Coda:

The no-thing that knows no name and the Beckett envelope, blissfully reconsidered

Enoch Brater

I love talking about nothing. It is the only thing I know anything about. (Oscar Wilde, *An Ideal Husband*)

In July 1974, when Maurice Beebe planned to edit a special number of the *Journal of Modern Literature* to interrogate (as we *didn't* say at the time) a sea change that was taking place in the cultural landscape all around us, he already knew that such a consideration was long overdue. 'From modernism to post-modernism', as the 200-page issue of *JML* was called, served as an early and modest and now mostly forgotten contribution to an academic discussion that was to have major repercussions in the decades to come. Thirteen years later Linda Hutcheon published her landmark study, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, soon followed in 1991 by Fredric Jameson's provocative and influential response entitled *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. At about the same time Marjorie Perloff and others began to wonder whether one could effectively talk about 'postmodern genres', while Deborah Geis speculated on the specifically theatrical potential of 'postmodern theatric[k]s' in contemporary American drama. Somewhat later, critics like H. Porter Abbott would centre this discussion on Beckett. Could his work be properly situated in the broad and less contentious context of 'late modernism'? Richard Begam went even further, describing how Beckett's fiction anticipates many of the defining themes and ideas of Barthes, Foucault and Derrida in moving us toward 'the end of modernity'.¹

By contrast, Beebe's authors were far more tentative in the approaches they pursued, though it should be noted here that they were equally concerned, albeit in embryonic form, with the

interrelated questions of aesthetics, Marxism, literary form and culture – though in this case it is probably fair to say that theirs was more observation than critique. Looking back on the period when these accomplished essays were written in the early 1970s seems like a glance at a lost innocence, soon to be characterised as nothing short of critical naivety; for the special issue appeared in print in the fleeting moment just before literary theory took over English departments with a vengeance. Translators from the French were working overtime. Modernism, ill-defined, and postmodernism, even more so – the latter term continues its vexed reign, this despite the consolations derived from those ambitious studies cited above – was a tempting though still ambiguous borderline for the *JML* authors, centring their attention as they did on an uncontested canonical space of ‘primary’ texts: Eliot, Pound, Williams, Wyndham Lewis, Lawrence and Gertrude Stein loom large. ‘The remarks that follow’, Beebe wrote cautiously in his introduction, ‘are therefore intended to be more suggestive than definitive’.²

My own contribution to the volume was a short piece that served, as this one does, as the final entry but not the final word on an intellectual dilemma that was at best both playful and profound. ‘The empty can: Samuel Beckett and Andy Warhol’, composed soon after completing my Ph.D. during the time when I was still trying to figure out how *not* to write about this most formidable of Irish playwrights, ended, *pace* Cleanth Brooks,³ like this:

The well-wrought urn may have indeed become the empty can, but in the transformational historical process this anxiety between object and audience has become a terrifying metaphor for the anxiety the world imposes on us as we approach the final quarter of twentieth-century aesthetics.⁴

Shades of Harold Rosenberg, self-quotation notwithstanding. In his 1964 study, *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience*, Rosenberg made a persuasive case for an unenviable condition Beckett had earlier problematized in his novel *Watt*: ‘But what was this pursuit of meaning, in this indifference to meaning? And to what did it tend? These are delicate questions.’⁵ A Beckett play – *Endgame*, for example – and a series of Warhol silkscreens, both filled with alarming and mysterious suggestion, might be seen as objects ‘anxious’ for a definition nowhere to be found. In terms of audience reception, nothing might indeed be more *sur*-real than nothing.

The 1970s was also an important decade for a change – nothing less than a paradigm shift – that was swiftly taking place in Beckett's creative activity. His late style for the theatre achieved a startling new dimension with Jessica Tandy's performance of *Not I* at Lincoln Center in New York in 1972. This was followed a few months later by Billie Whitelaw's legendary interpretation at the Royal Court in London (this well-known version was shot in close-up sharp focus and broadcast on the BBC as part of a program called 'Shades' in 1976). Beckett had written a remarkable play about a mouth in conflict with a stubborn pronoun, first-person, then – even more terrifying, ' . . . she . . . SHE! . . . '. Other body parts were soon on display. Beckett's next play, *That Time*, featured a disembodied head in a work the playwright himself characterised as the 'brother to *Not I*'.⁶ The play was produced in 1976 on a double bill, also at the Royal Court Theatre, with an even more enigmatic piece, *Footfalls*. In the second of the play's three related movements, an offstage voice intones fragments of a story that seem to objectify the haunting soundscape we encounter on stage as a female figure paces back and forth:

I say the floor here, now bare, this strip of floor, once was carpeted, a deep pile. Till one night, while still little more than a child, she called her mother and said, Mother, this is not enough. The mother: Not enough? May – the child's given name – May: Not enough. The mother: What do you mean, May, not enough? May: I mean, Mother, that I must hear the feet, however faint they fall. The mother: The motion alone is not enough? May: No, Mother, the motion alone is not enough, I must hear the feet, however faint they fall.⁷

In the next section the shrouded figure, '*chime a little fainter still*', narrates her own 'semblance' of a highly charged but none the less compromised back-story:

Mrs W: You yourself observed nothing . . . strange? Amy: No, Mother, I myself did not, to put it mildly. Mrs W: What do you mean Amy, to put it mildly, what can you possibly mean, Amy, to put it mildly? Amy: I mean, Mother, that to say I observed nothing . . . strange is indeed to put it mildly. For I observed nothing, of any kind, strange or otherwise. I saw nothing, heard nothing, of any kind. I was not there. Mrs W: Not there? Amy: Not there.⁸

Beckett's short prose published in the same period, written in an eccentric 'grammar for being elsewhere',⁹ was in some ways even

more elliptical – and nothing if not downright ‘strange’. It was difficult to tell at the time whether these short pieces were discrete works of their own, works in progress, or fragments of some larger opus yet to emerge, re: Joyce. Several were composed in the mid-1960s. *Lessness*, the author’s dynamic translation of French *Sans*, was printed on a single page of the *New Statesman* on 1 May 1970. Its 120 sentences are in reality only 60, each one organized into six statement groups containing a mere ten. Each of the two ‘orders’ is assigned a different paragraph structure, the whole arranged in ‘ $2 \times 12 = 24$ paragraphs’. *Make sense who may*. Beckett said he handwrote each of the 60 sentences on a separate piece of paper, mixed them all in a container, then drew them out in random order twice.¹⁰

With so many parallels to Dada composition, echoes of James Joyce, and resonances to the ‘midget grammar’ of Gertrude Stein,¹¹ it has always been difficult to know where to place Beckett on the great modernist/postmodernist divide. Somewhere beyond minimalism, his work explores the vast terrain that separates nothing from nothingness, and both from the far more intriguing *nothing in particular*. How can ‘worsening words’, Beckett’s literary métier, be structured, repositioned and retooled so that they ‘enclose’ – embrace really – something as contagious and all-encompassing as:

this this –
 this this here –
 all this this here –¹²

In the early 1970s ‘The empty can’ proposed looking elsewhere, outside of literature perhaps, for the appropriate artistic climate of spontaneity that seemed so central to Beckett’s relentless ‘work-in-regress’.¹³

Undaunted by such considerations, as well as several others, Beebe mailed a copy of the journal to Beckett. A few weeks later he called to say that an airmail letter addressed to me c/o the *Journal of Modern Literature*, Temple University, Philadelphia, had just arrived at his office, posted from Paris. But there was something odd about this: what he held in his hand was only an empty envelope, *nothing* enclosed. Perhaps, he offered, a letter had slipped out? Interesting: I asked if the envelope looked as though it had

9 The empty envelope sent by Beckett to Brater

been sealed. Apparently not. Did I want it sent to me anyway? I told the journal editor to dispatch it sans delay.

The Beckett envelope arrived by fast-mail the very next day. I recognised the ironic hand behind the handwriting immediately. The void never looked quite so promising before, especially so for a young scholar who was beginning to find his way through so much 'mental thuggee'. *A pox on void.*¹⁴

Such was my first contact with Samuel Beckett: nothingness enclosed indeed. Yet what the receipt of his non-correspondence

10 The empty envelope sent by Beckett to Brater

makes clear, finally, is something much more substantial and fulfilling than the provenance of some empty can: fashions of critical definition come and go, yet the encounter with Beckett's magnificent void, 'that MINE', is still out there somewhere waiting for his Reader, as for his Listener – somehow, 'nohow',¹⁵ always already *not* there.

Notes

- 1 For discussions of modernist and postmodernist perspectives, see Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London: Routledge, 1987); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991); Marjorie Perloff, ed., *Postmodern Genres* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Deborah R. Geis, *Postmodern Theatric[k]s: Monologue in Contemporary American Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993); H. Porter Abbott, 'Late modernism: Samuel Beckett and the art of the oeuvre,' in Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (eds), *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 75–96; and Richard Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996).
- 2 Maurice Beebe, 'What modernism was', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 3:5 (July 1974), 1065–84, p. 1065.
- 3 Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1947).
- 4 Enoch Brater, 'The empty can: Samuel Beckett and Andy Warhol', *Journal of Modern Literature* (July 1974), 1255–64.
- 5 See Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object: Art Today and Its Audience* (New York: Horizon, 1964); and Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 75.
- 6 Quoted by Enoch Brater in *Why Beckett* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1989), p. 110.
- 7 Samuel Beckett, *Footfalls*, in *The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), p. 241.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 243.
- 9 H. Porter Abbott, 'A Grammar for being elsewhere', *Journal of Modern Literature* (February 1977), 39–46.
- 10 Enoch Brater, *The Drama in the Text: Beckett's Late Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 93–4; and Samuel Beckett, *What Where*, in *Collected Shorter Plays*, p. 316.
- 11 See Susan D. Brienza, *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987), p. 88.
- 12 Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove Press, 1983), pp. 28–9; and 'what is the word', in *As the Story Was Told: Uncollected and Late Prose* (London: John Calder, 1990), p. 132. For 'nothingness / in words enclose', see the Addenda to *Watt*, p. 247.
- 13 Beckett used the phrase 'work in regress' on a postcard addressed to Ruby Cohn on 14 December 1971. Since the early 1970s there have been a number of useful studies linking Beckett's work to the

- non-literary arts. See in particular Lois Oppenheim, *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000); Mary Bryden (ed.), *Samuel Beckett and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); and Lois Oppenheim (ed.), *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts, and Non-print Media* (New York: Garland, 1999).
- 14 Samuel Beckett, *Eh Joe* in *Collected Shorter Plays*, p. 203; and *Worstward Ho*, p. 43.
 - 15 Samuel Beckett, . . . *but the clouds* . . . and *Ohio Impromptu*, in *Collected Shorter Plays*, pp. 261 and 285; and *Worstward Ho*, p. 47.