



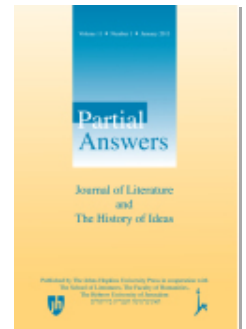
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Erasing Narration: Samuel Beckett's *Malone Dies* and *Texts for Nothing*

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I

A poem by John Hollander begins with the line “nothing makes something happen.” Any negating gesture must nullify something, and will be governed by an intention, motive, or impulse, all of which remain virtual and can only be inferred from what is negated or from the way in which negation operates. Thus negation makes virtual realities emerge, but these are usually hard to grasp. One of the most telling examples of the interrelationship between negation and emergence is provided by Beckett.

Approaching his work from this angle entails breaking away from the main categories that guide most of the prevailing Beckett criticism. On the one hand, the multifarious negations of Beckettian texts are taken for an all-encompassing demolition of what has come down from the past. On the other hand, they figure as a stimulus to the reader's imagination. In other words, the two categories have either representation or reception as their framework. If reception allows us at least to say something about what the text makes the reader do, representation makes these texts verge on senselessness.

Consequently, what we have to focus on is the performative character of the Beckettian text, which tends to be ignored when viewed in terms of both representation and reception, since the latter only gives the reader *something* to “perform.”

It may well be the hallmark of literature that it is performative by nature, as it brings hitherto non-existent phenomena into being. In Beckett's case it is all the more essential to spotlight the emergent character of literature in contradistinction to representation and reception. This gives a different slant to the negations in his texts. Negation becomes an agent that makes things happen in the sense that

John Hollander was alluding to. The more intensely this agent operates, the more nuanced the emergent becomes. But owing to the incessant cancellation of what has come into being, none of these phenomena can congeal into a product. This turns cancellation itself into an emergent phenomenon, because by discrediting what has emerged, it makes virtual realities happen. Beckettian negation turns emergence into a “thought-provoking reality,” which, of course, is differently processed by individual readers. However, it is the performative nature of the text and not the reader that makes such phenomena happen. In order to delineate these phenomena and to trace the strategies that make negations productive, we shall have a look at *Malone Dies* and *Texts for Nothing*.

II

In praising James Joyce, Beckett once remarked, “His writing is not *about* something; *it is that something itself*” (1984: 27). This is equally true of *Malone Dies*, which is not about Malone’s longing for his awaited end but constitutes the wait itself. How is this achieved in a narrative whose subject matter is the impossibility of presenting its subject matter? There is a hint in a letter which Beckett wrote as early as 1937 to Axel Kaun, in which he says: “Let us hope the time will come, thank God in certain circles it has already come, when language is most efficiently used where it is most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.”¹

In *Malone Dies* Beckett has succeeded insofar as narration itself is “misused.” This implies no less than narration narrating its own invalidation. Hegel once stated: “Thinking is always the negation of what we have immediately before us” (1927, I: 57; my translation), and what is immediately given in a narrative is narration, which now has to be nullified.

What is to be erased is the mimetic nature of narration, and this invalidation is effected by the many “holes” that Beckett “bores” into

¹ 1984: 52. The letter is written in German; the translation is by Martin Esslin.

the first-person deliberations of Malone, and into the string of stories that Malone tells himself – a procedure that we shall inspect in due course.

Erasure wipes out the stances that are inscribed into every narrative and are necessary for the depiction of what it is “about.” Narration that has been nullified, however, does not actually eliminate what has been cancelled, so that the discredited narrative makes Malone’s anticipation of death emerge as an unmediated reality. It is the waiting itself, and not a conception of what it may mean, that now moves into focus.

We shall now look at how the road to the end is marked out in the erased narration which, being stripped of any meaning, turns into a road to annihilation. Malone’s self-inspection, and the stories he keeps telling himself, will provide us with a focus to illuminate what is made to emerge from the negated narration. If thinking, in Hegel’s terms, is the negation of what is immediately before us, then negation is at best a concept, which tells us nothing about its operations. But it is the latter that give salience to a narration that is divested of its generic features. While thinking is equated with an abstract notion of negation, art concretizes what such a negation may entail. Hence, Beckett’s narrative is punctured by kaleidoscopically changing shapes of negation. The unfolding of the latter establishes the internal network of the text through which something will come into being that hitherto did not exist. Metaphorically speaking, we might say, the various ongoing nullifying operations in the novel are the “holes” that Beckett “bores” into the text.

Right at the outset Malone asks himself: “Does anything remain to be said?” (1956: 8). And when he continues talking, he keeps wondering whether he is not talking about himself, which he qualifies as lying. “Shall I be incapable, to the end, of lying on any other subject?” (12). Obviously, Malone wants to get away from himself, since he is waiting for the end. However, as it will be his end, it cannot be dissociated from him, so that his concern with himself interferes with what he wants to achieve. Thus he hangs in between and can only cancel what he keeps saying about himself. “I have tried to reflect on the beginning of my story. There are things I do not understand. But nothing to signify. I can go on” (12).

“Going on” means switching to writing. Indulging in such an activity, however, interferes with his preoccupation with the end, because what the writing is about is always anterior to writing. Furthermore, he writes

about himself in the past tense, indicating that he is already ahead of his immediate present, and this applies even to his effort to diminish the distance by writing about writing. Therefore he becomes aware that his notes “have a curious tendency . . . to annihilate all they purport to record” (88).

If his story has nothing to signify, Malone must break away from himself in order to open himself up for what he wants to happen. This makes him dissolve into two disconnected evanescent profiles. “My concern is not with me, but with another, far beneath me and whom I try to envy, of whose crass adventures I can now tell at last, I don’t know how. Of myself I could never tell, any more than live and tell of others. How could I have, who never tried? To show myself now, on the point of vanishing, at the same time as the stranger, and by the same grace, that would be no ordinary last straw. Then live, long enough to feel, behind my closed eyes, other eyes close. What an end” (19).

Does this sequence of closing eyes ever come to an end? If the answer is no, we have to ask ourselves why. Every negation has an intention which demands to be realized, and this constitutes a positive aspect of the negation. The more explicit the negation becomes, the more obvious is the positive aspect of what the negation is meant to nullify. If negation did not have this positive aspect it would cease to operate.

In his longing for ending, Malone is compelled to undo whatever he is involved in. He does it by means of negations, which keep changing their shapes owing to the diversity of the targets that are to be nullified. We shall spotlight only the most important of these in order to delineate the modes of operation through which the emergent gains salience. Malone spells out this quandary as follows: “Live and invent. I have tried. I must have tried. Invent. It is not the word. Neither is live. No matter. I have tried. While within me the wild beast of earnestness padded up and down, roaring, ravening, rending. I have done that. . . . Perhaps I have lived after all without knowing. I wonder why I speak of all this. Ah yes, to relieve the tedium. Live and cause to live . . . I began again, to try and live, cause to live, be another, in myself, in another” (18–19). Malone wants to know what it is to be alive. His bodily functions tell him nothing, because they are the part of him which lives. Hence the radical statement: “If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window” (44). He feels compelled to make statements about living in order to grasp what living might be. But these statements are all inventions, because each of them assumes that

the edited version of life is identical with life itself. Yet as there are no other means of grappling with the problem, he must go on inventing.

Invention, however, confronts the self at best with its own image, and whenever this is endowed with meaning, it can only be that of an appearance, not of the self. The belief that one is oneself a subject leads to a continual self-invention. In other words, the subject can have itself only as its own fiction. If Malone tries to know what it is to be alive, he is constrained to search for meaning, which can never be achieved, and so the resultant invention of images and the immediate rejection of their claim to authenticity reveal his dilemma. As long as he lives, he is unable to know what living is. Knowing what living is requires a stance outside oneself, which the subject cannot provide, as it cannot get outside itself in order to ascertain what it might be. Malone feels compelled to wipe out his inventions, because by nullifying them he can ensure that he is not inventing himself, since any conception of himself can only be an invention. Thus the problem involved in "live and invent" remains insoluble, but it is through living and inventing that the self produces its own indeterminableness by continually fictionalizing its various self-enactments. Malone keeps negating what he is driven to produce: his own self-inventions, and this appears to be a process that can never end, although it is the approach of the end that has energized this activity.

Malone's situation is marked by a duality, which is also inscribed in the negations. Hanging between living and inventing makes the subject alternate between its multiple fictions and their cancellations. If the subject were not staging itself, a non-enacted subject would be nothing, but a subject that is *only* able to enact itself is equally nothing, because it cannot grasp itself. Such a dually coded nothingness generates a proliferation of negations, because the various figments Malone comes up with keep changing, which also alters the shape of their cancellations. This is due to the fact that both negations and self-enactments operate under constraints, which will vary according to the sequence of their individual contexts.

Why is there no stop to this ongoing proliferation? If there were, Malone could not arise out of the featureless nothingness. It is the proliferation that makes nothingness into an enabling agent. The figments produced have forever to be cancelled, not least because Malone would otherwise imprison himself in one of his own fictions.

This is how negation comes to fruition. Despite the intention

operative in any negation, it cannot wipe out everything at one stroke, and so it generates its own proliferation in order to cover the domains that are to be cancelled, which in Malone's case are all his efforts to define what it is to be alive. However, each negation throws up something that it has failed to cover, which means no less than that each negation simultaneously highlights what is beyond its grasp. Consequently, negations generate their own self-perpetuation in order to bring the recalcitrant element within range. Potentially, this can go on forever. As Malone keeps negating his continual self-inventions in order to get away from himself, a string of stories begins to emerge, which requires a new set of negations. Thus negation, paradoxically, creates the dynamics of its own inability to come to an end.

What is it that the proliferating negations cause to emerge? The answer, in a word, is endlessness. This endlessness is generated by the sequence of negations insofar as any negation is a twofold process: a particular target has to be cancelled, and its cancellation moves a new target into focus. This sequence wipes out all traces of representation and depiction by invalidating everything that appears to be on the verge of assuming significance. For this to happen, narration undergoes erasure. Thus the text nullifies any idea of what it may be about, and this in turn leads to the emergence of an unmediated endlessness.

Endlessness is not a given object, and therefore cannot be represented. Hence Beckett's novel is not *about* endlessness; instead, the proliferating negations make endlessness emerge. Emergence, like literature itself, brings something into the world that hitherto did not exist. Consequently, we are eager to interpret it in order to incorporate it into our own experience. However, as endlessness emerges out of the proliferating negations, we are barred from taking it as a sign for something else. In other words, we feel tempted to bring it back to representation, but this road is forever closed, as narration undergoes erasure. Any attempt to conceive of endlessness in terms of representation would change it into a sign signifying an absurdity. If we were to translate the emergent endlessness into words at all, we could only quote Beckett's oft-repeated remark: "I can't go on. I go on." This is a linguistic signature of endlessness insofar as it fuses the negation of an activity with the compulsion to carry on. Furthermore, if emergence brings something into being that hitherto did not exist, its appearance is bound to have unforeseeable features, because it transgresses the limitations of what one has been familiar with. This

applies to the emergence of endlessness, which arises out of an all-pervading preoccupation with ending.

This is reinforced by Malone's storytelling. Why does he indulge in such a buttressing, since the stories repeat what the negations have revealed? Malone calls his storytelling a way of playing with himself. "I shall tell myself stories, if I can. They will not be the same kind of stories as hitherto, that is all. They will be neither beautiful nor ugly, they will be calm, there will be no ugliness or beauty or fever in them any more, and they will be almost lifeless, like the teller" (2). And in so doing he either wants to depart from himself or to avoid coming back to himself. Yet Malone nevertheless repeats what the author of the novel has already done by subjecting his storytelling to erasure.

How is this achieved? It is a generic feature of stories that they are told in order to make a point, and this is exactly the feature that Malone erases, because there is "nothing to signify" (12). This is also true of the nesting of different stories, as the subsequent story – or even their intercalation – does not provide what the previous one lacks. In connection with his first story on Sapo, Malone remarks, "I want as little as possible of darkness in his story. A little darkness, in itself, at the time, is nothing. You think no more about it and you go on. But I know what darkness is, it accumulates, thickens, then suddenly bursts and drowns everything" (13). A few lines later we read: "This is awful" (14), leaving open what the statement refers to. However, the darkness keeps growing in the stories, though their nesting and the interchanging of their characters seem to signalize that light will come from somewhere. Furthermore, the stories are brimful of detailed descriptions, and more often than not these details take the narrative in an unforeseeable direction, thus preventing the welter of incidents from assuming any meaning. Just as in the overall narrative, what remains is a truncated narration, and so Malone's stories keep paradoxically shrinking through their accumulation of disconnected trivia. And yet there seems to be no end to the piling of trivialities upon one another, and their unpredictable turns surprisingly make an otherwise shriveling story expand.

The words in the stories are nothing but signifiers, which are not geared to a signified, although storytelling is normally governed by the expectation that there must be a point somewhere. Thus the assembly of signifiers cannot help but adumbrate a virtual dimension, which appears as a blank but nevertheless radiates a forceful suggestiveness owing to

the accumulation of words. At best the virtual dimension is signified as absence – an absence, however, that remains indeterminate, and appears to burgeon through the nesting of the stories. This has repercussions on both the nested stories and their signifiers. The indeterminacy of the virtual dimension generated by the signifiers bounces back on them and keeps discrediting what is said. This generated indeterminacy is not an entity, let alone a signified, and thus drifts towards what still seems to be determinate, i.e. the sequence of words that are gradually engulfed by it. Now a strange two-way traffic develops. The welter of disconnected signifiers gives rise to a virtual dimension, but this remains indeterminate owing to the erasure of any signified.

Thus we may call the growing indeterminacy nothingness, which retroactively endows Malone's remark that there is nothing to signify with an ineluctable ambiguity. Malone does not want to signify anything, and hence all the signifiers of the stories appear to signify nothing. In this respect nothingness is virtually engendered by the stories and through the stories. However, as nothingness is not a tangible entity that can be grasped or perceived, it can only make itself felt by "seeping" into the stories, thus causing their disintegration. Similarly, as Malone is obsessed with his own death, the latter cannot help "seeping" into his life and nullifying what he is as long as he is alive. The nothingness engendered by the signifiers of the story rebounds on them and makes the twists and turns of the stories totally unforeseeable. Almost nothing that is said can be derived from what has been said before. Thus the fractured and segmented texture of the stories is in the end nothing. What the signifiers have adumbrated pales into nothingness, which in turn overwhelms the stories and gains its presence as unpredictability. Nothingness becomes tangible in what it annihilates, and this appears to be able to overpower what is. When the stories are engulfed by what the signifiers have adumbrated, speech becomes polluted by nothingness, which leads Malone to the conclusion: "*Nothing is more real than nothing*" (16). As this is the only sentence in the novel set in italics, it spotlights the reality that underlies all nullifications. Therefore, while pondering this "reality," Malone is careful to say "nothing negative about it" (47).

In view of the changing shapes of nothingness that we are given to witness in the stories, nothingness can be neither grasped nor represented. We cannot even ask what it might be, because such a question would tacitly assume that it is something. Hence we can only

say it appears to be a function whose impact comes from making inroads into what is. Yet even this function cannot be formally postulated, because there is no agent to prod it into action. Exposing narration to erasure means that the signifiers adumbrate a virtual dimension, which is totally indeterminate, although there is the expectation that the signifiers must point to a signified. Indeterminacy, however, can never be a signified, because it can never be grasped. Thus the ensuing indeterminacy becomes operative as nothingness, which gains shape only through the disintegration of the stories.

The erasure of the stories makes nothingness emerge. But as nothingness cannot be grasped as "itself," since it is forever indeterminate, its presentation requires an unending cancellation, which only highlights the *operation* of nothingness. As there is no stance outside nothingness that would allow us to grasp it, Beckett uses Malone's storytelling to double up what Malone undergoes. This strategy, however, also assumes a specific function in relation to what the novel causes to emerge. As we have seen, Malone's desire for ending sets the dynamics of self-perpetuating negations in motion, which lead to emergence of endlessness. Ultimately, his own storytelling is, as he remarks, nothing but "pretext, Sapo and the birds, Moll, the peasants, those who in the town seen one another out and fly from one another, . . . pretext for not coming to the point, the abandoning, the raising of the arms and going down, without further splash. . . . The horror-worn eyes linger abject on all they have beseeched so long, in a last prayer, the true prayer at last, the one that asks for nothing" (107). The stories seem to answer this prayer by making the desired nothing emerge.

If we combine this emergent nothingness with the emergence of endlessness (because the storytelling is after all an insert in the proceedings), then nothingness is bound to prevent any interpretation of endlessness, because whatever significance were to be given to endlessness would downgrade the a medium for representing something else. It is, however, vement in a text of pure performance to make the in of nothingness emerge as unlimited endlessness.

This intertwining contains another important aspect. Highlighting the impossibility of ever determining nothingness turns the cancellation of all items into an endless process. Endlessness, in turn, is made to go nowhere, because the indeterminacy of nothingness guides it. This

interplay is the emergent that *Malone Dies* brings into existence. What is remarkable, though, is the fact that while the emergent appears unbounded, it is given salience in spite of the limitations of a text.

We might be inclined to say endlessness and nothingness do not occur in life, and thus lack any reality of their own. But we have to remind ourselves of the italicized phrase in the text that nothing is more real than nothing. This may be taken as a warning against any rush to premature conclusions through the application of our own standards to what the Beckettian text causes to emerge in terms of our own standards. As we have seen, it is the performative character of literature to bring something into being that hitherto did not exist, and if this appears baffling, it is bound to trigger a prolonged preoccupation with itself, because whenever language is spoken or written, we expect meaning. What the Beckettian narrative thus achieves is the delineation of an “unmarked space” (Spencer-Brown 5) beyond knowledge and experience.

III

Malone’s stories make nothingness operative, and as growing indeterminacy, this seeps back into the narratives. Thus nothingness presents itself as indeterminacy. However, nothing “as” anything amounts to a determination of nothingness. Is it also possible to make nothing emerge by canceling the “as”? Beckett’s *Texts for Nothing* provide an answer.

There is an indissoluble ambiguity inscribed in the title of *Texts for Nothing*. The texts are either unimportant (in the sense of good for nothing), or they are a tribute to nothing, and thus of importance. Obviously, the two irreconcilable references cancel each other out, and this is a more radical erasure than just invalidating narration. Malone did not focus on what the growing nothingness was doing to his stories, whereas the personal pronoun in *Texts for Nothing* appears to be striving to make nothing happen. Thus we get a different constellation of components whose interplay aims at the emergence of nothing. This makes the indeterminacy of nothingness as witnessed in *Malone Dies* into a special instance, which simultaneously reveals the extent to which emergence is dependent on the interplay of the components that make it happen.

The variability with which nothing can be made to emerge highlights the sophistication of Beckett's art. How can "nothing" come out into the open, since "nothing" eludes thematization, not least as the title of the text already precludes referentiality, which thematization would require? The emergence of "nothing" in the text makes itself felt by diminishing the constellation of components. This is borne out by a reduction to voices that articulate the first-person pronoun, and by the texture of the language. These two remaining components, however, are potentially a hindrance to the emergence of "nothing," because there cannot be anything anterior to nothing, which the pronoun and the language appear to be. And yet without an agent and a medium "nothing" would be unable to become palpable. But as neither agent nor medium can determine "nothing," the text has to stage its own undoing. Thus textualizing nothing comes to fruition by unscrambling both the texture of the text and the agent that sets it in motion.

For the sake of analysis let us separate agent and medium, although they are intimately geared to one another. The agent has shrunk to a disembodied personal pronoun in contradistinction to the names which characters like Malone still had. What is beyond the pronoun is to a large extent eclipsed. More often than not the pronoun is nothing but a voice, though it is not a particular voice but many voices. "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" (1995: 109). The other voices issue into a multiplication of personal pronouns, which run counter to one another. Furthermore, the voices come from dislocated perspectives, and they often appear to be observing one another. However, in the process what is voiced gets dispersed. "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. . . . And the voices, wherever they come from, have no life in them" (113). Thus the voices themselves keep dwindling and become imponderable, not least as they are cut off from the "origin" of their utterance. "It's not me, it's not true, it's not me, and I'm far. No, no" (111). There is a ceaseless dispersal of what is said; each of the voices wants to get rid of other voices, and in certain instances, the pronoun believes itself to "exist" "in the pit of my inexistence" (114). And after all this loquaciousness, the agent yearns for muteness. "Then what a relief, what a relief to know I'm mute for ever, if only it didn't distress me" (118). Even relief is a mixed blessing.

We might look at more of these instances of scattered voices, the various stances from where they appear to speak, and the utter futility of what they are saying, but the examples seen so far will enable us to make a few general observations. They all allow us to perceive how “nothing” is made to move into focus. We witness a self-dissolving of the agent in its attempt to make “nothing” appear. In order to achieve this, it has to be subjected to erasure by launching its own self-destruction. The disembodied agent, the dispersal of voices, the scattering of stances, the mutual silencing of voices, the defamiliarization of the origin of speaking, the lapses into silence, the self-frustrating intentions and so on are manifestations of how “nothing” makes itself felt. The self-initiated dispersal of the agent thus turns into a medium for nothing to become palpable. However, this self-fracturing agent might be viewed as an exploration of “nothing,” although it is only the trappings that allow “nothing” to parade itself before our eyes. But exploring “nothing” still means that the agent is anterior to “nothing,” as “nothing” cannot explore itself. In other words, “nothing” cannot become its own agent, and the agent operative in the text remains an obstruction to the self-presentation of “nothing.” As “nothing” has no anteriority, anything in the nature of anteriority has to be dismantled. And so the athing in its attempt to explore “nothing,” launches itself on a trajectory of self-annihilation, as only the undoing of itself gives “nothing” a chance to come out into the open. Such an appearance gains salience by discrediting the very agent that is meant to explore “nothing.”

“Nothing” presents itself by dismantling everything that wants to say something about “nothing.” For this reason, every utterance takes on the character of a digit, and not – as some critics have argued – a notation, since notations already represent something. They are not even signifiers in the sense in which words functioned in Malone’s stories. There are moments in which it dawns on the self-annihilating agent that the words are cut off from denoting or signifying anything. “And the yeses and noes mean nothing in this mouth, no more than signs it sighs in its toil, or answer to a question not understood, a question unspoken, in the eyes of a mute, an idiot, who doesn’t understand, never understood, who stares at himself in a glass, stares before him in the desert, sighing yes, sighing no, on and off” (136). The yeses and the noes are just digits that run against one another, keep endlessly spreading, and turn the text into a continuous iteration. This digitalization is a far cry from Malone’s activity of canceling his own self-inventions. The

agent, seemingly anterior to “nothing,” now becomes instrumental in spelling out the presence of “nothing.” A digitalized agent highlights the fact that nothing that is said is representative of “nothing.” Instead, a digitalized dismantling of what is said allows for the appearance of “nothing” as boundless.

This is the nature of Beckett's art. Dissolving the agent into digits allows for a kaleidoscopically shifting digitalization to which there is no end. The more variable the digits become – and this astonishing variability is the hallmark of Beckett's style of writing – the more an all-engulfing “nothing” begins to emerge. This multiplication results in a fine-tuning of “nothing” that keeps forever burgeoning into its own boundlessness. The digits only provide a degree of precision for what otherwise cannot be “totally” brought into view.

Basically, Beckett's readers keep wondering how he can write at all, since he strips everything that is said of its reference. In doing so, he reduces all his words to digits, and this appears to offer two advantages: first, by transgressing the semantic restriction of words, the variability of writing becomes potentially endless. Second, reducing the words to digits increases the evocation of what is beyond words. Thus digitalization allows the emergence of what can never be encompassed, namely “nothing.”

This process has its correlation in the self-undoing agent. As the latter is anterior to “nothing,” it must dismantle itself in order to bring “nothing” to the fore, annihilating itself so that “nothing” can enter the stage, or alternatively “nothing” discredits the agent in order to make its presence felt? In the one instance the agent dissolves itself, in the other “nothing” demolishes the agent. As long as the agent is active, it wipes out its assumed anteriority to “nothing,” and as long as the latter is the driving force, the disfigurement of the agent becomes a medium through which it foreshadows itself. The alternatives continually tip over into one another, and the resulting interference adumbrates “nothing” in changing shades. Towards the end, the agent falls silent, and “wonders what has become of the wish to know, it is gone, the heart is gone, the head is gone, no one feels anything, asks anything, seeks anything, says anything, hears anything, there is only silence” (154). The play is ended and “nothing” appears to be present in the agent's silence, suggesting it will endure in this state forever. Consequently, “nothing” is not the matrix of emergence, but through the undoing of everything, “nothing” begins to emerge.

So far we have tried to spotlight the emergence of “nothing” in terms of the dissolution of the agent, marked by the disarray of mutually interfering voices. “Nothing” gains salience by “boring” itself into what there is, or more pointedly, into the agent that is meant to explore it.

Whatever there is imposes limits on “nothing,” and this includes another hindrance to its emergence, which is the text itself. The text imposes an even more severe constraint. However, just as the agent is indispensable for the emergence of “nothing,” the textuality of the text has a similar function. Conceiving of the text as a function implies that it cannot be understood as representation. On the contrary, it is the undoing of representation that provides the road along which “nothing” travels in the text. As textuality is not nothing, it is potentially an obstacle to the emergence of “nothing,” and at best it allows “nothing” to be staged. Enacting “nothing,” however, implies that it is mediated through textuality, and in order to make itself felt it has to undo the mediator.

What are the strategies that Beckett brings to bear in order to discredit the text? The text is littered with denials, negations, retractions, and cancellations, which are features that we already encountered when scrutinizing the operations of Malone. What is different here, though, is the fact that the nuanced forms of denying, negating, and canceling no longer allow us to spot their underlying intentions. Negations without positive intentions appear to be the distinctive feature of *Texts for Nothing*. This hollowing out of negations deprives them of their direction, thus leaving a void. In order to render this emptiness tangible, the frequency of the negations has to be drastically increased, and the acceleration turns the text into a vortex, sucking up everything that is said and negated. This makes the text highly unstable, and any attempt to order it issues in vertigo. Transforming the text into a vertiginous vortex gives “nothing” a presence that emerges from the limitations that textuality imposes on it. With the absence of positive intentionality in the negating act, the written text becomes a surface that adumbrates what is underneath, i.e. the silence of “nothing.”

Once again we encounter Beckett’s artistry. He refrains from equating “nothing” with a particular quality. There can be no “nothing as,” because any such correlation is bound to reify “nothing.” In *Malone Dies* nothingness kept seeping into the stories by making them indeterminate, and thus it fulfilled a function. In *Texts for Nothing* the appearance of “nothing” is moved into focus, displaying itself in

different modes, ranging from the dismantling of the agent, through vortex and vertigo, to silence. Nothingness as a *function* is fairly determinate, borne out by the indeterminacy of nothing that intervenes in Malone's stories. The *appearance* of "nothing," on the other hand, is featured as a hologram by moving into ever changing configurations.

There is at least one more of these configurations in *Texts for Nothing*, spelt out by the gaps between clauses, sentences, sequences of sentences, voices speaking, and the undoing of the spoken. The gaps give the clauses, sentences, and sequences of sentences unforeseeable turns. The writing proceeds as the puncturing of the written, and in doing so creates a welter of pauses, which increase almost exponentially. This is in line with Beckett's claim, voiced in the letter to Axel Kaun quoted above that the writer has to "bore holes" into the text in order to make what is beneath – "be it nothing or something" – "seep" through. Incidentally, Beckett considered Beethoven's Seventh Symphony outstanding,² because it has so many pauses. Puncturing the text with pauses makes "nothing" emerge through these openings, though owing to their overwhelming multiplicity they do not organize what they separate in terms of opposition, because the latter would endow the texts with stability. They are just "holes" in the text through which "nothing" peeps from underneath.

These openings for "nothing" are echoed by the disarray of voices, which do not speak to one another, or if occasionally they do so, they are eager to dissociate themselves from the voice addressed. In the long run, an ever-widening chasm opens up between what is spoken, what the spoken seems to point at, and what the speaking may have meant. Such a chasm is nothing but a magnifying of the pauses through which "nothing" bores "holes" into textuality, allowing itself to be glimpsed. However, this emergence of "nothing" is bound to overtax the voices, and towards the end of the text, we read: "A trace, it wants to leave a

² "Gibt es irgendeinen Grund, warum jene fürchterlich willkürliche Materialität der Wortfläche nicht aufgelöst werden sollte, wie z. B. die von grossen schwarzen Pausen gefressene Tonfläche in der siebten Symphonie von Beethoven, so dass wir sie ganze Seiten durch nicht anders wahrnehmen können als etwa einen schwindelnden unergründliche Schlünde von Stillschweigen verknüpfenden Pfad von Lauten?" ["Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved, like for example the sound surface, torn by enormous pauses of Beethoven's seventh Symphony, so that through the whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence?"] (Beckett 1984: 53).

trace, yes, like air leaves among the leaves, among the grass, among the sand, it's with that it would make a life, but soon it will be the end, it won't be long now, there won't be any life, there won't have been any life, there will be silence, the air quite still that trembled once an instant, the tiny flurry of dust quite settled" (152–53).

IV

Let me conclude with a few remarks regarding the constellations that cause the emergent to arise. As there is nothing behind the emergent to which it might point – it is a self-sufficient appearance that develops out of a transformation of components that are in play with one another. Narration is transformed by being exposed to erasure, which means that all the generic features of narrative are cancelled. Narration no longer represents or depicts anything that is beyond the page. Yet even a disfigured narrative is still there, and does not vanish, although all its topics are deprived of meaning.

This applies to Malone's waiting for the end as well as to the stories he tells himself. As neither waiting nor ending has any meaning, endlessness arises in which the cancelled semantics of waiting and ending are combined. We might qualify erasure as a massive constraint under which the narrative is operating, and it is through the constraints that the components are transformed.

In Malone's stories the signifiers do not point to any signified, because none of the stories is told in order to make a point. Hence the signifier refers to nothing that, in turn, "seeps" into the stories, manifesting itself in an endlessly expanding indeterminacy. At this juncture endlessness and nothingness begin to interpenetrate, because endlessness has no semantic connotation whatsoever, and nothingness appears to be endlessly expanding.

In *Texts for Nothing* this tendency is somewhat radicalized. The agent that tries to highlight "nothing" is under a severe constraint. It has to wipe itself out in order to give "nothing" an opportunity to appear. This, however, could still be considered a function that "nothing" exercises, as we had occasion to witness in *Malone Dies*. Therefore, "nothing" as a disruptive function is still qualified, and is not yet "nothing." Consequently, there are more stringent constraints operative in the text, depriving negation of the "something" that it intends to nullify.

Thus negations are turned against themselves, which paralyzes their operational intent and so makes them evaporate into a void.

What remains is the puncturing of textuality by increasing gaps and pauses. This is a drastic constraint on what the words of the text are meant to say, so that the texts peter out into murmurs and silences. What we are given to observe are changing configurations of “nothing,” which implies that none of the shapes lends itself to a representation of “nothing”. On the contrary, the shifting salience of these configurations spotlights what energizes them, namely “nothing” as an endless obliteration of what is meant to grasp it. Thus the text is neither about “nothing” nor a concept of it; instead, it makes “nothing” happen.

The modes we are given to witness, according to which endlessness and “nothing” inscribete themselves into agency, narration, and language, turn out to be an elaborate disfigurement. They are not as chaotic as they may seem at first glance, since agency, narration, and language are anterior to endlessness and “nothing,” but this anteriority creates a paradoxical situation. “Nothing” is always on the verge of being transformed into something, which of course it is not. However, without agent or language, endlessness and “nothing” could never become tangible. Hence the former are endowed with a duality that typifies the sophistication of Beckett’s art. The agent has to dismantle itself, narration has to erase itself, and language has to puncture itself with gaps in order for them all to undo their respective anteriority. The latter has to be defaced past recognition, which, however, is precisely what makes it into a medium for conveying the nothingness of “nothing.” The disfigurement has no reference whatsoever to which it could be related, and so it outstrips any attempt at comprehension. “Nothing” cannot be understood, and yet the form of the text makes it palpable; it paralyzes cognition, but gains presence with an overpowering impact. This duality is the hallmark of the Beckettian text, and indeed of all Beckett’s work.

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