

Nothing's Imperative: Late Beckett

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Summary

This article dwells on the imperative to say “nothing”, concentrating its attention, for the most part, on *Worstward Ho*. It aims to illuminate the imperative’s temporality as well as to account for its origin. It is suggested that Beckett’s late writing is best approached not by way of phenomenology but from what Walter Benjamin calls the “fundamental problem of the theory of language” (2007: 316; trans. modified): the question of the medial matter of language as such.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel wei uit oor die imperatief "om niks te sê nie" en fokus grotendeels op *Worstward Ho*. Die doel van die artikel is om lig te werp op die imperatief se tydelikheid en ook om die oorsprong daarvan te probeer verklaar. Daar word aangevoer dat die beste benadering tot Beckett se laat werke nie in die fenomenologie lê nie maar wel in wat Walter Benjamin die fundamentele probleem van die taalteorie noem (2007: 316), naamlik die kwessie van die bemiddelende aard van taal as sodanig.

A pox on void.

— Samuel Beckett, *Worstward Ho*

Repetition

Sometimes repetition calls attention to a word. The opening of *Worstward Ho*, arguably Beckett’s most intricate meditation on the vicissitudes of repetition, begins this way. Here, the reader must make do with what Alain Badiou calls a “philosophical treatise, [...] a treatment in shorthand of the question of being” (2005: 90). As befits such an enterprise, one can expect inconclusiveness. The stage is set for the exquisite modulation of motion that exemplifies this late style:

On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on.

(Beckett 2009: 81)

One knows not to expect pleonasm from late Beckett. Repetition takes the place of discursive supplementation. The effectuation of superfluity falls to the reader’s lot.

The repeated word gains weight, bears upon the reader as if for the first time. The word appears as a sign with a semantic function – as a preposition, say, marking the place of speech; as a noun designating its object; or as an adverb qualifying its momentum. There is a particular sound to it – “on” – and a rhythm borne of its repetition in time. The repeated word rises up above its background, suspends itself in relief. “On” takes shape against a surface. Lines have been formed into words. Inscription has taken place.

Those are a few particulars. Something is still to come. Another kind of repetition consoles us with that prospect, strengthens the assumption that speech will continue and that thought will go on. Although no certainty of progress attends to it, repetition’s “eccentric measure”, in Wallace Stevens’ words, still elicits pleasure:

A thing final in itself and, therefore, good:

One of the vast repetitions final in
Themselves and, therefore, good, the going round

And round and round, the merely going round,
Until merely going round is a final good.
The way wine comes at a table in a wood.

And we enjoy like men, the way a leaf
Above the table spins its constant spin,
So that we look at it with pleasure, look

At it spinning its eccentric measure.

(1964: 405-406)

“Merely going round is a final good”: Few readers of Stevens’ poem would, I suspect, quarrel with the sentiment of this line. Repetition can occasion a kind of satisfaction. It is when repetition becomes a compulsion that it arouses suspicion.

Repetition offers a consoling illusion: everything will stay the same. What will come has already occurred. *This* moment, however dull or insignificant it may be, will be inventoried as part of what has been read, and repetition serves to remind us of this lest we forget. Its “constant spin” is pleasurable because it tempers the imminent threat of change with the “supreme fiction” of an endlessly immanent return. Should we arrive at “nohow on”, we’ll be where we left – back at “On”. And so on.

To repeat is to try to lay hold of where one is – in *medias res*, somewhere between the past and the future. Freud, as is well known, thought that repetition was the manifestation of that which could not be brought to memory: “the patient”, he writes in “Recollection, Repetition and Working Through”, “remembers nothing of what is forgotten and repressed but expresses it in action. He reproduces it not in his memory but in his

behaviour; he repeats it without of course knowing that he is repeating it” (1964: 16). But events from the past are not the only ones at risk of being forgotten; those that occur in the present are in danger too.

Writing is a tool to counter that threat. To write, Derrida taught, is to consign the present moment to the possibility of the future – to make memories of the present, which is always on the verge of loss or lapse, *for* the future. Yet no guarantee of success is given in advance. At any given moment something truly odd might occur. It might occur this time and this time only. It might vanish before it can be inscribed, pass before it can be passed on. Such an occurrence is dramatised in Beckett’s early novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, when Belacqua remembers his first communion: “Alas! it was a short knock and went as it had come, like that, it vacated him like that, leaving him bereft and in his breast a void place and a spacious nothing” (1992: 185). The lost event is nothing other than the event of loss. It passes before it can be marked, happens too late to take place. The idea of something occurring just *once* (think of death) is intolerable because such an occurrence (if that is what it is) cannot be verified as such and accommodated to the order of experience or knowledge. “Once is never [*Einmal ist keinmal*]” (*Selected Writings*: 2, 2009: 739), Walter Benjamin declares; what occurs once can hardly be said to have occurred at all.¹

There is “[s]omething not wrong with one” (WH 89) observes the voice of *Worstward Ho*.² When “one” stands for a singular event, it is one so perfect that it thwarts the repetition which would bear it to memory. “The accidentless One-and-Only, conveniently called nothing” (1983: 246), to interpolate the words of Beckett’s Murphy, is at once tantalisingly exceptional and dreadfully insufficient. There can be no anticipation of that which occurs just once.

Each beginning is like this. Like every occurrence, this one – this one *now* – carries no inherent teleological significance. Nor does it bear in itself a measure for assessing whether change has, in fact, taken place. For change to take place, something must come from elsewhere – from outside the occurrence itself.³ To transform a contingent occurrence into a purposive

1. Compare Szondi (1986: 13).

2. Since the origin of this “voice” is indeterminate, Blanchot’s preferred term is more appropriate: “neutral speech” is speech “that speaks itself alone, that goes through one that hears it, that is without intimacy, excludes any intimacy, one that cannot be silenced, for it is the incessant, the interminable” (*Infinite Conversation* 2003: 213).

3. Compare Wittgenstein’s claim that the world is devoid of value:
In the world everything is as it is and happens as it does happen. *In* it there is no value – and if there were, it would be of no value. If there is a

event a witness is required. The witness is charged, as every narrator, indeed every reader is, with the responsibility of converting the one into the other.

Narration, in other words, aims to perfect the present.⁴ Narrators frame events, string them along into sequence. They inhabit the margin between the told and the telling, between those things that comprise a narrative and the means or mechanisms through which the narrative is spun. The margin is often explicit, although sometimes it is no more visible than in the effect of the addition of a word like “then”. Here goes: ... then once; once then twice. Or, transposed into the register of *Worstward Ho*: (silence) then “On”; “On” then “Say on”. The narrator charts the middle, the link that gets us from one to two. The first move, from nothing to something, the move that comes before the repetition of one and the creation of two, before the citation of “on” and its transformation as “say on”, is trickiest of all. But once it has been accomplished one can rest assured that no end will remain in sight. From now on, any conclusion will be provisional. Henceforth it will “[b]e said on”: “[I]f we have successfully managed this heroic feat of addition, assuming that one plus one makes two, then there seems to be no stopping this process, we can reproduce this step again and again, and thus count to infinity” (Dolar 2012: 1). “Something not wrong with one. Then with two. Then with three. So on” (*WH* 88).

Anxiety accompanies the count, not least because there is no end to it. The moment is in danger of being skipped. What counts can be missed. And there is little prospect of rest. All but needless to say, repetition often has productive effects. Where there is no repetition there is no interpretation. To repeat is at once the burden and promise of reading. Yet repetition can lead to an abyss; it can bring one close, perhaps closer than one cares to get, to the gap that intervenes between zero and one, and between one and two, and so on. The abyss is to writing what the present is to time: it separates the word from what is meant by it, just as the present divides the past from the time still to come.

Something odd happens when it appears.

Unchanged? Sudden back unchanged? Yes. Say yes. Each time un-changed. Somehow unchanged. Till no. Till say no. Sudden back changed. Somehow changed. Each time somehow changed.

(*WH* 85)

The word “unchanged” is significant, not merely because a definition or semantic function can be attributed to it. In its repetition it comes to bear an

value which is of value, it must lie outside all happening and being-so. For all happening and being-so is accidental. (1994: 6, 41)

4. Levi's aperçu is apt: “Perfection belongs to narrated events, not to those we live” (1984: 88).

unstable relation to itself. Suddenly something changes between “unchanged” and “unchanged”: an abyss opens between the repeated and the repeating word. Just as that which occurs but once sets a limit upon what can be known, so this abyss places a boundary before what can be said. When the reader arrives at it, there may be little alternative than to step back. But there is good reason to try to pause here, to linger a little longer at the brink. Here – this is my gambit – lies the impetus of *Worstward Ho*, and with it the imperative governing thought.

Neither Nothing Nor Something

For Maurice Blanchot the wait issues into “the dread of reading”.

“[I]t is that every text, no matter how important and how interesting it may be, is empty – it does not exist at bottom; it is necessary to clear an abyss, and if you don’t jump, you don’t understand”.

(Blanchot quoted by Warminski 1985: 267)

It is only *post factum*, after the leap from zero to one, that one comes to understand, or comes closest to seeing, as it were, the emptiness there from the beginning. Just as zero is vital to the act of counting, and yet cannot itself be counted,⁵ so an act of exegesis depends on that which lies outside the exegete’s preferred procedures. In itself a text is nothing – or nothing but a promise, a cipher of the presence of things hoped for.

Any given articulation – anything “said” – proceeds by way of nothing. Even “nothing” cannot escape the paradox: “the only way one can speak of nothing”, Beckett’s Watt ventures to say, “is to speak of it as though it were something” (1976: 77). Like everything else, “nothing” has come after the fact. When “nothing” is defined as something that does not exist, as an absent thing, that definition disavows it. “Nothing” still brings with it a trace of existence even if it is of the most exiguous kind. Standing for the very thing it lacks, the word “nothing” becomes a kind of fetish. What lies before “nothing” – before the nothing that, referred to as an object, is made into a pseudo-nothing, a virtual-nothing – is a question so vexed that it is perhaps best quickly repressed. Hence the warning Parmenides is said to have repeated throughout his life: “Never let this thought prevail, [...] that non-being is; But keep your mind from this way of investigation” (Plato 1921: 339).

One could, nevertheless, do worse (at least no better) than to approach “nothing” by way of its temporal analogue: the time of the present. Little can be done to stop nothing’s recoil into something, non-being into being;

5. Hillis-Miller (2004: 126) discusses some of the implications of this paradox.

and so the present lapses long before it can be marked. “The present leaves itself”, says Levinas, “it is the departure from self. It is a rip in the infinite beginningless and endless fabric of existing. The present rips apart and joins together again; it begins; it is beginning itself” (*Time and the Other* 1987: 52). “Nothing” is akin to a moment whose harried flight passes all too quickly to be turned into a memory and made a part of life. In Beckett’s poem of 1948, “my way is in the sand flowing”, this moment is not only a source of distress; embodied in an image of a threshold, it becomes the object of the speaker’s desire:

my way is in the sand flowing
between the shingle and the dune
the summer rain rains on my life
on me my life harrying fleeing
to its beginning to its end

my peace is there in the receding mist
when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds
and live the space of a door
that opens and shuts.

(Poems 2002: 18)

Worstward Ho, written some 35 years later, still aims to express these “shifting thresholds”. This, however, is not merely a problem of representation. As we shall see, the states of equivocation into which Beckett’s late writing casts its reader create a context in which to take the matter of expression – that is language itself – seriously. Just as one cannot acknowledge nothing without disavowing it, so this “space” (neither open nor shut, neither this way nor that) is a kind of correlative for the burden the writer must now shoulder: “unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation” (*Disjecta* 1984: 145).

If Beckett’s much vaunted obligation can be said to be motivated by a desire for understanding, its “expressive act” may be altogether too equivocal for comprehension, which implies, after all, a kind of victory over the work in view.⁶ In circumstances such as these, the Unnamable labours simply to speak.

All this business of a labour to accomplish, before I can end, of words to say,
a truth to recover, in order to say it, before I can end [...]. All lies. I have

6. Cf. Benjamin: “Knowledge is possession. Its very object is determined by the fact that it must be taken possession of – even if in a transcendental sense – in the consciousness. [...] For the thing possessed, representation is secondary; it does not have a prior existence as something representing itself” (*Origin* 1998: 29).

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nothing to do, that is to say nothing in particular. I have to speak. Whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak.

(1984: 314)

The *Unnamable* confronts its reader with a grim parody of the task he or she faces. Under the exegete's gaze, writing becomes a summons to explication, "a labour to accomplish", as if its existence were merely an incentive for the exhibition of the possessive mastery of its reader. Beckett's writing places, no doubt, an immense weight upon the reader, who cannot evade the summons, even if his or her response will inevitably transgress the imperative that governs it. The double-bind is, quite literally, evoked here, made voice: "Having nothing to say, [...] I have to speak". And it is echoed when Molloy expresses the view that "there could be no things but nameless things, no names but thingless names" (31). Words such as these do not merely affirm the commonplace of the inadequacy of the word. They advert at once to the reader's predicament and the desire that animates Beckett's work until the end: to take nothing for its own – a nothing that is neither a name nor a thing; a nothing otherwise than no-thing; a nothing that words neither do nor do not say. A "nothing" that exists as the present moment does, if only as the relation (or as the abyss) between nothing and something, in or as the separation from speech.⁷

What, then, can be expected in the end, after this labour has been accomplished? Perhaps yet another ontology, a declaration of the discovery of an altogether non-abstract or non-metaphorical basis of thought. Or a return to the surface at the start – to the blank before the writing, before the will to inscribe: the surface that offers the possibility of writing a language identical to the intransitivity of nothing, only to withhold it from realisation.

Reduction

... each was again divisible in divisions of
redivisible component bodies, dividends and
divisors ever diminishing without actual divi-
sion, till, if progress were carried far enough,
nought nowhere was never reached.

– James Joyce, *Ulysses*

7. The question of the relation is already posed, if only implicitly, in Beckett's letter of 9 July, 1937 to Axel Kaun. The crux of the matter is the oscillation between something and nothing – the ultimate (or most minimal) object that oozes beneath (or as) the surface of language. See *Disjecta*: 171.

Exploiting repetition as a means to undermine rather than fortify a word's significance is a proclivity that is not unique to Beckett's writing. Just as the protagonist of Gustav Meyrink's novel of 1914, *The Golem*, repeats words so "spasmodically, that they suddenly appear nakedly as meaningless, terrifying sounds from a barbaric, prehistoric past" (96; trans. modified), so repetition becomes for Beckett a method to reduce a word to its material quiddity – a graphic inscription received by the eye, or acoustically by the ear – a way to dissolve the "terrible materiality of the word surface".⁸ Once the skin of the paper (the surface of the text) is perforated even the most ingenious reader runs the risk of finding no more than gaps as the reward for his or her endeavours. But something does emerge from behind the skin: the threshold or abyss between the word and its exteriority: between the word, a function of language, and the world that is "seen" through that language.

Take a word like "this":

folly –
 folly for to –
 for to –
 what is the word –
 folly from this –
 all this –
 folly from all this –
 given –
 folly given all this –
 seeing –
 folly seeing all this –
 this –
 what is the word –
 this this –
 this this here –
 all this this here –
 folly given all this –
 seeing –
 folly seeing all this here –
 or to –
 [...]

(Beckett *Poems*: 113)

This reduction shares much in common with phenomenology's defining gesture, where the task is to suspend – or to "bracket" – all assumptions about the nature and existence of what is under consideration. Nietzsche, although not a phenomenologist, channels the rhetorical potential of this gesture with exemplary effect: "That cloud there. What is 'real' in that? Subtract the phantasm and every human *contribution* from it, my sober

8. Cf. Beckett's letter to Axel Kaun of September 7, 1939.

friends. If you *can!* If you can forget your descent, your past, your training!” (*Gay Science* 1972: 121). The cloud, of course, is not only somewhere out there but is here too: a word on the page, a sign subject to the intention of the one who perceives it. For a phenomenologist, the act of suspension would, when vigilantly pursued, lead to something more original than an intentional act itself. Phenomenology aspires to bring into view the things which precede abstraction, the things from which philosophy derives its purpose or its meaning. In his phenomenological manifesto *Ideas I*, Edmund Husserl poses a question that defines the task at hand: “What can remain over when the whole world is bracketed, including ourselves and all our thinking (*cogitare*)” (2012: 112)? The aim is clear: to establish who or what survives thought’s destruction of the world. In this way philosophy hopes to exhibit, as Husserl later puts it, that “region of Being which is in principle unique and can become in fact the field of a new science” (113).

Although the act of suspension was intended to issue into repose, the mind, compelled as it is to reflect upon the grounds of its reflection, is quickly afflicted by the disquiet of regress. Assuming it were able to lay hold of that unique “region of Being”, the substratum of thought, there would still be nothing to prevent the mind from reflecting on the conditions under which such a substratum was established. And among these conditions there is one that resolutely refuses the gesture of suspension. It is language. There can be no new science of thought save that it is thought from and grounded within language. When thought takes place it does so *as* language.

Whereas phenomenology takes for its goal a kind of non-discursive or irreducible desideratum, the foundation (“this this here”) from which every other philosophy would appear dogmatic or obsolete, *Worstward Ho*, as with much of late Beckett, mounts a rigorous challenge to its procedures. The challenge, however, is not merely the awkward aporia that springs most readily to mind, namely that if the foundation is prior to the relation between the subject and object, that is, anterior to the relation that constitutes cognition itself, then it must by definition be unthinkable. Nor is the challenge the one expressed by Alain Badiou:

Beckett’s method is like Husserl’s *epochē* turned upside down. Husserl’s *epochē* consists in subtracting the thesis of the world, in subtracting the “there is”, in order then to turn toward the movement or the pure flux of the interiority that is directed at this “there is.” [...] Beckett’s method is precisely the opposite: It is a question of subtracting or suspending of the subject so as to see what then happens to being.

(117)

Far from suspending or subtracting the subject, if anything is “seen” in *Worstward Ho*, it is that such a subtraction is impossible. And so it has always been. For the folly of subtraction is constituted, just as much as the “subject” itself is, by language. (“I’m in words, made of words”, says the

Unnamable (1984: 103).) Language intervenes before the *epochē* takes place. The suspension can never be *said* to succeed because there can be no suspension of language itself. Were it to succeed, language would need to speak its own absence. And when language disappears, thought goes too: “There is not a world of thought”, says Walter Benjamin, “which is not a world of language, and one sees of the world only what is provided for by language” (SW 2003: 3, 249).

The effort to bracket language generates more language; the reduction of the word to naught can proceed, if at all, only by way of more words.⁹ An infinitely propulsive propensity characterises this labour, and it is aptly conveyed when Bloom, in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, concludes his meditation on Zeno’s paradox: “if progress were carried far enough, nought nowhere was never reached” (1993: 1067). To speak of language – to speak about it – is always to speak from it, but is never more than short of “nought nowhere”. We can call language “language” only because something (call it that) precedes the call, or silently accompanies it.

While this constitutes a grave problem for phenomenology, Beckett’s late writing does indicate a direction for phenomenological research. At issue for phenomenology is the pre-predicative, the beginning of thought itself, the zero before one. But even Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, that austere endeavour to set Being free from the fetters of the metaphysical tradition, omits the matter of language itself. At the origin of Beckett’s meditations on language, themselves ironic acts of suspension, lies the imperative of “nothing”. And “nothing” is nothing if not a name for what language itself is.

The imperative calls upon language to speak itself. And the stakes are high. For if, as Benjamin suggests, one *sees* the world through language – that is, if language is the invisible modality of the visible – then nothing less than the coming into being of the world, the disclosure of the real, is here demanded of thought.

Measured against that disclosure, everything else (such as the use of language to circulate, negotiate or transmit information) seems beside the point. This leads to the challenge of Beckett’s late writing. Instead of trying to disguise an otherwise uncomfortable truth, this writing exposes the phantasms that console us as truths. These are figures and fantasies – fetishes even – that fulfil the reader’s desire, always only provisionally, by providing symbolic substitutes for what remains absent – that is, for language itself. “Subtract the phantasm [...] if you *can!*”, Nietzsche taunts. What is left is an unending effort to say –. How to transmit the rupture of language within language — to initiate an expression of the impossibility of

9. “If I were in the unenviable position of having to study my work”, Beckett famously advises Sighle Kennedy, “my points of departure would be the ‘Naught is more real’ and the ‘*Ubi nihil vales*’” (*Disjecta* 113).

expression? Every expression, instantly obsolete, demands destruction. The reader comes late to late Beckett. Those in search of a theory, whether of language or of absence, are bound to be disappointed. What remains, to repeat, is a less useful, a far more insidious thing. The imperative is transgressed whenever the present ought to be said. And it will endure long after the business of explaining Beckett's work has come to an end. Accounts of Beckett's "negativity" are by now legion;¹⁰ but even "nothing", the void itself, is not immune to such exposure.¹¹ "The destruction of illusion does not produce truth but only one more piece of ignorance, an extension of our 'empty space', an increase of our desert" (Nietzsche *Will to Power* 1967: 603).

Imperative

Express only that which cannot be expressed.

— Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*

The recoil from the word is driven in *Worstward Ho* by the imperative to "missay" and "unsay": "Say for be said. Missaid. From now say for be missaid" (81). What is remarkable is not only the intensity with which Beckett seeks to deprive speech of its transparency, as though words, once properly "missaid" or "worsened", could be turned upon the surface of language itself. Where the "word mirror" was, there words shall be.¹² When it comes to understanding Beckett's "methodology" such a theory may prove productive. But if theory is the crossing between text and meta-text, then the imperative demands nothing if not theory's end. Where theory implies company – the voice of another, one "with you in the dark" – its renunciation, we discover in *Company*, begins in solitude:

Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in

-
10. Cf. Hill (1990: 163).
11. One could call upon negative theology here: the hypostasis of the void beyond or before predication as transcendent being.
12. I borrow the phrase "word mirror" from J.M. Coetzee's *Elizabeth Costello*:
We used to believe that when the text said, "On the table stood a glass of water", there was indeed a table, and a glass of water on it, and we had only to look in the word-mirror of the text to see them.
But all that has ended. The word-mirror is broken, irreparably, it seems. (2006: 37-38).

the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were. Alone. (2009: 42)

A word properly missaid is tantamount to one that brings the need for words to an end. If such a word is singular, utterly unlike any other, it is as lonely as the referent of the word that “alone” bears within it: one. Were one to speak it, the end of the fable would be spoken too. From then on there would be no need to add text to text, no want of company between one voice and another, and little if any speech about anything at all. In the meantime, however, speech is fated to pursue that which occurs but once: the demise of speech. A process of subtraction is demanded, a backwards count, a bowing down: “Add a –. Add? Never. Bow it down. Be it bowed down. Deep down” (*WH* 89).

The task begins, as each act of reading does, with a blank page. Then the voice of *Worstward Ho* summons a body into being – a sort of figure for the reader to see (though, of course, there is nothing *there* to be seen). The figure is to the page something like an event is to space. According to a certain philosophical dispensation, space is the prerequisite upon which anything that occurs – that is to say, anything that takes place – rests. Kant sought to demonstrate the transcendental necessity of space in the opening of the first *Critique* with the argument that “we can never represent to ourselves the absence of space, though we can well think of it as empty of objects” (24). Beckett follows suit. Figures – a body, a mind, a place – are added to space so that space can be emptied of them. One must add before one can subtract. Words need to be uttered before they can be missaid.

Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still.

(*WH* 81)

To say “mind”, “body”, “place” where (there are) none is to move to reduce narrative to an ostensive form – to the most abstract condition, or “merest minimum”, of saying. As Steven Connor has it, “the very rhythm of these stunted, grudging phrases seems to enact the desire to make as little trace as possible on the immaculacy of silence, to leave no unnecessary stone turned in its itinerary to non-being” (83). Taken to its extreme, this “form” stands not merely in opposition to form, to any and all itineraries (even those that terminate in “non-being”), but is beyond those contraries, since it is tantamount to that which is anterior to form and formlessness, a marker, perhaps, of the potential that inaugurates distinction or difference. Tempting as it is to imagine it as a shapeless surface before lines are traced and meaningful marks are inscribed, even that is form of a kind.

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The imperative to say, one might say, is the zero degree of narrative, without which any “said” – body, mind, etc. – could not appear as such. But for it nothing can occur. Its function is analogous to the one space provides for Kant. Just as space, construed as a “form of intuition”, anchors the presentation of objects, and yet cannot itself be reduced to an object, so the imperative is incommensurable. Neither conceptual nor categorical, it is merely “medial” in Walter Benjamin’s sense:

... all language communicates itself [*teilt sich mit*]. Or more precisely: all language communicates itself *in itself*; it is in the purest sense the “medium” of communication. The medial, which is the immediacy [*Unmittelbarkeit*] of all spiritual communication, is the fundamental problem of the theory of language, and if one calls this immediacy magic, then the fundamental problem of language is its magic. [...] For precisely because nothing is communicated *through* language, that which communicates itself in language cannot be limited or measured from without, and this is why each language is imbued with its incommensurable, unique infinitude. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, designates its limit.

(“On language as such” 2007: 316; trans. modified)

The imperative commands: “Say on”. What it communicates is nothing but itself, for it is the medium of communication. It signifies nothing in particular, or nothing but the occurrence of signification itself. Nothing can conduce this medium to substance, yet Benjamin insists that language is immediate. This seems odd; but the word “*Unmittelbarkeit*”, when literally translated, also means “in-communicable”. What is immediate is thus also immediate: language, when conceptualised as a medium, cannot itself be mediated by language, carried from one point to another. That, however, does not mean that the medial does not exist, although its existence is of a most peculiar kind. The limit of language may be incomunicable *through* it – there is nothing one can do to *say* language’s “linguistic being”, no hope of bringing the essence of language to speech – but it indwells nevertheless. Communicating itself *in* language, it is always there, a silent accompanist to each and every utterance. What it *is* is elided in the instant it is said. It never is except as semblance. Silenced at the moment when it is summoned up, the limit is in the middle, like the indistinct line between past and future that is otherwise called the present. It marks the point from which one speaks. The magic of language is that it has already occurred: it precedes everything that is communicated or said, ever exceeding the intentions of those who speak. Whenever language is said, it is missaid: “Said is missaid. Whenever said said said missaid” (WH 97).

The imperative demands of speech that it turn upon itself and articulate its dependence on the force that binds it. *What* one says is of no matter. The

fact *that* one says: now that calls for speech.¹³ The imperative demands of speech what it cannot say: “nothing”. The reader, having advanced this far, is addressed by it too.

Say that best worse. With leastening words say least best worse. For want of worser worst. Unlessnable least best worse.

(WH 95)

“Say that best worse” amounts to more than an injunction to adopt a sceptical attitude towards one’s constructions, to cast a cold eye upon those exegetical exertions that are rewarded with a surfeit of supplementary fictions. In the wake of this injunction, every proposition is suspicious, each utterance already compromised. Whatever one might say, it will fall short of the “unlessnable least” the work demands. There is one way out of this dilemma: say nothing.

Yet silence is conspicuous, and not least because, as John Cage observes, “[t]here is always something [...] to hear. In fact, try as we may to make a silence, we cannot” (1973: 8). Not responding still requires action. And therein lies the impasse of passivity: something must be done to achieve it.¹⁴ While one is awake, keeping still requires thought. In this way, the imperative incites the transgression it prohibits. Rather like the concluding proposition of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, which insists that its reader remain silent about that which cannot be brought to speech, the imperative can demand silence only by not keeping still. In order to demand nothing, the imperative has to speak. If the “best worse” word is the unsaid word, then even the enunciation of the imperative effects the act which the imperative would itself restrict. The imperative is transgressed at the very moment when it is said. To “say that best worse” is to say nothing: Enunciated in order to be transgressed, the imperative exemplifies the impossibility of law as such.

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13. This is not the place to examine in detail the circumstances that occasion this turn. Suffice it to say that some of its implications are dramatised at the outset of Benjamin’s study of the *Trauerspiel*, where he insists that it is the task of thought not “to ensnare the truth as if it were something that comes from the outside” (28) but to account for the fact that it occurs inside, such that any “truth” thought contrives to ensnare is presupposed by the existence of language. Foucault’s studies of the “outside” are also of inestimable importance here, as it is precisely the appearance of the “inside”, the “being of language” (15), that coincides, for Foucault, with the demise of the subject.
14. Compare Kafka: “Two possibilities: making oneself infinitely small or being so. The second is perfection, that is to say, inactivity, the first is beginning, that is to say, action” (1991: 95).

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If the imperative is to be, then it requires its transgression. And since it incorporates its infraction as the necessary condition for its very articulation, fidelity to the imperative – the effort to answer its demand, be it in writing or with speech – is marked, just as every law is, by an inherent violation.¹⁵ The law's inability to emerge *ex nihilo* – to ground itself by itself – testifies to a regress that cannot be overcome, but also to the desire that quickens the momentum of *Worstward Ho*.

Saying

If he were to utter after all?
– Beckett, *Company*

The effort to answer the imperative without at once disavowing its demand is destined to fail, “doomed”, to say with the narrator of *Ill Seen Ill Said*, “to endure” (2009: 46). That outcome is not unique to late Beckett. It can be expected, Adorno says, from philosophy: “If philosophy can be defined at all, it is an effort to express things one cannot speak about, to help express the non-identical despite the fact that expressing it identifies it at the same time” (*Hegel* 1993: 102). The need to say on until “no how on”, to continue to speak until one speaks without the said, demands of every word that it coil upon itself, mortify its occurrence as word, and invalidate itself as soon as uttered. The demand is incessant: it requires the continuous deferral of the said, since the said (or the “identical” in Adorno’s terms) amounts to a capitulation before the status quo. Deferral can be sustained only as long as there is no ending; or rather, for as long as there is only ending and no end.

Either way, one must go on. The “effort to express things one cannot speak about” calls for an unlimited expenditure of energy, demands more than can be endured. Beset by prevarication, digression and repetition, the task is prone to produce symptoms of the imperative that governs its procedures. Like the Superego, which avails of every opportunity to strengthen itself, and overlooks no transgression no matter how minor or inconspicuous, with each failure to answer its demand the imperative grows ever more insistent.

It issues from me, it fills me, it clamours against my walls, it is not mine, I can't stop it, I can't prevent it, from tearing me, racking me, assailing me. It is not mine, I have none, I have no voice and must speak, that is all I know.

(Unnamable 307)

The momentum of these words, culled from the Unnamable’s monologue, falters on “it”. “It” figures the exposure to the imperative: mimed in language, “it” consigns every attempt at fidelity to its origin – every effort to

15. This point is developed by Comay (1993: 343-345).

make “it” yield a transitive object – to repetition. Speaking in a voice that reveals nothing, or nothing but the endless need for its own explanation, the Unnamable is driven to contrive a method to put an end to repetition, as if it might yet find the words capable of suspending the imperative’s demand. “What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later” (*Unnamable* 307).

There is no secret combination of words or gestures that would attenuate the imperative’s demand. Nothing will satisfy it – nothing, that is, but language itself. We share the Unnamable’s predicament; we speak a language that is not our own, a language which speaks us, lends us a voice through which we become real to ourselves, before we can speak of it. Whoever is immersed in language, yet in pursuit of it – desiring the merely medial, language itself – has already reached his or her destination. Issuing from language’s unstemmable source, the imperative always has the first word; for words can be recognised as such only on the basis of *its* word. The word of the imperative comes before all others, such that those others can be determined and understood. To understand one need not willingly subject oneself to its command, and remain mindful of those rules that are laid down by semantic or syntactic decree. To ask where its word originates may lead to an insight, although it is not likely to vindicate the freedom of the one who asks. Before the question there is the imperative. That is the law.

Whose words? Ask in vain. Or not in vain if say no knowing. No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One. No words for one whose words. One? It. No words for it whose words. Better worse so.

(WH 88)

The restless equivocation between “him”, “one” and “it”, each a word in place of the pre-predicative, is possessed both of the question’s impossibility and the necessity of answering it. Beckett’s procedure is again brought to the fore. “Whose words?” functions as a kind of “correlative of what it wishes to discover” (Levinas *Otherwise than Being* 1998: 24); but what the question begets as its correlative – the ascription of words to a being who speaks them – the response undoes. The question yields a finite quantity of possibilities, and these are conscientiously un-worded, as it were. This may be a strategy designed to attain what J.M. Coetzee calls “empty style” (“Beckett” 49), where “style” is understood as “consolation, [...] as redemption, the grace of language” (47). Be that as it may, we are left where the Unnamable starts. “It” names a language purified to the presupposition of articulation, a language from which all traces of style, each and every expressive eccentricity, have been erased.

Though “language” resolutely withstands the imposition of a name, what transpires in *Worstward Ho* cannot be reduced to that claim. The impossibility of naming – of naming that which is not, or rather the “not”

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that language is¹⁶ – sustains its momentum. What is unnamable is the name, which, as Walter Benjamin contends, “knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication” (“On Language as Such” 318). There can be no imperative without language; and that is because language is transcendental in Kant’s sense. If, in the final analysis, the imperative *is* language, this is because the absence of language cannot be imagined.

[T]he greater or lesser degree of consciousness that is apparently (or really) involved in [...] communication cannot alter the fact that we cannot imagine a total absence of language in nothing. The existence of something entirely without relationship to language is an Idea”.

(“On language as such” 315; trans. modified)

“The void. How try say? How try fail? No try no fail. Say only –” (*WH* 86). To speak the Idea, the void that admits of no immediate recoil into something, would be not to speak without language, as though the threshold or abyss could be mimed with an inscription of a dash and the imperative thereby set to rest. Nor would this be speech *about* language, speech that is at a metaphorical distance from language, let alone silence or speechlessness. What kind of speech is it then? A kind of its own. Another kind of speech altogether.

Since another language, a language which is “not”, tarries with every speech act, even an affirmation of absence is compromised. Every use of language, as well as every definition of it, communicates this other language in addition to what is said. The latter language insists rather than exists; “it” accompanies the execution of every act of transmission and insinuates itself into every intention to mean. Ever with speech, and yet never at one with speech, this clandestine accompanist is tantamount to that which can “[n]ever to naught be brought. Never by naught be nulled” – the “unnullable least” (*WH* 95). If something lies beyond or behind it, it is that to which consciousness cannot achieve purchase – something more akin to matter than to mind – the irreducible involution of substance at the genesis of thought.

What words for when then? How almost they still ring. As somehow from some soft of mind they ooze. From it in it ooze. How all but unimane. To last unlessenable least how loath to leassten. For then in utmost dim to unutter least most all.

(*WH* 96)

16. Cf. Hamacher (2008; 310).

Enough

“Gnawing to be gone. Less no good. Worse no good. Only one good. Gone. Gone for good. Till then gnaw on. All gnaw on. To be gone” (*WH* 100). Were the voice able to isolate itself from language, from the language that cannot accede to the imperative that gnaws at it, perhaps it would stand a chance. But until then “[v]oid cannot go” (87).

There is solace of a kind in this. Whatever conceptual difficulty is ours in the failure to imagine the inexistence of language, we are aware that the voice shares it too. What would be left were one’s voice to vanish? What kind of company could one share if one no longer had oneself to listen to?

When Emmanuel Levinas sets out to imagine the annihilation of things an inanimate species starts to stir. “There remains after this imaginary destruction of all things, not something, but the fact that *there is* [*il ya a*]”:

The absence of all things returns like a presence: like the site wherein everything has sunken, like an atmospheric density, like a plentitude of emptiness or like the murmur of silence. There is, after this destruction of things and beings, the “field of forces” of existing, impersonal. Something that is neither a subject nor a substantive. The fact of existing, which imposes itself when there is nothing more. And it is anonymous: there is no one and nothing that might take this existence upon itself. [...] An existence that returns, whatever be the negation by which one sets it aside. This is something like a pure existing that cannot be remitted.

(*Time and the Other* 46-47)

“There is” will trouble, like a parasite impervious to extermination, all endeavours to return to the *tabula rasa*, the blank surface at the start. It will remain ineffaceable, an ongoing obstacle to beginning afresh. Every claim to origination or originality, every insistence of purity, is subject to the hushed murmuring of the prior fact of existing. Like background noise, “there is” is always there, threatening, pulling after sense, insinuating itself, oozing within everything said. No negation will disarm it; no conjecture will elucidate it. This is the merest possible fact: *there is*. “There is” comes before the first, as zero comes before one.

The fact of existence returns with every attempt to negate “it”; “there is no more *this*, not *that*; there is not ‘something’” (*Existence* 1988: 58), Levinas insists elsewhere. That there is “no one and nothing that might take this existence upon itself” is of a piece both of a life in language and in time. For “there is” is tantamount to an affirmation of the difference of the present to itself – at once an opening to the future and the irremediable loss that consigns the present to the past. Everything passes in time but still there is time. Time, at least, remains.

Even an epiphany, an inexplicable intervention from the outside (or a sudden appeal to the idea of one), may not be enough to set repetition to rest,

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to still the urge to return to the point before the beginning, to a time before the “gnawing”, to the blank before “on”. Expectation need not precede its arrival. The reader of *Worstward Ho* is as ill prepared for its appearance as the voice itself is.

Enough. Sudden enough. Sudden all far. No move and sudden all far. All least. Three pins. One pinhole. In dimmost dim. Vasts apart. At bounds of boundless void. Whence no farther. Best worse no farther. Nohow worse. Nohow naught. Nohow on.

(WH 103)

At last, a stop. It is as if the voice were confronted with a manifestation of the object of its innermost desire: a language capable of giving itself to itself, a language that yields itself as something more than mere language. A language possessed of such immediacy that it tantalises the voice with the ecstasy of its own annihilation.

A tiny hole leads outside, though what lies beyond cannot be desried through it. Suddenly the three pins of the text – the voice, the imperative and the reader, or the three “shades” that inhabit its pages – are poised at the threshold of an exit. “At bounds of boundless void. Whence no farther.” Something is about to occur, for once and for all.

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No sooner has the end been reached – “Nohow naught. Nohow on” – than the “anonymous existence”, that which is neither a “subject nor a substantive”, returns. But not, *pace* Levinas, as the fact of “pure existing which cannot be remitted”, and nor to amount, as Badiou confidently avers, to “grace without concept, an overall configuration in which one will be able to say ‘no-how on’. Not an ‘on’ ordained or prescribed to the shades, but simply ‘nohow on’ – the ‘on’ of saying reduced, or leastened, to the purity of its possible cessation” (2005: 119). The epiphany, such that it is, emerges not from without but from within. Far from rupturing the surface of language, it shimmers across it. Where it appears to offer the promise of a crossing from the hither of the text to the yonder point where reading and writing reach their end, it is an end that cannot be said to exist without language. There remains, to repeat, the irremissible existence of language itself.

At the end of *Worstward Ho* language – “nohow on” – returns as the beginning: “Said nohow on” (103). For some the circle might appear to close, a consoling glimmer of “cessation” in sight; but in the wake of this final gesture, which returns the reader to the time before reading, the time before writing, nothing's imperative comes. “Say for be said. Missaid. From now on say for be missaid” (81). What has been said may count for nothing, but next time, perhaps, it will be “better worse all” (101). Now is that time. On.

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