

GOING ON BEYOND MODERNISM IN BECKETT'S *TEXTS FOR NOTHING*

Ruben Moi

The title of Samuel Beckett's thirteen minimalist prose texts from 1954, *Texts for Nothing*¹, contrasts strongly with the award of the Nobel Prize for literature and the canonization of the author in 1969. This prestigious recognition can clearly be regarded as a public act of Beckettian irony, as hardly any other author has done more to refute ideas of canonicity and to undermine the foundations of the institution of literature - not to mention principal philosophical positions. Beckett's failure to appear at the ceremonial event seems symbolic of the many elsewhere of his idiosyncratic imagination and the uncanny resistance in his texts to the demands of aesthetics and the claims of logics, to whose reconstructions his diversity of textual experimentalism has contributed so forcefully.

In retrospect it seems that Beckett's *oeuvre* confirms the questionable truism that to negate violently the tradition within which one writes, is the best guarantee for being included and elevated to a prominent position within that very tradition. Beckett's international acclaim is well deserved, but as always, processes of canonization and celebration threaten to surrender any author's subversive writing to processes of conservation. One consequence of the canonic calcification of the continuous productivity of Beckett's writing is to apprehend his protean aesthetics within the major modes of modernism.

¹ Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* (1959. London: Calder & Boyars, 1974). Dates here, in other footnotes or main text refer to first publications, and not to years of composition or first performances.

However illuminating such interpretations are, they passively deliver the significance of Beckett's texts into preconceived modes of hermeneutics – however current these were, or may be. A second, reductive result of these valorizations is their tendency to ignore how Beckett's texts contributed to establish the modernist criteria by which his writing has been explained. A third limitation is their lack of recognition of the aspects of Beckett's writing that suggest critical insights beyond the perspectives of paradigmatic modernism. Despite the stifling canonical status, Beckett's texts remain productive to intellectual activity.

“Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I.”² These are the unHINGING meditations of the multicorporal narrator at the very beginning of *The Unnamable*, which capture in their questioning and self-reference the probing of unknowability, and the precariousness of identity and language in Beckett's texts. Clearly, the solipsistic questions do not only delve into the uncertainty of human existence; they also interrogate conventional narrativity and the functions of language. Both of these aspects – the questioning of life and lines – indicate the position of Beckett's texts as transitional in the cognitive and aesthetic shifts in the many conflicting and conflating orientations of modernism and postmodernism. Possibly no other author of the twentieth century, perhaps not even James Joyce, offers a type of writing that bolsters more resistance to interpretation, and thereby spurns continuously new modes of critical analysis.³ New theoretical approaches tend to provide modes of thinking to which any text can be submitted, but Beckett's writing – both his creative and critical

² Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy* (1950-52. London: Picador, 1979), 267.

³ In Beckett's writing it is not only *Waiting for Godot* that, according to the author, avoids definitions at all costs. Linda Ben-Zvi, *Samuel Beckett* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 142.

idiom - seems to anticipate, activate and abnegate its concomitant hermeneutics to an exceptional degree.

In relation to the questions of the interaction of Beckett's texts with their critical interpretations, this article aims at to principal points: The first section discusses the position of Beckett as a transitional figure in the discourses modernism and postmodernism in close relation to his own creative and critical idiom. The second section makes a point of presenting an analysis of *Texts for Nothing* as textual sites in which the discourses of modernism and postmodernism overlap. Astonishingly, *Texts for Nothing* are utterly ignored in the vast body of Beckett criticism. For the sake of discussing this major shift in the theoretical approaches to Beckett's writing, modernism and postmodernism will be simplistically defined, as they frequently are, as the dominant contours of aesthetic, critical and philosophical thinking at the beginning and the ending of the twentieth century. This facile periodisation avoids Lyotard's more conceptual and transhistorical definition of the two malleable labels.⁴ Nevertheless, the two terms do not designate two distinct and totalizing approaches to Beckett's texts. Both modernism and postmodernism are evoked as common denominators for a multiplicity of interpretations and theoretical discourses that frequently overlap and interact, as much as they diverge and counteract. Furthermore, the absurdity after post-structuralist theories of consigning a vast collection of variegated texts to the singular name of Beckett will just have to be accepted for the sake of fluent argumentation.

In Beckett's breaches of the creative and the critical, the textual and the theoretical, "Crrritic" appears as the absolutely most abominable term of abuse to conclude a litany of vile invectives in *Waiting for*

⁴ Jean Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984).

Godot.⁵ A violent exclamation in *Catastrophe* also targets textual commentators and interpretation: "This craze for explication! Every i dotted to death."⁶ Beckett's "Three Dialogues" can be seen as symbolic of the displacement of many critics from their own discourse. Although the conversation on the paintings of the abstract expressionist is composed as a dialogue, the text was written by Beckett alone. Furthermore, they suggest a reorientation of critical procedures towards performative criticism in the manner they enact, rather than argue, their critical points.⁷ Despite Beckett's condemnatory caveats and creative displacement of critical control, or more likely, exactly because of Beckett's insistent questioning and intransigent opposition to explanation and standard criticism, his writing has provoked an enormous amount of interpretation. Much of the critical reception has been based upon the rigorous criteria Beckett himself contributed to establish for the avant-garde literature of his own day and his own writing.

Without doubt many of the shifts in interpretation and theory regarding Beckett are anticipated by the incessant involutions of Beckett's own texts. The intellectual interpretations - whether modernist or postmodernist - of Beckett's texts can not be extricated from the criteria he himself establishes in his critical and creative writing. Keeping in mind the views of critics and explication from *Waiting for Godot* and *Catastrophe*, it seems humorously appropriate of Beckett's aporetic attainment that his first extant publication should be a piece of criticism. "Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce," Beckett's explication of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* in the mock-pretentious apologia, *Our Exagmination round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1956. London: Faber, 1965), 75.

⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Collected Shorter Plays* (London: Faber, 1984), 299.

from 1929, contains self-referential significance for the composition of his own texts, and their subsequent criticism. Beckett starts his defence of Joyce's infamous intralinguistic and variform farrago by warning that "the danger is in the neatness of identifications," and he goes on to argue:

Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not meant to be read – or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something, *it is that something itself*.⁸

Similarly, Beckett's treatise on Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* two years later, in 1931, also reveals important insights into his artistic principles, which anticipate tendencies in his own fiction and drama. A militant disclaimer in the foreword denies the author any relation to his literary work. In his introductory debate to the analysis of Proust's masterpiece he goes on to meditate upon time – "that double-headed monster of damnation and salvation" - and the importance of "voluntary" and "involuntary memory."⁹ One of the treatise's eloquent aphorisms articulates another important theme: "Art is the apotheosis of solitude."¹⁰ Such a foregrounding of alterity and alienation, of formal awareness, linguistic importance and temporal issues at the eclipse of the author is endemic in Beckett's creative writing. In almost all, perhaps in each and all, of Beckett's texts, identifications are always refracted and referred in the formal disruptions and linguistic disabilities.

⁷ Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (1949. London: John Calder, 1987), 97-126.

⁸ Samuel Beckett et al., *Our Exagmination round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929. London: Faber, 1961), 3, 14.

⁹ Beckett, *Proust* (1931. London: John Calder, 1965), 11, 18-36.

¹⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, 65.

Evidently, many aesthetic aspirations, thematic concerns and impinging contextualities mark Beckett's texts as modernist. The insistent antireferential attitude and dedicated explorations of forms develop the typical modernist tenets of aesthetic autonomy and incessant innovation, which can be traced to the aestheticism of Nietzsche and the commandments of Pound and Orwell.¹¹ Most of Beckett's texts present loveless and moribund individuals who are alienated from themselves and society, they enact the problematic relations of human life to time and space, they foreground the significance of language to human existence, and they probe the processes of perception. These are all themes that are familiar from a vast range of modernist texts as well as the philosophical concerns of Freud, Bergson and Heidegger, Saussure and Husserl. In contextual terms, Beckett's long-lasting friendship with Joyce tends to solder his association with modernism.

Similarly, postmodernist approaches to Beckett's texts attend, paradoxically perhaps, to much of the same creativity, concerns and conceptualizations as modernist interpretations do, but develop the points in Beckett's texts that differ and defer the modernist modes to which they also contribute. The term "postmodernism" comprises both a contravention and a continuance of modernism that are clearly predicated upon the antithetical attainment of Beckett's own texts. The anti-establishment animus, solipsistic selves, self-imploding semiotics, and intriguing contingences of Beckett's texts activate the interrogations of language and identity of Lacan's neo-Freudian psycholinguistics, and the Nietzschean power analysis of Foucault and deconstruction of Derrida. An enormous amount of analysis of Beckett's texts

¹¹ "It is only as an *aesthetic phenomenon* that the existence and the world are eternally *justified*." Perhaps this provocative statement summarises most forcefully the cardinal tenet of Nietzsche's audacious aestheticism. *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872).

have been conducted under the philosophical auspices of the Parisian school over the last three decades, as evidenced in the Beckett criticism of for example H. Porter Abbot, Richard Begam, Stephen Connor and Leslie Hill.¹² The modernist association of Beckett with Joyce depends on an exclusivist conflation of Joyce with a limited definition of *Ulysses* as a modernist masterpiece, at the dismissal of the postmodernist qualities of that work, not to mention Joyce's prepostmodernist monument, *Finnegans Wake*. That Beckett's life span from 1906 to 1989 covers the whole century during which the interlacing debates of modernism and postmodernism unfolded, no doubt adds contextual pressures to the approaches to his written arts. However, the continuous stream of metamorphic texts during the same period, from his homage to Joyce, "Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce," in 1929 to his final text, the poem, "Comment Dire" – "What is the Word," in 1988, remain the primary reasons for his contributions to the critical and theoretical approaches to his own writing. What in Beckett's texts contribute to modernist modes of critical reception is already seminal with their evolving discourses.

In 1986, perhaps at the height of the controversy of modernism and postmodernism, Hugh Kenner announces: "The last modernist is

London: Penguin, 1993), 32. See also the influential essays by Ezra Pound, *Make It New* (1934) and George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language" (1946).

¹² H. Porter Abbot offers substantial evidence for his contention that 'the postmodernists' recently have outnumbered other interpretations of Beckett's texts in "Beckett and Postmodernism," *Beckett Writing Beckett: The Author in the Autograph* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1996), 23-51. For the liberation of Beckett's texts from the confines of modernism, see Richard Begam, *Samuel Beckett and the End of Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996); Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988); Leslie Hill, *Beckett's Fiction: in Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990) and Thomas Trezise, *Into the Breach: Samuel Beckett and the Ends of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University press, 1990).

alive and well in Paris where he lives under the name of Beckett.”¹³ After Beckett's death in 1989, Anthony Cronin could not bolster the same referential legitimacy when he, *in lieu* with Kenner's declamation, entitles his 1996 biography: *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*. In stark contrast to these claims on Beckett's art, David Lodge boldly proclaims Beckett “the first important postmodernist writer” in 1977, and Lance Butler and Robin Davis appreciate Beckett as “the poet of the poststructuralist age in 1990.”¹⁴

In the many shifting discourses of modernism and postmodernism Adorno and Foucault appear as transitional thinkers in theory, as much as Beckett does in poetry, prose and play. Adorno, perhaps the foremost and last advocate of modernism, reveres Beckett as the pinnacle of modernist art and intended to dedicate his intellectual systematization of the functions of art, *Aesthetic Theory*, to the Irish exile in Paris.¹⁵ Adorno's formidable analysis of Beckett's *Endgame* provides an apprehensive understanding of Beckett's art in entirety and still contains openings for detailed inspections.¹⁶ In Adorno's absolutism of aesthetic autonomy forms of self-critical art that continuously undermine their own foundations - such as Beckett's - present the ultimate radical resistance to a utilitarian society besieged by inimical capitalism and an almost inescapable industry of commercial culture. The abstract and the experimental preside as the governing criteria of

¹³ Hugh Kenner, “Modernism and What Happened to It,” *Essays in Criticism*, 37 (1986), 97-109.

¹⁴ David Lodge, *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor Metonymy and the Typology of Modern Literature* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977), 12; Lance St John Butler and Robin J. Davis (eds.), *Rethinking Beckett*, (London: Macmillan, 1990), x.

¹⁵ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1979), 271, 366.

¹⁶ Theodor W. Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” *Notes to Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 241-276.

contemporary art.¹⁷ His indomitable belief in the possibility of absolute art and its powers of social critique by negative aesthetics defines a modernist outlook. Nevertheless, Adorno's focus on Beckett's negative dialectics liberates his art from another modernist perspective; the existentialist humanism known from the works of Sartre, Kafka and Camus, which Esslin hypernormalises in his classic, *The Theatre of the Absurd*. In his comparison of the representational techniques of the engagement of Sartre's existentialism and the dismantling of illusions of Beckett's performativity, Adorno demonstrates how Beckett's play activates the anxiety and alienation of the human condition that the commitments of Sartre merely articulate.¹⁸ His arguments also regard absurdity not as the result of a human quest for meaning in a meaningless universe; rather a result of the colonization of mind, culture and society by the imperatives of progress and positivism of instrumental reasoning. To Adorno, Beckett's plays and fiction, epitomised by *Endgame*, posit the imaginative parallel to his own philosophical treatment of Enlightenment rationality. In this respect, Adorno's theo-

¹⁷ Eoin O'Brien's *The Beckett Country* (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1986) and Mary Junker's, *Beckett: The Irish Dimension* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1995) can clearly be regarded as a reappropriation of Beckett's texts from the abstractionism and internationalism of modernist interpretation. Within the Irish context, David Lloyd's reading of Beckett's texts as a dismantling of the identitarian, insular and monological discourses of nationalism appears more relevant and intellectually productive. "Writing in the Shit: Beckett, Nationalism and the Colonial Subject," *Anomalous States Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Movement* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993), 41-59.

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno sides with the Roland Barthes of *Writing Degree Zero* (1953) in his critique of the existentialism and social engagement Sartre propounds in his fiction and theorises in *What is Literature?* (1948). Probably the most succinct discussion of Adorno's insistence on the importance of aesthetic autonomy to politics, popular art, social agendas and commercial culture known from *Aesthetic Theory* and *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is to be found in his essay, "Commitment" (1965): "Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about. By dismantling appearance, they explode from within the art which committed proclamation subjugates from without, and hence only in appearance. The inescapability of their work compels the change of attitude which committed works merely demand." *Aesthetics and Politics*, (London: Verso, 1977), 177-96.

ries of Beckett's aesthetics overlap with the intellectual projects of postmodernism.

Within the theories of postmodernism, Derrida's justification for not attending to Beckett's texts indicates some of their postmodernist qualities. In an interview with Derek Attridge, Derrida admits that he is too closely affiliated to Beckett's thinking, and he acknowledges that Beckett's texts are self-deconstructive and "make the limits of our language tremble."¹⁹

If Beckett's writings commit their own deconstruction before and above Derrida, they also preconceive Foucault's philosophical purview. In concordance with Adorno, the age of rule and reason is forever Foucault's *bête noir*. The opposition of Beckett's texts to the tyranny of instrumental rationality, their recurrent enquiries into derangement, their plenitude of incarceration and torture, the complexities of desiring selves, and their linguistic cynosure constitute a dramatic and imaginative presentation of the major preoccupations of Foucault's investigations into the institutions of madness, prisons, sexuality and the power of discourse. Nevertheless, Beckett's texts are almost as absent in Foucault's theses as they are in Derrida's. However, his famous essay "What is an Author?" is of vital interest to Beckett's writing in general, and specifically to *Texts for Nothing*. In the beginning of his essay Foucault quotes two lines from the third section of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* – "What matter who's speaking, someone said what matter who's speaking" – as a point of reference for his New

¹⁹ Derek Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature* (London: Routledge, 1992), 60-2. It is interesting to observe that Derrida considers Beckett's writing closer to his own critique of Western metaphysics than that of Joyce, upon whose writing Derrida has written thought-provoking essays. See "Ulysses Gramophone: Hear Say Yes in Joyce," Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature*, 253-319 and "Two Words for Joyce," Mary T. Reynolds (ed.), *James Joyce: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 206-20.

Historicist moderations of Adorno's aesthetic absolutism, and his poststructuralist reconstructions of text and author-function in the wake of literary structuralism and Roland Barthes' infamous homicide of the author.²⁰ Beckett himself has long since become what Foucault in the essay terms 'a founder of discursivity,'²¹ and most of his poems, plays, prose and pieces of criticism open radical possibilities for the interpretation of earlier verse, drama, novels and critique, and also for the emergent production of theatre, fiction and performative criticism.²² Furthermore; despite the fact that Beckett is only referred to in passing in Foucault's essay, most of its intellectual discussion can be read as a riveting and illuminating analysis of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*. In his reconstructions of conventional concepts and literary genres, and in his questioning of the constituting of a literary work, Foucault explodes traditional delimitations and points to textualities beyond the poetic and the literary. *Texts for Nothing* defy facile categorization and belong to the marginalia of Beckett's comprehensive production. Likewise, textual self-referentiality, the interactions of writing with death, and the importance of the texts to the author-function are all issues of vital importance to Beckett's writing. Foucault demands that the author "must assume the role of the dead man in the game of

²⁰ Michael Foucault, "What is an Author?" Josué V. Harari (ed.), *Textual Strategies* (London: Methuen, 1980), 141. Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1968), *Image, Music, Text* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1977), 142-48. *Texts for Nothing* (1954. London; Calder & Boyars, 1974), 16. All further reference to this text will be cited with page numbers in the text.

²¹ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" 154.

²² Paul Muldoon enacts a Beckettian universe in his polyrhythmic discursive dissolution and corporeal disintegration in "Incantata" (*The Annals of Chile*, 13-27), James Kelman's adopts Beckett's narrativity and anti-heroes in his 1994 Booker Prize winner, *How late it was, how late*, and the histrionic of Beckett's plays informs the contemporary drama of Martin McDonagh and constitutes an inescapable template for the Norwegian playwright Jon Fosse. For a performative enactment of Paul Muldoon's poetry, see Ruben Moi, *Crossing the Lines: The Postmodernisms of Paul Muldoon's Poetics*, forthcoming.

writing,”²³ and that “we must locate the space left empty by the author’s disappearance, follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers.”²⁴ To a large extent Foucault sounds as if he is commenting upon *Texts for Nothing* as much as the philosophical reconstructions of author and literature.

The text and nothingness in Beckett’s marginal minimalisms, *Texts for Nothing*, invite and invaginate the aestheticism, existentialism or structuralism that characterise modernist theories of literature, as well as the textual anarchism and deconstruction of poststructuralist approaches. New readings of Beckett’s *oeuvre* can hardly escape this history of critique, although his texts retain their provocative power in the mist of metatextual theories. The thirteen repetitive, circuitous and contractive *Texts for Nothing* provide an almost pristine textual site for discursive consideration. In the massive evaluations of Beckett’s writing, these texts seem analogous to Beckett’s situation at the Nobel ceremony: they are present only in name. In this respect the title and its play on “next to nothing” seem prophetic. The author regarded the *Trilogy* as his most important work,²⁵ and described *Texts for Nothing* as “nothing more than the grisly after-birth of *L’Innomable*.”²⁶ Beckett’s main biographers passively follow suit. In her 750 page biography, *Samuel Beckett*, in 1978 Deidre Bair gives *Texts for Nothing* extremely short shrift. In a few sentences she notes that during their composition Beckett “was in the midst of the ‘celebrated impasse,’” and concludes on comparison with the *Trilogy*: “The violence of the trilogy is on the

²³ Foucault, “What is an Author?” 143.

²⁴ Michel Foucault, “What is an Author?” 145.

²⁵ Deidre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (1978. London: Vintage, 1990), 406.

²⁶ Anthony Cronin, *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist* (London: Flamingo, 1996), 402.

wane and the tone here is one of resignation.”²⁷ In similar brevity, James Knowlson’s expansive portrait of the artist from 1996, *Damned to Fame*, also attributes the texts to Beckett’s post-trilogy vacuum.²⁸ Anthony Cronin follows suit in his comprehensive presentation, also from 1996, *Beckett the Last Modernist*.

When these scholars do mention the texts, it is mainly for two reasons that can be expected by biographers: to connect details of the texts to biographical events or the typology of the author’s childhood landscape in Dublin and its vicinity.²⁹ None of them offer any textual interpretations, and they collude in allocating the texts to a period of literary inertia in the wake of the creativity of the postwar years, the “siege in the room”³⁰ that resulted in the novelistic and dramatic revolution of the *Trilogy* and *Waiting for Godot* in the three first years of the 1950s. Not only the most prominent biographers ignore these peculiar texts, they are also largely excluded from critical attention. This eclipse of the mini series of dissolution and purposelessness is obviously due to the dominant status of the *Trilogy* and *Waiting for Godot*. The delay in translating the texts into English until 1967 probably did not help to bring them into critical attention.

In the perspective established by Beckett and his biographers, the title of *Texts for Nothing* records with sardonic resignation and self-irony the perturbations of purpose and possible publication attached to the texts of his immediately preceding creative paroxysm. In this autobiographical context, it seems a conspicuous critical failure not to associate the number of texts – namely thirteen – to Beckett’s own life.

²⁷ Deidre Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 461, 477.

²⁸ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), 397.

²⁹ For an over-determinate appropriation of landscape, language and imagination in Beckett’s texts to Irish specificity, see Mary Junker, *Beckett: The Irish Dimension* (Dublin: Wolfhound, 1995) and Eoin O’Brien’s *The Beckett Country* (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1986).

³⁰ Deidre Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 367.

Beckett always insisted on being born on Good Friday 13 April 1906, although his birthday certificate stipulates his date of birth as 13 May. Evidently, Beckett intends to inscribe his own existence in a defining moment of Western culture associated with torture, death and religious incertitude. Beckett's problematic staging of self and time was not only a textual phenomenon. In a general view the number incites misfortune and disruption of numerological symbolism. Thirteen, the unlucky number, combines the holy numbers of the Ten Commandments and the divine trinity or the three crucifixions on Calvary, and exceeds the number of the twelve disciples and the natural cycle of the year. These personal, pseudo-religious and biological dimensions are subsumed in the *nothingness* of the title, which hints of nihilism and obviously alludes to the existentialism of Sartre's *Being and Nothingness*. It is significant that Beckett displaces Sartre's prioritization of existence over emptiness with text. It seems an indirect critique of Sartre's presentation of individuality and existence as phenomena not mediated by language. The word *Text* appears as an adventitious act of the dissipation of literary classifications and of the preference for text and textualism in post-structuralist discourses.³¹

The original title in French, *Textes pour rien*, alludes to the musical term "measure pour rien," a bar's rest in a score, as a metaphor for literary lacunae. Thus, the title indicates the characteristic Beckettian oscillation between silence and sounds. A respect for a possibility of meaning beyond the configurations of language gravitates more to-

³¹ Hardly any other texts than *Texts for Nothing*, despite not being mentioned, have a more determinate design on the reconsiderations in and of literature. See for example Roland Barthes seminal essay "From Work to Text" (1971), *Image Music Text* (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 155-165. The almost boundless circulation of the (willful) misunderstandings of Derrida's infamous axiom, "il n'y a pas de hors-texte" offers another point in these transitions in theoretical cognition and terminology. *Of Grammatology* (1967. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 158.

wards a modernist aesthetic than the imperialism of post-structuralist textualism. The liminalities of sound and silence also figure as the breaches of the unknown in Beckett's texts that have not yet been, and perhaps never will be covered with critical explication.

The first lines of the first text of *Texts for Nothing* start with incongruous negations and multiple perplexities:

Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't any more, I couldn't go on. Someone said, You can't stay here. I couldn't stay here and I couldn't go. I'll describe the place, that's unimportant. The top, very flat, of a mountain, no, a hill, but so wild, enough. Quag, heath up to the knees, faint sheeptracks, troughs scooped deep by the rains. It was far down in one of these I was lying, out of the wind. Glorious prospect, but for the mist that blotted out everything, valleys, loughs, plain and sea. How can I go on, I shouldn't have begun, no, I had to begin. Someone said, perhaps the same, What possessed you to come? I could have stayed in my den, snug and dry, I couldn't. My den, I'll describe it, no, I can't. It's simple, I can do nothing any more, that's what you think. I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack foundered in the street, struggling no more, struggling again, till it gives up. I say to the head, Leave it alone, stay quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever. I am far from all that wrangle, I shouldn't bother with it, I need nothing, neither to go on nor to stay where I am, it's truly all one tome, I should turn away from it all, away from the body, away from the head, let them work it out between them, let them cease, I can't it's I would have to cease. Ah yes, we seem to be more than one, all deaf, not even, gathered together for life.³²

These initial lines that echo the unforgettable final words of *The Unnamable* in *The Trilogy* – “you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on” - introduce a range of thematic concerns and stylistic characteristics that are central to Beckett's writing at large, and also to the transitions

³² Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing* (1954. London; Calder & Boyars, 1974), 7. All further reference to this text will be cited with page numbers in the text.

between modernism and its evolving aesthetic orientations. The first line signals forcefully a preponderant subjectivity and a temporal indeterminacy that cannot be extrapolated from its intertextual intricacies and paradoxical involutions. The compulsive presence of the speaking subject precipitates the questions of identity well-known to modernist masters with a predilection for Freud's theories and psychoanalytic practice. In the oscillations of the conscious and the unconscious in the narrative methods known from writers such as Proust, Richardson, Woolf and Joyce a composite, although complex, unity of self tends to remain. Ultimately, they represent a mental reality. Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* supplant the established techniques of stream of consciousness and interior monologues with *seams of unconsciousness* and *interstitial dialogues*.

A singular sense of subjectivity is simply not a possibility. In the quoted paragraph there is a difference between the speaking subject and the spoken subject – that is: the subject that speaks and the many positions and functions the subject that appears in language assumes. These interstices between the speaking subject and the spoken subject are filled with possible selves, they reverse the subject position, and they incorporate possible others. The frantic “I” in the text is never at one or at once with subjectivity: “I say to the body,” “I say to the head.” Subjectivity can never be constituted on self-sameness; alterity is always integral to the development of self: “Someone said,” “Someone said, perhaps the same.” Plurality and differentiation inform the emerging self: “Ah yes, we seem to be more than one, all deaf, not even, gathered together for life.” Perhaps the beginning of “Text IV” reveals most lucidly the complexities of the speaking subject and the spoken subject:

“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? Answer simply, someone answer simply. It’s the same old stranger as ever, for whom alone accusative I exist, in the pit of my inexistence, of his, of ours, there’s a simple answer.” (22).

This unceasing reductionist conflation of subject with syntax in *Texts for Nothing* is not merely linguistic solipsism, as the breaches of language incorporate remnants of metaphysical uncertainty and human precariousness. The endeavours to grasp a self within a linguistically mediated human condition develop throughout the series, and indefatigably seek new linguistic and narrative strategies. “Text II” abandons a personal position all together in its attempts to adopt an impersonal perspective. Certainly, this text too inscribes the incompatible shifts between the speaking subject and the spoken subject in its unfolding of the mortality of self and syntax: “The words too, slow, slow, the subject dies before it comes to the verb, words are stopping too” (13). Nevertheless, the allocation of this inanimate narrative within a subcelestial and subterranean dimension skirts the borders of language and consciousness. This posthumous perspectivism – a *memento mori* textuality, a discursive prolongation of Joyce’s *The Dead*, and a concurrent manifestation of O’Cadhain’s *Churchyard Clay* – posits the self upon the limits of language and time, human perception, narrative possibilities and textual recognition.

The Kafkaesque “Text V” – “where to be is to be guilty” (26) - conducts a sentencing of the subject. The inescapability of the subject from linguistic incarceration is inscribed with existential persecution. Within this atmosphere of accursed accusation Beckett’s text dissolves the structures of the subject on trial and the metaphysics of law: “To be judge and party, witness and advocate, and he, attentive, indifferent, who sits and notes” (26). Judge, lawyer and clerk are imbricated in an

economy of exchange that unsettles self-justified positions and distribution of justice. Any appeal to a higher court is also problematic, as such a dimensioned can not be ascertained. Such a possibility is not entirely denied, but can not be dissuaded from its various conceptualizations: "Perhaps someone will ask pity for my soul, I mustn't miss that, I won't be there, neither will God, and it doesn't matter we'll be represented" (28). Within the philosophy of being, this text indicts the metaphysics of identity, presence and divinity with sardonic humour. Above all, this text dismantles the illusions of transparent representationality.

In the final failure to reconcile human identity with linguistic certainty, "Text XIII," the "I" is in jeopardy of becoming its own object, a mere response to the discourses preceding subjectivity. In a text that clearly anticipates the futile linguistic ramble for identity in the later play *Not I*, voice takes precedence over subjectivity:

Weaker still the weak old voice that tried in vain to make me, dying away as much as to say it's going from here to try elsewhere, or dying down, there's no telling, as much as to say it's going to cease, give up trying. No voice ever but it in my life, it says, if speaking of me one can speak of life, and it can, it still can, or if not of life, there it dies, if this, if that, if speaking of me, there it dies... (61).

The "I," the insistent and intrusive first person pronoun of the first text, the principal guarantor of subject and individuality in language and metaphysics, has been displaced and disposed. If the voice has not managed to create a life, that uncreated life is the "I" that appears throughout the *Texts for Nothing*. Yet this inversion is merely another round in the conflict between pronouns and verbs that marks all the texts. The interminable efforts throughout *Texts for Nothing* to predi-

cate in language a space and time for a stable self dissipate themselves in the final sentences of the final text:

And were there one day to be here, where there are no days, which is no place, born of the impossible voice the unmakeable being, and a gleam of light, still all would be silent and empty dark, as now, as soon now, when all will be ended, all said, it says, it murmurs.(64)

“Interpretation inevitably lags behind Beckett,” Adorno states in his pivotal exposition of *End Game* in 1961,³³ and the critical reception to this day has proven the validity of his claim. At the end of his essay on author-function and discursivity, Foucault forges a number of questions from his propositions of a typology of discourse that are extremely pertinent to the radical mode of *Texts for Nothing*: “What are the modes of existence of this discourse?”; “Where has it been used, how can it articulate, and who can appropriate it for himself?”; “What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects?”³⁴ In Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing* the novelties upon the perennial themes of human existence and mortality might be characterised by a new theoretical term, *narrathantography*. That is: new modes of conceptualizing in narration and aporetic language the regressive movements of a differentiated self towards the inevitable end. In *Texts for Nothing* the recognizable world of an alienated subject is already left behind, and the many interrogatives and contradictions engage with the moribund, the dying, and the many elsewheres beyond in an increasing annihilation of identity, narrativity and linguistic coherence. These thirteen installments of narrathanotography explode the metaphysics of auto-identification, and posit the development of self upon the processes of alterity, the complexities of linguistic variance, and the inevitability of

³³ Theodor Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, 244.

death in a human condition where the possibilities and the significance of life and death can not be ascertained. *Texts for Nothing* suggest an implicit critique of the indomitable I and the metaphysics of being of existentialism, they issue a reminder of the utter despair in the aftermath of WWII and Holocaust, and they disclose the flaws of ideologies of progression, positivism and utilitarianism.

Several interpretations and theories have contributed to the continuous vitality of Beckett's texts. Certainly, it is the characteristic of most literary theories that they can be applied as a procrustean bed to any text, but in the case of Beckett the importance of texts to theory has more in common with Pandora's Box. The havoc they cause to ideas of referentiality, to former literary conventions, to the reader's expectations, and to ordinary logics promise the arrival of new modes of interpretation.

To conclude then, *Texts for Nothing* constitute documents in the history of the conceptualizations of humanism that dare think a self in the world without having recourse to undifferentiated subjectivity, to the self-justifications of uncontested language, and to the unrestricted liberalism of enlightenment ideology. In its narrathanotography *Texts for Nothing* present again and again textual indeterminacies and anti-foundational aporetics that continuously threaten to disperse the critical approaches and textual theories they engender. In this perspective *Texts for Nothing* still generate radical potentials for the intellectual activities of a future, whether these are labeled modernist, postmodernist, narrathanotography, or belong to a critical discourse yet to come.

³⁴ Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" 160.