6

Unwords

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In a well-known letter of 14 June 1967 to the literary critic Sighle Kennedy, Beckett counters her proposed literary couple of Joyce and Proust with the philosophical one of Democritus and Geulincx as the two ‘points of departure’ for any critical analysis of his works. As Beckett puts it: ‘I simply do not feel the presence in my writings as a whole of the Joyce & Proust situations you evoke. If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work my points of departure would be the “Naught is more real . . .” and the “Ubi nihil vales . . .” both already in *Murphy* and neither very rational.’¹ Aside from its substitution of the philosophical for the literary, what is perhaps most striking about Beckett’s response to Kennedy is that these two proposed points of departure share something – or, more precisely, they share the nothing: the Democritean ‘naught’ and the Geulincxian ‘nihil’. On closer inspection, however, this apparently shared concern with the nothing proves to be an antinomy, since, as Beckett was aware (and, as we shall see, this knowledge is evidenced by his philosophy notes of the 1930s), Democritus and Geulincx take diametrically opposed positions on what may be termed the ontological nothing. Whereas for the former the nothing exists (as the ‘void’ separating the ‘atoms’), for the latter the nothing (as ‘vacuum’) is quite simply ‘impossible’.² In his dismissal – as ‘an utterly silly opinion’ – of the Scholastics’ claim that space is nothing (*nihil*, *nihilum*), Geulincx follows Descartes and ultimately Parmenides.³ That said, unlike the Democritean ‘naught’, the Geulincxian ‘nihil’ to which Beckett refers in his letter to Kennedy is not an ontological but rather an ethical nothing: ‘Where you are worth nothing . . .’ (*Ubi nihil vales . . .*). So it is, then, that Beckett’s seemingly straightforward countering of the

literary by the philosophical, and his emphasis upon the importance of the nothing, in fact points to both an antinomy at the ontological level and a distinction between the ontological and the ethical in his own literary treatment of the nothing.

Taking Beckett's response to Kennedy as my own point of departure, my aim in this chapter is to offer a philologically orientated analysis of Beckett's engagement with the nothing as conceived ontologically and ethically, which is to say an analysis that focuses principally on his deployment of the words 'nothing', 'naught', 'nihil' and 'void', and a consideration of some of the sources by way of which these words entered his literary vocabulary and came to serve as markers for an aporetic experience. Following his own theorisation of a 'literature of the unword' (*Literatur des Unworts*) in his 9 July 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, these words might themselves be thought of as among Beckett's most important 'unwords'; that is to say, words that work against what in the letter to Kaun he terms the 'veil' (*Schleier*) of language in order to disclose that which lies beyond language, 'be it something or nothing' (*sei es etwas oder nichts*).⁴ Not least among the reasons for a philological approach to these particular 'unwords' is Beckett's own marked attention to the textual history of his engagement with philosophical reflections on the nothing. For instance, in opting for the words 'naught' and 'nihil' in his letter to Kennedy, Beckett indicates not only the precise *textual* nature of his encounters with philosophical writings on the nothing over three decades earlier but also the *order* in which these encounters took place.

Although his encounters with the thought of Democritus and Geulincx between 1933 and 1936 would prove to be critical for his literary treatment of the nothing from *Murphy* onwards, Beckett's preoccupation with the concept of, and figures for, the nothing in fact preceded those encounters. As early as *Proust* (written in the late summer of 1930), Beckett is already placing a form of the nothing at the heart of his conception of Proust's – and, by implication, all genuine – art when he claims that 'The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extracircumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy'.⁵ This statement suggests that the artistic procedure moves in the direction of a 'core' that is in fact nothing, and that this movement is itself an act of negation, albeit the paradoxical negation of a 'nullity'.

In his first completed novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*

(written in 1931–32), Beckett tends for the most part to emphasise the explosive disintegration of the ‘art surface’ in order to make that surface correspond to what is taken to be an ‘incoherent reality’.⁶ However, the novel also testifies in various ways to that nascent concern for the nothing already expressed in *Proust*. Early in the text, for instance, Beckett writes of the ‘violent voiding and blanking’ of Belacqua’s mind, and, anticipating one of the key phrases in *Godot* (written almost two decades later), the novel’s narrator states on three occasions that there is ‘nothing to be done’.⁷ In addition to the repeated valorisation of absence by the narrator – ‘the object that becomes invisible before your eyes is, so to speak, the brightest and best’; ‘Absence makes the heart grow fonder is a true saying’⁸ – the nothing as such is at once playfully valorised and, importantly, identified as the principal reason for the ‘difficulties’ faced by the artist: ‘there are few things more bel than a niente, but considered as a premise, and be you Abbot himself, it presents certain difficulties in the manner of manipulation’, the passage in which this remark occurs echoing the ‘core of the eddy’ image in *Proust*: ‘you find when you come to the core and the kernel and the seat of the malady that behold it is a bel niente’.⁹ As for the ‘Abbot’ to whom Beckett refers here, John Pilling has suggested that he is possibly either the ‘Abbé Gabriel’ mentioned earlier in the novel or the Abbé de Saint-Réal in Stendhal’s *Le Rouge et le noir*, who is also named in Beckett’s Trinity College lectures of 1930–31, as recorded by Rachel Burrows.¹⁰ The first of the two statements on absence quoted above also includes a reference to Stendhal, and, given that the ‘bel niente’ is thought here in relation to the writing of a literary work, it is not unreasonable to see Beckett’s reflections on art in its relation to the nothing as essentially Stendhalian at this point in his development. This conclusion is also supported by entries on Stendhal in Beckett’s ‘Dream’ Notebook of 1931–32, especially the phrase ‘folie pour rien’,¹¹ which, two decades later, will be echoed in the title of one of Beckett’s own works, *Textes pour rien* (written in 1950–51).

An important philosophico-theological source for both the ‘voiding’ and the ‘nothing’ in *Dream* is Augustine’s *Confessions*, from the Pusey translation of which the phrase ‘A void place, a spacious nothing’ is entered into the ‘Dream’ Notebook and then inserted into *Dream* as part of a description of Belacqua’s state of mind after a pleasurable sense of being ‘disembodied’.¹²

This sudden strange sensation was of a piece with the ancient volatilisation of his first communion, long forgot and never brought to mind in all the long years that had run out with him since and rolled over that delicious event. Alas! it was a short knock and went as it had come, like that, it vacated him like that, leaving him bereft and in his breast a void place and a spacious nothing.¹³

Further evidence that Beckett was already at this time preoccupied with conceptions of the nothing as 'void' within a range of discourses is to be found in other entries in the 'Dream' Notebook, including the phrase 'Emptiness of space' from Sir James Jeans's *The Universe Around Us* (1929).¹⁴

Prior to his sustained reading in philosophy shortly after the completion of *Dream*, however, it is arguably Schopenhauer whose influence is the strongest on Beckett's early reflections on an art that would take the nothing as its object or aim. In Schopenhauer, whom he first read (in French) in the summer of 1930, Beckett encountered a philosophy at the heart of which lies the theory of a liberating negation (*Verneinung*) that is orientated towards the experience of what, from the perspective of the world as representation (*Vorstellung*), is taken to be nothing:

we freely acknowledge that what remains after the complete abolition of the will is, for all who are still full of the will, assuredly nothing [*nichts*]. But also conversely, to those in whom the will has turned and denied itself, this very real world of ours with all its suns and galaxies, is – nothing [*nichts*].¹⁵

Three years later, when reading Windelband, Beckett came upon the following account of Schopenhauer's conclusions:

At the close of his work he intimates that what would remain after the annihilation of the will, and with that, of the world also, would be for all those who are still full of will, certainly *nothing*; but consideration of the life of the saints teaches, that while the world with all its suns and milky ways is nothing to them, they have attained blessedness and peace. 'In thy nothing I hope to find the all.'¹⁶

If the Schopenhauerian nothing remains impossible to represent – precisely because it lies beyond the very distinction between will and representation – *Dream* none the less contains images that evoke it. Of these, the 'night firmament' is among the most important for Beckett's future development, not least because that image

anticipates the reliance upon music in his later formulations of an art orientated towards a liberating nothing: 'The night firmament is abstract density of music, symphony without end, illumination without end, yet emptier, more sparsely lit, than the most succinct constellations of genius.'¹⁷ Crucially, too, Schopenhauer brings together what Beckett would later find separated in Democritus and Geulincx, namely the ontological nothing on the one hand and the ethical nothing on the other; for, according to Schopenhauer, the *Verneinung* of the will is the only properly ethical act, and what it produces is precisely that which ontologically goes by the name 'nothing'. In short, for Schopenhauer, to desire nothing – or, one might say, to desire *the* nothing – is the only mode of ethical being. That this mode of being does not necessarily exclude pleasure will be among the most radical elements in Beckett's works.

While the nothing conceived as absence or void is already present in *Dream*, that presence remains a relatively marginal one in comparison with the emphasis upon incoherence, disaggregation, or disintegration. By the time of Beckett's first published novel, *Murphy* (written in 1935–36), however, an explicitly named and capitalised 'Nothing' has come to occupy the very centre of the work, Beckett placing the description of an unmediated experience of this 'Nothing' between Murphy's failed attempt to communicate with Mr Endon on the chessboard and the former's death:

little by little [Murphy's] eyes were captured by the brilliant swallow-tail of Mr Endon's arms and legs, purple, scarlet, black and glitter, till they saw nothing else, and that in a short time only as a vivid blur, Neary's big blooming buzzing confusion or ground, mercifully free of figure. Wearying soon of this he dropped his head on his arms in the midst of the chessmen, which scattered with a terrible noise. Mr Endon's finery persisted for a little in an after-image scarcely inferior to the original. Then this also faded and Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence (to abuse a nice distinction) not of *percipere* but of *percipi*. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real. Time did not cease, that would be asking too much, but the wheel of rounds and pauses did, as Murphy with his head among the armies continued to suck in, through all the posterns of his withered soul, the accidentless One-and-Only, conveniently called Nothing.¹⁸

It is here that Beckett signals the principal philosophical sources for his own literary conception of the ontological nothing. On the basis of his philosophy notes (now held at Trinity College Dublin), it is possible to identify not only the texts in which Beckett encountered summaries of pre-Socratic atomism (especially Leucippus and Democritus) but also the precise source for the word 'naught' in the expression of the atomist paradox, namely Archibald Alexander's *Short History of Philosophy*, in which one finds the following statement (duly recorded by Beckett):

Aristotle, in his account of the early philosophers, says, 'Leucippus and Democritus assume as elements the "full" and the "void". The former they term being and the latter non-being. Hence they assert that non-being exists as well as being.' And, according to Plutarch, Democritus himself is reported as saying, 'there is naught more real than nothing'.¹⁹

While Alexander's text may – as Everett Frost observes²⁰ – become less important as an intellectual resource in the course of Beckett's note-taking enterprise than either John Burnet's *Greek Philosophy, Part I: Thales to Plato* (1914) or Wilhelm Windelband's *History of Philosophy* (1893), it is arguably more important than either Burnet or Windelband in philological terms, since, half a century after transcribing it from Alexander, Beckett deploys the word 'naught', together with 'void', at key moments in one of his major late prose texts, *Worstward Ho* (1983). Indeed, while the word 'void' is that text's most prevalent 'unword' (occurring a remarkable 52 times in the published version), and also having occurred in decisive statements in *The Unnamable* (written in 1949–50) – 'only I and this black void have ever been'²¹ – and *Ill Seen Ill Said* – 'Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness'²² – the word 'naught' (which occurs 11 times in *Worstward Ho*) is no less decisive, not simply on account of the impossibility that it names (Beckett here echoing Geulincx's insistence on the impossibility of the vacuum) but also because of the word's material quality (on which Beckett draws in the key phrase 'gnawing to be naught'), a quality that disappears in French translation, since the 'naught' in *Murphy* is translated as 'rien'²³ and the 'naught' in *Worstward Ho* remains untranslated by him.²⁴ So important is this particular 'unword' that all instances of its deployment in *Worstward Ho* warrant quotation:

Naught best. Best worse. No. Not best worse. **Naught** not best worse. Less best worse. No. Least. Least best worse. Least never to be **naught**. Never to **naught** be brought. Never by **naught** be nulled.

Nohow over words again say what then when not preying. Each better worse for **naught**. No stilling preying. The shades. The dim. The void. All always faintly preying. Worse for **naught**. Worser for **naught**.

Same stoop for all. Same vasts apart. Such last state. Latest state. Till somehow less in vain. Worse in vain. All gnawing to be **naught**. Never to be **naught**.

Best worse no farther. Nohow less. Nohow worse. Nohow **naught**. Nohow on.²⁵

It would be a mistake, however, simply to assume that, because Beckett refers explicitly to Democritus (as ‘the Abderite’) in *Murphy*, and because the word ‘naught’ is derived from a summary of his thought in Alexander, Democritus’ theory of the nothing as what Alexander, Burnet and Windelband all term the ‘void’ is the only one that is operative in Beckett’s works. The reference to the ‘nice distinction’ between *percipere* and *percipi* in *Murphy* directs the reader to another philosopher who will be important for Beckett, namely Bishop Berkeley, about whom Beckett encountered the following statement in Windelband: ‘*Body* is then nothing but a *complex of ideas*. If we abstract from a cherry all the qualities which can be perceived through any of the senses, what is left? Nothing.’²⁶ It is just such an abstraction of the qualities that is described in the above-quoted passage from *Murphy* on the experience of the ‘Nothing’. And, like the ‘naught’, this conception of seeing the nothing also recurs half a century later in *Worstward Ho*: ‘Old dim. When ever what else? Where all always to be seen. Of the nothing to be seen. Dimly seen. Nothing ever unseen. Of the nothing to be seen.’²⁷

Furthermore, a pre-Socratic philosopher of the nothing who is arguably no less important to Beckett than Democritus – although much less often noted – is Gorgias of Leontini. Although Gorgias is not named in Beckett’s published works, in a letter of 21 April 1958 to A. J. Leventhal he refers to the three fundamental propositions of what in Burnet is described as Gorgias’ ‘cosmological nihilism’.²⁸ In the letter to Leventhal, these three propositions are given as follows:

1. Nothing is.
2. If anything is, it cannot be known.
3. If anything is, and can be known, it cannot be expressed in speech.²⁹

As with the Democritean 'Naught is more real', so here too the phrasing is strikingly close to that in Alexander, as noted down by Beckett in the early 1930s:

In his chief work – *On Nature or the Non-existent*, which has been preserved by Sextus Empiricus – he [Gorgias] emphasises his three famous propositions: 1st, nothing exists; 2nd, even if anything did exist, it could not be known; 3rd, and even if it could be known, it would be incommunicable.³⁰

As C. J. Ackerley has argued, Gorgias haunts *Watt* (written in 1941–45) in various ways, that novel being a crucial counterpoint to *Murphy* not least because it presents the nothing as that which disconcerts the mind seeking rationality in the real:

What distressed Watt 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, with the utmost formal distinctness, and that it continued to happen, in his mind, he supposed, though he did not know exactly what that meant.³¹

In his fine commentary on the novel and its genesis, Ackerley observes that Notebook 1 of the manuscript contains a chapter entitled 'The Nothingness', and he connects this with the 'soul-landscape' included in the Addenda of the published text, which he identifies as the novel's 'primal scene'.³² The nothing in *Watt*, especially if one takes it (as so many commentators have done) as being figured in Mr Knott, may be related back not only to pre-Socratic thought on the 'void' but also to Kant's conception of the noumenon, about which Beckett read the following passage in *Windelband*: 'Noumena, or *things-in-themselves*, are therefore *thinkable in the negative sense as objects of a non-sensuous perception*, of which, to be sure, our knowledge can predicate absolutely nothing, – they are thinkable as *limiting conceptions* of experience.'³³

Watt's inability to bear the thought of the nothing obviously sets him apart not only from *Murphy* (for whom the experience of the nothing is a 'positive peace') but also from the voices in texts such as *Ill Seen Ill Said* and *Worstward Ho*, and aligns him instead with

the scientist or rationalist as defined by Heidegger in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, a text first published in 1953, the same year as *Watt*, and based on a lecture series delivered at the University of Freiburg in 1935:

One cannot, in fact, talk about and deal with Nothing [*das Nichts*] as if it were a thing, such as the rain out there, or a mountain, or any object at all; Nothing remains in principle inaccessible to all science [*Wissenschaft*]. Whoever truly wants to talk of Nothing must necessarily become unscientific. But this is a great misfortune only if one believes that scientific thinking alone is the authentic, rigorous thinking, that it alone can and must be made the measure even of philosophical thinking.³⁴

According to Heidegger, only the philosopher and the poet (*Dichter*) are in a position to ‘talk about Nothing’ (*vom Nichts zu reden*), and even they can proceed only by way of an indicating (*hinzeigen*) rather than direct presentation or representation.³⁵ For Beckett, too, the nothing will remain that towards which text after text indicates by way of those ‘unwords’ that increasingly dominate his works – with, as we have seen, the words ‘void’ and ‘naught’ being so central to the worsening that is enacted in *Worstward Ho*.

Not only do Beckett’s various reading notes of the 1930s help us to identify key sources for his thinking (and indeed his indicative naming) of the nothing as ‘void’ and ‘naught’, they also clarify the nature of the aporia of the ontological nothing within which his works will come increasingly to locate themselves. On the one hand, first in Alexander, and then in Burnet and Windelband, Beckett encounters Parmenides’ claim regarding the impossibility of non-being, a claim that will recur in different forms in both Descartes and Geulincx. In Burnet, for instance, Beckett records the following summary of Parmenides’ argument on ‘the consequences of saying that anything *is*’:

In the first place, it cannot have come into being. If it had, it must first have arisen from nothing or from something. It cannot have arisen from nothing; for there is no nothing. It cannot have arisen from something; for there is nothing else than what *is*. Nor can anything else besides itself come into being; for there can be no empty space in which it could do so. *Is it or is it not?* If it *is*, then it is now, all at once. In this way Parmenides refutes all accounts of the origin of the world. *Ex nihilo nihil fit*.³⁶

On the other hand, as we have seen, Beckett also encounters the atomist theory of the 'void' that separates the atoms, a theory the way towards which was prepared by Melissus, who, according to Burnet, made it 'necessary for Leukippos to affirm the existence of the Void'.³⁷ In Windelband, Beckett notes the following atomist counter-argument to Parmenides:

If [. . .] the plurality of things, and the mutations taking place among them as they come and go, were to be made intelligible, then instead of the single world-body, with no internal distinctions which Parmenides had taught, a plurality of such must be assumed, separated from one another, not by other Being, but by that which is not Being, Non-being: *i.e.* by the incorporeal, by *empty space*. This entity, then, which is Non-being [*i.e.* not Being in the true sense], must have in its turn a kind of Being, or of metaphysical reality ascribed to it, and Leucippus regarded it as the unlimited, the *ἄπειρον*, in contrast with the limitation which Being proper possesses, according to Parmenides.³⁸

While the passage from *Murphy* quoted above clearly suggests that the nothing can, albeit fleetingly, become an object of experience, and indeed an object of pleasurable experience, the Parmenidean denial of the possibility of non-being will come to exert an increasingly important pressure in Beckett's later works, and this not least because that denial finds a later advocate in Geulincx, Beckett's second proposed 'point of departure' for any interpretation of his oeuvre.

In his 11 pages of notes on Geulincx's *Metaphysics*, taken in March 1936 when *Murphy* was only months from completion, Beckett records proposition 4 in Part Two ('Concerning Body, or Somatology'): 'A vacuum is impossible' (*Vacuum est impossibile*).³⁹ As proposition 5 makes clear, Geulincx means by this that space is not nothing (*nihil, nihilum*); rather, it is a body (*corpus*). Geulincx goes on to expose what he takes to be a contradiction at the heart of the philosophy that insists upon the existence of the nothing conceived spatially: 'They [the Scholastics] admit (as they must) that space has such and such dimensions, yet they also want to say that it is nothing. But a nothing with dimensions is just as absurd as a white nothing, a nothing wearing a coat, or a nothing walking down the street.'⁴⁰ While these 'absurd' images will arguably find their place in Beckett's oeuvre, Geulincx's denial of the very possibility of the nothing also finds expression there, above all in *Worstward Ho*: 'All gnawing to be naught. Never to be naught.'⁴¹

Of course, as noted at the outset of this chapter, when he proposes Geulincx as one of the two points of departure for an interpretation of his works, Beckett is referring not to the philosopher's denial of the possibility of the ontological *nihil* but rather to his thinking of the ethical *nihil*. In fact, Beckett encountered the key phrase '*Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*' prior to his first-hand reading of Geulincx in 1936, since it is quoted in a footnote in Windelband that was duly recorded by Beckett three years earlier:

The 'autology', or *inspectio sui*, is, therefore, not only the epistemological starting-point of the system, but also its ethical conclusion. Man has nothing to do in the outer world. *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*. The highest virtue is a modest contentment, submission to God's will – humility.⁴²

By January 1936, Beckett was ready to acknowledge that such an ethics would have to occupy a central place in his own work, although not simply (as has often been assumed) as *the* ethics of that work. This complication of the Geulincxian ethics of humility (and of quietism more generally) is already made clear in a letter of 16 January 1936 to Thomas MacGreevy, in which Beckett declares: 'I suddenly see that Murphy is [a] break down between his: *Ubi nihil vales ibi nihil velis* (position) and Malraux's *Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens* (negation).'⁴³ Just as the Democritean affirmation of the ontological nothing is part of a more general economy within Beckett's works, the other pole of which is the Parmenidean/Geulincxian denial of that nothing, so Geulincx's ethical nothing is part of a more general economy, the other pole of which is a desire for company (that is, for the world) that finds expression in the line from André Malraux's novel *La Condition humaine* (1933), which was to become the epigraph to chapter 9 of *Murphy*. This need for company will also remain present throughout Beckett's oeuvre, being figured, for instance, as the hand-in-hand of father and son in *Worstward Ho*.⁴⁴

On the one hand, Beckett engages with the ethicalised nothing of negation in both Geulincx and Schopenhauer, or what in his *German Diaries* he terms the 'fundamental unheroic'.⁴⁵ Here, it is complete abandonment, or the reduction to nothing of power, that becomes the sole ethical mode of comportment. When reading Geulincx's *Ethics* in 1936, Beckett recorded the claim that 'The root of Ethics is humility, to withdraw from oneself', and also that

'we learn by inspecting ourselves that we can do nothing about any part of the human condition, we have no power, and no right over it; that it is all down to someone else's power'.⁴⁶ In the face of such absolute powerlessness, the ethical imperative becomes self-abandonment: 'Disregard of oneself, neglect and abandonment of oneself',⁴⁷ and this might reasonably be seen as precisely what the figures in Beckett's postwar fiction attempt to do. But, of course, Geulincx does not stop there, for he goes on to clarify that this self-abandonment is also a giving of oneself '*entirely into God's hands*'.⁴⁸ In Beckett, however, those hands are either absent – as is suggested in *All That Fall* (written in 1956) – or unloving – as suggested by the bitterly ironic use of 'merciful' as the epithet for God in *Not I* (written in 1972). This leads us to return to what Alexander, Burnet and Windelband all label the 'nihilism' of Gorgias, something that certainly haunts Beckett's works. As Alexander puts it:

If Protagoras affirmed that every opinion was equally true, Gorgias declared that every opinion was equally false. Such thoroughgoing scepticism makes knowledge impossible. All is delusion. Gorgias has been called, with reason, a philosophical nihilist.⁴⁹

This is not to say that Beckett's oeuvre constitutes the unambiguous expression of either cosmological or ethical nihilism, even if his interest in nihilism dates back at least as far as 1931, with the following entry from Jules de Gaultier's *De Kant à Nietzsche* occurring towards the end of the 'Dream' Notebook: 'knowledge the Nihilist founding the modes of a more solid illusion, nourishing the darkness in which Life prospers'.⁵⁰ Rather, through his deployment of a series of 'unwords', Beckett explores the antinomies within the thinking of both the ontological and the ethical nothing, and he does so by drawing on a wide range of philosophical sources, some of which are more evident than others, but all of which have to be taken into account if one wishes to do justice to the complexities of his literary treatment of the nothing.

If Beckett's works locate themselves within the aporias of both the ontological and the ethical nothing, they do so also at the affective level. On the one hand, and in a decidedly Schopenhauerian fashion, his narrators and *dramatis personae* state the nothing as the supreme object of desire. Just as Schopenhauer, as quoted in Windelband, declares: 'In thy nothing I hope to find the all', so the Beckett of both *Murphy* and *Ill Seen Ill Said* makes the nothing

that which promises all, and in *Endgame* has Clov retort to Hamm: 'Better than nothing! Is it possible?'⁵¹ On the other hand, and not just in *Watt*, the thought of the nothing is presented as anything but pleasurable. For instance, in the 'Whoroscope' Notebook Beckett records the phrase 'Sit stupid in the gloom of perpetual vacancy' from Johnson's *Rasselas*, and then in a letter of 9 July 1935 to Arland Ussher declares: 'I now sit stupid in the gloom of perpetual vacancy. The silence which refreshed you as respite from utterance, uninterrupted would oppress you.'⁵² Similarly, at the end of the radio play *Embers* (1959), Henry consults his diary and says: 'Saturday . . . nothing. Sunday . . . Sunday . . . nothing all day. [Pause.] Nothing all day. [Pause.] All day all night nothing.'⁵³ The mood here is far indeed from that at the end of *Ill Seen Ill Said*. In short, then, just as the nothing is presented both as that which underlies all and as that which is impossible, so it is presented both as that which is most desired and as that which is most feared or resisted.

The aporetic logic governing both the ontological and the ethical nothing finds its first culminations in *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing*, and by 1959, in a letter to A. J. Leventhal, Beckett can even characterise each of his texts as a 'next next to nothing'.⁵⁴ In order to grasp why Beckett's 'unwords' can be thought by him to result only in the production of a 'next to nothing' rather than opening on to the nothing as such, one has to consider not only the aporetic logic derived from the philosophers considered above but also Beckett's encounter with the critique of language theorised by Fritz Mauthner in his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*.

We have seen that, as early as *Proust*, Beckett is theorising an artistic procedure that is negative in nature and that takes as both its object and its aim a nothing figured there as the 'core of the eddy' and later as the 'void'. It is just such a conception of art that finds its first fully developed articulation in his 9 July 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, in which he declares that '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 [*an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen*]', and follows this with the assertion: 'To bore one hole after another in it [language], until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing [*sei es etwas oder nichts*] – begins to seep through: I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.'⁵⁵ Such a literature will,

Beckett asserts, be a literature of the 'unword' (*Unwort*). The description of language as a veil (*Schleier*) in this letter is significant not least because it builds on a passage in German on the 'veil of hope' (*Hoffnungsschleier*) in Beckett's 'Clare Street' Notebook, dating from August 1936. As Mark Nixon observes, this veil may be thought in relation to what Schopenhauer terms the 'veil of Maya'.⁵⁶

What cannot be emphasised strongly enough, however, is that on both occasions on which he refers to the nothing (*das Nichts*) in the letter to Kaun, Beckett situates it within the frame of the 'perhaps' by way of an 'or' (*oder*). In short, in this letter Beckett refrains from simply identifying the nothing as the real that a literature of the unword would disclose. A decade later, in the essay 'Peintres de l'empêchement' (June 1948), he returns to the image of the veil, characterising genuine art as 'Un dévoilement sans fin, voile derrière voile, plan sur plan de transparences imparfaites, un dévoilement vers l'indévoilable, le rien, la chose à nouveau';⁵⁷ here, too, he retains the 'perhaps' by offering both 'le rien' and 'la chose à nouveau' as the two possibilities for that which lies behind the veil. Only if one ignores Beckett's use of the *oder* in the letter to Kaun or the splice comma in 'Peintres de l'empêchement' can one conclude – as does Richard Coe, for instance – that nothingness is the 'ultimate reality' in Beckett's works.⁵⁸

Beckett's 1937 theorisation of a literature of the unword might seem to indicate that, to his reading of Schopenhauer and Geulincx, and about Democritus and Gorgias, he had by now added a close reading of Mauthner's *Beiträge*, in which the Austrian philosopher argues that the only way to overcome the kind of word superstition (*Wortaberglaube*) that leads us to mistake linguistic entities for non-linguistic ones is by turning language back against itself in an act of linguistic self-dissolution (*Selbstzersetzung*).⁵⁹ Such a conclusion appears all the more reasonable when one considers that, in his letter to Kaun, Beckett advocates 'some form of nominalist irony'⁶⁰ as a stage on the way towards a fully realised literature of the unword: not only does Mauthner (in one of the passages from volume II of the *Beiträge* on which Beckett took verbatim notes) assert that 'The nominalism of the Middle Ages is the first attempt at a genuine self-dissolution of metaphorical thinking',⁶¹ but he also identifies Goethe's use of irony as that which enables him 'more than any other writer before or after him to rise above all

possible linguistic limits'.⁶² The evidence is, however, now strongly in favour of dating Beckett's substantial note-taking from Mauthner to 1938; which is to say, after the letter to Kaun, even if he had already encountered Mauthner's work indirectly on his 1936–37 trip to Germany, when reading Karl Ballmer's pamphlet *Aber Herr Heidegger!* (1933).⁶³ Beckett's sustained reading of Mauthner took place, then, between the completion of *Murphy* and the beginning of work on *Watt*; for, in striking contrast to *Murphy*, *Watt* is a work in which the status of language as such is placed in question, and this placing in question is explicitly related to the nothing in that novel: 'the only way one can speak of nothing is to speak of it as though it were something'.⁶⁴ *Watt* is the first of Beckett's major works in which a dissonantal art of the kind outlined in the letter to Kaun begins to emerge: language becomes a mode of *Selbstzersetzung*, and it does so in the interests of a nothing that resists articulation. In short, it is with *Watt* that Beckett moves decisively towards an apophatic art whose object will be a nothing that is at once impossible and unavoidable. The consummation of this art comes, however, almost forty years later, in the unprecedented deployment of the unwords 'void' and 'naught' in *Worstward Ho*, where the aporias of both the ontological and the ethical nothing are enacted in a literary language that remains unlike any other: 'Nohow over words again say what then when not preying. Each better worse for naught. No stilling preying. The shades. The dim. The void. All always faintly preying. Worse for naught. Worsen for naught.'

Notes

- 1 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 113.
- 2 Arnold Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, trans. Martin Wilson (Wisbech: Christoffel, 1999), p. 55. As Wilson observes, 'by *vacuum* Geulincx understands somewhere where there is literally nothing, not even space', *ibid.*, p. 56, n. 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 4 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 172.
- 5 Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970), p. 65.
- 6 Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ed. Eoin O'Brien and Edith Fournier (Dublin: Black Cat, 1992), p. 102.

- 7 *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 5, 89, 190.
- 8 *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 40.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 10 See John Pilling, *A Companion to 'Dream of Fair to Middling Women'* (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2004), p. 274.
- 11 John Pilling (ed.), *Beckett's 'Dream' Notebook* (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999), entry 919.
- 12 *Ibid.*, entry 125.
- 13 Beckett, *Dream*, p. 185.
- 14 Pilling (ed.), *Beckett's 'Dream' Notebook*, entry 1067.
- 15 Arthur Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, trans. E. F. J. Payne, 2 vols (New York: Dover, 1966), vol. 1, pp. 411–12.
- 16 W. Windelband, *A History of Philosophy, with Especial Reference to the Formation and Development of Its Problems and Conceptions*, trans. James H. Tufts (London: Macmillan, 1893), p. 621.
- 17 Beckett, *Dream*, p. 16.
- 18 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1938), p. 246.
- 19 Archibald B. D. Alexander, *A Short History of Philosophy*, 3rd edn (Glasgow: Maclehose, Jackson & Co., 1922), pp. 38–9; cf. Trinity College Dublin (TCD) MS 10967/75.
- 20 See *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Notes diverse holo*, eds Matthijs Engelberts, Everett Frost, and Jane Maxwell, 16 (2006), 67–8.
- 21 Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1959), pp. 305–6.
- 22 Samuel Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said* (London: John Calder, 1982), p. 59.
- 23 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1965), p. 176.
- 24 After Beckett's death, *Worstward Ho* was translated into French by Edith Fournier, the word 'naught' being rendered as 'rien'.
- 25 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (London: John Calder, 1983), pp. 31–2, 41, 46–7.
- 26 Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, p. 470; cf. TCD MS 10967/206–10.
- 27 Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, p. 24.
- 28 John Burnet, *Greek Philosophy, Part I: Thales to Plato* (London: Macmillan, 1914), p. 122.
- 29 Quoted in Matthew Feldman, *Beckett's Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett's 'Interwar Notes'* (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 76.
- 30 Alexander, *Short History of Philosophy*, p. 51; cf. TCD MS 10967/48.
- 31 Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1976), p. 73.
- 32 C. J. Ackerley, *Obscure Locks, Simple Keys: The Annotated Watt* (Tallahassee, FL: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2005), pp. 210–12.

- 33 Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, p. 547; cf. TCD MS 10967/223ff.
- 34 Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), p. 27.
- 35 *Ibid.*, p. 28.
- 36 Burnet, *Greek Philosophy*, pp. 67–8; cf. TCD MS 10967/12.
- 37 *Ibid.*, p. 86; cf. TCD MS 10967/13.
- 38 Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, pp. 42–3; cf. TCD MS 10967/32.
- 39 Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, p. 55; cf. TCD MS 10971/6/4.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
- 41 Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, p. 46.
- 42 Windelband, *History of Philosophy*, p. 417, n. 2; cf. TCD MS 10967/189v.
- 43 Quoted in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 219.
- 44 Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, p. 32. For an analysis of the Beckettian hand-in-hand, see my ‘The politics of body language: the Beckett embrace’, in Thomas Baldwin, James Fowler and Shane Weller (eds), *The Flesh in the Text* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), pp. 141–59.
- 45 Samuel Beckett, *German Diaries 4*, entry of 18 January 1937.
- 46 ‘Samuel Beckett’s notes to his reading of the *Ethics* by Arnold Geulincx’, in Arnold Geulincx, *Ethics*, trans. Martin Wilson, eds Han Van Ruler, Anthony Uhlmann and Martin Wilson (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006), pp. 315, 327.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 352.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 344.
- 49 Alexander, *Short History of Philosophy*, p. 51; cf. TCD MS 10967/48.
- 50 Pilling (ed.), *Beckett’s ‘Dream’ Notebook*, entry 1146. See also Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005) and “‘Gnawing to be naught’: Beckett and Pre-Socratic nihilism”, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui: Des éléments aux Traces/Elements and Traces*, 20 (2008), 307–19.
- 51 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1986, 1990, 2006), p. 121.
- 52 Quoted in John Pilling, “‘For interpolation’: Beckett and English literature”, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui: Notes diverse holo*, eds Matthijs Engelberts, Everett Frost and Jane Maxwell, 16 (2006), 220–1.
- 53 Beckett, *Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 264.
- 54 Samuel Beckett to A. J. Leventhal, 3 February 1959; quoted in Dirk van Hulle, “‘Nichtsichtsundnichts’: Beckett’s and Joyce’s transtextual undoings”, in Colleen Jaurrette (ed.), *Beckett, Joyce and the Art of the Negative* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), p. 49.

- 55 Beckett, *Disjecta*, pp. 171–2 (translation slightly modified).
- 56 UoR MS 5003. On this important passage in the ‘Clare Street’ Notebook, see Mark Nixon, “‘What a Tourist I Must Have Been’: The German Diaries of Samuel Beckett” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Reading, 2005), pp. 178–81.
- 57 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 136.
- 58 Richard Coe, *Beckett* (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1964), p. 13.
- 59 Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner, 1923), vol. 2, p. 476; cf. TCD MS 10971/5/1. (All translations from Mauthner’s *Beiträge* are my own.)
- 60 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 173.
- 61 Mauthner, *Beiträge*, vol. 2, p. 474; cf. TCD MS 10971/5/1.
- 62 *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 506; cf. UoR MS 3000.
- 63 See Karl Ballmer, *Aber Herr Heidegger!* (Basel: Rudolf Geering, 1933), p. 19. I would like to express my gratitude to Matthew Feldman for having alerted me to this reference and for having supplied me with a copy of Ballmer’s pamphlet.
- 64 Beckett, *Watt*, p. 74.