Writing from the Margins

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The Aesthetics of Disruption in the Irish Short Story

Edited by

Catriona Ryan

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Introduction

Catriona Ryan

The title of this book concerns the work of a group of Irish writers whose writing has been marginalised in the mainstream Irish short story tradition. Due to their innovative approaches to the short story form they have struggled to gain full acceptance within the mainstream Irish literary canon. The essays in this book focus on some of the writers who make up this counter-tradition in Irish short story writing. One of the main questions that need to be considered is why, in the context of the Irish short story, writers such as Aidan Higgins and Tom Mac Intyre have been sidelined by critics. Beckett has an established reputation, yet his short prose work is considered very much at odds with the Irish short story tradition. One of the most significant publications to date concerning the history of the Irish short story is Heather Ingman's *A History of the Irish Short Story*. She tracks the history of the genre in Ireland from the nineteenth century to modern times. Ingman briefly refers to Aidan Higgins's and Samuel Beckett's contribution (ignoring Tom Mac Intyre) and there is an absence of any detailed analysis of a counter-tradition that involves an aesthetics of disruption. This anthology seeks to address that critical gap in contemporary Irish studies.

In the history of Irish literature the Irish short story is considered to be a pre-eminent Irish prose form. This is due to the Irish oral folktale tradition of which the Irish form of the literary short story is a descendant. In the nineteenth century the form found its key development in William Carleton who combined influences from the culture of oral Irish folk tales and models from the English literary tradition. As Declan Kiberd notes, "The short story is the natural result of the fusion between the ancient form of the folk tale and the preoccupations of modern literature" (2002: 42). In the nineteenth century the short story genre was developed by Anglo Irish writers whose various political and religious identities were reflected in a tradition that tended to stereotype the Irish Catholic masses.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century a growing Catholic bourgeoisie began to make an impact on the development of the Irish short

story. According to Frank O'Connor the modern Irish short story began with the work of the writer George Moore whose realist portrayal of Irish life influenced the subsequent tradition, especially the work of Joyce. The naturalist short story style of Joyce and Moore also had a subversive dimension in their criticisms of the influence of Catholicism in Irish culture. Through the influence of Kantian philosophy and the work of other philosophers, Moore developed an atheistic stance and in his classic collection of short stories, *The Untilled Field*, where he expressed his contempt for the Catholic Church and the power it had over Irish society. In the nineteen twenties, thirties and forties Moore and Joyce influenced the second generation of Irish short story writers such as Frank O'Connor and Sean O'Faolain, who, by continuing in the same vein as Moore and Joyce, were victims of the Catholic-run Irish censorship board.

Though the modern Irish short story tradition has its own history of subversion, the question remains as to why the short stories of Beckett, Higgins and Mac Intyre were never fully accepted. The marginalized status of the avant-garde writer in Irish literature has been well documented in other genres. In relation to the neo-modernist tradition of poetry in Ireland John Goodby makes the point that the reason experimental poetry has not been embraced by the aesthetic ideologues of mainstream Irish poetry is that as well as using experimental forms "the neo-modernists specifically reject the issue of family, nation and tradition" (2000: 301-302). Generally the mainstream aesthetics of a post-colonial twentieth century Irish culture was centred on attempts to articulate the nature of Irish identity in the face of a repressive Catholic state. The representation of that struggle was often mediated through realism. The neo-modernist project therefore remained marginalized.

Similar arguments may be attributed to the Irish experimental short story writers; but it is more complex. It would be easy to group the work of Beckett, Higgins and Mac Intyre into the rejectionist avant-garde mind-set like the Irish neo-modernist poets but what characterizes, in the Irish short story tradition, the avant-garde quality of these experimental short story writers, is their openness to a renegotiation of the representation of Irish realism. Their examination of the interrelationship between form and content and its impact on the representation of realism is central to Beckett, Higgins and Mac Intyre. The common stylistic link between these writers is their subversion of a linear narrative. As a consequence their experimentation with form ruptures the content of the piece where time, characterization, expressions of Irish subjectivity, and the multivalent play with language (where meanings are hidden and revealed in snapshots echoing the familiar and unfamiliar) reveals an existential angst that

crosses borders between the physical and metaphysical worlds. The political and the subjective dimensions in the work of these writers are enmeshed as language ruminates between the structured and unstructured worlds of their tragic protagonists.

The connection between the three writers is also a personal one. Beckett admired Higgins's work and recommended Higgins's first story collection, *Killachter Meadow*, to John Calder publishers in London. Aidan Higgins admired the work of Tom Mac Intyre and in his review of Mac Intyre's *The Harper's Turn* he states, "Mac Intyre's short long-delayed collection, most handsomely brought out by Gallery Books, is a joy to behold, and as good as anything printed out of one language into another since *Mal vu Mal Dit* by the taskmaster of Rue St. Jacques. The skipping and the buck-leaping in it are hard to beat" (1982: 174). The common link between Beckett, Higgins and Mac Intyre is their rejection of a linear realist portrait of Irish identity in fiction. They prefer to explore the nature of subjectivity itself either in the context of a deconstructed minimalist space, the constructed parodic nature of national identities and the subjective displacements within that, and the inability of language to express an inexpressible ideological desire for a metaphysical space that transcends physical and linguistic borders. The timing of the publication of this collection of essays is significant as there is currently a resurgent academic interest in the Irish short story. The essays in this collection provide an alternative insight into the Irish short story tradition and it is hoped this volume will encourage more scholarship in an area that has been woefully neglected.

Samuel Beckett

In the first chapter Hana Khasawneh discusses Beckett's short prose *Texts for Nothing*. This text has often been referred to as representing the period that marks Beckett's move from modernism to postmodernism. The theme of the text reveals a classic Beckettian conflict between what Khasawneh describes as the problem for the modern writer who has nothing to express yet the incentive to express it. The author explores Beckett's nihilist themes that mirror the deconstructed formal nature of the text where the traditional short story form of beginning, middle and end is subverted. Khasawneh examines how language in *Texts for Nothing* functions in a thematic and formal space where it struggles against its own existence.

In the second chapter Andrew Fox examines Beckett's role as "the last naturalist" in Beckett's *More Pricks than Kicks*. This essay marks an

aesthetic tension between naturalism and inflections of Beckett's later rejection of the naturalistic mode. In the early part of the essay Fox delves into the history of the Irish short story and how naturalism, in the Irish short story, developed in Irish twentieth century writing. This tension, in Beckett's work, is explored to the point where literary realism is replaced by modernist displacement and indifference. Fox's conception of the term, "the last naturalist," is a play on Anthony Cronin's famous reference to Beckett as "The Last Modernist." Fox's point is that *More Pricks Than Kicks* marked Beckett's aesthetic withdrawal from naturalism into more experimental forms.

Timi O'Neill's analysis of Beckett's experimentation, in the third chapter, takes a post-colonial turn as he explores the author's existential depiction of identity. He interprets Beckett's minimalist prose *Imagination Dead Imagine* as an example of Beckett's portrayal of the Irish subject's sense of alienation in a post-colonised Ireland. Through the use of the post-colonial term 'ambivalence' O'Neill shows how Beckett's nihilistic approach to the prose piece may be read as politically motivated. 'Ambivalence' in this context relates to marginalization which, as O'Neill notes, is depicted in the scene from Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist* where Dedalus experiences alienation in the presence of the Dean whose representation as a colonial authority induces Dedalus's crisis of identity. O'Neill also notes that the concept of 'ambivalence' implies resistance and that Beckett's style in *Imagination Dead Imagination* is part of that post-colonial aesthetic of subversion.

The depiction of alienation in Beckett's short prose is discussed in chapter four by Michelle Chiang in the context of love. In the traditional Irish short story the complexity of love in interpersonal relationships often symbolizes the subject's wider complex identification with the Irish nation. Beckett subverts this and instead represents love as an escape from an existential crisis. Beckettian love, as Chiang notes, is rooted in self-interest, as its vain nature is based on the tension between the mundane and the pursuit of transcendence. Chiang believes the general critical assumptions of gender stereotyping, which prioritizes male subjectivity, of Beckett's portrayal of love oversimplify the complex gender dynamic in Beckett's work. Chiang believes the subject's motivational factors in Beckett's work, in terms of negotiating the tension between the mundane and the pursuit of transcendence, are complex and equally apparent in both male and female subjects. The subject of love in Beckett's short prose reinforces his aesthetic portrayal of existential angst that has iconized his status as a writer from the margins in the Irish short story tradition.

Aidan Higgins

In chapter five the Irish writer Dermot Healy emphasizes the importance of Higgins's contribution to Irish fiction writing. Healy celebrates the genius of Higgins's style that mediates an incredible sense of realism through the poeticisation of language and arouses the reader's imagination along the borders of fictionality where the art of not telling is as important as telling. In his explorations of "Asylum" Healy lauds Higgins's Joycean style in the "The Dead" of merging the physical with the metaphysical to create a rich multivalent, dynamic piece of short story writing. Higgins's integration of the physical with the metaphysical creates a heightened aesthetic experience for the reader as the expected meets the unexpected.

In his discussion of Aidan Higgins's fiction Neil Murphy, in chapter six, focuses on Higgins's first short story collection *Felo De Se* which he believes is one of the most significant in the history of the Irish short story. Murphy explores the collection identifying various narrative strategies where the author blurs the boundaries between fiction and reality. The haunting nature of Higgins's writing has a profound effect on the reader's imagination where the tragic nature of the human condition is exposed through the author's exploration of the absurdity of existence. Through his discussion of Higgins's style of incorporating intense realist detail, Murphy makes the point that Higgins was formally innovative which resulted in a very individualist style that "implicitly expanded the traditional limits of social realism."

Grace Tighe Ledwidge, in chapter seven, explores the innovative realist dimension to Aidan Higgins's story "Asylum." She examines the alienated experiences of the main protagonist Brazill and the devastating impact the ultra-conservative culture of Irish Catholicism had on his sense of identity. She makes correlations between the existential nature of Mac Gahern's work and that of Higgins, but finds that ultimately Higgins's all-round negative portrayal of Irish culture and his integration of formal experimentations into his prose place him in the counter-tradition of marginalized Irish short story writers.

Tom Mac Intyre

In chapter eight Seamus Heaney explores Mac Intyre's experimental approach to the short story form in *The Harper's Turn*. Heaney questions the abstract nature of Mac Intyre's work and considers whether the term "story" is the correct term to describe Mac Intyre's word play. Heaney

makes correlations between the experimental aesthetics of Mac Intyre's prose and his theatre work in the eighties as Mac Intyre enmeshed an obscure linguistic poetic code with a Grotowskian physical style; both elements deconstructed traditional approaches to form in a way that was unique in both the Irish short story and in Irish theatre. Heaney roots the comparison between Mac Intyre's theatre and short prose in terms of the author's play on language that "reaches for the condition of poetry" (1982: 9). In this regard Heaney cites Mac Intyre as one of those unique writers who set out to create a new aesthetic in Irish short story writing.

In my essay, in chapter nine, I discuss the significance of the author's short prose in a paleo-postmodern context. I developed the term paleo-postmodernism to describe the uniqueness of Mac Intyre's aesthetics where he combines a Yeatsian paleo-modernist romantic vision with postmodern deconstruction. The paleo-postmodern methodology of analysis includes theorists such as Lacan and Jung, where the archetypal world and linguistic deconstruction meet at the point of the mythopoetic space of the unconscious. Mac Intyre's prose is steeped in language play as the author's art lies in the refusal to tell a story. Mac Intyre's protagonist, Sweeney, is caught in the inter-subjective metaphysicality of myth and the dense narrative multivalent space of linguistic play. In many ways Mac Intyre's language is the most obscure of the three writers where his brand of experimentation takes a Yeatsian postmodern spin. An extended analysis of paleo-postmodernism and its application to the work of Tom Mac Intyre was first published in my monograph on Mac Intyre's prose and drama (the first single-authored book-length academic study of Mac Intyre's aesthetics) entitled, *Border States in the Work of Tom Mac Intyre: A Paleo-Postmodern Perspective* in 2012.

Barry Sheils examines the uniqueness of Mac Intyre's approach to the short story in terms of his engagement with traditional Irish literary influences, such as Carleton, and with experimental forms. Sheils notes the cinematographic quality of Mac Intyre's work that allows for a certain mobility in the author's writing. Ideas are reflected and quickly transcended in an opaque, multivalent narrative space, where exaggerated explications of momentary experiences become the centrepiece of a narrative style that often parodies itself. Rather than embracing the naturalistic approach of traditional short story writers such as Frank O'Connor who composed their stories as a narrative of an event, Sheils sees the idea of the "event as narrative" as a dominant characteristic in the short prose of Tom Mac Intyre.

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PART ONE:

SAMUEL BECKETT

CHAPTER ONE

A RUPTURE OF COMMUNICATION:
TEXTS FOR NOTHING

HANA KHASAWNEH

It is the main claim of this article that Samuel Beckett's disruptive stories in *Texts for Nothing* attempt to communicate a breakdown in the lines of communication. The thirteen repetitive and circular texts convey unprecedented textual anarchism and a pristine textual site that has often perplexed readers. *Texts for Nothing* pursues that which narration cannot capture, namely, nothingness and emptiness. Beckett's artistic faith is that with the given absence of meaning, writing continues and the voice carries on speaking. In this respect the title *Texts for Nothing* and its play on "next to nothing" seems prophetic. Given Beckett's conception of cosmic irony, one can readily appreciate his fascination with the number thirteen, which is traditionally associated with misfortune. Thus, he organizes his poems into a dual series of thirteen and he divides Murphy into thirteen chapters. More difficult to explain is Beckett's use of the word "text" for both poetry and prose. Whatever Beckett's definition of "text," the derisive "for nothing" implies a judgment regarding the futility of the written word. In a letter to Kay Boyle he states, "I know nothing about the short story or any other aesthetics" (Ackerley and Gontarski, 2004: 265). Still, the first literary texts Beckett published were short stories, together with fragments from the novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women.* Gradually, the notion of "fragment" becomes more appropriate to describe Beckett's short prose. Similarly, Beckett often provided his short pieces with titles that consciously stress their fragmentary nature: *Odds and Ends, Disjecta, From an Abandoned Work*, and *Texts for Nothing.* Beckett's short prose pieces not only outline his development as an artist, but suggest Beckett's own view of art, "it is all part of a continuous process" (Gontarski, 1996: xxix-xxx). After the productive period of writing in the second half of the 1940s, Beckett abandoned structure notably in his *Texts for Nothing.* These *Texts* reflect what Porter Abbott called "Beckett's first deployment of an aesthetic of recommencement" (1966: 93).

The first section of *Texts for Nothing* presents itself as a recommencement. What is new in these *Texts* is the way Beckett chooses to make a linguistic decomposition. The silence to which the title refers represents a zone between the chaotic running preceding it and the organized composition it announces. *Texts for Nothing* expresses, according to Beckett in a letter to Barney Rosset (February 11, 1954), "the failure to implement the last words of the Unnamable" (Gontarski, 1996: xiv). The *Texts* focuses on the impasse "I couldn't stay there and I couldn't go on [...] I could have stayed [...] I couldn't" (Beckett, 1967: 100). On the first page Beckett introduces the word "neither" which, as he later told Morton Feldman, was to become the central theme of his work, "I need nothing, neither to go on nor to stay where I am" (Ackerley and Gontarski, 2004:100). Since there is no need for a composition, the text concentrates on the complex process of decomposition. Molloy states that "to decompose is to live too, I know, I know, don't torment me, but one sometimes forgets" (Beckett, 1979: 25). The sense of purposeless relentlessness of the *Texts* is expressed in *From an Abandoned Work*, "I have never in my life been on my way anywhere, but simply on my way" (Gontarski, 1996: 156). The need to neither go nor stay is not simply stasis but an uncomfortable situation that Beckett refers to as the "fidgets."

Texts for Nothing presents textual and linguistic indeterminacies. The havoc it causes to ideas of referentiality, to former literary conventions, to the reader's expectations and to normative reasoning promises the arrival of new modes of interpretation. The *Texts* fit very neatly among the received ideas about Beckett's sense of human despair, resignation and isolation. In a letter written by Beckett, he confesses, "In the meantime, I am doing nothing at all" (Letter to Axel Kaun, 9 July, 1973). After *The Unnamable*, Beckett realized that he faced the problem of how to go on artistically and linguistically. By the last novel in the trilogy, character, plot and setting had all disintegrated, as well as the paragraph structure, which had deconstructed. Yet Beckett does go on with a series of words and still they convey nothing. By employing a non-character in *Texts for Nothing* as a narrator, Beckett opens up a protagonist's possible subjective world of content. Acting on the premise that the modern writer has nothing to express and yet the urge to express it, Beckett uses several tricks of language which enable him to multiply the number and variety of words without having them add up to a narrative expression. This allows his fiction to "go on" and thus his devices emerge as Beckett's most important means of continuing his fictional voice's murmuring. Beckett's writing is driven by the aesthetics of the inaudible.

The title, *Texts for Nothing,* indicates the characteristic Beckettian oscillation between silence and sounds. The first lines of the first text start with negations and multiple perplexities:

> Suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't any more, I couldn't go on. Someone said, You can't stay here. I couldn't stay here and I couldn't go. I'll describe the place that is unimportant. The top, very flat, of a mountain, on a hill, but so wild, enough. Quag, heath up to the knees, faint sheep tracks, troughs scooped deep by the rains. It was for down in one of these I was lying, out of the wind. Glorious prospect, but for the mist that blotted out everything, valleys, loughs, plain and sea. How can I go on, I shouldn't have begun, no I had to begin (Beckett, 1967: 102).

The first line signals a preponderant subjectivity and a temporal indeterminacy that cannot be extrapolated from its intertextual intricacies and paradoxical involutions. A singular sense of subjectivity is not a possibility. There is a difference between the speaking subject and the spoken subject; the subject that speaks and the many functions and positions that the speaking subject assumes in language. The interstices between the speaking subject and the spoken subject are filled with possible selves and consequently they reverse the subject position and they incorporate possible others. "I" in the above quotation is never at one with subjectivity; it's either "I" say to the body or "I" say to the head. Subjectivity is never based on self-sameness; rather alterity is integral to the development of the self. Plurality and differentiation inform the emerging self, "Ah yes, we seem to be more than one, all deaf, not even, gathered together for life" (Beckett, 1967: 126).

"Text 2" abandons a personal perspective altogether in its attempts to adopt an impersonal perspective. The text inscribes the incompatible shifts between the speaking subject and the spoken subject in terms of the unfolding morality of self and syntax, "the words too, slow, slow, the subject dies before it comes to the verb, words are stopping too" (Beckett, 1967:13). *Texts for Nothing* calls for the generation of structures and existential modes that are able to come to terms with the challenges of difference and diversity and even to the extent of recognizing the necessity and creative function of radical questioning.

The title *Texts for Nothing* is derived from the musical term "bar rest" indicating a musical silence. It is not surprising that at times the different selves seem to be like orchestral parts singing in a kind of harmony, "I can follow them well, all the voices, all the parts" (Beckett, 1967: 119). All the voices are aspiring to silence and the failure of communication. As the *Texts* regress, the "we" breaks into "I", and "he" and "they" try to trick each other. In a traditional short story, action develops through conflict

between two main characters. John McGahern's short stories blend art, biography and philosophy. In McGahern's short story "Gold Watch" the first person narrator encounters an acquaintance from his university days in Grafton Street in Dublin and falls in love with her. They move in together and the eventual visit to the narrator's father and stepmother is less than amiable but the son continued to make the annual visit to his family in the haymaking season. During one of those visits he comes across an old gold watch, which he remembers from his boyhood, and he claims it as his heirloom. When the narrator and his partner decide to get married he chooses not to inform his father and his stepmother Rose and they pay him back by keeping the information from him that they will no longer cut the hay themselves but have leased their meadows to another farmer. As a result during his next visit home he is aware of this being his last haymaking holiday. He makes his father a gift of an expensive modern gold watch as a replacement for the old heirloom and he discovers that his father has immersed the watch in the barrel where he prepares the poisonous insecticide to spray the potatoes. The key symbol is that the passage of time favours the son since he is young and the elderly father attempts to stop time by poisoning the watch, as his time is limited. The difference between McGahern and Beckett is that the former explores the existential subjectivity of his protagonists whereas Beckett is suspicious of subjectivity itself and hence his protagonists are often represented as deconstructed entities without a clear subjective identity.

In *Texts for Nothing*, Beckett derives all the conflict he requires within his one non-character. The *Texts* are constructed in a series of scenes with no suggestion of proper characters, events or narration. The entire work is divided into 13 short pieces with little indication why one should follow the other. The shifting narrators in the texts are trying to establish place, time, orientation and character without success. There is what Beckett describes as "consternation behind the form of this work" (Knowlson, 1996: 45). Being able to see clearly and to comprehend such things as setting, events, characters and goals is an inescapable plague for the narrators. The effect is an illustration of the difficulty of beginning a narrative with no perspective that would implicate a place, characters, events and ending. The narrator in Text 8 comments, "It is the end that gives meaning to the words. It is with words, albeit meaningless, that one must begin a story" (Beckett, 1967: 202). Any sense of an ending/ beginning is what is missing from these texts. As one reads the fragmented texts, each break implies a movement towards silence that is disrupted by the abrupt beginning of a new piece.

The art of failure in *Texts for Nothing* is paradoxically an art of success that presents the unpresentable. Art then might be described as an expression of man's inability to attain unity, full presence and wholeness. Failure is a new form of success as the failure to express succeeds in becoming an expressive act in itself; of its impossibility and of its obligation. Dynamism is most apparent in Beckett's experimental writing where it opposes representational art and insists that the literary text cannot exist as a self-sufficient system. This dynamism has been perceived as an art of failure that paradoxically proves to be an art of success. The poetics of Beckett's dynamism allows the unrepresentable to become perceptible in a dynamic form of writing that oscillates between proposition and retraction and between erasure and rewriting. Beckett confides to James Knowlson, "my texts are in a terrible mess" (1996: 76). The infinite, the impossible, the incomplete text and the open text have been characteristic of Beckett's work. The impossible and the interminable is a metaphor Beckett embraced in the trilogy of novels after World War II: *Molly, Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, as well as in his thirteen texts which followed in *Texts for Nothing*. That metaphor of the infinite, incomplete and perpetually unfolding texts is a useful paradigm for reading Beckett's creative process of writing. The "I" that speaks throughout the *Texts* is not a person but the text itself. In the first of the 13 pieces Beckett accomplishes the difficult task of presenting us with clues so we can determine that the narrator is the printed text and not an imagined human character. However, the clues take the form of opposition and in fact the entire series of *Texts* is perceived through a set of oppositions, all of which are presented in rudimentary form in the first *Text*. The primary opposition is between process and stasis. This opposition is presented within the narration as the need to go on and the desire to stand still. The opposition is present in the first sentence, "suddenly, no, at last, long last, I couldn't any more, I couldn't go on," and frequently throughout the *Texts*: "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" (Beckett, 1967: 102, 128).

This opposition is not an inarticulate cry of human despair, it is a reflection of language, of its own nature, for one of the fundamental problems of working with a printed text is that each word is located in a specific space; each is static and immobile but none can have syntactic significance. In terms of *Texts for Nothing*, this is the opposition between "staying here" and "going on." A second example of opposition is between the reader and the text. The language, as it exists in print, is a self-enclosed static entity until the presence and the intrusion of the reader transforms

the stasis into process and forces the text to proceed up and down the page. In effect, the human intrusion transforms the text from being "an old story" into a perpetual frustration "toiling up the slope... 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 have been, always shall be" (Beckett, 1967: 78, 133). The readers are kept outside of the narration, "They are up above, all round me, as in a graveyard. I can't raise my eyes to them, what a pity... Do they see me, what can they see of me?" (Beckett, 1967: 76, 129). But readers are allowed engagement with the process of the narrative in two ways: as a human force completely separated from the static language and as a voice that enters into and repeats the words of the text.

   Though there are comparisons between *The Unnamable* and *Texts for Nothing* there is also a notable difference. Beckett claims that "I wrote all my work very fast between 1946 and 1950," and that *The Unnamable* represented a terminus in the creative process where "there is a complete disintegration. No 'I', no 'have', no 'being'. No nominative, no accusative, no verbs. There is no way to go on." *Texts for Nothing* constitutes an attempt "to get out of the attitude of disintegration, but it failed" (Graver & Federman, 1979: 148). Both voices share the same predicament of knowing nothing. It is the futility of their effort that is shaped differently. In the thirteen minimalist prose texts, Beckett has reached a point where it seems as though the voice was saying the same thing, namely nothing. The narrator states that, "And the voices, wherever they come from, have no life in them" (Beckett, 1967: 84). It is an almost "nothing" that speaks in the voice. The goal of the narrator throughout the texts is to create himself so that he can cease to exist. As he labours to be delivered, he calls up and invents memories of things and beings and all these provide material for his murmurs. The invention of more than a voice makes possible a dialogue with the self, "My den, I'll describe it, no, I can't. It's simple, I can do nothing any more, that's what you think" (Beckett, 1967: 75). *Texts for Nothing* cannot properly be labelled either shorter fiction or a novel. Other commentators have already pointed out that it is modelled on a musical form and Beckett himself calls the last section a coda. Viewed in a wider context the whole work is a coda to the trilogy. The voice in *Texts for Nothing* is the same as in *The Unnamable*. But instead of the gradual breakdown in punctuation in *The Unnamable*, the voice finds it harder to find subjects for self-narration and anticipates the frequent pauses for breath that subdivide its structure. Beckett's principal creation in the *Texts* is the voice that is forced to assume responsibility for actions in the

writer's past but which the writer has foisted off onto an invented character because of the fictitious nature of his own memory.

Texts for Nothing is without story, without people, without things, without space and time. The thirteen divisions, repeated beginnings and narrative attempts become the only story within a style that embodies its own futility. Beckett applies the principles of progression and circularity that were present as themes in his earlier work to the form of *Texts for Nothing*. There is an appearance of progression from text to text that frequently surfaces in the opening sentences. New questions are asked that offer the illusory possibility of a final solution and yet many of the *Texts* take a circular route by the conclusion, with the final lines echoing the opening lines. In *Texts for Nothing* Beckett has reduced the piece to the tones of a murmuring narrator and has restricted the protagonist to a voice that is talking about nothing. Each word bears the paradoxical responsibility of meaning containing as little as possible. The circular form of the work is reinforced by an imitative style in which the narrator struggles with language and its meaning.

In *Texts for Nothing* the narrator reveals that it is possible to construct a formal text without any traditional elements of narrative that are mocked by himself. At one point the "I" narrator starts to depict a realistic narrative with a religious atmosphere that takes place one particular Sunday and concerns a character called Mr Joly. The narrator catches himself with "Here at least none of that, no talk of creator and nothing very definite in the way of creation" (Beckett, 1967: 83). While Mr Joly concedes that a narrator usually requires characters, he rejects the typical romantic themes of adventure novels in one of the most humorous passages of the work:

> There has to be a man, or a woman, feel between your legs, no need of beauty, nor of vigour, a week's a short stretch, no one's going to love you, don't be alarmed. No, not like that, too sudden, I gave myself a start. And to start with stop palpitating, no one's going to kill you, no one's going to love you and no one is going to kill you (Beckett, 1967: 86).

The "I" feels that something must happen in his narrative, although he ridicules both romances and murder mysteries by "Text 6" and he is still promising to tell "a little story with living creatures coming and going on a habitable earth crammed with the dead" (Beckett, 1967: 105). By "Text 13" the possibility of a narrative, and even the word "story" has been abandoned, as the "I" would be content with merely "a trace" of its existence. All traces, all murmurings vanish because "to speak of instants, to speak of once, is to speak of nothing" (Beckett, 1967: 136). As for the

voice, "it breathes in vain, nothing is made" (Beckett, 1967: 146); but this nothing is still conveyed in words and these words are arranged in an intricate shape. Beckett advocates nothing but texts about nothing. Alternating with a search for the self-defining story is the theme of giving up the search for self and this vacillation between hope and despair, this cancellation between yes and no determines that in each of the thirteen *Texts*, the "I" starts again and there is no cumulative solution. For the artist struggling with words, each piece, each sentence, is a continual re-beginning and an oscillation between the "yes" of creation and "no" of revision. *Texts for Nothing* mirrors the configuration of the narrator's artistic journey; every text starts with the illusion of progress but ends in a circle. As in *Endgame*, the literary process is not a building up but a winding down. The "I" begins with a setting, memories and stories, and ends with only lies and murmurs. He commences with plans and hopes of being and concludes by despairing of existence. It is only in "Text 1" that the narrator is the closest to the conventional character. Beckett lends the narrator a mother, a father and a home he can see in the distance but a surrealist vision presides when the narrator cannot locate himself precisely in space and time. Moreover, every story line dwindles within the paralytic space of indecision of whether to remain or to go.

The playful aspect does not subvert narrative but moves it to a liminal space where it plays in elusive ways. *Texts for Nothing* comes very close to that frontier where language disappears in that empty space and where characters form a model of an odd society through a set of insignificant interactions. Since *Texts for Nothing* shares numerous links with other texts, the text is treated as a playful game that demonstrates the kinetic strategies employed in constructing and deconstructing the text's meanings. Readers interpret the meaningless plots as fragmented narratives that fail as a story. But the narratives that are made in accordance with a playful impulse have less to do with meaning than with an obligation to provoke things beyond the established order. This recursive oscillation generates endless possibilities. Beckett felt he had reached an impasse in his prose writing, viewing the later *Texts for Nothing* as merely "the grisly afterbirth" of *The Unnamable* (Brater, 1994: 9). *Texts for Nothing* is attributed to Beckett's post-trilogy vacuum. Voices are "dammed up, walled in, repressed, the narrator about to burst with speechlessness" (Beckett, 1967: 107) and "on the brink on shrieks" (Beckett, 1967: 118). The voice progressively gains power in Beckett's prose works until, in the final text of *Texts for Nothing,* nothing remains but a voice murmuring. The liminalities of sound and silence figure as the breaches of the unknown in Beckett's texts that have not yet been and

perhaps never will be. Deidre Bair, in *Samuel Beckett,* notes that Beckett "was in the midst of the celebrated impasse" and concludes that in comparison with *The Trilogy* that "the violence of the trilogy is on the wane and the tone here is one of resignation" (1994:98). Speaking of the weak old voice in "Text 13," the narrator speaks of "a trace, it wants to leave a trace, yes, like air among the leaves, among the grass, among the sand" (Beckett, 1967: 152). The will behind this voice seems very similar to that which Beckett claimed pushed his writing forward, "I couldn't have done it, otherwise. Gone on, I mean. I could not have gone through the awful wretched mess of life without having left a strain upon the silence" (Bair, 1978: 681). In Beckett's literature, this stain seems to come from an inner voice which is never still for long, "'there is always something to listen to', he said" (Juliet, 1996: 155).

The core theme of *Texts for Nothing* presents what is absent; a negativity that is not nothing or emptiness. It is an infinite circle in which the determination to come to an end is identical with the determination not to give up. It is true that the *Texts* contain ambiguities, but the ideas are recognizable by dramatizing themselves in a recursive form behind nothingness. Such a model no doubt fails to express any significant experience but it can express entirely the reality of these absurd individuals. This disruptive experimentation with new forms, styles and techniques is an essential part of Beckett's task because such experimentation provides new instruments for the search into reality. Beckett's task is highly paradoxical, if not futile. *Texts for Nothing* raises the possibility of an art whose object would be neither absent nor present. The thirteen minimalist prose texts undermine the foundations of a mainstream literary tradition of the short story that relies on a traditional plot that depends on a linear narrative and the subjective development of characters to create a story. *Texts for Nothing* offers a literary writing that resists interpretation. Eventually, it defies categorization. Likewise, textual self-referentiality, the interactions of writing with death and the importance of the texts to the author are all issues of vital importance to Beckett's writing. Beckett's eloquent treatise on Proust states how "Art is the apotheosis of solitude" (1965: 98). Beckett is not interested in William Wordsworth's successful romantic depictions of the world, but rather in the tranquillity that precedes it. "Text 6" suggests "what tranquillity, and know there are no more emotions in store" (Beckett, 1967: 125). What Beckett stages in his *Texts* is "the necessity" that Edgar Allan Poe in his *Philosophy of Composition* dismissed as being irrelevant, "Necessity-which in the first place, gave rise to the intention of composing a poem" (Poe, 1986: 482). When Beckett suggested a staging of one of the *Texts* to Joseph Chaikin,

he stated, "the idea was to caricature the labour of composition" (Gontarski, 1996, xvi). S.E. Gontarski claims that the suggested staging of caricatures is "the Romantic notion of creativity," the artist's agonized communion with his own pure, uncorrupted, inner being, consciousness, or imagination" (Gontarski, 1996, xviii). Michel Foucault in his lecture "What is an Author?" claims that the author "must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing," and that "we must locate the space left empty by the author's disappearance, follow the distributions of gaps and breaches and watch for the openings that this disappearance uncovers" (Foucault, 1987: 137).

To a large extent, it sounds as if Foucault is commenting upon *Texts for Nothing*. Such foregrounding of alterity and alienation, of formal awareness, linguistic importance and temporal issues at the eclipse of the author is endemic in Beckett's creative writing. Perhaps in each and all of Beckett's texts identifications are always refracted and referred to in the context of formal and linguistic disruptions. These contradictions that are involved in reading Beckett find themselves prefigured and performed in Beckett's works themselves. Beckett's oeuvre is about the void, the infinite nothingness that lies at the heart of experience; however this "not" is an identifiable object. Within the principle of "disintegration", Beckett presents "No 'I', no 'have', no 'being.' No nominative, no accusative, no verb" (1967: 42). Beckett argues that art originates not only in an awareness of rupture but also in an awareness of impediment and resistance. He argues that the artist "must recognize that the object of representation always resists representation" (Beckett, 1983: 135). Furthermore, the artist for Beckett is necessarily "a solitary and independent figure" (Beckett, 1965: 41).

The novelty of this new art is that it exceeds the very concept of the new and in particular the concept of the avant-garde. It is a newness that is at once unprecedented and ancient. *Texts for Nothing* offers a comic writing of withdrawal, reduction, void and disappearance. Beckett's writing is paring away, a gradual reduction towards a condition of absolute zero. Beckett writes about death but he also writes through death, towards a place that turns out to be surprisingly capacious. He produces from void and death a new form and a new writing or what he describes in his radio broadcast as "The Capital of Ruins" (Auster, 1997: 274). According to Paul Auster "Beckett begins with little and ends with even less. The movement in each of his works is towards an unburdening, by which he leads us to the limits of experience" (1992: 187).

Following the kaleidoscopic style of the trilogy, the first few *Texts* struggle with establishing setting, memories, childhood and relationships.

However, by "Text 4," there is an epiphany, as well as a resignation. The voice says:

> No need of a story, a story is not compulsing, just a life, that's the mistake I made, one of the mistakes, to have wanted a story for myself. Whereas life lone is enough… What counts is to be in the world, the posture is immaterial, so long as one is on earth. To breathe is all that is required, there is no obligation to ramble, or receive company, you may make no bones about it, … Yes, there are moments, like this moment when I seem almost restored to feasibility. Then it goes, all goes, and I'm far again, with a far story again, I wait for me afar for my story to begin, to end, and again this voice cannot be mine. That's where I'd go if I could go, that's who I'd be, if I could be (Beckett, 1967: 93-94).

In "Text 12" there is a desire to end as the voice hearing the long silent guffaw of the knowing non-existent subject seems to sigh "what a blessing it's all down the drain, nothing ever as much as begun, nothing ever but nothing and never, nothing ever but lifeless words" (Beckett, 1967: 134). "Text 13" ends with a contemplation of the failure, "And were there one day to be here, where there are no days, which is no place, born of impossible voice the unmakable being, and a gleam of light, still all would be silent and empty and dark, as now, as soon now, and all will be ended, all said, it says, it murmurs" (Beckett, 1967:140). What are left are silence and a voice. *Texts for Nothing* moves from the struggle with an interior voice to a swarm of voices. Eventually, silence pervades. For almost a decade Beckett did not complete any prose work. Thus, critics mistakenly came to believe that Beckett had no more to say. This was due to his productive involvement with theatre and radio, as well as the growing concern with the image and the lyrical potential of the voice.

To conclude, this successful failure or failed success renders *Texts for Nothing* as something other than a literary work, something other than the effected "identification of aliments and manner of dispatch" (Beckett, 1967: 43). Beckett's writing has been concerned with the possibility of persistence after death. In a modernist world where everything is doomed to fail, Beckett finds consolation in failure and incompetence. New forms, new arrangements of words are the things that Beckett has left after *Texts for Nothing*. The thirteen *Texts* offer stark, yet rich images, which serve as catalysts for the minimalist stories to come, but more importantly, the *Texts* provide testing grounds for the stylistic experimentation of the later fictions. Many critics, including the author himself, judged *Texts* to be a failure, although it was a fortunate fall indeed. Writing about the impasse itself provides a way out of the impasse as Beckett chronicles his struggle

to go on despite and through the linguistic challenges by creating self-reflexive fictions.

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