

**Inexpression:**

**Desire and Language in Samuel Beckett's short prose**



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## Acknowledgements

Being a space for a more light-hearted tone than the rest of the thesis, I want to start by thanking this page for existing; at the time of writing, very near the end of a very long process, this represents a nice change of pace. I also want to use this space to identify the source of the cover image, a painting by Bram van Velde, which was retrieved from the web pages of the National Library of the Netherlands<sup>1</sup>. That aside, the most important contributor to my work with this thesis – and deserving of my most sincere gratitude – has, of course, been my supervisor Charley Armstrong. His admirable patience and consistently helpful and challenging comments have been integral for the development and progress of this thesis. Furthermore, I want to thank Zeljka Svrljuga and Jena Habegger-Conti for constructive conversations and encouraging comments along the way, and Øyunn Hestetun for providing interesting and useful source material. Academic acknowledgements are also due to my teacher at Åsane Folkehøgskole, John Erik Bertelsen, for making me properly aware of Samuel Beckett, and for encouraging my then newly discovered interest in Beckett's work. On a rather more social and everyday level, the fifteen-odd months spent on this thesis would have been immensely less endurable had it not been for my fellow students at the IF study room – with a special mention going to the members of Språkspytt. Excessive coffee breaks, pub quizzes and jokes about reference styles – particularly jokes concerning *ibid.* – make even the most frustrating and unproductive days easier to get through. Less directly thesis-related thanks go out to my parents, for always encouraging my interest in reading and writing, and for their ever-present support regarding any academic choice I have ever made. Last, but not least, respect must be paid to the man himself: Samuel, you grumpy old pessimist, thanks for nothing – in all its shapes and meanings, with all its possibilities. I hope you're enjoying the expressionless void in the end.

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<sup>1</sup> 22 Nov 2010: <<http://www.kb.nl/bc/koopman/1976-1989/c28-en.html>>

## Samandrag

I denne oppgåva tek eg føre meg tre tekstar av Samuel Beckett: "First Love", "The End" og "Texts for Nothing". Målet mitt er å avdekke dei forskjellige uttrykka for begjær av ulike slag, gjennom ei nærlesing av dei tre tekstane og ved bruk av konsept og idear frå dei litterære teoriane psykoanalyse og poststrukturalisme. Eit viktig omgrep i tolkinga mi er 'inexpression', eit omgrep som vanskeleg lar seg omsetje, men som står for den grunnleggjande mangelen som ligg til grunn for begjær. Eg tar utgangspunkt i at det å feile inngår i Beckett sitt 'livsoppdrag' kva gjeld kunst, det er ein viktig del av hans syn på kunst. I "First Love" er det først og fremst forteljaren sine problem med å uttrykke kjenslene sine som står i fokus – eit resultat av faren sin død, og det eg kallar ein slags 'emosjonell forstopping'. Forteljaren i "The End" forsøker lenge å vere ein del av samfunnet han vandrar rundt i, men innser etter kvart at forsøka er fånyttas. Han slår seg til ro med si einsemd, og tar til takke med å overleve tom tiggjar, og eige så godt som ingenting. Buande i eit lite båthus, merker ein at døden kjem stadig nærmare, fram til han fortel om ein visjon eller ein slags draum han har om at døden endeleg kjem og frigjer han frå alt håp om eit betre liv. I "Texts for Nothing" er forteljaren knapt nok ein person, kanskje meir berre ei stemme, som forsøker å finne dei rette orda til å avslutte, til å bli ferdig med forteljing, med ord, for alltid. I eit forsøksvis konkluderande kapittel trekk eg fram at Beckett sitt livsoppdrag med kunsten sin – viktigheita av å feile – samt den alltid tilstadesverande usikkerheita i tekstane hans, gjer det vanskeleg å nå ein handfast konklusjon.

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## 1. Introduction

In a dialogue with Georges Duthuit, Samuel Beckett brings up the work of an acquaintance of his, Dutch painter Bram van Velde, to illustrate his opinion on contemporary art. Beckett expresses his admiration for van Velde's work, claiming that more painters should strive towards "[t]he expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, *no desire to express, together with the obligation to express*" (Beckett 1965: 103; emphasis added). This blatantly paradoxical utterance takes the shape of a narrow edge upon which I intend my thesis to balance. Although the context for the artistic ideal mentioned here was a discussion primarily concerning visual arts – in which expectations with regards to intelligibility and meaning are arguably lower than in literature – I shall argue that there are vivid traces of that ideal present also in Beckett's own work. Through presenting here a thorough explication of Beckett's statement, this introduction shall clarify what it is that I aim for, what I aim to say, with and in this thesis. Let it be understood right away that my main emphasis – as indeed suggested by use of italics in the above citation – will be on the notion of desire, and in relation to this, on the proposed obligation to express.

Before treating the quote as such, the term 'express' must be more precisely situated within this discourse. Preminger and Brogan cite an 18<sup>th</sup> century source on literary expression which claims that "[f]rom a literary point of view, [expression] is considered the representation of a thought" (Preminger and Brogan: 396). For my initial treatment of Beckett's quote, I shall stay close to a relatively uncontroversial definition of 'expression', such as the one above. That is to say, I shall treat expression mainly as a linguistic or symbolic representation of a thought, feeling, intention, etc., while not ruling out discussion of other relevant definitions. Meanwhile, it is worth noting that Preminger and Brogan's source later claims that "the poet or orator who has beautiful ideas and no power of

expressing them is doomed to fail” (Preminger and Brogan: 396). Furthermore, Louis Hjelmslev’s model of definition states that an “expressionless content or a contentless [expression] are both impossible” (Preminger and Brogan: 398). Both the doomed failure and the contentless – empty – expression are related to inexpression, or the expression of lack, which I shall discuss more at length later in this introduction.

As for Beckett’s artistic ideal, I refer to it as blatantly paradoxical not only because it negates itself; it also appears to (partly) oppose ‘common sense’ – provided one can accept such a term in the first place. An expression that there is nothing to express appears to negate itself, but not necessarily common sense. Judging by common sense, the expression that “there is nothing to express” seems fairly uncontroversial in a context where one feels that there is nothing to say. Yet it contradicts itself in the simple truth that, if nothing else, there is something to express in the form of that exact expression: “there is nothing to express”. Moreover, as a statement about art, more specifically about literature, the phrase expresses something else: that art is not dependent upon meaning; that art can meaningfully exist independently of an inherent meaning; that expression of something – of meaningful content – is not a prerequisite for artistic expression. Thus what Beckett claims here is a liberation of art from meaning; from «doing a little better the same old thing» (Beckett 1965: 103); ultimately, from the reduction of art to simple expression.

Moving on, we encounter the two interrelated claims that there is “nothing with which to express [and] nothing from which to express”. Not only contradicting itself, this claim also challenges a commonsensical view on expression, on expressing; the words with which to express are right there, yet he uses them to express that they are not ‘there’, even that they *are not*, that there is no(-such-)thing. Intuitively, this seems to be false; he must be saying something else – or something more. We might want to re-call, to call upon again, the previous claim: there is nothing to express. Common sense may suggest that we use words to

express *something*. But there is nothing with which to express that there is nothing to express. We may use words to utter the phrase “there is nothing to express”, but following the inherent paradox in that phrase, we will then have expressed. It is the uttering of the phrase which creates that paradox. If there is nothing to express, then we cannot use that expression – nor any other. There is nothing with which to express that there is nothing to express.

With his first claim, Beckett liberated art from meaning. However, with this second claim, it appears that meaning has caught up again – that he is again caught up with meaning. If there is indeed nothing with which to express (that there is nothing to express), then the mentioned liberation of art appears impossible, unattainable. Just as the phrase “there is nothing to express” effaces its own meaning through its utterance, so does the attempt at artistic expression free of meaning annihilate its own goal – through being artistic, through being expression, but most importantly through having a goal, an intention, *a meaning*. Beckett appears, then, to wish for art to express the impossibility of its own liberation from meaning.

Approaching the end of the quote, we find that there is also “no power to express.” Reading ‘power’ as equivalent to ‘strength’ or ‘force’, we may see this as an act of surrendering to the impossibility at hand, which serves more than anything as a way of emphasizing what has already been expressed – as if to underline the lack, the impossibility of it all. However, we might read into it a different type of power, one which hints at the inner workings of language in a more abstract sense. Through admitting a lack of power to express, Beckett implies a lack of power over language as a whole. If there is no power to express, it is such because we – as users of language – cannot pin down a linguistic expression to mean (or not mean) exactly one precise meaning. Beyond the social conventions which constitute our everyday understanding of language, we have no governing power over language. Here, yet again, Beckett performs an act of liberation: language is not a slave of the user – the user is a

slave of language. We are all always at risk of misunderstanding, of being misunderstood, of creating ambiguities in and through our use of language. As such, before moving on to perhaps the most important part of Beckett's statement, I shall here make an attempt at paraphrasing what has been made out of the statement so far: there is nothing with which to express that there is nothing to express, because language will not allow it.

I have so far only briefly mentioned the term 'desire'. The simple reason is that for this thesis, 'desire' is too important a concept to touch upon without a proper introduction. Furthermore, precisely because it is such an important term, I shall defiantly refrain from trying to answer the question of what exactly desire is. In fact, I shall defiantly refrain from assuming that desire necessarily *is anything*, in the sense that it can be nailed down by use of other words. Like Peter Brooks, I too claim to be aware "that 'desire' is a concept too broad, too fundamental, almost too banal to be defined" (Brooks: 37). Rather I shall attempt to expose the primary texts to close readings which intend to bring out the expression of desire – or, in the words of Brooks, I shall try to "say something about the forms that [desire] takes in narrative, how it represents itself, the dynamic it generates" (37). I say "the expression" not because there is only one expression or one way to express desire, but because I refer to expression in a general sense – perhaps in somewhat the same sense as Beckett himself, when he approaches the end of his quote by bringing in a lack of desire to express.

I claim that I shall not try to define 'desire', yet it seems irresponsible to avoid discussion of the term altogether. Therefore, with the help of Jacques Lacan, I shall try to clarify not *what desire is*, but rather *how it is*. Lacan constructs a triad consisting of need, demand and desire, which can be briefly summed up as follows: 'need' stands for the basic, biological urge for that which keeps us alive – food, warmth, human touch; 'demand' stands for the linguistic articulation of this need, the act of expressing it; 'desire', finally, comes to be as a result of the inexpressible in need having passed through the expression of demand. In



*Écrits*, Lacan articulates it as follows: "...in so far as [man's] needs are subjected to demand, they return to him alienated. [...] That which is thus alienated in needs constitutes [...] an inability, it is supposed, to be articulated in demand, but it re-appears in something it gives rise to that presents itself in man as desire." (316-17) Paraphrasing Lacan does seem somewhat risky, but in simpler words, I read this quote as follows: need is expressed through demand, but with the fulfilment of need follows a sense of dissatisfaction, a sense of lack. Desire shows itself here as a question unasked as well as unanswered for; it cannot be expressed and it cannot be fulfilled. Rather, desire comes to pass as inexpression, it takes up the place of that precise lack in expression which itself constitutes desire.

Having expressly stated that I shall not explicitly define 'desire', it may seem contradictory that I shall shortly refer to a definition suggested by OED. However, I bring this in not for definitional purposes, but rather to demonstrate an important aspect in Beckett's quote, namely the constant and, yet again, somewhat paradoxical presence of lack. As I have tried to demonstrate above, this presence of lack is not equivalent to an absence; that is to say, it is not so much a matter of something's lack of presence, but rather the strange presence which is constituted by that lack of presence. Analogically speaking, it is the (amputated) limb in which the wounded may experience sensations of phantom pain. As such, what is present in the phrase "no desire to express" is the lack of desire. The notion of lack is also implied in OED's suggestion that desire may be "a longing, properly for a thing once possessed and now missed; a sense of loss."<sup>2</sup> If we assume that desire has its origin in the lack of that which desire is directed at, we may read "no desire to express" – in other words, the stated lack of desire to express – as the paradoxical expression of that exact desire. "The

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<sup>2</sup> 'desire', Oxford English Dictionary, 23 Sep. 2009:  
<[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50061838?query\\_type=word&queryword=desire&first=1&max\\_to\\_show=10&sort\\_type=alpha&result\\_place=2](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50061838?query_type=word&queryword=desire&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=2)>

expression that there is [...] no desire to express” thus may present us with, as I have claimed above, the desire to inexpress.

I shall get back to the notion of inexpression momentarily, with regards to the very final phrase in Beckett’s quote, about the obligation to express. At present, however, I shall try to explain what it is I aim to do in the main chapters of this thesis, and how it ties up with the quote I have been explicating in this introduction. The texts to be discussed are short stories or short prose texts, all written by Samuel Beckett, in which I see different forms of desire as assuming important roles in the expression of the texts. That is to say, in all of these texts there is a presence which is constituted through an absence, a lack. This presence, I shall argue, is that of desire, and it is my intention to reveal the expression of this presence – how the various desires come to surface; how they are expressed by the characters and the narrator, as well as by the author; and what constitutes the absence that desire feeds on.

The obligation to express concludes Beckett’s statement about artistic expression, and it is the only part of the sentence in which there is a stated presence rather than an absence. The obligation to express is there, as a force, in the artistic expression – in fact, there is nothing but obligation; everything else is characterised by its absence. Thus follows the question “what do you do when ‘I can’t’ meets ‘I must’?” (Harvey in Casanova: 85). In a typically Beckettian paradox, impossibility of expression meets obligation – the sum of which, as I shall argue, is inexpression. As for obligation, it can be read to mean a requirement; the artist is required to express by nature of being an artist. Furthermore, the artist may *be obliged*, in the intransitive meaning which may suggest gratitude, being indebted, to art. The artist brings upon him- or herself the requirement to repay his or her debt to art by artistic expression. However, expression has already been denied by Beckett. The artist Samuel Beckett is indebted, required, to express. But there is no expression, no means for expression – there is only obligation. Thus the notion of ‘inexpression’, a term classified

by OED as a nonce word; it was used once by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a letter, about his own face, to express “Want or absence of expression”<sup>3</sup>. My use of it shall be to refer to that form of expression which Beckett appears to aim at with his claim: the expression of the lack which constitutes desire, the signifier for the present absence, the nothing which actively takes up the space of something. Derrida says about the trace that it “is not a presence but is rather the simulacrum of a presence that dislocates, displaces, and refers beyond itself. The trace has, properly speaking, no place, for effacement belongs to the very structure of the trace” (Derrida 1973: 156). My use of the term inexpression is similar, yet different. Rather than referring to an absence which is similar to presence, I direct my attention towards the absence in its own right, as something which has a presence.

The texts in question are the three early prose texts “First Love,” “The End” and “Texts for Nothing”. With regards to the latter text I intend to pay slightly more attention to desires directly related to expression in itself; the artistic expression as such will be central to my reading, more so than with the first two. Discussion of the two former texts will focus more on the plot and the actions of the characters, and how their desires are expressed through the voice of the narrator. The reason for this choice, I shall argue, is a difference in expression, in the specific use of language to relate the stories: “First Love” and “The End” are more focused on displaying a story with recognisable characters, with beginning and end, with a plot that, more or less, moves forward. “Texts for Nothing” to a greater degree centres its narration around stylistic aspects such as repetition and a more complex narrative, as well as mental or inner activity rather than physical or verbal action which often drive the plot of more traditional stories.

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<sup>3</sup> ‘inexpression’, Oxford English Dictionary, 2 Nov. 2010: <[http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/findword?query\\_type=word&queryword=inexpression&find.x=0&find.y=0&find=Find+word](http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/findword?query_type=word&queryword=inexpression&find.x=0&find.y=0&find=Find+word)>

I mentioned the central role of desire in these texts, but that is not the only link between them. As we shall see, publication history connects at least three of the texts: “First Love” was originally written in French in 1946, under the title “Premier amour”. The text was initially part of a planned collection of short stories called *Quatre nouvelles*. However, because some of his earlier works were accepted by a small Parisian publishing house called Minuit, Beckett chose to put the publishing of *Quatre nouvelles* on hold. As such, “First Love” was not published until 1970, then as a stand-alone text, followed by an English translation in 1973. This first publication of the story happened to some extent against Beckett’s own will, as he felt forced to publish something relatively quickly after having received the Nobel Prize in 1969 (Ackerley & Gontarski: 197, 372, 454, 473). Part of the planned *Quatre nouvelles* was also “La Fin”<sup>4</sup>, which was written in 1946 and later translated into English as “The End”. The English translation was first published in the Paris-based English magazine *Merlin* in 1954, and later most notably – at least for the purposes of this thesis – in a collection titled *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, by Grove Press in 1967 (ibid. 172, 195, 369). As the title suggests, this collection also included “Texts for Nothing”, which were originally written in French in 1951 as “Textes pour rien”. Various selections of the English translation were published in different literary magazines from the late 1950s, until all thirteen texts were compiled and published as one collection in 1967, both in *No’s Knife* and in the above-mentioned *Stories and Texts for Nothing* (ibid. 560-61).

In addition to stating my intentions and giving some background information, I have attempted, with this introductory chapter, to make a meta-point of sorts. My reading of Beckett’s statement on artistic ideal is both theoretically and methodically similar to what I will aim at with the forthcoming readings of the primary texts. That is to say that my approach

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<sup>4</sup> An earlier version of this text was called “Suite”. There was also a version of the text in two parts, “Suite et fin”, of which the first was published in a literary journal, by Simone de Beauvoir. The second part was, to Beckett’s dismay, refused by Beauvoir (ibid. 547). I shall discuss the importance of these alternative titles in the second chapter.

will largely be one of close reading, with the application of mainly psychoanalytical and post-structural concepts in accordance with the points that my readings bring forth. The reasoning behind this choice is first and foremost grounded in the impression that so-called applied theory – that is, trying to read a text in accordance with a particular set of ideas and concepts, or a specific ‘school’ – is bound to upset the independent and individual reading that I intend it to be. That is to not say, of course, that ‘anything goes’ as long as it makes sense to me and is in accordance with my reading. Rather, one may consider this an evasive choice of sorts: unable to stay true to the ideas of one particular branch of literary theory, I choose a mix-and-match approach – only leaning slightly towards the postmodernist tendency towards a fragmentary reading.

It is worth noting that such a tendency may serve to privilege the details and peculiarities of singular passages over an overarching sense of progress, over the totality of the bigger picture. I call this a postmodernist tendency in accordance with Jean-Francois Lyotard’s definition of postmodernism: In “Defining the Postmodern” he observes a “sort of decay in the confidence placed [...] in the idea of progress” (1613). Furthermore, Leitch claims that Lyotard “urged his readers to ‘wage a war on totality’ and to critique ‘grand narratives’ that purport to explain everything” (Leitch: 1032). It follows from this that I shall not make an attempt to ‘explain’ Beckett in terms of a totality or progress that I claim to see in his works. Rather, I shall try to uncover and bring out the expressions and passages that I deem of interest to the issue at hand – desire and language – and examine possible connections within and between these expressions.

Historically, the birth of the method that is generally termed ‘close reading’ is attributed to the school of New Criticism. This branch of literary theory is typically branded a formalist theory, because of its nearly exclusive focus on literary form, on the qualities that are inherent in the text; contextual, historical and intentional issues were of little interest for

the New Critical school. Terry Eagleton, in *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, claims that to call for close reading is:

to do more than insist on due attentiveness to the text. It inescapably suggests an attention to *this* rather than to something else: to the 'words on the page' rather than to the contexts which produced and surround them. [Close reading] was the beginnings of a 'reification' of the literary work, the treatment of it as an object in itself, which was to be triumphantly consummated in the American New Criticism. (44)

W. K. Wimsatt and M. C. Beardsley listed five 'axiomatic' propositions in their seminal article "The Intentional Fallacy". These axioms, briefly paraphrased, will here serve as a short summary of the main principles of New Criticism: 1. Although the author can be regarded as the 'cause' of the poem, the author's intention cannot be regarded as the standard by which to judge the poem. 2. If the author is successful in what he or she intended, the intention is readily available in the poem itself. If the author is unsuccessful, we must go outside the poem to find the intention. 3. A poem is treated all at once, as *one* complex of meaning; there is not an irrelevant part in a successful poem. 4. The thoughts and feelings of a poem are ascribed to the dramatic speaker rather than to the author. 5. A revised poem may better express the original intention than the original poem. However, the original intention cannot have been the intention when producing the revised poem.

Although close reading as a method of interpretation has its origin in the New Critical branch of theory, it is not set in stone that the performance, as it were, of a close reading must necessarily stay true to the axioms of New Criticism. As mentioned above, I shall rather turn to aspects of psychoanalysis and post-structuralism where my readings suggest that these may serve to clarify my points. Any such use of theoretical concepts or ideas will be properly introduced and explained in relation with the passage to which it is applied, and as such I will not go into further detail on these concepts at present.

## 2. The intolerable encounter: “First Love”

‘Love,’ to the narrator of “First Love,” is more than anything a word. He has heard of it – “at home, in school, in brothel and at church” (34) – even read books about it; in short, he is aware of its existence, even its ‘appearance’, but he has never experienced it. In *A Lover’s Discourse: Fragments*, Roland Barthes writes about love that “[t]here occurs an encounter which is intolerable, on account of the joy within it, and [...] man is thereby reduced to nothing” (Barthes 1990: 55). Interestingly, this statement may plausibly be read as a somewhat crude summary of the plot in “First Love”. Intolerable joy shall be a central theme of my reading, and as such it is important to understand the close connection between this intolerability and the notion of desire. Jacques Lacan uses the term ‘jouissance’<sup>5</sup> to refer to the desire to “transgress the prohibitions imposed on [...] enjoyment, to go ‘beyond the pleasure principle’” (Evans: 91-2). ‘Jouissance’ is the domain which lies beyond the limits of enjoyment, and as such ‘jouissance’ is also pain – because, as desires go, it cannot be satisfied. The intolerable part of the joy is precisely that part of it which constitutes desire, that part in which is grounded the desire to surpass possibility of attainment. In this chapter I shall explore in particular the problematic roles of Lulu and the dead father in Beckett’s story, the importance of space, and the narrator’s troubles with love and expression. I intend to show how the intolerable in joy is expressed through language; how the narrator’s desires are exposed through a lack of expression; how the intolerable in joy is also the impossible of desire.

“There occurs an encounter,” states Barthes; however, in this story there are two important encounters, both intolerable in their own way. The story sets off by connecting the two encounters: “I associate, rightly or wrongly, my marriage with the death of my father, in time. That other links exist, on other levels, between these two affairs, is not impossible”

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Jouissance’ is derived from ‘joir’ – an Old French word meaning ‘to enjoy’.

(Beckett 1995: 25). The first encounter, then, is with the death of the father; the second is with a woman, specifically with Lulu, a prostitute. In her article “The Father, Love, and Banishment”, Julia Kristeva sees Lulu as a substitute for the protection previously provided by the father. Love, she claims, “finally appears in reality under the guise of a paternal corpse” (Kristeva: 249), thus creating a strong connection between love and biological matter. This connection is reinforced by the narrator, through his “inscribing the letters of Lulu in an old heifer pat or flat on [his] face in the mud under the moon trying to tear up the nettles by the roots” (Beckett 1995: 34). Lacking a proper understanding of what love is, connecting it thus to something tangible, something material, may represent a way for the narrator to make it easier to relate to what he perceives to be a strange and unfamiliar feeling.

The connection between love and biological waste – most prominently, faeces and dead bodies – is a recurring one in “First Love”. Early on in the story, before his eviction, the narrator is troubled by constipation. He is so troubled, in fact, that his relatives in the house have the time they need to empty his room while he is doing his business, so to speak – or at least trying to: “One day, on my return from stool, I found my room locked and my belongings in a heap before the door. This will give you some idea of how constipated I was, at this juncture” (28). Biological waste is brought up even earlier in the story, when the narrator visits the father’s graveyard:

Personally I have no bone to pick with graveyards, I take the air there willingly, perhaps more willingly than elsewhere, when take air I must. The smell of corpses, distinctly perceptible under those of grass and humus mingled, I do not find unpleasant, a trifle on the sweet side perhaps, a trifle heady, but how infinitely preferable to what the living emit, their feet, teeth, armpits, arses, sticky foreskins and frustrated ovules. And when my father’s remains join in, however modestly, I can almost shed a tear.  
(25-6)

Here, a subversion occurs of the typical relationship between living and dead: the narrator admits to feeling more comfortable among the dead than among the living. It is from the latter that the foul smell of waste is emitted, whereas the dead fade into their natural surroundings



with minimal resistance. Central in the passage above is also the nearly-shed tear: finally the narrator can come close to feeling something, some kind of love, for his father in death – or rather, for his biological remains. The act of writing Lulu’s name in cow manure may work similarly to the nearly-shed tear: through ‘projecting’ Lulu – represented here only by name, the only part of her that he, through his act of renaming, can possess – onto waste-matter, he can objectify his feelings, he can make the dreaded ‘love’ into something material. As such, biological waste turns into a means to express desire.

The fatherly protection that Kristeva brings up, is first constituted in the form of a room in the father’s house – a room from which the narrator, soon after the father’s death, is evicted by the remaining inhabitants of the house. A similar sense of protection is represented by Lulu, particularly when she takes him in and lets him stay in her parlour. Indeed, she even allows him to rearrange the room according to his liking: he quickly moves all the furniture, save a single couch, out into the corridor. Furthermore, their initial meeting place may represent a protective space: a bench, ‘walled in’ on two sides by majestic trees, and on the rear side by a mound of dirt, at first serves the role of a room in its own right – a personal space, in the sense that it is reminiscent of the room from which the narrator was evicted. Soon, however, the space is invaded by Lulu, and is thus transformed into an image that represents her alone: “to speak of the bench, as it appeared to me at evening, is to speak of her, for me” (31-2). As such, the image of Lulu does indeed seem to represent a sense of protection. But is it the protection in itself that the narrator loves, or might there be something more to it?

The first sentence of the story may yet again provide a hint: despite the narrator’s use of the word ‘marriage’, this is in no way a case of lawfully pronounced man and wife; rather, as the narrator suggests, it is “a kind of union in spite of all” (45). Lawful or not, however, there does seem to be a sense of affection between Lulu and the narrator – a sort of reciprocal

dependency or emotional attachment. His love for her is clearly enough expressed, although the focus appears to be more on the expression itself than on the feeling – or rather, perhaps, on the apparent disparity between the two. The expression – that is, the name ‘love’ – is something that he can relate to, it is graspable because it is a mere word. The problem occurs with the realization that, although ‘love’ is a word much like any other word, its referent *love* is not a feeling much like any other feeling. Love demands something from him – it demands expression, materialization. “Powerless to utter itself, powerless to speak, love nonetheless wants to proclaim itself, to exclaim, to write itself everywhere,” Barthes claims in *A Lover’s Discourse* (77-8). But there is nothing in the word ‘love’ to make it stand out in the manner that the feeling does. This disparity between word and referent constitutes a sense of misrepresentation – as if love disconnects language from the world. It is for this reason that the narrator can relate to the word, to the name, but not to the feeling: “Yes, I loved her, it’s the name I gave, still give alas, to what I was doing then” (34). Uncertain of how to relate to how he feels, but certain that the feeling must be materialized somehow, he tries to transform love by connecting it to a set of rather concrete, and less complicated, actions: he writes Lulu’s name in cow manure, he thinks of her for up to half an hour a day, he visits the bench in the hope that he will find her there again. By assigning his actions with the name ‘love’, he betrays a desire to diminish the gap between signifier and signified, between language and the reality outside of language, that which language is an attempt to represent. Treating love as an action can be seen as an attempt to change the premises for expressing love: if it can be expressed through a simple act – if love can be simplified in the sense that it can be *done* – then he can claim the ability to do it, and the misrepresentation is, in a way, rectified.

Upon one of his repeated visits to the bench, their mutual affection is expressed by both sides: “Is it on my account you came? I said. She managed yes to that. [...] And I? Had I not come on hers?” (36). Thus having confirmed that there exists a pronounced emotional

bond between them, one may pose the question of what constitutes this bond. I have already suggested that Lulu may represent a sense of protection, one that he has lost with the death of his father. When she first steps inside the space of the text, physically speaking, she catches him by surprise, and the only thing preventing him from standing up and walking away, is his fatigue (30). As an ‘alien’, an invader of the narrator’s private space, she hardly seems to represent a protective force. Her behaviour, however, appears to intrigue him: “All she had done was sing, beneath her breath as to herself, and without the words fortunately, some old folk songs, and so disjointedly, skipping from one to another and finishing none” (30). This act of singing is repeated later in the story, then on the narrator’s own request:

I asked her to sing me a song. I thought at first she was going to refuse, I mean simply not sing, but no, after a moment she began to sing and sang for some time, all the time the same song it seemed to me, without change of attitude. I did not know the song, I had never heard it before and shall never hear it again. (36-37)

He then goes on to walk away while she is singing, all the while measuring the distance between them on the basis of the sound of her voice. When he can no longer hear it, he retraces his steps to know whether she has stopped singing or if he is merely too far away to hear. This is reminiscent, in many ways, of what Freud called the child’s ‘fort-da’ game. Madan Sarup describes the game as follows:

Freud observed his eighteen-month-old grandson who had a cotton reel with a piece of string tied to it. Holding the string, he would throw the reel over the edge of his cot and utter sounds that Freud interpreted as being an attempt at the German ‘*fort*’, meaning ‘gone’ or ‘away’. He would then pull the reel back into his field of vision, greeting its reappearance with a joyful ‘*da*’ (‘there’). [...] According to Freud the cotton reel was the child’s symbol for his mother, and the ‘fort-da’ game gave him the illusion of control over her (desirable) presence and (undesirable) absence. (68, 183)

What is perhaps most interesting, and relevant, in this description, is the illusion of control that is achieved by the child, through it being in charge of the presence and absence of the desired object. The narrator here takes charge of presence and absence in much the same way,

through leaving the bench – in his mind, a representation of Lulu – and returning to find her there again.

With regards to the narrator's feelings for Lulu, then, there appears to be hints of them being largely constituted by a sense of protection. As such, it might be fruitful to look closer at the narrator's use of the word 'love': how does he perceive and articulate the feelings that he has for her? In the first explicit reference to love, he claims that "[w]hat goes by the name of love is banishment, with now and then a postcard from the homeland" (31). Directly preceding this quote, is a passage where he recollects having an erection caused by Lulu stroking his ankles – an episode which seems to 'banish' him from his self: "One is no longer oneself, on such occasions, and it is painful to be no longer oneself, even more painful if possible than when one is." As mentioned above, love is demanding, it demands to be expressed. The narrator's difficulties with expressing it seems to make that demand even stronger, to the extent that it turns into an intrusion, an interruption of his being. Love becomes something that forcefully pulls him out of his normal state of being preoccupied only with his own self – it forces him not only to care for an Other, but to realise that the Other is similar to himself: "the way she kept on saying, I don't know, I can't. I alone did not know and could not" (36). The impression of love being an unwelcome feeling is soon solidified when the narrator realizes that "for the first time in my life, and I would not hesitate to say the last if I had not to husband my cyanide, I had to contend with a feeling which gradually assumed, to my dismay, the dread name of love" (33). The image of 'husbanding his cyanide' brings together two quite different connotations, namely marriage and suicide. It seems here as if the narrator sees his relationship with Lulu to be comparable to a drawn-out suicidal process, a downwards spiral headed towards his own destruction.

So far, then, the intolerable in the encounter with Lulu seems clear enough: her presence, whether in person or in his thoughts, interferes with the narrator's sense of self. He

feels as if he is banished from his self. But there must be some sense of pleasure here as well – after all, his revisiting the bench in the hope to find her there may be regarded as a sort of pursuit. If the encounter is intolerable, because of the feelings it induces, then why does he seek it? Now, the realisation that he is in love appears to be a consequence of not seeing her, thus a consequence of absence. In her absence, he is caught up in thoughts about her (presence), thus he must seek her presence. When he is with her, he is “at least free to think of something else than her, of the old trusty things, and so little by little, as down steps towards a deep, of nothing” (39). This act of thinking of nothing seems to represent an end in its own right, when he claims that “[w]hat mattered to me in my dispeopled kingdom [...] was supineness in the mind, the dulling of the self” (31). Considering this mental passivity to be a goal for him, we consequently encounter the possibility that the narrator’s wish for Lulu’s company is no more than a means to an end – a way of pacifying the mind which is otherwise brimming with activity on account of Lulu’s absence.

Returning now to Barthes, he claims that absence “can exist only as a consequence of the other: it is the other who leaves, it is I who remain” (13). Given that Lulu represents the other, it seems natural to consider her the absent one in the story. However, the absence-presence relation is here subverted: the narrator is the absent one, he is the one who leaves. Three times he abandons her: first in the form of no longer coming to the bench at night, even if it is “less [...] on her account than on its” (Beckett 1995: 33), as he claims. The second time he leaves is after having returned to the bench “to try and put an end, to this plight” (35), that is to say, to seek her presence in order to pacify the mind. This is when he asks her to sing him a song, and he plays with the sound of her voice. The very last lines of the story tells of his third act of leaving, in a fashion similar to the previous one. He wakes up one night to hear crying from the room next to his parlour – either from Lulu giving birth or from the newborn baby – and, finding the situation unbearable, the narrator leaves:

I began playing with the cries, a little in the same way as I had played with the song, on, back, on, back, if that may be called playing. As long as I kept walking I didn't hear them, because of the footsteps. But as soon as I halted I heard them again, a little fainter each time, admittedly, but what does it matter, faint or loud, cry is cry, all that matters is that it should cease. For years I thought they would cease. Now I don't think so any more. I could have done with other loves perhaps. But there it is, either you love or you don't. (45)

In all three of these scenes, Barthes' presence-absence relation is overturned: the actions of the "I" create a sense of absence, while the one to remain is the other. Thus speaking of Lulu's absence might be misdirected; rather, it appears as if her presence is constant – she is always there, be it in his mind when *he* is absent, right by his side when he is asleep, or even through her and the baby's cries after he leaves her for good.

It appears, then, that in the relationship between Lulu and the narrator, the latter is the absent one. There is a potentially intriguing connection here, to the above-mentioned banishment: because he is in love with Lulu, he is banished – he is forced to become the other, to leave his self. As such, if he is to return to his own self, he is forced to leave Lulu; no matter what he does, he is bound to be the absent one, to be the other. However, there is also a different absence in this story, namely that of the father. In this relationship, the father is the other – the one who leaves, as it were – whereas the narrator remains. The father's physical being within the story amounts to little more than a remote and "far too small" yard on the side of a hill (27). Paradoxically, it is precisely his absence which determines his presence – his absence is the one part of him that demands to be present in the text, through the space that is left behind by his death, by his leaving. That is to say, it is the father's permanent absence which makes the text possible; his not being there constitutes a lack in the narrator which serves as a catalyst for the story. Throughout the story there are hints about the relationship between father and son, the father being not just a provider of space – an idea which will be discussed at more length further on in this chapter – but also of knowledge, of

guidance: it was he who taught the narrator the names of the lighthouses and lightships of the city, and showed him the constellations in the heavens (44-5).

The role of the father deserves some more attention: the paternal function has an integral role to play in psychoanalysis. Here, it is interesting to note that Dylan Evans, in his *An Introductory Dictionary to Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, claims that “the symbolic father is also the dead father” (63), if only because it fills the role of the father in “First Love” with symbolic potential. I have claimed that the father here is, perhaps first and foremost, a provider of protection and space – a function which to some extent serves to feminize the father. There is a contrast, here, to psychoanalysis: the paternal function, according to Lacan, is to be the provider of Law – that is to say, “he is the representative of the social order” (Evans: 62), and the regulator of desire. The providing space and protection are typically more feminine properties in psychoanalytical schemas. Thus it seems that the father here has a potentially problematic role, and one which may appear to overlap with that of Lulu. I shall come back to the notion of space further on in this chapter.

As for the relation between father and son, the title of the story may provide some guidance here: for whom is the first love felt? Given that the first love is also the only one in the story, the answer to this question may lead to some interesting inferences. If Lulu is the object of his first love – which would appear to be the case – we may infer that the father was not an object of love. Alternatively, his feelings for Lulu may be the result of transference: redirection of the possibly retained feelings for the father, turning now towards an object able and willing to receive. Kristeva argues for a similar point, claiming also that the mentioned banishment in love is integral with regards to the narrator’s ability – or lack thereof – to realize his feelings. She presents two aspects or types of banishment, one for each of the two intolerable encounters. The first banishment, related to the father, is “an attempt at separating oneself from the august and placid expanses where the father’s sublime Death, and thus

*Meaning*, merges with the son's self" (Kristeva 1980: 249-50; emphasis original). The second, now with regards to Lulu, is "above/beyond a life of love. A life always off to one side, at an impassable distance, mourning a love. A fragile, uncertain life, where [...] he discovers the price of warmth [...] and the boredom of those humans who provide it – but who waste it, too" (250).

The two intolerable encounters, with the father's death and with Lulu, together set the premises, create a frame of sorts, for the story: the encounter with the death of the father sets the story off through culminating in the first banishment, that is leaving the father's premises behind. Throughout the encounter with Lulu – from when they first meet, until he finally departs – he stays at an "impassable distance" through his repeated acts of leaving and coming back to see her again. As mentioned above, this brings forth a similarity to Freud's notion of the child's 'fort-da' game, giving the narrator the illusion of control over Lulu's presence and absence. When the affair with Lulu later culminates with her pregnancy, followed by the birth of his child, a third intolerable encounter comes to pass – this time intolerable to the extent that he must resort to a third and absolute banishment. There occurs a kind of junction between life and death, constituted here by the child and the father respectively, which bears some resemblance to an observation made by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*, regarding the famous case of Dr. Ignaz Semmelweis:

Semmelweis noted [...] that puerperal fever is the result of the female genitalia being contaminated by a corpse; here then is a fever where what bears life passes over to the side of the dead body. Distracting moment when opposites (life/death, feminine/masculine) join in order to constitute what is probably more than a defense against the persecuting power of the mother: a panic hallucination of death following the abolishment of limits and differences. The remedy? – Once more it involves separating, not touching, dividing. (Kristeva 1982: 159-60)

The pronounced association between the dead father and the "marriage" with Lulu – not only associated in time, but also possibly by "other links [...], on other levels" (Beckett 1997:25) – appears to be intolerable with regards to the birth of what Lulu claims is his child; by the



extension that is the narrator himself, the child is contaminated by the father's body, and the narrator's complete absence is the only remedy. Kristeva appears to see banishment not only as an event, but also as a type of action. The seemingly sub- or unconscious act is necessary in order for the narrator to free himself from the death of the father – and to free his child as well: “without banishment, there is no possible release from the grip of paternal Death” (Kristeva 1980: 250).

The banishment from the dead father thus comes to reflect Lacan's mirror stage for the narrator – the point where the child takes its first and perhaps most important steps towards becoming an individual, through recognizing itself in the mirror as a self-governing and individual body, distinct from that of its mother.

The mirror stage is a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from *insufficiency* to *anticipation* – and which manufactures for the subject, caught up in the lure of spatial identification, the succession of phantasies that extends from a fragmented body-image to a form of its totality that I shall call orthopaedic – and, lastly, to the assumption of the armour of an alienating identity, which will mark with its rigid structure the subject's entire mental development. (Lacan: 5; emphasis added)

It is important here to note that Lacan considers the child to be unfinished and under construction, so to speak – that “the human child's resources at birth are insufficient for its needs” (Sarup: 64). With the mirror stage, the child anticipates the shape of a future, autonomous self; it constitutes the structure for this self. Thus, without this ‘orthopaedic totality’ there is no proper support for the self – it collapses. “*To love* is to survive paternal meaning,” claims Kristeva (250). In other words, the construction of the narrator's self must avoid collapse when the part of that construction constituted by the father, is taken away. Lulu may thus be read as the object of an unconscious transference of love, a substitution of the dead father, for an object with similar properties. With regards to the unconscious, I have already introduced Lacan's notion of the subject's dependence upon the Other. If we apply this dependence to the narrator's relationship to his father, a lack of being, a lack in the self,

comes to surface in the narrator. Considering, with Lacan, the human subject as a construction rather than as a natural whole, one may argue that the narrator represents an incomplete construction.

An important part of this construction of the narrator's self, appears to pertain to space. Through the death of the father, the narrator loses the space with which the father provided him: his own room in the father's house. Thus a part of his self is lost. Following the intolerable encounter with the father's death, he must embark on a quest to recover the lost space. However, space in itself is not sufficient to fulfil his needs; the organisation of space appears to carry some significance, as well. This is first hinted at when he accounts for his relation to graveyards, stating that "my father's yard was not amongst my favourites. [...] I infinitely preferred Ohlsdorf [...] with its nine hundred acres of corpses packed tight" (27). The same organisational preference is apparent when Lulu shows him her parlour; by moving all furniture, apart from the couch he is to sleep on, out into the corridor, he organises the available space. He appears to think of furniture as needless ornamentation – a waste of space. In relation with the desired 'supineness of the mind', he speaks also of "the execrable frippery known as the non-self and even the world, for short" (31). Judging by this, he seems to see the majority of the world around him as wasted space; in Lulu's parlour he is simply given an opportunity to arrange the 'world' – here in the form of an enclosed space within four walls – according to his liking.

There appears to be an appeal, to the narrator, in the idea of delimited or organized space. In two important parts of the story, he finds himself in a space surrounded by only three 'walls' – which, in both cases, leaves him open and vulnerable. He is first forced to get dressed in a "narrow space, guarded on three sides only," (29) outside of his room in the father's house, after he is evicted. Even though this part of the story is cut rather short by the narrator, it certainly carries some weight: the eviction in a way serves as a catalyst for the rest

of the story, as he is forced out of the safe habitat of the house, out into the world – it is the first banishment. It also serves to illustrate the relationship between the narrator and the rest of the people residing in the house. While the narrator is busy in the bathroom, struggling with constipation, ‘they’ take action and put all his belongings in a heap outside the door of his room. Having no choice, he leaves the house and finds the bench, which he also describes as being walled in on three sides. This can perhaps be considered in connection with the image of him as an incomplete structure; a room with three walls may also be seen as incomplete.

It is perhaps mainly because of Lulu’s little invasion of the bench that it seems feasible to consider this space a vulnerable one for the narrator; in fact, he himself initially refers to this space in positive terms:

It was a well situated bench, backed by a mound of solid earth and garbage, so that my rear was covered. My flanks too, partially, thanks to a pair of venerable trees, dead, at either end of the bench. [...] To the fore, a few yards away, flowed the canal, if canals flow, don’t ask me, so that from that quarter too the risk of surprise was small. (30)

As homely and secure as he makes this space sound, it is perhaps exactly the safety of the bench that makes him relaxed enough to let Lulu in, to let her take part in that space. Her presence fills in, one might say, for the lacking fourth wall, and she thus comes to provide a completely enclosed space for the narrator.

In order to develop further on the idea of Lulu as provider of space, I shall explore the term *khôra* in some detail: the term stems from ancient Greek philosophy, specifically the dialogues of Plato. John D. Caputo explains the *khôra* precisely as a sort of provider of space:

*Khôra* is the immense and indeterminable spatial receptacle [...] providing a “home” for all things. *Khôra* is neither an intelligible form nor one more sensible thing, but, rather, that *in which (in quo)* sensible things are inscribed [...]. This receptacle is like the forms inasmuch as it has a kind of eternity: [...] it is always already there, [it has] a certain a-chronistic a-temporality. (1997a: 84; emphasis original)

Moreover, Caputo claims, *khôra* is “neither present nor absent, active nor passive, the Good nor evil, living nor nonliving” (1997b; 35-6). Derrida goes even further, in *On the Name*, when he claims that we “cannot even say of it that it is *neither* this *nor* that or that it is *both* this *and* that. It is not enough to recall that *khôra* names neither this nor that, or, that *khôra* says this and that” (1995: 89; emphasis original). What seems evident from these two quotes is perhaps primarily that *khôra* is unrepresentable. As such, a possible reading of Lulu as a representation of *khôra* leaves us with an intriguing paradox: she is a representation of the unrepresentable.

I have already presented as plausible the idea of Lulu as a protective force in her relation to the narrator. The possible reading of her as representing *khôra* is, in fact, not a far stretch from that. Being a prostitute, she can certainly be said to provide some kind of space: through her occupation, perhaps mainly a space for sexuality and the space that results from the prostitute being a form of escapism for customers. With regards to her relationship to the narrator, I have mentioned how she may be read to take the place of the lacking fourth wall: she completes the protective barriers that he requires to be comfortable. This is evident, at first, when the narrator explains that “to speak of the bench, as it appeared to me at evening, is to speak of her, for me” (31-2). Initially, she was an invader of that exact space, whereas here it seems as if she has come to stand, to him, rather as the main provider of it. The homely space of the bench comes to seem almost analogous to a womb, and the narrator’s love for Lulu becomes reminiscent to the Freud’s concept of the death drive: according to Robert Hinshelwood, this concept can briefly be described as “a deathly wish to return to a state of disintegration, the silence of the grave” (135). Given that Lulu’s presence now has ‘transformed’ the bench to a womb-like space – and considering also the narrator’s ‘fort-da’ game with that space – his act of repeatedly returning to the bench appears to be constituted by a desire to return to the prenatal unity with the mother. Hinshelwood’s mentioning of the

grave is also interesting with regards to the narrator's visits to the graveyard earlier in the story: feeling, as he has admitted earlier, more at home there among the dead, than among the living, also appears to betray a wish for that calm and lack of being which comes with death.

Lulu's role as space provider becomes even more concrete when she takes him in, and lets him stay in the parlour of her apartment. A problem occurs, however, when she proceeds to transgress the protective barriers: she takes up the space that she has provided for him, through sleeping with him – and even worse, she becomes pregnant with his child. His desire for the womb again seems obvious in the passage where she presents her pregnancy to him: “She had drawn back the curtain for a clear view of all her rotundities. I saw the mountain, impassible, cavernous, secret, [...] all warmth and scent” (44). Rather than seeing the actual mother and the child that she bears, he sees past her, to the analogical womb of the caves of the mountain, paired with the memories of his father teaching him the names of lighthouses and lightships, all visible from said mountain. “From that day forth things went from bad to worse, to worse and worse,” he relates (44); there is no space for him anymore. I have cited above Kristeva's claim, that “to love is to survive paternal meaning”. The space – physical as well as analogical – that Lulu has provided, has allowed the narrator to survive the lack of the provider that was the father. That space, or at least a significant part of it, is now permanently taken up by another being.

In relation to the reading of Lulu as a representation of the *khôra*, I briefly mentioned the paradox that this entails: she is a representation of the unrepresentable. The narrator appears to have a similar understanding with regards to the expression of love: to him, love demands expression, yet it seems inexpressible. This is related to Beckett's desire for his own use of language, his own art: according to my reading of Beckett in his dialogue with Georges Duthuit, Beckett sees art as a slave of meaning; he wishes for his literature to express the impossibility of the artistic expression which is completely liberated from meaning. That is

Beckett's obligation, his project of failure. Pascale Casanova, in *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution*, claims that Beckett "became an artist of failure, a writer who 'dared to fail' or to write only that failure – someone who produced 'an expressive act, even if only ... of its impossibility'" (85). It is possible to read this story as embodying a synecdochic relation of sorts, in which the narrator's inability to produce the linguistic act demanded by his love, comes to stand for a more general lack in language, of the possibility to produce meaningful and precise representations of certain abstract phenomena, such as love. Such a reading is in line with a deconstructionist view of language: "The deconstructor typically reveals a failure of language: namely, the failure of our attempts to use language instrumentally, as the expression of some univocal intention or as the means of referring unequivocally to a given state of affairs" (Armstrong: 15).

I have already touched upon the three-walled rooms which surround the narrator at least twice in the story. The image of a room with three walls also has an aspect related to the narrative in "First Love", one which hails from the tradition of realist theatre: the theatrical stage is typically set in a room with three walls, an invisible fourth wall constituting the barrier between the world of the play and the audience outside. When a play – or in this case, the story and its narrator – draws attention to itself and its role as fictional, we speak of a 'breaking of the fourth wall'; the illusion of the existence of that wall is shattered, and the audience is actively made aware that what they are watching or reading is a work of fiction. In this story, there are a few points where narration is explicitly directed at the reader. Perhaps the most striking occurrence is when the narrator talks about having left the bench – it no longer answering to his requirements – for "reasons better not wasted on cunts like you" (33). It is peculiar to note that the narrator here actively and aggressively breaks the boundary between himself and the reader, thus putting himself in a vulnerable position by yet again

situating himself – even if only analogically – in a three-walled room, precisely through breaking the fourth wall himself.

In another passage, which may be read as a more subtle breach in the fourth wall, the narrator makes an interesting remark about his own status as narrator. At first glance, this passage assumes the shape of a sort of digression, but in truth it appears rather to say something integral about reliability of narration, as well as the present situation of the narrator. In this passage he has grown tired of the name Lulu, and has thus renamed his female companion Anna:

I thought of Anna then, I who had learnt to think of nothing, nothing except my pains, a quick think through, and of what steps to take not to perish off-hand of hunger, or cold, or shame, but never on any account of living beings as such (I wonder what that means) whatever I may have said, or may still say, to the contrary or otherwise, on this subject. But I have always spoken, no doubt always shall, of things that never existed, or that existed if you insist, no doubt always will, but not with the existence I ascribe to them. [...] I wrote somewhere, They gave me ... a hat. Now the truth is they never gave me a hat, I have always had my own hat, the one my father gave me, and I have never had any other hat than that hat. I may add it has followed me to the grave. (35)

There are several aspects here that are worthy of attention. His wish to think of nothing I have already mentioned earlier in this chapter; of more interest at this point is the speaking of things that do not exist, or that otherwise – that is, outside of his speaking of them – exist differently. The narrative in a fictional story like “First Love”, one may argue, mainly consists of the speaking of events that have never happened outside of that narrative, or events that may have occurred differently from how they are described in the narrative. In the last quote above, the narrator mentions a hat. It is worth nothing in this respect that, outside of this citation, the hat is mentioned only once in the story, and then only as a mere sidenote: “I had to change, I mean exchange my dressing-gown and nightgown for my travelling costume, I mean shoes, socks, trousers, shirt, coat, greatcoat and hat, I can think of nothing else” (29). Narrators of other stories written by Beckett around the same time – such as “The End”,

which I shall discuss in the next chapter – also frequently talk about their possession of a hat. Ackerley and Gontarski propose that the hat “suggests an identity, an entelechy that persists despite the changing self” (247). In a way, then, the hat suggests a shared self between the different narrators – perhaps even a shared consciousness, if we are to judge by the quote above.

A wholly different aspect of narration surfaces in the very final sentence of the cited passage: “I may add it has followed me to the grave.” Little is told about the narrator’s present situation, but from this quote it would seem that he is speaking from some kind of afterlife. Earlier in the story he speaks of the inscription he wants on his tombstone, in a manner which leaves a rather ambiguous impression regarding whether he is now dead or alive:

My other writings are no sooner dry than they revolt me, but my epitaph still meets with my approval. There is little chance unfortunately of its ever being reared above the skull that conceived it, unless the State takes up the matter. But to be unearthed I must first be found, and I greatly fear those gentlemen will have as much trouble finding me dead as alive. So I hasten to record it here and now, while there is yet time. (26)

Uncertainty regarding the narrator’s present situation is not unique for this story; in fact, I shall bring up the same point in the forthcoming chapters. The narrator of “First Love” does claim here that there is yet time, which would suggest that he is still able to record his epitaph. Moreover, he is able to provide narration, which also seems to hint at some sort of a conscious existence. However, his claim that “to be unearthed I must first be found”, followed by his fear that “the State” will have “as much trouble finding [him] dead as alive” appears to suggest that he may already be dead. As seems often to be the case with regards to Beckett’s work, we as readers are left in doubt; there are no clear-cut answers to our questions.

Nearing the conclusion of this chapter, some points of discussion deserve further attention. One such point is the potential connection between the narrator’s constipation early in the text, and his use of biological waste to express his feelings. He mentions, in connection



with his visits to the graveyard, how the smell of corpses combined with the thought of the dead father almost makes him shed a tear, inarguably a manner – willingly or not – of expressing emotion. His spelling Lulu’s name in cow manure has largely the same effect: it is, or he wants for it to be, an expression of how he feels. However, being constipated, he is unable to produce biological waste. Considering the connection we have established between this waste and his ability to express love, his constipation comes off as an image of precisely the lack of that ability.

This lack of ability is underlined by the narrator’s focus on *the word* ‘love’, the only sense in which he can relate to it. When he mentions love, it is first and foremost in order to name the actions that fill in for the lacking expression of the demanding love. One possible reading of this story would be as an attempt, by the narrator, at expressing the inexpressible, or at expressing the desire for this expression. Given that the story seems to be narrated from some kind of afterlife, as suggested by the narrator, it thus stands as a supposedly final attempt to express in death what he has never been able to express in life – which leads us back to Casanova and the failure of language. If the narrator is indeed dead, then certainly he has failed to, as it were, rid himself of his constipation; even if read as a successful expression of emotion, the story seems to fall short of reaching anyone that the narrator has a desire to reach. But for Beckett the author, it seems as if that failure is deliberate – it is part of his project. Casanova observes the following from one of Beckett’s dialogues with Georges Duthuit:

According to Beckett, with Bram Van Velde a new kind of art had been born. He was the first to have accepted the ‘situation ... of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint’. Why, Duthuit asked, was he powerless to paint? ‘Because there is nothing to paint and nothing to paint with,’ Beckett replied: ‘Van Velde is the first to desist from this estheticized automatism, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world.

(84)

Considering, then, Beckett's stance on art as a whole, it stands to reason that the story – as an expression of desire in itself – does not so much fail at succeeding, as it succeeds at failing: “its failure spells success” (Caputo 1997b: 45).

Lulu's position in the story has been discussed at length in this chapter, the discussion largely associating her with a motherly, protective role with regards to the narrator. However, his biological mother has been as absent from this discussion as she is from the narrator's recollection of the story. Evans claims that “it is the mother's presence which testifies to [the mother's] love. [...] Consequently, the mother's absence is experienced as a traumatic rejection, as loss of her love” (118-19). The mother is inexpressed; she is present precisely through her complete and utter absence – which speaks its own silent language of rejection. As for Lulu, who might be read to take up a maternal function, Kristeva sees her rather as a substitute for the father. This appears to support the interpretation of the father's role as ambiguous with regards to the function psychoanalysis typically asserts to the father: he is feminized, not just through his providing of space and protection, but through the maternal figure of Lulu taking his place.

It seems fitting to finish the chapter where we started out, namely with the intolerable. I stated early in this chapter that there are two intolerable encounters in the text, but I also conceded the occurrence of a third encounter to end the story. Now, the encounter described by Barthes is intolerable “on account of the joy within it”. With regards to the dead father, the joy is visible in the tear that the narrator nearly sheds for his father's remains at the graveyard: it is the belated realisation of the parental love that he could not feel until the father turned into biological waste. Joy is also present with regards to Lulu, who provides the space that he was banished from because of the death of the father, and whose presence diverts his mind from the pains of thinking too much. The intolerable is a result of a combination of lack and absence: the lack of ability to express, through the narrator's constipation, together with the

absence of the father, provides the possibility for the others who live there to turn the narrator out from his room in the father's house. Later, the narrator's absence from Lulu – following his act of leaving – makes him unable to think of anything but her: “I did not feel easy when I was with her, but at least free to think of something else than her, [...]. And I knew that away from her I would forfeit this freedom” (39), he says. His lack of understanding of and experience with love makes love analogous to a language that he does not speak, but which nonetheless constantly surrounds him. “It was my night of love,” he concludes about his first night in Lulu's parlour, after waking up, to his horror, in a disarray and with a naked Lulu by his side. Love becomes a language of misrepresentation, where no act, no expression, fits with his reality; love is the intolerable joy, tempting his desires but ultimately – and necessarily – failing to deliver.

### 3. A Fiction of Finality: “The End”

In Beckett’s play *Endgame*, Hamm – one of the play’s two main characters – shares with the audience his thoughts about ending: “Enough, it’s time it ended, in the refuge too. [*Pause*] And yet I hesitate, I hesitate to ... to end. Yes, there it is, it’s time it ended and yet I hesitate to – [*he yawns*] – to end” (Beckett 1958: 12). Somewhat ironically, this speech occurs at the very beginning of the play, thus setting the tone for what is to come: a play in which the end constantly seems close at hand, and in which any effort taken by the characters seems an effort to postpone the end – and yet that very end is precisely what they wish for. The narrator and protagonist of “The End” – the story I shall discuss in the present chapter – may very well share Hamm’s sentiments about ending, even though his words would most likely be not only less direct, but also significantly greater in number. The narrative style of this story is characterized by a lack of direction, largely because of the narrator’s overly digressive and detailed manner of narrating. These aspects – direction, digression and detail – are closely interconnected, establishing as such one of three important concepts that shall stand as the main points of reference in this chapter. This first of these aspects being primarily one of narrative style, the other two are the structural connection between continuation and end, and the thematic connection between desire and death.

It seems natural to start the discussion with the main recurring theme and term in this thesis: desire. The thematic connection with death has already been mentioned, but desire is also relevant with regards to the stylistic and structural links presented above. Given that desire is primarily constituted by lack, it becomes clear that the narrator’s aimless wanderings – seemingly lacking direction, both in a narrative and in a physical sense – are a result of a desire for direction, for purpose. Early in the story, after having been evicted from a beneficiary home, he expresses his displeasure with his situation, and with the dreaded longing that he now experiences:

I longed to be under cover again, in an empty place, close and warm, with artificial light, an oil lamp for choice, with a pink shade for preference. From time to time someone would come to make sure I was all right and needed nothing. It was long since I had longed for anything and the effect on me was horrible. (82)

He seems here to desire to be free of needs, free of longing – ultimately, free of desire; if he could lie in his bed at the beneficiary home and do nothing but stare at the ceiling, he would be perfectly happy. This is reminiscent to a passage from “First Love”, discussed in the previous chapter, where the narrator explains that what matters to him is “supineness in the mind, the dulling of the self” (Beckett 1995: 31). It appears that with both of these narrators, their sense of contentment is inversely proportional to their mental activity. With regards to the present narrator’s attention to detail in narration, the oil lamp and pink shade that he mentions here show merely brief examples of this – even in his fantasies, the most minor of details are important enough to be mentioned. His overflow of words is rather more apparent when he tells of a crocus bulb acquired from his landlady:

Once I sent for a crocus bulb and planted it in the dark area, in an old pot. It must have been coming up to spring, it was probably not the right time for it. I left the pot outside, attached to a string I passed through the window. In the evening, when the weather was fine, a little light crept up the wall. Then I sat down beside the window and pulled on the string to keep the pot in the light and warmth. That can’t have been easy, I don’t see how I managed it. It was probably not the right thing for it. I manured it as best I could and pissed on it when the weather was dry. It may not have been the right thing for it. It sprouted, but never any flowers, just a wilting stem and a few chlorotic leaves. I would have liked to have a yellow crocus, or a hyacinth, but there, it was not to be. (84)

From the outset of the story, it seems as if all the narrator wishes for is the means to stay alive, and if anything else, only a little something to make time pass – such as a crocus bulb to care for, if half-heartedly so. His long-winded explanations and digressions here function as means to postpone the end; as long as he keeps talking, he can keep the end of the story at an arm’s length. So far, then, it appears that his main desire is to make time pass, and to still be alive to see that it indeed does pass.

The phrase “go on” is a recurrent one in many of Beckett’s texts – particularly in his prose works – and its presence is also significant in “The End”. “Go on” is relevant here to the episodic structure of the narrative, as well as to the final passage of the story. With regards to the structure, I refer to it as episodic because it is told as a series of singular but connected events – where the apparent connection between events rarely goes further than the narrator’s presence in them. Such a structure relies heavily on a principle of collaboration between end and continuation, where the two work together and as parts of the same process, the same motion, to spur action forwards: the continuation of the story relies on the narration of each event coming to an end, because the end of each narrated event allows the story to go on. But the relationship between the two terms is not wholly unproblematic. The closing sentence of the story tells of the narrator’s memory “of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean *without the courage to end or the strength to go on*” (Beckett 1995: 99; emphasis added). The lack of both courage to end and strength to go on constitutes an oppositional, even paradoxical desire, for both end and continuation at the same time.

It is this paradox that leads us to the connection between desire and death. In the previous chapter, I only briefly introduced the death drive; here, it shall assume a more central role in the discussion. Freud introduces the term in his book *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the title of which gives us a hint with regards to how Freud considers the death drive to fit in with his earlier work: one of the basic premises in Freud’s psychoanalysis is that our mental activity is governed by the pleasure principle – that the drive behind our actions is a drive towards pleasure. But the existence of mental activity that does not lead to pleasure, necessitates the introduction of a new principle, a new drive, which lies *beyond* the pleasure principle. That drive is the death drive.

With regards to “First Love”, the death drive was connected with the narrator’s wish to return to the womb, to the unity with the mother. In “The End”, however, there is no

maternal figure at all, thus the death wish must be of a different sort. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud comes to the tentative conclusion that “*the aim of all life is death*” (70; emphasis original). Our positive drive, our seeking pleasure and life, is only a way to prolong the road towards death, Freud claims here, so that we can die in our own way. The narrator’s presentation of death in the form of a vision<sup>6</sup> appears to support the relevance of the death drive here: through it being a mere vision, and therefore lacking physical realisation, it seems obvious that what we are presented with here is a desire for end, the desired end, indeed nothing less than the perfect death. Maurice Blanchot touches upon a similar idea in his essay “Rilke and Death” in *The Sirens’ Song*:

His intense desire to die his own death stems from a form of individualism peculiar to the last decade of the nineteenth century. [...] To die individually, an individual death, to be an individual to the last, unique and undivided, such is the hard kernel that will not be cracked. We must be prepared to die, *but at the time and in the manner of our choice*. We should not die like ordinary people an ordinary death. This scorn for anonymous death, for ‘passing away’, is really only a reflection of the anguish death’s anonymity provokes; or a willingness to die – to die has a certain dignity – but not to de cease. (Blanchot: 144; emphasis added)

The narrator’s ultimate desire is precisely to “die his own death” rather than merely to pass away, “to de cease” – which, disregarding his death vision, is what he seems to be doing towards the final stages of the story. There is perhaps a connection here between the narrator’s rather anonymous existence throughout the main parts of the story, and this desire for a death which is truly his own, his individual death – a death which saves him from anonymity at last and at least, in his very final moments.

It seems, then, that the presence of undesirable mental activity constitutes the presence of the death drive. As such, it should be clear enough that the latter is, in some way or other, present in the narrator from the beginning of the story. Thus his early desire for the means to

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<sup>6</sup> I concede that the reading of the story’s final passage as a vision, and not as an actual occurrence, is not an open-and-shut case. I shall touch upon the possibility of the narrator’s death as actual rather than imagined or envisioned, but my discussion will first and foremost treat the passage as a vision or fantasy.

stay alive seems only to be a wish to be able to pass the time until *the right time* comes. Blanchot points out the importance of dying in “the time and manner of our choice”. Thus, until this time and manner comes along, death is anonymous, empty – death is nothing. Yet, despite this apparent desire to be an individual in death, the narrator does little to avoid anonymity in life. Early on, he wishes more than anything to stay in the beneficiary home, to make as little impact as possible on his surroundings. When, later on in the story, he takes to begging, he covers the lower part of his face with a rag and he cannot wear his hat because of the shape of his skull. It was suggested in the previous chapter that the hat, a recurring item in Beckett’s work, is deeply connected to its owner; it is, in a way, a provider of identity. Through covering his face and removing his hat – indeed, even refusing to beg with his hands – the narrator here makes himself as anonymous as seems possible.

This anonymity in life clearly stands in contrast with the desire for an individual death – but it may also be the source of that desire. There are several occasions in the story where the narrator attempts to take part in society as an independent individual, only to discover that any such attempt seems to result in failure: the hat literally hurts his skull, but perhaps also metaphorically, as if his identity does not quite fit him; he moves into a basement, trying to live as other people do, but ends up being conned out of most of his money, and replaced by a pig; he tries taking the bus, but is told to get off – three times; even when trying to befriend a cow, he ends up being kicked. Only when he has finally had enough of trying to fit in, does the realisation seem to dawn on him that it is easier for him to be anonymous – that individuality is better left for death:

I lay down on the side of the road and began to writhe each time I heard a cart approaching. That was so they would not think I was sleeping or resting. I tried to groan, Help! Help! But the tone that came out was that of polite conversation. My hour was not yet come and I could no longer groan. [...] What was to become of me? I said to myself, I’ll learn again. I lay down across the road at a narrow place, so that the carts could not pass without passing over my body, with one wheel at least, or two if there were



four. But the day came when, looking round me, I was in the suburbs, and from there to the old haunts it was not far, beyond the stupid hope of rest or less pain. (91)

This seems to be the point where that “stupid hope” of a life that fulfils is finally given up. Henceforth, the narrator rather starts embracing all the shortcomings, the complete lack, in his existence. As such, he appears to diminish the lack in a form of positive asceticism where having nothing amounts to needing nothing. Lack becomes total, all-encompassing and thus meaningless; this complete absence actively takes the place of that which is lacking, and thus diminishes the lack. As such, lack loses its meaning through a form of exaggerated inflation – with the effect that the narrator in the end lacks nothing.

I mentioned earlier the stylistic difference between *Endgame*'s Hamm and the narrator of “The End”. In another play by Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, the style is considerably more similar: Vladimir and Estragon spend the better parts of two acts merely exploring ways to keep talking – in other words, using an overflow of words with little direction, little purpose other than to make time pass. A similar tendency is visible both in the narrator of “The End” and, as we shall see in the third chapter of this thesis, in “Texts for Nothing”: the act of going on, of keeping the narrative going, becomes a means of staying alive. Derrida's definition of the term *différance* seems relevant in this regard: in *Margins of Philosophy* he explains that *différance* brings together the two meanings of the French verb *différer*, namely ‘to defer’ and ‘to differ’. The former meaning represents the temporization of deferral, the latter represents the spacing of difference. To exemplify, Derrida speaks of the sign, which “represents the present in its absence. It takes the place of the present. [...] The sign, in this sense, is deferred presence” (Derrida 1982: 9).

Particularly interesting with regards to “The End” is part of Derrida's explanation of deferral: “to temporize, to take recourse, consciously or unconsciously, in the temporal and temporizing mediation of a detour that suspends the accomplishment or fulfillment of ‘desire’

or ‘will’” (Derrida 1982: 8-9). Narrative detours are remarkably common in this story, in the shape of the narrator’s digressions and overly detailed descriptions. According to Susan Stewart, a narrative that “moves into the ‘detailed’ description of action rather than material life, [...] calls attention to itself as a manipulation of temporality.” Moreover, she claims, narrative digression “stands in tension with narrative closure. It is narrative closure opened from the inside out. It holds the reader in suspension, or annoyance, for it presents the possibility of never getting back, of remaining forever within the detour” (Stewart: 30). In “The End”, there hardly seems to be anything to get back to – as if the entire story is no more than a detour, no more than a putting off of the end. The above-cited passage with the crocus bulb is one of many such detours; another example is the narrator’s account of his habit of scratching himself:

I scratched myself in an upward direction, with four nails. I pulled the hairs, to get relief. It passed the time, time flew when I scratched myself. Real scratching is superior to masturbation, in my opinion. One can masturbate up to the age of seventy, and even beyond, but in the end it becomes a mere habit. Whereas to scratch myself properly I would have needed a dozen hands. I itched all over, on the privates, in the bush up to the navel, under the arms, in the arse, and then patches of eczema and psoriasis that I could set raging merely by thinking of them. (93)

Such passages are doubly relevant here: first and foremost, as the narrator himself says, scratching represents a way of passing the time. Moreover, his richly detailed explanations of habits and events, or lack thereof, in the narrator’s life – such as the scratching – pushes the end further away, and provides suspension of any kind of fulfilment or accomplishment. Thus he keeps himself busy, he passes the time and suspends the end, both in the narrative and in the narration – that is, both in the story he is telling, and by telling it as he does.

With regards to time, there occurs an interesting contrast in narrative style. In *A Beckett Canon*, Ruby Cohn observes the following:

[The] narrator can be maniacally explicit about certain matters – his clothes (which belonged to a deceased man), his crocus (which never blooms), the way he rides an ass, the way he milks a cow, his

carpentry applied to a begging board and to his last refuge in a boat. [...] It is as though the narrator sets out to include [...] whatever is usually elided in more conventional stories. (130)

In contrast to this, the sense of time in narration is lacking to the extent that time becomes arbitrary, even meaningless. Frequently, new paragraphs begin with the words “One day ...” or the indefinite “Now ...”, and narration of an event often ends with the equally unspecific “In the end ...”. The narrator’s use of the latter phrase is particularly striking, considering the title of the story – and yet ‘striking’ might not be the most suitable word for it: not one of the passages starting with the phrase “In the end ...” stand out as any less mundane or any more worthy of attention than the rest of the story. As such there occurs a kind of inflation of the phrase, as if with every additional occurrence of it – each time as arbitrary as the last – the true end seems even further away.

In fact, this inflation of sorts may be seen to reach further than just one particular phrase: the mere multitude of words at times appears to make each word mean less, as if the narrator is in some way emptying the narrated world of meaning. In the later stages of the story, he tells of his work as a beggar. While begging, he is one day harassed by a Marxist orator. The narrator, in his usual style, accounts for every little detail of the orator’s speech, including the replies of a heckler in the crowd; the orator refers to the narrator as a “down and out [and a] leftover. [...] Old, lousy, rotten, ripe for the muckheap” (94). Yet the narrator concludes the passage by simply observing that the orator “had a nice face, a little on the red side” (95). Through ending the digression as such, he effectively eradicates any potential significance that the event might have had; it is as if the orator’s words mean nothing to him, as if they were spoken about someone else. When the narrator decides to pack his begging board and leave, it seems to be because of the commotion caused by the orator, rather than because he is being harassed: “I went away, although it was still light. But generally speaking it was a quiet corner, busy but not overcrowded, thriving and well-frequented” (95).

I started this chapter with a quote from *Endgame*, a quote which leads our attention towards the notion of ending. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks chooses to quote that same play in a discussion of plot endings:

Ends, it seems, have become difficult to achieve [in *Endgame*]. In their absence, or their permanent deferral, one is condemned to playing: to concocting endgames, playing in anticipation of a terminal structuring moment of revelation that never comes, creating the space of an as-if, a fiction of finality. There is a wait for the end that never achieves satisfaction. (313)

These very words could just as well have been used to describe “The End”. The playing, in this case, appears in the form of the long-winded and detailed style of narration, interspersed with the odd instance of wordplay and touch of bleak humour – for instance when the narrator visits an old, dilapidated cabin in the mountains, and tries to get milk from a cow there: “The milk fell to the ground and was lost, but I said to myself, No matter, it’s free. She dragged me across the floor, stopping from time to time only to kick me. I didn’t know our cows too could be so inhuman” (90). The final vision can also be regarded as a sort of playing; it is the vision that here represents the “space of an as-if”, the “fiction of finality”. Making a fiction of death is first and foremost a way of taking charge, to thus make sure that the end is nothing short of the perfect death.

Moreover, this playing may be a way of making the thoughts of dying less overwhelming and easier to handle. Although the vision is perhaps a result of desperation – a final attempt to slip away from the cold grip of anonymous, silent death – creating fiction is still a game of sorts. Not only does it add a touch of lightness to the otherwise heavy topic at hand, it also brings with it a sense of continuation to the end, precisely through being an act of creation. This stands in contrast with the section of the story directly preceding the vision, which the narrator spends describing his own physical decay, and in which there is a marked change in the direction of the story, towards the theme of death and dying.

After having moved into his final abode, in an eerily coffin-like boat inside a shed, the narrator repeatedly claims that he is content with the present situation. As suggested above, his utter state of lack makes him virtually need nothing as far as material goods are concerned. Furthermore, being now “under cover again, in an empty place” (82), there is not much else for him to wish for, and consequentially there is little more for him to do. And indeed, it soon becomes clear that the narrator is weakening and wasting away:

There were times when I wanted to push away the lid and get out of the boat and couldn't, I was so indolent and weak, so content deep down where I was. [...] So I waited till the desire to shit, or even to piss, lent me wings. I did not want to dirty my nest! And yet it sometimes happened, and even more and more often. (97-98)

Not only are his physical wanderings slowing down to a halt here, even his narrative detours become fewer and shorter. It appears as if the narrator is weakening on two levels: both on the level of the story itself, where he can hardly get out of his boat, and on the narrative level, on which he now seems more direct and less wordy. He continues the above-cited passage of the occasional dirtying of the nest:

Arched and rigid I edged down my trousers and turned a little on my side, just enough to free the hole. To contrive a little kingdom, in the midst of the universal muck, then shit on it, ah that was me all over. The excrement were me too, I know, I know, but all the same. Enough, enough, the next thing I was having visions. (98)

He seems here to have reached a sort of breaking point, where even he has had enough of his own narration. Thus he must go on to find some way of ending it – whence appears the vision of his death.

Returning now to the connection between continuation and end, the link here is also pointed out by Cohn, who claims that the narrator's “main thread intertwines two themes subsumed by the story's successive titles – ‘Suite’ and ‘La Fin’ (Continuation and End)” (Cohn: 131). Derrida discusses the topic of titles in his essay “Before the Law”, claiming that a title “is placed in a specific position, highly regulated by conventional laws: at the beginning

of and at a set distance above the body of a text, but in any case *before* it.” Furthermore, he states, the title “names and guarantees the identity, the unity and the boundaries of the original work which it entitles” (Derrida 1992b: 188). In other words, the title of a story typically represents a sort of focusing gesture, a hint as to who or what the author intends us, as readers, to pay particular attention to – we are provided with a way in. Interestingly, this particular title – although placed traditionally at the beginning – leads our attention to a very specific part of the story, namely the final passage: it suggests that it is *in the end* that we find the identity, the unity and the boundaries of this story; the end is the key.

However, as pointed out by Cohn, the original title also plays a role here: as she mentions, the French word ‘suite’ can be translated as ‘continuation’ – but it can also mean ‘result’, a word which not only shares similar connotations with ‘end’, but which also reminds us of the double meaning of ‘end’: so far in this discussion, I have referred to this term solely in the sense of ‘finitude’. But we may also read ‘end’ to mean ‘purpose’, ‘goal’ or indeed ‘result’. As such, the title is slightly ambiguous; we cannot know for certain to which sense of ‘end’ it refers. As such, it is too simple to assume that the title necessarily refers merely to the final passage of the text, or to the closing stage of the narrator’s life. Rather, it seems plausible to read the title as playing with its own ambiguity: certainly it does suggest that we pay particular attention to the end of the story; but furthermore, if read in the sense of end<sub>1</sub>, it hints at another integral aspect of the narrative, namely the apparent lack of purpose and direction in the narrator’s existence. That is, until the act of finality, of reaching the end, becomes the purpose, the desired result – the end becomes the end.

Moreover, the ambiguity in the title may also reflect the ambiguity in how the narrator relates to the different senses of ‘end’ throughout the story: on the one hand, he goes from wandering around the city with no apparent goal, to finding a purpose in death, in escaping anonymity in death; on the other hand, he goes from deferring his own end – through his

long-winded narrative style, and through keeping himself occupied – to embracing that end, even envisioning it. Yet, for all the desire for a true end, a singular death that sets him apart, there is ambiguity to be found even here, in the vision. The very final passage has been touched upon before, and begs repetition here:

I swallowed my calmative. The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space. The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on. (99)

The ambiguity shines through particularly in the very final sentence: in a near-clichéd moment of death, where his life seems to pass before his eyes, he concludes that the story of his life is one stuck in limbo – it never stops going nowhere. Ambiguous, too, is the calmative that he mentions, the need of which is likely to be caused by an anxiety about reaching, finally, the end.

Furthermore, this passage emits an immense and overwhelming powerlessness, one which not so much immobilises narration as it implodes it; narration turns inwards and pulls away the already unstable ground beneath itself. With neither the courage to end nor the strength to go on, narration is caught in an impossible space where nothing can exist, nothing can have existed. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode briefly discusses Beckett:

[Beckett] is the perverse theologian of a world which has suffered a Fall, experienced an Incarnation which changes all relations of past, present and future, but which will not be redeemed. Time is an endless transition from one condition of misery to another, ‘a passion without form or stations,’ to be ended by no *parousia*. It is a world crying out [...] for apocalypse; all it gets is vain temporality, mad, multiform antithetical influx.” (115; emphasis original)

The narrator waits for an apocalypse that never comes, and as such decides to provide one of his own. His words seem carefully chosen in all their apocalyptic grandeur: “The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space.” Yet what follows seems to completely disintegrate this

grand finale, and instead of going out with a bang, the story fades out in a grounded loop, doomed for all eternity to repeat itself: “without the courage to end or the strength to go on.”

I have referred to the final passage of the story exclusively as a vision, which the present reading more or less demands it to be. However, according to Ackerley and Gontarski, in this story “distinctions between what occurs and what is imagined become impossible to determine” (172). Following their claim, then, it is difficult to rule out completely the possibility that the end presents not a fictional death, but a real one. However, I shall point to some aspects which I consider suggestive towards a reading of the conclusive passage as a vision. The narrator first introduces a vision of himself in his boat, floating on the waters presumably outside the city in which he has spent most of the story wandering about (98). The narration of this vision is interspersed with related memories of him as a child, watching the lights of the city with his father – twice he wanders off from the vision to a childhood memory. Here it is important to note his own reaction to these brief digressions: the first time he quickly reminds himself to “have done with these visions”, to get on with it. The second time, he is slightly more ambiguous:

And on the slopes of the mountain, now rearing its unbroken bulk behind the town, the fires turned from gold to red, from red to gold. I knew what it was, it was the gorse burning. How often I had set match to it myself, as a child. And hours later, back in my home, before I climbed into bed, I watched from my high window the fires I had lit. That night then, all aglow with distant fires, on sea, on land and in the sky, I drifted with the currents and the tides. (99)

I claim that this is more ambiguous first and foremost because of the lacking reference when he jumps from the memory to “that night”. I deem it likely that “that night” refers back to the vision, but also concede the possibility that it might refer to the actual night that he had a vision of floating around the bay, in his boat – the narrative of which is now ended.

The reading of the end of the story as a vision is also related to the thematic connection between desire and death. I have pointed to the passage of the vision as perhaps



the clearest sign of the narrator's desire to die, precisely because it is a vision, a fantasy. But if we consider again the principle behind the death drive, yet another ambiguity surfaces. The death drive is a concept which Freud bases on the existence of destructive mental activity – but what kind of mental activity does this vision represent? At first sight, it would seem that it is quite clearly destructive, if only because it is a vision of death. But it also envisions the fulfillment of desire, namely the desire for end. As such, it is difficult to argue that the vision is entirely destructive, entirely negative. The objective of the narrator's desire is not necessarily death, first and foremost; rather, it is the end of “the stupid hope of rest or less pain”, the end of all the suffering that he has spent most of the story relating to us.

In the introductory chapter, I emphasized Beckett's obligation to express. In the quote discussed in that chapter, obligation is the only active presence in Beckett's statement; obligation is all that he has. With the narrator of “The End” there also seems to be an obligation – if not obsession – to relate to the reader even the smallest and most insignificant piece of information. Without necessarily assuming that Beckett wrote the story with an active political message in mind, there is here a parallel to be found to the work of Walter Benjamin, and his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”. Here he argues for a kind of narration which is in some ways similar to that found in “The End,” when he claims that “nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history,” and that “only for a redeemed mankind has its past become citable in all its moments” (246). Now, considering the narrator of “The End” to be a part of a “redeemed mankind” seems on the verge of parody – he is barely part of mankind at all. Benjamin's point, however, is that the approach to history that he calls material historicism will let every voice speak, no matter the status or social position of the speaker. This view is certainly compatible with the typical narrator in Beckett's work, often a social outcast in the lower ends of society. Benjamin's point here is

reminiscent of the postmodern view I mentioned in the introduction, as presented by Lyotard – specifically the resistance to progress and the grand narrative.

As for Beckett's obligation to express, then, it appears that the voices that come to speak through this obligation are those that otherwise would not, or could not, speak. In the introductory chapter, I cited from Harvey the question "what do you do when 'I can't' meets 'I must'?" (Casanova: 85). The final sentence of "The End" seems to be related to this question, but here "I can't" is doubled up against itself. Ability is disintegrated, but obligation still remains. The desired death of the narrator, the desire to reach the end of the story, may as such be seen to represent a desire in Beckett to exhaust his obligation to writing, to end his debt to literature. But the obligation to express, as we have seen in the introductory chapter, withstands even the lack of means to express, and as such Beckett is doomed to failure also with regards to his desire to end. The presence of this desire seems inarguable in "The End", yet the story only scratches the surface of what is to come from Beckett in this regard. While the envisioned death of the narrator is certainly a strong image – precisely because it expresses so clearly a desire for end – the measures taken towards effacement of narration in "Texts for Nothing" are, as we shall soon see, significantly greater.

#### 4. The Words to End All Words: “Texts for Nothing”

In a discussion on negative theology, Jacques Derrida claims that “[t]o speak for *nothing* is not: not to speak. Above all, it is not to speak for no one” (Derrida 1992a: 76; emphasis original). What Derrida refers to speaking for nothing as “[speaking] only for the sake of speaking, in order to experience speech” (75). In Beckett’s “Texts for Nothing” the narrator<sup>7</sup> appears precisely to speak for the sake of speaking – not only to experience speech, but to experience anything at all. In these thirteen texts there is “no plot, no characters, no progressive structures” (Wolosky: 220); whatever actions are present above the narrative act itself, exist merely as more or less vague memories or fantasies. To a significant extent the texts consist of a shapeless narrator, a mere voice, whom at first sight cannot seem to decide whether it is speaking just to stay alive or rather to pass the time till death’s release.

It seems relevant to point out here, that I shall treat the collection of texts mainly in terms of what Galen Strawson sees as “a narrative”: that there is “a certain sort of *developmental* and hence temporal *unity* or *coherence* to the things to which it is standardly applied – lives, parts of lives, pieces of writing“ (74; emphasis original). This is to say that I choose to read “Texts for Nothing” mainly as a collection, where the texts are – if only loosely – tied to each other, rather than as thirteen independent texts. My reading will also be fairly selective, focusing more on singular passages than on the collection in its entirety. I shall treat the texts first and foremost with regards to how the narrator, through the narrative act, relates to itself and its role as bodiless voice, as medium and (communicator of) text. Furthermore, I shall take a closer look at the story that the narrator appears to wish to tell, including the above-mentioned memories and fantasies. It is worth noting that there is no clear-cut division between these two aspects of the texts, and that all of the following is

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<sup>7</sup> I shall refer to the narrator in singular terms, although I concede the possibility that there is more than one narrator in “Texts for Nothing”. This issue will not be a main concern here.

interconnected rather than separated into two different ‘readings’. I introduce the two aspects here as separate for the sake of analytical clarity.

I opened with the quote from Derrida because I want to illustrate a particular connection that I see between the primary text and the reference quote; in this particular case that connection leans rather heavily, although perhaps not entirely, on the phrase “for nothing.” According to Derrida and his discussion of negative theology, “speaking for nothing” does not mean not to speak, nor to speak for no one. It is also “not entirely to speak in vain [nor] to say nothing” (75). I shall try a little experiment<sup>8</sup> – an experiment which may not be quite by the book, as it were, but which will hopefully lead to some worthwhile results nonetheless: by negating the negatives, I will attempt to reach a tentative conclusion about this issue. Taking a step away from Derrida’s negative theology – that is to say, attempting to say what speaking for nothing is, instead of what it is not – we can lead from this the possible conclusion that speaking for nothing is (a) speaking (b) to/for someone (c) saying something (d) for the sake of speech. Thus, to speak for nothing appears to be an action where speech is *the means* as well as *the end*; one might say, perhaps, that it is *speech to the end of speech*.

Following the same logic we may read the title “Texts for Nothing” to designate text for the sake of text, text to the end of text. We thus have a collection of texts for nothing, in each of which there is a narrator who speaks for nothing; we have text to the end of text, language to the end of language. It is time now to linger for a second on the word ‘end’; it is a word for which a particular space is saved in “Texts for Nothing” – a space which, I shall argue, represents a double meaning, a pun. I mentioned the two meanings of ‘end’ in discussion of “The End”, but to briefly refresh: on the one hand, ‘end’ refers to finitude, a final point or cessation; on the other hand, it may stand for purpose, reason or goal. Both of

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<sup>8</sup> This experiment carries an agenda, on behalf of which I can only apologize for the unfortunate betrayal of negative theology. Defeating the point of said theology is a means to an end, and it is my hope that the end will justify this means.

these senses of 'end' are highly relevant to the texts, but the word itself is used sparingly and without much fanfare. Rather, 'end' has a different kind of presence in these texts: its meanings are more present than the word, signifying, yet again, a desire for end. I shall illustrate this with an example from text 6: "what is it, this unnamable thing that I name and name and never wear out, and I call that words. It's because I haven't hit on the right ones, *the killers*, haven't yet heaved them up from that heart-burning glut of words, with what words shall I name my unnamable words?" (125; emphasis added). Paraphrased as pun: the end is the end; or, all punning aside, the goal is to reach the final word. Desire steps up in the impossible shape of the unnamable words, "the killers," that can put an end to all words, an end to speech – for, as the narrator himself<sup>9</sup> neatly sums it up, "it's the end gives the meaning to words" (131). I shall argue in this chapter that desire is ever-present in these texts precisely due to the double meaning of the word end.

By insisting upon the presence of desire, I also imply the presence of a desiring subject; that is to say, I imply that the narrator has such subjective traits as to qualify him as a possible source of desire. Elliot Krieger, in his article "Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*: Explication and Exposition," appears more uncertain about this, when he claims that "there is no first-person narrator. The 'I' that speaks throughout the *Texts* is not a person, but is the text itself, the black words printed on the white page" (Krieger 987). His reading raises an important question: what is a narrator? Moreover, can we rightfully claim a text – the black words on the white page – to assume the role of a subjective entity? I shall, for now, leave the latter question open. As for the former, Mieke Bal presents a fairly uncomplicated and straight-forward answer to the question, in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*: "As soon as there is language, there is a speaker who utters it; as soon as those linguistic utterances constitute a narrative text, there is a narrator, a narrative subject" (22). It

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<sup>9</sup> I do not wish to force a gender upon the narrator, but for the sake of simplicity I will refer to the narrator as male.

remains uncertain to me whether Krieger sees the text as an actual narrative subject, and as such I cannot say whether or not Bal's definition contradicts Krieger's claim. Furthermore, it is not entirely clear what a narrative text is. Bal claims that it is "a text in which an agent relates ('tells') a story in a particular medium, such as language" (5). As I shall come back to later in this chapter, one may reasonably question whether or not the narrator in Beckett's texts succeeds in telling a story. One may also, then, question whether these are narrative texts, and as such whether or not they have a narrator. However, in my treatment of the texts I choose to consider even the attempt at telling a story – successful or not – sufficient to earn the status of narrator.

I stated, above, that desire for an end is present in two senses, purpose as well as finitude. However, there is also a desire to go on, to keep up the pace, to *not end*. This leads back to speaking for nothing, speaking to the end of speech. We may read these two desires, to end and to go on, as oppositional, working against each other, creating a back-and-forth dynamic. However, we may also read them as one and the same; the desire to end is not a desire to simply stop talking. It is a desire to end speech, to end words. It is a desire to find "the killers"; the narrator has a desire to keep the narrative going until the end is reached. It is on a similar note that Jonathan Boulter argues that "Texts for Nothing" represents, for Beckett, an "attempt to find the 'literature of the unword'," an attempt which the author himself considered a failure "to put an end, finally, to the human" (Boulter: 131). My claim is that failure is implicit in the desire to reach the end of expression, the end of language. This failure is largely grounded in the paradoxical act of ending: as long as that act is kept up, as long as one keeps ending, the end is necessarily kept at an arm's length. The attempt to express to the end of expression, then, seems to necessitate failure. As mentioned in the chapter on "First Love", Pascale Casanova sees this failure as largely intentional, claiming Beckett to be a writer who "dared to fail", an artist of failure. If indeed failure is the intention,

one may argue that Beckett cannot help but succeed – or, more precisely, success and failure engage in an everlasting chase in which none will be able to catch up with the other.

The above-mentioned desire to go on has further implications if read in relation with the sense of physical movement, or rather lack thereof, in these texts. The narrator can, indeed must, ‘go on’ with his narrative, but he cannot go at all in a more physical sense: if one disregards an implied sense of movement in the act of narration, he has no means of mobility. In text 3 he appears to make an attempt at finding the words that can make him exist physically, using narration as a means to create a body. “It’s enough to will it,” he says, “I’ll will it, will me a body, will me a head, a little strength, a little courage, I’m starting now” (109). Following this, his desire takes the shape of visions or fantasies of being human and having human relations, all of which I shall discuss more at length later in this chapter. Towards the end of the text he returns to the narration of his own body:

[To] sprout a head at last, all my very own, [...] and legs to kick my heels with, I’d be there at last, I could go at last, it’s all I ask, no, I can’t ask anything. Just the head and two legs, or one, in the middle, I’d go hopping. Or just the head, nice and round, [...] I’d go rolling, downhill, almost a pure spirit, no, that wouldn’t work, all is uphill from here. (113)

However, all he seems to obtain from this is the hopeless realization that physical being, to him, is impossible:

I’m here, that’s all I know, and that it’s still not me [...]. There is no flesh anywhere, nor any way to die. Leave all that, to want to leave all that, not knowing what that means, all that, it’s soon said, soon done, in vain, nothing has stirred, no one has spoken. Here, nothing will happen here, no one will be here, for many a long day. (113)

There is a sense here of self-effacement. Shira Wolosky states that “the conduct of these *Texts* is in great part the persistent denunciation of body, character, figure, voice, language, in the name of an interiority and essentiality before and beyond it. [...] In general in Beckett there is a double impulse toward invention and refutation” (Wolosky: 221). The above-mentioned narration of a body, of a physical being, is one example of the invention to which she refers.

The refutation can be seen in the quote above; narration takes a turn inwards in order to, as it were, tear itself, as well as the narrator, apart at the seams. “No one has spoken,” he says, as if the entire text never happened.

Such denunciation is even more evident in the final text of the collection, where the narrator’s “weak old voice that tried in vain to make me” (152) is dying away. This final text gives the impression of attempting to undo all that the other texts have tried, and successfully failed, to accomplish: “we’re ended who never were, soon there will be nothing where there was never anything” (154). Seeing as “we” never were, seeing as there “was never anything”, this text may be read as expression reversed, rather literally as taking back expression. But I am being vague: what does it mean to “take back expression”? Is it to regret what one has expressed, to the extent that one wishes to render it “never-having-been-expressed”? Or is it to regain expression – to regain the power, the ability, to express? If we follow through the former question first, we encounter a possible paradox: if there never was and if “we” never were anything, then there was never anything to take back. Can we assume, then, that what is taken back is *nothing*? Before attempting to answer this question, it might be useful to look closer at the role of the term ‘nothing’ in these texts.

Related to the concept of ‘nothing’ is what I shall call the ‘silent signifier’. Calling this a signifier is paradoxical, in the sense that it stands for precisely the lack of a signifier. More precisely, it stands for the lack – in language in a general sense – of a signifier for meaningful silence, a “silence that is not silence” (125). In a way, the silent signifier is a subversion of what Claude Lévi-Strauss calls the floating signifier, which has “symbolic value zero” (Mehlman: 23). Briefly put, the floating signifier is a signifier without a definite signified. The silent signifier, on the other hand, points to the lack of a definite signifier to refer to a particular signified: the pause that is meaningful precisely because it is a pause, precisely because of the lack of a signifier. The narrator of “Texts for Nothing” points to that lack in



text 5, which appears to take place in a courtroom, with the narrator serving in every role: “I’m the clerk, [...] the scribe, [...] judge and party, witness and advocate” (117). This courtroom, as it turns out, may be read to be situated inside his head – the existence of which is questioned by the narrator himself: “all these voices, like a rattling of chains in my head, rattling to me that I have a head. That’s where the court sits this evening, [...] that’s where I’m clerk and scribe, not understanding what I hear, not knowing what I write” (120). His job, as a scribe, is to note down what is uttered. The problem occurs when something is expressed without being uttered: “What do I do when silence falls, with rhetorical intent, or denoting lassitude, perplexity, consternation” (119). The silent signifier, just like desire, always stands for a lack – its “existence” is constituted by the lack of something, which at the same time cannot be *something* because that would imply that it *is*; the silent signifier stands for a something-that-is-not(-something). This lack here becomes an explicit issue, constituting a double expression of desire. It is on the one hand the repeated expression of the desire to inexpress, that is to have the means to signify the meaningful silence. On the other hand, we see a narrative desire here, which may be rooted in a desire of the author: the narrator desires to speak without speaking, but he cannot, for lack of means, for lack of the words that can truthfully not-speak. Thus he must write without writing, without words.

Early on in this chapter I performed an experiment on a quote by Derrida. I shall risk one more attempt at such an experiment – yet again in good faith and in the hope that the end will justify the means. Now, *speech without speech* should amount to the equivalent of  $n$  minus  $n$  – the sum of which is *nothing*. The tentative conclusion that follows is that the narrator desires to express *nothing* – leading us back to the title, “Texts for Nothing.” According to James Knowlson and John Pilling, in *Frescoes of the Skull*, “the title is derived from the musical term *measure pour rien*, meaning ‘a bar’s rest’, and hence, in literary terms, ‘a group of words conveying nothing’” (42; emphasis original). ‘Nothing’, then, seems a

central term both in “Texts for Nothing” and in this chapter – the question is as follows: what is ‘nothing’, what does it stand for? Wolosky sums up four different stances which together represent something of a norm in Beckett criticism:

(1) That Beckett’s nothing [...] designates a transcendent fullness opposed to the material world from which ascetic withdrawal is urged [...]. (2) That the nothing signifies an ultimate transcendence which however cannot be attained despite ascetic withdrawal from the material world [...]. (3) That the material world is utterly repudiated in the name of a transcendent nothing absolutely antithetical to it [...]. And (4) that at the core of reality, when all appearances have been stripped away, there is only an existential void [...] (Wolosky: 225)

Ackerley and Gontarski write about “Texts for Nothing” that it is “as close as [Beckett] ever got to the expression of the impossibility to express, when there is nothing to express and no means by which to do so” (410). I shall propose a reading of ‘nothing’ which may be seen to represent a fifth stance, but which in truth lies relatively close to the fourth stance presented by Wolosky. In words similar to hers, one may formulate it as such: at the core of language, when all means and ends have been stripped away, there is only an expressionless void. Presented in fewer words, then, I shall see nothing as *the impossibility to express without end and without means*. In the introductory chapter I addressed Beckett’s statement about art in one of his dialogues with Georges Duthuit. There, I took the phrase “there is nothing to express” to stand for a liberation of art from meaning – and I took the phrase “there is nothing with which to express” to stand for the impossibility to execute said liberation. That is to say, Beckett aims, desires, for art to express without end and without means – to express nothing.

I asked, above, what it means to take back expression. If we read text 13 as a “taking back” of the first twelve texts, can we assume that what is taken back is “nothing”, such as it has been tentatively defined above? I would claim that we cannot. Any discussion of the terms ‘nothing’ and ‘something’ appears to have a tendency to circle around itself and amount to paradoxes. However, it seems clear that it is a necessary burden of being part of a binary opposition that the one opposite cannot appear without the other. Nothing always implies

something – and the other way around. Derrida stated that speaking for nothing is not “not to speak” – neither, then, does being for nothing mean “not to be”. As such I claim that taking back texts for nothing is not to take back nothing, but rather to take back something. What is taken back here is the something-that-is-not-something; what is taken back is the expression of nothing: the presence of that lack of possibility for expression free of meaning.

I have suggested two possible interpretations of the term “taking back expression”. What might be termed a regret of expression has been treated, although not conclusively, in the discussion above, but I have yet to address the regaining of expression. To regain the power to express, it seems evident that one must be in a state of lack: one has been in possession of that power, but one has since lost it. As such, it seems as if “Texts for Nothing” must be constituted by a form of powerless expression, a type of expression which has no uttering power behind it. But how then, we may ask, can these texts be uttered at all? How can they exist if there is no power to express them? I propose that it is precisely the *lack* of power that produces the texts: lack, yet again, constitutes the absence which is filled by desire – the desire for power to express. This desire is what makes “Texts for Nothing” happen.

I have briefly mentioned the “weak old voice” which, in the final text, is dying away. In an attempt to separate himself from the one characteristic trait we have to go by – his voice – the narrator proceeds to interrupt narration through announcing the death of the voice mid-sentence:

No voice ever but it in my life, it says, if speaking of me one can speak of life, and it can, it still can, or if not life, there it dies [...], once you’ve spoken of me you can speak of anything, up to the point where, up to the time when, there it dies, it can’t go on, it’s been its death, speaking of me [...]. Whose voice, no one’s, there is no one, there’s a voice without a mouth. (152)

The narrator claims that speaking of him has been the death of the voice. But ultimately there is no one else, nothing else, to speak of; every attempt at producing a story, with scenes, characters, actions, has failed. As such, perhaps, the voice has finally spoken to the end of speech. In that respect, it appears relevant to recall, yet again, the desired liberation of art from meaning: through claiming that nothing exists but the voice, the narrator in a way renders it meaningless; if a voice is all that is, then what the voice says is of no consequence – in fact, what the voice says *is not*. The voice says nothing.

The interruption of narration is foreshadowed in text 2, where the narrator claims that “the subject dies before it comes to the verb” (106). An obvious implication here is one reminiscent of a famous single-sentence summary of Beckett’s play *Waiting for Godot*, in which the Irish literary critic Vivian Mercier claimed that it is a play in which “nothing happens, twice”. In “Texts for Nothing” no one takes action, no one does anything – nothing happens, thirteen times. If the subject dies before it comes to the verb, then the sentence ends with no action having been taken. But there is another implication here: the narrator is constituted through words and words only – the end of the sentence is the end of him. It is perhaps this end that he fears in another passage from text 2:

So long as the words keep coming nothing will have changed, there are the old words out again. Utter, there’s nothing else, utter, void yourself of them, here as always, nothing else. But they are failing, true, that’s the change, they are failing, that’s bad, bad. Or it’s the dread of coming to the last, of having said all, your all, before the end, no, for that will be the end, the end of all, not certain. (106)

Through his lack of physical presence, all that is left to determine the narrator’s existence is his words. Thus by extension, utterance as a means of voiding himself of words amounts to little more than the committing of narrative suicide. From this follows the dread that he presents here – a dread of dying before the verb, so to speak. A dread of reaching the end of the sentence before the sentence has reached the end. That will be the end of all, the narrator explains, before seeking shelter in ambiguity, adding “not certain”.

As I touched upon earlier in this chapter, the implied double meaning of ‘end’ is central for my reading of these texts. As hinted at above, I say that it is *implied* not because the word is wholly absent from the texts, but because I see its role as more significant than the actual usage of the word in this work may suggest. However, there are passages in which a certain importance is applied to its presence: “better be silent,” the narrator says, “it’s the only method, if you want to end, not a word but smiles, end rent with stifled imprecations, burst with speechlessness” (107). The paradoxical presence of the silent signifier – represented here by the stifled imprecations and speechlessness – makes it impossible to end; end is disintegrated by a silence, the destructive force of which springs from the tension created by the presence of meaning running into the absence of a signifier. All that is left is inexpression.

Leaving behind the meta-narrative aspect for a while, I shall now proceed to a closer examination of the story that the narrator appears to want to tell – or rather, perhaps, to be in possession of. At several points in “Texts for Nothing” the narrator expresses a desire to have a story to tell, to be able to tell a story. The attempts, however, largely amount to mere glimpses, memories and fantasies of a life, perhaps, once lived. In text 6, while speaking about the search for the right words to end, he presents what looks like an optimistic outlook: “I have high hopes, I give you my word, high hopes, that one day I may tell a story” (125). According to Knowlson and Pilling, the narrator’s “situation is at once revealed to be an essentially *post mortem* one” (45). One possible reading, then, would be that the narrator is a soul in purgatory, trying in vain to tell a story, “with living creatures coming and going on a habitable earth crammed with the dead” (126). I have mentioned how he tries to create a physical appearance for himself through narration, to narrate himself a body. Drawing further on this image, we may see narration also as a potential means of mobility for the narrator – in which case the inability to continue narration would equal the inability to move, to go on. In

other words, not being able to tell a story, the narrator is stuck in his present state of purgatory.

This immobility of sorts, the problem of not being able to go on, is related to the narrator's attempt at finding the silent signifier precisely because of the lack of a story in the narrator's life. The narrator needs to, indeed desires to tell a story without having a story to tell – thus yet again he is searching for the (in)expression that lets him relate the story for which no words exist, the language that can truthfully express the story in which nothing happens. But he knows no such language, and so lacking the possibility to tell a story, the narrator “cannot help but generate scenes and then proceed to people them” (Wolosky 221). In text 2, for instance, he talks of Mother Calvet, who “knew what she liked, perhaps even what she would have liked,” but limited imagination cuts her short and he cannot think of a story for her: “the mind slow, slow, nearly stopped [...]. The words too, slow, slow, the subject dies before it comes to the verb” (106). I suggested above that the latter phrase carries an implication for the entire collection of texts. Read in its immediate context, however, it also carries negative implications concerning the narrator's ability to tell a story.

Text 4 takes up the problem of storytelling rather directly, when the narrator talks about a third person, a “him”, who “tells his story every five minutes, saying it is not his, there's cleverness for you. He would like it to be my fault that he has no story, of course he has no story, that's no reason for trying to foist one on me” (115). Krieger suggests that this third person refers to the author, claiming that “the narrator is [...] distinguished from the writer, Beckett, through a pronominal process” (995). Early on in his article, Krieger claims that the first text “accomplishes the difficult task of presenting us with clues enough so we can determine that the narrator is the printed text and not an imagined human character” (987-8). As such, he appears to read the texts as riddles of sorts, where the implied author leaves us

clues from which we should be able to “solve” the conundrum that the texts present to us as readers.

And indeed, text 4 does provide us with some clues that might point towards “him” as referring to the author. In no other text does the narrator refer as clearly to other literary works, works written by none other than the author himself: “treat him like that, like a vulgar Molloy, a common Malone, those mere mortals, happy mortals” (115). Krieger’s claim is that the text, as narrator, is trying to gain independence from its author; it “reverses the ordinary process and uses the strength of its own atemporality both to control its own author and to attain its own mortal life” (Krieger: 996). That is to say, the text reverses the traditional relationship between author and narrator; whereas in a traditional narrative the narrator’s voice would, as it were, carry out the narrative will of the author, the narrator here appears to act on his own accord, as if the author cannot quiet the narrator’s voice. Reading it thus, the division between the two appears problematic, an issue which is soon emphasized: “That’s how he speaks, this evening, how he has me speak, how he speaks to himself, how I speak, there is only me, this evening, here, on earth, and a voice that makes no sound because it goes towards none” (115). They both speak, but not to each other – they both speak, but without a listener. Now, speaking without a listener does not quite amount to speech without speech, because speech in itself does not necessitate that someone hear it. However, if there is no one to listen, then what is said seems of little consequence. In a sense it becomes meaningless, it becomes a kind of silence, “a voice that makes no sound”.

Another interesting point follows from the narrator’s claim that “he’s looking to kill me, to have me dead like him, dead like the living” (114). Following the reading discussed above, it seems fairly plausible to assume that the murderer here is the author himself. The question is, what does killing the narrator of these texts amount to? It was hinted above that the narrator is in a sense rebelling against the author, as if he is trying to free himself from the

grip of the author. Killing that narrator would put a stop to this rebellion, but it would necessitate the author to come up with another narrator to carry out his authoritative will – one, perhaps, just as eager to take control of his own narration as the previous one. The death of the narrator, literally at the hands of the author, may be likened to a sort of reversed patricide: on the one hand, the narrator is the author’s brainchild, as it were. But on the other hand, the author has no say, so to speak, with regards to narration, without the presence of the narrator through which the author communicates and expresses his will. A potential killing of the narrator – that is, an action that would result in the lack of a narrator – may then stand as a twofold, and contradictory, expression of desire: the desire for the narrator’s death betrays a desire to end words, to end expression; the resulting lack of a narrator would then leave the author with the opposite, namely the desire for means of expression. This slightly paradoxical battle of desires may stand as an image of a destruction of desire, a wish to be rid of desire – ultimately, a desire to not desire. In text 3 the narrator expresses what may be read as a fear of desire: “no one’s going to love you, don’t be alarmed” (110). Recalling that desire represents a lack, we may see the lack which constitutes this fear of desire to be the lack of power to express nothing. Killing the narrator thus stands as a means of getting rid of a representation of lack, thus regaining – taking back – that power.

I have already mentioned the relationship between success and failure in Beckett’s literature, the two endlessly chasing one another, with no real possibility of catching up. Knowlson and Pilling observe that “Beckett’s aesthetic at this time [of writing ‘Texts for Nothing’] was predicated upon failure and the unavailability of failure” (41). Moreover, they see “Texts for Nothing” as revelling in variations of failure: “Each strategy which the voice engages in, in order to settle decisively the question of whether or not it is substantial, founders because there is no external, ratifying element that will guarantee its substantiality” (44). There seems to be a particular presence here of what may be termed a constitutional



failure, in the sense that the narrator tries – and continuously fails – to constitute an existence, a substantiality, for himself through narration, through language. But language is insufficient for this task, and as the narrator steadily seems to become increasingly aware of this, he becomes more and more prone to “gestures of cancellation”, to second-guessing his own attempts, “until the point where [he] resigns [himself] to solitude and awaits the demise of all voices whatever” (ibid: 44).

In “The Literature of Exhaustion”, John Barth writes that “for Beckett, [...] to cease to create altogether would be fairly meaningful: his crowning work, his ‘last word’” (313-14). Such an abrupt ending of his career, particularly with the artistic intention that Barth implies here, would be a near-perfect example of a “silence that is not silence”, of the silent signifier. Beckett ceasing to write while at the height of his career, would stand as an extreme act of inexpression, through which he would express the intention in his project of failure precisely through putting a stop to expression. To an artist like Beckett, an artist of failure, such an act would thus be meaningful. However, even if we consider such an act to be a form of literary utterance, we fail to take into account Beckett’s pronounced artistic obligation. Ceasing to create might have been a solution, might answer to one aspect of his creative desires – but those desires also include precisely that he dare keep writing, that he dare write the failure that is language. Thus, by continuing his work, Beckett necessarily fails to produce the meaningful silence that would have resulted from ending his career; any literary production is bound to failure, and this is exactly why he must dare continue.

## 5. A Coda Worthy of the Rest?

When working with an author the career of which was so significantly involved with the ambiguities of ending, it seems almost ironic when some kind of an end finally arrives, when the last word is suddenly within reach. As for Beckett's own work, it should perhaps come as no surprise that his final word turned out to be 'end'<sup>10</sup>: "The last words of his last story, 'Oh all to end', express, as Christopher Ricks has pointed out, 'both a hope and a regret: they could mean 'if only the whole thing would be over', or 'how sad that it should stop'" (Cronin: 593). As pointed out time and again throughout this thesis, Beckett's work is full of ambiguities – his very final sentence being no exception in this regard. Cronin points out a connection, here, to Beckett's own beliefs:

It is doubtful if he believed in any sort of survival of consciousness, or disbelieved in it either, since belief – or disbelief – was not something he permitted himself. He thought [...] that it was better to live, and to admit to living, in complete uncertainty: better because more honest. [...] His characters live in confusion, and the possibility of an after-life is part of it. (592-93)

This uncertainty, this lack of both belief and disbelief with regards to a central and ordering principle in our lives, may to an extent have been carried over to this thesis. As stated in the introduction, a somewhat fragmented and detail-focused reading – rather than one able and willing to see a totality, a process, a clear sense of progression – is one possible consequence of a mindset leaning towards postmodernism, if that can be called leaning. In this final chapter, which one may call a conclusion if one should be so inclined, I shall collect some loose threads – and if it should happen that these threads can be tied up, I shall make an attempt to do so. That is to say, I shall sum up the most important aspects of the previous

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting that this claim disregards any posthumous publications of Beckett's work. What I propose to be his final word occurs in "Stirrings Still", which is, as suggested by the words of Anthony Cronin, widely considered to be Beckett's final text.

three chapters, in order to reach, suitably, an end – most importantly, an end in accordance with Beckett’s artistic ideal, which I presented in the introduction.

The concept of the ‘end’ has seen some development through the three stories discussed in this thesis. In “First Love” the notion is present, but less notably so than in the other two texts. Here, whenever something comes to an end, there is also a clear presence of continuity rather than finality – and there seems to be no particular desire for that sense of finality, such as we have seen in “The End” and “Texts for Nothing”. The end that is the father’s death sets the story off, by precipitating the narrator’s forced departure from the father’s house. The end of the narrator’s affair with Lulu concludes the story, as he leaves her parlour during the birth of their child, and goes on to another life – of which we know nothing except that the baby’s cries never cease to sound in his head. In “The End” there is a clear presence not only of finality, but also of the desire for it. Moreover, the narrator of “The End” relates to ending more directly than what is the case in “First Love”: he seems to both fear and desire it. This ambiguity is played out by the narrator in more than one way: his extremely digressive and detailed narration keeps the story going, and keeps the end at arm’s length. Yet the desire for end, starting already with the title, in a way turns the entire story into an act of ending, an endgame of sorts.

In “Texts for Nothing” this endgame is taken even further: whereas in “The End” the physical presence of a (for the most part) conscious narrator is inarguable, in “Texts for Nothing” it is almost as if the act of ending itself is what constitutes the narrator – as if the texts exist solely in order to end, in order to reach that final word which obliterates all other words. In the act of ending there is also a somewhat enticing paradox: as long as the narrator keeps ending, as long as that endgame is kept up, he can never reach the end. The act of ending works against itself, and in a way works as an illustration of the impossibility of desire: the object of desire cannot be attained, because desire is never-ending; if the object is

attained, desire changes and directs itself towards a different object. The act of ending is not identical in its appearance, but it seems to work in a similar manner: it is an action that has as its primary objective to reach the end. But the act itself only serves to postpone the end; there can be no end until the act of ending has finished, until it has obliterated itself as an action.

I mentioned that the presence of end is more subtle in “First Love” than in the other two stories. Where they express a desire to reach the end of expression, “First Love” rather deals with the narrator’s inability to properly express himself at all. In a more general sense – as I claimed in the first chapter – the issue is an inherent failure in expression, in language. It was stated that love, to the narrator, becomes a language of misrepresentation: no expression fits with his experience of reality. In this regard, it is as if language will not work properly for him, as if his words lack the necessary connection to their referents. Thus he tries to make this connection himself, through materializing his feelings, making actions of the words, seemingly hoping that the physical imprint of Lulu’s name in cow manure will make the feelings behind the action more graspable. The “dread name of love” (33), as he calls it, represents a language unknown to him, one in which nothing makes sense, yet in which everything somehow affects him on a deeper level than what he is used to, and comfortable with. That is to say, love affects his thoughts, feelings and actions, because it demands the expression that his emotional constipation makes him unable to produce. “First Love” here touches upon one of the most basic issues in language, namely that of misrepresentation. This issue points all the way back to Ferdinand de Saussure, who claimed that the linguistic sign – the link between the concept and the sound-pattern – is arbitrary, and that this “is the organising principle for the whole of linguistics. [...] The consequences which flow from this principle are innumerable” (Saussure: 68). What this means is, among other things, that a word is not that which it refers to; in the words of Tony Myers: “every word is a gravestone, marking the absence or corpse of the thing it represents and standing in for it” (84). Every

word means something other than itself, and as such every word is subject to misunderstanding. There is no inherent meaning in words; rather, meaning must be provided by the competent language user. The narrator of “First Love” seems, at least partially, to lack the competence needed to make sense of the language, as it were, of love.

Whereas ‘expression’ was a key term for my reading of “First Love”, one may name ‘death’ as its counterpart in “The End” – specifically the desire for death, the death drive. However, the presence of the death drive is not clear-cut from the beginning of the story. Rather, there occurs a seeming shift of the narrator’s desires at one point, more precisely when he gives up on his attempts to be an individual and independent part of society, and starts begging for a living. There is a sense of content resignation present in narration towards the end of the story, as if an acceptance of approaching death. Having now come to terms with an anonymous life, all that is left is to wait for a death which will at last, and forever, extinguish that hopeless hope of life, and end the misery. I quoted Blanchot in this regard, who claims that the “scorn for anonymous death, for ‘passing away’, is really only a reflection of the anguish death’s anonymity provokes” (144). The desire for the perfect death, and conversely the repugnance towards deceasing, passing away, is merely a result of a sort of fear – a fear not only of death, but of no longer being, of the being-no-one that comes with death.

I have emphasized the role of inexpression in my readings. The importance of this term is related to the subtitle of this thesis, “Desire and Language in Samuel Beckett’s short prose”. ‘Inexpression’ refers to the expression of the absence that desire springs out from, that absence which is also a presence, precisely through its relation to desire. Inexpression, then, refers to the very constitutions of desire – it is integral for desire to have a means of expression at all. Peter Brooks claims that desire “never can quite speak its name – never can quite come to the point – but [...] insists on speaking over and over again its movement

toward that name” (61). Desire speaks through inexpression: it speaks the lack that brought it about, but it does not speak itself. Lacan’s triad of need, demand and desire seems relevant here: to bring out the inexpression in the text, as I stated my intention in the introductory chapter, means to bring forth the part of need that demand cannot express – that which is “alienated in needs” and which constitutes “an inability [...] to be articulated in demand” (Lacan: 316-17).

Lacan’s triad of desire is also relevant with regards to inexpression in “First Love” – particularly with regards to the mentioned expressional demand of love. The need – to love – passes through the demand – the materialization of love – and what remains is the desire for an expression which is relevant and meaningful to love, the expression that love demands from him. This yet again points to the narrator’s emotional constipation as a key with regards to the desires in the story: his love is inexpressed, that is to say, in the absence of the expression of his love, there is rather the expression of his inability to express that love. This lack of the expression of love, then, represents the main presence of inexpression in “First Love”: this lack seems to precede and – directly or indirectly – be the cause of all other lack in the story. In “The End”, the presence of inexpression is different, and in a sense more focused, because it surfaces through a particular expression, a single sentence. Inexpression is here locked within the single sentence that ends the story, yet that seems doomed to repeat itself to no end: “without the courage to end or the strength to go on.” The hopelessness in the desire to end – indeed, the impossibility of fulfilling desire at all – is emphasized by these paradox-ridden final words. With regards to “Texts for Nothing”, the question of inexpression seems a little more complicated. I have claimed two main desires for the narrator: the desire for a story to tell, and the desire to end. However, as was the case with “The End” – and in line with the principle of the death drive – the desire is not for just any end: it is a desire to find the right words, to find the words to end all words. This is precisely where the desire for

a story connects with this specific desire to end: both are grounded in a desire for words. Inexpression in “Texts for Nothing” comes to surface through precisely a lack of words – words to tell a story, words to express a meaningful silence, and not the least, words to end. And in the absence of these words are just more words, words that express nothing.

The term ‘nothing’ proved to be a key term in “Texts for Nothing”. Furthermore, ‘nothing’ shall provide a key connection between Beckett’s stated artistic ideal and obligation, and his own art, his literary work. I claimed my reading of ‘nothing’ to be *the impossibility to express without ends and without means*. I have also claimed that Beckett’s artistic ideal states a preference for art to express *the impossibility of artistic expression free of meaning*. While it is not entirely true that the one entails the other, there is certainly a more than trivial connection between these two interpretations: first and foremost, to express without ends – in the sense of ‘end’ implied in the above reading of ‘nothing’ – is to express without purpose, without meaning. Furthermore, albeit perhaps more trivially, to express without means – that is, to express when there is “nothing with which to express” – is per se impossible, even when disregarding any presence of ends. In effect, this appears to suggest that Beckett’s ideal is *an artistic expression of nothing: to express the impossibility of artistic expression without ends and without means*.

In *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*, Ackerley and Gontarski write about Bram van Velde that he and Beckett shared “the sense that their best works were driven by an inner force that had nothing to do with the will. [Beckett] wrote a few short introductions for exhibitions of Bram’s work, celebrating him as the first to admit that to be an artist was to fail.” Van Velde found, in Beckett, “for the first time someone who understood his silent struggle and obstinate determination” (603). It seems reasonable to assume that what they share is primarily the artistic ideal, the obligation to create in spite of the inherent failure that they see in their artistic creation. Their obligation is to express that their obligation is

impossible to fulfil; failure is the only option. But in the face of impossible expression, up steps inexpression, as a means at least to succeed at failing, “to write only that failure” (Casanova: 85): to write the lack – of possibility, of ability, of words, of stories, of ends; that is what we seem to be left with when trying to end.

I have claimed that the only active presence in Beckett’s ideal is that of obligation, but this claim is denied by the active presence of ambiguity, the uncertainty that most certainly makes itself present in this otherwise all-consuming and complete lack. The uncertainty that makes ending not only an arduous task, but a seemingly dangerous one: certainty does not suit a reading of Beckett; my attempt to make a conclusive remark is doomed to fail. I shall therefore let Beckett himself make that remark. His statement with which I opened this thesis, has a form which makes it near-plausible to call it a Beckettian dogma, particularly as it formulates something of an ideal about artistic expression. It seems only fitting, having now reached the ambiguous ending, to finish off with another Beckettian dogma: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better” (Beckett 2009: 81).



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