Oh I am ashamed
of all clumsy artistry
I am ashamed of presuming
to arrange words. . . .

Few aspects of Samuel Beckett's work are more exasperating to the cautious critical mind than the style of his early writings in English—before, in a fit of exasperation all his own, he turned to writing in French.

This is partly because, like Mr. Knott's wardrobe, this style is "very, very various." It is not one style, but many—"now heavy, now light; now smart, now dowdy; now sober, now gaudy; now decent, now daring"—making it seemingly impossible to pin it down for long enough to analyze it. It is also partly because, with all its obvious faults and failings, which should, according to most of the canons of taste, render it virtually intolerable, it nonetheless holds its own. It remains memorable and quotable; and at times it achieves a quite haunting beauty. It is, on the face of it, a perverse style. And yet, looking back now from the distance of nearly half a century, it is possible to discern a methodical process at work behind the façade of this apparently disorganized exuberance.

Two comments by early critics may offer a clue to the under-
standing of the Beckettian enigma. In the first-ever-published full-length study of Beckett, *Die Unzulänglichkeit der Sprache* of 1957, Niklaus Gessner observes that he once asked the writer why he had abandoned English for French. The reply—which, characteristically, was given in French rather than in English—was ‘‘parce qu’en français, c’est plus facile d’écrire sans style.’’

And a second remark from the same period, which was roughly that of the first English production of *Waiting for Godot* at the Arts Theatre Club in London in 1956, was made to me by that well-known historian of the English novel Dr. Arnold Kettle: ‘‘it sounds like a bad translation from his own French.’’

Now, it is generally assumed that Beckett is a superlative translator from the French, whether his own or anyone else’s. It is true that he *can* be. Robert Pinget’s play *La Manivelle*, for instance, is more effective from every point of view—poetically, dramatically, atmospherically—in Beckett’s version, *The Old Tune*, than it is in the original. On the other hand, there are some efforts that had best been left unpublished. Rimbaud’s *Bateau ivre* is one of these. There are some passable lines in *Drunken Boat*; but there are far too many that are clumsy, amateurish, and frankly in bad taste—neither good Rimbaud, nor good Beckett:

> Et, dès lors, je me suis baigné dans le poème  
De la mer infusé d’astres et lactescent,  
Dévorant les azurs verts où, flottaison blême  
Et ravie, un noyé pensif, parfois, descend;  
Où, teignant tout à coup les bleuités, délires  
Et rythmes lents sous les rutilements du jour,  
Plus fortes que l’alcool, plus vastes que vos lyres,  
Fermentent les rousseurs amères de l’amour. (Lines 21–28)

> Thenceforward, fused in the poem, milk of stars,  
Of the sea, I coiled through deeps of cloudless green,  
Where, dimly, they come swaying down,  
Rapt and sad, singly, the drowned;  
Where, under sky’s haemorrhage, slowly tossing  
In thuds of fever, arch-alcohol of song,  
Pumping over the blues in sudden stains,  
The bitter redness of love ferment.4
The first two lines of Beckett's translation are admirable; but thereafter the reader is torn between a kind of startled amazement at the slick skill with which the translator, like a virtuoso of the jigsaw puzzle, has taken each separate piece from Rimbaud's pattern, juggled with it, and then fitted it neatly into his own, the irritation at the ineptitudes of the vocabulary ("dimly" and "singly" jingling away in consecutive lines), the modish, post-dadaist, antipoetic imagery, and the rough and jerky rhythms taking the place of the smooth and subtle convolutions of the Rimbaldian prosody.

The unevennesses of Drunken Boat are revealing, if only for the fact that they are almost certainly (in a way) deliberate. For all that the Rimbaud translation was done frankly for money, Beckett betrays few of the characteristics of the polished professional translator. He is at once something less and, obscurely as yet, something more. He is less for the reasons outlined above; he is more in that quite clearly his use of English is designed to serve purposes of his own that are very different from those which Rimbaud was serving with his French. The distinction, in briefest possible form, is that Rimbaud was using language positively and creatively; Beckett is using it—in part at least—negatively and destructively. And it is this negative, destructive, or self-destructive element in Beckett's English style that we shall attempt to follow in this essay.

For Beckett the problem of a literary language presented itself in the form of an insoluble contradiction. As a metaphysician—that is, as a plain but compulsive writer with something to say about the condition of man sub specie aeternitatis—his concern was to get beyond language: to transmit not ideas but (in his own phrase) the more elemental "shapes of ideas"; not concepts but the logic of the failure of conceptualization; not "cogito, ergo sum" but rather some elusive echo of the Sartrian rejoinder: "non sum, ergo cogito." But to deal in language with the "shapes of ideas" without getting bogged down in the ideas themselves would mean reducing language itself to a form so automatic and primitive that it conveys no concepts whatsoever, but merely its own inherent patterns: computerized "shapes" (as in Ping), which may, by awakening some respon-
sive echo through the sheer intricacy of their permutations and combinations, serve to suggest the "shape" of the idea without evoking the idea itself.

It is a problem that perhaps can be illustrated from the art of painting—the problem, say, of painting a fish. A traditionalist painter paints a fish in its context of water, reeds, and movement: the fish plus its essential "fishness." A modern Japanese painter will paint a swirl of reeds and water without the fish: "fishness," as it were, without the fish itself. But a modern Canadian painter will paint the fish in a bleak and disquieting void, as a Ding-an-sich, an arbitrary and meaningless phenomenon in a nonexistence of space and time: fish, in fact, without "fishness." Beckett's ambitions would seem to be most nearly akin to the latter category: the "shapes" of ideas, stripped of any hint of the omnipresent associations and significances of the ideas themselves.

In this situation, the problem of language looms threateningly large. Setting aside for the moment the inevitable role of language in providing a context of conceptualization, the more immediate obstacle is that of "style"; for "style" in any advanced literary language, but more especially in English, provides a reverberating "context" of echoes, images, and associations—precisely the elements that Beckett wishes to avoid. "Style"—the "clumsy artistry," the "presuming to arrange words"—is the ultimate enemy, the trap, the devil's most dangerous, most insidious temptation, the sin for which there is no forgiveness: that of inauthenticity. All language distorts; stylistic language distorts absolutely. "A thought expressed is a lie," wrote the Russian poet Tyutchev over a century ago. If only it were possible to write without language at all—or, if not without language, at least without style! The problem is not new. Stendhal, in the 1820s, was already struggling with it, and came to the conclusion that the only valid model for his writing should be the impersonal officialese of the Napoleonic Code civil, the nearest that the language of literature could approach to the nondescriptive language of mathematics. The Code civil: as close as the nineteenth century could get to the styleless language of the computer.
But—and herein lies the dilemma—Beckett is not only a metaphysician, he is also a poet. And for the poet, the overwhelming and compulsive need is to convey his experience of the depth and richness of the world, its ecstasies and its despairs, through language. Probably this has always been so; but in the contemporary “Death-of-God” context, it is truer than ever. In a universe from which the traditional God-the-Father figure has been abstracted, the supreme experience is that of existential “is-ness” (“être-avec,” in the phrase coined by Gabriel Marcel): the intuitive sense, in certain instances almost verging on the mystic, of being uniquely and absolutely at one, both with one’s own self, and with all else that simultaneously exists, randomly and inexplicably, in a given instantaneous—external accident of space and time. This “communion with It-ness”\(^6\) is the ultimate experience of the poem and the justification of poetry, and it can be expressed only through language. The poet’s “style”—his linguistic alter ego, the embodiment in conceptual form of the miracle of his being-in-the-world—has about it nothing that is haphazard. It is the significance of his existence; it is the reason why he is a poet rather than a building contractor or a motorcycle salesman.

The outcome, in Beckett, has been from the outset a duality and a contradiction: a tug-of-war between poetry and non-poetry, between “style” and “nonstyle,” which, in the early writings in English, emerges as a series of self-parodies, almost in the manner of an introspective Raymond Queneau directing his exercices de style against himself. Each successive style, by dint of its deliberate and baroque exaggerations, becomes a “nonstyle,” or perhaps, better, an “antistyle,” destroying its authenticity by the assertive self-consciousness of its own artificiality. In Beckett’s case “le style,” quite categorically, “n’est pas l’homme même.”

In the long run, however, for a serious writer, anything so artificial and negative as an “antistyle” can scarcely offer a final solution—any more than the “antithéâtre” and the “antinovels” of the 1950s could be perpetuated indefinitely. An “antistyle” is at best the means to an end, and the end itself is a “nonlanguage,” a vehicle of expression in which the concepts to be
signified are neither colored nor distorted by the words used to signify them. In the last analysis, this could be the reason Beckett eventually turned to French. Not necessarily because French is less rich in poetic overtones and nuanced imagery than is English (although to some extent this is in fact the case); nor even because for any writer to write in a language not his own involves a degree of structured artifice that renders the self-conscious and auto-destructive artificialities of "style" superfluous; but ultimately because in the gap between one language and another there may reside that nonlanguage which it is Beckett's final aim to realize. Belacqua once claimed to live "a Beethoven pause"—to have his existence in those gaps of silence more real (for "Nothing is more real than nothing") and more significant than the great musical phrases surrounding them; and it is worth recalling that, in 1962, the somewhat eccentric Collège de Pataphysique, apparently following up a similar train of thought, devoted an issue of its Dossiers to an exploration of literature born "dans les interstices du langage." Beckett's French linguistic self is not identical with his English-structured linguistic self; nor, even more significantly, are his English translations from his own French identical renderings from one idiom into another. In both cases, there is a gap; and somewhere in the gap between the abolutes of any given language—be it English or French, German or Italian, Latin or Computerese—lies that nonlanguage which is at once existential poetry, and yet "styleless" in any recognizable context except that of Beckett himself.

Returning, however, to Beckett's use of English in the earlier writings, before the transition to French, what we discover is a series of experiments in artificiality; a multiplicity, in fact, of "antistyles," each one of which contains within itself the seeds of its own negation. One of the initial problems, on Beckett's own admission, was the "poetic" quality of English—the wealth of unwanted imagery, color, allusion, and reminiscence conjured up by the simplest sentence. And Beckett's earliest attempt at a solution was to intensify the richness of this color and allusiveness, of this "poetry," to the point where the
"poem" itself becomes virtually incomprehensible to anyone but the poet himself, and thus stylistically defeats its own object. To the poem Whoroscope (1930), Beckett, in a moment of weakness, provided some explanatory footnotes of his own; but the subsequent Alba (1931), Home Olga (1932), and Echo’s Bones (1935) are stripped of any such primitive aids to exegesis, and in fact it took trained academic critics the better part of forty years to begin to penetrate the obscurities and to grasp dimly at the meaning—and then not all of it since, as it chanced, none had happened to be living in London and Dublin and Paris and Dortmund during those precise years.

To illustrate this hermetic-solipsistic style—a "style" so inaccessible that it becomes in effect a "nonstyle"—we may take the two poems from Echo’s Bones, entitled respectively Enueg I and Enueg II.

When these were reprinted in 1961, in the collected Poems in English, enlightened critics could do no better than to suggest that the mysterious word Enueg could be nothing more subtle or significant than an approximative anagram of the French word jeune. Beckett, who had studied the literature of twelfth-century Provence, knew of course that Enueg derived from the late-Latin word inodium meaning “vexation,” and was a form of poetic complainte familiar to troubadour poets such as the Monk of Montaudon; but the majority of accredited critics, and certainly the average reader, did not possess this knowledge. Once the Provençal context is detected, then other allusions fit into place like (once again) the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle: the “Isolde Stores,” for instance, with the “great perturbation of sweaty heroes” who may equally well be Arthurian knights after a battle or simply hurling players after an exhausting game. But unquestionably the elucidation of the mystery does require the services of a skilled literary detective who is prepared to devote several years of his life to the job. And in the end, perhaps, the final significance of the intrusion of this antique Mediterranean element into an English poem lies precisely in the fact of its non-Englishness: a first step in the undermining of the monolithic self-sufficiency of a linguistic structural absolute.
Other equally exotic and esoteric allusions are drawn from the Bible and from classical mythology. Nothing straightforward, of course. To start with, just houses and trees: “Above the mansions, the algum-trees.” There are no algum trees in Dublin, more’s the pity; but they did grow once, in the highlands of Lebanon, and Solomon commanded that their wood should be transported by sea to Jerusalem for the building of his temple (2 Chron. 2:8–11)—the house or “mansion” of the Lord. So much for the Old Testament; from the New, that recurrent Beckettian obsession, the Crucifixion. But, again, one has to pick up the initial clue for the rest of the hermetic allusion to fit into place:

at Parnell Bridge a dying barge
carrying a cargo of nails and timber . . .
on the far bank a gang of down and outs would seem to be mending a beam . . .
and the weals creeping alongside on the water . . .
de morituris nihil nisi . . .
veronica mundi
veronica munda
gave us a wipe for the love of Jesus
sweating like Judas
tired of dying . . .

and, through the intermediary of Dante (“God’s Quisling on earth”), a brief vision of the River Liffey transformed into “the Pit” of Hell, with the Damned, Doré-fashion, or like the climbers of the ladders in The Lost Ones (Le Dépeupleur), attempting to crawl out:

Blotches of doomed yellow in the pit of the Liffey;
the fingers of the ladders hooked over the parapet,
soliciting . . .

The classical allusions are similiarly unmethodical and (apparently) scattered at random. If the “algum-trees” suggest the house of Solomon and the mansion of the Lord, they could equally evoke (for the classical scholar) the Greek word ἀλγός, meaning “pain,” which makes much sense in the context of the
woman dying of tuberculosis in the "Portobello Private Nursing Home." And then, on the road to Kilmainham,

I splashed past a little a little wearish old man,  
Democritus . . .

introducing thus for the first time in the Beckettian canon the figure of the "Abderite" with his memorable "guffaw." And back in the Isolde Stores, he observes the hurling-players come hastening down for a pint of nepenthe or moly or half and half

and though the most illiterate of his readers (if any) would have been familiar with "half and half" (a mixture of two brews of beer, half mild, half bitter), again only the scholar like himself would have identified nepenthe, "the drug producing forgetfulness of grief," or moly, the "fabulous herb with white flower and black root, endowed with magic properties." The picture formed by the jigsaw puzzle is easy enough to interpret once the pieces are in place, but utterly baffling so long as the key to the structure as a whole is missing.

Or, to take another element in the "nonstyle" of these poems: the use of rare, exotic, and unfamiliar words. Latin words: "Exeo," with which Enueg I begins, thus invoking the Cartesian "Cogito" and, like Descartes, avoiding the too-dominant subjectivity of the pronoun "I," with which two of the following sections of the poem begin. French words: gaffe; or "feet in marmelade"—not the familiar bitter-orange jam of the English, but rather any kind of Gallic or Slavonic jelly-like squishy mess. "Wearish" = OE "Werig" = OHG "wuarag," meaning "drunk." Irish: "pucking," from "puckaun," meaning a billy goat:

a small malevolent goat, exiled on the road,  
remotely pucking the gate of his field. . . .

German: "doch doch I assure thee." Or plain English rarities such as "cang" (reference to a Chinese torture) or "Rafflesia"—the latter, named after Sir Thomas Raffles, lieutenant-governor
Richard N. Coe

of Sumatra 1818–23, later founder of the Regent’s Park Zoo in London, being the largest flower in the world, and one of the most evil-smelling. All this constitutes not so much a language, in the normal sense of the word, as a code, just as the “language” of the computer is a code. And a code, at least in any literary sense, is a nonstyle.

It might be added that the formal style of the poems themselves (written ca. 1930–35) was, in its time, “exotic”; that is, it belonged to a French rather than to an English tradition. Its origins may lie remotely in the Provençal Enuegs themselves; but more immediately, these origins are to be found in the French tradition as it had developed over the decades between Rimbaud and Laforgue on the one hand and Beckett’s contemporaries Max Jacob, Pierre Reverdy, and Benjamin Péret on the other. This manner of conceiving poetic structure was absolutely foreign to English-language poets of the period, with the significant exception of those who were closely in contact with France: T. S. Eliot, for instance, or Ezra Pound, or e. e. cummings. For the rest, English poetry seems to have been so dazzled by the revelation of Gerard Manley Hopkins in 1918 that for the better part of a generation it was immunized, as it were, against the whole Rimbaldian aesthetic; and even James Joyce (so often referred to as Beckett’s “mentor”) would seem, in Pomes Penyeach (1927), to have been taking an anachronistic “last ramble through Palgrave,” rather than to have kept even remotely in touch with the truly original poetic idiom of his own time. Thus Beckett, in the Enuegs as in the other poems of Echo’s Bones, was in fact writing English poetry in an almost entirely French poetic idiom: yet another descent into that “gap” of silence that lies secreted in the interstices of language.

If the hermetic “code” of the Poems in English constitutes one “nonstyle,” Beckett’s use of realism, paradoxically, constitutes another. This is essentially because, though never cheating, he goes to immense pains to conceal the fact that he is a realist. Not the jigsaw puzzle now, but hide-and-seek is the game: “I hid and you sook,” as he observes in a not wholly irrelevant line of Whoroscope. So efficacious have been these efforts at
concealment that few if any critics seem to have concerned themselves seriously with the immediate—as opposed to the ultimate—metaphysical reality underlying Beckett's writing; yet it has been apparent for a long time that his "absurdism" (like that of his disciple Armand Gatti) is arrived at by driving the "realities" of reason, observation, logic, and mathematics to their necessary but unacceptable conclusions, and that his "surreality" never for an instant severs its relationship with the real—frequently in its grossest and most unpalatable form. Where a literal reality takes on the shape of a fantasy, a nightmare, or a plain impossibility, then "real" and "unreal" cancel each other out, and the result is another "nonstyle."

Admittedly, this technique of contradiction and cancellation is not exclusive to the writings in English; but it is more noticeable, say, in All That Fall, Happy Days, Play, Film, or even in Ohio Impromptu, than it is in Godot, in the Trilogy or in Comment c'est; and certainly all the fundamental techniques of Beckettian realism are well and truly laid in the early writings. It is as though the switch to French induced an additional stratum of abstraction—culminating in texts such as Le Dépeupleur—thus to some extent upsetting the carefully calculated balance of the "nonstyle," and allowing the artificially acquired language (just because it is artificially acquired) more autonomy than the natural, maternal idiom.

Once one starts to look for plain reality in Beckett's writing, the more evident it becomes. There is geographical reality—the basic guidebook promenades through central Dublin and through its remoter suburbs—in Enueg I, for instance ("Over the Liffey with its steep perilous bridge"); in "Fingal" and in "A Wet Night," and of course in Watt. Murphy similarly follows an accurate street plan of small but very real sections of London—of Edith Grove, Cremorne Road, Lot's Road, and Stadium Street, for instance, all of which, within less than a hundred yards of each other, can be located on the North Bank of Chelsea Reach in any edition of the familiar A–Z Atlas and Street Guide of that city. But undoubtedly what Beckett loves best to light upon is the existence of a real place whose name conceals an accidental but resplendent symbolism—it could well have
been his acquaintance with a very real suburb of Dublin named Chapelizod (= "The Chapel of Isolde") that sparked off the whole "troubadour" structure of Enueg I. And the very summit of this amalgam of realism and symbolism is attained when (given the Beckettian vision of decaying humanity astride disintegrating bicycles) the already symbolic place-name, to those who actually know the place, is associated with a hospital: Kilmainham (Enueg I), where the hurling-players have been locked in mortal combat, was, first, the building in which the "crucified" Parnell had once been imprisoned, and second, one which had later become a hospital; and what better syllable for the name of a hospital to begin with (and Beckett is supremely alert to the significance of the opening syllables of names) than "Kil"? The Chelsea Reach of Murphy leads directly to the famous Chelsea Royal Hospital. And Murphy himself, mewed up in life if not in death in his "Mew in West Brompton," overlooked the Western Hospital, which has as its garden the immense West Brompton Cemetery. When, in the course of translation, Beckett moved Murphy to Paris, West Brompton could not go with him; but—marvel of marvels—close by the cemetery of Montparnasse, Beckett discovered a (real) "Impasse de l'Enfant-Jésus"; and it was overshadowed by the grim walls of the Hôpital Necker!

Thus symbol and reality interfuse; and the same is true as he walks the streets and observes the life around him. In such a manner, the "surrealist" admonition to "smoke more fruit" (Enueg II) combines the essence of two all-too-prevalent publicity campaigns in the London of the 1930s: the Imperial Tobacco Company's "Smoke Capstans" (on huge hoardings), and the South African Trade Bureau's "Eat More Fruit" (in delicious cardboard cutouts of oranges, lemons, pineapples, and so on, available at every greengrocer and fruiterer). Or—another example of observed reality apprehended for its accidental symbolism—the Great Ice-Cream Rivalry. In Murphy's London, two firms vied for the juvenile ice-cream market: Wall's and Eldorado. Both employed disabled former service-men to pedal around the streets on delivery-tricycles fitted with refrigerated containers. Wall's (blue-and-white, with the slogan
“Stop Me And Buy One”) was reputed to have the better quality; but it was also more expensive. Eldorado (red-and-white) was the cheaper, inferior product; and cheap ice cream was then known as “hokey-pokey.” “Hokey-pokey-penny-a-lump,” chanted the nannies to their charges—conjuring up visions of unsanitary Italian vendors, their product concocted in the bathtub. A laborious explanation; but it is necessary, perhaps, for the modern reader to understand the typically elaborate mixture of the real and the symbolic that underlies one of Beckett’s apparently more ingenuous sentences:

Celia [contemplating suicide by drowning herself in the Thames] walked to a point about half-way between the Battersea and Albert Bridges and sat down on a bench between a Chelsea pensioner and an Eldorado hokey-pokey man, who had dismounted from his cruel machine and was enjoying a short interlude of paradise.20

Observed reality—decrepitude, hospitalization, and death—Inferno, Purgatorio, Eldorado. Social realism also: Wall’s “Stop Me And Buy One” would probably not have bothered with Lot’s Road or Chelsea Reach during the days of the Great Depression. Nor is the “cruel machine” wholly to be dissociated from the later Beckettian bicycle image, which had already made its first appearance in the “Fingal” of More Pricks Than Kicks (pp. 33–36).

But if Beckett’s eye is accurate, so also is his ear. Like Proust, he is truly a human tape recorder. The role of the tape recorder itself in Krapp’s Last Tape is not accidental; the then newly invented machine simply vulgarizes the processes of his own mind. The rhythms, intonations, and inflections of Murphy and Watt, of the English version of Godot, and even of some of the later sketches such as Footfalls or Theatre I and Theatre II, are not the product of Mind working in the quintessential Abstract; they are the rhythms of the Dublin street and public house—as accurate as those of Stanley Holloway’s Wigan and Runcorn, or of Barry Humphries’ Moonee Ponds. The utterances of the Winnie of “Fingal,” sparse as they are, nonetheless suffice to reverberate with the limitless vulgarities of her tiny-minded conventionality. “The Smeraldina’s Billet Doux,” as the
pastiche of a letter written in her own brand of English by a Germanic woman-in-love, is so devastatingly accurate that it hurts. The very accent of Kassel—or is it not rather that of Wiener-Neustadt?—echoes through the written words:

Bel! Bel! how could you ever doubt me? Meine Ruh ist hin mein Herz ist schwer ich finde Sie nimmer und nimmer mehr. (Goethes Faust.) Lord Lord Lord for god sake tell me strate away what asgactly I have done. Is everything indiffrent to you? Evedintly you cant be bothered with a goat like me. If I don't stop writing you wont be able to read this letter because it will be all ofer tears. Bel! Bel! . . .

Do you remember last summer (of course he dose) and how lovely it was lieing hearing the bees summing and the birds singing, and the big butterfly that cam past, it looked grand, it was dark brown with yellow spots and looked so beautiful in the sun, and my body was quite brown all ofer and I dident feel the cold any more. (P. 166)

On the other hand, the purely parodic speech-realism of La Smeraldina, or for that matter of the Miss Coonihan of Murphy, or of Maddy in All That Fall, is superficial compared with the profound psychological reality of verbal patterns in some of the later works. What Beckett's significant personal experiences may have been is unknown to us, and will probably remain so.21 But that he has passed through (and mentally tape-recorded) some of the most traumatic moments of a human existence is unquestionable. Psychoanalytical interpretation of great works of literature are normally futile because they are directed at the writer, who is usually far more intelligent than the would-be psychoanalyst. But in Beckett's case the result might be more fruitful, since these interpretations could only be directed at the characters. The Winnie of Happy Days, for instance: an uncannily accurate recording of the voice of a woman whose marriage has broken down, during the last days before she resorts to the tranquilizing pills, the psychiatrist, and the mental-home; Play: the word-for-word nastiness of marriage and adultery—the bestial melodrama that no modern dramatist without the genius of a Beckett would dare touch, and yet which is true nonetheless:
W2. One morning as I was sitting stitching by the open window she burst in and flew at me. Give him up, she screamed, he's mine. Her photographs were kind to her. Seeing her now for the first time full length in the flesh I understood why he preferred me.

N. We were not long together when she smelled the rat. Give up that whore, she said, or I'll cut my throat—(hiccup) pardon—so help me God. I knew she could have no proof. So I told her I did not know what she was talking about,


Or, of course, Lucky's great monologue in *Godot* that, from the psychiatrist's point of view, is the almost untreated, unpurgated version of the outpourings of any contemporary intellectual adolescent in the first crisis of drug addiction or of plain schizophrenia.

Another nonlanguage. In almost everything that he has written (but particularly in English), Beckett is presenting a total reality: a more-than-Zolaesque, absolute naturalism, which, within its context, refuses to behave as naturalism, or even as realism. It is the language of literal truth (to those who can recognize it) masquerading as the language of the metaphysical, the mythological, and the absurd. Truth pretending to be a nontruth. Truth and nontruth canceling each other out. Again a void.

Perhaps Beckett's supreme attempt to write both in superlative literary English and, at the same time, "without style" was achieved in *Watt*. *Watt* represents the nearest ever that a great poet has managed to transform himself into a computer; yet (because he is a poet) it remains a computer-with-a-bad-conscience.

The objective of *Watt* is to use language as though there were no positive or necessary relationship between word and concept—between signifier and signified. For Watt himself this is both a puzzling and (since he had not then read the later struc-
turalists) a painful procedure: "Watt’s need of semantic succor was at times so great that he would set to trying names on things, almost as a woman hats . . ." (Watt, p. 90).

For Watt’s creator, on the other hand, it was a supreme, a desperate exercice de style; or rather (once again) de non-style. But the basic principle of using words in a completely random relationship with concepts—saying of a pot, for instance, "It is a shield, or, growing bolder, It is a raven, and so on" (p. 90)—is only one part of the general pattern of linguistic disintegration. By a skilled and virtually unique use of the comma, Beckett breaks up his sentences into a series of semiautonomous sense-units, isolating hunks of raw language in such a way that, although the continuity of the thought is not destroyed altogether, each section of the argument that constitutes that continuity stands apart and comes as a surprise, seemingly arbitrary and unexpected, assumable or discardable upon the whim of the moment. Consider the description of Mr. Knott’s style of dressing, for instance, in which the comma—the "Beethoven-pause" between blocks of significance—appears more momentous than the phrases that it separates:

But whatever he put on, in the beginning, for by midnight he was always in his nightshirt, whatever he put on then, on his head, on his body, on his feet, he did not touch again, but kept on all that day, in his room, in his house, in his grounds, until the time came to put on his nightshirt, once again. (P. 222)

There is something vaguely archaic about the ring of these sentences, something tantalizingly reminiscent of the Areopagitica or of the Anatomy of Melancholy; but once again, if there is a suggestion of pastiche, it is not in order to bring about a rapprochement with a more ancient style but rather to achieve a further alienation effect: English, not as it once was written but as it is not written. Echoes of John Donne or of Izaac Walton invoked deliberately to undermine the authenticity of twentieth-century narrative prose.

Other devices likewise serve to emphasize the all-prevalence of nonstyle—including that of negativity itself. Time and time again, in Watt, faced with the choice of making a statement in
positive or in double-negative form, Beckett chooses the latter. Indeed, the challenge of the double-negative waves like the black flag of the anarchists above the doomed linguistic traditionalism of the narrative: "This is not to say that Watt never saw Mr. Knott, at this period, for he did, to be sure" (p. 75); "Not that he was always unsuccessful either, for he was not" (p. 84). Or else complex triple, quadruple, or quintuple implied negatives, such as the following:

For the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something, just as the only way one can speak of God is to speak of him as though he were a man, which to be sure he was, in a sense, for a time, and as the only way one can speak of man, even our anthropologists have realized that, is to speak of him as though he were a termite. (P. 84).

"Something" here is a *pis-aller* for the ultimate reality of "nothing," which language, even in the ultimate extremes of its negativity, is unable to grasp or to handle.

The variations on an "antistyle" in *Watt* are innumerable, among them the familiar antics of the "Academic Clown." There is, for instance, the borrowing of stylistic tricks and mannerisms from other writers and other situations wholly inappropriate and irrelevant to the thematic material of the argument. Arsène’s formal pomposity and reiterated interjections of "Haw!" are borrowed straight from P. G. Wodehouse’s Jeeves, with some addition, perhaps, from Dorothy L. Sayers’s Bunter and from innumerable other comic or semicomic gentlemen of the period. The naïvely repeated "said Mr. Hackett," "said Goff," "said Tetty" of the opening sequences suggest the deadpan formula of Ivy Compton-Burnett, with something thrown in from the sophisticated ingenuousness of *The House at Pooh Corner*. There are the computerized permutations and combinations of Mary eating onions-and-peppermints, of the Lynch family background to the dog who did or (as the case might be) did not consume the remains of Mr. Knott’s supper, or of Mr. Ernest Louit’s appearance before the committee responsible for determining his worthiness to receive an award for research. In all of these, step by step, the
computer begins, almost literally, to take over from the poet; and the ultimate nonlanguage is that code which electronics can contrive out of oblong holes punched in slips of pasteboard: "Ot bro, lap rulb, krad klub. Ot murd, wol fup, wol fup. Ot niks, sorg sam, sorg sam. Ot lems, lats lems, lats lems. Ot gnut, trat stews, trat stews" (Watt, p. 181).

With the computerized automation of Watt's linguistic experiments in part three of the novel, Beckett's search for a non-style reaches its climax and its logical conclusion. The "interstices" between languages have become gigantic chasms between language-as-such and the thoughts or concepts that language traditionally is expected to convey. Thought, words, style: the three have become absolutely and irremediably separated from each other; and, because of this separation, we are left with a style in vacuo—a style that functions as a nonstyle by having severed all connections with that which it is supposed to represent, while at the same time retaining its unique individuality. "Le pour-soi," wrote Sartre, "est ce qu'il n'est pas." Beckett's English style, in the last stage of its evolution before he turned to French, similarly "is what it is not." It is a style; but it is not, in that the signifier no longer bears any immediate or positive relationship to the thing signified. A style reveals; a code conceals. In Watt Beckett has given a style to a code, and thus has realized the ultimate self-contradition of which literature is capable.

If, as we have argued, the problem that Beckett set himself from the outset was to discover a manner of writing "in the interstices of language"—in the linguistic equivalent of the "Beethoven-pause"—the transition to French would seem in retrospect to have been almost inevitable. Under different circumstances, it might have been Latin, or Esperanto. A foreign language is a code; to learn a foreign language is one of the most computer-like functions of the human mind. By working in French, Beckett avoids the traps he feels to be implicit in establishing a direct or "organic" relationship between the thing signified and the phrase signifying. Instead, the computer first translates the concept into the "code" of a foreign
language—that is, into a medium that is not "natural" but artificial—and then, by a second and wholly distinct operation, works back to the "real" or "natural" language, by translating from, or deciphering, the code. In other words, from *Molloy* onward Beckett’s prose-poetry in English is, in Watt’s phrase, "language commenting language," and is thus positive and affirmative within the strict limits that constitute its domain, rather than language trying, and forever failing, to embrace reality. The artificiality of the whole procedure is of the essence. And to remind us of this, here and there Beckett translates with carefully calculated inadequacy, sometimes even to the point of clumsiness.

To take one example only. In the exchange between Vladimir and Estragon, when they attempt to recall the landscapes of the past, the French runs as follows:

\begin{quote}
*Vladimir.* Tout de même, tu ne vas pas me dire que ça *[geste]* ressemble au Vaucluse! Il y a quand même une grosse différence.

*Estragon.* Le Vaucluse! Qui te parle du Vaucluse?

*Vladimir.* Mais tu as bien été dans le Vaucluse?

*Estragon.* Mais non, je n’ai jamais été dans le Vaucluse! J’ai coulé toute ma chaudepisse d’existence ici, je te dis! Ici! Dans la Merdecluse!\(^{24}\)
\end{quote}

This becomes in English:

\begin{quote}
*Vladimir.* All the same, you can’t tell me that this *[gesture]* bears any resemblance to . . . [he hesitates] . . . to the Macon country, for example. You can’t deny there’s a big difference.

*Estragon.* The Macon country! Who’s talking to you about the Macon country?

*Vladimir.* But you were there yourself, in the Macon country.

*Estragon.* No, I was never in the Macon country. I’ve puked my puke of a life away here, I tell you! Here! In the Cackon country!\(^{25}\)
\end{quote}
It grates! "Macon" and "Cackon" neither translate the French wordplay, nor replace it by an English equivalent. As a semi-pun ("Vaucluse"/"Merdecluse" is not exactly subtle, it is meaningless. Surely, one feels, Beckett can do better than that:26 "It sounds like a bad translation from his own French!" Which is exactly (this is the essence of our argument) what it is meant to sound like.

Thus Beckett's sense of the failure of language is (provisionally) exorcised, and in translating these works of the middle period, he can write some of the greatest prose-poetry in English literature:

I listen and the voice is of a world collapsing endlessly, a frozen world, under a faint untroubled sky, enough to see by, yes, and frozen too. And I hear it murmur that all wilts and yields, as if loaded down, but here there are no loads, and the ground too, unfit for loads, and the light too, down towards an end it seems can never come. (Molloy, P. 40)

To deny that this passage has "style" would be absurd; yet, on analysis, it is a style that nonetheless makes use of those elements of "antistyle" that we have been examining. In their final form, however, and thanks to the procedure by which they have first been required to pass through the "computer-code" of a foreign language, these elements have, as it were, become naturalized. They are no longer negative but positive. They function as words should function, that is, as a "comment" on other words; only indirectly and accidentally do they relate to concepts. Only accidentally are they poetry. But for all that, they are stamped with the unique and unforgettable identity of their maker.


5. This illustration is based on three paintings assembled and hung in her office by Emeritus Professor Irene Manton, formerly professor of botany in the University of Leeds, and a knowledgeable collector of modern art.

6. The phrase is taken from Bernard Berenson's memoirs, *Sketch for a Self-Portrait* (1940); but, revealingly, Eleanor Farjeon, describing an identical experience in her autobiography of her childhood, *A Nursery in the Nineties* (1935), refers to it as "being suddenly immersed in It-ness."

7. The failure of the self to penetrate the barrier of words "imposed by Others" is, of course, one of the most important themes of *The Unnamable*.


10. "Exercices de Littérature potentielle": see *Dossiers du Collège de Pata­
physique*, No. 17, dated "22 sable 89 E.P." (= 1962). The idea of a void or "gap" between languages is (*pace* Ludwig Wittgenstein) not without some support from the world of practical experience. I have been assured by a former "direct-interpreter" working with the United Nations (now a reader at the University of Oxford), who has at his immediate command eight European languages, that when he was working under pressure, the concepts expressed by a U.N. delegate in one language would be plunged into a "linguis­tic void" in his own mind, whence they would reemerge "naked," as it were, to be clad immediately in any of the seven other languages as might be required.


12. See below, pp. 46–47.

13. Even Lawrence Harvey (*Samuel Beckett*, p. 134) does not seem to have recognized that "The Fox and Geese" is the archetypal name for an English inn or "public house."

14. From *Enueg I* and *Enueg II*. The italics are mine. The "Parnell" image—that of the "crucified" Irish patriot betrayed by his Judas-people (cf. James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*)—will reappear later, under the image of "Kilmainham." All quotations are from *Collected Poems*, pp. 10–14.


16. Nor by any means did all English-language poets who were in contact with France at this period accept this idiom: see, for instance, Gertrude Stein or Edith Sitwell.


18. At the symposium at the Ohio State University, no single paper—let alone a full session—was devoted to Beckett's "realism."


21. According to Deirdre Bair, in her tantalizingly incomplete “biography,” *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 75, the “Smeraldina” was Beckett’s first cousin, daughter of his aunt Frances (“Cissie”) Beckett and of the Irish-Jewish William Sinclair. This cousin, Peggy Sinclair, had been brought up largely in Kassel, and was called “Smeraldina-Rima” on account of “her deep green eyes and her passionate love of green clothing.” At one period Beckett was in love with her. But one cannot help suspecting that other elements, which Beckett failed to reveal to his biographer, contributed to the portrait.


23. Since these have been analyzed in admirable detail by Hugh Kenner and others, there is no need for me to dwell upon them here. Suffice it to note that they constitute yet another self-parody or “nonstyle.”


25. *Waiting for Godot* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), pp. 61–62. The odd fact is that the word “Cackon” (= “caca”; see the “Acacacaacademy of Anthropopopometry” in Lucky’s monologue) would immediately suggest something to a French spectator, but not to an English one.