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## This emptied heart: Watt's unwelcome home

Beckett's second published novel, *Watt*, tells the story of the title character's journey to, stay in, and expulsion from the house of a Mr Knott, to which he has been drawn, or summoned, to act as a servant. After his stay in the house, Watt becomes psychotic, ending up in a sort of asylum. Sam, the narrator, befriends him there, but admits the text may not approximate reality, since he can trust neither Watt's recollection (of his stay with Knott) nor his own recollection (of Watt's telling). Central to the book is the 'unknowability' of Knott, and 'unknowability' permeates the work itself, creating confusion within the reader that reflects the emotional and cognitive state of the main character. *Watt* can be read as an attempted repair of an infantile-self hovering near psychic disintegration (represented by Watt) through reconnection to maternal aspects of Mr Knott, a powerful, early imago variously experienced as withholding, uninterested and sadistic.<sup>1</sup> The novel explores early experience within the Autistic Contiguous and Paranoid Schizoid Positions, and there is a fluidity of imagos. At times, Watt appears predominantly in the maternal role, depleted through endless, unconditional loving of his master, while Knott acts as a devouring, insatiable infant, reflecting the condensed, confused experience of the narrative-self in its relation to an internal mother felt to be unreachable.

Hoefler views Watt's journey to Knott as an epistemological adventure doomed to failure because 'there is no logical formulation to explain Mr Knott' (Hoefler, 1965: 73). She believes Watt's inability to access a reality that underlies mere surface phenomenon causes his ultimate psychological deterioration. This reading suggests the underlying cause of Watt's lack of cognitive, exploratory 'tools' is a primary disconnection from Knott-as-mother, who cannot be *explained rationally* because he cannot be *reached emotionally*. Watt becomes fixed within early positions of human experience that are *before* language and reason. Webb (1970)

and Fletcher (1964) also emphasize the theme of the impossibility of all knowledge. Fletcher feels Watt's journey to Knott is primarily religious but, instead of salvation, he finds 'a negative God, the great Nothing of which nothing can be predicated' (Fletcher, 1964: 86). Again, it is Watt's failed *relationship* with Knott-as-mother, the infantile-self's 'personal God', that explains this 'impossibility [...] of all knowledge'. Engagement with the mother's body/mind engenders knowledge, as the security that comes through her containing love reduces the anxiety of psychic disintegration, allowing for an inner 'peace' that makes incorporation of the *whole* world possible. Federman views the novel as 'a narrative experiment which exploits the inadequacy of language, reason, and logic to reveal the failure of fiction as a means of apprehending the reality of the world' (1965: 119). He believes the core of the novel, Watt's journey to, and stay in, Knott's house, becomes a metaphor for the fictional process itself. This notion is central to this reading, which views the novel as a reflection of the underlying narrative-self and its own struggle to maintain an enduring, whole relationship with another (through fantasy), including using the fiction/fantasy *itself* as a container of anxiety. *Watt* is a close study of the experience of early fantasy, the primal fiction that connects the infant to the world that is both mother and self.

Barnard (1970) sees in all of Beckett a powerful expression of the subjective experiences of schizophrenia. His recognition of the core importance of Watt's *relationship* to Knott upon *meaning*, is close to the present study. Meares (1973) also examines the experience of schizophrenia in Watt, particularly the relationship between anxiety and indecision, Watt's tendency to become overwhelmed by stimuli, and the loss of personal boundaries. Levy (1980) notes that some readings of *Watt* tend to see it as an expression of the failure of Logical Positivism, or as an exploration of the implications of the structuralist tenet that reality is linguistic: 'Watt's predicament as a kind of post-structuralist yearning for a place where naive faith in the power of language to explain external phenomenon can once more be satisfied' (Levy, 1980: 28). He quotes Bernal, "'There is nothing as disturbing in modern literature as Watt's nostalgic desire again to seize language and prevent it from failing him'" (Levy, 1980: 28). Levy also points out the importance of Watt's being verified by the other: 'if [he] is not witnessed, or feels ignored by a witness, then he has no assurance of his relation to the outside world' (Levy, 1980: 30), and also feels the narrator attempts to express a subjective experience of nothingness. The present study

also recognizes the centrality of authentic language, which depends upon an enduring bond to the mother-as-primal listener, and Levy's recognition of the importance of 'witnessing' for self-development is further elaborated. Finally, there is nothing as disturbing in modern literature as Watt's failure to connect with the mother, and the consequence of this failure to establish the most central, enduring bond of the human condition – a fractured foundation of the child-self.

Hill feels the novel probes the 'precarious effects of a larger network of inconsequence, arbitrary coincidence, and self-defeating discontinuity' (1990: 20), laying more emphasis on the *nature of the relationship* between Watt and Knott as underlying the novel's fragmentation and loss of meaning: 'the figure of Knott has the effect on Watt of demolishing the already fragile structure on his identity as a subject of filiation' (1990: 27). Knott is seen as a 'figure of paternal indifference, engulfment and indeterminacy, apathy, and invisibility' (1990: 27), 'the still core of indifference at the centre of the novel' (1990: 30). Hill also stresses Watt's yearning for fusion with Knott and his anxiety about engulfment, seeing this dichotomy as important to Beckett's work in general. This study develops these points within the concept of the mother–infant matrix, and the fusion/engulfment dichotomy forms a pole of the unwitnessed infant's early schizoid dilemma. Finally, in his study of psychoanalytical 'mythologies' surrounding Beckett, Baker (1998) notes aspects of the novel's 'infant subtext', such as orality and abandonment. He describes some of the birth-imagery in the novel (Baker, 1998: 75), and of the Knott-experience writes: 'On one level it involves leaving the mystical realm [... but also suggests] a weaning-like Fall from oceanic "belonging", and a loss of primordial fusion' (1998: 23). The present study develops and integrates these notions into the overarching thesis concerning the narrative-self's struggle to connect to the mother. It hopes to correct Baker's suggestion that 'the schizoid confusion of *Watt* far exceeds the major myths of psychoanalysis' (1998: 29).

The *nature* of Watt's relationship to Knott is the central organizing principle of the novel; it is a relationship predicated upon *emotional* unavailability, neglect, and disregard. This novel explores the inter-relationship between the child's experience of the mother's love and its ability to understand the world; Watt cannot *know* Knott because Knott-as-mother's inability to love disables the *possibility* of knowledge, of both persons and the world. It is the early knowledge of the mother's body, being lovingly contained within her mind, that would 'bring [Watt the] peace', the freedom from early disintegration anxieties that

allows self-integration. The entire text, like a psychoanalytical session or a dream, reveals the predominant themes of abandonment depression, psychosis, yearning for connection and love. The text contains the narrative-self's internal state and re-enacts foundational experiences with early objects. The work is not pathological, but explores aspects of early human experience. Watt's final disintegration is perhaps as eloquent a cry as there can be for an appreciation of the importance of those aspects of human life – connection, respect, love – upon which all else depends.

This chapter looks at early scenes that reflect failed psychic birth: the actual birth of Larry Nixon, and Watt's own arrival into the fiction. Next, there is a detailed reading of Arsene's speech to Watt (as the former prepares to leave Knott's house for the last time) that suggests early anxiety situations; the next section examines Watt's stay in the house, with particular emphasis on the emotional (non-)connection between the two characters, and Watt's reaction to this failure in primary attachment. Finally, there is discussion of various symbols suggesting early maternal failure, of disruptions in nurturing, and of scenes that describe Watt's need for containment by substitute maternal figures.

### An unborn self

A central scene in the novel occurs before Watt appears, and embodies an experience at the emotional core of the oeuvre. Mr Hackett is conversing with the Nixons, an elderly couple, and the lady describes the birth of her son, Larry, during a dinner party she was hosting: 'The first mouthful of duck had barely passed [her] lips', when she feels the child move inside her. She continues to 'eat, drink, and make light conversation', while no 'trace of this dollar appear[s] on [her] face'. Labour begins 'with the coffee and liquors', and when the men retire to the billiard-room, she climbs up the stairs 'on [her] hands and knees', in 'anguish' and 'three minutes later [she] was a mother'. The birth is accomplished without assistance (the cord is 'severed' with her teeth), the emotion she describes is 'one of relief, of great relief' and, as the child is separated from her body, there is a feeling of 'riddance' (13–15). This vignette can be a satire of Irish middle-class mores, and certainly one can understand the woman's sense of relief at having independently survived a difficult ordeal. There is a darker side to Larry's birth, however: the father seems almost unaware of his wife's pregnancy,

certainly of the labour, and the atmosphere is one of emotional misattunement, abandonment, and neglect. The scene is devoid of joy; the mother seems emotionally disconnected from both the experience of birth and from her newborn infant. There is little to suggest the 'oneness' of Winnicott's mother-child dyad, of the attunement so vital to the child's developing sense of self. The entire bonding period is bypassed, the mother returns to her duties as hostess immediately after the birth 'leading the infant by the hand' (15). The text's associative movement continues to reflect a state of abandonment and its genesis in early dyadic ruptures – the passage that soon follows recounts Mr Hackett's fall off a ladder, at the age of one:

Where was your dear mother? said Tetty.  
 She was out somewhere, said Mr Hackett.  
 And your Papa? said Tetty.  
 Papa was out breaking stones on Prince William's Seat, said Mr Hackett.  
 You were all alone, said Tetty.  
 There was the goat, I am told, said Mr Hackett. (16)<sup>2</sup>

The associations and imagery remain centred on primary abandonment, as an emotional layering of neglect and loneliness develops. The child's only witness, a goat, highlights the yearning for connection, and this image is often repeated within the oeuvre when characters attempt to attach to animals.<sup>3</sup> The decrepit hero of 'The End', for example, survives on cow's milk while resting in self-exile from the world, and the narrator of 'From An Abandoned Work' says:

Never loved anyone I think, I'd remember. Except in my dreams, and there it was animals, dream animals [...] lovely creatures they were, white mostly [...] it's a pity, a good woman might have been the making of me, I might be sprawling in the sun now sucking my pipe and patting the bottoms of the third and fourth generations [...] No I regret nothing, all I regret is having been born, dying is such a long tiresome business. (158)

A feeling of primary disconnection manifests as an alienation from other persons, as the narrator can only dream of love with fantasy animals. There is a quick dismissal of his poignant, momentary realization that a loving relationship within a family may have allowed him to prosper. His comment about 'a good woman' touches the notion of the primary maternal object as a foundation of a vital, coherent psychic life: this is reflected in imagery suggestive of early experience (i.e. the 'sucking' of the pipe and the affectionate touching of children). In other

words, *within* his fantasy he reveals the absence of a good maternal object, explaining his turn to internal, dream animals for love (as a replacement for a loving internal family). His belief that life is futile is a direct consequence of his difficulty in connecting to good *external* others, something which would require an internal template he is lacking.

The opening sections continue to develop a sense of internal loss and primary disconnection, as Watt is delivered prematurely into the world, without love, experiencing a metaphorical birth by being forced to leave a tram before reaching his destination. Ejected by an angry conductor, he is left standing 'motionless, a solitary figure' (16), a near stillbirth abandoned by the slowly receding lights of a tram that is a womb of (m)otherness. Immediately the underlying feeling-state of the narrative-self (and its objectification in the *subjective* world of Watt) begins to merge, and a dissociative aura develops. Described as an 'it', Watt is 'scarcely to be distinguished from the dim wall behind', and he can be viewed here as an embryonic, genderless self with no discernible human features, awaiting a mother (Knott) who will help to 'create' him. Indeed, Mrs Hackett is unsure of his gender, and Mr Hackett is 'not sure that it was not a parcel, a carpet for example, or a roll of tarpaulin' (16). A mist of 'unknowability' is cast, Mr Hackett '[does] not know when he had been so intrigued' (17) feeling an unusual 'sensation' which he does not think he can 'bear [...] for more than twenty minutes, or half an hour' (17).<sup>4</sup> A sense of psychic dissolution pervades the scene, foreshadowing the stay in Knott's house, and there is an urgency for Hackett to 'know' Watt just as Watt will feel an urgency to 'know' Knott. The boundary between objects and persons dissolves as Mr Nixon says to Hackett: 'When I see him, or think of him, I think of you, and [...] when I see you, or think of you, I think of him' (19). To Hackett's urgent clamouring for information Nixon pleads ignorance, 'nothing is known' (21), despite apparently knowing (in the weak sense) Watt all his life. This inchoate sense of 'knowing' Watt is reflected by Nixon's statement that he does not remember their first meeting 'any more than I remember meeting my father' (23), as we enter a pre-symbolic realm that exists before identity and conscious memory, where the earliest subjectivity is formed. After leaving the group, Watt continues towards his destination via the railroad terminus, and the sense of disconnection from a loving primary object is highlighted by the song Watt 'hears', which appears in the addenda: 'With all our heart breathe head awhile darkly apart the air exile of ended

smile of ending care darkly awhile the exile air' (253). This suggests a primary rupture, the infant's whole world, merged with its mother ('all our heart') lasting only too briefly before separation ('darkly apart') into a world of loveless exile ('of ended smile'), and a schizoid withdrawal that reflects the primal loss ('of ending care'). The result of this loveless, darkened internal exile is Watt's withdrawn passivity, apparent when, after falling over a milkcan, he does not pick up his hat because he does not feel free to do so 'until the porter had finished abusing him' (25). He survives by remaining inoffensive, adopting a submissive demeanour in situations where he stumbles into others' affairs. This is characteristic of many Beckettian figures – Molloy's bumbling with the police, the travails of 'she' in *Not I*, or of O in *Film*, all of whom, like Watt, seem content to circumvent society in the hope of existing in peace on the periphery. Watt's socialization is actually severely disturbed: '[He] had watched people smile and thought he understood how it was done [... but] some little thing was lacking, and people who saw it for the first time, and most people who saw it saw it for the first time, were sometimes in doubt as to what expression exactly was intended. To many it seemed a simple sucking of the teeth' (25). He is unable to articulate one of the earliest gestures, a smile, a biologically wired reaction essential both to early mother and child bonding and to the growth of the child's sense of personhood (Meares, 1993: 66–8). His inability to smile with authenticity suggests an enduring disruption in his ability to be with others in any meaningful way, reflecting the depth of his disconnection from the mother. His tooth-sucking implies a regression to early stages of mother–infant relating – Watt seems to be self-nurturing by sucking at a nipple within his own body, and it also parodies the 'sucking reflex' of the newborn that communicates hunger.

Given this legacy, Watt's journey becomes a search for an emotional connection he has never known. On the train, the aura of reality begins to shift – no longer aware of the other passengers, Watt withdraws into an internal world: '[He] heard nothing of this, because of other voices, singing, crying, stating, murmuring, things unintelligible, in his ear' (29). In concert with this, the narrator presents the first of a number of long ruminative descriptions that appear in the book: '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 [etc.]' (29). These types of passage sometimes run for several pages, providing complete, logical

enumerations of the possible arrangements of the qualities of an object or of a situation. In this particular passage, it is the nature of the voices that Watt hears – later examples will be Mr Knott's appearance, the arrangement of his furniture, and the ways five committee members can look at each other in sequence. These passages create within the reader a sense of the closed intrapsychic space central both to Watt's experience and to the text's underlying emotional reality, as words themselves run on obsessively. This experience is often explored in the oeuvre as, for example, in Molloy's description of his 'sucking stones':

And the first thing I hit upon was that I might do better to transfer the stones four by four, instead of one by one, that is to say, during the sucking, to take the three stones remaining in the right pocket of my greatcoat and replace them by the four in the right pocket of my trousers, and these by the four in the left pocket of my greatcoat, plus the one, as soon as I had finished sucking it, which was in my mouth (64).

These passages have an autistic sense, reflecting the experience of certain patients described by Tustin (1981, 1986, 1990); they prefigure Beckett's continuing exploration of autistic aspects of early experience by using words as 'autistic objects', actual objects used by a child to soothe himself, replacing real interactions with persons. A child may grip a hard toy car, becoming entirely absorbed in this sensation to the exclusion of all external reality, and Tustin suggests these objects soothe by sparing the child the reality of separation from the primary love object. These children, oblivious to the world, have suffered a traumatic, early disruption in their core, primary psychological bond to the mother:

A sad situation which often seems to be the starting place for autistic withdrawal, is a mother and baby who experience bodily separateness from each other as being torn violently apart and wounded [...] pathological autistic objects seem to staunch the 'bleeding' by blocking the wound. They also seem to plug the gap between the couple so that bodily separateness is not experienced. (Tustin, 1981: 31)

In Beckett's work, birth is often represented as a painful, violent separation, and when viewed metaphorically as premature psychological birth, these images become extremely potent. The heroine of *Not I*, 'out into the world too soon' with 'no love', Hamm relying on his 'old stauncher' as he suffers the realization that Clov-as-mother (or as child) may be gone (i.e. he suffers a 'bleeding' loss of part of himself), and Watt, born from the tram a station too soon, and forced to leave

Knott's house without the emotional sustenance he seeks, all retreat into the autistic world Tustin explores clinically. In this light, Molloy's stones are deeply symbolic objects that, like Watt's tooth-sucking, allow him to reconnect to early experiences of feeding from the mother's body.<sup>5</sup> The autistic object also serves a protective function, creating the illusion of an impenetrable barrier to the external world, and words themselves can be used in this fashion. In an analytical setting, a patient may present a barrage of words, often impenetrable and without pause; words function as *things*, without emotional referent, and block awareness of the separate analyst/mother by shrouding the self in a protective 'second skin' (Bick, 1968, 1986). In *Watt*, Beckett begins to explore this aspect of words, as the long, obsessional passages reflect Watt's own experience, enclosing him in a self-contained world. The effect is shared with the reader: the passages create a sense of claustrophobic encasement, with words literally forming a dense barricade of ink that edges towards a loss of meaning, as the reader becomes frustrated, bored within a closed psychic space. These passages have another important quality, since their *content* reveals the underlying cause of Watt's schizoid withdrawal to be a failure in primary emotional connection. He re-experiences a traumatic situation where Knott is unavailable for repair, and his ruminations both defend against the deep depression engendered by this absence, and reveal it – they can be viewed as attempts to *create* feelings of connection within the self. The core obsessional passages *are* Watt's attempts to know Knott by locating him (203), or by imagining his personal belongings (204) or his appearance (209). Likewise, in the long passage concerning the five committee members at Louit's 'dissertation', who never meet each other's gaze (175–9), the primary importance of recognition is demonstrated. The ruminations about the Lynch family's chances of perfect numerical harmony (101–11) suggest a need for a complete, enduring group of internal objects. Overall, these passages create feelings of non-experience, exhibiting an active destruction of knowledge that protects the self from a persecutory, chaotic mother/world, perhaps reflecting an identification with a mother who herself used such obsessional devices to control the world or her child.

Watt represents the part of the narrative-self that feels itself a pariah on the world's margins: wandering toward Knott, an elderly lady throws a stone at him, and so complete is his divorce from his own body, this violence raises no emotion. Resting under the night sky, he becomes uncomfortable with the moon's shining upon him 'as though

he were not there' (33). The moonlight creates a sense of depersonalization, he is unrecognized, absent, his sense of himself is compressed, and there is no home in the world – he dislikes both the moon and the sun, the earth and the sky. The image of the bright, round moon 'face' connects to early feelings of seeing the mother, of *being seen* by her. The infant can, from virtually the earliest moments of life, begin to identify the human visage, and this appears to be hard-wired neurologically. Watt's disconnection from such primary contact underscores his isolation from the mother and the world, his dislike of celestial bodies may be an introjection of his feeling of being unwitnessed and unloved by heavenly faces. Curling up into the ditch, burying himself, as Molloy will do, into mother earth, Watt engenders himself, becoming his own creator, though now enclosed in an autistic world. The deepest human anxiety mounts, he hallucinates the singing of the long repetitive number, '*Fifty-one point one/four two eight five seven one/four two eight five seven one*' (35), strikingly reminiscent of autistic children described by Tustin, for whom numbers become enclosing, encapsulating objects that protect them by creating a shell that prevents seepage of the self into the world. In this way, the autistic number 'enwombs' Watt by holding him together intrapsychically. The internal voices also sing verses to him: 'greatgran/ma Ma/grew how/do you/do blooming/thanks and/you drooping/thanks and/you withered/thanks and/you for/gotten thanks and/you thanks for/gotten/too greatgran/ma Ma' (35). Despairing parts of the self view ageing as irrevocably, exclusively linked to emotional loss (i.e. the Great Mother, old and forgotten) and, as so often in the oeuvre, the life cycle is compressed and devalitised, becoming a hopeless decline that ends without meaning: 'grew [...] blooming [...] withered [...] drooping [...] withered [...] forgotten'. A second verse that Watt hallucinates demonstrates the despair that develops from an experience of maternal unavailability, and its effect on feeding:

a big fat bun [...]  
 for Mr Man and a bun  
 for Mrs Man and a bun [...]  
 a big fat bun for everyone ...  
 till all the buns are done and everyone is gone  
 home to oblivion (35)

This 'song' is Watt's core hope for an unimaginable bounty of feeding for all ('a big fat bun for everyone', i.e. all 'Man'-kind), and for a

happy, 'full'filled internal family living together in loving harmony. This fantasy is catastrophically drained, the source of nutrition is depleted or withheld, and total annihilation results ('everyone is gone'). Watt is unable to maintain an enduring image of a good, loving mother/nutrient-giver; rather, his internal world is dominated by an imago that is withholding, sadistic, or depleted by greedy, sadistic infantile demands, and the final paradoxical line ('home to oblivion') reflects a return to futile entrapment.

### On the primitive edge of Knott

Watt's stay with Mr Knott is an attempt at self-reparation, a tragic search for the mother's mind in the hope of creating an enduring, coherent sense of self. Winnicott describes the child's need for 'good-enough' mothering by a caretaker able to attend to its basic needs, allowing for the development of the self – it is the failure to recognize such needs, and the deleterious consequences of such failures on human development, that shall be enacted in the house. Watt's desire to be 'fully born' is suggested by his immediate motivation for leaving the ditch where he lay with the 'voices' prior to his arrival at Knott's: 'The earth [...] he felt it, and smelt it, the bare hard dark stinking earth. And if there were two things that Watt loathed, one was the earth, and the other was the sky. So he crawled out of the ditch' (36).<sup>6</sup> The possibilities of life are compressed, for between earth and sky there is no home for Watt, and no chance for an existence in which he is not suffocated within a neither-/non-space between two bad objects. Thus he begins his quest to be reborn, though he 'never [knows] how he got into Mr Knott's house' (37), the backdoor mysteriously becomes unlocked, as his entry becomes steeped in a sense of contingency. Sitting by the kitchen fire, playing with the ashes, using his hat to give them life, he watches the embers 'greyen, redden, greyen, redden', and while absorbed in this 'innocent little game' (38) the servant whom he is to replace, Arsene, enters the room without his knowledge. A beautifully lyrical passage illuminates Watt's central struggle to master his sense of isolation from the world, something reflected by Arsene's unpredictable (non-)arrival. The passage stresses this mystery, reflecting the Watt's 'fort-da' ash-game,<sup>7</sup> as he controls a myriad of losses by manipulating the embers: his tenuous grasp on the external world, his fragmentary sense of self, his absent internal mother, and the 'light' of reason:

He found it strange to think, of these little changes, of scene, the little gains, the little losses, the thing brought, the thing removed [...] strange to think of all these little things that cluster round the comings, and the stayings, and the goings, that he would know nothing of them, nothing of what they had been, as long as he lived, nothing of when they came, of how they came [...] nothing of when they went, of how they went, and how it was then, compared with before, before they came, before they went. (38)

This description of Watt's interior landscape suggests an isolated-self incapable of maintaining enduring links to its internal objects. The 'comings and goings' are unknowable, and the sense of lost attachment suggests an elusive, internal universe in incomplete contact with the self. The scene foreshadows the desperate sense of lost primary love described in *Embers*:

Ada: [...] Is this rubbish a help to you Henry? [*Pause.*] I can try and go on a little if you wish. [*Pause.*] No? [*Pause.*] Then I think I'll be getting back.

Henry: Not yet! You needn't speak. Just listen. Not even. Be with me. [*Pause.*] Ada! [*Pause. Louder.*] Ada! [*Pause.*] Christ! [*Pause.*] Hooves! [*Pause. Louder.*] Hooves! [*Pause.*] Christ! [*Long pause.*] (103)

Like Watt, Henry's grasp on his internal world (here represented by the hallucinated voice of his dead wife) is tenuous, ever ready to leave without warning, remaining beyond his ability to recall it, fading and glowing like gently dying embers. Henry's only need is for her presence, she need not speak nor even listen, he only desires to be alone in the presence of the mother. Winnicott (1965: 29–36) felt a momentous developmental stage for the emerging-self is the ability to be alone, something made possible by the infant's ability to lose itself in play while in proximity to the mother, who acted in a transitional manner to contain the child as a felt, background presence. Watt's little game with the ashes is, perhaps, a doomed attempt to play in this way. Like the female images in ... *but the clouds ...*, *Footfalls*, and so forth, the female visage in *Embers* reflects a primary imago that binds the internal world, but which is only tenuously felt and not enduring. Left alone again, Watt's ember-game ends, they 'would not redden anymore, but remained grey, even in the dimmest light' (39). His fort-da game lost as contact with the external world ebbs, his ability to retain his internal universe becomes tenuous, and he begins to '[masturbate] his snout' (40) like many autistic children who turn to self-stimulation to avert the

black hole of nothingness. The servant Arsene returns, aware his days with Knott are over and, in a long, rambling speech, he reveals the nature and impact of the intrapsychic consequences of his stay in the house.

Arsene begins, as if coming out of a trance, 'Haw! how it all comes back to me, to be sure' (39), and what comes back is a remembrance of his self-state, prior to his Knott-experience, a condensation of schizoid experiences:

The man arrives! The dark ways all behind, all within, the long dark ways, in his head [...] And all the sounds, meaning nothing. Then at night rest in the quiet house, there are no roads, no streets any more, you can lie down by a window opening on refuge, the little sounds come that demand nothing, ordain nothing, explain nothing [...] and the sky blue again over all the secret places where nobody ever comes [...] sites of a stirring beyond coming and going, of a being so light and free that it is as the being of nothing. (39)

It is possible to view the house as mother's mind, in which the anxious, fragmented infantile-self hopes to be contained; the house *is* Knott *is* the mother, and Watt hopes to rest here (as Murphy did in the 'third zone') to escape the darkness 'all within [...] his head'. Arsene and Watt are lonely, isolated men, fleeing a dark world for refuge, but there is also the intrapsychic world of the infantile-self fleeing deeper into Guntrip's 'lost heart of the self', a place of sanctuary, almost beyond yearning, past the 'comings and goings'. Guntrip saw this as the mind's last desperate retreat, into which it is driven by the despair of being unable to enter into a loving, genuine relationship, and it is this place into which Watt withdraws for reparation, hoping his damaged sense of himself will be recognized and nurtured. In relating such hopes, Arsene speaks of arriving in the house 'after so long, here, and here, and in my hands, and in my eyes, like a face raised, a face offered, all trust and innocence and candour' (40), like the infant seeking the mirroring, self-affirming smile of the mother, he comes to Knott hoping to find an emotional attunement that will allow a move beyond his inner fortress.<sup>8</sup> Knott, and his house, too, offer such sanctuary, the 'fit is perfect' between infant and mother, as a merged sense of loving containment binds the sensual world: 'The sensations, the premonitions of harmony are irrefragable, of imminent harmony, when all outside him will be he, the flowers the flowers that he is among him, the sky the sky that he is above him, the earth trodden the earth

treading, and all sound his echo' (40–1). The world loses its terrifying aura, and here, with what Winnicott calls the stable, nurturing 'background mother', Watt has the chance to rest 'without misgiving', to be 'as he is', for the first time since 'in anguish and disgust he relieved his mother of her milk' (41). This captures the ambivalence of early infantile experience – there is 'anguish', the desperate sense that it is the infant who is damaging the mother, draining her, possibly causing the ruptures in early feeding. Alternatively, there is a sense of disgust reflecting, perhaps, an anxiety about dependence on the breast for survival. Now, though, with Knott, there is an opportunity to move back beyond the 'basic fault' to a mental place where one is held psychically by the mother, and where one can begin to feel oneself into the world.<sup>9</sup> One can begin to *be*, feeling disparate sensations coalesce into a coherent self, fragments which are, at first, held together by the mother's containing function – mother and child create each other – Watt will 'witness[es] and [be] witnessed' (42).

Watt's experience with Knott begins with this hope of being at one with a caring, nurturing mother, able to soothe her infant, to merge with it in a mutual witnessing; it will end with the devastation of this hope. Thus, Arsene speaks of the Fall, that 'terrible day' (42) that begins with a sense of calm, primal merger with the world: 'I was in the sun, and the wall was in the sun. I was the sun, need I add, and the wall, and the step, and the yard, and the time of year, and the time of day, to mention only these' (42). Basking in the glow of the background Knott/mother, Arsene experiences a oneness with the external world, as a timeless lack of boundaries pervades his experience. This approximates a primary monadic bliss, beginning *in utero*, a vital part of early experience carried through the life cycle as a sense of internal well-being. Soon, however, a catastrophic change occurs that alters the world for ever. It reflects a premature psychological separation from the mother that is experienced as overly traumatic, overwhelming an infantile-self that is psychically unprepared; if the separation is precipitated by an unempathic or depressed mother, the results can be a depleted sense of self, a depressed or anxious attitude, or even frank psychosis. Arsene sits in the garden, merged with the universe, with the 'background object of primary identification', the Knott/mother, supplying a sense of belonging and security, when the change occurs. He puffs at his pipe in great contentment, like a babe at the breast, his own breast swelling. The boundary between self and mother blurs, there is a feeling of primary rupture, 'let us not linger on my breast' (43), just as

the separation begins. Birth images abound – the change lies ‘hymeneal still’, there is an image of maternal depletion, he says ‘bugger these buttons! – as flat and – ow! – as hollow as a tambourine’ (42). This imagery is central to an understanding of both Arsene’s and Watt’s Knott-experience, for there is substantial clinical and experimental evidence that the infant’s ‘rooting’ for the nipple is innate, and is a primary focus of early sensuality (Tustin, 1981: 32). Tustin sees:

The sensuous connection [of the infant’s mouth] with the nipple of the breast [as replacing] the ante-natal umbilical connection with the placenta of the mother [... and that] the constellation of nipple and tongue working rhythmically together with mouth and breast sets the feeling of rootedness in train [...] this basic sense of being rooted sets the scene for the development of a sense of identity, security and self-confidence. Lacking this sense of rootedness, the child’s psychic life is dominated by feelings of ‘nothingness’. (Tustin, 1981: 32–3)

In one of the central clinical vignettes of her work, Tustin describes a young autistic boy, John, whose terrified sense of dissolution centred around feelings that a ‘button’ was gone or broken. The ‘button’ was a clear referent for the mother’s nipple and was the boy’s ‘present day formulation for the previously undifferentiated, unformulated, insufferable experience of sensuous loss which had precipitated the autism’ (Tustin, 1986: 80). Thus, the button symbol, for both the autistic child and Arsene, comes to represent the entire experiential world of premature, catastrophic separation from the mother, and this is tantamount to a loss of fundamental containment for a fragile sense of self.<sup>10</sup> This loss leads to feelings of fundamental disconnection, attendant feelings of panic and despair, and fears of annihilation and fragmentation. Just as the ‘broken button’ experience accompanies John’s autistic withdrawal into a protective psychic shell, it is at this point in his telling that, for Arsene, ‘suddenly somewhere some little thing slipped, some little tiny thing’ (43). What slips is Arsene himself, away from the illusory security of the Knott-mother, now feeling alone, separate, and frightened by his smallness in the world:

There is a great alp of sand, one hundred metres high, between the pines and the ocean, and there in the warm moonless night, when no one is looking, no one listening, in tiny packets of two or three millions the grains slip, all together, a little slip of one or two lines maybe, and then stop, all together, not one missing, and that is all, that is all for that night, and perhaps for ever that is all, for in the morning with the sun a

little wind from the sea may come, and blow them one from another far apart, or a pedestrian scatter them with his foot. (43)

This passage is ripe with imagery of separation and fragmentation – the ‘great alp of sand’ can symbolize merged experience, both psychically and physically, within the mother/infant dyad. The alp is both the infantile-mind, and a containing, maternal mind, holding together, in unindividuated fashion, the experience of the infant-with-mother. Breast-like in shape, the alp echoes the primary imagery Arsene employs to describe his experience in the garden/mind of Knott. It suggests an experience of, or wish for, holding and containment within the Knott/mother, but also suggests the tenuous, ‘sand-like’ nature of that bond. When there is no one to witness, as Knott does not witness, the particles are blown asunder, as the infantile-self is ‘untimely ripped’ from the maternal mind. Again, the image of the moon suggests an early experience of the mother’s face, but in this case it is on a moonless night, when the alp-as-infant mind is unseen and unheard, that the disintegration occurs. Arsene’s sense of self now fragments, a few particles amidst an overwhelming universe, and these scatter, blown about, much as Murphy ends amidst the sawdust. The sand is a highly condensed metaphor for a self-state both constricted and scattered, both bound by the other and alone, and as prone to fragmentation as sand.<sup>11</sup> These particles of self (memory complexes of feelings and thoughts) are bound together in the child by the mother’s containment, something the child eventually internalizes and makes his own. Without this ‘glue of the self’, the child’s self is prone to a Humean nightmare of unconnected sensation, isolated, ever ready to fragment unless held together in a constricted, encasing, and autistic fashion, something often suggested by the oeuvre’s imagery of ashcans, bottles, and enclosed rooms. It is this separation that Arsene experiences, the slippage of multitudinous parts of himself that were ill-seen, ill-heard in Knott’s mind, parts not processed: ‘millions of little things moving all together out of their old place, into a new one nearby [...] I was the only person living to discover them’ (43). It is just at this point that Arsene experiences himself in a state of blissful merger with the universe, with the Knott/mother, in a place without boundary, without a sense of demarcation of the self: ‘My personal system was so distended [...] the distinction between what was inside it and what was outside it was not at all easy to draw. Everything that happened happened inside it, and at the same time everything that happened happened outside it’

(43). In this state, premature rupture is catastrophic for the developing self, since the child's pre-symbolic mind takes in the world directly, in a manner closer to feeling than thought, Arsene perceives so sensuously that 'the impressions of a man buried alive in Lisbon [...] seem a frigid and artificial construction of the understanding' (43). Arsene demands maternal containment, and the intense vivaciousness of the experience is compared to the terrorized thoughts of a man buried alive, a claustrophobic encasement the later prose and drama will develop. After 'the slip' the world undergoes, like the sun, a 'radical change of appearance' (44). Arsene is frozen in a pre-symbolic, Autistic Contiguous world, with no demarcation between things, no names to bind the sensual world: 'my tobacco-pipe, since I was not eating a banana, ceased so completely from the solace to which I was inured, that I took it out of my mouth to make sure it was not a thermometer, or an epileptic's dental wedge' (44). This oral, 'solace' giving nipple/pipe no longer calms, or nurtures, and this catastrophe is highlighted by the fact that virtual newborns can distinguish between objects within their mouths. Like the pre-representative infantile-mind, Arsene cannot name, nor remember, what he does not see – the pipe in his mouth is *unseen*, and must be lost. He is ripped away from the good breast, the containing mind, and from meaning, something Watt will soon experience himself.

Arsene describes the change as a separation: 'What was changed was existence off the ladder. Do not come down the ladder, I for, I haf taken it away' (44), like I for, he is left without a connection to another, and now feels his world is changed forever.<sup>12</sup> He experiences this premature separation as an overwhelming, disorganizing loss, 'As when a man, having found at last what he sought, a woman, for example, or a friend, loses it' (44); yet he acknowledges the human need to strive for satiation of instinctual drives such as food and sex:

It is useless not to seek, not to want, for when you cease to seek you start to find, and when you cease to want, then life begins to ram her fish and chips down your gullet until you puke, and then the puke down your gullet until you puke the puke, and then the puked puke until you begin to like it. To hunger, thirst, lust, every day afresh and every day in vain [...] that's the nearest we'll ever get to felicity. (44)

Experience is generalized from his relationship with Knott, whose only need is for an audience to contain him in his isolation. The all-encompassing intrusiveness of this demand is as an invasion of the self:

food is forced into the body and subsequent attempts to externalize this 'badness' fail, until the only option is compliance, and an acceptance of the bad as part of self. Kohut (1971, 1977) saw the breakdown of nurturing and empathic ties between the mother and child (particularly the mother's ability to allow the child to use her as a mirror) as leading to fixation on more primitive needs, which are breakdown products of unattuned parenting (Siegel, 1996). This passage highlights this from the child's point of view – mirroring needs are forever unmet, since love is unattainable (just as the love of the Knott is unattainable) and Arsene is left forever longing. He describes this absence as 'the presence of what did not exist, that presence without, that presence within, that presence between' (45). This 'presence', the sense of being that is the core of authentic subjective experience, is found within the mother's love, and so the boundaries of the world, 'within, without, between', collapse into a dead, empty despair. Knott is absence incarnate – there is no presence without, and no possibility to take the 'presence within' by incorporating the mother as a valued, calming, and mirroring part of the self.

This absence and premature separation leaves Arsene in hopeless despair: 'Not a word, not a deed, not a thought, not a need, not a grief, not a joy, not a girl, not a boy [...] not a face, no time, no place, that I do not regret, exceedingly' (46). This is, in Bion's terms, negative K, the absence of libido, and Arsene's entire world becomes depleted of meaning, much like the world of the painter friend of Hamm's in *Endgame*, who sees only ash. A similar sentiment is described in a passage dozens of lines long: 'The poor old lousy old earth, my earth and my father's and my mother's and my father's father's and my mother's mother's [...] and fathers' fathers' fathers' and mothers' mothers' mothers'. An excrement' (47). Arsene universalizes despair – everyone's world becomes meaningless, his entire inner world of progenitors, his *internal family*, is left joyless. It is an utter hopelessness, since all persons must share the same 'lousy earth' or internal world, and there is no chance of an alternative reality. This long, ruminative passage both encases and reveals his feeling-state; this denigration of possibility is also a defensive, envious attack on life, since by turning the world into 'an excrement' there can be nothing left for Arsene to desire. The entire life cycle is also devalued: 'The crocuses and the larch turning green every year [...] the pastures with the uneaten sheep's placentas [...] and the children walking in the dead leaves and the larch turning brown [...] and the endless April showers and the crocuses and

then the whole bloody business starting all over again. A turd' (47). This imagery reflects Arsene's internal world – depleted of meaning, hopeless, condensed and, like the life represented in *Breath*, there is neither space nor time for joy or rebirth. Worst of all there is no possibility of change: 'And if I could begin it all over again a hundred times, knowing each time a little more than the time before, the result would always be the same' (47). It is an eternal recurrence of Hell, a depleted, regressed self with no contact, nor any *hope* of contact with good or calming internal (or external) objects that could help effect psychic change. It is a feeling of such desperate sorrow that he imagines his 'weary little legs' carrying him away from this 'state or place', '[with] tears blinding [his] eyes', 'longing to be turned into a stone pillar', where perhaps a 'lonely man like [himself]' might come and rest against him' (49). The stone image reflects his dead self-state, and the fantasy that he might provide comfort to another is poignant in its yearning for contact, but his sympathy is withdrawn from the world, since he is in 'no fit state [...] to trouble [his] head' about the difficulties of others' (49). Like a helpless child, he imagines his departure will be catastrophic, and he leaves Knott without 'a hope, a friend, a plan, a prospect' to trudge off into a loveless world until he falls, and 'unable to rise', will be 'taken into custody black with flies' (56). There remains, to the end, a small sense of mercy and hope within the world, as Arsene, an orphan in the world of the living, seems destined for maternal containment within an institutional setting.<sup>13</sup>

Fundamentally, then, Arsene leaves Knott in the Depressive Position, able to experience a sense of loss and mourning. He sees a bleak future, is 'sadder, but not wiser' (56) and has been an Ancient Mariner for Watt, warning his replacement of his lost contact with the world. The tenuous tie to Knott broken, Arsene cannot maintain a sense of calm, self-nurturing, as life itself becomes loss. He tells Watt: 'another night [will] fall and another man come and Watt go, Watt who is now come, for the coming is in the shadow of the going and the going is in the shadow of the coming.' (57), echoing a famous passage by Freud, in *Mourning and Melancholia*. Following the loss of a loved person: 'the free libido was not displaced onto another object; it was withdrawn into the ego [...where] it served to establish an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. Thus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego' (Freud, 1987: 258). Since Knott is absent from the beginning, there is nothing but shadow to bring within, and because the proper work of mourning cannot be done Arsene remains chronically depressed,

experiencing life as a fusion between coming, going, and varying forms of separation, with no real point of contact or possibility of loving engagement. There is no sense of human presence, and therefore, in leaving Knott, he is truly alone, since nothing can be taken from the experience. His inner world is condensed into a 'budding withering', a 'coming and being and going in purposelessness' where any feeling of hope is 'dead' (58).

Before leaving Watt in the dawning light, Arsene gives him an idea of the master he is to serve. Knott is an isolated, withdrawn figure about whom it is 'rumoured' that [he] 'would prefer to have no one at all about him' (59). His desire for complete self-sufficiency is thwarted by his infantile nature, in that 'he is obliged to have someone to look after him' (59). Knott's narcissism is extensive, he has but two needs: 'not to need [...] and a witness to his not needing' (202). This equation sets up the dynamics at the heart of the novel, and of Watt's suffering, for though Knott needs the other, it is only by default, as a denied admission of failed omnipotence. The other is but a mirror of Knott's illusory self-sufficiency, and any yearning for genuine connection is doomed to fail, since the world acts only as a source of recognition and need fulfilment. Knott and his endless entourage of servants fluctuate between two poles, with Knott as absent, self-fulfilled mother and the servants, 'big bony shabby seedy haggard knockkneed men' or 'little fat shabby seedy juicy or oily bandy-legged men' (58) as yearning, love-starved infants, 'eternally turning about [him] in tireless love' (60). Alternately, Knott can be seen as an ever demanding, never grateful infant, about whom hovers an endless parade of very good mother/servants, and it is into this world that Arsene ushers Watt, leaving him as suddenly and quietly as the Ancient Mariner leaves the wedding guest. Watt, like the guest who must face the 'morrow morn', waits for Knott in the slowly dawning 'day without precedent' (64). But whereas the *Rime* yields up a hope for love from an embracing God who 'made and loveth all', Watt is doomed to seek where it cannot be found – from a being that loves only itself.

### An imperfect witness

The unfolding non-relationship between Watt and his master is a dramatic representation of early schizoid experience, with the characters forming aspects of a coherent narrative-self. It is an *internal* world, in which the central feeling-state is that of a helpless, hopeless child

struggling to maintain an attuned, intimate relationship to its mother. There are several key scenes that reflect this central dynamic organization as Watt, representative of a depleted, fragmenting aspect of self, vainly seeks a nurturing 'background object of primary identification' to contain him. He encounters Knott instead, and exists only as a witness to illusory self-sufficiency, finding that outside of this function he does not exist. A clinical example may set the stage:

The patient entered analysis complaining of binge-eating, excessive compliance, and the inability to think independently. An unwanted child, she served only two functions for her single mother, to mirror her grandiosity and to care for her when she suffered from her many depressive episodes. The patient's sense of herself was founded on her ability to provide an illusory sense of independence for her mother, something for which she received neither affection nor gratitude. As an adult she vainly attempted to find affection, and allowed herself to be used for the other's gratification and aggrandizement, as she had done earlier for her mother. Ultimately, she experienced an extended period of dissociation, and wandered from city to city in a haze, drifting from one relationship to another with abusive, selfish men. She felt she could be sure of nothing without the input of such men, and could not make decisions, nor have a clear sense of reality without them.

There are many similarities between this woman's experience and Watt's: difficulties in linking thoughts, repressed feelings of rage, abandonment depression and so forth, all linked to an experience of lost contact with a good, nurturing mother. Watt's story is both a re-creation of this internal experience and a revelation of his attempt to repair himself through a failed attempt to discover the mother's love.

Watt's entry into a matrix of early experience within Knott's house/mind begins quietly enough – he has no direct dealings with his master, though he imagines, wrongly, that he would some day. He works ardently at his chores, seeing little of Knott, who himself 'saw nobody, heard from nobody' (69), and indeed, the house is *itself* a sort of autistic shell. Intrusions are rare occurrences – 'fleeting acknowledgments [...] like little splashes on it from the outside world' (69), and the house is a rigid, nearly impenetrable barrier to the world metaphorical of a mind structured on exclusion.<sup>14</sup> This isolation is more abstract and complete in the published version of *Watt*. In the first draft, *Poor Johnny Watt*, Knott is a sixty-year-old man, living alone, abused by two servants, and quickly dismissed by the narrator as never having 'been properly born'. His father, a musician, was a suicide (Coetzee, 1972). By the time the

third draft was written Knott's father is no longer mentioned: his past remains speculative, and he has become more abstract in his role as an absent other. Thus, in his initial conception, Knott's person is formed in a relationship with a lost primary object, his dead father, and it is he, not Watt, who has not been born properly. In fact, the story of Larry Nixon's birth is an amplification of the story of the birth of Knott in the first draft (Coetzee, 1972). Within the development of the novel, through the draft stages, there is a blurred sense of an unborn self shifting between Watt and Knott, and this confusion mirrors their relationship in the final version. In *Watt*, both men are damaged, unable to form enduring connections with others, and this underlies the futility of Watt's seeking an identification and love with an object, Knott, who is himself incapable of such a bond. The loss becomes 'intergenerational', in that Knott, product of parental absence and a victim of abuse in the first draft, recreates the unavailability of his own dead father, and apparently absent mother, in his own relationship with Watt – this opens the possibility that within *Watt* the narrative-self is attempting to make sense of its progenitors' *own* internal experiences with primary objects.

It is only by obsessive rumination that Watt feels any connection to Knott: there is no possibility of a genuine evocative memory of the relationship, he must constantly hold Knott in his mind at the risk of losing him altogether. So fragile is this hold that there is no definitive image, but rather a series of speculations as his master, like an elusive electron, is knowable only in his uncertainty. By maintaining an image of him through all-encompassing fantasies, Watt fulfills Knott's own primary need to be witnessed in his not-needing, to be held in the maternal mind:

What kind of witness was Watt [...]
   
A needy witness, an imperfect witness.
   
The better to witness, the worse to witness.
   
That with his need he might witness its absence.
   
That imperfect he might witness it ill.
   
That Mr Knott might never cease, but ever almost cease.
   
Such appeared to be the arrangement. (203)

Watt, with his own experience of maternal absence, and his need for containment, is the perfect candidate to provide Knott with faulty mirroring (i.e. 'to witness its absence [...] ill' in Knott – the lack of internal connection), though he also attempts to provide, and to receive,

love. This allows Knott a tentative connection to Watt, reminiscent of Endon with Murphy, that does not become threatening, but holds both men just shy of total dissolution. Knott exists without experiencing an enduring sense of the world's permanence, '[moving] about the house he did so as one unfamiliar with the premises', and walking 'in the midst of his garden [...] as one unacquainted with its beauties [...] as though they, or he, had been created in the course of the night' (203). This explains Knott's dependence on his servants, including Watt, who act as Winnicott's 'object mother' to provide, with perfect anticipation, for Knott's every physical need. Knott is enmeshed in omnipotent self-sufficiency and not-needing, but cannot tolerate separateness since he needs to be held psychically by the other, to avoid abandonment to psychic death. Watt experiences Knott as elusive, unfixed, and emotionally unknowable – even in his room, where he 'seemed least a stranger', Knott's location is uncertain: 'Here he stood. Here he sat. Here he knelt. Here he lay. Here he moved, to and fro, from the door to the window, from the window to the door; from the window to the door, from the door to the window [etc.]' (204). This passage runs on for several hundred words, creating a hypnotic, derealizing effect in the reader that echoes Watt's experience. It is one of many in the work that creates a primal uncertainty, reflecting underlying loneliness, and disconnection; the style embodies a pervasive isolation, as well as an obsessive need to make contact.<sup>15</sup> The significance of such passages becomes clearer towards the end of Watt's stay with Knott, when are told that he does not experience, consciously, a deep emotional need for his master: 'Watt suffered neither from the presence of Mr Knott, nor from his absence. When he was with him, he was content to be with him, and when he was away from him, he was content to be away from him' (207). After he actually leaves Knott's house, though, he begins to cry, and is surprised by this reaction, not believing such a thing possible, 'if he had not been there himself' (208).<sup>16</sup> However, the next obsessive passage makes clear that any sense of true connection with Knott is an illusion, describing Watt's inability to fix a solid image of Knott's appearance in his mind: 'For one day Mr Knott would be tall, fat, pale and dark, and the next thin, small, flushed and fair, and the next sturdy, middlesized, yellow and ginger [etc.]' (209). This primary, unresolvable distance between Watt and his master provides the novel's emotional force, as Knott never firmly becomes fixed within his servant/child's internal universe. Watt remains enclosed in his autistic shell, unable to bring into himself an enduring, permanent image of

Knott, who refuses to engage his servant with the type of meaningful contact that would make such an internal experience possible. This is reflected in the clinical situation by patients who are unable to maintain a recollection of the analyst's physical appearance, or of the appearance of the office setting, until they feel connected to a safe, maternal aspect in the analyst.

The visit of the Galls, two piano-tuners, whose entry into the Knott-world is seen as a 'fugitive penetration' (70), makes clear the centrality of early dyadic experience in *Watt*. The elder Gall, who is sightless, depends on his son, whose devotion parallels that of Watt to Knott; Watt clearly identifies with the son, and, in fact, seems to admire him. Alas, the piano they come to tune is in tatters, the mice having returned:

Nine dampers remain, said the younger, and an  
equal number of hammers.  
Not corresponding, I hope, said the elder [...]  
The strings are in flitters, said the younger.  
The elder had nothing to say to this either.  
The piano is doomed, in my opinion, said the younger.  
The piano-tuner also, said the elder.  
The pianist also, said the younger (72).

This incident is important for Watt, and is the beginning of his own 'slip'. In the Galls, Watt sees co-operative contact between a father and son, in contrast to the absence of contact he experiences with Knott.<sup>17</sup> The piano is metaphorical of Watt's inner experience – a communicative tool that relates emotional experience to the world, it has come to grief, lying broken and useless. Watt's own need for authentic communication is thwarted in a house where there is no recognition; his mind, like a broken piano, begins to fragment as he withdraws from the world. The interplay of the Galls has the music-hall cross-talk quality that foreshadows sections of *Waiting for Godot*, and there is some sense of co-operative merger between the Galls that contrasts with Watt's own deep isolation from his primary object. Their dialogue has a catastrophic quality that reflects the hopeless despair Watt is beginning to feel and, in fact, it is communication and relatedness that are now in jeopardy, as Watt sinks inwards into a 'non-correspondence' from others.

The incident with the Galls becomes a model for Watt's experience during his stay with Knott, since it 'continued to unfold, in Watt's head, [... it] gradually lost [...] its sound, its impacts and its rhythm, all

meaning, even the most literal [... the incident with the Galls] became a mere example of light commenting bodies, and stillness motion, and silence sound' (72–3). Watt slips into a pre-symbolic realm, where the symbolic tie to the outer world is ruptured, as representations are sent adrift with no verbal organizations to hold them together. He is drowning in a sea of isolated meaninglessness, unable to connect representations to internal emotional meaning: 'The fragility of the outer meaning had a bad effect on Watt, for it caused him to seek for another, for some meaning of what had passed, in the image of how it had passed' (73). Living on the edge of meaning, 'miserably' among face values, he can recall, without any undue significance, 'the time when his dead father appeared to him in a wood [...] or the time when in his surprise at hearing a voice urging him to do away with himself' (74). These traumatic memories are disconnected from emotional significance, and his current trauma evokes *both* his own absent, dead father *and* the sense of primary maternal loss he is now reliving with Knott. The incident with the Galls is a watershed, however, that quickly disintegrates into displacement, so that 'it seemed rather to belong to some story heard long before, an instant in the life of another, ill told, ill heard, and more than half forgotten' (74), and in this is an echo of Winnicott's concept of the breakdown that has *already* occurred, the rupture of the primary mother–infant bond. Watt's sense of himself as a coherent 'I', which can attach mental representations of past events to itself, can 'own' its past, is dissolving as he disconnects from himself, falling apart 'in tatters' like the piano-mind. Watt's experience of dissociation from a triggering event (i.e. the Galls) resembles the speaker's experience in *Not I*; for both a disconnection from a primary object leads to a dissociated, fragmentary experience of life. The Gall experience, screening a darker reality of loss, has itself become 'Not-I', and the incident has a dream-like quality, its significance remaining unconscious, reflective of Watt's own inner experience in both its form (the merged relationship of father/son) and its content (the Galls' diagnosis of primary disconnection in the piano)

Watt does not give up the world of meaning without a fight, since it is not easy for him to let a piece of his own history (of which the incident with the Galls is one example) dissolve into nothingness. The loss of these object representations, tied to his sense of himself as an intelligent, feeling observer, would also mean the loss of the links of meaning that hold the intrapsychic world together. The struggle to elicit meaning from the world of sensation is the stuff of life itself: 'Watt

considered, with reason, that he was successful [...] when he could evolve, from the meticulous phantoms that beset him, a hypothesis proper to disperse them [...] for to explain had always been to exorcize, for Watt' (77–8). Unfortunately for Watt, his efforts to exorcize the spectres of meaningless sensation begin to fail, he finds himself in a state where the world 'resisted formulation in a way no state had ever done' (81). Now the signifiers have been cut loose, and the world is *full* of unnamables:

Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, at one of Mr Knott's pots, of one of Mr Knott's pots, it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot [...] For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted. It was in vain that it answered, with unexceptionable adequacy, all the purposes, and performed all the offices, of a pot, it was not a pot. (81)

This derealization couples with an alienation from the world not only of physical objects, but of persons, since he feels sure that the pot remains a pot for everyone *but himself*. This is related to a deep sense of depersonalization, for he begins to decouple from a sense of existing as a living, sentient being, since 'he could no longer affirm [of himself] anything that did not seem as false as if he had affirmed it of a stone' (82).<sup>18</sup> The deepest of human anxieties besets him: psychic annihilation triggered by the loss of one's loving internal objects, and because these anxieties are not contained, he loses the sense of living. Despite his chronic sense of withdrawal, Watt likes to be able to say of himself: 'Watt is a man, all the same, Watt is a man, or, Watt is in the street, with thousands of fellow-creatures within call' (82) and clearly the breakdown of meaning is engendered by Watt's losing contact with persons. He becomes overwhelmed by a sense of abandonment and intense loneliness, feeling 'greatly troubled' by this change, and 'more troubled perhaps than he had ever been by anything' (82). Ogden (1989) describes a similar experience in terms of a collapse from the Depressive Position, in which one can experience an object as whole with ambiguous mixtures of emotion, to the Autistic Contiguous Position, which is pre-verbal and sensation dominated. This results in a tyrannizing imprisonment in a closed system of bodily sensations that precludes the development of potential space. He describes a personal experience akin to Watt's:

After dinner one night [...] it suddenly occurred to me how strange it was that the thing called a napkin was named by the conjunction or the sounds 'nap' and 'kin'. I repeated the two sounds over and over until I began to get the very frightening feeling that these sounds had no connection at all with this thing that I was looking at. I could not get these sounds to naturally 'mean' the thing that they had meant only minutes before. The link was broken, and, to my horror, could not be mended simply by an act of will. I imagined that I could, if I chose to, destroy the power of any and all words to 'mean' something if I thought about them one at a time in this way. At that point, I had the very disturbing feeling that I had discovered a way to drive myself crazy. I imagined all the things in the world could come to feel as disconnected as the napkin had become for me now that it had become disconnected from the word that had formerly named it. Further, I felt that I could become utterly disconnected from the rest of the world because all other people would still share in a 'natural' (i.e. a still meaningful) system of words. (Ogden, 1989: 80)

Ogden, like Watt, realizes the central importance of symbolized thought to the core self, the terrorizing realization that without language all connection to others is lost and, more importantly, without a primary connection to others there can be no authentic language in the first place.<sup>19</sup> Unable to experience himself as human, in spite of recalling images of his mother's teaching him to view himself as such, Watt feels the deadened claustrophobia of a closed psychic world, and he 'might just as well thought of himself as a box, or an urn' (82), like so many other Beckettian characters who lose the sense of potential internal space. Unlike Ogden, this is not merely an experiment for Watt, who cannot maintain a core sense of self because he lacks a strong, stable internal object that could counter his fragmentation in times of stress, since neither the image of his mother, nor any sense of connection to his 'current' mother, Knott, can enliven him. Watt's deep fear of abandonment, and his loneliness, are triggered by the Galls' visit, which retraumatizes him, causing a deep, permanent regression to a pre-symbolic, disorganized experiential world.

Watt's desperate need for a soothing, containing core maternal introject is also demonstrated by his yearning for someone to 'hold' the world for him:

It was principally for these reasons that Watt would have been glad to hear Erskine's voice, wrapping up safe in words the kitchen space, the extraordinary newel-lamp, the stairs that were never the same and of which even the number of steps seemed to vary [...] not that the fact of

Erskine's naming the pot, or of his saying to Watt, My dear fellow [...] would have changed the pot into a pot, or Watt into a man, for Watt [...] but it would have shown that at least for Erskine the pot was a pot, and Watt a man. (83–4)

He needs a mother to 'wrap up safe in words' the world of primary sensation, to help define and outline his experience by establishing a self as subjective, enduring and delineated. There is the feeling that if the world is real for others, if it can be named and made real for them, then his own experience can be amended and brought into a symbolic realm. The entry into the symbolic realm is not sufficient (nor properly possible) without the core connection to an enduring, loving mother whom the infant wants to reach, and Watt's body is indeed in an 'unfamiliar milieu', in that he remains, as an infant at birth, in an unbounded world of sensation, without the mother to contain and bind the chaos.

The possibility that he has lost the world does not entirely create despair or panic in Watt, for whom 'there were times when he felt [...] satisfaction [...] at his being so abandoned by the last rats' (84). The rats, metaphorical inhabitants of his inner world (as they were in Murphy's), tend to be experienced as invasive and disturbing, and there is a regressive pull towards complete schizoid withdrawal: 'It would be lonely, to be sure, at first, and silent, after the gnawing, the scurrying, the little cries' (84). This attraction to the loss of his inner world, at times so appealing, is always overpowered by a need for the mother to drive off the terror of complete psychic annihilation: he often longs to hear Erskine's voice 'speak of the little world of Mr Knott's establishment, with the old words' (84). Watt still strives for connection, a sense of being that can only come with belonging, and for the relatedness that creates subjectivity. There remains, when the world is dissolving into unnamable fragments, the core acknowledgment of the human need to relate, an acknowledgment Watt 'would have appreciated more, if it had come earlier, before his loss of species' (85).

### Hungry for love

Watt is subjected to a reversal of the normal 'holding environment' during his stay with Knott, as *he* becomes the mother who attends to *Knott's* physical and psychological needs for nurturing. Knott, for example, is a sort of omnivore – his weekly allotment of seven lunches and seven dinners is prepared on Saturday nights in one large pot, and consists of a very long list of 'all the good things to eat, and all the

good things to drink' (87). This 'mess' must be boiled for four hours and becomes a sort of primal nutrient, transcending the basic 'goodness' of its individual ingredients, '[a] quite [...] new good thing' (87). The preparation of this 'good food', a most precious and fulfilling mother's milk, falls on Watt who has *himself* come to Knott seeking sustenance and security. It is a 'task that taxed Watt's powers, both of mind and body' (88) – tears and perspiration fall from his face and body as he labours over the sacred pot. It is a profound emotional ritual for Watt, one that provides Knott 'the maximum of pleasure compatible with the protection of his health' (88). So deep and destructive is Knott's narcissism that even here he denies Watt the opportunity to experience an emotional closeness – the dining times are constructed such that he is never seen by his servant during the meals. Watt is deprived of the love, resonance, and attunement that might accompany the sharing of meals, and the primary intimacy of the nursing couple is lost, robbed of its emotional intensity by Knott's self-enclosure. Watt's failure to repair this disconnected internal nursing relationship results in fragmentation and depression, and a deeply repressed rage, something he enacts in a reversal after he leaves the house:

Birds of every kind abounded, and these it was our delight to pursue, with stones and clods of earth. Robins, in particular, thanks to their confidingness, we destroyed in great numbers. And larks' nests, laden with eggs still warm from the mother's breast, we ground into fragments, under our feet, with particular satisfaction. (154)

Primitive rage and envy are at work in Watt, now clearly feeling abandoned and unwitnessed by the mother. Displacing his attacks, which continue, he and Sam sometimes seize 'a 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' (156). This is a reversal, as Watt becomes a loving mother to the rats, only to change without warning into the polar opposite, a violent, sadistic mother who initiates a nightmarish, cannibalistic feast, in which families devour themselves. This enactment also suggests his raging jealousy of the other servants, baby rats/birds left behind to continue a fantasized relationship with Knott. Watt exists in a confused, borderline state, where the mother is felt to be as unpredictable as the self, oscillating rapidly between a nurturing, all-embracing love and a violent, sadistic withholding. The case of Mr D. reflects this type of rage; the patient felt a deep, primal disconnection from his mother – she

was a monster who withheld food from him. During a Christmas break early in our work, he experienced deep rage at me-as-mother for abandoning him, and he drowned seven of his pets. He stated he felt 'sorry for them' and wanted to put them out of their misery, they must be sad and lonely. Only years later was he able to experience the fury he felt at this time, and realize he was killing *himself* out of despair, murdering his *mother/myself* out of anger.

While with Knott, Watt also learns about a long-departed servant, Mary, one in the long series of workers drawn into service only to be discarded as others come along. The emotional absence that permeates the house has a bad effect on Mary: 'little by little the reason for her presence in that place faded from her mind, as with the dawn the figments of the id, and the duster, whose burden up till now she had so bravely born, fell from her fingers, to the dust, where having at once assumed the colour (grey) of its surroundings it disappeared' (51). Mary responds to the house's emotional vacuum by becoming psychically disorganized – her conscious sense of herself fades along with her sense of purpose, and like her duster she begins to dissolve into the background greyness. Her isolation prompts a regression, a re-emergence of the core caretaking function of feeding, and as Mary deteriorates physically her appearance resembles other Beckettian heroines (e.g. May in *Footfalls* or the heroine of *Rockaby*), also representatives of the 'lost heart of the self'. Mary is 'propped up in a kind of stupor against one of the walls in which this wretched edifice abounds, her long greasy hair framing in its cowl of scrofulous mats a face where pallor, languor, hunger, acne, recent dirt, immemorial chagrin seemed to dispute the mastery' (54–5). She is in a catatonic state – she has a 'dreaming face', her body acts as an automated feeding machine as her hands flash 'to and fro', like 'piston rods' (55) from a food sack to her mouth, while not a muscle stirs that is not intimately involved in the process of self-nurturing that occupies her every waking hour. That Mary's face still reflects her hunger is not surprising since the food she ingests is a symbolic replacement for the emotional responsiveness and love she really craves. Guntrip (1968) describes such a 'love-hunger' in one of his patients, a woman, who felt compelled to eat whenever her husband came into the house, realizing she was 'hungry for him' and his love but could not show it. She dreamt 'she was eating an enormous meal and just went on endlessly. She is getting as much as she can inside her before it is taken away [...] she has no confidence about being given enough' (Guntrip, 1968: 72). Mary's decompensation, and her attempt

to maintain a primary maternal connection by bingeing, are mirrored in the following clinical example:

Ms A.'s binge eating had its roots in childhood neglect and deprivation. She had terrible difficulty 'thinking' independently and would position herself as a mirror for the other's desire. She experienced my talking to her as nurturing and filling, stating that the content was less important than the calming function my words provided. She used the television as a hypnotic distraction, lying on a couch covered by her favourite duvet, bingeing on sweets, and described how she felt dissociated from her eating as if her body was an automaton, her arms, hands, and mouth working in synchrony to feed her while she focused her attention on television talk shows. Her mother had suffered a post-partum depression, abandoning her to an incapacitated grandmother with the result that Ms A.'s feedings were infrequent and unpredictable. At eight years of age, she was again abandoned to a hospital for a fairly serious illness, and she remembered the depressive anxiety that accompanied her feeling unloved and forgotten. Her only visitors were an elderly aunt and uncle who brought her an endless supply of candy, which she remembered eating ravishingly, not stopping until they were all consumed, feeling calmed by her feeding, but also anxious lest the candy (and the kindly couple) be taken away before she finished filling her empty self. Thus began a lifelong coping mechanism through which she was able to tolerate unbearable feelings of abandonment and loneliness by continually and symbolically repairing her early and severe sense of primary maternal absence.

Like Mary, this patient binges to counter depression, and her dissociative state during her binges is a direct echo of Mary's 'automatic' behaviour, which reflects an attempt to repair a rupture in her internal world. The duvet became a sort of 'second skin' (Bick, 1968) that contains her fragmenting self, while the participants in the television shows people her depleted internal world as a loving, sharing inner family. For Mary, as for Ms A., a ruptured internal nursing relationship leads to somatized enactments of inner despair; as a despairing, withdrawn part of the infantile-self, she tries to symbolically reconnect to a loving mother in the hope of reparation.

### **Ships in the night**

A number of symbols reflect the primary dislocation between Watt and his master. Once his isolation from Knott becomes fully apparent, Watt tries to develop a relationship by peripheral means. Aware that Knott

sometimes rings for Erskine late at night, Watt spends long hours ruminating on the nature of this communication system, its mechanisms, and the reasons for its establishment. His thinking becomes terribly convoluted, obsessive, and paranoid and he decides to examine Erskine's room, but has difficulty with the lock, thinking 'Obscure keys may open simple locks, but simple keys obscure locks never' (124), and one could see Watt as the simple (infantile) key that cannot gain access to the obscure (maternal) lock that is Knott. He cannot fix any value to this thought in his mind, oscillating cruelly between regretting the thought, and finding comfort in its clarity. Unable to form a judgment, having lost the ability to attach emotional foundations to thought, he continues in this paralyzed state, until, by means unknown, he finds himself in Erskine's room, with a broken bell symbolic of a communicative access to Knott for ever beyond his ken. Like a ruptured synapse, the bell no longer functions, and Watt's dream of communicating with Knott, even indirectly, is shattered.

The bell is a central symbol whose significance is formed by the role it plays in linking Knott and his servants. It is reminiscent of a vignette in Kohut's *Analysis of the Self*, which describes a patient intensely enmeshed with his mother, who 'controlled him in a most stringent fashion', his eating times were 'determined by a mechanical timer which [she] used as an extension of her need to control [his] activity' (Kohut, 1971: 81–2). Knott also experiences his servants as extensions of himself, and the entire house is designed to place strict limits on their actions, in order to control them, guaranteeing fulfilment of his needs in a safe, predictable way. Knott, just as the mother in the clinical vignette, reverses the roles of child and mother when it suits his needs, and both discourage individuation of their child/servants. The patient's mother, as Knott has done (with the bell), installs a buzzer in the child's room: 'From then on she would interrupt his attempts at internal separation from her whenever he wanted to be alone; and she would summon him to her, more compellingly (because the mechanical device was experienced as akin to an endopsychic communication) than would have been her voice, or knocking, against which he could have rebelled' (Kohut, 1971: 82). Knott also controls his servants by means of the bell, again blurring the roles of mother and child: the servant/mother is summoned to attend to the helpless Knott/child, but it is Knott who dominates the relationship. There is a distortion of normal maternal attunement, both the child in Kohut's vignette, and the servant, lose their autonomous boundaries. The normal dyadic

relationship becomes parasitic in both cases and, as a consequence, Watt really begins to lose his mind, just as Kohut's patient 'felt increasingly that he had no mind of his own' (Kohut, 1971: 83).<sup>20</sup>

Alone in Erskine's room, Watt observes the 'only other object of note' to be a picture on the wall: 'A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture. Was it receding? Watt had that impression. In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot' (128). He struggles to grasp the painting's meaning, particularly the relationship between the circle and the dot, wondering how long it will be 'before the point and circle [enter] together in the same plane' (129). That they are in a vital, significant search is not in doubt: 'had [they] sighted each other, or were blindly flying thus, harried by some force of merely mechanical mutual attraction, or the playthings of chance. He wondered if they would eventually pause and converse, and perhaps even mingle, or keep steadfast on their ways, like ships in the night' (129).

The painting represents the possibility of communion between two distinct and separate objects, destined to meet, or to go on for ever, silently, in their aloneness. Watt finally settles on the following formulation, the dot now transformed into a 'centre', it was perhaps 'a circle and a centre not its centre in search of its centre and its circle respectively, in boundless space, in endless time' (129). The painting symbolizes the relationship to his Knott/mother: alone and fragmented he seeks a centre to his being, a strong, cohesive sense of self. His internal world is empty, there is a break in his sense of self, just as there is a break in the circle without its centre. Both Watt and the circle are searching for something to enter them, to make them whole, and he yearns for an enduring, internalized mother to hold him together. Conversely, though, the circle is Knott, and in Watt's fantasy it is the mother/circle who is looking to contain something that is both a part of herself, and not a part of herself – her child – and to hold it internally/psychically, as she once held it physically within her own body, allowing it the secure freedom to begin to create a world for itself. Alone and unheld by the mind of a mother who does not witness him, and with no hope of containment, Watt is left adrift like the dot, breaking apart under annihilation anxieties, and continuing a doomed attempt to contain Knott in order to maintain the dyadic bond. He enacts his fantasy of merger with Knott in his reading of the painting, and the desperate hope that somehow, magically, this reading connects to, and will shape, the real intentions of Knott himself. Tustin also

speaks of the circle's importance to the withdrawn child: 'I began to realize that the 'shapes' the autistic children were talking about to me were not these objective geometrical shapes which we all share. They were entirely personal shapes which were idiosyncratic to them, and to them alone [...] the circle being an especially comforting one for all of them' (Tustin, 1986: 120). There is something about the circle that binds sensation for the child, protecting it from the terrors of an indigestible world, and Watt dwells on his circle that is *both Knott and Watt*, yearning for completeness and loving containment. As he thinks about the centre and the circle in their search for each other 'in [the] boundless space, in [the] endless time' that are the domain of pre-verbal experience, he mourns the reality of his own loss in the house of Knott, and '[his] eyes filled with tears that he could not stem' (129), another example where a realization of the fantasy nature of an attachment to an unreachable internal imago creates a powerful emotional experience.<sup>21</sup>

In Knott's house, all is 'a coming and a going' (132), there is no space for a living presence or genuine relatedness. Watt struggles to maintain the illusion there is some sense to be made of his stay with Knott, thinking that if it *appears* to be arbitrary it is really be a 'pre-established arbitrary' (134). He cannot tolerate the idea that Knott is entirely detached, unconcerned with his servants' worlds: 'For otherwise in Mr Knott's house, and at Mr Knott's door, and on the way to Mr Knott's door, and on the way from Mr Knott's door, there would be a languor, and a fever, the languor of the task done but not ended, the fever of the task ended but not done' (134). This door imagery is reminiscent of 'neither', and the wandering 'to and fro' again suggests the homelessness, a self isolated between inner and outer worlds, itself and (m)other.

To the end, Watt maintains his view of Knott as a sanctuary, a saviour who will hold and heal him: 'Mr Knott was a harbour, Mr Knott was haven, calmly entered, freely ridden, gladly left' (135), imagery reminiscent of Mahler's 'safe anchorage' within its mother's mindful care. This is the heart of Watt's fantasy – being held by Knott would allow him a peace in the world, and in himself, he has not known in a lonely, despairing life in which he has been driven by both 'the storms without' and 'the storms within' (135). In coming to Knott, he hoped to find 'in the need, in the having, in the losing of refuge, calm and freedom and gladness' (135), a wish for primary containment that would allow him to leave this refuge, when he is ready, as a whole, sane person. Later, while thinking 'of all the possible relations between [the various] series' that he has ruminated over in his attempt to 'know'

Knott, Watt's mind drifts to a distant time when he was young, lying 'all alone stone sober in the ditch, wondering if it was the time and the place and the loved one already' (136). He hears the croaking of three frogs, at intervals:

Krak! – – – – –  
 Krek! – – – Krek! – –  
 Krik! – – Krik! – – Krik! – (137–8)

The pattern continues until all three voices are aligned as in the first instance, and this image is another powerful metaphor of Watt's need for connection with the mother, of his yearning for a sense of being in an intimate harmony. The frogs' voices go out of sequence as they separate, but return 'home' to be as one, as a child wanders from the mother to return to her side in safety, eventually coming home to the 'background mother' *internally* even when alone. There is a 'coming and going' of the voices as they work within a boundary of a lasting, permanent community, a sense of autonomous belonging is created, one that is tolerable and safe. There is a striking similarity between the patterns of these voices and the manner in which Feinsilver contacted a severely withdrawn schizophrenic patient 'J'. After months of 'meaningless', seemingly random monologue, Feinsilver realized there might be inner meaning to what the patient was saying, specifically that the word 'riggin' might refer to a star American football player. He began to mirror the wording of the patient, in an attempt to show him that he was at one with him, and not threatening. Eventually, Feinsilver was able to slowly separate himself from the internal pattern and establish himself as a real other for the patient (Fromm and Smith, 1989). The frogs' song serves a similar function for Watt, in that the voices begin together, separate, and explore their individuality within a community, finally returning to the source and to a unity. It is this very early type of mirroring that the mother provides for the child, bringing him into the community of minds, and it is here that Knott fails Watt.

### Aliv not ded not

Watt's inability to engage Knott results in ego-failure (e.g. loss of language, hallucinatory voices), in his defensive strategies (e.g. obsessive ruminations, intellectualization), and in his schizoid relationship with the world. He lives in a dead universe, entrapped by ruminative speculation about a world to which he does not connect emotionally.

Watt is beginning a process of repair when he enters the house, the 'wild dim chatter' he occasionally hears coming from Knott's lips is comforting, and he grows 'exceedingly fond' (209) of it. Living only in the moment, his experience is uncoloured by enduring emotion: 'Not that he was sorry when it ceased, not that he was glad when it came again, no' (209). However, burgeoning emotion begins to link various states of Knott's absence and presence, and Watt edges towards a Depressive Position – there is both a sense of loss and of joy that emerges in the metaphors surrounding the experience: 'But while it [Knott's voice] sounded he was gladdened, as by the rain on the bamboos, or even rushes, as by the land against the waves, doomed to cease, doomed to come again' (209). The experience of hearing Knott's voice is likened to a variety of soft, natural sounds, images that are evocative of the quiet, gentle murmuring of the mother with baby. There are many similar allusions in the oeuvre: Krapp's gently rolling bliss with the girlfriend/mother among the rushes; Vladimir and Estragon's mistaking 'the wind in the reeds' for Godot (19) and so forth, all reflecting an early experience of recognition and connection to the mother. There is a sense of this in Sartre's conception of the gaze, which became a starting point for Lacan: 'Of course what *most often* manifests a look is the convergence of two ocular globes in my direction. But the look will be given just as well on occasion when there is a rustling of branches, or the sound of a footstep followed by silence, or the slight opening of a shutter' (Sartre, 1958: 257). The images used by Sartre are found in Beckett: 'footfalls' appearing in the short play of the same name, as well as in *Murphy*, suggesting in both an early sense of connection to a mother who recognizes the infant. The opening, closing doors that appear in 'neither' and *Watt* echo the 'shutter' imagery that reflects the polarity of acceptance through, and exclusion from, love. These sounds are not always ones that elicit a sense of security. In *Waiting for Godot*, the tramps mistake the sound of 'the wind in the reeds' for a terrifying arrival, and later, in fast-paced cross-talk, speak of 'all the dead voices' that rustle like leaves (62), reflecting disconnection from a benevolent primary object. As Acrisus said: 'To him who is in fear everything rustles', in the paranoid state there can be no proper, loving recognition behind the sounds, only emptiness or hostile intent. This is the inherent ambiguity of the Paranoid Schizoid Position, that the same object, or its representation, can elicit both good and bad feelings, depending on the internal state of mind of the infant self.

Watt hovers close to mourning, almost able to experience Knott's absence as a loss. His general indifference to the world begins to melt away as contradictory states of pleasure/displeasure, love/hate, merge into a coherent sense of self-with-other linked by an emotional bonding. Regarding urination: 'He now envisaged its relaxation and eventual rupture, with sadness, and gladness, distinctly perceptible in an alteration of great rapidity for some little time, and dying blurred together away, in due course' (232–3). He is at the edge of the Depressive Position, able to tolerate ambivalence. Unlike Arsene, however, who appears to be entering into a mourning process as he leaves the house, Watt cannot tolerate the confusion and overwhelming emotions that the rupture with the Knott precipitates – he regresses back into a severely autistic position. After leaving the house he travels to a sanitarium of some kind, where he relates his story to the narrator of the novel, Sam, while they walk together on the grounds. In this telling, Watt's need for connection is made manifest, as he makes use of Sam as a containing mother to hold him together in the face of terrorizing anxiety and rage.

While recounting the last part of his stay with Knott, Watt is in a kind of somnambulistic delirium, his voice rapid and low, and he begins to invert his use of language, sentences, words, and letters. From these descriptions of his non-relationship with Knott comes an emotional climax that expresses the schizoid longing for contact with the mother:

Most of day, part of night, now with Knott. Up till now, oh so seen little, oh so heard little [...] so I moved, in mist, in hush [...] Abandoned my little to find him [...] to love him my little reviled. This body homeless. This mind ignoring. These emptied hands. This empty heart. To him I brought. To the temple. To the teacher. To the source. Of nought. (164–6, modified)

Finally, toward the end of his stay, Watt spends more time with Knott, but this merely physical presence does not provide a deep emotional connection. He has not seen or been seen for so long, moving in a world of 'mist' and 'hush', abandoning his living sense of himself to be near Knott. He comes to the house in a state of deep, dependent humility, with his body made 'homeless' by a premature, incomplete birth, with an impoverished internal world closed off to experience by schizoid withdrawal, and a sense of himself as barren of love. Knott is a 'temple', as the mother's body is a holy place that embodies the world to the infant and, as mother Knott is a 'teacher'

who could show Watt how to create the world. Certain critics (e.g. Baldwin, 1978) have highlighted the religious implications of these passages, but they also demonstrate the core emotional dynamic that exists between Knott as a maternal figure and Watt as an emerging infantile-self.

Towards the end of his stay with Knott, a primitive merger-experience develops, but it is a gross distortion of the normal maternal 'concern' that is found in a union held together by love and reverie: 'Go to, cam day lit. Knot not, Watt not. Sprit not, bod not. A ded not, aliv not. Awak not, aslep not. Gay not, sad not. Tim for, lived so' (167, modified). This reads like a 'death in life' nightmare, a disembodied, depersonalized account of 'neither' experience diametrically opposed to the warm, loving experience of a holding oneness that *leads* to experience. Like the dot and circle in Knott's painting, the two of them, Knott and Watt, exist together in isolation, and Watt is truly alone 'in the presence of the mother', without any internal sense of her presence to protect him from the terrors of nothingness. In the final passages, Watt relates to Sam about these times together with Knott, the full impact of neglect becomes apparent: 'Sid by sid, two men. Al day, part of nit. Dum, num, blin. Knot look at wat? No. Wat look at knot? No. Wat talk to knot? No. Knot talk to wat? No. Wat den did us do? Niks, niks, niks. Part of nit, al day. Two men, sid by sid' (168, modified). In addition to demonstrating the breakdown of his core ego functioning, these passages reveal the failure of maternal attunement; Watt does not exist for the mother, and attempts to maintain the threads of a relationship by remaining close to the source of absence. The experience of 'niks, niks, niks' is made somehow less annihilating if he remains close, but there is quite clearly a cry for primary containment through sensual touch, something Watt expresses through the hope that the 'niks' will envelop him as a 'skin'.

Watt's relationship with Sam provides a complement to his Knott-experience. On one occasion during their stay together, while walking in the garden behind his residence, Sam comes upon the fence that separates him from the garden belonging to Watt's residence. The isolation of the men wandering alone in their gardens recalls the theme of psychic separation that dominates the work, but in this setting there is passage between the two worlds. Sam spies Watt, now fully regressed, walking towards him, backwards, through brambles and briars: he is bloodied, but oblivious to the pain. As he turns to retrace his steps, Sam gets a look at him: 'suddenly I felt as though I were

standing before a great mirror, in which my garden was reflected, and my fence, and I, and the very birds tossing in the wind, so that I looked at my hands, and felt my face, and glossy skull, with an anxiety as real as unfounded' (158).<sup>22</sup>

Sam's experience of this mirroring depersonalization is a natural climax to the work, representing the narrative-self's attempt at reparation, a last desperate grasp to keep Watt a part of a shared world, though, as noted, this is ambivalent. Sam has a deep affection for his friend; he quickly goes to Watt's aid, telling us: 'in my anxiety to come to Watt then I would have launched myself against the barrier, bodily, if necessary' (160). Sam struggles to get to his friend, accepting a position in direct contrast to Knott. He becomes a caring mother who, seeing an infant in distress, experiences an empathic attunement and attends to the pain. The mirroring experience can be viewed as Sam experiencing himself in Watt, sharing a mutuality, or experiencing a projection, so that he is motivated to take action. Once he reaches Watt, he dresses his wounds, cleans him, and grooms him, in a word, heals his body and gives him a sense of human dignity. This contact takes place in between their respective garden/minds, in a sort of intersubjective potential space:

In Watt's garden, in my garden, we should have been more at our ease. But it never occurred to me to go back into my garden with Watt, or with him to go forward into his. But it never occurred to Watt to go back with me into his garden, or with me to go forward into mine. For my garden was my garden, and Watt's garden was Watt's garden, we had no common garden any more. (164)

There is development within this passage, as both men appear secure to meet within an intersubjective space, despite feeling a greater sense of security within their own containing garden/minds. Sam turns Watt to face him, places Watt's hands on his shoulders, and begins a beautiful, richly metaphorical 'mirror dance':

Then I took a single pace forward, with my left leg, and he a single pace back, with his right leg [...] And so we paced together between the fences, I forwards, he backwards [...] I turning, and he turning [...] I looking whither we were going, and he looking whence we were coming [...] we paced between the fences, together again after so long [...] To be together again, after so long, who love the sunny wind, the windy sun, in the sun, in the wind, that is perhaps something, perhaps something. (163)

In this mirroring, a ray of loving attunement and hope shines through in a world of despair. Sam's love for Watt is expressed literally in his concern for his friend's physical safety, and metaphorically as a perfectly empathic movement of two selves working together as one. As mother and child, they play together, blurring between the one who leads the dance, and the one who follows, between the mother who teaches life, and the child who learns it. Watt has found a mother to hold him in a selfless containment of his pain and confusion, allowing him to feel himself into the world as part of her body and its movements. It is his sad fate, as a lost part of the narrative-self, that this relationship cannot endure, for Watt is soon transferred from the pavilion never to be seen by Sam again. But of this dancing, this mirroring, that a sad and broken man, never fully born, experiences in the sun and wind, the love of which he shares with a friend, in this reunion, at last, on this 'abode of stones', perhaps we can say: It is something, yes, something!<sup>23</sup>

### Notes

- 1 This is not to deny the important paternal aspects of Mr Knott. The focus here is on the earliest aspects of human relating (i.e. where Knott is experienced *functionally* by Watt as a mother). It is also reasonable to look at Knott as a father, (as Hill does (1990: 27, 33)), to which Watt turns for reparation.
- 2 There is an allusion to the 'joke' related later, during Arsene's speech: 'Do not come down the ladder, I for, I haf taken it away' (44) since, for Hackett, there is no primary caregiver to watch over him and warn him of this danger. There is also an incoherence in Hackett's description that is typical of individuals with faulty early attachment (e.g. he describes a 'beautiful summer day', in response to the observation that he was left all alone, something which should evoke sadness or anger).
- 3 The goat reappears in *Waiting for Godot* (where a child cares for Godot's goats). In 'The Expelled', there is a reversal, since the *boy* (who is walking a goat) watches over and cares for the *narrator*. One could view this later narrator as the lonely aspect of the narrative-self that is embodied here in Hackett, and this later scene as a reparative fantasy. Certain patients with a primal disconnection from other persons eventually form deeply meaningful bonds with pets. It is usually a major breakthrough in analysis when the first glimmers of affection or concern for humans manifests itself as tenderness towards animals.
- 4 This echoes the labour-pains felt by Mrs Nixon, as well as Pozzo's inability to 'bear' or contain Lucky's feelings of depression and anxiety.
- 5 It is both the *form* of the passage about the stones and its *content* that serves the autistic/self-nurturing function. Molloy's sucking, and its concrete verbal representation, both *protects* him from the awareness of his separateness from the internal mother, as well as *re-creates* a connection to her.

- 6 In the addendum to *Watt* is written 'never been properly born' followed by 'the foetal soul is full grown' (248), which suggests a completeness of the infantile-self as well as its need for contact to emerge into the world as a whole person.
- 7 Freud's grandson, in his original 'fort-da' formulation, attempted to master an internal sense of the loss of his mother (who had left the room), by throwing away and pulling back a spool on a string, thus intrapsychically making the disappearing love object return.
- 8 This 'raising of the face' to the other is reminiscent of the narrator's attempt to connect to the face of a child in 'The Calmative' (see Chapter 1), as well as the visages in the short plays. It is because of a lack of integration within the self that the maternal image cannot be held onto (i.e. ... *but the clouds ...*, *Embers*) or connected to, as in 'The Calmative'.
- 9 Balint (1968) describes the 'basic fault' as a primary failure in maternal connection. He would later write: '[The analyst must be] felt to be present all the time at the right distance – neither so far that the patient feels lost or abandoned, nor so close that the patient might feel encumbered and unfree – in fact at a distance that corresponds to the patient's actual need' (Balint, 1986). Of course, this 'optimal distancing' applies to the mother as well, and it is in this area that Knott fails *Watt*, being both too distant, and too invasive (i.e. in his expectations for total nurturing). This sense of optimal distance and placement is a dominant theme in the oeuvre, from Hamm's obsession about his position to the late prose work in which space is mathematically described. In a like fashion, the reader of *Watt* is held at a distance from a depressed/raging feeling-state, by some of the mechanisms described earlier.
- 10 Arsene's comment about the buttons occurs outside of his narrative about Knott, while he is buttoning up his coat to leave, suggesting an unconscious unwillingness to leave Knott-as-mother, since he fumbles with his clothes in the way a small, anxious child might.
- 11 The imagery is echoed in *Happy Days*, where Winnie speaks from within an ever encasing/protecting mound of sand, telling a displaced tale that often concerns childhood trauma.
- 12 The ladder motif will return in 'The Lost Ones', where ladders operate as the means to explore womb-like niches, and to search for ways of connection to a fantasized external world outside of the all encasing cylinder.
- 13 Jacques (1953) explores this containing aspect of social institutions. In this case it is the narrative-self that places the characters within the institution for protection from abject despair.
- 14 *Watt's* dismissal from the house can be seen as his exclusion from the *mind* of the mother, since he is destined to be forgotten. One might view the servants who follow as fantasy examples of other infants who come to take his place inside of the mother's body/mind. This rivalry is revisited in *Waiting for Godot*, where Godot clearly cares for some children.
- 15 It is interesting that this style may have been in part developed by Beckett's having played numerous solitary word-games while essentially a prisoner in Rousillon. The obsessive need for *Watt* to fix the location and activities of the Knott/mother is reflected in the reaction of certain patients to breaks in analysis. One patient, for example, was extremely curious to know my *exact* location during the holiday breaks since she felt that it would help her to know

- where I was to be staying, and what my daily schedule would be. Without such knowledge she felt I would be lost to her as an internal presence, and it was only by being able to imagine *where I was* and *what I was doing* at any given moment while we were apart that she felt safe and real.
- 16 This foreshadows the narrator's experience in 'The End', when he leaves an institution after meeting with a Mr Weir, for whom he feels some affection. He states: 'I would gladly have turned back, but I was afraid one of the guards would stop me and tell me I would never see Mr Weir again. That might have added to my sorrow. And anyway I never turned back on such occasions' (81). Both passages emphasize the denial that prevents a full mourning and recognition of loss. This is also reminiscent of the anecdote told by Frieda Fromm-Reichmann, concerning a mute schizophrenic who did not speak not at all during their sessions, but who silently wept after she had left her once the session had ended. It also demonstrates the depth of Watt's dissociation from a loving attachment for the Knott/mother. I have seen this experience clinically innumerable times, as the patient becomes aware of the depth of his or her love for a primary, internal part-object figure from which they are separating as they enter into the Depressive Position. It is a moment of the most dramatic import, as it is in the novel.
  - 17 Baker (1998: 28–30) discusses Oedipal issues surrounding the appearance of the dead father in Watt, and its connection to the relationship of the Galls.
  - 18 This image is reminiscent of Arsene's fantasy of turning into a 'stone pillar', and Lucky's feeling that the world is an 'abode of stones'. It was echoed by a patient who said: 'It is the thought of my parents not having good intentions for me that turns my body into stone'. There are a number of cases in the medical literature of fetuses that have died *in utero* and calcified, without discovery, sometimes for many years. The sense of deadness, *within* the failing containment of the mother, lies at the heart of these fantasies of 'stoniness' within Beckett, and are reflected for example in the story of the birth of Larry Nixon, whose existence was not recognized *in toto*.
  - 19 It is of central importance to recognize that it is *because* of a properly organized pre-verbal experience, built on the foundations of the early mother–infant dyadic relationship, that symbol formation is possible at all. This is *why* Ogden can escape this regression and Watt cannot. It is interesting to notice that in both cases of symbol-loss there is a connection to early orality – Ogden focuses on a napkin after dinner, while Watt focuses on a pot, possibly the very one in which he lovingly prepares his Knott/mother's meals in the vain hope of sharing a nurturing experience.
  - 20 Bells serve similar functions for Hamm in *Endgame*, May's mother in *Footfalls*, Murphy's landlady, and so forth.
  - 21 Trivisonno (1970) also sees the painting as reflecting the relationship of Watt and Knott, in intellectual terms, and Baker (1998) points out the more physical aspect of the circle's birth-breach.
  - 22 This passage suggests the entry of the narrative-self into the fiction it creates, in the guise of the pseudo-narrator, the fictional character 'Sam', whose omniscience is completely flawed, see (Chalker, 1975) and (Ramsay, 1985). Ramsay sees this mirroring passage as a way in which the narrative-self distances itself from the psychic trauma embodied in the character Watt. However, it also

highlights a sense of empathic connection, as the rest of this chapter tries to demonstrate. That Watt is not ultimately 'rescued' in any enduring sense demonstrates the narrative-self's ambivalence in its relationship to the character, an aspect of itself. That the anxiety is as 'real as unfounded' suggests the blurring of the self into the other in a powerful transferential experience. That is, the narrative-self-as-Sam is *both* Watt and *not* Watt, and his loss, as a broken, withdrawn part of the self, is both a relief to Sam and a re-enactment of a maternal failure.

- 23 There is a great similarity between this scene and the work done between Feinsilver and his patient (see page 124). It is through imitation that the child learns within a loving relationship. Despite Watt's seemingly autistic withdrawal, he responds to Sam's calling out his name (162), and it seems clear that there is a nascent affection still alive in Watt for his friend.