On not being there: going on without in Beckett

John Pilling

'The essential is never to arrive anywhere, never to be anywhere . . .'
(Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*)¹

Not much in Beckett is left wholly unaffected by the notion of 'not being there', even though he remains haunted by the self-imposed imperatives of 'going on'. Not being there is only one of 'the problems that beset continuance' of which Beckett spoke in connection with the art and craft of his Israeli friend Avigdor Arikha, to which there can only ever be temporary solutions. The problems derive in large part from what another *hommage* to Arikha embodies as 'Eye and hand fevering after the unself',² a text which envisages the '[t]ruce for a space' in which some kind of relief attends a creative act that provides its own aspirin. I take the phrase 'not being there' from the coda (or 'codetta')³ of the tenth of the *Texts for Nothing*, finished in Paris in August 1951, the 'voice' of which has just decided that in its objective case of 'he', 'he'll have done nothing, nothing but go on'.⁴ The 'he' in question, very much in question as it happens (and perhaps precisely because it happens) is one of the 'pale imitations' of me and mine ('the one person') of which the text has earlier spoken,⁵ or attempted to speak, with Beckett mindful from the outset – *The Unnamable* having come to a grinding halt more than a year earlier (in January 1950) – that there is 'nothing new' here.⁶

Where, we might ask ourselves, have we heard this 'not' before, given the prevalence of the 'nothing new' (a phrase itself by no means new, since it is being reprised from the opening sentence of *Murphy*, written in late 1935)? Well, there is of course one very striking example at the end of the short story 'Dante and

the lobster', first published in the last issue of the Parisian émigré magazine *This Quarter* in December 1932, and subsequently in revised form in the collection *More Pricks Than Kicks* in May 1934. Belacqua is watching his aunt lift the lobster above the pot of boiling water which will kill it. 'Well', thinks Belacqua, 'Well, it's a quick death, God help us all', only for a voice to cut short the ironies and paradoxes of a quick death for all with the stern riposte, from no known source: 'It is not.' This is perhaps the most famous 'not' in the whole of Beckett, with the very position of the riposte, and its violent rejection of a more benign outcome, guaranteeing it maximum attention even in the absence of any designated authority to whom the substantive (or otherwise) declarative claims of 'It is' might be referred.

'Not' is of course not much of a word on which to construct an argument, even when a popular science author, John D. Barrow, can write 380 pages under the title *The Book of Nothing*.⁷ 'Not' is, we might go on to say, not much of a word at all, since it only really exists, or becomes active, in combinations like 'is not', 'has not', 'was not', 'did not' and such like, or in the less formal, the contracted forms that we find more convenient, 'isn't' and so on, which almost seem to preserve by ellipsis the absence they cannot quite contain. But to say 'becomes active' is perhaps misleading, since 'not' is surely better described as *reactive*, a qualifier, which cannot act as a qualifier unless and until there is something to qualify, something to react against. As *not* something, it gravitates in the opposite direction to something, *towards* nothing. As such, it is more a gesture than a word, yet it is nonetheless felt to be a fact, and quite as much of a fact as what it qualifies, much like 'nothing' in number theory and practice. Beckett's *Watt* tells us: 'the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as if it were something'.⁸ 'Not', then, *is* something, even as it gestures towards nothing. It may or may not be trumpeted as '*that something itself*' in the overheated manner of the Joyce essay of 1929,⁹ but it is the something that we use, in English, to designate nothing; and of course all languages (even though they use different words) do much the same thing. 'Not', a naturally re-active word, is a word full of potential, playing an active role in an 'art of negation'. It is, of course, only one weapon among many, but it is obviously one of the most effective weapons we have to subvert what has already been written, rendering it either less said, unsaid, or, in

Beckett's own late coinage, 'missaid' ('Say for be missaid', we read in *Worstward Ho*). And, though 'not' is undoubtedly extremely effective in an immediate and local context, there is of course no limit to its effects in the longer run. 'Not' occurs dozens and dozens of times in Beckett's first sustained prose fiction *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, and even seems to possess a kind of generative power when, as often, a cluster of 'not's lurks, as it were, in the margins of a text unusually preoccupied with 'the problems that beset continuance' (there are three in close proximity on 89, five, surrounded by other negative indicators, on 92–3). But the extreme case I have in mind is *Watt* (1941–45), which uses the formula 'Not that . . . for he [or, more often, 'it'] was not' hundreds and hundreds of times, the formula thereby becoming one of (and perhaps the major) contributor to the book's curious and distinctive elusiveness, which many readers find tiresome and/or alienating.¹⁰ 'Not' is even to be found in *Watt's* 'Addenda', in the poem, or piece of doggerel, beginning 'Watt will not / Abate one jot',¹¹ a relic surviving from one of the six notebooks in which *Watt*, before it became *Watt*, was written.

There are differences, and a gap of at least ten years, between the 'not' of 'Dante and the lobster' and the 'not's of *Watt*. The former is notable principally for its dramatic force, its immediate impact; the latter instances render a materially physical text meta-physically immaterial. In 'Dante and the lobster' the effect is one of surprise. But surprise is the least durable aesthetic phenomenon, and can only really occur once if the short story writer wants to keep his distance from O. Henry. In *Watt* the formula acts as an enabling element. Rather than terminating the business of writing, it furthers it, requiring the writer to 'go on' by producing more. Yet the very circularity of the construction, with a 'not' at either end frustrating negotiations, is also a kind of 'not' in itself, a *disabling* element. Precisely because of the circularity we find it peculiarly difficult to get beyond the surface of the statement and access the 'true' substance towards which it appears to gesture. In short, 'not' (like Knott) is one of the somethings which enable *Watt* to get going, and to keep going, even as it disables the reader's 'natural' desire to get a grip on what is happening, thereby rendering that very desire of questionable status.

Beckett was no theorist. But when, in the summer of 1938, he jotted down some abstract thoughts on how art is produced, or

produces itself, he spoke of a 'creative autology' (*autologie créatrice*) and envisaged two needs ('Les deux besoins').¹² What are these two needs? First, the 'besoin d'avoir besoin', the need to have a need, or the need to have need, let's call it, *the need to need*. Secondly, the 'besoin dont on a besoin', the need of which one has need, the need one wants, the need experienced as an appetite in a context of lack or want, let's call it *the need one needs*. (In German, as Beckett well knew, the word 'Not' designates a need, the need, need pure and simple; and the six months in Germany had left Beckett hyper-aware of need and want.) But only when he came to *Watt* could he explore the ambiguities of the two needs. Late in part three of *Watt*, on the point of leaving Mr Knott's house, Watt reviews what he knows of 'the nature of Mr Knott himself': 'For except, one, not to need, and, two, a witness to his not needing, Knott needed nothing, as far as Watt could see. [. . .] And Mr Knott, needing nothing if not, one, not to need, and, two, a witness to his not needing, of himself knew nothing. And so he needed to be witnessed. Not that he might know, no, but that he might not cease.'¹³ This is perhaps the *locus classicus* in Beckett for the relationship between 'not', 'need', 'nothing' and . . . 'going on'.

With Beckett not given to 'new ground', however, there are other ways in which similar elements recompose themselves. 'The forms', Malone tells us, 'are many in which the unchanging seeks relief from its formlessness'.¹⁴ One such form is the September 1976 text *neither*, sometimes thought of (though Beckett did not think of it) as a poem. The title tacitly answers to two needs, being either *nither* or *neether* according to taste, and the text opens up with a movement 'to and fro' as if it might just as well have been called 'Between'. The movement envisaged is 'from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself / by way of neither', and as such invites comparison with the *hommage* for Arikha. In *neither* there is no talk of nots or needs or nothings in what reads like a version, or perversion, of the philosophical 'law' of the excluded middle. The two opposed terms ('self' and 'unself') are both said to be 'in shadow', although the shadows permit the identification of 'the one gleam or the other'. As *either* shadows or gleams the two opposed terms are also 'refuges', as Mr Knott's house was, for Watt, in a way. But once the 'to and fro' movement is stilled, they diminish and disappear, in a kind of verbal equivalent of the *diminuendo al niente* in music. In their absence the 'way of neither' occupies the space: 'absent for

good / from self and other / [. . .] then gently light unfading on that unheeded / neither'. Whatever 'neither' may be, it is conceived of as a variant on the 'refuges', but (unlike them) an 'unspeakable home'. This 'home' is 'unspeakable' because it is neither one thing nor another, but somewhere between them. Not so much, then, an 'excluded' middle as an 'included' one, included but unspeakable.

Beckett had dealt with something similar to this some fifty years before, at the very beginning of his writing career, in a more declarative manner. Always 'on [his] way', he was 'never much of a one for new ground' (in *From an Abandoned Work*, a text ending 'my body doing its best *without* me').¹⁵ In the programmatic third section of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* ('UND', an appendix masquerading as the pivot of the whole) Beckett half-heartedly attempts to sum up the essence of his *alter ego* Belacqua, what (to adapt *Watt*) we might wish to call 'the nature of [Belacqua] in himself': 'At his simplest he was trine [a kind of three-in-one]. [. . .] Centripetal, centrifugal and . . . not. Phoebus chasing Daphne, Narcissus flying from Echo and . . . neither.'¹⁶ Neat or not neat, there it is, or is not. Hence Beckett's next 'move': 'The dots are nice don't you think?' The dots are *not* 'nice' in the sense we intend when we ask of someone 'did you have a nice time?', but rather in the sense found in the phrase 'a nice distinction', a fine line separating things which are almost the same, but not the same. The distinction being drawn is between categories which can be stated, contrasted, in every sense of the word staged (like 'impenetrable self' and 'impenetrable unself'), and a third category, which is really a *non-category* rendering all categorisation whatsoever suspect. Beckett knows full well that the dots are not 'nice' (in the 'agreeable' sense of the word), but a kind of obstruction, or (as in the postwar art criticism on Geer and Bram van Velde) an *empêchement*.¹⁷ Any attempt to transform a looming and shapeless absence into a cut-and-dried presence, a nothing into a something, is foreclosed.

In the non-category 'neither' one is 'without' (in a state of need, or outside any category), but without what? Perhaps the 1969 text we know in English as *Lessness* supplies an answer. This was originally written in French as *Sans*. 'What', we may ask ourselves, 'is *Sans* without?' Beyond what is obvious – there is, for example no 'plot' in the accepted sense – this study in 'disorder' pits a rudimentary 'little body' against a *mise en scène* ultimately seen as a 'figment' of the imagination. The text circles in upon itself via

repeated motifs randomly generated and distributed, as if words had a life of their own. This is a way of 'going on' whilst 'not being there', but a more abstract example than, say, that supplied in the 1975 play *Footfalls* by the voice of Mrs Winter, asking 'What can you possibly mean, Amy, to put it mildly? Amy: I mean, Mother, that to say I observed nothing . . . strange is indeed to put it mildly. For I observed nothing of any kind, strange or otherwise. I saw nothing, heard nothing, of any kind. I was not there. Mrs W: Not there? Amy: Not there.'¹⁸ Like the woman in *Rockaby* and the grey-heads of *Ohio Impromptu*, these are not so much figures as (to adapt *Lessness*) 'figments'.

It is no accident that Beckett should have gravitated near the end of his writing life towards the virtual worlds of celluloid and television, media particularly adapted to the conjuring up of images and to vanishing them away. But Beckett's fascination with 'figments' can be traced also by way of a 1974 poem in French beginning 'hors crâne . . .' ('something there' in its more expansive English version).¹⁹ In the French poem the 'crâne' or skull is described (compare both *Lessness* and *neither*) as the 'abri dernier', the last refuge. This skull occupies a kind of median position (a 'tympanum' the Unnamable would say: 'on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either')²⁰ between the 'dedans' and the 'dehors', the inner and the outer, the 'two needs' perhaps, which we might re-inscribe as the 'without' and the 'without which nothing'. The poem floats the idea of 'something there': 'quelque part quelquefois / comme quelque chose'. The English version, by contrast, seems to point in the opposite direction. After a 'sound so brief / it is gone and the whole globe', there is 'in the end' (or in the end there will be) 'nothing there'. This brief sound is the aural equivalent of what will in a still later (1986) poem be a 'Brief gleam'. But both are what Arsene, in his 'short statement' in *Watt*, would call 'sites of a stirring beyond coming and going, of a being so light and free that it is as the being of nothing'.

For a final illustration, or a final sounding, I turn to an example of 'going on' from a text that, for most readers, is 'not there' in the special sense that it has never been published, having been jettisoned in the 'tidying up' that permitted *Watt* to emerge and to, in some sense, be. At the start of the third of the notebooks towards *Watt*, under the date of 5 May 1942, Beckett engaged in the kind of *reculer pour mieux sauter* strategy which he had already decided, in

Dream, could only ever be *reculer pour mieux enculer*.²¹ This is how to bugger yourself, or, how to bugger yourself up:

The creative consciousness is double and obscure. Double and obscure when it acts, double and obscure when it receives.

Its acting is a receiving, its receiving an acting.

When it acts it receives its own act, when it receives it acts on the act of another.

At this point Beckett steps back, as it were, to admire his own handiwork, and wryly adds: 'God saw that it was good. Paul de Kock [popular late nineteenth-century French novelist, beloved of Molly Bloom] also.' God's single, once-and-for-all act of creation ('Let there be light! And there was light') has here become 'double and obscure' in a to-and-fro between re-creation and de-creation.

A few lines below this Beckett tries to 'fail better' (as he was later to put it in *Worstward Ho*) by shedding a little more light on what has thus far been 'obscure' or merely obscured:

When it acts it receives its own act.

It accepts & suffers it.

It accepts & suffers itself.

It is its own accepting & its own suffering. In the act is the accepting and its continuance the suffering.

Of the many double aspects here I would want to stress the one which is contained in the last of these oddly declarative propositions, where there is, on the one hand, 'the act', and, on the other, 'its continuance'. This is not creation *ex nihilo*, but (as the next entry indicates) a response to 'something there':

In the Creation is the ?

Perhaps at this point Beckett was reminded of his own 'definition' of art in his review of *Intercessions* by Denis Devlin in the last pre war issue of *transition*, almost exactly four years earlier: 'pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric'.²² For here the 'something there' is nothing more than a question mark, the mark of 'not being there'; and even without an answer there is no alternative to 'going on', irrespective of the conditions and constraints that threaten the continuance of the enterprise.

Notes

- 1 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1959), p. 341.
- 2 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 152.
- 3 Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1992), p. 113.
- 4 Samuel Beckett, *No's Knife* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967), p. 121.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 120.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 119.
- 7 John D. Barrow, *The Book of Nothing* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2000).
- 8 Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1963), p. 74.
- 9 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 27.
- 10 Beckett, *Watt*, p. 64ff.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 250.
- 12 Beckett, 'Les deux besoins', in *Disjecta*, pp. 55–7.
- 13 Beckett, *Watt*, p. 202.
- 14 Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *Trilogy*, p. 198.
- 15 Samuel Beckett, *From an Abandoned Work*, in *No's Knife*, p. 139, p. 142 and 149; my emphasis.
- 16 Beckett, *Dream*, p. 120.
- 17 Beckett, 'Peintres de l'empêchement', in *Disjecta*, pp. 133–7.
- 18 Samuel Beckett, *Footfalls*, in *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1984), pp. 237–43, p. 243.
- 19 Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems in English and French* (London: John Calder, 1977), pp. 62–3.
- 20 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Trilogy*, p. 386.
- 21 Beckett, *Dream*, p. 120.
- 22 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 91.