

THE IMAGINATION AND WHAT
PHILOSOPHERS HAVE TO SAY

What the philosophers say is often just as disappointing as it is when you read on a sign at a second-hand store: "Ironing done here." If you should come with your clothes to get them ironed, you'd be fooled; for only the sign is for sale.¹

Kierkegaard

I

My purpose in this paper is to consider the reaction of certain literary artists to the ways in which language is used by philosophers. Such an investigation is I think worthwhile for the light it throws both upon the nature of philosophical thinking itself and upon the preoccupations of certain workers. In particular it

¹ S. Kierkegaard, quoted in M. Grene, *Introduction to Existentialism*, p. 35 (University of Chicago Press, 1959).

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makes us enquire what it is about philosophical thinking which can be exploited imaginatively.

The purpose of most intellectual exercises is to come to terms with novelty, to render the novel intelligible. What is *this* most like? is one of the most important questions it is possible to ask and answer, for it is the start of all original thought, the basis of generalisation, and ultimately of rationality in the word. In other words at the root of most advances in understanding is the ability to spot analogies. Perhaps the most explicit use of analogical thinking occurs in science, and there is an extensive literature in the philosophy of science dealing with the heuristics of model construction. One of the great advantages of analogical thinking is that it has no rules. And although perhaps the most striking deployment of analogy is to be seen in the sciences, nevertheless it is also part of the machinery of philosophy and the artistry of the literary imagination. And it is here that philosophy may overflow into literature and literature into philosophy. For the dam is but a matter of words.

What is the philosopher's use of analogy? Philosophy is an attempt to use language to describe the language we use to describe the world. It is therefore a reflexive discipline, using symbols to describe the use of those symbols. And this is where misunderstanding often arises.

La vraie valeur de la philosophie n'est que de ramener la pensée à elle-même. Cet effort exige de celui qui veut le décrire l'invention d'une manière de s'exprimer convenable à ce dessein, car le langage expire à sa propre source.^{2*}

Many philosophers if not in the present, then certainly in the past have claimed to be saying something *in fact* about the world. This may seem preposterous in a scientific age, but the idea is not so absurd as it seems. The argument I suppose runs somewhat as follows. We need a language to talk about the world, to

² P. Valéry, *Discours sur Bergson* (in *Œuvres*, I, p. 885, Gallimard, 1951).

* The true value of philosophy is merely to lead thought back to itself. This effort requires of whoever wishes to undertake it the invention of a way of expressing himself which is appropriate to this aim, for language expires at its own source.

get to conceptual grips with it. A world not in some way coagulated by language is inconceivable, and certainly we could say nothing of it. In other words, *pace* Wittgenstein, what there is is what it can be said there is. The reality of the world, the ontological fundamentals, are decided by the language we use. Language is a package deal involving an ontological commitment. Reality crystallises from the solution of experience in language. A consequence of this is that some importance attaches to seeing that the conceptual grid of language is free of redundancies, that it gives us as tight a hold upon the world as possible. For example if as some philosophers have supposed, the concept “object” can be analysed away in terms of “sensations” or “sense-data,” the concept “object” is redundant; it is at best a linguistic lubricant. It follows since language dictates an ontology, that there are *in fact* no physical objects (for facts are linguistic). Philosophy then is the development of a consciousness about language and its reference to the world. Philosophy is a discussion of language, yet we have no means of doing this except linguistic.

A perhaps less palatable consequence is that there can be no absolute reality, but a plurality of realities parallel to the plurality of languages. Translation is not simply a change of ciphers, but a meshing of what may be two very different world-pictures. One may recall Mallarmé’s lament on this point in *Crise de Vers* (1886-95).

Les langues imparfaites en cela que plusieurs, manque la suprême; penser étant écrire sans accessoires, ni chuchotement mais tacite encore l’immortelle parole, la diversité, sur terre, des idiomes empêche personne de préférer les mots qui sinon se trouveraient, par une frappe unique, elle-même matériellement la vérité.*

So that the philosopher’s use of language is on two levels; and the philosopher’s problem is to ensure that these levels do not become one. He must do what Rilke insisted the poet did—

... set apart his word from the words of everyday life and communica-

* Languages are imperfect in that several lack excellence; to think being to write without accessories, nor does whispering the still tacit immortal word, the diversity of the languages on earth prevent anyone from uttering words which otherwise would themselves, by their simple coinage, be materially the truth itself.

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tion thoroughly and fundamentally. No word in a poem is identical with the same sounding word in common use and conversation.³

The philosopher uses language *extraordinarily* to talk about the way we *ordinarily* use language. He feels what Wittgenstein in *The Blue Book* calls a “philosophical cramp” about certain words. The philosopher’s usage surreptitiously gives to ordinary words an extended significance, and it is this which I want to say something about in terms of some examples.

Philosophers are playing a trick with language, and tricks can often be amusing. Philosophy is a verbal art with instructive intent—it is persuasive rhetoric about language. Merleau-Ponty in speaking of Bergson⁴ says that philosophical problems only arise when we try to put ourselves in a sort of primordial vacuum, so that philosophical categories are really no more than a verbal way of signifying that we are waiting for something. To take one example, the philosopher of perception tries to extrapolate what is already an object-centred language to a position where he thinks he can construct object-referring concepts—he tries to use ordinary language in a context of no assumptions. The philosopher is waiting to see how such things as objects turn up; how there can be such things as objects.

Nous commençons à lire le philosophe en donnant aux mots qu’il emploie leur sens “commun,” et peu à peu, par un renversement d’abord insensible, sa parole maîtrise son langage, et c’est l’emploi qu’il en fait qui finit par les affecter d’une signification nouvelle et propre à lui. A ce moment, il s’est fait comprendre et sa signification s’est installée en moi.^{5*}

This is why philosophers often seem to make startling claims, for example that there are no such things as physical objects. But

³ R.M. Rilke, *Letter to Margo Sizzo-Gouz* (1922), trans. by E. Rennie in *Selected Letters*, ed. by H.T. Moore (Doubleday, New York 1960), p. 325.

⁴ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Eloge de la Philosophie et Autres Essais*, p. 18 (Gallimard, 1953, 1960).

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 98-9.

* We begin to read the philosopher by giving the words he uses their “common” sense, and gradually, through an imperceptible inversion, his work masters his language; and this is the use he makes of it, which ends by its taking on a new meaning, the philosopher’s own. At this moment he makes himself understood and his meaning has been instilled in me.

such claims must be viewed in the light of the verbal *manœuvres* which produced them. The philosopher is using the word “object” not as we ordinarily do to signify an ontological fundamental which makes sense of experience, but as marking the terminus of a set of inferences starting from the contents of our experience. The philosopher’s objects are analogous to the objects of our environment; they are metaphorical objects.

Language which is being used literally, in its proper context, can be checked upon by public scrutiny, dictionaries and so on. On the other hand language which is being used metaphorically cannot be checked in this way, for metaphors are not correct or incorrect, but merely appropriate or inappropriate. The meaning of literal statements can be worked out, but the significance of metaphors has to be “jumped to,” their rightness “seen,”

‘Tis not solely in poetry and music we must follow our taste and sentiment, but likewise in philosophy—wrote Hume.⁶

Moreover a number of inferences can be drawn from a literal statement, whereas this is not so from a metaphorical statement. For example “The road is icy” enables us to infer that it will be slippery, but to say that an undergraduate class is a hive of activity does not allow us to infer that its members will sting if intercepted. Metaphors cannot be explained, for their effect derives simply from the shock involved in *saying* them. A philosopher has the ability to be linguistically shocking often in a most persuasive way.

The philosophical sceptic wants to know what it would be like to doubt everything, what it would be like to get back to sense-data. But the sense-datum “red-here-now” he will say “Of course not, it is *my* sense datum.” His language although it uses public ciphers is actually removed from the normal public context. This is an inevitable consequence of driving a wedge between appearances and reality. Consider Plato’s simile of the cave. The argument here uses an analogy from the sense of sight in order to justify an inclination to *mistrust* the senses. In the cave all we see are shadows, we do not see the objects causing them. All we have in the cave of life is shifting sense-perception, opinion

⁶ D. Hume, *Treatise on Human Nature*, Book 1, Pt 3, Sect. 8.

not knowledge. We never know the truth, unless we are philosophers (and then we may be disappointed). Now Plato here is covertly using the vocabulary of the sense of sight in an extended way; for either seeing shadows is a paradigm case of seeing what is real (for even if shadows are not objects in the usual sense, they are just as respectable candidates for seeing as objects) in which case nothing is gained by the analogy; or seeing shadows is not a paradigm case of seeing what is real, so that we must discount them as real shadows and the analogy never gets off the ground.

For empiricism, an illusion is not really an illusion because nothing has yet been constituted as an object. If our perceptions are never veridical, then there is no distinction between veridical and no-veridical perceptions, and the suggestion loses its point. For if we urge that the objects we see are illusory, we really cannot say this unless we accept some objects as real. What the sceptic is saying is that anyone who says he sees an orange is wrong. If he is not in doubt then he ought to be. That is, whether there actually are oranges there or not he must conclude that he does not see them. Or to put it another way, whether there actually are oranges or not, he will still see the same thing. Therefore the sceptic concludes there are no such things as oranges; all is fruity imaginings. But of course he could just as cogently conclude from this that there actually are oranges and that we see them.

The philosopher's usage depends for its effect then upon the background and legitimacy of ordinary usage. Philosopher's language as P.F. Strawson has said⁷ is a commentary upon ordinary language, not a translation of it. Once this is admitted philosophical usage becomes far less alarming. Philosophy far from being explicative of ordinary language is actually creative within it. In a sense philosophy is as gratuitous as poetry, and as full of conceits.

A most important area of dispute in philosophy centers upon the nature of individuality and the freedoms it enjoys. And not surprisingly this is a subject which comes close to the preoccupations of novelists. André Breton once said that the history of literature can be read as the history of liberties taken with the notion "I am." One of the dilemmas which confronts any conceptual thinking is to give a satisfactory account of the concept

⁷ P.F. Strawson, *Philosophy*, 24, 258 (1949).

“I.” For in so far as we grasp ourselves as “I” we are vaguely aware of stepping beyond the range of conceptual thought since we are able to choose, decide and intend, in fact to create ourselves anew. But in so far as we think, we think conceptually. The philosophical problem is that of how we should construe 1st person statements and 3rd person statements. In particular one must not construe 1st person statements on the model of 3rd person statements. A simple example will perhaps make the point. When I say “Angus sees a student,” I am justified in what I say by observing Angus seeing the student, but it would be absurd to say that I have to seek any justification for saying “I see a student.” For statements in the first person are non-criterial—the connection between psychic and physical states can be no more than contingent. This is not to say that when I say “I see a student” nothing is going on, but it is to say that what is going on is incidental to my using that expression if I wish to. There are two well-known philosophical escape routes from this position. One of these, determinism, construes all statements as 3rd person statements, while the other, the libertarian position, construes all statements as 1st person statements. For the determinist, all such statements are explicable; for the libertarian, they are all inexplicable. The determinist is embarrassed by the fact that somehow he has to account for the existence and importance of ethics, while the libertarian is embarrassed because he has to explain how genuine alternatives can arise from a given prior situation. But it is not hard to see that both these philosophers are guilty of linguistic duplicity.

The determinist says our actions or choices are *never* free, that a man is never answerable for what he does. The determinist in short is troubled by the possibility that men are machines. But the word “free” only has meaning if there are situations to which its negation is applicable. The philosopher has extrapolated its function to such an extent as to empty it of significance, for if things are *always* beyond my control, then I can only be unconcerned. The libertarian is equally guilty of an extrapolation, but in the opposite sense. He recommends that the word “free” should only be applied to choices which are wholly independent of the circumstances. But freedom is freedom relative to a certain situation—if there is no situation, there is no sense in speaking

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of freedom, since there is then no-one to be free. The truth of the matter lies as so often between these two extremes. The individual is both subject to, and the creator of *circumstance*. Life is *lived* from a point of view. (Dreams in which there often seems to be complete freedom are peculiar because in them there is *no* point of view; and science which is deterministic is the world from *everybody's* point of view).

It is giving up part of his spontaneity, by becoming involved with the world through stable organs and pre-established circuits that man can acquire the mental and practical space which will free him from his environment and enable him to see it.⁸

II

Jamais la littérature n'a été aussi "philosophique" qu'au XXe siècle, n'a autant réfléchi sur le langage, sur la vérité, sur le sens de l'acte d'écrire.^{9*}

Philosophy as I have tried to show, is an attempt to see what can be learnt from a controlled misuse of language, an attempt to see where linguistic analogy plays us false. This is the basis of Wittgenstein's assertion that philosophical discussion is senseless.¹⁰ Locke in the *Essay* wrote that wit is compounded of imagination and judgment.¹¹ Now wit relies upon the ability of language to move upon several planes simultaneously. Such linguistic incongruities are often very comic and sometimes philosophically informative. Laughter, Wittgenstein once said, occurs when language goes on holiday. Philosophy is an exploration of this whereas the imagination can exploit it. It would not be surprising then if the comic figure were a most effective way of criticising philosophical claims, of showing the literal absurdity of philosophical usage.

⁸ M. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, p. 87 (trans. by C. Smith, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).

⁹ *Idem, Eloge de la Philosophie et Autres Essais*, p. 238.

* Never has literature been so "philosophical" as in the nineteenth century, never has it reflected so much on language, on the truth, on the sense of the act of writing.

¹⁰ L. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54.

¹¹ J. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book 2, Ch. 11.

Unfortunately as Valéry says in talking of Descartes,¹² writers seem to have paid this possibility scant attention.

Mais la littérature jusqu'ici a peu considéré, que je sache, ce trésor immense de sujets et de situations. Les raisons de cette négligence sont évidentes. Il faut cependant que je distingue l'une d'entre elles que vous connaissez à merveille. Elle consiste dans l'extrême difficulté que nous oppose le langage, quand nous voulons le contraindre à décrire les phénomènes de l'esprit. Que faire de ces termes que l'on ne peut préciser sans les recréer? *Pensée, esprit lui-même, raison, intelligence, compréhension, intuition* ou *inspiration*?—Chacun de ces noms est tour à tour un moyen et une fin, un problème et un résolvant, un état et une idée; et chacun d'eux, dans chacun de nous, est suffisant ou insuffisant selon la fonction que lui donne la circonstance. Vous savez qu'alors le philosophe se fait poète, et souvent grand poète; il nous emprunte la métaphore et, par de magnifiques images que nous lui devons envier, il convoque toute la nature à l'expression de sa profonde pensée.*

He continues

... La soif de comprendre, et celle de créer; celle de surmonter ce que d'autres ont fait et de se rendre égal aux plus illustres... Et puis, le détail même des instants de l'action mentale; l'attente du don d'une forme ou d'une idée; du simple mot qui changera l'impossible en chose faite; les désirs et les sacrifices, les victoires et les désastres; et les surprises; l'infini de la patience et l'aurore d'une "vérité;" et tels moments extraordinaires, comme l'est par exemple, la brusque formation d'une sorte de solitude qui se déclare tout à coup, même au milieu de la foule, et tombe sur un homme comme un voile sous lequel

¹² P. Valéry, *Œuvres*, Vol. I, p. 797-9.

* But so far as I know, literature until now has barely considered this immense treasure of subjects and situations. The reasons for this negligence are obvious. However, I must distinguish one from among them that you understand especially well. It consists in the extreme difficulty which language poses for us when we wish to force it to convey the phenomena of the mind. What is to be done with these terms which cannot be stated explicitly, unless they are recreated? *Thought, the mind itself, reason, intelligence, comprehension, intuition* or *inspiration*?... Each of these words is in turn a means and an end, a problem and a resolvent, a state and an idea; and each of them, in each of us, is sufficient or insufficient according to the function which circumstance gives it. You know then that the philosopher becomes a poet, and frequently a great poet; he borrows the metaphor for us and, through magnificent images which instil our envy, he summons all of nature to express his profound thought.

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va s'opérer le mystère d'une évidence immédiate.—Que sais-je? Tout ceci nous propose bien une poésie aux ressources inépuisables.*

(What Valéry says here is reminiscent of what Merleau-Ponty says of philosophy⁴ (p. 4).)

One might expect literary artists to be interested in what philosophers have to say in periods when there is a particular concern with the nature of language, for as I have explained, both are self-conscious about it. Such a preoccupation with language is especially noticeable both during the eighteenth century and the present century. Both periods follow years of intense scientific speculation, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that extensive empirical discovery encourages the study of the language in which these discoveries are reported. For empirical discovery inevitably opens the question of what scientific language is, and how it relates to ordinary language. John Locke's chapters in the *Essay* on the use and misuse of words,¹³ and his emphasis on the fact that language was a human invention and not of divine origin led to the idea that language required careful study, and had to be guarded from the perils of imprecision arising from misuse. Dr. Johnson's *Dictionary* and Leibnitz's philosophical reflections upon the construction of perfect languages are eighteenth century expressions of this concern. The ideas of Leibnitz are particularly interesting as an anticipation of the interests of Russell and the early Wittgenstein in truth-functional logic. It is not hard to see that an almost inevitable consequence of these interests is a change in the philosophical climate from metaphysics to linguistic or conceptual analysis (although it must be said that logical atomism has its own metaphysics). Hume is a philosopher who

* ... The thirst for understanding is that of creating; of going beyond what others had achieved and of making oneself equal to the most illustrious... And then, the detail itself of the moments of mental action; the expectation of the gift of a form or of an idea, of the simple word that will change the impossible into a thing accomplished; the desires and the sacrifices, the victories and the disasters; and the surprises; the infinite patience and the dawn of a "truth"; and such extraordinary moments, as, for example, the abrupt formation of a kind of solitude, which suddenly declares itself, even in the midst of a crowd, and descends upon man like a veil, under which the mystery of an immediate revelation takes place... What do I know? All this suggests to us a poetry with inexhaustible resources.

¹³ J. Locke, *op. cit.*, Book 3.

often drew startling conclusions from a perceptive study of the functions of concepts just as philosophers now do after Russell and Wittgenstein.

Philosophers attempt to relieve their anxieties about the way we speak, to discover what gives meaning and intelligibility to discourse. Now Wittgenstein has shown us in his emphasis upon the diversity of linguistic function that there are important relations between these philosophical questions about language, and questions about what sort of life is meaningful and intelligible, or meaningless and unintelligible.

Can only those hope who can talk? Only those who have mastered the use of a language. That is to say, the phenomena of hope are modes of this complicated form of life.¹⁴

Language is one, and probably the most important, of those human activities which allow rationality, because within it our individual perspectives blend. The eighteenth century was not unaware of this. Now clearly we are here very near the novelist's concerns. For he is interested ultimately in lives which are meaningful or not, intelligible or not, coherent or not. And he therefore might quite easily become interested in the difficulties of ordinary language, and what philosophers have to say by way of commentary upon it.

In the remaining section of this paper I shall try to illustrate some of my remarks in terms of three writers, Laurence Sterne, Samuel Beckett and Maurice Blanchot.

III

I choose Laurence Sterne's work, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*¹⁵ not for literary appraisal, but as an eighteenth century example of imaginative concern with philosophy. Sterne wrote in the shadow of the empirical philosophy of his time, a fact already discussed in some detail

¹⁴ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, Pt. 2, i.

¹⁵ References will be to World Classic's Edition (Oxford, 1903) referred to hereafter as *TS*.

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elsewhere.¹⁶ I wish to confine myself to what I believe to be Laurence Sterne's critical purpose in writing *Tristram Shandy*. *Tristram Shandy* is an immensely comic because untidy book, this is no accident, but the result of a critical design. For *Tristram Shandy* is in part a criticism of the philosopher's commentary upon ordinary usage. When the word "Nose" occurs, writes Sterne abruptly, I *mean* a nose.¹⁷ In particular Sterne was out to suggest the absurdity of the philosophy of mind that went with the empiricism of Locke and his followers. He regards such philosophy as leading to comedy rather than profundity. Sterne does not doubt that to follow Locke's prescriptions could lead to a special of rationality, but he believes, rightly in my view, that life is *lived* beyond such reason. Logic is regularly falsified by events. The philosopher's vocabulary inevitably makes nonsense of life, for life against which reason and passion have significance, cannot be analysed in these terms. Uncle Toby declares his love for Widow Wadman without a single determinate idea in the philosopher's sense having entered his head.

But softly—where—every step that's taken the judgment is surprised by the imagination, I defy the best cabbage planter that ever existed, whether he plants forwards or backwards—I defy him to go on coolly, critically, and canonically planting his cabbages, one by one, in straight lines, and stoical distances, especially if slits in petticoats are unsewed up—without ever—sidling into some bastardy digression.¹⁸

Sterne in fact is arguing for a phenomenological theory of mind, and his criticism of philosophical empiricism is, I am inclined to think, one of the most telling before the recent developments of phenomenology. One is reminded strongly of Sartre's description of the intentional consciousness as having no "within" by which he means simply that it has no analysable contents.¹⁹

Certain facets of Sterne's thought lead one to think of Samuel

¹⁶ K. Maclean, *John Locke and English Literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Yale University Press, 1936); J. Traugott, *Tristram Shandy's World; Sterne's Philosophical Rhetoric* (University of California Press, 1954).

¹⁷ *TS*, Book 2, Ch. 31.

¹⁸ *TS*, Book 8, Ch. 34.

¹⁹ J.P. Sartre, "Intentionality," *Nouvelle Revue Française*, (1st January, 1939).

Beckett. Samuel Beckett's writing has been discussed elsewhere,²⁰ and all I want to do here is to pin-point certain areas of philosophical interest. The passage of time in *Tristram* produces as much a dissolution of personal identity as its creation and development. The lives of the principal characters seem to the reader wholly inconsequential, to be the subjects of an excess of circumstance, though perhaps to the characters themselves their dreams and fantastic obsessions²¹ seem real and cogent enough as explanations for their actions. This seeming inability to get to grips with reality, to hold the world in focus, reflects itself in a philosophical pedantry anticipatory of passages in Samuel Beckett.²² For pedantry is often merely a cloak for ignorance and an inability to get to the heart of a matter. *Watt* like *Tristram* is in part a commentary upon our epistemological poverty; for both Sterne and Beckett, epistemology or what the philosophers have to say, is both preposterous and comic.

... a thing that was nothing had happened with the utmost formal distinctness—with all the clarity and solidity of something.²³

But there is nevertheless a difference. Whereas Sterne is driven by his need to find spiritual salvation from the philosopher's logical point of view in the excess of circumstance in life, Beckett has as one of his principal themes the search for total spiritual release from both these. For Beckett even circumstances imprison. Beckett treats our inability to gel as individuals much more seriously and profoundly than Sterne ever did.

Life ruled by logic would be absurd, argues Sterne, just as absurd and meaningless as it *is* for those of Beckett's characters, who find it even difficult to die when all that holds them to life is a range of logical possibilities. In the trilogy *Molloy-Malone Dies-Unnamable* the separation of the mind from a decrepit body leaves their possessor nothing to do but ruminate upon never changing futilities of an obsessive kind. Logic, according to Sterne,

²⁰ *Inter alia*, J. Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (Chatto and Windus, 1964).

²¹ For example, *TS*, Book 1, Ch. 19.

²² For example, *TS*, Book 5, Chs. 42, 43.

²³ S. Beckett, *Watt*, p. 73 (Calder, 1963).

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prevents us from living; according to Beckett, it may even prevent us from dying.

... to know that you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in.²⁴

There are two other areas of concern common to Beckett and Sterne, and to the third author. I wish to mention Maurice Blanchot. All these writers are anxious about the imprecision of words and so the inherent limitation upon the reliability of communication; and about the difficulty of defining personal identity. These are not unrelated questions since the concept "I" is verbal. These are also problems of considerable philosophical interest for reasons which I briefly discussed in Part I of this paper. Language I said there was one of the principal guarantees of rationality, yet many writers see danger in this. Sterne himself was openly suspicious of language and the possibility of its being misunderstood.

'Twas not by ideas—by Heaven; his life was put in jeopardy by words.²⁵

And yet he also rejected the idea common in the eighteenth century of a language of words with precise meanings. This ambivalence probably reflects the uncertainty among eighteenth century intellects about the nature of language. A similar ambivalence towards language is detectable in Beckett. In *Malone Dies*, words are defended as the best tool we have in the circumstances.

It is no use indicting words—they are no shoddier than what they peddle.²⁶

If anything it is the circumstances which are to blame. We can read in *Watt* the novelist's reaction to Wittgenstein's philosophical idea that words define the totality of what can be said; that beyond the reach of language there is nothing. But here disillusion is not far away. For there may be many ways of talking about a given situation, and no means of choosing between

²⁴ Idem, *Molloy*, p. 64 (Calder, 1959).

²⁵ *TS*, Book 2, Ch. 2.

²⁶ S. Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 195 (Calder, 1959).

them. The result is the most noticeable feature of *Watt*, the endless lists, enumerations and permutations which occur frequently in the book; and these have the effect of destroying any confidence in our linguistic tool. There is no getting beyond the language barrier either way. In a different way Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* shows how a veil of words can give an illusion of substance in narrative and discourse. So that both Sterne and Beckett have as one of their ultimate concerns that most philosophical of all questions—the relation of words to the world; and both produced an imaginative commentary upon the philosophy of language of their time. Both reflect the inadequacy of this philosophy.

Both Beckett's and Sterne's characters achieve at best specious clarity about their existence. Words cannot specify precisely, argues Sterne, where human beings lie in the total reality. Words create a knot, never wholly tied, never wholly loosened, and somewhere inside lies the human self, ready to slip out and escape.²⁷ This lack of clarity is also the concern of Maurice Blanchot who emphasised in his work, for example *Thomas l'Obscur* and *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*, the wandering restlessness, the erring between the security of stable concepts and the changing face of reality.²⁸

Life for Blanchot as for Sterne and Beckett is wholly un-Aristotelian. The situation is most serious when it is a question of the behaviour of the concept "I." The philosophical problem, I have already mentioned in Part I of this paper.

My good friend—quoth I—as sure as I am I and you are you.—And who are you? said he.—Don't puzzle me—said I.²⁹

So writes Sterne by way of commentary upon the inadequacy of the empiricist theory of self. Beckett's *Unnamable*, in part anticipated by *Molloy* and *Malone Dies* must be reckoned one of the most profound imaginative explorations of the problem of self-identity ever to have been written.

And even my sense of identity was wrapped up in a namelessness hard to penetrate—already all was fading, waves and particles, there

²⁷ *TS*, Book 3, Ch. 10.

²⁸ M. Blanchot, *Celui qui ne m'accompagnait pas*, p. 98-9 (Gallimard, 1953).

²⁹ *TS*, Book 7, Ch. 33.

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could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names.³⁰

The philosophical point upon which all this hinges is, as I have mentioned already, that 1st person statements are non-criterial,³¹ that the correlation of psychic and physical states is contingent. The individual becomes as tenuous as a vapour, expanding meaninglessly to fill the universe available to it.

Maurice Blanchot shares this uncertainty about the concept "I."

... il garda la pensée qu'en sa personne déjà privée de sens, tandis que, juchés sur ses épaules, le mot *Il* et le mot *Je* commençaient leur carnage, demeuraient des paroles obscures, âmes désincarnées et anges des mots, qui profondément l'exploraient.^{32*}

This problem is of course not wholly new—it occurs from time to time in all literature since Romanticism—but in some authors it is clearly a preoccupation. Blanchot himself observes that the theme of *Thomas l'Obscur* could be treated infinitely variously, and he himself has produced two versions of it. Beckett and Blanchot differ in many respects, not least in wit, but their common concern is to explore imaginatively the philosophy of the concept "I."

It is in part the attempt to reach a satisfactory degree of self-knowledge that forces Beckett's characters to contract their lives, to alienate themselves from other people and the material environment; an alienation which leads to a curious hybrid of mental clarity and perplexity, of the clear sightedness of the old man and the child. And the corresponding feature of the novels and *récits* of Maurice Blanchot is a strange ambiguity in personal relationships—Thomas and Anne are at once intimate yet infinitely estranged; which reminds the reader of similar difficulties in *Tristram*. The ultimate agony is how to die.

³⁰ Mollo, p. 31; cf. *Unnamable*, p. 407-8.

³¹ A recent philosophical treatment is S. Schomaker, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Cornell, 1963).

³² M. Blanchot, *Thomas l'Obscur* (Nouvelle Version), p. 36 (Gallimard, 1950).

* ... He retained the thought, already deprived of sense, only in his person, while perched on his shoulders, the word *He* and the word *I* were beginning their carnage, remaining obscure words, fleshless souls and angels of words, which penetrated him profoundly.

Il était, dans la mort même, privé de la mort, homme affreusement anéanti, arrêté dans le néant par sa propre image.^{33*}

In this paper I have tried to show what philosophers are attempting to do with language, and to what extent the literary imaginations of Laurence Sterne, Samuel Beckett and Maurice Blanchot can make use of the philosopher's commentary upon our linguistic habits.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

* He was, in death itself, deprived of death, a man dreadfully annihilated, arrested in naught by his own image.