Horror and Hilarity in the Work of Samuel Beckett

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Abstract: In the work of Beckett, the comic is subtended by horror. Horror is not merely a matter of something horrible that happens and that can be made the object of a description or a story. It unsettles the core of language, and as result, the wholeness of the cosmos, being as such, and the subject who speaks. Horror designates the process of atomization in which the void assumes an ungainly presence, becoming a thing horribly concrete. Yet, this has the effect of making it horribly funny. In Beckett, one learns to laugh at the 'unhap'. A form of laughter that tends towards silence, this laughter serves to enunciate a void which is irreducible to nothingness. Such laughter enunciates a difference between nought and nothing, engendering an 'absentee' subject that laughs at its own unhap. Considering the full scope of Beckett's oeuvre, I suggest that Beckett is the thinker of the tragicomic.

Keywords: Beckett, comedy, tragicomedy, laughter, horror, humour, the void, nothing, Democritus, puns

> What I saw was a bald man in a brown suit, a comedian. He was telling a funny story about a fiasco. Its point escaped me.[1]

Horror in Beckett can be horribly concrete. In *Rough for Theater II*, a screwball comedy about suicide, two accountants A (Bertrand) and B (Morvan) – bickering and bantering bureaucrats – have been hired by their client, character C, to "sum up" the relative value of the portfolio of his life.[2] C stands motionless throughout the play with his back to the stage before a window, awaiting their audit, undecided as to if he is going to jump. His casefile is a poorly ordered mess containing fragmentary testimonies, biographical details (a youth's failed runaway attempts, a marriage beset with "five or six miscarriages" ending in "judicial separation"), hopes and aspirations ("hope not dead to see the extermination of the species…literary aspirations incompletely stifled"[3]) and a "slim file" of confidences that detail a series of infirmities at once horrible ("fibroid tumours") and hilarious ("pathological horror of songbirds").[4] A quick evaluation of his file looks grim:

> B: Work, family, third fatherland, cunt, finances, art and nature, heart and conscience, health, housing conditions, God and man, so many disasters.

1 Beckett, 1995, p. 63.

2 Beckett, 1986, p. 246.

3 Beckett, 1986, p. 242.

4 Beckett, 1986, p. 242.

[*Pause.*]
A: [*Meditative.*] Does it follow? [*Pause.*] Does it follow? [*Pause.*] And his sense of humour? Of proportion?
B: Swamped.[5]

And like good accountants who sum to the letter, who dot their "i"s and cross their "t"s, B (Morvan) reassures A (Bertrand) that C's leap into the void does not run the risk of failure. They are on the eighth floor: "He only has to land on his arse, the way he lived. The spine snaps and the tripes explode."[6] The fatal impact of concrete on the innards renders the horror concrete while negating the gravity of the fall with a humorous touch. By landing on his arse, the way he lived, the metaphor of his life becomes horridly literal in the manner of his death.

Like all of Beckett's "people," his "gallery of moribunds,"[7] as it is put in *Molloy*, C is a veritable do nothing who clearly has no reason to be something rather than nothing. His folder attests to the fact that he has no principled reason, let alone a principle of sufficient reason, to live. And just when the accountants stumble over the statement – "a morbid sensitivity to the opinion of others... " – that might give their account pause, the reading light begins to flicker, short, then intermittently cut in and out, derailing B's effort to find the verb – "Shit! Where's the verb? ... Hold on till I find the verb and to hell with all this drivel in the middle."[8] By the time, he finds the verb, "I was unfortunately incapable—", we and they have lost the point. The lamp continues to malfunction. Dragging on so long that the "gag" even begins to annoy the characters: "This gag has gone on long enough for me."[9] If there was a ground, the gag has ground it into oblivion. When B eventually comes to the end of the sentence, speed reading to the exasperating conclusion – "From then on it might as well never have been uttered"[10] – all has come to nought. Their hope of finding a reason and with it, the metaphysical ground of C's existence, has not only been dashed, but it has tried the patience of all involved, straining the understanding to a breaking point.

The gag demonstrates the lack of point, and with it, the proposition famously enunciated by Nell in *Endgame*: "Nothing is funnier than

5 Beckett, 1986, p.238.

6 Beckett, 1986, p. 238.

7 Beckett, 1958, p. 132. The sentence in full reads: "What a rabble in my head, what a gallery of moribunds. Murphy, Watt, Yerk, Mercier and all the others."

8 Beckett, 1986, p. 243.

9 Beckett, 1986, p. 244.

10 Beckett, 1986, p. 245.

unhappiness, I grant you that."[11] The author has by this point proven that he shares C's bleak sense of humor. As the testimonial of his "life-long friend" and "light comedian," Mr Moore reports: "'To hear him talk about his life, after a glass or two, you would have thought he had never set foot outside hell. He had us in stitches. I worked it up into a skit that went down well.'"[12] And with no reason to live, he, too, shall indeed go down well. This comedy will not prove otherwise. The accountants can find nothing, no "positive elements of a nature to make him think" it could be otherwise. So down in the dumps, his gaze so slumped that he can find nothing to uplift. As Mr Feckman, a "certified accountant," recounts: "To all appearances down and out. He sat doubled in two, his hands on his knees, his legs astraddle his head sunk. For a moment I wondered if he wasn't vomiting. But on drawing nearer I could see he was merely scrutinizing, between his feet, a lump of dogshit."[13] Fixated on a turd, a piece of nothing without even the metaphysical pretense to nothingness, Beckett positions C as next to nothing. All but voided, all that remains is the final plummet: the timeless passage of the *do* nothing.[14] The interval of a life "from nought come, to nought gone."[15] The horror of death's concretion – embodied in a quintessential image of the void's incontinence (the tripes exploding and the spine snapping) – conveys the true gravity of the fall. Landing on his arse, C is truly the butt of the lifejoke. The comic effect here touches on the truly *grave*.

In Beckett, comedy is deathly serious. Gravity is punishing, and it is here reinforced by the pun on "grave": gravity, gravitas, and the grave (the hole in the ground) converge in the fatal contact beween arse and concrete. Horror's concretion, in Beckett, is a thing horribly hilarious. If we laugh, whether full or stifled, loud or silent, it is because so much sense has come to nought, evacuated with the force of the bowel's exploding. Beckett's work is singularly interested in the specificity of laughs such as these that, in the words of *Watt*, "strictly speaking are not laughs but modes of ululation,"[16] which is to say, a howl or a wail, shifting registers between horror and hilarity like a demented yodel. It is common to laugh at the mishap, but Beckett forms the stuff of comedy into Art that laughs at the *unhap*. In *Rough for Theatre I*, the character A complains of being lucky but not lucky enough to be able to die. He

11 Beckett, 1986, p. 101.

12 Beckett, 1986, p. 240.

13 Beckett, 1986, p. 241.

14 Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 162. In conversation with Israel Shenker, Beckett refers to the 'do nothing' as "a non-can-er."

15 Beckett, 2009b, p. 216.

16 Beckett, 2009b, p. 39.

has thought of suicide but not done it: "I'm not unhappy enough. [*Pause*.] That was always my unhap, unhappy, but not unhappy enough."[17] In *Watt*, Beckett suggests that the laughter that laughs at the unhap is the highest form of laughter, having traversed the "bitter" and the "hollow" laugh that each laugh at the lack of the good and true respectively. Bitter laughs are ethical, hollow laughs intellectual, but "the mirthless laugh" is "dianoetic." Here we encounter the *eidos* of laughter: "It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus puris*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs – silence please – at that which is unhappy."[18] Constructing a divided line of ascending "laughs that strictly speaking are not laughs,"[19] which begins with a laugh that is indiscernible from the cry – the biter laugh: "Eyewater, Mr Watt, eyewater" – in order to differentiate the hollow from the pure laugh. This laugh laughs at what makes bitter and hollow laughs possible, namely the capacity to laugh at a life that is neither good nor true, to laugh at life's lack. This transcendental laugh is made possible by the unhap. One laughs, with the unhap, at the nothing that happens, and it is this relation to nothing that is not nothingness that positions this laugh in relation to itself. One laughs at laughter as such when one laughs at what is not funny, at a horror, at the grave, at the wretchedness of a life born in pain and destined to die. One laughs, in short, at the tragi-comic desire for happiness and the horror this desire has wrought.

This is the laughter that Beckett, in *Texts for Nothing*, refers to cryptically as the "xanthic laugh," which is an alien form of what in French one terms idiomatically a *rire jaune*, literally, a yellow laugh.

What exactly is going on, exactly, ah old xanthic laugh, no, farewell mirth, good riddance, it was never droll. No, but one more memory, one last memory, it may help, to abort again.[20]

The Greek, xanthic (yellow), awakens a memory of Watt's *risus purus* with its mirthlessness, but it alludes as well, perhaps, to Beckett's early story "Yellow," the penultimate chapter of his first published collection of short stories, *More Pricks than Kicks*, in which the first of Beckett's agonists,[21] Belacqua, attempts to "arm himself with laughter," the laughter of Democritus, to calm his anxiety in the face of his upcoming surgery, which proves fatal, to remove a toe and tumor "the

17 Beckett, 1986, p. 229.

18 Beckett, 2009b, p. 40.

19 Beckett, 2009b, p. 39.

20 Beckett, 1995, p. 107.

21 I would like to thank James Krone for this formulation. See his press release for the exhibition, *Fin de Partie*, at Louche Ops.

size of a brick that he had on the back of his neck."[22] Beckett carefully stresses that this laughter is poorly named, for as Beckett writes, "laughter is not quite the word but it will have to serve," adding: "Smears, as after a gorge of blackberries, of hilarity, which is not quite the word either, would be adhering to his lips as he stepped smartly, *ohne Hast aber ohne Rast*, into the torture-chamber. His fortitude would be generally commended."[23] This laughter of blackberry hew expresses a state that defies expression, locating the queer presence of what Beckett will later name the unnameable, but here associates with "Bim and Bom, Grock, Democritus, whatever you are pleased to called it."[24] Confronted with unnameable, the subject can only attempt a laugh which is not not a laugh because it is not not sad.[25]

Beckett associates this vertiginous space of the doubly negated with Democritus of Abdera. In *Murphy*, Beckett refers to him metonymically, as he often does, as the Abderite.[26] This Abderitean laughter is a laughter, to quote *Murphy*, that erupts when "the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real."[27] The "guffaw of the Abderite" does not just serve to punctuate Beckett's preferred translation[28] of Fragment 156 of Democritus – "nought is more real than nothing" [*mê mallon to den ê to mêden einaí*] – allowing for the full stress to fall on the ontological determination of nothing. The laugh is also the form of its enunciation. The "guffaw of the Abderite" enunciates a difference between "nought" and "nothing," which Beckett returns to decisively with *Worstward Ho*. This difference signifies nothing, drawing attention to a difference that fails to mean something but names the real of negation: what remains when the somethings give way or add up to Nothing. This difference does not make sense but does nonetheless

22 Beckett, 2010, p. 156

23 Beckett, 2010, p. 156.

24 Beckett, 2010, p. 155.

25 For an extensive treatment of the problem of laughter and the awkward joke in Beckett's oeuvre, see Salisbury, 2015.

26 For the importance of Democritus to *Murphy* as a whole, see Henning, 1985, pp. 5-20. For an overview of the philosophical import of Democritus to contemporary thought, see Dolar, 2013, 11-26. For the importance of the Pre-socratics to Beckett's work, see Weller 2008.

27 Beckett, 2009a, p. 154.

28 Beckett encountered this formulation of fragment 156 in Alexander's *Short History of Philosophy*. In Beckett's Philosophy Notes archived at Trinity College Dublin, Beckett records the following passage: "Aristotle, in his account of the early philosophers, says, 'Leucippus and Democritus assume as elements the "full" and the "void". The former they term being and the latte non-being. Hence they assert that non-being exists as well as being.' And, according to Plutarch, Democritus himself is reported as saying, 'there is naught more real than nothing.'" (Alexander, 1922, pp. 38-39. As cited by Weller, 2020, p. 112. Shane Weller's research has been an important resource for this essay.

makes a difference that marks the place where sense goes missing. "Nought," with its archaic spelling, is a signifier that signifies nothing, but does so differently, naming a difference that evades signification, because strictly speaking it means nothing. In signifying nothing, it registers an evasion at the level of the signifier: a material difference that differentiates two signifiers – "nought" and "nothing" – which both mean nothing. Differentiating this meaning, "nought" meaning nothing, which is to say, a nothing irreducible to nothingness. Nought is not nothingness. By literalizing its signification, the insignificant letters added to its determination, "nought" does not just mean nothing, it embodies it, materializing "nothing" in the senseless addition of the signifiers "ugh". A true "ugh" if there ever was one.

"Nought" is next to nothing but not nothing, marking the place of a signifier that presents its lack of sense. Like a laugh that signifies a present absence, this "nought" which is not nothing, and certainly not something, presents the signifier (the atom of language) as a hole in sense, as that which makes a hole, and thus makes evident that lack of sense. The atom of the signifier is the place holder of an absence: the void. The marker of a hole lacking all wholeness, the signifier is not at all wholesome. When the atoms of sense touch on this void, one cannot help but laugh, even if it is only silent, to quote Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*, "the long silent guffaw of the knowing non-exister, at hearing ascribed to him such pregnant words."[29]

No wonder in *Malone Dies* Beckett refers to Democritus' strange formula as one of "those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in pollute the whole of speech. *Nothing is more real than nothing*. They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down into its dark."[30] To devote oneself to a signifier that signifies nothing is utterly perilous. The height of folly. For is one not simply devoting oneself to Nothingness? Beckett's answer, as one might expect, is sheer folly.[31] His answer is simply, "No." Nothingness is not nothing. Nothing is "nought" and "nought" is not the same as "not". This difference falls silent in the saying. To try and address it, to speak about it, imperils all sense, dragging the speaker into a pit by imperiling the claim that all speech, all *logos*, is speech about something. Humanity as a whole, despite being comprised of creatures that cannot do without the nothing, would prefer that, when it comes to its oddness, one remains silent. It is, to quote *Murphy*, one of "the occasions" that "calls for

29 Beckett, 1995, p. 150.

30 Beckett, 1958, pp. 186-87.

31 In an interview with Gabriel d'Aubade, Beckett states: "'All I am is feeling. 'Molloy' and the others came to me the day I became aware of my own folly. Only then did I begin to write the things I feel'" (Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 240).

silence," and Beckett, here, provides one of the best definitions of silence as "that frail partition between the ill-concealed and the ill-revealed, the clumsily false and the unavoidably so."[32] Beckett takes this call – this call for silence – altogether literally. One must summon it, make its presence heard. What is at issue in the "nought" is a silence that can only be "ill-concealed" and "ill-revealed." One must stumble over these silent letters clumsily placed so as to obtrude, making the "not" bulge with the pus of the letter whose spotting can only be ill seen, ill said. This partition is what Beckett, in a letter to Mary Hutchinson, referring to the Abderite mentioned in *Murphy*, terms the "queer real." "If there is a queer real there somewhere it is the Abderite's mention in Murphy, complicated – ibidem – the Geulincx "Ubi nihil vale etc". I suppose these are its foci and where a commentary might take its rise."[33] Beckett positions his work between the void of Democritus and "the beautiful Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulincx: *Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*."[34] The beauty lies in the minimal displacements between "*ubi*" and "*ibi*" – from "where" to "there" – and "*vales*" and "*velis*" – from "worth" to "wish." Beckett translates the formula as: "wherein you have no power, therein you should not will."[35] With these "foci," Beckett situates his work philosophically between two Nothings: the "nought" of the object and the nihil of the subject, between being and desire, between the void and the subject's atomization. Beckett's fiction introduces us to an irreparably atomized cosmos, elaborating a world that is oddly pre-Socratic and post-Cartesian, out of time and out of joint, and governed by what he terms, in an early piece of criticism, "a principle of disintegration."[36]

Beckett's work exhausts itself in the effort to address, or rather, butt up against, this "queer real". A nothing more radical than nothingness: "Nothing will ever be sufficiently against for me," Beckett writes to Georges Duthuit, "not even pain, and I do not think I have any special need for it."[37] This is what Beckett terms, in the same letter, "the language of the no."[38]

32 Beckett, 2009a, p. 161..

33 Beckett, 2011, p. 669.

34 Beckett, 2009a, p. 112.

35 Beckett, 2012, p. 456.

36 In a review of Sean O'Casey's collection Windfalls, Beckett writes, "Mr O'Casey is a master of knockabout in this very serious and honourable sense – that he discerns the principle of disintegration in even the most complacent solidities, and activates it to explosion ... If 'Juno and the Paycock', as seems likely, is his best work so far, it is because it communicates most fully this dramatic dehiscence, mind and world come asunder in irreparable dissociation" (Beckett, 1984, p. 82).

37 Beckett, 2011, p. 97.

38 Beckett, 2011, p. 98.

> One must shout, murmur, exult, madly, until one can find the no doubt calm language of the no, unqualified, or as little qualified as possible. One must, no that is all there is, apparently, for some of us, this mad little tally-ho sound, and then perhaps the shedding of at least a good part of what we thought we had that was best, or most real, at the cost of what efforts. And perhaps the immense simplicity of part at least of the little feared that we are and have.[39]

Beckett's work, his art, can be aptly summed, as a "mad little tallyho" into the "language of the No." A writing, then, that ceaselessly insists on a difference that is *next to nothing*. "Is nothingness the same as nothing?" Adorno asks in his notes for an essay on *The Unnameable* that he unfortunately never wrote: "Everything in B[eckett] revolves around that. Absolute discardment, because there is hope only where nothing is retained."[40] In Beckett, nothing is retained, not even nothingness; what remains, then, is nothing. Adorno's query is admirable, and cuts to crux of Beckett's concern. Yet, Beckett might quibble about Adorno's expression of hope. Hope is "insufficiently against" for Beckett. Beckett doggerelizes a *Maxim* of Nicholas-Sébastien Roch Chamfort, beautifully.

> Hope is a knave befools us evermore,
> Which till I lost no happiness was mine.
> I strike from hell's to grave on heaven's door:
> All hope abandon ye who enter in.[41]

The hope of heaven, in Beckett, is not heavenly, nor are its surrogates, particularly, the promise of "home coming."

In an early note, occasioned by his reading of Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, Beckett pens the imperative: "don't be honing after home."[42] Home is a horror as Beckett suggests in a letter to McGreevy: "The sensation of taking root, like a polybus, in a place, is horrible, living on a kind of mucous [for mucus] of conformity [...] The mind is in league with one's nature, or family's nature, it pops up and say égal."[43] The promise of being at one with oneself, at home in nature or nation– what Jacques

39 Beckett, 2011, p. 98.

40 Weller and Van Hulle, 2010, p. 178.

41 Beckett, 2012, p. 199. The editors' note that Beckett shares the same birthday as the Aristocrat turned Jacobin, who managed to royally botch his suicide (Beckett, 2012, p. 437). Mladen Dolar reminded me that they both share the same birthday with Jacques Lacan.

42 Beckett, 1999, p. 116. Pilling notes that Beckett's usage alludes to Burton's formulation: "Tis a childish humour to hone after home."

43 Beckett, 2009c, p. 153..

Lacan terms "the archaic form of the pastoral"[44] – is deadly. Its promise is what Beckett already in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* terms the "wombtomb."[45] This contraction refers to Belacqua's honing after "the pleasant gracious bountiful tunnel" which he "remembers" but from which he is barred irreparably and to which he can only gain entry at ultimate cost. He "cannot get back. Not for the life of him."[46] Delivered with deadpan humor, the idiomatic phrase 'not for the life of him' assumes a deadly literality. It is the life in him that bars access to the life he desires, which is no life at all.

Such "honing" is what the Ur-promise of Comedy for Beckett amounts to with its promise of an end that ends well. Yet, Beckett's comic gamut is comprised of life stuff from which no mirth is made.[47] The mad little tallyho into the language of the no ends with the injunction to say farewell to farewell. To give up on calmatives. The only way of not being at home in hell is to not hope for heaven. To see hope as a thing homely. To view one's native "land" as the place of one's "unsuccessful abortion."[48] The one who learns to enunciate the nought forms a relation to the unhap that is not not happy. For Beckett, happiness comes to one who abandons all hope and learns to enunciate "like hell it is." This is, perhaps, what it could mean to laugh at life's unhap.

Let me end this beginning with some final words, the final words of Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*:

> Decision no sooner reached or rather long after than what is the wrong word? For the last time at last for to end yet again what the wrong word? Than revoked. No but slowly dispelled a little very little like the last wisps of day when the curtain closes. Of itself by slow millimetres or drawn by a phantom hand. Farewell to farewell. Then in that perfect dark foreknell darling sound pip for end begun. First last moment. Grant only enough remain to devour all. Moment by glutton moment. Sky earth the whole kit and boodle. Not another crumb of carrion left. Lick chops and basta. No. One moment more. One last. Grace to breathe that void. Know happiness.[49]

44 Lacan, 1992, p. 89.

45 On such instance runs as follows, "It was stupid to imagine that he could be organized as Limbo and wombtomb, worse than stupid" (Beckett, 2020, p. 129).

46 Beckett, 2020, p. 130.

47 I am alluding to the title of Ruby Cohn's *Beckett's Comic Gamut*.

48 In 1938, Beckett writes, "Do not imagine I am returned to the land of my unsuccessful abortion" (Beckett, 2009c, p. 647).

49 Beckett, 2009e, pp. 77-8.

To know the "No" – to parse the language of the No – leaves the one who desires to know, no happiness. Beckett never tired of his appreciation for Jonathan Swift's definition of happiness in *A Tale of the Tub*: "happiness, possession of being well deceived."[50] K*no*w happiness.

I

In Beckett's fiction, we inhabit a world whose meaning has not simply withdrawn but been eviscerated. "I listen and the voice is of a world collapsing endlessly, a frozen world, under a faint untroubled sky, enough to see by, yes, and frozen too."[51] The writer draws "back the curtains on a calamitous sky."[52] The blue of day has become interwoven with the black of night, unhinging this most foundational of oppositions and un-anchoring the subject of experience.[53] The viewer of starry sky is thoroughly disoriented.[54] We do not live beneath a sheltering sky, but "beneath a sky without memory of morning or hope of night."[55] The light of this star, like the light of the stars as such, report upon a calamity that is ferociously indefinite. As Adorno writes, "Beckett keeps it nebulous."[56]

Samuel Beckett's work is pervaded with a sense of obscure disaster. In *Endgame*, Hamm's anguished "What's happening, what's happening?" receives a disconcertingly flat response: "Something is taking its course."[57] Hamm has a hard time with the indexical, stumbling over its enunciation: "this...this... thing."[58] In *Happy Days*, where happiness is far from happy and refers to "the happy days to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the moon has so many hours,"[59] Winnie states: "Yes, something seems to have occurred, something has seemed to occur, and nothing has occurred, nothing at

50 Beckett alludes to Swift's line in *Echo's Bones*. See Beckett, 2012, p. 9 and the annotation on p. 64.

51 Beckett, 1958, p. 35.

52 This phrase is from *Molloy*. See Beckett, 1958, p. 97.

53 In the Addenda to *Watt*, Beckett comments on the sky above and the waste below: "The sky was of a dark colour, from which it may be inferred that the usual luminaries were absent." (Beckett, 2009b, pp. 217. Another example from *Molloy*: "The sky was that horrible colour which heralds dawn. Things steal back into position for the day, take their stand, sham dead" (Beckett, 1958, p. 134).

54 Already in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, we encounter the remarkable passage: "The inviolable criterion of poetry and music, the non-principle of their punctuation, is figured in the demented perforation of the night colander" (Beckett, 2020, p. 20).

55 Beckett, 1958, p. 35.

56 Adorno, 1992, p. 245.

57 Beckett, 1986, p. 98.

58 Beckett, 1986, p. 98.

59 Beckett, 1986, p. 144.

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all, you are quite right, Willie."[60] In the below of interminable mud that comprises the hell of Beckett's *How It Is*, a refrain repeats: "something wrong there."[61] From the indefinite to the logically impossible to the syntactically wrong, Beckett points to an indeterminacy that could not be more horribly concrete. Clov's observation in *Endgame* remains exemplary. When he "*turns the telescope on the without*" at Hamm's behest all he can report is "Zero ... [*he looks*] ... zero [*he looks*] ... and zero." Adding, when goaded, that "All is [...] Corpsed [*Mortibus*]."[62]

If the refrain "something wrong there" is exemplary, it is because it is a wrong that can only be wrongly stated. Ill said, ill seen. If horror, in Sade for instance, was once a matter of demonstration, a thing about which one could speak endlessly because it was external to language – a horror to be designated and described (Sade) – in Beckett horror's pervasiveness has unsettled the syntactical core of language and the subject tasked with its propositional synthesis. The copulation of meaning has been compromised and this recoils on the unfortunates who happen to speak. Beckett's "people," as he puts it, "seem to be falling to bits."[63] In *All That Fall*, Mrs. Rooney in a frenzy: "What's wrong with me, what's wrong with me, never tranquil, seething out of my dirty old pelt, out of my skull, oh to be in atoms, in atoms [Frenziedly.] ATOMS!"[64] Of an eroded substance, Beckett's people are composed of a language whose connective tissue is severely compromised. They are *wearish*, feeble, decrepit, like the first appearance of the Abderite in Beckett's corpus. In an early poem, *Enueg I*, Beckett encounters the enigmatic figure on what is less a journey than a "trundle" worstward, "into the black west / throttled with clouds,"[65] into "vasts of void"[66] if I may pair the early with the late, through a dilapidated Irish landscape at sundown, giving birth to a corpse like sunset: "the stillborn evening turning a filthy green."[67] It is in this grim light that he passes Democritus.

> I splashed past a little wearish old man,
> Democritus,
> Scuttling along between a crutch and a stick,

60 Beckett, 1986, p. 154.

61 Beckett, 2009f, p. 5.

62 Beckett, 1986, p. 106.

63 Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 162.

64 Beckett, 1986, p. 177..

65 Beckett, 2012, p. 6.

66 Beckett, 2009e, p. 92.

67 Beckett, 2012, p. 6.

> His stump caught up horribly, like a claw, under his breech, smoking.[68]

Figured as decrepit, ancient, and crippled, Democritus is an amputee more crustacean than human. Less here an "incarnation of laughter" than an embodiment of the void.[69] *This* Democritus is not ebullient, not filled with cheer, but dour. This is not the "dear droll"[70] Democritus of poetic legend that Belacqua will try to summon in Beckett's story "Yellow" to calm his anxiety. This Democritus simply demonstrates that "everything is hollow mockery, drift of atoms, infinitude," as Lucian has Democritus say in *Philosophies for Sale*.[71] This Democritus might find the life-joke funny, but he laughs no more.[72] If he does, it is no longer only at but with woe. He offers no calmative to ease life's distress. "My life, my life, now I speak of it as of something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and it goes on, and is there any tense for that?"[73]

This Democritus is perilously proximate to Heraclitus the obscure. At one point, Beckett flirts with the notion that they meet in the sigh: "Well I might do worse than find myself as it were polarized between Democritus and Heraclitus for all eternity, in a place where sighing is out of melancholy and not out of torment. I would be familiar with the position."[74] From Molloy's perspective the former's laughter has become a "way of crying" and the latter's tears, a way of crying "with the noise of laughter." One for whom "[t]ears and laughter ... are so much Gaelic"[75]

The refrain "something wrong there" sounds a bit funny, but the laugh need not follow. It is without tense. The excision of the copula in the refrain *something wrong there*, which foregrounds the absence of the "is," conveys with precision the view articulated in Beckett's letter to Axel Kaun that "language is best used where it is most efficiently abused. Since we cannot dismiss it all at once, at least we do not want to leave anything undone that may contribute to its disrepute. To drill one hole

68 Beckett, 2012, p. 7.

69 I borrow the expression from Lutz, 1954, pp. 309-314.

70 This is how the poet Matthew Prior refers to Democritus. As cited by Lutz, 1954, p. 310..

71 Lucian, 1915, p. 475.

72 In a letter to Ruby Cohn, 8.3.68, Beckett writes, "Have heard that Swedish joke before. Still find funny but laugh no more" (Beckett, 2016, p. 115).

73 Beckett, 1958, p. 31.

74 Beckett continues, "There seems to be a contradiction inherent in the idea of Democritus doing anything so romantic, and Heraclitus doing anything so restrained, as sighing, but one must not mind that" (Beckett, 2009c, p. 185).

75 Beckett,1958, p. 32.

after another into it until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through."[76] To drill holes into language requires the writer to pass from the depth of signification to the sonorous syllabic surface only to build that surface around gaps, spaces, absences, holes. The relationship between composition and decomposition, making and unmaking, integration and disintegration, coherence and incoherence, signifier and signified becomes unstable. By drilling holes into language's surface, writing makes present the absence that language contains but cannot name. The hole locates what is *in* language but not *of* language. Literary form does not only seem to be threatened – it *is* threatened by this "not *of*." "In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form."[77]

In a letter to Mary Manning Howe from 1937, written shortly after the letter to Kaun, Beckett suggests that his approach is the linguistic equivalent of iconoclasm: "I am starting a Logoclast's League [...] I am the only member at present. The idea is ruptured writing, so that the void may protrude, like a hernia."[78] Logoclasm, or ruptured writing, is related to what Beckett in the letter to Kaun terms "Gertrude Stein's Logographs."[79] Differentiating with approval Stein's "nominalistic irony" from Joyce's "apotheosis of the word," he nonetheless still thinks that her approach to literature has not sufficiently shed its "*heiligen Ernst*," its sacred seriousness. "*Aufhören soll es*."[80] "The fabric of the language [in Stein] has at least become porous, if regrettably only quite by accident and, as it were, as a consequence of a procedure somewhat akin to the technique of Feininger." The problem with Stein, according to Beckett, is that she remains "in love with her vehicle, if only, however, as a mathematician is with his numbers." The death of language, like the death of number to the mathematician, must seem to her "indeed dreadful." Beckett differentiates his own method from both that of Joyce and Stein as a matter of "verbally demonstrating this scornful [mocking] attitude towards the word [*höhnische Haltung dem Worte gegenüber wörtlich darzustellen*]."[81] Beckett calls this grinding of the teeth of language a "literature of the non-word."[82] Ending the letter with a remarkable summons: "Let's do

76 Beckett, 2009c, p. 518.

77 Beckett makes this statement in conversation with Israel Shenker in which Beckett clarifies what he takes to be the difference between his writing and that of Kafka. See Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 162.

78 Beckett, 2009c, p. 521 (note 8).

79 Beckett, 2009c, p. 519.

80 Beckett, 2009c, p. 515.

81 Beckett, 2009c, p. 519.

82 Beckett, 2009c, p. 520.

as that crazy mathematician who used to apply a new principle of measurement at each individual step of the calculation. Word-storming [*Eine Wörterstürmerei*] in the name of beauty."[83]

In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Beckett's first unpublished novel, he speaks of this introduction of the immeasurable or incommensurable into the number line as the insertion of a "demented" interval, a unit that violates unity. In other words, there is nothing to unify the story line, the development, nothing to rationalize the count, to render consistent the passage from 0 to 1. There is no story to tell and nobody to tell it, because there is nothing to provide the story or character with a measurable, countable unity. Both story and character have been atomized. Neither subject matter (the action or plot), nor the presence of the subject, i.e., the character, provide the unit of measure. The character's fundamental form, Beckett suggests, is that of Nemo (Latin for nobody) whose presence within a piece of writing makes the "line bulge,"[84] we might add, *herniatically*. *Nemo* links Belacqua, the central protagonist of Beckett's early fiction, to Odysseus, but unlike Odysseus, Belacqua is not only a true nobody, he is a do nothing (a no can-er). Belacqua is the first of Beckett's unheroes. The name alludes to the Florentine lute maker whose lassitude so impressed Dante that he installed him in weary repose, at the base of Mount Purgatory. Utterly bereft of motivation, he does not even have the desire to turn his gaze upward towards the peak. His reply to Dante is a constant in Beckett's writing. When asked why he does not ascend, Belacqua replies: "Oh brother, what is the use in going?" Not seeing the point, he is going to wait it out.

Belacqua is Beckett's first instance of the "Nothing to be done" which will be made famous as Estragon's opening line in *Waiting for Godot*. Belacqua is the central figure in a novel that is definitively without center like the cosmos it inhabits. As Beckett puts it, he is "not a melodic unit."[85] Whereas the melodic signifies "a lovely Pythagorean chain-chant of solo of cause and effect, a one figured teleophony that would be a pleasure to hear," the symphonic unit, in contrast, "is not a note at all but the most regrettable simultaneity of notes."[86] The symphonic novel has become noise, baring only a nominal relation to music. Despite the suggestiveness of the adjective, the symphonic is definitively not a symphony. It names the other of its name: a thing coming unstuck from what the name presumes to name: a unit without unity. The name, Belacqua, stands for nothing, marking an empty place that serves to

83 Beckett, 2009c, p. 520.

84 Beckett writes, "Our line bulges every time he appears" (Beckett, 2020, p. 15).

85 Beckett, 2020, p. 15.

86 Beckett, 2020, p. 14.

locate a multiplicity, a series of "terms" that cannot be summed or defined: "They tail off vaguely at both ends and the intervals of their series are demented."[87] Belacqua thus epitomizes nothing: "Yet, various though he was, he epitomized nothing."[88] He has nothing to stand for and therefore stands for nothing. He sums to nought. "Oh sometimes as now I almost think: nothing is less like me than me."[89]

Beckett later would likely choose to discard the "is" – *nothing less like me than me* – as he does with the refrain "something wrong here." The hole created by the absent *is* produces a contraction deficient at its core, a statement more cobbled than composed from the language wreck. *Something wrong here* cleaves together. It rings true by sounding off. It is no surprise that "the meaning of being" is "beyond" Molloy,[90] and that existence "has no sense," as Beckett writes in *Molloy*. "It is a dug at which I tug in vain, it yields nothing but wind and splatter."[91] The "is" may still be uttered, but it is more sound than sense, an utterance "free of all meaning" amounting to "the buzzing of an insect."[92] "Is- *zzz*" has become onomatopoeic. A presence whose "buzz" indicates the linguistic surface. Like the fly on a Dutch Still-life, or even more pertinently, like the fly that makes Moran's heart skip a beat: "And I note here the little beat my heart once missed, in my home, when a fly, flying low above my ash-tray, raised a little ash, with the breath of its wings."[93] Language raises the ash of the signifier, the remainder of a meaning that illuminates no more. "Nothing having stirred."[94] The buzz of being, sound *sans sens,* presents the language mess. A boil on the body of language. Not being, but the mess. "One cannot speak anymore of being, one can only speak of the mess."[95] If one cannot speak anymore of being, one can speak of the hole that being has left. It is a hole that oozes being's absence. Already in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, he suggests that the writer cannot "conjugate *to be* without a shudder."[96] The writer "with a pen in his fist"

87 Beckett, 2020, p. 130.

88 Beckett, 2020, p. 132.

89 Beckett, 2020, pp. 82-83.

90 Beckett, 1958, p. 35.

91 Beckett, 1958, p. 51.

92 Beckett, 1958, p. 45.

93 Beckett, 1958, p. 156. A few pages later, Moran returns to the flies, emphasizing the "odd ones" that die young without laying eggs, unnoticed: "You sweep them away, you push them into the dust-pan with the brush, without knowing. That is a strange race of flies" (Beckett, 1958, p. 160).

94 Beckett, 2009e, p. 53.

95 Graver and Federman, 1979, p. 242.

96 Beckett, 2020, p. 50.

is "doomed to a literature of saving clauses." The gaping hole that is the "is" cannot be plugged. Such a plugging would require nothing less than the whole of language, i.e., language as whole, but the writer, like any speaking being, can only proceed atom by atom.

Once cognizant of the peculiar fact, the writer cannot but issue one of those "terrible" smiles that "*broadens and seems to culminate in laugh*" only to be "*suddenly replaced by expression of anxiety.*"[97] The thinker, Lucien in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, based on Beckett's friend Jean Beaufret,[98] possesses a horrible smile,[99] and Watt's smile seems "more a sucking of teeth." Beckett likens its manifestation to a fart.[100] These are smiles that are not smiles, but not not smiles. They resemble smiles, aping their form, and are thus neither "yawn" nor "sneer,"[101] but these smiles leave the distinct impression "that something is lacking."[102] They do not come naturally to the faces they adorn. They are stuck-on. In *Dream*, Beckett summons a horrendous simile for its horror. "It [Lucien's smile] was horrible, like artificial respiration on a foetus still-born."[103] Baroque and futile, this smile of aborted sense belongs to a face that is coming unstuck:

> His face surged forward at you, coming unstuck, coming to pieces, invading the airs, a red dehiscence of flesh in action. You warded it off. Jesus, you thought, it wants to dissolve. Then the gestures, the horrid gestures, of the little fat hands and the splendid words and the seaweed smile, all coiling and uncoiling and unfolding and flowering into nothingness, his whole person a stew of disruption and flux. And that from the fresh miracle of coherence that he presented every time he turned up. How he kept himself together is one of those mysteries. By right he should have broken up into bits, he should have become a mist of dust in the airs. He was disintegrating bric-à-brac.[104]

97 Beckett, 1986, p. 145.

98 See the entry on Lucien in Pilling, 2004, p. 57. .

99 For Lucien's smile, see *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*: "The smile was terrible, as though seen through water. Belacqua wanted to sponge it away. And he would not abandon the gesture that had broken down and now could never be made to mean anything. It was horrible, like artificial respiration on a foetus still-born" (Beckett, 2020, pp. 51-52).

100 Beckett, 2009b, p. 21.

101 Beckett, 2009b, p. 19.

102 Beckett, 2009b, p. 21..

103 Beckett, 2020, p. 52.

104 Beckett, 2020, p. 122.

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Flowering into nothingness, the face's atomization presents a subject that *incoheres*, marking the place of an incommensurability between the nominal coherence of a name and the presentation of a disintegrating substance. Character, in Beckett, breaks apart into the characters of which it is composed; the person dissolves into a stew of "horrid features." As a thing written, a character is the impossible sum of its characteristics, each of which are comprised of characters whose material ensures that no character falls into line or "do their dope" in the parlance of this early novel.

II

Beckett thematizes this demented interval at the outset of *Murphy*. Through an introduction of a flaw in the count, Beckett introduces inconsistency into the *logos* of the story and cosmos of *Murphy*.[105] Murphy may believe that life is "a wandering to find home,"[106] but his story, in its telling, attests rather to permanent exile. To be a subject is not to be one. To tell the story of Murphy is to state this "not." Murphy's story is the story of his reduction to nought. Murphy is a wanderer, to be sure, but without destination. Despite his belief in destiny, his adventure ends in accident. The ignition of the gas in the garret consigns Murphy to Burton's "infinite waste," to chaos, to the "vasts of void" that punctuates the pun: gas-chaos.

Murphy's death will be ruled, as Dr. Killiekrankie puts it, "a classical case of misadventure."[107] A "misadventure" sums up a novel and a character that resists summing or summation, and for which there is no classical case. A point made boldly from the outset by a now infamous flaw in the count. The novel begins with Murphy "naked" and bound by seven scarves to "his rocking-chair of undressed teak, guaranteed not to crack, warp, shrink, corrode, or creak at night." Made of material unable to support such a guarantee, no such wood exists, the reader is forced to accept it based on narrative authority. An authority, however, which is promptly nullified, or better, voided as soon as we do the math: "Seven scarves held him in position. Two fastened his shins to the rockers, one his thighs to the seat, two his breast and belly to the back, one his wrists to the strut behind."[108] 2 + 1 + 2 + 1 = 6. The reader who reads *and* counts, and thus accounts for what has been read, encounters a discrepancy between the legible (seven) and the summed (6). The inconsistency between the sum and the summation is flagrant. The storyteller not

105 Hugh Kenner draws attention to this flaw in the count. See Kenner, 1973, pp. 57-8.

106 Beckett, 2009a, p. 4.

107 Beckett, 2009a, p. 164.

108 Beckett, 2009a, p. 3.

only forwards assertions of dubious merit, he erred so basically, and done so with such candor, that he must either be a careless fool or an utter knave. Intent on engendering doubt, of violating the rudiment of propositional truth, severing the sinew binding word and sense, that all but the fool must suspect the worse. We have been installed within an all-pervasive fiction presided over by "some malicious demon." Who but a malicious demon of "utmost power and cunning," as Descartes writes in the "First Meditation", would suggest that 2 + 1 + 2 + 1 = 7? The world of *Murphy* is at odds with consistency. "Seven" is itself an odd number which marks a hole in the account.

Neither he nor we inhabit a Pythagorean cosmos. The novel begins with a discordant note. Beckett aligns the modern writer with Hippasos, the "Akousmatic":

> 'Drowned in a puddle,' said Neary, 'for having divulged the incommensurability of side and diagonal.'
> 'So perish all babblers,' said Wylie.[109]

Condemned to babble, a speaking being cannot but betray the illogic of their *logos*. Those who continue to speak of Harmony or *armonia* (αρμονια) and its surrogates ("Isonomy" and "Attunement"[110]) can only do so falsely. They must drown out any mention of the incommensurable, round the irrational's decimal. However, the *logos* has not itself been brought to a halt. Until it does, it will continue to sow confusion, to err, to slip, to fumble its signifying materials. *Armonia* has become "Apmonia," for Neary the Pythagorean acolyte, through an unacknowledged flaw in its transcription. "It was the mediation between these extremes [the extremes of a heart ready to burst or seize] that Neary called Apmonia."[111] Neary has substituted the Greek letter "ρ" (rho) for "p" taken in by the form of its appearance. In addition to being a Pythagorean, Neary is a Gestaltist who believes that 'all life is figure and ground,' but here his belief in harmony, that the human is integrated into the cosmos as part to whole, leads to the misapprehension of the signifier leading to a comical note being struck each time it is uttered.[112] The whole's integration of the parts has become an illusion as blatant as the belief that one can suspend one's heartbeat through force of will or suicide

109 Beckett, 2009a, p.32

110 These are other terms that Neary uses to describe "Apmonia," which is to say harmony incorrectly transliterated.

111 Beckett, 2009a, p. 4.

112 Beckett shares the suspicions that Lacan articulates with respect to Gestaltism and Merleau-Ponty's reliance on the Gestalt notion of "*good form*." In Lacan's view the Gestalt conception of form leads to a return of vitalism and "to the mysteries of the creative force" and the "belief that progress of some sort is immanent in the movement of life" (Lacan, 1988, pp. 78-79).

through refusing to breath. Obtruding like a pustule, the "p" signifies a symptomatic element that cannot be integrated into its signification without remainder, without excess. The "p" signifies the primacy of pus: a sign of a body horribly out of step, like Watt's infamously decentered gait or Belacqua's boil. Language neither conforms to the body nor integrates it. The "P" forms like "a nice little abscess" on the "windpipe" that Beckett tells us in *The Unnamable* is "the point of departure for a general infection." The body infected by language is decomposed into "a network of fistulae, bubbling with the blessed pus of reason."[113]

We are, to say the least, a long way from the "harmonizer,"[114] Timaeus, and his conception of a cosmic animal "whole and perfect, made up of perfect parts" and "*one*" without remainder. Timaeus has drowned Hippapsos or, at least, drowned him out.[115] The cosmic animal is a sphere so absolute that there is no need of π and thus no need of irrational numbers. "[O]ne whole of all wholes taken together, perfect and free of old age and disease," the cosmic animal has a surface that is perfectly smooth and a form that is perfectly round. Revolving eternally and uniformly, this heavenly sphere has no need of hands or feet, no need of limbs, because it is all encompassing, without without. No eyes or ears, mouth or anus, this cosmic creature is wholly and completely self-sufficient, at one with itself, perfectly consistent, perfectly centered:

> For of eyes it had no need at all, since nothing to be seen was left over on the outside; nor of hearing, since there was nothing to be heard; nor was there any atmosphere surrounding it that needed breathing; nor again was there any need of any organ by which it might take food into itself or send it back out after it was digested. For nothing either went out from it nor went toward it from anywhere—since there *was* nothing—for the animal was artfully born so as to provide its own waste as food for itself and to suffer

113 Beckett, 1958, p. 347.

114 This is how Peter Kalkavage describes Timaeus in his "Introductory Essay" to his translation of Plato's *Timaeus*. Interestingly, he also likens Timaeus to another "harmonizer," Leibniz: "Leibniz' greatest feat of philosophic harmonization is the reconciliation of final and efficient causes (that is, the reconciliation of Aristotle and Descartes)" (Plato, 2001, p. 5).

115 In a truly superb Appendix to his translation of *Timaeus* on Music, Kalkavage writes, "the world of Timaeus is one in which the war against chaos is constantly being waged. The war mode of the cosmic soul reflects the central role played by *thymos* or spiritedness throughout the dialogue. It is that power of the soul that reason uses to subdue the irrational desire (70A)." Plato he shows demonstrates that the Pythagorean harmony of the sphere, as a harmony of perfect parts in conformity with a perfect whole, can only be maintained through a compromise in the harmonic scale, a coercion that Kalkavage reminds us recalls "the reluctance of the Other to mix with the Same." He continues, "The Pythagorean solution, for all its beauty, cannot prevent the thirds from being "off" or the **256:243** leftover from being ugly. It is haunted by what one might call a tragic necessity in the realm of tones. The scale is not a complete victory but a beautiful compromise" (Plato, 2001, p. 152).

> and do everything within itself and by itself, since he who put it together considered that the animal would be much better by being self-sufficient than in need of other things.[116]

Feeding on itself eternally, this animal is perfectly content to live off itself, to absorb its own waste, lap up its own shit. It *is* so fully, so full of being, so full of itself, so in command, because it has no need of nothing. It is devoid of void. Yet, to articulate its *logos*, as Plato has Timaeus do, exposes that it is a being that in no uncertain terms is full of shit. Its image of perfection can only be maintained in contemplative silence. When its *logos* is elaborated, when it is held to account, one hears that something is off. The belly of this beast is bloated with gas. It is unable to reason without appeal to the very presence of nothing it declares to be absent. Replete with many "no's" and "nothing's," the articulation of its *logos* presents a seam that betrays the vacuity of its bloat.

In Beckett, the tailor is the first to overcompensate for the flaws in the material. The suit that Murphy wears as he strikes out "on the jobpath"[117] is not only "aeruginous," and thus a bit out of date, but made of material, "advanced by its makers" to be "holeproof."[118] In *Endgame*, Nagg tells a joke about an Englishman who needing "a pair of striped trouser in a hurry for New Year festivities goes to his tailor who takes his measurements." After a litany of excuses for delaying their delivery, from making a 'mess of the seat,' a 'hash of the crutch', 'a balls of the fly,' and a 'ballocks of the buttonholes,'[119] the Englishmen throws a fit:

> 'Goddamn you to hell, Sir, no, it's indecent, there are limits! In six days, do you hear me, in six days, God made the world. Yes Sir, no less, Sir, the WORLD! And you are not bloody well capable of making me a pair of trousers in three months!' [*Tailor's voice scandalized*.] 'But my dear Sir, my dear Sir, look – [*disdainful gesture, disgustedly*] – at the world – [*pause*] – and look – [*loving gesture, proudly*] at my TROUSERS!'[120]

A better talker than tailor, one fears for the fit. But the joke turns on the WORLD'S poor stitching, which is suitably exposed by Timaeus' account.

To maintain its integrity requires that one smooth over the surface of its telling, plugging up its holes, sealing them shut. The

116 Plato, 2001, p. 63 (33A c-d). *Plato's Timaeus*, 63 (33A c-d).

117 Becket, 2009a, p. 46.

118 Beckett, 2009a, p. 47.

119 Beckett, 1986, p. 102.

120 Beckett, 1986, pp. 102-3.

image produced by language is imperiled by it. Its consistency, and smoothness, its perfection, depends upon hiding its seams, not pausing over the "no's" and the "nothing's". As soon as one does, this image of self-sufficiency becomes woefully deficient. One begins to trip over the very holelessness of this image of wholeness and wholesomeness, this image of consummate health. This absence, in its very insistence – "there *was* nothing" – becomes horribly present. To note the presence of this absence makes a hole in this whole of wholes. If one was to shape this hole into a mouth, "wordshit" would begin to flow. This is Beckett's verdict in *Texts for Nothing*:

> That's right, wordshit, bury me, avalanche, and let there be no more talk of any creature, nor of a world to leave, nor of a world to reach, in order to have done, with worlds, with creatures, with words, with misery, misery.[121]

The babbler would be buried by babble as Wylie subtly reminds us. A man, as his name insists, who has no reason to lie. In the beginning was the bungle and so on. Language betrays the stuff of which it is made: "coprolalia."[122]

> In Beckett, all is atomization and incontinence: "Incontinent the void."[123]

III

Language is Spirit's refuse and the task of writing is disposing of its remains. In *Murphy*, in the eponymous here's last Will and Testament, he requests to be cremated and then taken to what "the great and good Lord Chesterfield calls necessary house" in the Abbey Theater in Dublin, where his "happiest hours have been spent," and flushed without hesitation or show of grief, and "if possible during the performance of a piece." A poor piece of writing, for sure, for one values clarity and distinctness. For it is unclear whether Murphy's happiest hours were spent in the Theater itself or its toilet, "the necessary house." And it is unclear whether, his ashes, his remainders, should be flushed during the performance of a play, or while the one tasked with his disposal is taking a shit. Murphy consigns his life to art whose sense in the end amounts to a shit joke, whose crass emblem has always been the pun. The pustule of amphiboly.

121 Beckett, 1995, p. 137.

122 Beckett, 1999, 97.

123 Beckett, 2009e, p. 65.

Having what Beckett brilliantly phrases as "a postmonition of calamity," Murphy may not have seen his death coming – he has no premonition of the conflagration, despite numerous signals, and thus no conscious idea that he will be reduced to a charred, nearly unidentifiable, remainder. However, his "postmonition" offers a different kind of sight. Beckett writes,

> In the morning nothing remained of the dream but a postmonition of calamity, nothing of the candle but a little coil of tallow.
> *
> Nothing remained but to see what he wanted to see. Any fool can turn the blind eye, but who knows what the ostrich sees in the sand?"[124]

What remains to be seen is what he wants to see, which is to say, the Nothing – a matter of turning the eyes towards its blindness. Beckett recognizes that that we can only have a postmonition of the calamity of language, that makes us desire the thing – Nothingness – that brings an end to desire. This is to what the desire for meaning amounts. When we desire in accordance with this desire, meaning itself desires univocity, the reduction of something to nothing, but more profoundly, the reduction of nothing to nothingness. Yet, this amounts to the reduction of the pun to nothing, a thing of language that can be excised without remainder.

Yet, this is not possible for Murphy who is too well aware of how difficult it is to do nothing. *Murphy* is a story about the character, Murphy's failure to successful conduct a "life-strike." His efforts to avoid work, "the mercantile Gehenna," fail because Celia, his "beloved" makes the weaker argument the stronger. If he does not find work, Caelia tells him: "'Then there will be nothing to distract me from you.'" Beckett continues:

> This was the kind of Joe Miller [a bad joke] that Murphy simply could not bear to hear revived. It has never been a good joke. Not the least remarkable of Murphy's innumerable classifications of experience was that into jokes that had once been good jokes and jokes that had never been good jokes. What but an imperfect sense of humour could have made such a mess of chaos. In the beginning was the pun. And so on.[125]

124 Beckett, 2009a, pp. 110-11.

125 Beckett, 2009a, p. 43.

Fearing that he will lose this most important of barriers between himself and her, "the nothing," he strikes out on "job-path," setting in motion the calamity of which he will only have a "postmonition." Beckett inscribes not only *Murphy*, and the cosmos of the novel, but the whole of creation within the space of the pun, founding the whole of the *logos* on the metonym of metonyms: "In the beginning was the pun..." If the pun, as the saying goes, is the lowest form of wit – John Dryden referred to it as not only the lowest but the "most groveling"[126] – Beckett might add to Henry Erskine's reply that it *lies* at the "foundation." It grovels because it is *base*. Lying at the foundation, it is a foundational lie that would make those creatures unable not to speak, its victim, the butt of a cruel joke. "What but an imperfect sense of humour could have made such a mess of chaos. In the beginning was the pun. And so on."[127] Beckett lodges the pun at the crux of the *logos*, suggesting that the passage from nothing to something, *creatio ex nihilo*, proceeds by accident, an original unhap. The pun introduces a "demented interval" into language and, likewise, the subject who has the unhap of happening to speak.

IV

A Piece of Monologue begins hilariously: "Life was the death of him."[128] When life itself is 'the death of one,' as the idiom goes, there is no hope of escaping the horror. No writer or thinker in the 20th century is more keenly attuned to the wisdom of Silenus. This wisdom sums up, according to Nietzsche, the truth of Tragedy. Condemned to desire what is utterly out of reach, the companion of Dionysus tells King Midas, what is best for this "wretched ephemeral race, children of chance and misery" is "not to be born, not to be, to be nothing" and the "the second best" is "to die soon."[129] Nietzsche indexes tragedy to the chorus' judgment in Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*: "not to be born [*me phynai*]." The human horror is one with its birth. Barred from the best, the human being desires the very thing it can never obtain, *me phynai*. This miserable fate, however, has a way of bestowing a certain grandeur on human wretchedness. The tragic hero's impossible striving, despite its failure, elevates this creature from its animal muck. Tragedy ennobles as it destroys. Tracing the trajectory of a fall, the tragic story only has meaning for a being who has something to lose. Tragedy maintains a relation to loss, preserving a relation to what is always already lost.

126 See Redfern, 1984.

127 Beckett, 2009a, p. 43.

128 Beckett, 1986, p. 425.

129 Nietzsche, 2000, p. 42.

Yet, in Beckett, tragedy loses its solemnity. The wisdom of Silenus has become that of Grock (one of Beckett's favored clowns known for saying *sans blague* (no joke). From *Long After Chamfort*:

> Better on your arse than on your feet,
> Flat on your back then either, dead than the lot.[130]

Comedy has become hardly separable from horror, separated, perhaps, by the partition of nothing. In *The Unnameable*, the pearl of Silenus's wisdom is delivered stillborn. "I'm looking for my mother to kill her, I should have thought of that a bit earlier, before being born."[131] A liminal joke that is funny, perhaps, if indeed it is funny, in being not all that funny. Adorno refers to this as: "The humour of the last human being: that is the humour that can no longer count on any laughing."[132] If the best is not to be born, all life, barred from the best, tends *worstward*. "Better than nothing so bettered for the worse."[133]

Tragedy bestows on life a value it lacks. Beckett again from *Long After Chamfort*:

> The trouble with tragedy is the fuss it makes
> About life and death and other tupenny aches.[134]

Tragedy is a form well fit for a being who longs to mean something, helping to forge a relation to an absent presence that preserves the promise of hope. Seeking to express nothing failingly, such writing installs itself within the tragic absolute. However, the guffaw of the Abderite shifts focus from a meaning that lacks to the lack of meaning, from absent presence to present absence. Differentiating nought from nothing, the subject knows that there is no happiness outside this knowing, and thus, knowing just enough to say, as the Unnameable will say, "there I am the absentee again."[135]

130 Beckett, 2012, p. 198.

131 Beckett, 1958, p. 285.

132 Weller and Van Hulle, 2010, p. 168.

133 Beckett, 2009e, p. 92.

134 Beckett, 2012, p. 197.

135 Beckett, 1958, p. 406.

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