

Darren John Tofts

If you cannot understand my argument, and declare "It's Greek to me," you are quoting Shakespeare.

Bernard Levin

Psoriatic arthritis, in its acute or "generalised" stage, is unbearably painful. Exacerbating the crippling of the joints, the entire surface of the skin is covered with lesions only moderately salved by anti-inflammatory ointment, the application of which is as painful as the ailment it seeks to relieve:

NURSE MILLS: I'll be as gentle as I can.

Marlow's face again fills the screen, intense concentration, comical strain, and a whispered urgency in the voice over—

MARLOW: (Voice over) Think of something boring—For Christ's sake think of something very very boring—Speech a speech by Ted Heath a sentence long sentence from Bernard Levin a quiz by Christopher Booker a—oh think think—! Really boring! A Welsh male-voice choir—Everything in *Punch*—Oh! Oh! —

(Potter 17-18)

Marlow's collation of boring things as a frantic liturgy is an attempt to distract himself from a tumescence that is both unwanted and out of place. Although bed-ridden and in constant pain, he is still sensitive to erogenous stimulation, even when it is incidental. The act of recollection, of garnering lists of things that bore him, distracts him from his immediate situation as he struggles with the mental anguish of the prospect of a humiliating orgasm.

Literary lists do many things. They provide richness of detail, assemble and corroborate the materiality of the world of which they are a part and provide insight into the psyche and motivation of the collator. The sheer desperation of Dennis Potter's Marlow attests to the arbitrariness of the list, the simple requirement that discrete and unrelated items *can* be assembled in linear order, without any obligation for topical concatenation. In its interrogative form, the list can serve a more urgent and distressing purpose than distraction:

GOLDBERG: What do you use for pyjamas?

STANLEY: Nothing.

GOLDBERG: You verminate the sheet of your birth.

MCCANN: What about the Albigensenist heresy?

GOLDBERG: Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

MCCANN: What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?

(Pinter 51)

The interrogative *non sequitur* is an established feature of the art of intimidation. It is designed to exert maximum stress in the subject through the use of obscure asides and the endowing of trivial detail with profundity. Harold Pinter's use of it in *The Birthday Party* reveals how central it was to his "theatre of menace." The other tactic, which also draws on the logic of the inventory to be both sequential and discontinuous, is to break the subject's will through a machine-like barrage of rhetorical questions that leave no time for answers.

Pinter learned from Samuel Beckett the pitiless, unforgiving logic of trivial detail pushed to extremes. Think of Molloy's dilemma of the sucking stones. In order for all sixteen stones that he carries with him to be sucked at least once to assuage his hunger, a reliable system has to be hit upon:

Taking a stone from the right pocket of my greatcoat, and putting it in my mouth, I replaced it in the right pocket of my greatcoat by a stone from the right pocket of my trousers, which I replaced with a stone from the left pocket of my trousers, which I replaced by a stone from the left pocket of my greatcoat, which I replaced with the stone that was in my mouth, as soon as I had finished sucking it. Thus there were still four stones in each of my four pockets, but not quite the same stones. And when the desire to suck took hold of me again, I drew again on the right pocket of my greatcoat, certain of not taking the same stone as the last time. And while I sucked it I rearranged the other stones in the way I have just described. And so on. (Beckett, *Molloy* 69)

And so on for six pages. Exhaustive permutation within a finite lexical set is common in Beckett. In the novel *Watt* the eponymous central character is charged with serving his unseen master's dinner as well as tidying up afterwards. A simple and bucolic enough task it would seem. But Beckett's characters are not satisfied with conjecture, the simple assumption that *someone* must be responsible for Mr. Knott's dining arrangements. Like Molloy's solution to the sucking stone problem, all possible scenarios must be considered to explain the conundrum of how and why Watt never saw Knott at mealtime. Twelve possibilities are offered, among them that

1. Mr. Knott was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that he was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that such an arrangement existed, and was content.
2. Mr. Knott was not responsible for the arrangement, but knew who was responsible for the arrangement, and knew that such an arrangement existed, and was content.

(Beckett, *Watt* 86)

This stringent adherence to detail, absurd and exasperating as it is, is the *work* of fiction, the persistence of a viable, believable thing called Watt who exists as long as his thought is made manifest on a page. All writers face this pernicious prospect of having to confront and satisfy "fiction's gargantuan appetite for fact, for detail, for documentation" (Kenner 70). A writer's writer (Philip Marlow) Dennis Potter's singing detective struggles with the acute consciousness that words eventually will fail him. His struggle to overcome verbal entropy is a spectre that haunts the entire literary imagination, for when the words stop the world stops.

Beckett made this struggle the very stuff of his work, declaring famously that all he wanted to do as a writer was to leave "a stain upon the silence" (quoted in Bair 681). His characters deteriorate from recognisable people (Hamm in *Endgame*, Winnie in *Happy Days*) to mere ciphers of speech acts (the bodiless head Listener in *That Time*, Mouth in *Not I*). During this process they provide us with the vocabulary of entropy, a horror most eloquently expressed

at the end of *The Unnamable*:

I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (Beckett, *Molloy* 418)

The importance Beckett accorded to pauses in his writing, from breaks in dialogue to punctuation, stresses the pacing of utterance that is in sync with the rhythm of human breath. This is acutely underlined in Jack MacGowran's extraordinary gramophone recording of the above passage from *The Unnamable*. There is exhaustion in his voice, but it is inflected by an urgent push for the next words to forestall the last gasp. And what might appear to be parsimony is in fact the very commerce of writing itself. It is an economy of necessity, when any words will suffice to sustain presence in the face of imminent silence.

Hugh Kenner has written eloquently on the relationship between writing and entropy, drawing on field and number theory to demonstrate how the business of fiction is forever in the process of generating variation within a finite set. The "stoic comedian," as he figures the writer facing the blank page, self-consciously practices their art in the full cognisance that they select "elements from a closed set, and then (arrange) them inside a closed field" (Kenner 94). The *nouveau roman* (a genre conceived and practiced in Beckett's lean shadow) is remembered in literary history as a rather austere, po-faced formalism that foregrounded things at the expense of human psychology or social interaction. But it is emblematic of Kenner's portrait of stoicism as an attitude to writing that confronts the nature of fiction itself, on its own terms, as a practice "which is endlessly *arranging* things" (13):

The bulge of the bank also begins to take effect starting from the fifth row: this row, as a matter of fact, also possesses only twenty-one trees, whereas it should have twenty-two for a true trapezoid and twenty-three for a rectangle (uneven row). (Robbe-Grillet 21)

As a matter of fact. The *nouveau roman* made a fine if myopic art of isolating detail for detail's sake. However, it shares with both Beckett's minimalism and Joyce's maximalism the obligation of fiction to fill its world with stuff ("maximalism" is a term coined by Michel Delville and Andrew Norris in relation to the musical scores of Frank Zappa that opposes the minimalism of John Cage's work). Kenner asks, in *The Stoic Comedians*, where do the "thousands on thousands of things come from, that clutter *Ulysses*?" His answer is simple, from "a convention" and this prosaic response takes us to the heart of the matter with respect to the impact on writing of Isaac Newton's unforgiving Second Law of Thermodynamics. In the law's strictest physical sense of the dissipation of heat, of the loss of energy within any closed system that *moves*, the stipulation of the Second Law predicts that words will, of necessity, stop in any form governed by convention (be it of horror, comedy, tragedy, the Bildungsroman, etc.). Building upon and at the same time refining the early work on motion and mass theorised by Aristotle, Kepler, and Galileo, *inter alia*, Newton refined both the laws and language of classical mechanics. It was from Wiener's literary reading of Newton that Kenner segued from the loss of energy within any closed system (entropy) to the running silent out of words within fiction.

In the wake of Norbert Wiener's cybernetic turn in thinking in the 1940s, which was highly

influenced by Newton's Second Law, fiction would never again be considered in the same way (metafiction was a term coined in part to recognise this shift; the nouveau roman another). Far from delivering a reassured and reassuring present-ness, an integrated and ongoing cosmos, fiction is an isometric exercise in the struggle against entropy, of a world in imminent danger of running out of energy, of *not-being*:

"His hand took his hat from the peg over his initialled heavy overcoat..." Four nouns, and the book's world is heavier by four things. One, the hat, "Plasto's high grade," will remain in play to the end. The hand we shall continue to take for granted: it is Bloom's; it goes with his body, which we are not to stop imagining. The peg and the overcoat will fade. "On the doorstep he felt in his hip pocket for the latchkey. Not there. In the trousers I left off." Four more things. (Kenner 87)

This passage from *The Stoic Comedians* is a tour de force of the conjuror's art, slowing down the subliminal process of the illusion for us to see the fragility of fiction's precarious grip on the verge of silence, heroically "filling four hundred empty pages with combinations of twenty-six different letters" (xiii). Kenner situates Joyce in a comic tradition, preceded by Gustave Flaubert and followed by Beckett, of exhaustive fictive possibility. The stoic, he tells us, "is one who considers, with neither panic nor indifference, that the field of possibilities available to him is large perhaps, or small perhaps, but closed" (he is prompt in reminding us that among novelists, gamblers and ethical theorists, the stoic is also a proponent of the Second Law of Thermodynamics) (xiii). If Joyce is the comedian of the inventory, then it is Flaubert, comedian of the Enlightenment, who is his immediate ancestor. *Bouvard and Pécuchet* (1881) is an unfinished novel written in the shadow of the Encyclopaedia, an apparatus of the literate mind that sought complete knowledge. But like the Encyclopaedia particularly and the Enlightenment more generally, it is fragmentation that determines its approach to and categorisation of detail as information about the world. *Bouvard and Pécuchet* ends, appropriately, in a frayed list of details, pronouncements and ephemera.

In the face of an unassailable impasse, all that is left Flaubert is the list. For more than thirty years he constructed the *Dictionary of Received Ideas* in the shadow of the truncated *Bouvard and Pécuchet*. And in doing so he created for the nineteenth century mind "a handbook for novelists" (Kenner 19), a breakdown of all we know "into little pieces so arranged that they can be found one at a time" (3):

ACADEMY, FRENCH: Run it down but try to belong to it if you can.

GREEK: Whatever one cannot understand is Greek.

KORAN: Book about Mohammed, which is all about women.

MACHIAVELLIAN: Word only to be spoken with a shudder.

PHILOSOPHY: Always snigger at it.

WAGNER: Snigger when you hear his name and joke about the music of the future.

(Flaubert, *Dictionary* 293-330)

This is a sample of the exhaustion that issues from the tireless pursuit of categorisation, classification, and the mania for ordered information. The *Dictionary* manifests the Enlightenment's insatiable hunger for received ideas, an unwieldy background noise of popular opinion, general knowledge, expertise, and hearsay. In both *Bouvard and Pécuchet*

and the *Dictionary*, exhaustion was the foundation of a comic art as it was for both Joyce and Beckett after him, for the simple reason that it includes everything and neglects nothing. It is comedy born of overwhelming competence, a sublime impertinence, though not of manners or social etiquette, but rather, with a nod to Oscar Wilde, the impertinence of being definitive (a droll epithet that, not surprisingly, was the title of Kenner's 1982 *Times Literary Supplement* review of Richard Ellmann's revised and augmented biography of Joyce).

The inventory, then, is the underlining physio-semiotics of fictional mechanics, an elegiac resistance to the thread of fiction fraying into nothingness. The motif of thermodynamics is no mere literary conceit here. Consider the opening sentence in Borges:

Of the many problems which exercised the reckless discernment of Lönnrot, none was so strange—so rigorously strange, shall we say—as the periodic series of bloody events which culminated at the villa of Triste-le-Roy, amid the ceaseless aroma of the eucalypti. (Borges 76)

The subordinate clause, as a means of adjectival and adverbial augmentation, implies a potentially infinite sentence through the sheer force of grammatical convention, a machine-like resistance to running out of puff:

Under the notable influence of Chesterton (contriver and embellisher of elegant mysteries) and the palace counsellor Leibniz (inventor of the pre-established harmony), in my idle afternoons I have imagined this story plot which I shall perhaps write someday and which already justifies me somehow. (72)

In "Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*," a single adjective charmed with emphasis will do to imply an unseen network:

The *visible* work left by this novelist is easily and briefly enumerated. (Borges 36)

The annotation of this network is the inexorable issue of the inflection: "I have said that Menard's work can be easily enumerated. Having examined with care his personal files, I find that they contain the following items." (37) This is a sample selection from nineteen entries:

- a) A Symbolist sonnet which appeared twice (with variants) in the review *La conqu*e (issues of March and October 1899).
- o) A transposition into alexandrines of Paul Valéry's *Le cimetière marin* (N.R.F., January 1928).
- p) An invective against Paul Valéry, in the *Papers for the Suppression of Reality* of Jacques Reboul. (37-38)

Lists, when we encounter them in Jorge Luis Borges, are always contextual, supplying necessary detail to expand upon character and situation. And they are always intertextual, anchoring *this* specific fictional world to others (imaginary, real, fabulatory or yet to come). The collation and annotation of the literary works of an imagined author (Pierre Menard) of an invented author (Edmond Teste) of an actual author (Paul Valéry) creates a recursive,

yet generative, feedback loop of reference and literary progeny. As long as one of these authors continues to write, or write of the work of at least one of the others, a persistent fictional present tense is ensured.

Consider Hillel Schwartz's use of the list in his *Making Noise* (2011). It not only lists what can and is inevitably heard, in this instance the European 1700s, but what it, or local aural colour, is heard over:

Earthy: criers of artichokes, asparagus, baskets, beans, beer, bells, biscuits, brooms, buttermilk, candles, six-pence-a-pound fair cherries, chickens, clothesline, cockles, combs, coal, crabs, cucumbers, death lists, door mats, eels, fresh eggs, firewood, flowers, garlic, hake, herring, ink, ivy, jokebooks, lace, lanterns, lemons, lettuce, mackerel, matches [...]. (Schwartz 143)

The extended list and the catalogue, when encountered as formalist set pieces in fiction or, as in Schwartz's case, non-fiction, are the expansive equivalent of *le mot juste*, the self-conscious, painstaking selection of the *right* word, the *specific* detail.

Of *Ulysses*, Kenner observes that it was perfectly natural that it "should have attracted the attention of a group of scholars who wanted practice in compiling a word-index to some extensive piece of prose (Miles Hanley, *Word Index to Ulysses*, 1937). More than any other work of fiction, it suggests by its texture, often by the very look of its pages, that it has been painstakingly assembled out of single words..." (31-32). In a book already crammed with detail, with persistent reference to itself, to other texts, other media, such formalist set pieces as the following from the oneiric "Circe" episode self-consciously perform for our scrutiny fiction's insatiable hunger for more words, for invention, the Latin root of which also gives us the word inventory:

The van of the procession appears headed by John Howard Parnell, city marshal, in a chessboard tabard, the Athlone Pursuivant and Ulster King of Arms. They are followed by the Right Honourable Joseph Hutchinson, lord mayor Dublin, the lord mayor of Cork, their worships the mayors of Limerick, Galway, Sligo and Waterford, twentyeight Irish representative peers, sirdars, grandes and maharajahs bearing the cloth of estate, the Dublin Metropolitan Fire Brigade, the chapter of the saints of finance in their plutocratic order of precedence, the bishop of Down and Connor, His Eminence Michael cardinal Logue archbishop of Armagh, primate of all Ireland, His Grace, the most reverend Dr William Alexander, archbishop of Armagh, primate of all Ireland, the chief rabbi, the Presbyterian moderator, the heads of the Baptist, Anabaptist, Methodist and Moravian chapels and the honorary secretary of the society of friends. (Joyce, *Ulysses* 602-604)

Such examples demonstrate how Joycean inventories break from narrative as architectonic, stand-alone assemblages of information. They are Rabelaisian irruptions, like Philip Marlow's lesions, that erupt in swollen bas-relief. The exaggerated, at times hysterical, quality of such lists, perform the hallucinatory work of displacement and condensation (the Homeric parallel here is the transformation of Odysseus's men into swine by the witch Circe). Freudian, not to mention Stindberg-ian dream-work brings together and juxtaposes images and details that only make sense as *non-sense* (realistic but not real), such as the extraordinary explosive gathering of civic, commercial, political, chivalric representatives of Dublin in this foreshortened excerpt of Bloom's regal campaign for his "new Bloomusalem" (606).

The text's formidable echolalia, whereby motifs recur and recapitulate into leitmotifs, ensures that the act of reading *Ulysses* is always cross-referential, suggesting the persistence of a conjured world that is always already still coming into being *through* reading. And it is of course this forestalling of Newton's Second Law that Joyce brazenly conducts, in both the textual and physical sense, in *Finnegans Wake*. The *Wake* is an impossible book in that it infinitely sustains the circulation of words within a closed system, creating a weird feedback loop of cyclical return. It is a text that can run indefinitely through the force of its own momentum without coming to a conclusion. In a text in which the author's alter ego is described in terms of the technology of inscription (Shem the Penman) and his craft as being a "punsil shapner," (Joyce, *Finnegans* 98) Norbert Wiener's descriptive example of feedback as the forestalling of entropy in the conscious act of picking up a pencil is apt:

One we have determined this, our motion proceeds in such a way that we may say roughly that the amount by which the pencil is not yet picked up is decreased at each stage. (Wiener 7)

The *Wake* overcomes the book's, and indeed writing's, struggle with entropy through the constant return of energy into its closed system as a cycle of endless return. Its generative algorithm can be represented thus: "... a long the riverrun ..." (628-3).

The *Wake's* sense of unending confounds and contradicts, in advance, Frank Kermode's averring to Newton's Second Law in his insistence that the progression of all narrative fiction is defined in terms of the "sense of an ending," the expectation of a conclusion, whereby the termination of words makes "possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle" (Kermode 17). It is the realisation of the novel imagined by Silas Flannery, the fictitious author in Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller, an incipit* that "maintains for its whole duration the potentiality of the beginning" (Calvino 140). *Finnegans Wake* is unique in terms of the history of the novel (if that is indeed what it is) in that it is never read, but (as Joseph Frank observed of Joyce generally) "can only be re-read" (Frank 19). With Wiener's allegory of feedback no doubt in mind, Jacques Derrida's cybernetic account of the act of reading Joyce comes, like a form of echolalia, on the heels of Calvino's *incipit*, his perpetual sustaining of the beginning:

you stay on the edge of reading Joyce—for me this has been going on for twenty-five or thirty years—and the endless plunge throws you back onto the river-bank, on the brink of another possible immersion, *ad infinitum* ... In any case, I have the feeling that I haven't yet begun to read Joyce, and this "not having begun to read" is sometimes the most singular and active relationship I have with his work. (Derrida 148)

Derrida wonders if this process of ongoing immersion in the text is typical of all works of literature and not just the *Wake*. The question is rhetorical and resonates into silence. And it is silence, ultimately, that hovers as a mute herald of the end when words will simply run out.

Post(script)

It is in the nature of all writing that it is read in the absence of its author. Perhaps the most typical form of writing, then, is the suicide note. In an extraordinary essay, "Goodbye, Cruel Words," Mark Dery wonders why it has been "so neglected as a literary genre" and promptly sets about reviewing its decisive characteristics. Curiously, the list features amongst its many forms:

I'm done with life

I'm no good

I'm dead. (Dery 262)

And references to lists of types of suicide notes are among Dery's own notes to the essay. With its implicit generic capacity to intransitively add more detail, the list becomes in the light of the terminal letter a condition of writing itself. The irony of this is not lost on Dery as he ponders the impotent stoicism of the scribbler setting about the mordant task of writing for the last time. Writing at the last gasp, as Dery portrays it, is a form of dogged, radical will. But his concluding remarks are reflective of his melancholy attitude to this most desperate act of writing at degree zero: "The awful truth (unthinkable to a writer) is that eloquent suicide notes are rarer than rare because suicide is the moment when language fails—fails to hoist us out of the pit, fails even to express the unbearable weight" (264) of someone on the precipice of the very last word they will ever think, let alone write. Ihab Hassan (1967) and George Steiner (1967), it would seem, were latecomers as proselytisers of the language of silence.

But there is a queer, uncanny optimism at work at the terminal moment of writing when, contra Dery, words *prevail* on the verge of "endless, silent night." (264) Perhaps when Newton's Second Law no longer has carriage over mortal life, words take on a weird half-life of their own. Writing, after Socrates, does indeed circulate indiscriminately among its readers. There is a dark irony associated with last words. When life ceases, words continue to have the final say as long as they are read, and in so doing they sustain an unlikely, and in their own way, stoical sense of unending.

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