

NOVEL QUARTERS FOR AN ODD COUPLE: APOLLO AND DIONYSIS IN BECKETT'S *WATT* AND PINGET'S *THE INQUISITORY*

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...But, soon afterwards I noticed that although I wanted thus to think that everything was false, it was necessary that I, who was thinking this, be something. And noting this truth: I think therefore I am, was so firm and well assured that all the most extravagant suppositions of the skeptics were incapable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy for which I was searching. Descartes. *Discourse on Method*.¹

...I am in a terrible ignorance of all things; I do not know what my body is, what my senses are, what my soul is and that very part of myself that thinks what I am saying, that reflects upon everything and on itself, and does not know itself either Pascal. *Thoughts*.

Instructors in creative writing courses and paperback how-to books on drugstore shelves unite in urging beginning authors to "write about what they know best." Taking them at their word, many contemporary innovative and experimental French writers loosely grouped under the designation "new novelists" write novels about writing novels. In a sense, we are all unpublished authors, because we consciously organize the events and persons of our daily lives into a continuing story of which we are the protagonists. The new novelists attempt to dramatize this effort in order to give form and substance to experience by turning their books inward upon themselves. In doing so they confront two questions about the nature of creativity and art that have puzzled thinkers since antiquity. From what uncharted recesses of the mind and spirit does art emerge? And can a work of art engage the reader in

the creative process directly instead of describing it from the outside? For all its determinedly obsessive novelty, the "nouveau roman" suggests a symbolic answer to the first question that harks back to Greek mythology. This discussion will first examine two neglected major novels, Samuel Beckett's *Watt* and Robert Pinget's *The Inquisitory* in the light of those two questions.

The novels of Samuel Beckett and Robert Pinget depict fiction (among other things) as a continuing tug-of-war between the rational and the irrational with the creative imagination as the rope. As the seemingly antithetical forces come together, the reader is drawn to the center of the act of creation. Treating each work in turn, we will examine the effects of the struggle between reason and unreason on the treatment of time, space and plot in these novels. Finally, we will conclude by citing a few significant reference points in literary history where the conflict between the rational and the irrational is a major theme and suggest the significance of the fact that the two fuse in the peculiar creative insanity characteristic of Beckett's and Pinget's best novels.

Watt

In *Watt* (written while Beckett was in hiding during the German occupation and finally published in 1953) the reasoning mind's quest for order, pattern, and certainty unfolds as one long burlesque pratfall. Like Nietzsche's analysis of the evolution of Greek tragedy from Aeschylus to Euripides Beckett's novel has the structure of a philosophical confrontation.² Characteristically, Beckett pits reason against unreason in the context of his long-standing interest in Cartesian logic, a thread running through his work from the first, hermetic poem, "Whoroscope" (1930). Prefiguring *Watt's* convoluted structure, that poem spins out complex rational systems and veers off into intricate verbal games, all designed to frustrate the orderly sequence of thought from which the text seems at first to evolve. In the poem, insofar as he is portrayed as the destroyer of fraudulent philosophical systems cloaked in pseudo-certainty, Descartes comes as close to the noble and heroic as any character in Beckett's austere and resolutely grimy world. At the moment when certain tiles of reality slip out of the patterning mosaic of ordering thought, reason and unreason unite. But that moment lasts only for the flicker of an eyelash for the Descartes of "Whoroscope." Having opened the Pandora's Box of instinctive

forces uncontrolled by reason, he slams down the lid. For the very doubt of the "cogito" is used to posit the reality of self-awareness; the certainty of knowledge, and the existence of an omniscient deity.

Descartes' triumph of reason is mirrored most ironically however in the poem's structure where everything that is rational, linear, and commonsensical becomes ensnared in series of booby traps just as the protagonist of *Watt* will first show himself by falling flat on his face. The body of the poem, dashed off in a mere nine hours, lurches along from one unarticulated association of ideas to another and is so crammed with allusions to esoteric details of the philosopher's life as to be virtually incomprehensible. This frenzied outpouring is ostensibly to be clarified and explained by a set of notes, but this pseudo-scholarly apparatus garbles the text it is supposed to elucidate. The gnomic gloss raises as many questions as it answers. For example, the poem begins:

What's that?
An egg?
By the brothers Boot it stinks fresh.
Give it to Gillot.

And the notes calmly embellish this, clarifying almost nothing:

René Descartes, Seigneur du Perron, liked his omlette made of eggs hatched from eight to ten days; shorter or longer under the hen and the result, he says is disgusting.

He kept his own birthday to himself so that no philosopher could cast his nativity.

The shuttle of a ripening egg combs the warp of his days.
Line 3 In 1640 the brothers Boot refuted Aristotle in Dublin.
Line 4 Descartes passed on the easier problems in analytical geometry to his valet Gillot.³

Thus reason and unreason collide in forming the creative energy that brings the text into being, and the expansion of what seems an orderly process casts doubt on the limits and appropriateness of logic.⁴

The structural opposition of reason and its contrary in "Whorescope" is carried out on a far greater scale in *Watt*, Beckett's last novel written in English while he was scrambling to find some shred of order and sanity in the bedlam of war. As the book

begins, the division between rational and irrational is articulated in terms of Cartesian certainty and skeptical doubt.⁵ The first of the four chapters finds a Mr. Hackett (hack it) taking an evening stroll about town at dusk. Soon he is joined on a park bench by a Mr. and Mrs. Nixon (nix on). The bystanders soon notice an object on the pavement resembling a carpet or a rolled up rug.⁶ In fact, it is the first glimpse of the intrepid truth-seeker Watt, come a cropper in the indignity to which Body will subject boggins wrapped in flesh and clothing, Mr. Nixon can find precious little as he peers into the dark.

I really know nothing, said Mr. Nixon.

But you must know something, said Mr. Hackett. One does not part with five shillings to a shadow. Nationality, family, birthplace, confession, occupation, means of existence, distinctive signs, you cannot be in ignorance of all this.

Utter ignorance, said Mr. Nixon.

He is not a native of the rocks, said Mr. Hackett.

I tell you nothing is known, cried Mr. Nixon, nothing.

A silence followed these angry words, by Mr. Hackett resented, by Mr. Nixon repented.

He has a large red nose, said Mr. Nixon grudgingly.⁷

Following a short ride on the train during which he is hailed and harranged by a Mr. Spirou, the garrulous editor of a Catholic monthly, Watt gets off and makes his way on foot (perilously, as he is struck by a stone and takes frequent rests sprawled on the ground), to the house of M. Knott. As will be the case in *The Inquisitory*, the mingling of elements of reason and unreason in the novel will crystalize around the bizarre treatment of a dwelling that is at once reassuring and enigmatic, a less extremely disturbing abode than Kafka's castle. Anticipating the comic debate over whether a ringing doorbell proves definitively that there is or is not a person at the door in Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, Watt is never quite sure how he entered the house where he seeks employment and asylum.

Watt was surprised to find the back door, so lately locked, now open. Two explanations of this occurred to him. The first was this, that his science of the locked door, so seldom at fault, had been so on this occasion, and that the back door, when he had found it locked had not been locked,

but open. And the second was this, that the back door, when he had found it locked, had in effect been locked, but had subsequently been opened, from within, or without, by some person, while he Watt had been employed in going, to and fro, from the back door to the front door, and from the front door to the back door

The result of this was that Watt never knew how he got into Mr. Knott's house. He knew that he got in by the back door, but he was never to know, never, never to know, how the back door came to be opened. And if the back door had never opened, but remained shut, then who knows Watt had never got into Mr. Knott's house at all, but turned away, and returned to the station, and caught the first train back to town. Unless he had got in through the window.⁸

In the first part of this passage, language rocks back and forth on the hypnotic pivot of the repeated words "locked" and "open" until they seem to cancel each other out and to empty themselves of meaning. And from the broader viewpoint of the whole narrative, Watt's uncertainty on this point will later call the chronology of this entire story into question. In any case, having shown through his uncoordinated staggering across the landscape that he cannot master his own body, Watt gratefully enters Knott's "ménage." Stubborn pilgrim looking for certainty that he is, Watt seeks in the house some inner-oriented truth that he can know for sure. So this modern day, mock-Descartes enters the equivalent of the philosopher's "heated room," where the "cogito" came to being. Unfortunately, nothing is to be learned for sure about the house, its routine, or its occupants! Certainly no reasonable or orderly conclusions can be drawn from the hodge-podge of equivocal, contradictory remarks made by Arsène, the servant whom Watt is evidently replacing. The novel's second chapter describes Watt's service on the ground floor, including the enigmatic arrival of piano-tuners (an episode remarkable in that it progressively loses all sharpness of contour in the reading), and the elaborate rituals surrounding Mr. Knott's evening meal and the disposal of leftovers. Despite his keenest efforts in service on the first and second floors, zones of experience as contiguous and semi-permeable as the conscious and the unconscious, Watt can learn nothing conclusive about his master. For Knott is in constant flux, even to the details of his physical appearance.

In part three, the reader learns that the text presented to that point represents Watt's jumbled account of events told to the "real" narrator, "Sam," when the two were patients in a mental hospital. Speaking in the first person, Sam recounts his difficulties making sense of Watt's duties. As Watt himself is maddeningly fuzzy on these matters, the book depicts the strained attempt to sort out confusion at several steps removed. For we have the reader trying to understand "Sam," who is trying to understand Watt, who in turn is trying to understand Knott. Yet the clutter of frenzy and unreason escapes the net cast by the effort to impose a pattern. In part four the narrative pace accelerates further, as Sam describes how Watt in turn is replaced as servant and leaves the house. Watt then arrives at a trunk-line railway station, spends the night in the waiting room and heads off toward his destination the following morning. So, sharing the same roof in a country house outside Dublin, reason and unreason fight each other to a standstill. Watt shuffles off and the novel ends.

Clearly, in an uncertain, irrational world where sense impressions jumble together frenetically, Knott's house provides no asylum or sure haven. And the unpredictable chaos and jumbled detail reflected in the intricacies of the most minute aspects of the domestic routine and in the isolation of one floor from knowledge of the other is expressed graphically in the layout of the text. Instead of sweeping along from line to line slicing the white of the blank page into an orderly grid of words, Watt's text is rife with lacunae, question marks or ironic asides such as "Hiatus in the Ms" or "Ms illegible." To break up the conventional use of space, a musical score or the croaking of three frogs is thrown in apparently at random.

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Krak! — — — — —
Krek! — — — — — Krek! — — — — —
Krik! — — — — — Krik! — — — — — Krik!

Krak! — — — — —
— — — — — Krek! — — — — — Krek!
— — Krik! — — — — — Krik! — — — — — Krik!
Krak! — — — — — 9
    
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A sibylline set of notes like those appended to "Whoroscope" is tacked on as addenda. But they add precious little since no nexus

with the novel is provided. In fact the last coy disclaimer, "no symbols where none intended," sends reader and critics alike back to the book to try to decipher its enigmas but with no guarantee of success! The restless, frustrated feeling of mind sorting unsuccessfully through chaos in search for order is reflected by the patterns made by words and phrases on the page.

Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window; from the fire to the bed, from the bed to the fire; from the bed to the fire, from the fire to the bed; from the door to the fire, from the fire to the door; from the fire to the door, from the door to the fire; from the window to the bed, from the bed to the window, from the window to the bed; from the bed to the window . . .¹⁰

Such techniques express Watt's persistent Apollonian quest in visual terms. It's frustration brings on a Dionysian frenzy signaled by blanks and lacunae.

A similar process extends beyond single pages to encompass the entire narrative. It is essential when telling a coherent story that words keep to the place assigned them by customary usage and that events be strung together sequentially like pearls on a string. But Watt refuses or is unable to deal with space or time in such a way. As in the repetition of "locked" and "open" words take on an air of arbitrary vocables losing their signifying value.

Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot . . . It was in vain that Watt said "pot, pot." Well, perhaps not in vain, but very nearly. For it was not pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, "pot, pot" and be comforted.¹¹

The same arbitrariness applies to the placement and order of words and phrases. Pushed to the wall of illogic (which proves to be no wall at all) Watt begins reversing the order of words in phrases in his asylum talks with Sam. Finally he omits syllables and transposes letters, making communication colorful and comprehension problematic as in the description of an evening spent with Knott.

Dis yb dis, nem owt. Yad la, tin for trap. Skin, skin, skin. Od su did ned taw? On. Taw ot klat tonk? On. Tont ot klat taw? On. Tonk ta kool taw? On. Taw ta kool tonk? Nilb, mun, muel. Tin fo trap, yad la. Nem owt, dis yb dis.¹²

Sid(e) by sid(e), men two. Day al(l), nit(e) of part. Niks, niks, niks. Do us did ne(e)d Wat(t)? No. Wat(t) to talk Knot(t)? No. Knot to talk Wat(t)? No. Knot(t) at look Wat(t)? No. Wat(t) at look Knot(t)? Blin(d), num(b), dum(b). Nit(e) of part, day al(l). Men two, sid(e) by sid(e).

The same rubbery quality characterizes the general treatment of time and space. Read from top to bottom and from left to right, the story unfolds in four parts: 1) Watt at the station; 2) Watt in Knott's house; 3) Watt in "nut" house; 4) Watt on train, destination unknown. This chronological arrangement comes unstuck when Sam remarks casually that Watt told him the story while at the asylum in the order: 2, 1, 4, 3, that is: 2) arrival chez Knott; 1) the train station scene the evening before; 4) the final scene at the station; 3) the account of service in the house. The apparent order in which Sam has rearranged the story (the sequence we have followed in our summary of it) is 1, 2, 3, 4; arrival by Watt at the train station; the voyage to Knott's house; service there; and departure by train. It is equally logical and possible to posit yet another arrangement of these blocks of experience. For there is no factual information precluding the exchange of the two railway station scenes in the sequence. Such an arrangement would go 2, 3, 4, 1: discovery of Watt at station; trip to Knott's house; service in the house and arrival at the station the evening of the train trip to Knott's establishment. In such an arrangement the "final" scene leads back to the voyage to the house. The trip and Watt/Sam's account of it become circular, conforming to Joyce's theme of the "éternel retour" (drawn from Vico) or Nietzsche's "Ewige Wiederkehr".¹³ So the desperate, self-generating scramble for order keeps falling over itself. Lists, catalogues, baroque digressions, and verbal permutations and combinations balloon to scholastic proportions and, as abruptly, die, choking the sketchy story line. (Sam calmly and implacably spends five pages listing all possible ways in which glances can cross the room when five persons steal a peek at each other, for example.) Surely this is reason run amok, Apollo transported into a Dionysian frenzy.

As questions and answers become entangled, the quest for order flounders in uncertainty and the sprint toward truth bogs down in the sand. Apollonian certainty is the knot of the problem. Yet Watt, the seeker and Knott the sought cancel each other out as one might have suspected from the echos suggested by their names; What, not; whatnot; cannot; and naught, for example. The quest for certainly ends, then, at a blank wall.

Or does it? As Beckett wryly remarks of this kind of paradoxical exchange, so characteristically his, where affirmation carries its own negation (recalling the quotation of Saint Augustine about the three thieves in *Waiting for Godot*):

But what was this pursuit of meaning in this indifference to meaning and to what did it tend? . . .¹⁴

What had he learnt? Nothing. What did he know of Mr. Knott? Nothing. But was that not something?

He saw himself then, so little, so poor. And now, littler, poorer. Was not that something?¹⁵

Even this mitigated attenuated affirmation of the usefulness of Watt's quest is not without irony. It seems to be a reworking in Beckettian terms of the old saw, "Sadder but wiser." Yet Watt's "wisdom" at the novel's end consists in his growing realization of how very little he does, can, or will ever know. In *Watt* then, creativity is neither the creature of order or disorder. Like the imagination, depicted in a colorful French expression as "la folle du logis" ("the mad woman of the house"), the novel springs from the tension between reason and folly. Just as Watt and Knott need each other in order to emerge from nothingness, the novel needs both.¹⁶ Furthermore, the book is not a closed structure and the tension between reason and unreason within its covers reaches out to involve the reader. Beckett's struggle, although spare with philosophical certainties invites and even obliges the reader to join the search for knowledge that brings Watt Chez Knott. For Knott's house, its enigmas and mysteries, simply substitute the text. The reader is challenged to construct his own order from the fragments housed between the covers. In an ironic expansion, critics and scholars produce dissertations articles and monographs as they try to explain Beckett who tries to understand Watt who attempts to figure out Knott. In short, the pairing of the rational and the

irrational invites the reader to live the creative experience instead of describing it.

The Inquisitory

This invitation is tendered with equal urgency by Robert Pinget in *The Inquisitory* (*L'Inquisiteur*, 1963) a work Beckett described as one of the most important novels since the war. Written entirely in dialogue form, the book teeters on the edge between the Apollonian need to know and understand (represented by an investigator or policeman-like voice), and the Dionysian cult of feeling and instinct (personified in the replies of what at first appears to be a deaf, halfcrazy, retired manservant). The qualifier "first appears" is most necessary here, since the reader gradually becomes aware that the questioning and answering voices in fact represent not characters in the accepted sense of the term but the Apollonian and Dionysian poles of Pinget's personality as he sits at the typewriter and cudgels *The Inquisitory* into being. Once again the house is the controlling metaphor for the interaction of these oddly matched partners, since the voice asking the questions seems eager to learn all he can about what went on at the Château de Broy where the servant had been employed for many years.

"Yes or no answer" the text begins. Four hundred and eighty-nine pages later it closes inconclusively with the sentence:

"Yes or no answer
I'm tired."

And what has the interrogator learned and the reader experienced in the interim? Hints of sensational revelations about drug peddling, tax evasion, devil worship, homosexual parties, and ritualistic murders based at the castle encourage the investigator to push on with his combined inquisition and repository. But conclusive substantiation never materializes. Each time the questioner seems about to back his partner-antagonist into a corner, the latter slips away into evasiveness, forgetfulness or mendacity. Like Watt, he is a witness of dubious value at best, since he is stone-deaf and hence has been observing the spectacle of life at the castle with the sound turned off for years. As a direct consequence of his infirmity, he has trouble with words. It's not that he takes pleasure in playing with their order. He just doesn't get them straight. So

spoonerisms like “misancroak” for “misanthrope” and “clackachord” for “clavichord” and “keptomaniac” for “clergyman” pop up frequently in his slightly skewed vocabulary. Like Archie Bunker’s malapropisms these slips, by mocking the pomposity of pedantic learning, call knowledge itself into question. A series of hilariously farfetched etymologies worthy of Saint Isidor of Seville further repudiates the one-to-one relationship between word and thing that had troubled Watt. There is even a typically garbled allusion to Descartes who allegedly:

... spent a month there of July in the local hotel in 1610 he was 14 there’s a plaque inside that explains the method of Queen Christine and all that ...¹⁷

(That the *Discours de la methode* is wrongly attributed to Descartes’ patroness rather than the philosopher himself simply typifies the skewed knowledge of this bumbling autodidact).

When pressed on a point, or in order to restore a sense of order to the littered attic of his memory, he launches into inventories, catalogues, or detailed descriptions of the château’s furnishings, a mental reflex that recalls Watt’s fascination with verbal permutations and combinations. But the more he describes the house, the less the investigator and the reader can know for sure about it because the information volunteered is often inconsistent. The very precision of the château’s floor plan, the exhaustively complete listing of its bric-a-brac, and the minute description of each and every painting and stick of furniture flood the mind with so much detail that the broad outlines of the house go out of focus.

The same blurred effect is achieved through the treatment of space and time. The interrogator constantly seeks to learn how people get from one room to another in the house or from one point to another through the streets of the town, and his victim cheerfully obliges him by sketching in doorways. Only as the interrogation goes back in order to double check this information, it begins to appear incomplete or misleading. Secret doors, previously unmentioned tower rooms and oneway streets complicate access that had at first seemed simple. As in *Watt*, communication and transmission of knowledge from floor to floor become highly problematic. Since the old man’s memory is slightly dotty, it is equally difficult to locate the events related with any precision in

time. Punctuation is minimal or often completely absent, and the plot unfolds as blocks or chunks of anecdotal material that could be rearranged in any number of ways, as in the ordering and reordering of Watt's tale. One might note parenthetically that Pinget's novels that immediately preceded *The Inquisitory* had been getting shorter and shorter. Could it be that the novelist felt his world and his ability to express it slipping from him? On his publisher's urging, Pinget faced the blank page determined to write a long book. The ensuing dialogue is emphatically *not* what it seems. And Pinget roundly denounced critics who accepted the questioner — answerer characters at face value in his next book.¹⁸ And as he stated in the preface to *The Libera me Domine*, the phrase "yes or no answer" was in fact addressed to himself as he sat down at the typewriter to begin the book.¹⁹ Despite the novel's apparently random flow, the process of creation involved countless corrections and doublings back, as an examination of the marked-up, crossed-out manuscript pages will attest. Once again as in *Watt*, the desire to understand, pushed to the extreme, opens onto folly and the rational and the irrational unite.

The Chinese-box character of the old duffer's anecdotes reaches beyond *The Inquisitory* to encompass all of Pinget's work written up to that time (one book of short stories, four novels and five plays). From his very first volume, Pinget elected to give his work the form of a mock-chronicle of a developing fictional province much as Balzac, Faulkner and Zola had done. As a result, characters, places, names, houses, streets, and events recur frequently from one volume to another. In Pinget's hands, however, the information given about recurring elements often contradicts or challenges what had been stated previously. In good humored recognition of this phenomenon, the novelist's publisher had privately printed a pseudo-definitive list of the two thousand odd characters and place names dredged up in *The Inquisitory* by that initial, seemingly innocuous phrase "yes or no answer." Like Watt in his endless puzzling over how Mr. Knott's scraps and leftovers are disposed of, Pinget and the reader can believe whatever version or versions of events they please. As in the earlier work, the reader finds himself peering over the novelist's shoulder as he bites his pencil or dashes off a sketch or a doodle in order to get the flow of words back on the track. Once again, the act of writing, however limited

a relief from confusion it provides, is vindicated as a sort of "anamnesis," a psychiatric term that describes the healing accomplished by recalling the past.

Conclusion

In depicting creative energy as crackling between the poles of reason and unreason, the new novelists are not proposing an image that is fresh or new. Creative energy is depicted in Greek mythology as polarized around the deities Apollo and Dionysis. (The duality Reason-Control and Ignorance-Inspiration is reflected in the contrasting views held by Descartes and Pascal on the reliability of sense impressions and the predictability of phenomena around them).

Later, Nietzsche taking up this notion in his *Birth of Tragedy*, channels artistic activity in two types: the Apollonian drive, governed by moderation and proportion, and directed toward the affirmation of the self and exercised primarily in the plastic arts; and the Dionysian drive, dominated by instinct and moving toward union with the collective consciousness, often expressed in music. As at the end of *The Clouds* by Aristophanes, where the dramatist stages a debate between Just and Unjust Reason in which it is "proved" by syllogistic logic that sons have the right to chastise their fathers, contemporary writers often treat the rational and the irrational lightly in vaudevillian terms, as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. This device, of course, is a very old one and is often accentuated by casting the characters embodying the extremes as starkly contrasted physical types such as Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, Laurel and Hardy or Kramden and Norton. The television situation comedy alluded to in the title of this piece deals with the subject more explicitly. "The Odd Couple" is based on the premise that the human skull houses two cantankerous lodgers who bicker constantly. The Critical-Rational tenant, Felix-Reason pants fitfully after order, while his instinctive, disorderly roommate Oscar-Unreason gives in to chaos.

Whereas in many well-made novels of the nineteenth century the creative act imposes meaning and symmetry onto formless experience, much contemporary fiction seems to celebrate a sort of Dionysian frenzy, as in the works of Arrabal, Artaud, and Céline. This rebellion against norms accepted as "reasonable" shows man

experiencing the world in exclusively frenetic terms. The Dadaists and Surrealists who followed this tack sought to find images linking disparate elements with a capacity to startle similar to that of an electric shock. For them, modern beauty would be as strikingly bizarre as the union of an umbrella and a sewing machine on a dissection table. To be sure, their experiments with language through trance-like automatic writing have done much to free the novel of the shibboleths and taboos of the Victorian age, and the treatment of the castle in Julien Graque's *Le Chateau D'Argol* resembles a more reassuring but gothic treatment of the house metaphor discussed above. Yet whether because language is so fundamentally vital to simple communication or for other reasons, Surrealism's evocations of dreamlike reality seem far more effective in art than in literature. Its extension to the novel often produces works so idiosyncratic and so disordered as to be inaccessible and gnomically hermetic. At the other end of the spectrum, many French existentialist novels depict the Absurd so clearly and wander so little from accepted narrative conventions that the cruel unknown they analyse becomes completely domesticated.

In an atmosphere of terrorism, war, famine, genocide and fear of nuclear annihilation, is it little wonder that the literature of our period so often depicts a bewildered consciousness struggling to sort things out or to make sense with little or no success? The novels we have discussed steer a middle course between the extremes of the rational and the irrational. Such a position would not have surprised the Greeks. At certain times of the year, Apollo and Dionysis shared a temple in Delphi's sacred groves.²⁰ Nor would Nietzsche have looked askance at such a paradoxical coupling.²¹ Fusing disparate drives, the novels of Beckett and Pinget bring about a state of creativity where apparently opposite forces mingle as in the "snow chapter" in Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain*. Depicting the failure of reason to bend the chaotic, zany flow of experience into a pattern or form, *Watt* and *The Inquisitory* do not so much describe this situation as immerse the reader in it.

In distorting such commonsensical novelistic conventions as sequential plot, the order and function of words, delineation of cause and effect, and two dimensional handling of space, Beckett communicates in direct terms the failure of Watt's quest for certainty. Yet that aborted search has a positive aesthetic result. For

by engaging the reader simultaneously in the quest, Beckett has expressed something about nothing. Both Watt and Pinget's Inquisitor seek in vain to bring learned patterns of logic to bear on the mysterious houses they inhabit. Their attempts to control by understanding fall short of success, and the struggle between the Apollonian and Dionysian produces a sort of creative insanity where the authors and their surrogate narrators put pen to paper as a sort of bulwark against total confusion. Speaking of Watt as a creator figure in his excellent study of Beckett, Raymond Federman observes that by ascribing the creative act to a lunatic, the novel recreates a new order or pattern, but one that constantly falls into doubt and disorder. Perhaps this muddled but productive state is the modern version of the frenzy of the muse touching the artist described in antiquity or the process the Romantics called "Inspiration." Called by whatever name, the reader who expects to find conventional props for logical interpretation will become disoriented as they are deftly removed. So he must join Sam, Watt, Pinget, the old man, and his verbal duelist in a world where a house is not a home. In a period of "incursions" and "police actions" where peace is "waged" and "limited" war is a "crime," where indeed one can be tried for a "war crime" this view may represent the human situation more exactly than many would care to admit, and indeed provide an asylum of order in a mad world.

NOTES

¹ René Descartes, *Discourse on Method, Optics, Geometry and Meteorology*, Trans. Paul J. Olscamp (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965), pp. 27, 28. All translations from French to English in this article are by its author unless otherwise indicated.

² Nietzsche explains the transition in terms of the application to the theatre of Socratic philosophy. "This is the new antithesis: the Dionysian and the Socratic and the art-work of Greek tragedy was wrecked on it... Accordingly, if we have perceived this much, that Euripides did not succeed in establishing the drama exclusively on the Apollonian, but that rather his non-Dionysian inclinations deviated into a naturalistic and inartistic tendency, we shall now be able to approach nearer to the character of aesthetic Socratism, the supreme law of which reads about as follows: 'to be beautiful everything must be intelligible,' as the parallel to the Socratic proposition, only the knowing one is virtuous." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Trans. William Haussmann (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), pp. 95-98.

³ Samuel Beckett, *Poems in English* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), p. 9.

⁴ As Lawrence Harvey observes of the clash of these forces: "In *Whoroscope* the Cartesian 'cogito, ergo sum' fuses with the Augustinian 'si fallor, sum' to become 'fallor, ergo sum!' (73), and, typically thinking becomes erring. Although he admitted the fallability of human reason, Augustine claimed knowledge of man's condition and destiny. The poem denies the possibility of such knowledge." Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett Poet and Critic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. 41.

⁵ Despite his work done on Descartes one can question whether Beckett is being entirely faithful to Descartes here. The division between certainty and skepticism blunts Descartes' methodological doubt, where the antithesis between the two is already to be found.

⁶ "Tetty was not sure whether it was a man or a woman. Mr. Hackett was not sure that it was not a parcel, a carpet, for example or a roll of tarpaulin wrapped in dark paper and tied about the middle with a cord." Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1970), p. 16.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 21-22.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 137.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 167-168.

¹³ "Mention has already been made of the difficulties that Watt encountered in his efforts to distinguish between what happened and did not happen, between what was and what was not in Mr. Knott's house. And Watt made no secret of this in his conversations with me..." *Ibid.*, p. 126.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

¹⁶ "And Mr. Knott needing if not, one, not to need, and two a witness to his not needing, of himself knew nothing. And so he needed to be witnessed. Not so that he might know, no, but so that he might not cease." *Ibid.*, p. 203.

¹⁷ Robert Pinget, *The Inquisitory*, Translated by Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 266.

¹⁸ "Let no one come tell me that I'm answering questions, because they said it. For it has been said. About my other lives when I was trying to get rid of them. He's answering questions, see. It must be the police. There's a detective story tone, he's obliged to answer, they're forcing him, they're hounding him. Silly things like that. Must have gotten confused in my editing. To be that wrong, to give an impression that false." Robert Pinget, *Quelqu'un* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1965), p. 17.

¹⁹ "For example, when I decided to write *The Inquisitory*, I had nothing to say, I simply felt a need to explain myself at some length. I got down to work and wrote the sentence 'Yes or No answer' which was addressed to myself alone and which meant 'Produce' (Literally, 'give birth!') And it is the answer to that abrupt question which set in motion the tone and all the rest."

²⁰ "Yet the God of moderation could also welcome Dionysis, the God of excess and ecstasy, into partnership at Delphi. Undoubtedly, the frenzied priestesses of the God had some influence in welcoming Dionysis into Apollo's home, if he had not actually lived there before the Olympian deity arrived. The grave of Dionysis was shown in the inner sanctuary of the temple, and for three winter months Apollo was said to hand over the shrine to Dionysis while he retired to the north, to the fabled land of the

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Hyboreans." Philip Mayerson, *Classical Mythology in Literature, Art, and Music* (Lexington: Xerox, 1971), pp. 121-122. My thanks go to my colleague at Western, Professor George Osmun for pointing out this parallel.

²¹ "...both these so heterogeneous tendencies run parallel to each other, for the most part openly at variance, and continually inciting each other to new and more powerful births to perpetuate in them the strife of this antithesis which is but seemingly bridged over by their mutual term, 'Art'..." Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Trans. W. A. Haussmann (New York: Russell and Russell, 1964), pp. 21-22.