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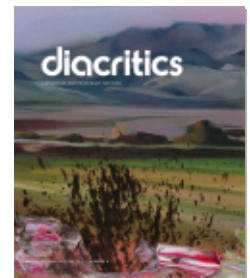
Against Metaphor: Samuel Beckett and the Influence of Science

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AGAINST METAPHOR

SAMUEL BECKETT
AND THE INFLUENCE
OF SCIENCE

NIKOLAI DUFFY

In conversation with Georges Duthuit, Samuel Beckett famously remarked, “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.”¹ Over the years, this statement has been read in numerous ways, and it is arguable that it has frequently been overread as an aesthetic manifesto that casts interpretative light on Beckett’s project as a whole. Irrespective of the complexities or problems that underpin such an overdetermined reading, however, what is particularly interesting about this statement for my purposes here is simply that for Beckett, language in its common form—language as we know it and use it on a daily basis—is not fit for purpose. In the famous “German letter of 1937,” Beckett writes that language is increasingly “a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind.” And as Beckett continues in the same letter, his task is to experiment with “grammar and style” in order that he might “drill one hole after another into [language] until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through—I cannot,” Beckett adds, “imagine a higher goal for today’s writer.”²

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In *Immemorial Silence* Karmen MacKendrick notes how “the concern with the limits of language is a tradition with multiple roots: we find it in ancient mysticism as the ‘ineffable,’ in negative theology as the unnamable, in the Nietzschean warning that grammar seduces us into a belief in metaphysics, even in the Wittgensteinian warning that philosophy, being all language games, must not infrequently remain silent.”³ Indeed, as Ludwig Wittgenstein famously cautioned in the seventh section of the *Tractatus*, “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent.”⁴ Yet it might also be well to remember Maurice Blanchot’s rejoinder, “to be silent is still to speak. Silence is impossible.”⁵

The problem of how to respond to this conundrum might be said to be one of the most fundamental formal problems at the heart of much twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century avant-garde literary practice.

With reference to Beckett’s notebooks and letters, it has been relatively well documented that one of Beckett’s primary sources for the sense of ignorance at play in his works stems from his reading, in 1936, of work of the seventeenth-century Flemish metaphysician and mathematician, Arnold Geulincx.⁶ One of the central elements of Geulincx’s thinking that interested Beckett was his consideration of the limits of empiricism. While Geulincx argued that “everything seeks to be known: not to have been known is almost not to have been born” (*nosci omnes appetunt: non notum fuisse, ferme est non natum fuisse*), he also maintained that each and every empirical explanation is undone by the parameters of its own definition.⁷ “Ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis,” Geulincx stated, “Wherein you have no power, therein you should not will.”⁸ “Yes, let’s go. *They do not*

move” as the famous final line and stage direction from *Waiting for Godot* have it; Vladimir and Estragon seek momentum but are riveted by their lack of power. According to Geulincx’s *Metaphysica*, “motion thus has two parts, from being and to being” (*motus enim duas habet partes: abesse et adesse*).⁹ If only they could give themselves to the passivity of waiting, in which one simply waits, rather than waits for something. It is the giving up, or over, of self that was most particularly expressed in Geulincx’s writing by the analysis of the term *humilitas*. “I am a mere spectator of this machine, whose workings I can neither adjust nor readjust; wherein I neither devise nor destroy anything: the whole thing is someone else’s affair.”¹⁰ *Humilitas* connotes the renunciation of will, the abandonment of both claims to power and knowledge. It is, in other words, the principle at the heart of both Geulincx’s and Beckett’s thinking that comes to be expressed in condensed form by the maxim *nescio*, “I don’t know.”

Broadly outlined, near the end of *Otherwise Than Being or Beyond Essence*, in “Skepticism and Reason,” Emmanuel Levinas’s main concern is to propose a form of argument that takes place as the cancellation of its own expression. For Levinas, the skeptical thesis emblemizes this cancellation succinctly. The reason for this is twofold. On the one hand, Levinas argues that skepticism prohibits comprehension because the equivocation it names necessarily puts all deductive reasoning into question. Skepticism, in other words, indicates the non-productive spacing of an ambivalent interval that prevents any correlation of thesis to synthesis, irregularity to equivalence. In Levinas’s terms: “skepticism, which traverses the rationality or logic of knowledge, is a refusal to synchronize the implicit affirmation contained in saying and the negation which this affirmation states in the said.”¹¹ On the other hand, the refutation skepticism specifies does not produce a counter-knowledge, which is to say, it does not produce a *veritas* of refutation. For Levinas, the exemplarity of skepticism consists precisely in the fact that skepticism also refutes the presentation of its own argument. The critical point here, then, is that Levinas points to the manner in which the structure of skepticism is irreducibly double: skepticism is always and already also the refutation of skepticism. Rather than denying the possibility of a skeptical discourse, however, the self-contradiction of skepticism is precisely that which returns the cautionary register of skepticism to discourse as an “invincible force.”¹² “Skepticism is refutable,” Levinas writes, “but it returns.”¹³ It returns as the dis-course of discourse, a discourse, in other words, that is periodic in the double sense of that which is both “without end and without continuity.”¹⁴

Levinas goes on to claim that the discourse of skepticism points to a language that would “exceed the limits of what is thought, by suggesting, letting be understood without ever making understandable, an implication of a meaning distinct from that which comes to signs from the simultaneity of systems or the logical definition of concepts.”¹⁵ In so doing, skepticism opens toward a thought of language indivisible from its crossings and traversal. Skepticism requires that language be counter-positional, that it proceed

in fits and starts, with questions and effacements, in a manner always turning, that is always wandering against the limit of what it has not been quite possible to say, always forming, always falling.

In an interview with Israel Shenker in 1956 Beckett implicitly recalls the importance of admitting the limits of knowledge when reflecting on the task of the writer.¹⁶ For Beckett, that is, to write is first and foremost an exercise in impotence and ignorance. In Beckett studies this rhetoric of ignorance or impotence more often than not tends to be read in the context of Beckett's reading, in the 1920s and 1930s, of Geulincx, Giordano Bruno, and George Berkeley, and particularly in relation to the latter's opinion that objects of sense perception have no existence outside the mind that perceives them (as expressed, in shorthand, by his famous dictum so central to Beckett's work, *esse est percipi*). More to the point, such "ignorance" or "impotence" is most frequently understood as being directly continuous with Beckett's avowed aim to excavate the something or nothing of language and which has been referred to variously by critics as indicative of Beckett's poetics of "unknowing," "ignorance," and "residua," as well as an intersected "poetics of exhaustion and a poetics of persistence," but which just as equally might be thought of as a "poetics of particles."¹⁷

For Beckett, though, the problem is that such "ignorance"—language's something or nothing—is practically impossible to achieve. It is, that is to say, impossible to achieve *in practice*. For the writer in particular, that is to say, language is never still, never stalled: still here, still stalling, still going on. The measure of a text is the distance its language keeps, like a still image, stalling what looks, as the body is at once both fragile and impenetrable, but there is always, always already, a word too many and any line of observation is unavoidably unbalanced by interference. Thus the methodological question of how best to drill into language to bring about this exposure becomes both the cornerstone and the first principle of the writer's motivation and practice.

Stephen Barker: "In Nietzsche, this Dionysian threat becomes a transgressive practice, in which fragmentary style is part of an effort to 'atomize' poetic discourse and philosophy, to 'return' it to its basic semantic and grammatical ingredients. Only interpolations of sense emanate from the *noli me legere* of Nietzsche's fragmentary logic, marking a portentous opening from and to a void. . . . His aphoristic and fragmentary works are themselves, as he calls them in *The Gay Science*, *Freigeisterei*, 'free-spirit works,' thus marking their extra-moral sense and their play on (and away from) the surface. In this transgressive (non-) designation in which the aphorism, or the fragment, is to be seen as the free spirit, at the same time one must remember that the *Freigeisterei*, in their flight from reason and the Law, must accept in that flight the slippage that makes them *vogelfrei*, 'free-birds.'"

As Barker continues: “Thus the outcome of Nietzsche’s strategic fragmentation is a radical atomism insisting that we ‘cannot legitimately group together individual momentary experiences or sensations’ (McGowan) but then *do just that*, precisely to show that the ‘legitimation’ of such a grouping is always its illegitimacy, its danger, the manifestation of *die Triebe*, the ‘drives’ (Nietzsche’s word, not yet Freud’s) both within and (not) beyond writing. This atomism is echoed in the elementalistic language strategies of Blanchot and Beckett, in which the most fundamental elements are examined for inclusion and rejection.”¹⁸

The nuclear physicist David Bohm once remarked how “revolutionary changes in physics have always involved the perception of new order and attention to the development of new ways of using language that are appropriate to the communication of such order.”¹⁹ Similarly, Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, first published in 1927, states that it is not possible to know the exact position and motion of something at the same time. For Heisenberg, the subatomic world of quantum mechanics goes against the grain of common sense. Throwing into question classical concepts such as mass, location, and velocity, it demands a departure from the standard language and imagery of physics. Thus Heisenberg argued that events in space-time in the subatomic level could not be conveyed in ordinary language or imagery because their effects are not perceived by our senses. Crucially, for Heisenberg uncertainty is not to be understood so much as an epistemic lack but rather as a deficiency in scientific description:

The point is we are bound up with a language, we are hanging in the language. If we want to do physics, we must describe our experiments and the results to other physicists, so that they can be verified or checked by others. At the same time, we know that the words we use to describe the experiments have only a limited range of applicability. That is a fundamental paradox, which we have to confront. We cannot avoid it; we have simply to cope with it, to find what is the best thing we can do about it.²⁰

“The syndrome known as life,” Beckett writes in *Murphy*, “is too diffuse to admit of palliation. For every symptom that is eased, another is made worse. The horse leech’s daughter is a closed system. Her quantum of wantum cannot vary.”²¹ As such, “a certain lack of clarity is inevitable,” writes Andrew Keen. The recourse to the loose, “flimsy” language of analogy is the only means of non-mathematical expression available to explain the intricacies of quantum theory, and it is never more than approximation.”²²

Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay “Elliptical Sense” is concerned with thinking through some of the implications of Jacques Derrida’s notion of *différance*. In that essay, Nancy refers to what he terms a “lightening of meaning” which, he says, refers to the “knowledge of a

condition of possibility that gives nothing to know.”²³ It gives nothing to know, Nancy continues, because it “‘signals’ there where there no longer is any sign—save the repetition of the demand, from sign to sign, towards the limit where existence is exposed.”²⁴ Here the “lightening of meaning” refers to that point or situation at which all language and all weighing break down or fracture. The lightening of meaning is that point at which language becomes dislocated, displaced, disarticulated, when the transparency of sense becomes an impenetrable depth. It is, Nancy says, “the lightening of every system and every cycle.”²⁵ It is the density of a writing of edges, sliding, in-significant. Nancy exemplifies what is at stake here:

Meaning needs a thickness, a density, a mass, and thus an opacity, a darkness by means of which it leaves itself open and lets itself be touched as *meaning* right there where it becomes absent as discourse. . . . This “there” is a material point, a weighty point: the flesh of a lip, the point of a pen or of a stylus, any writing insofar as it traces out the interior and exterior edges of language. It is the point where all writing *is ex-scribed*, where it comes to rest outside of the meaning it inscribes, in the things whose inscription this meaning is supposed to form.²⁶

The question of writing, Nancy remarks, is “the question of the letter of meaning and of the meaning of the letter.”²⁷ In order to measure this question, it is necessary to read not meaning but what spaces meaning. François Raffoul clarifies this, remarking how “this is what ultimately weighs: the fact of being exposed to what thought receives, to what remains inappropriable for it.”²⁸

It is fair to say that not much happens in Beckett’s 1972 text “Still.” But then again, it would also be fair to say that too much happens still. The opening of “Still” specifies that a body sits bolt upright in a chair, looks out of a window, and watches the sun set. It is “quite dark,” “quite quiet,” “quite still.” Yet it is also, therefore, not dark, not quiet, not still; or, perhaps better, it is not quite dark, quiet, or still enough: neither this nor that but hesitant, uncertain, something among other things, still life, or life still, as in the persistence of the body, despite itself, “trembling all over.”²⁹

Stillness is difficult to achieve. Faced with this difficulty, “Still” turns around half-formed questions of vision, notation, movement, and space, taken frame by frame, still by still, the anonymous anatomy of no one the textual pivot point:

Here because of what comes now not midway to the head but almost there before it hesitates and hangs there trembling as if half inclined etc. Half no but on the verge when in its turn the head moves from its place forward and down among the ready fingers where no sooner received and held it weighs on down till elbow meeting armrest brings this last movement to an end and all still once more.³⁰

Here, in the space of this indifferent room, in the angle of this anonymous, depersonalized body, Beckett’s “Still” plays on a four-fold sense of that word, suggesting at one time

or another “not moving,” “a state of calm,” “being stuck or remaining,” as well as “snapshot.” Still, and there everything breaks through and stays still. As in the words of Blanchot: “A hand outstretched, refused, which in whatever manner we would not be able to grasp.”³¹ But which also, on the other hand, rivets attention and holds it still.

Enoch Brater notes how “the word *still* itself, like the hours of a day, is sounded twenty-four times, a verbal journey in disorientating repetition that highlights inversion, opposition, and indeterminacy rather than stasis or immobility.”³² There is an interesting and implicit return in Beckett here to the Geulincxian doctrines of movement, but one in which again, the mind-body is essentially outside itself as in the phrase: “I am therefore a mere spectator of this machine. . . . Everything is the work of someone else,” or as Geulincx puts it in the dictum, “Ego non facio id, quod quomodo fiat nescio” (I do not do that which I do not know how to do).³³ In “Still” the arm moves but it is unclear how or why it does so, and then “all is still once more.” Throughout “Still” the limited range of vocabulary seeks to render physical stillness linguistically. It seeks to halt the forward momentum, or sequential drive of language, narrative, and experience. Via Beckett’s “syntax of weakness” the intonation of “still” corresponds to a double movement, an oscillating movement back and forth between here and there, trembling and still, unraveling, receding, starting over. As the voice of *Imagination Dead Imagine* puts it, “there is nothing elsewhere” such that everything comes back to what takes place here, what doesn’t take place, in the space of a room, in the movements of a body, stripped back but a kind of life all the same, a portrait of trembling, laid out into angles of composition, light and dark, the contours of still life.³⁴ In *Texts for Nothing* Beckett puts it in the following terms: “nothing ever as much as begun, nothing ever but nothing and never, nothing ever but lifeless words.”³⁵

In 1783 the English natural philosopher John Michell wrote a letter to Henry Cavendish, in which he set out the expected properties of what he termed “dark stars.”³⁶ Michell calculated that when the escape velocity at the surface of a star was equal to or greater than the speed of light, the generated light would be gravitationally trapped, so that the star would not itself be directly visible. “Escape velocity” is the speed needed for an object to “break free” from a gravitational field without further propulsion. Black stars, like the black holes they prefigure, can be understood as sites of silence, places where language fails or, perhaps more properly, “breaks free.” Likewise, in general relativity, an event horizon is the boundary beyond which no event can be observed. It doesn’t matter how long one gives it because there will never be enough time for light to travel such distance.

Since Beckett’s donation in 1988 to James Knowlson of the so-called Whoroscope Notebook, with its seven and a half pages of notes on modern physics largely drawn from

Henri Poincaré's *La valeur de la science* (1905), interest in Beckett's engagement with the new physics has been steadily growing and a number of studies have emerged over the last twenty or so years exploring this area of Beckett's writing. The large majority of these studies, though, have tended to work at the level of content rather than form, identifying direct or allusive references to modern physics in a number of Beckett's works. To a large extent, both Beckett's texts in general and the Whoroscope Notebook in particular encourage these kinds of outline interpretive approaches: the Poincaré notes are labeled by Beckett "FOR INTERPOLATION," which is to say, they are notes to be included, in various guises, in his own writing.

One of the most sustained general commentaries on Beckett's consideration of developments in physics is Angela Montgomery's "Beckett and Science: *Watt* and the Quantum Universe." While Montgomery's primary concern in this essay is with developing a detailed reading of the importance of references or allusions to the new physics in *Watt*, after an initial overview of the contents of Beckett's notes on physics in the Whoroscope Notebook, Montgomery also makes the interestingly astute observation that Beckett's first written reference to the atomic world predates the notes drawn from Poincaré by at least three years. Montgomery remarks that in the 1932 manuscript of *A Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, "the model of the atom recurs as a direct parallel to the creative process. . . . This model of the atom gives the idea of the fundamental building-blocks of matter being composed of an explosive energy; the sense of a centre which holds together with the greatest of difficulty."³⁷ Similarly, in *Beckett before Godot* John Pilling reads Beckett's interest in quantum physics, wave theory, and particle theory as the direct reason for *The Calmative's* non-dualist "refusal to distinguish between one domain and another."³⁸ Likewise, Daniel Albright somewhat hesitantly suggests that Beckett's conception of stage time derives, at least in part, from his reading of modern physics:

In *Happy Days* the ideas of modern physics are felt (perhaps) in the warps of time and space. When a character bleeds out into the space that she occupies; when parasols and bottles elongate on one axis and shrink on another; when one frame of reference exhibits extreme discontinuity with another; when time seems to slow down, almost to stop; when mass seems to increase to the point of immobility; then the Lorentz transforms and Einstein's relativity seem to be close at hand.³⁹

Finally, although writing before the donation of the Whoroscope Notebook, Sylvie Debevec Henning provides an astute reading of *The Lost Ones* in relation to notions of teleological self-legitimation, entropic stasis, and the second law of thermodynamics.⁴⁰

Needless to say, this is only a cursory overview of what constitutes a growing body of critical literature on the subject Beckett and science; no doubt the publication of Chris Ackerley's monograph *Samuel Beckett and Science* will contribute even further to this emergent field of Beckett studies. My main point here, though, is simply that a reconsideration of Beckett's creative response to developments in modern physics provides one very specific ground for understanding the particular development and underlying

trajectory of Beckett's poetics: the way he wrote and why he chose to write quite like that. In many of the early works, Beckett's interest in the implications of quantum physics largely emerges as plot device. Belacqua experiences the "dark gulf," Murphy's mind is a "tumult of non-Newtonian commotion," and so on.⁴¹ In *Murphy* the possibility of a transcendental system is constantly rejected, most frequently via irony. Arguably one of the greatest ironies in the novel is when Murphy idealizes the inmates of the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat asylum as exemplary of Geulincx's sense of self-abnegation (*ubi nihil vales, ibi nihil velis*) and yet disregards or does not register "frequent expressions apparently of pain, rage, despair and in fact all the usual."⁴² Paul Davies notes that "the ironic poise . . . is so finely maintained that all the statements fall just short of assent."⁴³ Or as Beckett puts it in a conversation with Charles Juliet, "Negation is no more possible than affirmation. It is absurd to say that something is absurd. *That's still a value judgment*. It is impossible to protest, and equally impossible to assent."⁴⁴ As Beckett put it in the much earlier essay, "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce," "the danger is in the neatness of identifications."⁴⁵

For all Beckett's early reading into the history of philosophy and science, however, together with the various expressions of atomism from the very beginning of his career, it is not until later, and particularly starting from *The Unnamable*, that the interest in physics starts to shape the *method* of Beckett's writing. The prose changes. "The thing to avoid," comments the narrator at the start of *The Unnamable*, "I don't know why, is the spirit of system. People with things, people without things, things without people, what does it matter, I flatter myself it will not take me long to scatter them, whenever I choose, to the winds. I don't see how."⁴⁶ Things proceed in fits and starts, with assertions, equivocations, falterings, and necessarily so. Every statement is an exercise in both folly and irony. "The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter."⁴⁷

Much of Beckett's subsequent career can be read as a sustained engagement with the practical problem of how to stage the "mess" in language. In other words, it concerned an ongoing attempt to find a method of writing that turned "mess" into structural principle. Such an understanding of the influence of physics on the development of Beckett's writing practices opens up interesting ways for thinking about new and innovative methods of writing that both reflect and structurally incorporate some of the central ideas that define the contemporary period. What I would like to suggest is that, like Beckett's texts—in particular the late prose works but also more broadly across all his writings—in its language, imagery, syntax, and structure, quantum physics trembles precariously at the edge of life, an interplay of falling and forming, and as such functions as both critical context and corollary for approaching Beckett's late writings and experimental poetics more generally. As Keen illustratively notes:

This is partially because the emergence of the scientific mode of thought (both in Beckett's writing and in a wider metaphysical sense) is so closely tied to the existence of the ostensibly subjective and non-rational operation of the creative imagination, as well as the development of mystical thought patterns (as discussed above). Although Beckett approaches these conflicting terms in a manner which is often parodic, and sometimes verging on caricature, he never loses sight of their fundamental role in the history and development of human thought. Furthermore, the methodological equivalence of opposites that this aspect of his work demonstrates is indicative of an assertion of the necessary co-existence of contrary, though not necessarily contradictory, elements in any system.⁴⁸

In his 1721 essay, "De Motu," ("An Essay on Motion") George Berkeley claimed that "the physicist studies the series or successions of sensible things, noting by what laws they are connected, and in what order, what precedes as cause, and what follows as effect."⁴⁹ Throughout that essay, Berkeley contends that notions of absolute space and time are, in themselves, without meaning. For Berkeley only sense experience may underwrite meaning. Since neither space nor time has any foundation in sense experience, Berkeley argues, there is no reason to accept them as meaningful words. All empirical signification, rather, is entirely conditional on effects.⁵⁰ Writing nearly two hundred years later, Ernst Mach remarked how "the intuition of space is bound up with the organization of the senses." "We are not justified," Mach goes on, "in ascribing spatial properties to things which are not perceived by the senses."⁵¹ Similarly, theories of metric expansion suggest that the opening out of the universe is intrinsic: it is defined, simply, as the relative separation of its own parts rather than any motion outward into something else. It is also possible for a distance to exceed the speed of light multiplied by the age of the universe, which means that light from one part of space might still be arriving at distant locations. As the universe expands and the scale of what is observable contracts, the distance to the edge of what can be seen gets closer and closer. While this may sound potentially instructive, when the edge of what is observable becomes smaller than a body, gravitation is unbound and falling away becomes scattering. All this said, however, and where, for instance, various critical responses have read this trajectory in Beckett as indicative of a narrative that provides "the tools to implement its abolition,"⁵² it is worth stating that there is no absolute necessity to correlate empirical limits and unknowability with narrative futility or possibility, or even generative possibility as, arguably, they most frequently are in Beckett studies, but rather as potentially something less loaded, less essentially meaningful, more matter of fact, just "how it is," or at the very least, just *how it feels to be*.

“Enough still not to know. Not to know what they say. Not to know what it is the words it says say. Says? Secretes. Say better worse secretes. What it is the words it secretes say. What the so-said void. The so-said dim. The so-said shades. The so-said seat and germ of all. Enough to know no knowing. No knowing what it is the words it secretes say. No saying. No saying what it all is they somehow say.”⁵³

Discussing the possibilities for a kind of distant or hands-off collaboration, the American composer Morton Feldman said to Beckett that he was after something that just hovered. In its shifts and turns, the resultant text, “neither,” performs a kind of hovering that resists comprehension, even, to some extent, commentary. In its folds and fissures, the text is a turning away, a never quite getting there, to such an extent that “neither” calls for a reading that doubles back or that stills itself. In Beckett’s text, language slips; it screens a spacing of movement that excepts identity, that turns inside out the common structures of reference and designation. In its elision, “neither” gives rise only to the non-voice of the neuter, what Levinas describes as “this Excluded Middle” that is “neither affirmation nor pure negation” but rather corresponds to a language that hesitates, that is “at once affirmative and negative.”⁵⁴

What is at stake is a form of language and identity that indicates itself in the event of its own rupture: “neither” produces only the errancy of misidentification and mispronunciation, the word that sticks in the mouth’s cavity. At the same time, however, the concern of “neither” is a concern for what remains when each and every form of sovereignty collapses, stills.

The American poet Rosmarie Waldrop writes:

Vertigo. The terms shift. The relation of the terms shifts. The richness undermines itself. If everything is like something else, no one likeness means anything. . . . We are left with “pure” analogy, the *gesture* of it rather than any one specific analogy. A gesture that makes the terms transparent for the very structure of language, of signification. . . .

Transparency for the structure of signification—and for its limits: the silence, the infinite, the nothing, all it is not able to hold.⁵⁵

Beckett himself closes “neither” with a similar, though also perhaps more hoveringly indirect, principle:

unheard footfalls only sound
 till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other
 then no sound
 then gently light unfading on that unheeded neither
 unspeakable home⁵⁶

In a sense, the closing “unspeakable home” arguably says both too much and not enough. The disproportion between the unspeakable and the specificity of home marks out the question of how to get from “silence” to “resting place,” highlighting less the hesitancy of home than the inability to remain still, silent, the rift of the look that turns back and stares and sounds. In doing so, Beckett precipitates the course of the world within the folds of what escapes, of what emerges, of what the semantic layerings of the words still and neither translate. As Feldman put it in an interview about his opera *Neither*, “the subject . . . essentially is to do with whether you’re in the shadows of understanding or non-understanding. Finally you’re in the shadows. You’re not going to arrive at any understanding at all; you’re just left there holding this hot potato which is life.”⁵⁷

Here myriad displacements are not to be explained but encountered rather as fathom, literally, as in “something which embraces” what falls through the cracks. As in Levinas’s phrase: “A voice comes from the other shore. A voice interrupts the saying of the already said.”⁵⁸

In the early *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* Belacqua passes comment on the “incoherent continuum” he sees explored by Rimbaud, Hölderlin, and especially the later Beethoven, specifically in relation to the nothing and the incoherence that lurks behind language and all empirical systems.⁵⁹ In Belacqua’s estimation, Beethoven’s art is “a blizzard of electrons; and then vespertine compositions eaten away with terrible silences.”⁶⁰ Or as Beckett writes to Axel Kaun, “the sound surface of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony is devoured by huge black pauses, so that . . . we cannot perceive it as other than a dizzying path of sounds connecting unfathomable chasms of silence.”⁶¹ “Of course, for the time being,” Beckett continues, “one makes do with little. At first, it can only be a matter of somehow inventing a method of verbally demonstrating this scornful attitude vis-à-vis the word. In this dissonance of instrument and usage perhaps one will already be able to sense a whispering of the end-music or of the silence underlying all.”⁶²

The concern of quantum physics is also a concern with first principles. Indeed, from this perspective the range of Beckett’s works that might be said to reflect, whether directly or indirectly, the same concerns in terms of poetics might include the calcified voice of the poems in *Echo’s Bones*, the third zone of Murphy’s mind, Lucky’s soliloquy in *Waiting for Godot*, the unimaginable zero toward which *Endgame* appears inevitably to steer, the grammatical disjunctions and ellipses of *Not I*, the simultaneously self-propelling and self-annihilating syntax of *The Unnamable*, the non-assemblage fragments in *How It Is*, the mathematically precise and overdetermined spatial precision of *The Lost Ones*, *Quad*, and *All Strange Away*, the reverberating landscape of “Still,” and the non-representational landscape of *Worstward Ho* with its recourse to notational “blanks” and, ultimately, dashes.

Worstward Ho is a particularly striking and apposite example here. Ruud Hisgen and Adriaan van der Weel suggest that *Worstward Ho* might be read as “an exercise in

establishing to what extent it is possible to disconnect the representational ties that bind language to our shared knowledge of the world.”⁶³ Ackerley and Gontarski have noted that “the closer to emptying the void, of man, boy, woman, skull, the closer void comes to an entity imagined in language. The desire to worsen language and its images generates an expansion of imaginative activity in its attempt to order experience.”⁶⁴ Similarly, although frequency remains constant, when a beam of light enters another object its speed and wavelength change and more and more this has less to do with knowing than with feeling. A wavelength is the distance between repetitions of a shape such as a body and may be measured by observing the distance between consecutive corresponding points of the same phase, including crests, troughs, zero crossings. A phase is the proportion of a wave cycle that has taken place in relation to a fixed point. If two waves of the same length and frequency are in phase, both the wave crests and wave troughs align. This is called constructive interference and results in a brightening of the waveform in that location.

The notion of quantum decoherence remarks the loss of coherence in a system. H. Dieter Zeh comments that “The essence of decoherence is thus given by the permanent and uncontrollable increase of entanglement between all systems. It describes the realistic situation of our world, which is very far from equilibrium, and it thus leads to the permanent dislocalization of superpositions. Its time arrow is formally analogous to the creation of ‘irrelevant’ statistical correlations by Boltzmann collisions. Neglecting these classical correlations . . . would lead to an increase of ensemble entropy.”⁶⁵

The composer Daniel Wolf’s discussion of his own score called *Decoherence* is illustrative of what is at stake here. It is, he writes, “an attempt to make counterpoint from an alternative premise or metaphor. Instead of this against that the idea here is that same becomes different through a loss of cohesion, a coming apart. This can be gradual (through accumulated errors, for example) or sudden.”⁶⁶

Across Beckett’s work in general, language slips. His writing, that is to say, screens a spacing of movement that, like the incoherent continuum, excepts analogy, metaphor, that turns inside out the common structures of reference and designation and leaves them hanging. N. Santilli notes how “the loss of prepositions and punctuation marks serve to invite a reasoning rather than a reading of the text, despite the fact that the result may be more ‘atomistic’ than associative.”⁶⁷ H. Porter Abbott labels such sites in Beckett “egregious gaps.” For Abbott, these gaps are essentially what might be termed a “felt empiricism,” a loose, idiosyncratic version, perhaps of Berkeley’s notion of empirical signification. As Abbott comments, “this art of the egregious gap has less to do with signifying *nothing there* than *nothing known*—less to do with nothingness as an actual void, empirical or metaphysical, than with creating a felt conviction of the inability to know whether there is an actual void out there or something else, of whatever degree of strangeness.”⁶⁸ In “Still” the disproportion between the unspeakable and the specificity

of textual notation marks out the question of how to get from “silence” to “resting place,” highlighting less the hesitancy of description than the inability to remain still, silent, the rift of the look that turns back and stares and sounds. In doing so, Beckett precipitates the course of the world within the folds of what escapes, of what emerges.

According to the seventeenth-century Jesuit priest, mathematician, and physicist Francesco Maria Grimaldi, diffraction is the bending of waves around obstacles and the spreading out of waves past small openings. The effects of diffraction are most definite where the wavelength is of a similar size to the diffracting object. Small particles in the air can cause a bright ring to be visible around a bright light source such as the sun or a halogen lamp. The word “diffraction” comes from the Latin *diffringere*, meaning “to break into pieces.”

In 1955 Blanchot observed that “to write is to make oneself the echo of what cannot cease speaking—and since it cannot, in order to become its echo I have, in a way, to silence it. . . . This silence has its source in the effacement toward which the writer is drawn.”⁶⁹

At the center of the French poet Claude Royet-Journoud’s first book, *Le renversement*, is a page which, in its entirety, reads “échapperons-nous à l’analogie” (shall we escape analogy).⁷⁰ There is no question mark and the rest of the page is blank. In many respects, this line is tantamount to a characteristically oblique statement by Royet-Journoud on the underlying principle of his own poetics. Royet-Journoud’s starting point here is a reaction against surrealism and what he perceives to be its compositional overreliance on juxtaposition, associative imagery and, crucially, metaphor. It has been against such compositional methods that, since the 1960s, Royet-Journoud has attempted to develop what is often termed a “literal” practice. In part, Royet-Journoud has attempted to develop such a practice by effacing his writing until the published works come to resemble something like minimalism: the white of the page is everywhere and is part of both the poem’s form and content; but Royet-Journoud has also developed a poetic—similar to that of Louis Zukofsky but also to the very late Beckett works such as *Worstward Ho* or “What is the Word”—that relies heavily on the repeated use of the preposition as poetic anchor and foil to language’s propensity to combine and sprawl. A preposition, in other words, is not sense itself but a companion to sense. Here “companion” should be understood only in its nautical sense, namely, as a window frame through which light passes to a lower cabin, and back again. It is the place of foreignness and the foreignness of place. Taking Beckett’s example as an initial starting point, Royet-Journoud’s work stands out

most in its attempt to establish a literary form that shows chaos, all the attendant mess, the come and go of things, more as they are than as they appear.

In an interview Royet-Journoud puts it in the following terms: “my work points to the imperceptible. . . . I play on minimal units of meaning. . . . The other constraint, perhaps more delicate in nature, is the avoidance of assonance, alliteration, metaphor: everything that usually represents struggle within a poem. . . . For me what is interesting is the literal and not the metaphoric.”⁷¹ Royet-Journoud goes on to develop this elsewhere, commenting how, “For me, Eluard’s verse ‘The earth is blue like an orange’ can be exhausted, it annihilates itself in an excess of meaning. Whereas Marcelin Pleynet’s ‘the far wall is a whitewashed wall’ is and remains, by its very exactness, and evidently within its context, paradoxically indeterminate as to meaning and so will always ‘vehiculate’ narrative.”⁷² In her essay on the poetics of Claude Royet-Journoud and Anne-Marie Albiach, “Shall We Escape Analogy,” Waldrop writes that “for the long stretch from Romanticism through Modernism, poetry has been more or less identified with metaphor, with relation by analogy. In linguistic terms, this has been an emphasis on the vertical axis of the speech act: the axis of selection, of reference to the code with its vertical substitution-sets of elements linked by similarity, rather than on the horizontal axis of combination, context, contiguity, syntax, and metonymy.”⁷³ In Fred Orton’s terms, metonymy “is based on a proposed continuous or sequential link between the literal object and its replacement by association or reference.” Crucially, metonymy is “the record of a lacuna, of a move or displacement from cause to effect, container to contained.” In other words, metonymy “represents not the object or thing or event or feeling which is its referent but that which is tied to it by contingent or associative transfers of meaning.”⁷⁴

In her 1977 essay, “Charles Olson: Process and Relationship,” Waldrop quotes both Charles Olson and Ernest Fenollosa on the inseparability of things. In his essay “The Escaped Cock,” Charles Olson writes that, “at root (or stump) what *is*, is no longer THINGS but what happens BETWEEN things.”⁷⁵ Similarly, Fenollosa writes the following lines in *Notes on the Chinese Written Character* (lines which, Waldrop notes, Olson underlined in his copy of the book): “A true noun, an isolated thing, does not exist in nature. Things are only the terminal points, or rather the meeting points of actions, cross-sections cut through actions, snap-shots. . . . Thing and action are not formally separated.”⁷⁶ And as Waldrop goes on to gloss in what can equally be read as an early statement of her own developing poetic principle: “what matters is what happens *between* things, *between* words. You cannot separate things and actions, you cannot separate an occasion into its discrete components.”⁷⁷

Yet nor can those components be conflated or rendered the same. Olson may well famously maintain that “ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION” but from there it does not necessarily follow that sequential movement is orchestrated by a pattern of cause and effect.⁷⁸ For Olson, as for Waldrop, rather, any sequence is contiguous, discrete, non-associative. It is so, Waldrop suggests, because here “the direction is outward and physical, toward perceptions rather than ideas.” Further, “such a movement has no ‘organic’ closure, that it could go

on forever, that it is is definitely ‘open.’ Even the balance of forces which tells writer and reader that the poem is finished is temporary. On contact with, in the neighborhood of, another poem the balance proves to have vectors toward yet further perceptions.”⁷⁹

In many ways, this suspicion of equivalence can be understood as a suspicion of knowledge, or more properly, a suspicion of claims to knowledge. In a letter to Cid Corman, Olson writes, “a man can only express that which he knows. Now the further difficulty is, we think we know. And that too is a mare’s nest: we don’t even know until we bend to the modesty to say we have nothing to say.”⁸⁰ Indeed, in Olson’s language, equivalence is a closed field. Rather than necessarily illuminating the world, however, contiguity caters for doubt: as a relation between terms it makes no totalizing claim. In *Being Singular Plural* Nancy develops this sense of contiguity, arguing that contiguity establishes a discrete chain of singularities which are non-continuous with one another. “From one singular to another,” Nancy writes, “there is contiguity but not continuity. There is proximity, but only to the extent that extreme closeness emphasizes the distancing it opens up.” Nancy then goes on to develop this argument by suggesting the ways in which the proximity yet non-equivalence of singular contiguities corresponds to the space of the between: the between has “neither a consistency nor continuity of its own. It does not lead from one to the other; it constitutes no connective tissue, no cement, no bridge.”⁸¹ Rather, it is analogous to the “strands whose extremities remain separate even at the very center of the knot. . . . The ‘between’ is the stretching out and distance opened by the singular as such, as its spacing of meaning.”⁸²

Beckett on Joyce: “Here form *is* content, content *is* form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read—or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. His writing is not *about* something, *it is that something itself*.”⁸³

Hugo von Hofmannsthal: “We must hide what is deep. Where? On the surface.”⁸⁴

Samuel Beckett: “Before the door that opens on my story, that will surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am.”⁸⁵

Jacques Lacan: “There is no speech without a reply, even if it is met only with silence.”⁸⁶

Gilles Deleuze: “*When a language is so strained that it starts to stutter, or to murmur or stammer . . . then language in its entirety reaches the limit that marks its outside and makes it confront silence. When a language is strained in this way, language in its entirety is submitted to a pressure that makes it fall silent.*”⁸⁷

In line with its root in the Greek *ekstasis*, meaning “standing outside,” in *Being and Time* Heidegger connects the ecstatic with existence. As ek-static, in other words, the one who lives is neither for-itself nor in-itself but ““*outside-of-itself*’ *in and for itself*.”⁸⁸ “Ecstases,”

Heidegger comments in the section in *Being and Time* called “The Temporal Problem of the Transcendence of the World,” “are not simply raptures in which one gets carried away. Rather, there belongs to each ecstasis a ‘whither’ to which one is carried away.”⁸⁹

Language, like any field at once constitutive and unknown, “comes to us from the furthest reaches, through the immense rumbling of a music destroyed, coming, perhaps deceptively, as also the beginning of all music. Something, sovereignty itself, disappears here, appears here, without our being able to decide between apparition and disappearance, or to decide between fear and hope, desire and death, the end and the beginning of time, between the truth of the return and the madness of the return.”⁹⁰

Susan Howe: “Pulling pieces of geometry, geology, alchemy, philosophy, politics, biography, biology, mythology, and philology from alien territory, a . . . woman audaciously invented a new grammar grounded in humility and hesitation. HESITATE from the Latin, meaning to stick. Stammer. To hold back in doubt, have difficulty speaking.”⁹¹

Recovering in the Hôpital Pasteur from a suspected stroke in July 1988, Beckett began to compose his final work, “Comment dire.” As Laura Salisbury notes, the work is “scattered with stuttered dashes, abrupt elisions, compulsive repetitions and controlled echoes that inhabit an uncanny hinterland between the voluntary and the involuntary.”⁹²

what –
 what is the word –
 seeing all this –
 all this this –
 all this this here –
 folly for to see what –
 glimpse –
 seem to glimpse –
 need to seem to glimpse –
 afaint afar away over there what –
 folly for to need to seem to glimpse afaint afar away over there what –
 what –
 what is the word –⁹³

“There was something like a word that could not be pronounced, even when one succeeded in saying it and perhaps precisely because one had, at every instant, and as if there were not enough instants for the purpose, to say it, to think it.”⁹⁴

Notes

- 1 Beckett and Duthuit, "Three Dialogues," 17.
- 2 Beckett to Axel Kaun, July 9, 1937, in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 1:518.
- 3 MacKendrick, *Immemorial Silence*, 3.
- 4 Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 151.
- 5 Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, 10.
- 6 For Beckett's notes on Geulincx, see "Latin Excerpts from Arnoldus Geulincx and R. P. Gredt," in Engelberts and Frost, *Notes Diverse Holo*, 141–55.
- 7 Geulincx, *Opera philosophica*, 1:69.
- 8 Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, 44. Beckett first came across this phrase in a footnote on p. 417 in Windelband's *A History of Philosophy*, and from which he took extensive notes in 1932. For more on the extent of Beckett's engagement with Windelband, see David Addyman and Matthew Feldman, "Samuel Beckett, Wilhelm Windelband, and the Interwar 'Philosophy Notes.'"
- 9 Geulincx, *Metaphysica*, in *Opera philosophica*, 2:176.
- 10 Geulincx, *Metaphysics*, 125.
- 11 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 167.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 168.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 169.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 169–70.
- 16 Shenker, "Moody Man of Letters."
- 17 See Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries: 1936–1937*; Van Hulle, "Samuel Beckett's 'Faust' Notes"; Caselli, "The Promise of Dante in the Beckett Manuscripts"; Cordingley, "Beckett's Ignorance." The phrase "a poetics of exhaustion and a poetics of persistence" comes from Peter Boxall's *Since Beckett*, 1.
- 18 Barker, "Nietzsche/Derrida, Blanchot/Beckett," §12, §13. Internal quotation from John McGowan, *Postmodernism and Its Critics* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 72.
- 19 Bohm, "Quantum Theory as an Indication of a New Order in Physics," 359.
- 20 Buckley and Peat, "Werner Heisenberg," in *Glimpsing Reality*, 7.
- 21 Beckett, *Murphy*, 200.
- 22 Keen, "The Neatness of Identifications," 27.
- 23 Nancy, "Elliptical Sense," 41.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 25 *Ibid.*
- 26 Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, 79.
- 27 Nancy, "Elliptical Sense," 43.
- 28 Raffoul, translator's preface to Nancy, *The Gravity of Thought*, xxxii.
- 29 Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, 155.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 156.
- 31 Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, 106.
- 32 Brater, *The Drama in the Text*, 70.
- 33 Geulincx, *Opera philosophica*, 3:205, quoted in Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 543.
- 34 Beckett, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, 14.
- 35 Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, 50.
- 36 John Michell to Henry Cavendish, May 26, 1783, in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* 74 (1784): 35–57.
- 37 Montgomery, "Beckett and Science," 173.

- 38 Pilling, *Beckett before Godot*, 224.
- 39 Albright, *Beckett and Aesthetics*, 77–78.
- 40 Henning, “The Solicitation of Science,” in *Beckett’s Critical Complicity*, 159–95.
- 41 Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, 120; *Murphy*, 113.
- 42 Beckett, *Murphy*, 112.
- 43 Davies, *The Ideal Real*, 32.
- 44 Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett*, 165.
- 45 Beckett, “Dante . . . Bruno . . . Vico . . . Joyce,” 19.
- 46 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 286.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 285–86.
- 48 Keen, “The Neatness of Identifications,” 29.
- 49 Berkeley, “De Motu,” 54.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 51 Mach, *History and Root of the Principle of the Conservation of Energy*, 86–87.
- 52 Sheehan, *Modernism, Narrative and Humanism*, 184.
- 53 Beckett, *Worstward Ho*, 93–94.
- 54 Levinas, *Proper Names*, 152.
- 55 Waldrop, *Lavish Absence*, 96.
- 56 Beckett, “neither,” in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose*, 258.
- 57 Frost, “The Note Man on the Word Man,” 51.
- 58 Levinas, *Otherwise Than Being*, 183.
- 59 Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, 102.
- 60 *Ibid.*, 139.
- 61 Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, 1:518–19.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 1:519.
- 63 Hisgen and van der Weel, “Worsening in *Worstward Ho*,” 243.
- 64 Ackerley and Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 653.
- 65 Zeh, “The Essence of the Concept of Decoherence,” par. 8.
- 66 Daniel Wolf, “Musical Works,” *Daniel James Wolf Composer*, <http://home.snafu.de/djwolf/Works-Descriptive.htm>.
- 67 Santilli, *Such Rare Citings*, 174.
- 68 Abbott, “Narrative,” 21.
- 69 Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, 27.
- 70 Royet-Journoud, *Le renversement*, 45.
- 71 Gavronsky, *Toward a New Poetics*, 117–18.
- 72 Bénézet, “Claude Royet-Journoud Interviewed,” 58.
- 73 Waldrop, *Dissonance*, 105.
- 74 Orton, “Present, the Scene of . . . Selves, the Occasion of . . . Ruses,” 172, quoted in Perloff, *Frank O’Hara*, xxii.
- 75 Olson, *Collected Prose*, 138, quoted in Waldrop, “Charles Olson,” 469.
- 76 Fenollosa, *The Chinese Written Character*, 46, 50.
- 77 Waldrop, “Charles Olson,” 469.
- 78 Olson, *Collected Prose*, 240.
- 79 Waldrop, “Charles Olson,” 470.

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- 80 Olson to Cid Corman, January 26, 1953, in *Letters for Origin*, 120.
- 81 Nancy, *Being Singular Plural*, 5.
- 82 Ibid.
- 83 Beckett, "Dante . . . Bruno . Vico . . . Joyce," 27.
- 84 Hofmannsthal, *Buch der Freunde*, 51; translated by Rosmarie Waldrop, *Ceci n'est pas Rosmarie*, 91.
- 85 Beckett, *The Unnamable*, 407.
- 86 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 40.
- 87 Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 113; emphasis in original.
- 88 Ibid., 377; emphasis in original.
- 89 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 416.
- 90 Blanchot, *Friendship*, 116.
- 91 Howe, *My Emily Dickinson*, 21.
- 92 Salisbury, "What Is the Word," 78.
- 93 Beckett, "what is the word," in *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, 229.
- 94 Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, 103.
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