

ENDINGS IN FLANN O'BRIEN AND SAMUEL BECKETT¹

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In the article the author takes the context of the end of the century and examines how questions of endings play a significant part in human life. He buttresses his argument by referring to writers who have considered the importance of this temporal break both on the personal and on the social-historical level. The central part of the article deals with the topic of the representation of endings in the work of the Irish novelists Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett. According to his argument, regardless of the important ways the texts of these writers differ, both clearly show that the framework in which one is positioned has an immense influence on the way we negotiate the impact of endings. This insight enables the author to draw attention to what, in his opinion, is the specificity of twentieth century existence but, going by the knowledge which he finds inscribed in the Irish texts, he makes it clear that he is well aware how pronouncements on endings might be no more than the discourse of a generation that feels the ticking away of the biological clock.

1.

The discourse on endings is in no way unique to our end of the twentieth century predicament but accords with a scenario which has been played out and replayed at other similar junctures of human history. The reason for this is not difficult to surmise: extinction, cessation or the end is the most existentially relevant of the different ways that temporality intertwines and effects the human predicament. The significance temporality has for that human predicament was

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noted by Jorge Luis Borges in the following poignant assessment: "The real problem, the problem we have to grapple with, and of course the problem whose solution we'll never find, is the problem of time, of successive time, and therein, the problem of personal identity, which is but a part of the problem of time." (quoted in Morse 37). Human mortality by its very nature implicates the issue of finality and endings.

In one sense time is the lacuna, the forgotten, because so taken-for-granted dimension, of human life. Borges's statement derives some of its poignancy from the way it brings to the fore truths submerged and repressed for the purpose of getting on in the world. A similar case can be made - and this of course has been done - for the other essential dimension of human existence - space. At this point I draw attention to an explanation for the reassertion of space in human life which has strong bearings on the subject under discussion. In a recent article, the Irish writer Mary O'Donnell made the following observation:

The appetite for rediscovering sources, myths and stories pertaining to place is stronger than ever, it seems, now that people are less sure of the permanence of anything created in their own lives. We do not expect anything to last beyond the given moment and not alone does a *fin de siècle* sense of dancing our way to doom pervade everyday consciousness, but an *end of existence* mentality is widespread (1995:270).

Throughout recent publications within different disciplines opinions have multiplied that time has been prioritized within the human sciences. If we look at this prioritization it can be claimed that the reason time has been privileged is because it is conceived as progress, alive, as unfolding history. Space is conceived as something inert and passive. However, time as negation has had a subterranean existence erupting, in full force, at certain historical turning points. I think that the time horizon of the end of the century give these questions an urgency which cannot be ignored.

The experience of things approaching some kind of a closing, a completion, of things as one knows or lives them approaching an end has always bred powerful feelings. In his introduction to a collection of essays entitled *Centuries' Ends, Narrative Means* (1996) Robert Newman writes how chronological decisions "evoke our anxieties and hopes" offering "explanations of both decay and restoration". The collected articles that he has chosen to narrate centuries' ends show

we inevitably allegorize these temporal junctures, condensing them into emblematic moments where we seek to ascertain historical meaning. Such allegorizing, whether we call it hieroglyph, expressive causality, or a "tiger's leap into the past," inevitably gestures toward *memento mori*, a sense of loss or deferral where even progress may be translated as the eternal return of catastrophe. Attempts to arrest time by accounting for it repeatedly resist the impossibility they have always demonstrated. By ascribing or inscribing fissures in temporal or narrative surfaces, we reenact both a redemptive intervention into the past and an ironic retelling of the failure to read the erosion of meaning (Newman 1996:1,11-12).

The profundity of these emotional investments varies according to the scope of things undergoing this process whether these be days, years, lifetimes, centuries or other differentiations of temporality. Positioned as we are within these "turn-of-the-millennium times" there is almost the obligation to address the thoughts and dilemmas provoked by the approach or the onset of the third millennium. The very fact that the precise dating of the start of the new millennium - whether we have inaugurated it with last year's global televised celebrations or whether the actual turning point is still before us - is up for grabs points to the way we culturally construct endings and introduce one of the main ideas I hope to work with in this article.

However, I would argue that there is a sense in which the predicament facing man at the end of the twentieth century is specific. In his contribution to the book *Reflexive Modernization* (1994) which explores, on one level, "the difficult-to-delimit deep insecurities of an entire society"(4), to use Ulrich Beck's phrasing, Anthony Giddens commences his argument by speaking of the new agenda faced by the social sciences and the contemporary social world:

We live, as everyone knows, at a time of endings. There is, first of all, the end not just of a century but of a millennium: something which has no content, and which is wholly arbitrary - a date on a calendar - has such a power of reification that it holds us in thrall. *Fin de siècle* has become widely identified with feelings of disorientation and malaise, to such a degree that one might wonder whether all the talk of endings, such as the end of modernity, or the end of history, simply reflects them (56).

Let me point to the unprecedented way humans stand before nature as they face the third millennium. In the course of his argument Giddens refers to B. McKibben's book *The End of Nature* (1989) pointing to the insight that the "thoroughgoing socialization"(77) of nature stages one of the numerous endings. The televised spectacles of nature playing havoc with human lives and property which seem to have proliferated in one's lifetime evidence the flip side of the same coin. Human rapacity has undermined a precarious balance in the outer world and unleashed forces for which, according to many accounts, man is to held accountable. To formulate this in the format of the morality tale, human intervention has overstepped its proper bounds and has provoked the vengeance of its slumbering gods. What is the common thread in both accounts is the felt loss of power and control, the sense that human ingenuity will not be able to overcome the difficulties that arise in its historical march.

The discourse of the end can find corroboration in the gloomy statements that the universe is running down. This is not just fashionable pessimism but an accurate translation of the second law of thermodynamics - the law of increasing entropy. For present purposes I offer the simple explanation that according to this law the disorganization of the universe increases with every energy transfer. In this process some energy is always degraded to useless, low-level heat. Though the precise mechanics of this running down are unclear there seems no escape from its effects. The effects of entropy play an important role in the new pessimistic wave of science fiction writing and include "rusting, decay, growing old, the

accumulation of rubbish in city streets and even the fading away of love affairs as the brightness of their initial spark dies" (Nicholls 1983:86).

Trying to account for the discontents of our condition, the prevailing pessimism manifested, for instance, in the discourses of the death of the subject, of art and of reason or in the end of history, Robert Hewison postulates that the clue

may well lie in that simple prefix, 'post'. We are not living in a New Age, but in the aftershock, the aftermath, possibly even the afterthought of one. Whatever it is, we are living in the AFTER. The 'after' is a difficult place to describe, since it is defined by what it is not, hence that sense of living in a void. Certain aspects of cultural theory seem to reinforce that sense of helplessness: language speaks us, we are castaways on a sea of ideology, in which our individual identities are no more than the froth of a wave. We are floating, lost in Jamesonian hyperspace, heading inexorably for Baudrillard's black hole (in Bird 1993:249).

The full implication of thinking one's time as an ending is brought out in the following remark made by John McCumber in his discussion of the telos of history:

To see a moment in time as *nothing more than* the telos of a previous transformation is to see it as something past and dead. To say that history has a telos, and that the present is that telos, is thus to say that the present already contains a moment that is entirely defined as how previous transformations turned out: it is to admit that the past is already gobbling up the present. The telos of history is thus always something about to become past, about to lose its possibilities, about to die (Comay and McCumber 1999:8).

My readings of Irish fiction are intended to show how literature addresses these issues and how the experience of reading it enriches the way we negotiate the questions of endings.

Speaking of endings one can conceive of them as objective endings or as human perceptions registering our purchases on the continuity of time. The series of days and years can be perceived as a significant whole or as an endless system of transformation which cannot be or resists being meaningfully enframed. The split exists between human-time consciousness on the one hand and objective time on the other. On one level we are dealing with subjective perception of endings as referring to specific points in the continuity of existence and, on the other, with a break in objective time. To state this in plainer terms: on the individual level endings gesture to the irreversible directionality of living out our lives unto death while as socio-cultural events they mark the disappearance of shared values and norms and, perhaps, harbinger a future inimical to us.

As a preliminary step it is necessary to distinguish between the symbolic expression of time, endings on the present occasion, and its source. Cultural artefacts have always attempted to grasp this ineffable source and in doing so have evolved various structures and patterns of understanding. Literary works rely on plot, denouement, climax, spatialization of the temporal dimension in order to

represent and meaningfully appropriate the flux of time. Frank Kermode in his *The Sense of an Ending* (1977) investigated the way endings help humans make sense of the world. He wrote: "Time cannot be faced as coarse and actual, as a repository of the contingent; one humanizes it by fictions of orderly succession and end"(160). He reiterates this two pages later: "tracts of time unpunctuated by meaning derived from the end are not to be borne"(162). The apocalyptic stance or, to return to fiction, the imposition of an ending onto a story unfolding in time create a "tension or dissonance between paradigmatic form and contingent reality"(133). This dissonance will be one of the crucial points tackled by the writers under review in this presentation. To anticipate a part of my argument I again quote Kermode: "tragedy assumes the figuration of apocalypse, of death and judgement, heaven and hell; but the world goes forward in the hands of exhausted survivors"(82).

Endings are sense-giving signatures which endow an unfolding sequence with an illuminating sense of fullness. The Croatian critic Milivoj Solar has this to say concerning this matter:

Within the novel totality is in principle realised as in absolute speculative philosophy; the totality of the story is established at the end; the ultimate sense, and therefore absolute knowledge, appears when the ending of the story establishes the meaning of its beginning, when at the end of narration we understand why there was knowledge at all. In philosophy, this is the position of such knowledge which comes into being when we finally understand why all of history took place while in the novel this is the ultimate significance of "enplotting" all of its various and different parts in such a manner that we see what, why and in what manner events took place in the life of the individual only at the end (Solar, 1998:152) (translation mine).

Solar's statement and the way it brings into correlation the novel and philosophy illuminates a great many of the projects that have endowed European culture with its distinctive identity. However, I believe that his reading of their endings as establishing meaning and knowledge can hardly apply to those narratives which intentionally write against absolutes and totalities, in which the fullness of resolution is no longer a possibility.

2 .

The sense of change and loss, inaugurated by innovations which undermined the routine and pace of a settled order, was a prominent feature of many authors engaged in reading the times at the beginning of the century. For present purposes, as an introductory backdrop, I will draw the reader's attention to a brief exchange between the two sisters Helen and Margaret in the last chapter of E.M. Forster's *Howards End* (1910). The immediate concern of their dialogue is what we recognize as the suburbanization of the English countryside which, Helen anticipates, will

melt down life all over the world. The other sister senses that the values they cherish are "survivals" and expresses a hope which demarcates a distinctive relationship to the onslaught of time and the transformations it holds in store. I quote the description of her inner thoughts and her response to Helen's bleak diagnosis:

Logically, they had no right to be alive. One's hope was in the weakness of logic. Were they possibly the earth beating time.

'Because a thing is going strong now, it need not go strong for ever,' she said. 'This craze for motion has only set in during the last hundred years. It may be followed by a civilization that won't be a movement, because it will rest on the earth. All the signs are against it now, but I can't help hoping, and very early in the morning in the garden I feel that our house is the future as well as the past' (Forster 1970: 316).

The reason I use this dialogue is to offer a contrasting mirror to the textualizations of endings I find in the Irish writers under discussion here. To be more precise, coming as it does from a liberal humanist perspective, Forster is here imaging a regressive possibility or, put otherwise, a possible ameliorative growth. In Margaret's hope we can make out not an acknowledgement of a fundamentally changed state of things but a hankering for the possibility of more of the same. In that sense Forster remains within the horizon of narratives that still work with the possibility of redemptive resolution.

A more disturbing vision of the end of the nineteenth century had been voiced in a book published twenty years before Foster's. I am referring to an exchange of dialogue in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891):

'*Fin de siecle*,' murmured Lord Henry.

'*Fin du globe*,' answered his hostess.

'I wish it were *fin du globe*,' said Dorian, with a sigh. 'Life is a great disappointment' (Wilde 1970:198).

This expression of "exhausted Life", as the comment by Lady Narborough in the next line has it, forecloses the hope of a synthesis between the past and the future expressed by Forster's character. It radicalizes the significance of epochs drawing to a close and ascribes to them a finality which, I think, find particular resonance with twentieth century experience which has seen so many of the cherished "enplotments" unravelled and disintegrate into lethal shreds. Therefore it comes as no surprise when Eibhear Walshe writes that Wilde has been reclaimed as a relevant contemporary, one who, among other things, is "an influential precursor of a twentieth-century *fin-de-siecle* consciousness" (Walshe 1997:24).

For reasons which might have to do with the persistence of the realistic tradition in English fiction and its absence in Irish literature the different ways Forster and Wilde addressed the issue of endings could have cultural-historical ramifications. Although such cross-cultural readings of the theme of endings

would, I believe, yield interesting insights, this is not the line of argument I want to follow on the present occasion. Taking as a given the presence of the theme of endings in Irish literature I intend to show how endings can provoke different responses. My selection of Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett was dictated both by the profundity of their writing different notions of endings into their texts and by the different ways they have negotiated this issue.

3 .

Before proceeding to O'Brien and Beckett a few critical pronouncements concerning the way their immediate predecessors, Yeats and Joyce, engaged the question of temporal endings will provide the background of our discussion. Yeats's vision of history both as mapped out in *A Vision* and as embedded in his poetry has received ample critical attention. Discussing Yeats's poetry of violence Jefferson Holdridge contends that

Yeats has all the apocalyptic and somewhat mystical 'end of man' rhetoric of the postmodernists, as well as having the potential for metaphysical truth which is sought by their divergent contemporaries and precursors. This uncertain, twofold nature of Yeats's work in many instances provides the "terror" that he defines as the source of "profound philosophy". It is also the source of this century's various political crises (Holdridge 1997:116).

I myself have written on the Nietzschean sources of his conception of time (1989; 1991) and the troubling politics that arose, I hold, in part from his apocalyptic reading of the times. Namely, during the thirties, Yeats came to the conclusion that Occidental civilisation was approaching its meridian, a point of exhaustion out of which, he believed, will rise the counterforce of a new order. My reading of Yeats's marching songs proceeds from the premise that "it is within the context of Yeats's belief in the imminence of a new historical dispensation that one must situate the often troubling agenda of a segment of his politically charged work" (Grgas 1998:173). Generally speaking, the apocalyptic conception of time was a contributing element to the strange infatuation many modernist writers felt for the rise of totalitarian politics during the second and third decades of the century. In one sense, the bleak apocalypse inscribed in Beckett's work comes out of the ashes and havoc which the demise of one of the totalitarian projects left in its wake.

Joyce had little truck with these millenarian challenges promising resolution and fulfilment. On one level his work ironizes the grandiose schemes man has devised to make sense of his life and reworks the ploy of enplotment to show the gravitational pull of the now. G.J. Watson relates Joyce's project to the apocalyptic strain in modernism in the following manner: "In its valuation of Bloom *Ulysses* strikes an extremely effective blow for the much-despised 'modern civilisation' then. Arising from that valuation comes the sanity of Joyce's mockery of the apocalyptic stance, so often adopted by the great literary reactionaries as a

response to their vision of the modern age as a waste land" (1979:222). Donald Bush perceives something similar in Joyce and gives it the following formulation: "At the heart of Joyce's project one can find his original progressive politics articulated in a philosophical and ironic frame. His work maintains an oppositional stance toward traditional values but also maintains a thoroughgoing suspicion of its own idealism" (in Witemeyer 1997:72). Joycean praxis of enplotment works on the premise of nonlinearity where we hedge away from the process of evolutionary unfolding and follow a winding back movement, a reversion in time. To give this a paradoxical formulation, Joyce thinks closure, the finality of ending in an unfinal way.

It would have been surprising if the two Irish twentieth century masters had not dealt with time and man's place within it which, if we heed Borges, is the central problem of human life. Echoes of the way they negotiated finality, counterechoes to their recorded experiences and new soundings into the unfathomable beyond can be found in the two most significant prose Irish writers of the next generation. In both O'Brien and in Beckett there is uncontested evidence that they took cognizance of the different ways that endings are relevant to their times. The distance between their evocation of endings and the yet-hopeful closure of Forster's novel marks the diminishing possibility of redemption and totality (Solar) of our century.

Flann O'Brien

The very structure of Flann O'Brien's novel *At Swim-Two-Birds* (1939) interwoven out of different story lines thwarts the expectation of a grand finale and defuses this mechanism of enplotment into sporadic breaks and new starts. His deviation from the encoded teleological structure of ordinary narratives is clearly adumbrated in the first paragraph of the text: "One beginning and one ending for a book was a thing I did not agree with. A good book may have three openings entirely dissimilar and inter-related only in the prescience of the author, or for that matter one hundred times as many endings" (1967:9). On another level of analyses the ludic rebellion of the characters against the embedded fictional novelist can be seen as their attempt to thwart the logic of dispensing with them in the unfolding of the narrative.

Although much of O'Brien's textual play functions as metacommentary there is the running analogy between endings and death. In the playful dialogue between Pooka and the Good Fairy the significance of death is referred to as the "oddity or otherwise of the last number" or, put otherwise, "will it be an odd one and victory for you and your people, or an even one and the resolution of heaven and hell and the world in my favour". The Good Fairy concurs in assessing the significance of this issue but is unable to voice a convincing opinion (108-9). The interplay between death and ending is forcefully foregrounded in the ultimate lines of the text that mention a strange German infatuated with the number three who "cut his jugular with a razor three times and scrawled with a dying hand on a picture of his wife good-bye, good-bye, good-bye" (218). O'Brien intends the reader to keep in mind the symbolic import of number three the way it functions as the sign of dialectical resolution but the way he employs it opens the possibility of

sarcastic comment and pastiche. To employ his own earlier description of what the novel ought to be, the mechanism of the end as a vehicle of structuration is in O'Brien's conclusion shown to be a "self-evident sham"(25).

O'Brien's strange narrative *The Third Policeman* (1967) plays with the notion of endings showing it to be not something final but something which repeats itself, something that contains within itself a new process, a new beginning. In one of the italicized passages supposedly spoken by the soul we read the following: "*Past humanity is not only implicit in each new man born but is contained in him. Humanity is an ever-widening spiral and life is the beam that plays briefly on each succeeding ring. All humanity from its beginning to its end is already present but the beam has not yet played beyond you*" (1976: 119). However, this poeticized description of the constant renewal of being is undercut by the mechanic description of the afterlife - to be more precise Hell - into which the reader is plunged throughout most of the text. This is emphasized by the ending of the novel (199) because the last passages, where the disembodied soul is brought before a tribunal, repeats word for word the passage that had occurred earlier in the novel (54). The fact that sixteen earthly years have elapsed during the few otherworldly days that have been covered by the main part of the narrative relativises time itself. The narrative's tone and repetitions dispel the finality of the end.

O'Brien's third novel *The Dalkey Archive* (1964) deploys the theme of the end within De Selby's scientific scheme of ending the world. His project is introduced by his pronouncement that he had mastered time: "Time has been called, an event, a repository, a continuum, an ingredient of the universe. I can suspend time, negative its apparent course"(1993:13). De Selby's scientific project consists in this work of the negative, in his dispensation of an apocalyptic judgement which was, according to him, "a prescribed doom, terrible but ineluctable, and a duty before God"(70). The plot develops around Michael Shaughnessy's successful efforts to thwart De Selby's monstrous plans. The zany, comic elaboration of this struggle between "a lowly civil servant" and the mysterious man of science stages a humane response to the threat of undisciplined scientific thought. In his hilarious fashion O'Brien is commenting on the repercussions that a science unheeding of man's needs can actuate.

In *The Poor Mouth* (1941), O'Brien's acerbic demystification of Gaelecht as the originary site of Irish specificity, the notion of the end is mentioned a number of times and is always referred to as something that cannot be apprehended or understood. In one instance the end is anticipated when someone mentions a gentleman who speaks in Gaelic (1988:48). The ending is invoked the second time when the narrator mistakes blood for apocalyptic "red showers"(113). The third reference to the end occurs in the following passage: "Is it the way, loving maiden, said I softly, that the Gaelic misery is at an end now and that the paupers are waiting for the final explosion of the great earth?"(116). In each instance the referent which is thought to be harbingering the end turns out to have been misinterpreted. However, this does not detract from the importance of the habit of invoking the end both as a means of facing unknown occurrences and as a mindset within a particular mentality, such as the one depicted in O'Brien's tale.

Samuel Beckett

Needless to say, Samuel Beckett is the more famous writer who has both an international reputation which has at times eclipsed the Irish connection and a burgeoning body of critical texts addressing his work. Both coming out of Joyce, O'Brien's exuberant play with narrative structure and language is paralleled in Beckett by an immobilizing reductionism (Grgas 1991). Let me rehearse a number of extant appraisals of Beckett that I think are pertinent to my discussion. Ihab Hassan labels him "an apocalyptic by reduction, possessed by the idea that the universe must evacuate itself" (Hassan 1982:210). Referring to Joyce's linguistic extravaganza and Beckett's linguistic penury, Seamus Deane makes the following comparison: "Joyce may be thought of as the exponent of the new art of incorporation, Beckett of the disconsolate art of incompetence" (1985:124). In his study of endings, Frank Kermode writes of Beckett's world as "a world crying out for forms and stations, and for apocalypse, all it gets is vain temporality, and, multiform antithetical influx.... In Beckett, the signs of order and form are more or less continuously presented, but always with a sign of cancellation; they are resources not to be believed in cheques which will bounce"(115). Critics have noted the relationship between Beckett's minimalist textuality and its extratextual relevance. Thusly, James E. Robinson argues that "Beckett's testing of the limits of language, the search for putting 'an end to speech', is at the same time an exploration of the edges of existence, a 'search for the means to put an end to things'" (1995:217). Donald E. Morse in an article on "Beckett's 'Fidelity to Failure'" ventures the opinion that "Beckett offers us an extraordinary image of human inability to predict anything, to establish any cause and effect through a temporal sequence of events". He continues by quoting the following passage from Thomas Postlewl: "In terms of the temporal sequence there is no orderly principle of cause and effect that unifies memory and expectations Time and space may be a priori conditions for understanding as Kant argues, but for Beckett's characters neither things next to each other nor one thing after another provides a modal basis for demonstrating interconnection"(1994:33).

For present purposes I want to restrict my reading to Beckett's novel trilogy including *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951) and *The Unnameable* (1953) and show how it deals with the issue of endings. To add to the above critical pronouncements the trilogy brings a torrent of writing on the margin of cessation. A foregrounded textual self-reflexivity reflects an immobilizing tedium which is caught between the mechanism to speak, its diminishing abilities and the erasure of silence. As a whole, the trilogy follows this enfeeblement of competence to its paradoxical last utterance, "in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (1965: 414). That future imperative is disempowered by both the blankness of the page and the fact that Beckett has brought his narrative to an end. However, such endings or anticipations of the end have appeared earlier in the text and it is to these that I want to turn to in my reading of the separate parts of the trilogy.

Although the persistence of the theme of ending could be documented by the number of times he explicitly uses the word in the text I draw attention to four instances in *Molloy* which show Beckett using it in his distinctive fashion. On the

second page of the text Beckett signalizes the position from which the narrative voice speaks: "It was the beginning, do you understand? Whereas now it's nearly the end."(8). The deictic now refers to the time of writing which is designated by the adverb "nearly" indicating the vicinity of the end. One way of putting this is that what follows will fill in the emptiness of duration indicated by the adverb. Later in the text there is a mention of the end which implies the way it tends to endow meaning and significance. The sentence reads as follows: "For today, if I do not feel precisely at the beginning of my career, I have not the presumption either to think I am near the end"(81). This comment can be seen as part of the undermining self-reflexivity of the narrative voice which never presumes to give enplotted, meaningful wholes. In the second part of *Molloy* the anticipated loss - "I shall soon lose consciousness altogether" (163) - prepares for the cessation of the text which ends with the self-cancellatory paradox: "It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. it was not raining"(176).

If the first part of the trilogy and the way its two narrative lines are related point to a rudimentary story *Malone Dies* presents the jottings of a terminal consciousness which, against the onslaught of oblivion, is taking stock of still remembered shards of a life drawing to a close. The earlier adverb nearly is replaced in the very first utterance of the text by the word soon: "I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all"(179). What has elapsed between the two parts of the trilogy is the distance between these two adverbs. A short time later in the text *Malone* reflects on the task of writing:

Perhaps I shall not have time to finish. On the other hand perhaps I shall finish too soon. There I am back at my old aporetics. Is that the word? I don't know. It does not matter if I do not finish. But if I finish too soon? That does not matter either (181).

Throughout the text there runs the compulsion to write which is constantly being undercut by the sense of its futility, by the incoming blankness. The aporetic nature of this endeavour is mirrored in the following description of perceiving natural phenomena: "Standing before my high window I gave myself to them, waiting for them to end, for my joy to end, straining towards the joy of ended joy"(206-79). I will leave *Malone Dies* with a final description of aporetic paralysis:

So I wonder if I should go on, I mean go on drawing up an inventory corresponding perhaps but faintly to the facts, and if I should not rather cut it short and devote myself to some other form of distraction, of less consequence, or simply wait, doing nothing, or counting perhaps, one, two, three and so on, until all danger to myself from myself is past at last. That is what comes of being scrupulous (251).

The fact that Beckett does not have *Malone* desist or simply wait for the end accounts for the text that he writes in the face of extinction.

After completing his trilogy Beckett made the following comment in 1956: "At the end of my work there's nothing but dust ... In the last book, *Innommable*, there's complete disintegration. No 'I', no 'have', no 'being'. No nominative, no accusative, no verb. There is no way to go on"(quoted in Hassan 1982:233-34). As one can surmise from this self-assessment *The Unnamable* takes the task of uttering the state of exhaustion a step farther. An indicative statement occurs near the beginning of the narrative: "Yes, it is to be wished, to end would be wonderful, no matter who I am, no matter where I am". After a short interval, indicated by blank spacing the voice continues: "I hope this preamble will soon come to an end and the statement begin that will dispose of me"(302). Choosing to read these two sentences as a sort of metacommentary I propose that the the text can be seen as a futile groping for a kind of self-actualization which is constantly being thwarted and abandoned by the pull of extinction. The frequent repetitions of the word "end" within the text could be used as support of this contention . On this occasion I restrict myself to pointing to a place in the text where this leitmotif reaches the intensity of a crescendo: "no, the other, in the end, it's the end, the ending end..."(408).

Both Flann O'Brien and Samuel Beckett envisioned in their texts endings ranging from the closures of their own works to the apocalyptic endings of worlds. Neither took recourse to recuperative strategies which would invest mind-chilling finalities with a higher purpose and meaning. This was simply not an option to them. In order to expand on that contention I will refer to David Kolb's three different conceptions of the end of history which he names as the completion of a theology, the exhaustion of possibilities and as an unblocking of circulation. Concerning the first he refers to structures which would have achieved their full actualization. As far as the second is concerned, Kolb has in mind an end which has completed the trajectory of western metaphysical culture and exhausted its potential. This fact can be either regretted or celebrated. In the third scenario barriers are removed which have restricted the movement of that something whose flow creates society. He goes on to summarize the thought of the four epochal thinkers he has used in his presentation:

Hegel's "end of history", like those of Heidegger and Marx, can be described as the unbinding of a circulation. In it, the movement of mutual recognition and/as Spirit's self-comprehension finally overcomes otherness and completes the circle of Spirit's becoming. But Hegel thinks this final stage under the sign of Aristotelean actuality whereas Heidegger and others think it as Nietzsche's eternal return of the same (Comay and McCumber 1999:58-9).

Going back to both O'Brien and Beckett what goes without saying is that the first conception of the end of history is simply no longer on an option for them. As the mirror image of the traditional ending in realistic fiction - persisting in Forster for instance - it is no longer on the agenda of the Irish innovative writers. Retaining Kolb's differentiation, the texts that I have targeted in my reading inscribe the sense of the ending either as exhaustion or as circularity.

However, this does not mean that one cannot make distinctions in the way the two author's use and relate to endings. What primarily differentiates the two Irish writers is the tonality with which they surround the theme of ending, the emotional-psychological response to this theme that can be found in their texts. Let me at this point quote Gordon McMullan who discusses Shakespeare's play *Henry VIII* in relation to the theme of the "end of history" and perceives in it a tension between linear and cyclical forces:

It is as if the play sets the Protestant teleological vision against a mythic sense of time as a cycle; and the key issue provoked by this linear/cyclical struggle becomes, perhaps oddly, not structure but tone. After all, while apocalypticism is typically humourless, the cyclical and the ridiculous are rarely far apart: the inevitable repeat and return of serious events makes them more ironic, less serious (in Brake 1995:25).

In similar fashion, the linear and the cyclical nature of time inscribed in O'Brien and Beckett yield two different tonalities. Perhaps, this difference can be connected to two Irish cultural matrixes where Beckett's writing would be aligned with the spare sobriety of his Protestant background whereas O'Brien's hilarious visions would be seen to owe something to the lingering influence of the pre-Christian Irish world. However, both cases clearly show that the framework in which one is positioned has an immense influence on the way we negotiate the impact of endings.

4 .

Commencing my argument I noted the regularity with which apocalyptic forebodings have characterized past *fin di siecle* cultural settings. This was the point in referring to Oscar Wilde and E.M. Forster. However, I also believe, that this regularity is only part of the story because, in a very powerful sense, the end of the twentieth century ushers in an epoch which is decisively different from previous times. Let me explain this.

In his study of history and the novel, David Cowart maintains that the writers he has chosen all deal with "the one great question of the present: human survival". They elaborate in their fictions "variations on an apocalyptic theme". The reason for the prominence of this theme is given as follows: "Perhaps every age perceives its own anxiety as somehow definitive, but only since 1945 have we known precisely the shape that apocalypse would take. We look to history now to provide clues for understanding, arguing, addressing the more absolute instability of our nuclear present"(1989:29). The millennium we have entered will be marked by this legacy.

In her study *Time and Social Theory* Barbara Adam makes the following observation:

Through the invention of the nuclear bomb we have lost the certainty of continuity. With its creation, the human race as a whole

has to live with the *potential end in the present* irrespective of whether or not that knowledge forms part of a society's stock of knowledge.... Death, beyond being an integral aspect of every individual person, has become a fundamental aspect of the human race collectively. Even if we were to disarm and destroy every last bomb on this earth, the knowledge of this tool of potential global extermination is not reversible or erasable. Social time is irreversibly altered because of it since the moment of the end has become part of the immediate present for the whole of the human species, and probably for most life forms on this earth (Adam 1994:141).

The apocalyptic stance would see in this historical development a confirmation of its prognostication of imminent doom. Margaret Beetham in her discussion of "apocalypse and utopia" gives another description of the times:

Approaching the end of the second Christian millennium, we seem to be living indeed in a mythic time, a time beyond the endings, after history, beyond the reach of grand narratives, post- everything; -modernism, -feminism and, of course, post-Marxism, that most important modern version of the narrative of historical transformation. Despite the triumphalism which greeted this ending, it is the apocalyptic rather than the utopian which dominates the stories we tell ourselves (Brake 1995:90).

In addition, developments in technology, particularly in telecommunications and the bombardment of human sense and perception which these have spawned have ushered in a decidedly distinct lifeworld. Baudrillard's work is of particular relevance here and his diagnosis of the "vanishing of history" to the point of our discussion:

history, meaning and progress are no longer able to reach their escape velocity. They are no longer able to pull away from this overdense body which slows their trajectory, which slows time to the point where, right now, the perception and imagination of the future are beyond us. All social, historical and temporal transcendence is absorbed by that mass in its silent immanence. Political events already lack sufficient energy of their own to move us: so they run on like a silent film for which we bear collective irresponsibility. History comes to an end here, not for want of actors, nor for want of violence (there will always be more violence), nor for want of events (there will always be more events, thanks be to the media and the news networks!), but by deceleration, indifference and stupefaction. It is no longer able to transcend itself, to envisage its own finality, to dream of its own end; it is being buried beneath its own immediate effect, worn out in special effects, imploding into current events (Baudrillard 1995:5).

We contemporaries of these developments are unable to stand at a distance from the whirl of simulacrum that we partake of daily. There is no vantage point from which to enplot the unfolding events and designate a meaningful termination. Or is this inability restricted to those who have experienced a different, can we say, less glutted universe?

Thusly these ruminations, more than occasional purchases on a number of Irish texts, ultimately reveal themselves to have an existential - perhaps no more than a generational - pertinence. I recognize, for example, that the anxiety about the nuclear armaggadon belongs to the concerns of a particular generation and that it has somehow slipped from the ken of public discourse. This is paradoxical in view of the fact that the danger of technological weaponry has grown and not declined. Or, to take another example, what is the relevance of the issue of semiotic overload to a generation which has been nurtured on televisual imagery?

The question that insinuates itself is to what extent are ruminations on the sense of the end products of extant mindsets which have to enplot a perplexing array of new developments and problems. In order to illustrate this I cite John Gray:

It is a commonplace that ours has become a culture of endings. We live amid the ruins of the projects of the modern age. They litter the landscape in which we must find our bearings. They stand in the way of any clear sight of the world as it is coming to be. The most unprecedented events of recent years are interpreted as stages on the way to worldwide modernity. We do not notice the obscure beginnings of a postmodern world, half-hidden in the shadows of modernity's failed projects. Understanding the present is made harder for us by unexamined inheritances from the past (Gray 1997:156).

When pronouncements are made upon the waning of a millennium and the apocalyptic implications this holds are we not, to use Gray again, "ruled by defunct modern utopias"(1997:161)

I leave the question open and bring this to a close on a more self-conscious note. Every generation because of its biological clock voices its own claims for historical ultimacy. This is so because time is, without doubt, "the ultimate scarce resource for the finite human being"(Beck 1994:189). In accordance, I am acutely aware that my preoccupation on the theme of endings derives, at least in part, from the awareness of my own finality, made more poignant by the drama of round numbers of the millennium divide. However, if we return to Robert Hewison's pronouncements concerning the prevailing pessimism of terminal existence, the living in what he designates "the after", I cannot but ask for whom are statements on endings pertinent. To what extent can we accept the diagnosis of a lack of utopian potential in the prevailing cultural atmosphere made in the wake of such utterances? The pretentiousness of these pronouncements is particularly striking coming as it does from a cultural discourse which has constantly privileged the provisional, the transitory. Regardless of the impasse some of us might feel within the new constellation of man and the way he deals with the world, ought we doubt

the agency of those who will have to live in these changed circumstances? What they perhaps will have no need of is our pronouncements on endings.

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Stipe Grgas: Svršetci kod Flanna O'Briena i Samuela Becketta

S a ž e t a k

U radu autor polazi od konteksta kraja stoljeća i opisuje kako pitanja kraja igraju veliku ulogu u ljudskom životu. On potkrijepljuje svoju argumentaciju pozivajući se na pisce koji su razmatrali važnost temporalnog prekida i na osobnoj i na društveno-povijesnoj razini. Središnji dio rada bavi se prikazbom svršetaka u djelima irskih pisaca Flanna O'Briena i Samuela Becketta. Prema autorovoj argumentaciji, unatoč značajnim razlikama u tekstovima dvaju pisaca, kod oba je umjetnika razvidno kako okvir u kojemu se nalazimo ima ogroman utjecaj na način kako se sučeljujemo sa svršetkom. Taj uvid omogućuje autoru ukazati na stvari koje su, po njemu, specifične iskustvu dvadesetog stoljeća ali, polazeći od spoznaje kojoj podučavaju irski tekstovi, on naglašava kako je svjestan da njegove prosudbe o kraju možda nisu ništa nego diskurz naraštaja koji osjeća otkucaje biološkog sata.