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Towards the Inexpressible Nothing in Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*

In a letter (*The German Letter of 1937*) to Axel Kaun, Samuel Beckett states that language is "like a veil that must be torn in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it" (Beckett 1983: 171). This statement seems to reveal that the direction of Beckett's artistic program is informed by an essentialist bias which locates authentic reality as existing behind the obfuscating appearances of language. To expose this "nothingness" behind the words, Beckett had to first compose the necessary textual fabric which would then be meticulously dismantled, thereby exposing the metaphysical presuppositions and grammatical entanglements which rendered the project an impossibility *ab initio*. Indeed, much of Beckett's work from, *The Unnamable* onwards, resembles a textual structure encasing nothingness, mathematically engineered patterns leading to an exhaustion of the very figures and signs constructing the structure. It has now become commonplace to view language in Beckett's fiction as an obstacle on the path to silence and ideal apperception. This approach owes much to the intentional fallacy of appropriating Beckett's own comments on language and his artistic obligation "to bore one hole after another in it [language], until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today" (Beckett 1983: 172). Language, or rather the distance that Beckett hoped to achieve from language, guides the esthetics of his work, which is an esthetics of inexpressibility.

The theme of nothingness in Beckett's work has gained critical currency mostly as an example of his moribund nihilism and has, at least up to the 1980s, been interpreted within the paradigm of an existential confrontation with Being (cf. Esslin). From the 1980s onward, however, a paradigm shift occurred in Beckettian studies which allowed his work to be approached in light of textual indeterminacy and linguistic strategies stressing the liminality of the work itself (cf. Trezise, 1990,

Connor 1988). Though justifiable, especially in terms of the "anything goes" attitude of postmodern criticism, these approaches oftentimes appear to be severed from the philosophical tradition informing Beckett's work (not to mention Derrida's) and specifically the concept of nothingness or inexpressibility. The two primary questions I will attempt to answer are: how does Beckett attempt to present nothingness and what is the philosophical context of this endeavor? To answer the first question I will present the negative imperative as it exists in Beckett's critical writing, whose importance in Beckett criticism became increasingly visible due to the publication of *Disjecta*, a collection of miscellaneous writings. Furthermore, I will present some textual strategies employed by Beckett as a way of destabilizing, or perhaps "detextualizing" the work. This will lead us to the second question of the philosophical conditions of such writing, as well as the significant place of nothingness in *Texts for Nothing*, which will be approached within the context of Beckett's contemporary and critic, Maurice Blanchot. Both these questions will be discussed within the framework of the inexpressibility *topos* binding Beckett's work.

The negative imperative in Beckett's critical writing

Beckett's critical writing comes from the initial phase of his career and, though never explicitly about Beckett's own literary work, it nonetheless offers insight into his artistic endeavors, providing as it does a gloss and framework of the themes found in his subsequent work. I am not suggesting here that his rather scant critical output should be treated as a key to a systematic philosophy or aesthetic theory which could be directly applied to Beckett's drama and fiction, yet it is impossible to ignore the multiple clues in the form of philosophical allusions, aesthetic concerns, and artistic assumptions found in the essays, letters and dialogues accumulated in *Disjecta*. Considering Beckett's reticence about his work, the publication of such critical texts offers the reader what must be treated as a tentative, though helpful, intellectual backdrop to his work. The two seminal critical texts to be considered here – "Dante … Bruno. Vico … Joyce" (1929) and "Three Dialogues with George Duthuit" (1949) – have been chosen due to their preoccupation with the themes in question: negativity and inexpressibility.

   A brief comparison of Beckett's work with that of Joyce's will suffice to shed some light on the formation of Beckett's poetics, particularly his preoccupation with negation. Indeed, the influence that Joyce had on his protégée has already been the subject of numerous studies, which is why only one aspect of the Joyce/Beckett relationship will be of interest here, namely, the understanding that each of the writers had of language. Though Beckett's poetics was greatly indebted to and influenced by the years he spent helping Joyce write *Finnegan's Wake*, it becomes clear that a radical separation did occur. This struggle with the Joycean

legacy is evidenced in an interview assembled by Israel Shenker[1] as quoted by Gontarski:

> … the difference is that Joyce was a superb manipulator of material, perhaps the greatest. He was making words do the absolute maximum of work. There isn't a syllable that's superfluous. The kind of work I do is one in which I am not the master of my material. The more Joyce know the more he could. His tendency is toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think that impotence has been exploited in the past. (1985: 232)

The rejection of knowledge and power language affords the writer like Joyce opens for Beckett a type writing which depends on negativity for its 'structure.' I use the term structure loosely, as Beckett's disintegrating texts and grammar offer testimony to his anti-systematic and anti-structural conception of writing, yet within this disintegration, the negative imperative does offer a principle on which composition is based.

"Dante … Bruno. Vico … Joyce", a tribute and interpretation of Joyce's "Work in Progress" (*Finnegan's Wake*), is a crucial starting point to a reading of Beckett's work. Here, Beckett addresses the melding of form and content in the *Work in Progress*, an aim that is arguably fulfilled in *Finnegan's Wake* and one that finds its continuation in Beckett's work. About *Work in Progress* Beckett writes: "Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His [Joyce's] writing is not about something; it is that something itself" (Beckett 1983: 27). Indeed, musicality and an onomatopoeic rendering of content was to remain a constant element in Beckett's writing**;** however, in other aspects, such as the aesthetic deployment of negativity, Beckett distanced himself from his mentor's poetics.

Linda Ben-Zvi draws attention to the influence of Fritz Mauthner's[2] linguistic skepticism and nominalism exerted on Beckett's poetics, identifying him alongside Descartes and Schopenhauer as key figures in Beckett's thinking (1985: 194). Mauthner's emphasis on the metaphorical nature of language and its inability to represent anything beyond itself may have led Beckett to refute Joyce's "apotheosis of the word" (Beckett 1983: 172). For Joyce language was capable of encapsulating history and could be utilized to compile an encyclopedic repertoire of phenomenal experience. Joyce strove for a realistic and teleological depiction of consciousness afforded by the "immediacy" of the stream of consciousness tech-

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[1]   Gontarski cautions the reader that the source of this interview, which is in fact a composite interview pieced together by a *New York Times* correspondent, Israel Shenker, has never been fully verified, although there is evidence in support of the artistic struggle described in the therein (232).

[2]   With his eyesight failing Joyce in 1932 asked Beckett to read and summarize for him Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, a work which presents a radical understanding of language's inability to represent not only universals but individuals and also a work which in many ways predates Wittgenstein's notion of language games (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 359).

nique, a technique already laden with the lyricism and verboseness Beckett sought to avoid. Instead, Beckett opted for an ascetic approach – not a mastery of language, but its rejection and reduction. Commenting on the aesthetic ambivalence present in the Joyce/Beckett relationship, Gontarski writes: "Although Beckett spent considerable energy imitating and defending Joyce, his own aesthetics was shaped mostly in recoil" (1985: 232). Yet this recoil into negativity is potency inverted, as the progression towards inexpressibility and nothingness propels the text, if not forward, then simply "on".

"The Three Dialogues with George Duthuit," most likely fashioned upon Berkeley's *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, are famous for containing one of the most famous of Beckett's dicta regarding the primary esthetic dilemma of art which, "weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little bit further along a dreary road" should instead opt for "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (Beckett 1983: 139). This oft-quoted passage, referring to Bram Van Velde's paintings, has gained critical notoriety, not only because it rather exhaustively expounds Beckett's "aesthetic of nothingness" (Murphy 1991: 49), but also because it combines both ethical concerns connected with the obligation to express with the purely esthetic notion of inexpressibility. Both the ethical and the aesthetic dimensions of art melt here as they do in his later work. This passage is therefore evocative of the impotence that a writer deals with when expressing what is not merely a product of language. Though negativity seems to be the axiomatic trajectory of Beckett's work, Gontarski reads the "nothing to express" as an active phrase: "what remains to be expressed is nothingness, even though that needs to be done with the faulty system of language" (1985: 236).

Based on a real conversation between Beckett and George Duthuit, *The Three Dialogues* express what could be read as an artistic manifesto, with a clear declaration of the negative mode his fiction and drama were to assume in the future. Furthermore, *The Three Dialogues* themselves are a dramatic dialogue structured in a way that reflects the negative imperative it advocates.[3] Hitch develops the assertion that B and D construct an argument with undefined assertions (such as void), instead of demolishing a proposed argument in the Platonic fashion *by questioning the assertions*. The feebleness of this construction is exposed by B with his last lines, "Yes, yes I am mistaken, I am mistaken" (Beckett 1983: 45). The character B often contradicts his assertions, occupying the role of the fool, consigning B to failure.

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[3] For a more detailed account of the blurring distinction between criticism and fiction in the *Three Dialogues* see Rupert Wood's "An Endgame of Aesthetics: Beckett as Essayist".

As the critical output shows, Beckett's preoccupation with inexpressibility of nothingness evolved in opposition to Joyce's poetics and in response to Fritz Mauthner's skeptical view of language which draws attention to its own paucity. Beckett noted that some form of Nominalist irony is necessary to his project of the "unword" (Beckett 1983: 173). The sense of having to continue writing, despite the impossibility of doing so, is a theme that permeates much of his later writing, starting with the trilogy and onwards. Moreover, the methods for how this "going on" would be carried out is prefigured in these critical statements which give a clear indication of the negative direction his work was to take.

Negation in *Texts for Nothing*

Few pieces of Beckett's *oeuvre* have attracted less critical attention than *Texts for Nothing*, written in French mostly in 1951 (English translated by the author was published in 1967) after the famous impasse Beckett encountered upon completing the trilogy. H. Porter Abbott calls them "a succession of misfires" or "last sputterings from the trilogy", an irregularly assembled "aftertext" (1994: 107). James Knowlson in his monumental biography of Beckett, *Damned to Fame*, mentions them only in passing. Exceptions to this critical silence have surfaced relatively recently and include the considerations by such Beckettian scholars as H. Porter Abbott, Shira Wolosky, and Susan Brienza. On the whole, however, critics and biographers have given *Texts for Nothing* only a cursory glance, relegating the work to Beckett's "post-trilogy vacuum" and seeing it as largely derivative of the themes occupying the trilogy. This attitude is understandable considering Beckett's own comments about this work found in Israel Shenker's interview from 1956, in which he goes on to state that *Texts for Nothing* were meant "to get out of the attitude of disintegration" but ultimately failed in this endeavor (Murphy 1991: 34).

The meaning of failure becomes a critical point of departure for Beckett's trilogy and *Texts for Nothing*, in particular. Far from being a failure in the traditional, negative sense of the word, *Texts for Nothing* affirm the necessity for such a failure; that is, the ways in which the *Texts for Nothing* fail to expose the underlying paradox of language grappling with its metaphysical origin and, in so doing, refuse to accommodate the traditional requirements of fiction, such as character, plot and linear narrative. This is just one way of reading the title, which would suggest the futility and purposelessness of the texts; however, as will become clearer further on in this paper, this futility is written into the text as a necessary condition of its being. To "fail better" is the aim of each subsequent work, to fail in such a way as to render saying/writing no longer necessary.

> Since well saying is impossible, the only hope lies in betrayal: to attain a failure so complete it would elicit a total abandonment of the prescription itself, a relinquishment of saying and of language. This would mean a return to the void – to be void or emptied, emptied of all pre-

> scription in the end, the temptation is to cease to exist in order to be. In this form of failure one returns to the void, to pure being. (Badiou 2003: 91)

This imperative to fail not only runs counter to the already expressed "obligation to express", but, more specifically – as analyzed by Badiou in his highly original book, *On Beckett* – it aims at "subtracting oneself from the imperative of saying" (2003: 91).

Despite the thematic and strategic overlapping between *Texts for Nothing* and the trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *Unnamable*), I would not consider them merely reiterative of *The Unnamable*'s aporetic disintegration towards the "unword", but rather its radicalization and refinement. Shifting the focus away from the dispossession of the subject and placing it on a hypostatic void, Beckett once again engages the "unwording" of the work, but in a more focused and unrelenting manner. As H. Porter Abbott notices, Beckett's *oeuvre* up to and including *The Unnamable* is still entangled in a teleological and linear form of narrative which has produced similarly end-oriented interpretations (1994: 106). Even though the trilogy ends with disembodiment and dispossession it was led to that point in a linear manner. *Texts for Nothing* mark the secession of teleology, which aside from inscribing the above-mentioned theme of failure, is also a step forward from the trilogy in that the text *per se* is the sole object of focus instead of the disintegrating subjectivity of the trilogy.

Similarly to *The Unnamable*, *Texts for Nothing* are bereft of a central character and plot capable of serving as a unifying principle. As Brienza states the only cohesive element in *Texts for Nothing* is the production of character, a character is created so that he can later be destroyed (1987: 21). I would suggest, however, that the idea of character as it appears in Beckett's work is first and foremost a manifestation of linguistic materialism and is dissolved as a matter of course making it thus no more a cohesive element than the dissolution of any such manifestation, such as subjectivity, verisimilitude, temporality, and space. Once again, here as in *The Unnamable*, it could be argued that language assumes center stage in a spectacle of self-erasure and aporetic logic. "With *Texts for Nothing*, language itself arises as Beckett's main subject, as his creatures weigh each unit of thought, question nouns, and revise phrases, all the while wandering along strange syntactic paths" (Brienza 1987: 19). What is brought into being is just as easily denied; language vacillating between affirmation and denials is exposed as immaterial and unreliable. Not only is Beckett here repeating the notion that language can only recreate false images and fictions deprived of an extralinguistic and logocentric anchor, he also attempts to reify the gaps coalescing these fictions. When language is reduced to such impotence, as it is in *Texts for Nothing*, absence protrudes from under the jumble of words and, in turn, becomes the focal point of the texts.

Indeed, these thirteen texts, devoid of order and interdependence, draw attention to the breaks between the texts. These empty gaps represent the nothingness

and silence which the texts disturb and defer. In support of this argument is the title itself: "Textes pour rien", which refers to a musical concept, *measure pour rien* – pauses in a piece of music (cf. Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 562 and Hill 1990: 125). It is through this concept of a musical pause, a period of silence that is nevertheless part of the music, that we might search for a similar strategy behind Beckett's literary lacunae. In the "German Letter" previously quoted, Beckett asks:

> 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? (1983: 171)

It is clear from this quote that the writer's emphasis is on silence and absence, not on the text whose *raison d'etre* is to bridge the silent gaps. Perhaps Beckett's assertion that words belong to a material structure which must be disassembled in order to make way for what must logically precede it makes it possible to consider his artistic project as being metaphysical. Locatelli, however, raises an important question in regard to this approach. She claims that by ascribing the notion authenticity to metalinguistic silence, such an approach reveals its logocentric bias. "However, this way of posing the issue of authenticity here remains within a logo-centered and metaphysical thought, one that predictably conceives silence as the opposite of language" (Locatelli 2001: 27). Perhaps, instead of treating Beckett's silence as the opposite of language, it should be treated as the condition of possibility for language to exist.

But how is this sense of absence achieved? In terms of rhetoric, Beckett utilizes three techniques in order to draw attention to this absence: rhetorical questions, self-canceling logic and repetition. Rhetorical questions set up the possibility of an answer only to leave it unfulfilled. No question is ever answered in *Texts for Nothing*, instead these questions serve as a means of suspending the text from any final affirmation of anything beyond the fact of its existence. Affirmations and negations (self-canceling logic) are only the first step, for negation alone would relate the experience of a singular loss. For there to be infinite regress and the sense of absence overwhelming the moment, repetition must also be utilized. Repetition and negation, which take the form of reflections and echoes, serve as a technique which rids language of substance and consciousness of subjectivity.

Only when all three techniques are in concert do the texts come closer to purging themselves of content, as is the case in the following passage: "How many hours to go, before the next silence, they are not hours, it will not be silence, how many hours still, before the next silence?" (1967: 104). On a purely textual level, this short fragment reflects the characteristic thematic perseverance in the midst of disintegration. Despite the introduction and immediate cancellation of "hours" and "silence", the speaking voice inaugurates words which are deleted,

thereby leaving behind traces of what could have been concrete and real. Like most Beckett's characters, so the speaking voices in *Texts for Nothing* oscillate between silence and speech; they wait for nothingness, be it in the form of silence, emptiness, or death, to engulf them once again. What can be regarded as Beckett's brand of negative eschatology, a continuing theme from the trilogy, achieves in *Texts for Nothing* a new level of urgency, as each text seem to be on the verge of collapsing onto itself.

This rhetorical "voiding" or "unwording" techniques can be extended to include the treatment of the I speaker, or, more precisely, the voice of the I speaker. Throughout the thirteen texts one of the main foci is the issue of the speaking voice's place and ontological integrity. "Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it's me?" (1967: 91). The I does not speak in *Texts for Nothing* but is spoken by the voice, a voice whose being is predicated on the incessant questioning of its own presence. The voice multiplies itself, assuming pronominal linguistic form. Deprived of referents, however, these pronouns play off each other and are, in turn, reduced to vestiges of meaning. Pronouns thus become empty capsules recruited to the service of sustaining the texts without imbuing it with any semantic content. In this process, the speaking subject is fused with the spoken subject, with multiple shifts occurring from "I" to "you" to "he". This constant pronominal shifting succeeds in dislocating the speaking subject from the narrative, thereby opening a space of absence as the source of the voice.

Negation in *Texts for Nothing* only seemingly brings the voice closer to its professed goal of silence and finality. A quote from Text 11 gives brief hope that there is yet a way out from this impasse:

> No, something better must be found, a better reason, for this to stop, another word, a better idea, to put in the negative, a new no, to cancel all the others, all the old noes that buried me down here, deep in this place which is not one, which is merely a moment for the time being eternal, which is called here, and in this being which is called me and is not one, and in this impossible voice... (1967: 130–131)

As we see here, the project of negation and self-erasure, predicated as it is on the hope of finding that right word that would put an end to the "incessant and interminable" voice, is frustrated by the very logic of its enterprise. To find a word, an idea, a reason that would silence the voice *via negativa* implicitly affirms what is negated, and so the voice must continue despite itself. This paradox, which for Maurice Blanchot, Beckett's contemporary and critic,[4] constitutes the source of literature, takes the form of speaking when there is nothing to say, this frantic

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[4] Maurice Blanchot published an early and very influential essay on Beckett entitled "Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?", first in *Nouvelle Revue Française*, 2 (octobre 1953), pp. 678–86, then in *Le Livre à venire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), Part IV, section (iii), pp. 256–64. The English translation, "Where now? Who now?" can be found in a collection of Blanchot's essays, *The Book to Come*.

search for the last word is what allows silence to speak. In "Literature and the Right to Death" (published in *Work of Fire*) Blanchot writes:

> One can, then, accuse language of having become an interminable resifting of words instead of the silence it wanted to achieve. But this endless resifting of words without content, this continuousness of speech through an immense pillage of words, is precisely the profound nature of a silence that talks even in its dumbness, a silence that is speech empty of words, an echo speaking on and on in the midst of silence. (1995: 332)

The echoing effect of empty pronouns, the endless repetitions and "pillage of words" spurring the text on is precisely what Blanchot considers constitutive of silence in literature, the "speech empty of words". Moreover, Blanchot's project of dissolving the materiality of words is realized in this conception of silence which underscores nothingness as the hypostatic and neutral space of literature. Blanchot asks in "Where Now? Who Now?": "What is the void that becomes speech in the open intimacy of the one who disappears in it?" (2003: 210). The greatest creative ambition is for Blanchot "to make literature become the exposure of this emptiness inside, to make it open up completely to its nothingness, realize its own unreality" (1995: 301). And thus transcending the unreal materiality of language through literature entails putting literature into question, making it "null". This is done through a language which submits itself to a double relation towards the inexpressibility of the unknown based on the necessity and impossibility to express, a theme discussed already in relation to Beckett and one that finds its correlation in Blanchot's work.

This paradoxical language is what Blanchot calls the *neutre*, which "discloses the unknown, but by an uncovering that leaves it under cover" (Blanchot 1993: 300), a language that neither discloses nor conceals but leaves the unknown in its otherness intact. Inexpressibility therefore is treated by Blanchot, who in this respect follows Levinas, as an ethical response to the demand of writing. Passivity – the inability to write and comprehend – comes to be the only ethical response of a subject called into question by literature, because, as argues Blanchot, any form of naming or signifying is a negative movement of language in which what is signified is annihilated and replaced with its meaning (Blanchot 1995: 322). "It is this principle of paucity and excess, suspension and alteration, effacement and proliferation, that in Blanchot comes to be called the *neutre*" (Hill 1997: 132) and is precisely this principle which in *Texts for Nothing* which "unwords" the text of its textual materiality: "No, no souls, or bodies, or birth, or life, or death, you've got to go on without any of that junk, that's all dead with words, with excess of words, they can say nothing else, they say there is nothing else" (Beckett 1967: 125).

Aporias, rhetorical questions, repetition, pronominal shifts, all contribute to the opening of this aforementioned neutral space. The thirteen texts, instead of showcasing semantic and syntactic disintegration in the manner of the trilogy, tend to focus more succinctly on neutrality and vacancy. It would be an overstatement to claim that Beckett's work endeavors towards silence and nothingness, as such a teleological implication would be a destructive imposition on the texts. As

was mentioned before, failure of expression is written into the text and, what is more, it is a necessary failure, because this aesthetics of failure requires that language finally betray its materiality; moreover, inexpressibility spurs the voice on in spite of the negativity and subtraction working against it. Negation in Beckett's work is therefore constitutive of the ethical obligation to "go on", to continue despite there being no reason to continue, nothingness being not the *telos* of the incessant writing but both the cause and effect of the repetitions and "syntax of weakness" precipitating the *Texts for Nothing*.

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