Árpád Mihály

Me, That Word, or Death by Text

> I wake: How happy they who wake no more!
> Yet that were vain, if Dreams infest the Grave.
>
> Edward Young: *Night Thoughts*

I. INTRODUCTION

It took a considerable time for Beckett criticism to bring itself to look upon *Texts for Nothing* as an original work rather than detritus from *The Unnamable*, with problems and goals of its own.[1] Despite Beckett's own dismissal of it as a text that fails to move beyond the impasse of *The Unnamable*,[2] the few attempts to see it as a new beginning after the trilogy have been illuminating, if the actual suggestions as to the why-or-how vary in persuasiveness. Two arguments seem of interest here.

As is clear from the subtitle of his *Reconstructing Beckett: Language for being in Samuel Beckett's fiction* (1990), P. J. Murphy believes that there is an ontological concern at the core of Beckett's writing:

> Beckett's art is an eloquent testimony of the power struggle between the conflicting claims of 'author' and 'other' – that alien being or character

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[1] For whole chapters devoted to the work in recent studies, see Susan D. Brienza, *Samuel Beckett's New Worlds: Style in Metafiction* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1987); P. J. Murphy, *Reconstructing Beckett: Language for Being in Samuel Beckett's Fiction* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1990); H. Porter Abbott, *Beckett Writing Beckett: the author in the autograph* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

[2] Interview with I. Shanker, quoted in Murphy p. 34.

> discovered in the very act of creation. ... [He] has obsessively sought the new forms which would allow the 'other' the power to speak in order to substantiate his own hungering for being, and ... has also sought to accommodate this incredible struggle to be human with the author's equally real need to corroborate his being through the creation of a self-sufficient formal literary construct. Beckett affirmed in the early sixties that "Being *has* a form," but the situation revealed in his fiction involved a perplex of quite fantastic perplexity: how to reconcile the claims of two distinct entities, with separate needs and radically different relationships to language.[3]

Much of my thesis derives from my initial misreading of this passage. Recognising the character as truly "alien" seemed to me an exciting critical tool for reading *Texts for Nothing*. The clause "this incredible struggle to be human" appeared to confirm my budding hypothesis that "alien" is to be understood as 'non-human.' However, Murphy's real meaning transpired later on, with this sentence: "Beckett's prose fiction reveals a struggle for an art of living that would reconstitute the human being within the fictional world of the text."[4] This struggle, Murphy suggests, is Beckett's solution to the problems of the *avant-guarde* "in the sense advanced by Peter Bürger in which it is a historically conceived attack on the autonomous status of art ... [aiming] at the reintegration of art and life."[5] Beckett works, as it were, in reverse, "trying to bring life to his art, to 'let being into literature.'"[6] His work is thus to be seen as an experiment with life within the boundaries of the literary text. Hence his interest in the "alien" discovered in this new world and its relation to the author. The question is then:

> how to reconcile the conflicting claims of the two distinct entities, with separate needs and radically different relationships to language. What constitutes reality, what is its ontological status, what is its significance – these are the central issues that Beckett raises in highly original ways.[7]

But the affair is thorny – Murphy's equation of 'being' with 'life' seems gratuitous to me. All Beckett is reported to have talked about is the former:

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[3] Murphy p. xvi.
[4] Murphy p. xvi.
[5] Murphy p. xiv.
[6] Murphy p. xvi.
[7] Murphy p. xvi.

> 'Being,' according to Beckett, has been excluded from writing in the past. The attempt to expand the sphere of literature to include it, which means eliminating the artificial forms and techniques that hide and violate it, is the adventure of modern art.[8]

For Beckett being is clearly non-identical with life, as the latter has hardly been "excluded from writing in the past." At the time of his conversation with Harvey, Beckett had been "eliminating the artificial forms and techniques" obstructing the way to being for more than a decade. These "forms and techniques" may well be the fruits of a peculiar susceptibility of language, aptly described by the speaker of *Texts for Nothing*[9] thus:

> No, no souls, or bodies, or birth, or life, or death, you've got to go on without any of that junk, that's all dead with words, with excess of words, they can say nothing else, they say there is nothing else, that here it's that and nothing else, but they won't say it eternally, they'll find some other nonsense, no matter what... (*T* 10: 142-3)[10]

Readers cannot help assuming a *speaker* behind these words; how could they when fickle pronouns like 'I,' 'here' and 'now' seem to function, signify, though the bodily presence that in live speech fills them with sense is not present? Their function is to identify a presence: he who speaks; and how could a speaking presence not live? The whole "nonsense" of life follows...

Yet this is not life – Beckett insists on elaborating this truism because he is in search of being, and written language seems to offer 'pure,' albeit spurious, being without life.

Murphy *may* understand as much when he says that *Texts for Nothing* tries to relocate "the self which has fallen into the noman's land of fictional non-being"[11]; however, his argument that Beckett intended to reunite this fictional being with "the world of things and people"[12] to give it a "proper" being seems

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[8] Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princetown: Princetown University Press, 1970) p. 249.

[9] I believe there is only one and the same spaker in all thirteen 'Texts.' For a proof, see the beginning of the sixth one: 'How are these intervals filled between these apparitions? ... I mean, how filled for me?' – where the 'intervals' clearly refer to the blank spaces between the 'Texts.'

[10] Abbreviated references are to *Texts for Nothing* in Samuel Beckett, *Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995). The numerals before the colon refer to the number of the 'Text.'

[11] Murphy p. 34.

[12] Murphy p. 35.

unjustifiable to me. What Beckett came to realise in *The Unnamable*, a recognition developed with exceptional force in *Texts for Nothing*, is the function of the body in "turning" being into life.

Beckett's critique of the idealist tradition, up to *Texts for Nothing*, concentrated on language, the home of counterfeit being and the perpetuator of essentialism. The speaker of *The Unnamable*, in true Cartesian fashion, is 'happy' to conduct his search for his true self without the assurance of a body, and attribute his pathetic failure to the nature of language: "it's the fault of the pronouns, there is no name, for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that..."[13] But the speaker's certainty of his own body, of having a body, is removed in the course of a mystic-philosophical excercise, which neutralises the effect for the reader who has already seen Descartes recede into his mind. (Or the textual being calling itself Descartes, to be precise.) For the speaker of *Texts for Nothing*, on the other hand, the body is not an epistemological crux but an ontological nix: he has to perform the trick of *cogito* in the full assurance that 'he' is nothing but words.

Beckett's interest in the ontology of fiction, suggests H. Porter Abbott, is not completely disinterested: what is at issue is the possibility of self-representation, or as the subtitle of his book imples, how *the author* can appear *in the autograph*. The term is broader than autobiography, and Beckett seems to belong to an exclusive club whose members include Augustine and Wordsworth:

> These texts are as distant from fiction as from conventional autobiography insofar as conventional autobiography is as given to the comforts and authorial distance enabled by fictional form as are traditional novels. Beckett's subset [of autography] is writing governed not by narrative form or any species of tropological wholeness but by that unformed intensity in the present which at every point in the text seeks to approach itself.[14]

These works are typically "work[s] in progress, something happening in a textual present ... in effect an escape from time."[15] Narrative becomes suspended in a gel of non-narrative writing, as Wordsworth's "spots of time" are surrounded by lyric or speculative discourse, rendered isolated, discontinuous. As Abbott points out, these "spots" of narrative in all three writers (his example from Beckett is

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[13] Samuel Beckett, *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1994 [1959]) p. 372.

[14] Abbott p. 18.

[15] Abbott p. 6.

Company) typically relate to the father or fatherhood, as if what was to be made ineffective by isolation were the authority of these past narratives over the present of the work. This kind of autography, it is suggested, strives for self-definition by the very displacement of the oedipal conflict:

> The signs of originary force which so absorbed Beckett's attention throughout his life achieve a configuration, not within a dialectic of parent and self, but outside of it. A major step in this process is disassembling narrative itself, disassembling, that is, the formal equivalent of generative fatherhood. This in turn, means the undoing of sequential time.[16]

Abbott's proposition is that Beckett's whole oeuvre is to be seen as an autographical project:

> What appears an extravagant concern for originality is a key part of the effort to avoid the development of tropes from within, tropes however peculiar to his own work, which would still occlude the possibility of, to ill-express it, the closest possible encounter. For one function of strangeness in Beckett's work is to keep readers (including, while he was alive, Beckett himself) in quest of its deviser. ... Instead of an artist above his work, paring his fingernails, we have an artist seeking to approach unmediated contact.[17]

This "unmediated contact" is what *written* language seems to preclude. *Texts for Nothing* fully thematises the problem and the struggle to overcome it. This work, more than anything Beckett had produced before it, constantly plays upon the bizarre situation of someone *speaking in writing*, when one (if one is an author) literally loses one's voice. One of the the images 'the speaker' in the *Texts* uses to describe his status gains an eerie ambiguity in writing: "I'm a mere ventriloquist's dummy" (*T* 8: 133). The ambiguity concerns the *origin* of the sentence, the identity and authority of the voice saying 'I.' Ventriloquism is "the art of producing vocal sounds that appear to come from another source"[18]: it is exactly the silent presence of a human body (the ventriloquist's) in the company of an obviously non-human body (the puppet) that thrills the audience: the voice does not appear to belong where it *should*. (In contrast with puppet-theatre, where

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[16] Abbott p. 19.
[17] Abbott p. 21.
[18] *Collins English Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Glasgow: HarperCollins Publishers, 1998).

the absence of human bodies enables the audience's leap of faith: it is the puppets who say 'I.') Yet, the comic incommensurability of the two bodies in a way compensates for the surrender of authority, which in itself is unsettling, as a human speaker on the stage is at times demoted to the status of passive listener to a puppet. This function of the body fails, once the sentence is written down: the surrender in *Texts for Nothing* results in an anarchy of authorities – perhaps no less comic –, since readers cannot help assigning authority to the one who 'says' 'I,' over what he says, while he seems to surrender all authority (he calls himself the "puppet") to another, one who cannot speak for himself. The word "mere" functions in a similarly anarchic manner in the above clause, since it might modify only the "ventriloquist," rather than the whole phrase "ventriloquist's puppet," in which case the puppet is depreciating his master, the author, as "a mere ventriloquist," i.e. one giving up his voice for the use of another. And indeed, what shall one think of an author without a voice of his own? How shall one, if one is an author, communicate about oneself to his audience?

The problem is no easy one if one understands oneself to be more than— and one is back at the problem of *what* is one? Beckett's philosophy of the self and the role of the body therein confront with his autographic project for the first time in *Texts for Nothing*.

Abbott also finds the *Texts* a turning point in the ouevre, rather than a dead-end after *The Unnamable*. The latter he sees as a terminus in the process he calls "recollection by invention,"[19] "the effort to avoid the development of tropes from within ... which would ... occlude the possibility of ... the closest possible encounter" with the audience. The treatment "the Victorian trope of onwardness"[20] receives in the oeuvre is typical of this operation. The onward journey as a theme first occurs in *Watt* and, by *Malone Dies*, Beckett has already introduced a "striking variation on the trope ... [by] its reflexive application to the writing of which it is a part."[21] Malone's journey is the writing of his book, with the end always in sight. In the next novel, "the trope was transferred from the task of narration to that of self-formulation."[22] *The Unnamable* brought this task to a dead-end, leaving only one option for *Texts for Nothing*, "the absence of any overall pattern."[23] Even though each 'Text' sets out on a journey of some sort,

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[19] Abbott p. 28.

[20] Abbott p. 33.

[21] Abbott p. 34.

[22] Abbott p. 34.

[23] Abbott p. 90.

they are never finished, having been started only to accentuate the "absolute frustration of structural 'onwardness.'"[24] They are therefore "the final steps in easing the deep structure of his work from the dominion of narrative,"[25] making *Texts for Nothing* Beckett's first exercise in a "postnarrative art,"[26] the new start after the trilogy, in which "Beckett consolidated his autographical project."[27]

I slightly disagree with Abbott, as far as "the absence of any overall pattern" in the work and the method of consolidating the autographical project are concerned. In the course of giving a close reading to the first four 'Texts,' I hope to reveal a progress of sorts, a change in concerns and methods. I wish to show how self-writing is thematised, together with those problems of representation that makes the Beckettian speaker call himself a "ventriloquist's dummy" in a later part of the work.

II. DEATH BY TEXT

Dead metaphors?

A journey appears to have come to grief in the first sentence of *Texts for Nothing*, which nevertheless seems strangely welcome for the speaker: "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 there and I couldn't go on" (*T* 1: 100). With such predecessors as Malone and the speaker of *The Unnamable* it is no surprise to see the journey of words terminate in a paradox. It is also no surprise that the narrative should be enmeshed with metanarrative remarks: "I'll describe the place, *that's unimportant*" (*T* 1: 100).[28] If the aside refers to the landscape rather than the narrative act, it may be emphasising that the landscape has figurative rather than literal significance:

> The top, very flat, of a mountain, no, a hill, but so wild, so wild, enough. Quag, heath up to the knees, faint sheep tracks, troughs scooped out by the rain. It was far down in one of these I was lying, out

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[24] Abbott p. 89.

[25] Abbott p. 87.

[26] Abbott p. 88.

[27] Abbott p. 87.

[28] In quotes from *Texts for Nothing* all italics are mine.

> of the wind. Glorious prospect, *but for the mist that blotted out*
> *everything*, valleys, loughs, plain and sea. (*T* 1: 100)

Since as early as the first short stories in French, landscapes in Beckett's writings
have worked in a remotely allegorical fashion by standing for mental scenes.
Rubin Rabinovitz was among the first to warn that these landscapes often provide
the "raw material for metaphors depicting inner reality."[29] Thus climbing hills or
towers represent the attainment of a "mental overview,"[30] while enclosed spaces,
such as dens or caves, act as "refuge[s] from the harshness of existence."[31] Now the
speaker's remark may serve as a warning, as this hill refuses to give an "overview"
(Note the ironic "glorious prospect").

"How can I go on, I shouldn't have begun, no, I had to begin" (*T* 1: 100).
The present tense has been used for the time of the narrative act, so this seems a
metaphoric equation of journeying and narrating, a trope of long standing – used
by such members of the guild as Dante and Malone, to mention only two of those
who make an appearance in this work. This enigmatic necessity to talk (write) has
tormented all Beckett's first-person narrators, and is one major theme in these
'Texts.' But for the time being, this thread disappears underneath the surface of
the texture and the story to be told briefly returns: "Someone said, perhaps the
same, What possessed you to come? I could have stayed in my den, snug and dry,
I couldn't" (*T* 1: 100). Slowly, the hidden narrative pattern starts to reveal itself,
with the speaker seeming to have left his "den" and to be stranded on a hilltop,
among unidentifiable company. Moreover, his coming here seems no less
enigmatically motivated than his need to report it.

> *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 ... till it gives up. I say to the head, Leave it alone, stay
> quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever. I'm 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 to me, 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.
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> (*T* 1: 100)

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[29] Rubin Rabinovitz, 'Samuel Beckett's Figurative Language' *Contemporary Literature* 26:3 (1988) p. 317.
[30] Rabinovitz p. 318.
[31] Rabinovitz p. 320.

His reluctance to deal with matters of body and mind is of the same stamp as the relief he felt in the first sentence when his journey was aborted. Yet, he admits grudgingly, the need to care is at the very core of his being ("it's I would have to cease"). The last sentence adds this care to the connotations of the journey. It also reveals the speech situation to be the continuation of the opening scene, as the tense of the next sentence confirms as well ("Ah yes, we seem to be more than one, all deaf, not even, gathered together for life" [*T* 1: 100-1]). In "I need nothing, neither to go on nor to stay where I am" journey and narration meet under the aegis of the opening paradox ("I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go on"). Going on has been associated with narrating, but now the narrated journey, too, becomes the metaphor of writing. This is a frustrated or disillusioned writer, claiming impotence ("I can do nothing any more") but spurred on by some instinct. His collapse may be the renunciation of his calling, the reason for which we do not know yet. But the sense of the journey, oscillating between metaphorical and common usage, now returns to rest momentarily in the concrete:

> Another said, or the same, or the first, they all have the same voice, the same ideas, All you had to do was stay at home. Home. They wanted me to go home. My dwelling place. But for the mist, with good eyes, with a telescope, I could see it from here. It's not just tiredness, I'm not just tired, in spite of the climb. It's not that I want to stay here either.
>
> (*T* 1: 101)

The motivations for this frustrated journey are not any clearer; neither is the speaker more ready to account for his collapse. The clue may be in the obscured landscape, where "home" is, to which the speaker refers repeatedly, with nostalgia? incredulity? scorn?

> I had heard tell, *I must have heard tell of the view*, the distant sea in *hammered lead, the so-called golden vale so often sung, the double valleys, the glacial loughs, the city in its haze, it was all on every tongue.* (*T* 1: 101)

"The *so-called* golden vale" preserves this ambiguity of attitude, as the elevated style can be either respectful or ironic. What is more important is that instead of an intimate *vision* of the homeland we are given a quasi-familiar *tale* of the view, shared by a community? all people? The "glorious prospect" now appears *fabulous*, as one fabled: the speaker's "den" turns out to be in a land of tale, with the journey leading here a little less real. All of which is canvassed over by the realistic presentation of the surroundings:

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> Who are these people anyway? Did they follow me up here, go before me, come with me? I am down in *the hole the centuries have dug*, centuries of filthy weather, flat on my face on the dark earth sodden with the creeping saffron waters it slowly drinks. They are up above, all round me, as in a graveyard. ... Do they see me? What can they see of me? Perhaps there is no one left, perhaps they are all gone, sickened. I listen and it's the same thoughts I hear, I mean the same as ever, strange. To think in the valley the sun is blazing all down the ravelled sky. How long have I been here, what a question, I've often wondered.   (*T* 1: 101)

As we shall see, these are the last realistic moments in the story. Yet even this tableau is 'loosened up' by the strange "I listen and it's the *same thoughts* I hear, I mean *the same as ever*." We recall how he described this group of people ("they all have the same voice, the same ideas") and they start to assume an eerie familiarity for the speaker; as if he were not here for the first time, or as if he has grown to know them through a long stay.

> How long have I been here, what a question, I've often wondered. And often I could answer, An hour, a month, a year, a century, depending on what I meant by me, and here, and being, and there I never went looking for extravagant meanings, there I never much varied, only the here would sometimes seem to vary.   (*T* 1: 101)

The first sentence only deepens the doubt voiced in the previous passage ("I've *often* wondered"). But the next sentence explodes the realist tableau, indeed the whole landscape, with the speaker revealing himself to be a fabulator, one creating *tales* of himself. "Here" is no more real than the "so-called golden vale."

Which leaves us all the more curious about the metaphoric value of his impotence to travel and to fabulate. What does his collapse and reluctance to commence symbolise:

> And that other question I knew so well too, What possessed you to come? unanswerable, so that I answered, To change, or, It's not me, or, Chance, or again, To see, or again, years of great sun, Fate, I feel that other coming, let it come, it won't catch me napping.   (*T* 1: 101-2)

The question may well be familiar, as it is a distorted version of what Dante is asked in Canto XV of the *Inferno*. As Murphy points out, the answers given are a melange of the conversation between Dante and Ser Brunetto,[32] and as they

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[32] Murphy p. 37.

appear to have been offered by the modern speaker on different occasions ("or,... or,... or again,... or again"), he cannot have been down here for the first time.

But "the here would ... seem to vary": this may not be simply Hell after all. If we take the hint of the Dante allusion and turn back to the description of the place, we find that it is more like a strange Irish (see *loughs*) version of the Mount of Purgatory: although Dante is blinded in Cantos XV-XVI of *Purgatory* by *smoke* (*fummo*), at the beginning of the next Canto he refers to it as *fog* (*nebbia*). The "golden vale" was also sung by him, and the company on this hill may be a group serving their sentence in Purgatory.

Is the speaker a reincarnation of Dante? As countless allusions in the *Texts* to other literary works could testify, the speaker has been a traveller not only of Dantean landscapes but the whole of the literary tradition – the archetype of the traveller, if you like. Dante himself seems only one manifestation of the model, as will Molloy or Piers Plowman in the next 'Text.' Why is this archetype lying "down in the hole the centuries have dug," as if in the grave of a tradition?

> To change, to see, no, there's no more to see, I've seen it all, till my eyes are blear, nor to get away from harm, the harm is done, one day the harm was done, the day my feet dragged me out that must go their ways, that I let go their ways and drag me here, that's what possessed me to come. And what I'm doing, all-important, breathing in and out, saying, with words like smoke, I can't go, I can't stay, let's see what happens next. (*T* 1: 102)

The age of journeys is over, "there's no more to see." A journey is no longer a way "to get away from harm" – as it was for Dante, seeking his way out of the "dark wood of error" – but the harm itself. Yet there is a dark instinct that drove him out of his den, symbolised by the headlong feet. The elliptic last sentence explains this psychomotoric deficiency: if read as "and [that's] what I'm doing, ... saying," the feet start operating as the vehicle for the tenor of words; the journey starts signifying writing. It is writing the speaker wants to but cannot abandon. The reason for wanting to do so is hinted at in a powerful image:

> Eye ravening patient in the haggard vulture face, perhaps it's carrion time. I'm up there and I'm down here, under my gaze, foundered, eyes closed, ear cupped against the sucking peat, we're of one mind, all of one mind, always were, deep down, we're fond of one another, we're sorry for one another, but there it is, there's nothing we can do for one another. (*T* 1: 102)

The schizophrenic scene is the recycling, the "recollection by invention," of an earlier moment in the oeuvre. As Murphy points out, the image first occurs in Beckett's poem of 1935, 'The Vulture'[33]:

> dragging his hunger through the sky
> of my skull shell of sky and earth
>
> stooping to the prone who must
> soon take up their life and walk
>
> mocked by a tissue that will not serve
> till hunger earth and sky be offal[34]

Lawrence Harvey calls attention to the allusion to the opening lines of Goethe's 'Harzreise im Winter.'[35] There the vulture in search of its prey is the song.[36] In Beckett's poem, the carnivore is the poet's creative self or poetic instinct: hence the distinction between "*his* hunger" and "*my* skull." As for "the prone," there is at play an ironic indeterminacy about who/what animates them, as if Beckett could not decide at this point 'how' dead they are. Is it the kiss of the vulture, which descends only on dead bodies, that gives them a new life, making poetry the creator of zombies? Or does the word that orders them to 'take up thy life and walk' come from the poet's imagination, which cannot help seeing them alive, despite his conviction that they are not? And who/what is mocked by the tissue? The fact that all stanzas begin with a participle, the first two of which clearly have the vulture for their subject, supports the idea that it is the bird whose hunger is scorned. It little matters whether the tissue belongs to the poet or his creations; poetry, in Beckett's view, is unlikely to give justice to life, since writing starts with the death of the subject. We arrive at the same conclusion with the other reading, as well, in which the fifth line modifies "the prone": the zombies' life, no more substantial than their will, appears a mere mockery of life as lived in living tissues.

I think Beckett would agree with Paul Ricoeur that one's body is something of an enigma insofar as it is "at once a fact belonging to the world and

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[33] Murphy p. 37-8.

[34] Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems in English and French* (London: John Calder, 1977) p. 9.

[35] Harvey p. 113.

[36] Harvey provides H. E. Zeydel's translation: 'As a vulture would, / That on heavy clouds of morning / With gentle wing reposing, / Seek for his prey— / Hover, my song.' Harvey p. 113.

the organ of a subject that does not belong to the objects of which it speaks."[37] But the problem for writing is not simply representing an object, but the impossibility of recreating that pre-linguistic *sense* of one's own body that constitutes one corner-stone of Ricoeur's ontology of the self. With the danger of oversimplifying his ambitious work, that much at least must be said that the key idea is the distinction between two senses of identity. *Idem*-identity is what answers to the questions of permanence in time, while *ipse*-identity responds to moral injunctions: even the latter "implies no assertion concerning some unchanging core of the personality."[38] As his title shows, part of his project is to show how the constitution of *ipse*-identity (of *oneself*) is dependent upon the Other (*another*), how *as*, in his title, means "inasmuch": being "oneself inasmuch as being another."[39] The body, being the first alien object in the world and the place of the most intimate "mineness," becomes one site of the dialectic between the *me* and the *other*.

So while the self as "as a multiple, sequential linguistic event"[40] is capable of representation, this sense of one's own body remains immune to representation. It actually saves the consciousness from complete linguistic deconstruction. In writing, where the ties with the body have been severed, this deconstruction can freely operate, as Beckett demonstrated in *The Unnamable*.[41] This rupture between the body and the subject in writing is, in a way, like death.

Texts for Nothing 'recycles' the metaphor and introduces the type of "invention" Porter talks about. The vulture now is clearly the speaker, while he himself is his own "prone" subject. This is self-writing, with a new awareness of the (meta)physics of the textual universe. The regret of "there's nothing we can do for one another" has to do with a new understanding of the possibilities in (self-)representation.

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[37] Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1994 [1992]) pp. 54-5.

[38] Ricoeur p. 2.

[39] Ricoeur p. 3.

[40] Shira Wolosky, *Language Mysticism: The negative way of language in Eliot, Beckett and Celan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995) p. 125.

[41] As pointed out by Wolosky. She sees *The Unnamable* as 'the relentless fulfillment' of a negative mystic project which aims to reach a/the core of the subject. The project, as is apparent in the novel, 'finally defeats itself. For it achieves a reduction that is revealed to be either impossible or empty.' (Wolosky p. 109.)

The tradition of first person narratives that involve metaphoric journeys, which is is epitomised here by Dante – the traiditon of fictional autographies –, is clearly rejected for its faith in representation. In the words of the second 'Text,' "it let nothing show ... of the true affair" (*T* 2: 106). The journey is the metaphor of gaining (self-)knowledge, and Dante's climb is its eminently successful version, with "home" at the end, symbolising a confirmation of salvation. The model receives parodistic treatment in *Texts for Nothing*, as the glory of "home" has been demeaned into a "den," just as Dante's confident narration of his journey to Ser Brunetto is chopped up and offered as evasions for the "unanswerable" question.

Not that Beckett himself could give an easy answer. As he told Lawrence Harvey: "I write because I have to. ... What do you do when 'I can't' meets 'I must'? ... At that level you break up words to diminish shame."[42] The vulture and its "carrion time" become the metaphor of this instinct in *Texts for Nothing*, whose speaker also aims to diminish the power of words by inserting the wedge of self-consciousness. He is by turns resolved to stop the sham called writing and downhearted because it can never be stopped, bursting out in frustrated asides like "that's what you think." It seems there is no end to this journey:

> One thing at least is certain, in an hour it will be too late, in half-an-hour it will be night, and yet it's not, not certain, what is not certain, absolutely certain, that night prevents what day permits, for those who know *how to go about it*, who have the will to go about it, and the strength, *the strength to try again*. Yes, it will be night, the mist will clear, I know my mist, for all my distraction, the wind freshen and the whole night sky open over the mountain, with its lights, including the Bears, to guide me *once again on my way*, let's wait for night. All mingles, times and tenses, at first I only had been here, now I'm here still, soon I won't be here yet, toiling up the slope, or in the bracken by the wood, it's larch, I don't try to understand, I'll never try to understand any more, that's what you think, for the moment I'm here, always have been, always shall be, I won't be afraid of the big words any more, they are not big. (*T* 1: 102-3)

The journey will continue in a world of text, as it always has. In fact, two journeys are implied: one the metaphor of writing in the past and the future, the route leading here and hence; the other, in a sense more real though appearing only in its trace, cvarried on in the structure of the sentences and the text: the

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[42] Harvey p. 249.

present writing itself. In a way, this is the kind of honest self-writing the passage hankers after, since the stasis of the first journey "down here" directs the reader's attention to the traveller "up there." Talk is still of written "me," but writing *me* signals his presence by the movement of writing itself. In this sense, "I" can never leave "here" ("I'm here, always have been, always shall be"). Once this is acknowledged, the first journey might as well be continued, if only to make life more interesting. After all, that is what journeying has always been about:

> Sometimes it's the sea, other times the mountains, often it was the forest, the city, the plain too, I've flirted with the plain too, I've given myself up for dead all over the place, of hunger, of old age, murdered, drowned, and then for no reason, of tedium, nothing like breathing your last *to put new life in you*, and then the rooms, natural death, tucked up in bed, smothered in household gods, and always muttering, the same old mutterings, the same old stories, the same old questions and answers, no malice in me, hardly any, stultior stultissimo, never an imprecation, not such a fool, or else it's gone from mind. Yes, to the end, always muttering, *to lull me and keep me company...* (*T* 1: 103)

Despite the paradox of an invigorating death scene, the tone is more melancholic than querulous, and "to lull me and keep me company" belies the autographer's loneliness. To solace himself, both for his solitude and the division of his writing and written selves, he remembers old times of union:

> Yes, to the end, always muttering, to lull me and keep me company, and all ears always, all ears for the old stories, as when my father took me on his knee and read me the one about Joe Breem, or Breen, the son of a lighthouse keeper, evening after evening, all the long winter through. ...
> Yes, I was my father and I was my son, I asked myself questions and answered as best I could, I had it told to me evening after evening, the same old story I knew by heart and couldn't believe, or we walked together, hand in hand, silent, sunk in our worlds, each in his worlds, the hands forgotten in each other. That's how I've held out till now. And this evening again it seems to be working, I'm in my arms, I'm holding myself in my arms, without much tenderness, but faithfully, faithfully. Sleep now, as under that ancient lamp, all twined together, tired out with so much talking, so much listening, so much toil and play. (*T* 1: 103-4)

"Tucked up in bed" might recall the moribunds of the trilogy, but the "old story" is certainly no newcomer, as it first appeared in the 1946 short story,

'Le Calmant' ('The Calmative'). In the latter – the story of a journey to gain a "mental overview" – the narrator remembers his father reading him the story and says: "For me now the setting forth, the struggle and perhaps the return, for the old man I am this evening, older than my father ever was, older than I shall ever be."[43] His self-consciousness did not prevent the narrator from telling a tale of a journey of self-exploration, or hinder the tale from functioning metaphorically, which explains the present nostalgia. It is in this mood that writing appears as "play" through the association made earlier between toil and the journeying ("toiling up the slope"). Though the narrated journey was never continued and though, strictly speaking, we leave the "hero" lying in the mud as the story ends, the other, implied, journey has achieved much. The need for a new kind of self-writing has been declared and perhaps fulfilled.

What with allusions to the 1946 short story and the fact that the "Joe Breem, or Breen"-story was a tale Beckett used to hear from his father,[44] the obvious question arises whether this is not simply Beckett's disguised intellectual-artistic autobiography. Is this speaker not a Beckett-persona? Certainly not in any clear-cut way: 'Texts' to come will amply thematise the speaker-author relation, presenting it as a major issue. Till then, we should bear in mind the ironic intent of the prone character when talking about himself and the vulture, saying: "we're of one mind, all of one mind, always were, deep down." Which is exactly what self-writing is about.

When life was babble

'Text 2' sets out with the heightened awareness that the previous one tried to dismiss towards the end. The line of thought is accordingly less tangled and produces an enquiry into the nature of "here."

> Above is the light, the elements, a kind of light, sufficient to see by, the living find their ways, ... the living. ... Here you are under a different glass, not long habitable either, it's time to leave it. You are there, there it is, where you are will never long be habitable. Go then, no, better stay, for where would you go, now that you know? Back above? There are limits. Back in that kind of light. See the cliffs again, be again between the cliffs and the sea, reeling shrinking with your hands over

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[43] Beckett, *Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989* p. 64.

[44] James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997) p. 372.

> your ears, headlong, innocent, suspect, noxious. Seek, by the excessive
> light of night, a demand commensurate with the offer, and go to ground
> empty-handed at the old crack of day.   (*T* 2: 105)

This is not a little like Hell, but perhaps more for the sake of distinguishing life "here" and life as described in the old autographical discourse than for any topological precision. For the issue is again writing. The firmament as (looking) glass is an allusion to the Book of Job (37:18), where it is described as a metal mirror. But the next return of the phrase, in 'Text 5,' points further:

> The sky, I've heard—the sky and earth, I've heard great accounts of
> them, now that's pure word for word, I invent nothing. I've noted, I
> must have noted many a story with them as setting, they create the
> atmosphere. Between them where the hero stands *a great gulf is fixed*,
> while all about they flow together more and more, till they meet, so that
> he finds himself as it were *under glass*, and yet with no limits to his
> movements in all directions, let him understand who can, that is no part
> of my attributions.   (*T* 5: 118-9)

To be under glass (either under a belljar or the behind the glass of a framed picture) is to be the hero of a story. This passage too contains an allusion to the Bible, to a metaphor of rupture. Abraham talks thus to the rich man in Hell:

> And beside all this, between us [Abraham and Lazarus] and you *there is a
> great gulf fixed*: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot;
> neither can they pass to us that would come from thence.   (Luke 16:26)

The hero under the glass, the written character, 'stands' in the very gulf of incommunication. The paradox the speaker refuses to deal further with is thus a compact formula for the ontology of the fictional world: a no-place with infinite dimensions.

   This journey is also suspended in paradox: though this "place" may not be suitable for self-representation ("not long habitable"), the old possibilities are no longer of use, either ("there are limits"). The archetypal traveller, Dante, is evoked again as examplum: the shore alluded to is probably Ante-Purgatory. Dante and Virgil emerge from Hell when it is still night and talk to Cato by "the excessive light" of four stars.[45] As Virgil tells Cato, Dante is seeking freedom (*Purgatory*:

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[45] 'The rays of the four holy lights so adorned his face with brightness that I saw him as if the sun were before him' (*Purgatory*: I.37-9).

I.70-72)[46]: his later incarnation in Beckett's text, who seems to be conducting his journey backwards, is frustrated in his expectations – apparently of necessity ("seek ... a demand commensurate with the *offer*, and go *to ground* empty-handed at the old crack of day"). This manifestation of the archetypal traveller is blended with memories of Molloy, who also spent unforgettable days by the sea:

> Much of my life has ebbed away before this shivering expanse, to the sound of waves in storm and calm, and the claws of the surf. Before, no, more than before, one with, spread on the sand, or in a cave. In the sand I was in my element, letting it trickle between my fingers, scooping holes that I filled in a moment later or that filled themselves in, flinging it in the air by handfuls, rolling in it.[47]

His play in the sand may be recalled now as "reeling shrinking with your hands over your ears, headlong, innocent, suspect, noxious."

The speaker emphasises his new awareness of the ontological rift that is the subject of 'The Vulture,' by openly talking to himself. He is addressing not only his written semblance but his writing self as well. He exhorts himself to summon memories of the old discourse and congratulates himself on his success:

> There's a good memory. Mother Calvet. She knew what she liked, perhaps even what she would have liked. And beauty, strength, intelligence, the latest, daily, action, poetry, all one price for one and all.
>
> (*T* 2: 105-6)

The nostalgia of the fourth sentence imperceptibly slips into the shouting of a street-vendor selling, among other things, cheap literature. The sarcasm is of course directed at the high-realism of a preceding scene with Mother Calvet and her dog. Her story is rejected together with that of Dante-Molloy:

> If only it could be wiped from knowledge. To have suffered under that miserable light, what a blunder. *It let nothing show*, it would have gone out, nothing terrible, nothing showed, of the true affair, it would have snuffed out. (*T* 2: 106)

Paradox remains the main strategy for delineating the situation. The light of the night "here" is powerful compared to the light "up there." What is to be seen is

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[46] Dante Alighieri: *The Divine Comedy*, trans. and commentary, Charles S. Singleton, 6 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

[47] Beckett, *Molloy* p. 68.

the possibilities of self-representation in language. Molloy on the shore is "suspect, noxious" because autography done in the old belief does not reveal "the true affair," death by text. In its dark truth, the light of the living "would have snuffed out." "Night prevents what day permits," said the speaker in the previous 'Text,' probably having in mind the useless freedom of the old discourse (the worthless "offer"), which only helped to obscure the ontological fissure.

The autographer goes on to examine the new possibilities in earnest:

> And now here, what now here, one enormous second as in Paradise, and the mind slow, slow, nearly stopped. And yet it's changing, something is changing, it must be in the head, slowly in the head the ragdoll rotting, perhaps we're in a head, it's as dark as in a head before the worms get at it, ivory dungeon. The words too, slow, slow, the subject dies before it comes to the verb, words are stopping too. *Better off then than when life was babble?* That's it, that's it, the bright side. (*T* 2: 106)

Doing away with narratives ("memories") results in motionlessness, the eternal present of a text that does not proceed anywhere. The seeking mind is, as it were, grinding to a halt, while the journey of words also seems to come to an end. The apparently free association to the head will later appear as the vulture's foreboding of his sky. The forced jubilation over discarding the hoax of the old discourse ("babble") cannot for long obscure the fact that the journey of words cannot be stopped:

> So long as the words keep coming nothing will have changed, there are the old words out again. *Utter*, there's nothing else, *utter, void yourself of them*, here as always, nothing else. But they are failing, true, that's the change, they are failing, that's bad, bad. Or it's the dread of coming to the last, of having said all, your all, before the end, no, for that will be the end, the end of all, not certain. To need to groan and not be able, Jesus, better ration yourself, watch out for the genuine death-pangs, some are deceptive, you think you're home, start howling and revive, health-giving howls, *better be silent*, it's the only method, if you want to end, not a word but smiles, end rent with stifled imprecations, burst with speechlessness, *all is possible*, what now. (*T* 2: 106-7)

The passage itself illustrates the travelling of words, if only the journey is ultimately circular – after all the rumination and the marshalling of extreme possibilities to end all discourse, the conclusion is: "all is possible." Saying is journeying. In fact, "having said all" may be "the end of all," not only of

travelling, since there may be no life beyond discourse; hence the anxiety over failing words, "the ragdoll rotting." It is both a constructed self-image, disintegrating with a language deemed insubstantial, and a specimen of the "prone" race.

More memories, to avoid answering the question "what exactly is going on" (*T* 2: 107)? First, reminiscences of "Mr. Joly," the bell-ringer, and the devout (*T* 2: 107), to provide the context for an ironical misjudgement: "Here at least none of that, no talk of a creator and nothing very definite in the way of a creation" (*T* 2: 107). Pretty soon, in 'Text 4,' the talk will be of a creator.

The second memory is of "Piers pricking his oxen o'er the plain" (*T* 2: 107), another incarnation of the traveller seeking for truth. The "den" is mentioned again, with little interest now for the speaker: "It was nonetheless the return, to what no matter, the return, unscathed, always a matter for wonder. What happened? Is that the question? ... No" (*T* 2: 107). The question is what *is* happening. It is the movement of the words that matters not the recounted journey.

> There, it's done, it ends there, *I end there*. A far memory, far from the
> last, it's possible, the legs seem still to be working. A pity hope is dead.
> No. How one hoped above, on and off. With what diversity.   (*T* 2: 108)

"There": the painter finishing a sketch for a self-portrait, ripe for the bin from the start. But these are words, with more will of their own than lead has ("the legs seem still to be working"). This 'Text,' too, ends on a note of nostalgia for the self-representation of olden times. The coda is ambiguous: is the hope of truthful appearance in a text really dead? Is its death welcome? Is the hope inextinguishable?

What matter how you describe yourself?

'Text 3,' in its investigation of the implications of writing on the speaking subject, returns to the non-sequential method of 'Text 1.' The opening is baffling, as a result:

> Leave, I was going to say leave all that. What matter who's speaking,
> someone said what matter who's speaking. There's going to be a
> departure, I'll be there, I won't miss it, it won't be me, I'll be here, I'll
> say I'm far from here, it won't be me, I won't say anything, there's
> going to be a story, someone's going to try and tell a story. Yes, no

> more denials, all is false, there is no one, it's understood, there is
> nothing, no more phrases, let us be dupes, dupes of every time and tense,
> until it's done, all past and done, and the voices cease, it's only voices,
> only lies.   (*T* 3: 109)

The speaker tries to evacuate all traces of himself from the text before the new
journey starts. He tries to hide behind "someone," and make sure by means of
paradox that the story cannot be taken to be about him. Then he changes his
tactics ("yes, no more denials") and tries to proceed in the knowledge ("it's
understood") that the textual journey is all too obviously virtual ("there is no
one, ... there is nothing"). He seems to have resolved the dilemma of the previous
'Text' about what to do till the "end of all" and chooses to carry on talking.
However, the lack of control over language, first implied by the self-willed "feet"
and then the attempt to "void yourself of them," is now openly admitted: not
only by the decision to be "the dupes of every time and tense," but also by the
story apparently being told by lying "voices."

But read with the knowledge of death by text, the problem is different.
Up till now, the speaker has been talking as if he were assure of his extratextual
existence, lamenting only the impossibility of faithful representation. Beckett
suddenly offers the reverse of the situation, i.e. that all that is certain is the
representation. What can a consciousness 'do' without a body? Suffer. (The move
is not so sudden in view of the previous 'Text,' with its descent into Hell, a
possible damnation, and the enclosure in a mind other than the speaker's own.
The vulture and his feast are, indeed, "of one mind"!) Alternatively, it can start
seeking a body.

> Here, depart from here and go elsewhere, or stay here, but coming and
> going. Start by stirring, there must be a body, as of old, I don't deny it,
> no more denials, I'll say I'm a body, stirring back and forth, up and
> down as required. With a cluther of limbs and organs, all that is needed
> to live again, to hold out a little time, *I'll call that living, I'll say it's me* ...
> It's enough to will it, I'll will it, will me a body, will me a head, a little
> strength, a little courage...   (*T* 3: 109)

He acts as if he had never heard the maxim of the Belgian follower of Descartes,
Geulincx, a favourite with Beckett: "Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis" (Where you
are worth nothing you must will nothing). Yet this irony is only the sign of a
greater one, that of writing, in which the speaking consciousness becomes effaced
by its own words – by the consciousness created. The silent assurance of one's

own body is replaced by the din of bodiless words. No wonder, then, that this consciousness 'feels' as if he were created by lying voices.

After moments of knockabout humour in which he claims to be creating different semblances, the speaker (we must call him one) returns to his doubts:

> Who taught me all I know, I alone, in the old wanderyears, I deduced it all from nature, with the help of an all-in-one, *I know it's not me*, but it's too late now, too late to deny it, the knowledge is there, the bits and scraps, flickering on and off, turn about, winking on the storm, in league to fool me. Leave it and go, it's time to go, to say so anyway, the moment has come, it's not known why. What matter how you describe yourself, here or elsewhere, fixed or mobile, without form or oblong like man, in the dark or the light of heavens, I don't know, it seems to matter, it's not going to be easy. (*T* 3: 110-11)

Essentialism as is represented here in neo-Platonism ("an all-in-one") is responsible for the neglect of the body in Western thought. Beckett's project is to show how giving credence to the lies of language fosters idealism. Deconstructing a solely verbal (i.e. transcendent and transcendable) consciousness shows what can be done to a mind without a body. The heritage is a burdensome one, as the speaker indicates here ("too late to deny it, the knowledge is there") and in later 'Texts' as he hankers after a kind of negative transcendence, seeking "committal to flesh" (*T* 10: 142). But this parody by inversion, similar to the *reductio ad absurdum* of negative mysticism in *The Unnamable*, exists in a situation which makes the speaker more of a victim than a gullible fool. Now it is only "voices" that create him, but in the next 'Text' the puppet-master will appear, too. But before that, this 'Text' spells out the knowledge that makes the speaker want to "leave all that":

> To be bedded in that flesh or in another, in that arm held by a friendly hand, without arms, without hands, and without soul in those trembling souls, through the crowd, the hoops, the toy balloons, what's wrong with that? I don't know, I'm here, that's all I know, and that it's still not me, it's of that the best has to be made. *There is no flesh anywhere*, nor any way to die. ... Departures, stories, they are not for tomorrow. And the voices, wherever they come from have no life in them. (*T* 3: 113)

The lack of presence in representation is nowhere more apparent than in the irreproducible mortality of human flesh. In this sense, it is certainly of little interest "who's speaking."

There's my life, why not

The instinct to travel dies hard. Even after the unmasking of the speaking subject in 'Text 3,' the first question in 'Text 4' concerns moving on, if only in the conditional:

> 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. (*T* 4: 114)

This time the speaker attempts to answer the question the previous 'Text' tried to ignore. The text is a "pit of ... inexistence" not only because of the gap between the body and its representation but also because of the separation of the voice from the speaking body. The grammatical sense of "accusative" directs attention to "I" as a pronoun (even if it is, strictly speaking, not in the accusative), a shifter that gains its reference in the speech situation – only to remind us that this situation is not one of *speech*.

"There's a simple answer" goes the ironic aside, for the logic of misrepresentation affects an author, too. Beckett's response is exaggeration – the "overdoing" of his own image – a move corresponding to the hyperbolic hypothesis of a speaker beleaguering its creator, the "ventriloquist's dummy" arguing with his master:

> He would like it to be my fault that he has no story, of course he has no story, that's no reason trying to foist one on me. That's how he reasons, wide of the mark, but wide of what mark, answer us that. He has me say things saying its not me, there's profundity for you, he has me who say nothing say it's not me. All that is truly crass. If at least he would dignify me with the third person, like his other figments, not he, *he'll be satisfied with nothing less than me, for his me.* (*T* 4: 115)

This open if comic admission of the autographic project illustrates its problems in the making. Written words masquerade as the voice of a consciousness while they efface the consciousness emitting them. But if the removal of 'I' from the body opens the way for its deconstruction, "he" fares no better. But instead of a victim, Beckett presents himself as the perpetrator of it all:

> When he had me, when he was me, he couldn't get rid of me quick enough, I didn't exist, he couldn't have that, that was no kind of life, of

> course I didn't exist, any more than he did, of course it was no kind of life, now he has it, his kind of life, let him lose it, if he wants to be in peace, with a bit of luck. His life, what a mine, what a life, he can't have that, you can't fool him, ergo it's not his, it's not him, what a thought, treat him like that, like a vulgar Molloy, a common Malone, those mere mortals, happy mortals, have a heart, land him in that shit, who never stirred, who is none but me, all things considered, and what things, and how considered, he had only to keep out of it. That's how he speaks, this evening, how he has me speak, how he speaks to himself, *how I speak, there is only me*, this evening, here, on earth ...   (*T* 4: 115)

I will now take the liberty to rewrite the passage as I understand it, turning the reported speech back into the direct speech that was never spoken:

> "When I had you, when you were me, I couldn't get rid of you quick enough, you didn't exist, I couldn't have that, that was no kind of life." Of course I didn't exist, any more than he did, of course it was no kind of life, now he has it, his kind of life, let him lose it, if he wants to be in peace, with a bit of luck. "My life, what a mine [of stories?], what a life, I can't have that, you can't fool me." Ergo it's not his, it's not him. "What a thought, [to] treat me like that, like a vulgar Molloy, a common Malone, those mere mortals!" Happy mortals! "Have a heart: [to] land me in that shit?!" [Him], who never stirred, who is none but me?! "All things considered,–" – and what things? and how considered? – "I had only to keep out of it." That's how he speaks, this evening, how he has me speak, etc.

Samuel Beckett, who identifies himself by two of his creations, emerges here in all the lustre of a vain god, deprecating "mere mortals" ("happy mortals," adds the speaker wryly). Not only is the writer a creator who is glorified in his creation but his condemning characters to bodiless being is also made to appear as irrationally motivated as anything the Old Testament God might do.

Of course, the certainty of "that is ... how I speak, there is only me" returns us to the paradox of the ventriloquist. The fact that Beckett has his speaker talk about him at length only in two 'Texts,' and later only sporadically, shows he tries to "go about it" differently. He opts for another kind of presence in the text than the false one written words create in exchange for the speaking body. As Abbott shows in his studies of later works, and as I hope to have shown in the case of the first 'Text,' there is a possibility for signalling this presence – what Abbott calls "autographic signature" – through the tensions and movement

of the text. Through the force that drives the text out of its den on a new journey; through the will that stops these journeys despite the claim that it is "an unending flow of words and tears." They all belie a presence that functions with the same silent authority as a conductor, "execut[ing]... one dead bar after another" (*T* 11: 144). In fact, the title is an allusion to 'measure for nothing,' a musical term for the silent movements of the conductor's baton at the beginning of a performance, setting the tempo for the orchestra.