SAMUEL BECKETT AND HIS WILD RIDE THROUGH THE LAND OF MODERN FICTIONAL WRITING

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Abstract:

Samuel Beckett authored novels, short stories, poetry, stage plays, and scripts—and he did each in a way that merged genre, challenged the norms of creative writing, and amazed the audience. His experiments include absurdism, genre-hybridization, and ergodicism, which led to Beckett fundamentally changing the approach to creative writing. His aesthetics have seeped down through the years and can be seen in Mark Z. Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*. By examining this writing compared to Beckett, this research paper hopes to illuminate the effects of Beckett's experimentation in form and genre on contemporary creative writing.

Keywords: Absurdism, genre-hybridization, ergodicism, creative writing etc.,

Introduction

Samuel Beckett, a Nobel Prize-winner, authored novels, short stories, poetry, essays, stage plays, radio plays, and scripts for both television and film—and he did each in a way that blended genre and challenged the norms of creative writing. His experimentation paved the way for future authors to push themselves against the established boundaries in their writing. Mark Z. Danielewski is such an author. This paper examines both form and content in Danielewski's novel *House of Leaves*[2] compared to Beckett's work. It also incorporates the author's thoughts on the art of writing by examining Danielewski's and Beckett's craft.

On the surface, Beckett could not seem any more different than Danielewski.

Beckett was an Irish writer who never formally studied creative writing in an academic setting but has published or produced in every imaginable genre. Danielewski is a contemporary American writer who lives in Los Angeles. He earned a degree in English

Literature from Yale and an MFA from the University of Southern California's School of Cinema-Television. Danielewski has published novels and novellas and has worked on musical, theatrical, and artistic collaborations. Stylistically speaking, the two authors do not appear related. Beckett has a minimalist style, and Danielewski's novel is more like a puzzle than a book. However, despite surface-level differences between the two writers, they have been celebrated and recognized for their literary talent, and Danielewski shares aesthetics with Beckett. Notably, it appears as though the two share a similar philosophy of creative writing.

Interestingly, both Beckett and Danielewski also refer to writing through a similar metaphor, but each interprets it uniquely. In his first published essay, "Dante…Bruno. Vico. Joyce," Beckett muses on the same thought, although not in so many words. While analyzing Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, still titled *Work in Progress,* he writes, "There is an endless verbal germination, maturation, putrefaction, the cyclic dynamism of the intermediate" (29). His "verbal germination" refers to the development of writing from a seed into a tree, while "maturation" is the growth of the branch and bearing of fruit. Beckett takes the metaphor further than Bender with the "putrefaction" and the "cyclic dynamism of the intermediate." He includes the decay of the fruit and focuses on the importance of the cycle of this progress, emphasizing not each main point in the cycle but the movement that occurs in the intermediate—the space between seed and tree, between branch and fruit. Danielewski takes the metaphor even further than Beckett and directly relates it to experimentation in writing.

These 21st century authors' shared approach to writing stems from a shared aesthetic, beginning with Beckett planting his seeds of experimentation in the 20th century. Beckett's work breaks from traditional genre norms in three main ways: his work is absurd, ergodic. A timeline of Beckett's authorship shows he was simultaneously writing in multiple genres throughout his entire career as opposed to many authors who focus on one genre at a time or dedicate their entire career to perfect their craft in only one genre. This parallel study of genres allowed Beckett to see how interconnected all genres are.

Beckett's approach to writing was assisted by his intricate knowledge of languages; Beckett earned a BA in Modern Languages and was fluent in both English and French. I am not arguing that Beckett invented any writing concepts or was the first to employ them in his writing. What I do claim is that Beckett was the first to experiment with these techniques on such a large scale that the use of these experimental forms in conjunction

with one another combined with being recognized as a Beckettian aesthetic.

Danielewski developed his definition by describing his style rather than revolting against the categorization process. By creating a broad definition, he has not limited his future writing or cut himself off from further experimentation. It is also important to note his defiance of allowing others to categorize him, reminiscent of Beckett, who revolted by refusing to acknowledge or accept a classification for his work. Equally important to note is Danielewski's focus on breaking down readers' expectations of both text and visuals, which is expertly demonstrated throughout his novel.

Although Beckett was not classified as a magical realist, he was a mentee and friend of James Joyce, whom many magical realists point to as an influence, and who is sometimes argued to be a predecessor of magical realism (Wexler 25-26). Experimentation is essential in creative writing because, without it, there would be no originality. If the purpose of Literature is to express life, then every day that new life comes into the world, new art is needed to express it. A writer cannot create new writing if they are trapped by convention and genre boundaries.

The authentic absurdism

As mentioned, the Beckettian aesthetic is characterized by the simultaneous presence of absurdism, ergodicism, and genre-hybridization. The first of these, absurdism, is the most difficult to understand. The term 'absurd' is often used to describe certain types of Literature. Traditionally, absurdist Literature dealt with the inability to find meaning in human existence (Gavins1). The term "Theatre of the Absurd," the most common type of absurdism associated with Beckett, was initially introduced in 1960 by a critic Martin Esslin in his essay "The Theatre of the Absurd."

Jack Mac Gowran, one of Beckett's friends and an actor who worked with Beckett on stage, television, and radio, recalls a conversation with Beckett on this subject, wherein Beckett states, "People read great symbolism I never intended," and "I will feel superior to my work if I try to explain it" (qtd. in Gussow 22-23). Knowing that this is how Beckett felt towards his work, it is possible to view absurdity instead as a literary device or stylistic tool that authors may implement in their writing. Absurdity as a literary technique involves an author taking a story or premise familiar to readers and then using object displacement, flattened tone, and juxtaposition to tell the story in a new and unique way.

Familiar Plot

At the core of each absurdist piece lies a familiar and commonplace plot that readers often never see because of the absurdity. At the core of Beckett's "First Love" is a story about a man down on his luck who shacks up with a young woman. He mooches off her, knocks her up, and then leaves her to avoid the responsibility of being a father. However, with the addition of absurdity, Beckett can elevate this premise into a story that represents various types of love that are experienced but rarely represented or even named. Simultaneously, Beckett can represent abusive, one-sided love and infatuation.

In Beckett's *Play*, three people—a man and two women—confess their roles in a love triangle. A love triangle, by no means, is a unique or fresh idea to revolve a plot around. As many would say, it is a tale as old as time. It happens not only in fiction but also quite often in reality. However, despite the familiarity of the surface-level plot, play can create a new dynamic in the love triangle through absurdity. By presenting the man and two women as heads in urns, requiring them to repeat their tale repeatedly in an endless loop, and introducing an interrogating spotlight as a fourth silent character, Beckett can transform an otherwise overdone storyline into something audiences have never seen.

When parsed down to fundamentals, Danielewski's novel, often touted as "reinventing the novel" (Fassler), is about a haunted house. The novel's premise is that a father quits his job and moves his family into a house in southeast Virginia for the family to grow closer and reconnect. However, the house turns out to be haunted. Furthermore, the parallel narrative following Johnny Truant is also full of familiar scenes—works scenes with an insufferable boss, and party scenes with his best friend full of booze and drugs where they try to pick up women, which leads to familiar love scenes readers have seen before and hangover mornings that are far too familiar to Johnny. However, Danielewski's approach to telling the story implements absurdism in several ways that position the reader not in the centre of the narratives, experiencing as they unfold, but positions readers in various vantage points around the central plot and allowing the story to be told through the lenses of others, thereby creating a novel like no other.

Object Displacement

Object displacement occurs when one item or thing would traditionally appear but has been replaced by something else. For example, in Beckett's "First Love," when the narrator moves from the bench to a deserted cowshed for cover during winter months, he

finds that his thoughts circulate only around Lulu. He states, "I found myself inscribing the letters of Lulu in an old heifer pat or flat on my face in the mud under the moon trying to tear up the nettles by the roots" (34). Seeing a pining lover doodling their crush's name in a notebook is nothing unusual or newsworthy. However, by having the narrator write Lulu's name in cow shit, Beckett makes the act absurd and monumentally more exciting and highlights the strangeness of the human condition.

Danielewski takes absurdism even further in *House of Leaves.* Object displacement is at play on an intricate level within the novel; the entire book is based on an object that may not exist. Johnny Truant, not quite the narrator but perhaps the reader's "guide" through the novel, questions the existence of the documentary.

What is most interesting about this instance of object displacement is that instead of the documentary film, Danielewski creates other items that all operate as though the documentary film existed, even though it does not. There are scholarly articles, comic strips, artwork, conceptual models, journal entries, poems, letters, sketches, photographs, and footnotes referencing journals, magazines, studies, books, and more. The overall purpose is to destabilize the reader's trust in the text, which links back to Danielewski's goal in his writing.[9]

Compressed Tone

In addition to object displacement, the second element of absurdity is flattened tone. A lack of emotion and varying levels of psychic distance between the reader and the events in the story characterizes a flattened tone. This tone is necessary for the delivery of an absurd story to be believable to the audience. If a story is absurd, yet the tone is emotive, the suspension of disbelief would be too difficult for readers, and the story would not be compelling or entertaining. A flattened tone is vital to avoiding over-sentimentality and melodrama, and it allows an absurd story to be told rationally, as if the facts of the story cannot be argued or challenged, thus evenly balancing the familiar and unfamiliar.

Juxtaposition

The final aspect of absurdity is the juxtaposition of things seemingly at odds. Juxtaposition is necessary to highlight the absurdities present in reality—Without the juxtaposition that exposes the reality of absurdity (and the absurdity of reality), the overall

effect of absurdism would fall short and fail. This final element wraps the entire absurdist aesthetic together and causes the reader to look for meaning; whether they find meaning or not is irrelevant and, ultimately, an individual response. For example, in "First Love", Beckett immediately juxtaposes the concept of marriage and love with that of death and corruption.

In the opening line, the narrator simultaneously refers to the relationship he had with a prostitute named Lulu, whom he later renames Anna, as both a "marriage" and an "affair" (25). This juxtaposition of terms immediately initiates the multifaceted nature of the love story. The narrator also outright states that he "associate[s], rightly or wrongly, [his] marriage with the death of [his] father" (25). This association of love with death immediately also indicates that the love story is that of dead love or a failed attempt at love. The death of the narrator's father is also associated with his relationship because were it not for his father's death, he would never have met Lulu/Anna. After his father dies, his family kicks him out of the house, having never liked him, and he begins living on a bench. Lulu/Anna also frequents this bench, and the two of them begin an odd romance in which the narrator immediately experiences an erection and eventually tells her to stop coming to the bench. Then, the narrator begins to realize his feelings for her.

Similarly, Bender uses juxtaposition to expand on her object displacement in "What You Left in the Ditch" during the scene where the couple is making love for the first time since the husband's return. Bender writes, "That night in bed, he grazed the disc over her raised nipples like a UFO, and the plastic was cool on her skin" (22). By presenting the moment in this surreal way, juxtaposing a married couple's lovemaking with that of an unidentifiable object, Bender avoids over-sentimentalizing the situation yet still perfectly capturing the strange, otherworldly feelings that the wife has at the same time. She finally has her husband back, which is the same but different. This feeling is amplified later with the juxtaposition of the husband's lack of lips with the young man's at the grocery store. The wife believes that she will find what is missing in the man's lips but finds that she cannot because "They were so soft. She kissed them for a moment, and then she had to move away; they were too soft, the softness was murdering her" (28). Here, softness and murder are juxtaposed to emphasize the wife's realization that another man is not what she wants; she wants her husband, even though he is different from before.

Absurdity, through object displacement, flattened tone, and juxtaposition, can take

an otherwise familiar story and turn it into something new and original. As a literary device, absurdity can help writers avoid sentimentality and melodrama and help make their writing feel fresh and original. Because of the various ways that authors can implement absurdism into their writing, it can also give a writer's style a unique twist.

Ergodicism

The second way that Beckett experimented and broke away from traditional creative writing conventions was by making his texts ergodic. Ergodic Literature requires the readers to make a more significant than-usual effort to process and understand what they are reading. Ergodic pieces do not operate by the same set of rules that readers are familiar with; they "teach you how to read them as you go" (qtd. in Fassler). Beckett creates this ergodic effect through various techniques, including disregarding grammatical and stylistic conventions, noise, and remediation. "Text" (1932) is a prime example of this; the piece is overwhelming to see at first, and it does not make much sense upon an initial or even a second or third read-through (see Appendix I). Many readers give up and label it a nonsense poem.

However, the work reveals itself to the reader when dissected bit by bit. The key to reaching an understanding is through defining the words, analyzing the symbolism, and recognizing the various instances of figurative language present. However, it requires effort from the reader to understand, and not all readers are willing to put forth the required effort.

The first step is to see beyond the madness of the page and begin identifying information. From the first line, there is a speaker, character, or an "I" narrator. The first line states, "cull me bonny." "Bonny" is a word that was commonly used to refer to a pretty girl. If readers continue looking up unfamiliar words, they will discover that in the second line, "springal" refers to a young man, and "twingle-twangle" refers to the "twang of a musical instrument." (Merriam-Webster).

Furthermore, "Kerry" could refer to County Kerry in Ireland, but it can also be a person's name. It is reasonable, therefore, for readers to conclude that there are now two characters: the female narrator and a young musician who is either from County Kerry or who is named Kerry. Moving forward, line three mentions the narrator's "week of redness with mad shame." Here, it becomes even more evident that the narrator is a woman, as red is often associated with blood, and a week of blood would refer to a woman's menstruation cycle.

The following lines state that the narrator is "lust-beleaguered and unwell." The first word here is a compounding, wherein Beckett has joined lust with belepered. A leper is someone that suffers from the chronic and infectious disease leprosy. So, by adding the word "lust" to "belepered," the narrator reveals that she is chronically infected by lust. Through the following four lines, she presents readers with a couple of sexual analogies of her and her lover, each ripe with phallic innuendo such as "coxcomb" and "joystick." The narrator gets caught up in her sexual fantasies and remembers that her menstruation began: "Day of the red time opened its rose and struck with its thorn." She flips a common analogy of a woman to a rose around and accentuates the painfulness of womanhood.

Immediately after this, the language completely breaks down with the line, "Oh, I'm all of a gallimaufry or a salady salmagundi single and single to bed." When dissected, this line becomes the key to understanding the entire poem. The opening words, "I'm all of a", indicate that whatever comes after is meant to describe the narrator. Although "gallimaufry" may look like a garble of nonsense, it is, in fact, an accurate word. The definition is "a confused jumble or medley of things" (Merriam-Webster). Thus, the reader discovers that the narrator is a confused jumble. The contraction "or" gives readers another option, making the narrator a "gallimaufry" or a "salady salmagundi." If readers remove the suffix -y from the end of "salady", they are left with "salad," a word that also means "a mixture." "Salmagundi" is not a word. However, it may be a malaprop for "salmagundi," which is a type of salad originating in English and also means "a general mixture or miscellaneous collection" (Merriam-Webster). Therefore, the speaker in this line says her head is a messy mixture of thoughts. The last part of the line, "single to bed," can be taken literally. The narrator is going to bed alone instead of having her lover. The last few lines reveal a third character, a "she" that says, "I will have no toad spit about this house." Toads pit is another word for cuckoo spit, a white, frothy secretion found on plants. Considering the piece's content, "toad spit" is most likely a double entendre for intercourse. Since the third character seems against the narrator having sex in her house, she is most likely a mother or caretaker. The last few lines include more of the narrator's fantasies but centre equally on the sexual and adolescent desire for maturation and freedom.

"Text" demonstrates the beauty of ergodicism. Because readers have to put in the effort to get to the story underneath, they become more invested in the work and, in the end, it means more to them than if they had read and consumed the story. By making the work

initially unreadable, Ergodicism succeeds in making a work that readers can return to multiple times to continue unearthing meaning.

Disregard Grammatical and Stylistic Conventions

One prime method of creating an ergodic text is disregarding grammatical conventions. Grammar, while often viewed as unnecessary torture by schoolchildren around the globe, serves as an essential roadmap to readers on how to navigate a text; punctuation indicates when to stop and pause, where to place emphasis, and what is within a sentence. Without it, readers would be unable to discern where one idea ends, and the other begins, or for a more specific example, where one character's dialogue ends and when another begins speaking. It is self-explanatory how this disregard for grammatical conventions is an ergodic element. However, it is essential to note that a disregard for grammatical conventions differs from a disregard for grammar. On this subject, Beckett once wrote in a letter to a friend, catalogued in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume I: 1929-1940,* that:

> It is getting increasingly difficult, even pointless, for me to write in formal English. Moreover, more and more, my language appears to me like a veil one has to tear apart to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. Grammar and style! To me, they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Biedermeier bathing suit or the imperturbability of a gentleman. A mask, it is hoped the time will come, thank God, in some circles it already has, when language is best used where it is most efficiently abused. (518)

The irony here is that Beckett does not treat grammar as irrelevant in his work. He treats grammatical conventions as irrelevant. He breaks grammar rules in order to elicit specific effects. In fact, he even does this in his letter by purposefully writing sentence fragments to add emphasis. He is a skilled wordsmith familiar with the tools at his disposal. It would not be possible for just any author to break the rules as well as Beckett does.

"Text" contains only a single stopping point: one period at the very end. Other than that, there are only three hyphens and a few apostrophes in contractions, and those are the only punctuation marks present in the entire piece. This gives the work a rushed feeling, as though the words are tripping over one another as the lines flow down the page. The utter lack of punctuation emphasizes how important punctuation is normally to understanding how to read a piece. Without it, "Text" becomes even more overwhelming to digest. Another

example of Beckett's unique use of grammar is in "First Love." The narrator writes:

> It had something to do with lemon trees or orange trees, I forget, that is all I remember, and for me, that is no mean feat, to remember it had something to do with lemon trees or orange trees, I forget, for of all the other songs I have ever heard in my life, and I have heard plenty, it being apparently impossible, physically impossible short of being deaf, of getting through this world, even my way, without hearing singing, I have retained nothing, not a word, not a note, or so few words, that, that what, that nothing, this sentence has gone on long enough. (37)

Compared to "Text," this comically long rambling can highlight the different ways punctuation can be manipulated to elicit different effects while simultaneously creating ergodicism. In "Text", there are no stops or pauses, with the only punctuation throughout being hyphens and apostrophes—punctuation meant to connect and create continuity and flow, which creates ergodicism through a rush to read the words without a pause to comprehend them.

Alternatively, the rambling section of "First Love" demonstrates a rather long passage with commas sprinkled throughout. It elicits a slower progression through the passage that interferes with comprehension by continuously pausing the reader and interrupting comprehension and train of thought.

"Text" and "First Love" demonstrate Beckett's ergodic disregard for grammatical conventions. They are run-on sentences, but more than that, they are *intentional* run-on sentences. Therein lies the difference between a disregard for grammatical conventions and a disregard for grammar entirely. Beckett could have written these portions in a grammatically "correct" fashion. However, were he to have done so would have completely ruined the intended and desired effect of the passages. In "Text", the rush of thought is intended to mirror the internal mental state of the narrator. In "First Love", the effect is that the narrator is rambling, his thoughts wandering from his initial purpose of relating the story into internal musings and then realizing what he was doing and snapping back into the story. By never breaking these sentences up in passages, readers can become caught up in the narrator's inner thoughts and lose themselves in their consciousnesses in a way that would have been impossible were Beckett following "formal English."

Danielewski feels similar regarding grammar and style. In an interview for *The Atlantic*, he states that he has an "attraction to books that invent their own narrative grammar" (qtd. in Fassler), which is apparent in *House of Leaves,* his novel, which must be read in a way that is unique to the book. No other work conforms to the set of rules that this particular novel creates and abides by. Danielewksi states, "I love texts that confront us with new grammar in this fashion, teaching us new ways to read and interpret as we go" (qtd. in Fassler). Again, *House of Leaves* is a creation born out of this love. The text contains interesting grammatical and stylistic choices that force readers to adapt their reading and interpretations as they move through the text.

Early on, readers learn and recognize that different fonts indicate different narrative branches and voices, with Times New Roman indicating Zampanó, Courier denoting Johnny Truant's voice, and others used throughout. Other sections that implement the use of empty brackets to indicate missing words: "'Look what you did. …..shot yourself a doe.' I almost killed myself then, but I guess I thought it couldn't get any worse. …..that was the worst" (329). The use of brackets in this way is the opposite of their traditional usage, which is to add new words to a passage or quote.

Even more interesting is Danielewski's implementation of the strike-through as a grammatical element. There are several passages throughout the novel where things are written and then struck through:

"Navidson is not Minos. He did not build the labyrinth. He only covered it….." (336). This punctuation indicates that someone, in this example Zampanò, has attempted to delete the passage from the text, which is remarkably interesting because in most texts, if something were meant to be deleted, it would not appear in the printed novel at all. Danielewski wants these passages to be read, however, and for the reader to understand that someone else did not want them to read, which creates a new type of conflict that would not exist if he were following traditional grammatical and stylistic conventions.

Contrastingly, there are entire passages that have been 'destroyed' in various ways, represented by lines of "Xs" as shown on page 354 in a footnote that reads: "Perhaps XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX…." The "Xs" continue on for several lines and end with a corresponding footnote in which Truant explains the reason that the text is unreadable, writing that it is "Crossed out with what looked suspiciously like black crayon and tar" (354). This, in its own way, is also a grammatical or stylistic convention. Danielewski has created

a new grammatical tool in his novel, wherein capital Xs can be interpreted as an indicator of a destroyed passage.

These ergodic grammatical and stylistic methods operate on multiple levels in Danielewski's novel. Not only does the reader have to learn how the different pieces of punctuation operate in the context of the passage, but also, they must sort through the punctuation to try to uncover the meaning behind it. The bracketed blanks, strike-through passages, and X 'd-out passages, each in their own unique ways, make the meaning of the text more difficult for the reader to consume and comprehend. It takes time and effort on the part of the reader to learn the book's new grammar and style and understand what meaning lies behind it.

Beyond this sentence-level disregard for grammatical and stylistic conventions, Danielewski takes it even further, as is his style. *House of Leaves* sets up the convention of form and then slowly breaks it down. For example, Chapter I opens up innocuously enough. If a reader were to glance at the page out of context, it would appear to them as any other scholarly text looks. There is a familiar shape, a few footnotes adorning the bottom of the pages, nothing too out of the ordinary. It begins, "While enthusiasts and detractors will continue to empty entire dictionaries attempting to describe or deride it, 'authenticity' still remains the word most likely to stir a debate" (3). This is an intriguing start to a scholarly text examining the legitimacy behind a highly discussed artefact—except this is supposed to be a novel, not an academic journal.[11]

Moving into Chapter II, Danielewski's approach of presenting the novel as a scholarly text continues until page 12, when he begins breaking down the conventions of scholarly texts, as well as the expectations that readers have built up to this point. He executes this breakdown by presenting the reader with footnote 18, which is four pages long and digresses into a parallel narrative that is not wholly related to the main article of the chapter. Chapters III through VI continue this slow and ever-increasing breakdown of the convention of academic writing. The footnotes are long, and eventually, readers even begin to question what is accurate and what is not. If outside research is done, it can be found that some referenced materials exist outside of the novel, and some are completely made up. Some information is true, and some are fiction. In this way, Danielewski has taken the form and convention of this type of genre—academic and scholarly writing—and slowly broke it down within his novel. Thus, Danielewski achieves his goal of the 'signiconic' and also

creates a mentally, as well as physically, ergodic text.

Danielewski does this throughout the novel, but another specific example is the letters from Johnny Truant's mother to him during his youth, which is present in Appendix E at the back of the book. The letters begin on page 587, appearing as innocent, normal letters from a mother to her son with nothing amiss. However, things are not right because the section is titled "The Three Attic Whales toe Institute Letters," which indicates that the mother is in some institution, which is why she is away from her son. As the letters go on, they slowly become more urgent in tone and more paranoid in content. They retain the normal form and shape of a traditional letter until the one dated 8 May 1987 (620), in which the letter makes no sense at all unless readers take the first letter of each word and decode the actual message. After this letter, the breakdown of form and convention escalates. The next letter is written in diagonal tilts across the page, followed by a letter that has sideways writing, a letter that has upside-down writing, and a few letters in which the words on the page overlap one another.

Danielewski "destabilizes both sides," meaning text and art, by starting out with conventional forms and then breaking them down. He uses the text as art and creates art through unique uses of text. Often, his breakdown of text and art coincides and runs parallel with the breakdown of characters' mental states. In the example of scholarly articles, which end up blending into narrative and exposition, the breakdown of text and art coincides with the mental breakdowns of the two main characters, Navidson and Johnny Truant. In the case of the Whalestoe letters, the breakdown is synchronized with the deteriorating mental state of Truant's mother, which is seen in a cyclic manner since the letters destabilize and then re-stabilize again in the end right before the mother's death.

This conceptual objective of destabilization, in its essence, is Beckettian; the desire to open up a third perspective is absurdist, combining text with visuals is genre-hybridization, and the attempt to destabilize and bring the reader beyond their limitations to a new understanding is ergodic. Danielewski's self-classified sign iconic style, while self-empowering, is not wholly accepted by others. Critics, booksellers, and readers still attempt to classify *House of Leaves,* and Danielewski, as everything from horror and romance to postmodernism and satire.

Bender, although not as intense as Danielewski, shows a disregard for grammatical and stylistic conventions. In "What You Left in the Ditch," in addition to having no quotation

marks at all to signify dialogue, Bender uses hyphens for everything that the lipless husband, Steven, says, "The-doctors-are-going-to-put-new-skin-on-in-a-few-weeks-anyway" (21). Added to her description of the way Steven talks "in a strange, halted clacking," these hyphens provide a visual that elicits the halting motion and slows readers down as they read his speech. This is the opposite effect that Beckett elicits using hyphens in "Text," which speeds up the flow of speech rather than slowing it down. Comparing the two effects garnered from the same punctuation showcases how versatile grammar and style can be when approached experimentally.

Bender's "Legacy," a short story remnant of fairy tales, depicts the story of a girl who gets pregnant and is sent to live with a hunchback in his castle. Throughout, there are interesting grammatical choices that break tradition. In the opening paragraph, there are intentional sentence fragments. When the girl's parents decide what to do with their now-pregnant daughter, they exclaim, "That castle! Your weird brother!" (143). These sentence fragments are meant to add emphasis. Later on, after the girl has been living with the hunchback and has had the baby, she finds out that his hunchback was surgically installed on his body. The grammatical elements of that particular section are quite interesting. Bender writes:

> You mean you are not for real? she screeched, and she ran outside to the weed while the baby slept; she poked at his hardback until he said You are hurting me and she said You are a fake fake fake! Furthermore, scooping up the baby, she flew down the four hundred stairs. (145)

Despite the presence of end-of-sentence punctuation, such as the question mark and the exclamation point, the sentence continues. Not only have quotation marks been removed and commas all but abandoned, but Bender has also taken power out of all but the period. The form, in this instance, is mirroring the content of the story, which hearkens back to Beckett's ideas of content and form being related in "Dante . . . Bruno. Vico... Joyce." Because the narrator is so upset in this section, the structure of the story begins to reflect her psyche; as she becomes emotional, the grammatical structure begins to break down as well, making this use of ergodicism even more poignant and also showing that grammar is more than just punctuation.

Noise

The second element of ergodicism, noise, is like static on a radio or a shoddy cell phone connection. Noise can be any interference that distorts a reader's understanding of the message being transmitted. Examples of noise can be stream-of-consciousness or rambling passages that lose focus, the introduction of foreign or unknown words, unconventional narrative organization, and more. Beckett takes the structure of his writing seriously. In "Dante…Bruno. Vico. . Joyce", he writes, "…form is content, content is form" (27). While he is speaking of Joyce's work in this

context, he applied the same practice about the relationship between form and content in his own works.

Beckett understood each mode he was writing in and catered for the type of noise he implemented to each. For example, in his prose, the narrator of "First Love" interrupts the flow of the plot and withdraws into inner dialogue that sometimes spans half a page to a page, causing the reader to sometimes lose themselves in the rambling thoughts and forget where they were in the progression of the plot. At one point, the narrator even interrupts the thoughts that have interrupted the plot. He says, "This sentence has gone on long enough" (37). He then immediately returns to where the plot had ended before the digression. Beckett recognized the strengths and limits of the prose form and tailored the noise to fit the medium.

To contrast, consider his play *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett introduces noise into his play through Lucky's monologue, which is delivered rapidly in a single breath and is comprised of a seemingly random assortment of words, all while the other three characters are on stage moving about, reacting to the agonizing noise and as such attempting to distract the audience from the speech. Similarly, *Not I* begin with the "*Mouth's voice unintelligible behind curtain*" (405) and ends with "*Curtain fully down. House dark. Voice continues behind curtain, unintelligible, 10 seconds, ceases as house lights up*" (413). This unintelligible speech is not only literal noise that the audience hears but is also impossible for them to understand. Furthermore, noise is created in *Not I* even when Mouth's words are recognizable; the way that it speaks continues creating noise for the audience through its continuous rapid bursts of loosely connected phrases that appear to be a one-sided conversation.

Danielewski's *House of Leaves* is an extremely noisy novel, with almost every page having some distraction working to divide the reader's attention, confuse them, or cause them

excess work in order to sift through the story. One of Danielewski's favourite ways of introducing noise is through the use of footnotes.[12] This tactic is embedded in the intricate threading of the novel's various narratives, as until Chapter XXI, Johnny Truant's entire narrative appears only via footnotes. These footnotes can appear at any time during the Navidson narrative and oftentimes have either a very loose connection or nothing at all to do with what is occurring in the main text. For example, in Chapter IX, in the midst of a scholarly article in which Zampanò is weighing the evidence on whether or not The Navidson Record is real or fiction, footnote 195 has Truant directly speaking about the text; however, within footnote 195, there is footnote 196, which breaks away into Truant relating to readers a hookup he had had that went poorly.

Truant's narrative, while the most obvious, is not the only way that footnotes cause noise. Sometimes, simply the placement of a footnote in a particularly climactic situation will interfere with the flow of the action, halt the buildup of momentum and suspense, and force readers to keep a distance that they may find frustrating to have to keep. Two such examples of this are during a time when Jed and his friend Wax are lost in the labyrinth of the house and are unable to find their way out:

> In the final shot, Jed focuses the camera on the door. Something is on the other side, hammering against it over and over again. Whatever comes for those who are never seen again has come from him, and Jed can do nothing but focus the camera on the hinges as the door solely begins to give way. (151) and interrupt a suspenseful and critical moment in the story to give anticlimactic information. Merely states: "Typo. Should read 'for'" and Footnotes.

"(No punctuation point should appear here) See also Saul Steinberg's *The Labyrinth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960)" (151). Neither of these footnotes is necessary since it would have been easier from an editorial standpoint to fix the two typos and move on. However, fixing the typos would eliminate the noise, and the point is for the footnotes to interfere with the delivery of the moment.

Footnotes are not the sole way that noise occurs in the novel. In fact, some of the most interesting noise is caused by cyphers, scattered text, and the implementation of varying forms of reading. All three of these types of noise are, for adventurous readers, fun and interesting additions to the novel. Cyphers, in particular, require readers to use a code in order to pull a hidden message out of a text. Most prolific of these involve The Whalestoe

Letters, as mentioned earlier. In the letter dated 27 Apr. 1987, Johnny's mother writes to him:

> Please pay attention: the next letter I will encode as follows: use the first letter of each word to build subsequent words and phrases: your exquisite institution will help you sort out the spaces: I have sent this via a night nurse: our secret will be safe. (619)

The following letter dated 8 May 1987, at first glance appears to be nothing but nonsense. The letter begins, "Tell hope everything you hear and value every fine outward understanding near day at windows and yore told over by cytopathic elephants announcing karmic meddling ends" (620). However, using the cypher provided from the previous letter, readers can work through and pull out the first letter of each word and find the hidden letter inside that reads: They have found a way to break me.[13] This acrostic style code can be used in multiple places throughout the novel as well to find hidden Easter eggs.[14] For example, if you take the first letters from footnotes 27-42, it spells out: Mark Z. Danielewski (22-37). While some of the noise is fun to work through and figure out, other cyphers are easier to decode yet ultimately irrelevant. Take, for instance, the backward writing on pages 120-42. These squares of text can easily be decoded by holding the book up to a mirror. However, doing so reveals nothing that the reader has not already read before, on the previous page. The blocks are just a mirror image of the words that appear on the flip side of the pages. Taking the time to hold the book up to the mirror and reveal that, however, causes a disruption in the reading and presents more noise. The only way to find this out, however, is to physically go through the action of holding the book up to a mirror or by flipping the page back and forth, comparing letter placement. Either way, the noise the author intended is achieved.

Similar to mirror image text, the scattered text creates noise by requiring the reader to move and position the book in more active ways, different from the normal holding of a book and reading pattern that goes left to right and top to bottom. Scattered text appears on several pages throughout the entirety of *House of Leaves.* Scattered text refers, literally, to text that is physically positioned on the page in a way that is not traditional. The first occurrence of scattered text appears on page 119, with a blue square holding the text of footnote 144 at the top.

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