had exhibited the same proud and inflexible autonomy of hang. But now, broken by miles of bitter stair till they were obliged to cling here and there for support to the legs within, a corkscrew effect betrayed their fatigue...With regard to the material of the suit, the bold claim was advanced by the makers that it was holeproof. This was true in the sense that it was entirely non-porous. It admitted no air from the outer world, it allowed none of Murphy's own vapours to escape...These remains of a decent outfit Murphy lit up with a perfectly plain lemon made-up bow tie presented as though in derision by a collar and dickey combination carved from a single sheet of celluloid and without seam, of a period with the suit and the last of its kind.

(44-5)

Not since Charles Bovary's hat has so grotesque a haberdashery made its way into a novel; certain components of the outfit even seem to be ironically aware of their own absurdity, such as the bow tie hanging "as if in derision."⁶⁷ The suit at once firmly

⁶⁷ Kent Puckett deftly links the act of narrating Charles' hat as a piece of "bad form," an excess of detail vitiating the symbolic power of any single one. He then argues that this "bad form" is related to the disappearance of the initial first person narrator and the emergence of the omniscient one.

identifies Murphy as a clown while making any firm identification impossible by tapping into the novel's comic definitional anxieties: what is Murphy?

The suit itself is a perfectly tailored crisis of distinctions. It is both outrageously conspicuous and a form of camouflage, shuttling among black, glossy, and aeruginous depending on the light. Aeruginous, a word tapping into a specialized Latinate chromatic vocabulary that mirrors the "specialized" appearance of the suit, is itself a mix of two colors, blue and green. The original "autonomy of hang" blends seamlessly with age into a more flexible relationship to the body of its wearer. That the collar and dickey is the "last of its kind" only *seemingly* indicates its *sui generis* stature, since it also establishes a category of similarly grotesque outfits that once existed. Moreover, the suit acts as a kind of palimpsest of lives, past and present. The description gives us the most extended look at Murphy's prehistory. It is Murphy's job-seeking suit, but it also sentimentally stirs up memories of his past student days (recall the connection between his job search with sentimentally charged locales), when time was decidedly *not* money and one had enough of it to peruse Bishop Bouvier's collected works. The suit also looks forward to the future, the lemon bowtie matching up with Suk's assignation of yellow as his favorite color. Thus it folds all aspects of Murphy, past, present, and future, into its non-porous fabric, which is precisely why it must be resistant to fashion and its constant mutations. Murphy's atrocious suit was never in style; like Bovary's hat, and unlike Lucien's green suit, which is so fashionable it calls attention to itself as such, it is an inherently comic, heterogeneous mix that never did *fit* in anywhere. With so much narrative attention paid to the suit, it is fitting that Murphy ends the novel splayed out naked at the coroner's; the distinctively indistinct, and grotesque, outfit gives way to yet another distinctive mark: the birthmark on his ass. The clothes didn't make the man after all.

If the suit is a perfectly tailored crisis of distinctions, it also taps into a key element of the *Bildungsroman*: metonymy. Murphy is after all "one of the elect, who require everything to remind them of something else" (40). The American usage of suit is a classic case of metonymy, a piece of fabric substituting for the whole, employed, person. The suit puts one in league with a series of like-minded, and similarly dressed, creatures. Both the etymology, *sequere*, to follow suit, and an alternate sense of the word as "a number of objects of the same kind or pattern intended to be used together or forming a definite set or series" (OED) speak to term's connective quality. In *Murphy*, however, what definitionally *should* make Murphy a member of a class literally seals him off from the outside world: "[The suit] admitted no air from the outer world, it allowed none of Murphy's own vapours to escape." Instead of going forth to mingle, he stews in his own juices. A free-flow of air can be taken as the seldom achieved ideal of the *Bildungsroman*, a seamless integration between self, suit and society, and this is precisely what Murphy's non-porous outfit prevents. Instead, this integrationist ideal is only to be found in the insane asylum's padded cell, an "indoor [bower] of bliss" which, like the suit, has "no system of ventilation" and is so perfectly heated that "only total nudity could do it justice":

No system of ventilation appeared to dispel the illusion of respirable vacuum. The compartment was windowless, like a monad... Within the narrow limits of domestic architecture he had never been able to imagine a more creditable representation of what he kept on calling, indefatigably, the little world. (103).

This physically delimited “monad” can only retain its Edenic stature if its limits hold. But even here the “sane” eyes of the nurses (Murphy included) intrude, just as Ticklepenny’s “extension” intrudes into Murphy’s garret, which is itself an attempt to replicate this “little world.”

Murphy’s suit creates its own momentary “monad,” but at the cost of constant ridicule: a monad under abusive siege from the outside world. (And of course the suit comes off). Any attempt to seal off a “little world” from the great wide world in *Murphy* fails, and this failure happens often because almost everything in the novel is described in terms of parts and wholes separating and merging. Unlike his suit, which is “entirely non-porous,” “the human eyelid is not teartight” (68); Hyde park is a “closed system” that rejects exotic varieties of lettuce; faces are culled from the big blooming confusion; mind is separated from body; “doing” is disentangled from and then bleeds into “being”; the part that Murphy loves wants one thing and the part that he detests wants another; Celia’s earthly anatomical measurements butt against her ineffable heavenly side; Celia is “a piece out of [Murphy] that he could not go on without” (130); Murphy on the jobpath reminds the Blake League of Bildad the Shuttite, and what is he “but a fragment of Job?” (44); Murphy’s mind is both sealed off from the universe and also encompasses it, “a large hollow sphere excluding nothing that it did not also contain.” And just as this “hermetically sealed” mind splinters into three distinct “zones” (65), Murphy’s M, Beckett’s *lettre de resistance*, splinters into the initials of his final home, the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat: MMM. All this to show that *Murphy* is one long exercise in impossibly entangled “filthy synecdoche” (48), one long exercise in failed definition: “a flux of forms, a continual coming together and falling apart of forms” (65).⁶⁸ The same holds true for *Murphy*’s generic status, a *Bildungsroman* in which the indefinite main character is defined to death.

“The I stories I was told, at one time! And all funny, not one not funny.” (MD 268)

All these definitional crises stem from an “imperfect sense of humour” (41) that divides chaos in the wrong way. Beckett’s comedy sets the world on its regressive path:

Not the least remarkable of Murphy’s innumerable classifications of experience was that into jokes that had once been good jokes and jokes that had never been good jokes. What but an imperfect sense of humour could have made such a mess of chaos. In the beginning was the pun. And so on. (41)

The Biblical creation begins with a division (light from dark, etc.) and so does Beckett’s comic creation, since a pun essentially divides one semantic entity into two. Puns, like *Murphy*, present definitional crises, extracting comic identities from accidental similarities in sound. By locating this unstable unit of meaning at the center of his world system, Beckett traces the novel’s entire series of definitional failures back to his parody of Genesis 1. But perhaps more importantly, Beckett identifies comedy as the central creative force of his world, thereby identifying a kind of prelapsarian, chaotic state: a paradise of Platonic comic forms unsullied by man’s imperfect sense of humor. This state is perhaps best represented by Mr. Endon’s eyes, described as “one of Nature’s jokes” (139). Endon’s state of consciousness is Murphy’s ideal, and it is through gazing deeply

⁶⁸ During a depiction of an erotic encounter, Beckett informs us that the phrases are “chosen with care to avoid censors and their filthy synecdoche” (48).

into his eyes that Murphy experiences the sublime dissolution of self he craves. Two scales of the comic are at play here, the one cosmic, eternal, Platonic, and the other human, finite, and fallen.⁶⁹ Endon's sublimely comic eyes open a window into the infinite, a utopian space in the novel immune from any and all "extension." Murphy's catalog of jokes, devised by an imperfect sense of humor, hems in that comic energy by rendering it more and more finite; the distinction between once good and never good eventually dissolves since over time *all* of these "fallen" jokes stink.⁷⁰ Mr. Kelly, for example, finds only minimal comfort in his granddaughter Celia's name, finding it "impossible to expand the sad pun. "Si il y a [If there is]....To be punning her name consoled him a little, a very little" (68). The "expansion" gestures to his futile attempt to break into another realm where the sad, exhausted pun can make good on its own promise of a theoretical space beyond the imperfect, closed systems of the novel which are sealed off from the creative comic energies of chaos. Instead, *Murphy* ends with Mr. Kelly's kite reaching the end of the line and the park being closed, forcing even the "hardened optimist" (157) to concede: *All out*.

And yet, as I've argued, comedy always works against limits and endings. Thus, despite existing firmly in the fallen comic world of London, Murphy taps into Endon's comic cosmos by etymologically forging his way back. Pondering the root of the "gas" poring into his garret, Murphy wonders:

And the etymology of gas? Could it be the same word as chaos? Hardly. Chaos was yawn. But then cretin was Christian. Chaos would do, it might not be right but it was pleasant, for him henceforward gas would be chaos, and chaos gas...Let there be Heaven in the midst of the waters, let it divide the waters. The Chaos and Water Facilities Act. The Chaos, Light, and Coke Co. Hell. Heaven. Helen. Celia. (100)

Murphy's creative fiat is a divisive, comic fiction, a parodic new way of dividing the world under the Chaos and Water Facilities Act. And yet this false etymology succeeds in literally returning him to chaos, since the gas leak returns Murphy's body to the chaos his mind craves:

By closing time [of the pub] the body, mind and soul of Murphy were freely distributed over the floor of the saloon; and before another dayspring greyned the earth had been swept away with the sand, the beer, the butts, the glass, the matches, the spits, the vomit. (154)

The list of refuse obscures the fact that this "free distribution" is the closest thing to a happy comedic ending Beckett affords, as well as the closest Murphy ever gets to Endon's comic chaos.

Murphy's London is a world where comedy has withered and died, a world struggling to maintain definitions, boundaries, and enclosed systems. In recasting the *Bildungsroman* in comic terms, Beckett pushes that world to its breaking point, frustrating its definitions, collapsing its boundaries, violating its closed systems, and

⁶⁹ As Hamm says of one oft repeated humorous anecdote in *Endgame*: "Less funny each time."

⁷⁰ Even his favorite: "Why did the barmaid champion? Because the stout porter bitter."

returning its hero to an originary comic chaos.⁷¹ But in so doing the novel explodes another limit, its comedy bleeds into tragedy, and *Murphy* morphs into a parody not only of the foundational *Bildungsroman*, *Wilhelm Meister*, but of the foundational *Sturm und Drang* novel as well: *The Sorrows of Young Werther*.⁷² Beckett's later work is a sustained effort to get back to the primal comic chaos he first identifies in *Murphy*, a return he effects stylistically rather than, as with *Murphy*, spectacularly: exploding his main character. *Company*'s spare, lyrical recollections provide us with exactly the back-story *Murphy*'s *Bildung* withholds, and its relentless daemonic, divisive spirit strives to divide the world along less imperfect lines.

From *Murphy* to *Company*

The central premise of *Murphy* and *Company* is essentially the same; we have only to move from *Murphy*, "lying supine on the grass and plunged in a torpor from which all efforts to rouse him had proved unsuccessful" (32) to *Company*'s supine body: "You are on your back in the dark and have no mental activity of any kind" (5).⁷³ At one point *Company*'s narrator wonders "Could M be reimagined in an easy chair?" (32). We recall that *Company*'s first line contains the imperative to "Imagine" (3). Thus "reimagine" is not only a continuation of that first effort, but a literal reimagination, a turning back to *Murphy*, the man who opens *his* novel strapped down to just such an easy chair. *Murphy* begins contemplating the sun shining on the "nothing new" (1); *Company* considers its sun "anew": "...you sit in the bloom of adulthood bathed in rainbow light gazing before you... You close your eyes and try to calculate the volume" (29).

Doubtless one could find similar echoes across all of Beckett's fiction; part of Beckett's fictional strategy is to whittle everything down until the few recurring motifs that do appear repeatedly achieve a kind of talismanic power. But I argue that the two texts are specially linked because *Company* provides the back story of *Murphy*'s delayed *Bildung*. *Murphy* walks and talks like a *Bildungsroman*, but it is no more a *Bildungsroman* than Rosie Dew, symptomatic though she may be, is a duck.⁷⁴ *Company*, however, looks nothing like a *Bildungsroman*, but turns out to be its purest and pithiest expression. *Company* comes at the issue of definition and *Bildung* from a more oblique, and less parodic, angle than *Murphy*. *Murphy*'s formal assaults on the genre give way to *Company*'s "bourneless dark" (36), a term whose ambiguity Beckett exploits (it can mean either "goal" or "limit") by making his goal an ever-receding limit in a limitless dark. Bourn thus becomes the perfect word to describe the kind of experience—narrative and existential—that Beckett's fiction produces.

⁷¹ *Murphy*'s mew is between a cattle market and prison, and the schizophrenic MMM, home to those of divided minds, is located at the border between two counties.

⁷² Whereas *Murphy* vainly tries to break out of the matrix that places him at its center, *Werther* vainly tries to break in to the Lotte/Albert matrix.

⁷³ We could even take the two protagonists in another posture: each lying facedown, *Murphy* after tipping over his rocking chair, *Company*'s boy having jumped from the fir tree in his garden: "You lie a little with your face to the ground" (15)

⁷⁴ Rosie Dew, a woman *Murphy* meets in the park, suffers from Duck's Disease, or *Panpygoptosis*, a "distressing pathological condition in which the thighs are suppressed and the buttocks spring directly from behind the knees..." (58).

Considering *Company* as a *Bildungsroman* may risk pushing the term past its usefulness, especially given both the novel's bournelessness and its explicitness about the lack of development: "You are no older now than you always were" (27), not to mention the preference for a "lower order of mental activity" (7). And yet *Company* is in fact the essence of *Bildung*, what's left of it after being stripped down to its essentials. Beckett distills the classical *Bildungsroman* into a form that captures the improvisational aspect of the human comedy better than the "spellbound backwash" of Balzac's "chloroformed narratives." This *Bildungsroman* replaces illusions of confidence and development with embarrassment and devolution. *Company* is a text about formation through certain key Proustian images: diving into the ocean under the watchful eye of a father, suffering a mother's stinging rebuke, discovering with horror that an attempt to aid a fellow creature has gone tragically wrong.⁷⁵ These recollections are the distillation of a life into a series of alternately defining, undefining moments, a life that in classical *Bildungsromans* leisurely unfolds over hundreds of pages (*Company* weighs in at forty-six). Moreover, the constant tension between the novel's unnamed subject ("You") and its unnamed (possibly nonexistent) companions, its "company," is a spare blueprint of all *Bildungsromans*: an individual's attempt to find his place, distinguish himself from a group, own his pronoun. To echo Shklovsky's now famous interpretation of *Tristram* as the most typical novel ever written, Beckett's may be the most typical *Bildung* because it lays bare the core struggle of the form.

Yet even if my reader were to acquiesce in reading *Company* as a *Bildung*, he or she might be hard pressed to identify it as a comic work. Gone is the playfulness of *Murphy* inspired by the 18th-century comic novel, as well as (most of) the acerbic dark humor of the French trilogy. And yet *Company*, in its narrowed search for inclusion, mercy, and grace, harkens back to the broader comedic form of a work dear to Beckett from the start, Dante's *Commedia*: "So sat waiting to be purged the old lutist [Belacqua] cause of Dante's first quarter-smile and now perhaps singing praises with some section of the blest at last" (44).⁷⁶ That "perhaps," that *si il y a*, points to the blissful comedic inclusion around which all Beckett's fictions revolve. Frye's schematic mapping of comedy's generic tendencies proves useful here: "The tendency of comedy is to include as many people as possible in its final society: the blocking characters are more often reconciled or converted than simply repudiated" (165). Despite his efforts to extricate himself from the people around him Murphy becomes a magnet for them: "all our medians meet in Murphy" says Neary to a cast of characters (Counihan, Wylie, Celia, Cooper) late in the novel. *Company*'s narrator desperately searches for just that sense of connectedness. Whether it's trying to find the "ideal amplitude for effortless audition" (24) or debating between the prone and the supine, or trying to measure the precise "unit of crawl," the animating spirit behind the novel is always the same: "The test is company. Which of the two darks is better company?" (23). *Company* becomes an Ur-comedy, what comedy would look like if one were, as one always was, "alone" (46). Even Dante

⁷⁵ Many critics point to Beckett's use of Dante, Shakespeare, and Milton, but Ann Banfield has identified *Recherche* as an equally key text for *Company*, calling it Beckett's most Proustian novel.

⁷⁶ Belacqua, a Florentine lute-maker famed for his laziness whom Dante encounters in ante-Purgatory (4.97-135).

had Virgil. Beckett pushes comedy to its limit by reducing a form that usually depends on an individual's interaction with his community to an individual striving to forge a community in his head. Abstracted though it may be, Beckett's comedy relies on the same forces of confusion and aversion to definition that characterizes the more traditional comic forms of Waugh and Roth.

"To read a good comedy is to keep the best company in the world, where the best things are said, and the most amusing things happen." (Hazlitt 64)

In the clearest example of the novel's comic confusion, *Company* never resolves the conflict between its title and its last word: "Alone" (46). The novel's final assertion seems to undercut any hope of fulfilling the comforting promise of the title and its embrace of the whole of life: companionship, society, sustenance (from the Latin *com* and *panis*, literally together with bread), friendship, sexuality (to keep company with), work, theater (group of actors), comedy (if we are to follow Hazlitt's definition), even war (company as a division of an army, relevant given the novel's deep affinity with *Paradise Lost*). But it only *seems* to undercut. I argue that "devise," and not "alone," is the novel's key word, and that this key word unleashes a comic daemonic energy that doesn't allow any statement (or state) of solitude to harden: "Deviser of the voice and of its hearer and of himself. Deviser of himself for company" (17). Whereas the *Bildungsroman* is a form that seeks to integrate its protagonist into society through development and a fixing of identity, *Company* achieves its own brand of integration through degeneration and a dissolution of singular identity, an endless series of company-creating devisings. *Company* always welcomes its protagonist, the second person hearer of the voice, back into the anonymous fold: "the first person singular and a fortiori plural pronoun had never any place in your vocabulary" (45).

Two etymological relationships are crucial to my argument. The first is among devise, divide, and daemon. The second is among test, tempt, try, and essay. I use each to argue for the structural importance of *Paradise Lost* as a source of *Company*'s comic daemonic energy and illusory (though sustaining) hope for paradise regained.⁷⁷ Both "devise" and "daemon" derive from terms meaning "to divide." When I refer to Beckett's comic daemonic energy, I mean his endless series of creative divisions, endless and improvisatory recreations of *Genesis*, that Ur-text about acts of creative division (night from day, water from land, etc.). Each of *Company*'s creative divisions, in turn, is a "temptation" (37), must be "justif[ied]" (20), and if deemed hastily or ill-imagined, tried and tested again.

In *Murphy* Beckett recasts the creation story in comic terms: "In the beginning was the pun." *Murphy* is a comic novel about the futile attempt to recreate the originary comic chaos through a series of "little worlds" (i.e. divisions) that fail to maintain their integrity. Thus *Murphy*'s dissolution is the only possible (and necessary) "happy" end. *Company* too is a creation story, one that seeks to devise a voice and hearer and oneself for company. Yet these creations are subject to the same fallible, divisive process of *Murphy*'s puns (recall his insistence that only an imperfect sense of humor could have made such a mess of chaos), each immediately collapsing and giving way to a new

⁷⁷ In Beckett's case this would be silence, finding the right words with which to "end the long sin against the silence" (*U*).

devising. Any attempt at continuity, let alone *kairos*, any effort to make the hearer “have a past and acknowledge it” (25) appears to be “labour lost” (46) as the devisings flare in and out of existence. Each imagining consequently invests less and less in its creatures. *Company* walks, then crawls, to the same dissolution of developmental ideals as *Murphy* does by trying to get back to an earlier, more chaotic space, a “void regained” (34), to become more akin to *Murphy*’s *Genesis*-inspired description as a lower life form: “the creepy thing that creepeth of the law” (121). When at one point the voice asks, “Might not the hearer be improved? Made more companionable if not downright human”(19), the answer is a resounding no. “Development” in *Company* proceeds exclusively through a purifying regression, dismissing not only any notion of “improvement” but any claim to sensory distinction as well: “Unhearing unseeing you go your way” (26). It is precisely this paradox, progress through regressive division, that is the culmination of Beckett’s career-long flirtation with the human comedy.⁷⁸ (Or as Molloy puts it: “To decompose is to live too...one sometimes forgets” (33)).⁷⁹ This purifying descent is Beckett’s take on the fortunate fall, the literal and figurative fall into company and something resembling *kairos*.

What I call purifying regression in Beckett’s late style, Ann Banfield describes as an attempt to “pare language down to its ‘essence,’ with no traces of localization in time and space” (12). Banfield argues that Beckett’s career is a sustained attack on English as a mother tongue. During his “Joycean apprenticeship,” of which *Murphy* is a result, Beckett follows Joyce’s neologistic impulses, exploiting the “productive” categories of language. Then, in an attempt to distance himself from Joyce, he switches to an “abstract[ion] of Joyce’s principles, reducing the mother tongue to scatological babytalk (‘cacababble’), a “reduction intended to show that language only repeats the ‘nothing new’ by making radically apparent its repetitive nature in carrying these processes [productive lexical categories] to absurd lengths” (15). During this intermediate phase Beckett is writing in French and translating into English; with the late trilogy, he returns to English, but an English “incommensurable...[and] shorn of its maternal affect.” Banfield identifies this late style as a “language of old age” (22), a return to an English “distanced in time and space,” a style which largely abandons the productive lexicon in favor of the “nonproductive” or “closed-class” lexicon (16). This last closed-class lexicon is defined by its lack of “highly specific semantic content” (17) such as pronouns, qualifiers, directional prepositions, determiners. Or as she puts it in a memorable example:

...the Unnameable thought “merde” [shit] “le mot juste” (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. (20) Recall the long list of failed *mots justes* I listed for *Murphy* earlier. There, indefiniteness prevails despite the novel’s avalanche of esoteric words; with the late style, Beckett is

⁷⁸ Similarly, when the Unnameable admits that his eerily totalitarian creators have “scandalously bungled [him] (372), we have to take it as a productive bungling, a bungling that produces the Unnameable’s extraordinarily rebellious, entertaining, despairing rant.

⁷⁹ Compare his more Wordsworthian version: “It is in the tranquility of decomposition that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life” (24).

fighting definition with one hand behind his back by depriving himself of the “riches of the dictionary” and turning instead to the “poverties of the syntacticon” (20). The linguistic journey Banfield traces, then, is one literally towards indefinition and out of the terms of definability, a journey away from the dictionary.⁸⁰

I argue that just as the late style eschews semantic specificity, *Company* eschews finality in a specifically, and highly abstracted, comedic fashion.⁸¹ *Company* is a text that never can answer the central question it poses itself: “What *finally* does this mean that at first sight seemed clear?” (15, emphasis mine). Despite the finality of the novel’s last word, “Alone,” which is separated on the page as if to assert its independence and truth, *Company* is above all a novel in which all that seems clear returns inevitably to a state of ineradicable confusion, a confusion which produces a comforting company and which gestures to its comedic core. As Harry Levin points out, comedy is a “planned confusion, created in order to be clarified: a series of misunderstandings brought about, under the guise of chance or contrivance”(128). The comic work, therefore, can only “end” by discounting every instance of pervasive confusion that constitutes it and replacing it with an illusory order; in other words, it can only end by betraying its own inspirational energy.⁸²

Company’s endgame, the definite fixing of the narrated as “alone,” seems to fit this generic expectation by decisively clearing up the novel’s pervasive confusion. And yet several pages before the novel’s conclusion we read:

Why not just lie in the dark with closed eyes and give up? Give up all. Have done with all. With bootless crawl and figments comfortless. But if on occasion so disheartened it is seldom long. For little by little as he lies the craving for company revives. In which to escape from his own. The need to hear that voice again. (40)

The craving persists, the craving for company, for integration into a community that works even after the final “Alone.” Though the voice seems to have definitely concluded its subject’s case, there is nothing to suggest that the series of cravings and doubts will cease; the certainty is a feint, another devising, and the “Alone” one more instance of the voice “reasoning ill,” “hastily” imagining, or simply “fabling” (46). As the voice itself says: “No answer of his was sacred” (39).

“Deviser of Himself for company”

In the impoverished “syntacticon” of *Company*, “devise” stands out as a key word. “Devise” comes from the Latin root *dividere*, to divide, and one of its modern meanings, to arrange a division (especially as it relates to a will), is particularly relevant to the notion of a voice partitioning itself for company. One paragraph in the text crystallizes what serves as the novel’s “plot,” which alternates between teasing out the uncertain

⁸⁰ Cf *The Unnameable*: “Method or no method I shall have to banish them in the end, the beings, things, shapes, sounds and lights with which my haste to speak has encumbered this place...First dirty, then make clean” (300).

⁸¹ Carla Locatelli treats Beckett’s comedy as belonging to “a *locus* of doubtful discourse” (80).

⁸² Frye makes a similar point about comedy’s illusory endings in *Anatomy*.

provenance of a “voice” and the dozen odd recollections that voice imposes on its unnamed listener (“You”):

Deviser of the voice and of its hearer and of himself. Deviser of himself for company. Leave it at that. He speaks of himself as of another. He says speaking of himself, He speaks of himself as of another. Himself he devises too for company. Leave it at that. Confusion too is company up to a point. Better hope deferred than none. Up to a point. Till the heart starts to sicken. Company too up to a point. Better a sick heart than none. Till it starts to break. So speaking of himself he concludes for the time being. For the time being leave it at that. (17)

Of course to “leave it at that” would be to end the acts of division, and thus the creative energy keeping the novel going until the very end when it has (seemingly) exhausted itself: “Alone” (46). So the tentative sentence fragments continue until we reach what appears to be a conclusive idea, for example: “Better a sick heart than none.” This judgment, however, instantly dissolves under the pressure of a new division, “Up to a point,” which marks a boundary between the sick heart and the broken heart. The passage announces its own conclusion (“So speaking of himself he concludes for the time being,”), but continues on to a modified version of the earlier issued imperative: “For the time being leave it at that,” which ends the passage, but only momentarily. As Beckett describes the chain-reaction quality of his prose in *The Unnamable*: “One starts things moving without a thought of how to stop them. In order to speak. One starts speaking as if it were possible to stop at will”(299). Again, Beckett’s devisings, like his characters, are fundamentally comic in that they are both permanently unfinished and improvisatory.

Company proceeds by a series of *apparent* divisions, working on the text down to the level of the pronoun: “Use of the second person marks the voice. That of the third the cantankerous other”(4), and later, “What an addition to company that would be! A voice in the first person singular”(10). The “You” feels pressure on his hind parts but not on his fore-parts.⁸³ His memories are usually spatially divided: a young boy, afraid to dive off a ledge, looking down at his father’s upturned face; a mother stooping over the cradle looking down at a baby; a boy looking up to the blue sky; a boy first in then out of his father’s shade; a hedgehog “parting from the edging on one side and “making straight for the edging on another” (21).⁸⁴ The voice is obsessed with questions of measurements; how many steps does it take to cross a field? How does one calculate the unit of crawl?; how do the proportions of one’s body change when one sits?: “You separate the segments and lay them side by side.” (30). Watching over is the eye, “filling the whole field”(14), but subject to the same partitioning: “Hooded. Bared. Hooded again. Bared again” (14).⁸⁵ Open it looks out into the dark, closed it has Miltonic “visions in the dark of light!”(44). To exist in a Beckettian space is to divide it, to divide it spatially, and to divide it by devising stories.

⁸³ I’ll refer to this “You” throughout the essay as either “the hearer” or “the narrated.”

⁸⁴ *Watt* comes to mind as a Beckett novel where spatial divisions are especially prominent, from the divided gardens (“For my garden was my garden, and Watt’s garden was Watt’s garden, we had no common garden anymore”(164) to the levels in the house, each corresponding to a specific role in Mr. Knott’s hierarchical network.

⁸⁵ In *Ill Seen Ill Said* the hooded/bared distinction is replaced by a recurring “curtain” metaphor and theater puns on scene and seen.

However, these divisions are not reified. The differentiated voices blend together when it becomes increasingly probable that they come from one source; the “creator” is internalized and externalized in the same way that its voices are, and subject to the very same laws it imposes on its creations: “Could he speak to and of whom the voice speaks there would be a first [person voice]. But he cannot. He shall not. You cannot. You shall not” (4); the narrated’s carefully counted steps eventually spread evenly over the landscape when he finds himself “nowhere in particular on the road from A to Z”; the distinctions between dark and light vanish when we learn that even the blackest darkness has a sliver of “light infinitely faint” (37); the pregnant stomach of his lover melts into the expanding waistline of his father; no sooner is something reasoned than that something is judged to be reasoned ill.

Beckett’s devising establishes a series of visual, thematic, and logical distinctions that soon prove illusory. “Devise” touches on the novel’s bodies as well. Beckett’s late creatures tinker with the central tenet of Cartesian mind-body dualism, that “a body, by its very nature, is always divisible. On the other hand, the mind is utterly indivisible” (Descartes 6.86). When Beckett devises in a text like *Company*, he divides both body and mind, each division leading closer to what in Beckett’s world amounts to a more peaceful existence at the lowest level of sense perception: a lower order of mental activity and better company. For Beckett, to fail better is to embark on a regressive narrative path until becoming a barely thinking, barely sensing thing.

Beckett’s creator is a devisor, gradually stripping the body that senses, and in turn the mind that is itself a sense organ, of its sense impressions. Towards the end of the novel the voice produces an extensive, and very funny, inventory of the hearer’s senses:

Would it be reasonable to imagine the hearer as mentally quite inert? Except when he hears. That is when the voice sounds. For what if not it and his breath is there for him to hear? Aha! The crawl. Does he hear the crawl? The fall? What an addition to company were he but to hear the crawl. The fall. The rising to all fours again. The crawl resumed. And wonder to himself what in the world such sounds might signify. Reserve for a duller moment. What if not sound could set his mind in motion? Sight? The temptation is strong to decree there is nothing to see. But too late for the moment. For he sees a change of dark when he opens or shuts his eyes. And he may see the faint light the voice imagined to shed. Rashly imagined...Taste? The taste in the mouth? Long since dulled. Touch? The thrust of the ground against his bones. All the way from calcaneum to bump of philoprogenitiveness....Smell? His own? Long since dulled. And a barrier to others if any. Such as might have once emitted a rat long dead. Or some other carrion. Yet to be imagined. Unless the crawler smell. Aha! The crawling creator. Might the crawling creator be reasonably imagined to smell? Even fouler than his creature. Stirring now and then to wonder that mind so lost to wonder. To wonder what in the world can be making that alien smell. Whence in the world those wafts of villainous smell. How much more companionable could his creator but smell. Could he but smell his creator. Some sixth sense? Inexplicable premonition of impending ill? Yes or no? No. Pure reason? Beyond experience. God is love. Yes or no? No. (37)

The passage is structured around a series of hypothetical, tempting additions to company and Cartesian judgments: “Rashly imagined,” “Let that much of want be conceded,”

“No.”⁸⁶ The only additions to company the narrator concretely concedes is the change of dark when he opens and shuts his eyes and the feeling of his body against the ground, in other words the same concessions made in the novel’s second paragraph. In a world of such sensory poverty, the hypothetical sense-impressions have the opposite effect on company from that of an increase of mental activity; however vile, these impressions are presented as additions to company. They strain to achieve verisimilitude, to be “reasonably imagined,” but ultimately reside in the realm of imagination, figment, devising. What *Company* settles on as its imagined ideal is the crawling creator who hears the crawls and falls of his crawling creations and smells the villainous smells of his smelly creations (and vice-versa).⁸⁷

Company, then, establishes a paradoxical relation to the senses. Given the mental inertia of the hearer, and the lack of any transcendental experience of divine love, the search for company narrows itself to the senses, particularly smell. And yet the quality of that smell works against company: “foul,” “villainous,” “alien,” and a “barrier to others.” This scene reproduces the same blocked metonymy of Murphy’s airtight suit, which both links him into a community and seals him off from it. Both long set pieces demonstrate that the grotesque element in Beckett (here the path towards smelly solitude) never fully isolates its subject; rather, it generates an odd kind of comic pathos precisely because of its intimate relation to, and insufficiently suppressed desire for, integration. The regression purifies the search for community by reducing it to its most common human element: a shared sense impression. That, in turn, the novel describes this purifying search as rife with *impure* smells is mordantly funny, which is the way despair always makes its presence known and felt with Beckett’s human comedies (here you can smell it).

In one of the novel’s central (and tragic) memories, Beckett translates his abstract foul-smelling crawler into the form of a hedgehog. In the recollection, the hearer, a boy, spies a hedgehog crossing from one “edging” to another. He picks it up and moves it into a warm hutch where it is free to come and go at will and equipped with a healthy supply of (fittingly for Beckett) worms. The narrator experiences the “glow” of a good deed (maybe *God is love*) until a creeping uneasiness overcomes him, an uneasiness described in Miltonic terms: “rather than do as you did you had perhaps better let good alone and the hedgehog pursue its way” (21).⁸⁸ The narrator, crippled by fear, cannot bring himself to visit the hutch for several weeks. When he finally does go, what he sees, and smells, burns itself into his memory forever: “You are on your back in the dark and you have never forgotten what you found then. The mush. The stench” (22).

In a novel populated by stinking crawling creatures, the decomposing hedgehog cannot help but call attention to itself as somehow related to the voice’s creations. It seeps into the creative machinery of *Company*, partially explaining the primacy given to smells and carrion and dead rats in *Company*’s imaginative figments. The letter “H”

⁸⁶ In *Ill Seen Ill Said* the repeated use of “Careful” acts in the same way.

⁸⁷ “Then let him move. Within reason. On all fours...Crawl and fall. Crawl and fall again. In the same figment dark as his other figments” (34).

⁸⁸ Compare to the description of Satan waylaying Eve: “Such ambush hid among sweet flow’rs and shades/ Waited with hellish rancor imminent/ to intercept thy way...(9.409-11).

briefly replaces “M” as Beckett’s *lettre de resistance* (“Let the hearer be named H. Haitch.”) and words from “hedge” and “Haitch” and “Hodgekin’s” subtly echo the “hedgehog” and “hutch” from the traumatic memory. Even the repeated command to “Quick leave him,” uttered by the voice in reference to its creator, is a version of the boy’s abandonment of the hedgehog. The boy’s intentions, the glow of the good deed, matter little, just as it matters little how carefully the boy has constructed the hutch so as to allow the hedgehog to come and go at will. What matters is that the voice has dropped the hedgehog into the voice’s narrative world, a world which, as *The Unnamable* memorably puts it, is one of “caged beasts born of caged beasts” (387). Once dropped into that world, it becomes trapped in the narrative descent that leads to mush and stench.⁸⁹

More broadly, the hedgehog scene can be read as a cautionary tale about letting anything in the novel harden into a fixed state, be it the memories or the alacritous devisings. The boy’s effort to corral the creature, to make the creature go *his* way instead of *its* way, runs counter to the comic spirit of the narrator’s endless qualifications. Each fiat in *Company* has a built-in hedge: a performative utterance haunted by its subjunctive feature. God speaks in the subjunctive: *Let* there be light. Beckett’s “Let there be a fly” (20) lacks the authority of the divine imperative and therefore must face the subjunctive’s grammatical consequences: “a mood...expressing what is imagined or wished possible.” *Company*’s fiats are nothing of the kind; they are imaginations, imaginations which can never be fully “justified” and which always have to be *hedged*: “Then let him move. Within reason” (34). Though the novel consistently hedges against its deviser’s creative energies, its central narrative set piece is a gruesome, indelible admonition about hedging those energies too drastically.

The hedgehog scene, placed squarely in the middle of the novel, is its most atypical one, a nightmarish trauma that momentarily puts the brakes on the text’s endlessly divisive comic energies only to reinforce them all the more, to redouble the commitment to “devis[e] figments to temper his nothingness” (33). Like *devise*, “temper,” from *temperare*, means “to divide,” more specifically “to proportion duly, to mingle in due proportion, to combine properly; to qualify, temper; to arrange or keep in due measure or proportion, to keep within limits, to regulate, rule.” This contrast between the infinitude of nothingness and the *divisive* effects of fiction, that which tempers and that which causes tempers to flare (Beckett’s narrators are notoriously dyspeptic), identifies what I’ve argued to be the fundamental alliance between comedy and the *Bildungsroman*: each dramatizes the never-ending, futile effort to contain the infinite array of human potentiality within a finite form.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Compare to this description of Worm’s condition: “The rascal, he’s getting humanized, he’s going to lose if he doesn’t watch out, if he doesn’t take care, and with what could he take care, with what could he form the faintest conception of the condition they are decoying him into, with their ears, their eyes, their tears and a brainpan, where anything may happen. That’s his strength, his only strength, that he understands nothing...” (358).

⁹⁰ *Malone Dies* succinctly expresses just such a “tempering” in mathematical terms: “It is then the true division begins, of twenty-two by seven, for example, and the pages fill with the true ciphers at last” (64): or π , that famously endless number.

Company's Fathers

Company is a pared-down *Bildungsroman*, one in which the developmental drama of its protagonist takes the form of a struggle to first identify, then assume, a voice: to wrest control of the power to decree from a "cantankerous other" (4). This struggle perhaps explains why *Company*, unlike *Murphy*, is a novel infused with paternal traces: vivid memories of the protagonist's father and pervasive allusions to Beckett's literary father figures. Just before his demise, Murphy tries to conjure up the picture of several people: Celia, his mother, and finally his father, but all he can manage is "scraps of bodies, of landscapes, hands, eyes, lines and colours evoking nothing" (141). He notes that he has failed before with his mother and Celia, "but never before had he failed with his father. (141). Telling, then, that Beckett's return to English places its "protagonist" in the same eidetic position but with a difference. *Company*, despairing though the prone narrator/narrated may be, fully realizes the vision which fails Murphy during his last night at the Mary Magdalen Mercyseat hospital: "You stand at the tip of the high board. High above the sea. In it your father's upturned face. Upturned to you. You look down to the loved trusted face... The red round face" (12). Though the narrated can never pin down the precise identity or location of its progenitor, the "memory" section can't get rid of its paternal stamp.⁹¹

Company's protagonist walks in his father's shadow, tramps alongside his shade, and shadows his laugh: "When he chuckled you tried to chuckle too" (28). The novel could similarly be said to shadow, and play in the shadow of, its literary fathers: "Dante, Shakespeare, the Bible, Milton, Joyce: the company Beckett keeps is rarely uncertain. External allusions in this work are primarily there to remind us of the same literary patterns Beckett has urged us to consider before as he weaves the web of his own private mythology" (162).⁹² So writes Enoch Brater on the numerous literary references in *Company*, arguing that the allusive quality of the text makes the reader go back not to the originals, but back to Beckett, back to Beckett's use of those originals throughout his career. His is on the verge (but only the verge) of a Bloomian argument about the anxiety of influence, the argument that Beckett creates the impression of "being imitated by [his] ancestors," that he is the strong poet questing "to re-beget one's own self, to become one's own Great Original," a quest "to abstract [himself] by fabrication (64). And indeed, "abstraction by fabrication" is as good a three-word description of *Company's* devisings as one is likely to find. Brater's reading of the references as a "private mythology" does certainly send us back to Beckett's previous use of these authors, but I'd like to argue for a more embedded relationship with the father texts and the battle for creative supremacy it dramatizes, one that places Beckett squarely between the forces of Proustian invention and Miltonic devising.

⁹¹ For example: "The voice came to him now from one quarter and now from another... In the course of a single sentence it may change place and tone" (9)

⁹² Compare Bloom's take on the selection of literary father figures, which he describes as a charmed period of infantile "play": "I use the word "shape," for to me in all seriousness the happiest, most pleasurable element of what we call education (*bildung*), the shaping of the human being, is just this powerful influence of admiration and love, this childish identification with a father-image, elected out of profound affinity."

Company is a thoroughly Proustian novel and also a thoroughly Miltonic one. Beckett combines two sprawling epics, *Remembrance of Things Past* and *Paradise Lost*, in his spare novella, the one a search for lost time, the other a reconstitution (and subsequent collapse) of lost paradise. Whereas *Murphy* seals us off from its hero's formative past and is a doggedly anti-Proustian novel (recall that Rosie Dew's dachshund interrupts Murphy's lunchtime *madeleine* "rapture" (56) in Hyde Park by eating his beloved biscuits).⁹³ By contrast, *Company* is Beckett's most Proustian novel, a series of recollections from a man lying down in the dark. And yet for Beckett there was always something Miltonic in the Proustian memory. In his early study of *Remembrance of Things Past*, Beckett describes the wonders of the Proustian involuntary memory: "we breathe the true air of Paradise, of the only Paradise that is not the dream of a madman, the Paradise that has been lost" (55). But a funny thing happens to memory in *Company*, which narrates the quest "to confess, Yes I remember. Perhaps even to have a voice. To murmur, Yes I remember" (10). Neither that confession nor the first person voice materializes, partly because the memories, pace Banfield, don't merely "flame up" (18), but rather are dictated to the hearer. Thus memory, while possessing the aura of the Proustian involuntary kind, is actually caught up in the novel's "devising," and the true air of Paradise becomes "the mush, the stench."⁹⁴

Company's devising is a bitter sensory version of the Proustian involuntary memory where hawthorns and *madeleines* are replaced by stinking carrion, rats long dead, and pungent youths: "Bloom of adulthood. Imagine a whiff of that" (28). Proustian memory enables an Edenic reconstitution; devising enables a regressive process, and a descent from erect, tall, God-like creatures (Adam and Eve from *Paradise Lost*) to crawling ones.⁹⁵ As Brater puts it, memory in *Company* is really nothing of the kind, since "to remember in *Company* is...to imagine" (168): an imagination that takes the form of "devise," a daemonic energy that carries the text away from Proust and squarely into Milton's realm.

Milton requests the following from his Muse at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*:

...what in me is dark
 Illumine, what is low raise and support;
 That to the highth of this great argument
 I may assert Eternal Providence,
 And justify the ways of God to men. (1.22-26)

Light, dark, high, low, the disconnect between creator and creature, assertions and justifications: such, in a nutshell, are the constitutive elements of *Company*, which begins

⁹³ "...a Ginger, an Osborne, a Digestive, a Petit Beurre and one anonymous."

⁹⁴ Paul Davies argues the same thing: "Just as the assumption that *Company* is simply divided into recollective and scrutinizing modes – the one past, the one present – can be faulted because there are two modes of recollection, so the supposition that the recollection are separate from the scrutinizing can also be found to be incorrect" (189).

⁹⁵ *The Unnameable*'s deficient memory makes this devolution explicit: "But I'll have made progress, they told me so, only not enough, not enough. Ah! Where was I in my lesson? That is what has had a fatal effect on my development, my lack of memory, no doubt about it. Pupil Mahood, repeat after me, Man is a higher animal. I couldn't. Always talking about mammals in this menagerie" (U 331).

with “a voice com[ing] to one in the dark” (3). Each time the narrator negates or fails to justify a movement or addition, the narrative gets reset back to the Miltonically resonant “void regained” (34), that initial void in which Lucifer finds himself at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*: “Seat of desolation, void of light...” (1.181).⁹⁶

“Justify” appears exactly once in the text (20) and brings with it the whole weight of Milton’s epic. Interspersed amidst the core group of Proustian recollections that make up *Company*’s “plot” is the painstaking work of justifying (or failing to justify) every aspect of the recollector’s existence: “Some movement of the hands? A hand. A clenching and unclenching. Difficult to justify” (20). In *Murphy* only the most local movements are possible; by *Company* even those are subjected to intense scrutiny, even prohibition, the endgame of a career-long narrative method devoted to purifying the “necessary journey” into the necessary staying put: “What a curse, mobility!” says Winnie in *Happy Days*.

Company’s Daemon

Company’s “protagonist” takes the position not only of Proust but also of Lucifer: “With head uplift above the wave, and eyes/ That sparkling blazed, his other parts besides/ Prone on the flood, extended long and large (1.193-195, emphasis mine).⁹⁷ Indeed, having spent a considerable time chained prone to a sea of fire, part of what rankles him when he makes his “oblique way” (3.564) to Eden are the upright creatures he sees there: “Two of far nobler shape erect and tall, God-like erect...” (4.288-9). What allows for the poem to unfold is that “the will/ And high permission of all-ruling Heaven/ Left him at large to his own dark designs” (1.211-13). Thus we have the same basic setup: a cantankerous creator letting his creation devise (within limits) in the dark. Satan, furthermore, is “death devising” (4.197), and after he has Beelzebub voice his plan to confound mankind in the council of hell scene, Milton makes it clear that the project was “first devised/ By Satan, and in part proposed: for whence,/ But from the author of all ill could spring/ So deep a malice...” (2.379-82, emphasis mine).

Throughout the poem, “devise” becomes a keyword for the bad kind of design (as opposed to God’s), the “motions vain” (2.191) and “plots and wiles” (2.193) that God “from heav’n’s heighth...sees and derides” (2.190-1). When Adam and Eve eat of the fruit, devise makes its way into their lexicon: “But let us now, as in bad plight, devise/ What best may for the present serve to hide/ The parts of each from other, that seem most/ To shame obnoxious (9.1091). Devise can be thought of as a demonic narrative energy, and it is precisely this energy that transfers not only from Satan to Adam and Eve, but also from *Paradise Lost* to *Company*.

Angus Fletcher begins his study of allegory by tracing the influence of the daemonic “voice” from Socrates onward, a voice “of such authority that one would not

⁹⁶ “Perverse, all monstrous, all prodigious things,/ Abominable, inutterable, and worse than fables/ yet have feigned, or fear conceived...” (2.625-7).

⁹⁷ Of course Beckett’s narrated has less ambitious plans than confounding the human race: “Prone in the dark he strains to see how best he may lie prone. How most companionably.”

willingly go against it,” and that, if heard, “cannot be questioned” (44). For Socrates this is a voice of reason and virtue, but it is still a coercive one, enforc[ing] virtue upon him” such that “he never departed from its dictates” (44). The insistence on the voice in *Company*, which dictates to one in the dark, coupled with the etymological affinities of “devise” and “daemon,” compel us to delve into the text’s daemonic energies:

Coming from the term that means “to divide,” *daemon* implies an endless series of divisions of all important aspects of the world into separate elements for study and control. The daemon of man is his fate, his Moira, his fortune, his lot, whatever is specifically divided up and allotted to *him*....It follows that if nature is a composite system all parts and aspects of which are daemonically controlled, and if man acts only within such a system, the allegorical agent – whose paradigm is daemonic man – is always a division of some larger power. (42-3)

Bloom glosses Fletcher (and Schneeweis) in *The Anxiety of Influence*, but he locates the daemonic voice as the source of all poetic inspiration:

The power that makes a man a poet is daemonic, because it is a power that distributes and divides (which is the root meaning of *daeomai*). It distributes our fates, and divides our gifts, compensating wherever it takes from us. This division brings order, confers knowledge, disorders where it knows, blesses with ignorance to create another order. (100)

Company creates a scenario in which it is impossible to disentangle daemonic voice from daemonic agent: “Deviser of the voice and of its hearer and of himself. Deviser of himself for company. (19). Each division seems to be fixed in a structural relation, but that relation collapses once each division’s own daemonic energies rebound upon itself. *Company*’s voice is both impossible to fix, coming “now from one quarter and now from another” (9) and never confirms that it is addressing the one hearer and not one (or all) of the countless others.

Related to the question about which dark is better company is another unanswerable question: Just who is in that dark? In a telling moment early on, the narrator wonders why the voice does not confirm the assumption that the body is *alone*: “Perhaps for no other reason than to kindle in his mind this faint uncertainty and embarrassment” (5). Every Beckettian dark, as *Ill Seen Ill Said* reminds us, is both a private dark *and* a general dark.⁹⁸ Hence the novel’s pervasive atmosphere of unsettling embarrassment, the story of a hearer that “view[s] [itself] as a stranger...surprised at prayer”(45). And yet Beckett adds one more turn of the screw. When he tries to name himself to alleviate that uneasiness, a curious thing happens. The embarrassment momentarily vanishes, but in its absence he discovers its generative potential: “So that faint uneasiness lost. That faint hope. To one with so few occasions to feel” (22). Not the possible others, but the uneasy feeling is the company. What proceeds is a willful devolution from self-naming (“Haitch”) to denaming, but also a regression to a previous character, the Unnameable, before settling on “You”: “Let him be again as he was. The hearer. Unnamable. You” (23). Self-definition ends not only the embarrassment but also the fabling, which is why Beckett resists it, and any clean definition between company and solitude, at all costs. Beckett’s human comedy consistently gravitates towards the indefinite.

⁹⁸ “In its private dark. In the general dark” (61).

“For solitude sometimes is best society,/ And short retirement urges sweet return.”
(Paradise Lost 9.249-59)

“Need for company not continuous. Moments when his own unrelieved a relief”
(Company 22)

Paradise Lost is thus a crucial father text not only because of its unleashing of daemonic energies, but also because it is a poem obsessed with the shifting relations between company and solitude. *Paradise Lost* constantly toys with the idea of company and solitude, the near paradox of being alone together in the world. Adam and Eve are a “Fair couple, linked in happy nuptial league,/ Alone as they.” (4.340). They are “the *only* two of mankind, but in them/ The whole *included* race (9.415-6, emphasis mine). Eve is the whole female race, though Adam considers her “sole Eve, associate sole, to me beyond compare all living creature dear” (204). Sole though she may be, their “state cannot be severed, we are one,/ one flesh; to lose thee were to lose myself” (9.958-9). Meanwhile, their “blissful solitude” (3.69) in Eden is also a spectacle, “a woody theater/ Of stateliest view. (4.141-2). The poem famously describes their expulsion from the garden as a transformation from one kind of united solitude to a darker, uncertain kind: “They hand in hand with wand’ring steps and slow,/ Through Eden took their solitary way” (12.641-9). And the spirit who precipitated their shared expulsion is Satan, the figure in the poem who is *actually* alone, a “sole King” (2.325) and a “sole fugitive” (4.923).

Company’s explicit reference to the last lines of *Paradise Lost* is perfectly apposite given its own issues with company and solitude: “Hearing on and off a voice of which uncertain whether addressed to him or to another sharing his situation” (32). Thus Beckett rewrites *Paradise Lost*’s tension between “solitary” and “hand in hand” as a tension between “together” and “respective ways”: “And together these and countless others [devisings] continue on their respective ways till they can go no further and together come to rest” (46). Adam and Eve walk slowly to find their place of rest; their “solitary” way is a kind of *tarrying*. Beckett claims to have come to rest, but that claim is just another hasty imagining. He should have followed his earlier self-admonition: “To rest where? Imagine warily” (34). At least Adam and Eve have providence to guide them; *Company*’s narrator has nothing but his “reason-ridden” (24) imagination, and therefore “rest,” or “alone” for that matter, never assume the finality or definition they imply.

One facile reading would interpret the novel’s second person narration as our inclusion, thus negating the novel’s final statement of solitude. I should say facile *and* unnecessary, since by the last page Beckett has already thoroughly confused “company” and “alone.” In the same way Milton constantly flirts (but only flirts) with the paradox of Adam and Eve’s solitary union, Beckett consistently confounds “one in the dark” (1) with “countless others” so that by the end, “alone” has lost all definition: confusion itself becomes company.

Company vitiates the definitional power of its closing statement in a variety of ways. We are told that “the voice *alone* is company but not enough” (5, emphasis mine), though we also learn that the hearer may have more company than the voice alone: “Hearing on and off a voice of which uncertain whether addressed to him or to another sharing his situation”(32). This ambiguity about whether the hearer is alone or in a group reappears in subtler forms: “Numb with the woes of your kind you raise none the less

your head from off your hands and open your eyes” (42). “Of your kind” could equally refer to the hearer’s specific woes or to the general woes of his species. This dedifferentiation extends down into the memories section. Musing on the sound of his footsteps, the narrator recalls: “Sole sound in the silence your footfalls. Rather sole sounds for they vary from one to the next. You listen to each one and add it in your mind to the growing sum of those that went before” (9). Over the course of two sentences, the passage moves from one distinct entity (“sole sound”), to several distinct entities (“sole sounds”), to one indistinct entity (“growing sum”), all the while punning on feet and poetry. Compare this movement to a description of another body in movement that plays on independence and unity: “Simultaneously the various parts set out” (45). Or take the memory of a walk with his father: “Halted too at your elbow during these computations your father’s shade. In his old tramping rags. Finally on side by side from nought anew” (9). The father already exists as a *revenant*, a shadowy ghost rather than a presence, even in this recollection of companionship. His father’s shadow indicates both company and the spectral, evanescent quality of that company, a quality reaffirmed later in the novel when we retrace that same walk when the father has disappeared: “Your father’s shade is not with you any more” (24). Words, too, become shades of their former selves, and while Beckett chips away at “company’s” inclusive connotation, he also never lets “alone” recapture its former defined glory.⁹⁹ The narrative only *seems* to move from uncertainty and embarrassment to the final pose of certainty and resignation: “...better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were. Alone” (46).

Fortunate Falls

There are no shadows in Milton’s Eden. Lucifer first espies Adam and Eve at high noon: “For sight no obstacle found here, nor shade,/ But all sunshine, as when his beams at noon/ Culminate from th’equator, as they now/ Shot upward still direct, whence no way round/ Shadow from opaque body can fall” (3.615-19). By contrast, the host of shadows that populate *Company*—his own, his father’s, those moving across the clock face, the hypothetical cohabitants of the dark, the tenebrous memories themselves—all clue us in to our presence in a fallen world. Shadows, like post-lapsarian man, fall. And indeed, the novel, as we have seen, broadly charts the movement from upright motion to crawling. To remember in *Company* is not only to imagine (Brater), but also to go on a literal and figurative descent: “So light as let be faintest light no longer perceived than the time it takes the lid to fall” (37). A descent into poetry, a descent into *kairos*, and a descent in search of mercy and grace: “From time to time with unexpected grace you lie” (45).

In his study of Proust, Beckett tentatively counts “12 or 13” set pieces of involuntary memory. *Company*, whose 46 pages pale in comparison to the voluminous *Recherche*, packs in a roughly equivalent number: 15. Most of the memories involve a fall, or are spatially organized around high and low. These include the question about the sky being more distant than it appears, the father’s hike to the mountain summit during his wife’s labor, diving into the swimming hole with his father looking up at him, the beggar woman jumping from the first story window, the boy jumping from the top of the

⁹⁹ Compare the revelation that Lucifer no longer resembles his old self: “Think not, revolted Spirit, thy shape the same,/ Or undiminished brightness, to be known/ As when thou stood’st in heav’n upright and pure...(4.835-7).

great fir tree, the hike to the boy's hilly hideout, the light falling (and failing), the mother stooping over the cradle. Feet fall across the landscape (9), heads bow and heads sink, faces upturn, scenes are lit from below, and white boots are "sunk to the top." Take one of the last recollections of the narrated looking out over the strand: "Were your eyes to open they would first see far below in the last rays the skirt of your greatcoat and the uppers of your boots emerging from the sand" (40). Amidst the dying light, the first visual scraps to emerge are all located along a vertical axis and *not* the sea's horizontal one: the bottom of the coat and top of the boot seen emerging from above. Even the "analytical" sections are determined by this high/low spatial divide: "The lower the order of mental activity the better the company. Up to a point" (7). The incidental connections between these qualitative adjectives such as "lower" and "up" are then projected onto a spatial realm in the memory section.

The novel is centered around a series of falls, some fortunate—"Always fall for good" (35)—others less so: "He has been a very naughty boy," reproaches the mother after he jumps from a tree. The first memory is about the boy's confusion about the horizon, that natural phenomenon in which vertical and horizontal axes collapse, and by the end of the novel the voice encounters a similarly confusing question when the easily measured footfalls collapse into the hard-to-measure crawl: "what is the unit of crawl?" (35).¹⁰⁰ That crawl alternates between rhomboid and oblong forms, or at least until the hearer falls yet again: "Oblong restored. So on til he drops" (36). More crucially, and perhaps the reason there is such narrative attention paid to falling bodies, is one theoretically delicious addition to company: "Does he hear the crawl? The fall? What an addition to company were he to hear the fall" (36). Of course one does hear the *fall* in the *crawl*; rhyme, it turns out, is an addition to company as well. Feet fall too ("sole sounds in the silence your footfalls") and throughout the novel we *hear* the poetry of Beckett's devolutionary, or pared down, feet: "Some soft thing stirring softly stirring soon to stir no more. To darkness visible to close the eyes and hear if only that" (12). Thus the fall is also a descent into poetry, into the company of sound.¹⁰¹

Company's voice, we're told, comes "at no times from below" (23). It wants to "have the hearer have a past and acknowledge it. You were born on Easter Friday after long labour" (25). Part of the novel's "labour" (46), then, is attempting to replace its horizontal timeline (a meaningless *chronos*) with an obliterating vertical scale (a meaningful *kairos*). *Company*, which devotes a long section to watching the second hand of a watch "preceded by its shadow" (43) work its way around the dial, is almost as mercilessly punctual a novel as *Murphy*. As a counter to the march, literal and figurative, of time, across a landscape,¹⁰² across the face of a watch, the vertical appears privileged

¹⁰⁰ Or as Winnie laments of her aging husband: "Not the crawler you were, poor darling" (295).

¹⁰¹ I can't help but hear in a line like this a turning back to Joyce's famous ending of "The Dead," itself a story about sound and memory: "His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead." Or one could turn to another late Beckett work, the play *Footfalls*.

¹⁰² On walking with his father: "How often round the earth already....Finally on side by side from nought anew" (9).

in the memories because it can transform *chronos* into *kairos*: “You lie in the dark and see the scene. As you could not at the time” (25).¹⁰³ That vertical scale not only carries the hearer towards a past differentiated from the meaningless march of time, but also towards merciful company. Beckett’s casual reference to *The Merchant of Venice*, “upon the place beneath” (25), allows him to unite two central themes of *Company*: the search for mercy and an obsession with axes (vertical and horizontal). *Merchant*, a “problem” comedy incidentally all about inclusion and exclusion, contains a famous discussion of mercy: “The quality of mercy is not strain’d/ It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven/ Upon the place beneath: it is twice blessed...” I’ve been trying to show how the novel’s series of falls is linked to the search for *kairotic* memory; those falls are also linked, via Shakespeare, to the search for mercy.

Mercy, like Lucifer, falls from heaven, but the voice falling on the narrator has no “trace of love” (35). Therefore *Company*, in its search for mercy, repeatedly recreates mercy’s journey by repeatedly dropping downwards; even the crawl takes on supplicating overtones: “Oblong [crawl] restored. So on til he drops. Of all modes of crawl this the *repent* amble is possibly the least common. And so possibly of all the most diverting” (36, emphasis mine). The text’s daemonic, diverting energies are also repentant ones. In one memory the boy helps a “poor old beggar woman” fumbling with a gate, a woman who, believing she could fly, once launched herself out of a window. This fallen Crazy Jane figure, however, becomes a source of spiritual blessing: “She blesses you. What were her words? God reward you little master. Some such words. God save you little master” (11). The blessing, though half-remembered, ultimately carries more force than the voice’s “flat tone” and cold logical reasoning: “Pure reasoning? God is love. Yes or no? No.”¹⁰⁴ Each fall is a leap down into a more diverting, repentant, merciful and poetic space, a leap from a loveless world into one where “the heart [is] too heavy. In the end too heavy” (28).

Human kindness is not to be taken lightly in Beckett. When a cabdriver decides to abandon his gig in a funeral cortege and drive the protagonist of *The Expelled* aimlessly around the city, the decision deeply moves him: “He had preferred me to a funeral, this was a fact that would endure forever” (57). Here kindness assumes the special status of fact, “un fait,” somehow set apart from the centripetal fictive force of Beckett’s conjurings. Indeed, it is the one fact in a narrative world that continually references its own mendacity. I say this not to reduce the moment to its platitudinous moral, but rather to account for the affective quality of *Company*’s title, the way Beckett’s misanthropy is always tempered by a yearning, and appreciation for, human company. Murphy finds

¹⁰³ The horizontal, as Molloy notes, has its charms as well: “Yes, when you can neither stand nor sit with comfort, you take refuge in the horizontal, like a child in its mother’s lap. You explore it as never before and find it possessed of unsuspected delights. In short it becomes infinite...”

¹⁰⁴ Brater makes a convincing case for the affective primacy of the recollections: “What makes *Company* a special edition in the Beckett canon is the risk he now takes with the dualism he has balanced so delicately in this work: heart wins hands down in the end. Despite the reason-ridden intellect, emotionally charged memories, no matter how formulated, recast, and patched up, shine through in the end shape of haunting images that will quite simply not go away” (168).

himself surrounded by people who *need* him; *Company* is concerned with the quest for mercy, *caritas*, human kindness in a world reduced to voices, figments, and crawlers. Far from being solipsistically lost in his computational reverie, its subject is a creature of empathy, wondering about those who may or may not be “sharing his situation” (15).

Dante’s Smiles

The comic indefinability of Beckett’s devising has at its heart a broader Dantean comedic element that draws power from a blessed, *kairotic* and inclusive vision. Towards the end of *Company*, Beckett glimpses this vision through his favorite Dante character, Belacqua, and his purgatorial journey to heaven: “So sat waiting to be purged the old lutist cause of Dante’s first quarter-smile and now perhaps singing praises with some section of the blest at last” (44). Dante’s smile is divided, a smile devised for company, but, like the beggar woman’s half-remembered blessing, is part of the animating comic spirit Beckett’s daemonic fabling. Beckett kept track of how many times Dante smiles in the *Commedia*, and there are worse critical strategies than doing the same for Beckett’s exclamation marks in *Company*. Though we’re repeatedly informed that the voice takes the “same flat tone at all times,” the text is littered with exclamatory phrases. These occur seventeen times over the course of the novel, five of which take the same form in which enthusiasm and sarcasm are seamlessly mixed: “What an addition to company that would be!” (10, 14, 19, 20, 41, 44).¹⁰⁵ (One such instance refers to the possibility of a fly mistaking him for dead.) Such an accounting risks devolving into a pedantically comic version of *Watt*’s academic committee scene, in which each member’s doomed effort to look at every other member is painstakingly recorded. But, at the risk of such pedantry, by keeping track of these exclamation marks we can see how they act as a kind of grammatical company, the embers of an original inspirational fire composed of hope, humor, irony and resignation that have survived the onslaught endured by all Beckett’s figments. It would be a mistake to read these marks as either completely ironic or sarcastic reflections on the state of affairs.¹⁰⁶

The first exclamation mark in *Company* displays the full spectrum of affective valences contained in the Beckettian exclamation mark. After the memory of his birth, and his father’s long walk to avoid it, the set piece concludes with “Over!” Relief, yes, but also a kind of comic incomprehension: Over? In a Beckett novel, not by a long shot. Several pages later we read “Oh never to have been!” Another exclamation, “One day!” creates the same ambiguity, first invoking then mocking an optimism that some day

¹⁰⁵ “Over!” (9); “What an [further] addition to company that would be” (10, 14, 19, 20, 41, 44); “One day!” (11); “What company in the dark!” (13); “Oh never to have been!” (13);

“Of words murmured in his ear to wonder if to him!” (22); “What a help that would be in the dark!” (13); “How given you were both moving and at rest to the closed eye in your waking hours!” (30); “Aha! The crawl. Does he hear the crawl?” (37); “What visions in the dark of light!” (44); “What visions in the shadeless dark of light and shade!” (44); “Home!” (44).

¹⁰⁶ *Worstward Ho* displays this range of complex and competing valences with characteristically Beckettian humor: “What room for worse! How almost true [the words] sometimes almost ring! How wanting in inanity!” (99).

something will happen to separate it from the others. Precisely because Beckett makes it impossible to distinguish one day from another, “One day!” achieves an odd power and assumes Miltonically epic proportions: “Day without end won and lost” (72).¹⁰⁷ In Beckett even the most corrosive irony can never fully abandon that which it mocks.¹⁰⁸ The final instance of an exclamation mark is “Home!” and it is hard to pin down: incredulity, nostalgia, joy, sarcasm? Probably a bit of each. Beckett, the last of the famous Modernist exiles, never abandons neither the drive to replace “the necessary journey” with the “necessary staying put,” nor the monomaniacal belief (from *Murphy* on) that “all life is...but a wandering to find home” (6). Amidst the incessant definitional assaults Beckett inflicts on characters and amidst all the daemoniacal devising, “home” clings to its talismanic status, carrying with it the illusory hope for paradise regained. *Company*’s Miltonic core is so vital not just because of Adam and Eve being alone together, but also because they are the first *Bildungsroman* heroes. Milton’s epic cuts out just as its *Bildung* is set to start. Beckett in a sense takes over from there, inhabiting their uncertain, wandering steps as they travel away from their Edenic home.

Company is an almost unrecognizably subtle comic *Bildungsroman*. It looks very different from *Murphy*, in which Beckett brilliantly, pyrotechnically and mercilessly exploits the form’s obsession with definitions until its protagonist combusts. Beckett’s career-long paring down of language, sense impressions, mental activity and mobility culminates in *Company*, which paradoxically swells to include *the* foundational *Bildungsroman*, and along with it Milton’s ambiguous blend of *kairos* and *chronos*, of solitude and company.

¹⁰⁷ Cf Pozzo’s irritated speech in *Godot*: When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night once more. On! (103)

¹⁰⁸ The conclusion of *Krapp’s Last Tape* illustrates this poignantly. Krapp, crotchety and decrepit, replays tapes of him speaking as a younger man, listening intently to his younger self’s confidence:

Perhaps my best years are gone. When there was a chance of happiness. But I wouldn’t want them back. Not with the fire in me now. No, I wouldn’t want them back.

Krapp motionless staring before him. The tape runs on in silence.

The fire long since gone, Krapp sits motionless in the devastating concluding silence, and Beckett’s famed pessimism seems to win out. That pessimism, however, exists simultaneously in time with the optimism. The ironic venom of the elder Krapp can’t completely stomp out the inspirational embers of the younger; indeed, against his best efforts to remain unmoved, the recording ultimately affects him deeply.

Roth's Perfect Joke

The goofiness you must get yourself into to get where you have to go, the extent of the mistakes you are required to make!...And they would tell you, we have faith, don't worry, and you would say no, no way, you need a much bigger schmuck than me, but they repeat they have faith that you are the one, that you will evolve into a colossal schmuck more conscientiously than you can possibly begin to imagine, you will make mistakes on a scale you can't even dream of now—because there is no other way to reach the end. (*Sabbath's Theater*)

The history of the *Bildungsroman* is precisely the history of colossal schmucks. It is a genre, which, even in its supposedly non-comic mode (the classical *Bildungsroman*), is about how the path to “the end,” the path to definition, lies through naivety, embarrassment, illusions, and missteps, the dispelling of first impressions, the eradication of pride and prejudice. My point about the *Bildungsroman* is that it has no non-comic mode; comedy inherently resides in the genre, “conscientiously” diverting its protagonists from their desired *telos*, a *telos* which, once achieved, transforms him into a character bearing almost no relation to the one who motivated the narrative in the first place. Because the genre is essentially comic, a genre of indefinability, endlessness, and yes, colossal schmucks, it has proven an especially fertile field for parody since its very inception. This essay looks at the evolution of Roth's comedy between two such schmucks: Alexander Portnoy, who fears he “will remain a fifteen year-old boy for life” (127) and Mickey Sabbath, who, at sixty-four, possesses the “instinctive force of a two-year old” (335). Both are classic examples of arrested development, but I argue that while Portnoy is trapped inside what he calls a “Jewish joke,” Sabbath magisterially reorders the world in his own image, making it, and himself, into his ideal, the “perfect joke.” He arrests development to such an extent that he develops a perverse comic *kairos*.

As I've argued for both Waugh's and Beckett's comedy, and which holds true for Roth's, the comic generates its energy by defying, overstepping, or collapsing established limits. *Enfant terrible* of American fiction though he is, Roth has his alter-ego Zuckerman declare that “once writing, it's all limits.” (ZU 609). *The Great American Novel* provides a compelling illustration of comedy's dependence on boundaries when General Oakhart, the no-nonsense President of the Patriot League, holds forth on baseball's history to a group of visiting schoolchildren. Looking into their “solemn and awed little faces” and pointing to a model baseball diamond on his desk, Oakhart delivers the following paean to the sport's rules and regulations: “I happen to think that ninety feet was *precisely* the length necessary to make this game the hard, exciting, and suspenseful struggle that it is...Boys and girls, take away the Rules and the Regulations, and you don't *have* civilized life as we know and revere it. (52-3, italics Roth's). This speech is key in thinking about Roth's comedy and its productive play with limits. Comedy is not “hard, exciting, and suspenseful struggle” without those limits. The baseball diamond acts a kind of anchor for the centripetal comedic force of the novel, which begins by trying to delineate a category whose unwieldiness is diametrically

opposed to the precision of the diamond: “The Great American Novel,” an appellation as inherently vague as it is insistently specific. Its article is the only definite thing about it.

For Roth, the primary limits are established by and identified with a familial and ethnic heritage as a Jewish son. In this respect Roth’s comic *Bildungsroman*s represent a major departure from the initiating structure of the English *Bildungsroman*, in which the protagonist is invariably, fatefully, an orphan: *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield*, *Oliver Twist*, *Middlemarch*, *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*. Roth’s protagonists have the opposite problem of the classical *Bildungsroman* protagonist; in the above works, the developmental intrigue involves shaping oneself in a world lacking familial bonds, whereas in Roth the problem is how to shape oneself within an excess of those very bonds. In the same way that comedy needs limits, Roth’s comic *Bildungsroman* needs the limiting, and often antagonistic, familial structure. In *Portnoy’s Complaint*, limits get figured as a particularly Jewish question:

Let the goyim sink their teeth into whatever lowly creature crawls and grunts across the face of the dirty earth, we will not contaminate our humanity thus... Yes, it’s all written down in history, what they have done, our illustrious neighbors who own the world and know absolutely nothing of human boundaries and limits. (88-91)

Yet the novel is all about Portnoy sinking his teeth into things Leviticus (and his mother) dictate he shouldn’t. He himself parodies himself as a “lapper of cunt... crawl[ing] through life feasting on pussy” and in the novel’s most notorious passage the sexual and the dietary mix: “I fucked my own family’s dinner” (150). It is Portnoy’s struggle with the limiting laws and rituals of Judaism, the contest between his “Dionyseian side” and his deeply felt family conviction that “...life is boundaries and restriction” (88), that leads to another comedic assault on ends: his persistent, and neverending “ritualized bellyaching”: “Where end? Is this truth I’m delivering up, or is this just plain kvetching? Or is kvetching for people like me a form of truth?” (105). Breaking one set of ritualistic distinctions leads Portnoy to another ritualistic (and distinctly Jewish) form of expression wherein the distinction between truth and performance vanishes: kvetching.

Sabbath’s Theater’s title character, who as many reviewers point out shares Portnoy’s predilection for sexual revelry (Kermode thinks the novel’s explicitness will “startle” even the most “hardened readers”), curtly dismisses the strictures haunting Portnoy: “There is no Jewish law you bastard!” (378). But Sabbath, for all his “radical audacity” (Brauner 125) and his status as the “luftmensch sublime” (Omer-Sherman 181), is a creature just as tormented by limits (and his mother) as Portnoy.¹⁰⁹ I argue that Sabbath only is Sabbath because of the looming specters of ultimatums—final, limiting terms—that control the novel from page one. Having “grown up on endlessness” (30), Sabbath is compelled to maintain that sense of endlessness despite the series of ends besieging him: the deaths of his brother, mother, and Drenka, Linc’s suicide, the disappearance of Nikki, his termination from his teaching post and his career-ending arthritis. Just as *Portnoy’s Complaint* generates comic energy by butting up against “boundaries and restriction,” *Sabbath’s Theater* generates a comic energy of its own by having Sabbath, consummate artist and performer that he is, improvise to forestall the

¹⁰⁹ At one point in the novel the ghost of his mother hovers over his shoulder while he makes love to his mistress.

encroaching finality of death, which itself “ha[s] overstepped the limits” (121) in the novel.¹¹⁰

Roth’s Comedy

Both *Portnoy’s Complaint* and *Sabbath’s Theater* do the work of a *Bildungsroman*, imposing order on a life by transforming *chronos* to *kairos*, through comedy: Portnoy’s concluding punchline and Sabbath’s bemused discovery that he “had perpetrated on himself the perfect joke” (209).¹¹¹ But each mocks the work of *Bildung* to different effect. Comedy makes Portnoy the butt of a sterile, “Jewish joke” (39) ultimately leading him to isolated exile: “How have I come to be such an enemy and a flayer of myself? And so alone! Oh so alone! Nothing but self! Locked up in me!...Home? I have none. Family? No!” (280). Sabbath, by contrast, achieves a kind of “transcendental homelessness,” a discovery that “he [is] elsewhere,” which I will argue is the version of the comic grace elder *Bildungsroman* heroes achieve, a rapturous isolation: “This is your niche...This is Sabbath’s Indecent Theater. Remarkable” (435).

Commenting on the “vulgar” quality of Roth’s early comedy, Irving Howe scathingly remarked that the cruelest thing one could do to *Portnoy’s Complaint* is to reread it, since that would lay bare the foreclosed nature of the work, its structure as a series of skits rather than a sustained novel:

An assemblage of gags strung onto the outcry of an analytic patient, the book thrives best on casual responses; it demands little more from the reader than a nightclub performer demands: a rapid exchange of laugh for punchline, a breath or two of rest, some variations on the first response, and a quick exit. (82)

Roth’s work, according to Howe, “drives a narrative toward cognitive ends fixed in advance (72), shuttling the reader between the novel’s established clinical parameters and increasingly outré comic exploitations of those parameters.”¹¹² Tony Tanner seems to second Howe’s aesthetic judgment, noting that “perhaps it is because of Portnoy’s transitional position that Roth really doesn’t know how to finish the book” (68). One critic sees everything geared toward a predetermined end (a punchline), and the other an impossibility to end: the comic in purgatory, unable to free himself from the framework he has built up around himself. Hermione Lee sees the purgatorial comic structure less as a sign of Roth’s “indifference to the Keatsian persuasion” (Howe 72) than as a reflection of Portnoy’s vexed relationship with comedy:

Portnoy is doubly a self-abusing humorist: that is, he makes use to the full of the tradition of ‘self-abuse’ in the Jewish joke, and at the same time abuses the tradition. *Portnoy’s Complaint* is more than the ultimate Jewish joke; it is a joke against Jewish humour. Roth’s protest against the rabbi’s or Jewish mother’s

¹¹⁰ Sabbath considers the persistence of ghosts accompanying him as an overstepping of death’s limits.

¹¹¹ The perfect joke is that he has unconsciously willed himself into an indigent isolation by choosing puppetry over his career in the Merchant Marines, by exiling himself to a remote (and hostile) community, and by marrying a woman who despises him.

¹¹² Roth splenetically responds in *The Anatomy Lesson* by having Zuckerman accuse Howe’s stand-in, Milton Appel, of “lay[ing] hold of [his] comedy with your ten-ton gravity and turn[ing] it into a travesty” (AL 572).

self-limiting idea of Jewishness is the same as Portnoy's complaint at being trapped inside a Jewish joke. (38)

All these critics point to *Portnoy's* sterile element, the idea that whether through a lack of vocational "discipline" (Howe) or through conscious design (Lee), Roth's comedy in *Portnoy* doesn't so much free Portnoy from the nets binding him as trap him further in a downward descent. As Naomi, the kibbutz dweller whom Portnoy meets in Israel, tells him: "I don't believe you actually want to improve your life. Everything you say is somehow always twisted, some way or another, to come out funny. All day long the same thing." (299).

Questions over the nature of Roth's comedy reappeared with the publication of *Sabbath's Theater* over a quarter-century later. Sabbath, too, makes everything into a farce (161), and one critic, J.M. Bernstein, judges Roth's late comedy as a strangely sterile, "unmotivated" (176) farce. Describing what he calls the melancholy form of American modernism, so called because "its fullest achievement can only be its failing" (171), Bernstein lauds *American Pastoral* (the novel immediately following *Sabbath's Theater*) for formally representing the death of the *Bildungsroman*. Zuckerman's ambition to "dream a realist novel" (AP 88) begins by trying to imagine the impenetrability of Swede Levov's beautiful ordinariness and ends by failing to imagine his daughter Merry, the cipher-like, terrorist monstrosity incapable of being formed: "The great and impossible task of the novel is to know the other; but the other that is to be known now is the life without *Bildung*, the life that is from the first a stutter" (183). Precisely what Bernstein likes about *American Pastoral* is its tragic indefinition, the "restraint" Roth uses in not giving Merry a subjectivity. And yet he recoils at *Sabbath's Theater's* comic indefinition, criticizing that novel for "failing" in the wrong way: "[what] makes *Sabbath's Theater* fail in its highest ambition is that its excesses remain unmotivated, disconnected from the judgment it wants to pass and the lament it means to offer (176).¹¹³

Bernstein's critique seeks to rope off *Sabbath's Theater*, to motivate its excess, whereas the whole point of Sabbath's anarchic energies is to spill outside the stage and transform everything into his daemonic playground. To have more than a momentarily fixed target for Sabbath's excesses—the "Japs," feminists, twelve-step programs, monogamy, and the bourgeoisie all take turns in the role—would be to dilute his Sabbathness, to define falsely his indefinable quiddity. The novel, pace Bernstein, simply doesn't mean to offer a lament or pass a judgment. As the astute critic James Wood has noted, Sabbath is a creature of "nihilistic blasphemy" which has no target and "unlike satire, which rests its case once its target has been speared...can never be completed" (257). Sabbath, according to Wood, is "beyond argument...he exists only to be confirmed by defeat" (256-7). I've been arguing throughout this study that the comic mode avoids ends like the plague; Bernstein sees this aimless quality of the novel but treats it as a failure rather than a formal necessity: comic indefinition.

I used the term "purifying regression" to describe Beckett's late style, specifically in relation to the decreasingly sentient creatures he devises. The same term applies to Roth's late work. Sabbath is an older, but also a purer comic version of Portnoy:

¹¹³ *American Pastoral*, by contrast, has an almost monomaniacal obsession with "the meaning of beauty" (175) and its unsightly, necessary remainder.

“Sabbath was reduced the way a sauce is reduced, boiled down by his burners, the better to concentrate his essence and be defiantly himself” (126). *Portnoy’s Complaint* generates its comedy by playing on the various forces pulling the protagonist apart, on the formal battle staged in the novel between Portnoy’s “I” and a series of voices crowding in on that “I”; Sabbath generates its comedy through the Rabelaisian urges that reduce him and enable him to be defiantly himself.

Portnoy’s Interrupted Monologue

When Portnoy’s mother learns that he has been eating French fries with Melvin Weiner after school, she implores her husband to intercede: “Tell him what the end is going to be...tatelah, it begins with diarrhea, but do you know how it ends? With a sensitive stomach like yours, do you know how it finally ends? Wearing a plastic bag to do your business in” (34-5).¹¹⁴ The end is, of course, slightly different from the worse case scenarios she envisions; the end is the condition after which the novel is named, which in turn is a definition: Portnoy’s complaint, “a bodily ailment, indisposition, disorder (esp. of chronic nature)” (OED). And it is in a sense this definitional structure from which Portnoy seeks to escape: “I am not the be-all and end-all of everybody’s existence!” (131).

From the outset of *Portnoy’s Complaint*, the novel’s clearly defined medical condition boxes the narrator’s manic energy within a confining structure.¹¹⁵ *Portnoy’s Complaint* begins with a definition and ends with a joke. Dr. Spielvogel, who has penned the “complaint” that serves as the novel’s epigraph, concludes the novel-long rant with the suggestion that “Now vee may perhaps to begin. Yes?” (309). That joke, the novel’s “Punchline,” retroactively assigns the entire novel a prologue status, much like Waugh ironizes the “Prelude” section in *Decline and Fall* by ending the novel exactly as it began. Most critics have commented on *Portnoy’s* circular structure, either in relation to the interminable process of psychoanalysis or in relation to Portnoy’s arrested development, but I’d like to focus on the overlooked point that this novel, an obsessive, claustrophobic trip through Portnoy’s psyche that has become almost synonymous with neurotic egomania (Belleter), is book-ended by two instances where Portnoy cedes his narratorial voice: the clinical condition outlined up front and Dr. Spielvogel’s concluding joke. Granted, beginning the novel with a condition named after the protagonist is not exactly untainted by egomania, but in both instances the “I” disappears, and as I will argue, the “I” continues to disappear throughout as Portnoy cedes his voice time and time again, thus insuring that he will never become fully himself, which is the central objective of the *Bildungsroman*.

The novel begins with not one, but two definitional feints, first the summary of the “complaint” and next the chapter heading of “The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve ever Met.” The novel aims to break free of the initial, definitional limit of the epigraph;

¹¹⁴ Compare to Bettelheim’s reading of another source of scatological fascination in the novel: “[Portnoy] is fascinated by his father’s constipation, which is so stark a contrast with his excessive masturbation and incessant, diarrhea-like talk” (Bettelheim 28).

¹¹⁵ In the Zuckerman series, Zuckerman’s medical condition goes to the other end of the definitional spectrum: “a causeless, nameless, untreatable phantom disease....it was nothing” (AL 434).

Portnoy is not a case, he is a character with a voice; he exists in a novel rather than in a medical textbook (or as a figure in a medical lexicon). As Roth later makes clear in *The Anatomy Lesson*, a medical diagnosis, with its “definite, useful, and authoritative conclusion” (515) is thoroughly at odds with the novelist’s task:

...a good writer can’t abandon his character’s suffering, not to narcotics or to death...a writer learns to stay around, has to, in order to make sense of incurable life, in order to chart the turnings of the punishing unknown even where there’s no sense to be made. (517)

Roth’s opening gambit in *Portnoy* establishes a tension between the detached, conclusive medical diagnosis and the sustained inconclusiveness of Portnoy’s first-person rant. But before we get to that rant we have to go through his mother.

In accordance with psychoanalytic presumption, Portnoy’s complaints all originate in his relation to his mother. This has been much commented upon, but I am less interested in the psychoanalytical dynamics than in the narrative consequences of the mother-son dynamic, the struggle to be the novel’s most unforgettable character. Portnoy’s mother is everywhere, so engrained in his consciousness that he is convinced she is his grade-school teacher in disguise. She even hijacks the opening of his complaint, which begins with a chapter titled: “The Most Unforgettable Character I’ve ever Met” (1). Given the “therapy session” conceit and the opening third person description of “Portnoy’s Complaint,” everything is set up to make us think that Portnoy is the most unforgettable character, and yet the chapter heading turns out to be the second insufficient definition we get of Portnoy before the novel even begins; “the most unforgettable character I’ve ever met” turns out to be his mother, momentarily deflecting us from the novel’s true, unforgettable subject: Portnoy himself.

The novel’s ending does the same thing as Portnoy defers to Spielvogel yet again. The therapist’s “yes?” strips Portnoy of the last word even as it invites him to speak again.¹¹⁶ The novel begins with the medical terminology of the case, and ends with Spielvogel resuming control and imposing his diagnosis on the novel: it’s all prologue, an outpouring of comic energy that only serves to provide a backstory to the definition which begins the novel. That this shift happens under the specific appellation of the joke (“Punch Line”) points to comedy’s resistance to ends and definition, since the punch line, which should effect a kind of closure, does anything but. Roth not only yanks the voice away from the *Bildung*’s protagonist, but does so in a way that renders the novel, like psychoanalysis and unlike the ideal, *Bildungsroman*, interminable.

Even before Dr. Spielvogel delivers his punch line, Roth has already begun edging him out of the novel. One bawdy example occurs when Portnoy, conceding the impossibility of “win[ning] an argument with a hard-on” (143), gives that member full narratorial reign in an uninterrupted monologue. Then there’s the impersonal, Kafkaesque voice which imposes its judgment on Portnoy and finds him guilty of crimes “too numerous to mention” over the course of his sexual adventures (307). Furthermore, Naomi, that “hardy, red-headed, freckled, ideological hunk of a girl” whom Portnoy picks up as she’s hitchhiking to Haifa, becomes the novel’s temporary, if heavily ironized, hero. When his sexual assault, an attack not only on Naomi, but on the self-righteousness

¹¹⁶ *Portrait of the Artist* figures prominently in *Portnoy*, but the ending gestures towards another Joyce character, one who shares Portnoy’s logorrhea: Molly Bloom.

she represents, ends in failure, she stands over him resembling the Allegorical picture of Victory. Portnoy, impotent, has nothing left to do but lie prostrate and marvel at the six-foot woman looming over him, her foot perched menacingly on his chest: "How big big women are! Look at you – how patriotic! You really look like victory, don't you, honey...Heroine!" (304).¹¹⁷ He continues to apostrophize her as "Heroine!" throughout the scene, literally getting his characteristic voice, and his libido, stomped out of him: "If I was born to be austere about myself, so be it! A grueling and gratifying ethical life, opulent with self-sacrifice, voluptuous with self-restraint! Ah, sounds good. Ah, I can just taste those rocks!" (304). In her brief appearance, Naomi becomes an ironic "Heroine" in a novel without a proper hero. Becky Sharpe she's not, but then again that's the point. In her proud embrace of moral strictures she couldn't be more unlike Becky, and in fact, more unlike Portnoy. She pauses during her attack to ask Portnoy whether the word she needs to describe his style is self-deprecating or self-depreciating (299). She means the former, but his humor is of course both; Portnoy tells her self-deprecating, but Portnoy's style is also a depreciation: "What a waste," she tells him, passing her judgment on the devaluing effects of Portnoy's boorish antics. The "i" makes all the difference, highlighting the crucial effect of Roth's comedy on Portnoy's splintered personality: the ceding of his voice to a series of bit players (even his penis).

Just as the beginning of the book attempts to delay the entrance of Portnoy's "I," the end attacks it from different angle, first from the ethical, self-righteous kibbutz dweller Naomi, Portnoy's Jewish antithesis and impossible ideal, then with the impersonal voices of condemnation, then with a retreat to the idiom of gangster film ("Blaze, you bastard cop, what do I give a shit...But at least while I lived, I live big" (309)) then with an undifferentiated cry (Aaaaaaaaaaaaa...!), and finally with Dr. Spielvogel. The "complaint," which at first glance seems to be governed exclusively by the power of Portnoy's "I," actually stages a series of assaults on that "I." Its main character may feel like "nothing but self," but the novel is actually a palimpsest of competing voices. The clean definitional framework which opens the novel bursts open with Portnoy's overflowing kvetching.

Distinction and Regression

Portnoy's Complaint, like all comic Bildungsromane, is obsessed with the conditions of distinction and regression. The obsession is related to the (feeble but active) belief that regression, paradoxically, is the route to wholeness. Thus Portnoy's desperate cry to "Make me whole!" (40) is also tied up with his wish to regress: "Believe me, I'm not trying to slither out of my slime—I am trying to slither into it!" (151). And yet he is haunted by the consequences of that wish, the fear that he will be publicly exposed as "no higher in the evolutionary scale than the mobsters and millionaires who choose their women from the line at the Copa" (226). Portnoy is not whole because his wish to slither into the slime is just that: a wish. He is, like Beckett's Belacqua, a "border-creature."

¹¹⁷ Eileen Cohen argues that Portnoy's encounter thwarts his goal of going to Israel to become "an authentic man, in control of his will" (163), or a "hero": "But the role Naomi casts him in in this Promised Land is the role of the schmiel" (164). "Alex in Wonderland, or 'Portnoy's Complaint.'" *Twentieth Century Literature*. Vol. 17. No.3. (July 1971): 161-68.

During one otherworldly set piece, Portnoy describes his visit to a sauna with his father as a blissful reversion that momentarily rids him of the familial and religious bonds tormenting him:

The moment he pushes open the door the place speaks to me of prehistoric times, earlier even than the era of the cavemen and lake dwellers that I have studied in school, a time when above the oozing bog that was the earth, swirling white gases choked out the sunlight, and aeons passed while the planet was drained for man...back in some sloppy water time, before there were families such as we know them, before there were toilets and tragedies such as we know them, a time of amphibious creatures, plunging brainless hulking things with wet meaty flanks and steaming torsos... an age when they existed as some herd of Jewish mammals, whose only utterance is oy, oy...A place without goyim and women. (53-4).

This Mesozoic mist, equal parts Edenic, comic, and grotesque, effortlessly conflates toilets and tragedies (given that his potty training is a significant source of later life neurosis). Roth out-cave-mans the classic cave-man fantasy, recreating a world in which society devolves itself out of any and all distinctions (excepting occasional grunts) and in the process banishes any and all tragedy. That Portnoy's 158 points of IQ and verbal dexterity can never let him fully belong to this "brainless hulking" herd is both a blessing but also its own kind of tragedy.¹¹⁸ Portnoy, despite his regressive fantasies, is the elect of the elect, a pathologically distinctive character. Just as Murphy ultimately can't inhabit Endon's comic chaos, Portnoy can't reason himself out of his 158 points of I.Q., out of how distinctly fit he is for the world and how grotesquely unfit he is to inhabit the world of hulking Jewish mammals.

The novel's engagement with distinction and devolution constantly swirl around the definition of the "human." Portnoy is bombarded by different definitions of the human. He remembers that the "very first distinction I learned from [his parents], I'm sure, was not night and day, or hot and cold, but goyische and Jewish!" (84). That distinction is based on one group's lack of distinction: "Yes, it's all written down in history, what [the goyim] have done, our illustrious neighbors who own the world and know absolutely nothing of human boundaries and limits" (91). Later in the novel, his mother tries to reinforce this distinction in her warning against him dating shikshas: "THEY ARE ANOTHER BREED OF HUMAN BEING ENTIRELY! YOU WILL BE TORN ASUNDER!" (212). Portnoy, however, is otherwise inclined, believing that there is "just a little bit more to existence than what can be contained in those disgusting and useless categories!...I also happen to be a human being!" (84). And as a result Portnoy's academic and intellectual distinction (he graduates first in every class and has an I.Q. of

¹¹⁸ Compare Zuckerman's similar desire to cast off his writing vocation, its compulsion to order and assign meaning to everything, and instead embrace typographical chaos: "The right to be stupid. The right to be lazy. The right to be no one and nothing. Instead of solitude, company; instead of silence, voices; instead of projects, escapades... To capitulate to qwertyuiop, asdfghjk, and zxcvbnm, to let those three words say it all... (ZB 443).

158) culminates in a profession devoted to eradicating another kind of (nefarious) distinction: racial discrimination.

Portnoy's title is Assistant Commissioner for the City of New York Commission on Human Opportunity, though at one point he is accused of having "human values of a race-horse jockey" (228). Indeed, it is precisely his failure to come to terms with [missing word: his] girlfriend's humanity that torments him: "Why not let her be what she is? What an idea! Love her as she is! In all her imperfection – which is, after all, maybe only human!" (217). But Portnoy gives his non-Jewish girlfriend a nickname that negates her humanity: The Monkey. The Monkey, in turn, challenges Portnoy's "humanitarian" bona fides: "Human opportunities! Human! How you love that word! But do you know what it means, you son of a bitch pimp! I'll teach you what it means!" (160). And she even expresses her love for him in a way that both distinguishes him and (touchingly) drags him down out of the human sphere: "... you're the very best man, woman, or child I've ever known! In the whole animal kingdom!" (239). This presumably in reference to an erotic reading of Yeats' "Leda and the Swan," during which The Monkey translates Zeus' indifferent beak into Portnoy's: "Jew-swan!" Portnoy's last encounter with a woman draws on the animal kingdom less ecstatically: "Pig!" (305) Naomi shouts at him.

These plays on essential distinctions (Jewish/goyim, human/animal) continue with Portnoy's body, which is at times easily defined and readable: "I am marked like a road-map from head-to-toe with my repressions. You can travel the length and breadth of my body through superhighways of shame and inhibition and fear" (139). And yet throughout the novel Roth consistently unmarks his body. For example, during Portnoy's childhood, when he is "so small [he] hardly know[s] what sex [he is]" (48), and when, during one harrowing episode, his testicle launches an "anarchic insurrection" (41) and ascends into his inguinal canal, causing the panic-stricken boy to wonder if he is metamorphosing into a girl. The body also vacillates not only between sexual but racial poles of goyim/Jew as well. He describes the disappearance of his childhood button-nose in Gogolian terms, except instead of getting his old one back, he gets one that marks him as Jewish: "Porte-Noire and Parsons my ass, kid, you have got J-E-W written right across the middle of that face..." (168).¹¹⁹

Alongside the prevalent forms of bodily distinction are the novel's set of alternately defined and undefined moral distinctions. To their Jewish parents, children are both "unique as unicorns on the one hand...and such bumbling, incompetent, thoughtless, helpless, selfish, evil little shits, little ingrates, on the other!" (134). It is this split conception that keeps Portnoy anchored in another crisis of distinctions: "Good Christ, a Jewish man with parents alive is a fifteen-year old boy, and will remain a fifteen year-old boy for life till they die!" (124). Furthermore, Portnoy is both unicorn, the "most moral man in New York" (198), and so convinced of his own evilness that he imagines himself in Hell, at which point the devil proceeds to single him out from the other sinners: "You really distinguished yourselves, all right. And you in particular," he says, lifting a sardonic eyebrow in my direction..." (227). The devil then transforms into a hectoring Rabbi Warshaw, Satan and holy man delivering the same message again reinforcing the constant cycle of distinction and dedifferentiation upon which comedy thrives.

¹¹⁹ Portnoy comes up with an old French etymology of his name to obscure his Jewishness.

These distinctions, and crumbling distinctions, have formal analogues as well, eliding the demarcation between form and content. At one point Portnoy wonders if his “bottomless...ritualized bellyaching” is leading anywhere: “Is this truth I’m delivering up, or is this just plain kvetching? Or is kvetching for people like me a form of truth?” (105). The Freudian principles to which he appeals at various points prove no help in disentangling the two, since Portnoy comes to the conclusion that he has “a life without latent content” (291). The complaint’s actual conclusion fittingly takes place in a land that yet again scrambles the distinctions (Jew/goyim, human/animal) established all throughout. It concludes with Portnoy’s ironic exile to his “homeland,” Israel, an exile that toys with his first Jew/goyim distinction: “In this country, everybody is Jewish...Hey, here we’re the WASPs!” (286). Israel a place where Portnoy imagines his (illusory) end: “Where other Jews find refuge, sanctuary, and peace, Portnoy now perishes! Where other Jews flourish, I now expire!” (306). And it is a place where one part of Portnoy does, at least temporarily, end: his libido. The character tormented by endless desires becomes impotent, a condition which could be defined, delicately, as a lack of distinction.

Roth’s Tundish

That *Portnoy’s Complaint* ends in exile is the final in long series of nods to Joyce’s coming-of-age novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which itself concludes with Stephen’s exilic determination to “fly the nets” of Ireland. The novel’s engagement with *Portrait of the Artist*, alternately parodic and almost imperceptibly tactful, displays the full range of Roth’s comedy. Even before he spots his sister reading Joyce’s novel (85), *Portnoy’s Complaint* is explicitly in dialog with *Portrait of the Artist*. Portnoy talks about how he hopes to lead a different life than his father: “Where he had been imprisoned, I would fly: that was his dream. Mine was its corollary: in my liberation would be his—from exploitation, from ignorance, from anonymity” (7).¹²⁰ Roth reworks Joyce’s nets—language, religion, nationality—into exploitation, ignorance, and anonymity. Stephen’s strategy of silence, exile and cunning has its satiric version in Portnoy’s machinations, his “struggle with all guile and cunning and strength to go to dinner only once a month” (38). *Portnoy’s Complaint* also echoes *Portrait*’s famous closing, Roth dismissing the lofty goals of a *Bildung* almost as soon as they are announced: “A man’s character is being forged, a destiny is being shaped...oh, maybe not” (149). While Joyce’s is an occasionally ironic portrait, one built around a series of deflations, its primary mode, unlike *Portnoy’s Complaint*, is not comic.¹²¹ (As if to drive home the point, Roth immediately follows the parodic reference to Stephen’s forge with a discussion of his inhibitions about public urination (149)).

¹²⁰ At one point he imagines “the thrill of leaving for another continent without father knowing” (128).

¹²¹ *The Ghost Writer* marshals irony in a more militant salute to *Portrait*: “...when I came upon Babel’s description of the Jewish writer as a man with autumn in his heart and spectacles on his nose, I had been inspired to add, “and blood in his penis,” and had then recorded the words like a challenge—a flaming Dedalian formula to ignite my soul’s smithy” (49).

And yet one scene in *Portnoy* points to a crucial non-parodic engagement with Joyce that lets Roth put his own stamp on *Portrait*'s depiction of a young artist's vexed relationship to language. Portnoy is a character whose growing libido is fed by his growing vocabulary and its "illicit" pleasures: "And then there are the words that furtively, at home alone, I used to look up in the dictionary just to see them there in print, the hard evidence of that most remote of all realities, words like vulva and cervix" (72). Sex and language are intertwined, but just as shame intrudes upon Portnoy's enjoyment of his sexual life, shame crucially inserts itself into Portnoy's relationship with language in a traumatic childhood scene. During a school competition, the star pupil Portnoy fails to identify a picture of a spatula. Knowing perfectly well that his mother calls it a "spatula," Portnoy erroneously believes the word to be Yiddish, and thus not the real word for the object. Therefore he doesn't answer anything, instead opting for silence (which is saying something for a Roth character).¹²² Portnoy associates this minor lapse with his permanent uneasiness with expectations, his mother's apocalyptic warnings, and language itself: "And that's how far back my fate goes, how early in the game it was "normal" for me to be in a state resembling torment—in this particular instance over something as monumental as a kitchen utensil" (107). Here the mother's tongue imprints "spatula" with a Jewishness (as it does with two of her other favorites, "bedlam" and "tumult") inconsistent with the word's origins, a reversal of Joyce's famous tundish scene in *Portrait of the Artist*, in which confusion over the national provenance of a word also arises.¹²³

While discussing with Stephen the aesthetic theories of Aquinas in the dean of studies' office, the Trinity dean makes references to the "funnel" that feeds oil to a lamp. Stephen supplies him with the correct word, "tundish," which prompts the dean to ask: "Is that called a tundish in Ireland?" (158). Even before Stephen disgustedly learns that tundish is in fact an English word (212),¹²⁴ the episode rankles him and inspires his famous meditation on speaking English as an Irishman:

The language in which we are speaking is [the dean's] before it is mine. How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (159)

Confident about and sensitively attuned to the competing strands of language that make Irish English particularly charged, Stephen never accepts that "tundish" is an Irish word. Portnoy, by contrast, has an almost paranoid relationship to Yiddish, a language of which

¹²² "Your mouth is who you are. You can't get very much closer to what you think of as yourself. The next stop up is the brain," says Zuckerman in *The Anatomy Lesson*.

¹²³ Later in the novel Portnoy becomes enchanted with the street names around his college girlfriend's WASPy neighborhood, "Elm" resonating with his idea of a non-Yiddish language in a way spatula doesn't.

¹²⁴ "That tundish has been on my mind for a long time. I looked it up, and find it English and good old blunt English too. Damn the dean of studies and his funnel! What did he come here for to teach us his own language or to learn it from us?" (212).

he knows only a sprinkling of words, paranoid not only because Yiddish marks him as Jewish, but also because it is a language marked by his mother's overpowering presence. Portnoy's subsequent tutoring of Monkey (a serial misspeller) and the non-native speakers he encounters in Israel are attempts to remedy his initial timid relationship to language, to repeat his childhood failure with a difference. The "spatula" scene is staged as a failure (literally a botched competition) and points to Portnoy's consistent failure to disentangle himself from competing strands of identity. Spatula is woven into the fabric of American English as firmly as Portnoy's mother is "imbedded" (1) in his own consciousness. Thus his desire to fly the nets becomes near impossible since from an early age he's unsure even of where those nets are. This moment of definitional confusion, the failure to place a word and the failure to place a self, captures the pervasive confusion of all *Bildungsromans*, confusions which pullulate, crowding out any definitional certainty, in comic *Bildungsromans*.

Double Exposure: From Portnoy to Sabbath

That Portnoy's humiliating defeat takes place on stage is key; Portnoy lives under the constant threat of (real and imagined) exposure. Sabbath, on the other hand, is a creature of the stage, the founder of a street puppet troupe and quondam actor/impresario. Thus the best way to move from the young, libidinal Portnoy to the old, libidinal Sabbath, is to briefly consider how each conceives of self-exposure on-stage and off. Portnoy is in a sense the victim of his paranoid, theatrical fantasies about self-exposure. His nightmarish manifestations of guilt, the imagined headlines and court-room scenes, are psychic projections that transform him into Joseph K., a figure beset by a horde of accusatory demons. That these projections take comically exaggerated forms doesn't erase their underlying anxiety: Portnoy's fear of exposure, and communal disdain and reprobation. His exuberant comedy only serves to heighten the disjunct between Portnoy's public self-projection and (in his mind) unruly sexual desires: the impurity of his being, his unconcentrated essence (recall Sabbath's description as a reduced sauce, a concentrated essence). *Sabbath's Theater* is a novel about a similarly guilty character, but Sabbath's guilt is an open secret: "You should be locked up Mickey—and everyone who knows you knows it!" (239), Sabbath's wife tells him. He is not immune to anger or disgust at the various accusations of guilt, but whereas Portnoy's primary fear is to be exposed, Sabbath not only lives but thrives in a constant state of exposure, freely confessing to things he has done and even fabricating confessions to things he hasn't. Sabbath follows the Prospero model, reworking the world into his own indecent theater but in turn exposing himself, both figuratively and literally. Sabbath, who "expose[s] [his] mind when [he] talk[s]" (244), fittingly ends the novel in a state of undress, his "spout without menace" (445) dangling in front of an enraged police officer.

Roth and Brontë

"You don't exist. There are no ghosts."

"Wrong. There are only ghosts" (162)

I begin my discussion of *Sabbath's Theater*'s exposed hero by exposing the novel's sustained engagement with *Wuthering Heights*, a work that Roth deftly employs to

accommodate Sabbath's voracious libidinal and theatrical appetite. As no critic to my knowledge has pointed out, Roth in *Sabbath's Theater* explicitly rewrites a libidinally-visionary monument of the Victorian novel tradition: *Wuthering Heights*. For the geriatric *Bildung* depicted in *Sabbath's Theater*—a septuagenarian's last journey from small town to big city and back again—Roth fittingly turns to the more daemonic Brontë sister in this “panegyric for obscenity” (347) drawing on *Wuthering Heights*'s obsession with *thanatos*, hauntings, and primal forces for his own daemonic comedy.¹²⁵

“I am Drenka!” (78). Sabbath's howl, a play on Catherine's iconic line, “I am Heathcliff,” clues us into our presence in a *Wuthering Heights* world, a world of outsized, ferocious passions set in a remote, insular community. Sabbath and his lover Drenka, like Heathcliff and Catherine, are each mired in a heatless marriage. Moreover, Sabbath, like Heathcliff, remains an unassimilated stranger. Roth's narrator informs us that Sabbath “always fought being a human being” (152) and that “...because of his strangeness most people couldn't stand [Sabbath]” (78), recalling Heathcliff, who is described as a “half-civilized ferocity” (81), a “fierce, pitiless, wolfish man (87), and who constantly compels people to ask “Is Heathcliff a man?” (116).

Heathcliff and Sabbath not only share a questionable classification as human, but also a daemonic energy. Both Sabbath, who “burst[s] forth in a boiling blaze, incandescent from Pandemonium” (309) and Heathcliff the “devil daddy” are zealous manipulators, orchestrating the weaker-willed humans around them in ways that border on torture (physical and emotional). Sabbath's art, puppetry, is the perfect vocational match for his personal manipulations. Disabusing Roseanna (his student and future wife) of her innocent notions of the craft, Sabbath explains “that puppets were not for children; puppets did not say, ‘I am innocent and good.’ They said the opposite: ‘I will play with you,’ they said, ‘however I like’” (96), which explains why she is “always in danger around him, on edge, afraid of the satire” (97), since each character he meets runs the risk of becoming “another of his puppets” (111) in his daemonic play.

And yet despite the difficulty of labeling either Heathcliff or Sabbath a “human,” and despite their penchant for pathological exploitation, their respective love affairs consist of complete, and mutual, identification with their love objects. Sabbath is Drenka, and for Drenka, an immigrant from Tito-era Yugoslavia, and for all his strangeness Sabbath is America.¹²⁶ Heathcliff may not be of Nelly Dean's species, but Catherine, asserts that she is Heathcliff and describes him as “more myself than I am” (68). (Heathcliff returns the sentiment.) Each novel plays with inclusion and exclusion, isolating a character from the (human) community while plunging him into an amorous commingled bond so intense that individual boundaries disappear. And when in each novel death intervenes to break up these couplings, the result is a heavily eroticized *thanatos*, a striving to regain inclusion: “To commingle with you, Drenka, to commingle with you now” (429) sighs Sabbath after her death, a version of Heathcliff's plea to have Catherine haunt him.

¹²⁵ Hidden in *Wuthering Heights* is Heathcliff's off-stage *Bildungsroman*, a *Bildungsroman* which transforms Heathcliff from a monosyllabic, destitute brute to an articulate and economically viable, and well-dressed brute, and which Brontë shrouds in mystery.

¹²⁶ “You are America” (419).

Thanatos pervades both *Wuthering Heights* and *Sabbath's Theater*, the latter of which opens with an epigraph from *The Tempest*: "Every third thought shall be my grave."¹²⁷ Sabbath, during his attempted seduction of Michelle Cowan, asks himself what happiness is, and finds the answer in her "substantiality," in her "knowledge that everything subterranean beats everything terranean by a mile" (335). This knowledge, presumably shared by Sabbath, is both figuratively and literally true in the novel. Sabbath refers here to his preference for primal desires, but, like Heathcliff's repeated visits to Catherine's grave, Sabbath keeps returning to the subterranean, the dead and buried: his "life with the dead" (121) in the form of several visiting ghosts, his frantic quest to secure a burial plot next to his brother's and parents', and his nocturnal visits to (and emissions on) Drenka's grave.¹²⁸ As Sabbath begins to commune with the spirit of his mother, he reflects on his previous disgust at his first wife's reluctance to part with her dead mother's body: "To think how repelled I was by her—as though it were Nikki and not Death who had overstepped the limits" (121). Death continues to overstep its limits throughout the novel, continues to support Sabbath's mother's claim that "there are only ghosts," so much so that by the end Sabbath, despite being "ferociously...realist" (16) fully embraces necromancy: "Drenka, it's you...your warm body resurrected! Out o' the grave. Morty [his deceased brother] next." (336).

Similarly, Heathcliff's great wish is "to annihilate [himself] properly from the face of the earth." He spends the later part of the novel monomaniacally willing himself towards death and a reunion with his beloved: "I have a single wish, and my whole being, and faculties are yearning to attain it" (275). The yearning to be haunted by the spirits of their respected lovers transform both Heathcliff and Sabbath's anguish into suicidal impulses.¹²⁹ Sabbath comes to a realization late in the novel that he too has been nursing a Heathcliffian monomania for self-destruction:

And now, thought Sabbath, the feature attraction, the thing that matters most, the unforeseen culmination for which he had battled all his life. He had not realized how very long he'd been longing to be put to death. He hadn't committed suicide, because he was waiting to be murdered. (450)

Though Sabbath shares Heathcliff's wish, he can never properly achieve the latter's "proper" annihilation: "In the masterpieces they're always killing themselves when they commit adultery. He [Sabbath] wanted to kill himself when he couldn't" (337). Sabbath

¹²⁷ Deborah Shostak notes that "death motivates the way Sabbath's life takes narrative shape much as it has motivated his choices" (53).

¹²⁸ He both masturbates and urinates on the grave. I'm speaking of the literal ghosts in the novel. But Sabbath refers to his current wife in figuratively spectral terms: "What a bother we are to one another—while actually nonexistent to one another, unreal specters compared to whoever originally sabotaged the sacred trust" (263).

¹²⁹ "Catherine Earnshaw, may you not rest, as long as I am living! You said I killed you—haunt me then! The murdered do haunt their murderers...Be with me always—take any form—drive me mad! Only do not leave me in this abyss, where I cannot find you! I cannot live without my soul" (143). Sabbath's first wife, Nikki, having disappeared inexplicably, exists only in spectral form: "If there wasn't a body to bury physically, he could not bury her mentally...the fact was that Nikki wouldn't die until he did" (127). Sabbath, like Heathcliff, raises the possibility that he murdered her.

fails because he is a comic version of Heathcliff, a perpetual “little stranger” who makes “death itself into a farce”(160), who may or may not be only playing the role of the brooding Romantic hero and his “hell-bent-for-disaster erotomania” (156).¹³⁰ Just as it is never clear, even to himself, whether Sabbath is a lunatic or only a “simulated maniac” (151), an exhausted, teetering old man or one who merely fakes collapse at key moments (185), Sabbath’s identification with Heathcliff’s annihilating grief is always in doubt: “To a life that had come to nothing, a crude theatrical instinct was lending a garish, pathetic touch of last-minute drama” (111).

The brilliance of the *Wuthering Heights* allusion is that both Sabbath’s compulsive state of performance and his overinvestment in the love object (Drenka) result in the collapse of an independent, stable identity. Sabbath, “a caricature of himself and entirely himself...self-haunted while barely what you would call a self” (198), may only be playing at being Heathcliff, but that role requires him to further distance himself from his ever elusive, indefinable Sabbathness by becoming, or rather by playing at being, Drenka. It’s impossible to tell which, since at various points in the novel he “play[s]” at being other characters as well: Rip Van Winkle at his friend’s funeral (189), Othello (claiming to have strangled his first wife), Leopold Bloom in Manhattan, Virgil to his student’s Dante in “the sexual underworld (136), and King Lear on the NYC subway. And when the reviewer of Sabbath’s production of *King Lear* calls the disastrous performance a “megalomaniacal suicide” (192), he unwittingly grasps Sabbath’s impossible entanglement of actor and subject, since what, after all, is Lear but a megalomaniacal suicide himself? Consider, furthermore, how play factors into Sabbath’s determination to kill himself: “Yes! Yes! Yes! I will emulate my failed father-in-law, a successful suicide. But am I playing at this? Even at this? Always difficult to determine” (363).¹³¹ This difficulty is inherent in his determinations, both etymologically (“to come to an end”) and existentially, and extends to his Heathcliffian persona. Roth taps into the potent energy—daemonic, tragic and “blissfully serious” (448)—of the Romantic hero but at the very end swerves to maintain his hero’s indestructible comic integrity. Sabbath would like to transform his picaresque adventure into a life with a definite aim, but in the end is as powerless to do so as one of his puppets. Instead, Sabbath’s comic integrity takes the form of an exuberance working against the series of ultimatums encroaching upon him.

“The Last of Last Things” (443)

Sabbath’s Theater is one long dilatory effort to forestall ultimatums by force of exuberance. The twin poles of the novel are “ultimatum” and “exuberance,” one trying to end things, the other beginning them anew. The opening line, “Either forswear fucking or the affair is over” (3), is the “maddeningly improbable, wholly unforeseen ultimatum”(3) delivered to Micky Sabbath, a sixty-four year-old man of “oppositional exuberance”

¹³⁰ At another point in the novel he takes on another literary role: Leopold Bloom: “So Sabbath passeth the time, pretending to think without punctuation, the way J. Joyce pretended people thought, pretending to be both more and less unfixed than he felt...” (198).

¹³¹ Determine: “to come to an end,” also “to settle, decide” (*OED*).

(219), by Drenka, his longtime fifty-two-year-old mistress.¹³² Compared with the tongue-in-cheek medical terminology opening *Portnoy*, Sabbath's *in medias res* first line puts the reader in the front row of "Sabbath's Indecent Theater" from the outset. It vulgarly introduces the dilemma facing the protagonist as an "ultimatum," the final terms (from *ultimare*, "to finish, complete, carry to an end"), which seek to bound the secret affair that has been going on with "amazing licentiousness" (3) into something a little less exuberant. The affair has lasted too long, the characters are too old, the liaison has remained (improbably) too secret and, according to Drenka, now must come up against a considerably more permissive version of Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* formulation. But Sabbath, and by extension the entire novel (it is his theater), works at resisting such a clean break along the sharply defined lines of either/or. Either/or sets bounds, neatly distinguishes between two categories. As Sabbath admits, he's not doing much (any) other fucking, but that's beside the point. If Sabbath, as we learn later, is the "Monk of Fucking," then to forswear it is a kind of heresy, a violation of his "sacrament of infidelity" (31).¹³³ It's in Sabbath's Whitmanian nature to expand to his full bulk, to absorb, assimilate, transgress rather than choose. Thus despite his age, indeed because of it, the ultimatum, because of its very finality, represents to Sabbath a fundamental betrayal of his comic identity: "...here at the approach of *the end* of everything, he was being charged, on pain of losing her, to turn himself inside out" (3, emphasis mine). If the approach of one "end" entails the "end" of his polygamy, then that in turn, rationalizes Sabbath, would mean the end of Sabbath as we know him: "He was badgering her so relentlessly because he was fighting for his life" (27).

Ultimatum is set against the other etymological tidbit Roth provides in the novel's first section. He describes Drenka's breasts as "uberous" and informs us that it is the root word of exuberance, "to be fruitful, to overflow like Juno lying prone in Tintoretto's painting where the Milky Way is coming out of her tit..." (13). The style is itself exuberant, ranging from stodgy OED usage to cultivated art history reference to puerile ekphrasis. Roth plays on the etymology of uberous to contrast its sense of overflow with the constricting terms of ultimatum. Take, for example, Sabbath's description of her: "Drenched Drenka, bubbling spring, mother of moisture and overflow, surging, streaming Drenka, drinker of the juices of the human vine" (445).¹³⁴ The prime locale for Sabbath and Drenka's erotic exuberance is called the Grotto, which is next to a "cold pool of one of the remotest tributaries of the sacred falls" (217). The charmed space is free from the "threat" of "human presence," a secluded, "sacred" place to which they retreat to "renovate their lives" (5). Roth is well aware of the etymological connection between grotto and grotesque, and there is something grotesque in the extent (and descriptions of) their commingling of bodily juices. (Without getting too graphic, Drenka at one point uses the phrase "enormous wet sauce" (424) to refer to their lovemaking.) Roth, however, never lets this grotesque carnality go unironized, at one point parodying a curatorial

¹³² "Forswear" playfully resonates with Sabbath's professed "monkish" devotion to sex, his inversion of the celibacy rite.

¹³³ He only agrees to the deal if Drenka agrees in turn to fulfill, regularly, certain matrimonial duties of her own.

¹³⁴ The passage refers to Drenka alone, but as we learn, Sabbath is Drenka too and over the course of the novel starts to share in her "mother of moisture" qualities.

description that reduces the intensity of their union, their “naked gambols,” to caricature: “See plate 4. Detail from the Madaska vase of dancing nymph and bearded figure brandishing phallus.” (217). To show how ultimatums are grotesque to Sabbath, Roth revels in the gleefully distorted version of ultimatum’s opposite: an “oozing physicality” to quote Debra Shostak, a renovating exuberance, an overflowing sense of newness (renovare, “to make new”). The over-the-top, alternately earnest and satirical descriptions of their licentious affair make it into a kind of “sacred” communion, a sublime comic rite rather than vulgar performance.¹³⁵

The opening ultimatum is only the first in the struggle against exuberance, the first in a series of attempts to rope off things that can’t be roped off. No sooner does Sabbath declare his “forty-seven-year experiment with women...officially concluded” (169), then does the pregnant maid of his Manhattan host reanimate him: “And yet the colossal balloon that was Rosa’s behind piqued his curiosity no less than the pregnant belly did” (169). Like Rosa’s expanding waistline, Sabbath’s “experiment” continues to swell, inspiring Sabbath to deliver a rapturous paean to the shape of life:

Life’s last fuck. Working since she was nine. No school. No plumbing. No money. A pregnant, illiterate Mexican out of some slum somewhere or up from peasant poverty, and weighing about the same as yourself. It couldn’t have ended otherwise. Final proof that life is perfect. Knows where it’s going every inch of the way. No, human life must not be extinguished. No one could come up with anything like it again...(179)

But “Life’s last fuck” is as heretical a statement to Sabbath as the ultimatum which begins the novel. And thus that “last” must be deferred, since the comic logic of the novel takes precedence over Sabbath’s libertine logic: “...if you can still do something, you must do it—that is the golden rule of sublunar existence...” (233). By working himself up for this last experience, Sabbath ends up sabotaging it: “He was dying, had given himself a heart attack by going all out for Rosa’s amusement. Final performance. Will not be held over. Puppet master and prick conclude career” (180). But neither are actually concluded, since Sabbath is “fairly sure” he fakes the whole thing, the latest example of his “superabundance of self-subversion” (231). The only thing the episode produces is an emotional catharsis that eschews any final reckoning (or love-making), and instead tautologically reaffirms Sabbath’s “concentrated” essence:

Sabbath felt as though he were porous, as though the last that was left of the whole concoction that had been a self was running out drop by drop...What conclusion was to be drawn? Any? Who had come to the surface in him was inexorably himself. Nobody else. Take it or leave it. (184)

Exuberant Sabbath overflows, oozes, becomes porous rather than, well, hard. The critical consensus that “for Sabbath, sex is the only way to ward off death” (Safer 61) simply isn’t true. Far from being a priapic satyr, Sabbath actually melts every time he’s called to

¹³⁵ Shostak, drawing on Bakhtin, places Roth in the Rabelaisian tradition of exalting the lower bodily stratum: “Roth uncovers the material body in all its grotesque ephemerality...the bodily lower stratum is le vrai, the site of the good, the source of our most authentic performances of self...”(59).

perform because each performance carries with it the specter of finality.¹³⁶ Prospero supplies the novel's epigraph, but the magician's famous concluding pronouncement haunts every encounter Sabbath has: "Our revels are now ended..."¹³⁷

Later in the novel he sabotages yet another "last": his final mistress. When the discovery of a beggar's cup in his pants pockets convinces Michelle Cowan to cancel her imminent adulterous tryst, Sabbath doesn't so much berate himself over the missed erotic opportunity as wax rhapsodic about the "magical lure of begging":

At the thought that he had lost his last mistress before he'd even had the chance of wholeheartedly appropriating her secrets—and all because of the magical lure of begging, not just the seductiveness of a self-mocking joke and the irresistible theatrical fun in that but the loathsome rightness of its exalted wrongness, the grand vocation of it, the opportunity its encounters offered its despair to work through to its *unequivocal end*—Sabbath fell faint to the floor. (349, emphasis mine)

That collapse, "neither wholly rooted in necessity nor entirely unentertaining," is precisely an equivocal end. In the fact of any finality (either a last mistress of the unequivocal end of begging), Sabbath instinctually falls back on his grand vocation, which is an open-ended, aimless theatrical fun.

As his paeans to the daemonic energy of puppetry make clear, his "art" is the one domain capable of competing with Sabbath's monkish devotion to fornication. Sex and puppetry, are in fact inextricably linked during his public indecency trial for unbuttoning the blouse of an onlooker of his finger-puppet show on the Upper West Side. But that display is just a simulacrum of sex, a performance of seduction that never reaches a conclusion. This makes it very different from real sex, whose conclusion is both very real and very tied up with mortality. (Roth takes the *petite morte* commonplace about orgasm and pushes it to its almost absurdly literal limit: Drenka's lovers performing onanistic pilgrimages to her grave.) For precisely this reason, Sabbath, unexpectedly, avoids sex like the plague; he has plenty of opportunities—I've just described two—but none are consummated because each could be the last. The "Monk of Fornication" does no real-time fornicating in the novel, preferring instead the lubricious memories of past encounters. Memories, like ghosts, are timeless, which is why the novel insists on mixing the two. In one scene Sabbath remembers making love to Drenka in the grotto with the ghost of his dead mother hovering over his shoulder. Portnoy would have played this to full comic effect, but Sabbath is neither bothered nor particularly surprised by the apparition, because his response to the encroaching ultimata is a retreat into the timelessness of memories and ghosts.

¹³⁶ Yet another example is his spurning of Kathy Goolisbee; when he declines "what he had never before declined in his life" (240), he also declines "the *last* twenty-year-old into whose tent he would ever again creep (248, emphasis mine).

¹³⁷ Even his pre-ultimatum couplings with Drenka: "What had him grasping at the broadening buttocks as though the tattooist Time had ornamented neither of them with its comical festoonery was his knowing inescapably that the game was just about over" (13). Grasping at ends because the end is nigh; the cheap joke introduces the specter of ultimatum, the haunting prospect that there will be an ultimate coupling, a specter that haunts the novel to the very last sentence.

Pockets and Grapefruits

Despite the novel's obsession with memories and ghosts, Roth never lets us forget *Sabbath's Theater's* earthly considerations. Thus the novel's twin poles of exuberance and ultimatum have their material counterparts in Sabbath's pockets and Michelle Cowan's segmented grapefruits. Sabbath's pockets are a gateway to the infinite, emblematic objects of comic indefinition. They are also a kind of comic heirloom, linking Sabbath, as they do, to the endlessly resourceful and well-equipped Panurge, the trickster who accompanies Pantraguél on his adventures and who makes up in ingenuity for what he lacks in size. One passage from *Pantagruel* describes his curious wardrobe and its accoutrements:

In his cloak he had more than twenty-six pockets, small and great, which were always full. In one was a little lead dice and a small knife as sharp as a furrier's needle, with which he cut purses; in another was some grape-juice, which he threw into the eyes of anyone whom he met; in another were burrs flighted with little goose or capon's feathers, which he threw at the good men's gowns and bonnets...in another he carried a quantity of small cones filled with fleas and lice, which he borrowed from the beggars of St. Innocent's...[and] in another he kept a large supply of hooks and buckles, with which he would often fasten men and women together, in places where they were crowded close... (223-4)

Rabelais' inventory goes on to include pockets full of tinder-box and matches, needle and thread, itching powder, oil to smear on "a man or woman in any sort of finery" (225), euphorbium, a pick lock, and little cups with which to play Renaissance version of Three-card Monte. The collective pockets are the material counterpart to the infinite comic ingenuity of Panurge; slapping a number on the pockets (stubbornly indefinite though it is) belies the comic logic of the description, which makes it all too clear that Panurge has a pocket for every occasion, every tool, every prank, and that the attempt to either number them or list them all would soon prove futile: "more than twenty-six" will have to do. We can think of Panurge's pockets as a comic emblem of resourcefulness and indefinition, an emblem that Roth translates into his Rabelaisian comic epic as Sabbath's saggy corduroy pants.

Sabbath's Theater takes place during a road trip from the Berkshires to New York City to the Jersey Shore and back, and needless to say Sabbath doesn't bring a change of clothes: "[His] pants had had an active life during the last several weeks, a real full life such as would leave an ordinary person exhausted" (330). The pants are distinguished by "huge pockets in which you could carry a couple of dead ducks" (348), and into which Sabbath is always putting things then forgetting things. During his attempt to seduce Michelle Cowan while staying with her and her husband, Sabbath seems to be making progress until a discovery made during a pre-laundry pocket emptying makes her reconsider. Sabbath is initially bewildered at the cause of her change of heart, but upon reflection thinks of several items he had gathered on his travels that could be the culprit: a vial of crack cocaine he buys on a lark and the purloined underwear of the Cowan's college-age daughter (Sabbath is staying in her room). Both reasons enough to rethink the liaison, certainly, but what makes Michelle irrevocably cancel their adulterous meeting and kick Sabbath out of the house is yet another object that Sabbath has stashed in his pockets and forgotten about: a beggar's cup. (After a passerby mistakes Sabbath for

a bum and tosses a quarter in his half-filled coffee cup, Sabbath, always game, runs with it and goes-a-begging on the streets of New York.) Which particular object seals Sabbath's fate is less important than the profusion of possibly offending objects offering themselves up from Sabbath's bottomless pockets. (It is not entirely out of the realm of possibility that a dead duck would actually materialize.) The novel is neither a lament nor a judgment (Bernstein) but an exercise in comic exuberance—the overflowing of desires, objects, explanations, motives—bumping against ultimatums—the definite, fixed explanation for Michelle's cold shoulder: "Was how far he had fallen with that cup even clear to him?" wonders Sabbath. Of course not, because that clarity would be a form of definition, fixing himself as the beggar jangling the change cup and betraying his Panurgian heritage.

If Sabbath's life is all about exuberance, the Cowans' life is all about containment, a containment epitomized by a piece of fruit Sabbath spies on their kitchen counter: "The half grapefruit had been segmented for Sabbath. The segmented grapefruit. Fundamental to their way of life...[Michelle] is as indispensable to the way of life as the segmented grapefruit. She is the segmented grapefruit: the partitioned body and the piquant blood" (345-6). Their life is not without its share of "chaos" (345)—a straying wife hiding provocative photos of herself (presumably taken by a lover) and a wad of cash in her drawer—but Sabbath finds the Cowans' shared commitment to the "segmented" in the face of marital collapse oddly heroic: "I think the more I come to understand the chaos churning about here, the more I admire how he holds it together...The courage of putting up with it instead—the 'realism'...[Norman]'s fixed in this life. His talent is for this life...Minimize, minimize" (345-6). And Michelle's "whole life," notes Sabbath, is "devoted to keeping things in drawers" (395), literally in the case of her racy photos. Pockets and drawers fulfill the same function, both are receptacles of the unseen or hidden, but whereas the Cowans' drawers seek to minimize, to segment, Sabbath's deep pockets exist to be opened, their contents "exposed" like Sabbath's mind. As such they don't yield up secrets so much as infinite comic worlds.

Sabbath's Epitaph

Sabbath, like the other comic heroes I discuss, is hard to define; the task is as impossible as fully enumerating the contents of Panurge's pockets. Sabbath, essential though he may be, is the epitome of the indefinite, a walking negative definition:

So passeth Sabbath, seeing all the antipathies in collision, the villainous and the innocent, the genuine and the fraudulent, the loathsome and the laughable, a caricature of himself and entirely himself, embracing the truth and blind to the truth, self-haunted while barely what you would call a self... (198)

The second he takes a stand, defines himself, that definition dissolves and becomes its opposite. Thus upon hearing Norman's contention that Sabbath has always fought at being human, the latter replies: "To the contrary...to being a human being I've always said, 'Let it come.'" Or take his response to Christa, a hitchhiker whom he picks up, when she tries reductively to define him: "You're nothing but a fat old man!" Serial resister to limits as he is, Sabbath uses that "nothing but" limitation to place himself in a comic tradition of large livers: "So was Falstaff, kiddo. So was that huge hill of flesh Sir John Paunch, sweet creator of bombast! 'That villainous abominable misleader of youth, Falstaff, that old white-bearded Satan!'" (53). The comic tradition into which Sabbath

inserts himself is one which uses the “nothing but” categorization as a means to illustrate definitional failure as such; to say Falstaff is nothing but a fat old man is both dead-on and dead-wrong at the same time, and it is precisely in these interstices that the comic thrives.

If Sabbath is unsatisfied with being labeled as either inhuman or “nothing but a fat old man,” he gets a chance to remedy the situation by composing his own epitaph. In *Wuthering Heights*, “Heathcliff” is the only inscription the surviving Earnshaw/Lintons can come up with to put on his headstone (280); attempting to bring about his own end through writing, Sabbath is less concise:

Morris Sabbath
“Mickey”
Beloved Whoremonger, Seducer
Sodomist, Abuser of Women,
Destroyer of Morals, Ensnarer of Youth,
Uxoricide,
Suicide,
1929-1994 (376)

The ultimate (and final) act of definition is the epitaph, the summing up of a life, yet Sabbath’s comic composition bursts out of its lapidary confines. Even chiseled in stone, the definition Sabbath crafts for himself is mutable. Some descriptions are true, some are false, some debatable, some come from his own estimation and others from his critics’; the whole constitutes both him and a fantasy of himself, simultaneously himself and his theatrical performance of the self. Roth’s epitaph contains the novel’s entire range of accusations and defenses, realities and fantasies, given names and nicknames. If the novel’s two poles are exuberance and ultimatum, then the epitaph illustrates this beautifully, since it puts the finishing touch (“suicide”) on a life even as that life doesn’t end.

Notably missing from the headstone is his vocation. Sabbath is an artist, though as he ages, crippled with arthritis, he bitterly reflects on the ineffability of his craft: “He’d paid the full price of art, only he hadn’t made any....He was just someone who had grown ugly, old, and embittered, one of billions” (143). While the gravestone lays heavy emphasis on Sabbath’s sexual transgressions, “Puppeteer,” his vocation, gets left out. Sabbath, for all his nihilism and self-deprecation, believes that he is an artist: “Despite the arthritis that disfigured his fingers, in his heart he was the puppeteer still, a lover and master of guile, artifice, and the unreal—this he hadn’t yet torn out of himself. ¹³⁸When that went, he would be dead” (147), which explains why while Sabbath inscribes “Suicide” on the headstone as his imaginary cause of death. He can’t bring himself to write his vocation, to fix all its “guile, artifice, and...unreal” in a permanent, unchanging form. Sabbath is not a character known for his restraint, yet this withholding of a part of himself, clues us into how key his vocation is to his being.

Unlike his vocation, “suicide” does of course make it on the epitaph, yet that is the closest Sabbath comes to doing away with himself. Musing on his suicide note,

¹³⁸ “Should have dumped Roseanna and gone back to sea. Puppets. Of all the fucking callings”(156).

which, like the suicide itself, is never completed, Sabbath reflects upon the inherent comedy of self-slaughter:

All the great thoughts he did not reach were beyond enumeration. There was no bottom to what he did not have to say about the meaning of his life. And something funny is superfluous—suicide is funny...It's not driven by despair or revenge, it's not born of madness or bitterness or humiliation, it's not a camouflaged homicide or a grandiose display of self-loathing—it's the finishing touch to a running gag... For anybody who loves a joke, suicide is indispensable. For a puppeteer particularly there is nothing more natural: disappear behind the screen, insert the hand, and instead of performing as yourself, take the finale as the puppet. (443)

The finishing touch that he, like Beckett's *Unnameable*, or Kafka's Joseph K. for that matter, can't complete.¹³⁹ The gag continues, and continues, and continues. Sabbath is as allergic to the gag's culmination as he is to the culminations of his various sexual encounters. He is a creature of "deep pockets"; even the admission that he has nothing to say about the meaning of his life is constructed as a negative infinity: "no bottom to what he did not have to say..." If the comic *Bildungsroman* treats its hero as an utterly superfluous being to the society in which he or she resides, then that hero has no other choice but to turn to comedy's infinite riches. As I will show in the concluding section, Sabbath, at the height of his isolation, does just this.

Realism, the Sacred and the Perfect Joke

In an oft-cited passage from the novel, Sabbath redefines the terms in which sexuality is usually confined:

The core of seduction is persistence. Persistence, the Jesuit ideal... You must devote yourself to fucking the way a monk devotes himself to God. Most men have to fit fucking in around the edges of what they define as more pressing concerns: the pursuit of money, power, politics, fashion, Christ knows what it might be—skiing. But Sabbath had simplified his life and fit the other concerns in around fucking....all in all, for a man of his stature, he had been improbably successful. Ascetic Mickey Sabbath, at it still into his sixties. The Monk of Fucking. The Evangelist of Fornication. *Ad maiorem Dei gloriam.* (60)

Sabbath radically simplifies the dilemma facing Portnoy, which is how to fit his libido in around the edges of the other forces (familial, religious, professional) defining him. Norman Cowan asks the best questions about Sabbath's solution: "Isn't it tiresome in 1994, this role of rebel-hero?"; "Are we back to Lawrence's gamekeeper?"; Isn't "the inverted saint whose message is desecration" hackneyed? And thus isn't Sabbath, for all his anarchism, simply a "relic," the "discredited male polemicist's last gasp"? (347). All these criticisms are legitimate; Sabbath is a cliché and a relic, but Roth, having redefined

¹³⁹ "K. now perceived clearly that he was supposed to seize the knife himself...and plunge it into his own breast. But he did not do so, he merely turned his head, which was still free to move, and gazed around him. He could not completely rise to the occasion, he could not relieve the officials of all their tasks; the responsibility for this last failure of his lay with him who had not left him the remnant of strength for the deed" (228).

the terms of saintly asceticism, adds another turn of the screw: Sabbath, over the course of the novel, behaves less like an “inverted saint” and more like a real one: celibate, ascetic, self-sacrificing. Roth is less interested in teasing out the tired debate about civilization and its discontents than the central issue of realism in the novel. Everything Sabbath does tests the boundaries between his own daemonic conjuring (his theater), and the “real” world.

Roth comically drops hints about Sabbath’s sanctification. Sabbath, who is “trained in the warehouses of Central and South America,” transforms his reckless courtship of disease into a sign of his election: “He Never used a rubber and miraculously never contracted VD” (193). Elsewhere Sabbath reflects on his saintly existence, “seized by the miracle of having survived all these years in the hands of a person like himself” (434). At another point Sabbath, “called to enter the realm of virtue” (350), embraces the saint role not in the inverted mode but as the sententious moral scourge who, for all his raillery about sexual Puritanism, sees fit to punish Michelle for her transgressions: “She must be taught, before it’s too late, to renounce this callow quarrel with life’s limits” (350). Later, the pervasive tragic, self-annihilating impulses flowing through the novel shift to a sublimely comic register: Sabbath’s offer to cede his body to Morty, not to accomplish his own end but rather to give his deceased brother once more the pleasure of being alive: “Rapture itself, to reach out my hand and give him a laugh, a body, a voice, a life with some of the fun in it of being alive...Here, brother, a living soul—for whatever it’s worth, take mine!” (377). He of course can’t cede his body, but the urge to include him manifests itself in the complete reverence Sabbath shows for the last five letters Morty writes before being shot down in WWII.¹⁴⁰ What Sabbath loved about his brother was the “thrill of inclusion” (403) that Mort always conveyed, and the one time Sabbath’s swelling orbit accepts something without modifying it to fit his own “indecent theater” is when he includes, without comment, the supremely dull, anti-exuberant letters of his brother.¹⁴¹

Roth toys with the notion of Sabbath’s mock-sanctification by making him miraculously immune from venereal disease, transforming him into a peripatetic marriage counselor, and by formally interrupting his “theater” by unsatirically including his brother, but the crucial moment of that sanctification comes when Sabbath, who doesn’t really believe in anything (least of all his own riffs), considers the possibility that he is actually a saint, that his comic portrayal of himself seems to have actually come true:

Maybe it wasn’t repulsion at all that [Norman] felt but something like awe at the sight of the white-bearded Sabbath, come down from his mountaintop like some holy man who has renounced ambition and worldly possessions. Can it be that there is something religious about me? Has what I’ve done—i.e. failed to do—been saintly? (141)

¹⁴⁰ Especially when compared to the utter irreverence with which Sabbath handles the letters his wife writes to her deceased father in rehab. (He composes satirical responses, and signs off “Your father in hell.”)

¹⁴¹ Mort describes a thrilling game of cards (“Incidentally we won the game”), the joys of buying grapefruit juice, “good on a mission when you are thirsty,” and his last night, during which he “saw a good movie....shot the bull for few hours and hit the sack.”

The momentary, revelatory convergence of Sabbath's demonic fictions and his ferocious realism alerts us to larger issues of comic *kairos*. As the novel stages an initial conflict between ultimatums and exuberance, Sabbath attempts to liberate "realism" from its bounds, to infuse it with exuberance. "I dreamed a realist chronicle," Zuckerman explains of his attempt in *American Pastoral* to imagine the Swede's family tragedy. In *Sabbath's Theater*, Roth reverses the process, infusing a "ferocious" realist chronicle with daemonic, exuberant dreams.

Sabbath is both "ferociously...realist," and a "lover and master of guile, artifice, and the unreal" (147). He is both the "King of the kingdom of the unillusioned" (359) and "someone to whom the tangible and the immediate are repugnant, to whom only the illusion is fully real" (242). To reconcile realism and illusion, he chips away at the stable categorization of both. Take, for instance, his definition of realism, supplied during his visit to his brother's grave: "The rain bestowed more meaning than was necessary. That was realism for you. More meaning than was necessary in the nature of things" (353). More meaning: realism is the dominant form of the *Bildungsroman* precisely because of its ability to supply more meaning than necessary to a life, significance, which, according to Sabbath is "always the prelude to missing the point." Puppets, on the other hand, are deficient in meaning, and thus hyper-realistic:

There was nothing false or artificial about puppets, nor were they "metaphors" for human beings. They were what they were, and no one had to worry that a puppet would disappear, as Nikki [Sabbath's first wife] had, right off the face of the earth. (21)¹⁴²

Sabbath can never decide which he is: puppet or puppet-master, realist or illusionist, creature of *chronos* or Prospero-devised *kairos*:

The problem that was his life was never to be solved. His wasn't the kind of life where there are aims that are clear and means that are clear and where it is possible to say, "This is essential, this I will not do because I cannot endure it, and that I will do because I can endure it." There was no unsnarling an existence whose waywardness constituted its only authority and provided its primary amusement. (108)¹⁴³

And yet Sabbath never relinquishes his *kairotic* leaning toward ascribing definite aims to his life. When he momentarily becomes a street performer on the streets of New York again, he infuses the episode with realism, his brand of realism, providing a coherent meaning to his wayward life:

At it again. How he'd begun was how he'd end, he who had gone gloomily around for years believing his life of adulteries and arthritis and professional embitterment to have been senselessly lived outside the conventions, without purpose or unity. But far from begin disappointed at the malicious symmetry of

¹⁴² Sabbath elsewhere transforms the fact of Nikki's disappearance into dream logic: "When Nikki disappeared, aside from the grief and the tears and the torments of confusion, he was also as delighted as a young man could be. A trapdoor had opened and Nikki was gone. A dream, a sinister dream common to all. Let her disappear. Let him disappear. Only for Sabbath the dream came true" (198).

¹⁴³ "Sabbath meets his match: life. The puppet is you. The grotesque buffoon is you" (158).

his finding himself thirty years later once again on the street with his hat in hand, he had the humorous sensation of having meandered blindly back into his own grand designs. And you had to call that a triumph: he had perpetrated on himself the perfect joke. (208-9)

This is the *kairos* the comic *Bildungsroman* affords: order as the perfect joke. The world becomes a comic reflection of a joke once devised and long-since forgotten. Goethe's harmonious Tower society is replaced by a daemonic fiction that imposes order not from without but from within. Zuckerman's disastrous trip to Czechoslovakia in *The Prague Orgy* says it all: "Another assault upon a world of significance degenerating into a personal fiasco, and this time in a record forty-eight hours!" (782). The "personal" is the key word; for all their "failures," comic *Bildungsroman* heroes imprint the world with their own particular fiasco, shape it according to their own daemonic comic energies, and thus achieve an odd kind of comic grace: the perfect joke.¹⁴⁴

I used the term comic grace to talk about how Beckett's devisings always welcome the hearer, "alone" though he feels himself to be, back into a community of "countless others." *Sabbath's Theater*, like *Company*, is about a man in search of companionship: "The immensity of your isolation is horrifying" (347), Norman tells him when Sabbath shows up at his Upper West Side apartment. But towards the end of the novel when his travels are nearly over, he returns home to find his wife taken up with a lesbian lover and arrives at the "loneliest moment of his life" (348), the experience is less horrifying than revelatory:

...he was at the foot of the drive of the afterlife, entering that fairy tale freed at last from the urge that was the hallmark of his living: the overwhelming desire to be elsewhere. He was elsewhere. He had achieved his goal....Elsewhere is wherever you are; elsewhere, Sabbath, is your home and no one is your mate, and if ever anyone was no one it's Rosie. Search the planet and you will not find at any latitude a setup more suitable than this one. This is your niche: the solitary hillside, the cozy cottage, the Twelve-Step wife. This is Sabbath's Indecent Theater. Remarkable. (435)

By the end of the novel, isolation is recognized as its own kind of ecstatic home. Perhaps more than any other passage, Sabbath's realization indicates the perversity of comic *Bildungsroman*, a perversity muted in the course of criticism that sees the genre as a historically specific ideological critique of prevailing norms. Far from repudiating the things it hates, the comic *Bildungsroman* needs them. Nothing, after all, is funny in an utopia, and thus if Sabbath can be said to have developed at all, it is precisely in this realization that "he [is] elsewhere," specifically in his renunciation of his idealized vision of the utopian path not taken:

¹⁴⁴ Consider a similarly assessment of Roth's comic energies, this one from a Mossad chief in *Operation Shylock*: "The message of your book? I wouldn't say so. It's a happy book, as I read it. Happiness radiates from it. There are all kinds of ordeals and trials but it's about someone who is recovering. There's so much élan and energy in his encounters with the people he meets along the way that anytime he feels his recovery is slipping and that thing is coming over him again, why, he rights himself and comes through unscathed. It's a comedy in the classic sense. He comes through it all unscathed" (394).

I should never have given it up, thought Sabbath—the life of the sensual port like Bahia, even of the shitty little ports around the Amazon, literary jungle ports, where one could mix with the crews of all kinds of ships, sailors of as many colors as Debby’s underthings, from all kinds of countries, and they were all going to the same place, all ended up in the whorehouse. Everywhere, as in a lurid dream, sailors and women, and I was learning my trade.” (155)

Just as *Sabbath’s Theater* turns out to find an almost accidental asceticism more dramatically (and comically) compelling than fornication, it finally comes to the same realization about the “solitary hillside” vis-à-vis the bustling South American port towns of Sabbath’s youth. It is the difference between playing ball on a precisely-measured diamond and on an expansive prairie.

Conclusion: Kairos By Other Means

**He [Crispin] humbly served
Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event,
A clown, perhaps, but an aspiring clown...**

**...if Crispin is a profitless
Philosopher, beginning with green brag,
Concluding fadedly...
what can all this matter since
The relation comes, benignly, to its end?
(Wallace Stevens, "The Comedian as the Letter C")**

In a review of Saul Bellow's recently released collection of letters, Leon Weiseltier assembles some choice quotes from the comic author of *Herzog* and *The Adventures of Augie March*:

Bellow was clear about the role of comedy in his work. "The real thing is unfathomable," he declares in 1974. You can't get it down to distinct or clear opinion. Sensing this, I have always had intelligence enough (or the intuition) to put humor between myself and final claims." To Richard Chase, in 1959, he remarks on his lack of "the will or the capacity to continue to a definite conclusion" — this was a charge frequently brought against his teeming novels — and explains that "I sometimes think the comedy in my books is a satire on this inconclusiveness."

Authors are not necessarily their own best critics, but as Bellow's self-assessment aligns nicely with my own view of comedy, I take it as gospel. I have argued that comic writers exploit the definitional potential of the *Bildungsroman*, a form which is all about definition; furthermore, this comic indefinability is systemic, manifesting itself structurally and incidentally, physically and ontologically. Though I have concentrated largely on failed limits, definitions, and endings, I conclude by emphasizing the *kairotic* underpinning of comedy that allows its *chronos*-like energies to flourish. Consider, for example, Bellow's *Augie March* and how his *Bildungsroman* ends. Gazing out across the North Sea from a beach in Normandy, Augie reflects on his peripatetic nature:

Look at me, going everywhere! Why, I am a sort of Columbus of those near-at-hand, and believe you can come to them in this immediate *terra incognita* that spreads out in every gaze. I may well be a flop...Columbus too thought he was a flop, probably, when they sent him back in chains. Which didn't prove there was no America. (536)

The "American, Chicago born" (1) hero pauses his dynamic picaresque to look home. And just as America exists simultaneously as *terra incognita* and *terra cognita*, March analogically hovers between Columbus the flop and Columbus the success. Comedy may never reach a definite conclusion, but comic indefinability never becomes totally unmoored from the possibility of *kairotic* definition.

If there is a latent comedic element in all *Bildungsromans*, there is also a latent *kairotic* instinct in all comedy. Comic writers attack the narrative expectation of *kairos*

by deliriously violating limits and bounds in endlessly creative ways. And yet sublime comedy never finishes the job, never fully slays the *kairos* so relentlessly under attack. Comedy, in fact, could be said to be *kairos* by other means. Great comic writers suffer from what Thomas Pynchon calls “attacks of acute optimism” (V 147).¹⁴⁵ Pynchon anchors his boundless comic energies in the patterns of the vast *kairotic* conspiracies that define his work. In V, for example, the plot revolves around a cryptic journal entry left by a nineteenth-century diplomat “There is more behind and inside V. than any of us had suspected. Not who, but what: what is she. God grant that I may never be called upon to write the answer, either here or in any official report” (53). Though such revelatory systems (V., the *Trystero*, etc.) never fully come into full focus, they nevertheless are a comic firmament for the “amusing world...where things and people can be found in places where they do not belong” (212).¹⁴⁶ This is comic logic at its purest: things and people in places where they don’t belong. And yet that logic works best when played out against a *kairotic* background in which everything belongs, even if that order is hazily defined or wholly illusory.¹⁴⁷

Pynchon appeals to conspiracy and mystery for his effervescent *kairos*. Waugh’s lethal style binds his characters to a Damocles-like state of *chronos*, a state typified by Tangent, with his gangrenous foot and plaintive question: “Am I going to die?” But the lethal style is also the lone path to *kairos* through the thicket of comic indefiniteness, the only way for a comic character like Tangent or Prendergrast to round out his existence. (This is of course little comfort to them.) Beckett’s reason-ridden imagination ceaselessly explores the possibilities and permutations of the human comedy, a comedy which he ultimately reduces to the fable of one lying on his back in the dark, devising himself and others for company. If these devised fablings never let anything harden into fact, they also “[stand] still in esperance” (*Lear* 4.1.4) as Shakespeare says of the lowest and most dejected things of fortune. Beckett never fully banishes the faint but ever-present hope of attaining “unexpected grace”: a *kairotic* state in which “the gnashing ends...the longing for longing gone...and one is in the hollow, at the foot of all hills at last, the ways down, the ways up, and free, free at last, for an instant free at last, nothing at last. (Watt 202). “Perhaps,” says Watt, “that is something,” the same idealistic “perhaps” that *Murphy*’s Mr. Kelly identifies in Celia’s name (*si il y a*), and the same perhaps that motivates *Company*’s search for the perfect addition to company. Roth provides the most striking example of comic *kairos*, as Sabbath’s novel-long exercise in anomic disorder all turns out to stem from a domestic impulse: the unification of his indecent theater and his

¹⁴⁵ “A schlemihl is a schlemihl. What can you ‘make’ out of one? What can one ‘make’ out of himself? You reach a point, and Profane knew he’d reached it, where you know how much you can and cannot do. But every now and again he got attacks of acute optimism” (147).

¹⁴⁶ The “human yo-yo” Benny Profane is one such dislocated person, one “so shapeless it was difficult to locate any center of gravity” (390).

¹⁴⁷ As Johan Huizinga unplayfully decrees in *Homo Ludens*: “Play demands order absolute and supreme” (10).

home.¹⁴⁸

These instances of *kairos* in Waugh, Beckett and Roth constitute their comic firmament, the faint version of the rhapsodic vision Lukács lays out in the startling opening passage of *Theory of the Novel*:

Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths – ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light. Thus each action of the soul becomes meaningful and rounded in this duality: complete in meaning – in *sense* – and complete for the senses; rounded because the soul rests within itself, finds a centre of its own and draws a closed circumference round itself. (29)

Lukács elegiacally describes the world of the vanished epic in which *Bildung* is unnecessary; development becomes superfluous when each action is already complete in meaning and each soul perfectly circumscribed.¹⁴⁹ There is fiction in this vision, but it is magisterial fiction. What makes certain comic figures so affecting is their indefatigable, often tragic search for the *kairos* that Lukács imparts to every epic hero. Comic heroes may be clowns, but like Stevens's Crispin, they are always, "aspiring clown[s]," and similarly prone to "concluding fadedly."

¹⁴⁸ As I noted in the Roth chapter, that *kairos* is a double-edged sword. Sabbath realizes that he has unconsciously devoted his entire life to making himself the butt of a perfect joke.

¹⁴⁹ Lukács contrasts these happy ages with modernity, in which "the fragmentary nature of the world's structure" (39) leads to the "complete disorientation of modern literature" (122).

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