2

Nothing of value: reading Beckett's negativity

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The first section of Samuel Beckett's novel *Watt* depicts Watt's journey to and arrival at Mr Knott's house, an establishment in which Watt is to feel for the first time in his life at rest. When Watt arrives at his destination and settles himself, like Beauty's father enjoying the hospitality of the Beast, at Mr Knott's kitchen table, he meets Knott's manservant Arsene, whom he is to succeed in Mr Knott's employment. As Arsene prepares to leave in order to make way for Watt, he delivers a long speech in which he describes to Watt the peculiar homecoming that is in store for him. 'How it all comes back to me', Arsene remarks, comparing Watt's prospective period at Mr Knott's with his own just drawing to a close. The 'dark ways', he says, are now 'all behind' him, and he has before him 'rest in the quiet house'. For him now, he goes on,

there are no roads, no streets any more, you lie down by a window opening on refuge, the little sounds come that demand nothing, ordain nothing, explain nothing, propound nothing, and the short necessary night is soon ended, and the sky blue again over all the secret places where nobody ever comes, the secret places never the same, but always simple and indifferent, always mere places, sites of a stirring beyond coming and going, of a being so light and free that it is as the being of nothing.¹

To have arrived in such stillness, to have been delivered to the midst of such rest, Arsene enthuses, is to have been 'proffered all pure and open to the long joys of being himself, like a basin to a vomit'. 'Having oscillated all his life between the torments of a superficial loitering and the horrors of disinterested endeavour', Arsene reflects, 'he finds himself at last in a situation where to

do nothing exclusively would be an act of the highest value and significance'.²

This moment in Beckett's writing, at which the prospect of doing nothing is accorded both value and significance, might be thought of as a turning point. Beckett's earlier protagonists Belacqua and Murphy were fond of indolence, and enjoyed after their own fashion the delights of inactivity, but this moment in *Watt* is arguably one in which Beckett's work for the first time seeks to orient itself to nothinghood as a generative principle, and to develop a form that not only accommodates itself to this 'being of nothing' but is in some way derived from it, drawing its value and significance directly from an encounter with the 'nothing' that both Arsene and Watt find they are contracted, under Mr Knott's employment, to 'do'. At this moment not only can one glimpse the birth of the 'nothing to be done' that opens *Waiting for Godot*, and in a sense inaugurates Beckett's career as a dramatist, but one can hear here the first stirring of works that would not arrive at their own stilled thresholds for decades to come – works such as *Come and Go*, and *Stirrings Still*.³ It is as if here, as Watt settles himself at Mr Knott's kitchen table, jostling against the shades both of Grimm's fairy tales and of the fictions of the Big House, he is initiated by Arsene into a doctrine of nothinghood that is also Beckett's initiation into the negative writing practice, the literature of the unword, that becomes his signature, and that marks his departure from the Joycean fictions that had characterised his early period.⁴

Such an encounter with a nothingness which has significance and value, however, both stages a certain Beckettian becoming – as if here in contemplation of the 'being of nothing' both Beckett and Watt find themselves in their 'midst at last, after so many tedious years spent clinging to the perimeter'⁵ – and poses a difficulty that Beckett's writing in a sense never overcomes. For if the relentless effort to give expression to nothingness and meaninglessness might be thought of as the central task of Beckett's writing, it is also the case that this is a task in which Beckett is doomed endlessly to fail. As the double genitive in my title suggests, to propose a 'nothing of value' is at once to ascribe value to nothingness, and to declare an absence of value, and this paradoxical contradiction between the simultaneous assertion and negation of value accompanies any attempt to make nothingness significant, to ascribe to it qualities or quantity, to 'weigh absence in a scale', or to 'mete want with

a span'.⁶ This is of course a conundrum with which Watt himself has much fun, and which diverts him for a considerable amount of the time he spends in Mr Knott's establishment. The 'incident', for example, of the Galls father and son, in which the said Galls come to Mr Knott's house in order to tune the piano, is comically tormenting for Watt because it requires him to confront, and to try to articulate, his sense that the 'incident' was in some sense unconsummated, that, happening, it nevertheless failed to happen, taking place as it does in the empty midst of Mr Knott's nonbeing. 'What distressed Watt' the narrator explains,

in this incident of the Galls father and son, and in subsequent similar incidents, was not so much that he did not know what had happened, for he did not care what had happened, as that nothing had happened, that a thing that was nothing had happened, with the utmost formal distinctness.⁷

Watt 'could not accept', we are told, that 'nothing had happened, with all the clarity and solidity of something'.⁸ The incident itself – 'a piano tuned, an obscure family and professional relation, an exchange of judgements more or less intelligible'⁹ – becomes a 'purely plastic' manifestation of a central unhappening, a kind of unnameable occurrence at the heart of things that is somehow formally represented by the arrival of the Galls father and son. The skill that Watt tries to learn at Mr Knott's is one which will allow him to negotiate the relation between the nothingness that resides at the heart of Mr Knott's establishment and those 'outer meanings'¹⁰ in which such nothingness finds itself expressed, without either corrupting Mr Knott's nothingness by contact with the forms that give it expression, or allowing himself and his surroundings – including the Galls father and son – to fall into that unnameable vacuum which it is the job of Watt and of the narrator Sam to relate, to commit to words and forms. But this skill proves elusive to Watt; 'to elicit something from nothing', the narrator reflects, 'requires a certain skill, and Watt was not always successful, in his efforts to do so'.¹¹ Watt learns eventually 'to accept that nothing had happened, that a nothing had happened, learned to bear it and even, in a shy way, to like it',¹² but the suggestion is that this learning, this bearing, this shy liking, does not constitute a resolution of the contradiction between something and nothing – or the development of a capacity successfully to 'elicit something from

nothing' – but rather demonstrates the birth of a certain willingness to live in the midst of its impossible demands. In the dramatic dialogues between Beckett and George Duthuit, Beckett suggests that the painter Bram Van Velde is faced with the kind of dilemma that so exercises Watt – that he is confronted with the demand that whilst there is 'nothing to express', he is nevertheless obliged to express, and so, as a consequence, the content of his painting must in some sense be a nothingness made something, an expression of the impossibility of expression. Duthuit, in responding to what he calls Beckett's 'fantastic theory' of inexpressive art, suggests that the means of resolving this difficulty is simply to suggest that the 'occasion of his painting is his predicament', and that an art which is 'skewed on the ferocious dilemma of expression',¹³ is one that becomes 'expressive of the impossibility to express'.¹⁴ Beckett responds that 'No more ingenious method could be devised for restoring [the artist] safe and sound to the bosom of saint Luke',¹⁵ but the burden of his unserious argument in the dialogues is that this kind of critical reconciliation between expression and inexpression, between something and nothing, is a premature reconciliation that shields us from the ferociously unthinkable relation between the nameable and the unnameable in which it is Watt's perhaps dubious privilege to dwell during his stay with Mr. Knott. Beckett's writing does not incubate that skill that Watt sets out to learn, does not constitute a nothingness made palpable, but rather performs an endlessly failed reaching for a nothingness which gives rise to the work, which the work seeks endless to name, but which remains also forever beyond the grasp of those forms which are its only manifestation. When Malone declares epigrammatically that 'the forms are many in which the unchanging seeks relief from its formlessness',¹⁶ he suggests just this kind of unending back to front striving, in which an unchanging formlessness comes to birth in a series of Beckettian forms which can only embody such formlessness by disavowing it, by denying its only defining characteristic. Beckett's formlessness, like that of *The Unnamable's* uncharacter Worm, dies at the moment of its birth into form; delivering it kills it, bringing it into being condemns it to death.

None of this, of course, is news. On the contrary, it might be argued that the question of the relation between form and formlessness, between something and nothing, is that which has determined the passage of Beckett's reception from the 1950s to the

present day. The problem that Beckett has addressed in his writing, and that Beckett studies has addressed in seeking to develop a critical discourse that is adequate to the philosophical and hermeneutic challenge represented by his work, is how to calculate the value of the nothingness that Watt discovers with Mr. Knott, without either doing violence to such nothingness by translating it into somethingness, or falling into the silence and inarticulacy that is the only faithful response to the apprehension of 'the being of nothing'. Each of the various phases of Beckett criticism, I would suggest, can be characterised in terms of how they respond to this central problem, the problem that Simon Critchley describes in much broader philosophical terms as the 'problem of nihilism'.¹⁷ The way in which Beckett's nothingness is accorded value can be seen as an index to the critical mode in which he is approached. The shift from the humanist urge to recuperate Beckett's negativity under the figure of a *condition humaine*, to the deconstructive tendency to see Beckett's undoing as symptomatic of a more general failure of language to adequately represent the human, might be the most legible shift in the critical approach to Beckett's negativity. But there are several other critical approaches that have evolved through this history, and in each case one might argue that the value of Beckett's negativity is a key to the way in which he is read. Theodor Adorno, for example, has famously argued that Beckett's nothing represents is the unnameable remains of a critical art, the last remaining expression of negative autonomy in the midst of what Adorno calls the 'total society'. Similarly, to characterise an Iserian understanding of Beckett's writing in relation to reader response theory would require us to calculate the value that Iser gives to Beckett's negativity; to catch the precisely Blanchottian cast of Blanchot's reading of Beckett requires an attentiveness to Blanchot's address to Beckett's unnameability; to approach Deleuze's articulation of Beckettian exhaustion in his signal essay 'The exhausted' is to hear the ways in which 'Language III' gives expression to silence; to understand Cavell's reading of Beckett's *Endgame* requires an approach to a Beckettian version of Wittgensteinian silence; and so on.¹⁸

So, it is possible to read Beckett's readers in terms of their understanding of negative value. But if Beckettian nothingness might give rise to the critical traditions that grow up around his work, nourishing them like good soil, it is also the case that such

negativity constantly challenges the critical discourses it provokes, undermining their claims to authority, emptying them of explanatory power at the moment that it endows them with it. This is what lies behind Simon Critchley's analysis of Beckett's 'resistance to interpretation', a resistance that Critchley discovers in his own reading of Beckett's relation to nihilism. 'The Writings of Samuel Beckett', Critchley writes,

seem to be particularly, perhaps uniquely, resistant to interpretation. To speak from the vantage point of a conceptual framework, an interpretive method or any form of metalanguage, is, at the best of times, a hazardous exercise with regard to those texts regarded as 'literary' [. . .]. However, the peculiar resistance of Beckett's work to philosophical interpretation lies, I think, in the fact that his texts continually seem to pull the rug from under the feet of the philosopher by showing themselves to be conscious of the possibility of such interpretations; or better, such interpretations seem to lag behind the text which they are trying to interpret; or, better still, such interpretations seem to lag behind their object by saying too much: something essential to Beckett's language is lost by overshooting the text and ascending into the stratosphere of language.¹⁹

There is something about Beckett's singular attitude to nothingness, something about the way that nothingness resides at the heart of his work, as it lies at the heart of Mr Knott's establishment in *Watt*, that renders interpretation peculiarly empty, that dismantles the critical apparatuses that one brings to it, that turns the assumptions that one makes about the value of reading inside out. Indeed, Critchley's own response to the challenge of Beckett's 'meaninglessness' suffers just this paradoxically surplus lag, this tendency to say at once too much, and not enough – almost nothing. When he claims that 'the task, the labour of interpretation – of interpretation respecting the determinate negation of meaning enacted by Beckett's work – is *the concrete resurrection of the meaning of meaninglessness*',²⁰ one experiences the same peculiar emptying of a claim that occurs whenever Beckettian nothingness is put to critical work. To valorise Beckett's meaningless as an 'achievement', the 'achievement of the ordinary',²¹ is to have one's own system of value exposed to the peculiar undoing effect of Beckett's logic, as Critchley knows. Rather than using such a system or 'metalanguage' to develop a reading of Beckett – to assess its value, to concretely recreate his meaninglessness – it is as if Beckett's writing

reads one back, demonstrating the vanishing point of one's own reading practices whilst refusing to yield itself to interpretation. It is perhaps this quality, this kind of reverse interpretation, that leads to Derrida's famous reluctance to read Beckett, to expose deconstruction to Beckett's deconstructive gaze. Beckett is an author, Derrida says in an interview with Derek Attridge, 'to whom I feel very close, or to whom I would like to feel myself very close; but also too close',²² and it is precisely this proximity, this sense that Beckett's writing takes on the qualities of s/he who reads him, that causes one to brush up against a kind of inclusive limit to reading, a limit to interpretation, for Derrida a limit to deconstruction. He has been able, Derrida says, to respond in some fashion to a number of other writers, to Kafka, Joyce, Celan, Artaud – he has been able, with these writers, 'to risk linguistic compromises'.²³ As he puts it, 'I have given myself up to them'.²⁴ But this giving up is not possible in relation to Beckett, because it would threaten a kind of annihilation, a disintegration of a reading practice which comes unspeakably home to itself in the text that it reads. 'This wasn't possible for me with Beckett', Derrida says, 'whom I will thus have "avoided" as though I had always already read him and understood him too well'.²⁵

The approach to Beckett's negativity, then, has defined a number of the critical discourses that have sought to account for his work, whilst also producing the dismantling of such discursive structures, as Watt finds that his language is dismantled as he comes nearer to the emptiness marked by Mr Knott. This double effect does not in any sense render the history of reading or nonreading of Beckett's work valueless. On the contrary, the peculiar aporetic effects that occur at the threshold between Beckett and his readers stage a certain stalled becoming of Beckett's writing, whilst also allowing for a reflection on the limits of critical reading. But it does mean that the question of value in Beckett has proved difficult to measure or to quantify, or to articulate critically. It is this difficulty that has contributed to the perception that Beckett's writing is somehow uniquely resistant to criticism and to thought – a perception that is perhaps the dominant feature of his reception. It has been clear to many, for example, that his writings have a political and ethical valence – a simple glance at the contexts which Beckett's work have addressed testify to this – but it has seemed a constituent part of Beckett's politics and of his ethics that they

resist or evade expression, both in the writing itself and in the critical languages that account for it. Derrida remarks in his interview with Attridge that a 'certain nihilism is interior to metaphysics (the final fulfilment of metaphysics, Heidegger would say) and then, already, beyond'.²⁶ In Beckett, nihilism is brought to the point of an expression which reveals this interiority, but only by putting it under a certain erasure, stating the productive value of nothing whilst finding its own expressive power negated in the process ('All I say cancels out', the narrator of *The Calmative* declares, 'I'll have said nothing').²⁷ 'With Beckett in particular', Derrida says, the 'two possibilities' – the interiority of nihilism and its location in or deferral to the beyond – 'are in the greatest possible proximity and competition. He is a nihilist and he is not a nihilist'.²⁸ The history of Beckett criticism has been, to a degree, an attempt to live up to these two proximate and competing possibilities, and in seeking to do so the criticism has traced the limits of critical thinking, often by failing to think what the texts seem to enable us or provoke us or require us to think. But what I want to argue here – and this is the main claim of this chapter – is that we are now entering into a period in the reception of Beckett's in which a new set of possibilities for the articulation of Beckett's negativity are beginning to make themselves felt. This new period or phase, I would argue, is one that is enabled by a growing awareness both of Beckett's debts and of his legacies, and one that is informed by a much stronger and deeper body of knowledge than was previously available both about the ways in which Beckett's thinking interacts with a number of traditions that he inherits, and about the ways in which those who come under his influence interact with the legacies that he passes on. Daniela Caselli's book *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and the Criticism* and Matthew Feldman's and Mark Nixon's collection *Beckett's Literary Legacies* are two examples – from either end as it were – of this new concern with tracing intertextuality and influence in and through Beckett's work.²⁹ One of the effects of this new development is to suggest ways in which the kind of proximity that Derrida finds so disabling – the closeness which leads reading practices to become one with and negated by the work that they seek to read – might be in some sense deflected, to introduce the kind of distance in which reading might take place, in which nothingness might yield to an expression which is not immediately negated or cancelled out or, as *The Unnamable*

has it, 'invalidated as uttered'.³⁰ When Derrida reads Beckett, he suggests, he finds in his writing a kind of mirror, as Murphy finds himself mirrored in Mr Endon's gaze in *Murphy*. The proximity that Derrida invokes in his failure to read Beckett is given an uncomfortable, and peculiarly erotic, form when Murphy seeks to look as deeply as possible into Mr Endon's eyes. 'Kneeling at the bedside', the narrator writes,

the hair starting in thick back ridges between his fingers, his lips, nose and foreheads almost touching Mr Endon's, seeing himself stigmatized in those eyes that did not see him, Murphy heard words demanding so strongly to be spoken that he spoke them, right into Mr. Endon's face, Murphy who did not speak at all in the ordinary way unless spoken to, and not always even then.

'the last at last seen of him

himself unseen by him

And of himself'

A rest.

'The last Mr Murphy saw of Mr Endon was Mr Murphy unseen by Mr Endon. This was also the last Murphy saw of Murphy.'

A rest.

'The relation between Mr Murphy and Mr Endon could not have been better summed up by the former's sorrow at seeing himself in the latter's immunity from seeing anything but himself.'

A long rest.

'Mr Murphy is a speck in Mr Endon's unseen.'³¹

This passage is the first of several in Beckett's writing which dwell on the peculiar sense that seeing, like reading, requires a degree of distance. Murphy's hunger to find himself recognised by Mr Endon, his desire to penetrate into the emptiness that he imagines resides behind Mr Endon's cornea, results here of course in an approach only to his own image, 'horribly reduced, obscured and distorted',³² a self-regard that is also an unseeing. Proximity here destroys the conditions that might allow for vision, that might allow us to see across a divide or a gulf between one person and another, creating instead a kind of short circuit in which what one looks at becomes a simple reassertion of what one already is, and in which precisely the empty gulf between discrete things, what Belacqua and Watt think of as the 'interval' or musical pause,³³ is eradicated. This scene in *Murphy* predicts the scene in *Krapp's Last Tape*, in which Krapp remembers lying in a drifting punt with his lover:

I asked her to look at me and after a few moments – [Pause.] after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow and they opened. [Pause. Low.] Let me in.³⁴

And again, in *Company*, the scene reappears, somewhat modified:

You are on your back at the foot of an aspen. In its trembling shade. She at right angles propped on her elbows head between her hands. Your eyes opened and closed have looked in hers looking in yours. In your dark you look in them again. Still. You feel on your face the fringe of her long black hair stirring in the still air. Within the tent of hair your faces are hidden from view. She murmurs, Listen to the leaves. Eyes in each other's eyes you listen to the leaves. In their trembling shade.³⁵

On each of these occasions, the erotics of contact and of proximity give way to a kind of failure, in which the trembling possibility of company, of being two, returns to the assertion of solitude. The perception of an affinity, like that affinity between Beckett and Derrida, leads to a closeness which destroys such affinity. The phrase 'Eyes in each other's eyes' might suggest a romantically unifying gaze, but it also suggests something of the mush and the stench of a biological decomposition, a decomposition of the apparatus of vision, which requires the eyeball – the 'globe' as it is most often called in Beckett – to remain whole and sealed, unsullied by penetration by another.

This kind of failure of vision, then, in which the other becomes a reflection of the self, might be thought of as analogous to the failure of reading that Derrida experiences in relation to Beckett. The emptiness that inhabits Beckett's writing, its lack of content, suggests and provokes an affinity with the reader, allows the reader to find his or her self reflected in Beckett's work, as reader and listener reflect each other in *Ohio Impromptu*, as Murphy is reflected in Mr Endon. This emptiness, this pallor, allows for and provokes such affinity, but it is also just this negativity that is eradicated as affinity gives way to stifling proximity, to a becoming one. Attention to the question of influence and of inheritance, however, allows for a more oblique gaze, allows for a play of seeing and of reading in which the gulf, the interval, between reader and listener might be left open, as the doors and windows in *Ghost Trio* remain 'imperceptibly ajar'.³⁶ If the nothingness that inhabits the interior

and the beyond of Beckett's writing might have value, ethical and political as well as aesthetic value, then it may be that this oblique gaze offers a means of glimpsing such value, of apprehending it in its arrested state without either making of it a something, or finding one's own reading annulled by contact with it.

To begin to gesture towards such possibility here, in fact, I will focus quite specifically on some of the ways in which Beckett's own gaze has been reflected in recent work by J. M. Coetzee and W.G. Sebald – in Sebald's and Jan Peter Tripp's striking work *Unrecounted*, and in Coetzee's recent essay on Beckett, 'Eight ways of looking at Samuel Beckett'. In Sebald's and Tripp's *Unrecounted*, Beckett's is one of the gazes that is captured in Tripp's extraordinary series of lithographs, which focus tightly on the stilled, unblinking eyes of a number of people and animals, who seem to look at us through letterboxes, posting their gaze from somewhere on the other side of the page.³⁷ In Beckett's portrait, his eyes are depicted in close up, shining glassily in a bird like fashion, as he looks past us and slightly to the right, over our shoulder. In Coetzee's essay, Beckett's gaze is evoked not visually but verbally, where Coetzee likens Beckett's gaze to that of Kafka. 'It helps to have a piercing gaze', Coetzee writes, 'and Beckett had his own variety of piercing gaze. Like photographs of Kafka, photographs of Beckett show a man whose inner being shines like a cold star through the fleshly envelope.'³⁸ Both Coetzee and Sebald and Tripp, then, dwell on Beckett's gaze, and in both instances his gaze is invoked partly to celebrate its capacity to penetrate, to pierce or puncture what Coetzee calls the 'fleshly envelope'. In both cases, also, this capacity to cut through flesh is thought through a particular and strikingly resonant relation between human and animal, as if the power to look that these writers find in Beckett allows him not only to shine through his own flesh but also to pass through the species barrier, to achieve the kind of communication or interaction between radically different beings that seems so signally to fail in that recurring mirrored gaze that is first unseeingly shared by Murphy and Mr Endon.

In Coetzee's essay, the piercing quality of Beckett's gaze is imagined in relation most overtly to the whale – to the white whale of Melville's *Moby Dick* – and more implicitly to the bird, to the apprehension of the blackbird that is summoned in Coetzee's title reference to Wallace Steven's poem 'Thirteen Ways of looking

at a blackbird'. The relation between human and whale is cast, by Coetzee, in terms of unbroken whiteness, the whiteness of the whale and the whiteness of the cells and rotundas in which Beckett's creatures are immured. 'One image', he writes: 'the white wall of a cell in which we find ourselves imprisoned, which is also the white wall constituted by the huge forehead of the whale. If the harpoon is cast, if the harpoon tears through the wall, into what does it tear?'³⁹ To be enclosed in a cell, in a white ring of bone, is to be locked into a consciousness that cannot cross that white blankness – the unbroken blankness of page as well as of bone, the 'dumb blankness, full of meaning' that Melville ascribes to whiteness in *Moby Dick*.⁴⁰ 'In their white cells', Coetzee writes,

Beckett's selves, his intelligences, his creatures, whatever one prefers to call them, wait and watch and observe and notate [. . .]. Why do these creatures not grasp their harpoon and hurl it through the white wall? Answer: because they are impotent, invalid, crippled, bedridden. Because they are brains imprisoned in pots without arms or legs. Because they are worms. Because they do not have harpoons, only pencils at most. Why are they cripples or invalids or worms or disembodied brains armed at the most with pencils? Because they and the intelligence behind them believe that the only tool that can pierce the white wall is the tool of pure thought.⁴¹

Here, Beckett's bodies are seen as impotent beings locked inside themselves, unable to cross that white wall that divides human from the human, human from animal. They do not have harpoons, the harpoon that might tear through the white wall. But what they do have, Coetzee suggests, is the piercing capacity of thought, that capacity that evidences itself, at the close of Coetzee's essay, in Beckett's penetrating gaze, and that is harnessed also in his writing, the writing that corrupts the blank whiteness of the page. It should be stressed that Beckett's creatures find, 'despite the evidence of their eyes, that the tool of pure thought fails again and again';⁴² Coetzee here is not arguing that thought alone can transform our conditions, can bring down the barriers that separate human from human and human from animal. But what he does seek to give expression to here is the possibility of a form of seeing or imagining that can stage an open if failed relationship between beings that maintains them in their otherness rather than returning them to blank sameness – the form of seeing that is

imagined by Wallace Stevens as he crafts his ways of looking at the 'eye of the blackbird'.⁴³ Coetzee declares that Beckett's people do not have harpoons, perhaps forgetting or repressing the fact that Malone does indeed have a harpoon of sorts, and that he uses this to pierce, to puncture the pages upon which he writes his narrative (and in a limited sense Beckett's novel), as if writing for Malone is a kind of puncturing. 'The exercise book had fallen to the ground', Malone writes. 'I took a long time to recover it. I had to harpoon it. It is not pierced through and through, but it is in a bad way'.⁴⁴ For Malone, writing with his pencil and puncturing his exercise book with a harpoon are part of the same process, part of the same failed attempt to allow writing to destroy and thus to exceed the conditions of its own production, to tear down the wall and the page that separates Ahab from the whale. It is perhaps this capacity for writing to summon the erosion of the barriers that hold consciousness in place, that enclose us with our subjecthood and within our species, that is quietly suggested by the pen that is given as a gift to Malone's character Saposcat by his clumsily adoring parents. The pen, of course, is 'A Bird', and 'a bird, its yellow beak agape to show that it was singing adorned the lid' of the cardboard box in which Mr Saposcat plans to present it to his son.⁴⁵ If the suggestion here is that the pen might give sound to that mute singing, as Moran seeks to recognise and communicate with his wild birds at the end of *Molloy*, to 'understand their language better',⁴⁶ then it is certain, as Coetzee suggests, that such a hope will fail. Sapo's blackbird will remain mute, thought and writing cannot penetrate the wall that separates you from me, cannot allow the indecipherable, unimaginable thinking of the whale to flood into our own thought. But what Coetzee seeks to put into a kind of motion in his essay is a series of oblique relations, between texts, between writers, between humans and animals, that allows the possibility of an interaction between them, that allows for the kind of impossible surplus that Beckett's writing produces to open its own, imperceptible threshold in which radically different beings might enter into some sort of unspoken colloquy.

Sebald's engaging of Beckett's gaze suggests a similar set of associations between penetrating vision and the possibility of a form of communication across insuperable barriers – across the barrier between humans and animals as well as that between the living and the dead. If Tripp's lithograph suggests something bird like

about Beckett's gaze, something unmistakably aquiline, then the verse that accompanies the image builds on this association. 'He will cover / you with his / plumage', the text reads, '& / under his wing then / you will rest',⁴⁷ suggesting that Beckett is looking at us here from the other side of the wall that separates human from bird, as if he is looking back at us from an animal future, rather than towards us from a human past. Beckett becomes part here, in all his peculiar animality, of a series of images that reach across Sebald's writing, and that stage an insistent, mute conversation between distant intelligences imprisoned in their cells. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* is shot through with close-up photographs of the gaze of animals, which regard us, like Beckett, from the other side of a barrier or final border. The novel opens famously with the narrator's visit to a nocturama, in which he is struck by the open gaze of the nocturnal animals, rather as Murphy is compelled by Mr Endon's 'prodigiously dilated pupils',⁴⁸ the pupils that become great gaping black holes that fill the field in *Worstward Ho*, 'Inletting all. Outletting all.'⁴⁹ Sebald's novel includes a series of photographs of the animals' eyes, composed as Tripp's lithographs are composed, around which the text declares that

all I remember of the denizens of the Nocturama is that several of them had strikingly large eyes, and the fixed, inquiring gaze found in certain painters and philosophers who seek to penetrate the darkness which surrounds us purely by means of looking and thinking.⁵⁰

This relation between the gaze of the animal and that of the painter, philosopher, poet, emerges again and again in *Austerlitz*, and across Sebald's writing, where it suggests both the imprisonment of the thinker and his or her capacity to transform such imprisonment into a liberation, as if the barrier itself (of cage, of page, of personhood) becomes an open threshold, or is pushed imperceptibly ajar. Much later in the novel, Sebald and his companion Marie see a group of deer in an enclosure whose collective gaze, like that of the animals in the nocturama, is reproduced photographically in the text. Marie, Austerlitz recalls,

particularly asked me to take a photograph of this beautiful group, and as she did so, said Austerlitz, she said something which I have never forgotten, she said that captive animals and we ourselves, their human counterparts, view one another *à travers une brèche d'incompréhension*.⁵¹

It is this capacity to regard the other across such a breach – a breach at once absolutely impassable, and strangely, delicately navigable – that characterises the relation between human and animal in *Austerlitz*, and that characterises Beckett's gaze as it is imagined in Sebald. The narrator of *Austerlitz* remarks, of his perception of a similarity between the gaze of Wittgenstein and that of Austerlitz, that

whenever I see a photograph of Wittgenstein somewhere or other, I feel more and more as if Austerlitz were gazing at me out of it, and when I look at Austerlitz it is as if I see in him the disconsolate philosopher, a man locked into the glaring clarity of his logical thinking.⁵²

This extraordinarily delicate play of likeness and singularity, of an intelligence whose locked imprisonment is woven into his freedom from enclosure, whose apprehension of solitude is also a kind of company, is central to the ways in which Sebald negotiates the boundaries that hem us in, that position us in bodies, in time and in space. Sebald develops a poetics which allows the experience of incarceration, in all its horror and its unwavering certainty, to produce a kind of almost unthinkable freedom, as if he has found a language in which to bring the other side of every limit, of every barrier or border, to the point of expression.

So, both Coetzee and Sebald, in different ways, bring Beckett's gaze into a kind of intertextual economy which works to coax the nothingness that inhabits being, and the gulf or breach that intervenes between beings, to a borderline perceptibility. Where Derrida's non-reading of Beckett tends to find itself so closely identified with him that it falls under the erasure produced by Beckett's self-cancelling logic, the play of glances here between Beckett, Sebald and Coetzee opens the ethical possibilities of Beckett's poetic thinking – its ethical value – to a new kind of legibility, a new kind of mensuration. One of the figures in which this impossible thinking, this benighted illumination, finds itself most resonantly expressed is that of visible darkness, a figure which links those who inherit Beckett's legacies with those who pass legacies on to him. In both Coetzee's novel *Slow Man* and Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* the possibility of visible darkness grazes the surface of the text in relation to the work of photography, the bringing to visibility of an image in the darkroom. The protagonist of Coetzee's novel reflects that

his greatest pleasure was always in darkroom work. As the ghostly image emerged beneath the surface of the liquid, as veins of darkness on the paper began to knit together and grow visible, he would sometimes experience a little shiver of ecstasy, as though he were present at the day of creation.⁵³

Coetzee's protagonist here catches a distinct echo from *Austerlitz*, where Austerlitz tells the narrator that

In my photographic work I was always especially entranced [. . .] by the moment when the shadows of reality, so to speak, emerge out of nothing on the exposed paper, as memories do in the middle of the night, darkening again if you try to cling to them, just like a photographic print left in the developing bath too long.⁵⁴

In both of these instances, the narrators are interested in the way in which photography brings a nothingness, a kind of darkness, into the light, and in both instances it is possible to hear a set of resonances echoing back, through Beckett, to Dickinson and to Milton. The difficult idea of visible darkness, or as Clov has it 'light black',⁵⁵ is something that stirs time and time again in Beckett's writing, most notably perhaps in *Company*, where we are told that the faint narrative voice sheds a 'faint light', that 'Dark lightens while it sounds', making the 'darkness visible'.⁵⁶ Perhaps the clearest reference at this point in *Company*, the most reputable and well known source of such visible darkness, is book 1 of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where the poet captures wonderfully the unthinkable horror of hell by declaring that the flames that burn eternally there do not give off light, but rather shed a 'darkness visible'.⁵⁷ This reference also helps darkly to illuminate the Miltonic structure of *Company*, and to bring to light the Miltonic resonance of the narrator's uncertainty about whether Beckett's creature rightly belongs 'in the same dark' as his creator.⁵⁸ But the echo I want to focus on here, as this chapter draws to a close, is not from Milton but from Emily Dickinson, a writer with whom I suggest, without any evidence, Beckett has an extraordinarily rich and unspeakable affinity, as though he had always already read her and understood her too well. Dickinson, like Beckett, and like Sebald's and Coetzee's narrators, is entranced by the thought of visible darkness, of lightening black, and the idea stirs in her poetry, as it does in Beckett's. The example I will refer to here is from her poem 'From Blank to Blank', a poem in which it is possible to see the seeds of Beckett's oeuvre:

From Blank to Blank –
 A Threadless Way
 I pushed Mechanic feet –
 To stop – or perish – or advance –
 Alike indifferent –

If end I gained
 It ends beyond
 Indefinite disclosed –
 I shut my eyes – and groped as well
 'Twas lighter – to be Blind⁵⁹

Both Beckett and Dickinson, I suggest, catch something from Milton when they imagine the possibilities of a light darkness, a vision that is won from blindness, but Dickinson's thinking of such possibilities seems to me much closer to Beckett's than Milton's is, so close, indeed that they shape to merge, to become a single dark. The blanks that inhabit both the deepest interior of this poem and its far beyond offer to disclose the indefinite that simultaneously annuls them, just as Beckett's writing stages at once a glaringly white revelation of nothingness and a submission to its darkness. In both Dickinson and in Beckett darkness and light become bound up in this wonderfully intricate aporetic of statement and negation, the kind of turning that has made the value of Beckett's nothing impossible to quantify. It is not possible to separate these two movements – the light is won from the dark, just as it returns to it, and the extraordinary reach both of Beckett and of Dickinson emerges from the closeness of this coupling. When reading both poets one has to contend with this difficulty, a difficulty that might make of the most careful reading a kind of avoidance. But what I have been trying to suggest here is that the reading of Beckett and Dickinson together, the reading of visible darkness as it sheds its black light in Milton, in Dickinson, in Beckett, in Coetzee, in Sebald, allows us a kind of approach to nothing made something that the direct gaze makes impossible. It is in the almost unthinkable spaces between Beckett and his legators, and between Beckett and his legatees, that the possibility of an imperceptibly open threshold might be glimpsed, in which the indefinite might find itself disclosed, in which that breach of incomprehension that intervenes between human and human, between human and animal, might come to a kind of ethical expression.

Notes

- 1 Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: Calder, 1976), p. 38.
- 2 Beckett, *Watt*, p. 39.
- 3 See Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in Samuel Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 10.
- 4 For a reconsideration of the role of Joyce in Beckett, see P. J. Murphy, *Beckett's Dedalus: Dialogical Engagements with Joyce in Beckett's Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 39.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 247.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 69.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 70.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 74.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 77.
- 13 Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: Calder, 1955), p. 110.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 121.
- 15 *Ibid.*, pp. 121–2.
- 16 Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: Calder, 1994), p. 198.
- 17 Simon Critchley, *Very Little . . . Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 12.
- 18 See Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974); Maurice Blanchot, 'Where now? Who now?', in *The Siren's Song*, ed. Gabriel Josipovici (Brighton Harvester, 1982); Gilles Deleuze, 'The exhausted', in Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 152–74; Stanley Cavell, 'Ending the waiting game: a reading of Beckett's *Endgame*', in Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say? A Book of Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 115–62.
- 19 Critchley, *Very Little*, p. 141.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 60.
- 23 *Ibid.*, p. 61.
- 24 *Ibid.*
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 *Ibid.*

- 27 Samuel Beckett, *The Calmative*, in Samuel Beckett, *The Expelled and Other Novellas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980), p. 51.
- 28 Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, p. 61.
- 29 See Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes: Intertextuality in the Fiction and Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), and Matthew Feldman and Mark Nixon (eds), *Beckett's Literary Legacies* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007). See also Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'* (London: Continuum, 2006) and Peter Boxall, *Since Beckett: Contemporary Writers in the Wake of Modernism* (London: Continuum, 2009).
- 30 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, p. 293.
- 31 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Picador, 1973), p. 140.
- 32 *Ibid.*
- 33 Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (London: Calder, 1995), p. 28. Here Belacqua seeks to live in the space of the 'Beethoven pause', in the 'silences' that obtain 'between you and me'. This desire re-emerges in *Watt*, where Watt expresses his desire to live in the 'interval' between musical bars (Beckett, *Watt*, p. 134). For a discussion of music and nothing, see Catherine Laws, Chapter 10 below.
- 34 Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, in Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 221.
- 35 Samuel Beckett, *Company*, in Samuel Beckett, *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (London: Calder, 1992), p. 39.
- 36 See Samuel Beckett, *Ghost Trio*, in *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 408.
- 37 W. G. Sebald and Jan Peter Tripp, *Unrecounted*, trans. Michael Hamburger (New York: New Directions, 2004), pp. 78–9.
- 38 J. M. Coetzee, 'Eight ways of looking at Samuel Beckett', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Borderless Beckett / Beckett sans frontières*, eds Minako Okamuro et al., 18 (2008), 31.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 40 *Ibid.*; Herman Melville, *Moby Dick* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 199.
- 41 Coetzee, 'Eight ways', p. 23.
- 42 *Ibid.*
- 43 Wallace Stevens, 'Thirteen ways of looking at a blackbird', in Wallace Stevens, *Selected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), p. 43.
- 44 Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 209.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 211.
- 46 Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 176.
- 47 Sebald and Tripp, *Unrecounted*, p. 79.
- 48 Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 140.

- 49 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, in Beckett, *Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho*, p. 115.
- 50 W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, trans. Anthea Bell (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 3.
- 51 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 369.
- 52 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 56.
- 53 J. M. Coetzee, *Slow Man* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2006), p. 65.
- 54 Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 109.
- 55 Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, in *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 107.
- 56 Beckett, *Company*, p. 15.
- 57 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (Harlow: Pearson Longman, 2007), p. 64.
- 58 Beckett, *Company*, p. 19.
- 59 Emily Dickinson, 'From blank to blank', in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 222–3.