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"Ché la diritta via era smarrita": Dante's *Commedia* in Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*

Theoharis Constantine Theoharis

- 1 Samuel Beckett ended his days immobilized, watching televised tennis and reading Dante's *Commedia*, presumably alternately. He is most likely to have seen in both the game and the epic that ceaselessly plenary limitation that fascinated him throughout his career: order shot through the void. Placed together this way, the orders bestowed by a game and a story bring the following questions readily to mind. When does repetition amount to development, when does motion make a journey, when do increase and decrease indicate growth and decline? These riddles, and their cognates, constitute the struggles to act, to know, often simply to be that exhaust and enliven the wanderers in the wilderness, the decrepit masters and servants, and the disembodied mouths and voices that people Beckett's fictional world. How much of the order shot through their void is a game and how much a story? *Texts For Nothing*, published in one volume with *Stories* in 1958, presents a mostly motionless, sometimes disembodied wanderer in a wilderness who asks, at the moment of his newest paralysis, in thirteen unlucky monologues, whether he can or should make himself a story and so "go on" with the game of ending for good. Dante's epic journey starts in a moment of panic and terrified exhaustion, a moment when a wanderer in the wilderness can't go on any more and has to go on. In his alternately grim and tender musings, Beckett's paralytic occasionally compares himself to Dante's cosmic pilgrim, who journeyed through all kinds of death, in the medieval poem, to find his way back to the living. The comparison involves not only a man in a bog envying, benignly and tritely, a man in the stars, but more significantly life sundered from order, from the "via diritta," and life enacting order, journeying on the straight path, absolutely. And not, in this comparison to Dante, the order of a game, which deleteriously toys repeatedly with the reality of life in the void, but the order of a story, which, as Dante conceived that aesthetic form, once, and for all time, fills the void life stumbles into with the energetic rest of the real.

- 2 Beckett's speaker has fallen at evening into a bog on a hillside. Face down in the muck, he occupies himself mentally with various symbolic departures from the spot, but never leaves it. Instead of achieving energetic rest, the deliberate enacting of an intelligible and desired purpose, the man in the muck drifts in a torpor of murmuring shifts from memories of his former life to self-canceling and contradictory accounts of his current situation. These include evanescent fantasies, errant speculations, hapless analysis, and the aspiration to escape all that by telling a story. In number 5, towards the end of an intermittent fantasy that he is clerk, scribe, judge and prisoner in his own trial, the speaker breaks off for a moment.

It's tiring, very tiring, in the same breath to win and lose, with concomitant emotions, one's heart is not of stone, to record the doom, don the black cap and collapse in the dock, very tiring, in the long run, I'm tired of it, I'd be tired of it, if I were me. It's a game, it's getting to be a game, I'm going to rise and go, if it's not me it will be someone, a phantom, long live all our phantoms, those of the dead, those of the living and those of those who are not born. I'll follow him, with my sealed eyes, he needs no door, needs no thought, to issue from this imaginary head, mingle with air and earth and dissolve, little by little, in exile.¹

- 3 The tiring game here is not only the trial, but also all the unavailing murmuring of which it is a piece. And, of course, the fantasy hasn't even achieved the full status of game, it's only getting to be one. If it were one, there would be an ordered way to be in the muck, and that is precisely what the speaker cannot manage. An ordered way would be a real way, a way that doesn't come and go, a way to reliably pursue, to enact deliberately. Deliberation in his case can only be imagined. And even then, not as something he does to pursue happiness—the objective of all human action and all stories representing it, as Aristotle's *Poetics* puts the matter—but as something done to him in a courtroom to judge the culpability of his moral and psychological helplessness where action is concerned. He seems to know as much, since he dismisses the game-like fantasy momentarily here, before lapsing into its final collapse at the end of the section. The almost game of being on trial, and recording it in writing, is dismissed because it is merely tiring, and what he wants, of course, is not to be tired out by words, but, somehow, to be changed by them, to be taken or to go out of being in the bog, to end. Appropriately enough, his temporary relief from the imperfect trial-game scenario temporarily presents an action, a story of following an imagined ghost, an image of himself or a projection out of himself, who bodiless, can pass through all physical barriers into an exile that will end in the dissolution he has all along desired.

- 4 A living exiled journey through a phantom realm of the dead lead by a phantom to achieve deliverance evokes Dante's *Commedia*, especially for readers familiar with Beckett's frequent references to that epic throughout his works. In *Texts for Nothing* the allusions to Dante's symbolically salvific narrative glint sporadically, amounting to leitmotifs of yearning for the most concrete and elaborately systematic presentation of life as a divinely ordered story, an action through which souls partly make and partly take their given place in the real. In number 6, the speaker ends a memory of having seen his own eyes in a mirror shared first by his father and, later, his mother, with the following longing for the sense of identity felt by characters who can tell stories.

I was, I was, they say in Purgatory, in Hell too, admirable singulars, admirable assurance. Plunged in ice up to the nostrils, the eyelids caked with frozen tears, to fight all your battles o'er again, with tranquility, and know there are no more emotions in store, no, I can't have heard aright.²

5 I was so and so, the thief, I was so and so the late-repenter, I was so and so the just ruler. Through hundreds of such on the spot interviews with dead souls in Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, Dante encounters the encyclopedic forms of human action, and so learns and then writes the order of happy and unhappy relations that longing, tempered by intellect and will, makes between every human life and the real. The term "singularity" here is a sardonic reduction of moral agency, that securely felt "I" the bogged speaker keeps disavowing, to an etiolated, merely grammatical form. What he admires in Dante's dead is the "assurance," which their place in the after-life gives them, that they acted, that they brought about the end they now live out, that, in and through their lived and their told stories longing and rationality and will coalesced in such a way in them as to make them all "singulars," each a self, an "I" which none, even in their suffering, are moved to disavow.

6 The particular singulars referred to, those "plunged in ice up to the nostrils, the eyelids caked with frozen tears," occupy the first and third of four rings in the ninth and last circle of Hell, where traitors to their kin, homeland or party, guests, and finally benefactors, successively freeze ever more intensely in the concretely isolating form of that deceitfulness by which they lived with those close to them. The physical torment counts more in this reference to *Inferno* than the ethical offense, appropriately for Beckett's speaker, who is not tortured for treacherous misdeeds, but frustrated by the lack of any available action whatsoever. Keeping track of his physical identity is usually more than this speaker can manage; the ethical dimension, that of stories, simply drops out of his consideration, even as he invokes it in the Dante reference. As he admits in the passage, concerning the emotionless, tranquil rehearsal the sinner's make of their old battles, he "can't have heard aright." As further proof that the ethical sense is missing from his sardonic parody of the Wordsworthian lyric impulse in storytelling, he notes at the end of the section:

But first stop talking and get on with your weeping, with eyes wide open that the precious liquid may spill freely, without burning the lids, or the crystalline humour, I forget, whatever it is it burns. Tears, that could be the tone, if they weren't so easy, the true tone and tenor at last. Besides not a tear, not one, I'd be in greater danger of mirth, if it wasn't so easy.³

7 The earlier *Inferno* reference to "caked" and "frozen" tears, recalls Canto 32, lines 46 through 48. There, traitors to their kin are immersed up to their necks in ice, so that "their eyes, which wept upon the ground before, shed tears down on their lips until the cold/held fast the tears and locked their lids still more."⁴ This second reference, specifically in its citation of the desire for the tears to "spill freely" from the eyes, and most particularly in the word "crystalline," shifts the *Inferno* citation to the third ring of ice. There, traitors who murdered their guests while feasting them at table lie on their backs, sheathed in ice, with their faces exposed to the freezing air. Of them Dante writes:

Their very weeping there won't let them weep,
and grief that finds a barrier in their eyes
turns inward to increase their agony;
because their first tears freeze into a cluster,
and, like a crystal visor fill up all
the hollow that is underneath the eyebrow.⁵

8 The anti-hosts enjoy a unique status among the damned. Their offense is so heinous that no time to repent of it is allowed them. At the moment of their sin their soul

plunges immediately to ring three of circle nine and a demon takes possession of their earthly body, inhabiting it in the world above until the destined moment of its physical death. The punishment for their social deceit thus takes an ironically absurdist physical form of deceit, one that falsely contradicts a first principle of truth itself: they seem to be, although they are not, in two places at one time.

- 9 Although the speaker seems ignorant of the split identity of these tear-tormented frauds, he attributes the same doubling to himself often across the thirteen monologues. Sometimes as a fantasy, sometimes as a protective denial, sometimes as a metaphysical assertion or biographical speculation the bog-man claims repeatedly to be active in the world he left behind and mired in the slimy ditch at one and the same time. In #1 "I'm up there and I'm down here, under my gaze, foundered," in #7 "And what if all this time I had not stirred hand or foot from the third class waiting-room of the South-Eastern Railway Terminus..." and so on.⁶ This split agency goes farther in these short texts than the Cartesian division of consciousness against extension that has become a common-place topic in Beckett criticism, vitiating consciousness itself, as the speaker indicates in #4:

He tells his story every five minutes, saying it is not his, there's cleverness for you. He would like it to be my fault that he has no story, of course he has no story, that's no reason for trying to foist one on me. That's how he reasons, wide of the mark, but wide of what mark, answer us that. He has me say things saying it's not me, there's profundity for you, he has me who say nothing say it's not me. All that is truly crass. If at least he would dignify me with the third person, like his other figments, not he, he'll be satisfied with nothing less than me for his me.⁷

- 10 The all doubting Cartesian ego is certainly at play here, but its doubting has been shifted to the realm of material extension. Now the body, the second "person" in this metaphysical argument about being and story-telling, does all the deconstructive thinking. Beckett deepens the Cartesian inquiry into being here, replaying it not only as a grammatical quarrel between a mental "I" and various bodily kinds of "me," but also as a quarrel between two other "persons," the Father and Son in the Christian Trinity, and their analogues in literary thinking and practice, the God-like author and his image-bearing creation. Reversing a more modern Italian literary forebear, Pirandello, Beckett's character, despite his contradictory shunning and longing for a story, is in flight from and not in search of an author, especially a divine one. From #1, "Here at least none of that, no talk of a creator and nothing very definite in the way of a creation. Dry, it's possible, or wet, or slime, as before matter took ill."⁸ The idea that creation troubled matter unwilling to receive it, as a disease troubles an organism, recalls Freud's metaphysical speculations about *thanatos*, the "death wish" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and, more generally, the diagnosis of decadence and nihilism to which Nietzsche ceaselessly subjected all the claims of moral consciousness on life.

- 11 Their modernist, anti-Christian atheism breathes through this next repudiation of life in words—specifically of rationality and morality shaping longing, the formula for mimetic narration—from #6:

Blot, words can be blotted and the mad thoughts they invent, the nostalgia for that slime where the Eternal breathed and his son wrote, long after, with divine idiotic finger, at the feet of the adulteress, wipe it out, all you have to do is say you said nothing and so say nothing again.⁹

- 12 The "nostalgia for that slime where the Eternal breathed," is a paraphrase of Freud's idea that matter desires to return to its unformed, uncreated, and most especially

unliving state. Here the prehistoric memory in the death wish is sublimated by the counterpart urge Freud pairs it with—"eros," the urge to live and create more life. The nostalgia is for the moment when the slime received breath, after all, not for the moment before that creative sigh. Words offend, the speaker asserts, when they transform the strongest wish backward—the wish not to be at all—into nostalgia for the original energy of the first creative act, God's breathing life into the slime that became Adam, and then all of us. The strong weakness of this "mad thought,"—that human life is a divinely spoken creation, and that language can reveal and enhance saving knowledge of that idea—is what the speaker would blot out. In Christian accounts of the creation, the "Eternal" who breathed creatively with a word was the Father, the breath was the Holy Spirit, and the word was the Son. Beckett packs that dogma into his reference to Jesus' writing, that sublimating revision of the Mosaic code which amounts, in Christian thinking, to a second creation of life and a new story of spiritual rescue.

- 13 The slime where the son wrote with divine idiotic finger, long after his creative words spoken to Genesis mud in Eden, is now the ground of the temple in Jerusalem. The scene, narrated in John's gospel, chapter 8, verses 1 through 11, presents Jesus writing on the ground in response to the scribes and Pharisees, who have asked him to comment on the Mosaic requirement that the adulteress they have brought before him should be stoned. The accusers will not allow Jesus his literary subterfuge, which Beckett presents here as an actually dim-witted or distracted, "idiotic," dirt doodling, and press him for an answer. After Jesus tells them that he who is without sin amongst them should cast the first stone, he bends down and writes, enigmatically, in the ground again. During the second divine scribble, the accusers, conscience stricken, depart without executing the adulteress. Jesus then rises, and exonerates the woman, telling her to go and sin no more. The speaker has no more enthusiasm for the enlivening moral creativity of the Son's temple writing than he had for the physically creative language that same Son uttered in Eden. Forgiveness of adultery appears here, ironically, as a species of "eros," a morally ennobling desire for life to continue, and, as such, is anathema. While vengeance on eros may be reprehensible, restorative extinction, or at least the desire for it, persists as the only good the speaker won't despair of. But even that can only exist in saying so—"all you have to do is say you said nothing and so say nothing again"—which leaves the speaker in the same wordy tension between "thanatos" and "eros" that he's been in all along.
- 14 Against all this shunning of stories and their schizoid tellers stands the figure of Dante, who not only invented split-identity sinners, but who casts himself simultaneously throughout his poem as one. The pilgrim progressively undergoing the liberating journey through the after-life, named, with some anxiety, along the way as "Dante," is also Dante the earth-bound writer, authoritatively recounting his otherworldly experience. While the pilgrim Dante recovers his imperiled soul, the author Dante writes that story of spiritual rescue as an "allegory of the theologians," effectively claiming that his epic poem has the moral and spiritual authority of God's writing. Thus, extravagantly and radically, for the author, the pilgrim, and their readers, the *Commedia* doubles as the Bible itself.¹⁰ Standing as savior to his own endangered self in the work, Dante assumes the ultimate authorial figure of God in relation to his own mortal image. His words, like God's, reveal the unfailing order reconciling alienation and longing. To speak theologically, Dante's words, re-enact the Father's "Power,"

displayed in the Son as "logos," as creative "Word." They redeem life by fashioning its story.

- 15 Beckett's ditched fool does not always angrily resolve to blot out the idiotic writing of the two-personed author God. In text #1 the speaker's recollection of his father telling him a story in childhood includes a tenderly naive diminishing of the divine aspiration in storytelling, particularly in Dante's.

Yes, to the end, always muttering, to lull me and keep me company, and all ears always, all ears for the old stories, as when my father took me on his knee and read me the one about Joe Breen, the son of a lighthouse keeper, evening after evening, all the long winter through. A tale, it was a tale for children, it all happened on a rock, in the storm, the mother was dead and the gulls came beating against the light, Joe jumped into the sea, that's all I remember, a knife between his teeth, did what was to be done and came back, that's all I remember this evening, it ended happily, it began unhappily and it ended happily, every evening, a comedy, for children. Yes, I was my father and I was my son, I asked myself questions and answered as best I could, I had it told to me evening after evening, the same old story I knew by heart and couldn't believe, or we walked together, hand in hand, silent, sunk in our worlds, each in his worlds, the hands forgotten in each other. That's how I've held out till now. And this evening again it seems to be working, I'm in my arms, I'm holding myself in my arms, without much tenderness, but faithfully, faithfully.¹¹

- 16 In his epistolary account of the *Commedia* as an allegory of salvation, written for his patron Can Grande della Scala, Dante defines "comedy" in conventional medieval fashion as a story that begins unhappily and ends happily. The definition suffers in Beckett's translation.
- 17 His speaker has "a comedy for children" told to him, and replays the scene in memory ever after, to "lull me and keep me company." The alienating fear of night coming brings on the longing for protective love from the story-telling father. In the ritual repetition of the narrative scene the son becomes the teller and the hearer of the tale, "I was my father and I was my son." While this identifying bond accurately portrays the psychology of listening to stories, especially the childhood psychology, it also turns the comforting company into solipsism. Becoming his own father every evening, the boy doesn't take on his father's edifying authority to ask and answer meaningful questions about the story. Instead he blots it out. And how could it be otherwise, since this son is, for all his formal identification with the story-telling father, only a boy? In the absent presence of the unloving father, the story-telling boy loses confidence in the tale's power to be a lesson. The father does not and the son cannot give an inspiring presentation of how the boy, like Joe jumping into the sea, might do "what was to be done." "I asked myself questions and answered as best I could," the speaker says, "I had it told to me evening after evening, the same old story I knew by heart and couldn't believe."
- 18 The revelatory grace of authorial cooperation between Father and Son, the theological truthfulness which Dante claims for his comic telling of the old story of dangerous rescue drops out here. Instead of the discovery of an order that masters danger, instead of cathartic identification with the action that brings happiness out of unhappiness, the telling and hearing lapse into a habitual standoff of alienation and longing. The hope blighted in the tale telling is indistinguishable from the barely survived loneliness binding the father and son on those evenings when they walked along without playing the story-game. "I had it told to me evening after evening...or we walked together, hand

in hand, silent, sunk in our worlds, each in his worlds, the hands forgotten in each other (emphasis mine)." This grammatically ambiguous "or" does little to distinguish the silent times from the story times, and much to make them sadly interchangeable.

- 19 The unbelieving story-teller who holds himself in his own arms "without much tenderness, but faithfully, faithfully," poignantly rehearses and empties the promise of ordered deliverance from alienation and longing that writing like Dante's and the Bible's makes. "That's how I've held out till now." The faith keeps true to a linguistic form whose content has no reliable but an ever-desired power to lull or comfort the all ears teller. Yet once more, "this evening," breathing over slime again, the faithful word "seems to be," eternally, working. The cold comfort of this faltering theological frame for Dantean narrative, recurs later in # 5, where the speaker says:

The sky, I've heard—the sky and earth, I've heard great accounts of them, now that's pure word for word, I invent nothing. I've noted, I must have noted many a story with them as setting, they create the atmosphere. Between them where the hero stands a great gulf is fixed, while all about they flow together more and more, till they meet, so that he finds himself as it were under glass, and yet with no limit to his movements in all directions, let him understand who can, that is no part of my attributions.¹²

- 20 In Luke's gospel, in chapter 16, verses 19 through 31, Jesus tells the story of the beggar Lazarus and the rich man at whose gates the beggar lay without ever being cared for. At their deaths, Lazarus goes to Abraham's bosom in the sky and the rich man to flames in Hell. Looking up and seeing Lazarus comforted, the rich man asks Abraham to send the beggar to comfort him in Hell, to touch his burning tongue with a single drop of water. Abraham denies the rich man's plea, arguing that he and Lazarus have the afterlife their lives merited, adding, in verse 26, "And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed; so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence." When the rich man asks instead for Lazarus at least to go and warn the rich man's brothers to act charitably and so be saved from his torment, Abraham rebuffs him, observing in verse 29, that the scriptures must suffice for their salvation—"They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." When the rich man counters that the words of a man come back from the afterlife would have more moral authority to bring about repentance, to give an unhappy beginning a happy ending, Abraham ends the conversation, asserting that if the scriptures have not sufficed no ghostly visitor from the afterlife could ever be ethically persuasive.
- 21 The great Biblical gulf fixed between earth and sky is a startlingly magnified image, in reverse, of the mean gully Beckett's stalled pilgrim has fallen into. Where his hero of many stories stands face up to view the sky and the earthly horizon, the speaker who can successfully summon no story lies face down, his only prospect the pit of a pouch in a hill. All movement in or from that pouch is denied the speaker, while his greatly accounted hero can move laterally "with no limit." That hero's storied position on the vertical axis, where the "great gulf" between sky and earth is fixed, always keeps him at one earthly point, immovably distant from the heavens. There "he finds himself as it were under glass." But his position on the horizontal axis, where "all about" the sky and earth "flow together, till they meet" (at the horizon) allows him unlimited "movements in all directions." The speaker can't understand how these opposed positions of earth and sky affect his hero's motion—"let him understand who can, that is no part of my attributions—" but he does know that the sky and earth, motionless or

still, are necessary elements of stories—"they create the atmosphere." In this case that atmosphere is suffused with literary-theological claims.

- 22 The speaker's hero stands not only in that great gulf, through which Jesus says, and Abraham says, no heroic storyteller can pass to bring moral instruction or physical relief, but on a spot with panoramic access to the horizon, where that great gulf curves down to close itself. While the horizon limitlessly approachable by the speaker's hero is physically an illusory meeting of earth and sky, morally and psychologically it presents a naturally instructive and inspiring symbol of desire satisfied. The optical trick the horizon plays reads here as one more image of the promise stories make—that wanting ends in having. That devoutly wished consummation is what Beckett's speaker and the parable's rich man do not understand and cannot experience in heroic stories, and what the Bible and Dante's *Commedia*, proclaim in heroic tales of deliverance.
- 23 In Jesus' parable the rich man fails to persuade Abraham that a traveler returned to the living from the world of the dead with first-hand tales of the eternal punishment awaiting wrongdoers there would have more persuasive force to redeem them than the scriptures. Dante's rewritten Bible provides precisely the moral exemplar Abraham and Jesus denied the rich man. In his *Commedia*, the great gulf fixed between the damned and the saved is crossed by Beatrice, who leaves Heaven to summon Virgil in Hell and send him to the base of that earthly hill where Dante, at evening, is stalled on his journey out of the terrifying forest of error. Unfit yet for the direct path to happiness, Dante learns from Virgil that he must travel a long detour through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, and observe in those realms the full extent of the soul's eternal reward for its earthly choices for happiness or unhappiness before he can travel the direct path of virtue again himself.
- 24 Like Jacob Marley in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, a work Beckett makes extensive use of in his play *Endgame*, Dante presents his own penitential experience to his audience as a corrective tale, with this important difference. Unlike Dickens' ghost or Jesus' beggar, Dante's narrator goes to and comes back from the dead alive, improving on the narrative miracle sought by the rich man who ignored Lazarus and offered to an ultimately reformed rich man by Dickens. In a complexly ironic gesture of humility, Dante improves even on those classical and Biblical antecedents for such a journey to whom he fearfully compares himself in Canto 2 of *Inferno*, line 32: "I am not Aeneas, I am not Paul." Neither the princely empire builder nor the converted Pharisee who established the theological and institutional foundations of Christ's church told the story of their qualifying trip to the after-life themselves. Only Dante derives his authority to tell the dangerous story of death turned to life by claiming that he has lived through it himself. On that authority, he presents his *Commedia* as the paradigm--imperial, ecclesiastical, and literary-- for every storied change from unhappiness to happiness. There is no stronger claim in Western literature that life calls for and flourishes in a story.
- 25 The courage and ambition in that claim, the audacity in it, prick Beckett's speaker time and again. When he resists the spur to make life fictive, there are comments such as this one in #4:

What am I doing, talking, having my figments talk, it can only be me. Spells of silence too, when I listen, and hear the local sounds, the world sounds, see what an effort I make, to be reasonable. There's my life, why not, it is one, if you like, if you must, I don't say no, this evening. There has to be one, it seems, once there is speech, no need of a story, a story is not compulsory, just a life, that's the mistake I

made, one of the mistakes, to have wanted a story for myself, whereas life alone is enough.¹³

- 26 When he's game, as he is at the close of #6, the "me" can say "I" as if he were, like Dante or God, his own author:

No, grave, I'll be grave, I'll close my ears, close my mouth and be grave. And when they open again it may be to hear a story, tell a story, with living creatures coming and going on a habitable earth crammed with the dead, a brief story, with night and day coming and going above, if they stretch that far, the words that remain, and I've high hopes, I give you my word.¹⁴

- 27 The adjectival "grave" here contains a punning noun, and recalls that ditch where life and death change places. Here the resurrection is figured as the speaker's long hoped for ability to tell a story. Beckett varies this "grave" hope that words have the power to "stretch that far"--to raise order out of chaos--in the speaker's final reference to Dantean storytelling in the closing lines of #9.

The graveyard, yes, it's there I'd return, this evening it's there, borne by my words, if I could get out of here, that is to say if I could say, There's a way out there, there's a way out somewhere, to know exactly where would be a mere matter of time, and patience, and sequency of thought, and felicity of expression. But the body, to get there with, where's the body? It's a minor point, a minor point. And I have no doubts, I'd get there somewhere, to the way out, sooner or later, if I could say, There's a way out there, there's a way out somewhere, the rest would come, the other words, sooner or later, and the power to get there, and the way to get there, and pass out, and see the beauties of the skies, and see the stars again.¹⁵

- 28 The allusion in the final phrases is to the end of *Inferno*, where Virgil and Dante exit Hell.

My guide and I came on that hidden road
to make our way back into the bright world;
and with no care for any rest, we climbed—
he first, I following—until I saw,
through a round opening, some of those things
of beauty Heaven bears. It was from there
that we emerged, to see—once more—the stars.¹⁶

- 29 In the end, as in the beginning, the chance for longing to be appeased, for reality to be felt and thought and lived as something good, hangs on the power to "say There's a way out there" for the bog-man, as for Dante. "Say" is distinguished here from merely making the sounds or shapes of words. That power exists amply in the hillside and the infernal ditch. What Beckett's speaker lacks, and what Dante restores in himself in his *Commedia*, largely through the divinely sanctioned guidance of the sayer who created the conscience of Imperial Rome, the forebear of Christ's Church on earth, is another power in "say." That greater force expresses, indicates, adjudicates, establishes, orders and creates a dynamic relation between consciousness and its object, between yearning and its promised joy. And that relationship is the "via diritta," "the way out there," which Aristotle's *Poetics*, and the theological allegory of the Bible and Dante's star walk offer.
- 30 Beckett's speaker can invoke that journey in the weak sense, he can make the sounds and shapes of the words, but he cannot take it himself. The problem seems to be one of conviction in his case. Dante's "via diritta" was lost because he erred. Beckett's hero hasn't so much erred as failed, exhausted his capacity to bring meaning into or out of words, to make them stories. The conviction Dante felt, the heroic sense of guilt and

purposeful atonement, has faded to irritation and unavailing complaint for Beckett. Certainly his hero can muster "sequency of thought" and "felicity of expression," but the comparison of these to Dante's does more to discredit than to celebrate the robust sense of "say" glorified in the *Commedia*. The celebration, such as it is in Beckett, is a sparkling in detritus. Seen against the starry exit from Hell, the impulse to make and shape the sounds words come in amounts to little more than sweat on the literary brow. "So long as the words keep coming nothing will have changed, there are the old words out again. Utter, there's nothing else, utter, void yourself of them, here as always, nothing else."¹⁷ But the working out of Adam's curse in this uttering still bears some stamp of the theological glory which brought Adam into being. Face down, Beckett's authorial persona can't help but twitch his muttering upward a bit.

A glow, red, afar, at night, in winter, that's worth having, that must have been worth having. There, it's done, it ends there, I end there. A far memory, far from the last, it's possible, the legs seem to be still working. A pity hope is dead. No. How one hoped above, on and off. With what diversity.¹⁸

NOTES

1. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 98.
2. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*. (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 104.
3. Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 105.
4. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 295.
5. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 305.
6. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 77, 108.
7. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 92.
8. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 83.
9. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 103.
10. For an extended treatment of the radically inventive relations between classical and medieval moral and literary theory and poetry in Dante's *Commedia* see *Dante's Testaments: Essays in Scriptural Imagination* by Peter S. Hawkins.
11. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 78- 79.
12. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 96-97.
13. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 93.
14. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 105.
15. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 121.
16. Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum, (New York: Bantam Books, 1982), 317.
17. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 82.
18. Samuel Beckett, *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 84.

ABSTRACTS

La voix narratrice qui s'engage dans la construction des Textes pour rien de Samuel Beckett, commence un récit qu'elle abandonne, reprend et abandonne de nouveau, emportée par la colère, le désespoir ou la lassitude. Ce processus de recommencement est truffé de références à la théologie poétique de la Divine Comédie de Dante. Le présent article compare le grand pouvoir qu'ont les histoires de Dante à évoquer la réalité, au statut d'évocation inférieur des histoires de Beckett. Cela pour montrer l'attachement nostalgique de Beckett à l'idée que la langue peut engendrer le réel sans pour autant y croire.