3

Nothing has changed

Mladen Dolar

In *Whoroscope*, one of his first published texts, the poem which won a poetry competition in 1930, Beckett aims an elaborate blow at Descartes. There is the philosopher of the methodical reduction, the reduction of all supports in the outside world, in perception, in the body, reduction of all supports in questionable inner certainties, safe traditions and evident truths, reduction of both contingency and necessity, external and internal, in order to arrive to the minimal point of certainty, the firm rock of cogito, the prop of the subject from whom all other props have been taken away. But Beckett takes the cogito (the word never mentioned in the poem, as neither is Descartes for that matter)¹ through its reverse, by the angle of irreducible contingency. The cogito is, as it were, inserted back into the body from which it emanates and into the haphazard eventualities of historical circumstance. The Cartesian body depends on its trivial tastes (the notorious eggs which had to be hatched from eight to ten days, no shorter and no longer); the Cartesian mind is preoccupied with the trivial rivalry with its opponents – both illustrious (Galileo, Harvey, Arnauld) and obscure (Anna Maria Schurmann, Weulles). The cogito is thus confronted with this intricate web of trivia, which Beckett assiduously excavated from Adrien Baillet's late seventeenth-century life of Descartes. Descartes, we learn in the notes appended at the end (in the manner of T. S. Eliot, and without which we would be quite lost), 'kept his own birthday to himself so that no astrologer could cast his nativity', but to no avail: three centuries later Beckett cast his horoscope, his *whoroscope*. This is the whoroscope of the cogito, providing this bodiless entity with the contingency of its haphazard moment, reversing its reduction, reducing its reduction in the

opposite direction, expanding it into a baroque fresco of poignant fleshy detail and over-elaborate scholarly references, defying the minimalism of the cogito's subjectivity with the maximal expansion of contingency, and confronting its clear and distinct reason with its underside of stupidity.²

Whoroscope has ninety-nine lines, but only because the entries for the competition had not to exceed one hundred lines. It mentions some twenty names and refers to a dozen historical occasions, in a florid and heavily overlaid idiom. Compare this to the first piece of Beckett's *Mirlitonades*, some half a century later:

En face
le pire
jusqu'à ce
qu'il fasse rire

That's all. The opposition between the two poems couldn't have been more drastic. The whole poem has the flavour of a slogan, the shortest possible *profession de foi*, achieved by minimal means. It is as if Beckett has accomplished his own Cartesian reduction, reduction of means and ends, to arrive to his own version of the cogito, which, in its very minimalism, presents a sort of anti-cogito. He strove for the anti-cogito in *Whoroscope*, if one can venture to give this name to his endeavour, but in a way which fell short in its very floridity. The contingent, trivial and historical network in which it was inscribed was perhaps unwittingly still caught in the workings of the cogito, it was but its underside, it fell into its web precisely through the maximal distance it tried to establish from it. The proper way to deal with the cogito was to take the Cartesian route of reduction: Beckett had to take it on his shoulders, reduce to the utmost, to the core, to the minimum, to the bare rock – to arrive at what? Nothing? Almost nothing? It's the 'almost' that is the problem.

First the language. *Whoroscope*, like most of Beckett's early work, is clearly under the long shadow of James Joyce. Every detail has the tendency of being overblown, the language is thick with convoluted ramifications, jokes are too smart, erudite and studious to be funny, each line ransacks the encyclopaedia. But what defined Beckett's subsequent work was precisely a sharp demarcation from this:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as he could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than adding.³

The art of subtraction (the concept whose fortune was secured by Alain Badiou) versus the art of addition, the infinitely expandable versus the infinitely shrinkable.

The more Joyce knew the more he could. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. There seems to be a kind of aesthetic axiom that expression is achievement – must be an achievement. My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has been set aside by artists as something unusable – as something by definition incompatible with art.⁴

The art of omnipotence versus the art of impotence, omniscience versus ignorance.

With such a program, in my opinion, the latest work of Joyce [*Finnegans Wake*] has nothing whatever to do. There it seems rather to be a matter of an apotheosis of the word.⁵

The art of apotheosis, the magic of the word versus the art of the senselessness, 'the literature of the unword', of the drained, barren, porous, meaningless word (as Beckett put it in the famous letter to Axel Kaun, written in German in 1937).

And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. [...] As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.⁶

So the aim of the writer, by definition someone working with words, is to impoverish his means, to undo his tools; if not to eliminate his means of production entirely, then at least to make them work against themselves, to counteract the fascination with words and meaning, to stop producing more and more meaning and to engage in hard labour towards the senseless.⁷ Joyce's art consisted in producing an overflow, in making meaning proliferate to the point of its being expanded into infinite floating, a surplus-meaning

which can never be pinned down and whose fascination lies in infinite addition, in the possibility of an eternal $(n+1)$: Joyce's is the art of the always expandable excess propelled by enjoyment-in-language. The meaning is never to be exhausted, for every surplus produces more surplus; thus it seems that Joyce has reached the very matrix of production of meaning, to the point where generations of scholars will have to sweat over the enigmas of his ultimate book for centuries (as he himself had correctly predicted). To be sure, to describe Joyce as the writer of surplus-meaning is misleading, for what is at stake, in his supreme artistry with words, has only in part to do with the overflow of meaning, it also has to do with the overflow of sounds. Language is taken, in one and the same gesture, as a machine for the endless production of meaning and as a web of infinite sound-echoes, reverberations, words contingently echoing other words and finding a surplus of meaning in the very contingent consonances of sounds, in sound contaminations, intersections, cross-cuts, in endless punning. *Finnegans Wake* can be read as an interminable pun, running for hundreds of pages and folded on to itself, each pun breeding more puns, the end rejoining the beginning. Thus Joyce ultimately embodies, in a paramount manner, the Lacanian concept of *lalangue*, an inextricable web of meaning and sound, of the signifier and the enjoyment, where language is not either taken to be the matter of the signifier or simply sound echoes, but is apprehended precisely through their very difference, their incommensurability – their division and their union falling under the same heading in their very divergence. Hence Lacan's own fascination with Joyce, his seeing Joyce as the incarnation of *sinthome*⁸ – the word which is itself a pun on symptom (just as *lalangue* is a pun, for that matter) and which immediately breeds more puns on *saint-homme*, *sinthome madaquin* (*Saint Thomas d'Aquin*), etc. It seems that Lacan wholeheartedly espoused Joyce as the showcase for a certain line of his teaching. But couldn't one argue that following Beckett's way would actually come much closer to the bone of Lacan's teaching? This is the argument I will briefly try to pursue here.

Beckett's art, as opposed to Joyce's, is the art of $(n-1)$. The words have to be deprived of their magic, hollowed, their meaning has to be subtracted from them so that they become scarce and empty, like senseless sounds,⁹ reduced to clichés (dead words in a seemingly living language).¹⁰ What has to be explored is how much

one can take away, how little will one make do: the vocabulary is contracted, the references reduced to the minimum, the encyclopaedia has to shrivel, and the grammar has to be reduced to the bare necessity (what Beckett called 'the syntax of weakness'). What better means to achieve this, on an external level, than to write in a foreign tongue, with diminished powers of 'expression', voluntarily forsaking the bountiful 'natural' means at one's disposal? To abandon style, to abandon the notorious 'finding one's own voice' that all creative writing courses are after, to write in a voice which is anonymous and impersonal. The minimal internal split, the least difference, so much at the heart of Beckett's endeavour, is externally translated into the split of two languages, two originals for most of Beckett's texts, which play with minimal divergences between the two. One can easily imagine the two writers reading proofs, Joyce relentlessly adding new twists, and Beckett constantly crossing out, deleting sentences, paragraphs, pages. For one there is never enough, for the other there is never little enough.

Language itself is a veil, that was Beckett's insight already in the late 1930s, not the locus of expression, a veil to be pierced, not expanded, not a canvas to paint upon to conjure a new infinite universe. Rather, the veil is there only to get behind it, to what seemingly lies beyond. But what lurks behind the veil? Is there not a treacherous illusion in the very supposition of something lurking behind the veil that one should get to? 'Be it something or nothing', says Beckett, and the oscillation between the two is fundamental. There is no 'something' behind the veil, no thing that one might get to and take hold of by piercing the veil, no thing with any positive features or qualities, no nameable thing, but it is not simply nothing either. The void itself, the nothing, takes on the quality of 'something' without qualities. The action of piercing the language by reducing the words to the function of a minimal split arrives to the minimal inner split of something/nothing, an irreducible split where neither term can be taken by itself. There is something that always comes to supplant nothing, yet something only emerges on the verge of nothing, at the limit of being engulfed by it.

Along with the reduction of language there is the reduction of the body. Beckett's 'heroes' constantly move from relative mobility to increasing immobility. Means of transportation fail and are taken away, legs won't work any longer, eyes go blind, and the body disintegrates, more and more is taken away from it: it

is the infinitely shrinkable body in an infinitely shrinkable space. Molloy and Moran are condemned to greater immobility, Malone is dying confined to a small room, the narrator of *The Unnamable* has shrunk to a mere voice whose origin remains uncertain. The heroine of *Happy Days* is buried in the ground to her waist in the first act, to her neck in the second. In *Breath* there is but a breathing in and out, the pure point of emission, not even of a voice in any linguistic or expressive sense, but of a mere breath, the minimal statement possible – not a statement, just a pure enunciation. The voice itself can be externalised and estranged from the body, as in *Krapp's Last Tape*, taken over by a device, a non-bodily point of emission, or else, more tellingly, there can be 'the voice without a mouth', as in the *Texts for Nothing*, so that even the existence of a point of emission is suspended, reduced to being a split into the inner and the outer.

The body is reduced in the same process as words are reduced: it is increasingly mutilated and emaciated, more and more can be taken away from it, it is the body on the verge of dying, on the way to disappearance, to the bodily almost-nothing. On the unending way there, the bodily almost-nothing is epitomised by the voice, the voice gradually not of a person or any nameable entity, but an unnameable source of enunciation. This is the voice at the point of the void, the voice incessantly on the brink of getting lost itself, but nevertheless persevering, tenuously and tenaciously, always recuperating itself at the very point of vanishing.

The reduction of language and the reduction of the body both lead to the voice. After all, the voice is what language and body have in common, it is the point of their intersection, the network of words and meanings has to be underpinned by a point of bodily emission, it is the incongruity of the two that makes their junction, their minimal overlapping, the crossing. It is as if the diminution of the words endows them with a quality which brings them closer to the body, they are reduced to pure voice, that is, the body at its most obstinate when everything else has been removed. They cling to the body in a way that becomes increasingly material, while on the other hand it is as if the flow of words drains the body, it contracts it. There is a mutual and interdependent reduction, a reduction to the point of exhaustion. Exhaustion is something quite different from tiredness, as Deleuze has taught us in his beautiful essay on Beckett, although Beckett's 'hero' is also always tired to

the point of death. Being tired implies he is not able to realise the possible, but the point is that 'he exhausts himself in exhausting the possible, and vice-versa. He exhausts that which, in the possible, is not realized.'¹¹ It is not that the possible is not realised, it is the possible itself that is exhausted, and the exhaustion of the possible is what is at stake in all Beckett's later work. Taking up another of Deleuze's cues, one could say that the reduction of meaning immediately leads to the production of sense (the sense used in *The Logic of Sense*). The less there is meaning, the more sense is produced, from one sentence to another, out of nothing, of almost nothing, with useless remains, vestiges, residues of what once was meaning, in a necessary illusive retroactive supposition. This is why it is an absurdity to take Beckett under the heading of the 'literature of the absurd' – the reduction of meaning can appear as absurd only by the yardstick of the lost meaning, but the point is precisely to be rid of this yardstick so that sense can be made. The two tramps in *Godot* quite literally *make sense*. A sense that relentlessly keeps surprising us, catching us unaware in the midst of meaninglessness, and the point of *Waiting for Godot* is precisely that *Godot comes*, he keeps coming all the time, and, if it seems that he doesn't, it's only because we have been expecting him from the wrong quarters.

Sartre's *Nausea* was the paradigmatic work which took the absurd as its master word:

The word Absurdity is now born beneath my pen [. . .]. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the sound of a voice, but that long dead snake at my feet [. . .]. And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the key to Existence, the key to my Nausea, to my own life. [. . .] But I, a little while ago, experienced the absolute: the absolute or the absurd [*l'absolu ou l'absurde*]. [. . .] Absurd: irreducible; nothing – not even a profound, secret aberration of Nature – could explain that.¹²

The famous scene where Molloy finds stones on the beach and sets up an elaborate system for sucking them is a sort of response to the opening scene of Sartre's *Nausea*.¹³ Both heroes find themselves on the beach and pick up a stone, but the difference between the two scenes couldn't have been more striking. In six points. First of all, in *Molloy* there is not one stone, epitomising stonehood, as in Sartre's *Nausea*, but a multiplicity, a host of stones, yet a multiplicity to be submitted to count, even more, to a careful and complicated

combinatory calculus. They are sixteen – the first thing to do with stones is to count them. Second, if the stone immediately inspired disgust in Sartre's hero, if it was the cause of the onset of nausea which will be persistently tormenting him henceforth, then Molloy picks up stones to put them into his mouth, to suck them. If disgust pertains particularly to taste and smell, where its forces are at their most powerful, then Molloy displays the very opposite of disgust, he does the unimaginable: he puts the disgusting thing into his mouth. Disgusting? Let's see what it tastes like, let's taste the existence, not recoil from it – and unsurprisingly he finds it tasteless. *Stones suck*. Third, the stone is a border creature, found on the dividing line between land and sea, and it has the strange property of putting into question the border, most conspicuously the divide between the exterior and the interior. The stone, which is externality itself, is being internalised, sucked; systematically, one by one, each at its appropriate turn, stones are sucked, that is, kept on the verge, at the aperture, at the point of transition, at the limit, as a detachable part of the body, the oral object, the breast turned stone. It is being oralised, and, most significantly, put at the locus of the emission of the voice – and this is a good description of the way the voice functions in Beckett: it is like sucking stones. The stone, the deadest thing there is, is as if integrated into the life cycle, recycled, on the verge of life and death. Fourth, the stone is a practice, it calls for a practice, it is neither an object of contemplation out there nor something inspiring horror when touched: it is something to handle, feel, process, displace, replace, shift, move, shuffle, order – and the whole scene hinges on arranging the stones in the right pecking order, that is, in their sucking order, so that each will be sucked in turn and in equal proportions. *To leave no stone unturned*. Fifth, if for Sartre's hero the stone is metonymised, spreading its properties to other objects and ultimately to the whole of existing things – so that to exist is to be a stone – then here there is only metonymy from stone to stone, from one stone to another: shall I say, each stone 'representing the subject' for another stone? Shuffling stones from one pocket to another, and between four pockets and the mouth, looks like an elementary structuralist exercise in the dialectics of the empty place and the element that comes to fill it. And the point of the combinatory exercise is to exhaust all possibilities of permutation in this metonymy (see Deleuze). Sixth, all stones taste the same, they are tasteless, indifferent, so

why suck one stone rather than the other?¹⁴ Well, the stone is the creature of minimal difference, of the difference of the same, the difference of the indistinct, and it is the 'indifferent difference' that counts, quite literally. And the minimal difference of the indistinct will be very much at stake in all Beckett's later work. To the point of indistinction of life and death.

One can sense that the whole exercise is at the same time essential while being completely pointless: 'And the solution to which I rallied in the end was to throw away all the stones but one, which I kept now in one pocket, now in another, and which of course I soon lost, or threw away, or gave away, or swallowed.'¹⁵ So, are we stuck with the futility of it all? Of course we are, but with the meaningless stones a lot of sense has been made, the scene is extremely striking and very funny, both delirious and completely pragmatic (nonsense and no-nonsense, as it were), crucial and trivial in one: one can make do with Sartre's nauseating stone, provided one submits it to the quickly sketched six points; provided one doesn't turn it into substance or seek transcendence.

In Sartre the stone has no meaning, its stupid being there and inertia endow the rest of existence with a stone-like quality – the stone petrifies it and turns it into absurdity. The stone is recalcitrant to making sense, so the hero is overcome by nausea, by a universal disgust with existence, from which he cannot quite recover until the last page. On the other hand, the antidote to this nauseating stony existence is found in the voice, the voice of an American woman jazz singer, and the voice is what offers the possibility of transcendence in the midst of absurdity: it has the power to dispel the nausea. This is a parable of damnation and salvation. With Beckett, the landscape of absurdity has been utterly overturned. The stone and the voice come to occupy the same place, there is no meaning to be recovered from the one or the other, they both have to be sucked so that sense can be made, in the face of the absence of meaning. The immanent transcendence from stone to stone, from voice to voice, is all there is.

The voice in Beckett implies a body, a bodily point of emission and a bodily point of reception, but its location is uncertain.

I shall transmit the words as received, by the ear, or roared through a trumpet into the arsehole, in all their purity, and in the same order, as far as possible. This infinitesimal lag, between arrival and departure, this trifling delay in evacuation, is all I have to worry about.¹⁶

The bodily apertures are interchangeable: the mouth, the anus, the ear communicate immediately, it is not a question of their location, they become all-one. There is just the question of time-lag between arrival and departure; words are received and then retransmitted through the orifices, or not even that.¹⁷

Yes, my mouth, but there it is, I won't open it, I have no mouth, and what about it, I'll grow one, a little hole at first, then wider and wider, deeper and deeper, the air will gush into me, and out a second later, howling. [. . .] do I feel an ear, frankly now, do I feel an ear, well frankly now I don't, so much the worse, I don't feel an ear either, this is awful, make an effort, I must feel something¹⁸

The orifices are not only interchangeable but utterly uncertain; not only their location but also their very existence is questionable, the reception and transmission are on the verge of collapsing, yet the very fact that there is voice, the voice which goes on and on, retransmitting words received, or at least their remnants and crumbs, devouring and vomiting words – this fact implies an opening, an opening as such, the juncture of language and body as an opening, appearing at the very point of closure in this closed and shrinking world with no way out.

Where is the voice coming from, this pure voice of enunciation? Is it a monologue someone is proffering to anybody who might be listening? *A bon entendeur salut*? Or is it going on in the head, the interminable rambling of an internal voice? The alternative is itself faulty, the point of enunciation cannot be quite sorted out in that way, it cannot be placed on either side of this roughest of divides.

I'll have said it, without a mouth I'll have said it, I'll have said it inside me, then in the same breath outside me, perhaps that's what I feel, an outside and an inside and me in the middle, perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside, that can be as thin as foil, I'm neither one side nor the other, I'm in the middle, I'm the partition, I've two surfaces and no thickness, perhaps that's what I feel, myself vibrating, I'm the tympanum, on the one hand the mind, on the other the world, I don't belong to either¹⁹

One couldn't be more precise: the enunciating voice is the very principle of division, itself not on either side and yet on both sides at once, at the intersection of the inner and the outer and unplaceable in that division, the thinnest of foils which connects

and separates the two. Beckett's literature, written as literature is, is at the same time the literature of the voice as no other, not only by virtue of its being close to the spoken idiom, but also by being sustained merely by pure enunciation which propels it forward – the voice of enunciation with no other hold or footing, the voice more important than the words it utters. For the words are hollow, contradicting, clueless, digressing: the flow of words is a constant digression without the main line, without a course, its course is a dis-course, undermining itself yet carrying on. This is not a literature of sentences and statements, the statements are trivial, they are not propelled by a will to express, they contradict and retract themselves, they keep getting lost, and what emerges through all this is a literature of pure enunciation, yet an enunciation which most carnally brings forth the body.²⁰

There is a traditional way of dealing with the inner voice under the heading of 'the stream of consciousness'. The term, stemming from William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890), was first applied to Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*, then to William's brother Henry, and to Joyce, Woolf and a number of other modernist writers, thus becoming like a trademark of the modernist novel. As far as Beckett is concerned, the term is misleading and inappropriate, for the stream of consciousness presupposes consciousness as realm neatly separate from the outside world, and the writer supposedly follows the inner rambling and faithfully records it as a scribe, putting down its meanderings in a raw form as they appear to consciousness before being made presentable and coherent. The whole point with Beckett is that this inner voice maintains itself as unplaceable, at the very edge of the mind and the world, the speech and the body, cutting into both and being cut by both. Its inner split immediately translates into an outer split and vice versa. It is not that the consciousness is incoherent; rather the very line that separates consciousness and constitutes it as such is constantly blurred and indistinct.

The voice is there as a pure enunciation without a subject, or an enunciation in search of a subject, where various modes and levels of enunciation are mixed, heterogeneous voices are inserted. Without hierarchy and usual punctuation, multitude of diverse subjectivities flock together, but they are just so many aborted attempts, pursued for a while and then abandoned, suspended in the flux of the sheer perseverance of a voice. Voice is the anti-

cogito. It is at the far end of clear and distinct reasoning, it is quite its opposite, since its point is precisely to undo the distinctions and to introduce the indistinct. The distinct ideas? 'But it is gone clean out of my head, my little private idea. No matter, I have just had another. Perhaps it is the same one back again, ideas are so alike, when you get to know them.'²¹ The indistinct rules.²² The seemingly most self-evident distinctions get blurred and vague ('It's vague, life and death'),²³ the line between life and death is obscured and confused no less than the inner/outer divide. However, it is the indistinct that opens up the space for a minimal difference, a tiny split, which, so to speak, lacks distinction. The rock of cogito is irretrievable rocked at the very opening of *The Unnamable*, in the justly famous first lines: 'Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on.'²⁴ The French original is more poignant and precise at the crucial point: '*Dire je. Sans le penser.*'²⁵ It is a question not of belief, but of thought, of dissociating the 'I' from thinking. 'Say I. Without thinking it.' Say ego, without cogito. It is an 'I' which doesn't give support to thought, an unthinking 'I', an 'I' without substance, apart from being a vehicle of perseverance, on the verge of vanishing and resurrecting itself from the void. 'I' doesn't think, but speaks, and exists only as long as it goes on talking. Or does it? Is existence the proper term to describe its status? Doesn't the endless talking preclude ever saying 'therefore I am'? Isn't there a being quite different from existence, a locus of being without qualities?

How can talking ever come to an end? If it is endlessly propelled forward by the thrust of sheer persistence, then this prevents the retroactive recuperation of meaning:

It's an unbroken flow of words and of tears. [. . .] I confuse them, words and tears, my words are my tears, my eyes my mouth. [. . .] it's for ever the same murmur, flowing unbroken, like a single endless word and therefore meaningless [*sans signification*], for it's the end gives the meaning to words.²⁶

Ultimately, meaning is produced retroactively, it is the end which endows the preceding words with a meaning, the provisional ending of a sentence, of a section, the final ending of the book, it is always the last element which reshapes the preceding ones and makes

them tend toward that end, in both senses. It totalises what went before, words retroactively become teleological, flowing towards their end or goal that reclaims them, salvaging their haphazard and tentative advance with a hindsight seal. This is what Lacan's concept of *point de capiton*, the suture point, tries to account for. But with an unending flow no such point is ever reached, the *point de capiton* seems to be infinitely deferred and suspended, it is not a journey towards some end which would restore meaning. And if the novel has to end at some point, then the last novel of the great *Trilogy* ends on 'I'll go on', on the impossibility of ending, on the utmost ambiguity of ending which doesn't end.

How can talking ever come to an end? With the correlative reduction of words and bodies, the question can immediately be extended into 'How can body ever come to an end?' 'How can life ever come to an end?' Indeed Beckett's 'heroes' are always and increasingly on the brink of death, they keep dying through whole novels and theatre pieces, waiting for death to come as a salvation, they are all 'heroes' who have come to an end of their journey, who have exhausted the possible, and yet they cannot die. They start at the point of the end of their journey, at the point where some *point de capiton* should make sense of their lives, but the end is endlessly receding, it seems that death would rescue them and that this is all they wish for, but in the space of the withdrawing end there is a time-loop: they are caught in a loop which is at the same time an opening of a space, of a sense without any meaning. They reach a rock, not the firm rock of cogito but rather a being on the verge of nothing, they enter into a space of immortality which provides all the salvation needed precisely at the point where there seemed to be a pure nothing to engulf them. The reduction of words, meanings, bodies, their utter fragmentation leads to a nothing, but 'nothing' is but a loop which keeps them going on, nothing is but an 'event horizon', on the edge of the black hole, in which the minimal object emerges, 'the least'.²⁷

Immortality is not the good word for this situation, it reeks of damnation and redemption – a more appropriate and less distinguished word is called for. One of the interpreters says of the Beckett 'hero': 'Not able to be immortal, he is *increvable*! [*À défaut d'être immortel, il est increvable!*]'²⁸ *Increvable*, an excellent Beckettian word, is hardly translatable into English.²⁹ The dictionary offers 'to kick the bucket' as the trivial expression for dying

– he is not immortal, he just can't kick the bucket. Could one say 'unbucketable'? If I can be excused this questionable pun: could one say that the 'unbucketable' turns out to be 'becketttable'?

This is where one could use another, albeit highly laden, psychoanalytic term, the death drive. For the death drive is not simply a drive towards death, rather quite the opposite, despite some confusion in Freud. It is a drive which itself cannot die, a pure thrust of persistence which cannot be annihilated,³⁰ it can merely be destroyed from outside, a pure life in the loop of death, emerging on the verge of nothing. Reduction of words and of bodies thus runs into the realm of the death drive, impelled by 'unnullable least' that cannot be reduced and which glimmers on the edge of nothing.

Is this Beckett's way out of nihilism? Is nihilism defeated and overcome in this way, not by clinging to meaning, value, ethical injunctions, creed, belief, world-view, religion, art, hope, which are all prey to the logic of nihilism and its reproduction, but at the point of reducing them to facing this 'object nothing', nothing itself as a mere loop of 'unnullable least', a support of perseverance, an opening of a new production of sense? Or is the alternative itself faulty, the alternative between Beckett the great nihilist and Beckett the great saviour from the abyss of nihilism? If it is naive to see in Beckett the proponent of the absurd and the showcase of nihilism, is it not also naive to take him as the best antidote, as a host of his defenders have tried to do in various ways?³¹

The least – unnullable least? – one could say is: *nothing has changed*. The double meaning of this sentence invokes on the one hand the claustrophobic and static setting of Beckett's writing, a site where seemingly nothing could ever change – already since the first sentence of his first published novel, the justly famous incipit of *Murphy*: 'The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.' No alternative, nothing new under the sun, from the first sentence on. Nothing could change except for nothing itself, and maybe this could summarize his endeavour: nothing *has* changed, it has changed imperceptibly as we went on, following the erratic narrating voice in its chaotic meanderings, it has appeared, almost without our noticing, that this nothing *is* the new in 'the nothing new' on which the sun shines without alternative. And that perhaps the ultimate paradox in Beckett is that he has operated this incredible feat, a transformation of nothing, he changed nothing – what

seems to be immune to any change by definition – and that this shift within nothing has actually changed the very terms of the alternative.

Notes

- 1 But we do find 'René du Perron' and 'Fallor ergo sum'. Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems in English and French* (New York: Grove Press, 1977).
- 2 It reduces it also in the opposite direction of the horoscope, since the last two lines of the poem point to the moment of death: 'and grant me my second / starless inscrutable hour'.
- 3 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 352.
- 4 Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman, *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 148.
- 5 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 172.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 172.
- 7 For a reconsideration of the role of Joyce in the Beckett oeuvre, see P. J. Murphy, *Beckett's Dedalus: Dialogical Engagements with Joyce in Beckett's Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).
- 8 Jacques Lacan, *Le Sinthome (Le Séminaire XXIII)* (Paris: Seuil, 2005).
- 9 See for instance, 'Yes, the words I heard, and heard distinctly, having quite a sensitive ear, were heard a first time, then a second, and often even a third, as pure sounds, free of all meaning [. . .] And the words I uttered myself, and which must nearly always have gone with an effort of the intelligence, were often to me as the buzzing of an insect.' Beckett, *Molloy*, in *The Beckett Trilogy* (London: Picador, 1979), p. 47.
- 10 But that cliché is dead is itself another cliché. 'A cliché is a dead piece of language, of which one cliché might be that it is dead but won't lie down.' Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 78. The subject has now been remarkably explored by Elizabeth Barry in her *Beckett and Authority: The Uses of Cliché* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
- 11 Gilles Deleuze, 'The exhausted', in *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), p. 152.
- 12 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, trans. Robert Baldick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1965] 1972), p. 185; *La Nausée* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1968), p. 182.
- 13 Beckett, *Molloy*, pp. 64–9. See also the remarkable article by Denise Gigante, 'The endgame of taste: Keats, Sartre, Beckett', in Timothy Morton (ed.), *Cultures of Taste / Theories of Appetite: Eating Romanticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 183–202.

- 14 'And deep down it was all the same to me whether I sucked a different stone each time or always the same stone, until the end of time. For they all tasted exactly the same.' Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 69.
- 15 *Ibid.*
- 16 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, p. 321.
- 17 'Saying is inventing. Wrong, very rightly wrong. You invent nothing, you think you are inventing, you think you are escaping, and all you do is stammer out your lesson, the remnants of a pensum one day got by heart and long forgotten, life without tears, as it is wept.' Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 31.
- 18 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, pp. 353 and 352.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 352.
- 20 'Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, not to be able to say what you think you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition.' Beckett, *Molloy*, p. 27. And: 'Is there then no hope? Good gracious, no heavens, what an idea! Just a faint one perhaps, but which will never serve.' Beckett, *The Unnamable*, p. 336. And: 'and so depart, towards my brethren, no, none of that, no brethren, that's right, take it back [. . .]. And would it not suffice, without any change in the structure of the thing as it now stands, as it always stood, without a mouth being opened at the place which even pain could never line, would it no suffice to, to what, the thread is lost, no matter, here's another.' Beckett, *The Unnamable*, p. 252. There is a whole rhetoric of retraction in Beckett, the constant attempt to take back, make the said unsaid, but this only makes the insistence of enunciation more tenacious.
- 21 Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 207.
- 22 'coming to the truth of being requires thinking the non-separate, the in-distinct. But what separates and distinguishes e.g. light from darkness, constitutes rather the place of non-being and of the false.' Alain Badiou, 'L'Écriture du générique: Samuel Beckett' in *Conditions* (Paris: Seuil, 1992), p. 335; my translation. See also Andrew Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou: The Pathos of Intermittency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
- 23 Beckett, *Malone Dies*, p. 206.
- 24 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, p. 267.
- 25 Beckett, *L'Innommable* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1953), p. 7.
- 26 Samuel Beckett, *Text 8, Stories and Texts for Nothing* (New York: Grove Press, 1967), p. 111; Beckett, VIII, *Nouvelles et textes pour rien* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1955), pp. 167–8.
- 27 'Least. Least best worse. Least never to be naught. Never to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least.' Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), p. 32.

- 28 Simon goes on: 'Through the vibration of time he goes towards his death which he never joins, yet carrying it in him.' Alfred Simon, *Samuel Beckett* (Paris: Belfond, 1963), p. 130.
- 29 Alain Badiou used it in the subtitle of his book on Beckett: *Beckett: l'incroyable désir* (Paris: Hachette, 1995).
- 30 This is where my reading sharply differs from Badiou's, who sees in the death drive merely a morbid preoccupation with death.
- 31 I must refer here to Shane Weller's most remarkable *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005), which explores this at length. Weller writes: 'To read all of Beckett's "little phrases" as nihilist may well be naïve, but it is surely no less naïve to read them as resistant to nihilism.' Weller, *A Taste*, p. 196.