12

'Something or nothing': Beckett and the matter of language

Laura Salisbury

In 1981, Lawrence Shainberg sent Samuel Beckett a copy of his book about neurosurgery hoping it might be of interest. To Shainberg's surprise, Beckett replied almost straight away, and in their subsequent meetings, the younger author continued to be intrigued by Beckett's enthusiastic and particularised questions about the work of the brain surgeon:

Whenever I saw him, he questioned me about neurosurgery, asking, for example, exactly how close I had stood to the brain while observing surgery, or how much pain a craniotomy entailed, or, one day during lunch at rehearsals: 'How is the skull removed?' and 'Where do they put the skull bone while they're working inside?'¹

Perhaps this was nothing more than the curiosity of the interested amateur. Beckett's questions are given a particular resonance, however, because he went on to articulate to Shainberg an explicit connection between what we might term a metaphysics of the craniotomy and his own writing practice. In his written response to Shainberg's book, Beckett firmly stated: 'I have long believed that here in the end is the writer's best chance, gazing into the synaptic chasm'.²

If this was indeed a lasting belief, it might be productive to speculate on just how long Beckett had held the notion that it is within the brain, within the cleft between chemical synapses – those specialised junctions between which neuro-transmitters pass in order that the cells of the nervous system might signal to each other – that the writer's best chance may lie. For once one begins to look for it, it seems as though Beckett's fascination with the space inside the skull and the strangely materialised, perhaps

even neurological, conception of language to be found there, can be traced as far back as the work of the 1930s. What lies behind textual images of the hard surface of the skull in Beckett's work is, of course, in the end, nothing but words – linguistic matter that describes cranial interiorities, wounded heads and a way of uttering traced through with lesions and disturbances. But there is a strange translation at work, here, a shuttling back and forth, in which language shapes the imagined appearance of a compulsively cranial space, but does so through an aesthetic seemingly bound to forms of signification scored through by an awareness of their emergence from a frailly material brain.

From that gap between the synapses that is peculiarly productive and yet so easily disturbed, from this space which may indeed be no-thing but forms a connection (etymologically, *syn* 'together', *haptein* 'to clasp'), a space of emergence for language appears that is much more than a straightforward absence. One reason why it is suggestive that the later Beckett, so famously attracted to ideas of negation, silence, pause, should be specifically drawn to the functioning of the synapse and the cleft between neurons is that, within accounts of neurological function, the synaptic void is not any simple kind of 'nothing', despite having no material substance. When coining the term in 1897, Charles Sherrington was seeking to overturn the notion that nerve impulses pass from one excitable cell to another in the brain through a continuously connected network of fibres.³ He proposed instead a gap that enables chemical neuro-transmitters to create particular conditions in the adjacent neuronal receptors, increasing the likelihood that electrical impulses will be triggered in that neuron. So this gap, whilst being insubstantial, is the very condition for the production of message and information, for the emergence of all that 'something' of which the human subject experiences itself to be made. This is a gap that is the space of matter's translation into something that seems to transcend, to matter, more than the material.

The notion of a productive void that functions as the ground for signification and is to be found in the interstices of material presence is, I will argue, central to Beckett's aesthetic. For although it is true that Beckett's work is persistently fascinated by the idea of silence and absence expressed in words, images and configurations of bodies and objects, it is plain that there can be no 'nothing' that would count as the 'work', except those shapes constructed and

displaced by the material that is present. This is saying more than the obvious – that Beckett's oeuvre is made up of the texts that we have, the words printed or uttered and the bodies and objects presented on stage, rather than some imagined and ideal condition of silence to which his work is taken sometimes to point. It is saying that Beckett's work seems peculiarly concerned with using the material frame of what is there in the texts to determine and construct gaps, elisions and silences which become strangely porous; presence seems everywhere to be leaking into them, making them fecund, teeming with signification. For these are signifying voids in which information is constantly being exchanged between presence and absence; they are voids invaded by and replete with the conditions for the production of meaning rather than hermetically sealed spaces of nothing.

The argument here, though, is that this articulation of a peculiarly embodied and materially productive void that underpins the emergence of language and thought, does not itself come from nowhere – from the immateriality of Beckett's singular genius. Instead, it suggests that the 'synaptic chasm' illuminates something revealingly specific about an idea of language and signification experienced as issuing from a void that is the buzzing condition for a connection. For the synaptic chasm is a very particular kind of nothing that can be placed within a set of historical intellectual conditions in which language, cognition, and the subjectivities they subtend, are reconfigured as products of fundamentally material processes taking place in the nervous system. Returned to such a context, it is perhaps no surprise that Beckett's obsession with naggingly and sometimes abjectly fecund material voids, should undertake complex transactions with the work of signification seen to emerge from the interior of the cranium – a material brain figured as leaking language. Beckett finds within the cranium both a space for imagining writing and subjectivity nailed to a peculiar and estranging materiality, and a way of conceiving of linguistic signification as emergent from historically determined notions of the 'unseen vicissitudes' by which matter is translated into meaning.⁴

Skullscapes and deadheads

Beckett's late work is relatively well-known for its fascination with the interiority of the skullscape. Bound to scenes abstracted

from recognisable geography and all but the most meagre particulars, a number of short prose texts written in the 1960s describe strangely cranial spaces. In *Imagination Dead Imagine*, bodies are confined within the space that compulsively imagines them. This space is described as a 'white rotunda', but its walls may in fact be more cranial than architectural, for they 'ring as in imagination the ring of bone'.⁵ It is perhaps more than felicitous idiom that gathers *D'un ouvrage abandonné, Imagination morte imaginez, Bing and Assez*, in which the subject's memories obdurately persist as 'gleams in my skull',⁶ into a collection published in 1967 in French as *Têtes-mortes*, or dead heads. But it is clear that this interest in the space inside the skull and its openings on to the world – 'that inner space one never sees, the brain and heart and other caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath' as *Molloy* has it –⁷ can be traced further back into Beckett's work. C. J. Ackrley and S. E. Gontarski find the architecture of the cranium to be of sufficient significance across the oeuvre to offer up a section of their *Companion to Beckett* entitled 'skull'.⁸ They note, amongst numerous examples, that in *Malone Dies* it seems to the narrator that he has become brain, he is 'in a head and [. . .] these eight, no, six, these six planes that enclose me are of solid bone',⁹ whilst one of the Unnamable's 'vice existers'¹⁰ similarly seeks comfort by imagining itself 'surrounded on all sides by massive bone'.¹¹

This bone that might become a shield, impermeable to the exteriority of 'another's thoughts, lacerating my sky with harmless fires and noises signifying nothing',¹² seems to register the desire for the skull to be a last refuge ('crâne abri dernier').¹³ A fantasy indeed appears in *The Unnamable* that the head and its interior could become a kind of kernel, something solid and essential – 'Yes, a head, but solid, solid bone, and you embedded in it, like a fossil in the rock'.¹⁴ There is perhaps a hope that there might be a stable speaking subject to be found in this solid thinking head, something that is sufficiently substantial to bring the textual speculation to an end. But if this is so, there is a need to 'bung' up the 'streaming sockets' of the 'vice exister' so that it becomes 'round, solid and round [. . .] no asperities, no apertures'.¹⁵ Of course, this is a vain hope: nothing ever does quite appear as itself in this text. Instead, little breaths of oxygen seep into the sealed space and the displacing and paradoxical effects of a morbidly aspirant language are produced: 'Air, air, I'll seek air, air in time, the air of time, and in

space, in my head, that's how I'll go on.¹⁶ The dilemma of being able to say the something of 'I' or nothing at all is a 'high class nut to crack',¹⁷ and indeed it is precisely the cracking of the nut, the penetration of the cranium, of going deeper and further inside, that seems intuitively to get one nearer to a kernel of a graspable and stable subjectivity. But the opened skull only offers more language, and more information passing in and out, as internal material becomes frighteningly extended. Getting inside the head does not open up a smooth empty space, a cavern containing nothing on to whose walls immaterial shadows might be projected, although neither is it solid and substantial; rather, the head is bulging with matter. The policeman's skull penetrated in *Mercier and Camier* (begun in 1946) makes and takes an 'impression' precisely because of its abject materiality, the gelid firmness of the brain exposed '[l]ike a partly shelled hard-boiled egg'.¹⁸ The perpetually refigured skulls in *The Unnamable* similarly refuse to be solid bowls – the casing for an empty space where imagination can play itself out in solitary joy –; instead, the cranium is pierced and the holes in it are 'streaming', reflexively oozing tears of 'liquified brain',¹⁹ as they become sites of translation concerned with imbibing impressions and releasing torrents of language over which intention has only a tenuous hold.

Belacqua, in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1931–32), speaks of the same desire to experience the mind as a curtained retreat:

The mind, dim and hushed like a sick-room, like a chapelle ardente, thronged with shades; the mind at last its own asylum, disinterested, indifferent [. . .]; the mind suddenly reprieved, ceasing to be an annex of the restless body, the glare of understanding switched off. The lids of the aching mind close, there is suddenly gloom in the mind; not sleep, not yet, nor dream, with its sweats and terrors, but a waking ultra-cerebral obscurity.²⁰

But this '[l]imbo from which the mistral of desire has been withdrawn', this 'tunnel, when the mind went wombtomb' cannot be sustained.²¹ Sight and sound percolate and perforate through orifices in the cranium, disrupting the peace of its solipsism. And by the time of the *Trilogy*, the purity of the mind imagined as a monad no longer convinces; instead, mind is, as often as not, replaced and displaced by brain and body. The space inside the head is no longer self-sufficient, a windowless retreat, relieved of

all engagement with exteriority. The head is, instead, a perforated container of recalcitrant substance, drinking in impressions and reflexively streaming language in ways that determinedly denude the text of a neatly intending or immaterial mind that could close its own curtains on the world.

Head wounds

In one sense it is hardly surprising that the *Trilogy*, so concerned with the vicissitudes of language and its relationship to the subject's sense of itself, should remain fascinated by the head and what it might mean to get inside it. For Beckett is writing in a historical period relatively newly certain that difficulties of cognition and language, alongside the concomitant torsions of subjectivity, could be localised in the materiality of the head, and even within particular areas of the brain. In *Dream*, a fine and rhythmic rhyme indeed appears that riffs on the fact that it is the brain rather than the soul, or even the mind, that is penetrated in the talking cure: here, it is 'a thalamus that by day folds up for psycho-analysis'.²² As I have suggested elsewhere, Beckett's work indeed seems fascinated by language pathology and the distortions of expression, memory, cognition and mentation that bear useful comparison to the neurological dysfunctions that constellate in the symptom of aphasia.²³ There is certainly a sense that Beckett is writing in the wake of conceptions of language function rendered newly material and housed within the skull. After the 1860s debate all but ceased in medical discourse as to whether language was produced and represented within the materiality of the brain; discussion focused instead upon precisely how the relationship between physiology and function was to be theorised and modelled.²⁴ The faculty of language that had in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century been most commonly associated with the immaterial part of human nature, the unextended soul, was transfigured to appear as something that arose according to analysable anatomico-physiological conditions – conditions that were all too easily displaced and transformed by disease or wounding.

Although the idea of the cerebrum as the material home of language and the major proportion of higher mental functioning became something of a given in the twentieth century, Beckett was also aware of specific material on brain function through his

reading of R. S. Woodworth's *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* in 1934–35. Beckett took down notes from Woodworth on the neurologist S. I. Franz (1874–1933), who worked to map 'sensory and motor areas of cortex, [and] studie[d] localization of higher functions'.²⁵ He might also have learnt that a golden age for work on the localisation of higher brain function in the 1920s was precipitated by a clear historical event. Woodworth asserts that the 'World War, with its numerous bullet and shrapnel wounds affecting small circumscribed spots of the cortex, gave abundant opportunity for testing these conclusions',²⁶ as a factory production line of relatively discrete head wounds allowed disabilities to be mapped on to the cortex from observable sites of penetration. War had thus produced the empirical testing of the relation between brain wound and symptom that it had not been possible to precipitate experimentally in humans. Sixty years before the occlusions of the cranium would be dissolved by functional magnetic resonance imaging, it was penetrating head trauma that effected 'natural' experiments in the wounding of language; it was head trauma that enabled the shapes and distortions of a resolutely material language, and its concomitantly displaced subjectivity, to be observed.

So it is more than simply suggestive that Beckett's work accompanies its experiments with estranged language and subjectivity with persistent images of penetrating the skull, that locked box of bone beneath the skin. In the late prose and poetry the skull is a reasonably smooth boundary, encasing an interior that is the textual home for experimentation; bone is something into which a neat hole can be bored by the narrator with surgical precision in order to anatomise what is inside. In the rotunda of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, for example, in which there is 'No way in', there is nevertheless the compulsion to 'go in, measure',²⁷ to delimit the contours of that something inside, and view and stage the interior machinations of perception, representation and affectivity. But the cranium in the *Trilogy* and the work that precedes it does not yield so easily to clean penetration. The surgical precision required to perform a craniotomy and to peer into the functioning of the living brain seems aesthetically unavailable; instead, as Woodworth notes of the wartime neurologist's gaze, getting into the living head can be effected only by a more thoroughgoing violence.

In *Malone Dies* one of the most striking assertions made by

the narrator is that he might be living in a 'kind of coma'. He seems vaguely to recall some of events of the earlier *Molloy* and wonders whether 'I was stunned by a blow, on the head, in a forest perhaps'.²⁸ The 'creature', reminiscent of Molloy, that Malone invents as a protagonist for his stories also wears a hat that is 'as hard as iron, superbly domed above its narrow guttered rim, [. . .] marred by a wide crack or rent extending in front from the crown down and intended probably to facilitate the introduction of the skull'.²⁹ For Lemuel, the homicidal figure who tends the disabled and indigent Malone, self-inflicted head-trauma actually has its comforts: 'the part he struck most readily, with his hammer, was the head [. . .] for it too is a bony part, and sensitive, and difficult to miss, and the seat of all the shit and misery, so you rain blows upon it, with more pleasure than on the leg for example, which never did you any harm, it's only human'.³⁰ It is the cranium, then, the newly determined 'seat of all the shit and misery', that persistently becomes the site of Beckett's experimental wounding. Of course, Beckett's characters need more injuries like they need holes in the head: skull trauma is just one more entry in the catalogue of wounds, disabilities and decrepitudes they are forced to endure and perhaps even enjoy. The repetition of violent skull trauma in Beckett's texts of this period is particularly significant, however, because the effects of penetrating head wounds are also articulated. These works indeed seem to play out, through textual experimentation, the deficits of articulation, cognition and perception that can be read according to the neurological damage that a penetrating head wound might inflict. And within that symptom, although language and the subjectivity it subtends are disabled and reshaped, they are, significantly, never reduced to nothing.

Aphasia can be defined, somewhat unsatisfactorily, as a 'loss of speech, partial or total, or loss of power to understand written or spoken language, as a result of disorder of the cerebral speech centres' (*OED*). The emphasis on loss, the reduction of areas of linguistic ability to nothing, in this definition accords with the aphasiology of a classical localisationist such as Carl Wernicke. In the 1870s, Wernicke produced models and diagrams that reconstructed language as a process of purely mechanical communication of sensory-motor units along 'association fibres' in the brain. Damage was thus synonymous with negation: 'If certain letters are missing in the apparatus, specific errors would be consistently

repeated in the message'.³¹ But the complexity of the symptom of aphasia, which did not, in fact, submit itself placidly to Wernicke's mapping of determinedly localised lesions on to relatively predictable symptoms, began to demand more complex accounts of the emergence of language than the simple firing of punctate areas of the cortex. For the aphasic symptom, as the dictionary definition implies, very rarely results in the complete wordlessness one would expect if there were a wholly localisable speech centre. John Hughlings Jackson was the first to emphasise in 1897 that aphasia is not a disorder that manifests silence or wordlessness; it is, instead, a form of propositional speechlessness, with emotional (the more automatic) language being preserved where there is a loss of intellectual (the more voluntary) qualities of speech.³² The neurologist Kurt Goldstein, who worked primarily with soldiers in the aftermath of the First World War, notes approvingly that it was Jackson who emphasised that aphasic speech was disturbed and displaced rather than absent: 'The patients have not lost words, but the words are not available for the higher service of propositional expressions, i.e., for some special purpose of the individual. Aphasia, for Jackson, is one expression of a defect of basic mental function, similar to what I later called abstract attitude.'³³

Although Goldstein is not mentioned by Woodworth, *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* demonstrates a profound intellectual sympathy with the German clinician's position, derived from Gestalt psychology, that the brain is not a fleshly typewriter whose keys may be broken to produce specific and repeatable errors in the message. Woodworth implies that particular areas of the cortex do not fire according to the push and pull of reflex arcs, as classical aphasiologists such as Wernicke had thought; instead, the brain 'functions in wide-spreading patterns or dynamic systems and not in sharply localized centres'.³⁴ Indeed, Woodworth asserts that the brain works, as Beckett notes down, through a '[p]rinciple of equipotentiality – any part of the cortex (exclusive to motor and sensory areas) potentially the same as any other in its ability to participate in an sort of learned performance [. . .] the cortex acts as a whole'.³⁵ For Goldstein, this explains the complexity of the aphasic symptom, as the brain produces displacements that are 'positive', linked to a reorientation of function, rather than simple records of loss and negation.

Gestalt psychology attempted to reconfigure the classical,

mechanistic conception of the brain/mind relation by demonstrating empirically, using the apparatus of psychophysics and experimental psychology, that lived reality was not produced according to the random generation, perception and subsequent ordering of meaningless elements in a mechanically associating brain. Instead, the human mind was constructed according to a latent orientation of function towards the perception of patterns of order. Goldstein translated this notion into a theory of neurological function, noting from his observation and treatment of wounded soldiers that the underlying and universal disturbance in all brain injury was a defect in the ability to perceive pattern and meaning, Gestalts, from a background sea of phenomena – a defect in the ‘figure ground function’.³⁶ Language use, if it was non-pathological, was similarly orientated towards the perception and categorisation of Gestalts: ‘A word becomes meaningful from the context in which it appears; the meaning of a thought is conditioned by a vast contextual background.’³⁷ But brain-damaged language is born from ‘a general levelling or intermingling of figures and background’ which leads inexorably to an impairment of the ‘abstract attitude’.³⁸ What is damaged in the aphasic symptom is precisely language’s ability to function in a predictably intentional, purposive fashion – to affirm what counts as something and what can recede into the background as nothing substantial.

As a number of critics have suggested, Beckett’s explicit and parodic use of Gestalt psychology’s fascination with the ‘figure-ground’ problem can be found in *Murphy*.³⁹ In his Woodworth notes, Beckett transcribes the Gestaltist position: ‘Nature runs to organized wholes [. . .] The figure stands out naturally from the ground in virtue of the fundamental distinction between them’.⁴⁰ But in *Murphy*, this ‘natural’ relationship has become disturbed: ‘[n]o sooner had Miss Dwyer [. . .] made Neary as happy as a man could desire, than she became one with the ground against which she had figured so prettily. Neary wrote to Herr Kurt Koffka [a Gestalt psychologist mentioned by Woodworth and associated with Goldstein] demanding an explanation. He had not yet received an answer.’⁴¹ Instead of an answer that could emerge from language working according to an ‘abstract attitude’, figure and ground convert into one another, mirroring the disorganisation of brain damage. Like those articulating brains bored into by the bullets of the First World War, or the subjects of penetrating head wounds

in which Beckett's *Trilogy* delights, the language towards which Beckett begins to gesture in the 1930s is not one that is transcended in or as silence; instead, it is language written to its material limit. Stable signification reveals itself to be a figure that is only ever contingently separated from the noise and nonsense of sounds and signifiers which are language's Ur-condition and into which it threatens to merge. So although 'divine aphasia' is the phrase used by Lucky in *Waiting for Godot* to describe God's incommunicativeness, this 'personal God quaquaquaquaqu with white beard quaquaquaquaqu' does not appear in an immaculate silence in which language is transcended;⁴² instead, the divine Word is garbled, rendered as an unintelligible quacking, a noisy 'quaquaquaqu' in which message and noise cannot be fully distinguished. Lucky's very mode of expression is in fact closer to certain configurations of aphasic language than any silence would be. For, disarticulated from the 'abstract attitude', the measure and seeming intentional transparency of 'normal' language use, Lucky stutters rather than reduces words to nothing, stammering 'the skull the skull the skull the skull in Connemara'.⁴³

Boring Beckett

In 1937 Beckett wrote to Axel Kaun what is often taken to be his most explicit theoretical statement about language:

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 [. . .] 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 into 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. Or is literature alone to remain behind in the old lazy ways that have so long ago been abandoned by music and painting? Is there something paralytically holy in the vicious nature of the word that is not found in the elements of the other arts? Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, like for example the sound surface, torn by enormous pauses, of Beethoven's seventh Symphony, so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence?⁴⁴

Beckett seems, at first glance, to be following Stéphane Mallarmé's sense of the imperfection of language, which, in its current condition, can be matched in univocal harmony neither with the 'things' nor perhaps the 'Nothingness' (the more suspicious Beckett insists), to which signs point.⁴⁵ In 'Crisis in poetry' Mallarmé speaks of a necessary 'fluttering of the temple's veil – meaningful folds and even a little tearing',⁴⁶ and the creation of a signifying fissure in the fabric of language to which Beckett's letter seems clearly to allude. But where Mallarmé finds reparation and 'atonement' 'for the sins of language' in tearing the veil,⁴⁷ in the rhythmic penetration and disruption of the sound surface in such a way as to allow a glimpse of revelation, Beckett's letter insists that all it can do is console itself with '*sinning* willy-nilly against a foreign language' (my emphasis),⁴⁸ insisting upon the compulsive and involuntary (this sinning is '*unwillkürlich*')⁴⁹ poking of a tongue into the tender cavities of words to explore and widen their gaps and crannies.

So Beckett moves beyond Mallarmé's metaphor of rending the veil of language to 'bor[ing] one hole after another into it',⁵⁰ which seems more like an acknowledgement of an obdurately 'vicious' and 'terrible materiality' than its transcendence – the suggestion of the possibility of revelation. For both Mallarmé and Beckett, the metaphor of the veil is redolent of Christian conceptions of the Word made flesh, as appears it in Hebrews 10.20. Christ offers 'a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh', with the crucifixion representing both a tearing apart of the veil of corporeality and a rupturing of the orthodoxy of the Temple as the only conduit to God: 'the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom' (Matthew 27.51). Beckett's insistence on boring holes into the paralysing holiness of language, whilst cleaving to the elision of word and flesh, is decidedly untranscendent, however; it seems more suggestive of sexual penetration, which would accord with the metaphors of desire that runs throughout the text and Beckett's insistence that his language must throw off the outdated modesty of 'the Victorian bathing suit'.⁵¹ But if such metaphors return us to the space of language's embodiment, perhaps it is not too tendentious to suggest that the instrument used to bore holes into the word made flesh need not simply be bound to sexual desire and penetration, but might be related to other modes of piercing the flesh and exploring the body's interiority.

There is nothing in the letter that specifically links the 'terrible materiality of the word surface' into which holes must be bored to the brain and its containing cranium; nevertheless, as we have seen, if language is material, in this period the head becomes its most obvious home. One could argue, then, that the Beckett who had subjected his own skull to penetration under the psychotherapy of Wilfred Bion only two years previously might be reconfiguring his linguistic method not through analytical structures but as a kind of textual trepanning in which disarticulated language becomes both the instrument and effect of an experimental head wound. Etymologically linked to the action of 'boring' (derived from the Greek *trypanon*), trepanning is metaphorically suggestive for Beckett's textual experiments because it evokes the creation of a new cranial orifice of perception and expression through which something other than the normative self might form itself and speak. Accounts of trepanning tend to concur that although it is performed for a variety of medical and mystical purposes, its underlying aim is to create a new aperture in the skull because the given ways in and out of the cranium are somehow insufficient either to let something out – be it pus, pressure, vapours, spirits – or to let something in – air, inspiration or the gods.⁵² The most clear textual link between Beckett's writing and a form of ritual trepanning is to be found in Beckett's transcription of a practice undertaken by Tibetan lamas in his *Whoroscope Notebook* in the early 1930s. Beckett notes:

'hik!' followed by 'phat'

spiritual ejaculations whereby the spirit of the dying leaves the body by hole in skull (very important), pronounced by lamas, or by dying man himself, if he has the leisure.

Suicide by hik! phat!⁵³

The source is uncertain, but could be Alexandra David-Neel's *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, published first in French in 1929, which details that 'hik!', 'Phat!' 'is the ritualistic cry that the officiating lama shouts beside a man who has just died, in order to free the "spirit" and cause it to leave the body through a hole that this magic syllable opens in the summit of the skull'.⁵⁴ She goes on to state, as does Beckett in more ironic terms, that if these sounds are uttered by the lama without the presence of a dying person, the lama himself will effect a precipitate and deadly separation of

spirit and body. Language itself becomes the trepan, then, a 'magic syllable' that can bore a hole through the materiality of the skull in a suggestive convertibility of instrument and effect.⁵⁵

If the boring of holes is framed in terms of skull trauma, the German letter seems to be using words as an instrument of penetration to create a new orifice that mouths and forces the emergence of a profoundly un-normative language – a language which, in turn, persists in piercing and distorting itself, bringing itself into disrepute. The hole bored in the word surface, like the orifice torn into the blank blackness of the theatre in *Not I*, streams a language denuded of much of its securely intending, propositional qualities. Of course, Mouth's organ and utterances are possessed of an excessive materiality and presence that has no truck with silence. On a closer reading, however, what appears through the newly made holes in the German letter is not muteness but the whisper of a peculiarly Beckettian form of silence that is characterised as sound rather than its negation, something rather than nothing. More akin to propositional speechlessness, as Hughlings Jackson might have had it, rather than wordlessness, this 'silence' is audible, articulating itself as a murmur, the '*whisper* of that final music *or* silence that underlies All' (emphasis mine);⁵⁶ it is a kind of detuned signification in which the muttering interference of the unsorted, the unintended, the involuntary, can be heard. Beckett equivocates, wondering whether what seeps through after boring a hole into language really is 'something or nothing'. This hesitation is everything. For what emerges from a pierced language that becomes both an instrument and its wounded effect is a 'literature of the unword' in which it is precisely what counts as something and what as nothing, what is figure and what is the ground, that cannot finally be determined.

The work of the abscess

In a letter to Mary Manning written two days after the one to Kaun, Beckett repeats that one must sin against the putative holiness of language. Again, the aim is not that language should be dematerialised but that its embodied materiality could be strained so that its occluded substance would begin to extrude. 'I am starting a Logoclasts league', he writes to Manning, 'I am the only member at present. The idea is ruptured writing, so that the void may

protrude, like a hernia.⁵⁷ From strain and a little tearing of the surface of words there will be a protrusion of tissue, or an organ, through the fabric of the muscle or membrane that is supposed to contain it. To imagine a void linked to language as a hernia suggests an urging, unwilling, probing presence rather than absence and, by association, a remarkably embodied and substantial form of nothing. In terms of the persistent emphasis on the materiality of words, it becomes revealing to read Beckett's insistence on a linguistic hole, alongside the hernia that pokes through it, as part of the system that Evelyn Grossman describes as an aesthetic of the abscess that preoccupies Beckett in the 1930s.⁵⁸ Suffering from cysts, boils, herpes, and lancing his own infected finger with a needle and razor blade,⁵⁹ Beckett indeed returns repeatedly in this period to a vision of language bound to the swellings of the abject and to an eventual dehiscence in which the surface of the artwork is ruptured and something bursts forth from behind. This void from which language appears, like the synaptic chasm, is not an arid absence; here it takes the shape of a teeming, oozing fecundity. Mercier asks Camier, 'how is your cyst?'; the reply is '[d]ormant [. . .] but under the surface mischief is brewing'.⁶⁰

In 1932, however, the abscess seems to stand for another kind of anxiety that is precisely the obverse of the unwilling accumulation of abject material imaged in the shape of a hernia. Beckett writes to MacGreevy, complaining that his unsuccessful work seems forced, overly-willed; his writing is 'all frigged up, in terram, faute d'orifice [for want of an orifice] [. . .] – the work of the abscess', instead of having the involuntary 'integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows there is grit in the wind'.⁶¹ Here, then, the abscess is associated with masturbation; it is 'frigged up',⁶² emerging as a strangely embodied form of intentionality bound to a frothed self-involvement. Physiologically, the work of the abscess is the body's creation of a cavity in its tissue, which it then fills with its own materials, with pus, in order to encase an infection and control its spread. According to its etymology, '(abs away + cede-ere to go), to move away, to lose contact' (*OED*), the abscess and its cavity are part of an embodied process of holding things apart; so it is perhaps appropriate that it should be aligned in Beckett's formulation with masturbation and a momentary refusal to meet with otherness. In this work there is not yet an orifice of emission that would enable the boil to be lanced and a passage between interiority and exteriority to be formed.

Beckett's own boils and cysts, alongside the tortured relationship with his mother, had led him to psychotherapist Wilfred Bion in 1934. And, writing many years later in 1957, it is Bion who offers up a model that associates a form of psychological 'encysting' with a refusal of the outside world and the exteriority of otherness. Bion suggests that there is a tendency for psychotic parts of the personality to split themselves and the world into autistic and persecutory islands of experience: 'the psychotic splits his objects [the people and objects with which he interacts and exists], and contemporaneously all that part of his personality, which would make him aware of the reality he hates, into exceedingly minute fragments'. Using the Kleinian concept of projective identification – an omnipotent phantasy that one is able to split off temporarily undesired, though sometimes valued, parts of the psyche and put them into an object – he continues: 'consciousness of sense impressions, attention, memory, judgement, thought, have brought against them [. . .] the sadistic splitting eviscerating attacks that lead to their being minutely fragmented and then expelled from the personality to penetrate, or encyst, objects'.⁶³ For Bion, projective identification should exist in tandem with an introjective activity, in which experience of the external world can be taken back into the self to allow the formation of good internal objects. But in the excessive projective identification of the psychotic state, '[t]he object, angered at being engulfed, swells up, so to speak, and suffuses and controls the piece of personality that engulfs it' (48). As such, the object cannot be taken back into the mind and integrated with it, although neither can it remain safely encysted.

In 'Attacks on linking' (1959), Bion describes how it is language itself that is often the subject of such splitting attacks, owing to its capacity to effect cognitive and symbolic links and integrations between areas of the mind that were seemingly cleanly dissociated.⁶⁴ Such a model of the encysted mind and the work of the abscess as an attack on linking is suggestive for reading the fantasy of the monad in Beckett's early work, in which, as we have seen, 'the mind at last its own asylum' hopes to insist, safe from contamination. The letter from 1932 of course suggests a desire that pulls in the other direction. There is hope for an artwork written 'above an abscess and not out of a cavity',⁶⁵ a poetry that would refuse the omnipotence of the purely voluntary denuded of any external contact. It is significant, though, that another version of the abscess

and the cyst keeps festering in Beckett's texts of the 1930s, and in this model the idea of art and language as an infected lump no longer stands just for the encystic elements of the voluntary in which linking is attacked. For the assault on language in the German letter is indeed not simply an attempt to keep things in their own containers; instead, the violent attack on words through words that Beckett imagines leads to a penetration of something that seems redolent of an abscess, as the perforation of language as flesh – the epidermal veil – leads to the creation of a new expressive orifice and a linguistic leaking, an involuntary oozing. As the veil is punctured, the voluntary work of the abscess cedes authority to an unwilling dehiscence. Of course, in Bion's model, it is precisely the attack on linking that, whilst hoping safely to encyst, brews up mischief, bad objects that will threaten to burst forth and engulf the mind. In Beckett's German letter, the attack on language also punctures the abscess, causing a hole in its material fabric that allows inside to ooze into outside as the interiority of the cavity becomes topologically continuous with the surface of the skin. In imaging language as both containing skin and dehiscent pus, produced and seeping from a teeming void, Beckett reveals the frightening and involuntary fecundity within words, figured according to their ability to couple, connect and contaminate.

The word 'dehiscence', or the opening of a pod at maturity, that Beckett copied into his *Dream Notebook* from Pierre Garnier's *Onanisme seul et à deux* (1894), appears in *Dream* in relation to the production of the aesthetic. The narrator invokes the 'the dehiscing, the dynamic *décousu* [unstitchedness], of a Rembrandt' that threatens to invade the surface of the art as a 'disfaction, a *désuni*, an *Ungebund*, a *flottement*, a *tremblement*, a tremor, a tremolo, a disaggregating, a disintegrating, efflorescence, a breaking down and multiplication of tissue, the corrosive ground-swell of Art'.⁶⁶ In opposition to an art that is intentionally stitched into an impermeable container, the involuntary urging of the hernia or a dehiscence appears in which material pushes from behind the surface of language, rupturing its limits. The narrator goes on to speak of Beethoven's work in *Dream* as something which takes musical punctuation, spacing and pause, back to its etymological root in the punctum, the bringing to a point. Here, punctuation becomes a piercing in which all begins to come unstitched, rather than a mode of suture:

[Beethoven] incorporates a punctuation of dehiscence, flottements, the coherence gone to pieces, the continuity bitched to hell because the units of continuity have abdicated their unity, they have gone multiple, they fall apart, the notes fly about, a blizzard of electrons; and then vespertine compositions eaten away with terrible silences, [. . .] pitted with dire stroms of silence [. . .] And I think of the ultimately unprevisible atom come asunder.⁶⁷

This seems at first glance to be a repetition of the earlier notion of an 'incoherent continuum as expressed by, say, Rimbaud and Beethoven [. . .] whose audibilities are no more than punctuation in a statement of silences'.⁶⁸ But what is significant here is that punctuation or pauses are, at one moment, the 'stroms of silence' between the phrases as they might appear in music or spoken language, and at another the articulation of 'audibilities', the presence of a punctuation mark.

For Belacqua, the distinction between punctuation as presence and absence, something and nothing, becomes lost as the book's 'whole fabric come[s] unstitched, [. . .] The music comes to pieces. The notes fly about all over the place, a cyclone of electrons'.⁶⁹ This is art subject to dehiscence, the very opposite of a textual monad; it is pierced, leaking signification in and out, so that what becomes figure and what remains ground is blurred and dispersed in a material swell of signifying marks and phenomena. Earlier, the narrator speaks of the night sky as, first of all, a metaphor for the absolute transcendence of art: 'The night firmament is abstract density of music, symphony without end, illumination without end.' But in this vision any blackness, or complete illumination, is soon compromised by observations of intermittence – the 'crazy stippling of stars'.⁷⁰ Again, involuntary states are lauded as part of the capacity to burrow away from the involuted 'work of the abscess', the cystic work of a particular kind of thought that attacks the wild disorganisation of language as 'blizzard' or 'cyclone' – language as an unbounded linking:

The tense passionate intelligence, when arithmetic abates, tunnels, skymole, surely and blindly (if only we thought so!) [. . .] in a network of loci that will never be co-ordinate. The inviolable criterion of poetry and music, the non-principle of their punctuation, is figured in the demented perforation of the night colander.⁷¹

The narrator insists, though, that the process by which such art might be made is no longer a process of 'going wombtomb',

retreating inwards into the quarantined and curtained 'sick room' of the intending mind; instead, the drapes find themselves being ripped apart, the windows of the subjective and textual monad are punched through towards exteriority: 'The mind suddenly entombed, then active in an anger and a rhapsody of energy, in a scurrying and plunging towards exitus, such is the ultimate mode and factor of the creative integrity, its proton, incommunicable.'⁷² It is this 'scurrying and plunging towards exitus' which produces a particular kind of text in which an 'insistent, invisible rat, fidgeting behind the astral incoherence of the art surface' can make its way out – tunnelling 'skymole' rather than 'wombtomb'. Art appears as something within which a writhing life, drawn from images of suppurating fecundity, swells in its frame, its container, bursts forth and is lanced, and then swells again.

When Beckett returns to Beethoven in the German letter, to 'the sound surface, torn by enormous pauses, so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence',⁷³ the very fact that pause and silence emerge from a peculiarly embodied act of boring, in which both presence and absence become leaky vessels, is suggestive of a conception of language and artwork as 'demented colanders' rather than impermeable containers. Beckett goes on to call for the longed-for formation of a 'Literatur des Unworts';⁷⁴ and his turn to a neologism, or *Unwort*, is revealing because of its particular attitude to negation. Literature and words are not transcended in the turn to the 'unword'; rather, the word surface is perforated. This does not announce the appearance of something completely other; instead, as with a hernia, something from within extrudes and is displaced from its proper shape, marking the very contingency of normative syntactical and lexical forms. Gilles Deleuze suggests in 'He stuttered' that the symptom manifested in Beckett's language is indeed a straining of the grammatical limit. Beckett's language proceeds according to 'inclusive disjunctions', Deleuze affirms, as the different lexical and syntactical possibilities that are the creative conditions from which any singular utterance appears are folded back into the texture of the message rather than excluded or rendered redundant – as nothing. He states: 'Every word is divided, but into itself [. . .]; and every word is combined, but with itself [. . .]' Beckett took this art of inclusive disjunctions to its highest point, an art that no longer selects

but affirms the disjointed terms through their distance, without limiting one by the other or excluding one from the other.⁷⁵ It certainly seems that the unwordly quality of the ‘unword’ comes from the peculiar agrammaticality of an ‘inclusive disjunction’ (in German as in English).⁷⁶ For ‘un’ can be used as a prefix to negate verbs, adjectives or adverbs, but not nouns. The ‘un’ pushes the noun into disequilibrium, makes it do and describe an action of negation; it thus forms a nagging presence rather than announces the transformation of something into nothing – word become nonword. The ‘un’ adds rather than subtracts; it adds action and quality, and takes something of the ‘ground’ of the material noise and redundancy that should be excluded if the word is to function in a clearly intentional, singular fashion, back into the distorted shape of the figure.

In ‘The exhausted’, Deleuze writes that the signature of Beckett’s words is their ability to ‘pierce themselves and turn against themselves so as to reveal their own outside’,⁷⁷ as he reaffirms, in a refrain from ‘He stuttered’, that to ‘strain’ utterance and writing in this way is to ‘push language as a whole to its limit, to its outside, to its silence – this would be like the *boom* and the *crash*’.⁷⁸ The void protruding like a hernia through words so strained, or the pierced and penetrated cyst bursting so that the cavity is exposed and what seems like interiority seeps out to become one with the surface of the skin, suggests an illegitimate topology in which inside and outside leak into one another. And what emerges from language figured in these terms is a new work of the abscess. This work, though anxious about its legitimacy, begins to undo the attack on linking that marks the putative outside of language – that definitive sorting of something from nothing – to render a sense of words as emergent from the abjectly productive groundswell, from the urging and uncontainable noise that aphasiology began to hear as part of the Ur-condition of language that shapes itself in a fragile material brain. Such noise in the German letter offers up precisely that paradoxical ‘silence’ that nevertheless whispers, a silence that, in Deleuze’s initially illogical terms, ‘would be like the *boom* and the *crash*’. So in the letter to Axel Kaun of 1937, Beckett’s language states its aim: to render audible within words the condition of noise in which something *and* nothing seep into one another, and to pierce the abscess, the ‘frigged up’ cavity of the voluntary. By returning words to their commerce with the automatic, to their

propensity to proceed according to the non-propositional and through sets of teeming and fertile links, what would normally be figured as the outside of language shows itself to have been immanent all along. It only takes a piercing of the head or a disreputable straining of the word for it to whisper its way back in.

Notes

- 1 Lawrence Shainberg, 'Exorcising Beckett', *Paris Review*, 104 (1987), 102.
- 2 *Ibid.*, 102.
- 3 Don Todman, 'Synapse', *European Neurology*, 61 (2009), 190–1.
- 4 Beckett noted down the phrase 'unseen vicissitudes of matter' in his *Whoroscope* Notebook. Reading University Library MS 3000/84.
- 5 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), p. 182.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- 7 Samuel Beckett, *Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1994), p. 10.
- 8 C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Beckett* (New York: Grove, 2004), pp. 530–1.
- 9 Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 222.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p. 317.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 350.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 350.
- 13 Samuel Beckett, *Poems: 1930–1989* (London: Calder Publications, 2002), p. 62.
- 14 Beckett, *Trilogy*, pp. 396–7.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 307.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p. 397.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 314.
- 18 Beckett, *Mercier and Camier* (London: John Calder, 1974), p. 93.
- 19 Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 269.
- 20 Samuel Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (London: John Calder, 1996), p. 44.
- 21 *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 149.
- 23 See Laura Salisbury, "'What is the Word": Beckett's aphasic modernism', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 17 (2008), 78–126.
- 24 For an account of this see Laura Salisbury, 'Sounds of silence: aphasiology and the subject of modernity', in Laura Salisbury and Andrew Shail (eds), *Neurology and Modernity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009).
- 25 Trinity College Dublin 10971/7/10.

- 26 Robert S. Woodworth, *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (London: Methuen, 1931), p. 90.
- 27 Beckett, *Complete Short Prose*, p. 182.
- 28 Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 184.
- 29 Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 229. The holograph notebook of *Malone meurt* also contains a doodle of a head with what appears to be a small hatchet or hammer embedded in it.
- 30 Beckett, *Trilogy*, p. 269.
- 31 Carl Wernicke, 'The motor speech path and the relation of aphasia to anarthria' (1884), in Gertrude H Eggert (ed.), *Wernicke's Works on Aphasia: A Sourcebook and Review* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), pp. 152–3.
- 32 John Hughlings Jackson, 'On affections of speech from disease of the brain' (1897), in Paul Eling (ed.), *Reader in the History of Aphasia* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1994), p. 152.
- 33 Kurt Goldstein, *Language and Language Disturbances* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1948), p. 22.
- 34 Woodworth, *Contemporary Schools*, pp. 92–3.
- 35 Trinity College Dublin 10971/7/10.
- 36 Goldstein, *Language*, p. 5.
- 37 *ibid.*, p. 5.
- 38 *ibid.*, p. 5.
- 39 See, in particular, C. J. Ackerley, *Demented Particulars: The Annotated Murphy* (Tallahassee: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2004), p. 37.
- 40 Trinity College Dublin MS 10971/7/12.
- 41 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Picador, 1973), p. 31.
- 42 Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), p. 42.
- 43 *ibid.*, p. 43.
- 44 Beckett, *Disjecta*, pp. 171–2.
- 45 John Pilling notes that Beckett seems to be alluding to Mallarmé in the letter, although he does not make the reference explicit. John Pilling, *Beckett Before Godot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 153.
- 46 Stéphane Mallarmé, *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), p. 34.
- 47 Mallarmé, *Selected*, p. 38.
- 48 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 173.
- 49 *ibid.*, p. 54.
- 50 *ibid.*, p. 172.
- 51 *ibid.*, p. 171.

- 52 See Edward L. Margetts, 'Trepanation of the skull by the medicine men of primitive cultures, with particular reference to present-day East African practice', in Donald R. Brothwell and A. T. Sandison (eds), *Diseases in Antiquity*, (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1967), pp. 673–701.
- 53 Reading University Library MS 3000/78.
- 54 Alexandra David-Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (Escondido: Book Tree, 2000), p. 14.
- 55 David-Neel notes that it is known that a lama has achieved the capacity to perform this feat when, after shouting 'hik!', 'a straw stuck in the skull stands up straight for as long as desired' p. 14.
- 56 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 172.
- 57 Samuel Beckett to Mary Manning, 11 July 1937, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, Box 8, Folder 10. Quoted in Martha Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (eds), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 521.
- 58 Evelyne Grossman, *L'Esthétique de Beckett* (Liège: SEDES, 1998), pp. 37–40.
- 59 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 241.
- 60 Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, p. 30
- 61 Samuel Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, 18 October 1932. Fehsenfeld and Overbeck, *Letters*, pp. 134–5.
- 62 It seems more likely that this word is 'frigged' rather than Fehsenfeld and Overbeck's 'triggered'. 'Frigged' is not only less arcane, it works as the obverse of the desired aesthetic of spontaneous ejaculation referred to in the same paragraph as 'the integrity of a pendu's [hanged man's] emission of semen'. John Pilling has also suggested to me that Fehsenfeld and Overbeck's 'in terrain' should read 'in terram'.
- 63 Wilfred Bion, 'Differentiation of the psychotic from the non-psychotic personalities', in *Second Thoughts* (London: Karnac, 1984), p. 47.
- 64 Wilfred Bion, 'Attacks on linking', in *Second Thoughts*, p. 94.
- 65 Fehsenfeld and Overbeck, *Letters*, p. 134.
- 66 Beckett, *Dream*, pp. 138–9.
- 67 *ibid.*, p. 139.
- 68 *ibid.*, p. 102.
- 69 *ibid.*, p. 113.
- 70 *ibid.*, p. 16.
- 71 *ibid.*, p. 16.
- 72 *ibid.*, pp. 16–17.
- 73 Beckett, *Disjecta*, p. 172.
- 74 *ibid.*, p. 173.

- 75 Gilles Deleuze, 'He stuttered', in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (London: Verso, 1998), pp. 110–11.
- 76 The exception which perhaps proves the rule would be neologisms like the uncanny (*das Unheimlich*) or the undead, both of which seem to take something of their spooky quality precisely from the grammatical violation. On the uncanny, see also Thomson, Chapter 4 above.
- 77 Deleuze, 'The exhausted', *Essays*, p. 173.
- 78 Deleuze, 'He stuttered', *Essays*, p. 113.