CHAPTER FOUR

From Joyce to Beckett:
The Tale That Wags the Telling

ULYSES

"‘Look!’" said James Joyce to Frank Budgen, as their conversation in a small Paris cafe was "interrupted by the fierce pounding of an electric piano... ‘That’s Bella Cohen’s pianola. What a fantastic effect! All the keys moving and nobody playing.’" Bella Cohen’s pianola playing itself presents to our imagination two signal features. First, we become aware of the pianola as an active element in the musical experience rather than simply the instrument, or medium, that conveys it. Second, we become aware of the pianola, or medium, as what generates the musical experience—all the keys moving and nobody playing. In *Ulysses* Joyce causes us to see not only what happens to Stephen and Bloom and what their world looks like but what the material that composes their world looks like as well. He brings the medium of the novel into its dramatic compass, gives his medium the same kind of dramatic life he gives his characters. He also makes it into a dynamic force that threatens his characters and continually upsets the equilibrium of his readers. Like Bella Cohen’s pianola, the medium of *Ulysses* is an active element in the experience we encounter; indeed, it is a formidable antagonist. It is also an autonomous, self-generating cause of what we encounter. What a fantastic effect!

I have taken *Ulysses* out of its chronological position in order to follow one course of the novel in motion that Joyce helped initiate—as the narrative eye becomes a dominant dramatic force. Joyce’s picture of the girls on the library steps in *Portrait*—with its swift shifts in perspective, sharp fragmentation, and attention to gratuitous detail—foreshadows much in *Ulysses*, but even
more in the novels of William Faulkner. In *Portrait* Joyce’s narrator, identifying with Stephen Dedalus even when he views him ironically, engages us in the act of excited perception as Stephen learns to see. Faulkner goes a step further, for his pictures in motion are generated not by any character in the world of his novels but by the narrator, trying to apprehend the senseless energy that drives his characters to creative and destructive ends, and generating another level of senseless energy as he mediates between us and their stories. It is his mediation, then, that continually upsets our equilibrium and stimulates the sensation of motion. Or, to put it in another way, our sensation of motion derives from a major component of the narrative medium. In Joyce’s *Ulysses* the narrator often identifies with a character and engages us in the act of excited perception, whether what we see is present in the character’s world or in his mind. Sometimes he engages us in the act of seeing what his characters could not see. But he also engages us in the activity of his medium’s other components: the shifting styles, the sounds of words, the look of words on the printed page, an arbitrary point of view, language issuing from no source in the narrative world and gathering its own momentum, stage directions and dialogue attributions. Every component of the novel’s medium is brought into its dramatic compass. But they also intrude into the narrative, compete with what is happening, interfere with what we are trying to see and understand, and become the source of a new kind of movement that threatens and enlivens us.

We have looked with Stephen Dedalus across his “threadbare cuffedge” to see a “ring of bay and skyline” that “held a dull green mass of liquid,” and within his mind to see the “bowl of white china . . . holding the green sluggish bile” torn up by his dying mother.² We have seen something, though not much, of Mr. Deasy’s school and Sandymount strand. We have seen a great deal of Dublin through the eyes of Leopold Bloom, in scenes continually fragmented by his recollections and associations. Suddenly we encounter not a scene but a *page*—where what Bloom sees is fragmented by boldface headings. Indeed, what Bloom sees is only part of a pattern that includes—is in fact dominated by—the typography.

**IN THE HEART OF THE HIBERNIAN METROPOLIS**

*Before Nelson’s Pillar, trams slowed, shunted, changed trolley started for Blackrock, Kingstown and Dalkey, Clonskea, Rathgar and Terenure, Palmerston park and upper Rathmines, Sandymount Green,*
Rathmines, Ringsend and Sandymount Tower, Harold's Cross. The hoarse Dublin United Tramway Company's timekeeper bawled them off:
—Rathgar and Terenure!
—Come on, Sandymount Green!
Right and left parallel clanging ringing a double-decker and a single-deck moved from their railheads, swerved to the down line, glided parallel.
—Start, Palmerston park!

THE WEARER OF THE CROWN

Under the porch of the general post office shoeblacks called and polished. Parked in North Prince's street His Majesty's vermilion mailcars, bearing on their sides the royal initials, E. R., received loudly flung sacks of letters, postcards, lettercards, parcels, insured and paid, for local, provincial, British and overseas delivery.

GENTLEMEN OF THE PRESS

Grossbooted draymen rolled barrels dullthudding out of Prince's stores and bumped them up on the brewery float. On the brewery float bumped dullthudding barrels rolled by grossbooted draymen out of Prince's stores.
—There it is, Red Murray said. Alexander Keyes.
—Just cut it out, will you? Mr. Bloom said, and I'll take it round to the Telegraph office.

The door of Ruttledge's office creaked again. Davy Stephens, minute in a large capecoat, a small felt hat crowning his ringlets, passed out with a roll of papers under his cape, a king's courier. (115)

It is only at the bottom of the page that we discover we are in a newspaper world, and that the boldface headings are like newspaper headlines. Still, we cannot locate their source. They are not part of what any character sees or thinks. Nor are they part of what the narrator sees or says. They are certainly not taken from any newspaper. The headlines are just there—gratuitous, obturate lines of boldface print that intrude into the narrative, interrupt, fragment, and sometimes focus or comment upon the scene. What we encounter in "Aeolus," besides what Bloom and Stephen see of the newspaper offices, is the medium, the very material that forms the novel. What we see on the screen of our visual imagination includes both the imaginary world of the newspaper offices and the tangible page of print. In "Aeolus" the medium has become a dramatic element, which David Hayman describes as a counterforce. It has become a tangible antagonist against which the narrator, the characters, and the reader will have to contend. And it will become a driving force of the novel.

We continue to follow Stephen and Bloom in their aimless wan-
derings through the streets of Dublin, evolving a sense of their
habits and needs. That is, we form a relatively coherent though
complex picture of the novel’s main characters. But we form this
picture against the force of a narrative medium that grows in­
creasingly arbitrary and at times almost opaque. For the nar­
rative voice, having been playfully undermined in “Aeolus,” is
nearly overcome by the arbitrary musical sounds in “Sirens,”
blown all out of proportion by the “giganticism” of “Cyclops,”
nearly obscured by the stylistic parodies in “Oxen of the Sun.” In
“Circe” there is no conflict between the narrative voice and the
counterforce of the medium: the narrative voice is completely
usurped by a set of stage directions. Denied our narrative guide,
we encounter the nighttown experience completely on our own: we
have almost no way of telling the level of actual action and speech
from the levels of recollection, daydreaming, fantasy, or deep un­
conscious projection. And here, where Bella Cohen’s pianola ap­
ppears as part of the nightmare, we can discern most clealy the me­
dium’s twofold role as tangible dramatic element and self-
generating dramatic force.

The Mabbot street entrance of nighttown, before which stretches an
uncobbled tram siding set with skeleton tracks, red and green will-o’-
the-wisps and danger signals. Rows of flimsy houses with gaping
doors. Rare lamps with faint rainbow fans. Round Rabaiotti’s
halted ice gondola stunted men and women squabble. They grab
wafers between which are wedged lumps of coal and copper snow.
Sucking, they scatter slowly. Children. The swancomb of the gon­
dola, highreared, forges on through the murk, white and blue under
a lighthouse. Whistles call and answer.

THE CALLS
Wait, my love, and I’ll be with you.

THE ANSWERS
Round behind the stable. (429)

What we first encounter in “Circe” is a set of stage directions.
The nightmare is initiated by their coming to life. Flimsy houses
gape at us. The swanscomb of Rabaiotti’s ice gondola rears itself
on high and forges through the murk. Whistles call and answer.
But more: words are transformed into objects or stage props, and
sound effects come to life. A will-o’-the-wisp, the name for an elu­
sive and unseen creature, is a metaphor; but we are asked to see
will-o’-the-wisps casually alternating with the danger signals
that line the railroad tracks. The whistles’ calls and answers are
sound effects, but they are given lines of dialogue—“Wait, my
love, and I’ll be with you,” call the whistles’ calls. “Round behind the stable,” answer the whistles’ answers.

The stage directions and dialogue attributions not only come to life in the experience of nighttown, they are a dramatic force. It is the stage directions that cause Bloom to give birth to eight male yellow and white children, cover his left eye with his left ear, pass through several walls, hang on Nelson’s pillar by his eyelids, eat twelve dozen oysters (shells included), eclipse the sun by extending his little finger. And while Bella Cohen might act the role of Circe, it is the costume changes that evoke the multiple transformations of character, or awaken sleeping personae. What I am trying to point out is that the dramatic script that intrudes itself into the narrative of Ulysses is not, like the conventional script, a set of directions for a theatrical performance (even though the nighttown scene has been staged and filmed). The effect of the episode would be lost if a director were to create something like a will-o’-the-wisp and have it stand or move among the danger signals, if we were to hear a whistle call, “Wait, my love,” if we were to see Bloom give birth to eight male yellow and white children or hang from Nelson’s pillar by his eyelids. The stage directions and dialogue attributions—the particular manifestations of the novel’s medium in “Circe”—are not signals for action. They are elements of the drama. They are as much a part of the fully imagined experience as the characters, the background, the movement, the dialogue, the streams of consciousness. Moreover, they are major forces in the drama and generate its erratic movement; they directly affect the characters, create discontinuities, and cause a series of comic but disturbing conjunctions and collisions.

In the “Circe” episode the medium usurps the narrator. What the reader sees on the screen of his visual imagination is not a picture of characters talking, thinking, and acting against a surrealistic background—a picture, that is, contained within the narrator’s consciousness and transmitted through his voice. Rather, the reader sees an erratic montage composed of subject matter and the materials of the printed language—characters, memories, fantasies, pieces of stage sets, words, and empty spaces—kept in continual motion, arbitrarily fragmented, senselessly joined, comically animated and impelled, like Bella Cohen’s pianola, by the medium itself. What a fantastic effect: all the keys are moving and nobody is playing.

Let me try to elaborate on the dynamics of montage by employing another model, this time from Sergei Eisenstein’s first film.
the year after Joyce published *Ulysses*, Eisenstein was producing Ostrovsky's play, aptly titled *Enough Simplicity in Every Sage*. He was inspired to fit into his dramatic production a short film, which, like Joyce's intrusion of the play script into his novel, had the alienating effect of mirroring characters, set, and action in another medium. Indeed, by speeding up the film, he could convey what Joyce conveyed less directly: characters impelled by the movement of the medium itself.

The play, as Eisenstein describes it in *Film Form*, is an elaborate intrigue in which Glumov deceives his uncle by courting his aunt, while at the same time deceiving the aunt by courting the niece. For the film insert Eisenstein made imaginative use of the stage set, which was shaped like a circus arena with a small raised platform at one end. He arranged for the scene with the uncle to take place downstage in the arena, and for the fragments with the aunt to take place on the platform. "Instead of changing scenes, Glumov . . . ran from one scene to the other and back—taking a fragment of dialogue from one scene, interrupting it with a fragment from the other scene—the dialogue thus colliding, creating new meanings and sometimes wordplays. Glumov's leaps acted as caesurae between the dialogue fragments."

The key elements of Eisenstein's montage are caesura, leaping, fragment, and collision. Now let us see what we would imagine if Eisenstein's model were applied to "Circe." Joyce's stage set, like Eisenstein's, might be shaped like a circus arena, with a series of overlapping platforms at one end. The action that takes place between 12 and 1 A.M., in the grotesque present of Mabbot Street and Bella Cohen's whorehouse, would be played on the ground level of surreality. Fragments from the hallucinated past and future of Bloom and Stephen and of their literary analogues would be played on one or another of the raised platforms. Instead of changing scenes, Bloom, and to a lesser extent Stephen, would run from one scene to another—taking a fragment of dialogue from one scene, interrupting it with a fragment from another scene—the dialogue thus colliding, creating new meanings and sometimes wordplays. The leaps of Bloom and Stephen would act as caesurae between the dialogue fragments.

Frank Budgen has pointed out that Joyce composed *Ulysses* as a mosaic, and A. Walton Litz has described this process in detail. But though both Budgen and Litz have contributed immeasurably to our understanding of Joyce's mode of composition, and their image of the mosaic accounts for the fragmentation as well
as our awareness of the medium, it does not account for the two-
fold role of the medium in *Ulysses* or the disorienting motion that
engages us. For a mosaic, though composed of many fragments, is
perceived as fragments situated next to one another in space and
not following one another in time. Moreover, it is seen as a com-
position of static fragments cemented together. The medium,
then, though part of what we encounter, does not generate the
movement from one fragment to another which Eisenstein de-
scribes in terms of leaping and, especially, collision. Although
film makers and critics have often discussed montage as the ce-
menting together of film fragments, or shots, from the early days
of cinematic art Eisenstein argued to the contrary. The key to
montage, he insisted, is conflict; the relationship between film
fragments is not the cemented joint but collision. Indeed, joining,
he tells us, is only a special case of collision; for when two spheres
collide, an infinite number of combinations may result. One of
these combinations “is so weak that collision is degraded to an
even movement of both spheres in the same direction.”

Joyce and Eisenstein recognized that they were “moving along
kindred lines.” Although Joyce did not formulate his aesthetic
principles in terms of montage or catalog them as systematically
as Eisenstein did, the effects of *Ulysses* can be usefully described
in Eisenstein’s language, especially in terms of collision, which is
the essence of Eisenstein’s theory. I have tried to show how Joyce
brought all the components of his medium into the dramatic com-
pass of *Ulysses*, and how the self-generating dynamic of his me-
dium becomes a driving force. Let me now try to show how the
movement we encounter in *Ulysses* can be described as a series of
collisions that both include the medium and are generated by it.

Collision of characters is the most obvious because it results in
the special case of joining. We will immediately think of the join-
ing of manifest characters: Stephen and Bloom, Molly and Mar-
tha, Gerty and Mrs. Purefoy. Or we will think of joining a charac-
ter and his mythic counterpart: Bloom and Ulysses or Christ,
Stephen and Telemachus or Hamlet. What is often lost in the in-
tellectual exercise of discovering these kinds of links in *Ulysses*
are the radical differences—the caesurae—that make themselves
felt as one trait leads us to connect but others remain present to
enforce the separation, the *leaps* our minds make and the feeling
of continual oscillation that results from our not being able to land
on one foot or the other, and the *collision* of associations we have
with such different characters. To more fully represent the dy-
namics of this novel in motion would be to describe Stephen as leaping from the mundane world of twentieth-century Dublin to the world of Homer’s *Odyssey* or Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, or of Bloom carrying fragments of his dialogue or interior monologue from 7 Eccles Street to Calypso’s island or from Barney Kiernan’s tavern to Cyclops’s cave—and from the resulting collisions to describe the unsettling new meanings.

In one sense the collision of characters lies in the domain of the novel’s subject matter: we are reading about Stephen, whose actions are parallel to Bloom’s; we are reading about Bloom, whose journey is like Ulysses’ and whose temperament is like Christ’s. But we are made conscious of the connections by the reflexive form of the novel, by the medium, which forms connections that we know to be both meaningful and absurd. The second form of collision is more immediate and palpable. It comes when, striving to hear the narrator’s voice or see his picture, we collide with an arbitrary style. We collide with the newspaper headlines in “Aeolus” as they undermine the narrator’s voice and interrupt the action. We collide with the arbitrary pattern of sounds in “Sirens” as they distract us from following the complex choreography of characters in and out of Ormond’s restaurant, and from following the multileveled stream of Bloom’s consciousness just when he gives in irrevocably to becoming a cuckold. We collide with the literary parodies of “Oxen of the Sun” as they obfuscate the meeting of Stephen and Bloom that we have been anticipating for four hundred pages. Perhaps the most significant collision is between the reader and the catechistic style of “Ithaca,” for here the style intrudes and transforms a quality of action—the long and important exchange between Stephen and Bloom—into a set of quantitative results. We can never see or hear what happens in the kitchen of 7 Eccles Street; we can only infer what happens through a process of addition. We cannot see a new relationship forming between Stephen and Bloom; we can only count up instances like Stephen’s acceptance of Bloom’s mustache cup. We cannot hear a conversation, which in contrast to that in “Eumaeus” seems to have achieved a genuine dialogue; we can only infer how far Bloom and Stephen got with one another if they were led to discover such a “connecting link” as Mr. Riordan. We cannot directly feel the kind of male intimacy that developed between them; we can only deduce this from the fact that they playfully urinated together in the penumbra of Molly’s lamp.

The capricious movement of the medium, as it collides with the
The reader, dislocates us from the scene of action. It is a force that keeps us from seeing, feeling, and knowing what happens during the most important moments in the story. And it is essentially comic in its surprise, incongruity, and power to create distance. When the medium gratuitously collides with the characters, it dislocates the reader and reveals its threatening potential. We first become aware of this collision in "Wandering Rocks," when we encounter an arbitrary shift in the point of view—and the dislocation is sensed before it is understood. Instead of focusing on the scene from the perspective of Stephen or Bloom, we are suddenly lifted, as it were, to a bird's-eye vantage; and we are engaged by a pattern of many characters moving through the streets of Dublin. More striking still, we see the major characters reduced to the same level of importance as a host of minor characters and, indeed, to a lower level of importance than some characters who are arbitrarily introduced for the first and last time. Moreover, the characters are fragmented; our dominant visual impression is of parts of people or their dress—Father Conmee's watch and silk hat, the sailor's single leg and crutch, Molly's arm, the carnation between Blazes Boylan's smiling teeth. What impels the movement in "Wandering Rocks" and reduces and fragments the characters is nothing more than the point of view. The counterforce as point of view collides with the characters, threatens them as free and integral human beings, and, continually dislocating the reader, keeps them beyond our grasp.

In "Cyclops" we are dislocated by two unrelated voices, the demotic voice that describes the naturalistic conflict between Bloom and the Dubliners, and the mock-heroic voice that transmogrifies this experience into gigantic proportions. But the mock-heroic voice, like the point of view in "Wandering Rocks," has no locus in the world of the novel. It is all style, language itself speaking and gathering momentum. When Bloom is threatened by the Dubliners on his return to the tavern and when he barely escapes the Citizen's biscuit tin, we feel an intensity of danger that emanates—not from the characters—but from the language that has gathered its momentum from a sheer accumulation of words. If the language, playing itself like the keys of Bella Cohen's pianola, creates one of the most comic effects in the novel, in its collision with Bloom it achieves its most menacing potential.

In the "Ithaca" episode the style is most threatening; and here we encounter the ultimate agon between Bloom and the medium. The language, now completely mechanical, not only transforms a
quality of experience into a quantity of data: it threatens to reduce Bloom into one of the many countable items or objects. The threat is most potent right after Stephen leaves. Bloom, now completely alone for the first time during his long day, bumps his head on a walnut sideboard and is dramatically displaced by a long catalog of furniture in the front room. Indeed, in the pages that follow, Bloom is reduced to one of the many objects. Throughout the day Bloom has been an alien object to the Dubliners in general and to Blazes in particular; he has been like the crumpled throwaway floating down the Liffey. If he seems to have survived the social and psychological threats, this is only because we have been allowed a sympathetic view into his consciousness. At the climax of his drama, the medium gratuitously imposes itself between us and Bloom, and we are left to focus on the agon between the novel’s medium and the novel’s main character. The achievement of *Ulysses* is that Bloom emerges as an individual who is uniquely humane and heroic. In his comic and realistic acceptance and affirmation of Molly’s adultery and of his own situation, Bloom overcomes the threats not only of society, history, and his own psyche but of that ominous and anonymous force that Joyce locates in the very medium of his novel.

Still, the force is not brought under control, even though the “Ithaca” chapter is succeeded by Molly’s soliloquy—where the medium no longer intrudes, where there are no fragments, no leaps, no caesurae, and where the movement, though palpable, is continuous and cumulative. In the Molly chapter the printed page is almost transparent; the long sentences read easily and give rise to the sound of Molly’s voice. In her unbroken monologue Molly draws together all her experience while centering on Bloom. The novel’s conflicts are dispelled, and one source of conflict—the ungovernable medium—is subdued. But when we finish the chapter and put it into its total context, we do not feel a sense of equilibrium. There is a caesura between the last two chapters. Despite the superabundance of fact in the chapter that ends with Bloom going to sleep, we are not told of Bloom’s asking for breakfast in bed: the signal request that impels Molly’s monologue. There is a leap from the remote viewpoint in “Ithaca” to Molly’s intimate and direct stream of consciousness. The Molly chapter then, though in itself harmonious and whole, is an element in the novel’s dynamic montage; and if the medium is unobtrusive, it remains the driving force. Like Bella Cohen’s pianola, all the keys are moving and nobody is playing.
SAMUEL BECKETT'S WATT AND HIS TRILOGY

Joyce's language in *Ulysses* has more than the power to call up Dublin on 16 June 1904 and embody the streams of its characters' consciousness. It becomes a fully autonomous element, issuing from no source within the narrative world and gathering its own momentum—a counterforce that is self-generating, arbitrary, intrusive, comic, and dramatically threatening. In Beckett it is not a counterforce but the only force. It does not intrude into the narrative world, it is all the world. It literally creates a world as one word after another fills in the empty space, and then it cancels what it has created. Or it creates a narrator who brings a world to life through his intercourse with the words he has written, who keeps from dying as long as he has lead in his pencil, and who is ultimately threatened by the very language he speaks. We know that Beckett was attracted by the fecundity of Joyce's language, especially in *Finnegans Wake*. If we turn to *Watt*, where he was beginning to find his own style, and the trilogy, where he fully realized it, we can see how he drew on the autonomous power of Joyce's language in *Ulysses*, how he endowed it with an even greater momentum, and how he realized its ultimately destructive potential.

On the opening page of *Watt*, Mr. Hackett turns a corner and sees, in the failing light, at some little distance, his seat. But what is the corner he turns? It is not like the stairhead from which Buck Mulligan emerges; we never see enough of the scene to place or define it. We do not even know—cannot even see—what it is the corner of. It has only a single dimension. It is no more than a point, an intersection, between what never was and what will become as one word succeeds another and fills up the page. It is the point from which Mr. Hackett emerges like a line drawing. First he is only a name, an abstraction, a virtual character. Then—as one verbal event follows another, and we follow the movement of the story line—the virtual becomes actual. Mr. Hackett stretches out his left hand and fastens it around a rail. Now that the rail is there to support his hand, he can strike his stick against the pavement and feel the thudding rubber in his palm. When he gets closer to the seat, the occupants appear part by part: "the lady held the gentleman by the ears, and the gentleman's hand was on the lady's thigh, and the lady's tongue was in the gentleman's mouth." Even though the clauses of the sentence are joined by coordinating conjunctions, signifying the simultaneous presence...
of all the parts, we discover them one by one, incrementally. Each new element is a surprise. Mr. Hackett has called a policeman, although we do not discover this till he arrives, and he sees no indecency. After the lovers leave, Mr. Hackett can take his seat; and in his seat he emerges, part by part, until he is fully three-dimensional: “Mr. Hackett’s nape rested against the solitary backboard, beneath it unimpeded his hunch protruded, his feet just touched the ground, the stick hooked around his neck hung between his knees” (9).

In Watt we are engaged in the extension of a story line—in its most concrete and elemental form. The opening section begins the process that extends through the whole length of the novel, for the story line—an autonomous, self-generating element—develops incrementally in two ways: first, as one word succeeds another; and, second, as one story succeeds another. A gentleman and a lady pass Mr. Hackett. They become husband and wife when the gentleman introduces Mr. Hackett. Then they become parents, Goff and Tetty Nixon, when they tell the story of Larry’s birth. Larry is literally born and the husband and wife literally become parents in the telling of the story. Or, to put it another way, Larry exists as a character and they exist as his parents only in their story. This is just what happens in the body of the novel. Beckett’s narrative strategy has been described in terms of combinations and permutations, but it is important to realize that each new combination and permutation is a new increment—a new movement, extending the story line as it extends the world of Watt into the empty space of the page. This movement is just what we experience when—to dispose of Mr. Knott’s leftover food, on those occasions it is left over—the problem of a dog is considered. An average hungry or starving dog could hardly be expected to attend the house every evening between eight and ten for food that might not appear, so to solve the problem of a dog, the problem of its owner must be considered. The Lynch family appears—twenty-eight members afflicted by as many diseases and disabilities, each of which is accounted for in the twenty-six pages of extending story line.

So far as I know, every critic has accepted Sam as the ultimate storyteller, for Sam has taken careful notes from the time Watt began to “spin his yarn.” Sam’s mind is like Watt’s and he is seeking to know Watt just as Watt was seeking to know Knott. He is obsessed by the same kinds of questions and generates the same incredible multiplicity of possibilities, and he brings into focus the
nature of Watt’s language—as well as the language Watt is constrained to compose in. “How hideous is the semi-colon” (158), he complains; and he is often forced to resort to question marks to make an ultimately enigmatic point. But what are we to make of those distinctly editorial interpolations: “Hiatus in MS” (238) and “MS illegible” (241)? Should they not lead us back to see the question marks and semicolon complaint as interpolations as well? If so, can the ultimate narrator really be Sam—at least the Sam who appears in the first person in the manuscript? If not, can we find any other voice in the novel to assure us of a narrative presence? No! What we have, from the first to the last page of Watt, is a story line extending itself, a yarn spinning itself out of empty space—bringing characters, objects, and events into existence through its own movement. The story line issues out of the empty space in the opening page, disappears in the empty space after the Hackett section, turns Watt from a “roll of tarpaulin, wrapped up in dark paper and tied about the middle with a cord” (16) into a singular individual, burgeons out of the generative capacity of words as they succeed one another, comes nearly full circle—past where Sam sees Watt disappearing into the undergrowth for the last time—to where the train first took Watt to Mr. Knott’s house. Watt is created out of the story line and is ultimately canceled by it, for we are finally left with the station attendants watching his train leave, looking from one to the other until Mr. Nolan looks “at nothing in particular, though the sky falling to the hills, and the hills falling to the plain, made as pretty a picture, in the early morning light, as a man could hope to meet with, in a day’s march” (246). And then continuing through an appendix.

Watt is developed from a roll of tarpaulin into a singular individual by the movement of the story line, but Molloy is there from the very beginning—for Molloy tells his story in the first person. Molloy is in his mother’s room. He is filling up empty pages with what he knows. Which is his story. What he knows, then—indeed, what he is—is what he writes. He knows nothing beyond his present situation. His present situation includes the words he has just written into the empty space. Whether they are in the past or present tense, they are presences. And it is through his engagement—through his toying, struggling, and intercourse—with these physical presences that his story comes to life.

He does not know how he got to his mother’s room. He does not know whether his mother was dead when he arrived or only died later—that is, “enough to bury.” He tells us, though, that he has
taken her place. “I must resemble her more and more. All I need now is a son.” And then Molloy gives birth to a son. Watch how: “Perhaps I have one somewhere. But I think not. He would be old now, nearly as old as myself. It was a little chambermaid. It wasn’t true love” (my emphases).

Molloy speculates upon the possibility, reflects upon the improbability—and then creates a son by shifting from the conditional present to the indicative (or actual) past: “He would be old now. . . . It was a little chambermaid.” This grammatical conception is also generated by a shift from “he” to “it.” And though “it” has no antecedent in the text, we easily apprehend its referent, for such ellipses are common in everyday speech. In this case “it” refers to the event of his son’s conception—which is itself conceived by Molloy’s pencil dallying with the grammar and filling in the empty space after a sentence defining his son as no more than what Stephen Dedalus called a “Godpossibled soul” (389).

*Watt* is the process of words, as autonomous physical presences, extending themselves into a story line, creating and finally canceling a world by the addition of new increments. *Molloy* is also the product of an autonomous, procreative language, but not of a burgeoning story line. Rather, it is a process we can understand more graphically by comparing it to Beckett’s plays. Krapp listens to what he recorded in the past, but the words exist only in the present; their autonomous presence is made dramatically evident by their issuing from a tape recorder. And Krapp creates himself from moment to moment by reacting to the sounds he hears. In *Act without Words I*, Beckett’s mime creates himself silently through his intercourse not with words but with objects: a carafe, a tree, a rope, and a pair of scissors. And Winnie creates perhaps the most memorable character on the modern stage through her verbal intercourse with the objects in her purse. So Molloy is challenged by, challenges, teases, laments over, and engenders new life out of the words he has just written—that are there on the page just as Krapp’s sounds, the mime’s objects, and Winnie’s purse are there on the stage. He questions them, is disturbed by them, undermines or contradicts them, shifts their tense or mood, creates ellipses. He also engenders alternative characters by mitosis (Was it A or C? Lousse or Mrs. Loy? Edith or Ruth?), evinces surprise at what he creates (“Well, well, I didn’t know I knew this story so well”[58]), and completely abandons many of his offspring.
Molloy creates his own elusive self by filling up the empty pages with words and interacting with them, continuously creating new presences and a new present. But he is also aware that the language he toys with has its own autonomous power and generates its own movement. "Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson" (32). We will not realize the full import of Molloy's intuition until we come to *The Unnamable*, where we will discover that the language of the trilogy, though seeming to be the product of one narrator after another, is not under their control—and that it excludes the possibility of their not only inventing but saying anything for themseves.

As we read through the trilogy, one storyteller yields to another. The second part of the first novel is narrated by Moran, who goes out in search of Molloy. Moran starts off as a conventional character speaking in a conventional voice, but he ends up looking and speaking like Molloy. He hears a voice telling him things. "It did not use the words that Moran had been taught. . . . It told me to write the report." The report—the novel—ends: "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining" (176). The concluding sentences are more than self-contradictory. The last two sentences contradict the first two sentences of Moran's story; they cancel everything Moran has told us. Moreover, with the change from the past to the present tense, they create a new beginning. And, since Moran has learned to speak in the voice of Molloy, he may be beginning what we had considered to be the novel's first section. That is, Molloy may not be the initial storyteller but only a character in a story by Moran.

In *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, each new storyteller resembles his predecessor, except that he is older, less mobile, and more capable of discovering possibilities within ever-narrowing limits. Moreover, each new storyteller denies the independent existence of his predecessor. "I have only to open my mouth for it to testify to the old story, my old story," says Malone. "But let us leave these morbid matters and get on with that of my demise, in two or three days if I remember rightly. Then it will be all over with the Murphys, Merciers, Molloys, Morans, and Malones, unless it goes on beyond the grave" (236). And the Unnamable sees Malone pass before him, although it may be Molloy wearing Malone's hat. But it may also be, says the Unnamable, that "it is I
who pass before him” (292-93). And “it is equally possible . . . that I too am in perpetual motion, accompanied by Malone, as the earth by its moon” (295). Indeed, as we move from one novel of the trilogy to the next, we experience perpetual motion and perpetual uncertainty about the narrative center. Our only certainty is of an autonomous narrative voice that usurps each successive narrator, or of the words on the printed page that generate themselves, create each narrator in turn, and ultimately undermine them all.

Malone tells us that, while waiting to die, he will tell stories. He also tells us that “this exercise-book is my life” (274), and we become aware that he is coterminus with his pencil, which is growing shorter and shorter. Malone, therefore, is no more than the product of his diminishing pencil in the exercise book we are reading. And though Molloy seemed to have created new life through his intercourse with the words that filled up his pages, Malone’s pencil moves toward the end of death. It creates a whole new cast of characters and brings Malone into existence as their ostensible creator. But Malone also extends the story line by killing off its characters. “How many have I killed, hitting them on the head or setting fire to them?” (236). He kills off Molloy and Moran by placing them in his exercise book, or reducing them from independent narrators to the products of his pencil. He kills off Sapo by changing his name to Macmann. He kills off Moll because he tires of her. He kills off Macmann, Maurice, Ernest, and Lady Pedal by creating a murderer called Lemuel. Malone himself vanishes from the final pages of the exercise book, which is his life, as his pencil runs out of lead. On the last page Lemuel “raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone, he will not hit anyone any more” (288). And finally Lemuel is no more. There are only the words:

    never anything
    there
    any more

Only the words persist. Malone will be reduced to an obsession of the succeeding narrator, who is himself both the creation and the victim of an autonomous, threatening, and persistent flow of words.

The narrator of *The Unnamable* is alone and immobile. As a stump of life who can no longer feel his limits, he is no more than a point of consciousness. He has no physical locus except within the perpetual movement of the words that issue from him, though
they are not his. With the very end in sight—that is, the blank space on the final page—he says:

all words, there's nothing else, you must go on, that's all I know, they're going to stop, I know that well, I can feel it, they're going to abandon me, it will be the silence, for a moment, a good few moments, or it will be mine, the lasting one, that didn't last, that still lasts, it will be I, you must go on, I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say the words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (414)

The Unnamable is in perpetual motion, "going nowhere, coming from nowhere" (294). At one point in an unparagraphed rush of 110 pages, he tries to tell the story of Mahood. But he finds that it was Mahood who "told me stories about me . . . his voice continued to testify for me, as though woven into mine, preventing me from saying who I was" (309). In the opening of the trilogy, Molloy seemed to create a son through the power of grammar—by shifting from the conditional present to the indicative (or actual) past tense. I say "seemed to" because we have gained perspective on Molloy. His creative power and independent existence have been threatened by a succession of narrators, each of whom has reduced his predecessor to the product of his own apparent voice. Now we realize the power that grammar exercises against the narrators themselves, for the final narrator is denied his very existence by a third-person past tense. He cannot say "I am" because he cannot say "I was." In his trilogy Beckett has not only brought the narrative voice—the medium's basic element—into his dramatic compass, he has created a comic-tragic agon between his narrators and that voice which is the very source of their power and existence. "I trust there is nothing in common," says the Unnamable, "between me and that miscreant who mocked the gods, invented fire, denatured clay and domesticated the horse, in a word obliged humanity" (303). But he has a great deal in common with Prometheus—in his defiance, in his attempt to steal for man the source of power, in his futile but heroic self-affirmation, and in his perpetual suffering.

In Ulysses Joyce discovered the potential of language as an autonomous, self-generating force. And though he realizes its threatening potential, his medium attaining the level of a dra-
matic counterforce, he ultimately affirms its creative power. In the final chapter we have more than Molly's monologue. It is the language that transforms her into an earth goddess; language burgeons with an experience of fullness and affirmation, which continues to develop in *Finnegans Wake*. Beckett begins by realizing the creative power of language—and this is his debt to Joyce. But he ends by discovering its full autonomy as a capricious, threatening, and literally self-denying force.