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Ethics, Vol. 98, No. 2. (Jan., 1988), pp. 225-254.

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Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love

Martha Nussbaum

I

Two voices, immobilized by life, go on telling their stories about emotion. One voice has no name; it says:

They love each other, marry, in order to love each other better, more conveniently, he goes to the wars, he dies at the wars, she weeps, with emotion, at having loved him, at having lost him, yep, marries again, in order to love again, more conveniently again, they love each other, you love as many times as necessary, as necessary in order to be happy, he comes back, the other comes back, from the wars, he didn't die at the wars after all, she goes to the station, to meet him, he dies in the train, of emotion, at the thought of seeing her again, having her again, she weeps, weeps again, with emotion again, at having lost him again, yep, goes back to the house, he's dead, the other is dead, the mother-in-law takes him down, he hanged himself, with emotion, at the thought of losing her, she weeps, weeps louder, at having loved him, at having lost him, there's a story for you, that was to teach me the nature of emotion, that's called emotion, what emotion can do, given favourable conditions, what love can do, well well, so that's emotion, that's love.¹

The other voice calls itself Malone. It tells a story about one Macmann, who himself tells stories to himself, lying cheek to the ground, soaked by the "heavy, cold, and perpendicular rain":

The idea of punishment came to his mind, addicted it is true to that chimera and probably impressed by the posture of the body and the fingers clenched as though in torment. And without knowing exactly what his sin was he felt full well that living was not a sufficient atonement for it or that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life, for the living. And no doubt he would have wondered if it was

1. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Press, 1955), p. 406. All references to the trilogy are to this edition, in which the translations of the second and third novels are by the author and that of the first by the author in collaboration with Patrick Bowles. Page numbers will be given in parentheses in the text.

really necessary to be guilty in order to be punished but for the memory, more and more galling, of his having consented to live in his mother, then to leave her. And this again he could not see as his true sin, but as yet another atonement which had miscarried and, far from cleansing him of his sin, plunged him in it deeper than before. And truth to tell the ideas of guilt and punishment were confused together in his mind, as those of cause and effect so often are in the minds of those who continue to think. And it was often in fear and trembling that he suffered, saying, This will cost me dear. But not knowing how to go about it, in order to think and feel correctly, he would suddenly begin to smile for no reason . . . to smile and give thanks for the teeming rain and the promise it contained of stars a little later, to light his way and enable him to get his bearings, should he wish to do so. [Pp. 239–40]

(And that story is a love story too, don't think that it isn't.)

Beckett's voices, here and elsewhere in the *Molloy* trilogy, share an attitude toward emotions like love, fear, guilt, disgust, hope—and to the complex intersection of all of these that is aroused, for the second voice, by the thought of mother's body. It is that emotions are not feelings that well up in some natural and untutored way from our natural selves, that they are, in fact, not personal or natural at all, that they are, instead, contrivances, social constructs. We learn how to feel, and we learn our emotional repertoire. We learn emotions in the same way that we learn our beliefs—from our society. But emotions, unlike many of our beliefs, are not taught to us directly through propositional claims about the world, either abstract or concrete. They are taught, above all, through stories. Stories express their structure and teach us their dynamics. These stories are constructed by others and, then, taught and learned. But once internalized, they shape the way life feels and looks. In the first passage, the meaning of love is given in paradigm stories of longing, fear, loss, conflict, despair. In the second, the complex scenario that describes Macmann's efforts to reenact a cultural paradigm of guilt, fear, and longing serves the narrating voice, at the same time, as its own paradigm story of the complex interrelationships among all these. Society has given Macmann a story about his guilt and the guiltiness of his very efforts to atone; it has given him, too, standards of "correctness" for his longing for salvation. This complex story, accepted, shapes and constitutes his experience of feeling; and his story in turn shapes and expresses the emotional world of the narrating voice. Indeed, it seems right to say, along with the nameless voice, not only that a certain sort of story shows or represents emotion but also that emotion itself is the acceptance of, the assent to live according to, a certain sort of story. Stories, in short, contain and teach forms of feeling, forms of life.

These voices express isolation and despair. They connect their predicament in no uncertain way with the fearful, disgusted, and guilty love that is, because of the stories, the only love they know. So at the same time that they ask us to see the origins of feeling, they invite us to consider

critically these contingent structures and the narratives that are their vehicle. Indeed, they themselves make increasingly radical attempts to put an end to the entire project of storytelling and to the forms of life that this practice supports. They ask us to see their forms of feeling as a pattern that can be unraveled, a writing that can be unwritten, a story that can be ended—not by bringing it to the usual happy or unhappy ending but by ending the storytelling life. If stories are learned, they can be unlearned. If emotions are constructs, they can be dismantled. And perhaps the silence onto which this deconstructive project opens is an opening or clearing in which human beings and animals can recognize one another without and apart from the stories and their guilt. And perhaps, too, the longing for that silence is itself an emotion of and inside the stories. Perhaps the negative project is a happy-ending story trapped, itself, inside the very thing that it opposes.

These disturbing thoughts are among the obsessions of Beckett's trilogy, as of much of his work. They are thoughts that need to be confronted by anyone who thinks about the relationship between narrative and human self-understanding or who approaches narrative searching for an understanding of human life and its prospects. But they are especially subversive, dangerous, and necessary for anyone who wishes to claim that fictional narratives play a central and, so to speak, a positive role in self-understanding, a role that is not as adequately played by texts that lack narrative form. There is, in particular, a project that Beckett's voices seem to call into question. This project involves supplementing abstract philosophical attempts at self-understanding with concrete narrative fictions, which are argued by the proponents of the project to contain more of what is relevant to our attempts to imagine and assess possibilities for ourselves, to ask how we might choose to live.

Since this is a project that I believe to be both valuable and viable—not only for professional philosophers but for people who are, in their lives, pursuing questions about life—and since Beckett's voices have been for some time audible to me in the background of this work, speaking their subversive claims, audible even as Henry James praises the moral role of the novelist or as Proust argues for the epistemological value of narrative form, I want to let them speak and to see how much of this work they really do call into question, how their insights about the narrative forms of human desire and emotion would cause us to revise it—or perhaps, even, to end it. In short (using already their words), I want to judge this work with the judgment of Molloy when he writes, “It is in the tranquillity of decomposition that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life, and that I judge it, as it is said that God will judge me, and with no less impertinence” (p. 25). (And perhaps that, and this, act of judgment is itself inside the stories and, therefore, doomed to affirm the stories even as it calls them into question.)

The assessment must begin with a description of the project—just as Moran's search begins with the story of its “quarry” (p. 110). Next we need to describe in more detail the view about emotions that we have

heard in Beckett's voices. We shall find that it is not a view peculiar to the voices but one that has a long philosophical-literary history, and one that is recently reemerging as the dominant view of emotion in philosophy and in social anthropology. This means that we cannot evade its challenge by saying to ourselves that Beckett and his voices have a rather peculiar view of life—which, I think, is the way that Beckett is read and refused, more often than not. Then we shall turn again to the *Molloy* trilogy, looking closely at Beckett's particular stories of narrative emotion; not in the trilogy as a whole, which would be too vast a task, but in its first section, *Molloy*, and especially at that novel's stories of love, guilt, and their relatives hope and fear, and the source of all these in a socially taught religious view of life. Moran writes a story whose aim is, increasingly, the frustration of the reader's emotion, the dismantling of narrative structures that both represent emotions and evoke them. We will consider next this project of ending, asking about its relationship to its own critique. And we can then compare this genealogical critique of stories with two other related philosophical enterprises (those of Lucretius and of Nietzsche) and judge its relevance for our own.

II

I shall speak here of "the project"; and I shall refer to an explicitly organized and theoretically justified enterprise that goes on the borderline (or by refusing to acknowledge that there is one) between philosophy and literature.² Nonetheless, I do not mean to say that it is only a specific form of more or less philosophical writing that is called into question

2. My own work in this area will be collected in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988). Among the essays to appear in this collection are: Martha Nussbaum, "Flawed Crystals: James's *The Golden Bowl* and Literature as Moral Philosophy," *New Literary History* 15 (1983): 25–50, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible: Moral Attention and the Moral Task of Literature," *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (1985): 516–29, reprinted in expanded form in *Philosophy and the Question of Literature*, ed. A. Cascardi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," in *Critical Projections*, ed. Ralph Cohen (London: Methuen, 1987), "Fictions of the Soul," *Philosophy and Literature* 7 (1983): 145–61, "Love's Knowledge," in *Self Deception*, ed. A. Rorty and B. McLaughlin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), "Love and the Individual: Romantic Rightness and Platonic Aspiration," in *Reconstructing Individualism*, ed. M. Sosna et al. (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1986). See also my *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Other recent work in this area to which my own thought is especially indebted includes work of Hilary Putnam; see esp. *Meaning and the Moral Sciences* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), pp. 83–96, and his reply to "Flawed Crystals," "Taking Rules Seriously: A Response to Martha Nussbaum," *New Literary History*, vol. 15 (1983); Stanley Cavell, esp. *The Claim of Reason*, pt. 4 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Cora Diamond, esp. "Missing the Adventure," a reply to "Finely Aware," abstracted in *Journal of Philosophy*, and "Having a Rough Story about What Moral Philosophy Is," *New Literary History* 15 (1983): 155–70; and Arthur Danto, "Philosophy As/And/Of Literature," *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 58 (1984): 5–20.

here. For the project describes itself as an explicit extension of activities that are implicit in the activity of reading and of thinking reflectively about reading. It claims to be a description of a function (not the only function, but an important one) that narrative fiction has traditionally had in human lives, a function that needs to be mentioned in any explanation of the great human importance we ascribe to narrative fiction.³ The project stands to this human activity as a descriptive grammar to the use of a native speaker.

The project, even in its explicit form, is not new; in its essentials it is as old, even explicitly, as the debate between the Greek tragic poets and their opponent Plato.⁴ It is the project of a dialogue between philosophy and literary analysis in pursuit of the human question, "How should one live?" It takes its bearings from Henry James's claim that the novelist's art performs a practical task, the task of assisting us in our pursuit of that question by expressing a "projected morality" and an active "sense of life," and also from Proust's claim that it is only in a text having narrative form that certain essential truths about human life can be appropriately expressed and examined.⁵ At its core is the claim that literary form and human content are inseparable: that forms themselves express a content and that the content cannot be prized loose, without change, from the form in which it is expressed. The project joins to this claim another: that literary forms call forth certain specific sorts of practical activity in the reader that can be evoked in no other way; that, as Proust insists, a certain sort of self-scrutiny requires a certain sort of text, namely, a narrative text, for its evocation; or, as Henry James would insist, that we need a story of a certain kind, with characters of a certain type in it, if our own sense of life and of value is to be called forth in the way most appropriate for practical reflection.

The project moves on from these claims to a number of more concrete investigations into the relationship between literary form and practical content. One of its primary aims is to criticize much contemporary work in moral philosophy, on the grounds that this work claims, on the one hand, to assess all of the major available conceptions of human personal and social life, while, on the other hand, it confines itself entirely to forms of writing which, in their abstract and emotionless character, are far better suited to investigating some practical conceptions than others and which call up a correspondingly narrow range of responses and activities in the reader. Nor does this work present arguments justifying its implicit

3. For further remarks on this point, see Nussbaum, "Perceptive Equilibrium"; and Danto. The linguistic analogy is first used (to my knowledge) by Plato's character Protagoras in the dialogue of that name.

4. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, and "Perceptive Equilibrium."

5. For further discussion of James's conception of the novelist's task, see Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible." For discussion of Proust on the task of literary art, see Nussbaum, "Love's Knowledge" and "Fictions of the Soul."

assumption that these responses are the only ones relevant to the task of practical assessment.⁶ This critical part of the project is especially (or, one might say, obsessively) interested in a certain sort of practical conception: one that, taking its bearings from Aristotle's norm of practical "perception," emphasizes the human importance of a fine-tuned responsiveness to complex particular cases and of a willingness to see them *as* particular and irreducible to general rules. This conception urges a flexible immersion in the "adventure" of living and a process of practical choice based upon perception and improvisation. It insists, as well, that the correct perception of a practical situation requires emotional as well as intellectual activity, that the emotions have a valuable informational role to play within the ethical life as forms of recognition.⁷ The project now argues that for several reasons this practical conception is most adequately expressed—and, therefore, can be most appropriately scrutinized—in texts that have a complex narrative structure; and that those narratives are also the texts best suited to evoke in the reader the moral activities associated with this conception, in particular emotional activities to which the conception ascribes both cognitive and intrinsic ethical value. The argument is that if moral philosophers (and, in general, people pursuing 'wisdom' about the practical) wish to assess fairly and duly this and related conceptions of human life, they will need to include in their study texts that have the appropriate form. If philosophy is a search for wisdom about ourselves, philosophy needs to turn to literature.

The project does not wish to claim that this is the only inquiry into narrative that is of literary interest—or, indeed, the only literary inquiry into narrative that is of human interest. But it does urge vigorously the thought that literary study has too frequently failed to speak about the connectedness of narrative to forms of human emotion and human choice.⁸ By insisting that narratives embody forms of human life and desire, and by insisting that certain types of human understanding are irreducibly narrative in form, it calls for a literary discourse that studies the connections between narrative forms and forms of life and also between narrative movement and the desiring activity of the reader of narrative. In this way it links itself to various other postformalist currents in the contemporary study of narrative that are urging us once again to regard narrative as a human structure.⁹ This does not mean a return to a simple-minded

6. These criticisms of contemporary moral philosophy are developed in Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, chap. 1, in "Perceptive Equilibrium," and in Martha Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality," *Proceedings of the Boston Area Colloquium in Ancient Philosophy* 1 (1985): 151–201, to be reprinted in Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*.

7. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, chap. 10, and "The Discernment of Perception."

8. A similar argument is made by Danto.

9. For example, Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1984); Martin Price, *Forms of Life: Character and the Moral Imagination in the Novel* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983). In "Perceptive

moralizing criticism of literature that extracts a useful practical content while neglecting subtleties of literary form.¹⁰ For the proposed study of content insists on content's inseparability from form. And the project claims, in fact, that a study of literature that attends to form alone, without asking what human content (what desires, projects, choices) the forms themselves express is, while not without great interest, seriously incomplete.

III

The project has spoken about emotions and emotional activity. It has praised the novel for representing emotional responses as valuable sources of information about the practical and as of high practical value themselves, even apart from this informational role. It has also insisted on the ability of narrative to evoke emotional activity in the reader; and it has spoken as if this is an activity valuable, again, both for itself and for its epistemological role. In speaking this way, the project has used, and also argued for,¹¹ a conception of the major human emotions according to which they are not simply blind surges of affect, stirrings or sensations that arise from our animal nature and are identified (and distinguished from one another) by their felt quality alone. Instead, they themselves have a cognitive content; they are intimately related to beliefs or judgments about the world in such a way that the removal of the relevant belief will remove not only the reason for the emotion but also the emotion itself. The belief is the necessary basis and "ground" of the emotion. It might even be said to be a constituent part of the emotion itself. Anger, for example, is defined by Aristotle, the first great proponent of this view, as a composite of painful feeling with the belief that I have been wronged. This implies (as seems correct) that if I discover that my belief is false—that the apparent wrong did not in fact take place—I will, discarding my false belief, cease to be angry. If some residual painful feeling does persist, it will not be considered anger any longer but, rather, as residual irrational irritation or excitation.¹²

Within this general cognitive picture of emotion, several different accounts are given about the precise relationship between emotion and belief. Some versions make the belief a necessary cause of the emotion but no part of what the emotion is. Some, for example Aristotle's, make the belief one component part of the emotion but hold that it is not, by

Equilibrium," I discuss, in this connection, work of Lionel Trilling and F. R. Leavis (see esp. Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* [1957; reprint, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979] and Leavis, *The Great Tradition* [London: Chatto & Windus, 1948]).

10. See esp. Nussbaum, "Perceptive Equilibrium."

11. Especially in Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, chap. 10 and Interlude 2, and "The Discernment of Perception." But this account is developed in more detail in Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, Martin Classical Lectures (in press).

12. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Interlude 2, and *The Therapy of Desire* for extended discussion of this passage.

itself, sufficient for the emotion. (I can believe that I am wronged and yet not be angry.) Some hold that the belief is (whether as external cause or as component part) sufficient for the emotion: if I do not get angry, then I do not really truly accept or believe that I have been wronged. Some, in particular the view of the great Greek Stoic philosopher Chrysippus, who is in my view the most profound thinker on emotion in the entire philosophical tradition, insist that the emotion is itself identical with the full acceptance of, or recognition of, a belief. I myself defend this last and strongest cognitive view.¹³ But since it is at first sight a rather strange view, it takes detailed argument—in particular, it requires careful unpacking of Chrysippus's notions of recognition and acceptance, or "assent" to a belief, to make it plausible. So I shall not insist upon it here.

What we find in this entire family of cognitive conceptions, however, is a common idea: the idea of the criticism and assessment of emotion. If emotions are not natural stirrings but constructs, if they rest upon beliefs, then they can be modified by a modification of belief. And they can be assessed in the way that beliefs are assessed—as rational or irrational (in respect of their manner of acquisition), as helpful and noxious, even as true and false. If I hastily and uncritically believe a false story that I have been wronged, my anger may be criticized as both irrational and false. And argument can change it, by removing the belief that was both false and irrationally formed.¹⁴

This idea can be applied at several different levels of specificity: for I might hold on to the very general belief that there are some wrongs that I can suffer through another's agency that would, if they did occur, be grounds for anger, while criticizing particular cases in which my beliefs about wrongs had been false: X did not, in fact, wrong me in that way just now. Moving toward a more general criticism, I might judge that a whole range of cases that I had previously taken to be serious wrongs, and therefore grounds for anger, were not of serious importance after all. For example, by changing my views about the importance of public reputation, I would alter my experience of anger with respect to that class of situations involving slights to reputation. Finally, at a still higher level of generality, I might decide that the whole structure of belief that made that emotion possible was false and/or irrational: for example, I might come to feel that there are in fact no damages that anyone could do to me that would be sufficiently important to be grounds for anger. And the claim of the cognitive view is that if I really truly believe that, I will no longer be angry.

What this picture is claiming is, then, not only an intimate connection between emotion and belief but also, in particular, a connection between the emotions and a certain *sort* of belief, namely, beliefs about what is

13 Nussbaum, "The Stoics on the Extirpation of the Passions," in *The Therapy of Desire*.

14. This is the central theme of Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, developed in connection with Epicurean, Skeptic, and Stoic therapies.

valuable and important.¹⁵ Anger requires the thought that I have suffered not trivial but important damages at another's hand. Fear requires the thought that I may possibly suffer serious damages in ways that lie beyond my control. Love requires a high evaluation of its object, grief the thought that what is lost is of serious value. And, we notice, these emotions all require not only beliefs about value but also beliefs about a certain sort of thing: beliefs that things outside of us, things not fully under our own control, have value or importance. Thus if we imagine a person who cares nothing at all for the world outside of him or her, who attaches no importance at all to that which he or she does not fully control, we see that nothing that happens to that person could ever have the power to grieve, or to anger, or to frighten, or to delight. And here we arrive at the most general level of emotion criticism. For now we see that if we really get someone to hold the Stoic belief that no external or uncontrolled item was of any value at all, that person would have (as, indeed, the Stoics insisted) no emotional life at all. We would not want to teach a person this if we think their emotion beliefs are either true or helpful. But if we should believe, with the Stoics, that they are both false and in other ways pernicious, if we believe that a life with emotion beliefs in it is bound to be in certain specifiable ways a life in which we both suffer agony ourselves and do harm to others, then we would have good reason to set about undoing those beliefs. This project of undoing would take different forms in different societies, for each society structures emotion beliefs in certain highly specific ways, and the undoing will have to be correspondingly specific in order to counter the very thoughts that grip us. It is my suggestion that Beckett's voices are engaged in one form of this project of radical undoing.

The criticism of emotion cannot proceed in the same way in which the criticism of, for example, scientific or mathematical beliefs proceeds—by giving the person a logical argument, or fresh perceptual evidence. For the evaluative beliefs that ground our emotional life are not learned in logical arguments either. They are learned through exposure—usually very early and very habitual—to complex social forms of life, in which these beliefs and the related emotions are housed, so to speak, and by which, for the individuals who learn them, they are constructed. A child does not learn its society's conception of love, or of anger, by sitting in an ethics class. It learns them long before any classes, in complex interactions with parents and society. These interactions provide paradigms of emotion and teach the cognitive categories that underlie the experience of emotion. And, since we are all tellers of stories, and since one of the child's most pervasive and powerful ways of learning its society's values and structures is through the stories it hears and learns

15. See Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, Interlude 2, and *The Therapy of Desire* on the Stoics. This aspect of the cognitive conception of emotion is not, so far as I know, stressed in any of the modern defenses of it.

to tell, stories will be a major source of any culture's emotional life. What fear, or love, *is* will be, for a child—as for Beckett's voices—a construct out of stories, the intersection, the somewhat confused amalgam of those stories. Stories first construct and then evoke (and strengthen) the experience of feeling. So a criticism of emotion must be, prominently, an unwriting of stories.

So much, roughly speaking, is common ground among the major cognitive theories of emotion, from the ancient Greek thinkers through to today's philosophy of psychology and cognitive psychology, the more cognitive parts of psychoanalytic thought, and the various forms of "social construction" theory about emotion that prevail in social anthropology and also in radical social history.¹⁶ (In the case of the last group I am thinking of Foucault, but also of more objectively critical historians of desire, who write, frequently, from a left-wing perspective and stress the possibility of criticism and change in our socially taught distinctions of feeling.)¹⁷ Views vary at this point in many ways: in the degree to which they find the origin of the emotions in early infancy and in the family, as opposed to later social interactions; in the degree to which they find a common cognitive structure across societies or, on the other hand, stress the relativity of emotion to particular social forms; and, finally, in the degree to which they hold that there is available any possibility of change in the structures with which our past has presented us. (For the cognitive conception makes change a logical possibility; but the real availability of change depends on further beliefs about how structures of this sort can be challenged.)

There is a great deal of territory here that needs further exploration; and it is unfortunate that there is very little contact among the different groups who hold views of this type, therefore little synthetic working out of these issues. I cannot even begin to sort them out here in an adequate way, so I shall simply assert what I myself take the status of the current debate (and nondebate) to be, what I myself would be prepared to argue for. It is, that emotions are taught to us by our culture from early infancy, in patterns of interaction between the child and others, prominently including parents, and later including the wider community. (But parents,

16. For examples of these different approaches, with extensive bibliography, see Amélie Rorty, ed., *Explaining Emotions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980); for an excellent recent collection of articles on anthropological social-construction views, see R. Harré, ed., *The Social Construction of Emotion* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), especially articles by Harré, Armon-Jones, and Averill. In psychoanalytic thought I have been particularly influenced by work of Melanie Klein: see esp. *Love, Guilt, and Reparation and Other Works, 1921–1945* (London: Hogarth Press, 1985).

17. M. Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vols. 2 and 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1984). For an especially lucid presentation of the latter group of views I am indebted to Henry Abelow, "Is Gay History Possible?" (paper delivered at the Brown University Conference on Homosexuality in History and Culture, Providence, R.I.); but there are numerous other historians of desire writing from a similar perspective, e.g., Jeffrey Weeks, *Sex, Politics, and Society: The Regulation of Sexuality since 1800* (London and New York: Longman, 1987).

as psychoanalytic thought too frequently forgets, already embody and teach the social conception of which they are a part.)¹⁸ This teaching takes highly specific forms in specific cultures. Prominent among the structures that embody and teach these specific forms are a culture's stories. There will be many family resemblances among cultures, since most societies teach schemes of value that support some form of anger, fear, love, grief, and so on by supporting the beliefs about importance, on which, as we argued, these emotions depend. But the ways in which emotions are demarcated, related to one another, and connected with other aspects of life will vary greatly among societies, as will, then, the narrative structures in which they are housed. This concrete social shaping is an essential part of what it is to have an emotion in each case. We could not sufficiently define the emotion in terms of the acceptance of a certain sort of abstract proposition. And if stories are, as Beckett's voices claim, primary vehicles of emotion teaching, then we might say that to have an emotion will be (or centrally involve) the acceptance of a certain sort of story. This implies that to grasp the full story of the emotional life of an individual or group will require examining the stories it tells itself and the connections among these: understanding, for example, why love, in our first story, is connected in that particular way with frantic anxiety and with the expectation of death; why, in the second, love of a mother is associated with guilt, with a need for atonement that is unsatisfiable, with a feeling of sinfulness and a fear of judgment, with, finally, a certain sort of impossible hope. And if it should be seen that this complex emotional fabric is, in its specific cultural manifestation, in some ways an obstacle to human life, then its criticism will require the criticism not only of abstract propositions but also, above all, of stories (including those stories that dwell in us at an unconscious level), and also of our love of stories, of the patterns of desire, hope, and expectation that are formed and called forth by our experience of reading.

Acceptance of a social constructionist account of the origins and the nature of emotion does not seem to me to imply that we are simply stuck with what we have got, with no possibility for active criticism and change. The depth at which these stories dwell in us is sufficiently great that change is going to be a matter of prolonged therapy, not of one-shot argument. But I see no reason to suppose that we cannot devise therapies capable of altering us, even at the unconscious level. Nor does the view imply that there is no account of human flourishing available to us, as we ask the question how we ought to live, with reference to which we may appropriately criticize our own social stories. Although this is not often seen by proponents of social construction views (especially in an-

18. But as Melanie Klein insists, anthropologists too frequently ignore similarities in the structure of infantile object-relations across societies (see Melanie Klein, "Postscript" to "Our Adult World and Its Roots in Infancy," in her *Envy, Gratitude, and Other Works, 1946-1963* [London: Hogarth Press, 1984], pp. 247-63).

thropology), the diversity of cultural emotion stories in no way implies a complete cultural relativism about the normative values involved in the emotions, any more than in any other case a conflict of beliefs implies the subjectivity of belief. Social construction theory makes us face the question of relativism; it does not, by itself, answer it. I think it is plain that individuals are critical and active, as well as passive, in the process of social construction and that frequently they criticize and act out of a view about what is good for the flourishing of human life—either a view that they have found within that society itself narrowly understood, or one that they have discovered elsewhere and made comprehensible to themselves. Marxist versions of social-construction theory insist that we must conduct a criticism of desire with reference to some such notion of human flourishing. I see no reason to suppose that this general approach is doomed and that all such critical projects are merely uncomprehending intrusions upon each culture's own autonomous self-constructive activity.¹⁹

IV

In one way, the acceptance of this view of emotion gives great support to the philosophical/literary project we have described. For the view makes clear exactly why, and on what basis, we wish to say that the emotions are cognitive and that a process of practical deliberation that omits them leaves out material of rich informational value. It shows us, too, a deeper reason than the project has so far given why *narratives* are essential to the process of practical reflection: not just because they happen to represent and also to evoke emotional activity, but also because their very forms are themselves the sources of emotional structure, the paradigms of what, for us, emotion *is*. This gives us additional reason to say that we could not acquire the rich information we seek by simply adding to abstract theoretical treatises a few examples of emotion and a few emotive appeals: for the whole story of an emotion, in its connections with other emotions and forms of life, requires narrative form for its full development.

But in another evident way the acceptance of this view of emotion calls the project into question. For the project has in common with a good deal of work in contemporary moral philosophy a reliance upon intuitive responses to the concrete, prominently including emotional responses, as data of special importance and, so to speak, veracity in giving us a sense of life.²⁰ It insists with Aristotle that “the discrimination rests with perception” and that “among statements about conduct, those that are universal are more general, but the particular ones are more true—

19. The issue of the rational “internal” criticism of a culture is discussed in M. Nussbaum and A. K. Sen, “Internal Criticism and Cultural Rationality,” in *Relativism*, ed. M. Krausz (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).

20. See esp. Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979); and Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), and *Moral Luck* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

for action is concerned with particulars, and statements must harmonize with these."²¹ Its case for the practical ineliminability of stories rests on an idea that the concrete judgments and responses embodied in stories are less likely to lead us astray, in the sense that they will contain what is deepest for us, most truly expressive of our moral sense, and most pertinent to action, by comparison with the abstractness of theory. But once we are reminded that intuitions do not come from nature, or indeed from any special part of ourselves that is more "pure" and more accurate than the place from which our theories and principles emerge, that, indeed, they are learned in a society in much the same way as our other beliefs, we can no longer leave the intuitions, emotions, and stories unsuspected and unquestioned.²² And indeed, when we reflect that we learn emotion stories when we are less critical and less rationally adept, on the whole, than when we learn our theories, when we reflect that these stories from then on constrain, in many ways of which we are not even aware, our new perceptions and responses—then we see that it would be foolhardy indeed to rely uncritically on the data drawn from our experience of stories and, also, that it will be extremely difficult to find a criticism that is not itself shaped by and expressed in terms of the structures that it purports to criticize. This does not exactly undermine the project, as we shall see, but it tells us not to expect to find in stories a golden age of unsullied ethical purity.

V

"It is in the tranquillity of decomposition that I recall the long confused emotion which was my life, and that I judge it, as it is said that God will judge me, and with no less impertinence" (p. 25). Molloy suggests that the emotions are not a discrete episode inside his life story but, rather, the living out of a story that has a certain shape. And in fact his story shares with the story of his double Moran a complex emotional structure in which guilt, fear, disgust, hope, and love do not pop up in isolation from one another, identifiable separately and singly defined. Instead, they emerge as interwoven aspects of a single narrative. The two passages with which we began, and especially the second, give a part of the recipe for this emotional concoction, showing that love does not occur without guilt, the fear of judgment, and the longing for reparation and salvation—and that all attempts to love are watched and judged, as Molloy now judges himself, as God will judge him.

The life story that is Molloy's "long confused emotion" is the story of two journeys: of Molloy's journey back from the outer world to the inside of his mother's room and of agent and detective Moran's journey

21. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1107a29–32.

22. Nagel's criticism of Epicurus's position on death seems to me to miss this dimension of Epicurus's critical argument, simply assuming that we can use uncriticized intuitions to object to Epicurus's position (see Thomas Nagel, "Death," in *Mortal Questions*).

to find and judge Molloy. Both are stories of progressive disintegration, as the crisp orderly Moran becomes indistinguishable from the prey he quarries and as the bodies of both give way, increasingly, to ludicrous and somewhat revolting weaknesses. This search, which Moran explicitly describes as a search for and through his own insides (p. 113), so that it is more than usually apparent that the story of this novel is the story of emotions, has a geography that informs us about the structure of those insides. Molloy's native country is called Bally. It is the hub of the region of Ballyba (p. 134). Moran, on the other hand, is a native of Turdy, home of the Turdy Madonna, goddess of pregnant married women (p. 173). Another town in the vicinity is Hole. And Moran's son "was capable of hanging about Hole, under God knows what conditions" (p. 143). So Moran travels from Turdy to Ballyba (he never quite reaches Bally) and camps out in the vicinity of Hole. And Molloy, having departed from Bally, ends up inside his mother's room (p. 7)—"her who brought me into the world, through the hole in her arse if my memory is correct. First taste of the shit" (p. 15). So the basic fact in this world, the fact that structures all of its geography, is the fact of the filthiness of conception, the fact that the pregnant married woman is by her act wrapped in shit, and that the new baby, even before it acts or feels, is born into the world through the shit. His entire life is lived, from then on, in shameful proximity to vagina, anus, and balls. Inasmuch as the child is a child born of a woman, he is covered in her filth. Inasmuch as he is a man who feels sexual desire (a resident of Bally), he compounds the transgression. His desire is filthy because of the original filth and also because it is a desire for the mother, who is already seen as covered, herself, in filth. The journey back to the mother's room or womb, which might in one way be a project of atonement, an attempt to cancel the sin of his birth by returning to a fetal condition, is, in the light of the sexual desire that motivates it, a guilty desire for filthy penetration and a compounding of original guilt (" . . . that this atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything else but life for the living"). "What business has innocence here?" asks Molloy as he sets out. "What relation to the innumerable spirits of darkness?" (p. 10). Guiltily placed between balls and hole, born through the anus and doomed to return through it, sinning further.

And there is one further fact about the geography of this place. It is all watched—watched by the chief of a vast organization, whose home is at a distance but who gives all journeys their purpose and meaning and who judges them all with an arbitrary and unpredictable (p. 115) combination of paternal care, anger, and furious judgment (p. 162). He likes to use the "prophetic present" tense of actions that the beings under his command will perform (e.g., "Your son goes with you"). And his name is just such a prophetic present: "Youdi," or "You die." Mortality is the punishment meted out for universal original transgression. Youdi has a messenger named Gaber (a relative of angel Gabriel), who visits

Youdi's "agents" to convey his commands; and even this messenger is watched, not permitted to perform a sexual act without disturbance (p. 94). Youdi's role of judge and assessor is imitated by his agents in their own lives, as they play the role of judge to their women, their children, their own guilty thoughts and desires. The paradigm of Youdi infuses their journeys with purpose; and through membership in the Youdi organization all their movements and actions take on a significance beyond themselves.

We could summarize the emotion story that is Molloy's life by saying that it is the story of original sin, of the fear of God's judgment, and of the vain longing for salvation.²³ This would begin to show us how these voices' experience of fear and love differs from the experience of those emotions in a non-Christian culture; but it would not, being a summary, contain the particular and highly specific learned tonality that makes the Christian world of these people a world of highly concrete and distinct form and feeling, in which the ubiquity of guilt and an anal form of disgust (and humor) color every emotion and perception. We want not only to say that these people feel guilt at original sin; we want to say also that it is guilt at a parental sexual act that is seen as immersing the mother in excrement and causing the birth of the child through excrement. Not only that they feel disgust and loathing, but also that their disgust has as its object, above all, the female body—and their own bodies seen in the aspect of virility and desire, seen, by extension, as mortal, since mortality is seen itself as the punishment for sexual guilt. Not only that they feel fear, but that it is a fear of being punished by a supreme being who watches their every feeling, and a punishment that they more than deserve simply in virtue of existing. Not only that they feel hope, but that it is hope for "succour" (p. 71) and for a merciful waiving of just punishment (p. 162). And even this is so far too abstract. What they feel is best given in the concreteness of the sentences of the story.

And love? We cannot tell the story of their love without making all of these connections and still others. For erotic love, here, lived around the paradigm scenario of the child's reparative but guilty attempt to enter his mother's womb, becomes a peculiar, highly specific mixture of longing for bliss with loathing and disgust, both toward the object and toward oneself, suffused, always, with the premonition of disaster. When Molloy recalls his experience of "true love," he thinks first, guiltily, of his mother: "Could a woman have stopped me as I swept towards mother? Probably . . . Now men, I have rubbed up against a few men in my time, but women? Oh well, I may as well confess it now, yes, I once rubbed up against one. I don't mean my mother, I did more than rub up against her" (p. 56). The woman met him, he goes on, in a rubbish dump, as

23. A marvelous discussion of these aspects of Beckett's work is in Stanley Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," in his *Must We Mean What We Say?* (1969; reprint, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

he was "limply poking about in the garbage saying probably, for at that age I must still have been capable of general ideas, This is life" (p. 57). Her invitation to him to "know what love was" (p. 57) is greeted with eagerness, as a salvation. She even at first appears to have an aperture for lovemaking that is "not the bunghole I had always imagined, but a slit." But after the act—made pleasureless (or remembered as pleasureless) on account of her ugliness and the "doglike" position she assumed, Molloy is not certain after all that their intercourse was not anal: "Perhaps after all she put me in her rectum. A matter of complete indifference to me, I needn't tell you" (p. 57). It is of indifference because genitality is covered in shit, and the vagina, as birth canal, just is a rectum.

All of this, and more, is a view of love, a view taught by a certain concrete society at a certain point in history. The view forms a seamless unity with the society's other views or stories of emotion, with its cosmology, its shared forms of life. Molloy feels always, in this world, that he dwells in an "atmosphere of finality without end" (p. 111) and that he is a "contrivance" of this world, a role-player "playing my parts through the bitter end" (pp. 114, 122). The substitution of "through the bitter end" for the expected "through to the bitter end" expresses his sense that all social parts are played out through filth. All utterance, like birth, is anal.

We have said that this story is a structure of feeling. But we could equally well say that these forms of feeling act themselves out in forms of life, as the characters play out with doomed repetitiveness the paradigm scenarios their culture and its stories have taught them. The central drama of these two narratives (interweaving with the drama of the search for mother's room) is the plot of the hunt for the guilty one, who is at the same time oneself. For the human being internalizes, as we said, the role of judge and punisher, even as he is aware that his own desires are the object of the punishment. Moran, agent of Youdi, imagines his task:

There somewhere man is too, vast conglomerate of nature's kingdoms, as lonely and as bound. And in that block the prey is lodged and thinks himself a being apart. Anyone would serve. But I am paid to seek. I arrive, he comes away. His life has been nothing but a waiting for this, to see himself preferred, to fancy himself damned, blessed, to fancy himself everyman, above all others. [Pp. 110–11]

This drama, a detective-adventure story in which the guilty party is "man" and any individual man would do as well as any other, displays the strange mingling of damnation and salvation, fear and hope, that are intrinsic to Moran's story.²⁴ The story is an expressive structure and, at the same time, a source or paradigm for emotions. And it shows us how our most loved story patterns, prominently including the detective story, express and further nourish the emotions of this world, teaching us to imagine ourselves as hunters after guilt and to long for a final judgment.

24. On the plot of the detective story, see Brooks.

In other parts of life the same story is played. "I knew how difficult it was not to do again what you have done before," says Molloy (p. 85). And both he and Moran reenact, compulsively, their cultural habits, in every relationship. It should be no surprise by now that all relations with women are colored by the longing and loathing that makes Molloy add to the syllable "Ma" the phoneme "-g":

because for me, without my knowing why, the letter g abolished the syllable Ma, and as it were spat on it, better than any other letter would have done. And at the same time I satisfied a deep and doubtless unacknowledged need, the need to have a Ma, that is a mother, and to proclaim it, audibly. For before you say mag you say ma, inevitably. . . . Besides for me the question did not arise, at the period I'm worming into now, I mean the question of whether to call her Ma, Mag or the Countess Caca. [P. 17]

Nor should it be a surprise that Moran is reminded, in his journey, of "the old joke about the female soul. Question, Have women a soul? Answer, Yes. Question, Why? Answer, In order that they may be damned" (p. 137). Nor is it surprising that the world of nature is itself, in many perceptions, infused with Christian significances: that plants offer Moran "a superfetatory proof of the existence of God" (p. 99), that the earth, in his eyes, is "the earth that lifts itself up, to be approved, before it sets out" (p. 140).

But it is in the most fully developed fictional relationship in the trilogy that the consequences of these repetitions are most vividly seen—namely in Moran's relationship with his son. We first meet the boy as he passes by, "caught up," his father hypothesizes, "in I know not what fantasy of flight and pursuit. I called to him not to dirty himself" (p. 93). From this point on, the relationship plays out the Youdi roles: parental punishment strangely mixed with paternal care, love blocked by the need to discipline. Moran's own feeling that "I myself had never been sufficiently chastened" causes him to "go too far when I reprimanded my son, who was consequently a little afraid of me" (p. 95). In consequence, each instinct of affection must be checked by guilty moral resolve: "This sight went straight to my heart, but nevertheless I did my duty" (p. 109; cf. p. 121). Moran's conception of the proper job of father is that it requires, above all, teaching the young human a proper degree of guilt: "I inclined his young mind towards that most fruitful of dispositions, horror of the body and its functions" (p. 118); "I brought him unerringly to a proper sense of his iniquitiés" (p. 160). And it requires, as well, a vivid disgust at the child, seen as a being similar to oneself: "Did he love me then as much as I loved him? You could never be sure with that little hypocrite" (p. 120). The human communication of the pair is never personal, never direct or directly tender, mediated as it always is by the structures of religion: "And the only walk we regularly took together was that which led us, every Sunday, from home to church and, mass over, from church to home. Caught up in the slow tide of the faithful

my son was not alone with me. But he was part of that docile herd going yet again to thank God for his goodness and to implore his mercy and forgiveness, and then returning, their souls made easy, to other gratifications" (p. 129). That's parental love, and the narrative language it uses, reproducing itself from generation to generation.

VI

Moran's journey is a journey of disintegration and of ending. The Molloy who was seen as a quarry outside him proves to be the disorder and unseemliness within (pp. 113, 115). And his "pilgrimage," which takes him out as far as Ballyba (though not to Bally itself, nor yet to Hole)²⁵ proves to be, finally, a journey back home to Turdy—a pilgrimage, as he lies, to the Turdy Madonna, goddess of pregnant married women (p. 173). In short, it becomes, increasingly, indistinguishable from Molloy's journey to his own mother's room or womb, his desirous and therefore guilty attempt to preexist the sin of his own conception. From the straight, crisp, orderly life that was his at the story's opening, Moran moves increasingly into Molloy's life of inertia and decomposition. He speaks of the "change" from what he was, of a "crumbling, a frenzied collapsing of all that had always protected me from all I was always condemned to be" (p. 148), of his "growing resignation to being dispossessed of self" (p. 149).

In one way, this journey is simply a discovery, within him, of the other side of the social emotions that Moran already inhabited and a working out of their inner logic. For wherever there is a hunter there is a prey. And if the hunter is born and dwells in Turdy he must himself be at the same time the prey; and Youdi's purpose must surely be to judge and punish him (cf. pp. 154, 162) as he judges and punishes the prey; and so, inasmuch as he imitates Youdi's judging activity, this must be his own purpose toward himself. And so the discovery of self as prey and filth and disorder is simply the discovery of self as "man." But man is what he always was, so guilt and fear and the role of prey were always his also.

There is, however, another and more radical collapsing in this story. It appears to be the collapsing of the emotional structure itself, as Moran increasingly distances himself from the entire armature of love, disgust, guilt, and longing, by distancing himself from the religious meanings that have constituted them and the stories that are their primary vehicle. At first the "crumbling" looks just like the reverse side of the earlier judging and seeking. But as Moran goes further on, his project of ending seems to become the project of ending the whole game, of cutting himself off from both of its sides, even at the cost of losing the order on which he has based his life and a great part of himself.²⁶ When he finds in his

25. This may suggest that he is impotent as well as guilty.

26. See Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game."

thought the “hopes that spring eternal, childish hopes”—hopes of a reconciliation with his son, of a reconciliation with Molloy in the role of father, of a reconciliation, at last, with a Youdi who ceases to be angry and to punish—he does not indulge or nourish the hopes but rejects them in an attempt to empty out his entire spiritual being, cleansing it of these conceptions: “Yes, I let them spring within me and grow in strength, brighten and charm me with a thousand fancies, and then I swept them away, with a great disgusted sweep of all my being, I swept myself clean of them and surveyed with satisfaction the void they polluted” (p. 162). And now, thinking of his possible punishment at Youdi’s hands, Moran simply laughs, shakes with “a mighty fit of laughter” (p. 162).

It is at this point that Moran hears the report of Youdi’s words to Gaber, that life is “a thing of beauty . . . and a joy forever” (p. 164); and instead of embracing the sentiment with longing and desire, he asks, with what seems to be a new detachment, a skeptical question: “Do you think he meant human life? . . . Perhaps he didn’t mean human life” (p. 165). It is at this point, too, that he speaks a few words to himself “to prepare my soul to make an end” (p. 166). These words include sixteen absurd and abstruse theological questions, whose grim and outrageous humor serves to distance us (Moran and the reader both) from the serious life of the religious view. (Christ never laughed [p. 101].) They also include a prayer that displays, even more vividly, Moran’s new distance from religious emotions: “And I recited the pretty quietist Pater, Our Father who art no more in heaven than on earth or in hell, I neither want nor desire that thy name be hallowed, thou knowest best what suits thee. Etc. The middle and the end are very pretty” (p. 167). The narrative is progressing in the direction not of any conventional happy or unhappy ending but of a more radical breaking down of religious significances and religious desire.

Increasingly at this period Moran’s thoughts turn to his bees, as to creatures whose lives are not “polluted” by religious meanings. Their dances seem to him to display a “different way” from human communication, for they have a complex and discernible form, they can be studied, and yet (unlike human agency under God’s eye) they have no significance—or, if a significance, then an alien one, “too noble ever to be sullied by the cogitations of a man like me, exiled in his manhood” (p. 169). He considers the life of the bees to be a life apart from the life of emotions and his own relation to the bees to be the one relation in his life that is not mediated by emotion and the other infirmities of the flesh: “And I would never do my bees the wrong I had done my God, to whom I had been taught to ascribe my angers, fears, desires, and even my body” (p. 169).

And increasingly Moran gives indications that this new and radical attitude to religious emotion requires a new attitude to literature and the writing of literature and a new attitude to the relationship between

writer and reader. We might say that in the old narratorial relationship the writer is, for the reader, God the father: the one who makes things mean, the one who makes the world, the one who evokes and structures the reader's emotions of delight and longing and guilt and fear. In Moran's detective story, the writer is the one who manipulates the reader's desire to seek and condemn, to track and judge the guilty prey. So increasingly, as he distances himself from Youdi and from that fear and longing, Moran refuses the task of the narrator and refuses us the emotions of the reader. He calls his life an "inennarable contraption" (p. 114), reminding us of the simplifications and refusals imposed by narration. Shortly after this, he identifies himself as the author of this entire novel and of Beckett's other novels—but he tells us that, this time, novel writing will not take place: "Oh the stories I could tell you, if I were easy. What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others. . . . Stories, stories. I have not been able to tell them. I shall not be able to tell this one" (p. 137). In such moments he seems to echo Molloy's expression of frustration with the ongoing and unending character of the stories: "For if you set out to mention everything you would never be done, and that's what counts, to be done, to have done" (p. 41). But whereas Molloy considered that goal unachievable and hoped, at most, for a "change of muck, to move from one heap to another a little further on" (p. 41), Moran seems to believe that narration will not take place any more, that it is all ending, that he is ending it all.

And often he finds himself on the verge of the old literary games, writing so as to arouse our narratological desire—and he turns away from that activity with firm resolve. "I'll tell you. No, I'll tell you nothing. Nothing" (p. 134). Introducing a new character, he balks at the narrator's task of rich description, one of the primary strategies used by an author to summon up our interest in a character who will then hunt, or be hunted, or love, or be filthy, or all of these. "I shall have to describe him briefly, though such a thing is contrary to my principles" (p. 150). Twice he politely refuses us what we would have wanted from his story, as if literature would be his, and our, weakness, and the time is now too late for backward movement: "I am sorry I cannot indicate more clearly how this result was obtained, it would have been something worth reading. But it is not at this late stage of my relation that I intend to give way to literature" (p. 151). "I would have described them once, not now, I am sorry, it would have been worth reading" (p. 166). And even as he frustrates and destructures our desire, he achieves an ending to his own narrative longing. Refusing the opportunity to tell of adventures (obstacles, fiends, misdemeanors, disintegrations) on the road to Ballyba, he comments: "It was my intention, almost my desire, to tell of all these things, I rejoiced at the thought that the moment would come when I might do so. Now the intention is dead, the moment is come and the desire is gone" (p. 159). He even wonders whether he is beyond thinking and conceiving altogether (p. 165). But whatever awaits him, what is "certain" is that it

will not "be known," will not be in any story (p. 172). His talk of preparing his "soul to make an end" (p. 166) and his announcement, "Now I may make an end" (p. 174) refer, perhaps, to the end of this written story. But, beyond this, they point to the end of storying, the end of the forms of life taught and lived in stories.

Moran's narrative ends where it began, in the garden of his home. But this ending seems to confirm our view that a great change has taken place and that a new life is beginning:

My birds had not been killed. They were wild birds. And yet quite trusting. I recognized them and they seemed to recognize me. But one never knows. Some were missing and some were new. I tried to understand their language better. Without having recourse to mine. They were the longest, loveliest days of all the year. I lived in the garden. I have spoken of a voice telling me things. I was getting to know it better now, to understand what it wanted. It did not use the words that Moran had been taught when he was little and that he in his turn had taught to his little one. So that at first I did not know what it wanted. But in the end I understood this language. I understood it, I understood it, all wrong perhaps. That is not what matters. It told me to write the report. Does this mean I am freer now than I was? I do not know. I shall learn. 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. [Pp. 175–76]

We seem to see here a clearing beyond disgust and guilt, an acceptance of nature and body that does not ask them to be redeemed by any beyond, a relation with living beings that no longer requires to be mediated by religious emotions or even by the language in which they are constructed. With the refusal of human language we seem to have broken the chain by which the "long confused emotion" perpetuates itself, father to son. Even Moran's indifference to questions of meaning and understanding seems to be the happy discovery that the world does not need to be interpreted, it can simply be lived in, accepted, trusted as the birds trust. He lives in the garden, a part of nature, no longer hunting, no longer hunted.

Beckett alludes, in this ending, to two powerful stories of antireligious salvation; and these allusions strengthen our conviction that the constraints of religious emotion really have been transcended. The ending in the garden refers, most obviously, to the conclusion of Voltaire's *Candide*, in which the return home to one's own and the choice *cultiver son jardin* represents the overthrow of the Leibnizian search for a religious meaning in all events, and a decision to live in the world as in a chancy arbitrary place made partially habitable by the decency of friendship. But Beckett's and Voltaire's gardens have, as well, an earlier reference: to the Garden of Epicurus, in which pupils learned, by a patient therapeutic criticism of the emotions that society had taught them, to live a life free from

religious fear and longing, and the love that is based upon these.²⁷ Epicurus's doctrine that the root cause of human unhappiness lies in our desires and emotions and that these bad desires are "empty" social constructs, erected by convention and capable of being dismantled by opposite habits, is the doctrine about emotion that is being worked out in this book as a whole; so it is not really surprising that the ending to Moran's story should have this Epicurean setting. Even Beckett's interest in animals parallels that of Epicurus (and Lucretius): animals have forms of life apart from the pollution of religion; they show us what it could be to be alive without hope or fear or disgust or even love.

But for Epicurus, Lucretius, and Voltaire, the garden really is a place of happiness, an oasis of human acceptance in a casual and violent universe. Does Moran's story have a similarly happy ending, even to this limited extent? And if it did have one, if in this way it did fulfill our readerly longing, wouldn't that itself imply that what we have just been saying about the end of storytelling has been in part false? A happy end state is precisely what the reader's old emotions deeply desire: a salvation, a redemption. So if this is what we are getting here, then, ironically, it really is not what we are getting. We can be redeemed only by ending the demand for redemption, by ceasing to use the concept of redemption. Beckett's antinarrative is too many-sided, too ironic, to leave us with any simple comfort. He makes us call the new turn into question from its inception, making us ask ourselves whether this project of bringing hope and the other emotions to an end is not itself a project that lies securely in the grip of the old emotions, a project born of disgust, straining toward salvation. Remember that when Moran swept away his hopes, he did so "with a great disgusted sweep of all my being" (p. 162). His ensuing laughter at Youdi is indistinguishable, in its violent shaking, from fear: "strange laughter truly, and no doubt misnamed" (p. 162). The list of mocking theological questions is followed by a list of personal questions that ask about the salvation, in heaven, not only of Moran and his family but also of the author's other characters in other novels (pp. 167-68). It begins to look as if the new movement of ending is motivated, like the old, by guilt. The only difference is that previously the disgust was directed at only a certain aspect of the self—the bodily, born-of-woman aspect—whereas now it moves, so to speak, one level up and takes as its target Moran's whole being as a social "contrivance," including, and especially, his emotions of guilt and disgust. This second-order disgust, and the corresponding second-order longing (for a redemption from the longing for redemption) are the structures that organize Moran's homeward journey. Even his search for ending is a preparation of the soul (p. 166), a preparation, presumably, for final judgment.

27. See Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*, and also Martha Nussbaum, "Therapeutic Arguments: Epicurus and Aristotle," in *The Norms of Nature*, ed. M. Schofield and G. Striker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 31-74.

We are forbidden by such indications to have the comfortable thought that something happy and liberating and conclusive is happening here. And when we notice that things are not happy and conclusive, we notice in ourselves yet a third level of disgust: disgust at the disgust with human disgust that motivates Moran's search for ending and keeps him always within the constraints that this search opposes. But then, of course, we are likely to notice that that reaction is, as well, a part of the same old trap: for it sets our desires rushing off to imagine what would be a *real* happy ending. And that's itself a defect calling for more judgment. "Atonement was in itself a sin, calling for more atonement, and so on, as if there could be anything but life for the living."

And Moran's writing? The fiction that he is putting an end to fictions is, we are informed in the end, an artfully constructed fiction of his own, commanded as a penance (p. 133), executed under orders from a strange voice (p. 131). So—once again—it is encased within the very structures it opposes, and it announces as much with relish, confessing, in the end, to its own fictionality and making us see that this assault on stories is just another story. Only, perhaps, one in which the prey is stories themselves and their structures of desire, the hunter our readerly judgment upon the lying character of stories, and the judgment our aggressive and disgusted lashing out at the disgust and guilt that hold us. Its acts of confessing and judging, though directed at the whole apparatus of confession and judgment, are nonetheless the same old religious acts and are no less violent, no less constraining, than the original first-order confession concerning the filth of the body. More damning, really, since we might have thought that it was the word that was going to be our salvation.

What it comes to is that you can't go beyond writing, if writing is what you are in fact doing. You are, apparently, stuck with "the convention that demands you either lie or hold your peace" (p. 88). Perhaps a bee dance, or Moran's birds, would be truly beyond disgust and guilt—but—that song and dance are not what we readers of literature desire, for they would not express *us*, as we have been contrived. We have learned our lesson so thoroughly that we cannot depart from it, even to end it. We go on telling stories in the only way we know; and on the other side, if anything, is only a silence. But we feel that if our death and its silence did come at last, they would probably come, like Malone's, inside a story of our own telling. And the weapon of aggression might be, indifferently, a hammer, a stick, a fist, a thought, a dream, or a pencil (p. 288).

VII

This attack on religious desire has ancestors. Two of them are Lucretius and Nietzsche. For both Epicurus's great poet-pupil and the evangelist of God's death believed that a religious view of the world had deeply poisoned human desires in their time, constructing deformed patterns of fear and longing. Both believed, too, that certain influential art forms were powerful accomplices of religious longing and that a successful

attack on religion required the undoing of these forms. And yet neither ended by embracing silence. Both, indeed, imagined a fruitful life for human beings beyond religious expectation, and both constructed forms of writing that seemed to them appropriate for that more fruitful life, or at least for the movement toward it. Perhaps the pursuit of this difference of ending, so to speak, will help us to see where we have been and whether we had to go there.

Lucretius, following Epicurus's teaching, held that a great part of human desire and emotion is "empty": built upon beliefs that are both socially taught and false, beliefs that express, for the most part, the aim of a religious elite to gain power over humans by making them unhappy and disgusted with the merely human in life. Central to this religious project is a teaching about death that engenders fear and loathing, along with the passionate longing for immortal life. And it was Lucretius's view that most of our other emotions—including the anger that motivates war and the erotic love that seeks personal salvation through fusion with a "goddess"—were disguised forms of this religious fear and longing. These forms of feeling are perpetuated in poetry, especially in the poetry of mourning and in erotic love poetry. So an attack on these socially constructed emotions requires an attack on those poetic forms. In his own poetry, Lucretius pursues the attack, through satire and scathing negative argument.²⁸

Yet Lucretius believed that there were many human desires and motivations that were not pernicious in this way. There were the natural desires of the body; there was a human being's natural love of the use of reason; and, finally, there were some learned but still fruitful desires, such as the desire for friendship and the sense of justice—all of which could be tapped in order to construct a fruitful human life on the other side of religion. He believed that one could imagine this life and even describe it in writing. And he seems to have believed that even though some of the desires that motivate writing are the same ones that his argument attacks—longing for immortality, erotic love, anger at one's finitude—still, this was not true of all writerly motivations. For example, there is a "pure" desire to give and receive pleasure that stands apart; a desire, as well, for social justice and peace, a desire for fruitfulness. So even though his writing had to attack many of the forms of writing common in his time, including most actual poetry, still it did not have to tear all writing down, and it did not need to subvert itself. There is a therapeutic discourse that can be housed in verse, albeit very unusual verse, that will give pleasure to the reader without falling under its own critique. Perhaps even on the other side of therapy—though this is less clear—there is something for writing to do and to be: a source of pleasure, a bond of friendship.

28. This account of Lucretius is developed in detail in Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire*.

Nietzsche had a still more pessimistic view about the extent to which existing patterns of feeling in his time were the product of religious teaching. Nineteen hundred years of Christianity have, he believes, made a tremendous difference in human self-conceptions. Now the human being is so radically alienated from natural bodily humanity, so thoroughly immersed in longing for a happy ending in another world, by contrast to which this one is seen as poor and loathsome, that the removal of religious hope creates a crisis of nihilism. Religious teleological patterns of desire are so deep in us, the horror of the body is so deep in us, that it is not clear that there is any vivid life in us that is not made in religion's image, nothing, therefore, to motivate us to construct a new life after its demise.²⁹ The threat of nihilism is the prospect of the collapse of the will, the refusal to continue ordering and valuing.

And yet Nietzsche did hold out hope for a human life beyond nihilism. And he believed his task as a writer to be the creation of that hope as a vivid possibility. The first step in the creative task must be negative: the thorough, detailed dismantling of religious beliefs and teleological desires through the techniques of debunking genealogy, mordant satire, horrific projection. But even this negative movement in Nietzsche's writing contains, already, a positive side: images of human strength and "virtue," and, in its portrait of the ancient Greeks, the image of an entire people who lived, and felt, without fear. And beyond the "nay-saying" stage of the spirit, Nietzsche foresaw, and held out as a possibility, a joyful affirmative life for the spirit and the body together, a life truly beyond the constraining oppositions of disgust and awe, loathing and longing. And although most actual poets and artists are criticized as valets of conventional religion—even Goethe is in the end found lacking, a captive of the quest for beatitude—Nietzsche clearly believed, as well, that art, including music and dance and including as well the art of the philosopher-poet, had a central positive role to play in restoring man to himself and to the earth. This writing has to struggle against being inspired, and limited, by the desires of its own time; even Zarathustra longs for a contented end-state and yearns to throw off his burdens. But this temptation is one that the writer can overcome in himself and still find speech and creation. "Do I aspire to *happiness*?" says Zarathustra joyfully at last. "I aspire to *works*."³⁰

VIII

Beckett is a member of this therapeutic company. But his pessimism (or that of his voices) denies a possibility that they hold open. We need to

29. A fine discussion of this element in Nietzsche's work is in Henri Birault, "Beatitude in Nietzsche," in *The New Nietzsche*, ed. David Allison (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985).

30. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pt. 4, "The Sign," my translation. (W. Kaufmann's version uses "work" for *Werke*, which does not adequately convey Zarathustra's emphasis on creation. See Kaufmann, *Nietzsche: Philosopher, Psychologist, Antichrist*, 4th ed. [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975].)

understand this denial more deeply if we are to see, finally, where we are. One thing that becomes very clear, as we read these novels, is that we are hearing, in the end, but a single human voice, not the conversation of diverse human voices with diverse structures of feeling. Beckett emphasizes this fact, by identifying Moran with the author of his other novels.³¹ And the solipsism of this voice's sense of life is so total that we get no sense of the distinctive shape of any other lives in this world. An implicit claim is made by these voices to be the whole world, to be telling the way the world is as they tell about themselves. But is there any reason to suppose that this one life is, in that way, representative? To speak rather bluntly, even if Christian emotion of this particularly sterile form does so deeply infuse *some* lives in some parts of the world, that for those people there is no emotion and no writing beyond it, have we any reason to think this true for us all, or an undermining of the emotional lives of us all? This question arises naturally if one reads Beckett side by side with one of his own great heroes, Proust, and even more so if one at the same time reads other great novelists whose work Beckett would, in his youth, have read, such as Henry James or Virginia Woolf. For in none of these writers does one find that religion plays a role of paramount importance; nor is religion's disgust with the body a major source of emotional life. Whatever problems they find with our emotions and their social construction, these problems do not generate Beckett's nihilism and his search for silence. Is this simply because they have failed to see something about our society that Beckett sees more clearly? Or isn't it, instead, because in the lives they depict and the sense of life they express, these problems really are not central? Not all persuasive voices speak Moran's language.

Along with an absence of human diversity, we find in Beckett, as well, an absence of human *activity* that seems foreign to our experience of emotional development, even at the cultural and social level. Beckett's people are heirs of a legacy of feeling that shapes them inexorably. They cannot help being shaped in this way, and they feel like "contrivances," like machines programmed entirely from without: "You think you are inventing, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensus one day got by heart and long forgotten" (p. 31). They are made, and the only thing they make is a child in their own image. This is not a convincing picture either of an individual child's development or of a society's evolution. Children actively select and interpret; and the society around them contains a plurality of active voices, striving to persuade us in new directions. And persuasion, not just manipulation, is at least a part of what explains those changes. The point about diversity and the point about activity seem connected: for it is in part because Beckett sees society as single and monolithic that he is able to omit the

31. See also p. 412, where the unnamed voice proves to be the author of all the trilogy's stories.

presence of argument, criticism, and change. In all this we sense, I believe, a deeply religious sensibility at work; for we have at all times the sense that mere human beings are powerless to make, on account of the fact that there is something very much more powerful in this universe that does all the making. We are at best its *agents*; and that is why we cannot *act*.

Beckett has shown us how the desires engendered by narrative are responses to our sense of finitude, our powerlessness. Hope, fear, passionate longing, all are bound up with our feeling that the world eludes our control and that cherished things out in the world are not governed by our will. But we could agree with this general analysis of the relationship between emotion and finitude—indeed, we did agree with this in our general account of emotion (Sec. III above)—without conceding that this sense of finitude, and our emotional responses to it, are themselves necessarily suffused with a sense of *guilt* and of *disgust*. There is a peculiar movement in Beckett's talk of emotions—which we notice even in our first two passages—from a perception of human limits to a loathing of the limited, from grief to disgust and hatred, from the tragedy and comedy of the frail body to rage at the body, seen as covered in excrement. It is as if Beckett believes that the finite and frail can only inspire our disgust and loathing—that life (in the words of Youdi) can be “a thing of beauty and a joy” only if it is “forever.” And this is because, as we said, mortality in Beckett's world is seen not as our neutral and natural condition but as our punishment for original sin.³² The complete absence in this writing of any joy in the limited and finite indicates to us that the narrative as a whole is an expression of a religious view of life. Lucretius and Nietzsche stand apart from what they condemn. They have a separate and uncorrupted sense of pleasure and of value; and because of this they can see how a finite life can have its own peculiar splendor. Beckett's narrative does not see this. But then his assault on narrative does not remove from us the possibility of another sort of narrative: one whose structures express the beauty of that which is human and fragile and call forth in us a love of that beauty and the limits that constitute it.

Finally, we notice in this narrative one further religious prejudice: the prejudice against that which is made in society and in favor of the pure soul, the soul before and apart from all social constructing. For it is not only the specific forms of socially constructed desire that inspire loathing in Beckett's voices. It is also the whole idea of social construction itself, the whole idea that a group can tell me who and what I am to be and to feel. These reflections are most fully developed in *The Unnamable*, with its attacks on the “pupil Mahood,” who thinks and feels as he has been taught to do and who has, therefore, only a species language, only

32. Compare the illuminating remarks about the difference between Lucretius and Dante in George Santayana, *Three Philosophical Poets* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1910).

species feelings, who can never, in virtue of this, say or even think *himself*. But this line of reflection is present throughout the trilogy, beneath its loathing of specific social forms, and it contributes powerfully to the novels' despairing message.

But, we might ask, why is it that these voices are so intolerant of society and of shared forms of thought and feeling? Why aren't they willing to allow that the common to all might be and say themselves? Isn't it, really, because they are in the grip of a longing for the pure soul, hard as a diamond, individual and indivisible, coming forth from its maker's hand with its identity already stamped upon it? Don't they reject shared language because they long for a pure language of the soul itself by itself and for pure relationships among souls that will be in no way mediated by the contingent structures of human social life? Everywhere the voices turn, they find the group and its history. They cannot go beyond that. But this is a tragedy for them only because they are gripped by the conviction that nothing man-made and contingent could ever stand for them. Their very despair gives evidence of their deep religiosity. They have not been able to go far enough outside the Christian picture to see how to pose the problem of self-expression in a way that is not shaped by that picture. If they could get that far outside, they might discover that it is no disgrace to be a political animal, that the fact that human language is not available either to beasts or to gods is no point against it.

IX

The project, and related projects, have several important lessons to learn from Beckett's voices, despite these criticisms. First, it must always bear in mind that the emotions, if they are cognitive and therefore useful sources of information concerning human values, are also, by the same token, subject to social manipulation. This, as I said, does not imply a relativism in which no construct is better than any other, any more than the fact that different societies teach different beliefs implies that they are all equally true. But it does mean that the issue of social origin must be squarely faced with emotions as with beliefs, that emotions do not give us a bedrock of reliable "natural" evidence that stands apart from what society makes. It means that with emotions as well as with beliefs, the social and also psychogenetic origins must be carefully investigated, before we are entitled to draw any conclusions about their role in human life. And before any normative conclusions can be drawn about what is or is not conducive to human flourishing, the issue of relativism must be confronted. The project, in short, must look at social history, and not without a critical eye.

We need to bear in mind, as well, that narratives contain emotions in their very structure; so their form stands in need of the same sort of scrutiny that we give to emotions represented within it. Narrative is not unshaped human life; indeed, human life is not either. Narratives are

constructs that respond to certain patterns of living and shape them in their turn. So we must always ask what content the literary forms themselves express, what structures of desire they represent and evoke.

This means, where the assessment of abstract principles and theories is concerned, that we must not treat the literary "evidence" as Baconian observation data that any good theory must fit. Instead, we will see both principles and stories as different sorts of theories or views about life; and in the case of a discrepancy we would not always give priority to the story and its emotions. The whole enterprise of examining our sense of life should be holistic: frequently we will reject an abstract theoretical account for being at odds with the concrete perceptions of life and feeling embodied in literary forms; but sometimes, too, we may criticize a story by setting it beside a theoretical account—if we decide that the latter includes more of what we want to preserve. There is no Archimedean point that we can occupy as we do this; and there is no hard-and-fast rule as to how this will be done.³³ But our reflection about the depth of Christian feeling in the construction of our narrative forms suggests, at the least, that we should keep strongly alive the theoretical and critical side of the enterprise and subject the emotions to rational scrutiny.

Finally, we need to consider, as Beckett forces us to consider, that the choice to write at all expresses, itself, a content, that, therefore, if we really wish to examine all the attitudes toward human life and its value, we cannot simply examine the contrasting forms of writing. We must ask as well, if we can, along with Beckett's voices, exactly what writing itself *is* in human life; how it is related to the ambition to control and order, therefore, perhaps, to a certain discontent with or even a hatred of human life as it is lived; how it might displace both writer and reader from a loving acceptance of the world. We have so far spoken as if writing could express all the human forms of feeling, in its own many forms. But writing is itself a choice, an act, and not a neutral act either. It is opposed to other forms of action or passion: to listening, to waiting, to keeping silent.³⁴ And so its forms of feeling may be similarly confined, opposed to other forms. In *The Unnamable*, the voice perceives itself as "shut up" inside a wall of words, constrained by its own speaking. And "the silence is outside, outside . . . nothing but this voice and the silence all round." And the thought of silence is linked with the thought of freedom (p. 409); a freedom, perhaps, from both making and being made.

And even that thought, the voice realizes, is uttered in the old language, the language of stories, of progress, of hope and happy endings.

33. On this (with reference to Rawls), see Nussbaum "Perceptive Equilibrium."

34. It is opposed, as well, of course, to speaking orally; but Beckett's voices do not seem to make a significant distinction between storytelling and story writing. In any more extended treatment of this matter, however, the difference between writing and speaking would have to be considered.

It is not silent enough to accept being as it is. In the end, he imagines that he might live a different story and that words have taken him only to the "threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story" (p. 414). And if that door opens, "it will be the silence" (p. 414), and the end of knowing and conceiving, and the end of writing and speaking; and that silence would be the only exit from a life of writing, the only story that ends stories. (And isn't that thought of ending itself an ending, in the old style?) These things, too, we must consider as we go on (as we must, as he must) using the words that are all we have to say ourselves.

And what emotion, if any, does the silence itself express? Could there be a form of love in the silence, in the act of not structuring, not writing? Or perhaps an absence of emotion, of story construction, that is itself more loving still than love has ever been? This, too, must be considered in any writing on this topic, although the act of writing obscures it as a possibility.