

Samuel Beckett's Humour: Attuning Philosophy and Literary Criticism

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Declaration of Original Authorship.

I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores and describes the comic features of Samuel Beckett's prose works. It explores fundamental questions about Beckett's humour. On the one hand, it investigates the nature of humour, and, on the other, it investigates what counts as humour in Beckett. This twofold investigation requires 'attuning' philosophy and literary criticism, where questions and tools of each discipline mutually sharpen and refine each other.

Chapter 1 evaluates philosophical accounts of humour and identifies Incongruity Theory as the theory offering the best account of humour. According to this theory, a necessary and not sufficient condition for comic amusement is the perception of an incongruity.

Chapter 2 starts exploring *what* counts as humour in Beckett by examining where comic incongruities are located. By doing so, this chapter puts the Incongruity Theory to the test, and, evaluates the analytical tools ordinarily used in describing humour. This exploration uses Ruby Cohn's seminal description of Beckett's humour as a springboard. This chapter individuates a comic layer which Cohn's description has overlooked – the 'comic of language acts'.

Chapter 3 analyses Beckett's texts in order to describe the comic devices that depend on the (mis)performance of language acts. In order to do so, the discussion makes use of Austin's Theory of Speech Acts. As a result, this chapter develops a set of tools able to capture 'the comic of language acts', a comic layer which crucially shapes Beckett's writing.

Chapter 4 demonstrates how to make use of the set of tools developed in Chapter 3 by examining three key works of Beckett – *More Pricks than Kicks*, *Watt*, and *Molloy*. This examination leads to the individuation of three movements at the level of illocutionary acts – 'twists', 'convolutions', and 'oscillations' – which are informative of Beckett's writing and of the experience of reading these works.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Asking Fundamental Questions

This thesis investigates the comic side of Samuel Beckett's works. The centrality of this aspect is evident to readers familiar with Beckett's works and its relevance has been widely recognised by scholars. As a consequence, considerations on humour have often contributed in a significant way to the overarching interpretations of Beckett's works. However, despite this centrality and relevance, there are only a few studies where the primary focus is on Beckett's humour. This is a cause for concern, not only because these studies have not covered all the aspects of Beckett's humour, but primarily because, as a result of the lack of careful and thorough studies, a number of assumptions regarding Beckett's humour have been left unexamined.

For example, a discussion of the 'humanist' criticisms of Beckett's works indicates an instance of how the unexamined assumptions of humour could lead to problematic conclusions for them and for their critics. 'Humanist' criticism, one of the most influential and lasting interpretations of Beckett works, claims that these works have an ethical value insofar as they face up to and unmask the misery of the human condition.¹ Because of this, humanists claim, Beckett's works elevate rather than disparage human beings, by showing their capacity to grasp their own limitations and see their own misery. In the words of Martin Esslin, "the very act of confronting the void, or continuing to confront it, is an act of affirmation. The blacker the situation, the deeper the background of despair against which this act of affirmation is made, the more complete, the more triumphant must be the victory that it constitutes".² Beckett's works would be working then as a *critique* of the human condition: they aim to unmask the true nature of the human condition, by revealing its limitations, and in doing so they produce emancipation. In this picture, the ethical significance of Beckett's works depends on its relationships to truth; it is by unveiling the 'truth' that Beckett's works achieve what is 'good'.

Humour plays a fundamental role in this picture: it is what enables Beckett's works to destitute as well as to elevate human condition. Firstly, humour *disparages* its target (a certain image of the human condition according to which human beings are in control of their own fate); secondly, humour *unveils* or *unmasks* the reality about the human condition (its misery); thirdly, humour *distances* those who laugh from the target of laughter, leading to the acceptance of their condition.³ There is a *prima facie*

¹ For presentations of 'humanist' criticism see: David Pattie, *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett* (Routledge, 2000), pp. 105-152, David Pattie, 'Beckett and Bibliography', in Lois Oppenheim (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2004), pp. 226-246. Paul Sheehan discusses the humanist theses in connection to laughter in Paul Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 153-155.

² Martin Esslin, 'Introduction', in Martin Esslin (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 1-15, p. 14.

³ For example, the following works share, to different extent, these claims. W. Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study* (New York: Grove Press, 1961), Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (New edition edn.; London: Bloomsbury, 2014). Ruby Cohn's view is often associated with this view. However, whilst it seems quite safe to say that she sees humour associated with disparagement, it is less sure that she agreed with this view on the ethical role played by Beckett's works. Indeed she

contradiction between the claim of the ethical nature of Beckett's works and the claim that this is achieved by disparagement, i.e. at the expense of the object of laughter. However, according to the scholars who hold this view, this contradiction is only apparent and it is dispelled by realising that the object of laughter and the subject of laughter coincide. This is for example the stance of Simon Critchley who recently has claimed that Beckett's humour is a model for a proper ethical humour - a humour that is played at the expense of no other, the subject who laughs is also the object of the laughter. In this view, the subject enters as object of laughter twice: firstly, as participating in the human condition that is targeted by laughter, and, secondly, as taking its own laughter as an object of laughter.⁴

Whilst the humanist view has the merit of freeing Beckett's works from the stigma of presenting a wholly grim picture of humanity, it has also implications that strongly affect the critical appreciation of Beckett's works. Firstly, Beckett's works present an array of instances of humour, and the ethical role indicated by humanists cannot be claimed for all of them. If one accepts the humanist view that the significance of Beckett's humour lies in its ethical stance, then one accepts also that the humour that does not contribute to this stance should be dismissed as less significant. Secondly, whilst the humanist picture has the merit to counter an interpretation of Beckett's works that privileges the bitter and grim aspects, it runs the risk of presenting Beckett's works as the champion of clear and evident ethical judgment. This is something that Beckett has strongly refused for his works, and, more importantly, this representation does not reflect the experience of reading Beckett's works, which almost always leave the reader with more uncertainties than certainties. Accepting the roles that this picture confers to humour entails accepting that a large part of Beckett's humour is not significant and that Beckett's works take a clear ethical stance.

Those who are not ready to accept these controversial implications can counter the humanist view in different ways and with different strategies. One such way is to engage with the view by looking at whether the premises on which their conclusion is based are true in the context of Beckett's works. This approach has been taken recently by Shane Weller who has scrutinised the main claims of the humanist view. Weller extracts the argument of these views and shows that the conclusion on the ethical nature of Beckett's works follows from the premises which claim that Beckett's works (i) invite laughter at (ii) certain specific objects (human condition as well as the laughing subject too). Thus the two premises on which the conclusion on the ethical stance of Beckett's works is based are that (i) Beckett's works involve the assumption of a specific attitude – that of laughter, and that (ii) this attitude is taken towards distinguishable objects. Without either of these two conditions being met, it would be impossible for this view to conclude that Beckett's works play an ethical role. On the one hand, laughter is necessary to enable the mechanisms of disparagement and elevation, and, on the other hand, the object of laughter

claims that "Beckett's fool no longer achieves anyone's catharsis, least of all his own". Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962), p. 284.

⁴ Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 50. Critchley discusses his view of Beckett's humour also in Simon Critchley, *Very Little... Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (2nd edn.; London: Routledge, 2004).

must be evident to those who laugh in order for them to see what exactly is being disparaged and elevated. However, Weller points out, the conclusion of the humanist view relies on the assumption “that in Beckett one is left in a position to establish who is laughing, at what they are laughing, and why”.⁵

Weller’s efforts are thus directed towards showing that the assumptions on which the humanist conclusion is based turn out to be false. As a consequence, the conclusion on the ethical nature of Beckett’s works does not follow. By contrast, from the indecision with regard to the attitude that Beckett’s works invite to take, as well as with regard to the object of the putative laughter, Weller derives the ‘anethical’ character of Beckett’s works:

It is not simply that laughter has been left behind, however, but rather that one is no longer in a position to determine whether there is anything to laugh at, and, if not, who, if anyone, might have had the last laugh. That indecision is neither ethical nor unethical, but rather anethical, blocking while also soliciting the establishment of both ethicality and unethicality as the underlying principle of Beckett’s art.⁶

The critical picture that Weller offers certainly takes a step forward towards offering an account of humour which does not rely on unexamined assumptions. In addition the description that he offers of the role played by humour seems more reflective of the experience of reading Beckett’s works, where the ethical message, if there is one, is rarely unambiguous. However, Weller’s conclusion also relies on an assumption, and one which his view shares with the humanist account that he criticises. Whilst Weller criticises the humanist conclusion for being based on mistaken premises about Beckett’s texts, he does not examine the assumptions regarding the nature of humour on which that argument is based. Indeed, not only the humanist argument assumes that the comic attitude and the object of laughter are unambiguous to the readers, but also that the comic is bounded with *disparagement*, *unmasking* and *distancing*. As said previously, Weller criticises the humanist argument that Beckett’s works (i) invite laughter on (ii) specific object to (iii) disparage, unmask or distance and (iv) on this depends their ethical stance. Weller criticises the humanist argument by rejecting (i) and (ii) and, as a consequence, rejecting the conclusion (iv). But he does not question (iii). Indeed his own view is based on this assumption. Given that we are left in the indecision regarding (i) and (ii), the outcome of the argument cannot be (iv), but the suspension of ethical and unethical judgements. However, that (iii) there is a link between the ethical and laughter is not questioned. The question that Weller does not raise is the question around the nature of humour. Weller’s conclusion is not granted unless the connection between humour and ethical stances is examined; that is, unless the question ‘what *is* humour?’ is answered. Thus the investigation that is required is not only one of literary nature, that looks at whether certain claims are

⁵ Shane Weller, ‘Last Laughs: Beckett and the Ethics of Comedy’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 15/1-2 (2005), pp. 35-59, p. 49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 56-57.

true in the context of Beckett's works, but it is one that engages with philosophical discussion around the nature of the concepts employed.

The question 'what *is* humour?' is even more pressing for Weller's account insofar as his picture of Beckett's humour could contain a contradiction if he does not clarify his position on the nature of humour. In the passage quoted above, Weller claims that there are instances in Beckett's works where 'one is no longer in a position to determine whether there is anything to laugh at'. According to this picture, determining whether there is anything to laugh at or not depends on being in the appropriate position to judge it. Depending on how one interprets the phrase 'determine whether there is anything to laugh at' and, more importantly, depending on what theory of humour one holds, this claim can be more or less problematic. We shall first explore how this phrase can be interpreted, and then consider whether the different possible interpretations are compatible with the account of humour that Weller seems to hold.

On the one hand, 'determining whether there is anything to laugh at' could be understood as (i) determining whether or not there is an object that could be suitable to elicit laughter. On the other hand, 'determining whether there is anything to laugh at' could be understood as (ii) determining whether laughing is an appropriate response to the perception of an object which is suitable for laughter (as in 'there is nothing to laugh about').

The first of these two interpretations leads to a contradiction regardless of the account of humour that one holds. Indeed, if it is truly the case that a condition for identifying if there is anything to laugh at is that one is in the appropriate position to determine it, when this condition is not met, one would not perceive an object as the possible object of laughter at all, one would not be puzzling about it. On the other hand, if the question around the presence of laughter arises, then either the condition posed by Weller is met - and he is mistaken about no longer being in the position to judge - or the conditions determining the presence of laughter are different.

To understand whether the second interpretation leads to the same contradiction, we must consider what accounts of humour one could hold.

If we are right in saying that Weller does not question the link between humour and disparagement, then there might be room to say that he holds an account of humour similar to that offered by the Superiority Theory of humour. According to this theory, a necessary condition for comic amusement is feeling superior to the object of laughter. As a consequence, according to this theory, the essential role played by humour is that of *disparaging*. In addition to the fact that Weller seems to confer to humour the same role (*disparagement*) that Superiority Theory confers to it, some of the expressions that he uses are typical of the tradition of Superiority. For example, to wonder who 'had the last laugh' is to wonder who was victorious, and only Superiority Theory thinks about comic experiences as experiences where one is a winner over someone else.

Were Weller to hold an account of humour similar to the Superiority Theory, as the various elements indicated seem to suggest, then his claim that there are instances in Beckett's works where 'one is no longer in a position to determine whether there is anything to laugh at' contains elements of tension even when we interpret the stance 'to determine whether there is anything to laugh at' in the second way (i.e. determining whether we should be laughing or not at an object suitable for laughter). It is useful to spell out the second way to interpret this claim more clearly, to see how the tension arises. According to the second interpretation, Weller would be claiming that (a) one is no longer in a position to determine (b) whether it is appropriate or not to laugh at (c) a suitable object for laughter. So according to this interpretation, one lacks the means to determine (b), but one might have the means to determine (c). In other words, we are in the position to determine whether or not an object is suitable for laughter (c), but we are not in a position to determine whether or not it is appropriate to respond to the perception of the object with laughter (b). However, these claims struggle to hold together under a Superiority account of humour. On this view, to determine (c) that an object is suitable for laughter equals to (c*) feeling superior to the object. But claiming that one is in the position to feel superior (one can judge himself as better than others) seems at odds with claiming that one is not in a position to judge whether or not it is appropriate to laugh (if it is right or wrong, appropriate or not) as these are both evaluative judgments that depend on similar considerations and involve the exercise of similar faculties.

On the other hand, there is an alternative account of humour that Weller could hold under which his claim would be less problematic. According to the Incongruity Theory of humour a necessary condition for comic amusement is the perception of an incongruity. Interpreted under the light of this account, saying that we are able to determine that (c) an object is suitable for laughter is to say that we are able to (c**) determine that an object is incongruous (that an object contradicts some patterns of expectations on how things ordinarily are). Claiming that we are able to (c**) determine that an object is incongruous is compatible with saying that we are not able to (b) determine whether it is appropriate to laugh at the object. Indeed, these two claims are about our ability to make two different types of judgments - descriptive judgements about expected patterns, on the one hand, and normative judgements, on the other.

Shane Weller's claim is not contradictory if one sees it under the light of Incongruity Theory. However, this theory does not see a necessary link between humour and disparagement, which is a link that Weller's account seems to assume. For this reason, the examination of the nature of humour should be a pressing concern for him. Again, in order to solve this problem, one must ask the question 'what *is* humour?'

Furthermore, to set an account of Beckett's humour on firm ground, we must answer another question in connection to the one already individuated. Weller rightly points out that in Beckett's works it is

often difficult to say unambiguously that something is funny as well as to neatly identify the object of laughter. Part of the difficulties behind identifying *what* counts as humour in Beckett's works depends on the fact that Beckett's humour is often on the verge of turning into its opposites. For example, where one would ordinarily expect humour to be entertaining and rhythmic, Beckett's humour borders with excruciation and boredom; where ordinarily humour would be considered light-hearted and playful, Beckett's humour is often grave and tragic; finally, where ordinarily the comic would be expected to be intuitive or effortless, Beckett's humour is often considered obscure and complex. This aspect of Beckett's writing not only invites us to ask the philosophical question of 'what *is* humour?', but also elicits the question 'what is humour in Beckett?' If one is to provide a thorough and careful account of the role played by humour, then one must be able to, if not circumscribe, at least describe the elements of Beckett's texts that are potentially humorous. One must be able to say what could count as humorous, what does not, and why sometimes what could be considered as humorous does not lead to laughter.

Answering the question 'what is humour in Beckett?' requires an investigation which is perceptive to the various elements of Beckett's writing. It requires an investigation that not only examines funny passages, but which will also examine the texts in order to understand what elements make comic features more prominent than others, what elements facilitate, enable or block humour to perform certain roles and not others, or what elements contribute to or prevent humour from turning into its opposites.

Furthermore, answering the question 'what is humour in Beckett?' requires an investigation equipped with tools which allow for tracing and describing the elements of the texts that are informative of Beckett's humour. However, very often critical readings make claims regarding the role played by humour without questioning the set of tools that they use to individuate comic instances in Beckett's works. It is often the case that the comic instances that are chosen to illustrate Beckett's humour are not representative of the complexity of Beckett's comic writing. Indeed, the illustrations often consist in Beckett's puns, word plays or jokes, which certainly have the advantage of being circumscribed and self-evident, but that are not representative of the whole of Beckett's comic writing, which builds over passages. This also gives us reasons to be sceptical of how informative these devices actually are. Moreover, even when studies have focused on other types of instances, the assumption that we have the instruments to effectively describe Beckett's comic devices has not been questioned. For example, Salisbury recognises that it is difficult to isolate and extract passages from Beckett's works that are representative and informative of his comic writing. However, according to her, the constraints on the possibility to do so are practical (these passages are long and interwoven into the text) rather than conceptual (we lack the conceptual tools to do so).⁷ An investigation of Beckett's humour cannot claim

⁷ Laura Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 1-3.

to be thorough unless the comic devices on which such claims are based are representative and informative of Beckett's comedy.

Thus, if it is true that (i) humour plays a fundamental role in Beckett's writing, and nonetheless (ii) humour is under-examined in Beckett's scholarship, then if we want to improve our understanding of Beckett's writing, (iii) we should understand the role that humour plays in it. Furthermore, given that understanding the role of humour entails knowing (iv) what humour *is* and (v) *what* is humour in Beckett, then the question that we are urged to address first if we want to set the ground for a better understanding of Beckett's works is *what is Beckett's humour?*

2. The Project: Its Aim, Scope and Nature.

This thesis aims to respond to the pressing concern individuated in the previous section – ‘what is Beckett's humour?’ – by investigating (i) what humour *is* and (ii) *what* is humour in Beckett.

Notice that these investigations respond also to the particular nature of Beckett's humour. It is because Beckett's works are strangely funny that they invite an investigation that starts first and foremost from asking fundamental questions on what makes something funny and how we can individuate and describe what causes amusement. Had Beckett's work been obviously funny, then perhaps these two questions would have been less compelling.

Furthermore, the nature of the two investigations determines the nature of the project, which is philosophical *and* literary. On the one hand, to investigate (i) ‘what *is* humour?’, entails asking a set of questions around the nature of humour which are of genuinely philosophical nature. Accordingly, we shall move this investigation by evaluating available philosophical accounts of humour. On the other hand, to investigate (ii) ‘*what* is humour in Beckett?’ entails conducting a study which is of a genuinely literary nature. Indeed, to understand what is comic in Beckett's works we must ask what the relevant characteristics of Beckett's works and the relevant features of his writing are.

The twofold nature of this thesis makes it particularly apt to explore the potentiality of *attuning* philosophical and literary discussions. With the word ‘attunement’ we do not refer to an investigation which simply makes use of philosophical and literary critical discussions. By contrast, we use the term ‘attunement’ to refer to an investigation where philosophical discussions and literary critical discussions shape one another. Maximilian De Gaynesford describes ‘attunement’ - in his case the attunement of philosophy and poetry - as follows:

By attunement, I mean a mutually shaping approach in which we really do philosophy in really appreciating poetry, doing the literary criticism necessary for this. By ‘doing philosophy’, I mean analysing material in genuinely philosophical ways, with the prospect of changing the way we think about things in general. By ‘really appreciating poetry’, I mean adopting a genuinely critical

approach, with the prospect of changing the way we respond to poems. And I mean ‘mutually shaping’ in a strong sense: attunement is a single, unified activity.⁸

In accordance with this description of ‘attunement’, a further and underlying aim of this thesis is to show that not only do philosophical and literary discussion benefit from each other, but that they sometimes enable each other. The claim that philosophical and literary discussion can benefit from each other is hardly controversial. It is quite common that literary passages are used as illustrations of philosophical concepts or analysis, and is at least equally common that philosophical theories are used as springboards for literary discussions. In each of these two cases, only one discipline benefits from the other. Philosophy benefits from literature when the latter is used as illustration, but not much of literary relevance is usually said about the passages taken as illustrations. Similarly, the critical understanding of a literary work benefits from approaching it through a philosophical theory, which, however, is not discussed for its philosophical stances. The same considerations cannot be made for the second claim supported by this thesis, i.e. that philosophical and literary discussions sometimes enable one another. This claim is certainly more controversial, insofar as it entails claiming that some philosophical discussion could not be carried out without an attunement to literary analysis and vice-versa. A discussion that requires an attunement to both philosophy and literature to be carried out is one where both disciplines benefit from such an attunement; the discussion bears its significance in literary criticisms as well as in philosophy.

Thus, the initial outline made earlier of the two components (philosophy and literary criticism) of our investigation shall not mislead the reader into thinking that these components are two separate and independent souls inhabiting the same project. Rather, the opposite is true. Firstly, in this thesis philosophy and literary questions are interconnected because their answers are mutually dependent. Each question is answered in a satisfactory way only if the other is too. To answer the question (ii) ‘*what is humour in Beckett?*’ cannot be done if we do not know the answer to the first question, that is if we do not know (i) what humour *is*. However, at the same time, we cannot have a satisfactory account of (i) what humour *is* unless we know that our answer is able to account for all the relevant comic features of a given text. And, for the purposes of this thesis, this requires knowing (ii) *what is humour in Beckett’s works*.

Secondly, philosophy and literary questions are interconnected because they refine and sharpen each other. On the one hand, the philosophical investigation of the nature of humour (in particular, of the humour which depends on features of language) informs our assessment of literary accounts of Beckett’s humour, sharpens our perceptiveness of certain features of the text, and leads to a literary description of key elements of Beckett’s writing. On the other hand, the literary analysis of features of Beckett’s texts recurrently prompts questions around the gaps left by the philosophical accounts of

⁸ Maximilian De Gaynesford, *The Rift in the Lute: Attuning Poetry and Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017b), p. 9.

humour, and suggests possible avenues for further investigation. Furthermore, the alertness to the literary features of the texts guides the development of an original philosophical approach to humour.

Thus, different modes of interactions and collaborations between philosophy and literary criticisms are at work in each of the chapters of this thesis. In outlining the contribution of each chapter to the main aim of the thesis (investigating what is Beckett's humour), we shall also highlight their contribution to the underlying aim of the thesis (investigating the relation between philosophical and literary discussions).

Before outlining the discussion of the thesis, we shall circumscribe its scope. The thesis does not aim to provide an exhaustive answer to its leading question, 'what is Beckett's humour?' Firstly, the thesis does not analyse the whole range of literary genres employed by Beckett. It focuses on Beckett's prose works, and it does not offer considerations on Beckett's poetry, nor on his dramatic works (theatre, film, television and radio plays), or on his pieces of literary criticism. Secondly, the prose works used for the discussion are those where, as the majority of Beckett's scholars would claim, humour plays a pivotal role. These are Beckett's early and mature works, up until the writing of the three novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable* (henceforth 'trilogy'). By contrast, the considerations made in this thesis do not apply to Beckett's post-trilogy prose works, where the presence of humour is not as overwhelmingly recognised. Given this, if these texts contain humour, the investigation of it would require a separate set of considerations to explain how its presence is not as easily recognised.⁹ Finally, even with regards to this restricted set of works, the thesis does not aim to offer an exhaustive answer to its leading question. This is to say that the thesis does not aim to offer a definite and complete catalogue of the different types of comic instances that Beckett employs in the works examined. By contrast, the thesis aims to develop an approach to capture a layer of 'comic' that is significantly informative of Beckett's writing.

The discussion of this thesis is organised in two parts, which address the two leading questions of this thesis ('what is humour?', and 'what is humour in Beckett?') and contribute to their answers in a different way. Firstly, a large part of the investigation of Part 1 is carried out by looking at the critical literature in both humour studies and Beckett studies. By contrast, a large part of the investigation of Part 2 is carried out by developing an original approach to humour and to Beckett's writing. Despite the fact that the main positive and original contributions of the thesis come from Part 2, Part 1 contributes to the current debate in both fields by sharpening and focusing some of the questions involved.

⁹ Salisbury's and Locatelli's studies are exceptions as they provide a discussion of humour in the works that Beckett wrote after the trilogy. See Carla Locatelli, *Unwording the World: Samuel Beckett's Prose Works after the Nobel Prize* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*.

In particular, Chapter 1 addresses the question ‘what *is* humour?’ by evaluating possible accounts of humour. Given the nature of this question, the discussion carried out in this chapter is primarily philosophical, and Beckett’s texts are introduced as illustrations. The chapter concludes that the theory which offers the best account of humour is the Incongruity Theory of humour, which claims that the perception of an incongruity is a necessary but not sufficient element for comic amusement. The discussion of this theory leads to the individuation of two problems related to it. In the first instance, the notion of *incongruity* is criticised to be vague in such a way that it becomes uninformative and vacuous (‘Problem of Vagueness’). In the second instance, the theory does not provide us with tools to distinguish between incongruities that lead to amused reactions and those that do not (‘Problem of Non-humorous Reactions’).

The second chapter starts investigating *what* counts as humour in Beckett by looking at where the comic incongruities are located in Beckett’s texts. This chapter addresses two separate questions. On the one hand, it addresses the question ‘*what* is Beckett’s humour?’ by looking at how this question has been answered by Beckett’s scholars. In particular, this chapter chooses to evaluate Ruby Cohn’s description of Beckett’s instances of humour, given that this is, to date, the most thorough, careful and influential description available. On the other hand, Chapter 2 addresses the first of the two problems individuated in Chapter 1: it investigates whether the notion of *incongruity* is informative, despite its vagueness. Chapter 2 carries out these two lines of investigation in conjunction, and, consequently, the discussion is one where the philosophical and literary considerations enable each other. The notion of *incongruity* proves to be informative as it gives us tools to describe the comic mechanisms individuated by Cohn’s analysis. Moreover, it unpacks layers of comic that Cohn’s analysis had overlooked. Despite Cohn’s reading proving able to capture a wide range of comic instances, Chapter 2 shows that there is at least a group of comic instances (‘comic of language acts’) that the tools that she employs do not capture.

In Chapter 3, the thesis begins to take leave of well-known discussions and to explore new territory. This chapter develops an approach aimed at describing the comic instances where humour depends on acts performed in using language (and thus it addresses the gap individuated in Chapter 2). In order to do so, Chapter 3 makes use of Austin’s theory of Speech Acts, which is a philosophical theory specifically focused on the acts performed *in* saying words and with the *incongruities* (infelicities, in Austin’s terminology) that hinder this performance. As in Chapter 2, the discussion of this chapter requires an attunement of philosophy and literary criticisms. Whilst philosophy offers key elements to understand the performative aspect of language, the development of a set of tools able to capture the humour connected to this aspect would not be possible without an alertness to the literary features of Beckett’s texts. Furthermore, comparing and contrasting literary features of texts that appear to be similar, provides us with some indications on how the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions individuated in Chapter 1 could be approached in future investigations.

Finally, Chapter 4 demonstrates how to make use of the set of tools developed in Chapter 3. In doing so, it tests the ability of this set of tools to capture a comic layer in Beckett's writing that is informative and representative of Beckett's comic style, and hence to provide an answer to the question 'what is humour in Beckett?'. On the one hand, this chapter tests the resourcefulness of the set of tools by showing that they can capture pivotal elements of three main Beckett's works (*More Pricks than Kicks*, *Watt*, and *Molloy*). In particular, these tools lead to the individuation of three movements that take place at the level of illocutionary acts – 'twists', 'convolutions', and 'oscillations' – which significantly shape Beckett's writing and the experience of reading these works. On the other hand, this chapter tests the resourcefulness of these tools by assessing their contribution to debates in Beckett's studies. The individuation of these three movements contribute to the discussion around some of the features of the texts analysed. Given the nature of these two tests, the discussion of this chapter is primarily of literary nature, where a philosophical framework is used as guideline.

Before starting the substantive chapters, it is important to draw attention to how the considerations that will be made in this thesis could contribute to broader debates in humour studies as well as Beckett's studies. On the one hand, this thesis willingly chooses to counter a (legitimate) tendency in philosophical humour studies to focus on simple comic devices, and offers an extensive discussion of Beckett's passages where humour takes complex forms. Because of this, this thesis offers a solid ground to affirm that the notion of *incongruity* is not vacuous and to counter some of the criticism made to it. Moreover, it is because this thesis chooses to immerse in the complexity of humour instances and of literary texts, rather than do away with them, that it is able to indicate a promising avenue for future research on the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions. Finally, this thesis shows that humour studies could benefit by entering in dialogue with Austin's theory of Speech Acts, which is under-examined in this field.

On the other hand, the discussion of this thesis provides new tools and considerations that can be used in Beckett's studies to find new resources for several debates. Firstly, the considerations about the nature of humour can contribute to discussion of the ethical relevance of Beckett's works. Given that these two elements are often associated, then understating what humour is in Beckett would lead to a more informed discussion on what is its ethical value. Secondly, the tools developed in this thesis offer a new angle to investigating and understanding Beckett's interest with language, and more specifically his interest with language performativity. Moreover, this investigation could take a comparative turn and see how Beckett's use of performative language differs across different *genres*, and whether Beckett's turn to theatre has influenced the use of performative language in his prose works. Finally, if further investigated, the considerations made in this thesis could contribute to the debate on the unity of Beckett's *oeuvre*. This would be the case if, for example, the tools developed in this thesis show that some of the key elements of works that Beckett wrote in different stages of his career are based on similar devices.

Thus, despite the considerations made in this thesis having a narrow focus, and although they do not offer a new account of humour nor a new overarching interpretation of Beckett's humour, the scope of their bearing is wide. This is because, as argued at the beginning of this introduction, this thesis questions fundamental assumptions about a central element of Beckett's writing, its comic side. The revision of these assumptions could generate a domino effect and lead to questioning the overarching interpretations of Beckett's work based on these and related assumptions. The invitation is then that of bearing in mind these further possible avenues of discussion while reading this thesis.

PART 1

Chapter 1: What *is* Humour?

1.1 Preliminary Distinctions and Criteria of Assessment of Humour Theories

Before starting our discussion of the different accounts of humour, there are preliminary clarifications around the use of terms such as ‘laughter’, ‘amusement’, and ‘humour’, and around the use of adjectives such as ‘comic’ and ‘funny’ to be made.

The term ‘laughter’ is used in this discussion to indicate a combination of bodily movements and events which are, in non-pathological situations and in situations where laughter is not performed as an action, involuntary or semi-voluntary responses to a stimulus.¹ Laughter could be then either a response to stimuli such as those detectable in verbal, figurative or practical forms of humour, or a response to non-humorous stimuli. This is the case, for example, when laughter has been caused by sensory stimuli (being tickled) or in the case of laughter which accompanies joy, victory or even embarrassment.

Scholars who believe that a theory has to be comprehensive enough to explain both humorous and non-humorous laughter, regardless of what theory they endorse, have criticised classical accounts of humour or laughter for not being able to do so.² The debate around whether humorous and non-humorous laughter should be regarded as the same phenomenon is not of concern for the present study, which is only interested in what triggers humorous laughter. Nonetheless, it should be noted that even if it is the case that humorous laughter and non-humorous laughter, as well as the stimuli that cause them, have significant commonalities, a theory that aims to account for these commonalities must account also for their difference. Such a theory must be able to explain what differentiates humorous from non-humorous laughter: it would have to provide an account of humorous stimuli and of their distinctive features.

‘Amusement’ is the term used to indicate an intentional mental state.³ We distinguish between two different uses of the term ‘amusement’. In a broad sense, it can be used to describe the state one is in

¹ See Robert R. Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000).

² See, for example, John Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously* (Albany: State University of New York, 1983a), pp. 38-59. Joshua Shaw criticises what he regards to be a consensus amongst contemporary philosophers of humour, namely that humour can be separated from laughter. According to him, this consensus is based on some unexamined assumptions which mislead current theories of humour. See Joshua Shaw, ‘Philosophy of Humor’, *Philosophy Compass*, 5/2 (2010), pp. 112-126. Hurley, Dennett and Adams in *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2011) whilst recognising that laughter is neither necessary nor sufficient for humour, claim that a thorough explanation of humour should nonetheless account for the relationship between the two as well as for the cases of humour without laughter. On the other end of the spectrum, many critics have endorsed the view that a theory of humour need to be concerned only with amused laughter. See, for example, Noël Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014a), p. 16; Aaron Smuts, ‘Humor’, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (2006); Hugh LaFollette and Niall Shanks, ‘Belief and the Basis of Humor’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 30/4 (1993), pp. 329-39, p. 329.

³ The debate in humour studies on whether amusement is to be classified amongst the emotions or whether it is to be considered as a mental state of its own peculiar kind, does not question the intentional nature of amusement in itself. As this thesis is not committed to any position, this debate is not addressed here. See for example, Michael Clark, ‘Humour and Incongruity’, *Philosophy*, 45/171 (1970), pp. 20-32; Robert A. Sharpe, ‘Seven Reasons Why Amusement Is an Emotion’, *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, 9/3 (June 01 1975), pp. 201-203; Roger Scruton and Peter Jones, ‘Laughter’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian*

when indulging in some practices that one enjoys. In this sense, we are amused when we occupy our mind in a pleasant way. In a narrow sense, the term amusement refers specifically to comic amusement. We are amused in this narrow sense, not only if our attention is agreeably occupied, but if it is so in a particular way.⁴ For the purposes of this thesis, I am only interested in comic amusement. The presence of comic amusement is what marks the difference between humorous and non-humorous laughter. Only laughter that is caused by, and is the expression of, amusement involves humour.⁵

The term ‘humour’, in this thesis, is used to indicate the object that elicits comic amusement. The term is stripped of the connotations of disparagement, playfulness, merriment or deceitfulness that usually accompany it. For these reasons it is preferred over terms such as wit, mirth or scorn that involve some of such connotations. Adjectives such as comic, and less frequently, funny are used to indicate and qualify passages that contain an instance of humour.

For an object to be suitable to elicit comic amusement and to be considered an instance of humour, the object must be perceived as having some specific characteristics, let us call them characteristics *x*. Part of the job of a theory of humour is that of describing such characteristics *x*.

However, the mere fact that an object is perceived as having characteristic *x* does not seem to be sufficient to determine whether or not a subject is amused by an object.⁶ Indeed, we are all familiar with cases where something that amuses some of our friends does not elicit the same response in us – ‘we do not get it’. In a similar way, we are all familiar with cases where we are amused by objects that in the past had failed to amuse us, and we are all familiar with cases where objects that in the past amused us now leave us indifferent. A possible explanation for the first kind of situations would be saying that ‘we do not get it’ – the joke for example – because we do not perceive it as having the characteristic *x* whereas the others do. However, this explanation, though correct in certain cases, is not the only possible one. Furthermore, it does not account for the second type of situations. It might be the case, that although I perceive the characteristics *x* in the object, ‘I get it’, I am still not amused because I am

Society, Supplementary Volumes, 56 (1982), pp. 197-228; John Morreall, ‘Humor and Emotion’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 20/3 (1983b), pp. 297-304.

⁴ This distinction is drawn, for example, in John Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987b), p. 4. In section 1.3 of this chapter, we shall discuss some of the ways in which someone can be pleasantly occupied without being amused and we shall distinguish such attitudes from those appropriate for eliciting comic amusement.

⁵ Whilst in what follows we approach humour by describing the formal object of amusement (approach first formally proposed in Clark, ‘Humour and Incongruity’), some scholars think that a theory of humour should be approached by focusing on its tendency to elicit laughter. See for example Jerrold Levinson, ‘Humour’, in Graig Edward (ed.), *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (v. 4; London: Routledge, 1998), pp. 562-567, and Shaw, ‘Philosophy of Humor’.

⁶ This is for example the case of Murphy’s joke that Celia recognises as such, but which does not amuse her.

‘Why did the barmaid champagne?’ he said. ‘Do you give it up?’

‘Yes’, said Celia.

‘Because the stout porter bitter’, said Murphy.

This was a joke that did not amuse Celia, at the best of times and places it could not have amused her. That did not matter. So far from being adapted to her, it was not addressed to her. It amused Murphy, that was all that mattered.

Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009f), p. 88.

not in the appropriate conditions to be amused. In a similar manner, something which amused me in the past might not amuse me on other occasions, if I am not in the appropriate conditions to be amused.

What marks the difference in these cases between subjects who are amused and subjects who are not could either be the perception of characteristics x , or being in conditions, let's call them y , appropriate for being amused. A satisfactory theory of humour should be able to offer a description of the characteristics x that elicit comic amusement as well as the conditions y that allow for comic amusement to take place.⁷

There are different explanatory forces that a theory of humour can claim for its description of instances and comic amusement. A strong version of such a theory would aim to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for comic amusement. Such a theory would provide a description of the characteristic x that a subject must perceive the object to have, and of the conditions y under which the subject must perceive the object. It would then claim that if a subject perceives an object as having characteristics x and the subject is in the conditions y , then the subject must be amused by O .

On the other hand, a more modest theory might offer conditions for characteristic x to count as appropriate to elicit comic amusement and of the conditions y in which the subject must be, without claiming that the mere satisfaction of such conditions is sufficient to trigger comic amusement. Thus, even if it is the case that the subject is in the conditions described by the theory as appropriate, and the subject perceives the object as having characteristic x described by the theory, it might still be the case that the subject is not amused. In contrast, the more modest theory claims that if the subject is amused, then the object of the subject's mental state has at least the characteristics x , and the situation fulfils some of the specified conditions. Although such a theory is not able to predict whether a subject would be amused by a certain object, it would nonetheless offer significant insight into the object that elicits amusement.

Finally, it is important to note that not all the scholars who have discussed humour are confident that there could even ever be a theory able to provide necessary, let alone sufficient, conditions for comic amusement. Critics who are sceptical towards providing these conditions maintain that a theory of humour can at most claim that it is sometimes (or often) the case that when a subject is amused the subject perceives the object as having the characteristics x and the subject is under conditions y .

⁷ The difference between humour-recognition and humour-appreciation has been discussed, for example, by Alan Roberts in a recent paper. He provides the following response-dependant definition of humour:

(Har) x is an instance of humour iff x would elicit humour-recognition from normal subject in normal condition.

Note that Roberts considers instances of humour only those which are intentionally created. Thus, according to him a cloud with a funny shape would not be an instance of humour. We, on the other hand, consider as instances of humour also what in literature is called 'found humour'. This type of instances includes things which are unintentionally funny, which were not designed to be funny. Alan Roberts, 'Humour Is a Funny Thing', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 56/4 (2016), pp. 355-366, p. 359.

However, it can be the case that the object does not have characteristics x and nonetheless the subject is amused at the object.⁸

For our purposes, it would be enough to obtain from the discussion of the available theories of humour a description of humour able to capture most of the cases of humour instances or the central cases of humour instances. It would then be our task to test the description provided by the theory against the works of Beckett. However, the discussion in this chapter leads us to support a stronger version of the theory of humour: one that provides necessary, though not sufficient, conditions for a humorous instance to be apt to elicit comic amusement. The next chapter will give us the opportunity to test such a theory, as well as to refine our conception of it by using sophisticated and complex instances of humour.

In the next section of this chapter, we shall present and assess the accounts of humour and laughter available in humour studies. These accounts are conventionally grouped into three main theories: Superiority Theory, Release Theory and Incongruity Theory.⁹ The first of these theories, Superiority Theory, sees humour connected to feeling of superiority. By contrast, Release Theory considers it to be

⁸ See for example Lafollette and Shanks, 'Belief and the Basis of Humor' Ted Cohen, 'Humor', in Berys Gaut and Dominic Mciver Lopes (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (2nd edn.; London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 469-476 Levinson, 'Humour'.

⁹ The conventional classification follows the work of Monro. Whilst he considers Incongruity, Superiority and Release from Restraint as the three main theories of humour, he recognises the existence of other two theories: Play Theory and Ambivalence Theory. David Hector Monro, *Argument of Laughter* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963).

In the literature of humour studies there are several different classifications. Patricia Keith Spiegel, for example, divides the field in eight different groups of theories. She adds to the canonical three theories: Biological, Instinct, and Evolution Theories; Surprise Theories; Ambivalence Theories; Configurational Theories; and Psychoanalytical Theory. See Patricia Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues', in Paul E. McGhee (ed.), *The Psychology of Humor* (San Diego: Academic Press, 1972), pp. 3-39.

Keith Spiegel's division is picked up and slightly modified in Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*. The authors individuate six groups of theories: Biological Theories, Play Theories, Superiority Theory, Release Theory, Incongruity-resolution Theories, and Surprise Theories.

Noël Carroll individuates five leading theories: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, Release Theory, Play Theory, Dispositional Theory. Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 4-54.

We have decided to discuss only the three canonical theories as they are the most discussed in humour studies and they are the most influential in other fields. Furthermore, many of these additional theories can be seen as variations of others. According to Carroll, for example, Play theories, which he presents as being based on the claim that "humour involve playful relaxation", incorporate some elements of the Release Theory. Furthermore, the connection between humour and play is neither convincing nor too helpful. Play and playful are very controversial concept and it is not quite clear how they can illuminate a study of humour. Moreover, if play is taken to mean as 'non-serious, or detached from reality, as Carroll seems to interpret it, then its connection with humour is not convincing. Whilst some, perhaps many, instances of humour involve playfulness, many others are deeply engaged with serious matter, as Carroll notices. See *ibid.*, pp. 42-43, quote at 42. On the other hand, Hurley, Dennett and Adams individuate a strong connection with the Biological theories. Even if this was the case, biological theories are of less interest for us as they have traditionally focused on the evolutionary significance of laughter (and not humour, which is our main focus). Similarly, the Surprise theory considered as a separate set of theory by Hurley Dennett and Adams can be considered as a variation on the Incongruity Theory (Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, pp. 37-40, 53-54). Carroll's study and Hurley, Dennett and Adams' study consider Max Eastman one of the endorsers of this theory. See Max Eastman, *Enjoyment of Laughter* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2009).

The Dispositional Theory, which according to Carroll is presented and defended by Levinson, though not reducible to one of the canonical theories, is not of interest for us either. By defining humour as something that has a disposition to elicit laughter, the theory does not provide much insight into the objects that have this feature. See Levinson, 'Humour' Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 43-48; John Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Wiley, 2009), pp. 58-64.

linked to the release of built-up energy. Finally, according to Incongruity Theory, what is common to all humorous experiences is the perception and enjoyment of an incongruity.

These theories will be assessed according to their ability to provide an adequate account of comic amusement and a satisfactory description of instances of humour. Furthermore, the available theories are rated on the inclusiveness and explanatory power of their account. In the former case, they are evaluated according to their capacity to account for all the cases of humorous stimuli. The strategy, in this case, is the standard one of looking for counter examples which are not covered by the definition of humour provided by the theories under examination.¹⁰ The criterion of inclusiveness considers the capacity of a particular theory to account for all humorous stimuli, rather than humorous laughter. Laughter is only contingently and causally related to humorous stimulus and amusement and, therefore, it is not part of its essence or concept.¹¹ Inclusiveness, however, is not the only criteria taken into account. Indeed, a definition might provide a criterion that is able to encompass all cases of humour and yet it might do so without being informative about humour. The explanatory power of an account would then be taken into consideration too.

1.2 Humour Theories

1.2.1 Superiority Theory

The passage below, from Beckett's short story 'Dante and the Lobster', offers a first insight into what motivates the claims held by Superiority Theory. Belacqua arrives at his aunt's house with a parcel containing a fresh lobster that he collected for her from the fishmonger earlier that day. It is only when they unwrap the parcel that he realises that the lobster he had carried around with him all day has been alive for the whole time:

She took the parcel and undid it and abruptly the lobster was on the table, on the oilcloth, discovered.

'They assured me it was fresh' said Belacqua.

Suddenly he saw the creature move, this neuter creature. Definitely it changed its position. His hand flew to his mouth.

'Christ!' he said 'it's alive.'

His aunt looked at the lobster. It moved again. It made a faint nervous act of life on the oilcloth. [...] It shuddered again. Belacqua felt he would be sick.

'My God' he whined 'it's alive, what'll we do?'

The aunt simply had to laugh. She bustled off to the pantry to fetch her smart apron, leaving him goggling down at the lobster, and came back with it on her sleeves rolled up, all business.

'Well' she said 'it is to be hoped so, indeed.'¹²

¹⁰ Counter examples are taken from *Monro, Argument of Laughter*.

¹¹ As Robert Sharpe clearly states, "laughter is a sign of amusement but, of course, amusement is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition of laughter. I may be amused secretly and there is such a thing as a forced or hollow laugh". Sharpe, 'Seven Reasons Why Amusement Is an Emotion', p. 201.

¹² Samuel Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010b), pp. 13-14.

Belacqua's aunt's laughter in response to Belacqua's surprised reaction offers us some insight into what she might be thinking: she sees Belacqua as lacking some basic knowledge, and perhaps she finds his reactions foolish. Her verbal response to Belacqua reinforces, if not confirms, these conjectures. By saying "Well [...] it is to be hoped so, indeed",¹³ she refuses to engage with Belacqua's reactions as she does not deem it worth explaining to him how lobsters are usually cooked. By contrast, she appears to confirm Belacqua's statement "it's alive"¹⁴ by adding that it is indeed the case one should hope for in such a situation. In a similar way, she does not engage with Belacqua's question "what we'll do?"¹⁵ as one worth answering. On the contrary, she indirectly answers the question by leaving the room, putting on her kitchen apron and getting herself ready to cook: she behaves as if nothing noteworthy is taking place in the kitchen.

Belacqua's aunt's laughter is emblematic of what laughter is taken to be by Superiority Theory.¹⁶ According to this theory, laughter arises from the feeling of superiority: what elicits one's comic amusement is the perception of oneself as superior to the target of laughter. We can now rephrase our description of the comic in the passage quoted above according to this theory: Belacqua's aunt laughs as she feels superior to Belacqua. In particular, she is judging Belacqua as inferior as he is unaware of this common piece of knowledge.

As pointed out by different scholars, this theory has the merit of accounting for an important aspect of our shared experience.¹⁷ It is indeed undeniable that often targets of our laughter are characters that exhibit some sort of deficiencies, which could be anything including physical, mental, moral, cognitive, epistemic, social or other attributes. This is the case in the above example, where Belacqua lacks some knowledge, and this is also the case in the passage below, where the character of 'The Expelled' lacks certain physical abilities.

I set off. What a gait. Stiffness of the lower limbs, as if nature had denied me knees, extraordinary splaying of the feet to right and left of the line of march. The trunk, on the contrary, as if by the effect of a compensatory mechanism, was as flabby as an old ragbag, tossing wildly to unpredictable jolts of the pelvis. I have often tried to correct these defects, to stiffen my bust, flex my knees and walk with my feet in front of one another, for I had at least five or six, but it always ended in the same way, I mean by a loss of equilibrium, followed by a fall.¹⁸

We laugh at this passage, according to Superiority Theory, because we feel superior to the character as he lacks some abilities that we have – i.e. the ability to walk in an efficient way, without falling. Finally, in the next example, one of the characters is presented as lacking some moral qualities. Mercier and

¹³ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ It is possible to find several general introductions to Superiority Theory. See, for example, Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 8-16; Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, pp. 4-9; and John Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority', *Cogito*, 9/1 (1995c), pp. 54-61.

¹⁷ See, for example, Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 9-10; Monro, *Argument of Laughter*, p. 90.

¹⁸ Samuel Beckett, 'The Expelled', *The Expelled/the Calmative/the End with First Love* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009b), pp. 1-16, pp. 6-7.

Camier are confronted by a ranger who wants them to move their bicycle. The situation reaches a stalemate with the ranger on the one side repeatedly asking Mercier and Camier to shift the bicycle and the pair on the other side alternatively ignoring the request or answering the ranger's questions with impossible excuses and long asides. However, Mercier and Camier find a way out of the impasse:

Will you shift her or won't you? said the ranger.
Are you venal, said Mercier, since you are deaf to reason?
Silence.
Can you be bought off? said Mercier.
Certainly, said the ranger.
Give him a bob, said Mercier. To think our first disbursement should be a sop to bribery and extortion.
The ranger vanished with a curse.
How of a piece they all are, said Mercier.¹⁹

The ease with which the ranger accepts the bribery is a sign of his moral corruption, which Mercier claims is typical of police officers. A description of this passage based upon the claims of Superiority Theory would say that we laugh at the moral corruption of the ranger. The moral corruption would thus be the inferior trait that elicits our comic amusement.

Even though Superiority Theory has the merit of accounting for some aspects of the phenomenology of humour exemplified in the above examples, a closer examination reveals it to be unsatisfactory. The account of amusement that Superiority Theory provides is one that is subject oriented. It provides a description of what the subject should be feeling in order to feel amused. However, it is not informative about what characteristics an object O must have in order to be an appropriate object of humour. Even if it were true that one of the conditions for triggering comic amusement is the presence of a feeling of superiority, a theory of humour would still have to provide a description of which objects elicit such feelings.

The lack of information about the features of the object that elicit comic amusement is what ultimately leads to the rejection of a strongest version of Superiority Theory, namely one that claims that feelings of superiority are a necessary and sufficient condition for eliciting comic amusement. Superiority Theory does not seem able to discern between situations in which one feels superior and is comically amused and others in which one feels superior but is not comically amused.²⁰ There are many instances where one feels superior to other people that do not trigger comic amusement, let alone laughter. For example, schoolteachers can feel superior with regards to their ability to write and read to pupils who have just started to learn how to write and read, and yet teachers are not necessarily comically amused

¹⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010d), pp. 10-11.

²⁰ Similar remarks in Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority', p. 57.

by their pupils.²¹ A theory that wants to provide necessary and sufficient condition for comic amusement should be able to discriminate between these cases.

Hobbes' remarks on laughter could provide a *prima facie* answer to this criticism. According to Hobbes the realisation of our superiority must be sudden in order to elicit comic amusement.²² Whilst feelings of superiority are not sufficient to elicit comic amusement, they are jointly sufficient when they are elicited suddenly. However, as Lippitt remarks, we might feel suddenly superior at the sight of an act of corruption (much similar to that described in *Mercier and Camier* above) and yet feel outraged and not amused.²³

Although this theory is not satisfactory with regard to the description of humour instances, it might be nevertheless offering a necessary condition with regard to the feeling that must be experienced by the amused subject. However, the version of the Superiority Theory that affirms that feelings of superiority are necessary for eliciting comic amusement faces several criticisms too.

First, the necessary claim of Superiority Theory faces difficulty when considering cases of self-directed laughter. In those cases, indeed, Superiority Theory would require one to feel superior to oneself, thus leading to a contradiction. This problem was probably evident to Superiority theorists since Hobbes, who attempted to allow for such cases by adding to his description of the necessary condition of laughter the clause that one can feel superior to one's past self. However, he also placed some constraints on the possibility to laugh at oneself. This is possible as long as one is conscious of the "eminency" of one's present self over one's past self, and if remembering one's past self does not cause any feeling of dishonour.²⁴ However, this does not seem to be sufficient to dismiss the criticism as it seems possible

²¹ See Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 14, and John Lippitt, 'Humour', in David E. Cooper (ed.), *A Companion to Aesthetics* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1995b), pp. 199-203, p. 200.

²² Hobbes is considered the father of Superiority Theory of humour. In the *Leviathan* he writes:

Sudden glory, is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called LAUGHTER; and is caused wither by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 38.

It is possible to read the phrase "laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory*" as providing the necessary and sufficient conditions for amusement (or laughter). For a discussion of these passages see Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority' For a discussion on whether or not these passages should amount to a theory of humour see Sheila Lintott, 'Superiority in Humor Theory', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 74/4 (2016), pp. 347-358.

²³ See Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority', p. 57.

²⁴ In *Human Nature*, Hobbes expands his remarks on laughter. He includes an addition that allows for laughter of one's former self.

Men laugh often, especially such as are greedy of applause from everything they do well, at their *own* actions performed never so little beyond their own expectations; as also at their own *jests*: and in this case it is manifest, that the passion of laughter proceedeth from a *sudden conception* of some *ability* in himself that laugheth. Also men laugh at the *infirmities* of others, by comparison wherewith their own abilities are set off and illustrated. Also men laugh at *jests*, the *wit* whereof always consisteth in the elegant *discovering*, and conveying to our minds some *absurdity* of *another*: and in this case also the passion of laughter preceedeth from the *sudden* imagination of our own odds and eminency: for what is else the recommending of ourselves to our own good opinion, by comparison with another man's infirmity or absurdity? For when a jest is broken upon ourselves, or friends of whose dishonour we participate, we never laugh thereat. I may therefore conclude, that the passion of laughter is nothing else but *sudden glory* arising from some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves, by *comparison* with the *infirmity* of others, or with our own

to be amused by one's present self. Carroll provides the example of someone laughing at themselves in the process of doing something as foolish as putting sugar instead of parmesan cheese on pasta when one is tired.²⁵

Perhaps this last example would not be convincing enough to prove that one is laughing at one's present self. Indeed, a Superiority theorist could say that, even in this case, the laughter is directed to a past self, just a self from the very recent past. A better counter-example is one where we imagine someone laughing at their own actions while performing these actions. For example, imagine someone singing at a karaoke and laughing at the sound of their own voice while singing. Something similar takes place when street comedians invite members of the public to take part into their gags and to perform some actions. In these situations, it is often the case that the members invited to participate at the performance laugh at their own actions while doing them.

A different response to the self-laughter criticisms could be offered by looking at Rapp's position on the matter.²⁶ Rapp, who tries to provide an evolutionary explanation of humour, regards instances of self-laughter as instances in which the object of laughter is not oneself but the self considered as external.²⁷ Thus, if advocates of Superiority Theory were to endorse Rapp's view of self-laughter, they could respond to the criticism by saying that the apparent contradiction is dispelled by claiming that, when one laughs at oneself, one regards the self that elicits laughter as different from the self which laughs and feels superior.

Even this response does not seem to dismiss the criticism completely. Indeed, as Morreall points out, there are cases where one's amusement is boosted by the fact that it is one's *actual* and present self that is doing something foolish. According to Morreall, we laugh harder when the mistakes that result from absent-minded actions are the result of our own absent-minded actions; we would laugh harder if we are the one that are about to put sugar instead of parmesan on the pasta in the example above.²⁸ Furthermore, as Lippitt notices, even if it is true that in such occasions we regard ourselves from a certain distance, this does not mean that we do not consider those foolish actions as being ours: it does not lead us to feel completely detached from those actions.²⁹

formerly: for men laugh at the follies of themselves past, when they come suddenly to remembrance, except they bring with them any present dishonour.

Thomas Hobbes, 'Human Nature', in J. C. A. Gaskin (ed.), *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic: Part I, Human Nature, Part II, De Corpore Politico; with Three Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 21-108, pp. 54-55.

²⁵ Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 11. Lippitt provides a similar example of absentmindedness in Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority', p. 59. Shaw provides a different kind of example to argue against Hobbes' response to the self-laughter criticisms: sometimes one laughs at oneself when one fits a humorous cliché. See Shaw, 'Philosophy of Humor', pp. 114-115.

²⁶ Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority', p. 59.

²⁷ Albert Rapp, *The Origins of Wit and Humor* (New York: Dutton, 1951), p. 67.

²⁸ Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 12.

²⁹ Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority', p. 59.

In addition to the criticisms related to self-laughter, the necessary condition individuated by this theory has been criticised for leaving out of the account other common cases of humour. In the first instance, those conditions do not capture a large part of those instances of humour where the target is not a human being. As Superiority Theory requires that the people who laugh feel themselves to be superior to the objects of their laughter, then it is not clear how this comparison is carried out in cases where the target does not have any quality to which a human being could be compared. For example, one might be amused at a cloud which looks like a dog: but in such a case the source of superiority is unclear, as there is no obvious relationship between the laugher and the doglike cloud for any such feeling of superiority to be based.

In the second instance, there are cases where the actions or the behaviour of the target of laughter are superior to those of the laugher. Noël Carroll provides the example of Buster Keaton's gag in *Our Hospitality*, where the protagonist, who is hanging over a deep waterfall, manages, by swinging, to catch and rescue his girlfriend, who is about to fall down the waterfall, and to land safely on the ground. In this case, we are amused by Keaton's performance and yet he shows physical agility and power that we do not have. In the third instance, there are cases of laughter where a comparison does not seem to be required. Word plays, puns, nonsense rhymes or phonetic repetitions are considered humorous and are amusing in themselves; they do not require us to feel superior in respect of anything.³⁰

Ludovici has tried to answer the above criticisms, reformulating the notion of superiority into that of 'superior adaptation'. According to Ludovici, we laugh when we discover that we have, or we seem to have, some sort of advantage over others. Feeling superior then amounts to feeling yourself to be, in some sense, more advanced than others. According to Ludovici, this formulation is able to account for those cases that are problematic for classical accounts of Superiority Theory. In instances of humour such as puns, word play or amusing shapes, Ludovici claims, we find ourselves superiorly adapted. We show that we are, or we discover that we are freed by strictures and constraints of rigid laws of logic and language:³¹ this is an advantage over others who have to obey those laws.

However, this does not seem to be the case. Firstly, it seems unlikely that one feels superiorly adapted with respect to the person who has created the pun. Indeed, in that case the punster is at least as adapted as the laugher is: the punster or jokester must be at least equally free from the laws of logic and language in order to create the pun or the joke. Second, the one who enjoys a pun or a joke is supposedly one

³⁰ See John Morreall, 'A New Theory of Laughter', *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, 42/2 (1982), pp. 243-254; Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*; Clark, 'Humour and Incongruity'; Monro, *Argument of Laughter*. Marie Collins Swabey moves criticisms along the same line reported in this and previous paragraph in Marie Collins Swabey, *Comic Laughter. A Philosophical Essay* (Hamden: Archon Books, 1970), pp. 212-213.

³¹ "Here is a case of the liberation from the customary constraints, or rigid laws of reason and logic, and since every form of liberation is a state of superior adaptation, it leads to showing teeth. All nonsense comes under this head, and leads to the order of laughter which Hobbes, in his explanation, says arises from 'absurdities' and 'infirmities abstracted from persons'". Anthony M. Ludovici, *The Secret of Laughter* (London: Constable, 1932), p. 77. For a discussion of Ludovici's claims see Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority', p. 58.

amongst many who are able to enjoy it. Being amused by a pun does not mean that others cannot be too, and thus getting the pun does not give them any supposed advantage over others.

The Superiority Theory is not able to capture the whole range of objects that elicit comic amusement. Self-directed laughter, non-human targets, puns, and word-plays are cases that cannot be explained by this theory and thus, as it stands, should be rejected. One worries that Superiority Theory is ultimately concerned with one type of laughter, the triumphant laughter.³² What Superiority Theory might be doing is providing a description not of humorous experiences, but rather of experiences of triumphant feelings.

The set of triumphant experiences overlaps partially, but not completely, with that of humorous experiences when the instance is one that elicits both amusement and triumphant feelings. Triumphant experiences include instances where comic amusement is not involved: for example, laughing when winning a competition; and excludes other instances where one is amused but not triumphant: as laughing at puns or world-plays.

Superiority Theory then would be offering insight into what triumph is, and not comic amusement. The only insight this theory offers into humorous situations is that of pointing out that there are sometime situations in which one is amused and triumphant. Thus, if Superiority Theory is not providing a necessary (let alone sufficient) feature of humour, it is still pointing to aspects of the phenomenology of humour worth addressing, if for no other reason than their frequency. Thus, the only claim that links superior feelings and comic amusement that should not be rejected is the weaker claim, according to which feelings of superiority are sometimes experienced in situations of comic amusement.

1.2.2 Release or Relief Theory

According to the second of the three main theories - which is sometimes called the Release Theory or Relief Theory³³ - amusement is caused by the release of mental or physical built-up energies. How these energies are built up is described differently by different theories.³⁴ I shall not evaluate the account of amusement provided by Release Theory by assessing its ability to account correctly for the mechanisms responsible for the building up and releasing of energies. I assume, for the sake of this discussion, that it is at least possible that energies are built up and released during humorous experiences. Release

³² This worry is justified by looking at Hobbes' remarks on laughter, for example. Hobbes, amongst the object of one's laughter, lists both other people infirmities and one's eminencies. The predominance of the triumphant aspect is also clear from Rapp's account. There laughter is traced back to the laugh of victory at the end of a fight.

For remarks on the appropriateness of the object of study of Superiority Theory see Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 16; Noël Carroll, 'Two Comic Plots', in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Art in Three Dimensions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 417-439, p. 420; Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority'.

³³ Scholars have used these two labels for this theory. The label 'Release Theory' is used for example in Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, Hurley, Dennett, and Adams, *Inside Jokes: Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, John Lippitt, 'Humour and Release', *Cogito*, 9/2 (1995a), pp. 169-176. Monroe uses the label 'Release from Restraint'. See Monroe, *Argument of Laughter*. Morreall, on the other hand, uses 'Relief theory' as the label for this theory. See, for example, Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*.

³⁴ For an overview see Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 38-42; Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, pp. 15-23; Monroe, *Argument of Laughter*, pp. 176-209. For a discussion of Freud's account see Lippitt, 'Humour and Release'.

Theory would be assessed by its ability to provide a satisfactory description of comic amusement and its ability to account for a whole range of comic instances.

Release Theory has the *prima facie* merit of considering an important aspect of the phenomenology of humorous experiences, namely the sense of ease and pleasure which are often felt when experiencing comic amusement. However, this theory, as it was the case for Superiority Theory, is subject oriented. This formulation provides a description of the state in which the subject must be in order for comic amusement to be elicited. It does not provide, on the contrary, any description of what characteristic the object that is causing the building up of comic energy has.

There are different counter-examples that lead to rejecting the claim that release of energies is a sufficient condition for eliciting comic amusement. We feel physical relief by doing gym classes or running, and we feel mental relief by venting to a friend, when we solve an intricate puzzle, or when we submit a piece of work. None of these situations involves comic amusement, and yet mental and physical energies are released.

If the release of energies is not sufficient, it might still be necessary for eliciting comic amusement. Either the content of an instance of humour, or something that is typical of the structure of instances of humour could be responsible for building-up and releasing energies. This could be, for example, energies built-up by an instance of humour which touches on a taboo or inhibition. Amongst cultural inhibitions, one might list the explicit mentioning of sexual and scatological practices.

The following two passages taken from *Molloy* are examples of scatological humour. In the first one Molloy is stopped by a policeman who asks for his documents:

Your papers! he cried. Ah my papers. Now the only papers I carry with me are bits of newspaper, to wipe myself, you understand, when I have a stool. Oh I don't say I wipe myself every time I have a stool, no, but I like to be in a position to do so, if I have to. Nothing strange about that, it seems to me. In a panic I took this paper from my pocket and thrust it under his nose.³⁵

A supporter of Release Theory would claim that amusement in this passage depends on the allusion to excrements. In support of this, one can imagine to take this allusion out of the passage. According to the picture offered by Release Theory, if Molloy had not mentioned what he does with the newspaper, and if he had shown an ordinary newspaper to the police officer, this passage would not have been amusing. This seems to be even more evident in the following passage of scatological humour. Here the amusement seems to rely almost completely on the mention of Molloy's bodily habits:

And in winter, under my greatcoat, I wrapped myself in swathes of newspaper, and did not shed them until the earth awoke, for good, in April. The Times Literary Supplement was admirably adapted to this purpose, of a never-failing toughness and impermeability. Even farts made no impression on it. I can't help it, gas escapes from my fundament on the least pretext, it's hard not to mention it now and then, however great my distaste. One day I counted them. Three hundred

³⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009a), p. 17.

and fifteen farts in nineteen hours, or an average of over sixteen farts an hour. After all it's not excessive. Four farts every fifteen minutes. It's nothing. Not even one fart every four minutes. It's unbelievable. Damn it, I hardly fart at all, I should never have mentioned it. Extraordinary how mathematics help you to know yourself.³⁶

Other cases of energies built up from inhibition might be the energies accumulated and released in instances of humour which involves sexual content or references. This could be the case, for example, of the following passage, which revolves around onanism:

I unbuttoned my trousers discreetly to scratch myself. I scratched myself in an upward direction, with four nails. I pulled on the hairs, to get relief. It passed the time, time flew when I scratched myself. Real scratching is superior to masturbation, in my opinion. One can masturbate up to the age of seventy, and even beyond, but in the end it becomes a mere habit. Whereas to scratch myself properly I would have needed a dozen hands. I itched all over, on the privates, in the bush up to the navel, under the arms, in the arse, and then patches of eczema and psoriasis that I could set raging merely by thinking of them. It was in the arse I had the most pleasure, I stuck in my forefinger up to the knuckle. Later, if I had to shit, the pain was atrocious. But I hardly shat any more.³⁷

According to Release theorists, the explicit reference to masturbation is responsible for comic amusement in this case. Scatological and sexual instances of humour are not the only instances of infringed taboos. Many others can be probably added to the list. To provide an example, the passage below shows morbid humour in which the taboo is death:

Personally I have no bone to pick with graveyards, I take the air there willingly, perhaps more willingly than elsewhere, when take the air I must. The smell of corpses, distinctly perceptible under those of grass and humus mingled, I do not find unpleasant, a trifle on the sweet side perhaps, a trifle heady, but how infinitely preferable to what the living emit, their feet, teeth, armpits, arses, sticky foreskins and frustrated ovules. And when my father's remains join in, however modestly, I can almost shed a tear.³⁸

The infringement of taboos and consequent alteration of energy or tension probably captures part of the story around comic amusement in the above instances of humour. However, the claim that the infringement of taboos is necessary for eliciting comic amusement faces at least two criticisms. Firstly, infringement of taboos is not involved in all cases of humour, and, secondly, even in those cases where it is involved it might not tell the whole story around comic amusement. Let us start with the first criticism. Even conceding that the list of taboos can be enlarged to comprehend more instances of humour and comic amusement, it is quite easy to see that this list cannot possibly cover all cases of comic amusement. Indeed, there are instances of comic amusement elicited by passages where no taboo is infringed. The passage below is a first example. This excerpt describes the arrival of Watt at Mr Knott's house in the novel *Watt*:

The house was in darkness.
Finding the front door locked, Watt went to the back door. He could not very well ring, or knock, for the house was in darkness.

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 27-28.

³⁷ Beckett, 'The End', p. 51.

³⁸ Beckett, 'First Love', p. 61.

Finding the back door locked also, Watt returned to the front door.
Finding the front door locked still, Watt returned to the back door.
Finding the back door now open, oh not open wide, but on the latch, as the saying is, Watt was able to enter the house.
Watt was surprised to find the back door, so lately locked, now open.³⁹

This passage contains what I take to be the verbal equivalent of a physical gag around the continuous failure of a repeated action. Nothing about the content seems to be infringing any taboo, so this cannot account for comic amusement.

A Release theorist might reply by saying that even if what is infringed is not a taboo, this passage is infringing some other rules with which we comply in our everyday lives. Indeed, our actions might be seen as governed by some logical, moral, prudential and practical norms. The infringement of one of those rules might be what is necessary for eliciting the same sort of affection of mental or physical energies that is elicited when taboos are infringed. Thus, in this passage, Watt could be seen to infringe a norm regarding practicality. Watt is inefficiently using his energy in the attempt to enter Mr Knott's house, as it is quite unlikely that he would find one of the doors open only by continuously trying to open them. Thus, this infringement of the practical norms of efficiency of action might be considered the inciting element which leads to the build-up and subsequent release of tension.

In a similar way, a Release theorist might expand the notion of infringements in such a way to also encompass infringements of expectations.⁴⁰ As previously mentioned, the build-up of energy could be generated either through the content or the structure of an instance of humour. With regards to the content, we have said that it could be due to the touching upon taboos or to the infringement of some fundamental norms of everyday living. Further to these cases, a Release theorist might claim that something about the structure of the instance of humour could be responsible for the build-up of energy. In the last example taken from *Watt*, Watt's repeated actions are responsible for the build-up of energy. The repetition creates a tension that is relieved when Watt finally finds one of the doors open. In a similar manner, jokes, which could either have the form of a riddle or a narrative form, are structured to build up tension that is released by their punch lines. In the case of riddles, the tension is created by the initial question that puzzles the audience. By contrast, narrative jokes have a beginning (where ordinarily characters and situation are introduced), a middle (where the situation evolves into a complication) and an end that ordinarily coincides with a punch line. In this case too, the construction of the joke is such that tension is established by inducing the audience to wonder about the final outcome.⁴¹ See for example the following joke told by Nagg in *Endgame*:

³⁹ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009g), p. 29.

⁴⁰ Noël Carroll presents Release Theory as possibly arguing for this view. Even if Carroll is sceptical towards the theory, he attempts to presents various way in which Release Theory could be seen working. See Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 38-42.

⁴¹ Noël Carroll, 'On Jokes', in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Beyond Aesthetic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001b), pp. 317-335, pp. 322-32. Ted Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), pp. 1-11.

NAGG: Let me tell it again. [*Raconteur's voice.*] An Englishman, needing a pair of striped trousers in a hurry for the New Year festivities, goes to his tailor who takes his measurements. [*Tailor's voice.*] 'That's the lot, come back in four days, I'll have it ready.' Good. Four days later. [*Tailor's voice.*] 'So sorry, come back in a week, I've made a mess of the seat.' Good, that's all right, a neat seat can be very ticklish. A week later. [*Tailor's voice.*] 'Frightfully sorry, come back in ten days, I've made a hash of the crutch.' Good, can't be helped, a snug crutch is always a teaser. Ten days later. [*Tailor's voice.*] 'Dreadfully sorry, come back in a fortnight, I've made a balls of the fly.' Good, at a pinch, a smart fly is a stiff proposition. [...] [*Pause. Raconteur's voice.*] Well, to make it short, the bluebells are blowing and he ballocks the buttonholes. [*Customer's voice.*] 'God damn you to hell, Sir, no, it's indecent, there are limits! In six days, do you hear me, six days, God made the world. Yes Sir, no less Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!' [*Tailor's voice, scandalized.*] 'But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look – [*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*] – at the world – [*pause.*] – and look – [*loving gesture, proudly*] – at my TROUSERS!'⁴²

Nagg's joke develops in such a way that elicits a tension in the reader or the audience. They wonder about the excuse that the tailor will provide to the Englishman and when the punchline is delivered, the tension is released. The release of this tension is what, according to a Release theorist, is responsible for eliciting comic amusement. What has just been said about jokes could be extended in such a way to include other instances of humour. *Non sequiturs*, for example, are passages where two bits of narrative do not follow each other. In other words, something happens in the narrative that does not follow on from or is not related to what has happened before. For instance, in the following passage from *Malone Dies*, Malone's long and lyrical reflection on his situation is abruptly interrupted, and what comes after does not follow from the preceding lyrical passage:

And if I close my eyes, close them really, as others cannot, but as I can, for there are limits to my impotence, then sometimes my bed is caught up into the air and tossed like a straw by the swirling eddies, and I in it. Fortunately it is not so much an affair of eyelids, but as it were the soul that must be veiled, that soul denied in vain, vigilant, anxious, turning in its cage as in a lantern, in the night without haven or craft or matter or understanding. Ah yes, I have my little pastimes and they

What a misfortune, the pencil must have slipped from my fingers, for I have only just succeeded in recovering it after forty-eight hours (see above) of intermittent efforts. What my stick lacks is a little prehensile proboscis like the nocturnal tapir's. I should really lose my pencil more often, it might do me good, I might be more cheerful, it might be more cheerful. I have spent two unforgettable days of which nothing will ever be known, it is too late now, or still too soon, I forget which, except that they have brought me the solution and conclusion of the whole sorry business, I mean the business of Malone (since that is what I am called now) and of the other, for the rest is no business of mine.⁴³

The first half of the excerpt contains dramatic and lyrical elements that create expectations around what Malone is about to share. Firstly, the topic discussed is of fundamental importance, Malone appears to describe the conditions of his soul and of his mind. Malone is reflecting on the sounds that he hears and on the drafts of air that he feels and he is considering whether they are real or if he is merely imagining them. This leads Malone to reflect on the movements of his soul, which is described quite dramatically

⁴² Samuel Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 102-103.

⁴³ Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010c), pp. 48-49.

as continuously moving ('anxious', turning in its cage') in search of or waiting for something ('vigilant'), but without a place to rest ('haven') or means to reach its objective ('craft') or guidance towards it ('understanding'). Furthermore, the lyrical tone of the passage contributes to the build-up of expectations. The passage is construed on a sustained metaphor where Malone's mind and soul are compared to straws and vessels ('craft') at the mercy of the agitated movements of water ('tossed' 'by the swirling eddies'), and without a safe place where to moor ('haven'). After these considerations, Malone seems to assume a declarative tone, and he appears to be willing to share more about himself and perhaps about what he just said ('I have my pastimes and they'). However, these expectations are not fulfilled: Malone's writing is abruptly interrupted, and when Malone resumes to it, he does not continue his considerations from where he left them. A Release theorist would say that this abrupt change causes the release of the built-up tension, and this release, in its turn, causes the comic amusement.

Different objections can be raised to the attempt at making Release Theory more comprehensive, either by enlarging the set of norms and taboos that can contribute to the building up of energies or by seeing the instances of humour as building up energies by creating expectations. Firstly, even if we were to accept the validity of these moves, there are still cases that are not accounted for by this theory. The passage below represents a first possible counter-example. The narrator of *Murphy* describes one of the characters – Celia – by providing her measurements and physical traits:

Age.	Unimportant.
Head.	Small and round.
Eyes.	Green.
Complexion.	White.
Hair.	Yellow.
Features.	Mobile.
Neck.	$13\frac{3}{4}$ ".
Upper arm.	11".
Forearm.	$9\frac{1}{2}$ ".
Wrist.	6".
Bust.	34".
Waist.	27".
Hips, etc.	35".
Thigh.	$21\frac{3}{4}$ ".
Knee.	$13\frac{3}{4}$ ".
Calf.	13".
Ankle.	$8\frac{1}{4}$ ".
Instep.	Unimportant.
Height.	5' 4".
Weight.	123 lbs. ⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 9.

The way in which Celia is described does not infringe any taboo or any fundamental rule about our everyday pattern of expectations. Providing data such as those in the passage above is a legitimate way to describe a person. Furthermore, nothing in the structure of this description sets up expectations or builds up tension that is thereby relieved. Indeed, whereas jokes and *non-sequiturs* are instances that are stretched over time, there are humour instances that are not. In these cases, expectations are not set up that are subsequently relieved.⁴⁵ Furthermore, Release Theory has often been criticised for not being able to account for humour in children's behaviour, word-play or nonsense.⁴⁶ This type of criticism can be generalised saying that there are humour instances that do not revolve around infringements of fundamental norms or taboos, and that there are humour instances that do not set up any expectation over time.

Finally, when stretched in the ways described above, the notion of release is either not informative about the nature of comic amusement, or it is picking up on aspects that are better described by other theories. Indeed, in the above discussion of the examples, the input of Release Theory is that of capturing the sense of easiness often associated with comic amusement. However, even if it is the case that a sense of easiness is always present in cases of comic amusement, this does not say much about what triggers comic amusement. Indeed, the theory seems to capture some feature of the laugher's psychological state when experiencing comic amusement, but does not say much about the formal object of comic amusement. If, by contrast, one wants to maintain that Release Theory is providing information about the object of comic amusement, namely either norms infringed upon or expectations dispelled, then it seems that the focus of the theory thus phrased is no longer the energies which are built up. In this case, the theory starts to become very similar to the third theory that we are going to discuss, Incongruity Theory, with the disadvantage of positing the existence of highly disputable mechanisms for building up and releasing energies.

Thus, Release Theory does not offer a satisfying, necessary or sufficient condition for comic amusement. At most, this theory can be seen as describing some of the feature of comic experience: the fact that sometimes one experiences relief in a situation of comic amusement.

1.2.3 Incongruity Theory

Let us turn our attention to Incongruity Theory, which claims that, at least in part, responsible for eliciting comic amusement is the perception of an incongruity.⁴⁷ This theory, in contrast to the other

⁴⁵ See Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 40.

⁴⁶ See Morreall, 'A New Theory of Laughter'; Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*; Clark, 'Humour and Incongruity'.

⁴⁷ The nature of this incongruity has been described by scholars from different perspectives. For example, Morreall, in his general account, which aims at giving an explanation for all kinds of laughter, states that: "laughter results from a pleasant psychological shift", Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 39. Scholars like Attardo and Raskin have provided semantic description of incongruity. See Victor Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor* (Dordrecht; Lancaster: Reidel, 1985), and Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin, 'Script Theory Revis(It)Ed: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model', *Humor* -

two discussed, provides a definition which is object oriented. Superiority Theory and Release Theory provide accounts that explain amusement by describing the mental or emotional state in which a subject must be (feeling of superiority for the former theory, and relief from tension for the latter). By contrast, Incongruity Theory provides an account of amusement that provides a description of the object of amusement. It describes what characteristics an object must have for the amusement to take place. Scholars who support this theory have also described the attitude which one must have in order to perceive comic amusement: for comic amusement to be generated not only must an incongruity be perceived, but it should be perceived in an appropriate way.

We can see Incongruity Theory as holding two different claims: (a) perceived incongruity is a necessary/ necessary and sufficient element of humour; and (b) comic amusement requires enjoying the perceived incongruity in an appropriate way. In this section I shall assess whether or not the perception of incongruity is a necessary or sufficient condition for comic amusement. In the next section, I shall illustrate what is meant by perceiving an incongruity for its own sake.

The passage below, taken from Beckett's text 'The Smeraldina's Billet Doux',⁴⁸ helps to provide a first illustration of the Incongruity Theory. This text consists of a love letter to Belacqua from his German girlfriend, the Smeraldina. The letter opens as follows:

Bel Bel my own bloved, *allways* and for *ever* mine!!

Your letter is soked with tears death is the onely thing. I had been crying bitterly, tears! tears! tears! and nothing els, then your letter cam with more tears, after I had read it ofer and ofer again I found I had ink spots on my face. The tears are tolling down my face. It is very early in the morning, the sun is rising behind the black trees and soon that will change, the sky will be blue and the trees a golden brown, but there is one thing that dosent change, this pain and thos tears. Oh! Bel I love you terrible, I want you terrible, I want your body your soft white body Nagelnackt!⁴⁹

Following the Incongruity Theory, what allows for considering this passage as an appropriate object of humour is the presence of an incongruity between what we consider to be a well-written letter in English and how Smeraldina's letter is written. Indeed, this passage, as well as the rest of the letter, contains numerous spelling and grammatical mistakes. Some of the mistakes are ascribable to the German pronunciation of English language. According to Incongruity Theory, the perception of these incongruities is what, at least in part, elicits comic amusement.

Note that it is not the presence of incongruity per se that is said to elicit comic amusement. What is considered, at least in part, responsible for eliciting comic amusement is a *perceived* incongruity. This, on the one hand, allows for cases where the object of amusement is not incongruous but is perceived as

International Journal of Humor Research, 4/3-4 (1991), pp. 293. In what follows, we shall discuss the work of those that have provided description of the nature of humour and comic amusement.

⁴⁸ Short prose collected in *More Pricks than Kicks*.

⁴⁹ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 143,

such. For example, one might find the shape of a cloud amusing when it resembles a familiar shape, that of a dog, for example. There is nothing incongruous *per se* in the cloud. It is perceiving it as resembling a dog which makes it suitable for eliciting comic amusement.

On the other hand, the stress on perceived incongruity allows us to provide a first explanation for why in some cases the same instance is perceived as humorous by someone and not by others. Indeed, it could be the case that not everyone perceives the incongruity and therefore not everyone perceives the instance as an appropriate object for comic amusement.

Looking again at Smeraldina's letter helps to provide an illustration of this. Whereas most readers will be able to identify the incongruities of that passage and consider it as a suitable object of humour, there is at least one situation in which this is not the case. Indeed, we can imagine that the fictional character Smeraldina has written the letter without recognising the incongruities which it contains, and consequently the letter is not amusing to her.

Another passage taken from Beckett helps to further illustrate this. In 'A Wet Night', the narrator describes the wanderings of Belacqua around Dublin. Along with descriptions and names of places, the narrator also reports thoughts, feelings and reminiscences that arise in Belacqua's mind when he passes through different scenarios. For example, Dublin's fire station, which is modelled after the architecture of the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, brings back some positive memories to Belacqua. The narrator comments on this and on the choice of building the Fire Station on the model of Palazzo Vecchio:

This pleasure was dispensed by the Fire Station opposite which seemed to have been copied here and there from the Palazzo Vecchio. In deference to Savonarola? Ha! Ha!⁵⁰

As explicitly reported in the text the narrator is comically amused at the remarks he just made. He ironically suggests that a possible reason behind the choice to design Dublin's Fire Station similar to Palazzo Vecchio was in honour of Savonarola, who was an intellectual burnt to death in Florence. The incongruity that causes the narrator's amusement lies in the contrast between a building that is meant to house those who work to save people from fire and the possibility that the palace might be designed in honour of someone who was willingly arsoned. The readers would not share the narrator's amusement unless they *perceive* this incongruity. This is to say, despite the fact that the incongruity is in the text, the readers will not find the passage amusing unless they are able to recognise the presence of such incongruity. To do so, they must have some background knowledge about Savonarola and his relation to Palazzo Vecchio. If they do not have such knowledge, this passage might result obscure to them and they might be puzzled by the narrator's reaction; they might wonder what the narrator find funny about his own comments. They might even be amused by the reaction of the narrator, i.e. by the fact that the narrator laughs at his own remarks while narrating the story. However, without the background knowledge they would not be able to follow the narrator's ironical line of reasoning; they

⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 44-45.

would not perceive the incongruity that causes the narrator's amusement and, as a consequence, they will not be amused by it.

Smeraldina's letter provides an example where incongruity is explicit and easily identifiable: the letter breaches rules of grammar and spelling. However, comic passages do not always involve the breaching of explicit and codified rules. This is for example the case of Watt's walk, which is described in the following passage:

Watt's way of advancing due east, for example, was to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and at the same time to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and at the same time to fling out his leg as far as possible towards the north, and then again to turn his bust as far as possible towards the north and to fling out his right leg as far as possible towards the south, and then again to turn his bust as far as possible towards the south and to fling out his left leg as far as possible towards the north, and so on, over and over again, many many times, until he reached his destination, and could sit down.⁵¹

Watt's walk is comically amusing and there are no codified rules around how one should walk. Because it is often the case that comic instances do not involve breaching self-evident or codified rules, Incongruity Theory has been challenged with several criticisms which revolve around the definition of incongruity and what counts as incongruous. To start with, let us say that an object is perceived as incongruous when two elements are in disagreement or are discordant.

Let us first consider the strongest version of Incongruity Theory, namely one that would claim that perceiving something as incongruous is a necessary and sufficient condition for eliciting comic amusement. By contrast to this claim, there are many situations where we perceive an incongruity and yet we are not amused by it, and that thus constitute counter-examples for the sufficiency claim. Incongruities indeed could elicit fear, when we perceive them as threatening. If, in stepping into our house we would find all the drawers open and their content on the floor, we would probably not burst into laughter; on the contrary, we would probably feel anxious. Incongruities can also elicit puzzlement, as when we find less money in our bank account than we expected, so we start to look for an explanation. Finally, incongruities could be simply aesthetically pleasant, as the incongruities typical of the paintings of Dali' or De Chirico.

Incongruity Theory faces a series of objections even when it is seen holding only a necessity claim: perceiving something as incongruous is necessary, but not sufficient, for eliciting comic amusement. The first set of criticisms is directed towards those formulations of the Incongruity Theory where incongruity is phrased in terms of expectations. This is the case, for example, of the formulation provided by Kant, according to whom: "Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of strained expectation into nothing".⁵² Kant's definition is echoed in the description of Incongruity

⁵¹ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 23-24.

⁵² Quoted in Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, p. 47.

Theory provided by Morreall: “What amuses us is some object of perception or thought that clashes with what we would have expected in a particular set of circumstances”.⁵³

This formulation has been accused of not being comprehensive enough as there are instances which are rightly considered comic where, however, the outcome is expected and predictable.⁵⁴ This is for example the case of Buster Keaton’s gag in the movie *The General*. The character played by Keaton, caught up in his thoughts, inadvertently sits on the rod which connects the wheels of a locomotive. The locomotive starts moving, and yet Keaton is so miserable that he fails to notice. The audience, on the other hand, is well aware of the situation and expects the moment in which the character realizes the risk of the situation in which he has put himself. This is a case where comic amusement derives from something that we expect to happen: the character’s realization of the situation he is in.⁵⁵ The same could be said of when we play practical jokes on our friends. We design and expect the outcome of our practical joke, yet we are amused by it when it takes place.⁵⁶

A further, related objection challenges Incongruity Theory by pointing out that there are humorous instances where it is not self-evident that any specific expectation is subverted. This is often the case with jokes. The punch line does not seem to incongruously substitute a specific thought we had in mind or something we specifically expected. Consider, for example, the following passage in *Watt*. Lady McCann walks down the road behind Watt and, by looking at his strange way of walking, she is reminded of an old joke that she heard in her childhood.

[...] she recalled the old story of her girlhood days, the old story of the medical students and the gentleman walking before them with stiff and open stride. Excuse me, sir, said one of the students, raising his cap, when they drew abreast, my friend here says it is piles, and I say it is merely the clap. We have all three then been deceived, replied the gentleman, for I thought it was wind myself.⁵⁷

Following the objection reported above, the punchline of the joke, the response of the ‘gentleman’ with ‘stiff and open’ stride is funny and yet it does not contradict some specific answer that we had in mind. It is not the case, the opponents to Incongruity Theory say, that we expect the gentleman to give a specific answer, and our expectation is contradicted by the actual answer ‘I thought it was wind myself’.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 6. For a brief discussion of Kant’s view see Glenn A. Hartz and Ralph Hunt, ‘Humor: The Beauty and the Beast’, *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 28/4 (1991), pp. 299-309.

⁵⁴ See Shaw, ‘Philosophy of Humor’, p. 116 Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 17.

⁵⁵This example is taken from Carroll, ‘On Jokes’. In this paper, originally published 1991, Carroll is sceptical towards Incongruity Theory and uses this example to mark the difference between jokes, where according to him the punch line is unexpected, and other forms of humour. In this specific case, he uses Keaton’s gags to mark the difference between sight-gags and jokes. Carroll has since then changed his position towards Incongruity Theory and he holds a more sympathetic view (see Carroll, ‘Two Comic Plots’). It is reasonable to think that he will provide a different description of this gag now. Indeed, responses to similar objections to those reported above could be found in Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 17-18.

⁵⁶ Shaw, ‘Philosophy of Humor’, p. 116.

⁵⁷ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 24.

As above stated, these are objections which target a specific formulation of Incongruity Theory, the one which understands incongruity in terms of unexpected or unforeseen outcomes. The mistake here is to consider the expectations which are subverted as specific expectations.⁵⁸ By contrast, as Carroll explains, the expectations we should consider are our general expectations about the world: how it is and how it should be.⁵⁹ As Morreall explains,

The basic idea behind [the Incongruity Theory] is very simple. We live in an orderly world where we have come to expect certain patterns among things, properties, events, etc. When we experience something that doesn't fit these patterns, that violates our expectations, we laugh.⁶⁰

Given this ambiguity between 'unexpected' interpreted as unforeseen, and 'unexpected' interpreted as contrary to the normal patterns of experience, some scholars prefer to talk about incongruity in different terms. Thus, for example, Shaw describes Incongruity Theory as claiming that "humour involves delighting in a departure from some regularity or norm",⁶¹ and Carroll claims that: "incongruity is a comparative notion. It presupposes that something is discordant with something else. With respect to the comic amusement, that *something else* is how the world is or should be".⁶²

Consider the example of Watt's walk discussed earlier. Watt's walk is incongruous even if does not breach any codified rule; it breaches the pattern of expectations we have of how efficient walks should be carried out, or, in other words, it is discordant with how walks are in normal situations. In a similar way, we do not have a specific expectation on the gentleman's response to the medical students of Lady McCann's jokes in *Watt*. Nevertheless, the gentleman's response is discordant with the type of response we would have expected, i.e. a response indicating a disease which would have explained the gentleman's peculiar way to walk. A similar response can be given to the counter-example provided by Keaton's gag. As noted, we expect that Keaton will become aware of his situation. However, even if his reactions are foreseen, the situation which he is in (being carried away by the train while sitting on the rod that connects the wheels) and the fact that he is not aware of it remains incongruous.

This response also answers a third criticism which can be grouped with the previous two. Incongruity Theory seems unable to account for the longevity of some jokes and pranks, i.e. for the fact that we keep finding amusing jokes and gags that we have already heard or seen. For example, we read comic

⁵⁸ Morreall has offered a different response to this line of criticism. According to him, in the case of laughing at comic scenes or sketches already seen, we are amused because a new incongruity become available. When I see for a second time a performance and I still laugh at it, it is because I find new incongruities. See Morreall, *Taking Laughter Seriously*, p. 50. Morreall's proposal has been criticised by Robert C. Roberts, who links the longevity of jokes related to the 'freshness' of their incongruity and their mode of presentation. See Robert C. Roberts, 'Humor and the Virtues', *Inquiry*, 31/2 (1988/01/01 1988), pp. 127-149, pp. 146-147. Both views have been criticised by Hartz and Hunt, who say that even in repeated performances of the same humorous instance is the alertness to the incongruity of the instance what leads to comic amusement. See Hartz and Hunt, 'Humor: The Beauty and the Beast', p. 300 See also Shaw, 'Philosophy of Humor', pp. 116-117.

⁵⁹ Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 17. See also Noël Carroll, 'Humour', in Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Aesthetics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 344-365.

⁶⁰ John Morreall, 'A New Theory of Laughter', in J. Morreall (ed.), *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor* (Albany: State University of New York 1987a), pp. 128-138, p. 130 .

⁶¹ Shaw, 'Philosophy of Humor', p. 115.

⁶² Carroll, *Humour: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 18.

novels and watch comic movies more than once and we still find them funny. We see the same gags repeated in different shows or pieces, we know what to expect, and yet we still find them amusing. This is the case with the gag in *Waiting for Godot* where Estragon and Vladimir, the two main characters, find Lucky's hat, another character who was previously on stage, on the ground. Vladimir takes off his hat, gives it to Estragon, and wears Lucky's hat. Estragon, in his turn, takes his hat off and puts Vladimir's hat on. Subsequently Estragon hands his hat to Vladimir who proceeds to take off his hat, wearing Estragon's one and handing Lucky's hat to Estragon. This is repeated a few times.⁶³ This gag is not new, and it is probable that Beckett saw it first in the movie *Duck Soup* by the Marx Brothers.⁶⁴ The gags remain funny even if you have seen one of the two works first and you already know how it evolves. As Shaw explains, here the objection seems to confuse the requirement of incongruity with that of *unexpected* incongruity.⁶⁵ The incongruities are still present in the movies that we have seen more than once or in the gags that we find repeated in different works. And it is the presence of the incongruities, not their freshness, which leads to comic amusement.⁶⁶

Incongruity Theory has been challenged by offering counter-examples where comic amusement seems to be elicited by *congruity* rather than incongruity. According to Scruton, for example, this is the case of caricatures: they are amusing because they resemble what they portray.⁶⁷ It is because a caricature is congruous with what it depicts that we are amused by it. Counter-examples similar to caricatures can be found in literature too. There are passages in Beckett's texts which contain what could be considered the verbal equivalent of caricatures. Characters are described or presented by exaggerating some of their distinctive features. The passage below is taken from the short story 'A Wet Night', a short story that revolves around a Christmas party. Some of the characters which will attend the party are followed and described during their preparation for the party or when they are on their way to the party. The passage below describes Chas, who the narrator introduces as "a highbrow bromide of French nationality with a diabolical countenance compound of Skeat's and Paganini's and a mind like tattered concordance".⁶⁸

Chas's girl was a Shetland Shawly. He had promised to pick her up on his way to Casa Frisca and now, cinched beyond reproach in his double-breasted smoking, he subdued his impatience to catch a tram in order to explain the world to a group of students.

'The difference, if I may so—'

'Oh' cried the students, *una voce*, 'oh please!'

'The difference, then, I say, between Bergson and Einstein, the essential difference, is as between philosopher and sociology.'

'Oh!' cried the students.

'Yes' said Chas, casting up what was the longest divulgation he could place before the tram, which had hove into view, would draw abreast.

⁶³ Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 67.

⁶⁴ See Mary Bryden, 'Clowning with Beckett', in S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *A Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), pp. 358-371.

⁶⁵ Shaw, 'Philosophy of Humor', p. 117.

⁶⁶ See also Lafollette and Shanks, 'Belief and the Basis of Humor'.

⁶⁷ Scruton and Jones, 'Laughter', p. 202.

⁶⁸ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 45.

‘And if it is the smart thing now to speak of Bergson as a cod’ – he edged away – ‘it is that we move from the Object’ – he made a plunge for the tram – ‘and the Idea to SANSE’ – he cried from the step – ‘and REASON’.
‘Sense’ echoed the students ‘and reason!’⁶⁹

This passage portrays Chas and the student in such a way that some of their distinctive features are made salient. Chas, the highbrow intellectual is portrayed as pretentiously lecturing a group of students in order to explain the world. However, his explanation displays those defects often attributed to intellectuals: the use of obscure metaphors and complex sentences. On the other hand, the students are pictured as listening to Chas’ words in blind and blatant admiration. Thus, in this passage, comic amusement seems to be caused by the congruity of Chas’ and his students’ features with what intellectuals and students are often taken to be.

However, as Carroll notes, caricatures are not strong counter-examples to Incongruity Theory. First, one can find amusing a caricature even when one does not know the person portrayed and could not possibly be aware of the similarities between the person and his or her caricature. On the contrary, the fact that caricatures, as such, have distorted shapes and exaggerated elements is what elicits comic amusement. It is the caricatures’ incongruities and not their resemblance to those portrayed.⁷⁰ Furthermore, even though it is the case that caricatures are based on features of the person portrayed or on distinctive features of a stereotype, and in this sense they are constructed on congruities, it does not follow that comic amusement depends on congruities. As Carroll explains: “the relevant dimension of congruity - truth to the character - does not preclude the incongruity the theory appeals to – namely, an incongruity in the subject’s appearance, usually in terms of an exaggeration”.⁷¹ Thus, in the above example, it is true that Chas and his students behave as intellectuals and students are presumed to behave and, nonetheless, this is not what causes comic amusement. On the contrary, the caricature makes salient some of the features of Chas and his students by exaggerating them. Furthermore, these exaggerations establish a second incongruity by flipping those features. The respect and admiration for intellectual authority as well as the formality and rigor of speech are exaggerated and turned into their undesirable opposite: blatant and blind admiration and obscure and complex speech.

Incongruity Theory is able to respond to the objections raised against its necessary claim. However, this theory is still liable to a criticism that is perhaps more undermining than the others, and which can be described as the ‘Problem of Vagueness’. As Lippitt points out, the notion of *incongruity* has been used by theorists to describe a wide-open range of different phenomena. Scholars have used the term

⁶⁹ Ibid., pp. 52-53.

⁷⁰ Carroll, ‘Two Comic Plots’, p. 424.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 425. Roberts C. Roberts provides a similar response to Scruton’s suggestion that is the congruity that elicits amusement in caricature. Roberts points out that a perfectly congruent portrait or picture of someone in a normal pose would not be funny “unless something is added to it by a humourist – a comment, a subtitle – that renders visible the incongruity in the pose, or something with which the pose can be associated”. Roberts suggests that sometimes a caricature, by emphasizing certain features, draws attention to some existent incongruities. See Roberts, ‘Humor and the Virtues’, p. 129.

‘incongruity’ to describe instances which involve logical impossibilities, ambiguity, irrelevance or general inappropriateness. However, he says, the meaning of the term ‘incongruity’, in order to account for all of the instances that fall under the aforementioned categories is rendered too vague. The notion of *incongruity* is stretched in such a way that it ceases to be informative.⁷² Similar considerations are found in a paper written by Carroll on jokes:

[Incongruity Theory] is generally very loose about what constituted its domain (objects, events, categories, concepts, propositions, maxims, characters, etc.) and, as well, it is exceedingly generous about the relations that may obtain between whatever composes the domain (contrast, difference, contrariness, contradiction, inappropriate subsumption, unexpected juxtaposition, transgression, and so on). Consequently, such theories run the danger of becoming vacuous; they seem capable of assimilating anything, including much that is not, pretheoretically, comic.⁷³

The classical response that Incongruity theorists provide to this charge can be found in another paper written by Carroll after he became more sympathetic towards this theory. In ‘Two Comic Plots’, Carroll is willing to admit that the theory is “overly elastic”, that the list of what counts as incongruous is “extremely wide-open” and that the definition of incongruity is “very imprecise”.⁷⁴ However, Carroll adds, even if the notion of incongruity is vague, it should not be considered vacuous or utterly uninformative; on the contrary, it provides us with the outline of the formal object of comic amusement.⁷⁵ With this in mind we can proceed to explicate what exactly we mean by incongruity in each single case.

We adopt Carroll’s response to the Problem of Vagueness, and we shall defend the Incongruity Theory from this criticism by proving that the tools provided by this theory are apt to describe comic instances. To this end, in Chapter 2, we put the notion of *incongruity* to the test challenging it with an array of comic instances and investigating its ability to offer insightful description of them. Furthermore, in Part 2 we shall show that the description of humour offered by Incongruity Theory provides a key for describing cases where it seems harder to capture what is the object of our amusement.

In the next section, we shall conclude the discussion on Incongruity Theory and, more in general, on the nature of humour and comic amusement by looking at some of the conditions in which a subject must perceive an instance of humour for being comically amused. As we have said, Incongruity Theory claims that: (a) perceived incongruity is a necessary element of humour; and (b) comic amusement requires enjoying the perceived incongruity in an appropriate way. In this section, we have defended

⁷² Lippitt, ‘Humour’, p. 200, and John Lippitt, ‘Humour and Incongruity’, *Cogito*, 8/2 (1994), pp. 147-153. See also Shaw, ‘Philosophy of Humor’, p. 117.

⁷³ Carroll, ‘On Jokes’, p. 317.

⁷⁴ Carroll, ‘Two Comic Plots’, p. 426.

⁷⁵ Also Mike Martin, who is critical towards Incongruity Theory under other regards, considers the wide-ranging breadth a virtue of Incongruity Theory. According to him, the notion of incongruity allows for capturing the great variety of objects that elicit amusement with, at the same time, being vacuous. Mike W. Martin, ‘Humour and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities’, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 23/1 (1983), pp. 74-85, p. 76.

claim (a) and we have illustrated why it is that what is necessary is *perceived* incongruity and not just incongruity. In the next section, I proceed to illustrate claim (b).

1.3 Comic Amusement

In the last section we have argued that if a perceived incongruity is what renders the object of perception suitable for triggering comic amusement, this is not however sufficient. Indeed, according to Incongruity Theory, to be amused one must perceive an incongruity and perceive it through an appropriate lens. There are familiar cases where we perceive some incongruities and yet we are not amused by them. By contrast, we react with fear, rage, puzzlement or surprise. Michel Clark has offered a formulation of Incongruity Theory that proved to be very influential, and that aimed to account for these cases. According to Clark, to be comically amused one must perceive an incongruity and enjoy it for its own sake.⁷⁶

In the next few paragraphs, I will provide some excerpts to illustrate different reactions to perceived incongruities, and to investigate what entails perceiving an incongruity for its own sake. The first passage is taken from ‘Dante and the Lobster’. Belacqua is in the local dairy to buy a slice of Gorgonzola, an Italian cheese, to prepare a sandwich that he will consume for lunch.

He looked sceptically at the cut of cheese. He turned it over on its back to see was the other side any better. The other side was worse. They had laid it better side up, they had practised that little deception. Who shall blame them? He rubbed it. It was sweating. That was something. He stooped and smelt it. A faint fragrance of corruption. What good was that? He didn’t want fragrance, he wasn’t a bloody gourmet, he wanted a good stench. What he wanted was a good green stenching rotten lump of Gorgonzola cheese, alive, and by God he would have it.

He looked fiercely at the grocer.

‘What’s that?’ he demanded.

The grocer writhed.

‘Well?’ demanded Belacqua, he was without fear when roused, ‘is that the best you can do?’

‘In the length and breadth of Dublin’ said the grocer ‘you won’t find a rottener bit this minute.’

Belacqua was furious. The impudent dogsbody, for two pins he would assault him.⁷⁷

Belacqua arrives at the dairy with specific expectations around the features that a good Gorgonzola should have. However, the Gorgonzola available at the local dairy does not fulfil Belacqua’s requirements. This causes Belacqua’s reaction of rage and anger. In this case, Belacqua perceives an incongruity, but this incongruity is not enjoyed, let alone enjoyed for its own sake, and thus does not cause comic amusement.

⁷⁶ Clark, ‘Humour and Incongruity’, p. 150.

⁷⁷ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 7.

Enjoying an incongruity is required for eliciting comic amusement. However, not any type of enjoyment shall do. We will now discuss cases where the incongruity is enjoyed in a way which is not apt for eliciting comic amusement.

Further on in 'Dante and the Lobster', Belacqua eats the sandwich that he prepared with the Gorgonzola bought in the local dairy, the smell and look of which had disappointed him. However, Belacqua's requirement for a good Gorgonzola is called into question during lunch:

Belacqua drew near to the school, quite happy, for all had gone swimmingly. The lunch had been a notable success, it would abide as a standard in his mind. Indeed he could not imagine its ever being superseded. And such a pale soapy piece of cheese to prove so strong! He must only conclude that he had been abusing himself all these years in relating the strength of cheese directly to its greenness. We live and learn, that was a true saying.⁷⁸

In this passage, as in the previous one, Belacqua explicitly acknowledges that he perceives an incongruity. In particular, here, he finds an incongruity between how he thought a good piece of Gorgonzola should look and smell, and the smell and look of the Gorgonzola that he is enjoying and savouring. In this case, by contrast to the previous passage, Belacqua enjoys this incongruity. Yet here, too, this does not cause him to be comically amused. He is pleasantly surprised and delighted, as the sentence 'we live and learn, that was a true saying' proves, but not amused. Incongruity Theory explains this by saying that, even if Belacqua is perceiving and enjoying the incongruity, he is not enjoying it in the appropriate way. As Clark puts it: "amusement is the enjoyment of (perceiving or thinking of or indulging in) what is seen as incongruous, partly at least because it is seen as incongruous".⁷⁹ By contrast, Belacqua's enjoyment of the incongruity depends on the enjoyment of the fact that he has learnt something new about Gorgonzola.

In another passage of the same short story, 'Dante and the Lobster', Belacqua ponders the pun '*qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta*' that he read in a passage of the *Inferno* in Dante's *Divina Commedia*. The pun revolves around the two meanings of the Italian word '*pietà*': it can mean either piety – religious devotion, zeal or reverence – or pity – compassion, feelings of mercy. The literal translation of the pun is something along the lines of 'here piety/pity lives when it (piety/pity) is dead (ceases)', and it can be spell out as 'here pity lives when piety is dead'. Or as John Pilling puts it "there piety must die for pity to live".⁸⁰ The pun wants to highlight the contrast between piety and pity: if one feels pity towards the damned souls in the *Inferno* then one ceases to feel piety towards God, as God's judgment is called into doubt:

'I recall one superb pun anyway:
'*qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta...*'"
She said nothing.
'Is it not a great phrase?' he gushed.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷⁹ Clark, 'Humour and Incongruity', p. 150.

⁸⁰ John Pilling, *Beckett before Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004b), p. 32.

She said nothing.

'Now' he said like a fool 'I wonder how you could translate that?'⁸¹

He walked on, gripping his parcel. Why not piety and pity both, even down below? Why not mercy and Godliness together? A little mercy in the stress of sacrifice, a little mercy to rejoice against judgment. He thought of Jonah and the gourd and the pity of a jealous God on Nineveh.⁸²

In these two passages Belacqua is intellectually engaged with Dante's pun. In the first passage, he expresses his enjoyment of the pun. In the second passage, Belacqua is puzzled by the meaning and significance of the pun, as his reasoning reveals. This time too, Belacqua perceives an incongruity without being amused by it. This is because he is not enjoying the incongruity for its own sake. By contrast, he is perceiving the incongruity in relation to the problem it raises and to find a solution for it. To be amused, one must not engage the incongruity with a problem-solving attitude.

Finally, the perceiver of the incongruity does not have to regard the incongruity in a way which is anxiety-producing or which elicits negative emotions. In horror stories and movies, for example, it is very often the case that what is fearsome is also incongruous. The incongruity is perceived as conducive to something troubling or dangerous. Those incongruities are thus not amusing as they are not perceived for their own sake.⁸³

Where incongruities do not elicit fear, they are very often apt to elicit negative emotions or attitudes. To prevent this from happening, comic authors often keep the elements which would elicit negative emotions hidden in the background and highlight the comic elements. This is evident for example in the following passage, taken from the short story 'The Expelled'. The main character is kicked out of his house and thrown down the stairs. He ends up in the middle of the street where he lies unconcerned and calmly reflects on his situation:

Under these circumstances nothing compelled me to get up immediately. I rested my elbow on the sidewalk, funny the things you remember, settled my ear in the cup of my hand and began to reflect on my situation, notwithstanding its familiarity.⁸⁴

Even if the actions that lead to the situation described are violent, none of the elements in the passage refer to the physical or emotional pain experienced by the character. By contrast, our attention is drawn to the incongruous behaviour of the character. Had there been elements that underlined the violence of the act, they probably would have acted to prevent comic arousals.

A further illustration of this point can be found by comparing *Waiting for Godot* to Bruce Nauman's 1987 installation, *Clown Torture*.⁸⁵ Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is full of gags which are derived from

⁸¹ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 11.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 13.

⁸³ For a comparative analyses of horror and humour see: Noël Carroll, 'Horror and Humor', in Noël Carroll (ed.), *Beyond Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001a), pp. 235-254.

⁸⁴ Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 4.

⁸⁵ This comparison was found in Bryden, 'Clowning with Beckett', p. 366.

the world of clowns.⁸⁶ As it is often the case with clowns, the gags are often physical and violent. For example, the entrance of Pozzo and Lucky on stage is described as follows:

[(...) *Enter POZZO and LUCKY. POZZO drives LUCKY by means of a rope passed round his neck, so that LUCKY is the first to appear, followed by the rope which is long enough to allow him to reach the middle of the stage before POZZO appears. LUCKY carries a heavy bag, a folding stool, a picnic basket and a greatcoat. POZZO a whip.*]

POZZO: [Off.] On! [Crack of whip. POZZO appears. They cross the stage. LUCKY passes before VLADIMIR and ESTRAGON and exit. POZZO at the sight of VLADIMIR and ESTRAGON stops short. The rope tautens. POZZO jerks it violently.] Back!

[Noise of LUCKY falling with all his baggage. VLADIMIR and ESTRAGON turns towards him, half wishing half fearing to go to his assistance. VLADIMIR takes a step towards LUCKY, ESTRAGON holds him back by the sleeve.]⁸⁷

In this passage, as in clown gags, some of the outcomes of violent actions are hidden – such as pain and sorrows – and others are brought to the foreground – sounds, mechanical and clumsy gestures. The outcomes in the foreground are those which are suitable to lead to comic amusements. The outcomes left in the background are those that would militate against comic amusement if they were made salient. Bruce Nauman's installation shows that this is the case. *Clown Torture* consists of projections of sequences of clown acts on different screens in an enclosed room. On each screen a single short sequence is projected continuously and repeatedly. The voice of the clowns, the sounds of their laughter, their screams are amplified. As Mary Bryden describes it:

Approaching the installation through a padded tunnel suggests the passageway to a torture chamber, or to Dante's *Inferno*. Entering it is terrifying, with shrieks, shouts, and even ambient noise tuned up to ear-splitting volume. In one sequence, a clown repeatedly screams the word "No!" from a variety of postures, often lying kicking out on the floor.⁸⁸

Nauman's installation foregrounds those elements of the clowns' gags which must pass unnoticed for comic amusement to arise. Once they are made salient, they act as defeaters, and compassion or a sense of uneasiness take the place of comic amusement.

Clark's formulation of Incongruity Theory, and in particular the condition that he places on the mode of perception of the incongruity, have been criticised for not being accurate enough. In support of this criticism, scholars such as Mike Martin, John Morreall and Tom Cochrane have offered counter-examples of situations where incongruities are enjoyed for their own sake, and yet they are not comically amusing.⁸⁹ Certain works of art offer a particularly compelling and challenging counter-example. For example, Dalí's Surrealist painting *The Persistence of Time*, which depicts three melting watches and another ambiguous melting shape, contains incongruities which seem to satisfy Clark's

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 23.

⁸⁸ Bryden, 'Clowning with Beckett', p. 366.

⁸⁹ Martin, 'Humour and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities', pp. 77-78. Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor*, p. 13. Tom Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 57/1 (2017), pp. 51-66, pp. 57-58.

conditions: the incongruities of the painting are (aesthetically) enjoyed and they are enjoyed for their own sake. The viewer's attention is drawn onto the melting watches and onto their shapes because of their incongruous figures, and part of the aesthetic enjoyment of the painting depends on the perception of these incongruous figures. However, the perception of these incongruities does not elicit amusement, but rather a sense of estrangement.⁹⁰

Admittedly, Incongruity Theory has not offered a conclusive answer to this criticism, which we name the 'Problem of Non-humorous Reactions'. Carroll's formulation of the Incongruity Theory provides a possible way out of the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions by adding some stipulations to the necessary condition discussed in the previous section. He claims that:

[...] someone is comically amused if and only if: (1) the object of her mental state is perceived incongruity; (2) which she regards as not threatening or anxiety-producing, or as the source of any other negative emotion; (3) which does not motivate her to engage in genuine problem-solving or serious explanation; (4) which she enjoys.⁹¹

Although Carroll's strategy is not satisfactory for those who, like Cochrane, advocate that a "deeper account should explain *how* we manage to not be puzzled or annoyed by the incongruity",⁹² his stipulations are enough for our purposes. When, in the next chapters, we examine Beckett's passages, it will be our task to point out what elements facilitate an amused reaction to the perception of the incongruities.

⁹⁰ We shall notice that these scholars offer several counter-examples which, however, are not always as compelling as the one above. For example, one of Mike Martin's counter-examples is Picasso's painting *Guernica*. This however does not seem an appropriate counter-example as it contains representations of pain and suffering which block the positive enjoyment of incongruities. Similar considerations apply to Cochrane's choice of Magritte's *Young Girl Eating a Bird* as a counter-example. This painting consists of a depiction of a girl eating a bird. This, however, could be explained by the fact that, in contrast to the clowns' sketches described earlier, the disturbing elements are prominent. Beyond, counter-examples of aesthetic enjoyment of incongruities, Martin offers another counter-example which we do not find compelling. He reports a case described by Freud of a foot fetishist who is sexually excited by the incongruous shapes of feet. However, in this case it does not seem that the foot fetishist is enjoying the incongruity for its own sake. In contrast, it seems that the incongruous shape of the feet is enjoyed in relation to sexual pleasure. See Martin, 'Humour and Aesthetic Enjoyment of Incongruities', pp. 77-78. Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour', p. 57.

⁹¹ Carroll, 'Two Comic Plots', p. 424. Carroll maintains that the conditions that he has outlined are jointly sufficient for eliciting comic amusement. I remain neutral on whether or not these conditions are in fact jointly sufficient or if it is even possible to provide an exhaustive list of conditions. In the rest of the thesis, I shall make use of the description of humour instances as containing incongruous elements. I will not discuss whether a reader is comically amused and in which condition the reader must be to be so.

⁹² Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour', p. 57. Cochrane offers his own explanation and solution for what we have called the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions. According to him, to be amused by an incongruity we should not be prompt to change our attitude towards the norm violated and the violation should not prompt us to correct the person who is violating the norm or to feel outraged by it either. For this to be the case an incongruity must be perceived as non-serious, that is as non-pragmatically demanding. Cochrane's formulation, however, is based on his definition of what makes an incongruity apt for eliciting comic amusement, which is highly controversial. According to him, the incongruities that are apt for eliciting comic amusement are those that involve the disruption of a norm about "how something ought to be (rule-based norms)", and which is "grounded in intentional actions or attitudes". The constraint on pragmatic demand that Cochrane places as a second condition for eliciting comic amusement derives from the fact that he sees the comic incongruities as incongruities ought-based norms. However, there are many incongruities that are not of this kind and are comic, such as when we are amused by the funny shape of a cloud. See *ibid.*, pp. 53-56.

1.4 Additional Considerations on the Theories

Humour, comedy and laughter have been objects of interest for philosophers and scholars at least since Plato and Aristotle. In the last century, scholars have put particular effort into systematising the field of humour studies by providing classifications and distinctions.⁹³ One of the merits of classificatory works is that of trying to provide a common ground on which different accounts can be compared and contrasted. Thus attention has been drawn to the distinction between humour, amusement and laughter, or between analysing humour in an attempt to provide an answer around its necessary or sufficient conditions, or around the feelings aroused or which arouse humour, or the (social, psychological, physiological or evolutionary) purpose humour serves.⁹⁴

Classifying and systematising the field of concern in humour studies has the merit of promoting precise definitions and clarity of goals, and, for our purposes, has the merit of focusing the discussion on a precise aspect of comic instances, namely the characteristics of the object that elicit comic amusement. Nonetheless, as sometimes, at their origins, the available accounts were set up to answer different questions or were focused on different aspect of comic instances, presenting the field as dominated by contrasting and competing groups of theories causes some problems. In particular, we discuss here two problems, which I call the problem of accuracy and the problem of forgetfulness.

For the views on humour to be comparable, a few of the original comments have been, in some cases, stretched or abstracted and thus, according to some scholars, somehow distorted. Thus, for example, Aristotle and Bergson have been alternatively taken as first supporters of Incongruity Theory or Superiority Theory, depending on what passage the commentators chose as their focus.⁹⁵ This leads to some concerns regarding accuracy. Firstly, the views of those philosophers who never really intended to write a theory of humour risk to be misrepresented. Secondly, the representation of the debate in the field of humour studies is at risk of not being itself accurate. Indeed, the three theories of humour are presented as competing accounts. However, as argued, the intent of the philosophers was often that of commenting on singular aspects of humour experiences (cognitive, emotional, behavioural or social). Furthermore, their intent was rarely that of contrasting an existing and thorough theory of humour with a different one. Thus, comments regarding the physical experience and the feelings associated with

⁹³ See Morreall, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, pp. 1-7; Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues', pp 13-34 Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*.

⁹⁴ For an introduction to questions that different approaches ask see: Smuts, 'Humor'; Levinson, 'Humour'.

⁹⁵ Aristotle is mainly identified as holding an Superiority account of humour (see for example Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues'; Lippitt, 'Humour'; Cohen, 'Humor'). Others suggest that while Aristotle can be seen as holding a Superiority Theory of humour, his comments can be seen as suggesting what will become the Incongruity Theory. See for example Smuts, 'Humor', and Carroll, 'Humour'.

Bergson's theory of humour has been read as involving both elements belonging to the Incongruity Theory as well as Superiority Theory. See for example Smuts, 'Humor', and Keith-Spiegel, 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues'. Lippitt considers Bergson's theory belonging to the Superiority type. See Lippitt, 'Humor and Superiority'.

laughter have been stretched to the point of becoming claims around the necessary or even sufficient condition for amusement.⁹⁶ The views obtained are so difficult to defend as to be almost implausible.

It is often the case that problems of accuracy can be set aside when the aim of the study is not that of accurately presenting where and when different theories originated and what the historical forms of these theories wanted to claim. If the aim of the study is precisely that of looking at specific aspects of humorous experiences – be they features of humorous stimuli, humorous amusement or the function of laughter –, then it becomes less important to provide an accurate picture of the field and its history. What really matters for studies of this type is to provide an accurate picture of the phenomenon in question. Setting aside questions regarding accuracy can be even more beneficial for this purpose. Indeed, it allows for those processes of reshaping, recasting and abstracting that are fundamental for setting up clarifications and grounding notions.

However, setting aside accuracy is less beneficial if it leads us to forget key details in the study. For example, as outlined, Superiority Theory is understood as to claim that feelings of superiority are what triggers humorous amusement. On the opposite side, Incongruity Theory claims that perception and enjoyment of an incongruity is a necessary element for eliciting comic amusement. Now, scholars interested in systematising the field arrived at both these formulations by abstracting and stretching comments on humour scattered across the history of philosophy. If one is interested in assessing which of the two theories more accurately describes humorous experiences, then knowing the origins of such formulations seems less important than assessing their ability to account for the different kinds of humorous mechanisms and instances or their ability to distinguish between humorous experiences and non-humorous experiences. However, once merits and limits have been assessed and once the most plausible candidate has been picked out, one must look at those elements that have been set aside to provide an accurate and complete picture of the phenomenology of humour. Thus, if Incongruity Theory is a better candidate than Superiority Theory to offer a description of the nature of humour, it is nonetheless important to look at those aspects of the phenomenology of humour which have attracted the attention of the Superiority Theory scholars in order to provide a complete picture of certain comic instances and experiences. For instance, identifying the key element of humour with the perception and enjoyment of incongruities leaves the social aspects of humorous experiences which have been the focus of Superiority theorists (i.e. their ability to correct behaviours or their association with attempts at disparaging) unexplained.

Highlighting the merits of such classifications is, on the one hand, an invite for us to stick to the rigour that has been introduced in humour studies and to clarify the focus of our analysis when approaching Beckett's texts. On the other hand, having pointed out the problems that might arise, we shall not hasten in evaluating and dismissing the insight offered by these accounts. In particular, we shall keep in mind

⁹⁶ See for example Lintott, 'Superiority in Humor Theory'.

the suggestions that are provided by those accounts when looking at the different readings of Beckett's humour provided by scholars. This will help us to separate claims that focus on the same object of study as ours and claims that deal with other aspects of the phenomenology of comic situations.

Chapter 2: Locating Beckett's Humour

2.1 Introduction

From this chapter onwards, one of the leading aims of our discussion is to see whether an approach that is informed by Incongruity Theory can fruitfully illuminate aspects of Beckett's texts. In order to achieve this aim, we first resort to the available literature on Beckett's humour. As a consequence, this chapter presents a change of focus. Whilst Chapter 1 was mainly focused on philosophical theories of humour, this chapter enters into a debate with previous literary critical studies of Beckett's works.

This chapter also marks a change in the role played by Beckett's works in our discussion. In contrast to Chapter 1 – where passages taken from Beckett served mainly as illustrations for philosophical discussions – in this chapter the analysis of the passages taken from Beckett enables our discussion, and it is the ground on which we make new considerations. Whilst in Chapter 1 Beckett's works were used to illustrate a point, in this chapter they are the means to arrive at new points in the discussion.

The comic elements of Beckett's works can be approached from different angles in order to investigate different aspects of these works. For example, the investigation could be of interpretative nature and investigate the role played by humour inside the text and in relation to the significance of the text.¹ A different discussion could be of comparative nature and discuss Beckett's humour in order to collocate Beckett's work in a particular tradition or to compare it to the work of other authors.² Our discussion, on the other hand, chooses to focus on detecting and describing the *presence* of humour in Beckett's works, as this investigation forms the basis for the other discussions. By illuminating such presence, our investigation aims to offer new grounds for further interpretative and comparative works.

We start our investigation of the presence of humour in Beckett's works by looking at the analysis provided by Ruby Cohn, in her 1962 study *Samuel Beckett: the Comic Gamut*.³ Despite the fact that Cohn's study was written nearly six decades ago, it is still the best work for comparison with our analysis. Other studies have been produced over time since the publication of Cohn's work, but this remains the only study dedicated to Beckett's humour that provides a systematic and thorough textual

¹ This is, for example, the case of the considerations around humour made in: Kenner, *Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study*; Valerie Topsfield, *The Humour of Samuel Beckett* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988); Sylvie Debevec Henning, *Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition* (Lexington, Ky: University Press of Kentucky, 1988); Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*.

² This is, for example, the case of Vivian Mercier, *The Irish Comic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962); W. Hugh Kenner, *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett. The Stoic Comedians* (London: W. H. Allen, 1964); Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. And of papers such as Edith Kern, 'Black Humor: The Pockets of Lemuel Gulliver and Samuel Beckett', in Melvin J. Friedman (ed.), *Samuel Beckett Now: Critical Approaches to His Novels, Poetry, and Plays* (2nd edn.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 89-102. More recently: Marjorie Perloff, 'Beckett in the Country of the Houyhnhms: The Transformation of Swiftian Satire', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 22 (2010), pp. 17-38; Adam Winstanley, "'Grâce Aux Excréments Des Citoyens": Beckett, Swift and the Coprophagic Economy of Ballyba', *Revisiting Molloy, Malone meurt/Malone Dies and L'Innommable/The Unnamable*, /26 (2014), pp. 91-105.

³ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*.

analysis of it.⁴ Amongst the studies that have focused on humour, there are only a few that are not focused only on single aspects of individual works, however none of these are interested in describing the mechanisms of humour devices. Valerie Topsfield's study does not offer a textual analysis of comic devices. Instead, her study is focused on the consequences of the presence of humour, and is carried out mainly by looking at Beckett's view on the matters and the themes that are targeted by humour in his work.⁵ Henning's study proposes a Bakhtinian reading of Beckett's texts: she does not deal with single instances of humour; on the contrary, she points out how topics and themes are held in a comic dialogue inside Beckett's texts.⁶ Finally, Laura Salisbury's study is focused on how Beckett's humour negotiates the relationship of power between the laugher and the object of laughter. Although her study is concentrated on a formal aspect of humour, her considerations are mainly of the interpretative type and are around the significance of this negotiation in Beckett's texts.

The similarity with our approach is not the only reason behind our choice of concentrating on Ruby Cohn's study.⁷ Cohn's interpretative considerations on humour are still relevant to the contemporary debate. Simon Critchley has relatively recently provided an account of humour that contains considerations on Beckett's humour which, although are not explicitly connected to Cohn's work, strongly resonate with her interpretation.⁸ Humour, for both scholars, plays a fundamental role in the recognition and acceptance of human beings' shared fate. Furthermore, at testimony of the importance that this view plays, two recent works from Shane Weller⁹ and Laura Salisbury¹⁰ have debated and challenged such an interpretation.

Moreover, Cohn's study occupies an important position in the wider context of Beckett's studies. Not only is it one of the first books entirely dedicated to Beckett's works published in English,¹¹ but this study, along with those of Kenner¹² and Esslin,¹³ gave rise to what today is referred to as the 'humanist' reading of Beckett's works, a reading that is still very influential.¹⁴ According to this reading, as David

⁴ Cohn's analysis covers all Beckett's published works and some unpublished ones up to the date of its publication in 1962. Cohn's analysis deals then with a range of literary and non-literary works: poetry, prose, theatre as well as Beckett's literary criticisms pieces. See *ibid.*

⁵ See Topsfield, *The Humour of Samuel Beckett*.

⁶ See Henning, *Beckett's Critical Complicity: Carnival, Contestation, and Tradition*.

⁷ At this regard, Pattie writes:

Although Cohn herself later expressed doubts about the work [*Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*], it played an important part in early discussions of Beckett as a writer of particularly grim comedy, the master of illiberal jest.

Pattie, *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett*, p. 116.

⁸ Critchley, *On Humour*.

⁹ Shane Weller discusses in particular Critchley version of the view. See Weller, 'Last Laughs: Beckett and the Ethics of Comedy'.

¹⁰ Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*.

¹¹ The first critical studies dedicated to Beckett appeared in French. Whilst the first monograph was Kenner, *Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study*, Beckett's study in English were *de facto* initiated by a collection of essays edited by Ruby Cohn and published as a special issue: Ruby Cohn (ed.), (1959), *Perspective*, 11 (3): Special Issue on Beckett.

¹² Kenner, *Samuel Beckett. A Critical Study*.

¹³ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*.

¹⁴ David Pattie, in a presentation of Beckett's criticisms, describes Cohn's seminal study with this words:

Ruby Cohn's first book on Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: the Comic Gamut*, ranks alongside Kenner's as one of the most influential, and one of the most cited, of the early studies; it also established Cohn firmly in the forefront of Beckett scholarship [...].

Pattie said, Beckett's writing "represents a heroically sustained and determined attempt to uncover the foundations of human experience" and the characters in his works confront "the human condition – the naked, uncomfortable truth of human existence in an indifferent universe".¹⁵

Finally, it is worth discussing Cohn's analytical approach as it anticipates the claims that will become central to another tradition of criticism in Beckett studies. Indeed, whilst, Cohn's interpretation of Beckett's works resonates perfectly with the humanists' claims, as David Pattie notes, her analytical approach as well as some of her interpretative claims anticipate the approach and claims of another strand of criticisms, the postmodernist approach. An important part of Cohn's considerations on the role played by humour depends on the centrality that she claims questions around the nature of language and its irremediable fictionality have in Beckett's texts. These are the questions that are taken at the foreground in the postmodernist approaches to Beckett's works.¹⁶

Notice that we could have chosen to develop our analytical approach to Beckett's work without starting from one of the available positions in literature. However, the reasons that we have offered in support of our choice to choose Cohn's study over other studies as a starting point of our discussion, largely explain our choice to start from an available approach in the first place. Beyond providing a point of anchorage to our investigation, the discussion of Cohn's study that we carry out in this chapter is, at the very least, a way to contribute to Beckett scholarship where, as we have argued, Cohn's study occupies a prominent position. Moreover, Cohn's study offers insightful and perceptive analysis and, as the discussion in this chapter shall prove, choosing it as an interlocutor generates a creative and fruitful debate.

We thus introduce Cohn's textual analysis of Beckett's humour and we follow it in the task of locating humour. This task can be understood and undertaken in two ways. Firstly, one could look at Beckett's text to see which texts contain instances of humour and which texts do not. In this sense, to answer the question 'where is humour?' is to answer the question 'in which texts is there humour?'. Secondly, the question can be interpreted as asking where in a text, i.e. in what elements of a text, the incongruity of humorous instances is located. As we shall see shortly, an incongruity can be located at different levels of a text depending on what type of elements are involved in it. For example, an incongruity can be located in the plot structure when it depends on how events follow one another. In other cases, the

Pattie, *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett*, p. 116.

¹⁵ Pattie, 'Beckett and Bibliography', p. 227. See also Pattie, *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett*, pp. 102-125.

¹⁶ According to Pattie, Cohn anticipates some of the postmodernist claims on Beckett when she points out that amongst Beckett's main themes there are the one that equates the human being to the artist and characterises both of them as liars, the one that presents true knowledge of reality as impossible to achieve, and, finally the undermining of fictional structures and literary forms. See Pattie, 'Beckett and Bibliography', pp 234-236, and Pattie, *The Complete Critical Guide to Samuel Beckett*, p. 117.

Cohn, Pattie says, withdraw this 'proto-postmodernist' claims in her later publications, placing her feet more firmly in the humanist tradition. Our reading is here concerned only with her early monograph. Pattie, 'Beckett and Bibliography', pp 235-236. For Cohn's later positions, see Ruby Cohn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1976), Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

incongruity of a humorous instance might be located at the level of characters if, for example, it depends on the characters' idiosyncrasies. Or finally, when the humorous instances depend on language play their incongruities are located at the level of the language.

In what follows, we choose to answer the question 'where is humour?' by interpreting it in the second way. We shall thus provide examples of instances of humour to illustrate the different loci that they can occupy. As will become clear, it is often the case that a humorous passage involves more than one incongruity and these incongruities might not all occupy the same locus. From time to time, our attempt at locating humour by describing incongruities will perhaps look somehow reductive as it will often focus only on one of such incongruities. Although this operation might seem reductive when seen in its single aspect, it is vital to understand the complexity of humour in Beckett's texts: it is only by locating the different loci that it is possible to point at all the different aspects that one instance contains.

Thus, the aims of this chapter are that of (i) individuating some loci of the incongruity of the instances of humour in Beckett and thus (ii) offering a description of Beckett's humour by (iii) presenting Cohn's account of it and (iv) critically engaging with it.

Despite the change of emphasis - from a philosophical discussion supported by literary illustrations to a discussion where literary criticism is at the forefront - this chapter contains lines of continuity with the previous chapter. The discussion in Chapter 1 has provided us with some tools to describe humour instances, but, at the same time, it has left us with some questions too. Particularly, whilst incongruity was shown to be a necessary feature of humour, its explicatory power was questioned. The notion of *incongruity*, to encompass all cases, some opponents to the theory say, is rendered vague to the point that it is not quite clear whether this notion is explaining anything anymore. As a response to this criticism, Incongruity theorists have pointed out that, despite its vagueness, the notion of incongruity is not vacuous, and that it can be made more precise case by case. Thus, the further aims of this chapter are that of (v) putting Incongruity Theory to the test with instances of humour of various nature and complexity, and by doing so (vi) enlarging the pool of examples that the theory proves able to deal with, and hence (vii) prove its explicatory power.

Finally, it should be noted that the discussions that are carried out in order to achieve the first set of aims (i-iv) and the second set of aims (v-vi) enable one the other. It is by putting Incongruity Theory to the test that we will be able to describe instances of Beckett's humour and critically engage with Cohn's account and vice versa. The discussion carried out works also towards achieving an overarching aim of the thesis, that is to show that the collaboration between philosophy and literature is particularly fruitful when they inform each other, and not when they are used as mere illustrations of one another.

2.2 Cohn's and Bergson's Classifications of Comic Devices

Cohn's reading of Beckett's works is based on two different, yet complementary, approaches. On the one hand, Cohn carries out an interpretative reading of Beckett's works: she individuates central and recurring themes that Beckett explores. On the other hand, Cohn carries out a textual analysis of Beckett's works: she analyses and categorises central and recurring literary comic devices. These two levels of analysis are tied together in her analytic-interpretative reading of the role played by humour: she (a) individuates the devices that Beckett uses and (b) reflects on Beckett's use of such devices with a close attention to how they relate to the main themes of Beckett's works. According to her analysis, similar devices can be used in significantly different ways. Given the aims of this section, our presentation of her reading focuses on her description of the devices used, i.e. on her textual analysis and considerations (a), particularly on the tools that she uses to classify humour.

At the textual level, as said earlier, Cohn orientates her analysis in two directions. Firstly, she moves through Beckett's works chronologically, and, secondly, she uses a classificatory grid to group the devices that she finds in each work. Cohn claims that the classificatory grid she uses follows Bergson's classification of comic instances, who groups instances of humour in three categories: 'comic elements in situation', 'comic elements in character', 'comic elements in language', – or, following Cohn's terminology, 'comic of situation', 'comic of character', 'comic of language'.¹⁷ Both Bergson and Cohn do not provide explicit criteria for this distinction. However, by looking at the instances they group under these categories and the descriptions that they provide, it seems safe to say that what distinguishes the three groups is the source of the comic. Thus, an instance belongs to the 'comic of situation' if the comic depends on actions or events. It belongs to the 'comic of character' if the comic depends on social and personal features, or attitudes of individuals. Finally, an instance belongs to the 'comic of language' if the comic depends on the arrangement and meaning of words and expressions.

It should be noted, before continuing, that Cohn's classificatory grid does not entirely coincide with Bergson's. Bergson's study offers the analysis of two further categories of comic instances: 'comic elements in forms' and 'comic elements in movements'. The three categories that Cohn uses in her study are those that Bergson employs to analyse "comic playwright and the wit",¹⁸ i.e. comic instances that are manufactured with the intention to create something funny rather than objects, shapes or situations that are unintentionally funny. Cohn does not mention the other two categories included in

¹⁷ Cohn explicitly refers to Bergson's classification of comic instances when she analyses *More Pricks than Kicks* "Of the three domains. Situation, character, and language, it is mainly upon the last that Beckett's comic effects depend" (Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 22). Despite the fact that she does not always say it explicitly, Cohn's analysis of other Beckett's works is based on this distinction. If one reads her analysis carefully, recurring patterns can be individuated: she always starts her reading by looking at the plot, then moving onto characters and finally the use of language. Here and there, she scatters references to the analytical grid by using those labels.

The difference in terminology between Cohn's and Bergson's might be due to the fact that Cohn translates Bergson's groups directly from the French. For Bergson's classification and terminology see Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* trans. Cloudesley Brereton and Fred Rothwell (London: Macmillan & Co, 1911).

¹⁸ Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* p. 66.

Bergson's study, and she might have decided to use only the three categories that Bergson uses for manufactured comic because she is applying them to literary works. A passing remark on *More Pricks than Kicks* lends some support to this hypothesis. She notices that since Bergson "bases his analysis of the comic largely on the comedy of manners, it is not surprising that his framework best fits this Beckett book".¹⁹ Whilst it is true that Bergson takes most of his illustration from the comedy of manners, this is particularly so for the section that he dedicates to the comedy of 'playwright and wit' and from which Cohn takes her grid. By contrast, when he refers to the comic in movements and forms he often refers to the comic linked to the everyday situations and people. Thus, Cohn might just be referring to a part of Bergson's work. Pointing out this difference between Cohn and Bergson is not just a question of scholarly precision, but, as we shall see in the dedicated section, it will clarify some of the claims that Cohn makes on the 'comic of character'.

The last comparison between Cohn's and Bergson's approaches that we make is about their position in regard to the nature of humour. Bergson offers his own view on what makes something comic. He claims that at the heart of the comic there is the rigidity of what is living: "the laughable element [...] consists of certain *mechanical inelasticity*, just were one would expect to find the wide-awake adaptability and the living pliability of a human being".²⁰ Although Cohn mentions Bergson's view and although she does not explicitly reject it, she does not endorse it either and her study does not make any consideration that would suggest otherwise.²¹

¹⁹ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 22.

²⁰ Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* p. 10. Few considerations on Bergson's principle. Firstly, the above formulation of the principle traces an exclusive relationship between the comic and the human. The liveness and pliability that become rigid must be that of a human being. The same point is stated even more explicitly few lines before the above enunciation: "The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly *human*", *ibid.*, p. 3. Although Bergson in this passages seems to exclude the non-human from the set of the objects appropriate to elicit comic amusement, he clarifies that this is not what he intends to do. Indeed, he adds that you might laugh at non-human objects or animals insofar as you have detected in them some resemblance to some human features, attitudes or expressions. *Ibid.*, pp. 3-4.

Secondly, although the above formulation of comic is compatible with the Incongruity Theory of humour, classifying Bergson's theory of humour is not straightforward. Indeed, on the one hand, Bergson makes remarks that are openly critic towards Incongruity Theory: "those definitions which tend to make the comic into an abstract relation between ideas: "an intellectual contrast," "a palpable absurdity," etc., – definitions which, even were they really suitable to every form of the comic, would not in the least explain why the comic makes us laugh", *ibid.*, p. 7. In second instance, his view of the social function of the comic aligns with Superiority Theory more than with Incongruity Theory: according to him laughter is a social gesture that "by the fear which it inspires, it restrains eccentricity". *Ibid.*, p. 20.

Perhaps a solution to this apparent contradiction is to distinguish between Bergson's view on the fundamental mechanism of *comic* – similar to Incongruity Theory – from Bergson's view on the function of *laughter* – similar to Superiority Theory –, as he himself seems to do: the "rigidity is the comic, and laughter is its corrective", *ibid.*, p. 21.

This tension inside Bergson's work is perhaps what has led scholars to have contrasting views on whether to consider him as supporting Incongruity Theory or Superiority Theory.

²¹ The philosophical theory that underlies Bergson's classification of humour is mentioned only once in Cohn's study. In her conclusive remarks, where she reframes her picture of Beckett's humour using *Watt's* terminology, Cohn presents the Intellectual laughter with these words: "Intellectual laughter, aroused by deviation from truth, may be compared to Bergsonian laughter, aroused by mechanical rigidity imposed upon the authentic free flow of life, which is a kind of truth". Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 288. However, as she does not extend this comparison to the other two types of laughter that she discusses (ethical and dianoethical), these remarks do not amount to an endorsement of Bergson's view.

As a side note, whilst Cohn remains silent on Bergson's principle of humour, she explicitly dismisses, at least with regards to Beckett's humour, the corrective role that Bergson confers to it. See *ibid.*, p. 8.

Not only Cohn does not deal with Bergson's account of humour, but she does not deal with any theory of humour. Her study leaves a gap in this regard and she does not offer her view on the matter.²² In fact, her description of the comic instances is not based on any theory of humour and the classification of comic instances that she offers is compatible with each of the three theories that we have examined in Chapter 1. Whilst Cohn's (and Bergson's) classification looks at the elements that are comic and divides the instances according to whether those elements belong to situation, character or language, Superiority Theory, Release Theory and Incongruity Theory aim to provide an account of what is responsible for comic amusement and hence common to all the comic instances. One could hold any of these accounts of humour and at the same time categorise comic instances as Cohn does. A comic instance can be described by classifying it in one of the three categories used by Cohn and then, depending on the account of humour held, by explaining how those elements cause amusement. They would do so by causing feeling of superiority (if one is a Superiority theorist), or by causing release of tension (if one holds a Release account of humour), and due to the presence of an incongruity (if one supports the Incongruity Theory).

The gap that Cohn leaves can be bridged by using the tools that Incongruity Theory has provided us. This gives us also the opportunity to test Incongruity Theory and Cohn's account of Beckett's humour against each other. We shall see whether the theory is able to describe the instances identified by Cohn and, on the other hand, if the classification provided by her is satisfying in capturing all the types of incongruity.

Thus, our description will take in account both types of approaches: Cohn's classification and the claims of Incongruity Theory. For example, for us, to say that a comic instance belongs to the 'comic of situation', amounts to say that the incongruity of the comic instance is to be found between elements that belong to the situation. The comic depends on the situation in the sense that elements of situations, events or acts stand in an incongruous relationship, and, because of this relationship, they are apt to elicit comic amusement. That is to say, if we had to extract the events, acts or situations from a novel and describe them with different words from those used in the novels, they will still be incongruous and thus apt to be conducive of amusement.

Noël Carroll takes a similar approach to plot structures. He aims to describe what it is that makes some plot or narrative structures comic, and to do so he moves his investigation from the following hypothesis.

Ex hypothesi, if there are narrative structures worth calling comic, they should have some special connection with humor or amusement. That is, they should either be funny themselves or be

²² The fact that Cohn does not clarify her position on what theory of humour she endorses is not problematic for her analysis as she is not interested in individuating what makes an instance comic. By contrast, Cohn individuates and classifies instances of humour in order to relate their presence to the main themes of the works.

naturally conducive to eliciting comic amusement. They should bear some internal relation or otherwise intimate connection to provoking mirth.²³

If there are narrative structures that are genuinely comic, Carroll says, they must hold some independent connection with humour. Given that for us, and for Carroll, at the heart of humour there is incongruity, then a narrative structure to be comic *per se*, it must involve some incongruities. In a similar manner, for a comic instance to belong to one of three categories – situations, characters or language – must be based on an incongruity where the elements belong respectively in one of three categories.

Now that we have clarified the relation of Cohn and Bergson's classifications to Incongruity Theory, we can offer an illustration of the distinction of instances in 'comic of the situation', 'comic of character' and 'comic of language'. Compare the following passages taken from *Murphy*. Each of these passages relates to the representation of love-relationships. The first describes the direction of love-interests amongst some of the characters. The second is a description of the step Murphy must take in order to find a job, which is the condition that Celia has put on their relationship. The third passage is a description of Murphy and Celia's mutual love:

Of such was Neary's love for Miss Dwyer, who loved a Flight-Lieutenant Elliman, who loved a Miss Farren of Ringsakiddy, who loved a Father Fitt of Ballinclashet, who in all sincerity was bound to acknowledge a certain vocation for a Mrs. West of Passage, who loved Neary.²⁴

Celia had not been long back on the street when Murphy wrote imploring her to return. She telephoned to say that she would return if he undertook to look for work. Otherwise it was useless. He rang off while she was still speaking. Then he wrote her again saying he was starved out and would do as she wished. But as there was no possibility of his finding in himself any reason for work taking one form rather than another, would she kindly procure a corpus of incentives based on the only system outside his own in which he felt the least confidence, that of the heavenly bodies. In Berwick Market there was a swami who cast excellent nativities for sixpence. She knew the year and date of the unhappy event, the time did not matter. The science that had got over Jacob and Esau would not insist on the precise moment of vagitus. He would attend to the matter himself, were it not that he was down to four-pence.²⁵

Celia loved Murphy, Murphy loved Celia, it was a striking case of love required.²⁶

The first passage is one that both Bergson and Cohn would be happy to consider as belonging to the category of 'comic of situation'. The comic element is in the circular chain of unrequited romantic relationships. To look at it with our terminology amounts to saying that the incongruous element

²³ Carroll, 'Two Comic Plots', p. 418. Carroll's analysis of comic plot structures is prompted by his reflections on comedy. He argues that the definitions of comedy available are not able to describe appropriately all the cases of comedy. Previous studies on comedy have alternatively focused their attention on the characters involved (low characters instead of noble), on the ending of the comedy (happy ending, marriages) or on the diffuse presence of comic instances. However, as it is easily imaginable these descriptions often capture only some types of comedy, but leaves out a large number of others. Carroll approaches the matter from a different angle: he looks for plot structures that are genuinely comic. A comic structure, according to him, is one that incorporates incongruities apt to elicit comic amusement.

Salvatore Attardo makes a similar move in Salvatore Attardo, *Humorous Texts: A Semantic and Pragmatic Analysis* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

²⁴ Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 5.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

perceived as funny is the fact that the love-relationships form a chain that closes in a circle. This could appear at first contradictory. The relationships above form a circular chain because they have features that are recursive (each person involved in the chain does not correspond the feeling of someone who loves them, but instead they love someone who does not love them back) and symmetrical (the first person of the chain is loved by the last person). Hence the love-chain might appear as characterised by congruity rather than incongruity. However, what is incongruous is the very fact that one would not expect such a situation to take place. The recourse of the same elements is an exaggeration which is used to create comic effect and to draw attention onto a theme that is central to *Murphy*: the difficulty in establishing and maintaining a romantic relationship. The elements that establish the incongruity described depend entirely on the situation, on how the relationships between characters are shaped, and for this reason they are said to belong to the ‘comic of situation’.

In the second passage, there are elements that Cohn and Bergson would consider as belonging to the ‘comic of character’. To capture some of these comic elements, it is useful to provide some background information, about Murphy and Celia. Murphy is unemployed and lives off a small pension that his uncle regularly sends him. Celia, Murphy’s girlfriend, is a prostitute, and her job is the only source of proper income for the couple. However, Celia would stay with Murphy only at the condition that Murphy finds a job, and she could quit hers. Given that Murphy cannot motivate himself to look for a job, Murphy tells Celia that only a horoscope ordering him to do so could be a strong enough motivation. Murphy’s attitude is a first source of amusement where the elements depend on the character. In this case, the comedy lies in the fact that Murphy is not motivated to find a job, but, at the same time, he is motivated to find a motivation to work. To describe it with the terminology of Incongruity Theory, the contrast between these two attitudes is what elicit comic amusement. Another source of amusement that depends on elements that belong to the category of the ‘comic of the character’ is the fact that Celia’s request is not as powerful as a six-pence horoscope. In this case, the incongruity lies in the disproportion between results generated by actions of considerable different importance. On the one hand, something as important as losing Celia is not a strong enough motivation for Murphy to look for a job. By contrast, something so effortless as buying a six-pence horoscope might be successful in convincing Murphy to look for a job.

By contrast, in the third passage the comic elements depend on language, and, as such, Cohn and Bergson would place them in the category of the ‘comic of language’. A first comic incongruity is in the exaggeration that depends on the choice to use the adjective ‘striking’ to characterise a quite common phenomenon, namely reciprocal love. In addition, the second half of the sentence, which contains the exaggeration (‘striking’) that presents reciprocal love as difficult to achieve, comically contrasts with the first half of the sentence where the mutual relationship is presented as linear and simple. A third comic contrast is generated by the misplacement of the adjective ‘requited’ (‘love requited’ instead of ‘requited love’). This misplacement, beyond causing estrangement, depicts an

incongruous and comic aspect of Celia and Murphy's love. Their love is requited without being *requited* love. Murphy loves Celia, and Celia loves Murphy (their love is requited). However, Murphy and Celia reciprocal needs and attitudes do not coincide. Murphy wants to be with Celia, but he cannot stay with her if she continues working as a prostitute. Celia wants to be with Murphy, but she will not leave her job unless Murphy finds one, and he does not want to do so. On the one hand, staying with Celia is good for Murphy, and, on the other, it is bad as it means he should find a job. Thus, even if they love each other, their love does not match (it is not *requited* love). The comic misplacement of the word 'requited' suggests that the directions of Murphy and Celia's love are parallel without being coincident.

Individuating the elements that make these three passages belonging respectively to the comic of situation, character and language is neither to say that these passages contain comic elements belonging only to one category and not to the other, nor to say that comic elements that belong to one category do not affect comic elements that belong to another category. On the contrary, it is often the case when approaching literary texts that comic passages are complex and contains comic incongruities that belong to different groups and that are connected one to the other. Notwithstanding this, saying that an incongruity belongs to a category is to say that if the passage analysed were to be changes in such a way that elements of the other comic categories are taken off, that incongruity would still be present.

Thus, for example, not all the comic elements in the first passage belong to the category of 'comic of situation'. Language plays an important role too and some choices made at the level of the linguistic presentation of the situation contribute to the perception of the comic aspects of the situation – the circular chain of unrequited love. The repetition of the phrase 'who loved', the choice of starting and ending the sentence on Neary, as well as the fact that the description of the love circle is condensed in a single sentence are all elements that drive our attention onto the incongruous aspects of the situation. However, the incongruity established by the circular chain of unrequited love would be still there, and would still be one belonging to the category 'comic of situation', even if the passage would have been worded differently. Other comic incongruities belong to the category of 'comic of character'. According to the description offered in the passage each person in the chain *loves* another person. The only exception to this is Father Fitt of Ballinclashet's, who 'in all sincerity was bound to acknowledge a certain *vocation* for Mrs. West of Passage'. In accordance with his profession, and thus establishing a parody of it, the Father's love is different from that of the others: his love is a vocation. His feelings towards Mrs West Passage are thus represented as the result of God action and will (or at least he might prefer to say that they are as such or justify them by saying that they are as such): they are more spiritual and less self-driven.²⁷ However, if the incongruity connected to the characters was to be taken out from

²⁷ The main definition of the word 'vocation' reported by the OED underlines the agency of God and passivity of the subject of vocation, and the spiritual nature of such call. Oxford English Dictionary, "*Vocation, N.*" (Oxford University Press).

the passage, the situation would be nonetheless funny (though perhaps the overall passage would be less funny).

Similar considerations can be made for the second passage. The sequence of events and their outcomes reported in the passage establish comic incongruities that belong to the category of ‘comic of situation’. For example, Celia’s actions have comically different and incongruous outcomes. What seems to be her most powerful means to convince Murphy to look for a job – which is giving him an ultimatum on their relationship – is in actuality ineffective. On the contrary, the action that Murphy asks her to do in order to convince him to look for a job is almost effortless: she needs to lend him four-pence to have a horoscope cast. Furthermore, there are comic instances that belong to the category of ‘comic of language’: the choice of using a sort of intellectual jargon that strides with the object to which it refers (‘corpus of incentives’, ‘heavenly bodies’ to talk about the horoscope), the description of Murphy’s birth as an ‘unhappy event’. However, even stripped by the comic elements that depend on the situation and language, the passage would still contain the incongruities that depend on Murphy’s character, as its comic nature does not depend on them.

As for the first two passages, one could individuate in the third passage incongruities which are not linguistic. By characterising Celia and Murphy’s love as a ‘striking case of love requited’, the sentence resonates comically with other aspects that belong to the overall situation in *Murphy* and to the character Murphy. If we remind ourselves of what has been said so far about mutual love relationships in *Murphy*, we can see that when one such relationship takes place it might be rightly defined as striking. The first passage illustrates that mutual love is hard to achieve in *Murphy*, and the second passage shows that Murphy’s attitudes and desires make it particularly hard for him and Celia to have a relationship. By defining the relationship as ‘striking’ the narrator might be ironically referring to these other aspects. However, even if this was not the case or the sentence were to be stripped of these resonances, amusement would still be derived from the way it is worded.²⁸

Before moving to the discussion of Cohn’s finding and analysis, we shall make some last considerations on Cohn’s choice of using Bergson’s classificatory grid and on the role that the grid plays in her argument. In Bergson’s account of humour the grid does not play any substantial role. He starts out his account by putting forward his hypothesis on the nature of humour and on what lies at the heart of comic instances. As mentioned earlier, according to Bergson is the stiffening of what should be lively that elicit comic amusement under certain circumstances. Then he moves on to test his hypothesis by looking at a range of examples. It is at this point that he introduces this grid as he uses it to organise his examples. However, his argument would still work had the grid been different or not been there at all.

²⁸ There is a similar instance of humour in *Watt* where mutual interest, if not striking, is a ‘merciful coincidence’.
The fishwoman pleased Watt greatly. [...] And Watt pleased the fishwoman. This was a merciful coincidence, that they pleased each other.
Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 118-119.

Cohn does not seem to be willing to attribute much weight to the role that the grid plays in her work too. She never describes the classification, and she explicitly claims to be using it as a springboard.

Since almost the entire comic range is present in Beckett's work, a catalogue of his comic techniques can be compiled empirically, but the convenient and widely known classification of Bergson is usable as a springboard.²⁹

As any springboard, Bergson's classification is for Cohn a starting point as well as a parting point: it is a tool that enables her analysis as well as a tool that is left behind during the analytical process. Choosing to start her analysis by employing this classification is advantageous for her in two ways. Given, as she claims, that Bergson's classification is well-known she does not have to justify her choice and she does not have to worry about explaining such a division. On the other hand, it is convenient as it provides her with a ready-made grid against which compare the development of Beckett's humour. She is indeed able to register whether one category of comic devices is used more than others or if the quality and quantity of certain devices differ as Beckett's writing career develops.

Bergson's grid is also a parting point for Cohn's analysis which often deviates from it. However, the reasons that lead Cohn to deviate from it do not represent a challenge for the grid, and Cohn does not seem to question it. For example, she recognises early in her study that, even though Bergson provides useful tools for her analysis, there are comic instances in Beckett's works which were not catalogued by Bergson.³⁰ These types of remarks do not constitute a challenge for Bergson's grid: it is Bergson's catalogue of instances, which never aimed at completeness, that proves to be defective, and not the grid itself, which can nonetheless account for these additional devices.

Furthermore, she claims that comic instances in Beckett's mature works, which for her are the most representative of Beckett's style, are characterised by the collapse of the distinction between language, character and situation and consequently of the distinction that separates the three Bergsonian categories. However, this consideration does not seem to challenge Bergson's classification either. What Cohn is saying is that some instances can belong to more than one category, as they coincide.³¹

²⁹ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 9.

³⁰ For example, according to her analysis, Bergson's classification is able to pick out the majority of the humorous tokens of *More Pricks than Kicks* – "Since Bergson in *Le rire* bases his analysis of the comic largely on the comedy of manners, it is not surprising that his framework best fits this Beckett book", *ibid.*, p. 22. Nevertheless, even in this early work, Bergson's classification leaves out some of Beckett's humorous instances. According to Cohn, this is because Beckett's "shock devices" – his illiberal jests, cruelty, obscenity and disgusting – "belong to one of the oldest traditions of Western comedy, and are too crude for Bergson to notice in an analysis based largely on the civilized comedy of manners", *ibid.*, p. 39. Elsewhere in the study, she notices that "the anti-Irish remark and the mild obscenity, uncatalogued by Bergson, become standard Beckett comic devices", *ibid.*, p. 17. She traces their presence back to Beckett's early critical work *Proust*, see *ibid.* Likewise, Cohn notes that, starting with *Murphy*, Beckett uses new "comic devices" that "appear briefly, and are interesting for their suggestions of later comic methods: mathematical series, and fictions of Beckett's fictions", *ibid.*, p. 62. Finally, in introducing her textual analysis of *Watt's* humour, she states that "from *Watt* on, we find Bergson's analysis is less and less descriptive of Beckett's comic", *ibid.*, p. 66.

³¹ For example, on *How It Is* she says that "plot and character virtually coincide in a narrator who crawls naked through the mud". See *ibid.*, p. 182. It is also the case that she considers some instances as belonging to one group where Bergson would have probably classified them differently. However, this is something which would not have troubled Bergson too much as he admits that the distinction between the three categories is not clear-cut. He recognises that many of the instances that he groups under one of the categories could be easily seen as belonging to others. For example, Bergson acknowledges that when the

Given that Cohn never challenges the grid and given that she seems to say that it can be dropped when not useful, it seems that, from her point of view, the grid is not playing an important role in her argument. She does seem to regard the classification as a tool to arrange the comic instances in groups, and perhaps organise her discussion, and not as a tool on which her conclusions are based. Not differently from Bergson, she would be using it as a tool that organises her analysis, and not a tool that enables it.³²

However, there are reasons for being more cautious in this regard. Indeed, some of Cohn's interpretative claims seem to bear, at least in part, on how she organises and collects evidence in support of her claims.

For example, when Cohn claims that Beckett's use of humour in early works differs from the use in late works, she supports this claim in part by showing that the balance between instances that belong to the three categories changes as Beckett's writing develops. This process continues until it reaches the point in which the categories collapse one into the other in mature works. However, if one happened to find additional categories to those individuated by Bergson, then Cohn's claims would be called into question. Nothing would exclude the possibility of finding one or more types of comic instances which might not change much over Beckett's writings. If this was the case, there would be a continuity in Beckett's works which has been overlooked by Cohn.

Similar remarks could be made on Cohn's interpretation of the role played by humour in Beckett's works and on the support that she provides for these claims, which are in part dependent on the analytical grid that she uses. Cohn's interpretative claims hinge, at least in part, upon the relationship that she individuates between comic instances and the main themes of Beckett's works. She, for example, considers the humour of early works as 'gratuitous' as it is not related to any of Beckett's main themes. However, in the case that additional categories are added to Bergson's grid, then it could be possible to describe the comic tone of Beckett's works as depending on incongruities that were not captured by Cohn. This could open up, as a consequence, the possibility that these newly found incongruities bear a relationship with Beckett's main recurrent themes.

In what follows, we do not discuss Cohn's interpretative reading of the role played by humour in Beckett's texts, and hence, we will not consider whether or not the outcomes of our analysis constitute a challenge for her interpretation. It will be enough for us to see whether or not these outcomes challenge her textual reading and the analytical grid that she employs.

repetition of events and acts is due to some idiosyncrasies in the characters, then the comic of situation becomes akin to comic of character. See Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* pp. 90-93.

³² As far as I am aware, the role played by Cohn's analytical grid is not questioned in the critical literature too. Commentaries on the analytical side of Cohn's study are often limited to highlighting the connection to Bergson's study and to praising of her work as thorough, methodological and painstaking. See, for example, Melvin J. Friedman, *Comparative Literature*, 16/3 (1964), pp. 264-269; D. Wright, 'A Short Guide to Samuel Beckett Studies', *Critical Survey*, 4/4 (1970), pp. 213-216; Raymond Federman and John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics. An Essay in Bibliography* (London: University of California Press, 1970).

Finally, Cohn's analysis is not debated in order to see whether or not she accurately classifies the instances under the right label, or whether or not her cataloguing of instances is complete. By contrast, I present a summary of her classification along with some examples in order to see whether her classification of humour captures all the relevant and significant features of the comic instances she analyses and of comic instances that we consider to be representative of Beckett's comic style. Similarly, our investigation of Beckett's works does not aim at completeness either. Whilst we aim to see whether there are important comic features which are overlooked by Cohn's work, we do not aim to study all the features of the comic elements in Beckett's works.

2.3 Comic of Situation

The instances of 'comic of situation' individuated by Cohn are discussed in this section by types, and not chronologically as Cohn does in her work. In particular, we divide the instances that she finds in two broad groups: the 'comic of plot' and the 'comic of sequence of events'. The first group includes devices where the incongruity lies in the overall structure of the plot. The second group includes devices where the incongruity is in the sequence of events. Cohn very rarely explain why she considers a device that she individuates comic. In what follows we shall attempt to fill this gap with the help of Incongruity Theory and, from time to time, Bergson's description of comic techniques will come in handy too.

2.3.1 Comic of Plot

In looking at *More Pricks than Kicks*, Cohn finds that many of the stories included in the collection have a plot structure that contains a comic "inversion of "normal" plots"³³ where the traditional plot pattern is twisted.³⁴

In "Fingal" the hero abandons his damsel more or less in distress; in "Love and Lethe" there is a turning from suicide to sex; in "Walking Out" the hero urges his fiancée to take a lover, only to have her incapacitated for all sexual love; the lady is lustful in "The Smeraldina's Billet-Doux", in "Draff" the dead husband's best friend replaces him in the arms of his wife.³⁵

The plots cited by Cohn are illustrations of situations where the comic incongruity lies between some archetypal literary plots and the plot of these stories. Belacqua subverts the figure of the hero: in 'Fingal' he abandons his lover, and in 'Walking Out' he encourages his fiancée to be unfaithful.³⁶ In a similar contradictory fashion, Smeraldina, in 'The Smeraldina's Billet Doux', writes a letter that is more

³³ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 22.

³⁴ Although Cohn does not say it explicitly, she might have in mind Bergson's characterisation of inversion. "The root idea involves an inversion of rôles, and situation which recoils on the head of its author". Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* p. 95.

³⁵ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 22.

³⁶ John Pilling's remarks on the aptness of the title 'Walking Out' resonate with Cohn's description of comic of situation in *More Pricks than Kicks*. He points out that the expression 'walking out' was in the past used to refer to couples that walked out to get engaged or to get married. However, this is not the case of the couple in Beckett's short story. Belacqua literally walks out into the countryside, and Lucy fears he is figuratively walking out their sexual relationship. See John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's 'More Pricks Than Kicks': In a Strait of Two Wills* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), p. 27.

lustful than romantic, and Belacqua's best friend and Belacqua's wife, in 'Draff', rather than mourning on the death of Belacqua starts a love-affair. Finally, sex replaces an unsuccessful suicide pact in 'Love and Lethe'.

With regards to other Beckett's works, Cohn's analysis focuses almost entirely on the comic that depends on how events are arranged. She makes only few passing remarks on the fact that, beyond the comic elements linked to the sequence of events, the setting of the situation of some of the novels is comic. In particular, she finds the situation in *Watt*, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* comic because absurd.³⁷ The absurd situation in *Watt* is that of a rational man who attempts to make sense of the irrational, embodied by Mr Knott:³⁸ the incongruity lies in the attempt to pursue this impossible task. Similarly, the opening lines of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*³⁹ depict a situation that is absurd: Molloy is in his mother room and does not know how he got there, Malone is in his bed from where he tells story to pass time while he awaits for his death, and the voice in *The Unnamable* opens his narration discarding the importance of some basic information about his situation: "where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning".⁴⁰

These instances could be considered as much belonging to the comic of situation as to the comic of character as the comic element seems to lie as much on the situation as on the characters. It is because Watt and Knott have specific traits that Watt cannot make sense of Knott; and, it is because he stubbornly insists in doing so, that much of the comedy arises. In a similar manner, it is because the narrators of the trilogy have certain traits that some aspects of their situation could be seen as absurd: it could be said that is due to the fact they tend to forget their past or that they cannot make order to their stories linked with their insistence to do so that lead to some of the comic effects.

However, even if this was the case, this would not constitute a problem for Cohn's analysis as, according to her, situation, character and language are not clearly distinguishable in mature Beckett's works. Consequently, comic of characters and comic of situation become two sides of the same coin.⁴¹ This

³⁷ H. Porter Abbott would add *How It Is* to this list as, according to him, "what Beckett composed in *How It Is* was a *reduction ad absurdum* of the human demand for order set in a Newtonian afterlife". H. Porter Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 144.

³⁸ "Like Kafka's *Castle*, *Watt* is a novel of the failure of a quest; Watt serves Mr Knott, lives a metaphorically "side by side" with him, but learns nothing about him. Watt's failure implies the failure of *Homo sapiens*; Watt's situation is that of a rational man in the face of an irrational presence. And we are, of course, worlds away from what Bergson understood by the comic of situation". Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 68.

³⁹ About the comic linked to plot and situation in the trilogy, Cohn claims that: "With Beckett's protagonists, there are two level of absurdity. One appears from the opening lines [...]. The other is discovered progressively and cumulatively, from phrase to phrase, incident to incident, and work to work", *ibid.*, pp. 117-118. For the discussion of this aspect in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, see *ibid.*, pp. 115, 118- 123.

⁴⁰ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (Faber & Faber, 2010a), p. 1.

⁴¹ For example, she claims that the story that Malone writes conflates with his own story: "In spite of Malone's determination to be tepid, to compose only calm stories, passion bubbles to the surface. His stories, his state, and his possessions flow into one another, and all assault him", Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 120. About *The Unnamable* she says: "the interplay between fact and fiction, between the words of his fictions and the only words the Unnamable knows, is so constant, and so increasingly intense, that there is no clear boundary between pain and parody, personal and artistic anguish", *ibid.*, p. 129.

reaches its peak with *How It Is* where, according to Cohn, “plot and character virtually coincide”.⁴² As we shall see in the next paragraph, these instances can be approached from the angle of comic of character too.

Arguably, the catalogue of devices which belong to the ‘comic of plots’ could be enlarged. For example, one could build on Rolf Breuer’s analysis of the different types of paradoxes inside the structure of Beckett’s novels to point out their comic nature.⁴³ Paradoxes can contribute to the comic tone of a work given that they involve some apparent contradiction. One could then stress the comic aspects of the plot of *Murphy* or *Watt*, if one agrees with Breuer that they are built on the recursion of some basic elements: the unsuccessful quest in the former,⁴⁴ and the ‘Chinese Whisper’⁴⁵ of different narrators in the latter.⁴⁶ Then again, one could see comic elements in the plot of *Molloy*, that, according to Breuer, is based on two recursive unsuccessful quests – Molloy’s quest for his mother, and Moran’s quest for Molloy –,

⁴² Ibid., p. 183.

⁴³ Raymond Federman discusses Beckett’s works in term of paradoxes too. By contrast to Breuer, Federman considers the central paradox of Beckett’s works to be similar to the liar’s paradox. On the one hand, the narrators of *Molloy* and of the works that preceded *Molloy* tell us that they are lying in their fictional reports. On the other hand, Malone and his successors by lying and inventing are saying the truth about the nature of language.

Who is telling the truth? Is Moran telling the truth about the lie of his and of Molloy’s fiction? Or is Malone lying about his fictional truth? We are again caught up in the vicious circle of the liar’s paradox. For if Molloy, Moran, and their predecessors are telling the truth it is about a lie (the lie of a fiction), and if Malone and his successors are lying, it is about the truth of their condition (verbal authenticity).

Raymond Federman, ‘Beckettian Paradox: Who Is Telling the Truth?’, in Melvin J. Friedman (ed.), *Samuel Beckett Now: Critical Approaches to His Novels, Poetry, and Plays* (2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), pp. 103-117, p. 117.

⁴⁴ Breuer points out that *Murphy* includes two plot lines which are both recursive and both revolve around Murphy. The main plot line is structured on Murphy’s repeated attempts to avoid mundane matters. The side plot revolves around the attempt of the secondary characters to find Murphy in order to find out his feelings towards Miss Counihan. Rolf Breuer, ‘Paradox in Beckett’, *The Modern Language Review*, 88/3 (1993), pp. 559-580, p. 563.

⁴⁵ The length of the chains varies: it can be as short as Watt’s reports of what other people say as, for example, in the Gall’s episode; or it can be longer than that, as when Sam reports Watt’s report of Arthur’s recount of what happened to one of his friend, Mr Louit. The tale of Mr Louit is, in its turn, a report of dialogues. For reference to the *Watt*’s passages mentioned, see respectively Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 57-61 and 145-170. For Breuer discussion on *Watt*’s plot see Breuer, ‘Paradox in Beckett’, pp. 563-564. Pilling makes similar remarks and comments on this episode in *Watt* as well as the Lynch episode saying that they give a “Chinese-box effect to the whole”. John Pilling, *Samuel Beckett* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 41.

⁴⁶ Bergson’s description of ‘repetition’, which is one of the techniques that he lists under the category of ‘comic of situation’, is similar to Breuer’s description of the paradox in *Murphy*’s plot. According to Bergson, repetitive plots are comic insofar as they are “a combination of circumstances, which recurs several times in its original form and thus contrasts with the changing stream of life”. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* p. 90. The plot that Bergson offers as illustration of the typical plot of comedies (at least, comedies of his time), is analogous to the plot of *Murphy* and its relation to the unsuccessful quests: “For instance, a certain thing, say a letter, happens to be of supreme importance to a certain person and must be recovered at all costs. This thing, which always vanishes just when you think you have caught it, pervades the entire play, “rolling up” increasingly serious and unexpected incidents as it proceeds”. Ibid., pp. 82-83.

Furthermore, Bergson offers examples which resemble the repetitive structures of other works of Beckett, such as *Molloy* or *How It Is*. One of Bergson’s examples is the following: “In several of Moliere’s plays we find one and the same arrangement of events repeated through the comedy from beginning to end. Thus, the *Écoles des femmes* does nothing more than reproduce and repeat a single incident in three *tempi*: first *tempo*, Horace tells Arnolphe of the plan he has devised to deceive Agnès’s guardian, who turns out to be Arnolphe himself; second *tempo*, Arnolphe thinks he has checkmated the move; third *tempo*, Agnès contrives that Horace gets all the benefit of Arnolphe’s precautionary measures”. Ibid., p. 91.

Cohn makes some passing remarks on *Murphy* and on *How It Is* that, when illuminated by the fact that she could have had in mind Bergson’s description of recursive plots, could be seen as resonating with Breuer’s claims. Particularly, Cohn stresses the centrality of Murphy for the series of unsuccessful quests in the eponymous novel. See Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 46, and 182-183.

and it is open to infinite reproduction as it ends by quoting the beginning of Moran's report.⁴⁷ Finally, *Malone*'s structure could be considered apt to elicit comic amusement when its paradoxical nature is exposed. According to Breuer, in *Malone Dies*, the structure is paradoxical because the elements that compound it generate themselves: by writing his stories, Malone contributes also to development of the plot of *Malone Dies*.

Furthermore, one could enlarge Cohn's list of comic devices belonging to the 'comic of plot' if one considers the relation between some of the plots of Beckett's works and what 'traditional' plots are considered to be like. For example, Porter Abbott in *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect* focuses on the formal element of Beckett's works and his description of some of these works stresses the comic contrast to traditional novel.⁴⁸ According to him, Beckett's early short story 'A case in Thousand' constitutes a parodic attack to the traditional beginning-middle-end structuring of plots and to closure.⁴⁹ In a similar manner, Abbott claims that *More Prick Than Kicks* and *Mercier and Camier* can be described as parodying traditional unity of plots and themes.⁵⁰ Then again, his description of *Watt* and *Molloy* highlights the parody of traditional literary themes, patterns and situations (e.g. the quest is a pattern parodied in both novels).⁵¹ Finally, *The Unnamable* comically contrasts the traditional novel by obliterating its most fundamental elements: space and time.⁵²

Other comic instances can be individuated and added to the list provided by Cohn if one looks at a device that Bergson lists, but Cohn does not mention. Under the category of 'comic in situation', Bergson presents a type of comic devices that he calls 'reciprocal interference of series'. He defines this technique as follows: "A situation is invariably comic when it belongs simultaneously to two altogether independent series of events and is capable of being interpreted in two entirely different meanings at the same time".⁵³ According to Bergson, the 'equivocal situation' is one of the prototypical

⁴⁷ "Then I went back into the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows". Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 184. Moran does not merely quote the beginning of his report, he negates its truthfulness – "It was not midnight. It was not raining", *ibid.* According to Breuer, this is another level of reproduction of the tale. "In strict analogy to the failure of the quests of Molloy for his mother and of Moran for Molloy, the attempt of the artist Beckett at making his work of art catch up with itself also fails or, more precisely, is shown to fail of necessity". Beckett's attempt at achieving a coincidence between the act of narrating and what is narrated, however, is doomed to fail: the act of narrating produces the story and, any addition to the story represents a further step in the narration, taking it farther away from coincidence. See Breuer, 'Paradox in Beckett', p. 568.

⁴⁸ There are other studies that present Beckett's works as parodies of, or as comically in contrast to, traditional novel or other specific genre. See, for example, Julie Campbell, 'Moran as Secret Agent', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 12 (2002), pp. 81-92; Mark Byron, "'Change All the Names": Revision and Narrative Structure in Samuel Beckett's *Watt*', *AUMLA*, April/Special Issue (2012), pp. 57-63; Julian Murphet, 'On the Mortification of Novelistic Discourse in Three Novels', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 26/1 (2017), pp. 39-52; Paul Fagan, 'Samuel Beckett's 'Le Concentrisme' and the Modernist Literary Hoax', in Olga Beloborodova, Dirk Van Hulle, and Pim Verhulst (eds.), *Beckett and Modernism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 161-177.

⁴⁹ Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, pp. 17-21.

⁵⁰ About *More Pricks than Kicks*, for example, he says that "the book seems to be fully enjoying the ultimate hoax that it is a novel. In the face of virtually no unity of plot or theme, it brazenly calls attention to the slightest links between chapters", *ibid.*, pp. 22, discussion at 21-36. About *Mercier and Camier*, Abbott writes that it contains "a number of disintegrative, antinovelistic devices – efforts at frustrating the reader's sense of closure – particularly in the spheres of plot and characterisation". *Ibid.*, pp. 76 and discussion at 75-91.

⁵¹ See respectively, *ibid.*, pp. 68-74, and 92-96.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 124-137.

⁵³ Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* p. 96. Italics in the original.

situations where this technique is used. Equivocal situations arise when characters and audience have two different understandings of the same situation. One or more of the characters' act in ways that the audience is able to judge as misguided or not beneficial because the audience has access to information that are restricted to the characters. It is possible to find examples in Beckett's works that fit this description. One occurs, for example, when Malone describes the scene that he sees through the window opposite to his. Whilst it is quite clear to the reader that the two people are being intimate, he seems lost with regard to understanding what the people are doing – "perhaps they are cold, that they rub against each other so, for friction maintains heat and brings it back when it is gone" –, and when the moment of understanding arrives, it adds up to the comic tone of the passage, – "Ah how stupid I am, I see what it is, they must be loving each other, that must be how it is done".⁵⁴

If these additions to Cohn's analysis were to be accepted, they could at most, create a problem for Cohn's interpretative claims. For example, she might have to take in account the fact that structure might play a bigger role than the one she recognises. However, these additions would not create a problem to Cohn's analytic approach, i.e. to the Bergsonian grid that she uses to individuate comic instances. On the contrary, these additions, by showing that the grid is able to capture a larger variety of instances than those individuated by Cohn, are a proof in favour of the ability of the grid to account for comic instances.

2.3.2 Comic of Sequences

Whilst the instances analysed so far had to do with the plot or the situation of the novel, there are instances belonging to the category of 'comic of situation' that depend on how events follow each other inside each episode.⁵⁵ Cohn's analysis of Beckett's works written after *Murphy* finds that devices of this group are more pervasive than the devices linked to the plot. In particular, she finds that, *non sequiturs* and use of irrelevant digressions⁵⁶ are devices of the category of 'comic of situation' that are of relevant importance from *Watt* on.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, pp. 65-66.

Another example could be found in the episode of *Watt* where Watt met Mr Spiro. Whilst Mr Spiro thinks that he is engaging in a conversation with Watt, the readers know that this is not the case. The narrator reveals to the readers that Watt's mind is occupied by voices and he did not hear what Mr Spiro said. See Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 20-23.

⁵⁵ As Cohn notices, the devices that she finds belonging to the group of 'comic of sequence' are not mentioned in Bergson's study. Notwithstanding this, she seems to consider these devices as part of the category of 'comic of situation'.

⁵⁶ It should be noted that Cohn mentions a third technique that depends on a sequence of events – namely the disproportionate space given to some events. She explicitly spells out only one example: when discussing the *Novellas* she illustrates the technique with a reference to 'The End' where the construction of a canoe takes over more space than the protagonist's son. This technique shares many features with 'digression' discussed below, and perhaps their difference is only a matter of degree. See Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 103.

John Pilling finds this device in place in some of the stories of *More Pricks Than Kicks* too. For example, about 'Walking Out' he says that it "plays the *More Pricks* trick of surrounding what would be the focal point in a more conventional story – the accident – with lots of much more trivial business". Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's 'More Pricks Than Kicks': In a Strait of Two Wills*, p. 29. Although Pilling does not talk about the comic elements connected with this 'trick', his comments chime with some of our considerations. Pilling says that this 'trick' causes a distortion of the focal point of the story. Thus a disproportion of space given to events causes the further incongruity of placing the focal points of the story on trivial matters.

⁵⁷ Cohn actually finds that *non sequiturs* and digressions are used to create comic of situation even in *Murphy*. However, the sequence of events in the novel is not largely based on this device. Furthermore, she does not give to *non sequiturs* in *Murphy*

Let us start from the first of these devices, *non sequitur*. With the development of Beckett's writing, Cohn claims, the role played by *non sequiturs* becomes increasingly important. For example, according to her reading, in *Molloy* "we are plunged into *non sequitur*"⁵⁸ which takes place between remarks as well as episodes.⁵⁹ The same device is used in *Malone*, Cohn says, to express the absurd.⁶⁰ Although Cohn does not provide a description of what she means by '*non sequiturs*'; her analysis of passages taken from Beckett provides some insight. For example, she quotes at length the following passage from *Watt*:

Watt suffered neither from the presence of Mr Knott, nor from his absence [...].

This ataraxy covered the entire house-room, the pleasure-garden, the vegetable-garden and of course Arthur.

So that when the time came for Watt to depart, he walked to the gate with the utmost serenity.

But he was no sooner in the public road than he burst into tears. He stood there, he remembered, with bowed head, and a bag in each hand, and his tears fell, a slow minute rain, to the ground, which had recently been repaired. He would not have believed such a thing possible, if he had not been there himself. The humidity thus lent to the road surface must, he reckoned, have survived his departure by as long as two minutes at least, if not three. Fortunately the weather was fine.

Watt's room contained no information. It was a small, dingy, and, though Watt was a man of some bodily cleanliness, fetid compartment. Its one window commanded a very fine view of a race-course. The painting, or coloured reproduction, yielded nothing further. On the contrary, as time passed, its significance diminished.

From Mr Knott's voice nothing was to be learnt. Between Mr Knott and Watt no conversation passed. From time to time, for no apparent reason, Mr Knott opened his mouth in song.⁶¹

According to Cohn, the information given about the states of the road or the weather conditions is "wildly irrelevant". In addition, she points out that some of the elements mentioned in this passage contrast with other information previously provided. For example, Watt's cleanliness, stressed in the passage, contrasts with what he has been doing until that point in the novel, – "he has been vomiting and picking his nose".⁶² The remarks around Watt's room and Knott's voice stand in a dubious position too. Watt's room and Knott's voice are negatively described only to say that they do not provide any significant insight into Watt or Knott. As Cohn says, "most of the details in these few abrupt paragraphs have 'no apparent reason'". Moreover, Cohn highlights that the narration does not seem to evolve smoothly or coherently. On the contrary, it passes from talking about ataraxy to talking about the weather, it moves on Watt's room and ends on Knott's voice. Topics do not seem to be explicitly prompted by what precedes them, and, if they are, the lack of comments from the narrator keeps the

the same symbolic resonance that she attributes to those techniques when they are used from *Watt* on. For Cohn's remarks on *Murphy* see Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 46-47. With regards to mature prose, she finds these devices for examples in the four short stories (see *ibid.*, pp. 102-103), in the trilogy (see *ibid.*, pp. 113-123), in *From an Abandoned Work* (see *ibid.*, pp. 179-180).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

⁵⁹ For example, Cohn describes *Molloy*'s first pages by highlighting the *non sequiturs*: "Disconnected remarks fall pell-mell – the room, pots, an arrival, a mother, a possible son, love, a messenger, writing, beginning and ending. Suddenly we witness the meeting and separation of two men, designated as A and C, on a bare road". *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 151.

⁶¹ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 179-180.

⁶² Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 68.

links between them in the background. Overall, Cohn's comments on this passage highlight some of the feature of the passage, which, in our terminology, constitute also the incongruities of the passage. In particular she highlights that, in the episode discussed, the events do not follow (*non sequitur*), - "without sequence or connective, dialogue follows event, follows reasoning, pushed to an unbearable, seemingly nonsensical limit."⁶³ Looking at the elements that have been selected we can distinguish different ways in which events do not follow or, to say it differently, we can say that this specific type of incongruity can take different forms. Sometimes events do not follow any sort of narrative logic, or they are irrelevant and they do not lead anywhere, other times they do not follow from previous information provided and they are inconsistent with them, other times again, they do not follow from what immediately precedes them.

Another comic device linked to the development of sequences of events individuated by Cohn is that of 'digression'.⁶⁴ Although Cohn mentions this device only with reference to some of Beckett's mature works, digressions could be found in earlier works too, where narration of tangential episodes, comments or aside often take over space of the main narration. Before showing that this is the case, we shall describe what makes some of the digressions in Beckett's works comic.

In discussing digressions in *Watt*, John Pilling links the use of digression to the Picaresque tradition and shows how Beckett's use of them is divergent from the traditional one. Digressions in *Watt* (and we could extend this remark to later works), by contrast to their traditional role, are not used to introduce new useful information; they do not add anything to the plot, and they are not expedient to illustrate any moral point. It is exactly their seeming gratuitous nature that makes them comic.⁶⁵ It is the fact that episodes take up space without them having any weight on the economy of the story, or taking up a space that is not adequate to their importance in the economy of the novel, that makes these devices comic. By contrast to *non-sequiturs*, comic digressions often maintain a link to, and are indeed generated by what precedes them. However, they usually have little or no influence on the events which follow.

Comic digressions could be of different length. They could be as short as few lines, as in the examples below where Arsene, in *Watt*, gets distracted by his buttons, or in *Molloy*, the narrator gets distracted and starts talking about his hand:

[...] I felt my breast swell, like a pelican's I think it is. For joy? Well, no, perhaps not exactly for joy. [...]. But let us no linger on my breast. Look at it now – bugger these buttons – as flat and – ow! – as hollow as a tambourine. You saw? You heard? No matter? Where was I? The change.⁶⁶

⁶³ See *ibid.*, pp. 67-68.

⁶⁴ Cohn offers example of digressions in 'From an Abandoned Work' and 'Waiting for Godot'. See *ibid.*, pp. 179, 218.

⁶⁵ Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, pp. 40, 41.

⁶⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 34-35.

I felt the first star tremble, and my hand on my knee and above all the other wayfarer, A or C, I don't remember, going resignedly home. Yes, towards my hand also, which my knee felt tremble and of which my eyes saw the wrist only, the heavily veined back, the pallid rows of knuckles. But that is not, I mean my hand, what I wish to speak of now, everything in due course, but A or C returning to the town he had just left.⁶⁷

These digressions are both prompted by some elements of the situation (the buttons and the breast in the first passage, and the hand in the second passage), but these are elements on which is not worth lingering. In mentioning them, the speakers deviate from the plot and halt its alleged normal progression. The speakers, in the two passages, recognise that lingering on those elements is not important for their tales, and so they bring their narrations back on track. The deviation from what is presented as the normal course of the plot is the incongruity that makes digressions similar to those above comic instances of the category 'comic of situation'.

Comic digressions, on the other hand, can continue for the space of several lines or pages. Whilst in *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and the four 'novellas' ('The Expelled', 'The Calmative', 'The End', 'First Love', henceforth 'novellas')⁶⁸ comic digressions are often less than a page length, in *Watt* comic digressions could be very long. An example of such long digressions is the tale of Mr Louit that Arthurs tells to Mr Graves. The tale takes up nearly thirty pages⁶⁹ and, notwithstanding the two disclaimers that frame it – "to these conversations we are indebted for the following information",⁷⁰ and "But I shall better illustrate what I mean if I tell you what happened to my old friend, Mr Ernest Louit" –, ⁷¹ this tale does not seem to reveal any important information or illustrate any point. The gratuitous nature of this digression is even more explicit in this occasion than in other given that Arthur leaves the story of Mr Louit incomplete as he grows tired of it – "But here Arthur seemed to tire, of his story, for he left Mr Graves, and went back, into the house".⁷²

The various lengthy explorations of hypothesis in *Watt* could be considered in the same way as comic digressions. These explorations are often attempts to grasp the reasons that lie behind some events,

⁶⁷ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ See for example, *ibid.*, p. 10 and Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 32. The opening episode of Molloy's narration, the tale of A and C, could be considered as a lengthy digression insofar as it does not have any significant bearing on the rest of the plot, beyond introducing Molloy. Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 5-13.

Likewise, the opening scene of 'The Expelled' could be seen as a digression as figuring out the number of the steps do not seem important for what follows. Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 3.

Maximilian de Gaynesford has argued that this initial scene contains in a nutshell an illustration of the process of 'going on ending' that is then replicated in different episodes of the short stories. See Robert De Gaynesford, 'Knowing How to Go on Ending', in Mark Nixon (ed.), *Beckett: "All Sturm and No Drang": Beckett and Romanticism: Beckett at Reading 2006* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 285-296.

This position not only is orthogonal to our reading of this passage as digression, but also supports a point that we shall make later on. The fact that a passage does not contribute to the development of the plot, and for this is considered a comic digression, does not amount to say that the passage has a gratuitous nature with reference to the overall significance of a story or novel.

⁶⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 145-170.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 170.

circumstances or arrangements.⁷³ Were they to be successful in doing so, these explorations of hypothesis could potentially bear weight on to the overall plot. However, given that this is not the case, lingering for several pages on them makes their presence comically incongruous and halts the progression of the storyline.

The presence of *non sequiturs* and digressions in novels can be seen as establishing a further incongruity that belongs to the category of ‘comic of situation’. These devices, by disrupting the ‘normal’ structure or economy of plots, render the novels that include them incongruous with traditional novels. Cohn seems to recognise the presence of this further incongruity too when, about the novellas, she claims that:

The comic of situation, even more than in *Watt*, depends upon *non-sequitur*, confusion, and disproportion, thereby implicitly deriding the orderly tradition of a well-made plot of French literature.⁷⁴

According to her, one of the roles played by some of the *non sequiturs* is that of parodying traditional well-made novels. This signals that, to say it in our terms, the incongruity that *non sequiturs* contribute to establish is that between the plot of works that contain them and the well-made plots of the novels of the literary tradition.

Considering *non sequiturs* and digressions as devices of the situation allows for taking in account several of their features and of the features of the works where they appear. Cohn’s analytical grid demonstrates to be useful in this regard: it allows for an explanation of certain features of the texts that contain these devices as well as for describing the similarity between those works where these devices occur. For example, our description of the comic incongruities linked to these devices can help in explaining the fact that, as John Pilling says, they contribute to erode the fictional structure, distract from the main plot and alert to the conditions of narrating.⁷⁵ We have shown that both *non sequiturs* and digressions consist in deviation from normal progressive plots and, because of this, they can distract from the main plot as well as contributing to the erosion of the fictional structure. Furthermore, by inviting the comparison with traditional well-made plots and novels, they alert the reader to the features that such plots and novels have.

Recognising the advantages linked to the use of the grid provides us with reasons to be cautious. Whilst Cohn’s analytical grid highlights common characteristics of digressions and *non sequitur*, the same approach seems to overshadow other features of these devices. For example, the picture offered of *non sequiturs* and digressions is able to account for features that these devices seem to have both in *Watt* and in the trilogy, but it does not seem able to account for their differences. Consider, as an illustration,

⁷³ See, for example, Watt’s reasoning on Mr Knott’s meals *ibid.*, pp. 74-75. Alternatively, on the famished dogs and the Lynch family, see *ibid.*, pp. 75-99.

⁷⁴ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 102.

⁷⁵ See Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 41.

two lengthy digressions. The first is taken from *Watt*, the story that Arthur tells to Mr Graves. The second, taken from *Molloy*, is the story of A and C. These comic digressions share features that can be captured by the description that we have provided: they both contain elements that are not important for the development of future events in the plot of the respective novels. Furthermore, in both cases, the presence of the digression calls attention to the features and conditions of well-made novels and narration. Notwithstanding this similarity, these two digressions have important differences. The digression in *Watt* is presented as a tale in the tale: the main narrative plot is interrupted to start a digressive internal secondary tale. The digression becomes comic when it becomes clear that it is taking up more space than is necessary and, when interrupted is left without a conclusion. By contrast, the digression in *Molloy* is presented as the beginning of Molloy's story. Only at the end of the tale of A and C we discover that it is a comic digression. The way in which the digressions are presented and inserted into the main plot contributes to the comic nature of the digressions and to the reader's experience of them. By describing these digressions (the same could be said for *non sequiturs*) only as belonging to the 'comic of situation', these other important aspects are not captured.

We should not be quick to dismiss the grid used by Cohn. As we shall see in the following sections of this chapter, these devices can also be described from the point of view of 'comic of character'. If describing the devices from the point of view of these categories can account for the differences highlighted, then Cohn's grid will be considered as appropriate to capture the main features of Beckett's comic devices. For the moment, the discussion carried out so far gives us reason to be cautious about it.

2.4 Comic of Character

There is a comment at the outset of Cohn's discussion of 'comic of character' in *More Pricks than Kicks* that at first sight might seem in contradiction with what we are set to discuss in this section. It is worth then starting our discussion of this group of instances by looking at Cohn's initial remarks:

The comic of character is almost non-existent in *More Pricks*, or, indeed, in any Beckett work. Neither moral norm nor moral deviation is suggested. The hero is not integrated into society, but we rarely penetrate deeply enough inside him care about his isolation. Other characters are candid caricatures.⁷⁶

Cohn claims that the comic of character does not find much space in Beckett's works and, accordingly, the discussion of this type of comic is quite limited in her study. If the 'comic of character' is the category of the devices where the incongruity depends on characters' features, then Cohn's claim might strike those familiar with Beckett's works to be, to say the least, too strong. Indeed, many of Beckett's main or secondary characters have physical appearances or countenances that are hard not to find funny.

⁷⁶ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 22.

To mention only one type of instances that would fall in this category, consider the various comic motion difficulties that affect Beckett's characters: Belacqua's mechanical and constant motion in some of the stories in *More Pricks than Kicks*,⁷⁷ Watt's uncoordinated steps,⁷⁸ the challenge that walking without falling is for the character of 'The Expelled',⁷⁹ and Molloy's way to cycle and move with his crutches.⁸⁰

To understand why Cohn claims that there are only very few cases of 'comic of character', when the opposite would seem true, we must remind ourselves of the difference indicated between Cohn's analytical grid and Bergson's. In Bergson's classification, 'comic of character' is different from 'comic in movements' and 'comic of forms'. Whilst the second and third categories are related to comic appearance, shapes and movements of people, the first category has to do with their character and behaviour. Bergson considers the category of 'comic of character' the one with the most apparent connection with the social function of humour, its corrective role. When Cohn says that in Beckett the 'comic of character' is almost inexistent, she is probably referring to Bergson's category of 'comic of character', as opposed to the other two categories. The remarks that she makes in connection to the 'comic of character' support this hypothesis. She notices the 'comic of character' is almost inexistent as that there is no moral resonance in Beckett's works, where the isolation of the character from the society is not at issue.⁸¹ What Cohn is suggesting is that Beckett is not using comic instances to correct any deviant behaviour. The absence of this moral/social agenda is taken by Cohn as evidence of the absence of 'comic of character'.

In the list of devices that Cohn individuates there are 'caricatures', which are devices that Bergson lists not under the category 'comic of character', but under the category 'comic elements in form'. Given that Cohn talks about 'caricatures' when she talks about characters, we propose to enlarge the category of 'comic of characters' as understood by Bergson (connected with character and behaviour) to include those instances where the comic element is in the appearance and movements of characters. That is to say, we enlarge the category 'comic of character' to include the instances that Bergson would have listed under 'comic elements in form' and 'comic elements in movements'. In this way, devices such as caricatures effectively belong to the category 'comic of character'. Furthermore, by enlarging the category of 'comic of character', the grid used by Cohn is able to account for the comic instances where the comic elements depend on movements, appearance and countenance of characters.

We do not provide a description of instances of comic that depends merely on movements, appearance and countenance as Cohn does not provide one herself. Given that our aim is not to test Cohn's account

⁷⁷ See for example the description of Belacqua's movements in 'Dante and the Lobster', 'Ding-Dong', and 'A Wet Night' in Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, pp. 1-14, 29-40, 41-76.

⁷⁸ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 23-24.

⁷⁹ Beckett, 'The Expelled'.

⁸⁰ See for example Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 17, 77 ff.

⁸¹ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 22.

for its completeness in terms of instances individuated, but to test it in its ability to describe and capture all the relevant instances of humour, it is enough for us to say that those instances would be captured by the category ‘comic of character’ understood in the broader sense just defined. What we do provide is a discussion of the instances of caricatures that Cohn individuates. As for the previous discussion of ‘comic of situation’ we are interested to see whether describing the instances she individuates through her grid allows her to capture all the relevant features of those instances.

2.4.1 Caricatures and Types

In this section, we offer a detailed description of three different caricatures taken from Beckett’s works. This gives us the opportunity to present two different ways in which caricatures occur in Beckett’s texts. Caricatures can be presented in self-contained descriptive passages, or can be built throughout a novel by repeatedly emphasising certain elements. Furthermore, given that caricatures are comic instances that offer some challenges to the Incongruity Theory, a detailed description gives us the opportunity to put the theory to the test. As said in Chapter 1, caricatures are considered counter-example to the Incongruity Theory by its opponents, who claim that caricatures are comic insofar as they offer an image that is congruent with the subject depicted. The caricature of a glutton, for example, amplifies traits that have to do with greed: a big round belly or a large and red nose. The image represented is thus congruous with the character of the subject presented and for this reason we find it comic.

In what follows, first we present three caricatures, explaining the mechanism on which they are built. In the second part of the section, we discuss their comic nature and we discuss the challenge offered to Incongruity Theory. For each caricature, we point out the elements that lend support to the criticism moved by the opponents to the theory.

Although Cohn individuates,⁸² refers to and sometimes reports in length different caricatures she does not say what a caricature is in her picture and what makes a caricature comic. Bergson, on the other hand, offers a description of how caricature works. According to Bergson, a caricature is made by means of exaggerating some features of the object that the caricaturist is portraying or describing. Furthermore, according to Bergson, caricatures emphasise features that are already somehow incongruous. By emphasising those traits, they are brought to our attention.⁸³ Keeping Bergson’s description of caricatures in mind, we can now approach some of the examples of caricatures that Cohn finds in Beckett to provide a description of the mechanisms and incongruities involved.

⁸² In particular, she finds that two stories of *More Pricks than Kicks* are rich in caricatures ‘What a Misfortune’ and ‘A Wet Night’. Ibid., p. 23.

⁸³ “The art of the caricaturist consists in detecting this, at times, imperceptible tendency, and in rendering it visible to all eyes by magnifying it. [...] He realises disproportions and deformations which must have existed in nature as mere inclinations [...]. For exaggeration to be comic, it must not appear as an aim, but rather as a means that the artist is using in order to make manifest to our eyes the distortions which he sees in embryo”. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* pp. 26-27.

One of the caricatures individuated (but not described or explained) by Cohn is the description of Smeraldina, Belacqua's widow, in 'Druff'. Smeraldina's description starts as reported below:

Bodies don't matter but hers went something like this: big enormous breasts, big breech, Botticelli thighs, knock-knees, square ankles, wobbly, poppata, mammore, slobbery-blubbery, bubbububbub, the real button-busting Weib, ripe. Then, perched away high out of sight on top of this porpoise prism, the sweetest little pale Pisanello of a birdface ever. She was like Lucrezia del Fede, pale and belle, a pale belle Braut, with a winter skin like an old sail in the wind.⁸⁴

This passage, and the caricature that it contains, can be unpacked if one pays attention at the elements that are emphasised. The caricature is based on two different strategies. On the one hand, the narrator sets up a comparison between Smeraldina's body and face to the canonical beauty of body and face of women as represented in Botticelli, Pisanello and Andrea Del Sarto's paintings. On the other hand, some of the features of Smeraldina's body and face are over-amplified. In particular, the caricature amplifies those features of the body connected with fecundity. Whilst canonical female beauty is connected to harmony as well as to fecundity, Beckett's picture of Smeraldina emphasises only the latter to the detriment of the former.⁸⁵

The passage starts from the description of Smeraldina's body with an invitation to compare it with Botticelli's Venus.⁸⁶ However, of the *Venus*, Smeraldina has only the thighs, and the description calls attention to her abundance by exaggerating some of her traits through the use of amplifiers ('big', 'enormous', and 'big enormous') as well as of words whose meaning is related to fecundity ('poppata'⁸⁷ and 'mammore' recall respectively the Italian for 'sucking' or 'breast-feeding' and 'breast'), and of the repetition of the 'b' and 'r' ('slobbery-blubbery, bubbububbub, the real button-busting Weib, ripe'). Ankles and knees are placed in sharp contrast with the aspects of the body just described: their shape is edgy as the sound (repeated 'kn') of the words used to refer to them ('knock-knees', 'square ankle'). The body contrasts also with the face, whose shape and colour are described positively. Smeraldina's face is compared to the face of Lucrezia del Fede, allegedly the sitter for the painting of Andrea del Sarto,⁸⁸ for its colour and beauty, 'pale and belle'.

The traits that are emphasised in the caricature are such that they offer a specific image of Smeraldina: the caricature does not merely offer a grotesque picture of her body, it offers a sexualized picture of it. This image is in agreement with the image of Smeraldina that can be evinced by other passages. For

⁸⁴ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, pp. 167-168 See also Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 23-24.

⁸⁵ According to Doireann Lalor, this caricature highlights also a feature of the paintings that are called in comparison as it "lays bare the works of these Renaissance masters to an irreverent sexual gaze, subjecting their decorous reputation to reconsideration". Doireann Lalor, "'The Italianate Irishman': The Role of Italian in Beckett's Intratextual Multilingualism", *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 22 (2010), pp. 51-65, p. 58.

⁸⁶ This passage comes in part from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. According to John Pilling, 'Botticelli thighs' is a reference to Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* that Beckett have seen in the Uffizi in 1927. See John Pilling, 'A Companion to Dream of Fair to Middling Women', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 12/1-2 (2004a), pp., p. 43. For the passage in *Dream* see Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (New York: Arcade, 1993), p. 15.

⁸⁷ Pilling, 'A Companion to Dream of Fair to Middling Women', p. 43.

⁸⁸ See Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's 'More Pricks Than Kicks': In a Strait of Two Wills*, pp. 220-221, Pilling, 'A Companion to Dream of Fair to Middling Women', p. 43.

example, it resonates with the lustful character of the letter that Smeraldina writes to Belacqua and reported in 'The Smeraldina's Billet Doux'.⁸⁹ It can also be seen as in agreement with the events that will take place in 'Draff'. Smeraldina after the death of her husband, Belacqua, accepts Hairy's invitation to stay with him. She appears to base her decision on the thought that perhaps this is what the late Belacqua would have wanted. However, given the lustful description that the narrators offer of Smeraldina, one wonders if the decision is not due to different reasons.⁹⁰ The congruity between Smeraldina's caricature and the traits that she manifests in other passages of the story is what an opponent to the Incongruity Theory would stress.

Similar considerations can be made for another caricature that Cohn individuates (and, in this case too, does not discuss). This time the subject caricaturised is the Frica: the caricature invites to compare the Frica with a gazelle and distorts some of Frica's traits by amplifying them. The result is an image that presents the Frica as lacking taste.

The story of 'A Wet Night' is for a large part set at the Christmas party organised by the Frica at her house in Dublin and attended by Dublin intellectual elite. The passage below describes the Frica's look.

The Frica combed her hair, back and back she racked her purple tresses till to close her eyes became a problem. The effect was throttled gazelle, more appropriate to evening wear than her workaday foal at foot. [...] Throttled gazelle gives no idea. Her features, as though the hand of an unattractive ravisher were knotted in her chevelure, were set at half-cock and locked in a rictus. She had frowned to pencil her eyebrows, so now she had four. The dazzled iris was domed in a white agony of entreaty, the upper-lip writhed back in a snarl to the untented nostrils. Would she bite her tongue off, that was the interesting question.⁹¹

The caricature emphasises the animal traits of the Frica by comparing her face to the face of a gazelle, and it distorts them by amplifying some elements. The Frica's hair is tied so tightly to the point that it pulls her skin, lips and nostrils back in a grimace and rictus that reminds of the snout of a gazelle. This time the caricature tries to emphasise Frica's lack of taste, in order to target the alleged superiority of the intellectual elite, to which Frica's belong, in such matters. Thus, the caricature stresses Frica's lack of taste in choosing the right combination of dress and hairstyle and her clumsiness in doing her make-up. She pencilled her eyebrows while her forehead was frowned and, as a result, she has two additional lines above them. The caricature stresses Frica's lack of taste and this congruous with the fact that she belongs to a self-proclaimed intellectual elite.

The caricatures of Smeraldina and Frica are presented in a passage that is self-contained. However, there are caricatures that Cohn individuates that do not share this feature. Some characters are caricaturised, not because we are offered a caricaturised description of them, but because some and the same traits are stressed over and over in the novel where the characters appear. This seems to be,

⁸⁹ see 'The Smeraldina's Billet Doux' in Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, pp. 143-147.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 179-180.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

according to Cohn, the case of Celia. Although Cohn considers Celia one of the most complex characters of *Murphy*, she suggests that Celia is caricaturised by emphasising elements linked to her profession, – “[n]ot quite humanized, she is caricatured by her professional gait and her Beckett locutions”.⁹²

Cohn does not articulate this comment in a discussion and she does not quote any passage as evidence for her claims. However, we can try to offer an illustration in support of her claims. She might have in mind passages along the same lines of the passages quoted below, where Celia’s profession is taken to the foreground. In the section of the novel where the quotes below are taken, Celia, who is a prostitute, walks towards Mr. Kelly’s house to tell him about her relationship with Murphy. In the space of a few lines, Celia’s movements and gait are mentioned three times. Each time the description of her movements remind us of her profession:

She stormed away from the callbox, accompanied delightedly by her hips, etc.

[...]

She then made her way rapidly on foot, followed by four football pool collectors at four shillings in the pound commission, to the apartment in Tyburnia of her paternal grandfather, Mr Willoughby Kelly.

[...]

He desired Celia to sit down, but she preferred to pace to and fro, clasping and unclasping her hands in the usual manner. The friendship of a pair of hands.⁹³

While Celia walks away from the telephone box, our attention, as readers, is called upon the movements of her hips in the same way as the attention of a passer-by would be drawn to the accentuated gait of a prostitute. Likewise, she captures the attention of the bookmakers, who follow her departure from the pub. Finally, in Mr. Kelly’s house she paces to and fro as she habitually paces the streets. By contrast to the previous two instances of caricatures, Celia’s gait and its connection to her profession is not caricaturised in a self-contained passage. The caricature is here constructed by emphasising every time again elements that connect Celia’s gait to her profession.

Celia’s caricature differs from the previous caricatures examined in another aspect. The caricatures of Smeraldina and Frica were such that they were highlighting some aspect of their character, lustful for Smeraldina and lack of taste for Frica, the same cannot be said for Celia. The caricature of Celia stresses the relation between Celia and her profession, but the picture that is obtained is that of a troublesome relationship. Whereas prostitutes willingly accentuate their gait and movements to attract attention, Celia does not seem to have control over her movements and their effects. By contrast, it seems that is Celia’s profession that somehow follows her: Celia’s hips follow her *delightedly*, as they have their own agency and they are responsible for choosing what gait Celia carries out; likewise, the four football pool collectors follow her, it is not Celia that willingly attracts their attention. In the last passage, Celia seems

⁹² Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 48.

⁹³ Beckett, *Murphy*, pp. 9-10 passim.

to have some agency with regard to the movements that she is performing: Celia *prefers* to pace to and fro rather than sitting. However, her choice to behave in the 'usual manner' might be just a matter of habit.

Presenting Celia as haunted by her profession, rather than willingly choosing to behave as her profession would require, is in line with other elements of the novel. A large part of Celia's efforts in the novel are devoted to establish a situation where she could stay with Murphy without having to work as a prostitute anymore. However, leaving her profession is proving to be difficult, given that Murphy is not willing to find a job himself. Celia's profession haunts her given that, if she were to go back to it, it would be the end of her relationship with Murphy.

So far we have explained what makes the instances that we have analysed caricatures. However, we have not explained yet, what makes caricatures comic. Caricatures as we have shown in the three instances analysed are built by amplifying elements that have a connection with the character: for example, their physical features – Smeraldina's abundant body, Frica's unpleasant face, Celia's professional gait – or their character's traits – Smeraldina's lustfulness, Frica's lack of taste. The opponents of Incongruity Theory stress the role played by congruity in caricatures to show that the theory is not able to capture these instances. According to them, we appreciate the value and insight of a caricature because we recognise the connection between the elements amplified and the characters. It is because we recognise the connection between the representation of Smeraldina and her lustful attitude that we appreciate the caricature of her. It is because we recognise the connection between Frica's lack of taste and the way she prepares herself for the party that we appreciate her caricatured picture. Finally, it is because we recognise the connection between Celia's gait and her desire to not practice her profession that we enjoy the caricature.

In the previous chapter, we offered some answers to this criticism in defence of Incongruity Theory. In particular, we said that, although congruity is present in these instances on some level, there are still incongruities and they are responsible, at least in part, for comic amusement. Some incongruities are quite apparent. For example, in the caricatured pictures of Smeraldina and Frica there are incongruities established by the exaggeration of certain features as well as by the comparison to canonical beauty and animal features. Thus, one could find these two excerpts comic without reading or knowing anything else from *More Pricks than Kicks*.

However, this answer is not completely satisfying. Whilst it shows that Incongruity Theory can provide a description of comic elements in the case of caricatures similar to those of Smeraldina and Frica, the same cannot be said for the case of Celia's caricature, which proves to be quite challenging for Incongruity Theory. The passages on Celia do not seem to contain the same apparent incongruities that are found in the other two cases. Celia walks as expected and attracts attention as expected: Celia is a prostitute and her gait and behaviour reflect it. It is this connection, this congruity that seems to play a

pivotal role in eliciting comic amusement. To be sure there are some incongruities that can be easily spotted, as the fact that hips are given their own agency. However, even if the passage was stripped of that particular detail, it would still be funny (imagine for example that the sentence was: ‘She stormed away from the callbox, accompanied *delightfully* by her hips, etc.’).

If Celia’s case proves to be particularly challenging to Incongruity Theory, on the other hand, it is also by looking carefully at it that we can offer a satisfying answer to the criticism moved. What we have considered to be elements of *congruity* in the three caricatures illustrated rest in fact upon a deeper incongruity, and Beckett’s description of Celia’s gait is quite apt to show it. Recall the first passage we quoted:

She stormed away from the callbox, accompanied *delightedly* by her hips, etc.

And recall what we said about the comic elements related to the use of the word *delightedly*. Celia does not accompany her walk with a delightful movement of her hips. Rather, the hips accompany Celia’s walk and they do so with delight. Beckett’s phrasing gives to the hips its own agency and responsibility on the movement. This is the perfect illustration of the incongruity that lies below the congruity that we have identified and we are going to show why.

According to Bergson, one of the ways in which the characters are comic is when they are presented as types. For example, this is the case when attitudes, gestures, jargon or way to think related to their own profession take over a person: some of the person’s attributes are “upon him without forming part of his organism, after the fashion of a parasite”.⁹⁴ In this case, a person is comic because he or she does not seem to act accordingly to the situation, by contrast he or she acts mindlessly but in accordance to some aspects of their personality. A doctor, for example, is comic if they can’t help but using medical jargon in any circumstance and about any topic. The character, Bergson would say, manifests a sort of rigidity and a sort of lack of control. What is incongruous, to say it with Incongruity Theory, is the fact that a person does not seem to be freely and consciously choosing to act in a certain manner. In our example from *Murphy*, Celia’s seems followed by her profession rather than her choosing to manifest certain attitudes of her profession. In the illustration offered, she is followed by her hips – she does not control their movement. Although Celia is not certainly presented in *Murphy* merely as an instance of character type ‘prostitute’,⁹⁵ some of her actions and gestures can be linked to that and their comic aspects understood when seen through the lenses of the ‘character type’.

Similar comments can be made on Frica and Smeraldina. The caricatures present the two women as belonging to a type and what they do does not seem to be a matter of individual and independent choice.

⁹⁴ Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* p. 170.

⁹⁵ Cohn acknowledges that, although Beckett stresses some attitudes and character traits of Murphy and Celia more than others (job and chair for Murphy, and prostitution for Celia), they are complex characters and there is much more to them than those traits. See Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 47-48.

Smeraldina's aspect is the aspect of the lustful and what she does is determined by the fact that she belongs to the lustful type, it is not a matter of individual choice. Frica is the deluded and pretentious member of the so-called cultural elite and anything that she does is the result of this.

Now that we have shown what is incongruous and comic about characters presented as type, it is easier to understand a comic element that Cohn individuates in other characters of *Murphy*. Cohn claims that many of the secondary characters in *Murphy* "are reduced to their ridiculous motifs", of which she provides a list: Mr. Kelly is associated to his kite, Miss Carridge's odour is often at the forefront, Ticklepenny's homosexuality is stressed, Wiley is associated with his obsession with money and sex, Cooper's various inabilities keep coming up, Miss Rosie Dew is reduced to her duck-feet and medium, brutality is a common trait for Bim Bom, Dr. Killicrankie and the Coroner.⁹⁶ Even Neary, though considered by Cohn closer to Celia in terms of complexity, is according to her often associated with his drink habit.⁹⁷ What Cohn is pointing out is that all these characters are frequently presented in association with a specific element. This connection becomes the motif that underlines their appearances. We can explain what is comically incongruous about this recurring connection in a manner similar to how we have explained what is comically incongruous about types. As for types, the characters' gestures and attitudes associated to their motifs are seen as somehow detached and imposed on them.

2.4.2 The Intellectual and the Artist

The discussion in the previous section highlighted that the caricatures that Cohn finds in Beckett's works could be divided into two groups. Firstly, there are caricatures that consist in self-contained descriptive passages, where a narrator presents a character by amplifying some of her or his physical traits, attitudes or behaviour. This is the case of the Smeraldina's and the Frica's caricatures. Secondly, there are caricatures that are not provided in a self-contained description, but that are evinced by joining together different passages or elements of the texts. For example, the caricature of Celia is not contained in a descriptive passage, on the contrary, it is constructed by joining together the repetitive and distorted references to her profession.

Cohn's comments on the main characters of *Watt* and the *Trilogy*, even though not very articulated, seem to suggest that she finds at work in these novels the mechanisms typical of the caricatures of the second type.⁹⁸

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 48.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 47-48 passim.

⁹⁸ Cohn's comments on the Novellas go in the same direction. She points out that some comic devices belonging to the category of 'comic of language' are subservient to showing character and situation as absurd. For example, she says that "The 'I's' of the stories are physically grotesque, and their responses tend to be incongruous – those of foreigners to our world", *ibid.*, p. 107. To this she adds that "literalism serve to point up the absurdity of situation or character", *ibid.*, p. 108.

She claims, that Watt is a ‘latter-day Cartesian’, and given that the only explicit description of Watt at this regard is that “he is a university man”,⁹⁹ she must evince the Watt’s Cartesianism from his behaviour and attitudes:¹⁰⁰

[Watt is] ‘probably a university man’, is a latter-day Cartesian. Again and again, he attempts to impose what Descartes implied, and Hegel stated: “the real is rational and the rational real.” He is therefore concerned only with external phenomena; his interest in language, which he identifies with thought, is scientific; he is obsessed with logic. Far from a poet, what he demands of words is that they name things or explain events, and what he demands of things and events is that they be subservient to the rational understanding.¹⁰¹

Watt’s attitudes towards reality, his concerns about it and about language are all derivative from the fact that he is a Cartesian and, as such, he believes that words should be able to represent reality and rational thought should be able to explain it. Most of Watt’s incongruous attitudinal traits, according to Cohn, depend on Watt’s intellectual standpoint and “upon his effort to relate the world of appearance to a language that will describe it”.¹⁰²

Some of the devices that we have described as belonging to the category of the ‘comic of situation’ can be shown to be inter-dependent on comic elements that belong to the ‘comic of characters’. The comic situation of incommunicability between Watt and Mr Knott depends on comic features of the two characters. Watt is a character that belongs to the Rational/Cartesian/Intellectual type. Watt faces Mr Knott, who could be considered as standing for ‘irrationality’, and rather than behaving according to the situation, Watt behaves as his type requires.¹⁰³

Non sequiturs and digressions that have been described as devices belonging to the category of ‘comic of situation’ can be seen as devices that belong to the ‘comic of character’ too. Cohn suggests reading them as the result of the disintegration of Watt’s mind. *Non sequiturs* and digressions represent the

⁹⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 17.

¹⁰⁰ According to Cohn, other characters of *Watt* are presented in a caricaturised manner too. Mr. Knott is represented by its incongruous habits and paradoxical traits, and little information are given about other minor characters and often only about their “grotesque physical, social or professional attribute”. Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 70 For Cohn’s discussion of ‘comic of character’ in *Watt* see *ibid.*, pp. 69-70.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p. 79. According to Cohn, by offering in *Watt* a caricature of modern rationality, Beckett points at the inadequacy of modern rationality to understand and explain the world. However, Watt is not merely ridiculed but is presented as a hero too as he perseveres in his task. She adds that by placing on Watt’s shoulders this task, and by investing him with such incongruous attribute, Beckett turns Watt into a heroic figure. “Through his eccentricities, Watt is both ridiculed and highlighted in the role of hero, for his heroism is intellectual. And if his intellect, like his appearance, is incongruously comic, Watt is nevertheless heroic. [...] He attacks an irrational order of reality with tools of the habitual world – his senses, ‘his most noble faculties’ and his mind ‘whatever that might mean’”. *Ibid.*, p. 80.

¹⁰³ Cohn notices that the presence of *non sequiturs* contributes to convey the picture of the situation around which the novel is built: the fact that there is no communication between Watt and Mr Knott and that Watt does not and cannot know Mr Knott – “All these *non sequiturs* are subsidiary to the central point – that Watt and Mr. Knott do not communicate; that Watt, whose senses and mind are full of Mr. Knott, learns nothing about him”, *ibid.*, p. 68. The situation is depicted as incongruous with the situation we would normally expect between two human beings. We would expect that at least some sort of communication is possible and that at least some pieces of information about the other are available to our senses.

disintegration of a Watt's mind not by describing it, but by signalling it. They are the symptom that signals that the mind cannot capture reality anymore.¹⁰⁴

However, the reading of Watt as a caricature of the Intellectual, or of the Cartesian Intellectual who is struggling to reduce the irrational reality to a rational picture, faces the risk to simplify the richness of the character. Firstly, there are many comic instances related to Watt's attitude and behaviour that do not fit into the image of the latter day Cartesian. Consider, for example, the picture of Watt's mind that we are offered in the episode where Watt encounters Mr Spiro, a self-declared "neo-John-Tomist".¹⁰⁵ Mr Spiro reads and answers three questions that have been addressed to the "popular catholic monthly"¹⁰⁶ 'Crux', of which he is the editor:

A rat, or other small animal, eats of a consecrated wafer.

1) Does he ingest the Real Body, or does he not?

2) If he does not, what has become of it?

3) If he does, what is to be done with him?

[...]

Mr Spiro now replied to these questions, that is to say he replied to question one and he replied to question three. He did so at length, quoting from Saint Bonaventura, Peter Lombard, Alexander of Hales, Sanchez, Suarez, Henno, Soto, Diana, Concina and Dens, for he was a man of leisure. But Watt heard nothing of this, because of other voices, singing, crying, stating, murmuring, things unintelligible, in his ear. With these, if he was not familiar, he was not unfamiliar either. So he was not alarmed, unduly. Now these voices, sometimes they sang only, and sometimes they cried only, and sometimes they stated only, and sometimes they murmured only, and sometimes they sang and cried, and sometimes they sang and stated, and sometimes they sang and murmured, and sometimes they cried and stated, and sometimes they cried and murmured, and sometimes they stated and murmured, and sometimes they sang and cried and stated, and sometimes they sang and cried and murmured, and sometimes they cried and stated and murmured, and sometimes they sang and cried and stated and murmured, all together, at the same time, as now, to mention only these four kinds of voices, for there were others. And sometimes Watt understood all, and sometimes he understood much, and sometimes he understood little, and sometimes he understood nothing, as now.¹⁰⁷

Watt is far from being stimulated by the seemingly scholarly discussion and his attitude is not that of an intellectual. Even more so, given that he lacks one of the fundamental requirements to engage in any intellectual activity, let alone in scholarly work: Watt is not able to attend to the matter of discussion as he cannot discern the voice of his interlocutor, Mr Spiro, from the voices in his head. Watt's inability to discern between the voices inside and outside his mind is a comic incongruity that belongs to the

¹⁰⁴ "Often without sequence or connective, dialogue follows event, follows reasoning, pushed to an unbearable, seemingly nonsensical limit. Towards the end of the novel, continuous use of *non sequitur* conveys the final disintegration of Watt's mind, or the alogical absurdity of the cosmos, and suggests that the latter may be a reflection of the former". Ibid., p. 67.

Note that Cohn's reading could be too narrow as *non sequitur* that belong to the category of 'comic of the situation' can be found in the actions of other characters too. This is the case, for example, of Lady McCann, who meets Watt when he is on his way to Mr Knott and who, for no apparent reason, hits him with a rock. Watt's lack of reaction to this event contributes to present Lady McCann as gratuitous. He does not acknowledge her presence in any way; he does not ask her for any explanation, let alone reacting with rage. On the contrary, he stops and picks up his hat, which was knocked to the ground by the stone. Beckett, *Watt*, p. 25.

¹⁰⁵ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., pp. 22-23.

‘comic of character’. The passage contains other comic elements that belong to the other two categories: we have already described the comic elements connected to the situation in the previous section (the reader and Mr Spiro have different points of view on the situation), and we shall discuss the comic incongruities that belong to ‘comic of language’ (repetitions) in the next section.

Considering Watt as a caricature does not only raise a concern around the ability of such pictures to account for all the episodes in which Watt appears. Indeed, one might adjust the claim and say that, most of the time Watt is presented as a caricature of an intellectual. However, even so adjusted this claim is not satisfying. Particularly, it does not account for the difference between a caricature of the Intellectual such as that of Mr Spiro and the experience that we have of Watt.

Consider Mr Spiro: he is presented as a caricature of the Intellectual. His actions are not adequate responses to the situation – on the contrary, actually – but he mindlessly performs actions as someone of the ‘Intellectual’ type would do. He indulges in lengthy presentations of himself and his work; he rushes to discuss a topic that he is interested in when he discovers that Watt is about to get off the train, “there is not a moment to lose, said Mr Spiro”:¹⁰⁸ after he presents the topic of discussion he does not wait for Watt to contribute to the discussion, but he provides his own view first. These elements contribute to the caricaturised depiction of Mr Spiro.

If Watt were to be a caricature of intellectual, then the difference between the caricature of Watt and that of Mr Spiro would be only one of length and detail. However, there seems to be more to this difference than just a mere difference in the quantity of details and length. For one, the caricature of Mr Spiro ridicules the pedantry of some scholarly debates showing them as pointless. After having encountered Mr Spiro, we think less of pedantic scholarly debates. By contrast, Watt’s attempts to represent and understand the world, although they fail, often prompt the readers to question the role of language and of our means of understanding reality. Many episodes do not merely poke fun at Watt’s intellectual approach to reality, they enable considerations and reflections of an intellectual and philosophical nature.

Similar considerations can be made for Cohn’s characterisations of the ‘I’s of the trilogy. As Watt stands for the ‘Intellectual’ or for individuals solely driven by rationality, the ‘I’s of the trilogy, according to Cohn, embody the ‘artist’ type,¹⁰⁹ and their difficulties with telling stories is read as the elements of caricatures of the ‘artist’.¹¹⁰ This point is elaborated in more detail in an article by Gianni Celati. Whilst Celati does not claim that the ‘I’s of the trilogy are caricatures of the ‘artist’, he seems to agree with Cohn in saying that is possible to find instances belonging to the category of ‘comic of character’ by

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁰⁹ “*Molloy* shows the making of an artist, *Malone Dies* the artist making, and *The Unnamable* the artist’s reflections upon art and the artist”. Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 118.

¹¹⁰ For example, she sees the recurring presence of hats in Beckett’s novels as an attempt to characterise the characters’ intellectual heritage. See *ibid.*, pp. 106-107, 124.

looking at how the stories are narrated.¹¹¹ In particular, he offers an analysis of the techniques that are used by Beckett to exhibit the scribe behind the narration.

As Celati shows, the presence of the narrators behind the story narrated is signalled in the text by using several techniques. One of such techniques is the direct addressing of the audience. Celati shows that in *Molloy*, the extensive presence of the pronoun 'you' – "Let me tell you this";¹¹² "I shall tell you perhaps one day";¹¹³ "my feet, you see, never took me to my mother [...]"¹¹⁴ by stressing the communicative exchanges, gives to the readers and to the speaker specific and visible location.¹¹⁵ As a consequence, the attention of readers is drawn onto the speaker who is performing the narration. On other occasions, the narrator secures the communication with the audience by pretending to answer some of their (hypothetical) questions – "Yet I don't work for money. For what then? I don't know" –,¹¹⁶ their (hypothetical) request of clarifications – "deep down is my dwelling, oh not deepest down, somewhere between the mud and the scum" –,¹¹⁷ of explicating hidden implications – "They don't want that. Yes, there is more than one, apparently" –,¹¹⁸ and responding possible objections –¹¹⁹ "to decompose is to live too, I know, I know, don't torment me".¹²⁰ This technique too contributes to making explicit that a communicative exchange is taking place and draws the attention to the source of the narration.

Whereas these techniques reveal and secure the relation between audience and narrator, and, by doing so, they assign a specific place to the two relata; other passages work to draw attention to the presence of the narrator by separating him from the narration. According to Celati, this is achieved using different techniques: the various corrections and adjustments – "and when I say, I said, etc., all I mean is that" –,¹²¹ the refusal to narrate – "no, I can't record this fatuous colloquy" –,¹²² the distaste towards narrating

¹¹¹ This is not, however, the only type of instances of comic of character that Celati finds in these works. Whilst he sees the characters' actions as largely amounting to that of narrating, this coincidence is not exact. Some instances that belong to the category of 'comic of character' could be individuated in the actions that narrators perform as character of their own narratives. One of such example is the episode where Molloy reasons on how to arrange stones in his pockets. For the passage in the novel see Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 72-75. For a reading of this passage as an instance of comic of character, see Gianni Celati, 'Su Beckett, L'interpolazione E Il Gag', *Finzioni Occidentali: Fabulazione, Comicità e Scrittura* (Terza Edizione edn.; Torino: Einaudi, 2001), pp. 167-194, p. 179.

¹¹² Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 21.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 22.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 27.

¹¹⁵ This is at least the case, according to Celati, in the trilogy and in the novellas. There, he says, "la parola del testo risulta spartita da voci contrastanti segnalate dai pronomi io e voi: attraverso un inciso, una clausola finale o una battuta d'umore, c'è un'eco della nostra presenza che devia la linearità del discorso". Celati, 'Su Beckett, L'interpolazione E Il Gag', p. 167.

¹¹⁶ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 3.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

¹¹⁹ "[L]interrogazione rimanda ad un soggetto distinto dall'io narrante, che partecipa al discorso e potrebbe sollevare obiezioni, porre domande imbarazzanti, accusare o negare. Tutto ciò è anticipato da una precisazione autistica a sorpresa, attraverso una domanda retorica e una risposta di ovvietà". Celati, 'Su Beckett, L'interpolazione E Il Gag', p. 168.

¹²⁰ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 22.

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 89.

¹²² Ibid., p. 31.

works in this direction “what a rigmarole”,¹²³ and the comments on its development – “It’s coming, it’s coming”.¹²⁴

These techniques do not belong to the category of ‘comic of character’, but they contribute to the depiction of the characters as comic. The picture that results from the use of these techniques is thus one of a ‘clumsy narrator’. *Non sequiturs* and digressions discussed in the previous section can be seen as contributing to compose the picture of the ‘clumsy narrator’ too. The stories narrated by the ‘I’s in the trilogy are not well-formed because the ‘I’s cannot master their material. This reading of the way in which the narration takes place lends support to Cohn’s reading of the characters as a caricature of the artist and therefore a comment on the potentiality of Art.

There is something not entirely satisfying in describing the ‘I’s of the trilogy as being caricatures of the ‘Artist’. And this is not only because the trilogy cannot be reduced to a metanarrative discussion of possibility and limits of artistic representation. Even if we see Cohn’s description of the characters as being about only one of the themes and aspects of the trilogy (the relation between story teller and its material), and we grant her that the ‘I’s could be plausibly considered caricatures of the Artist, this description is not satisfying. In fact, saying that the clumsiness of the narrators is subservient to create a caricature of the Artist and to the ridiculing of the Artist does not capture what is proper of the way in which these caricatures are created. Beckett could have created a caricature of an artist with the aim of ridiculing him or her just by offering a third person narrative on a clumsy writer, and he would have obtained the same effect. However, the elements involved in what is considered the building of the caricatures, i.e. all the linguistic devices examined by Celati, contribute to the experience of reading in a way that merely saying that we assist to a caricature does not capture.

So far the analysis of situations and characters provided by Cohn seems to leave some gaps. In particular, devices such as *non sequiturs* and digressions are described as comic elements in the situation and comic elements in the characters. However, this description has been shown to not being satisfying. We turn now to the last category of devices listed by Cohn, and consider whether Cohn offers the missing part of the picture in her analysis of language.

2.5 Comic of Language

Under comic of language Cohn lists a series of devices which she very often leaves unexplained. In what follows we list the main recurring devices individuated by Cohn and, where necessary, we discuss what makes the use of those devices comic. In addition, whereas Cohn does not introduce further distinctions in this category, we organise the instances individuated in her study in two main groups.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 9.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 24.

We distinguish between: comic instances where the incongruity stands between two terms which are internal to the work studied (internal incongruity); and comic instances where the incongruity stands between elements of Beckett's works and elements that are external to it (external incongruity). As for the previous two sections, in describing the instances, we consider possible challenges to Incongruity Theory and to Cohn's analytical grid.

2.5.1 Internal incongruity

Cohn individuates a number of devices where the relation of incongruity is established between terms that are internal to the work discussed. In some of the devices she individuates, this relation depends on the choice and arrangement of words and sentences in the text. This is for example the case of comic instances that contain linguistic inversion and a comic use of jargon. Other devices depend on the relation between words and sentences to other words and sentences in the book. This is the case of contradictions, repetitions and what Cohn labels as 'mathematical series'.

Then again there are instances where the comic elements lie in particular uses of rhetorical figures such as pun, litotes, hyperbole and literalism. Finally, other comic instances depend on the type of object targeted by the comic instances.

2.5.1.1 Linguistic Inversions and Jargon

Linguistic inversions are instances that could be considered as paradigmatic cases in support of Incongruity Theory of humour, as what is incongruous is apparent: the order of letters and words is inverted or contradicted. The examples range from simple inversion of letters – "when ten o'clock strock" –, ¹²⁵ to inversion of words – "The question to this answer was the following [...]" –, ¹²⁶ to more extended inversions. This is the case of the inversions that muddle Watt's speech extensively illustrated in *Watt* (Watt talks back to front and inverts the order of letters, words and sentences in different combinations). ¹²⁷

Some passages are comic due to the language register used: certain choices of words are off-key in relation to the topic discussed or the register of the rest of the novel. ¹²⁸ This we consider it to be the

¹²⁵ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 80.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 140-144. For Cohn discussion of inversion in *Watt*, see *ibid.*, p. 75.

¹²⁸ Pilling also comments on Beckett's use of erudite references and jargon. He registers that they become less apparent and frequent with the development of Beckett's writing. However, he nonetheless claims that even when less apparent the use of such vocabulary does two things: "it calls attention to itself [...] and hence mocks itself; but it also makes a specialized, scientifically accurate language seem momentarily plausible. As a result, the first mock is often succeeded by a drier, more despairing mock, a *risus purus* indeed". Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, pp. 48-50, quote at 49-50.

case, for example, of Beckett's use of jargon¹²⁹ that Cohn suggests to be comic because "is specialized terminology that is incongruous with the subject".¹³⁰

2.5.1.2 Contradictions

With the term 'contradiction' we refer to a range of devices individuated by Cohn, which goes from paradoxes¹³¹ – for example, "gentlewoman of the people" –,¹³² to flat contradictions – "it is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. [...] 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" –¹³³ as well as more complex contradictions – "and once again I am I will not say alone, no, that's not like me, but, how shall I say, I don't know, restored to myself, no, I never left myself, free, yes, I don't know what that means but it's the word I mean to use [...]".¹³⁴

The incongruity that contradictions establish could seem self-evident, as it could seem self-evident the fact that they belong to the category of 'comic of language'. Some sentences or words contradict or appear to contradict, and hence are incongruous with, other sentences or words. Whilst it is true that a linguistic incongruity of this type is established, this description does not seem to be satisfying in capturing the central elements of some of these instances.

Consider for example the instance of flat contradiction that we have quoted. At midnight, while outside it is raining, Moran, who has just returned from his journey, begins to write the report of his quest for Molloy – "it is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows".¹³⁵ At the end of the report, Moran contradicts what he said at the beginning: "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".¹³⁶ Part of the comic amusement certainly depends on the fact that one sentence is the opposite of the other. However, this

¹²⁹ This entails both using learned jargon or explicit and vivid jargon. According to Cohn's study, learned jargon is pervasive in early Beckett's works and becomes less frequent as Beckett's writing style matures. The following are two of the examples that Cohn finds in *More Pricks than Kicks*: "They considered Fingal for a time together in silence. Its coast eaten away with creeks and marshes, tesseræ of small fields, patches of wood springing up like a weed, the line of hills too low to close the view"; "He had allowed himself to get run down, but he scoffed at the idea of sequitur from his body to his mind". Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, pp. 17-18 and 22. See Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 29.

¹³⁰ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 30. In the same passage, Cohn specifies that she considers learned jargon an example of Bergson's comic of transposition. Bergson's considers comic of transposition one of the types of comic of language, and sees it obtained by "*transposing the nature expression of an idea into another key*". Italics in the original. Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* p. 123.

¹³¹ Beckett extensively employs a particular form of paradox, the bull. Christopher Ricks offers a careful discussion of Beckett's bulls in Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures 1990* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 153-203. Shane Weller has also commented on the use of bull in Beckett's works in Weller, 'Last Laughs: Beckett and the Ethics of Comedy'.

¹³² Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 37.

¹³³ Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 95,184.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9. For Cohn's discussion of these passages, see Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 36, 140.

¹³⁵ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 95.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

does not seem to capture it all: in particular, it does not capture the sense of estrangement that we feel in reading this contradiction.

Perhaps one way to provide a better description of the comic estrangement that this contradiction establishes is to consider what other incongruities the presence of this contradiction establishes. For example, Cohn suggests that the use of contradictions, along with others, convey the desperate situation of the writer, who is doomed to be a liar.¹³⁷ Following this suggestion, contradictions could be seen as contributing to compose the picture of the ‘clumsy narrator’ as described in the previous section on the ‘comic of character’. Then again, in a similar way, contradictions could be seen as contributing to the parody of ‘traditional novel’: we expect from a well-formed narration that the material presented is coherent. Contradictions can then be described from the point of view of language, character, or *genre*, and thus be captured by the grid used by Cohn.

The addition of these elements to the description of the contradiction, however, does not seem yet to capture the estrangement established by it, and there seems to be more than what Cohn’s analytical grid is able to capture. The contradiction does not only draw our attention on to the character or the *genre*, it also draws our attention on what the speaker is doing in uttering the two contradictory sentences: ‘it is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows’ and ‘It was not midnight. It was not raining’. Whilst we thought at first that the narrator was reporting an event, after having read the last sentence, we are no longer sure of it. Part of the comic estrangement is due to the ambiguity and uncertainty around the acts that the speaker is performing when uttering these two sentences. We shall look in more detail at this type of comic in the next chapter, for the moment it is enough to say that, whilst Cohn’s grid captures some of the aspect of the contradiction with the category of ‘comic of language’ and ‘comic of character’, it does leave out an important comic element.

2.5.1.3 Repetitions

The next two devices that we discuss are repetitions and mathematical series. Both these types of device appear to challenge Incongruity Theory as they are based on models of *congruity*: they are either reiteration of combination of elements, or arrangements of elements according to some mathematical patterns. We shall look at some examples to see whether Incongruity Theory could offer some insight in the case of these instances and vice versa.

Starting with repetition¹³⁸ first, consider the following two passages taken from *Watt*. The first passage describes Watt’s arrival at Mr. Knott’s house and the second is taken from Arsene’s speech:

¹³⁷ In discussing contractions and literalisms, Cohn claims that “in the trilogy, as in no previous work, comic devices convey the desperate state of the writer, that obsessive liar”. Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 140.

¹³⁸ Cohn finds instances of repetition that range from repetition of sounds, formulas, sentences. *Ibid.*, pp. 61, 74, 86, 87, 146, 187-189. She notes that the use of repetition is particularly exploited in *Watt*. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

The house was in darkness.

Finding the front door locked, Watt went to the back door. He could not very well ring, or knock, for the house was in darkness.

Finding the back door locked also, Watt returned to the front door.

Finding the front door locked still, Watt returned to the back door.

Finding the back door now open, oh not open wide, but on the latch, as the saying is, Watt was able to enter the house.

Watt was surprised to find the back door, so lately locked, now open.¹³⁹

The ordinary person eats a meal, then rests from eating for a space, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, then eats again, then rests again, and in this way, now eating, and now resting from eating, he deals with the difficult problem of hunger, and indeed I think I may add thirst, to the best of his ability and according to the state of his fortune.¹⁴⁰

Both these passages, as many others in *Watt* are, are constructed on the repetition of some elements, and therefore on the presence of something that is congruous with what precedes. This *congruity* could appear to be responsible for the comic amusement. However, if we take a closer look at the two passages, it is possible to show that the repetition is not humorous per se, but it depends on the context in which is presented.

In the first passage, Watt's repetitive movement back and forth from the front door to the back door is what is responsible of our amusement. However, this movement is not funny merely because the same movement is repeated over and over again. The description of the situation, by reporting only Watt's repeated movements, presents them as mechanical or mindless. In a similar manner, the repetition in the second passage presents the repeated alternation between eating and resting as a mechanical and mind-less succession. In both these cases, a device belonging to the category 'comic of language' is used to present a situation as comic.

There are further incongruities that a repetition establishes. One such incongruity is that repetitions such as those above are not appropriate, and hence not expected, in a descriptive narration. Both speakers could have chosen different and more appropriate ways to describe their subject matter. The narrator could have said that Watt moved repeatedly back and forth between the two doors, and Arsene could have said that the ordinary person repeatedly alternates eating and resting. To be sure the effect achieved would have been very different (for one the description would not be comic), but the actions described

Rubin Rabinovitz individuates repetitions in *Murphy* – which range from linguistic repetitions to repetitions of references and allusions, situations and characters – and discuss their significance in Rubin Rabinovitz, 'Murphy and the Uses of Repetition', in S. E. Gontarski (ed.), *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism* (London: Anthem Press, 2012), pp. 53-71.

Repetitions could be found also in the structure of the plot of other Beckett's works. For example, Abbott finds in *Mercier and Camier* an "arbitrary use of symmetrical patterning" and considers an experimentation with the form the choice of structuring *Molloy* in two parts. Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, pp. 75-91, 92-109, quoted text at 89.

The discussion we offer here of repetitions would work for these other types of repetitions too.

¹³⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 29.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

would have been the same. Thus, the presence of the repetition is comically incongruous with what is expected from a descriptive passage.

The description of repetitions offered so far, however, does not seem to capture all the aspects related to their presence in a text. The first incongruity that we have pointed out had to do with the fact that there was something odd with the actions when described as performed repeatedly and mechanically. The second incongruity that we have pointed out had to do with the fact that there is something odd with having repetitions such those reported in a descriptive passage. However, the repetition, beyond drawing our attention on to the actions performed by the subjects described and on to the medium that contains it, draws our attention also on to the speaker who is uttering it. Particularly, it draws our attention on the type of act that the speakers are performing in the two passages above. The speakers of both passages at the outset of the repetitions appear to be describing a situation: Watt's action in the first passage, and the habits of the normal person in the second passage. However, when the repetition is underway, it is not as certain that the speakers are still performing those actions.

We shall look in more detail at the comic use of language acts in the next chapter. For now, it is sufficient to notice that, although this is an aspect of language is one that is not considered by Cohn when describing humour.

2.5.1.4 Mathematical Series

The other device individuated by Cohn is that of 'mathematical series'. As for the majority of devices that she individuates, Cohn does not explain what makes 'mathematical series' a device that belong to the 'comic of language', nor what makes it comic. As for repetitions, it is worth discussing this device in detail given that it appears to be a challenge for Incongruity Theory. Furthermore, as for repetitions, the discussion of this device prompts questions around Cohn's analytical grid.

Firstly, it should be noted that the label 'mathematical series' captures a variety of instances that share some core features: the presence of an underlying scheme that follows a mathematical order or, at least, it has the appearance of it. There are instances that are described as a mathematical calculation. This is the case of the passage where Murphy calculates the number of combinations of five different variety of biscuits.¹⁴¹ Then again, there are instances that are built on mathematical series of combinations where the different possible combinations are actually spelt out. This is for example the case of the voices that Watt hears in his mind during Mr Spiro's speech.¹⁴² Other instances have only the appearance of a mathematical series as they are built following a similar pattern. For example, when Watt ponders about the arrangements around Mr Knott's meals, he formulates twelve possible hypotheses. In a similar way to mathematical combinations, these hypotheses are built by combining

¹⁴¹ Beckett, *Murphy*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁴² Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 22-23.

and varying few fixed elements. In contrast to mathematical combination, the list of hypothesis does not include all the possible combination of elements and some elements change from a hypothesis to the other.¹⁴³

Mathematical series appears to be amusing due to the presence of the underlying mathematical scheme and hence due to elements arranged according to a model of *congruity*. However, as for repetitions, the comic elements of the series depend on the context in which they appear. Firstly, the comic amusement related to the presence of mathematical series partly depends on the fact that they are often employed to solve a situation that, although presented as problematic, is of little importance and trouble. This is the case of the passages where Murphy calculates the combinations of biscuits or Molloy considers different arrangements of the stones in his pockets.¹⁴⁴ This incongruity, however, belongs to the category of ‘comic of situation’ rather than ‘comic of language’: what is comic is the situation, i.e. the fact that mathematics is employed to solve a hideous matter.¹⁴⁵

Secondly, in some cases the presence of mathematical series establishes incongruities that have to do with the fact that they occur in a written work of a certain kind. This is for example the case of the two passages in *Watt* mentioned earlier (the combination of voices in Watt’s mind and Watt’s hypothesis on Mr Knott’s meal arrangement), and the case of the passage where Molloy considers different ways of arranging stones in his pockets. Spelling out in lengthy details the different combinations is not necessary for the description and it is not appropriate for a novel; the speaker could have described, in a much more elegant way, these combinations by summarising them.

The comic elements of mathematical series described so far are those that Cohn’s grid is able to capture. However, the picture that they offer is not complete. There are passages where the presence of a

¹⁴³ The twelve possibilities listed play with some ambiguities changing the elements involved in the list. See *ibid.*, pp. 74, 75.

¹⁴⁴ Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 69-75.

¹⁴⁵ To see that this is the case, consider the passage where Murphy calculates the number of possible ways in which he can arrange the order in which a group of five different biscuits are eaten. The problem is set when he realises that by always eating as last his favourite biscuit (the Ginger biscuit) and as first the biscuit that he finds last palatable (the anonymous biscuit), there are only other six combinations in which he could eat the remaining three biscuits. The small number of combinations strikes him as a violation of the “very essence of assortment, this was red permanganate on the Rima of variety”. For this reason, he considers different ways in which increase the possible combinations.

On his knees now before the five it struck him for the first time that these prepossessions reduced to a paltry six the number of ways in which he could make this meal. But this was to violate the very essence of assortment, this was red permanganate on the Rima of variety. Even if he conquered his prejudice against the anonymous, still there would be only twenty-four ways in which the biscuits could be eaten. But were he to take the final step and overcome his infatuation with the ginger, then the assortment would spring before him, dancing the radiant measure of its total permutability, edible in a hundred and twenty ways!
Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 62.

The situation here is funny for the very fact that Murphy applies mathematical calculation to a trivial matter such as the order of eating biscuits. To be sure there are incongruities in this passage that depend on language. For example, the enthusiastic tone used at the end of the passage contrasts with the subject matter. Or again, the jargon used to refer to what he must do in order to have a larger number of combinations is more appropriate to the description of a journey of personal growth – ‘conquered his prejudice’, ‘taken the final step’. Finally, the problem itself arises due to a comic misunderstanding of linguistic nature. The term ‘assortment’ on the box should be understood as referring only to the fact that there are biscuits of an *assorted kind*, it should not be taken to refer to the *assorted ways of eating* them. However, even if the passage was re-written without these comic elements, the situation would still be funny.

mathematical series establishes incongruities that have to do with the language acts performed by the speakers. This is especially evident in passages where a mathematical series is used by the narrator to organise his description (as opposed to when the narrator merely reports that characters use mathematical series to organise hypotheses or objects). Recall the passage, quoted earlier in this chapter, about the voices that Watt hears in his mind:

Now these voices, sometimes they sang only, and sometimes they cried only, and sometimes they stated only, and sometimes they murmured only, and sometimes they sang and cried, and sometimes they sang and stated, and sometimes they sang and murmured, and sometimes they cried and stated, and sometimes they cried and murmured, and sometimes they stated and murmured, and sometimes they sang and cried and stated, and sometimes they sang and cried and murmured, and sometimes they cried and stated and murmured, and sometimes they sang and cried and stated and murmured, all together, at the same time, as now, to mention only these four kinds of voices, for there were others. And sometimes Watt understood all, and sometimes he understood much, and sometimes he understood little, and sometimes he understood nothing, as now.¹⁴⁶

This passage certainly establishes incongruity related to the situation (Mr Spiro talks to Watt, and Watt's mind is occupied with other voices), to the character (this seems to be a feature of Watt's mind), and to the genre of the text (the passage appears in a novel). The description of the humour in the passage would not be complete, however, if it did not mention an important source of it. The fact that the speaker goes into detail in listing all the possible combination of actions performed by the voices draws the readers' attention on to the actions performed by the narrator itself. The passage starts off as a description of the voices in Watt's mind, but as it goes on in providing more details that do not add much to the description, one wonders whether the narrator is still performing the same action. For example, he could be working out all the possible combinations that the voice can form, rather than describing Watt's mind.

As said for repetitions, we shall say more about the comic elements related to language acts in the next chapter. For now, it suffices to say that Cohn's analysis seems to overlook this comic aspect of Beckett's texts.

2.5.1.5 Rhetorical Figures and Literalism

Some of the devices that belong to the category of 'comic of language' are based on the use of some rhetorical figures. This is for example the case of puns, litotes and hyperboles. Puns hold together and exploit different meanings that correspond to same word or to words with similar sounds.¹⁴⁷ Litotes are

¹⁴⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 22-23.

¹⁴⁷ Cohn provides various examples of puns. She pays particular attention to puns related to books' titles – *More Pricks than Kicks* (Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 26); *Comment C'est* (p. 190) – and characters' names – for example Belacqua (p. 28); Murphy and Celia (p. 54); Watt and Knott (p. 72); Mercier and Camier (p. 97); and somehow even in Molloy and Malone (pp. 129-130). Cohn finds puns scattered in the texts too. We have already discussed the citation of Dante's pun: "Qui vive la pietà quando è ben morta". See Chapter 1.3, Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 11. Here another example: "I don't like the gloom to lighten, there is something shady about it". Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 84. The pun plays on the double meaning of shady as shadowy and suspicious. See Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 133.

used to convey a meaning by understating the opposite.¹⁴⁸ Hyperboles are exaggerations that are often exploited for comic purposes.¹⁴⁹

Instances of literalism offer some challenges to Incongruity Theory. In broad terms, instances of literalism can be described as instances where the literal meaning of a sentence or word is picked up rather than a more obvious figurative meaning. Cohn seems to individuate a range of instances of literalisms, which goes from simple literalism of words to more articulated passages.

An example of simple literalism that Cohn individuates is in the dialogue between the Polar Bear and the Jesuit in 'A Wet Night'.

'Our Lord –'
'Speak for yourself' said the P.B. [...].¹⁵⁰

The phrase 'Our Lord' is an expression used to refer to Jesus Christ, where the pronoun 'our' is used to indicate all the human beings: 'The Lord of Human Beings'. However, the Polar Bear's response highlights a different possible context of reference and, hence, meaning of the pronoun 'our'. The Polar Bear's refusal to accept 'our' as referring to him too, highlights that the context of reference of the pronoun 'our' can be understood as that of the dialogue, and as a consequence 'our' could be understood as referring to the Jesuit and the Polar Bear, – 'yours and mine Lord' or 'the Lord in which you and I

The annotated companion to *Dream of Fair to Middling Women, More Pricks than Kicks, Murphy* and *Watt* are very useful support to identify puns and other rhetorical devices in Beckett's works. See respectively Pilling, 'A Companion to Dream of Fair to Middling Women', Pilling, *Samuel Beckett's 'More Pricks Than Kicks': In a Strait of Two Wills*, Chris Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated 'Murphy'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), Chris Ackerley, 'Obscure Locks, Simple Keys: The Annotated Watt', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 7 (2005).

¹⁴⁸ Here an example: "I was no ordinary cripple, far from it, and there were days when my legs were the best part of me, with the exception of the brain capable of forming such a judgment". Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 83 Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 137

We add also that often Beckett misuses litotes. For example, in the following passage he repeatedly uses what seems a litotes. However, at the end, he twists the meaning of the litotes by taking it literally.

Not the least charm of this pure blank movement, this 'gress' or 'gression', was its aptness to receive, with or without the approval of the subject, in all their integrity, the faint inscriptions of the outer world. Exempt from destination, it had not to shun the unforeseen nor turn aside from the agreeable odds and ends of vaudeville that are liable to crop up, this sensitiveness was not the least charm of this roaming that began by being blank, not the least charm of this pure alacrity with which it welcomed defilement. But very nearly the least. Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 33.

The expression 'not the least' is normally used to indicate that something is not ranked in the low side of a given range of value. It is used to say that something sits far from being the least. However, by adding the last 'but very nearly the least', the expression 'not the least' assumes its literal meaning: it is not in exactly in the last position, but it could be in any other, even the penultimate.

In this other example, Molloy plays with the extension of the litotes:

To say that I stumbled in impenetrable darkness, no, I cannot. I stumbled, but the darkness was not impenetrable. Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 84.

Whereas we would expect the negation to refer to the main predicate (and thus saying that he did not stumble), the second sentence reveals that what is negated are the conditions in which he stumbled (the darkness was not that thick).

¹⁴⁹ Here is an example: "Then he ventured to consider what he had to do next. There was always something that one had to do next. Three large obligations presented themselves. First lunch. Then the lobster, then the Italian lesson". Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 4. The errands that Belacqua has to run – completing and consuming his lunch, collecting from the fishmonger a lobster that his aunt has ordered, and going to his Italian lesson – are presented, by using a hyperbole, as 'large commitments' when they are not.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

believe'. The refusal of being associated to the Jesuit is the refusal to accept a possible implication of the pronoun 'our'. In a case of simple literalism as this one, the incongruity lies in the choice of using the less obvious meaning of a word.¹⁵¹

The incongruity is less apparent in those cases of literalism, individuated by Cohn, which present a more articulated form. This is a type of literalism that occurs frequently in *Watt* and consists in passages where what is said by an initial sentence is explicated (or at least appears to be explicated) pedantically by the sentences that follow. Consider, for example, the passage in *Watt* that starts with the following two sentences:

Erskine was for ever running up the stairs and down them again. Not so Watt, who came down only once a day, when he got up, to begin his day, and only once a day went up, when he lay down, to begin his night.¹⁵²

The first two sentences depict the difference between Erskine and Watt's habits. In the course of a normal day, Erskine is constantly running up and down the stairs of Mr Knott's house, whereas Watt tends to use the stairs only twice a day. These two sentences contain already all the necessary information about the extent to which Watt and Erskine use the stairs. The pieces of information added after these two sentences (as reported in the quotation below) do not add much to what we already know.

The second sentence contains already some elements of the pedantry that will become evident as the passage continues. The additions 'to begin his day' and 'to begin his night' are either redundant or pedantic. They are redundant if one considers the customary meaning of the phrases 'getting up' and 'laying down': they are used to refer respectively to the action of waking up in the morning and going to sleep at night. By contrast, they are pedantic addition if one takes the two phrases literally: it is possible that one 'gets up' not at the beginning of the day, and one 'lays down' not at the beginning of the night.

The pedantry built via literalism continues with the sentences which follow:

Unless when, in his bedroom, in the morning, or in the kitchen, in the evening, he left something behind, that he could not do without. Then of course he went back, up, or down, to fetch this thing, whatever it was. But this was very rare. For what could Watt leave behind, that he could not do without, for a day, for a night? His handkerchief perhaps. But Watt never used a handkerchief. His slobbag. No, he would not have gone back down all the way expressed for his slobbag. No, there was so to speak nothing that Watt could forget, that he could not do without, for the fourteen or fifteen hours that his day lasted, for the ten or nine hours that his night lasted. And yet every now and then he did forget something, some tiny little thing, so that he was obliged

¹⁵¹ Passages that exploit ambiguities for comic purposes work in a similar manner to simple literalism. The following exchange from *Murphy* is an example.

I have it, 'she said.

'Don't I know,' said Murphy.

'I don't mean that,' she said, 'I mean what you told me –'

Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 7.

Given the context where the exchange appears, it is clear that Celia refers to the horoscope. Murphy, however, exploits the ambiguity of the pronoun 'it' to make a sexual reference.

¹⁵² Beckett, *Watt*, p. 99.

to return and fetch it, for he could not have got on, through his day, though his night, without it.
But this was very rare.¹⁵³

The sentences that compose the paragraphs add specification about ‘very rare’ cases in which Watt uses the stairs more than twice a day. He does so when he forgets something in his bedroom or in the kitchen. But this happens very rarely, given that there are not many things that Watt needs during a normal day and for which it would be worth using the stairs.

Given that each sentence in the paragraph specifies what is left ambiguous by the previous one, it is not self-evident that Incongruity Theory can explain these instances according to its own terms. The incongruity becomes apparent if one considers that each clarification does not add much to the previous sentence, but, on the contrary, it actually renders the sentence that precedes it even more obscure. Consider again the following sentence:

(1) Not so Watt, who came down only once a day, when he got up, to begin his day, and only once a day went up, when he lay down, to begin his night.

If the pedantic additions ‘to begin his day’ and ‘to begin his night’ are taken out, the sentence would be perfectly intelligible:

(2) Watt, who came down only once a day, when he got up, and only once a day went up, when he lay down.

Firstly, the two additions are incongruous because they are superfluous; they are supposedly introduced to add information, but they do not really do so. Secondly, they are incongruous because they introduce ambiguity, they obscure rather than clarify. Whilst the meaning of ‘got up’ and ‘lay down’ is quite clear in (2), it is less so in (1). By clarifying what is meant by ‘getting up’ and ‘laying down’ in (1), one is invited also to consider their alternative possible meanings.

Note that these two incongruities are not discussed by Cohn’s grid. They are both dependent on the language acts that the speaker is performing: informing and clarifying. The comic of the passage partly depends on the failure of both these acts.

2.5.1.6 Shock Laughter

Finally, Cohn discusses in the category of ‘comic of language’ instances to which she refers to as ‘shock laughter’ and ‘cruel laughter’. She uses the first term – ‘shock laughter’ – to refer to instances of obscene, disgusting and scatological humour,¹⁵⁴ and she uses the second term – ‘cruel laughter’ – to refer to instances of humour that involve physical violence, pain or tragic situations.¹⁵⁵ As in other occasions, Cohn does not describe what is that makes a passage an instance of ‘shock laughter’ or ‘cruel laughter’.

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 99-100.

¹⁵⁴ See for example Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 38, 39, 61, 91, 109, 127, 131, 146, 147, 175.

¹⁵⁵ See for example *ibid.*, pp. 61, 62, 92, 98, 109, 127, 131, 152-154, 175, 180, 191.

However, by looking at the instances that she selects, it is evident that they are similar insofar as they elicit comic amusement, at least in part, by referring to, and in doing so infringing, 'cultural taboos'.

Although we group these devices under the category of 'comic of language', there is a difference between them and any of the other devices belonging to this category. All of the other devices that are grouped under 'comic of language' are comic due to some linguistic mechanisms. By contrast, devices which are responsible for 'shock laughter' or 'cruel laughter' depend largely on the subject matter of the comic instance. This could be considered a different categorisation of humour instances altogether. One that alongside 'shock laughter' and 'cruel laughter' might list other categories such as 'learned laughter', 'moron jokes', 'racist laughter', and so on. For the sake, of the discussion, we accept that all these other categories could be considered as sub-categories of 'comic of language', and thus be captured by Cohn's analytical grid.

As it is evident from Cohn's analysis, instances that belong to these groups could be found in almost any Beckett's works. As our purpose here is mainly to discuss Cohn's analysis in order to evaluate her analytical grid, it is sufficient that we provide some illustrations to give an idea of what type of instances Cohn's analysis is able to capture.

An example that combines disgusting and obscene laughter is the episode that contains the story of Mrs Nixon's delivery of her child Larry in *Watt*. The representation of child-birth that is offered by this passage contrasts with the respect with which this matter is usually treated. The passage contains several comic elements, and not all of them are of the language type. For example, some comic elements are found in the situation. Mrs Nixon delivered her son during a dinner party she was hosting for her husband and some of his colleagues. Contrary to what one would expect, firstly, Mr Nixon is unaware of Mrs Nixon's pregnancy, and, secondly, Mrs Nixon's main concern when she enters in labour is that of not interrupting and ruining the party. For this reason, she decides to not seek help and to deliver the baby alone, where she cannot be seen or heard.

The first mouthful of duck had barely passed my lips, said Tetty, when Larry leaped in my wom. [...] there were moments, I assure you, when I thought he would tumble out on the floor, at my feet.

Merciful heavens, you felt him slipping, said Mr Hackett.

No trace of this dollar appeared on my face, said Tetty. Did it, my dear?

Not a trace, said Goff.

Nor did my sense of humour desert me. What rolypoly, said Mr Berry, I remember, turning to me with a smile, what delicious rolypoly, it melts in the mouth. Not only in the mouth, sir, I replied, without an instant's hesitation, not only in the mouth, my dear sir. Not too osy with the sweet, I thought.

[...] I went up those stairs, Mr Hackett, said Tetty, on my hands and knees, wringing the carpetrods as though they were made of raffia. [...] Three minutes later I was a mother. [...] I did everything with my own hands, said Tetty, everything.

She severed the cord with her teeth, said Goff, not having a scissors to her hand. What do you think of that?

I would have snapped it across my knee, if necessary, said Tetty.¹⁵⁶

Beyond the incongruities that belong to the situation, other comic elements depend on language. This is for example the case of obscene comparisons (such as referring talking to the labour as leaping or tumbling or slipping), and obscene comments (such as Mrs Nixon's ironic comment on the food melting not only in the mouth). The passage closes on a series of disgusting details about the umbilical cord that Mrs Nixon severs 'with her teeth' and would have 'snapped' with her knees if otherwise necessary. The obscene and disgusting nature of the passage contrasts with, and it is heightened by, the entertained tone of Mr and Mrs Nixon, who present the events in such a way that they appear to be mid-way between heroic gestures and stunts of the young age.

An illustration of scatological humour can be found in the passage below where Mercier and Camier comment on the military decorations of the ranger who has approached them.

Will you look at that clatter of decorations, said Mercier. Do you realize the gallons of diarrhoea that represents? Darkly, said Camier, as only one so costive can.¹⁵⁷

The comic elements of the passage depend on mentioning scatological disorders – 'diarrhoea' and 'costiveness'. The incongruity lies not only in drawing attention to these aspects, but also in describing and evaluating military honours according to these terms. Furthermore, the contrast between costiveness and diarrhoea is comic: Camier is at the same time in the best and worst position to appreciate what Mercier is pointing out, as the adverb 'darkly' aptly suggests. On the one hand, given Camier's costiveness, he cannot know by means of direct experience the value of the decorations; he can know them darkly, i.e. only in an obscure or vague manner. On the other hand, given his costiveness, he is in a good position to appreciate the value of the decorations by means of *via negativa*: he knows the value of the decorations exactly because of the difficulties that he has in evacuating, and perhaps the because of the physical desire of doing so. In this sense he knows them 'darkly': he knows them 'in the dark',¹⁵⁸ because of the absence of experience.

Cohn seems to consider instances of 'cruel laughter' those passages where the comic elements depend on discomfort, pain or violence. For example, she considers an instance of 'comic laughter' the scene in *Watt* where Sam and Watt feed some rats with other animals as well as with members of their families:

But our particular friends were the rats, that dwelt by the stream. They were long and black. We brought them such titbits from our ordinary as rinds of cheese, and morcels of gristle, and we brought them also bird's eggs, and frogs, and fledgelings. Sensible of these attentions, they would come flocking round us at our approach, with every sign of confidence and affection, and glide up our trouserlegs, and hang upon our breasts. And then we would sit down in the midst of them, and give them to eat, out of our hands, of a nice fat frog, or a baby thrush. Or seizing suddenly a

¹⁵⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 8-9.

¹⁵⁷ Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, p. 10.

¹⁵⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, "*Darkly, Adv.*" (Oxford University Press). Perhaps there is also a pun on the colour of the rangers' faecal excretions, if one consider the meaning of 'darkly' when is used as adjective: "dark-looking, somewhat dark". Oxford English Dictionary, "*Darkly, Adj.*" (Oxford University Press).

plump young rat, resting in our bosom after its repast, we would feed it to its mother, or its father, or its brother, or its sister, or to some less fortunate relative.

It was on these occasions, we agreed, after an exchange of views, that we came nearest to God.¹⁵⁹

The situation depicted is, at first, comically disgusting: whilst the tone evokes pastoral images, Sam and Watt are surrounded by rats. The depiction of Watt and Sam's relation to the rats starts positively: they feed them and they receive 'affection' in exchange. However, the situation turns dark and absurd very quickly: Sam and Watt feed rats with member of their own breed, and hence there is no apparent reason for the rats to keep 'flocking' around them. The comic cruelty of the passage partly depends on the contrast between the tone of the description, on the one hand, and the brutality of the scene depicted, on the other. In contrast with the brutality of what depicted, Sam presents the scene by using in a sort of affectionate way and using (the frogs are 'nice' and 'fat', the 'thrush' is a 'baby', the rat is 'plump'). In addition, the comic cruelty of the passage is enhanced by the final comparison. The comparison between Sam and Watt to God is incongruous because it depicts God as cruel and because it invites to consider the fate of human beings as the same of the fate of the rats. The comparison of rats to human beings is further supported by the use of anthropomorphised terms – 'father', 'mother', 'brother', 'sister', 'relative' – to refer to the relation between rats.

'Cruel laughter', according to Cohn, becomes increasingly important as Beckett's writing develops. According to her interpretation, this type of laughter is prominent in the trilogy. In her analysis of the trilogy, Cohn enlarges the category of 'cruel laughter' to include a wider range of instances. According to her reading, the situation of 'I's in the trilogy elicits cruel laughter too: the various comic devices contribute to depict characters, and with them each human being, as victim of 'cosmic irony' and 'cosmological cruelty'.¹⁶⁰ This latter, according to Cohn's reading of Beckett, is the cruelty that human beings experience due to the position that they occupy in the 'cosmos'. Part of what Beckett's works show is that human beings, due to the epistemological tools that they are given, are able to obtain only a limited, subjective and unstable understanding of the reality. This, in addition to the fact that Beckett shows human beings as "compelled to keep trying to know",¹⁶¹ is what constitutes the 'cosmic irony' that Beckett's mature works aim to convey. Human beings are victim insofar as they are not responsible for their condition and they cannot change it, and the humour is cruel as it laughs at this situation.

2.5.2 External Incongruity

Amongst the instances that Cohn lists under the category of 'comic of language', there are some where the comic incongruity is external to the text: it lies between what is written in Beckett's texts and something outside them, such as other texts or utterances, other authors' styles or novels, or social

¹⁵⁹ Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 133-134.

¹⁶⁰ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 152.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

groups.¹⁶² This is the case, for example, of literary and biblical misquotations or reminders¹⁶³ as well as instances of hidden proverbs and variation on cliché.¹⁶⁴ These are cases where sentences or phrases in one of Beckett's works alter sentences or phrases which are either written in other texts or commonly spoken.

The device that Cohn labels as 'fiction of fictions' works in a similar way to those just mentioned. With this label Cohn refers to those passages which mention characters that have appeared in other works by Beckett: Belacqua recurs in several of Beckett's works, Watt appears and plays a role in *Mercier and Camier*,¹⁶⁵ whereas Molloy,¹⁶⁶ Malone¹⁶⁷ and the voice of *The Unnamable*¹⁶⁸ often mention their predecessors.¹⁶⁹ Though Cohn considers 'fiction of fictions' as a comic device, she does not say what is comic about this. Whilst we do not intend to claim that references to other works are always comic in Beckett, understanding what could make them comic is nevertheless interesting as it provides some insight into the consequent interpretation of humour. Mentioning characters could be considered as comic if one views it as a Beckett's ironic gesture. On the one hand, only those familiar with Beckett's other works would understand the reference. The comic element would lie then in Beckett's play with hidden references. On the other hand, when this device is used in works which are focused on the practice of writing or narrating, the mention of other works could be considered as Beckett ironically linking the struggle of the characters with his own. Furthermore, the mentioning of characters from

¹⁶² For a discussion of the significance of inter-textual references in Beckett's works see Campbell, 'Moran as Secret Agent' See also Rubin Rabinovitz, 'Samuel Beckett's Revised Aphorisms', *Contemporary Literature*, 36/2 (1995), pp. 203-225.

¹⁶³ Cohn individuates and reports many of the above mentioned instances (unfortunately, she rarely provides the original reference that Beckett is misquoting). She points out, for example, that in *Murphy*, Marlowe's "infinite reaches in a little room" becomes "Infinite reaches in a w.c.", Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 135. For a more detailed description of the misquotations see also Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated 'Murphy'*, p. 179. For this and other literary misquotations see for example Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 26,51, 52,76, 136.

With regard to biblical misquotation and reminders, for example, Cohn notes that *Murphy*'s incipit is an example of biblical reminder – "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new" – which parallels the biblical: "there is no new thing under the sun". See Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 3. For a full articulation of the reminder see Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated 'Murphy'*, p. 28. For this and other biblical reminders or misquotations see Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 26, 52, 76, 134, 135, 174.

Cohn notes the presence of literary reminders in other aspects of stories and characters. For example, reminders about Descartes' life and habits are sometimes transferred to some of Beckett's characters. Murphy's room and stove remind, according to Cohn, Descartes' ones. For this and other learned reminders see for example, *ibid.*, pp. 50, 59, 186.

For a reflection on the significance of the pervasive presence of learned references in Beckett's early prose and on the development of his mature writing style, see S. E. Gontarski, 'Style and the Man: Samuel Beckett and the Art of Pastiche', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 12 (2002), pp. 11-20.

¹⁶⁴ The following is an example of twisted cliché that Cohn individuates: "It was like looking for a needle in a haystack full of vipers" Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 74. For this and other cliché and hidden proverbs reported by Cohn see Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 27, 51, 77, 134-136, 174, 186.

For a discussion of Beckett's use of cliché, as re-vitalisation of a language that 'went dead', see Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures 1990*, pp. 62-89.

For a discussion of Beckett's use of cliché as a way to investigate and resist different type of authority see Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (Basingstoke Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2006).

¹⁶⁵ Beyond the appearance of Watt, *Mercier and Camier* contains also the reference to another of Beckett's main characters, Murphy. See Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, p. 91. For comments on the relation and possible significance of the recurrence of these characters see Mark Byron, 'The Ecstasy of "Watt"', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 14 (2004), pp. 495-506.

¹⁶⁶ Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 143, 176.

¹⁶⁷ For example, there are implicit references to Watt and Molloy, see Beckett, *Malone Dies*, pp. 4, 7.

¹⁶⁸ Several mentions, for example, in Beckett, *The Unnamable*, pp. 1-16.

¹⁶⁹ For a quick overview of cross-citations in Beckett's prose, see Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, pp. 63-64.

other works can be seen, as has been read, as a way to mock the idea of a coherent canon of works. The constant return of characters would suggest coherence where there is none.¹⁷⁰

2.5.2.1 Parody and Social Satire

Amongst the devices that belong to the category of ‘comic of language’, Cohn discusses instances of literary parody and social satire. Both devices depend on a comparison with something external to the work where they occur (e.g. another literary work or style for parody, and some social group for social satire), and, similar to caricatures, they are both very often built on other comic devices. For example, some of the caricatures we analysed depend on exaggeration: certain elements are amplified to create a caricaturised representation of a subject. In a similar manner, parodies and social satires use comic devices to stress some features of the subject of the parody or the satire.

Cohn’s analysis finds social satire in *More Pricks than Kicks* (mainly in ‘A Wet Night’, and ‘What a Misfortune’),¹⁷¹ in *Watt* (for example, in the dialogue between Mr Hackett and Mr and Mrs Nixon, and in the description of the Lynch family),¹⁷² and in the novels of the trilogy (for example, in the dialogues between Molloy and the policeman, between Mahood’s family members, between Worm and his caretaker).¹⁷³ Looking at a passage provides insight on how social satire works. Whilst Cohn does not quote any specific passage, we consider the passage below an illustration of what Cohn claims to be the nature of the social satire in ‘What a Misfortune’. She claims that ‘What a Misfortune’ “is primarily social satire” where, by contrast to stories such as ‘A Wet Night’, “the milieu has been moved from the intellectual-arty set to the Irish Protestant bourgeoisie, whose money originates in toilet requisites”.¹⁷⁴ The passage below nicely illustrates the social satire of bourgeoisie:

The one ground lay under Mr bogg’s contempt for Belacqua and Thelma’s consent to be his bride: he was a poet. A poet is indeed a very nubile creature, dowered, don’t you know, with the love of love, like La Rochefoucauld’s woman from her second passion on. So nubile that the women, God bless them, can’t resist them, God help them.¹⁷⁵

A social satire is such that some features of a certain class, or of those belonging to that class, are made evident, often by using other comic devices.¹⁷⁶ The passage above stresses in particular the relationship, or perhaps the lack of relationship, between bourgeoisie and poetry. Bourgeois are depicted as contemptuous towards and fearful of (or perhaps contemptuous because fearful of) the figure of the poet. The difficulty of the bourgeoisie to come to terms with the figure of the poet is illustrated by using

¹⁷⁰ This is for example, H. Porter Abbott’s reading, who sees this in place throughout Beckett’s corpus of works as well as in *More Pricks than Kicks* where the cross references mock coherent novel. Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, pp. 21-22 and fn 3 at p. 156.

¹⁷¹ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 19-20, 23.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, pp. 86, 91.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

¹⁷⁵ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 112.

¹⁷⁶ Despite the fact that Cohn does not articulate her comments on the instances of social satire that she individuates, she often points out the connection between social satire and other comic devices. See for example, Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 23, 86, 91.

the term ‘creature’ to refer to the poet. This term has indeed different possible connotations, which, once unpacked, explain Mr bbog’s attitude and feelings towards poets. A ‘creature’ can be admirable, or can be despicable; a ‘creature’ can be elevated or can be a beast; a ‘creature’ can be super-human or sub-human. In any case, a ‘creature’ is not part of the community of human beings. And indeed poets have special features: they are created ‘very nubile’, but that at the same time they are ‘dowered’ with the ‘love of love’.¹⁷⁷ Their sexual and gender identity is difficult to pin down. The poet is ‘nubile’, term that refers to individuals who are sexually mature and, hence, in the age of marriage, but that is customarily used to refer to women. The poet is not simply ‘nubile’, on the contrary, the poet is a creature ‘very nubile’: truly nubile, nubile in the most appropriate way. And indeed the poet is ‘dowered’ with the ‘love of love’: the poet does not deal with mundane emotions, the poet loves love. However, the fact that the poet is ‘very nubile’, makes him ‘so nubile’, that women cannot resist them, ‘God bless them’. But ‘God help them’, they are doomed to suffer: they strive for a creature who is sexually attractive beyond resistance, but who is only interested in the ‘love of love’. The use of jargon and repetitions (‘God help them’, ‘God bless them’), of hyperbole (‘very nubile’) and of ambiguous terms (nubile, creature) contribute to the comedy of the passage as well as to presenting Mr bbogg’s as belonging to a specific social group. The tirade sounds as learned by heart or as echoing the popular sentiment.

Parody is similar to social satire in depending on other comic devices. For example, according to Cohn, the passage below, “parodies the omniscience of the Victorian author making free use of hyperbole, litotes, jargon, and involved syntax”.¹⁷⁸ Although Cohn does not say more than this on what makes this passage a parody, there are several elements that supports her reading:

When we say a girl of substance we mean that her promissory wad, to judge by her father’s bearing in general and in particular by his respiration after song, was, so to speak, short-dated. To deny that Belacqua was alive to this circumstance would be to present him as an even greater imbecile than he was when it came to seeing the obvious; whereas to suggest that it was implied, however slightly, in his brusque obsession with the beneficiary to be, would constitute such an obloquy as we do not much care to deal in. Let us therefore put forth a minimum of charity and observe in a casual way, with eyes cast down and head averted until the phrase has ceased to vibrate, that he happened to conceive one of his Olympian fancies for a fairly young person with expectations. We can’t straddle the fence nicer than that.¹⁷⁹

The passage contains an apparent contrast in registers and jargon, uncommon words as ‘respiration; contrasts with the colloquial and explicit ‘imbecile’, for example. Similarly, the detached analytical tone of the first sentence, where the narrator spends words to explain why and how he used a certain

¹⁷⁷ The use of terms that are customarily used in relation to women, such as ‘nubile’ or ‘dowered’, probably depends also on the reference to La Rochefoucauld’s poem that describes two objects of women’s love. Firstly, they love their lovers, and secondly their second passion is the love of love. See Pilling, *Samuel Beckett’s ‘More Pricks Than Kicks’: In a Strait of Two Wills*, p. 192.

¹⁷⁸ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 34.

¹⁷⁹ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 111 Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 34. For other example of parodies mentioned by Cohn see *ibid.*, pp. 31-34, 55, 83-85, 105, and the pages on the trilogy 114-168.

phrase, contrasts with the quick and abrupt dismissal of the discussion of Belacqua's feelings by saying that 'we do not much care to deal in'.

The privileged view that the omniscient narrator enjoys is here stressed and distorted by using litotes – 'to deny that', 'to suggest that' – that, whilst normally used to express something cautiously, they reveal more than what they conceal: that Thelma short-dated 'promissory wad' might have played an important role in Belacqua's decision to marry her. A similar role is played by the 'involved syntax', as Cohn defines it, such as in the intricate sentence that starts with the first litotes 'to deny that'. Although the narrator asserts that he does not want to present Belacqua as 'an even greater imbecile than he was', he manages to present Belacqua as, at least, quite a good one: he reveals that Belacqua's imbecility manifests when he is face to face with the obvious.

The omniscient narrator plays the know-it-all role. However, he is a know-it-all of the lazy kind. The narrator indeed, as the contrast between registers emphasises, decides to 'straddle the fence', not because he wants to be as faithful as possible in narrating what happened and in reporting Belacqua's feelings, but because he does not 'much care to deal in' Belacqua's putative 'obloquy'. Thus, he does not use the litotes to be cautious around the subject and as an attempt to not tone down some judgements. On the contrary, he does use the litotes to avoid talking about the subject matter, to not deal with the issue.

By describing the passage above as a parody, we have pointed out some of its comic elements. However, this description does not capture all the significant comic elements. This becomes evident if one considers the elements that are brought to the attention of the reader. Some of the comic elements of the passage highlight features of Belacqua: his skills, attitudes, and behaviour. Other comic elements highlight the nature of the narrator: he is an omniscient narrator, but not a very well-disposed one. It is true that this last contrast can be described by comparing the narrator to a traditional omniscient narrator. But the contrast is brought to our attention in the language acts that the narrator is performing: the contrast between concealing and revealing, and between informing and not being willing to inform. If the passage is merely described as a parody of the omniscient narrator, and hence as a comic comparison to a narrator who knows it all and is willing to narrate it all, the play between the language acts risk to be overlooked; and, what is more important, the role that this play has in the text is overlooked. This play does not merely contribute to building a parody of the omniscient narrator, he draws our attention to the source of narration and process of narration.

Cohn seems to recognise the presence of the mechanisms that we are pointing out when, in referring to the last sentence of the passage ('We can't straddle the fence nicer than that'), she notices that "the short parenthetical concluding sentence heightens the ludicrousness of the elaborate parody".¹⁸⁰ According

¹⁸⁰ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 34.

to Cohn, the last parenthetical comment adds to the comic tone of the passage. Although she does not explain why this is the case, something can be said by looking at the sentence that she singles out. This is a sentence where the narrator interrupts the narration of the plot, and comments on the performance of the narration: he could not do any better or be any nicer. This comment explicitly does what the other contrasts between language acts do implicitly: draw attention to the acts performed by the narrator. The comic elements that derives from these contrasts as well from the presence of comments such as those of the narrator does not seem to be fully captured by Cohn's analytical grid.

To credit Cohn, there is a device, 'parenthetical intrusions', that she lists under the category of 'comic of language' that we have yet to discuss, and it is to this device that her last comment quoted refers. We shall discuss this device in detail in the next chapter, and the discussion will take us to describe what we have presented several times in this chapter as 'comic of language act'. Although Cohn individuates a device that seems to take in account the contrast between acts that narrators perform in speaking, she does not discuss this device in these terms. Moreover, as we have pointed out more time by time in this chapter, the 'comic of language acts' can take different forms, and it is not limited to a single device.

2.5.3. Parenthetical Intrusions

Cohn explicitly refers to the comic device which she calls 'parenthetical intrusions' when she discusses early works such as *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy*.¹⁸¹ She does not provide a description of 'parenthetical intrusions' which might explain which elements make the passages that she lists comic and how the comic elements of the passages are connected with the fact that they are instances of intrusion. One of the aims of this section is to compensate for this and to provide a description of the instances that Cohn individuates.

A satisfying account of these instances is one that explains what makes these instances comic as intrusions. Given that an act of intrusion is an act of breaking or thrusting in, and as such it is an act that involves someone or something entering a space (physical or figurative) without being asked or allowed, a satisfying account of these instances is one which describes the comic elements as depending on the act of intrusion as described.

The sentences emphasised in bold in the passages below are those that Cohn offers as illustrations of 'parenthetical intrusion'.¹⁸² They are respectively quoted from *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy*. In the first passage, the intrusion consists in the interruption of the narration for providing the definitions

¹⁸¹ The discussion of later works hints to the fact that some instances found in those works use this device, though Cohn does not use the specific label (or any other, for that matter) to talk about them. As all what we want to do now is to show that this device puts pressure on the distinction proposed so far and suggesting a possible way out of this problem, we shall concentrate on the instances of this device that she individuates in Beckett's early works. We do not discuss whether the same device is present in late Beckett's texts or not.

¹⁸² Cohn quotes only the sentences in bold in her study, however, we decided to quote the context in which the sentences occur. This facilitates the discussion of these sentences as intrusions. See Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 35, 60.

of the terms 'rosiner' and 'gloria'. In the second passage, the intrusion consists of the interruption of the narration to explain the choice of choosing the term 'music':

Mrs Tough was used to the whims of Ruby and took them philosophically usually. But this latest fancy was really a little bit too unheard of. Coffee in the lav! What would father say when he heard? However.

'And the rosiner' said Mrs Tough, 'will you have that in the lav too?'

Reader, a rosiner is a drop of the hard.

Ruby rose and took a gulp of coffee to make room.

'I'll have a gloria' she said.

Reader, a gloria is coffee laced with brandy.

Mrs Tough poured into the proffered cup a smaller portion of brandy than in the ordinary way she would have allowed, and Ruby left the room.¹⁸³

Celia said that if he did not find work at once she would have to go back to hers. Murphy knew what that meant. No more music.

This phrase is chosen with care, lest filthy censors should lack an occasion to commit their filthy synecdoche.

Goaded by the thought of losing Celia even were it only by night (for she had promised not to 'leave' him any more), Murphy applied at a chandlery in Gray's Inn Road for the position of smart boy, fingering his lemon bow nervously.¹⁸⁴

Let us first examine these passages with the tools that Cohn's analysis has given us so far. These passages contain several incongruities that can be captured by the analytical grid and the catalogue of instances offered by Cohn, giving testimony and evidence to the wide breath of her grid and richness of her catalogue of instances. This enables us to unpack the different layers of comic elements and to remove from consideration comic incongruities that are not connected with the fact that these are instances of intrusions. We shall thus circumscribe the area on which we must focus in order to provide a satisfying description of these passages.

Both passages contain comic devices that belong to the category of 'comic of language'. In the first passage, the comic repetition is apparent: the word 'reader' occurs twice in a short span of space and the construction of the two intrusive sentences is identical ('*reader*, a rosiner is a drop of the hard', '*reader*, a Gloria is coffee laced with brandy'). In the second passage, the use of learned jargon enhances the comic tone: terms such as 'synecdoche' or 'lest' seem to belong to a different register than that used in the previous passage.¹⁸⁵

Moreover, in the second passage, there are incongruities that belong to the category of 'comic of character'. Firstly, the characterisation of censors and their acts as filthy ('*filthy censors*', '*filthy synecdoche*') contrasts with what censors take themselves to do, i.e. a process of moral cleansing.

¹⁸³ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 80.

¹⁸⁴ Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 50.

¹⁸⁵ There is a less apparent incongruity belonging to this group. The choice of using the word synecdoche to indicate censure could be seen as ironical. Using 'synecdoche' for 'censure' is a metasememes, the same type of rhetorical figures of synecdoche. Thus, the accusation of performing synecdoche is carried out by performing an action which resembles very closely a synecdoche.

Secondly, the role of the censors is comically compared with that of the authors when the actions of the censors are described as ‘synecdoche’, that is with a rhetorical tool typically used by literary authors (‘This phrase is chosen with care, lest filthy censors should lack an occasion to commit their *filthy synecdoche*). Thirdly, the role of the author is comically inverted with that of the censors. The intrusion (‘This phrase is chosen with care...’) refers back to the sentence that immediately precedes it (‘No more music’) and reveals that the term ‘music’ is chosen to avoid censorship. From the context, it is clear that ‘music’ is chosen to substitute ‘sex’. Hence the author plays the role of the censor insofar as he performs actions that are typical of censors: the author performs self-censorship by using ‘music’ for ‘sex’, but also by using ‘synecdoche’ for indicating the actions that censors perform.

None of the incongruities individuated so far, however, are connected with the fact that these are instances of intrusion. The incongruities that we have individuated show that some elements of the language used in the intrusion are comic (repetition and jargon) and some elements connected with the images that the second intrusion provide are comic (inversion of the role between authors and censors). Yet, they do not explain what is comic about intrusions in and of itself.

The first step in offering a description of the comic elements which are specific to parenthetical intrusions is to understand how these passages can be said to contain intrusions. We can preliminarily distinguish between two ways in which intrusions can occur in a narrative. On the one hand, there are intrusions which are part of the events that are narrated in a plot. In this case, characters or objects intrude into or onto something and the intrusion is one of the many events that are narrated in the story. On the other hand, there are intrusions that occur at the level of narration. In this second case, it is the narrative voice which is intruded on. The passages selected by Cohn belong to this second group of intrusions.

To see the difference between the two levels of intrusion, consider the following passage from ‘Dante and the Lobster, where Mll Glain intrudes into Belacqua’s Italian lesson:

A knuckle tambourined on the door, it flew open and lo it was Mll Glain, the French instructress, clutching her cat, her eyes on stalks, in a state of greatest agitation
‘Oh’ she gasped’ forgive me. I intrude, but what was in the bag?’¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 12 The passage below, from *Eleuthéria* is an example of an intrusion in a performative work and it offers also an example of a more abrupt intrusion.

VICTOR Don’t you be concerning yourself about my father

GLAZIER (Rubbing his hands) Ah, that’s how we’ll get him!

AUDIENCE MEMBER (Standing up in a stage-box) Stop! (he straddles stiffly the side of the stage-box and comes down cautiously toward the bed) I am sorry for this intrusion.

GLAZIER You’ve been elected?

AUDIENCE MEMBER No, not precisely. But I’ve been at the bar, in the lobby, and I have been chatting with relatives, friends. I even came across a critic, at the first intermission.

Samuel Beckett, *Eleuthéria : A Play in Three Acts*, trans. Michael Brodsky (New York: Foxrock, Inc, 1995), pp. 135-136

The audience member enters onto the stage without being expected and interrupts the continuation of the story.

Mill Glain's intrusion into the room is connected with the other events that are narrated and that involves the characters of 'Dante and the Lobster'. The intrusion is inserted in a chain of events that had happened in the story: Belacqua had left a package with the lobster that he had just bought from the fishmonger in the hall of the school; Mill Glain had stopped a cat that tried to get to the package and decided to intrude onto the lesson to enquire about the contents of it: as a consequence of the intrusion, a conversation starts between Belacqua, Mill Glain and Belacqua's Italian teacher, the Ottolenghi. The intrusion is thus one amongst the events that are narrated and that form the plot of the story.

Contrast the passage from 'Dante and the Lobster' with the two instances of 'parenthetical intrusion' offered by Cohn. Cohn's examples of intrusions are not excerpts where the narrative is about an intrusion: the narrators are not reporting the fact that an act of intrusion took place. In the first passage the narrator provides definitions for the terms 'rosiner' and 'gloria', and, in the second passage, the narrator explains the reason behind the choice of the word 'music'. These intrusions are of the second type: they intrude on the narrative voice interrupting it.

Before continuing with our discussion, we want to stress that this distinction is only preliminary and it is kept in place insofar as it enables the examination of the elements that make 'parenthetical intrusions' comic. The difference between these two types of intrusions, however, is not as clear cut as presented, particularly given that Beckett often intentionally puts it into question. There are episodes where intrusions that appear to occur in the sequences of events are such that could be equally read as intrusions on to the narration.¹⁸⁷ Then again, there are episodes where intrusions which appear to be intrusions on to the narration could equally be intrusions in to the sequence of events.¹⁸⁸

Note that the instances of 'intrusion' that we are analysing are not cases of mere interruption of narrative either. A narrative could be interrupted without there being any intrusion, but only absence of narrative. This is the case, for example, in *Malone Dies*, where the narrative is interrupted when Malone, who writes and narrates the story, loses his pencil. Between the two strands of the narration however nothing else takes place - at least at the level of the narration:¹⁸⁹ the narrative voice is not intruded on, is only interrupted. By contrast, the instances of intrusion onto the narration analysed so far consists of utterances that intrude, interrupt and take place between two strands of narration. In the first passage taken as illustration of 'parenthetical intrusion', the narration of the events is interrupted and the

¹⁸⁷ For example, the comments on the arrival of "the first of a long line of maleficent beings" (8), the officer, in *Mercier and Camier*. The intrusion of the ranger happens at the level of the sequence of the events, but Mercier and Camier's remarks on it could be equally seen as metanarrative and as entering in a dialogue with the narrator: "We could have done without this [...] Can it I wonder be the fillip we needed, to get us moving?". Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, p. 9.

¹⁸⁸ For example, in 'Fingal' the exclamation 'Winnie take thought!' appears to intrude on the narration of the events. However, the status of this intrusion is put in question by Belacqua's words: "'I see' he said 'you take thought. Shall we execute a contract?'". They are so similar to the exclamation, that one wonders if the intrusion has happened at the level of the events. Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 19.

¹⁸⁹ That nothing takes place at the level of narration does not equal to say that nothing takes place at the level of the events. On the contrary, much happened - "two unforgettable days", as Malone says - while the narration was interrupted. We are just not told about it. See Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 49 .

definition of the terms ‘rosiner’ and ‘gloria’ are provided. In the second passage, the narration of the sequence of events is interrupted and some remarks on the use of the term ‘music’ are made. After both these intrusions, the narration of the events resumes and continues from where it was interrupted.

So far, we have described the instances of intrusion by pointing out which elements are intruded on: either the sequence of events, or the narration of the events. Another possible way to describe these instances is to describe who or what is the intruder. The passage taken from ‘Dante and the Lobster’, where the intrusion takes place at the level of the events, states explicitly who is the intruder: Mll Glain enters into Belacqua’s Italian lesson by saying ‘I intrude’. By contrast, there is no indication of *who* is intruding onto the narrative voice in the two passages that Cohn considers instances of ‘parenthetical intrusions’.

Different interpretations have been offered by scholars on this matter. Ruby Cohn¹⁹⁰ and H. Porter Abbott,¹⁹¹ for example, identify the intruder’s voice with Beckett’s own voice. By contrast, John Pilling claims that, in *More Pricks than Kicks*, in the instance quoted as well as other similar instances, “the omniscient narrator interrupts any continuum which might threaten to take over”.¹⁹² Thus, according to this second reading, it is the narrator who interrupts the narration and provides definition or explications in the two passages quoted. Far from aiming to settle the debate between these two interpretations, in Chapter 4 we shall provide additional and complementary interpretation of these intrusions, and claim the ambiguity between voices as one of the comic elements of the passage. For now, it suffices that the description that we shall offer of the comic elements specific to the intrusions can take into account any of these interpretations.

There is a further way in which the intrusion can be described and which does not require us to decide *who* is the intruder. The intrusions can be described by looking at *which acts* constitute the intrusion. In describing the two selected ‘parenthetical intrusion’, we said that the narration is interrupted and intruded on by sentences that define terms, in the first passage, and explain the use of some words, in the second passage. In both cases there is sudden change from reporting acts about the sequence of events to defining and explain terms that are used in the narration. The narration, after the two intrusions, goes back to performing the act of reporting the events. The intrusion, in these two instances, could be

¹⁹⁰ Intrusions in *More Pricks than Kicks* differ, in Cohn’s analysis, to that in *Murphy* for the relation that they hold with Beckett. In *Murphy* according to Cohn “Beckett intrudes in *propria persona*”, Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 59. By contrast, in *More Pricks than Kicks*, according to Cohn, Beckett intrudes in the texts but his comments should not be taken at face value, *ibid.*, p. 34. The only exception seems to be the final ‘it is not’ of ‘Dante and the Lobster’, given that Cohn considers it as Beckett’s own expression of his own view, *ibid.*, p. 36.

It is important for Cohn to point out that some of Beckett’s intrusions should not be taken at face value. Her main aim is that of offering an interpretation of Beckett’s works, of their meaning and of the role that humour plays in it. In order to do so, she often refers to what she takes to be Beckett’s position on certain themes and she often tries to evince it from his texts: she does not only comments on whether we hear Beckett’s voice, she also comments on whether or not Beckett means what he says.

¹⁹¹ Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, p. 31.

¹⁹² Pilling, *Beckett before Godot*, p. 103. Pilling seems to have a slightly different position in his earlier study of Beckett’s works. Whilst he maintains that it is not simply Beckett himself that participates to the narrative, he suggests that might be a projection of Beckett, an implied author or second-self. See Pilling, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 40.

captured by pointing out that the act of defining, in the first case, and of explaining, in the second case, intrudes on the act of reporting.

Now that we have put on the table some elements that help to illuminate what makes the instances chosen by Cohn instances of intrusions, we shall now look at what makes those instances comic.

The key to understand what makes this intrusion comic as intrusion lies in the descriptions that we have provided. Both passages include a comic use of intrusions that depend on the *abrupt*, and *unexpected* change of acts performed. Both passages contain an abrupt and unexpected shift from the act of narrating to the act of defining or explaining. Whilst the act of narrating is about the sequences of the events that take place, the other two acts are about elements of the narration: about words that the narrator has chosen ('rosiner', 'gloria', 'music'). The passage from an act to the other leads thus to a swift change of focus: the attention of the reader is swiftly moved from the story to the words used to narrate.

The intrusions can be described also as an abrupt and unexpected change in voice. If one agrees with Cohn and Abbott, part of the comic tone of the passage depends on the intrusion of Beckett's voice into the novel. The unexpected intrusion of an external voice onto the narrative voice is what would then elicit comic amusement. If, by contrast, one agrees with Pilling, and identifies the intruder's voice with that of the narrator, then one can see the narrator switching between two different narrative voices. The narrator abruptly switches from the external and detached voice used to describe the sequences of events, to the direct voice used to define and explain the words.

Describing these passages in terms of acts performed also enables us to capture a further type of incongruity. In both passages there is a discrepancy between what the intrusions appear to purport to do and what they really succeed in doing. In the first passage, the intrusion allegedly provides a definition of the terms 'rosiner' and 'gloria' to facilitate the understanding of the episode that contains these terms. The fact that the readers is directly called upon ('Reader...') further stresses the importance to make sure that those terms are clear to anyone reading the text. However, the abruptness of the intrusion and the insistence on the reader achieve a result that pulls in the opposite direction of that wished. The reader's attention is called onto the voice who is speaking and onto the terms used to narrate the story, losing the focus of the story.

Similar considerations can be made for the second passage where the act performed by the intrusion seems to achieve results which go in the opposite direction of those allegedly wished. By explaining that the word 'music' stands for something illicit, the narrator makes sure that the reader has understood the euphemism and calls the attention to it a second time. Whilst the word 'music' was chosen to avoid censorship, calling attention to it and presenting it as something illicit contributes to perhaps an even more intense arousal of the imagination.

The comic elements that depend on the fact that these passages contain intrusions cannot be captured by Cohn's analytical grid. The description of these comic elements is not complete unless the acts performed by the speaking voice are taken into account.

Part 1 Conclusion

Part 1 of this thesis has introduced and discussed two views, Incongruity Theory and Cohn's textual account of Beckett's humour, which occupy a central position in their respective fields.

Chapter 1 has introduced and discussed the Incongruity Theory of humour, by comparing and contrasting it with other available theories. It presented and discussed the main criticisms moved to the theory and the answers that have been offered to those criticisms. In so doing, Incongruity Theory proved to be a strong candidate in offering an account of humour. Despite this, we noticed that at least one of the criticisms still had some force. The vagueness of the notion of *incongruity* represents a potential problem to the theory, that must prove that the notion is not vague by showing the explicatory power of it. We thus decided to put the theory to the test in Chapter 2 to see whether the notion of *incongruity* can be used fruitfully in approaching instances of humour.

Chapter 2 conducted a discussion that was driven by two main aims. Firstly, the chapter put Incongruity Theory to the test by challenging it with a range of instances of various complexities. Secondly, the chapter presented a critical discussion of a seminal textual account of Beckett's humour. The co-presence of these two strands of discussion proved to be fundamental for the successful achievement of the aims. The outcome would not have been as positive, if the two discussions were carried out separately. Indeed, although both Chapter 1 and Chapter 2 place philosophy and literature one on the side of the other, this juxtaposition proves to be particularly fruitful in Chapter 2, where the two disciplines are used to inform each other. Whilst in Chapter 1 literature is used as merely a source of illustration for philosophy, in Chapter 2 the literary discussion enables philosophical theory to effectively counter criticisms and make new points.

Thus, the discussion of Incongruity Theory offered in Chapter 2 is fruitful mainly because the theory is challenged with complex instances which require an attunement to literary discussion to be unpacked. For example, we have shown that the standard answer that Incongruity Theory provides for counter-examples where the comic elements appear to be based on *congruity* (such as caricatures, repetitions, mathematical series) is satisfying only for simple comic instances. Philosophers often prefer to resort to illustrations that are simple because it is in virtue of their simplicity that these instances can be used to isolate single and specific features. For instance, simple caricatures based only on the amplification of features can easily and vividly show where the comic incongruity lies. However, answers that are based on simple illustrations are not always satisfying, and we have shown situations in which this is the case. When faced with a complex case the standard answer that Incongruity Theory offers to the counter-examples proved to be unsatisfactory. We decided to not turn away from the complexity, on the contrary, we delved into the complexity of the comic instances to find a satisfying answer. The philosophical discussion of Incongruity Theory has thus benefitted from the literary discussion.

On the other hand, the critical discussion of Cohn's account of humour has been particularly fruitful because it was approached with the philosophical tools provided by Incongruity Theory. This approach has given us the opportunity to present the richness and the breath of Cohn's account by showing the large range of comic instances that she individuates as well as the variety of discussions and considerations that are prompted by it. More importantly for our discussion, by looking at the elements illuminated by Incongruity Theory, we could point out a gap in Cohn's account: we showed that there are comic elements that Cohn's textual reading of Beckett's humour does not capture.

The discussion of Part 1 leaves us with tools to use in Part 2 as well as with some gaps to be filled in. Firstly, Cohn's account of humour has identified pivotal loci of incongruity (situation, character, language) and has circumscribed important areas of discussion. However, many of the analyses that we have carried out in Chapter 2 have shown that Cohn's account has overlooked at least one locus of comic incongruity, the incongruity which depends on the actions performed by the speakers in speaking. Secondly, Incongruity Theory has proved to be a strong theory and the notion of *incongruity* proved to have explicatory power. However, in Chapter 1 we have identified a further problem of the theory, the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions, which we have set aside by accepting some stipulations. Despite the strategy that we have taken, this problem remains a cause for concern.

Several questions arise from these gaps and it will be our occupation in Part 2 that of addressing these questions. The gap left by Cohn's analyses leads to two questions: (a) how can the comic incongruities that are dependent on the acts performed in speaking be captured? And (b) does capturing these comic incongruities offer any insight in Beckett's texts?

The first of these questions, question (a), will be addressed in Chapter 3 by making use of Austin's Theory of Speech Acts, that is, a philosophical theory specifically interested with the acts performed by speakers in speaking and with the situation in which their performance is incongruous. Thus, in Chapter 3, we develop a set of tools to capture comic incongruities dependent on speech acts. This approach constitutes an original contribution to the field of humour studies as well as to the field of Beckett's studies. On the one hand, comic instances are rarely studied in terms of Speech Acts in humour studies. On the other hand, whilst the importance of both comic devices in Beckett's work and Beckett's interest with what is done with language has often been highlighted, these two elements have not been brought together before.

Question (b) will be addressed by looking at short passages taken from Beckett's texts (Chapter 3) as well as at longer and more complex passages or sections of texts (Chapter 4). Part 2 answers the question (b) positively (i.e. that capturing comic incongruities dependent on speech acts offer some, and indeed significant, insight in Beckett's texts) in two different steps. In the first instance, Part 2 answers positively by unpacking and describing a layer of comic devices that are frequent in Beckett's texts (Chapter 3). In the second instance, Part 2 answers positively by capturing pivotal elements of key

Beckett's texts (i.e. what in Chapter 4 we will describe as 'Twists', 'Convolutions' and 'Oscillations'). In providing these positive answers, Part 2 contributes originally to the scholarship. At the very least, Part 2 contributes to it by adding new elements to the catalogue of devices found in Beckett's works. Moreover, Part 2 individuates and describes three pivotal devices of Beckett's texts ('Twists', 'Convolutions' and 'Oscillations') which have not been presented under this light before and thus offering new perspectives to the wider debate in Beckett's studies. Finally, Part 2 indicates a new critical angle from which approaching Beckett's interest with language as well as what Beckett does with his own language: Beckett's interest with language performativity can be studied in terms of illocutionary acts.

Part 2 does not aim to fill the second gap individuated, which is to solve Problem of Non-humorous Reactions. Nonetheless, it will address at least one of the questions that arise from it. The first step to solve the problem is indeed to ask (c) what directions could be taken to investigate the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions. This question will be addressed by comparing passages which contain similar incongruities but that result in different reactions which not always are of comic amusement. In doing so, Part 2 indicates a possible and original avenue that can be further investigated by studies willing to solve this problem (Chapter 3).

PART 2

Chapter 3: The Comic of Language Acts: Beckett's Collection of Infelicities

3.1 Introduction

The discussion conducted in Part 1 has pointed out that Cohn's approach to Beckett's humour, despite the wide breath of instances that it can account for, is not able to account for some aspects of the comic instances which have been analysed. In particular, several of the analyses made in Chapter 2 have shown that Cohn's analytical approach does not capture comic elements that are dependent on the speech acts performed by the speakers (very often the narrator) with their words or in speaking.

Two of the aims of this chapter are (i) (at least in part) filling the gap left by Cohn's analysis (ii) by developing an approach to Beckett's works which can capture and illuminate the comic elements that depend on the speech acts performed by the speakers in speaking. The development of this approach requires an investigation that attunes literary analysis and philosophical discussion.

On the one hand, the discussion carried out in this chapter starts from the literary analysis of Beckett's texts to illuminate a comic layer of Beckett's writing previously overlooked. The discussion then is of literary nature insofar it starts from - and develops inside - the reading of Beckett's works in order to achieve a better grasp of features of their writing. Accordingly, this chapter aims also to analyse Beckett's works in order to (iii) draw attention onto the presence of comic devices related to the speech acts by (iv) showing several typologies of these devices.

On the other hand, the literary analysis of the comic instances related to the speech acts is refined and informed by some philosophical discussions. In particular, given the nature of the elements that we choose to illuminate, we resort to Austin's Theory of Speech Acts, which is a philosophical theory interested precisely in the speech acts performed in speaking and in a specific kind of incongruities ('infelicities' in Austin's terminology) which is related to the performance of these acts.

Beyond the nature of the elements highlighted in the analysis carried out in Chapter 2, there are other reasons that support the decision to make use of Austin's theory in this chapter, and which are rooted in both the disciplines (philosophy and literary criticism) involved in the discussion of this thesis.

The first of these reasons - which is of literary nature - is sited in Beckett's own fascination with what is done with words. Beckett's fascination with this aspect of language is at the forefront since his early writing on Joyce's *Work in Progress*, where he starts by laying out the risk that any piece of literary criticisms, and indeed any reading of a literary work, potentially faces. Beckett warns that "the danger is in the neatness of identifications"¹, i.e. in the practice of literary criticism that finds a one to one correspondence between what is said and its meaning. This practice, compared by Beckett to that of

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 19.

‘book keeping’, reduces the value of a work of literature to its content at the price of disregarding, or at least discounting, its form.

Beckett’s warning is first of all directed to himself, who is about to embark on the enterprise of critically presenting Joyce’s work armed with some abstractions and comparisons to orientate his reading.² Although reducing the work to such comparison and concepts is required to produce a neat presentation of Joyce’s work, this process of reduction runs the risk to distort it.³ This approach, Beckett warns, is not alert to features that are central to Joyce’s works where language is “direct expression”,⁴ and where “form is content, content is form”.⁵ According to Beckett, Joyce’s “writing is not about something; it is that something”.⁶ To clarify what he means, he adds “When the sense is sleep, the words go to sleep. (See the end of *Anna Livia*). When the sense is dancing, the words dance”.⁷ Joyce’s words do not, or do not merely, convey a message by denotation, but they do so by enacting the meaning that they want to convey. Consequently, by disregarding the form to grasp the content, literary critics, as well as readers, would miss this important quality of Joyce’s work.

Critics have often pointed out that Beckett’s words on aesthetics, here as elsewhere, are an indication of the direction that Beckett would follow with his own writing. Thus, many Beckett scholars have started from Beckett’s fascination with what language *does* to approach Beckett’s own work. Many readings of Beckett’s works have pointed out that in Beckett’s works the form *enacts* what the work is about. Martin Esslin, for example, considers this feature of Beckett’s theatrical writings as one of the marks that differentiates Beckett’s theatre from that of Existentialist writers such as Sartre or Camus. Whilst Camus and Sartre’s writing is a rational presentation of the irrationality of the human condition, Beckett’s writing expresses irrationality by abandoning rational devices.⁸ H. Porter Abbott describes Beckett’s prose from *Watt* to the *Texts for Nothing* as ‘imitative’.⁹ The term ‘imitation’ is used by

² “And now here am I, with my handful of abstractions, among which notably: a mountain, the coincidence of contraries, the inevitability of cyclic evolution, a system of Poetics, and the prospect of self-extension in the world of Mr Joyce *Work in Progress*”. Ibid.

³ “There is a temptation to treat every concept like ‘a bass dropt neck fust in till a bung crate’, and make a really tidy job of it. Unfortunately such exactitude of application would imply distortion in one of two directions. Must we string the neck of a certain system in order to stuff it into a contemporary pigeon-hole, or modify the dimensions of that pigeon-hole for the satisfaction of the analogymongers?”, *ibid.*

⁴ Ibid., p. 26.

⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “These writers [Giradoux, Anouilh, Salacrou, Sartre, and Camus] differ from the dramatist of the Absurd in an important respect: they present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought”. Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 5.

⁹ As Ricks pointed out, language considered as enacting rather than representing is at once the essence of imitation and its opposite.

The principle is at once profoundly mimetic and profoundly anti-mimetic. Mimetic, in that nothing could be more imitative than for words to be what they say; anti-mimetic, in that nothing could be *less* compatible with *imitation* than something’s actually being that of which it speaks.

Abbott to refer “not as much to the notion of reflection or representation as we do to a generation in the reader of experiences that are at the same time the subject of the work”.¹⁰ According to Abbott, Beckett’s works are imitative insofar as they stimulate experiences that are akin to those experienced by Beckett’s characters. Beckett would do so, according to Abbott’s reading, by attacking, as well as experimenting with, pivotal elements of narratives and narrations: “the attack in each case is an independent experiment with the imitative potential of certain elements of fiction: the archetypal pattern, the narrator, the report, the two-part form, storytelling, the tale of espionage, and the text itself”.¹¹ In recent publications both Dirk Van Hulle and Shane Weller have considered the fact that Beckett’s works *enact* the issues at the heart of modernism as the mark of Beckett’s specific kind of modernism.¹²

In support of the choice to approach Beckett’s texts with a literary analysis informed by through Austin’s Theory of Speech Acts there is also the aim to develop a set of tools that could contribute to debates in Beckett scholarship by adding a new dimension to the understanding of how Beckett’s works *enact* what each work is about. In particular, it offers a specific angle to look at the way in which this is done, i.e. by looking at the acts performed in uttering words; an angle which has not been explored yet by Beckett’s scholars.

Finally, humour scholarship benefits from the choice to use Austin’s theory to develop an approach to humour. It is certainly not uncommon that the field of humour studies to resort to the philosophical theory of language to unpack the mechanisms at the heart of comic devices. Raskin and Attardo, to name two of the most influential contemporary scholars in the field of Incongruity Theory, have often resorted to the Grice’s theory of discourse to describe many comic devices.¹³ Despite this ongoing interest with theory of discourse and of language, the possibility to resort to Austin’s Theory of Speech

Language is imitative in the sense that they are what they are what they want to convey. At the same time, they are not imitation because rather than being a copy, a representation of something, they are that something. Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures 1990*, pp. 54-55.

¹⁰ Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, p. 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

¹² According to Van Hulle, who refers to the same Beckett’s critical passage quoted above, Beckett applies to his writing a technique that he calls ‘enactment’. This technique, according to Van Hulle, is pivotal to understand Beckett’s relation to modernism. “Obviously, enactment in literature is not an exclusively twentieth-century phenomenon, but in combination with linguistic scepticism and a preoccupation with the materiality of language, this enactment of a profound dissatisfaction with received language may be a crucial element in our investigation into Beckett’s relation to modernism”. Dirk Van Hulle, ‘Negative Modernism: Beckett’s Poetics of Pejorism and Literary Enactment’, in O. Beloborodova, D. Van Hulle, and P. Verhulst (eds.), *Beckett and Modernism* (Cham: Palgrave, 2018), pp. 1-18, p. 12.

According to Weller, “*Beckett stages, embodies, or enacts the experience of the failing attempt to repair what is taken to be the radical division of word and world*”. Shane Weller, ‘From Language Revolution to Literature of the Unword: Beckett as Late Modernist’, *ibid.*, pp. 37-52, p. 44. See also Shane Weller, ‘Beckett and Late Modernism’, in Dirk Van Hulle (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge Companions to Literature; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 89-102.

¹³ See for example Raskin, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*. Salvatore Attardo, ‘Violation of Conversational Maxims and Cooperation: The Case of Jokes’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 19/6 (1993/06/01/ 1993), pp. 537-558, Jonathan D. Raskin and Salvatore Attardo, ‘Non-Literalness and Non-Bona-Fide in Language: An Approach to Formal and Computational Treatments of Humor’, *Pragmatics & Cognition*, 2/1 (1994), pp. 31-69 Salvatore Attardo, *Linguistic Theories of Humor* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, 1994) Salvatore Attardo, ‘Locutionary and Perlocutionary Cooperation: The Perlocutionary Cooperative Principle’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 27/6 (1997/06/01/ 1997), pp. 753-779.

Acts to describe comic mechanisms has been under-examined. By analysing comic elements with an approach informed by Austin's Theory of Speech Acts, this thesis wants to draw attention to the potentiality of this application.

Before moving onto the discussion, we shall set out its scope. Firstly, whilst our discussion is informed by Austin's Theory of Speech Acts, we do not aim to defend the theory from the various criticisms that it has received since its appearance, and we do not need do to so. Indeed, our discussion uses Austin's theory insofar as this theory allows for capturing interesting aspects of Samuel Beckett's writing and works, and for making interesting points about them. We do not need to defend the theory, or to prove the theory correct in all its aspects in order to do so. Secondly, the discussion in this chapter does not aim to provide a comprehensive catalogue of the devices linked to the acts performed in speaking, let alone to claim that this is the only type of devices overlooked by the analysis of previous Beckett's scholars. We are certain that other approaches informed by different philosophical or literary theories - say for example Grice's theory - would highlight comic elements that have not been properly studied by scholars interested with Beckett's humour.

As a final note, we want to anticipate that a part of the discussion that we are going to make in this chapter will lead us to indicate a possible avenue of research to approach the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions pointed out in Chapter 1.

3.2 Austin on Doing Acts *in* Speaking

Austin, in a series of lectures posthumously collected in *How to do Things with Words*, draws attention to the acts that are performed *in* and *by* speaking as well as to the conditions which govern the performance of these acts.

Austin's investigation starts from what he considers to be such a "widespread and obvious" phenomenon that he judges what he has to say about it "neither difficult nor contentious".¹⁴ Utterances (statements included), Austin says, are not merely used to describe something, but they are often used to perform some actions. For example, Austin points out, when a spouse says 'I hereby take this woman/man as my lawful wedded wife/husband' in a wedding ceremony, or when an officer says 'I name this ship the *Queen Elizabeth*', the spouse and the officer, in saying those words, are not describing the act that they are performing, but they are performing respectively the act of marrying and the act of naming.

Austin distinguishes between three types of speech acts that one can perform when uttering words: locutionary acts, illocutionary acts, and perlocutionary acts. When one utters words, firstly, one

¹⁴ J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1975), p. 1 passim.

performs the locutionary act of saying something, i.e. the act of uttering certain words which have certain linguistic meanings;¹⁵ secondly, one performs the illocutionary act(s) of doing something *in* uttering those words;¹⁶ finally, one performs the perlocutionary act(s) of doing something to an audience by saying those words.¹⁷ Reporting one of Austin's classical examples may help in clarifying this division. If a man says to me 'Shoot her!', I can describe the acts done by him as follow:

Act (A) or Locution

He said to me 'Shoot her!' meaning by 'shoot' shoot and referring by 'her' to *her*.

Act (B) or Illocution

He urged (or advised, ordered, &c.) me to shoot her.

Act (C. *a*) or Perlocution

He persuaded me to shoot her.

Act (C. *b*)

He got me to (or made me, &c.) shoot her.¹⁸

The speaker who uttered 'Shoot her!' in Austin's example performs three types of speech acts. The speaker performs the locutionary act of saying something: he or she says the words 'shoot' and 'her' with the meaning that those words have. Furthermore, the speaker performs one or more illocutionary acts of doing something *in* saying those words. He or she could perform the illocutionary act of advising me to shoot her, or urging me to do so, or ordering me to do so. Finally, *by* uttering 'shoot her', the speaker performs perlocutionary acts of doing something to his or her audience. The speaker might persuade his or her audience (me) to shoot her or the speaker might make his or her audience (me) to shoot her.

In the next few sections, we will be focusing on the illocutionary acts performed in speaking and, given that comic elements are our main focus, we are particularly interested in incongruities related to the performance of illocutionary acts. Austin too was interested in the situations in which something goes wrong with the performance of illocutionary acts. We shall then be guided by his considerations on this matter in approaching Beckett's works.

Illocutionary acts, Austin says, are heir to some sort of ills which depend on their twofold status as actions and utterances. As it is true of any other action, language acts can be performed unintentionally: by mistake or under duress, for example. If this is the case, the illocutionary acts might not be considered as satisfactorily performed or performed at all.¹⁹ Furthermore, Austin claims that illocutionary acts are not successful when they are uttered non-seriously, as when one is joking, or when they are uttered in

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 94-95. Austin distinguishes between the phonetic, the phatic and the rhetic act. The phonetic act is the act of uttering certain sounds and noises. Uttering noises that correspond to certain words that are part of a specific vocabulary and that follow the rules of a certain grammar is the phatic act. Finally, the rhetic act consist in using words and vocables with a sense or reference (which is more or less definite). See *ibid.*, pp. 95-98.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 98-99.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 101.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 101-102.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 21.

a parasitic or etiolated way, as when they appear in literary works.²⁰ Finally, to perform illocutionary acts successfully, Austin claims, one must secure uptake: the addressee must hear the utterer and must recognise the illocutionary force with which the words are uttered.²¹

The last two conditions individuated by Austin are a challenge for our analysis as they appear to undermine the very possibility to talk about speech acts in relation to any work of literature. On the one hand, Austin seems to rule out the possibility that utterances in poetry, and generally speaking in literature, can be at all successful in performing illocutionary acts. On the other hand, even if the first challenge would be placed on a side, it is not at all easy to predict readers' uptake of the illocutionary force of the utterances.

Although these conditions are surely a challenge for our analysis, we should not be stopped by them. Firstly, Austin's claims on the impossibility of performing successfully illocutionary acts for utterances that occur in literary works has been challenged and refuted.²² Hence, there is room and scope for our analysis. Secondly, though it is true that it is not easy to predict readers' uptake, this does not stop us from pointing out the elements that could play a role in informing and determining readers' uptake.²³

Even if the conditions outlined are all in place – i.e. one intends to perform an illocutionary act, and one does so uttering certain words seriously and these words are not contained in a literary work –, illocutionary acts are still liable to failure. Austin provides some rather amusing illustrations to show that this is the case. For example, not everyone can name a ship just by smashing a bottle against it and uttering a name. If a passer-by during one such ceremony, smashes the bottle on the ship and says 'I name this ship *Mr Stalin*', the uttering of these words would not be a successful performance of naming: one must have the appropriate authority to perform certain acts.²⁴ Or, to give another of Austin's example, uttering the right words during a wedding ceremony would not amount to doing much if it turns out that one of the spouses is a monkey.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 21-22. Austin makes similar remarks in the first lecture, where he says that for the action to be performed "I must not be joking, for example, nor writing a poem". Ibid., p. 9.

²¹ Ibid., p. 22.

²² See, for example, Maximilian De Gaynesford, 'The Seriousness of Poetry', *Essays in Criticism*, 59/1 (2009a), pp. 1-21; Maximilian De Gaynesford, 'Incense and Insensibility: Austin on the 'Non-Seriousness' of Poetry', *Ratio*, 22/4 (2009b), pp. 464-485; Maximilian De Gaynesford, 'Speech Acts and Poetry', *Analysis*, 70/4 (2010), pp. 644-646; Maximilian De Gaynesford, 'How Not to Do Things with Words: J. L. Austin on Poetry', *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 51/1 (2011b), pp. 31-49; Maximilian De Gaynesford, 'Speech Acts, Responsibility, and Commitment in Poetry', in Peter Robinson (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 617-637.

²³ The uptake condition has been challenged too. For example, De Gaynesford has argued that not all the illocutionary acts are such that they require the uptake of an audience. See for example, Maximilian De Gaynesford, 'Speech, Action and Uptake', in Maximilian De Gaynesford (ed.), *Agents and Their Actions* (Chichester: Blackwell, 2011a), pp. 121-137; Maximilian De Gaynesford, 'Uptake in Action', in Savas L. Tsohatzidis (ed.), *Interpreting J.L. Austin: Critical Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017a), pp. 79-95.

²⁴ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 23.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 24.

These and similar cases point out that some conditions must be met in order for the performance of the illocutionary act to be successful. Austin, thus, develops what he calls the ‘Doctrine of Infelicities’,²⁶ that is the doctrine of the conditions for illocutionary success and of the cases where the performance of illocutionary acts is unsuccessful or, to use Austin’s terminology, unhappy, infelicitous. The conditions that Austin individuates are about the aspects of the context in which utterances occur, as well as about the people involved in such context, and the performance of speech. We shall give now a quick overview of the conditions outlined by Austin, and we shall present them in more detail in the dedicated sections in this chapter.

Austin’s articulation of the ‘Doctrine of Infelicities’ starts with listing the conditions for successful performance.

(A.1) There must exist an accepted conventional procedure having a certain conventional effect, that procedure to include the uttering of certain words by certain persons in certain circumstances, and further,

(A.2) the particular persons and circumstances in a given case must be appropriate for the invocation of the particular procedure invoked.

(B.1) The procedure must be executed by all participants both correctly and

(B.2) completely.

(I.1) Where, as often, the procedure is designed for use by persons having certain thoughts or feelings, or for the inauguration of certain consequential conduct on the part of any participant, then a person participating in and so invoking the procedure must in fact have those thoughts or feelings, and the participants must intend so to conduct themselves, and further

(I.2) must actually so conduct themselves subsequently.²⁷

Conditions (A) are concerned with the existence of convention around the illocutionary act performed and with the appropriateness of the persons involved in such procedure. For example, saying ‘I divorce you’ won’t amount to performing the illocutionary act of divorcing in a country where there is no legal procedure to do so. Or saying ‘I hereby take this woman/man as my lawful wedded wife/husband’ will not amount to performing the illocutionary act of marrying, if one of the spouses turns out to be a monkey.²⁸

Conditions (B) are about the performance of the act, which must be correct and complete for the illocutionary act to be felicitous. A wedding is not performed unless all the people involved utter the correct formula, and they pronounce it all.²⁹

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 13-15.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 14-15.

²⁸ These examples are paraphrases of Austin’s own examples. See *ibid.*, p. 27 and 24. Austin discusses these conditions at *ibid.*, pp. 26-36.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 36-38.

Conditions (*I*) are concerned with the attitude and conduct of those who participate in the speech performance. For an illocutionary act to be felicitous the participants must intend to conduct themselves, and do so, in accordance with what required by the illocutionary act performed. Thus, for the illocutionary act of promising to be felicitous, one must, at the moment of stipulation, intend to maintain the promise and think that is possible to maintain the promise; and one must also conduct oneself in such a way to attempt to maintain the promise.³⁰

Where conditions (A) or conditions (B) are not met, Austin says, the purported illocutionary act misfires. The illocutionary act is not performed at all. By contrast, if condition (*I*) are not met, the illocutionary act is performed, but there is still some form of infelicities involved: the illocutionary act, Austin says, belong to the category of ‘Abuses’.

To provide an illustration, the uttering of the words ‘I hereby take this woman/man as my lawful wedded wife/husband’ does not constitute a felicitous performance of the illocutionary act of marrying, hence misfires, unless (condition A) both spouses are human beings and the officiant has the authority to perform weddings. Moreover, the performance of the act misfires if (contra B) one of the spouses pronounces the wrong formula or does not pronounce it all. Finally, the illocutionary act of marrying is performed, but it is still somehow unhappy and hence it should be considered as an ‘abuse’, if (contra *I*) one or both spouses do not intend to marry or do not conduct themselves as they are married.

In each of the next three sections we focus on one of these conditions. Our aim is to show that there are instances of comic that depend on the performance and misfire of illocutionary acts.

3.3 Authority

As said, for language utterances to be a matter of acts is, amongst other things, to be liable to failure. The first group of conditions (A) individuated by Austin is concerned with the conventionality of acts,³¹ and the appropriateness of the persons involved. With regard to this last aspect, Austin clarifies that one of the requirements for an illocutionary act to be successful is that utterers have appropriate authority to perform the illocutionary acts purported. Performing an act successfully, according to Austin, goes with being in the appropriate position to perform such an act and with being recognised as being in such position.³²

³⁰ Ibid., p. 40.

³¹ The notion of conventions and the role they play in Speech Acts has originated much debate since the appearance of Austin’s work. Two classical and opposed positions in this regard are those of Searle and Strawson. John R. Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969). P. F. Strawson, ‘Intention and Convention in Speech Acts’, *The Philosophical Review*, 73/4 (1964), pp. 439-460.

³² “Just as we often say, for example, ‘You cannot order me’, in the sense ‘You have not the right to order me’, which is equivalent to saying that you are not in the appropriate position to do so: so often there are things you cannot state – have no right to state – are not in a position to state”. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 128 .

To paraphrase Austin's example, saying 'I name this ship *Mr Stalin*' would not amount to performing an illocutionary act of naming if the utterer is not the person appointed for naming the ship.³³ If the authority condition is not met, Austin says, the illocutionary speech act purported misfires, it is 'void'.³⁴ As another example, the word 'foul' could be shouted by many people during a football match. It could be shouted by the fouled team and by its supporters to *demand* that the referee judges the action as being against the rules. Or it could be even shouted by the opposing team –Foul?!- to *express* their *incredulity* towards such a demand or toward a decision taken by the referee. However, it is only the referee that, *in* uttering it, *declares* an action to be unfair play. This is because the referee is the only one that during a football game has the authority to declare something to be unfair play, and hence the only one whose illocutionary acts could be recognised as having the force of declaring a foul.

It is more difficult to see what is it to have the right authority to perform illocutionary acts where the conventions are less formalised or codified, as for example in the case of the illocutionary act of *stating*. Fortunately, Austin offers examples for this case too. He notices that having authority is to be in the appropriate position to perform a certain illocutionary act, hence, given one's position, there are things that one cannot state. Take the example of a person who utters 'there are fifty persons in the next room' to a hearer that knows that the person cannot have possibly had access to this information. The utterer is not in the appropriate position to perform the act of stating how many people are in the next room *in* saying those words and the hearer would not recognise the illocutionary act as having the force of stating.³⁵

The link between authority and performance of illocutionary speech acts is highlighted in different ways in Beckett's works. In this section we discuss different passages where the connection between authority and speech acts is highlighted resulting in comic effects. Particularly, we look at instances that reveal a lack of authority and as well as passages that show that the speakers might have an authority (or occupy a position) different from that initially presumed.³⁶ These passages often achieve comic effect by asking

³³ Ibid., p. 23.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 16-18.

³⁵ This is a paraphrase of Austin's own example: "often there are things you cannot state – have no right to state – are not in a position to state. You *cannot* now state how many people there are in the next room; if you say 'There are fifty people in the next room', I can only regard you as guessing or conjecturing (just as sometimes you are not ordering me, which would be inconceivable, but possibly asking me to rather impolitely, so here you are 'hazarding a guess' rather oddly)." Ibid., p. 138.

³⁶ There are passages that expose the link between authority and illocutionary acts performed by confirming that the speaker as the right authority rather than calling into question. This is, for example, the case of the incipit of 'Ding- Dong' and *Mercier and Camier* reported below.

My sometime friend Belacqua enlivened the last phase of his solipsism, before he toed the line and began to relish the world, with the belief that the best thing he had to do was to move constantly from place to place.
Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 31.

The journey of Mercier and Camier is one I can tell, if I will, for I was with them all the time.
Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, p. 3.

These passages contain information that confirm to the reader that the narrators are in the appropriate position to report these stories. The narrator of 'Ding-Dong' used to be a friend of Belacqua and this should implicitly confirm to the reader that he occupies a position appropriate for performing speech acts of narrating Belacqua's story. The narrator of *Mercier and Camier*,

the reader to revise the force that he had assigned to the illocutionary acts performed by the speakers, resulting in comic ambiguities and uncertainties.

3.3.1 Lack of Authority

Let us start with the first type of passages: those that reveal that the speaker might not have the required authority to perform the illocutionary act initially assumed. In these cases, the link between authority and narrating is highlighted negatively. See the passage below taken from *Watt*, where the narrator describes the circumstances under which Watt has told his story to him. *Watt* mainly consists in Sam's report of Watt's experience at Mr Knott's house.³⁷ However, Sam's appropriate access to the information about Watt's permanence at Mr Knott's house, and hence the appropriateness of the position he occupies in telling Watt's story, is called into question. Watt's perception of what happened in Mr Knott's house, his report of it, the context in which this report takes place, along with Sam's aptitude towards receiving this report, hinder Sam's authority with regards to the illocutionary act of reporting Watt's story.

For when Watt at last spoke of this time, it was a time long past, and of which his recollections were, in a sense, perhaps less clear than he would have wished, though too clear for his liking, in another. Add to this the notorious difficulty of recapturing, at will, modes of feeling peculiar to a certain time, and to a certain place, and perhaps also to a certain state of the health, when the time is past, and the place left, and the body struggling with quite a new situation. Add to this the obscurity of Watt's communications, the rapidity of his utterance and the eccentricities of his syntax, as elsewhere recorded. Add to this the material conditions in which these communications were made. Add to this the scant aptitude to receive of him to whom they were proposed. Add to this the scant aptitude to give of him to whom they were committed. And some idea will perhaps be obtained of the difficulties experienced in formulating, not only such matters as those here in question, but the entire body of Watt's experience, from the moment of his entering Mr Knott's establishment to the moment of his leaving it.³⁸

The connection between the position occupied by the speaker, authority in Austin's terms, and the successful performance of an illocutionary act is brought to the foreground in the above passage. Sam, the narrator of *Watt*, highlights Watt's difficulty in recollecting information about his story as well as the 'obscurity' of Watt's way to communicate. Furthermore, the narrator stresses the adverse conditions in which the narration took place, and the lack of aptitude of the narrator himself in receiving such a

on the other hand, is in the appropriate position to tell the story given that he was with the two characters all the time and he is a witness of the story he is about to tell.

³⁷ Whereas Sam is identifiable as the narrator of the story of Watt at Mr Knott's establishment, it is less certain that he is the narrator of the opening and closing episodes of *Watt*, given that these episodes either do not involve Watt or are told from a perspective which is not Watt's. These parts could be interpreted as narrated by a voice that is not Sam's. Further to this, the narrative contains footnotes and Addenda which might be read as the expression of a voice which is neither Watt's nor Sam's. However, this is not the only way in which the inconsistency regarding footnotes, Addenda, and opening and closing chapter can be read. One could read all these acts as the expression of a single voice who is not merely narrating, but who is also stipulating or devising.

It is not our intent to argue for one of the two interpretations. On the contrary, we think that not only both are plausible readings of the presence of voices in *Watt*, but that both these contrasting readings are kept together before the eyes of the reader. This co-presence establishes comic ambiguities and uncertainties.

³⁸ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 62.

narration. Sam, by revealing that he might not have access to some pieces of information, calls into question his authority in performing the illocutionary act of reporting Watt's experience in Mr Knott's house. Having claimed to lack secure access to relevant information on Watt's experience in Mr Knott's establishment, the illocutionary speech act of reporting such a story could be seen misfiring. By calling into question the narrator's authority, the reader is asked to re-evaluate the illocutionary force of the acts that were performed before this revelation.

Note that saying that the illocutionary act of reporting Watt's story misfires does not equal to say that Sam in performing the locutionary acts that compound the narration of Watt's story does not perform any illocutionary act. As Austin points out, when a certain illocutionary act misfires, other illocutionary acts are nonetheless performed: the words uttered will be given a different illocutionary force. For example, Austin suggests that the utterer that says that there is a certain number of people in the nearby room, without being in a position to perform the illocutionary act of stating it, might be seen as performing the illocutionary act of guessing or conjecturing.³⁹ The same could be argued for Sam's narration: given that he reveals that he is not in the appropriate position to perform the illocutionary act of reporting, he might be successfully performing the illocutionary act of guessing or stipulating that something is the case for Watt.

Sam's revelation about his lack of authority thus introduces comic ambiguities that are specific to the illocutionary acts performed in the texts. Whilst until the point of such revelation Sam was taken as performing the illocutionary act of reporting, this is called into doubt and opens up different possibilities. The narrator could be either guessing, stipulating or indeed, sometimes, correctly reporting. However, there is no way for the reader to settle the question and to attribute a specific illocutionary force to Sam's illocutionary act.

3.3.2 Inconsistent Illocutionary Acts

The link between illocutionary acts performed and the roles occupied by the speaker is comically highlighted also when inconsistent illocutionary acts are performed. According to Austin, an illocutionary act, when successfully performed, takes effect. This is to say that it brings about different types of consequences and effects. Some of the consequences of illocutionary acts are to be listed as perlocutionary acts, i.e. the acts that are done to an audience by uttering words. There other consequences and effects that are not of the perlocutionary type. One of these effects is the fact that in performing an illocutionary act, the subsequent performance of other acts is not permissible.⁴⁰ To use

³⁹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 138.

⁴⁰ Marina Sbisà argues that these consequences should be considered as of a peculiar kind. They are illocutionary effects and as such they can be undone, if the illocutionary act were to misfire. She has defended this reading of illocutionary effects and of the conventionality of illocutionary acts in various papers. She has argued for this reading to be compatible with an exegetical reading of Austin's original take in Marina Sbisà, 'How to Read Austin', *Pragmatics*, 17/3 (2007), pp. 461-473. She has defended it in more detail against what she deems it to be the standard view of illocutionary acts (which comes from Strawson's and Searle's traditions of reading Austin) in Marina Sbisà, 'Uptake and Conventionality in Illocution', *Lodz Papers*

one of Austin's example, if I successfully name a ship *Queen Elizabeth*, this determines the fact that a certain course of actions is legitimate and another not. For example, one cannot legitimately refer to the ship by calling it with another name.⁴¹ In a similar manner, in a narration, the narrator performs illocutionary acts which bring about some effects and consequences. Some of the consequences consist of making other illocutionary acts compatible or not with those just performed. In the next few passages that we examine, the speaking voice, *in* uttering certain words, performs illocutionary acts which are inconsistent.

The following passage contains an incongruity that is located at the level of illocutionary acts and that depends on the inconsistency of some of the acts performed. The sentence in bold, indeed, performs an illocutionary act that is not consistent with that of narrating a story:

Watt's smile was further peculiar in this, that it seldom came singly, but was followed after a short time by another, less pronounced it is true. In this it resembled the fart. And it even sometimes happened that a third, very weak and fleeting, was found necessary, before the face could be at rest again. But this was rare. **And it will be a long time now before Watt smiles again, unless something very unexpected turns up, to upset him.**⁴²

The passage starts with the narrator describing Watt's smile. The narrator performs this illocutionary act in conjunction with other acts. He, for example, performs the illocutionary act of conceding: he concedes that - when Watt smiles a second time - Watt does so with a less apparent smile ('less pronounced it is true'). Furthermore, in saying that sometimes even a third smile takes place, the narrator performs the illocutionary act of ranking this event as being exceptional. Conceding that something is the case and ranking the probability of something happening are illocutionary acts which, not only are compatible with the act of describing, but they also contribute to it. Ranking, for example, is an act that contribute to a description by placing the object described on a scale of value, which could be more or less formalised. Conceding could be seen as an indirect way to state that something is the case. From a rhetorical point of view, conceding that something is the case, rather than simply stating that something is the case, is used to capture and engage the reader. Whilst the audience is left in a passive position when one ranks or states, the act of conceding is audience-directed: to concede is to concede something to someone.

On the other hand, the illocutionary act performed by the narrator in the last sentence is one that is excluded by the illocutionary act of narrating. The sentence starts out in the fashion of an anticipation ('And it will be a long time now before Watt smiles again'). The act of anticipating is consistent with the act of narrating a story: the narrator, indeed, is supposed to have a comprehensive view of the events

in Pragmatics (5, 2009), 33. She has then defended it by showing its illuminating potential and its ability to account for some of what she considers as being features of the illocutionary acts in Marina Sbisà, 'On Illocutionary Types', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 8/1 (1984/02/01/ 1984), pp. 93-112, and Marina Sbisà, 'Illocutionary Force and Degrees of Strength in Language Use', *Journal of Pragmatics*, 33/12 (2001/12/01/ 2001), pp. 1791-1814.

⁴¹ Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 117.

⁴² Beckett, *Watt*, p. 21.

that took place and to be in a position of knowing in advance what will happen in the story. He knows whether or not something would happen and how long it would take for that event to happen again. However, the second half of the sentence performs an act which is not compatible with the illocutionary act of anticipating. The narrator concedes that Watt could smile again, if something upsetting or disturbing were to happen to him. This turns the narrator's initial claim that Watt will not smile into a conditional claim. This, however, is inconsistent with the act of anticipating which consequently misfires. This misfire establishes a first comic incongruity: an act that appears to do something turns into something different.

Furthermore, the concession that the second half of the last sentence performs ('unless something very unexpected turns up, to upset him) establish a further incongruity. Note the difference with the previous concession. In the first concession ('less pronounced *it is true*'), the narrator concedes that something *is* the case. With the concession contained in the last sentence, the narrator concedes that something *could be* the case. The second concession opens up uncertainty, whereas the first one does not. This establishes a further incongruity as an uncertainty of this kind is not compatible with the act of narrating a story which is concluded. When one undertakes the task of narrating a story, you would expect that one knows how the story goes from the beginning to the end. Thus, expressing uncertainty on whether or not a character will behave in a certain way is not one of the acts compatible with it.

The narrator of the first passage, who fails to predict that something will be the case, shows that he might not be in the right position to narrate a story. Or better, he is not in the appropriate position to perform a specific type of narration, one which is close to be a testimony or a report of the past. By contrast, this passage reveals that the narrator might be occupying a different position. He could be creating and crafting the story as it develops, or he could be providing a sort of live-narration of the story that unfolds before his eyes. It could be as if the narrator does not yet know what would happen to Watt, either because he is the deviser of the story and he has yet to finish devising it, or because he is the reporter of the story who, however, annotates the story as the story is told or it develops. This introduces a comic ambiguity that calls the reader for re-assessing the acts that the narrator is performing in the text.⁴³

3.3.3 Stipulating

Whilst, in the passages seen so far, some of the illocutionary acts performed by the narrator lead to consider the possibility that the narrator might be stipulating the story, there are passages where the narrator overtly performs the act of stipulating. Look at the passages below.

Belacqua drew near to the house of his aunt. **Let us call it Winter, that dusk may fall now and a moon rise.** At the corner of the street a horse was down and a man sat on his head.⁴⁴

⁴³ We shall discuss other passages that contain illocutionary ambiguities due to inconsistent speech acts in Chapter 4.

⁴⁴ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 13.

After we had verified the last address the cabman suggested bringing me to a hotel he knew where I would be comfortable. **That makes sense, cabman, hotel, it's plausible.** With his recommendation I would want for nothing. Every convenience, he said, with a wink. **I place this conversation on the sidewalk, in front of the house from which I had just emerged.** I remember, beneath the lamp, the flank of the horse, hollow and damp, and the handle of the door the cabman's hand in its woollen glove.⁴⁵

These passages are taken from two stories - 'Dante and the Lobster' and 'The Expelled' - where the narrators appear to undertake similar tasks; the narrator of the first story reports the events that occurred to Belacqua on a particular day, and the narrator of the second passage reports the events that happened to him on a day of the past. When narrators undertake the task of reporting events, be it either of their own past or someone else's past, one would expect their report to be as faithful as possible to the events that compound the story. One expects the narration to be not much more than the transposition in words of the story. Sentences like 'Belacqua drew near to the house of his aunt' or 'After we had verified the last address the cabman suggested bringing me to a hotel he knew where I would be comfortable' seem to do exactly so. They describe events and they describe reasons or considerations that support some decisions or actions.

However, the narrators, in uttering the sentences reported in bold, perform illocutionary acts that are in contrast with that of reporting a story: they stipulate that something is the case. The first narrator stipulates that the story takes place in a certain season. He does it so he can set the final episode of the short story at dusk, with the moon rising. The second narrator evaluates the credibility of some information that he has provided and stipulates that some of the events took place in a specific location. Stipulating and reporting, in this case, are acts which are inconsistent.

The co-presence of inconsistent illocutionary acts establishes some comic incongruities. First, as for the other passages examined, the shift from different kind of authority results in comic effect that are specific to the illocutionary acts performed. On the one hand, there is a comic shift between the roles performed by the narrative voice, from testimony to stipulation. On the other hand, such a shift introduces comic ambiguities onto the acts performed in the text more broadly. Given that the narrators reveal to be occupying a position from which they can stipulate that something is the case, then the readers might question the illocutionary force of other utterances where the narrator appears to be performing the illocutionary act of reporting the story.

Furthermore, there are other comic incongruities introduced by the presence of the illocutionary act of stipulating. By overtly stipulating, narrators hinder their own attempt at increasing the credibility of the story. Likewise, the narrator of the second passage hinders the credibility of its description and reveals its artificial nature by overtly evaluating its credibility. The incongruity can be better located by using Austin's terminology: the presence of the act of stipulating, not only affects the illocutionary success

⁴⁵ Beckett, 'The Expelled', pp 13-14.

of the act of reporting, but it also plays into its perlocutionary effects. If the stipulation is made in order to convince the audience that something is the case, by overtly performing the act of stipulating this perlocutionary effect is blocked.

3.3.4 Devising

Similar considerations can be made for those instances where the question around authority and performance of illocutionary acts arises because narrators say something that, although not inconsistent with the illocutionary acts previously performed, shows that they might be occupying a different position from that of a mere narrator. See the passage below taken from 'Druff'. The narrator is describing the late Belacqua:

The hands pious on the sternum were unseemly, defunct crusader, absolved from polite campaign. Hairy reached out with his endless arms and tugged at the marble members. **Two nouns and two adjectives.** Not a stir out of them. How stupid of him.⁴⁶

The narrator halts his narration to utter the sentence 'Two nouns and two adjectives'. This sentence refers to the previous one where two nouns and two adjectives are used. By uttering this sentence, the narrator reveals some features of what narrating entails. He is not merely occupying the position of one that reports a story, but he could also be the crafter of the story. The narrator could be the one who chooses what to report and what not, in what style doing it and what elements are important to insert in the narration.

Revealing that the speaking voice is the crafter of the story is not something that, per se, makes the act of narrating 'misfire', in Austin's technical term. However, the situation changes if one sees these two acts as performed simultaneously: the narrators perform the act of crafting while he is narrating. The simultaneous performance of these two acts is more evident in passages like those quoted below:

[...] it was merely my hat sailing towards me through the air, rotating as it came. [...] **How describe this hat? And why? [...] But how describe it? Some other time, some other time.**⁴⁷

I have always greatly admired the door of this house, up on top of its little flight of steps. **How describe it?** It was a massive green door, encased in summer in a kind of green and white striped housing, with a hole for the thunderous wrought-iron knocker and a slit for letters, this latter closed to dust, flies and tits by a brass flap fitted with springs. **So much for that description.**⁴⁸

The narrator of 'The Expelled' is allegedly reporting a story from his past. However, he appears to be crafting his narration while he is reporting the story: he ponders on how to describe his hat ('How to describe this hat?') and the door of the house from where he has just been kicked out ('How to describe it?'); he reflects on the reasons to describe the hat ('And why?'); finally, he decides if certain descriptions must take place ('Some other time, some other time') and where other descriptions must end ('so much for that description'). The simultaneous performance of the act of reporting and that of

⁴⁶ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 172.

⁴⁷ Beckett, 'The Expelled', pp 4-5.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

crafting leads to the comic ambiguity around what speech acts are performed. Furthermore, this ambiguity introduces uncertainty into the narrations, as one calls into question whether the events that appeared as being reported are still in the process of being devised. And, consequently, the core illocutionary act performed by the speaker-narrator is called into question: whilst it appeared to be that of *reporting* a story from the past, now it could as well as be that of *devising* a story.

3.3.5 Considerations

The instances analysed share a similar mechanism: they reveal that the narrators are not, or not merely, occupying the position of a testimony and hence the illocutionary force of their acts is not that, or not merely that, of reporting. They might be reporting and crafting, or they might be stipulating. It should be noted that the fact that a narrative voice is also the deviser of the story, that it might be stipulating it or guessing it, is not comic per se. Likewise, the fact that the narrative voice overtly stipulates or devises or guesses is not comic per se. There are cases where the shifts between illocutionary acts takes place without generating comic amusement. We shall compare now these latter cases with the comic passages already analysed, where the shift between illocutionary acts generates comic amusement, to see if this comparison allows us to make some further considerations on the relation between *incongruity* and comic instances.

Consider the following passages from *Malone Dies*, where Malone changes and corrects some parts of the story of Sapo, which he is devising and telling:

I have tried to reflect on the beginning of my story. There are things I do not understand. But nothing to signify. I can go on.

Sapo had no friends – no, that won't do.

Sapo was on good terms with his little friends, though they did not exactly love him.⁴⁹

Half-way through the sentence about Sapo's friendships ('Sapo had no friends') Malone decides to change what he is saying and, consequently, to change the characterisation of Sapo. In doing so, Malone exercises his authority of deviser of the story: he does not only perform the illocutionary act of *telling* Sapo's story, but he also *stipulates* it. He decides what is Sapo's relationship with his friends.

In contrast to the examples we have seen so far, Malone's illocutionary act of stipulating Sapo's story and Malone's illocutionary act of telling Sapo's story are not incongruous in the context of the novel. Indeed, it is clear since the beginning of the novel that Sapo's story is devised and told by Malone. When, at the outset of the novel, Malone plans how he is going to occupy his time while he is waiting to die, he explicitly says that beyond describing his present state and making the inventory of his possessions, he is going to tell a story of a man – "I think I shall be able to tell myself four stories, each one on a different theme. One about a man, another about a woman, a third about a thing and finally

⁴⁹ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 14.

one about an animal, a bird-probably”.⁵⁰ In accordance to what stated, Malone proceeds by alternating passages where he describes his present state, or his possessions, with passages where he tells Sapo’s story. Thus, when Malone interrupts Sapo’s story to change some of the elements of it, the fact that Malone *stipulates* Sapo’s story does not come as a surprise nor is incongruous.

Of course this is not to deny that this passage contains comic elements. On the contrary the passage above contains several comic incongruities, and some of these comic incongruities depend on the stipulation. However, none of the comic elements depend on the switch between illocutionary acts, as this passage does not establish any incongruity. Some of the comic elements are to be found in the content of the stipulation and on the modality of the interruption. The narration is interrupted abruptly as if the narrator realises that something is quite wrong with ‘Sapo had no friends’ and decide to revise it. However, if ‘no friends’ is not good enough, ‘Sapo was on good terms with his little friends’ offers only a slightly more positive view, which is swiftly cancelled by the final part of the sentence ‘though they did not exactly love him’. As a consequence, the corrected description of Sapo’s friendship situation is more isolating than the initial ‘no friends’. Whilst the initial description leaves open the possibility that Sapo has no friends due to lack of opportunity to form friendships, the corrected version pictures Sapo as having unrequited friendships: he is alone amongst others.

Compare the previous passage with the following one from *Malone Dies*. The comic elements of the passage just quoted, where Malone is telling and devising Sapo’s story, do not depend on the simultaneous performance of the illocutionary act of *devising* and *telling*. In the following passage, by contrast, Malone is allegedly *reporting* his present situation, but in doing so he reveals that he might be simultaneously performing a different illocutionary act, *establishing*. By contrast to the passages from *Malone Dies*, analysed earlier, the switch and ambiguity between illocutionary acts results in comic effect.

Now it is the present **I must establish**, before I am avenged. It is an ordinary room. I have little experience of rooms, but this one seems quite ordinary to me.⁵¹

In this passage, Malone does not say that he must *describe* or *report* his present state, but he must *establish* it. This calls in question the illocutionary act performed *in* saying ‘It is an ordinary room’. The statement could be a description as well as a stipulation, and this second option is further supported by the last sentence. Malone reveals that he does not know much about rooms, so he might not be in the right position to compare it to others, but the room looks ordinary to him. The act of describing is subsequent to the act of establishing. Malone *in* saying that ‘the room is ordinary’ *establishes* so: it is an ordinary room in his experience, if compared to other rooms that he has seen. Given that he has established that the room is ordinary, *in* saying that ‘the room is ordinary’, Malone describes it. The

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 5.

⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

comic incongruities are introduced by ambiguity between these two acts. This comic ambiguity affects the interpretation of the other passages of the text where the narrator appears to describe. The readers might be resistant in recognising this as the force of the illocutionary act performed, knowing that in some occasions where Malone appeared to describe, he was in fact *establishing* that something was the case.

The comparison between the passages from *Malone Dies* where he tells and stipulates Sapo's story with the passages from *Malone Dies* where Malone establishes and describes his present state is an illustration of the fact that whether or not the ambiguity between two acts is incongruous partly depends on the context of their occurrence. We shall now consider a passage where the ambiguity between illocutionary acts takes place and yet it does not elicit comic amusement. Consider the incipit of 'All Strange Away':

Imagination dead imagine. A place, that again. Never another question. A place, then someone in it, that again. Crawl out of the frowsy deathbed and drag it to a place to die in. Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war, no, not that again. Five foot square, six high, no way in, none out, try for him there.⁵²

'All Strange Away' begins with a voice issuing some orders. The first sentence orders to 'imagine', the second makes the content of the first order more precise ([imagine] 'A place, that again'), and the third sentence orders the end of questioning ('Never another question'). The sentences that follow appear to perform a different illocutionary act: they seem to be *telling* the story of a person in that place. This act is, however, abruptly, interrupted ('no, not that again'), and the act of telling resumes but the scenery has changed. The brusque change between the act of ordering and the act of telling creates an ambiguity between which act is performed and when. The ambiguity between the illocutionary acts this time, however, does not result in comic effect. This is perhaps because the illocutionary ambiguity is present since the very beginning and it is not played against a norm that would set up a model of *congruity*. To reiterate, in this chapter we examined examples where we found a comic shift between illocutionary acts, from *reporting* or *describing* to *devising*, *stipulating*, *guessing*. This shift to *devising*, *stipulating*, *guessing* takes place against what, in each work, has been set up as the illocutionary acts to be expected, namely *reporting* or *describing*. In these instances, the illocutionary shift or the illocutionary ambiguity is comic because it is perceived against what has been set up as a model of congruity, i.e. a model of what would be expected. By contrast, in the incipit of 'All Strange Away' there is not a norm that establishes what is expected, what is congruous and what is incongruous, and hence, the illocutionary ambiguity results in estrangement, but not in comic amusement.⁵³ To phrase it differently, in the former case the model of congruity which is disrupted is prominent in the text, whereas in the latter is not.

⁵² Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976* (London: Faber & Faber, 2010e), p. 73.

⁵³ John Pilling's remarks on 'All Strange Away' resonate with our discussion here. According to Pilling, this text differs from other Beckett's works as it is not a text which "insinuates a submerged principle of composition behind its apparent randomness". The randomness, in this text, is not played against a principle of composition. By contrast, the material is

An incongruity such as ‘ambiguity’ is not then comic per se, but it depends on the context in which it appears. In particular, it results comic when the model of congruity that the ambiguity is set against is apparent and established. Thus, to account for the comic tone of an incongruity it seems important to take in considerations the prominence of the model of congruity against which is set. Notice that the considerations just made could be seen as indicating a possible approach to investigate the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions that we have set out in Chapter 1. Far from claiming to have found the solution of this problem, or to have found a further necessary condition to add to the Incongruity Theory, we are just pointing out a possible and promising avenue of investigation. Future studies could investigate the difference between humorous and non-humorous incongruities by looking at whether or not the pattern or norm disrupted by the incongruity was prominent.⁵⁴

3.4 Incomplete and Incorrect Acts

Recall Austin’s felicity conditions (B). He pointed out that an illocutionary act of speech misfires when the performance of the act is (B.1) incorrect or (B.2) incomplete. The performance of an illocutionary act is ‘flawed’, Austin’s term, when the procedure is performed incorrectly. For example, one does not successfully perform the illocutionary act of *marrying*, if one pronounces the wrong wedding formula or uses terms which do not identify the right individuals involved.⁵⁵ Moreover, a performance of an illocutionary act of speech misfires in those cases that Austin names ‘hitches’, that is when the performance of the illocutionary act is incomplete. If, during a wedding, one of the spouses say ‘I take you to be my wedded wife/husband’ and the other does not, the wedding is not successfully performed.⁵⁶ If conditions (B) are not met, Austin says, the illocutionary act is not performed at all, it misfires.

Austin considers the case of statements and claims that they too can fail to satisfy conditions (B). Although Austin claims that statements are liable to both flaws and hitches, he provides only examples of flaws. One fails to perform the illocutionary act of stating, Austin says, when one says something

approached in a “disarmingly uneconomical and haphazard way”. As a consequence, according to Pilling, the text exhibits “desperateness and anguish”. James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (London: John Calder, 1979), pp. 136-137 passim.

⁵⁴ This line of investigation might find support in recent studies in humour scholarship. However, these studies have a scope of investigation limited to puns and jokes. These studies have argued that, beyond the presence of an incongruity, a factor that plays a fundamental role in determining the ‘funniness’ (whether the pun or joke is funny) of puns and jokes is what they call ‘obviousness’. Jokes or puns are devices that involve two ways of interpreting a word or a situation. In the set-up of jokes and puns one of these two interpretations is made more *obvious* than the other, whilst in the punch line the other interpretation is made more obvious. In a similar manner our discussion has drawn attention to the fact that in the comic passages analysed, the incongruity is more likely to elicit comic amusement when the pattern disrupted by the incongruity is prominent. See, for example, Graeme Ritchie, *The Linguistic Analysis of Jokes* (London: Routledge, 2003), and Alan Roberts, ‘Funny Punny Logic’, *Dialectica*, 71/4 (2017), pp. 531-539.

⁵⁵ “These are flaws. They consist in the use of, for example, wrong formulas – there is a procedure which is appropriate to the persons and the circumstances, but it is not gone through correctly. [...] The use of inexplicit formulas might be put under this heading. Also under this heading falls the use of vague formulas and uncertain references, for example if I say ‘my house’ when I have two, or if I say ‘I bet you the race won’t be run today’ when more than one race was arranged”. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 36.

⁵⁶ “These are hitches; we attempt to carry out the procedure but the act is abortive”. Ibid.

and, by mistake, uses the wrong word. To use one of Austin's examples, a case of incorrect performance of the illocutionary act of stating is when one says 'the cat is on the mat' but he or she intended to say 'bat'.⁵⁷ The performance of the illocutionary act is flawed and the act of stating 'the cat is on the mat' misfires.

In the next paragraphs we shall examine comic instances in Beckett's works where the comic elements depend on the mis-performance of illocutionary acts, particularly on performances that are comically incongruous because incorrect and/or incomplete. This discussion enables us to make further considerations on the notion of *incongruity* and to indicate plausible avenues to investigate what marks the difference between incongruities that are comic and incongruities that are not comic.

3.4.1 Incorrect Performance of Illocutionary Acts.

There are several passages in Beckett's works where the connection between correct performance of an illocutionary act and successful performance of it is highlighted. This connection is often stressed negatively, that is, by infringing it, giving rise to comic effect. Look at the following examples:

So I got a tin and hung it from a button **of my greatcoat, what's the matter with me, of my coat**, at pubis level.⁵⁸

But now he knows these hills, **that is to say** he knows them better, [...].⁵⁹

Mr Hackett did not know when he had been more intrigued, **nay, he did not know when he had been so intrigued**.⁶⁰

In each of these three passages, the sentences are adjusted in due course, and so it is the performance of the illocutionary act. The narrator of the first passage describes how he used to beg for money. At the outset of the sentence, he mistakenly says that he used to beg using a tin which he hung from a button its greatcoat. In the second part of the sentence he corrects his mistake and reveals that he should have said 'coat' instead of 'greatcoat'. In the second passage, Molloy is telling the story of A and C, two men that he saw, from afar, crossing paths on a countryside road. In the passage reported above, Molloy is reflecting on the fact that perhaps C by wandering through the hills gets to know them. After having said his initial conjecture ('he knows these hills'), Molloy swiftly adjusts it and makes it more specific, 'he knows them better'. In the last quotation, the narrator of *Watt* describes Mr Hackett's mental state and adjusts the initial description ('Mr Hackett did not know when he had been more intrigued'), to a more cautious one ('so intrigued').

⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 138-139. Note Austin's irony here: his illustration of a 'flaw' is a flaw itself. The token statement that Austin has used throughout his lectures is 'the cat is on the mat', see, *ibid.*, pp. 48-52, 95, 136-137. Thus, one would expect 'the bat is on the mat' to be the flawed performance of the statement 'the cat is on the mat'. However, Austin swaps the terms, and use as in illustration as a purported statement, 'the bat is on the mat', one that looks flawed with respect to the token statements that he used thus far.

⁵⁸ Beckett, 'The End', p. 50.

⁵⁹ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 6.

⁶⁰ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 11.

The narrators, by correcting their utterances, reveal that they were performing illocutionary acts that did not meet Austin's condition of correctness (B.1). They were performing the purported illocutionary acts using words which were not appropriate. The initial statements 'So I got a tin and hung it from a button of my greatcoat', 'he knows these hills', and 'Mr Hackett did not know when he had been more intrigued' are shown to not be appropriate to the act that the narrators purported to perform, and thus they misfire. The second half of these utterances, however, makes some adjustments on what said in the first half and successfully performs the respective illocutionary acts. The presence of this local adjustment, corrections and misfires is one of the comic incongruities established.

The effect of these comic instances is not only local and limited to the misfire of a small portion of the text. By contrast, several passages that contain incongruities similar to those pointed out in the passage above work to introduce uncertainty around the felicitous performance at a larger level of the text. Let us look first at the passages below to compare them with those previously discussed. In the passages below, we witness the development of Malone's reasoning. The writing medium records the reasoning as a voice recorder would capture someone who would speak it out loud:

I could die to-day, if I wished, merely by making a little effort, if I could wish, if I could make an effort.⁶¹

I look forward to their giving me great satisfaction, some satisfaction.⁶²

From now on it will be different. I shall never do anything any more from now on but play. No, I must not begin with an exaggeration. But I shall play a great part of the time, from now on, the greater part, if I can. But perhaps I shall not succeed any better than hitherto. Perhaps as hitherto I shall find myself abandoned, in the dark, without anything to play with. Then I shall play with myself. To have been able to conceive such a plan is encouraging.⁶³

These passages contain many quasi-contradictions and adjustments. It is because of their presence that we know that what we are reading is the recording of the process of reasoning, rather than its outcome. Note that Malone does not describe his reasoning. The utterances are not about what the narrator wishes or plans, rather they are the acts of wishing and planning. Malone expresses wishes, desires, and he sets out plans. However, at the same time, he evaluates them, corrects them and adjusts them. This uncertainty is responsible for some of the comic amusement. The acts performed are the expression of someone who is not firm in his position and that, in trying to figure it out, keeps stumbling. The adjustments are what gives the impression of a reasoning in process. Malone is in the process of taking a resolution and, therefore, he adjusts some of the steps to arrive at the final outcome. Though clumsy, this is still a line of reasoning.

In a similar way, the corrections and adjustment that the narrators of the passages quoted previously perform during their narration give to the narrative a sense of work-in-progress. As in *Malone Dies*,

⁶¹ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 3.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

Malone does not report the act of reasoning, but he performs the act of reasoning, in a similar manner the narrators in the passages reported do not merely tell a story, but they shape and unfold the narrative before our eyes. The narration is corrected and adjusted while the narrators are narrating. This gives to the narrative a sense of comic uncertainty and openness.

Beyond providing elements of similarity with regard to the processes that unfold before the eyes of the readers, the comparison between the passages where narrators correct their own words and the passages where Malone performs the act of reasoning enables us to point out differences between these two sets of passages. Unpacking these differences illuminates another comic aspect that is introduced by some of the corrections. Let us look again at some of the instances quoted. The first of the following instances belongs to the first set of examples quoted, which grouped examples of corrections of sentences. The second and third of the following instances are taken from the second set of quotations examined earlier, where Malone is shown performing the act of reasoning. Lastly, we quote an instance from *The Unnamable*, which we have not yet examined. This last instance helps us to emphasise the differences between the other examples:

(1) So I got a tin and hung it from a button **of my greatcoat, what's the matter with me, of my coat**, at pubis level.⁶⁴

(2) I look forward to their giving me great satisfaction, **some satisfaction**.⁶⁵

(3) From now on it will be different. I shall never do anything any more from now on but play. **No, I must not begin with an exaggeration**.⁶⁶

(4) Keep going, going on, **call that going, call that on**. Can it be that one day, off it goes on, that one day I simply stayed in, in where, instead of going out, in the old way, out to spend day and night as far away as possible, **it wasn't far**.⁶⁷

The passage from *The Unnamable* (4) contains both the act of reasoning and the act of narrating. The two acts are, intentionally, difficult to distinguish and separate. Part of the difficulties in separating the two acts is due to the presence of the stances that appear to correct something that has just been said ('call that going, call that on', 'it wasn't far'). The presence of these stances shapes the illocutionary performance of the acts. Let us examine how.

The passage begins with what seems to be an act of reasoning. Particularly, the speaker could be taken to be urging himself to 'keep going, going on', or to be describing what it is attempting and aiming to do ('keep going, going on'). In any case, the text appears to be recording the flow of thoughts. By contrast, the illocutionary act performed by the next sentence appears to be of a different kind. The description of the actions of a day in the past ('one day I simply stayed in') invites to consider the utterance as performing the act of *reporting* or *narrating* something from the past. This interpretation

⁶⁴ Beckett, 'The End', p. 50.

⁶⁵ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 4.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Beckett, *The Unnamable*, p. 1.

is facilitated by the brusque intrusion ‘off it goes on’. Firstly, the use of the pronoun ‘it’ appears to refer to the narration (‘Off *it* goes on (the narration)’), suggesting that the sentence in which the intrusion appears is performing the act of *narrating*. Secondly, the intrusion, by commenting on the sentence where it appears, singles out the sentence and divides it from what precedes it.

The switch between illocutionary acts just described (from recording to narrating) however is far from being unambiguous. The last stance ‘it wasn’t far’ changes the perspective on the role played by the description. The speaking voice reflects and corrects something just said, and takes the description back to the fictional time of reasoning. The description, which appeared to contribute to the illocutionary acts of *narrating* or *reporting* something of the past, could as well as be contributing to the performance of the illocutionary act of *reasoning*. Reading the description of the day of the past as part of an illocutionary act of *reasoning* rather than *narrating* is further facilitated by the beginning of the sentence: the description starts off in an interrogative mode (‘Can it be that one day’) and not in the affirmative mode expected in descriptions.

Moreover, the ambiguity is not only of those acts that we first presented as illocutionary acts of reporting or narrating. By contrast, the two corrective stances, ‘call that going’ and ‘call that on’, change also the perspective on the illocutionary acts performed by the utterance ‘keep going, going on’, which we have initially described as the illocutionary act of reasoning. Firstly, these two corrective stances show that what appeared to be an act of reasoning is also an illocutionary act of *naming*: urging to ‘keep going, going on’, or describing one’s aim as ‘keep going, going on’ entails naming that performance as ‘going’ and the movement as ‘on’ (‘call that *going*, call that *on*’). Furthermore, if one takes into consideration that one of the acts performed by the utterances ‘keep going, going on’ is that of *naming*, then it becomes apparent the possibility that the illocutionary acts performed by ‘keep going, going on’ could be illocutionary acts of *narrating*. In naming the performance of the subject as ‘going’ and the movement of the performance as ‘on’, the voice is already fictionalising the situation. On this view, the stances ‘call that going, call that on’ could well be *protesting* against this fictionalisation.

The corrective stances in passage (4), rather than showing a mistake in a part of the sentence and correcting it, introduce illocutionary ambiguity. By contrast, in passage (1), the correction does not affect the fact that the illocutionary acts performed (once corrected) is an act of *stating*. Similarly, in passage (2), the correction does not affect what illocutionary act is being performed, namely an act of *expressing* (‘great’ or ‘some’) *excitement*. Only in passage (3) the corrective stance introduces illocutionary ambiguity making it similar, in this regard, to passage (4). The correction in passage (3) (‘No, I must not begin with an exaggeration’) changes the perspective on the illocutionary act performed in the initial stance. What could have been an illocutionary act of promising (‘I shall never do...’), it could as well as, after the correction, be an act of urging oneself to do something.

Beyond introducing illocutionary ambiguity, the corrective stances in passage (4) establish further comic incongruities that can be unpacked by looking at the perlocutionary acts (mis-)performed. Consider again the last correction in passage (4) ('out to spend day and night as far away as possible, it wasn't far') and compare it with the correction in passage (1) ('of my greatcoat, what's the matter with me, of my coat'). The correction in passage (1) substitutes a word that is used incorrectly with the correct one ('coat' for 'greatcoat'). The correction 'it wasn't far' in passage (4) could be taken as doing something similar: it could be showing that what has just been said was wrong ('far away' corrected with 'it wasn't far'). If read as a correction of this kind, the illocutionary act of stating performed by the initial version of the sentence would misfire. However, the correction 'it wasn't far' in passage (4) is not as flat as the one in passage (1) and it could as well as be taken as specifying something about the distance covered: it was indeed the longest distance possible ('as far away as possible'), and the longest distance possible is a quite short one ('it wasn't far'). Read like this, the correction would not play a role in determining the illocutionary success of the act of stating performed by the stance 'out to spend day and night as far away as possible, as the other corrections do. On the contrary, the correction would be affecting the *perlocutionary* acts that the stance performs. If the stance 'as far away as possible' gives to the audience the misleading information that the distance was long, the stance 'it wasn't far' corrects it.

Passage (3) contains a similar comic perlocutionary correction. The corrective stance 'some satisfaction' neither affects the felicitous performance of the illocutionary act performed by the stance 'I look forward to their giving me great satisfaction', nor introduces illocutionary ambiguity. In a similar way to the last stance of passage (4), the corrective stance in (3) affects the perlocutionary acts performed by the corrected stance. Whereas 'I look forward to their giving me great satisfaction' could have created the prospect of events of great excitement, the corrective stance tones down the level of excitement. The effect is easier to grasp if one considers that perhaps Malone's intended audience in the case of that utterance is himself and what he is attempting to do is to tone down his own excitement by playing into the performative acts of the utterance.

The comparison shows that corrections can shape the comic elements of a passage in different ways. In the simplest cases, their incongruity depends on revealing that a sentence was using incorrect terms causing some of the illocutionary acts to misfire. In other cases, corrections can introduce illocutionary ambiguity as well as perlocutionary misfire.

3.4.2 Incomplete Performance of Illocutionary Acts

Beckett's works also offer examples of hitches, i.e. instances where the illocutionary acts misfire due to the incompleteness of the performance of the speech act (contra B.2). Some straightforward cases could be found in *Malone Dies*. Several times sentences are not completed. In some cases, Malone interrupts his fictional narration half-way through a sentence when he is not happy with the direction

that the sentence or the narration is taking; “In his country the problem - no, I can’t do it”.⁶⁸ Other times, Malone interrupts sentences that are about his present situation as for example when he loses his pencil: “Ah yes, I have my little pastimes and they What a misfortune, the pencil must have slipped from my fingers, [...]”.⁶⁹ Then again, similar instances of incomplete performance of the illocutionary act can be found in *Watt* where the presence of several question marks signals the lack of some pieces of information.⁷⁰

The instances above are cases of hitches where the incompleteness of the performance of an illocutionary act is due to the incompleteness of the locutionary act. These sentences are unsuccessful in performing the illocutionary acts due to the fact that the correspondent locutionary act is interrupted and incomplete. There are instances, by contrast, where the incompleteness is not as evident and blatant.

A first case could be that of the entire narration of *Watt*. The completeness of the narration is called into question by the presence, at the end of it, of a sections that contains the ‘Addenda’, i. e. all the material that has been left out of the narration. The material that constitutes the ‘Addenda’ is presented as “precious and illuminating material” that was not incorporated into the narration due to “fatigue and disgust”.⁷¹ This section, far from being formed of marginalia and tangential episodes, contains material that could reveal that the narration of *Watt*, that ends with chapter IV, is actually incomplete. If illuminating material has been left out, then the narration of Watt’s experience might be incomplete. The situation is even more radical if one follows the invite to “carefully study” the material and takes in consideration one of the notes within the ‘Addenda’ which says “change all the names”.⁷² This note might be revealing not only that the illocutionary act of narrating Watt’s story is incomplete, but also that it is incorrect, as the name might be reported incorrectly.⁷³

If this reading is legitimate, then one should consider the purported illocutionary act of narrating Watt’s story as misfiring. This is to say that, whilst the novel appears to perform the illocutionary acts of narrating Watt’s story, the revelations about the missing information affects the felicitous performance of this act. Note that this would not amount to saying that no illocutionary act will be performed. Many indeed will be. For example, many individual illocutionary acts of describing, narrating and

⁶⁸ Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 21.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁷⁰ For example: “[...] for Watt had a poor healing skin, and perhaps his blood was deficient in?”. Or: “Perhaps you are right, said Mr Gorman. (Hiatus in MS) Yet we cannot leave him there like that, [...]”. Beckett, *Watt*, pp. 25, 207.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

⁷³ Ackerley expresses a similar view on the completeness of *Watt*, though not with regard to the illocutionary act performed: “The inclusion of the Addenda within *Watt* precludes any possibility of a finished or determinate quality to the novel as text”. Furthermore, the state of incompleteness of *Watt* is even more radical in Ackerley’s view, given that according to him the ‘Addenda’ refers back to the manuscripts and the actual process of composition of *Watt*. Ackerley notes also that *Watt* presents to its readers a mystery analogous to the one that Watt faces in the presence of Mr Knott. Watt as well as the readers are invited to investigate into this mystery. Chris Ackerley, ‘Fatigue and Disgust: The Addenda to “Watt”’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, 2 (1993), pp. 175-188, p. 175.

The relationship between the ‘Addenda’ and the completeness of the work, as well as the compositional process, and the way they affect the reader’s experience is also investigated in Byron, “Change All the Names”: Revision and Narrative Structure in Samuel Beckett’s *Watt*’.

commenting will be performed but the novel in its entirety would not be performing the purported illocutionary act of narrating the entirety (or at least the relevant parts) of Watt's story and experience in Mr Knott's house.

In other occasions the completeness of the illocutionary acts are called into question by passages where, similarly to what seen before in the case of correctness, the narration unfolds before our eyes. This is for example the case of some of the comic digressions. The following passage, for example, contains a digression which gives the impression that the narrator, Molloy, gets distracted while he is narrating his story:

I felt the first stars tremble, and my hand on my knee and above all the other wayfarer, A or C, I don't remember, going resignedly home. Yes, towards my hand also, which my knee felt tremble and of which my eyes saw the wrist only, the heavily veined back, the pallid rows of knuckles. **But that is not, I mean my hand, what I wish to speak of now, everything in due course,** but A or C returning to the town he had just left.⁷⁴

The narrator claims that he did not see much of A or C's departure as his attention was directed towards various things, amongst which his hand. By mentioning his hand, Molloy gets distracted from his narration and begins describing the hand. Once he realises that he is diverging from the point of narration, Molloy sets the narration back on its track. However, the fact that the digression is prompted by the simple mentioning of the hand gives the impression that the course of the narration is not pre-set, but that it is taking shape as it develops. The involuntary digression breaches the condition of completeness with regard to the digression left suspended half-way through and of correctness by showing that some of the material of the narration is misplaced.

Other passages that give the impression of a narration which is still open are those where the narrators set out to perform some illocutionary acts, but they struggle to complete them or lose track of them. There are situations in which this struggle derives from the attempt to be accurate. When this attempt is exaggerated, readers are left wondering whether the narrator had in mind what to say before starting uttering certain passages. This exaggeration, indeed, gives to the narrative the appearance of a ramble, as in the following passage:

But before passing from the Galls father and son to matters less litigious, or less tediously litigious, it seems advisable that the little that is known, on this subject, should be said. For the incident of the Galls father and son was the first and type of many. And the little that is known about it has not yet all been said. Much has been said, but not all.

Not that many things remain to be said, on the subject of the Galls farther and son, for they do not. For only three or four things remain to be said, in this connexion. And three or four things are not really many, in comparison with the number of things that might have been known, and said, on this subject, and now never shall.⁷⁵

⁷⁴ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 7.

⁷⁵ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 62.

The narrator decides that he wants to say more about the Galls' episode. However, in the attempt to justify why he must say more about the Galls and to specify how much is left to say about the episode, the narrator starts rambling. In this case an attempt to complete a picture leads to confusion and obscurity, calling into question the completeness of the passage.

3.4.3 Considerations

We shall look now at a last instance where the fulfilment of the condition of completeness and, consequently, the felicitous performance of the illocutionary act are called into question. This discussion enables us to make comparisons between passages that contain similar incongruities which, however, are not comic. Let us start from the passage below taken from *Watt*:

And so he rested for a little time, listening to the little night sounds in the hedge behind him, in the hedge outside him, hearing them with pleasure, and other distant night sounds too, such as dogs make, on bright nights, at the ends of their chains, and bats, with their little wings, and the heavy daybirds changing to a more comfortable position, and the leaves that are never still, until they lie rotting in a wintry heap, and the breath that is never quiet.⁷⁶

The narrator, who seems here to take on a rather lyrical tone, keeps adding information and elements to his description. It is as the narrator does not know from the beginning what he wants to say and he continuously adds bits to the sentence without ending it.⁷⁷ The fact that the locutionary act seems never to end is what leads us to ask whether or not the illocutionary act is ever satisfactorily performed. One wonders if the full stop at the end of the passage is placed because the list is concluded or because it is merely conventional. Nothing in the content of what the narrator says seems responsible for comic amusement. On the contrary, the incongruity which is apt to elicit comic amusement, lies in the way in which the illocutionary act of describing is (mis-)performed.⁷⁸

In order to fully grasp the openness of this passage from *Watt*, compare and contrast it with the following passage taken from *The Lost Ones*:

Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one. Vast enough for search to be in vain. Narrow enough for flight to be in vain. Inside a flattened cylinder fifty metres round and sixteen high for the sake of harmony. The light. Its dimness. Its yellowness. Its omnipresence as

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

⁷⁷ This use of the commas seems to me to be what Steven Connor describes as affecting an 'open chain'. According to Connor, one of the ways in which Beckett uses commas, is that of joining clauses in chains that extend due to the addition of alternatives. Such chains, however, do not end when their sense is completed, but when it is tired out. Connor provides the following passage from *First Love* as an illustration of this use of the comma.

It was December, I had never felt so cold, the eel soup lay heavy on my stomach, I was afraid I'd die, I turned aside to vomit, I envied them. Beckett, 'First Love', p. 63.

Whereas in our example the commas join the sounds heard, in Connor's one the actions performed.

See Steven Connor, 'Was That a Point?: Beckett's Punctuation', in S.E. Gontarski (ed.), *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 269-281, p. 273.

⁷⁸ As said, the shift between illocutionary acts is one of the ways in which the presence of a narrator is taken to the foreground. The connection between punctuation and presence of speakers is the focus of James Williams, 'Beckett between Words: Punctuation and the Body in the English Prose', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui*, 24 (2012), pp. 249-258.

though every separate square centimetre were agleam of the some twelve million of total surface.⁷⁹

In this last passage, the tone of the narration is quite different from that of the previous passage from *Watt*. In this passage from the *Lost Ones* as in the previous passage from *Watt* pieces of information are added in sequence. However, in the *Lost Ones* the pieces of information are added in self-contained utterances, each of which performs a complete illocutionary act. Each sentence provides a definite piece of information which add up to form the description of the ‘adobe where lost bodies roam’.

Compare now the passage from *Watt* to the two following passages, taken respectively from the short text ‘I gave up before birth’ and from *Company*. Both the passages share with the one from *Watt* the incongruous use of punctuation: ‘I gave up before birth’ is a text that contains only commas, and the passage from *Company* lacks commas. However, this incongruity is not comic in these two cases. We shall try to capture what is responsible for this difference:

I gave up before birth, it is not possible otherwise, but birth there had to be, it was he, I was inside, that’s how I see it, it was he who wailed, he who saw the light, I didn’t wail, I didn’t see the light, [...].⁸⁰

Though now even less than ever given to wonder he cannot but sometimes wonder if it is indeed to and of him the voice is speaking. May not there be another with him in the dark to and of whom the voice is speaking? Is he not perhaps overhearing a communication not intended for him?⁸¹

As for the passage from *Watt*, the first passage contains an incongruous use of punctuation: full stops are absent and the commas are used to join together several stances. However, by contrast to the passage in *Watt*, the commas are not used to add parts of a same locutionary and illocutionary act. The parts of the discourse that are added perform illocutionary acts of different types. For example, the first, fourth and fifth part (‘I gave up before birth’, ‘it was he’, ‘I was inside’) perform the illocutionary act of stating. On the other hand, the second and the third part (‘it is not possible otherwise’ and ‘but birth there had to be’) perform the act of reasoning. The question around completeness, and hence the connected comic incongruity, this time does not arise, given that each stance adds a self-contained and different illocutionary act: this time is not the completeness of the performance of a single illocutionary act at issue.

The second passage is characterised by a lack of punctuation. Despite this, the illocutionary acts performed by the sentences appear complete. Take the first sentence, which is, at first, quite challenging to read. The structure of the sentence is complex with regards to its ordering (‘if the voice is speaking to and of him’ would have been easier to read than ‘if it is indeed to and of him the voice is speaking’)

⁷⁹ Samuel Beckett, ‘The Lost Ones’, in Beckett Samuel (ed.), *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), pp. 101-120, p. 101.

⁸⁰ Beckett, *Texts for Nothing and Other Shorter Prose, 1950-1976*, p. 145.

⁸¹ Samuel Beckett, *Company/Ill Seen Ill Said/Worstward Ho/Stirrings Still* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009c), p. 4.

and because some parts are left implicit ('*he is* given to wonder' would have been easier to read than simply 'given to wonder'). Furthermore, due to the lack of punctuation, there is also a lack of guidance and indication on how to navigate this complexity. However, the sentence becomes easier to read once one reads it a second time and becomes familiar with it. The sentence dictates to the reader the speed and mode of reading: the lack of punctuation, rather than inciting the reader to read the sentence in one breath, promotes a piecemeal reading where each part of the sentence is added in sequence ('Though now even less than ever/ given to wonder/ he cannot but sometimes wonder/ if it is indeed/ to and of him/ the voice is speaking'). Once the rhythm of reading takes up, the rest of the passage requires less effort to read. In contrast to the example taken from *Watt*, in this passage the various stances compound and complete the sentence as well as the illocutionary act. Despite the difficulties of reading it, and the lack of (or incongruous use of) punctuation, the sentence does elicit the question of completeness and, hence felicity, of the illocutionary speech acts.

The three passages all contain an incongruous use of punctuation, and yet only in the passage from *Watt* this incongruity elicits comic amusement. The key to understanding this difference lies in the analysis we have provided. Not only is the passage from *Watt* the only one where the completeness of the illocutionary act is called into question, but it is also the only one where the model of congruity, against which the incongruity is set, is present in the novel. In each of the passages the use of commas is incongruous with a correct grammatical use of them. However, the correct grammatical use of commas is only present in *Watt*. By contrast, 'From afar a bird' and *Company* are since their outset misusing the punctuation. The passages from these two works do not contrast with a ground of *congruity*. The misuse of punctuation, the complex structuring of the sentences, as well as the continuous shift between illocutionary acts are incongruities that lead to estrangement without resulting in comic effects. As said at the end of the previous section, these considerations could be taken as an indication of a possible avenue for approaching the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions set out in Chapter 1. Investigating the role played by the prominence of the pattern of congruity disrupted might provide fruitful insight on what marks the difference between instances that elicit amused reactions and those that do not.

3.5 Abuses

Recall Austin on the condition (*I*) that must be satisfied in order for the performance of an illocutionary act to be felicitous. Austin points out that, for an illocutionary act to be felicitous, (*I*.1) speakers must have the appropriate kind of thoughts, feelings and intentions, they must intend to conduct themselves as required by the act performed, and (*I*.2) they must actually conduct themselves in accordance to what is required by the act once the act is performed. By contrast to what happens when conditions (A) and (B) are not satisfied, when condition (*I*) is not satisfied the illocutionary act does not misfire. If, (contra *I*.1) one does not have the appropriate kind of thoughts, feelings or intentions, or (contra *I*.2)

one does not conduct oneself as required by the acts purported to perform, the illocutionary act is still performed, however, the performance is suboptimal. Particularly, we face cases that Austin calls ‘abuses’, which are distinguished in ‘insincerities’ (when $I.1$ is not met) and ‘breaches’ (when $I.2$ is not met).⁸² For example, if I respond to my friends’ invitation to their wedding by saying ‘I promise I will be there’ when (contra $I.1$) I know it will be impossible for me to be there on that day, the illocutionary act of promising is performed, but something is not quite right. In this case, the act is successful, but it is an abuse, an ‘insincerity’ specifically. Then again, if I respond to the invitation by saying ‘I promise I will be there’, but then (contra $I.2$) I do not conduct myself in such a way to trying to fulfil my promise, for example I do not make any effort in organising myself for attending the wedding, the illocutionary act of promising is performed, but it is an abuse of the ‘breach’ kind.

Austin also offers examples of insincerities and breaches with regards to the illocutionary act of stating. As the felicitous performance of the illocutionary act of promising implies that I have the intention to fulfil the promise, an act of stating implies that I believe that what I state is true.⁸³ If I say ‘I state that Beckett wrote *Ulysses*’ but I do not believe that Beckett did so, I would have performed the illocutionary act of stating, but my act should be regarded as an insincerity, to use Austin’s terminology. The problem is better captured when the illocutionary act that I purport to perform is one where sincerity is a relevant feature of the act. For example, if I give my testimony in court, and my words are not sincere, I would have stated something, however, my illocutionary act of stating would be somehow ‘unhappy’, in Austin’s technical use of this term.

Austin discusses cases of breaches with regard to the illocutionary act of stating. Breaches, we have said, are cases in which the speaker or those involved in the speech situation do not conduct themselves as the illocutionary speech act performed would require. Austin notes that where a statement p entails another statement q , then $\neg q$ entails $\neg p$. For example, the statement ‘the cat is on the mat’ entails the statement ‘the mat is underneath the cat’, and excludes the statement ‘the mat is above the cat’. The same relation holds for the performance of the illocutionary act of stating. If one were to state ‘the cat is on the mat’ such performance commits to saying that ‘the mat is under the cat’. To be sure, I could say ‘the mat is above the cat’ and the performance of such an act would be successful. However, condition ($I.2$) of my former statement would be unfulfilled and the statements would turn out to be a breach.⁸⁴ Thus, we turn to our case of testimony and jury. If someone states contradictory sentences, then one would ask whether or not the performance of the illocutionary act of stating is actually an abuse of it.

⁸² Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 16.

⁸³ “We have already noted that sense in which saying, as equivalent to stating, ‘The cat is on the mat’ implies that I believe that the cat is on the mat. This is parallel to the sense – is the same sense – as that in which ‘I promise to be there’ implies that I intend to be there and that I believe I shall be able to be there”. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 136-137.

In what follows we look at instances in Beckett where some of the comic elements of the passages can be reduced to the fact that these instances are cases of ‘insincerities’ and ‘breaches’.

3.5.1 Insincerities

In Beckett’s works, different types of passages give rise to questions around the attitude of the speakers and the performance of illocutionary acts. In some instances, the speakers, often the narrators, express doubts on the truth of something they have just stated, calling into question the felicitous performance of the illocutionary acts that they are performing. Consider the examples below:

But the general appearance of the river, flowing between its quays and under its bridges, had not changed. Yes, the river still gave the impression it was flowing in the wrong direction. **That’s all pack of lies I feel.**⁸⁵

When she had finished and my self been resumed, mine own, the mitigable, with the help of a brief torpor, it was alone. **I sometimes wonder if that is not all invention**, if in reality things did not take quite a different course, one I had no choice but to forget.⁸⁶

Both passages start with sentences that the narrators appear to use in order to perform the illocutionary act of *stating* (‘The river still gave the impression...’, ‘When she had finished and my self been resumed...’). However, both narrators immediately express their doubts on the truthfulness of what they have just stated (‘that’s all pack of lies’, ‘I sometimes wonder if that is not all invention’). This calls into question the performance of the act of stating, which though successful, might be read as ‘unhappy’, to use Austin’s terminology. The narrators are successful in performing the illocutionary act of stating; however, the performance is not completely satisfying.

Similar considerations could be made for some of the instances that we have catalogued under the category of contradictions in the previous chapter. For example, we offered the following passage as an example of flat contradiction:

Her speech was that of a woman of the people, but of a **gentlewoman of the people.**⁸⁷

Given that the term ‘gentlewoman’ allegedly refers to a woman who comes from a high social class, the epithet ‘gentlewoman of the people’ contains a contradiction. The contradictory nature of the statement calls into question the felicitous performance of the illocutionary act of stating which, albeit successful, invites us at least to not take what stated literally, but to enquire in what the narrator wants to say with it.

⁸⁵ Beckett, ‘The End’, p. 40.

⁸⁶ Beckett, ‘First Love’, p. 67.

⁸⁷ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 37.

3.5.2 Breaches

Contradictions can perhaps be read also as cases of breaches. As Austin says, for an illocutionary act to be successful, the speaker must conduct himself or herself as appropriate to the illocutionary act in question. In particular, an illocutionary act of stating is an abuse of the ‘breach’ type if contradictory statements are uttered. As in the case of ‘insincerities’, the illocutionary act of stating is performed (it does not misfire), but the performance is ‘unhappy’.

It is possible to find passages, in Beckett’s works, that contain contradictory statements and that could be considered as ‘breaches’. See for examples the two following passages taken from *Molloy*:

But **I also said**, Yet a little while, at the rate things are going, and I won’t be able to move, but will have to stay, where I happen to be, unless someone comes and carries me. **Oh I did not say it in such limpid language. And when I say I said**, etc., **all I mean is that** I knew confusedly things were so, without knowing exactly what it was all about. [...]. **And I did not say**, Yet a little while, at the rate things are going, etc., but that resembled perhaps what I would have said, if I had been able.⁸⁸

It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. [...] 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.⁸⁹

The initial illocutionary act of stating performed by Molloy (‘I also said, Yet a little while, at the rate things are going...’) appears to be subject to both cases of abuses. Firstly, Molloy reveals that his statement about what he said is not actually true, either because he did not use those specific words (‘Oh I did not say it in such limpid language’) or because the meaning of what he stated did not correspond to what he intended to say (‘And when I say I said, etc., all I mean is that...’). This turns his initial illocutionary act of stating into a case of insincere performance. Furthermore, he then contradicts the initial statement (‘And I did not say, Yet a little while...’), thus contradicting the initial statement, and turning the initial illocutionary act of stating in a case of breach performance.

Similar considerations can be made for the second passage. Moran at the end of his report quotes and declares false the opening statement of the report. The illocutionary acts performed in uttering these two illocutionary statements are affected one by the other. In saying those two statements Moran is performing illocutionary acts that, according to Austin’s doctrine of Infelicities, should be regarded as abuses.

Note that these instances of contradictions resemble the instances of corrections examined in the previous section. Distinguishing between the categories of Infelicities is not always straightforward, and this should not be a worry. As Austin pointed out early on his study, the performance of illocutionary acts can go wrong in different ways simultaneously.⁹⁰ Furthermore, the “ways of going

⁸⁸ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 89.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 95, 184.

⁹⁰ To use Austin’s example, “we can insincerely promise a donkey to give it a carrot”. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, p. 23.

wrong ‘shade into one another’ and ‘overlap’, and the decision between them is ‘arbitrary’ in various ways”.⁹¹

Other instances could amount to be cases of breaches insofar as they reveal something about the attitude of the narrators towards the act of narrating. Consider the passages below:

I don’t know why I told this story. I could just as well have told another. Perhaps some other time I’ll be able to tell another.⁹²

Bodies don’t matter but hers went something like this: [...] But what matter about bodies?⁹³

If the words of the narrators in these two passages are taken at face value, then they give an indication of what is their attitude. In the first passage, from ‘The Expelled’, the narrator reveals two things about his narration. He has not narrated the story for some specific reasons and any other story could have been narrated instead. The narrator of ‘Draff’, in the second passage quoted above, opens and closes the lengthy description of Smeraldina’s body by stating that ‘bodies don’t matter’. In saying this, the narrator reveals that the description he is performing is not relevant for understanding the rest of the story. Given that bodies do not matter, the description of Smeraldina’s body is not necessary for understanding the story and does not add anything relevant to it.

Each of these passages is then revealing that what is being narrated might be irrelevant and might not be used to convey a message or to illustrate some points. These instances defeat some basic expectations: that when one tells a story, (i) one tells a story for at least a reason (to illustrate a point, to convey a message, to entertain, ...) and (ii) one selects material for the story (characters, episodes, description, ...) in such a way that is in accordance with the reason to tell the story (to facilitate the illustration of a point, to facilitate the conveyance of the meaning, to maximise the entertainment, ...). The narrator of the first passage contradicts these expectations by revealing that there is not a reason for which the narrator has chosen to tell the story (contra i) and the story has not been selected against others: any other story would have done the same job (contra ii). The narrator of the second passage explicitly states that the description he is going to provide does not matter, leading to think that there is no reason for him to indulge in it (contra i), and that it is not important for the story (contra ii).

Notice that the words used by the narrators to intervene onto the narration could not be taken at face value, and the narrators’ interventions could be interpreted in other ways. For example, the narrator’s intervention in the second passage could be considered to be ironical. Rather than revealing the narrator’s ‘true’ attitude, one could take the passage as responding ironically to those who claim that ‘bodies do not matter’. This reading would be further supported by considering how Smeraldina’s body

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Beckett, ‘The Expelled’, p. 16.

⁹³ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, pp. 167-168.

is described and how this description fits into the story. The description of Smeraldina's body seems to contrast with the statement that 'bodies do not matter'. As we have shown in Chapter 2, the narrator describes Smeraldina by emphasising the materiality and sexual qualities of her body. In addition, the emphasis placed on the alluring aspects of Smeraldina's body corresponds to information about her provided elsewhere in *More Pricks than Kicks*. The letter that she writes to Belacqua (in 'The Smeraldina's Billet Doux'), as well as her decision to hasten into a new relationship just after the death of her husband Belacqua reveal her lustful character.

According to this alternative reading of the narrator's words as being ironical ('bodies don't matter... but what matters about bodies?'), and in contrast to the reading offered previously, Smeraldina's description plays a central role in building the character 'Smeraldina'. However, in this reading, as in the previous one, the intrusion reveals something about the narrator's attitude, and the mechanisms that are in play are the same. The narrator, by intruding, invites us to consider the significance and importance of the description he has just provided. It is because of this invitation that we question his attitude and we wonder whether we should take his words at face value or we should consider them as an expression of irony. The intrusion leads us to question the felicitous performance of the illocutionary act of describing, to ask whether it is an abuse or not, and, as a consequence, to question the narrator's attitude.

Similar considerations can be made about the intrusion in the first passage, where the narrator of 'The Expelled' appears to reveal that he did not tell his story for a specific reason. However, these words could also be interpreted in different ways. Firstly, these words could be interpreted as a declaration of impotence of the narrator. The narrator has told a story where many episodes have the potential to be emotionally charged (the brutal dismissal from his house, the memories about purchasing his first hat with his father), and he might be declaring that he is not in control of choosing what to narrate. The narrator, by declaring his ignorance about the motivation behind his narration and his inability to tell another story, might be revealing that these memories continuously recur to him, or that he is haunted by them. In contrast to this reading of the narrator's intervention as emotionally charged, one could read his words as being ironical. Given the potential emotive weight of the episodes told in the story, the narrator releases some tension by shading doubts on the poignancy of the story.

Regardless of how one interprets the narrator's intervention (at face value, as an emotional comment or as the effort to place some ironic distance between him and the content of the story), Austin's notion of 'abuses' is still helpful to understand the mechanisms that the intervention puts in play. The narrator's attitude is questioned when the intervention raises the possibilities that the story told did not meet some conditions ordinarily expected for the felicitous performance of the act of narrating. As in 'Druff', there are no conclusive elements that support one reading over the others. By intervening onto the narration, the narrator introduces ambiguity around his own attitude and uncertainty about the optimality of the

performance of the relative illocutionary acts. This ambiguity and this uncertainty are what generate comic amusement.

Whilst these passages reveal something about the attitude of the narrators while they are narrating, other passages reveal that the narrators might not be conducting themselves as the practice of narration might require. If we look again at the basic expectations outlined earlier, we might add a third clause. Given that when someone tells a story, we expect that (i) one narrates a story for a specific reason and (ii) one selects the material of the story accordingly, then we also expect that (iii) one includes the material selected in the narration, developing them properly. This, however, does not always seem the case. Look at the passages below:

It was no doubt to this tree that the garden owed its existence, [...]. But to have done with this tree and hear no more about it, from it the garden derived what little charm it still possessed, not to mention of course its name.⁹⁴

I will not tell what followed, for I am weary of this place, I want to go.⁹⁵

These passages are similar; the narrators grow impatient with their own narration ('hear no more about it', 'I am weary of this place'). As a consequence of it, the narrator of *Mercier and Camier*, in the first passage, quickens his description of the garden ('to have done with it'), and Molloy, in the second passage, decides to skip an episode of his story ('I will not tell what followed'). The actions taken by the narrators seem to be in contradiction with what is required for the felicitous performance of the illocutionary act of narrating. If we assume that it is the case that (i) and (ii) hold in the case of these narrations, and hence that the narrators are telling their stories for a reason and they have selected what to narrate in accordance with such reason, then deciding to hasten the narration or to skip an episode appears in contradiction with (iii). *Mercier and Camier's* narrator, by deciding to hasten the description of the garden might not have appropriately developed the material linked to it. In a similar manner, Molloy by skipping an episode of the story could be excluding some of the material selected for the story.

'The 'Addenda' section in *Watt*, if the notes that accompanies the section is correct, discloses information that turn the novel in an even more blatant case of infringement of condition (I):

The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied. Only fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation.⁹⁶

Whether the speaking voice here is that of the narrator or of the author, it is not of great importance, in both cases this reveals something infelicitous with the attitude behind the narration. If illuminating material has been left out due to disgust and fatigue, then clause (iii) of our sketched description of narration is not met. Furthermore, one also wonders whether or not the materials that have been included,

⁹⁴ Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, p. 5.

⁹⁵ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 21.

⁹⁶ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 215.

were chosen to be part of the narration over the one left out for a specific reason. If only 'fatigue and disgust' is the reason for leaving the material of the 'Addenda' out of the narration, then the clause (i) does not hold for the narration of *Watt*.

Note that the interpretation could go in the opposite direction. One could consider the note contained in the 'Addenda' as lying about the importance of the material contained there. In any case, it is the presence of the note that affects the readers' uptake of the illocutionary acts performed. The ambiguity on the status of the note shapes the illocutionary ambiguity.

In the passages analysed in this and in the previous sections, there are elements of the texts that introduce ambiguities that affect the performance of the purported illocutionary acts. Readers are often left puzzling about what is that Beckett's stories and novels ultimately do. In the next chapter, we shall show how Beckett exploits these ambiguities to create different movements at the level of illocutionary acts which significantly affect the experience of the readers.

Chapter 4: Twists, Convolutions and Oscillations

4.1 Introduction

The discussion in this chapter takes a bold departure from the discussion of the previous ones. This thesis began from asking a genuinely philosophical question around the nature of humour ('what *is* humour?'), and proceeded with an investigation aimed to answer the question 'what *is* humour in Beckett?' This investigation has been carried out by attuning philosophy and literary criticism and it has developed a set of tools which have been used to describe the comic of language acts. In this last chapter, we shall show how to make use of this set of tools and we shall show their resourcefulness. In order to do so, the discussion in this chapter takes a genuinely literary turn. We consider pivotal works of Beckett and we proceed with a careful and piecemeal analysis of different features of Beckett's writing.

The literary analysis that we shall carry out in this chapter thus differs markedly from the analysis of comic devices that we have provided in Chapter 3 in style and aims. Firstly, in Chapter 3, our discussion has mainly focused on short passages of the text. This strategy has given us the opportunity to look at a variety of examples and to concentrate on the features of the comic mechanisms without worrying excessively with the context from where the passages are extracted. However, this type of analysis does not entirely render justice to the experience of reading Beckett's works, where the comic tone often develops across long passages of texts. Furthermore, Chapter 3 has developed a set of tools to analyse comic devices by looking at passages where the comic incongruities (the breach of one of Austin's felicity condition) was somehow evident and circumscribed. This, however, is not always the case with Beckett's works where, as Laura Salisbury has pointed out, "Beckett's comic moments are hard to extract and describe"; the more so because, and according to Salisbury precisely because, the comic tone is often being questioned.¹ Finally, by focusing on short passages, the discussion carried out in Chapter 3, though it has provided us with a set of tools to approach the comic elements in Beckett's texts, it has not fully shown the potential of those tools. Whilst the discussion in Chapter 3 has shown the potential of the tools developed to collect a new array of comic devices belonging to a category (comic of language acts) to which previous studies have not drawn attention, not much has been said on how these tools can help us to identify some pivotal characteristics of Beckett's writing or how these tools can contribute to the debate around it.

In contrast to Chapter 3, this chapter shows how to *make use* of the set of tools developed (in both sense of the expression, how to *employ* this set of tools and how to *capitalise* on it). Having done extensive

¹ Salisbury, *Samuel Beckett: Laughing Matters, Comic Timing*, p. 2. Salisbury's analysis takes the uncertainty of the comic tone and the reflective character of some of the comic passages at the focus of her study of Beckett's humour. Shane Weller discusses some of the complex elements of Beckett's comedy too. In particular, he discusses the significance of the uncertainty of the direction of the humour (who is laughing at whom or what) as well as of the characters' awareness of their comic status. See Weller, 'Last Laughs: Beckett and the Ethics of Comedy'.

groundwork in the first three chapters of the thesis, we now have the opportunity to delve more deeply into Beckett's works. As we said, this departure necessitates a marked change of the style and the type of discussion.

Firstly, to show how to *employ* this set of tools in approaching a text, our discussion must begin from Beckett's works *and* develop inside them. Indeed, if the analysis in this chapter is to do justice to the experience of reading Beckett's work, it should entail a careful description of key elements of Beckett's writing. Such a description is one that is perceptive and alert to the features of Beckett's writings and which is carried out by a piecemeal discussion of their different facets. The discussion will pay particular attention on the elements such as sentence structure, word choices and sequences of sentences and paragraphs. In each of the sections of this chapter, the discussion starts from a main work of Beckett (*More Prick than Kicks*, *Watt*, and *Molloy*), and it develops in accordance to their key elements.

Secondly, to show how to *capitalise* on the set of tools developed, our discussion enters in a dialogue with some of the debates in Beckett's studies. This results in a significant change from the discussion in the previous chapters with regards to the type of considerations that are drawn from the outcomes of our analysis. The outcomes of our analysis are shown to contribute to the debate in Beckett's studies by testing some of the positions in this debate, as well as by offering new perspectives on it.

Thus this chapter aims to (i) put the set of analytical tools developed in Chapter 3 to the test by (ii) engaging with some of the debates in Beckett's studies and by (iii) engaging with long and/or complex texts. The outcome of (i), putting the tools to the test, will be considered positive if (ii) and (iii) are fruitful. Particularly, the analytical tools we have developed will turn out to be resourceful if: in (ii) engaging with some of the debates in Beckett's studies, our tools (iia) can capture the debate and more so if they (iib) can make new points that advance the discussion; and in (iii) engaging with long and/or complex texts they are able to (iiia) offer description of pivotal aspects of key Beckett's texts and more so if they (iiib) can offer a description of those comic elements that are not circumscribed or straightforwardly evident. Notice that, given these aims, the three sections of this chapter should not be considered as mere case studies that could have been relegated to an appendix. Quite the opposite, their presence is vital insofar they do not merely test the validity of the tools developed, but they prove their resourcefulness. The analyses carried out in the next three sections are not just illustrations of how the tools work, they prove the importance of developing those tools.

The choice of focusing on *More Pricks than Kicks*, *Watt* and *Molloy* to achieve our aims depends on two main reasons. Firstly, we have privileged the variety of writing and comic styles: each of these texts differ significantly in style from the others. By challenging our tools with this variety, we test their ability to deal with an array of styles as well as their sensitivity to it, i.e. their responsiveness to the differences as well as to the similarities between these texts. Secondly, we have chosen these texts for their importance in the arch of Beckett's writing career and development. On the one hand they could

be seen as standpoints signalling significant steps taken by Beckett. *More Pricks than Kicks* is Beckett's first collection of short stories to get published, and indeed his first substantial prose work to get printed. This collection comes after the publication of several poems and some sparse short proeses, as well as after the time spent working on his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, which however was not published until after his death. *Watt*, on the other hand, is Beckett's last substantial work written in English before he turns to French as his first language of composition. *Molloy* represents Beckett's first major novel written in French as well as the first chapter of the trilogy, which are perhaps Beckett's main prose works. Given the centrality and importance of these works, analysing them might result in offering considerations that, if picked up by further studies, could contribute to the wider debate around Beckett's works.

Having outlined the aims and rationale behind our analysis in this chapter, we shall now delimit the scope of our considerations. The considerations and remarks that we are going to make in the three sections of this chapter do not aim to be definite, exhaustive or comprehensive in capturing the characteristics of the three works analysed. By contrast, these three sections should be understood as spotlights that deal with specific aspects of these texts to fulfil the aims that we have outlined. Specifically, we anticipate that we will identify three movements that happen at the level of the illocutionary acts and which bear an interesting relationship to the comic.

Firstly, we shall individuate 'twists' that take place at the level of illocutionary act. This is a movement that takes places in texts where some elements allow for interpreting illocutionary acts in more than one way and, importantly, as performed by different speakers. However, many of these acts are mutually exclusive. This means that when one sees the act performed as performed by a speaker and as of a certain kind, then other available options of interpretations are consequently ruled out. However, the ambiguity between the possible interpretations is never dispelled given that the elements present do not give conclusive evidence in favour of one of the options. The presence of the ambiguity allows for taking in consideration the other options which, in their turn, exclude the first one examined and causing a twist in the illocutionary acts. What initially was considered as performed by a speaker, e.g. the narrator, is now considered as performed by a different speaker, e.g. the character, and in connection to this a twist between illocutionary acts takes place.

Secondly, we shall draw attention to movements that take place at the level of illocutionary acts which we indicate as 'convolutions'. In this case sentences and utterances are such that rather than giving rise to a progression in the narration, they fold back on each other and they originate convoluted movements. The illocutionary acts initially performed by utterances and sentences are almost cancelled by those performed by the utterances and sentences that follow, giving thus the impression that no step ahead is taken in the narration.

The third movement individuated - 'oscillations' - can also be grasped in contrast to the expected progression of the narration. These movements are generated by utterances and sentences placed in sequences such that the presence of later elements of the sequence calls for re-examining the interpretation of the illocutionary acts of previous sentences and utterances. At the same time, sentences and utterances that appear early on in the sequence affect the interpretation of the illocutionary acts of the later sentences and utterances too, thus generating a back and forth movement where the illocutionary acts are under constant re-interpretation.

As a final note, we shall anticipate that examining these movements allows us to draw attention to the features of the texts and of comic elements that support the indication that we have given in Chapter 3 about a possible direction that future studies of humour could take for addressing what we have defined as the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions.

4.2 Twists

More Pricks than Kicks is the first of Beckett's works with which we challenge and put to the test the analytical tools developed in Chapter 3. As we said, we test the resourcefulness of our analytical tools by seeing whether they contribute to discussions that take place in the literature around the work examined, as well as by proving their ability to capture pivotal elements of the work analysed. Particularly, to carry out this test we choose to focus our discussion of *More Pricks than Kicks* on one of its aspects, i.e. its discontinuous nature.

The uneven and discontinuous style of *More Pricks than Kicks*, Beckett's first collection of short stories, has captured the attention of Beckett's critics since its appearance. The contrast between the continuity given to the collection by the ubiquitous presence of Belacqua and the discontinuity of styles and tone from story to story, as well as the fragmentation internal to individual stories due to the various digressions and the vagaries of the art of making "a great deal of everything",² have been recognised since early criticism.³ John Pilling and H. Porter Abbott see this tension between continuity and discontinuity, with both its positive sides as well as its limits, as the hallmark of the collection of short stories.

John Pilling argues that "it was doubtless part of Beckett's purpose in putting *More Pricks than Kicks* together to frustrate a reader's attempt to make the collection a more ordered one than its narrative discontinuities allow it to be".⁴ Pilling presents a range of evidence in support of his claim, amongst which, for example, he points out that the order in which the stories are collected invites the reader to

²Edwin Miur's review of *More Pricks than Kicks* for 'Listener', collected in L. Graver and R. Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1979), p. 44.

³ See the reviews collected in *ibid.*, pp. 43-46.

⁴ Pilling, *Beckett before Godot*, p. 99.

expect a continuity for then frustrating this expectation.⁵ Similarly, the continuity established by the ubiquitous presence of Belacqua is supported by the presence of footnotes where episodes are cross-referenced and, at the same time, frustrated by remarks that do not match up with other stories. This, for example, is the case, Pilling points out, of the remark at the beginning of 'Fingal', where we are told about "The last girl [Belacqua] went with",⁶ without having yet met the first of Belacqua's girls.⁷ Then again, as Pilling says, the discontinuity is established by the open-ended finale of some of the stories which invites readers to expect that the last episode will continue in the following story, only to find the expectation frustrated each time.⁸

If taken farther, Pilling's comments seem to unravel a playful attitude behind the construction of *More Pricks than Kicks*: readers' expectations of an ordered collection of stories are set up and frustrated contributing to the overall comic tone of the collection. Similarly, Porter Abbott singles out a constant tension between unity and disunity in *More Pricks than Kicks* and he explicitly attributes to its presence the intention to mock fictional conventions.⁹ The discontinuity in this work, according to Abbott, could be seen in the lack of consistent "satiric butts nor a consistent sympathetic portrait of Belacqua", as well as in the "use of distinct stylistic departures for certain chapters as a whole".¹⁰

Both Pilling and Abbott singles out the variety of styles as one of the factors of discontinuity in the collection of short stories. This variety is apparent just by skimming through the book. Compare, for example, these incipits:

My sometime friend Belacqua enlivened the last phase of his solipsism, before he toed the line and began to relish the world, with the belief that the best thing he had to do was to move constantly from place to place.¹¹

Hark, it is the season of festivity and goodwill. Shopping is in full swing, the streets are thronged with revellers, the Corporation has offered a prize for the best-dressed window, Hyam's trousers are down again.¹²

The Toughs, consisting of Mr and Mrs and their one and only Ruby, lived in a small house in Irishtown.¹³

Bel Bel my own bloved, *allways* and for *ever* mine!!¹⁴

⁵ "The final order of *More Pricks* misleads the reader into thinking that 'Dante and the Lobster' will be followed by similar stories, and by following it with 'Fingal' and 'Ding-Dong' Beckett misleads the reader into thinking that there will be more variety in the stories than in the event there proves to be. The relative sameness of the *More Pricks* material is, however, tacitly acknowledged by placing two very similar stories, 'Walking Out' and 'Love and Lethe', alongside one another at the centre of the collection". *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 17.

⁷ Pilling, *Beckett before Godot*, pp. 100-101.

⁸ This is, according to Pilling, the case for the ending of 'Fingal', 'Ding-Dong', 'A Wet Night', 'What a Misfortune'. *Ibid.*, pp. 101-102.

⁹ Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, p. 22.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26 *passim*.

¹¹ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 31.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143.

Whilst the majority of the stories in the collection are told by a third person external narrator, some of the stories depart from this model. As the first incipit illustrates, 'Ding-Dong' is told by an internal character. By contrast, as shown in the last incipit, in the 'The Smeraldina's Billet-Doux' we hear Smeraldina's voice, who writes a loving and lustful letter to Belacqua. There is also a good variety of styles amidst the stories told by a third person external narrator, and the second and third incipit quoted should give a good taste of it.

The discontinuity of the styles of the stories of this collection does not only depend on the nature and type of their narrators. The frequency and intensity with which, in each story, the narrative voice decides to reveal itself with comments and asides is another factor that distinguishes the stories collected. The intrusions of the narrative voice, which as we have seen in Chapter 2 is individuated by Cohn as one of Beckett's comic devices, have been singled out by both Abbott and Pilling as a device to dis-unify the single stories, as well as the entire collection. According to Pilling, the interventions are used to fragment the style and "interrupt any continuum which might threaten to take over".¹⁵ According to Abbott, the continuous 'interjections' are used by Beckett to manipulate his authorial image, and in particular, to present it as a "flux of shifting attitudes". The various interjections contribute to picture Beckett as an author, Abbott argues, who is "alternately bored and amused, indifferent and exasperated", and who manifests "a complete indifference to the value or success of the book itself". However, Abbott warns against seeing in this disdainful attitude a residue of unified personality, and hence a last fortress of unity. Indeed, one must compare the authorial attitude that is evinced from the intrusions with the fact that the author took "trouble to compose the book, to give it characters and chapters, and to publish it".¹⁶

Pilling, Abbott and Cohn agree in interpreting the interjections as the intrusion of a single voice, but they disagree on the identity of the voice. Whilst Pilling suggests that the voice belongs to the narrator, Abbott and Cohn seem inclined to identify it with the voice of the author. Furthermore, these scholars stress different effects brought about by the interjections: whilst for Pilling the interventions interrupt a continuity in style, for Abbott they interfere with the unity of the authorial attitude.

In what follows we want to engage with this debate by providing a different reading of these intrusions. Whilst we do not question the role that these intrusions and interjections play in dis-unifying the text, we take issue at the views of these scholars insofar as they see these intrusions as being performed by a single agent (the narrator for Pilling, and the author for Abbott and Cohn). On the contrary, by using our analytical tools, we aim to show that the discontinuity of voices in the texts is more radical and the identity of the intruding voice more uncertain. Far from aiming to argue for each passage for one of the

¹⁵ Pilling, *Beckett before Godot*, p. 103.

¹⁶ Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, p. 31 passim.

possible interpretations of the identity of the voice, we shall show that the result of the abruptness and the ambiguity of the illocutionary act performed allows for the presence of a polyphony of voices. This polyphony enhances the comic tone of the passage as well as introducing a more radical disunity of that described by Abbott and Pilling.

Let us first start our analysis by looking at those instances of intrusions that support Pilling, Abbott and Cohn's view. We have already analysed some of these comic instances in the previous chapters. We have discussed the comic intrusion of the author or narrator onto the narration of events in 'Love and Lethe' to give definitions of terms ('Reader...'). Then again, we have discussed the comic intrusion onto the narration of events in 'Dante and the Lobster' when the narrator switches from the illocutionary act of *reporting* to the illocutionary act of *stipulating* ('Let us call it...'). Finally, we have discussed the comic interruption of the narrative in 'Draff' to comment on the use of 'two adjectives and two nouns' in a sentence.

These instances, as with several others in the texts, share the fact that the narration is interrupted by metanarrative intrusions which are about some elements of the narration: defining terms in 'Love and Lethe', devising the setting where the events take place in 'Dante and the Lobster', and commenting on some of the words used in the description in 'Draff'. The fact that the narration of the events is interrupted by metanarrative utterances is perhaps what invites the identification of the intruding voice with that of the narrator or the author: the voice is of someone that is handling the narration. Note that this type of comic intrusions not only supports the interpretation of the intrusions as performed by a single voice, but it also supports Pilling and Abbott's descriptions of the comedy established by the intrusions. Indeed these intrusions, when conceived as performed by the narrator or the author, frustrate the expectation of an ordered narration, which is typical of traditional literature; this frustration could be considered as a source of comic amusement.

However, in *More Pricks than Kicks* there are many intrusions which are not metanarrative, and which allow for multiple interpretations of the intrusive voice's identity. In these instances the narrator or author are not the only candidates as possible speakers. Analysing these instances allows us to capture two features of the writing of *More Pricks than Kicks*. Firstly, it leads us to identify a movement - a 'twist' - that takes place at the level of the illocutionary acts, and, secondly, it allows us to capture further incongruities that are characteristic of the comedy of this collection of short stories.

Let us start from those instances where some elements of the texts allow for reading the voice of the narrator as entering in a dialogue with the character. The possibility of this interpretation is generated by the abrupt changes of illocutionary acts performed as well as by the ambiguities around the illocutionary force of the acts performed. This is to say that the texts contains words and sentences for which it is difficult to say with a good degree of confidence what illocutionary acts are performed. It is difficult to say what the speakers are doing in uttering those words and sentences.

Examine, for example, the following passage taken from 'Fingal'. Belacqua and Winnie are out for a walk in the countryside. The narrator reports their dialogue in the form of direct speech:

'Oh Winnie' he made a vague clutch at her sincerities, for she was all anyway on the grass, 'you look very Roman this minute.'

'He loves me' she said, in earnest jest.

'Only pout' he begged, 'be Roman, and we'll go on across the estuary.'

'And then...?'

And then! **Winnie take thought!**

'I see' he said 'you **take thought**. Shall we execute a contract?'

'No need' she said.¹⁷

The utterance 'Winnie take thought' could be considered as one of the intrusions that Abbott and Pilling attribute to the narrator or the author. They, for example, would be intruding onto the narration to perform the illocutionary act of warning, or urging, Winnie to take thought.

One could even take this reading further, and pursue the possibility that, by urging the character to take thought, the narrator also shapes the story. Belacqua's reaction ('I see [...] you take thought') suggests that Winnie takes thought, and one could say that Winnie does so because the narrator or the author urges her to do so. The intruding voice could be seen as a sort of inner voice, or someone who has the control of Winnie. If this is the case, then the narrator or the author would be interfering with the story and not simply narrating it or commenting on it. Seen in this way, the illocutionary act of urging and its consequences establish new incongruities which facilitate comic amusement.

However, this is not the only interpretation of the utterance 'And then! Winnie take thought!'. In the part of the story that precedes this excerpt, the narrator has been proven to be able to access and report both Winnie and Belacqua's thoughts. Given that Belacqua repeats something similar right after the exclamation under discussion, it would not be surprising if the exclamation is actually a report of Belacqua's thoughts. Perhaps it is Belacqua, and not the narrator or the author, who is hoping that Winnie takes thought, or who is perhaps ironically urging her to do so.

The elements that the text offers are not enough to favour one interpretation over the other, leaving the matter ambiguous. The presence of this ambiguity initiates the 'twist' at the level of illocutionary acts. Indeed, by taking in consideration one of the available options, others are blocked but not cancelled. For example, if we consider the words 'Winnie take thought!' as uttered by the narrator and as performing the illocutionary act of warning or urging, then the interpretation that sees these words as uttered by Belacqua is blocked. However, given that there are no conclusive evidence in favour of the former interpretation, the latter is still there available to be taken in consideration. If this happens, then the pictures of the situation, of the identity of the speaker and of the illocutionary acts performed twists to a different scenario where the speaker is Belacqua who is commenting on Winnie's thoughts. This

¹⁷ Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 19.

time too, there are not enough elements for deciding in favour of this option, and the other which is momentarily blocked, is not discarded.

In passages like this, the source of comedy is thus at least twofold. On the one hand, the abrupt intrusion causes comic amusement. This comic aspect is the one highlighted by Pilling and Abbott's description. On the other hand, the comedy depends on the ambiguity of the acts performed and of the identity of the voice who speaks. The ambiguity around the identity of the voice as well as around the nature of the illocutionary acts is comic.

Many passages in *More Pricks than Kicks* are similar to the last one quoted insofar as they contain intrusions where identifying the identity of the intruder is challenging and insofar the ambiguity thus established give way to illocutionary 'twists'. Look at the following instance from 'Dante and the Lobster'. Belacqua's aunt opens the parcel containing the lobster that Belacqua had bought from the fishmonger and carried with him all day. He discovers in that moment that lobsters are boiled when still alive:

'Christ!' he said 'it's alive.'

His aunt looked at the lobster. It moved again. It made a faint nervous act of life on the oilcloth. They stood above it, looking down on it, exposed cruciform on the oilcloth. It shuddered again. Belacqua felt he would be sick.

'My God' he whined 'it's alive, what'll we do?'

The aunt simply had to laugh. [...] 'Well' she said 'it is hoped so, indeed.'

'All this time' muttered Belacqua. Then, suddenly aware of her hideous equipment: 'What are you going to do?' he cried.

'Boil the beast' she said, 'what else?'

'But it's not dead' protested Belacqua 'you can't boil it like that.'

She looked at him in astonishment. Had he taken leave of his senses?

'Have sense' she said sharply, 'lobsters are always boiled alive. They must be.' She caught up the lobster and laid it on its back. It trembled. 'They feel nothing' she said.

[...]

She lifted the lobster clear of the table. It had about thirty seconds to live.

Well, thought Belacqua, it's a quick death, God help us all.

It is not.¹⁸

During this passage the narrative voice, which is performing the illocutionary act of describing, is perceived as neatly separate from the voices of the characters. On the one hand, this neat separation is achieved by allowing the readers to hear the characters' voices in the dialogue, which is reported in direct speech. On the other hand, the short descriptive sentences create the impression that the narrator is looking at the scene from an external position and describes it almost objectively ('It moved again', 'they stood above it', 'it shuddered again').

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 13-14.

By contrast, the final ‘it is not’ is uttered in such a sharp contrast to what precedes it that identifying whose voice is saying this is not as straightforward and gives way to the comic ambiguities. Firstly, the utterance ‘it is not’ comes after a tight and fast exchange of lines between Belacqua and his aunt. The abrupt contradiction of what Belacqua thinks and hopes sounds as a direct response to those thoughts and hopes. If it was the narrator uttering those words, he would not be simply *stating* that something is the case (i.e. that lobsters do not die quickly), but also *responding* to Belacqua and thus entering into a dialogue with him. Secondly, even if we consider the final remark as uttered by the narrator, it is not clear what other illocutionary acts this utterance is performing. Is it a description? Or is it a comment? Is it a scornful remark on Belacqua’s naiveté? Thirdly, the utterance of ‘it is not’ stands in such a sharp contrast with what precedes it, that it gives rise to the possibility that it is not the narrator the one who utters this. It could be the horrified Belacqua who, after having seen the lobster boiling, changes his mind about the quickness of death. On a different scenario, it could be a new voice intruding onto the conversation. It could be the lobster itself who, perhaps ironically, is uttering the final ‘it is not’, or it could be the voice of God who would be responding to Belacqua’s invocation (‘God help us all’).

As in the previous case, each different scenario blocks the other without discarding them. This gives way to twists between them which include twists of voices and illocutionary acts. And as in the previous case the source of the comedy is double. Firstly, the comedy depends on the abrupt intrusion, and secondly, it depends on the ambiguity around the identity of the voice who is speaking and the nature of the illocutionary acts performed.

Similar considerations can be made for the following passage from ‘Draff’. After Belacqua’s death, Hairy, Belacqua’s best friend, invites Smeraldina, late-Belacqua’s wife, to start a relationship with him. Smeraldina considers the possibility and considers the fact that accepting Hairy’s invitation might be what Belacqua would have wanted for her. After all, she thinks, Belacqua did something analogous when, shortly after losing his wife Lucy, he had married Smeraldina. Perhaps, Smeraldina conjectures, there is no better way to honour Belacqua’s memory than that of following his steps. However, the footnote introduces a different perspective on the view entertained by Smeraldina:

‘Why not come with me’ said Hairy, ‘now that all this has happened, and be my love?’

[...]

‘Perhaps after all’ murmured the Smeraldina ‘this is what darling Bel would wish.’

[...] They fell silent. [...] The Smeraldina, far far away with the corpse and her own spiritual equivalent in the bone-yard by the sea, was dwelling at length on how she would shortly gratify the former, even as it, while still unfinished, had that of Lucy¹, and blot the latter for ever from her memory.

¹ A most foully false analogy.¹⁹

The footnote, which is a self-contained and separate text, isolates the comment that it contains and, thus, draws attention on to it and onto the voice that performs it. If the text was deprived of the footnote, the

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 179-180.

readers' focus would be entirely on the story. By contrast, the footnote works as an aside comment or as an intrusion in diverting the readers' attention away from the episode narrated. The footnote demands the readers' attention by asking them to move their sight away from the main body of the text and, hence, to interrupt the flow of reading. The story is put on pause for as long as the reader is engaged with the footnote.

The speaking voice, *in* uttering the sentence reported in the footnote, performs at least two illocutionary acts. It states that something is the case (Smeraldina's analogy is false), and judges Smeraldina's behaviour (which probably is as unfair as her analogy is erroneous). Some comic incongruities are established by performing these illocutionary acts in a footnote.

Firstly, if we identify the voice who speaks in the footnote with that of the narrator, then the narrator is using the footnote in an unconventional way. Footnotes are usually employed to provide supporting information that, nonetheless, is not essential in order to convey the main point discussed in the main body of the text. By contrast, the footnote in this passage provides pieces of information which radically change the interpretation of the story. If the narrator had not provided this information, one would have considered Smeraldina's behaviour differently. She would be seen as honouring the memory of her late husband by accepting Hairy's invitation. However, the footnote informs us that this is not what Belacqua would have wanted (the analogy is 'false') and that Smeraldina has made the analogy for her own benefit (the analogy is 'fouly'). The analogy is fit for the occasion as it justifies her behaviour.²⁰

Furthermore, the isolation of the illocutionary acts via the footnote, beyond drawing the readers' attention to them, emphasises them in such a way that these acts stand out from the text, introducing the possibility that someone who is not the narrator performs them, and giving way to the twists between scenarios. For example, it could well be the late Belacqua, whose corpse lies between Smeraldina and Hairy, who utters the words reported in the footnote and who is judging Smeraldina's behaviour.²¹ If this is the case, then the interpretation of the illocutionary acts performed in the footnote changes too: Belacqua might be protesting against Smeraldina's behaviour or he might be trying to warn her against it. The abruptness introduced by the isolation of speech gives way to these further comic ambiguities which depend on the uncertainty around the voice who speaks and around the type of illocutionary acts performed.

There is a second type of instances where the intrusions give way to comic polyphony of voices and to the twists between scenarios. In the illustrations of ambiguous polyphony of voices provided so far, the

²⁰ Note that this is not the only incongruity established by the use of footnotes. However, this is an incongruity that has to do with the illocutionary act performed.

Other type of incongruities can be individuated and described. First, isolating these acts from the acts of narrating in the main body is incongruous in this particular text, where the narrator is not stingy with intervention during the narration. The text is scattered with his comments on the character as well as with remarks about the narrative. Ruby Cohn provides a list of the interventions in Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, pp. 55-57.

²¹ This would not be too exceptional for a Beckett's work as other of his characters seem be coming back in a post-mortem state. See Samuel Beckett, *Echo's Bones* (London: Faber & Faber, 2014), and Beckett, 'The Calmative'.

voice, which initially appears to be that of the narrator, could as well as come from different sources. By contrast, in the passages that we are going to examine now, the polyphony is such that the voice, which at first appears to be that of one of the characters, might as well be that of the narrator:

Belacqua took in the whole outfit at a glance and felt, the wretched bourgeois, a paroxysm of shame for his capon belly. The bitch, in a very remote manner, stepped up to the cart and sniffed at the rags.

‘Cmowathat!’ vociferated the vagabond.

Now Belacqua could see what he was doing. He was mending a pot or a pan. He beat his tool against the vessel in his anxiety. But the bitch made herself at home.

‘Wettin me throusers’ said the vagabond mildly ‘wuss ’n meself.’

So that was his trousers!²²

Mrs Tough was used to the whims of Ruby and took them philosophically usually. But this latest fancy was really a little bit too unheard of. **Coffee in the lav! What would father say when he heard? However.**

‘And the rosiner’ said Mrs Tough, ‘will you have that in the lav too?’

Reader, a rosiner is a drop of the hard.

Ruby rose and took a gulp of coffee to make room.

‘I’ll have a gloria’ she said.

Reader, a gloria is coffee laced with brandy.

Mrs Tough poured into the proffered cup a smaller portion of brandy than in the ordinary way she would have allowed, and Ruby left the room.²³

In the first passage, taken from ‘Walking Out’, Belacqua, who is out in the countryside for a walk with his dog (‘the bitch’), meets a vagabond who is ‘mending a pot or a pan’. The expression of surprise that closes the passage (‘So that was his trousers’) appears, at first, as uttered by Belacqua. This interpretation is supported by an analysis of the context in which illocutionary acts occur that privileges consistency,²⁴ and which would exclude that the narrator could be the one expressing surprise. A narrator who is performing the act of *reporting* a story cannot be *surprised* by what he is reporting. To be sure the narrator could have been surprised when he ‘got to know’ the story, or the narrator could report his surprise about an episode or an event. However, the sentence ‘So that was his trousers’ is expressing surprise at the moment of narrating the story, and that seems to be inconsistent with the act of reporting a concluded story. The interpretation of the surprised voice as Belacqua’s is also facilitated by the use of the indexical ‘now’ few sentences above, which moves the focalisation of the narration from being external to coinciding to that of Belacqua’s. Indeed, the use of ‘now’ as opposed to, for example, ‘at that point’ (‘*At that point* Belacqua could see...’), as well as the use of the modal ‘could’ as opposed to the simple past (for example, ‘*At that point* Belacqua *saw*...’) set the narration into the fictional present of the story. Furthermore, Belacqua’s focalisation is further stressed by the fact that the description of the scene is provided in two short and disconnected sentences that mimic Belacqua’s sequential understanding of the scene: the narration appears to disclose information as Belacqua

²² Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, p. 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁴ The importance of the context for understanding a sentence meaning is at the heart of the view developed by Sperber and Wilson in Dan Wilson Sperber, Deirdre *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (2 edn.; Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

discovers it. The climax of the sequence of discovery is reached with the final denouement revealed in the final surprised expression ('So that was his trouser!').

However, it is possible to read the final surprised expression in a different way. One could interpret the expression of surprise as uttered by the narrator. This reading is enabled by exactly the same mechanisms that have facilitated the interpretation of the expression as uttered by Belacqua. The coincidence between the focalisation of the narration with Belacqua's point of view does not cancel the voice of the narrator, who can be seen as discovering the scene at the same time as Belacqua does. If read in this way, it is possible to see how the narrator could be as surprised as Belacqua for the discovery. The comedy in this case depends on the fact that the narrator intrudes on to the narration as well as on the fact that the narrator performs illocutionary acts (expressing surprise) that are unexpected in well-formed narration where the narrator has full control of the story, but also on the ambiguity around the identity of the voice too.

A similar twist between voices takes place in the second passage quoted. We have already examined the intrusions of the narrator ('Reader... Reader...') in detail in the last chapter. By contrast, we want to focus now on the shocked and puzzled expression: 'Coffee in the lav! What would father say when he heard?'. As for the first passage, in this case too, the inconsistency between the illocutionary act of reporting and the illocutionary act of expressing shock and puzzlement promotes an interpretation of the passage that identifies the utterer of the shocked expression with Mrs Tough. This interpretation is further facilitated by the presence of the contemptuous expression 'however' that pairs up with the contemptuous behaviour in pouring the brandy ('Mrs Tough poured into the proffered cup a smaller portion of brandy than in the ordinary way she would have allowed').

However, in this case too, the interpretation could be twisted. The double intrusion of the narrator onto the narration of events ('reader... reader...') takes the voice of the narrator to the foreground enabling to see the shocked and puzzled expressions as being uttered by the narrator. In this case the narrator would be (comically) sharing the same contemptuous attitude of Mrs Tough, and after an initial moment of shock he would resume the narration ('However.'). The fact that the identity of the voice who utters these shocked comments is ambiguous enhances the comic tone of the passage.

The analysis of the example selected in this section has shown that the disunity in some of the texts collected in *More Pricks than Kicks* is more radical than what described by Abbott and Pilling insofar as it contains a comically ambiguous polyphony of voices and it gives way to twists between scenarios. In so doing, this section has proved that the analytical tools that we have developed in Chapter 3 not only are able to capture the elements at stake in a debate in Beckett's scholarship, but that they can fruitfully contribute to it. Furthermore, this section, by drawing attention to the presence of the ambiguous polyphony of voices and of 'twists', has proved that our analytical tools are able to capture

the pivotal elements of complex passages of texts. Finally, notice that it is by focusing on the comedy of language acts that we have been able to describe the device defined as ‘twist’. This device can be indeed only be captured by an analysis that focuses simultaneously on incongruity and on the illocutionary acts performed in the text.

4.3 Convolutions

This section focuses on another of Beckett’s main works, *Watt*. As for the first section, our main aims are that of putting the analytical tools developed in Chapter 3 to the test by challenging them with complex passages and engaging them with debates on specific aspects of the novel. In particular, as in the previous section, we select an aspect of *Watt* that has been often discussed by Beckett scholars. Critical analyses of *Watt* have often stressed that Watt’s attempts (and failures) to understand the reality that surrounds him are reflected in the experience of reading the novel, rather than being the subject represented in the novel. Readers are invited to assume the same attitude towards the novel that Watt assumes towards reality, and, in particular, towards Mr Knott’s establishment. Readers are placed in such a position that they are asked to make order in the material which the novel presents them with, and as for Watt, their attempts to do so are continuously frustrated.²⁵

The elements that are provided as evidence for these readings are often of two types. On the one hand, the polyphony of narrative and authorial voices, as well as, the structure of the novel in four of the chapters plus an ‘Addenda’ section is shown to be made up of elements that puzzle the readers and challenge them to make order in the material.²⁶ On the other hand, the heavy presence of lists, permutations and enumerations of hypothetical possibilities is seen as a mark of Watt’s mind and, at the same time, as inducing the readers to experience Watt’s mind. As put by Ruby Cohn in *A Beckett Canon*, they “madden the reader with reason in order to show the madness of reason”.²⁷

In what follows we aim to show that the analysis that we have offered in Chapter 3 can contribute to the discussions around these features by capturing the nature of the experiences that these two sets of evidence are pointing out. In the first part of this section, we shall show that the polyphony of narrative voices give way to ‘twists’ similar to those individuated in *More Pricks than Kicks*. On the other hand, in the second part of this section we shall focus on the second set of evidence. In both cases, we shall

²⁵ See for example, Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, pp. 56-74 Ackerley, ‘Fatigue and Disgust: The Addenda to “Watt”’, p. 175 Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 118 .

²⁶ Ackerley, ‘Fatigue and Disgust: The Addenda to “Watt”’, Byron, “Change All the Names”: Revision and Narrative Structure in Samuel Beckett’s *Watt*’, Byron, ‘The Ecstasy of “Watt”’.

For an attempt to situate some of the structural features of *Watt* in a wider literary context see John Chalker, ‘The Satiric Shape of *Watt*’, in Katharine Worth (ed.), *Beckett the Shape Changer* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), pp. 19-37.

²⁷ Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 118, Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 65-94, Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, pp. 56-74.

show that our analysis is able to capture the devices that are singled out by other scholars and to unpack layers of comic elements that depend on those devices and are often overlooked.

Furthermore, our analytical tools will allow us to describe a device that is characteristic of *Watt*. As we shall show the narration in *Watt* often proceeds by ‘convoluted’ movements, rather than progressing. These convolutions are one of the devices that are responsible for the comic tone of the novel as well as for significantly contributing to the experience of reading it.

4.3.1 Illocutionary Twists in *Watt*

As said, part of the experience of reading *Watt* depends on the fact that the novel is inhabited by a narrative voice whose status is questioned on two complementary aspects: its identity and its position in relation to the story. On the one hand, it is difficult to place an identity on the voice speaking, and it is not clear that the speaking voice is unitary. On the other hand, as we have seen in the section on authority in Chapter 3, the access of the narrator to the information is often questioned too. By calling into question the status of the narrative voice, the nature and success of the illocutionary acts performed are called into question too, generating incongruities able to elicit comic amusement.

The main event of *Watt* that raises the question on the identity of the narrator takes place at the beginning of Part III, where the narrator is revealed to be a character in the story.²⁸ Sam (this is the name of the character) is reporting the story that Watt himself has narrated to him when they were both guests of the same institution. The denouement of Watt and Sam’s relationship adds a new framework to the story as well as a new narrative thread. In Part I and Part II there is only a single narrative thread and framework: the two parts contains the events that compound the story of Watt’s journey towards Mr Knott’s house and his experience there. By contrast, Part III places what has been told in an additional framework: the story that has been told thus far is Sam’s report of Watt’s report of his journey and his stay in Mr Knott’s house. This also gives way to a further narrative thread which is about the time Watt and Sam has spent together in the institution and which is mainly occupied by the narration of how Watt has narrated his story to Sam. Sam’s denouement causes a twist in the position occupied by the narrator (authority) – from external narrator to internal character – and, consequentially, it causes a twist in the illocutionary acts performed, from external bird view testimony or report to an internal secondary report of a story.

However, the twist from external to internal narration is not as smooth as this description implies. *Watt* contains elements that hinder the identification of the narrative voice with Sam’s as well as the recognition of the illocutionary acts that Sam is performing as acts of reporting Watt’s story. Whilst

²⁸ Before the denouement at the beginning of Part III, there were in the texts signs that the story could have be the report of an internal character. In few occasions in Part II the narrator hints to the fact that the story he is telling derives from Watt’s own reports, as when he refers to Watt’s ‘mouthpiece’ (Beckett, *Watt*, p. 57) or to the “scant aptitude” to receive Watt’s communications “of him to whom they were proposed”, (p. 62). Furthermore, in one occasion the narrator swiftly makes explicit that he is the addressee of Watt’s report - “at the period of Watt’s revelation to me”, (p. 65).

Sam, who reveals to be the narrator of Part III, could be easily the narrator of Part II too, the same cannot be said for Part I and Part IV. Indeed, given that the events of Part II are told in third person and the focalisation of the narration coincides with Watt's, the narrative voice could be easily interpreted as being that of Sam's, who is reporting what Watt has told him. By contrast, Part I and Part IV contain episodes where Watt is not present making it more difficult to interpret these chapters as Sam's reports of Watt's narration. This is, for example, of the opening episode with Mr Hackett and the Nixons,²⁹ and of the last episode at the station, which closes on Mr Nolan, Mr Gorman and Mr Case puzzled about Watt's disappearance.³⁰ Furthermore, the narration sometimes follows secondary characters with a perspective that cannot be Watt's. For example, the narration indulges on a short digression focused on the newsagent, who crosses paths with Watt at the station, describing his arrival at home and his departure from it the day after.³¹ Similarly, in Part IV, the considerations that lead Mr Case to the decisions to let Watt stay in the waiting area of the station are reported, despite the fact that Mr Case did not disclose these considerations to Watt.³² Finally, the matter is further complicated by the presence of footnotes and 'Addenda' that hints to the presence of a further authorial voice.³³

The difficulties in identifying the narrator affect the uptake of the illocutionary acts performed.³⁴ If we take the voice to be unitary, and we take it to be that of Sam, then Part I and Part IV would be the product of Sam's stipulation. Once we admit that those two parts could be Sam's stipulation, then the status of Part II and Part III becomes unstable as well: Sam could be reporting or he could be stipulating these two parts. By contrast, we could consider *Watt* as inhabited by a polyphony of voices, where Part II and Part III are chapters that report Sam's perspective on Watt's story.

As said for the 'twists' individuated in *More Pricks than Kicks* the incongruities that the twists between an illocutionary act to the other introduce as well as the incongruities due to the unresolved ambiguities around the identity of the voice and the nature of the acts significantly affect the experience of reading this novel and makes it apt for eliciting comic amusement.

4.3.2 Convolutions

The polyphony of voices and the twist between illocutionary acts performed in the novel, though puzzling, do not account on their own for the experience of reading *Watt*. And indeed, the dense

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 3-18.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 214.

³¹ "Now at the end of the platform the newsagent came out of a door, wheeling his bicycle. He would carry it down the winding stone stairs and then ride home. There he would play a game of chess, between masters, out of Mr Staunton's handbook. The next morning he would carry his bicycle up the stairs again". Ibid., p. 20.

³² "The reasons that had led Mr Case to settle this, in his mind, rather than something else, Mr Case had the delicacy to keep to himself, as being more likely to cause Watt pain, than to cause him pleasure". Ibid., p. 200.

³³ The interpretation of the footnotes as presenting the voice of the (fictional) author is facilitated by the fact that some of the footnotes are used to point out mistake in the narration as well as instances of 'artistic license'. Ibid., p. respectively at 87 and 86.

For a list of all the instances that affect the reliability of the narrator as well as the difficulty to identify it with Sam, see Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, pp. 118-120.

³⁴ The discussion here is taking a slight departure from Austin's original theory as he did not discuss the issue related to identification of the utterer.

presence of repetitions, lists, permutations and enumeration of hypothesis are held responsible for inducing the reader to experience Watt's mind, rather than simply reading its representation. These rationalist devices have been seen as the result of Watt's obsession with precision and rational explanation,³⁵ and, in its turn, this obsession has been associated with Watt's failure to come to terms with reality.

If, on the one hand, the enumeration of all the possible hypothetical explanations for the events represents Watt's attempt to impose an order on to reality, on the other hand, the misuse of enumeration and of mathematical devices creates a larger gap between Watt's attempt to understand reality and reality itself. Firstly, as Kenner has pointed out, in the attempt to have a precise picture of reality, Watt accumulates hypotheses that - because they are not tested against reality - create a series of merely hypothetical scenarios.³⁶ Furthermore, the failure of this approach is emphasised by the fact that often the process of reasoning is not taken to its end by Watt: the hypotheses that he formulates, not only are not tested against reality, but they are not weighted against each other in order to perform a selection and arrive to a conclusive explanation. The other techniques employed in *Watt* face a similar failure. The extensive application of repetitions and permutations onto the description of the reality does not take Watt far in understanding it. Repetitions and permutations are ways to list possible arrangements of elements, which, however, do not provide a picture of the actual arrangement that they are trying to capture. Furthermore, as Mood have accurately pointed out, many of these lists and enumerations are defective, contributing thus to experiencing the failure of Watt's rationalist approach to reality.³⁷

Note that the failure that is related to the maniac employment of hypotheses, repetitions and permutations in *Watt* can be captured also at the level of illocutionary acts. Firstly, if one takes Watt as purporting to perform the illocutionary act of *arguing* when he sets off to enumerate the hypotheses that could explain a certain arrangement or certain events, then one must recognise the misfire of such act when the process of arguing is not taken to its end. At most Watt can be seen *listing* the hypothesis, but the act of listing, however, hardly counts as an explanation of events. Furthermore, although the illocutionary act of *listing* hypotheses about how things are arranged could potentially contribute to the act of *describing*, given that none of the hypotheses are chosen as the most plausible one, the list of hypotheses do not end up describing the reality around Watt, but they do indirectly provide a picture of Watt's mind. Thus the illocutionary act of describing Watt's reality, to which the illocutionary act of

³⁵ This reading is present since early criticism. See for example, Jacqueline Hofer, 'Watt', in Martin Esslin (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 62-76 Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, pp. 65-94.

³⁶ Kenner, *Flaubert, Joyce and Beckett. The Stoic Comedians*, pp. 75-86.

³⁷ John J. Mood, "The Personal System" - Samuel Beckett's Watt', *PMLA*, 86/2 (1971), pp. 255-265. Cohn reports personal correspondence with Beckett that confirms Mood's argument that Beckett intentionally has introduced mistake in lists and permutations. See Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, pp. 120, fn 10 p. 396.

listing was set out to contribute, misfires and what might be successfully performed is the perlocutionary act of offering a picture of Watt's mind.

The obsession with precision and the failures due to this obsession are what, according to Cohn, shape the reader's experience of *Watt* who, in her words from her 1962 study, "no longer knows whether to laugh or scream".³⁸ The various incongruities that we have highlighted indeed are at the same time apt for eliciting comic amusement as well as excruciation and frustration. Cohn's words are echoed by several other scholars as well as by herself in a later study: the obsession with precision and method is largely casting the tension in the reader's experience between, on the one hand, pain, excruciation and boredom, and on the other hand, enjoyment and amusement.³⁹

Whilst we agree that the dynamic between precision and failure is fundamental to the experience of reading *Watt*, as we have said, it also establishes misfires that are able to elicit comic amusement, we want to show that this dynamic is not just limited to those passages of *Watt* where the quasi-mathematical devices are employed and misused. By contrast, the same dynamic could be found in passages of *Watt* that appear as more 'narrative'. By looking at these passages with the approach outlined in the previous chapter, we aim to show a different way in which the obsession with precision leads to comic and excruciating failure, a way which has been overlooked by the previous approaches.⁴⁰

Firstly, recall that correctness is one of the conditions that, according to Austin's 'Doctrine of Infelicities', must be met for an illocutionary act to be felicitous. We have shown cases where utterances which did not meet the correctness condition were corrected and, as a consequence, the illocutionary act the speakers purported to perform was prevented from misfire. However, there are instances in *Watt* where the felicitous performance of illocutionary acts is called into question due to attempts to meet the condition of correctness. In these instances, the narration folds on itself performing movements that could be described as *convolutions*. Convoluted movements take place on different levels of the text: at the level of sentences, paragraphs or pages.

Let us start from analysing convoluted movements in sentences. See the following passage:

Mr Knott was a good master, in a way.

Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott, at this period. Not that Watt was ever to have any direct dealings with Mr Knott, for he was not. But he thought, at this period, that the time would

³⁸ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 74.

³⁹ See, for example, Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), pp. 31-32; Mood, "The Personal System" - Samuel Beckett's *Watt*"; Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 123

⁴⁰ An exception can be found in Connor's analysis of repetitions in *Watt*. He provides an analysis of a passage that is similar to those that we examine in this section. However, Connor's remarks are on the repetition of certain words and how the repetition affects their meaning, they are not interested with the illocutionary failure. Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text*, pp. 26-27.

Connor's study contains also interesting remarks on the relation between obsession with precision and its failure which differs from those mentioned above insofar Connor's remarks focus on incompleteness and on the materiality of the language. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-33.

come when he would have direct dealings with Mr Knott, on the first floor. Yes, he thought that time would come for him, as he had thought it had ended for Arsene, and for Erskine just begun.⁴¹

The two sentences ‘Mr Knott was a good master, in a way’ and ‘Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott, at this period’ have a similar structure. The first part of both sentences contains statements whose meaning is restrained by the second part, which comes after the comma. Both the first parts (‘Mr Knott was a good master’, ‘Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott’), if taken literally and out of their context, are statements which have absolute connotations. The first sentence would state that Watt was a good master under any regard, and the second sentence would state that in no occasion did Watt ever deal directly with Mr Knott. The absoluteness of their connotation is however rectified by the final clause of each sentence, which restricts the context to which each statement applies. In the first sentence, the clause ‘in a way’ restricts what appears to be a statement about the utter goodness of Mr Knott as a master. In the second case, the clause ‘at this period’ delimits the set of time to which the first part of the sentence is applicable. In both sentences, the second part appears to correct the statement and to make it more precise and clear.

However, though correctness might be what drives those clarifications and restrictions (‘in a way’, ‘at that period’), they both achieve a result that pulls in the opposite direction of their desired outcomes. Indeed, given that each restriction and correction arrives at the end of its respective sentence, they introduce ambiguity with regard to the illocutionary acts performed by the sentence as well as by the two corrective clauses themselves. Whilst the two corrective clauses could be read as contributing to the overall illocutionary act performed by each sentence, that is the act of *stating*, the corrective clauses could equally be taken to perform a separate illocutionary act. For example, whilst the first part of the first sentence ‘Mr Knott was a good master’ is performing the illocutionary act of stating, the second part ‘in a way’ could well be a comment in response to the first part. The same can be said about the second sentence, where ‘at this period’ would be responding to the statement that precedes it. In both cases the corrective stances would be comments that, by delimiting the context of the first part of the two sentences, point at their incorrectness as absolute statements.

To fully appreciate the importance that the position of the corrective stances plays, compare the position in which they appear in the original version with other positions in which the same stances could have appeared:

- (i) Mr Knott was a good master, in a way
- (ii) In a way, Mr Knott was a good master
- (iii) Mr Knott was, in a way, a good master

⁴¹ Beckett, *Watt*, p. 55.

- (iv) Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott, at this period.
- (v) At this period, Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott.
- (vi) Watt had no direct dealings, at this period, with Mr Knott

Whilst in (i) and (iv) the clauses ‘in a way’ and ‘at this period’ come after the main statements, in (ii), (iii), (v) and (vi), the same clauses pre-emptively restrict the context of reference of the main statements, and consequently their meaning. In (ii), (iii), (v) and (vi), the main statements (‘Mr Knott was a good master’, ‘Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott’) refer already to a restricted set of possibilities. Thus, whilst the corrective clauses in (ii), (iii), (v) and (vi) mainly change the meaning of the sentence, the corrective clauses in (i) and (iv) introduce ambiguity at the level of illocutionary acts. It remains ambiguous whether the clauses in (i) and (iv) are comments on the first part of each statement, in which case they would render the first part of the sentence an incorrect statement; or whether they should be considered as part of the statement with, consequently, a restricted meaning. In any case, the presence of this ambiguity plays against the attempt to clarify the sentence. This establishes a first type of incongruity that is apt for eliciting comic amusement: the speech acts achieve result that are opposite of that wished.

Furthermore, the two clauses ‘in a way’ and ‘at this period’, in establishing such illocutionary ambiguities, give a convoluted motion to the narration. Whilst, with the first part of the sentences the narration seems to take a step forward, the second part folds the sentence and the narration back on itself. The presence of these convolutions establishes a second type of incongruity which is apt for eliciting comic amusement. Whilst we would expect a progressive motion from a narration, very often in *Watt* the speech acts work against this progression, affecting the felicitous performance of the illocutionary acts on which the narration folds back onto. These convoluted movements are incongruous insofar as they go against our expectation that the narration will progress, and because they affect, and almost cancel out, the illocutionary acts initially performed.

This movement occurs also at the larger level of paragraphs, introducing illocutionary ambiguity there too. A first example can be found in the last paragraph quoted. As we said, the clause ‘at this period’ appears to rectify the absoluteness of the utterance which claims that Watt never dealt directly with Mr Knott. The correction turns the statement into a relative one, leaving open the possibility that Watt could, eventually, deal with Mr Knott. However, the sentence that follows (‘not that Watt was ever to have any dealing with Mr Knott’) is in its turn a correction, which this time invites to see the beginning of the previous sentence (‘Watt had no direct dealings with Mr Knott’) as indeed correct. The role played by the clause ‘at this period’ is in its turn rectified by the next coming sentence (‘But he thought, at this period, that the time would come...’). The clause ‘at this period’ should not be taken to restrict the

meaning of the claim on the dealings between Mr Knott and Watt, but as setting the claim into Watt's perspective at that time.

A similar movement takes place at a level larger than the paragraph. In this case too, the narrative moves without progressing; the movements are either variations of previous steps taken, or they are tortuous movements which fold back on the previous steps taken. A sample of passages of this type is reported in the following quotations which are taken from the episode in *Watt* where Watt's need of 'semantic succour' is discussed. The narrator explains that Watt would benefit from speaking to Erskine, as Erskine could confirm to Watt that the word 'pot' is used to refer to objects of the category 'pots', and the word 'man' is used to refer to human beings, and hence to Watt.

The first of the following passages refers to what just explained: given that Erskine could validate the use of words to Watt, Watt would be glad to hear his voice. However, this first sentence is followed by a series of clarifications that results in a convoluted movement that obscures the matter rather than clarifying it. Sentences and paragraphs which allegedly aim to provide additional information which could offer a clearer picture of Watt's situation, lead only to tangle and convolute the discourse on itself. The result once again is that the steps taken are then almost undone by those that follow:

It was principally for these reasons that Watt would have been glad to hear Erskine's voice, [...]

Not that the fact of Erskine's naming the pot, or of his saying to Watt, My dear fellow, or, My good man, or God damn you, would have changed the pot into a pot, or Watt into a man, for Watt, for it would not. But it would have shown that at least for Erskine the pot was a pot, and Watt a man. [...] But it would perhaps have lent a little colour to the hope, sometimes entertained by Watt, that he was in poor health, owing to the efforts of his body to adjust itself to unfamiliar milieu, and that these would be successful, in the end, and his health restored, and things appear, and himself appear, in their ancient guise, and consent to be named, with the time-honoured names and forgotten.

Not that Watt longed at all times for this restoration, of things, of himself, to their comparative innocuousness, for he did not.

For there were times when he felt a feeling closely resembling the feeling of satisfaction, at his being so abandoned, by the last rats. [...]

But if there were times when Watt envisaged this dereliction with something like satisfaction, these were rare, particularly in the early stages of Watt's stay in Mr Knott's house. And most often he found himself longing for a voice, for Erskine's, since he was alone with Erskine, [...].⁴²

As said, the opening sentence of this thread presents the matter at issue: Watt would have been glad to hear Erskine's voice. What follows this initial sentence elaborates on this thread asking us to re-evaluate each time the meaning of the initial sentence. For example, the second paragraph quoted is an attempt to clarify what said in the initial sentence. The clarification, however, begins in a negative fashion. Rather than explaining what hearing Erskine's voice would entail, it explains what it does not entail.

⁴² Ibid., pp. 69-70.

Thus, what is presented in the paragraph are clarifications that provide a picture of what does not constitute a reason for Watt to be happy to hear Erskine's voice.

The other sentences reported specify that the initial point should not be taken as a universal statement. The third passage quoted corrects the context of reference of the initial statement, saying that there were times where Watt did not long for Erskine's language validation. The fourth passage specifies this by saying that the times when Watt did not long for Erskine's validation were those when being 'abandoned' by language and succours gave him satisfaction. Finally, the last passage rectifies the third and fourth passage, and changes the range of the frequency with which Watt longed for Erskine's voice. Note that the third and fourth passages by specifying the frequency with which Watt longed for Erskine's language validation adds a connotation to the initial claim. Whilst the initial claim could have been taken as merely linking the fact that Watt would have been happy to hear Erskine's voice to its reason, the clarifications of the third and fourth sentence turn the initial sentence into saying that Watt would *always* be happy to hear Erskine's voice, in each moment of his permanence at Mr Knott's establishment.

4.3.3 Considerations

We want to point out that the analyses carried out in this chapter can help us in lending some support to the indication given in Chapter 3 about future approaches to the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions. Incongruity Theory, as we have explained in Chapter 1, as it stands, cannot distinguish between situations where the incongruities lead to comic amusement and situation in which they do not. In Chapter 3, we have indicated a possible avenue for study: we said that the point of demarcation between humorous and non-humorous incongruities could be dependent on the prominence of the pattern of expectation or of the norm infringed. To say it in different words, whether the pattern disrupted by the incongruity is taken to the foreground in a situation or not could be affecting the reaction to the incongruity. Our analysis of *Watt* can help us to illuminate this point.

As Cohn has aptly said, *Watt* is not always straightforwardly amusing. The rational devices that we have presented and discussed are extensively and incessantly "pounded at the reader until he longer knows whether to laugh or scream".⁴³ The reaction to *Watt* is ambivalent and we have thus an example of incongruities which could elicit humorous as well as non-humorous reactions. This reaction seems to be typical of those passages where the rational devices and – we add – convolutions 'are pounded at the reader'; this is to say, this reaction is typical of those sections of the book where the presence of the incongruous element is continuous and extensive. The analyses of convolutions that we have offered can provide an illuminating illustration of this ambivalent reaction. Compare the convolutions that are circumscribed (such as the convolution contained in the sentence 'Mr Knott was a good master, in a way') to the convolutions that are extended over paragraphs and pages. The former type of convolutions are more likely to result in a humorous reaction than the latter. One of the reasons could be that in the

⁴³ Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*, p. 74.

latter case the convolutions continue for such a length, and takes up such a considerable amount of space, that the norm which is infringed (the fact that we expect a narration to progress for example) is overshadowed, and its prominence is diminished. The same does not seem to be true in the case of circumscribed convolutions.

Notice also, in support of this view, there is another way in which we find amusing these extended convolutions, that is when we reflect on them – when we take a step back from the close reading of the text and we think about what the text is doing (i.e. folding back on itself rather than progressing). In reflecting on this, we see the incongruity, but we are not experiencing it. When we reflect on the incongruous way in which the text develops (when we see the contrast between linear and convoluted progression) we are inclined to consider this incongruity funny as the norm disrupted is evident to us. By contrast, while reading *Watt*, one experiences the incongruity as well as the tension between the reactions to it. On the one hand, the fact that they are excruciatingly long tends to elicit frustration - ‘scream’ in Cohn’s terminology. On the other hand, reflecting on what the text is doing tends to elicit laughter.

The discussion made in this chapter has thus proven that our set of analytical tools can fruitfully engage and contribute to discussions that take place in the context of Beckett scholarship. Furthermore, our analytical approach has proven to be able to capture pivotal elements of the texts. It has indeed described the mechanisms that lie at the heart that the convoluted movements that greatly affect the experience of reading *Watt*. In convolutions, the narration undertakes a convoluted movement, where the attempts at correctness stall the progress of the narrative. Sentences and paragraphs, rather than contributing to the overall illocutionary act of narrating, ask the reader to keep re-evaluating what previous sentences have said or what illocutionary acts they have performed. Finally, our tools have given us the opportunity to reflect on the relationship between the mechanisms individuated and their relation to comic as well as reflecting on the issue of Non-humorous reactions discussed in the context of humour scholarship.

4.4 Oscillations

This last section aims to test our set of analytical tools in the same way in which has been tested in the previous two sections. This time we aim to challenge them with long and complex sections of text taken from *Molloy*. Moreover, we test the ability of our analytical tools to capture some of the elements that are the heart of debates on *Molloy*.

Many of Molloy’s comic devices question the types of illocutionary acts that Molloy is performing when he tells his story. Very often the fictional nature of Molloy’s report of the quest for his mother is called under attention, to the point that the question of the veracity of representation is often taken as one of the main themes of the novel. Our analysis of the comic of language acts could lend support to

this reading by pointing out those passages where Molloy, by way of digressions and interruptions, presents to the readers a narration that unfolds before their eyes. We have shown that the correctness and completeness of the illocutionary acts performed in narrations of this type are questioned. Then again, we could point out those passages of metanarrative nature which present Molloy as occupying a position different from a mere reporter of his own story, but also perhaps as deviser of it.

Whilst all these passages lend support to the reading that sees the question around veracity of representation as one of the main themes of the novel, they also face the danger to obscure some of *Molloy's* subtleties. By focusing only on the passages where Molloy quite openly shows that he is stipulating part of his own report, this reading could give the misleading impression that all what *Molloy* has to say about the question around veracity of representation is that reporting is always fictional and therefore irremediably one step removed from the truth. If this was the case, then the movements at the level of illocutionary acts would not be much different from the twists analysed in *More Pricks than Kicks* and in *Watt*: Molloy, by revealing his position as inventor and deviser of the story that he is telling, would be performing illocutionary acts of devising and not illocutionary acts of reporting.

However, there is much more subtlety in *Molloy* and much more illocutionary ambiguity: the question is not so easily settled. In the first of the following sections, we aim to show that the relation between devising and reporting in *Molloy* does not have marked boundaries. In the second section of this chapter, we continue the analysis of the movements that take place at the level of the illocutionary acts and we individuate a movement at the level of the illocutionary acts that we call 'oscillations'.

4.4.1 Inventing, Embellishing, Stipulating, and Remembering

To show the relationship between devising and reporting in *Molloy*, we start from an often quoted passage where the fictional nature of Molloy's report appears to be explicitly exposed:

So I saw A and C going slowly towards each other, unconscious of what they were doing. It was on a road remarkably bare, I mean without hedges or ditches or any kind of edge, in the country, in the evening silence. **Perhaps I'm inventing a little, perhaps embellishing, but on the whole that's the way it was.** They chew, swallow, then after a short pause effortlessly bring up the new mouthful. A neck muscle stirs and the jaws begin to grind again. **But perhaps I'm remembering things.** The road, hard and white, seared the tender pastures, rose and fell at the whim of hills and hollows.⁴⁴

Molloy, after having announced and delayed the beginning of his story, finally appears to start it off with the statements, 'I saw A and C', 'It was a road remarkably bare'. At this stage, we do not know yet what type of story Molloy is going to tell. We do not know yet that Molloy's story will turn out to be the report of his quest for his mother, hence, at this stage, the focus on A and C could well be the preannounced beginning of Molloy's story. The identification of this passage as the incipit of Molloy's story is further facilitated by other features of the passage. The initial 'so' gives the (misleading)

⁴⁴ Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 4-5.

impression that Molloy is about to tell something connected to what he has just said and, given that he was reflecting on his present situation, the 'so' gives the impression that the 'I' of 'So I saw A and C going...' is Molloy, and that he is remembering an event from the past. The story of A and C is hence one that Molloy has witnessed in the past, and one which now Molloy is reporting.

However, the third and the sixth sentences provide a different view on the illocutionary acts performed by Molloy: 'Perhaps I'm inventing a little, perhaps embellishing, but on the whole that's the way it was', 'But perhaps I'm remembering things'. Molloy lists four possible options that might help the reader identifying the nature of his storytelling: (i) inventing, (ii) embellishing, (iii) 'on the whole that's the way it was', and (iv) remembering. Amongst the options considered for individuating the action that the narrator is performing, three are explicitly named – (i), (ii), and (iv) –, and another is implied – (iii). Molloy, by listing these possible activities, casts a shadow on the veracity of his story and on the illocutionary acts that he is performing in telling it. What first appeared as a story that Molloy was remembering from the past, now could well be Molloy's own invention.

The first action, (i) inventing, and the fourth (iv) remembering, at first glance, exclude one another. Take what the *OED* considers to be the "chief current sense" of the verb 'invent': "To find out in the way of original contrivance; to create, produce, or construct by original thought or ingenuity, to devise first, originate (a new method of action, kind of instrument, etc.)".⁴⁵ To invent is to create, to produce, to devise. To remember, on the other hand, excludes to create, to produce, to devise. To remember a fact is to recall or recollect a fact, to call it back from memory, whereas if one were to create, produce or devise a fact, one would make it anew. To invent - as used to mean create, produce, devise - might include some acts of remembering, as recollection. However, it would be only to create something different of what recollected from memory. Said in other words, if one invents *x*, it might do it with the help of recollecting *y* and *z*. But he would not be inventing *y* and *z*. On the other hand, remembering *y* cannot be done by inventing *y*, it might be done by way of inventing *x*, and *x* prompting to remember *y*.

When we discussed authority, we based some of our considerations on this exclusion. For example, when in 'The Expelled', the narrator checks the plausibility ("that makes sense") of what he says or stipulates the setting of some events ("I place this conversation"),⁴⁶ we said that the illocutionary act performed changed from *reporting* to *devising*. There was a twist from perceiving the story as recollection to invention. However, in *Molloy*, the shifts that take place at the level of the illocutionary acts are not a matter of simple twists of this type. As said there is more subtlety in *Molloy*: the actions (remembering and inventing), which appeared to be sharply separated, are often held together.⁴⁷ In this

⁴⁵ Oxford English Dictionary, "Invent, V." (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁴⁶ Beckett, 'The Expelled', p. 13.

⁴⁷ Christopher Rick's scepticism against reductive interpretations of Beckett's works, i.e. those interpretations according to which Beckett's works are merely stating that every statements about the world is fictional, chimes with our considerations here. See Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures 1990*, pp. 145-152. Describing the movement in *Molloy* as oscillatory is to show that though reality and fiction are shown to be terms that do not exclude each other; they are not reducible

section, we argue that the connection between these actions could be evinced already from looking at the four options listed by Molloy. In the next section, we shall show the subtlety present in *Molloy* by looking at the illocutionary acts performed by passages of the text.

(i) Inventing and (iv) remembering are at the two extremes of the range of the actions that Molloy says he might be performing. The sharp divide between these two extremes fades when their relations to the other two actions in the range is analysed. As said, one other action is named explicitly (ii) embellishing, and the other is left implicit (iii) ‘on the whole that’s the way it was’.

Let us start from (ii) embellishing. On the one hand, (ii) appears closer to (i) inventing than to (iv) remembering. To remember in the context of literary works is to report something from memory. On the other hand, to embellish is figuratively used, the *OED* says, “with the sense to ‘dress up, heighten with fictitious additions’”.⁴⁸ Thus in narrative, the more one adds fiction to embellish, the less one is remembering or mentioning the fact. Rather, one is mentioning a fictitious version of the fact. The more one embellishes *x*, one would say, the more one invents *x*.

On the other hand, (ii) embellishing and (i) inventing have some points of divergence. Whilst embellishing, as inventing, involve fictional elements (to embellish is “to beautify with adventitious adornments; to ornament”),⁴⁹ the action of embellishing requires something, an object, to be embellished: something that was already existent before the embellishment. In this sense embellishing diverges from inventing (given that when one invents, one creates something anew) and gets closer to remembering.

Whilst (ii) embellishing makes the divide between (i) inventing and (iv) remembering less sharp by looking at the fictional additions, the action (iii) ‘on the whole that’s the way it was’ reduces the divide from a different route. Let us first understand what action (iii) is describing.

In contrast to (i), (ii) and (iv), Molloy does not name explicitly action (iii). At first sight, one could take (iii) to be simply an indication that Molloy in telling the story is performing the act of remembering. If this was the case, Molloy, by saying (iii) ‘on the whole that’s the way it was’, would be saying something along the lines of ‘on the whole that’s the way it was, *I remember*’. In this scenario, (iii) and (iv) amount to the same action. There are, however, reasons to doubt this.

Firstly, (iv) is introduced by a ‘but’: ‘but perhaps I am remembering’. The ‘but’ introduces something that is in opposition to what precedes it. Thus (iv) remembering is presented as an option different from those already offered, amongst which there is (iii). Secondly, that (iii) is not merely remembering can be seen if (iii) is placed back in its context: ‘perhaps I’m inventing a little, perhaps embellishing, but on

one to the other either. Our position chimes with Ricks’ commentary in his conclusion, not in his criticism of the specific critical works quoted.

⁴⁸ Oxford English Dictionary, “*Embellish, V.*” (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

the whole that's the way it was'. (iii) is not given as a mere alternative to (i) and (ii). (iii) is an option notwithstanding (i) and (ii). Molloy is saying that, even if it was the case that he (i) is inventing or (ii) embellishing, the things were as he is claiming them to be. The narrator *stipulates* that the things were as he is saying. He decides that 'on the whole', what he is saying it was the case, it was indeed the case.

Let us look at the relationship of (iii) stipulating with the other acts. 'Stipulating' is an act that involves creativity. Stipulating could be creating something, and this seems to take it closer to (i) inventing as well as farther away from (iv) remembering. However, (iii) stipulating that something is the case differs from (i) inventing that something is the case, given that stipulating involves deciding that something is the case, where inventing does not. Stipulating that *x* is *y* is different from merely devising *y*.

Finally, the distance between (i) inventing and (iv) remembering becomes less sharp if other meanings of the verb 'to invent' and 'to remember' are taken into account. Inventing might not be as far from remembering as we have pictured it at the beginning if one takes in account what, for the *OED*, is an obsolete meaning of the verb 'invent': "to come upon, find; to find out, discover".⁵⁰ To invent is then, sometimes, to find out something, to discover something. Seen from this angle, 'inventing' loses the creative side, making it a step closer to remembering. On the other hand, 'remembering' could be read as re-member, i.e. as putting together components. To remember gains thus a creative, or at least crafting, side, taking it a step closer to 'inventing'. This connection seems to be stressed by Molloy himself:

Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a penum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept. To hell with it anyway.⁵¹

The ambiguity between the acts performed by *Molloy* are present throughout the novel. This oscillation can take place at the level of the sentence as well as at a larger level. Look for example at this sentence:

The air was sharp, for they wore greatcoats.⁵²

This sentence contains an ambiguity which, at a superficial level, looks innocuous. The ambiguity plays out in two different readings of the sentence:

- (a) The air was sharp and, for this reason, they wore greatcoats.
- (b) They wore greatcoats then the air was sharp.

At first glance, the original sentence appears to be describing the situation of A and C. Particularly, the pieces of information that the sentence aims to convey are two: that the air was sharp and that A and C wore greatcoats. The success of the sentence in conveying these two pieces of information does not depend on what interpretation one privileges.

⁵⁰ Dictionary, "Invent, V."

⁵¹ Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

The ambiguity is, however, more problematic if the attention is moved onto the acts performed by such a sentence. The illocutionary act of describing is not the only act performed by the above sentence. In both the interpretations, two elements ('the air was sharp' and 'they wore greatcoats') are put into a relationship and in both the interpretations these elements are linked through abduction. Thus, in both cases, Molloy is performing the illocutionary acts of describing and abducing. However, what is part of the description and what is part of the abduction differs from one interpretation to the other, as it differs from the illocutionary act that Molloy is performing. As a consequence, from one interpretation to the other, the status of the narrative changes. Let us go in order and look closer at the two interpretations.

In the interpretation (a) 'the air was sharp' and 'they wore greatcoats' are both premises for the conclusion 'the air was sharp, for they wore greatcoats'. 'The air was sharp' and 'they wore greatcoats' are both datum that prompts the abduction. Given that Molloy has said that he is witnessing the scene that he is describing, in uttering the two datum, Molloy is performing the illocutionary act of describing. By contrast, the illocutionary act of abducing consists of joining the two pieces of data in a relation where the second term ('they wore greatcoats') depends on the first one ('the air was sharp'). To say it differently, the act of abducing consists of concluding that the second term of the relation depends on the first one.

Things are different when the sentence is interpreted as in (b) 'they wore greatcoats then the air was sharp'. 'They wore greatcoats' is here the single premise, and the conclusion is 'the air was sharp'. In uttering the premise, the speaker is describing; whereas in uttering the conclusion he is abducing. In this second interpretation the only datum from experience is 'they wore greatcoat'. The information that the air was sharp, in (b) as opposed to in (a), is not part of the description, and this is at odd with what we know about the situation. Indeed, if Molloy is witnessing the situation because he is in the same environment of A and C, he should be able to see that 'they wore greatcoats' *and* feel that 'the air was sharp'.

The position of authority of Molloy is then questioned too. Is Molloy remembering the scene he had witnessed, in which case (a) should be preferred to (b)? Or is he embellishing the scene, by adding the connection between the two relata in (a) for example? Or is he inventing (as in finding out starting from available information) the scene? Thus in (b) the conclusion would be invented starting from the available premise. Or is he tout court stipulating, in which case the premises too would be performing that action?

The elements that *Molloy* provides are not enough to settle these questions and provide answers for them. These different options for what Molloy is doing are co-present and, by contrast to what happens in cases of illocutionary twists, they do not appear to block one the others. Thus, although it is true that the nature and veracity of Molloy's report (and perhaps, generalising, of fiction) is one of the themes of *Molloy*, the discussion should not be simply settled on a mere equation of fiction with invention.

In the next section, by challenging our set of tools with longer and more complex sections of text, we try to capture some of their pivotal elements. In particular, we draw attention to the fact that the co-presence of the different possible (and not mutually exclusive) interpretations of the illocutionary acts performed gives way to movements that we describe as ‘oscillations’.

4.4.2 Oscillations

The ambiguity between different interpretations of the illocutionary acts performed in *Molloy* takes place at a larger scale. In contrast to what can be seen with twists, this ambiguity is not between interpretations that block one the others. In *Molloy*, it is the case that sequences of illocutionary acts in paragraphs are such that elements that are later in the sequence calls for the re-evaluation of elements that come earlier on, giving to the experience of reading *Molloy* an oscillatory movement. Take the incipit of *Molloy*:

I am in my mother’s room. It’s I who live there now. I don’t know how I got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I was helped. I’d never have got there alone. There’s this man who comes every week. Perhaps I got here thanks to him. He says not. He gives me money and takes away the pages.⁵³

There are two movements, at the level of acts performed, that can be described in this passage. Firstly, there is movement from describing to conjecturing and vice versa. Secondly, there is a movement from live description/conjecture to narration and vice versa.

Let us start with the first movement and look at it at the level of sentences. The passage opens with a voice describing its situation: ‘I am in my mother’s room. It’s I who live there now. I don’t know I got there now.’ Three short sentences that perform the same action - describing - and which have different subject matters. The first sentence is about the location of the ‘I’, the second sentence is about the situation of the ‘I’, and the third sentence is about what the ‘I’ knows (or does not know) of his present situation. However, this last sentence introduces some degree of uncertainty (the speaking ‘I’ claims to not knowing how he ended up in his room), giving way to a different type of illocutionary act and setting in motion the illocutionary oscillation towards the act of ‘conjecturing’. The third sentence calls for an explanation and aptly, the following sentence is a conjecture (‘perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind’). Molloy moves from the illocutionary act of describing to the illocutionary act of conjecturing. The certainty with which this conjecture ends, however, appears to set the illocutionary act performed back to ‘describing’, and, accordingly, the next two sentences have an affirmative tone: ‘I was helped. I’d never got there alone’. However, the openness introduced by the presence of a conjecture has not left the act of describing unaffected. In contrast with the certainty that closes off the conjecture, the description has become cautious: ‘I’d never have got there alone’ as opposed to ‘I did not get there alone’. The description resumes its strength at the end of the paragraph, (‘There is this man who comes every week’), and the successive conjecture (‘perhaps I got here thanks to him’) does not

⁵³ Ibid., p. 3.

affect the incoming description, which is based on external testimony ('he says not. He gives me money and takes away the pages').

The sequence of acts just described could, at first glance, be described as an alternation. The voice alternates from illocutionary acts of describing to illocutionary acts of conjecturing. Not differently from Lucky who, in *Waiting for Godot*, wears his thinking hat to perform his monologue,⁵⁴ Molloy would alternately wear the describing hat and the conjecturing hat. However, presenting the sequence above as an alternation is not accurate. Consider again the first conjecture: 'Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind'. We said that this sentence starts as a conjecture and ends with certainty, which leads to interpret the sentences which follow it as cautious descriptions. This conjecture seems to be answering the question: 'How could one get to a room?' The conjecture could then be read as answering that what is certain is that one gets from one point to another using a vehicle, and an ambulance, being a vehicle of locomotion, can be an option (and a comic option, not being the first that one would have thought).

But what type of certainty is manifested here? It could be the certainty that derives from facts and description of facts. In such case the certainty would depend on information that is left implied. Perhaps Molloy's mind is not completely blank about how he got to his room - perhaps he has *some* memory of it. In this case what is left implied is something along the line of: 'I am certain that was a vehicle because I remember that I got here on a vehicle'. If the certainty is of this kind, then what starts off as a conjecture ends in a description. And if this is the case, then the sentences that follow should be considered as descriptions too, - 'I was helped. I'd never have got there alone'.

But there are other options that should be considered. The certainty could be of the type that results from reasoning, and on this picture, Molloy would have deduced what he considers as certain from the elements at his disposal: 'I am certain because I deduce it from evidence'. On this picture, 'Certainly a vehicle of some kind' would be the apex of the illocutionary act of conjecturing: it would be the conclusion of the argumentation. But what are the premises of such a reasoning? One has to move backward and forward to find them. This movement, by contrast of the movement described in the previous option, makes what proceeds and what follows part of the conjecture. The sentences become the premises of the argument for which we are invited to fill in the gaps.

(i) I am in my mother's room now. It's I who live there now. I don't know how I got there.

(ii) I'd never have got there alone.

⁵⁴ VLADIMIR: [To POZZO.] Tell him to think.

POZZO: Give him his hat.

VLADIMIR: His hat?

POZZO: he can't think without his hat.

Beckett, *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 41.

C1. I was helped.

C2. Certainly [I got there with] a vehicle of some kind.

The vehicle is perhaps an ambulance, but could well be another human being. It could be thanks to the man that comes and takes the pages ('perhaps I got here thanks to him'). Seen in this way, the whole passage turns in an illocutionary act of conjecturing. The three initial descriptive sentences become premises. The descriptive 'I was helped' becomes the consequence of the fact that I could have not get there alone.⁵⁵

Beyond the illocutionary oscillation from describing to conjecturing and vice versa, there is another illocutionary oscillation, between narrating and live-describing the present situation and vice versa. To see this second oscillation of illocutionary acts, we must pay attention to the syntax of the passage. It is the syntactical oscillation of the term 'I' that sets in motion the narration and, at the same time, moves it back to live-description.

The above passage opens and closes with sentences where the 'I' is the subject of the sentences – 'I am in my mother's room', 'Perhaps I got here thanks to him'. Were these two sentences to follow each other, Molloy would be probably taken to be describing his present state and he would be conjecturing about it. However, in the second sentence the 'I' is the object of the sentence - 'It's *I* who live there now'. In this sentence, the term 'I' is not simply the first term pronoun used to refer to the source of the voice, but it is also the object of the description. The term 'I' is kept in that position in the following sentence, - 'I don't know how *I* got there' – and this changes the perception of the illocutionary act performed: Molloy appears now to narrate. The subject of Molloy's narration would be the 'I', conceived as a character, distinct from the speaking voice. The separation between the 'I' that narrates and the 'I' that is narrated is enhanced by the use of the indexical 'there' – 'It's *I* who live *there* now', 'I don't know *I* got *there*', 'I'd never have got *there* alone' – as opposed to the 'here' which would have gone better with the initial 'I am in my mother's room now', and with the live-sketching performance.

This oscillation can be rendered graphically if one substitutes to the term 'I' any other proper name. Let us try it with a generic *x*:

⁵⁵ The oscillation reverberates at the level of the meaning of words, and one could see in the sentence 'certainly a vehicle of some kind' a paraphrase of one of the 'antithetical words' examined by Christopher Ricks. Ricks shows that the word 'certain' appears sometimes in Beckett with its antithetical meanings. On the one hand, it means to be sure, on the other hand, it is withdrawal of information, as in 'man of a certain age'. The un-specificity implicit in the second meaning goes somehow in the opposite direction of the absoluteness implicit in the first one. In the sentence quoted from *Molloy*, the un-specificity of 'a vehicle of some kind' (a *certain* vehicle?) goes in the opposite direction with the absoluteness of the adverb *certainly*. Note that 'certainly' does not maintain the double meaning of 'certain'. Beckett's sentence, however, forces the two meaning back together. See Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words: The Clarendon Lectures 1990*, pp. 128-145, (for 'certain' see in particular 133-134).

Ricks' analysis shows the ubiquitous presence of these words, such as 'quite', 'certain', 'still', 'inexistent'. As Ricks says, these words *cleave* (Ricks aptly and ironically uses an antithetical word to describe Beckett's antithetical words): they separate as well as keep together antithetical meanings. *Ibid.*, pp. 128-145 (for 'cleave' see in particular 142).

I am in my mother's room. It's I/x who live there now. I don't know how I/x got there. Perhaps in an ambulance, certainly a vehicle of some kind. I/x was helped. I/x'd never have got there alone. There's this man who comes every week. Perhaps I got here thanks to him. He says not. He gives me/x money and takes away the pages.

Even the sentences where the 'I' is in the subject position could be seen as part of the narration about the character 'I/x'. It is 'I/x' who was helped and who would (could?) never have got there alone. Likewise, the closing sentences of the above quotation could be read as part of the narration, assumed that the present tense is read as the historical present, or, to say it with Molloy's own terms, "the mythological present".⁵⁶ The sentences 'he says not. He gives me/x money and takes away the pages.' would be sentences written in the historical present that narrates events from the past.

However, the sentence 'I got here thanks to him' creates some problems to the interpretation of this passage as performing the illocutionary act of narrating. The indexical 'here' takes the performance of the illocutionary act back to live-describing and turning the present tense in the habitual present tense which refers to the actual (fictional) present time. Thus, seen from this other extreme of the spectrum, the last sentences are written in the habitual present, - 'He [*repeatedly*] says not (when I ask him about it), He [*habitually*] gives me money and takes away the pages'.

The oscillatory illocutionary movement takes place at an even larger level than that of the paragraphs. This becomes evident, for example, when one tries to situate the beginning of Molloy's story. The incipit of *Molloy* contains only one of the many false starts of narration. After a page and a half of similar oscillations and false starts (as when Molloy introduces the figure of the mother without taking this new incipit of narration anywhere) the narration seems to reach its starting point. The narrator explains that the man who comes to take his page and to give him corrections has told him that he "begun all wrong, that [he] should have begun differently".⁵⁷ He is now ready to hand his beginning in:

Here's my beginning. Because they're keeping it apparently. I took a lot of trouble with it. Here it is. It gave me a lot of trouble. It was the beginning, do you understand? Whereas now it's nearly the end. Is what I do now any better? I don't know. That's beside the point. **Here's my beginning.** It must mean something, or they wouldn't keep it. Here it is.⁵⁸

This is, however, only another false start. Not only because what immediately follows is not the beginning of a narration,⁵⁹ but because this enacts another oscillation. On the one hand, the illocutionary act performed by sentences like 'here it is my beginning' or 'here it is' could be read as being that of announcing the beginning. Consequently, one would be invited to look for the incipit of the narration in what follows the announcement. However, given that the story does not start after this announcement, one is tempted to read the illocutionary act performed by those sentences differently. These sentences

⁵⁶ "I speak in the present tense, it is so easy to speak in the present tense, when speaking of the past. It is the mythological present, don't mind it". Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 23.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ The paragraph that follows is not the beginning of Molloy's journey, but it is again a description of the present situation. "This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it'll be over, with that world too". *Ibid.*

could be indicating as ‘beginning’ what has preceded them. ‘Here it is’ could be indeed be uttered before presenting the ‘it’, as an announcement, or after having presented the ‘it’ as an indication. In the second way of reading it, the beginning of Molloy’s report coincides with the beginning of *Molloy*.

That this is not simply a matter of delaying the beginning, but it is rather an oscillation that keeps moving the location of the beginning back and forth, is also clear when one looks these false starts in connection to the other false starts of the series. A story appears to begin few lines below the announcement/indication of the beginning. Molloy, this time without announcement, starts telling about the time he witnessed two people, who he refers to as A and C, crossing path, - “So I saw A and C going slowly towards each other, unconscious of what they were doing”.⁶⁰ However, even locating at this point the beginning of Molloy’s story and of Molloy’s narration is called into question. Any of the directions that take off from here are not such that they compound a story and, hence, that they can turn the ‘story of A and C’ into a beginning. Indeed, Molloy’s attempts at setting the story in motion fails both when he tries to follow A and when he tries to follow C. In both occasions, his attention is repeatedly taken back on himself.⁶¹

A most promising location for the beginning of Molloy’s story could be when Molloy moves the focus onto his position in the situation: “I must have been on the top, or on the slopes, of some considerable eminence, for otherwise how could I have seen, so far away, so near at hand, so beneath, so many things, fixed and moving”.⁶² Indeed, despite few digressions (as for example when Molloy speaks of the possibility of having heard C walking back on his steps⁶³ or when he speaks of his mother⁶⁴), the narration finally sets out as the character (Molloy) sets out on his journey towards his mother - “now that we know where we’re going, let’s go there”.⁶⁵

The story finally moves, but the location of its beginning is far from being certain. The story is about the journey of Molloy to his mother’s room, and for this reason its beginning could be seen coinciding with the beginning of *Molloy*. However, Molloy’s journey does not start from the room where he is writing. It starts from the hills where we first met A and C, and perhaps the beginning of the story should be located there. A and C are however only a prelude to Molloy’s story and they are not coming back into it. The beginning is perhaps then where Molloy sets out on his bike. If this is the case, it would be a very odd beginning: one that takes place after we have already been given a lot of information about the main character. And if this is the beginning of the story and hence of the illocutionary act of

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ For example, Molloy tries to follow C, but in spite of his “soul’s leap out to him”, he could see C only “darkly”, given that many other things called his attention. Ibid., p. 7.

The same movement takes place when following A, Molloy ends up talking about himself and he cannot but be disappointed, - “what a rigmarole. [...] And to thing I try my best not to talk about myself”. Ibid., p. 9.

⁶² Ibid., p. 10.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 11.

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp. 13-16.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

narrating, what illocutionary acts were performed by the utterances that precede that? Also, are we sure that the beginning is to be located roughly in the first section of *Molloy*? After all Molloy warns us that the beginning of the story is now at the end of his narration (“it was the beginning, do you understand? Whereas now it’s nearly the end”).⁶⁶ Furthermore, the end of *Molloy* coincides with the end of Moran’s report. And the end of Moran’s report, in its turn, it is a return to its beginning, which it is the beginning of his quest for Molloy.

By drawing attention to the presence of oscillations at the level of illocutionary acts, the second part of this last section of Chapter 4 has proved that our set of analytical tools is able to capture pivotal elements of a key Beckett’s work such as *Molloy*. The analysis of this movement can contribute to the wider discussion of Beckett’s writing, and in particular of Beckett’s writing in *Molloy*. By illustrating the constant call for questioning the acts performed, this analysis can contribute to the discussion around the theme of veracity in fiction as we have argued in the first part of this section. Moreover, by drawing attention to what words *do* in Beckett’s novels, our approach offers a new angle to Beckett’s fascination with language and with its performative side. Finally, by illustrating a movement that takes place at the level of illocutionary acts, our analysis can provide new ground for comparing different period of Beckett’s writings and to suggest the presence of similarities and differences that have perhaps been overlooked. Indeed, our analysis of three of Beckett’s works show the presence of devices that create ambiguities at the level of illocutions since early on in Beckett’s writing. At the same time, they also show that the ambiguity can be played out to achieve significantly different effects.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 4.

CONCLUSION

The discussion of this thesis began from the individuation of two fundamental and pressing questions regarding the presence of humour in Beckett's works. In particular, we said that there are influential interpretations of Beckett's works which are based on unexamined and problematic assumptions regarding the nature of humour. For example, according to the 'humanist' view the ethical value of Beckett's works largely depends on the *critique* of the human condition, which is enabled by humour. Beckett's works would be disparaging and unmasking the limitations of the human condition, and yet, in doing so, they would be affirming the ability of human beings to grasp their own limitations. However, this view does not provide a critical examination of how it is possible for humour to do so.

The humanist account has been criticised for not providing an accurate picture of Beckett's works. For example, Shane Weller shows that some of the claims held by this view are not supported in the context of Beckett's works. Weller argues that the humanist's conclusion regarding the ethical stance of Beckett's works depends on the premises that Beckett's works (i) unambiguously invite laughter at (ii) certain specific and recognisable objects (e.g. the human condition). Indeed, Weller points out, for Beckett's works to be enlightening about the human condition *through* humour, on the one hand, laughter must be elicited in order to put at play the mechanisms of disparagement and elevation, and, on the other hand, it must be clear what object is disparaged and unmasked. According to Weller, these two premises are not supported in the context of Beckett's works, where it is often difficult to claim with certainty that laughter is the attitude invited and to indicate with certainty what the object of laughter is. Given these sources of indecision, Weller claims that the humanist conclusion on the ethical stance of Beckett's works should be rejected and replaced by a description of Beckett's works as 'anethical', in Weller's technical terminology.¹

Regardless of one's agreement with Weller's claims on the falseness of the premises of the humanist's argument, and independent from one's agreement with Weller's conclusion on the (an)ethical stance of Beckett's works, we said that this debate reveals the presence of an unexamined assumption about the nature of humour. In particular, this debate assumes that humour is strictly bound with an ethical stance, and that this assumption seems to be related to the fact that the default roles that are given to humour are that of *disparaging* and *unmasking*. Whilst Weller criticises the humanist account for its descriptive claims regarding Beckett's works, he does not question the claim on the nature of humour.

We said that in order to set an account of the role played by humour in Beckett's works on firm ground one must first answer the question 'what *is* humour?'. Accordingly, the investigation of our thesis began from the discussion of different philosophical theories of humour. After having analysed the three main theories – Superiority Theory, Release Theory and Incongruity Theory – we concluded that Incongruity

¹ Weller, 'Last Laughs: Beckett and the Ethics of Comedy'.

Theory offers the best account of humour. On the one hand, this theory is preferable because, by claiming that a necessary (but not sufficient) condition of comic amusement is the perception of an incongruity, it provides a description of humour that is object oriented. This is to say that this theory provides a description of humour which is informative about some of the features that a suitable object of amusement must have. The same cannot be said about the other two theories, which provide an account of the conditions in which those who laugh must be. Furthermore, the account provided by Incongruity Theory is able to account for all the instances of humour, whereas the other two accounts cannot offer a description of some of the ordinary instances of humour.

Whilst our discussion proceeded from the conclusion on the nature of humour to the investigation and description of humour devices in Beckett's works, this conclusion could contribute to other discussion in both Beckett studies and humour studies. Particularly, it could contribute to those studies which are interested in the connection between humour and ethical values, in Beckett's works as elsewhere. The conclusion about the nature of humour and its necessary link to incongruity excludes that the disparagement elements, often seen in connection with humour, are necessarily connected with humour instances. However, this is not to say that disparagement elements are never connected to humour - we are all familiar with situations in which humour is used to disparage its target. To have a thorough picture of humour, further philosophical studies of humour must explain *how* humour is connected to disparagement; how humour *disparages*. In addition, this investigation is one which is of interest of Beckett scholars too. Although the connection between Beckett's use of humour and the ethical value of his works should not be assumed, it might be still the case that there is such a connection in Beckett's works. Thus, those scholars who claim this connection for Beckett's works, would need to explain *how* Beckett uses humour in order to generate a specific ethical stance.

The investigation of the ethical and disparaging aspects of humour is one which would benefit greatly from an attunement of philosophy and literary criticism of the kind employed in this thesis. Carrying out a philosophical discussion of the ethical aspects of humour in connection with a literary discussion of the ethical stance of Beckett's humour would first and foremost help philosophy to direct the discussion on grounds that are under-explored. Indeed, whilst the ethic of humour is perhaps the most discussed topic in today philosophy of humour, this discussion revolves around instances of humour (e.g. racist or sexist jokes) which contain material which is already morally dubious and diminishing (e.g. racist or sexist stereotypes). Accordingly, the discussion does not revolve around what makes an instance of humour morally dubious, but whether or not responding with laughter to an instance of humour of this kind is reflective of one's own moral character and values.² Certainly this discussion is

² There are four main positions in this debate. For Comic Immoralism see: Memo Bergmann, 'How Many Feminists Does It Take to Make a Joke? Sexist Humor and What's Wrong with It', *Hypatia*, 1/1 (1986), pp. 63-82; Daniel Jacobson, 'In Praise of Immoral Art', *Philosophical Topics*, 25/1 (1997), pp. 155-199, David Benatar, 'Prejudice in Jest: When Racial and Gender Humor Harms', *Public Affairs Quarterly*, 13/2 (1999), pp. 191-203. For Comic Ethicism see: Berys Nigel Gaut, 'Just Joking: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humor', *Philosophy and Literature*, 22/1 (1998), 51-68. For Moderate comic Moralism see:

helpful to obtain a better grasp of the dynamics involved in the appreciation of comic instances and, in addition, it could also contribute to understanding the ethical nature of certain literary works. However, this discussion, given its focus, cannot say much on how sometimes, regardless of the moral status of the object of laughter, humour leads to disparagement. A literary analysis of humorous texts then would guide the philosophical analysis on elements that enable the humour to disparage but which might not be disparaging by themselves.

On the other hand, the literary discussion of the ethical stance of humour in Beckett's works would benefit from the attunement to philosophy insofar a philosophical discussion would provide conceptual description of disparagement and of the mechanisms connected with it. Our analysis of humour offers a ground from which to start this investigation and clarify this connection. This investigation would start from the fact that *disparaging* is not something that humour *is*, but it is something that humour *does*. Given this, an investigation of the disparagement use of humour in Beckett's work would have to look for those elements of the texts which enable this role, as well as elements that might block it in other circumstances. By being perceptive to these elements, the literary discussion would be able to provide a picture of Beckett's humour which would not just claim that literary mechanisms are connected with ethical stances, but it would explain how this connection is enabled. Carrying out this analysis would greatly improve our understanding of Beckett's writing as well as our understanding of the significance of his works.

The discussion of the mechanisms involved in disparagement and unmasking is not one that would interest only those Beckett scholars who are interested in the ethical stance of Beckett's works. Indeed, the tradition of Beckett criticisms which focus on formal and structural aspects of Beckett's works have often conferred to humour the same mechanisms of disparagement and unmasking that the humanist tradition confers to it. These readings focused on the formal aspects of Beckett's works often begin their consideration from the fact that, in several cases, Beckett's novels and plays are structured in such a way that the ordinary elements and features of traditional literary forms are placed under question. These formal readings of Beckett's works tend to highlight the playful attitude that Beckett's works maintain towards the literary medium that they are employing. In accordance with this emphasis, these readings attribute two roles to humour. Firstly, humour *unveils* or *unmasks* the fictional mechanisms behind the literary medium employed. Secondly, humour *disparages* its object (the pretence of verisimilitude of the literary medium).³ Not differently from the humanist tradition examined, these formal readings do not explain how it is possible for an instance of humour to disparage or unveil. For

Aaron Smuts, 'Do Moral Flaws Enhance Amusement?', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 46/2 (2009), pp. 151-162; Aaron Smuts, 'The Ethics of Humor: Can Your Sense of Humor Be Wrong?', *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, 13/3 (2010), pp. 333-347; Noël Carroll, 'Ethics and Comic Amusement', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 54/2 (2014b), pp. 241-253. For Comic Autonomism, see Cohen, *Jokes: Philosophical Thoughts on Joking Matters*.

³ See, for example, Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, and Angela Moorjani, *Abysmal Games in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982).

them, as for the humanist tradition, it is important to clarify the connection between humour and disparagement.

The discussion of the ethical aspects of Beckett's humour and its ability to affect the attitude of those reading his texts could also contribute to a further debate that takes place in humour studies. In a recent paper, Tom Cochrane has argued for the 'non-seriousness' of humour, that is to say for the claim that humour is powerless with regard of changing the attitudes of those who experience comic amusement. A condition for experiencing comic amusement according to Cochrane is to perceive the cause of laughter as 'non-serious', i.e. as not demanding to change one's attitude towards the object of laughter. On Cochrane's account, given that this is a condition of humour, comic instances, and hence comic literature, are powerless with regard to affecting people's attitude.⁴ This is in striking contrast with what many literary critics have claimed and still claim about Beckett's works and humour. Thus, clarifying the relation between humour and ethical stance would help to settle the debate around the 'seriousness' of humour, and to settle a potential debate between some philosophers and literary critics.

In addition to its main conclusion, Chapter 1 has individuated and discussed two problems related to Incongruity Theory – the Problem of Vagueness, and the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions. The first of these two problems is related to the notion of *incongruity*. Critics of Incongruity Theory have accused this theory to deploy a notion (*incongruity*) which is vague to the point of being vacuous and uninformative. Admittedly, Incongruity Theory does not have a direct answer to this criticism. Chapter 1 has advocated as a strategy to answer this criticism to put the notion of *incongruity* to the test by challenging it with several instances of comic of different type and complexity. We said that if, in each of the cases, the notion of *incongruity* proved able to provide a description which captures and explains the main features of the passage, then this would have proved that this notion is not vacuous.

At first, the notion of *incongruity* was tested in Chapter 2, where we assessed its ability to describe appropriately the comic passages discussed by Ruby Cohn in her seminal study of Beckett's humour. Not only the notion proved to be successful in doing so, but it also proved to be informative by pointing out a comic layer of Beckett's texts (comic of language acts) that Cohn's account had overlooked. In addition, the notion of *incongruity* demonstrated to be particularly resourceful in Chapter 3. In this chapter, this notion contributed to the development of a philosophical approach to the comic of language act, as well as to the literary discussion of this aspect of Beckett's comic writing.

The discussion of complex instances of humour that this thesis carried out offers precious material that could contribute to other debates in humour studies not considered here. In particular, Incongruity theorists have debated different possible ways in which the notion of *incongruity* can be made more specific.⁵ One way to see whether these more specific definitions of incongruity are satisfying is to see

⁴ Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour'.

⁵ See, for example, Clark, 'Humour and Incongruity', Cochrane, 'No Hugging, No Learning: The Limitations of Humour'.

if they hold up to scrutiny when tested against complex multifarious instances of humour such as those examined in this thesis.

Chapter 1 singled out a second problem related to Incongruity Theory, the Problem of Non-humorous Reactions. This problem regards the fact that Incongruity Theory does not offer tools to distinguish between incongruities that elicit comic amusement and those which elicit other reactions. For example, one might respond to an incongruity with puzzlement, curiosity, or fear. The conditions that Incongruity Theory offers are not fine-grained enough to explain what it is about some incongruities that lead to an amused reaction and not to other reactions. In Chapter 1, the discussion adopted Noel Carroll's answer to this criticism and stipulated that in order for comic amusement to arise, one should perceive it with the right attitude, i.e. one should not regard the incongruity as being anxiety-producing, as a source of negative emotion, and the incongruity should not lead one to engage in a problem solving explanation.⁶ Whilst we recognised that that this solution is not satisfying for those who want a more informative theory of humour, we also said that this stipulation was enough for the purposes of this thesis. It has been the job of our discussion of humour to individuate, when necessary, what elements conducted to comic amusement and not to other reactions. This led to individuate in Chapter 3 and 4 a possible avenue of investigation to solve this problem, which could be picked up in further philosophical investigation of humour. In particular, we suggested that whether or not an incongruity leads to comic amusement might depend on whether or not the pattern or norm disrupted by the incongruity is prominent.

The investigation of the problem of non-humorous incongruity is one that is of interest also for Beckett studies as it could shed some light on some of the features of the writing of Beckett's late prose. In Chapter 3, we discussed some passages taken from Beckett's late writing and we indicated that, although they share some incongruities with Beckett's mature works, they are not funny. An investigation of the similarities and differences of Beckett's prose works with regard to the incongruities that they contain, will shed light on the development of Beckett's writing as well as on the role that similar incongruities play in different works.

Beyond investigating 'what humour *is*' this thesis also investigated '*what* is humour in Beckett'. We said that the need for this second investigation arises from the particular features of Beckett's writing and Beckett's humour. Beckett's humour is such that it is often on the verge of turning into its opposites (e.g. boredom, excruciation). Furthermore, we said that Beckett's humour often is not contained in evident and circumscribed comic instances. Given the particular features of Beckett's humour we said that, in order to provide a thorough picture of Beckett's comic devices, one has to question the tools

⁶ Carroll, 'Two Comic Plots', p. 424.

commonly used in Beckett scholarship to provide this picture. The literary analysis of the comic aspects of Beckett's works was thus carried out alongside an examination of the tools used by this analysis.

Chapter 2 took the first step into the investigation of 'what is humour in Beckett'. We decided to explore the analysis of Beckett's comic devices offered by Ruby Cohn and to see whether the analytical tools which she employs are able to correctly locate the site of the comic incongruities and to capture all of the relevant comic layers of Beckett's works. The discussion demonstrated that Cohn's account is able to capture a wide range of comic devices and to provide a description of Beckett's comic writings that accounts for their different facets.

Although our discussion of Cohn's account dealt only with her descriptive claims about Beckett's comic writing, the richness of her picture is certainly an invitation for further studies to delve into her interpretative claims too. Cohn is often associated with existentialist and humanist readings of Beckett's humour, and certainly she shares many claims with these views. For example, as existentialists and humanists do, she too claims that a central theme of Beckett's works is the human condition and the capability of human beings to understand and make sense of their reality. Despite this, she individuates and discusses other themes that, according to her, are crucial in Beckett's works (e.g. formal structure, bilingualism), thus anticipating discussions that takes place later on in Beckett scholarship. In addition, as for the humanists, she considers 'disparaging' as one of the roles played by humour in Beckett's texts. However, it is less clear whether she agrees with them on the cathartic role conferred to Beckett's works. These features of Cohn's account make her a leading figure in Beckett scholarship and represent the richness of her interpretation. In addition to this, the fact that she has significantly contributed to Beckett's scholarship for over five decades and her personal connection with Samuel Beckett make her a fascinating and crucial figure with whom future scholarship should continue to engage.

Despite the richness of Cohn's account, we have individuated a comic layer that Cohn's analysis had overlooked. To capture this comic layer, we equipped our literary discussion of Beckett's comic writing with additional analytical tools borrowed from philosophy. Given that these devices are related to the acts performed *in* uttering words, we made use of Austin's Theory of Speech Acts which is a theory specifically interested with the acts performed in speaking and with different incongruities related to the performance of these acts.

Chapter 3 used Austin's Theory, and in particular his 'Doctrine of Infelicities' as a guideline to analyse Beckett's works. This theory guided our literary analysis of the comic passages by pointing out the elements to which to be perceptive. Chapter 3 has then provided us with additional tools to approach Beckett's humour and Beckett's writing as well as with a first description of a comic layer previously unexamined. By taking example from several of Beckett's works, the analyses of this chapter have shown the presence of these devices in several of Beckett's works and have thus illuminated this aspect of Beckett's writing.

Given that Chapter 3 did not aim to be exhaustive in offering a full catalogue of the different types of instances of comic of language acts, the work carried out in this chapter could be further developed into two different directions. On the one hand, the set of tools developed in this chapter could be further developed and refined to capture more of the comic incongruities of language acts (illocutionary acts as well as perlocutionary acts). On the other hand, the analysis of these comic instances in Beckett's works can be further refined, and the catalogue enlarged. The further development of the approach to the comic of language acts and of the analysis of this type of comic in Beckett's works is one which would benefit from marrying up philosophical and literary discussions, as it has been the case in chapter 3. The philosophical discussion can provide additional tool to the literary discussion, and on the other hand, the literary analysis can sharpen the focus of the elements considered by the philosophical discussion.

The discussion of the comic of language acts developed in Chapter 3 was organised following three main axes of Austin's 'Doctrine of Infelicities'. We firstly analysed comic instances where the comic incongruities had to do with the 'authority' of those performing the speech acts. We analysed instances where the narrators perform illocutionary acts which are inconsistent with those normally expected from narrators, as well as comic instances where the narrator, contrary to ordinary expectations, stipulates or devises some of the elements of the story. Then we discussed comic instances where the comic elements are related to 'incomplete' or 'incorrect' performance of illocutionary speech acts. In these cases we showed that the successful performance of illocutionary act is not certain as the completeness and the correctness of their performances is questioned. Lastly, we looked at the comedy created by the lack of an appropriate attitude by those performing the speech acts. In these cases, whilst the success of the performance of illocutionary acts was not at stake, we found that the questionable attitude of the narrators was nonetheless affecting the optimal performance of the illocutionary acts.

Some of the elements that enable the comic devices that we have discussed in this chapter have been the object of insightful studies in Beckett scholarship. For example, narrators stipulate and devise their stories, as well as the incompleteness of some of the stories are elements that have been discussed in comparison and contrast to traditional and well-formed narratives. As a consequence, the humour that derives from these elements has often been discussed in terms of parody of traditional novels, and Beckett's works have been interpreted as aiming to dismantle traditional narratives.⁷ Whilst the considerations made in this thesis do not deny that Beckett's works contain parodic elements, our discussion forms the ground for further and fresh interpretations of Beckett's humour as well as Beckett's works. Chapter 4 has provided examples on how new interpretations could make use of the tools that we have developed in Chapter 3.

⁷ For example, in the thesis we have discussed Abbott's and Cohn's remarks on this regard. Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut*. Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*.

In Chapter 4 we analysed three main Beckett's works, *More Pricks than Kicks*, *Watt* and *Molloy* in order to show the potential of the tools developed in this thesis to describe pivotal aspects of Beckett's writing. The literary analysis of these texts led to the individuation of three movements that take place at the level of illocutionary acts – 'twists', 'convolutions', 'oscillations'.

The literary analysis of *More Pricks than Kicks* individuated the presence of illocutionary 'twists'. These movements take place when the texts allow for more than one interpretation of the illocutionary force of the acts performed and, in correspondence, for seeing the illocutionary act as performed by different speakers. These interpretations are mutually exclusive, and hence interpreting an illocutionary act as performed by a speaker and with a determinate illocutionary force blocks the other interpretations. Given that the texts do not offer conclusive evidence in favour of one interpretation, the ambiguity between acts and speakers is never dispelled. The presence of this ambiguity generates twists between illocutionary acts.

The discussion of *Watt* led to the individuation of a movement at the level of illocutionary acts that we called 'convolutions'. In this case, the sentences and paragraphs are organised in such a way that, rather than contributing to the linear progression of the narrative, they fold back on the previous sentences and paragraphs. In doing so, they affect the felicitous performance of the illocutionary acts that they purported to perform.

The last discussion focused on *Molloy* where we individuated a third type of movement that takes place at the level of illocutionary acts, 'oscillations'. This movement is generated by sentences and paragraphs structured in such a way that elements situated in a later position of a sequence of sentences and paragraphs call for the re-interpretation of the force of the illocutionary acts performed by elements that are situated in an earlier position. However, the text does not offer enough elements to decide in favour of determinate interpretations over others, and this ambiguity gives rise to oscillations.

Whilst the discussion in Chapter 4 demonstrated how the individuation of these illocutionary movements contribute to the debate around some of the features of these works, the type of analysis that we used in Chapter 4 could take part to a number of larger debates in Beckett scholarship. First and foremost, the tools that we have developed have the potential to enlighten an aspect of language with which Beckett was interested, namely the performative aspect of language, and which is largely debated in Beckett scholarship. In an early letter to Axel Kaun, Beckett hoped that "the time will come [...] when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused".⁸ In a short story published somewhat ten years later, he seems to elaborate on a way in which language can be abused – "All I say cancels out, I'll have said nothing".⁹ The tools that we have developed could help in filling in the picture of

⁸ Letter to Alex Kaun, 9 July 1937, printed in Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009d), p. 518.

⁹ Beckett, 'The Calmative', p. 19.

how Beckett abuses language and how it is possible for language to cancel itself out. Indeed our approach can lead to a fresh interpretation where these claims are seen as pointing to language devices where language is abused and is cancelled out by making the illocutionary acts misfire.

The literary discussion around the performative side of Beckett's prose could then take different avenues. For example, this discussion could lead to comparative analyses to see if Beckett's use of comic of language acts change across *genres* and over his writing career. The discussion in Chapter 4 pointed out some similarities and differences between prose works taken from different stages of Beckett's artistic development. If a thorough analysis of Beckett's works were to be carried out with the tools developed in this thesis, it could lead to new ways to understand the development of Beckett's writing. Along the same lines, another debate which would benefit from using our tools is that around the unity of Beckett's *oeuvre*. It has been argued that Beckett's works should be read as part of a continuum, rather than forming significantly different steps.¹⁰ Our analysis in Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 indicated that early Beckett's works (for example *More Pricks than Kicks*) show an interest with language that is similar to that of later prose works. This might play in support of those scholars who are claiming the unity of Beckett's works. Saying this does not, of course, deny that there is a difference between how these tools are used in early and mature prose, and neither aims to do so. By contrast, these considerations aim to show that, from early on in his career, Beckett deals with some issues which have been traditionally considered typical of his mature works.

The investigation of the performative features of Beckett's prose works, and in particular of the way in which language can be cancelled out by making it misfire, it is an investigation that would benefit greatly from attuning literary criticism and philosophy. Indeed, there are lively and insightful philosophical debates on how speech acts, and particularly illocutionary speech acts, can be silenced or blocked by making them misfire.¹¹ Attuning literary criticism to philosophy would sharpen the tools that a literary discussion of Beckett's works would employ to analyse this aspect of Beckett's writing. Moreover, philosophical discussion around these topics would benefit from the attunement with literary criticisms too. Firstly, these discussions would benefit from being challenged by, and being put to the test with, a series of complex instances to analyse and discuss. Secondly, and more importantly, the philosophical debate around silencing and blocking could benefit from the discussion of Beckett's works as it would entail looking at how blocking and silencing can be carried out using humour. The study of humour in this context could be of particular interest for philosopher working with Austinian

¹⁰ See, for example, Dirk Van Hulle, 'Introduction: A Beckett Continuum', in Dirk Van Hulle (ed.), *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett* (Cambridge Companions to Literature; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. xvii-xxvi.

¹¹ The discussion on silencing has solicited many insightful works. Seminal studies are: Rae Langton, 'Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts', *Philosophy & Public Affairs*, 22/4 (1993), pp. 293-330 Jennifer Hornsby, 'Disempowered Speech', *Philosophical Topics*, 23/2 (1995), pp. 127-147 Jennifer Hornsby and Rae Langton, 'Free Speech and Illocution', *Legal Theory*, 4/1 (2009), pp. 21-37 For a discussion of blocking see Rae Langton, 'Blocking as Counter-Speech', *New Work on Speech Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), pp. 144-163.

theories given the troublesome relationship that these theories have traditionally had with discussions on humour and literature.¹² In addition, future investigations could explore the positive aspects of connection between humour and performative use of language. So far we have focused on those accounts that have claimed for humour a *disparaging* role. However, both humour devices and language performativity have been object of studies that have explored their positive potentiality. A future line of investigation could explore whether and how the comic of language act could contribute to establishing new connections between readers and works.¹³

To conclude, it should be noted that many of the future avenues that this study could take require an attunement of philosophy and literary criticism. This thesis demonstrated that an attunement of this kind is not only possible and beneficial, but is a requirement for determinate discussions. The discussion of this thesis began from a genuinely philosophical question around the nature of humour and ended with a genuinely literary description and examination of the features of Beckett's works. This literary description and examination would have not been possible without attuning it to philosophy. Philosophy informed the literary discussion by providing it with new tools. At the same time, philosophy would not have been equally helpful if these tools had not been refined by an attunement to literary features.

¹² For an overview of this debate see De Gaynesford, 'Incense and Insensibility: Austin on the 'Non-Seriousness' of Poetry', and De Gaynesford, 'How Not to Do Things with Words: J. L. Austin on Poetry'.

¹³ For an example of how the performativity of language could be discussed with regards to new connections between readers and works see Gilles Deleuze, 'He Stuttered', *Essays Critical and Clinical* (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 107-114. This essay is particularly interesting for the discussion in this thesis as Deleuze mentions, even if only briefly, both Beckett and Austin.

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