Introduction

Beckett and nothing: trying to understand Beckett

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Best worse no farther. Nohow less. Nohow worse. Nohow naught.
Nohow on.

Said nohow on. (Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*)

In unending ending or beginning light. Bedrock underfoot. So no sign
of remains a sign that none before. No one ever before so – (Samuel
Beckett, *The Way*)¹

What not

On 21 April 1958 Samuel Beckett writes to Thomas MacGreevy about having written a short stage dialogue to accompany the London production of *Endgame*.² A fragment of a dramatic dialogue, paradoxically entitled *Last Soliloquy*, has been identified as being the play in question.³ However, John Pilling, in more recent research on the chronology, is inclined to date *Last Soliloquy* as post-*Worstward Ho* and pre-*What Is the Word*, on the basis of a letter sent by Phyllis Carey to Beckett on 3 February 1986, on the reverse of which we find jottings referring to the title *First Last Words* with material towards *Last Soliloquy*.⁴ If we accept this new dating hypothesis, the manuscripts of this text (UoR MS 2937/1–3) – placed between two late works often associated with nothing – indicate two speakers, P and A (tentatively seen by Ruby Cohn as Protagonist and Antagonist) and two ways in which they can deliver their lines, D for declaim and A (somewhat confusingly) for normal.⁵ Unlike Cohn, I read A and P as standing for ‘actor’ and ‘prompter’, thus explaining why the text is otherwise puzzlingly entitled a soliloquy and supporting her hypothesis that the lines

'Fuck the author. Fuck all authors' underline the rehearsed quality of the suicide.

There are three holographs of this incomplete text: MS 2937/1 is the longest version, consisting of four sheets of paper, with a substantial section of the third page, numbered 2 in the manuscript, crossed out; this is followed by a single sheet in which both MS 2937/3 and MS 2937/2 appear, the latter placed at the bottom of the page. MS 2937/3 contains four exchanges between P and A, while MS 2937/2 consists of five lines, no longer attributed to any of the two speakers. This dialogue laboriously stages a theatrical death by drinking poison, rehearsed by A and prompted by P (as quoted below, the initials A and P are inconsistently followed by a full stop).

In a letter of 26 April 1980, as S. E. Gontarski and Antony Uhlmann remind us,⁶ Beckett responded to Joseph Chaikin's request for permission to adapt *Stories and Texts for Nothing* by suggesting staging a single 'Text for nothing' as follows: 'Curtain up on speechless author (A) still or moving or alternately. Silence broken by recorded voice (V) speaking opening of text. A takes over. Breaks down. V again. A again. So on. Till text completed piecemeal. Then spoken through, more or less hesitantly, by A alone. Prompts not always successful, i.e., not regular alternation VAVA. Sometimes: Silence, V, silence, V again, A. Or even three prompts before A can speak.' This staging, ultimately rejected by Chaikin, was, in Beckett's words of 5 September of the same year, a method 'valid only for a single text. The idea was to caricature the labour of composition.'⁷ It is tempting to read *Last Soliloquy* as such a caricature, as if Beckett were following his own suggestions for the staging of a 'text for nothing', doomed, for reasons different from those of Chaikin, to be in turn rejected and jettisoned. P can be read as the gatekeeper of the letter of the text (he twice threatens to leave A if he does not 'stick to the book') and of the intended meaning ('A (D) All man can. Have with myself away. (Pause. N.) With myself away. / [erased words] What you suppose that means? / P. Nothing left but to away with yourself.'). Nevertheless, the letter of the text is itself far from self-evident in the words of P, missing as they do the defining verb which would equate suicide with the 'nothing left': 'Nothing left but to away with yourself' as opposed to 'Nothing left but to do away with yourself'. Later, an exasperated A wants to have done with the lines and with himself

away and adduces as his excuse to accelerating the process the fact that nobody ‘will know’; P, however, replies that the author will. At which point the ‘Fuck the author. Fuck all authors’ line is delivered (as if it were not a line), and P then leads the attention back to the text. The manuscript stages the complex relationship between text, hidden and yet all-pervasive authorial control, P and A as different kinds of interpreters, and the possibility of an audience and its reactions. The process of ‘having with oneself away’, of swooning or dropping and putting an end to this drivel about what and what not is a double staging, where the register alternates between the normal and the declamatory; both are, however – to borrow from Shane Weller’s discussion of nihilism in Beckett – *du théâtre*.⁸ The author is evoked as a menacing and potentially displeased entity by P, but is otherwise absent; the text has a letter and yet needs to be interpreted, and discussed, by two very different readers such as A and P are; and A dutifully plays the role of the actor in search of a stable interpretation for the lines he is supposed to deliver.⁹ Eager to find an explanation, or a meaning, this typology of actor has become a familiar figure in Beckett criticism, in which Beckett’s repeated refusals to provide psychological explanations for his characters’ behaviour are legendary.¹⁰

Last Soliloquy is a good example of a text belonging to the grey canon that has recently been receiving increased critical attention,¹¹ a text that was, until not long ago, nothing for most people aside from specialists. It is also a text that rehearses some of the central preoccupations with nothing that a number of scholars have identified in Beckett and that this volume wants to both analyse further and question. It does so by engaging with ‘little’ nothings, ‘what nots’, and having these partial, temporary, unsatisfactory ‘nothings’ enter into a dialogue that threatens to turn them into something else. *Last Soliloquy* is, I would argue, a text that ‘returns to the scene of its betrayals’, from its very opening lines: ‘A (D) I am done. All? I – / P Have. / A (N) What? / P Have done. I have done. / A: Better one. Stronger.’ This ‘abandoned work’ echoes incipits from *Waiting for Godot* (E: ‘nothing to be done’) to *Endgame* (C: ‘Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished’) via the desire for exhaustion of the *Texts for Nothing* and some of the *Fizzles*. However, it also, and perhaps more heavy-handedly than both *Worstward Ho* and *What Is the Word*, reads as a ‘caricature of the labour of composition’, and in this respect Cohn’s analogy

with *Catastrophe* and *Fragment du théâtre II* stands: ‘Ten words two mistakes’, P drily points out to A, forcing him to take it from the top, hindering the progress toward the drinking of the goblet of poison.¹² In line with much of the canon, the text exploits the fact that (as Denise Riley has pointed out in a book which characterises Beckett’s late monologues as ‘a stoical embodiment of sheer utterance set against pathos’) ‘there’s humour in the not quite dead. Out of a satirical weekly, Freud clipped a joke about the old adage: “Never to be born would be the best thing for mortal men.” – But, adds the philosophical comment in *Fliegende Blätter*, this happens to scarcely one person in a hundred thousand.’¹³ The echoes of previous works are generated at a dizzying speed in this text, from the ‘what not’ structure of *Watt* to the oral pleasure in the repetition of ‘swoon too soon’, paralleling Krapp’s delight in the roundness of his spools (‘Spool! [Pause] Spoooo! [Happy smile. Pause . . .]’). Almost a compendium of how Beckett’s theatre – moving towards an ever-increasing paring down – deals with nothing, this text also mounts an ‘approach to nothing that is to be produced in performance’, which, as Stephen Thomson argues in Chapter 4 below on *Footfalls*, ‘operates not by the simple removal of things but by their interaction, their “busy life”, even by their addition’.¹⁴ Rather than being merely a stripped down ‘stoical utterance’ this soliloquy is focused on the relation between the what not and the not what. The difference between ‘What not if not what’ and ‘What not if not what not’ is presented as the difference between getting the (invisible original) script right or wrong; but, unlike the actor, we do not seem to have a prompter who can guarantee – however infuriating that may also be – our interpretation of the text, and are left with that movement back and forth ‘by way of neither’ that John Pilling, Stephen Thomson, Derval Tubridy, Laura Salisbury and Peter Boxall discuss from different perspectives in the course of this volume:

- P. (prompting) Then what?
 A. Then what? What not? If not all what not? What not done? What if not all done not done? What? What not? (N.) What now?
 P. (prompting) What not if not . . .
 A. (N.) Not what?
 P. (prompting) What not.
 A. (N.) What not if not what not?
 [. . .]

What is remarkable in this manuscript is also the comic eagerness of the actor not only to have done with this 'drivel' but also to 'drop dead' by quickly (too quickly for P) quaffing the poison from his theatrical goblet. In line with the rest of the Beckett canon, however, such ending can never quite take place, and the piece ends with the actor alternating his swooning and dropping 'too soon' with the prompter's fantasy of fame and acclaim. Not unlike what happens in *What Where*, the text voiced by the speakers repeats the movement of the text itself: A questions P on the sense that 'what not if not what not' makes, and P. comically and enigmatically replies:

- P Did all sense what he didn't.
 A Couldn't.
 P. Right. What couldn't he didn't.
 A. Didn't couldn't.
 P. Right.
 (Pause)

This last soliloquy for two voices makes us unsure that we have actually heard the 'last words first' uttered: the last words of the soliloquy seem to be 'what not if not what not?', declared, as above, to be the correct version by P, who is, however, soon losing his credibility as a guide, having just assented to A's 'didn't couldn't' and thus given up on his reading of the letter of the (for us invisible) script. Furthermore, in line with the paradox of the title, the last words could be seen as being 'cue me in darling' (which is the last line in MS 2937/1), or, if we were to really 'stick to the book', the lonely letter P, hanging in mid-air after the last line. This literal reading, however, unlike what P promises to A, is no guarantee against being abandoned, no matter how faithful to the text we remain. *Last Soliloquy* attacks the vanity of actor ('fuck the author'), the fantasies of the prompter ('Ovation') and that of 'the labour of composition'. By having A asking again for the cue and leaving P dangling in mid-air, the text indicates that the labour is indeed not finished, even after the hypothesised curtain has dropped, like the actor himself. MS 2937/2 sums up the situation in four brief lines, echoing the smile (although that was 'toothless for preference') at the end of *That Time*: 'Smile first. / Smile? / (from text) Long smile. / (Smile off). Quaff. / Drop.'

Little nothings

On 26 April 2006, to mark the occasion of Beckett's centenary, *The Onion* published an article under the title 'Scholars discover 23 blank pages that may as well be lost Samuel Beckett play'. Parisian scholars – the article claimed – 'uncovered a small stack of blank paper', 'the latest example of the late Irish-born writer's genius'. A 'natural progression from his earlier works, including *Breath*, a 30-second play with no characters, and 1972's *Not I*, in which the only illuminated part of the stage is a floating mouth', these blank pages are allegedly praised by literary scholar Eric Matheson for 'the bare-bones structure and bleak repetition of what can only be described as "nothingness"'.¹⁵ The spoof article identifies and mocks what is by now often taken to be the defining, almost clichéd characteristic of Beckett's work: its engagement with 'nothing', or, as the *Onion*'s Sartrean inflection has it, Nothingness.¹⁶ Ironising on the industry spinning around this Beckettian 'very little, almost nothing', *The Onion* also attacks the way in which 'crrrrritics!' (a classic Beckettian insult in *Waiting for Godot*, matched only by 'architect' in the French version) project their fantasies of an all-controlling genius on to this nothing.

To dig up a jettisoned, unfinished, and paradoxical text such as *Last Soliloquy* may appear as dangerously encroaching on *Onion* territory; and yet I would argue that it helps us to reflect precisely on the ways in which trying to understand Beckett's engagement with nothing can cast some light on issues at the forefront of contemporary discussions of his work. Indeed, it can help us to see how *The Onion*, by qualifying nothing in Beckett as a cliché, places itself firmly on the side of common sense by claiming to be able to 'rigorously distinguish between clichéd and non-clichéd readings of an *oeuvre* [. . .] in which the nature of cliché is itself both thematized and problematized'.¹⁷

'Nothing' has been at the centre of Beckett's reception and scholarship from its inception. Beckett criticism was characterised in its early stages by a sustained attention to nothing as a philosophical concept. As Peter Boxall has pointed out, 'initial responses to Beckett's drama by critics such as Vivian Mercier and Martin Esslin and the important work by Hugh Kenner and Ruby Cohn arguably responded to Beckettian nothing rather in the manner that Georges Duthuit approaches the inexpressive "predicament" suffered by Bram van Velde'.¹⁸ Attention to nothing (perhaps more than

anywhere else in Esslin's much debated notion of the 'theatre of the absurd') has often been directed towards a basic condition of humanity, so that a 'groundlessness of being' is soon metamorphosed into 'the ground of Beckett's writing, that an uncompromising expression of the meaningless of the human condition becomes the expressive occasion of his work, and of the experience of being more generally'.¹⁹ In Alain Robbe-Grillet, for instance, being is read as having a nothing at its core, with Beckett as the playwright able to stage such nothing, to give it a material shape. The importance of this tradition cannot be underestimated, since – as Stephen Thomson points out in Chapter 4 below on the late theatre – recent theories on the increasing importance of Beckett's theatrical image over drama still address the preoccupation with nothing on stage.²⁰ To see the late theatre as pared down to almost nothing and favouring image and movement over dialogue, is to follow in the steps of a tradition that privileges 'nothing' on stage while exposing that the nothing that critics such as Martin Esslin, Vivien Mercier and Alain Robbe-Grillet had perceived in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* was far too full of somethings.

Theodor Adorno, who in his 'Trying to understand *Endgame*' (1958) argued that the nothing which characterises the Beckett stage (and page) could not be read as a content, exploded (possibly even before it had become an ingrained critical tradition) the comforting association between Beckett and existentialism which characterises, one may argue, some of the early work on Beckett, but which is still an important legacy in Beckett studies (and not always a disabling one, as anyone who teaches Beckett is quick to discover). For Adorno, 'drama cannot simply take negative meaning, or the absence of meaning, as its content without everything peculiar to it being affected to the point of turning into its opposite'.²¹ This is why for him Sartre's conventional theatre delivered nothing as a message, thus reducing theatre to 'a clattering machinery for the demonstration of worldviews';²² unlike Sartre's *pièces*, Beckett's plays resisted – through their form and structure – having their nothing transformed into something. 'We are not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?' Hamm asks Clov in *Endgame*, turning upside-down the assumption that something on stage can mean nothing, even in plays in which 'nothing happens, twice', as Vivien Mercier famously said of *Waiting for Godot*.

Nothing remains a central preoccupation in the criticism after Adorno; no critical tradition has been able to disengage from the

problem of nothing in Beckett, and for good reasons, even if sometimes, as P. J. Murphy has recently argued, this happened at the expense of being able to trace 'alternative dimensions of his work of a more affirmative nature.'²³ What happens to nothing, however, is distinctly different in those critics who, marking a break with previous humanist readings of Beckett, started looking at nothing both as a possibility and as a problem, such as Steven Connor, Leslie Hill, Thomas Trezise and Carla Locatelli.²⁴ Both texts and performance cease to be, in these critical contribution, 'a place where nothingness yields itself up to expression'²⁵ and, focusing on how the human occurs in Beckett under the sign of disavowal, see nothingness as part of a subjectivity unable to coincide with itself. With hindsight, the danger for critics working within a humanist tradition was that of turning 'the human' into an allegedly knowable and shared entity, which could flip its negativity into a positivity precisely thanks to this essential quality. Similarly, the danger of some criticism produced within a tradition interested in decentred subjectivities and negative self-reflectivity was that of hypostatizing in the past scholarship a fullness that was probably never quite as solid as one might have wished. This is, in brief, Eagleton's position with regards to the history of philosophy in the foreword to this volume; such a critique, in turn, can be suspected of caricaturing postmodernists and post-structuralists as card-carrying Derrideans more interested in the opacity of their own and other's writing than in the painstaking business of elucidation which remains an essential trait of this criticism.²⁶ Beckett's work, one can say after Connor in 1988, 'seems to undermine not only the particular claims of his individual critics, but the more general claims upon which they often rest and from which they derive their authority'.²⁷ As most of the critics mentioned here already made clear in the early 1990s, however, even this self-reflective form of resistance in Beckett's work cannot be, in turn, metamorphosed into a stable value, as interventions focused on nihilism²⁸ unsaying and 'unwording',²⁹ negative space in Beckett's theatre,³⁰ irony,³¹ Zen,³² the body³³ and authority³⁴ have demonstrated.

All done unsaid

The all-controlling eye of the invisible author, able to tell the difference between 'what not' and 'not what' in the soliloquy even if

nobody else can, is both a comic and a serious staging of one of the main paradoxes of the Beckett canon. Analysing the ways in which Dante appears in the Beckett oeuvre, I have argued that Dante is assumed as a source of literary and cultural authority while also participating in the texts' sceptical undermining of authority.³⁵ This point can be extended beyond Dante, and, as *Last Soliloquy* makes clear, applies to repetition, parody and 'caricature' of Beckett's own texts too. *Last Soliloquy* can be read both as a pared-down version of Beckett's late theatre, advertising an especially parodic take on the movement towards finishing, and as an exercise in accretion, where the textual lives of 'not', 'what not' and 'nothing' are collected, from *Murphy* to *Watt*, from *Godot* and *Endgame* to *What Is the Word*. In a much less lyrical register than either *Worstward Ho* or *What Is the Word*, *Last Soliloquy* implicates itself and the main actors of its theatre (author, prompter, actor, audience) as sources of authority which undermine authority (the 'labour of composition'). Through its back and forth movement, these jettisoned pages endorse and resist what is tempting in Beckett, that is, not only filling in the nothing, or turning it into something, but also project and apply this nothing to a figure, to the image of Beckett the author, whose giant black-and-white pictures reproduced on the banners lining central Dublin were looking down on us during the April 2006 Irish Literature Festival celebrating the centenary of his birth. The black-and-white reproductions of the rather stark and forbidding face of the author claimed to be recognising the nothing at the core of Beckett, indeed claimed to be faithful to it through their employment of a minimalist style that is however far from being 'immune from the grip of commodity aesthetics'.³⁶ By going for the 'critically minimal' as if it were a product to be possessed and marketed, rather than laboured for, the iconic presence of the author seemed to be watching us to see if we ever wanted, like A in *Last Soliloquy*, 'to swoon too soon'.

This cultural phenomenon mirrors the problems encountered even by those critics who have scrupulously avoided seeing negation, nihilism and nothing as containers to be filled with a philosophical meaning or mere disabling mechanisms that force the reader into silence. In many instances, a resistance to both these positions is accompanied however by the notion of an author too complex, too skilful, or – we could say with an adjective that has always been circulating in Beckett studies, even if often under

the sign of disavowal – too *good* to be reduced to any one system. Like most Beckett scholars, I share a hard-won appreciation of his oeuvre, of its complex mechanisms of recuperation and resistance, but I remain intrigued by how the Beckett oeuvre, through its paradoxical fidelity to nothing, produces critical approaches which aspire to putting an end to interpretation: in this instance, the issues of authority, intertextuality and context, which this volume tackles via ‘nothing’.

These are, I would argue, central problems at the forefront of Beckett studies today. By retracing the history of Beckett studies through ‘nothing’, this volume is also a way of taking stock of the present moment in Beckett studies. Criticism is to some extent linked to an economy of the new (as it was, albeit in less neo-liberal forms, even before the scholarly field took on late capitalist forms of exchange) which intrinsically clashes with a Beckettian poetics in which ‘the sun’ shines ‘having no alternative, on the nothing new’³⁷ and in which even the negation of the new has a textual history that negates its inauguratory function.³⁸ Bearing this in mind, P. J. Murphy in his *Beckett’s Dedalus: Dialogical Engagements with Joyce in Beckett’s Fiction* claims that the two most fruitful ways forward in the field have been renewed understanding of historical specific contexts and engagements with what Peter Boxall describes in this volume as ‘influences and legacies’.³⁹

The issue of nothing, because of its simultaneous protean malleability and stubborn resistance, has given rise in this volume to discussion of historically specific contexts and issues of intertextuality (both in Beckett and in artists who have turned to his work). ‘Context’ is a word seemingly impervious to any possible form of attack: how could we not welcome more specific historical research that places Beckett within the history of film, of television, of Ireland, of music, of visual art? Jonathan Bignell’s Chapter 7 in this volume looks at the material history of televisual production and places the aesthetic concerns of Beckett’s television plays within a nuanced context that takes into account the formation of ideas of television aesthetics, appropriateness and economical concerns. Matthijs Engelberts’s contribution (Chapter 9) digs up reviews and comments within cinema studies and popular film publication in order to use ‘nothing’ as a category to interrogate the fraught relation between cinema and literature in *Film*, thus providing a historical context for Bignell’s previous work on authority in *Film*.

Catherine Laws (Chapter 10) discusses the nexus between nothing and silence in order to analyse the specific relations between music, sound, and hearing from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to *Ghost Trio* and *neither*. Russell Smith (Chapter 11) goes back to biographical narratives (a former no-no of a certain critical tradition) and mobilises them in order to see how Beckett can speak to contemporary criticism aiming at recuperating affect in literature and culture. This is seen as a viable notion able to overcome some of the dead-ends of post-structuralism without forgetting how these have been fruitful forms of critique to widely held humanist assumptions. Bill Prosser (Chapter 5) looks at something that has remained a 'nothing' within the Beckett canon so far: his doodles as they appear in the *Human Wishes* manuscript. Prosser uses them to interrogate aesthetic theory and questions a reading of doodles which sees them simply as a means to guess the psychological state of the author or his hidden motivation. By devoting detailed attention to these little nothings that seem to deflect attention from themselves while being the outcome of boredom, Prosser provides us with a new context in which to rethink the role of marginality, tedium and relations between the textual and the visual in the canon. Enoch Brater (Coda), in his brief personal recollection in which the complex, funny and even melancholic sounds of nothing resonate, also provides us with a context in which a memoir becomes a history of interpretation. Terry Eagleton, in the foreword to the volume, revisits the debates around Beckett as the twentieth-century writer able to undo both the liberal-humanist subject as 'the subject of the era of production' and the 'so-called decentred subject'. Analysing Beckett's protestant and middle-class Irishness and his historical and geographical locations, the foreword polemically shows the dangers of reading Beckett as annihilating subjectivity, as turning subjectivity into nothing. Focusing on the ambivalent attitude of the Beckett oeuvre towards nothing, Eagleton maintains that there is 'no modish celebration of the fragmented subject in Beckett' and that, if Beckett 'shares with the post-structuralist a fear of determinacy', 'ambiguity is a curse as well as a blessing' in his work.⁴⁰

In this respect, these pieces contribute to a renewed interest in context in Beckett studies. But, if context seems an approach beyond reproach, it is not without pitfalls. If the importance in Beckett of the familiar, the material, the domestic, the situated

cannot be underestimated (as indeed it has been), the notion of context can nevertheless act as the promise of full meaning, of ‘restoring’ the Beckett oeuvre to its ‘heart’, to adapt *Dream*’s sarcastically sweetish expression.⁴¹ Context, in other words, can promise to finally deliver a solid materialism that the Beckett oeuvre seems instead stubbornly to both promise and rebuff. This is why the contributors to this volume treat history (the history of music, television, film, philosophy and materiality itself) as a set of complex, if not necessarily unstable, narratives. These narratives demand, just as the primary texts do, careful scrutiny and analysis in order not to be simply turned back either into supplements to texts which continue to prove too disquieting or into replacements for some form of solidity which the notion of the human has, for quite a long time, been unable to provide. To trace contexts for Beckett’s peculiarly variable nothings does not, in other words, let us off the hook: we still have to carry on that labour of interpretation that David Cunningham has persuasively argued, after Adorno, to be of central importance,⁴² and that John Pilling describes in Chapter 7 as ‘the relationship between “not”, “need”, “nothing” and . . . “going on”’. Also, to find a context, and to argue for the importance of a context in the awareness of the difficulties that any historical narratives presents us with, does not take us back to a crass form of relativism. As Laura Salisbury’s Chapter 12 demonstrates, to argue for the real is very different from stubbornly asserting that the real is there for all to see.

Context, therefore, cannot be the panacea to a Beckett criticism ‘bogged down’ both by the difficulty of being able to say something about Beckett’s nothing and by the fact that this lack of mastery easily flips over into yet another form of mastery, this time projected on to the author. This volume, through contributors such as John Pilling, Laura Salisbury, Mladen Dolar, Shane Weller, Peter Boxall, therefore focuses – through attention to variable incarnation of the nothing in Beckett – on the issue of value in Beckett. These authors look at what we could broadly define as influence in Beckett, from the role of Beckett’s fascination with neurology (Salisbury) to his engagement with philosophy (Dolar; Weller), from the role of self-repetition in the oeuvre (Pilling) to the ways in which Beckett’s nothing has been transmuted and put to use by writers such as Sebald and Coetzee (Boxall).

The relation between intertextuality and the recourse to manu-

script study is one at the core of a reconsideration of ‘nothing’. As Stephen Thomson has argued, the crucial and painstaking work of manuscript studies ‘raises some curious critical quandaries’: in the words of Dirk Van Hulle, ‘drafts open up interpretive possibilities that cannot be perceived in the final version, and yet they form an “underlying” presence. Whether or not the knowledge of these presences is necessary or even relevant to a richer understanding of the final version is perhaps not the most crucial issue.’⁴³ If the effort should not necessarily be aimed at reinstating cut material to produce an Ur-text, then it is essential to explore how the ‘very little, almost nothing’ we have in front of us – the result of a process of distillation, of cuts as opposed to accretion (as Dolar points out in his chapter) – promises to be of value.⁴⁴

By looking at intertextuality in Beckett, the volume wants to tackle this sort of critical investment; this is not to dispute – as our practice makes clear – the central role of manuscripts in the oeuvre, but to avoid using manuscripts (and context, and authority) as a way of bringing interpretation to a close. To put it slightly differently, we are at a critical point in Beckett studies in which new textual resources should not be let to ‘speak for themselves’ but should be recognised as part of that interminable process of interpretation which characterised the published canon. I have argued elsewhere in favour of a reading of manuscripts that brings to the fore issues of marginality at the centre of the Beckett canon, rather than relegating them as a marginal which can constantly be recuperated as origin.⁴⁵ Smith, Salisbury, Dolar, Boxall, Tubridy, Weller and many other contributors to this volume (among them myself in this Introduction) employ letters, manuscripts and interviews not only because these prove their points but also because they are part of a wider reconsideration of value and the limits of interpretation in the oeuvre. However, in this volume neither intertextuality (or even the more affectively invested ‘influence’) nor context are simply welcomed with the sigh of relief that seems to have characterised their recent critical reception. They do not allow us to finally stop worrying about issues that elude the aesthetics and let us go back to good, honest, uncomplicated spade work: critics as diverse as Pilling, Cohn and Connor have always known that archive work was never that. Persuasive literary criticism has always, be it labelled humanist or post-structuralist, built its argument on the close reading of texts, be they published or

in manuscript form. The archive may interestingly complicate the picture, but it does not simply bring us back to the comforting stability of authorial intentionality. When Mladen Dolar (Chapter 3) traces, through the relation between Beckett and nothing, the relation between voice and stone in Sartre and Beckett, we are reminded precisely of the importance of the history of an idea, even the ideas of context, influence, and history. When Laura Salisbury (Chapter 12) talks about the history of materiality through that of neurology and brings the two into a dialogue sustained by Beckett texts, letters and notebooks, she is arguing against the collapse of a history of materiality into a materiality of history that can simply be taken for granted. When Peter Boxall (Chapter 2) theorises a future for the study of Beckett's legacies he is, at the same time, interested in the constant problem of value in the oeuvre. A value which – because it cannot be assigned *a priori* to a certain position – derives from not knowing where you are 'with' Beckett and may even point to a reconsideration of the place of ethics in literary criticism. When John Pilling draws a history of 'not' within the Beckett oeuvre, he reads the notebooks to *Watt* as part of an interminable 'going on without in Beckett', which cannot be stopped.

The last line of the self-translation of *Je suis ce cours de sable qui glisse* reads 'My peace is there in the receding mist / when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds / and live the space of a door / that opens and shut'.⁴⁶ Perhaps the nothing peculiar to Beckett lies there: the peace is in the indefinite place of the receding mist, the wish is to cease 'trading these long shifting thresholds' and to live in a paradoxically impossible space, not immune, however, from a dialectic movement. Like in the case of the strip of light in *Footfalls*, it is important, when staging our critical theatres of the Beckett oeuvre, not to let this impossible 'space of a door / that opens and shut' grow a landing around it.⁴⁷

Notes

- 1 Samuel Beckett, *The Way*, first published as 'Crisscross to infinity' in *College Literature*, 8:3 (1981). This alternative title, Ruby Cohn points out, was 'foisted on Beckett'. Holographs and typescripts of *The Way* are held at the HRC, with photocopies at UoR. See UoR MS 3218. Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Cannon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001), p. 269.

- 2 John Pilling, *A Samuel Beckett Chronology* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 140.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 140, and Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 241. See also C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), p. 309.
- 4 I would like to thank John Pilling for generously sharing this information.
- 5 Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 241. Although 'N.' is used in the body of the text to indicate the 'normal' tone of voice, at the top right of page 1 of the manuscript we read: 'D = declaim A = Normal'.
- 6 S.E. Gontarski, 'From unabandoned works: Samuel Beckett's short prose', *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), p. xvi; Anthony Uhlmann, *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 51.
- 7 Gontarski, 'From unabandoned', p. xvi.
- 8 Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), p. 170.
- 9 There is no indication of the gender of either P and A in the manuscript, but the role of the heroic solitary actor places A quite firmly in a masculine position.
- 10 Perhaps a less well-known instance in this genealogy is Beckett's letter to Alan Schneider of 21 November 1957 regarding *Endgame*, recently discussed by Matthew Feldman. After recalling his thoughts on the pre-Socratics, Beckett interprets the Sophist paradox of the 'Heap and the Bald Head' and refers to the 'Old Greek'. Alice and Kenneth Hamilton, in *Condemned to Life: The World of Samuel Beckett* (Grand Rapids, MI: Erdman 1976), propose the identification of the 'Old Greek' with Eubulides (linked with Alexinus). Beckett could easily in his memory of Wilhelm Windelband's *A History of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan [1893] 1907) have confused Eubulides and the more often touted Zeno; see Windelband, p. 89. 'One purpose of the image throughout the play', Beckett writes, 'is to suggest the impossibility logically, i.e. eristically, of the "thing" ever coming to an end. "The end is the beginning and yet we go on." In other words the impossibility of catastrophe. Ended at its inception, and at every subsequent instant, it continues, ergo can never end. *Don't mention any of this to your actors!*' *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. Maurice Harmon (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1998), p. 23; emphasis mine. See also Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 32.

- 11 In addition to the classic work by John Pilling, C. J. Ackerley, Mary Bryden and James Knowlson, see *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Notes diverse holo* (special issue on the Trinity College Dublin manuscripts), eds Matthijs Engelberts, Everett Frost and Jane Maxwell, 16 (2006); Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005); Dirk Van Hulle (ed.), *Beckett the European* (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2005) and *Manuscript Genetics: Joyce's Know-how, Beckett's Nohow* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2008); Matthew Feldman and Mark Nixon, *Beckett's Literary Legacies* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006).
- 12 Cohn, *A Beckett Canon*, p. 241.
- 13 Denise Riley, 'But then I wouldn't be here', in *Impersonal Passion: Language as Affect* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 105–13, pp. 3 and 106. Sigmund Freud, 'Jokes and their relation to the unconscious' (1905), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 8 (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 57.
- 14 In this introduction, I am referring to portions of longer incarnations of Thomson's and Boxall's chapters.
- 15 *The Onion*, 42:17 (26 April 2006).
- 16 On how the link between Beckett and nothing, and, more specifically, between Beckett and nihilism, has been placed in the realm of 'public consciousness' as opposed to that of criticism since the time of Esslin's early writings, see Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative*, p. 6. For a popular history of nothing, see John D. Barrow, *The Book of Nothing* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000). See also Hélène Cixous's *Le Voisin de zéro: Sam Beckett* (Paris: Galilée, 2007) a book poised between the academic and the impressionistic, which produces a troubling familiarity between critic and writer, as suggested by the 'Sam' sported in the title. Forthcoming in English as *Zero's Neighbour*, trans. Laurent Milesi (Cambridge: Polity, 2009).
- 17 Weller, *A Taste for the Negative*, p. 20. Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 18 See note 13. See also Peter Boxall, *Contemporary Writers in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009) and *Samuel Beckett: Endgame and Waiting for Godot* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). I tend to see Ruby Cohn as doing something quite different from the other critics mentioned, such as John Fletcher. See for instance Beryl Fletcher, John Fletcher, Barry Smith and Walter Bechem, *A Student's Guide to the Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber & Faber, 1978); John Fletcher, 'The private pain and the whey of words: a survey of

Beckett's verse', in Martin Esslin (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1965), pp. 23–32; and Ruby Cohn, 'Philosophical fragments in the Works of Samuel Beckett', in Martin Esslin (ed.), *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, pp. 169–77.

- 19 I am quoting from a longer version of Boxall's chapter.
- 20 S. E. Gontarski, 'Staging himself, or Beckett's late style in the theatre', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Crossroads and Borderlines / L'œuvre Carrefour / L'œuvre limite*, eds Marius Buning, Matthijs Engelberts, and Sief Houpperman, guest editor Emmanuel Jacquart, 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1997), 87–97. Emphasis added.
- 21 Theodor Adorno, 'Trying to understand *Endgame*', in Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 2 vols, vol. 1, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholzen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 242.
- 22 Adorno, 'Trying to understand *Endgame*', p. 242.
- 23 P. J. Murphy, *Beckett's Dedalus: Dialogical Engagements with Joyce in Beckett's Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 4.
- 24 This has been followed, more recently, by the work of Daniel Katz, *Saying I No More: Subjectivity and Consciousness in the Prose of Samuel Beckett* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999); Anthony Uhlmann, *Beckett and Poststructuralism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999) and *Samuel Beckett and the Philosophical Image* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006) and Garin Dowd, *Abstract Machines: Beckett and Philosophy after Deleuze and Guattari* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007).
- 25 I am quoting from a larger version of Boxall's chapter.
- 26 Shane Weller discussed both these theoretical positions, using examples from Lukács to Žižek and from Adorno to Badiou. Weller, *A Taste for the Negative*, pp. 6–23.
- 27 Steven Connor, 'The doubling of presence in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*', in Steven Connor, ed., *New Casebooks: Endgame and Waiting for Godot* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1992), p. 131. This point has also been taken up by Simon Critchley in *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death Philosophy Literature* (London: Routledge, [1997] 2004). For an in-depth discussion of Critchley's position and its critique, see Peter Boxall Chapter 2 below.
- 28 Weller, *A Taste for the Negative*; Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006).
- 29 Locatelli, *Unwording the Word: Samuel Beckett Prose Works after the Nobel Prize* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990); Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988).

- 30 Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theatre* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Shimon Levy, *Samuel Beckett's Self-Referential Drama: The Sensitive Chaos* (Eastbourne: Sussex Academic Press, 2002).
- 31 Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1962); Simon Critchley, *Very Little*; Laura Salisbury, forthcoming.
- 32 Paul Foster, *Beckett and Zen* (London: Wisdom, 1989).
- 33 Anna McMullan, *Theatre on Trial: Samuel Beckett's Later Drama* (London: Routledge, 2003); Yoshiki Tahiri, *Samuel Beckett and the Prosthetic Body: The Organs and Senses in Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Ulrika Maude, *Beckett, Technology and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).
- 34 Daniela Caselli, Steven Connor and Laura Salisbury (eds), *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 10:1 and 2 (Fall 2000 / Spring 2001). Reprinted as *Other Becketts* (Tallahassee FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2002); Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes*; Elizabeth Barry, *Beckett and Authority*.
- 35 Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes*.
- 36 David Cunningham, 'Ascetism against colour, or modernism, abstraction and the lateness of Beckett', *New Formations*, 55 (Spring 2005) 104–19, p. 116. See also Caselli, Connor and Salisbury's 'Introduction' to *Other Becketts*.
- 37 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Picador, 1973), p. 5.
- 38 See John Pilling, Chapter 1 below.
- 39 Murphy, *Beckett's Dedalus*, p. 19.
- 40 For a radically different notion of the postmodern from that put forward by Eagleton see Slavoj Žižek. See also Shane Weller's detailed discussion of these two approaches in *A Taste for the Negative*. For a specific history of Irish philosophical thought in Beckett, see also Eagleton, 'Beckett and Nothing', in Anna McMullan and S. E. Wilmer (eds), *Reflections on Beckett: A Centenary Celebration* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009).
- 41 See David Addyman, 'Samuel Beckett and the treatment of place' (Ph.D. thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, 2008); Peter Boxall, 'Beckett's negative geography: fictional space in Beckett's prose' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Sussex, 1996).
- 42 David Cunningham, 'Trying (not) to understand: Adorno and the work of Beckett', in Richard Lane (ed.), *Beckett and Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 125–39, p. 138.
- 43 Dirk Van Hulle, 'Genetic Beckett studies', Introduction to *Beckett the European* (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2005), pp. 1–9, p. 3.
- 44 For a wider debate, see Lois More Overbeck and Martha Fehsenfeld,

'In defense of the integral text' and Matthew Feldman, 'Beckett and Popper, or "what stink of artifice": some notes on methodology, falsifiability, and criticism in Beckett studies', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Notes diverse holo*, eds Matthijs Engelberts, Everett Frost and Jane Maxwell, 16 (2006), 347–71 and 372–91, respectively. Feldman partially revises his position in 'After "The End" of Samuel Beckett: influences, legacies, and "legacees"', Introduction to Matthew Feldman and Mark Nixon, *Beckett's Literary Legacies* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2006); for a critique of this notion of falsifiability, see Van Hulle, 'Genetic Beckett studies'.

- 45 Daniela Caselli, 'The promise of Dante in Beckett's manuscripts', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Notes diverse holo*, eds Matthijs Engelberts, Everett Frost and Jane Maxwell, 16 (2006), 237–57.
- 46 Carla Locatelli has recently presented an innovative and persuasive reading of this poem at the 'Beckett in Rome' 2008 international conference, forthcoming in print.
- 47 See Thomson, Chapter 4 below.