

Introduction

From his earliest critical writings onwards, Samuel Beckett places the emphasis squarely upon the role of the negative in his conception of the literary work. In his 1931 monograph on Marcel Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* (published 1913–27), he claims that 'The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extracircumferential phenomena, drawn in to the core of the eddy' (*PTD* 65–6). In his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (written in 1931–2; published posthumously), Beckett has his protagonist, Belacqua, dream of a writing in which the reader's experience will lie 'between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals, not the terms, of the statement' (*Dream* 137). In his 1934 review-essay 'Recent Irish Poetry', he distinguishes between the 'antiquarians' and the writer whose aim is to 'state the space that intervenes between him and the world of objects' (*Dis* 70). Later in the same year, in his review of Sean O'Casey's collection *Windfalls* (1934), he makes a similar point: O'Casey's best work, he asserts, communicates a 'dramatic dehiscence, mind and world come asunder in irreparable dissociation' (*Dis* 82).

This preoccupation with the negative in the literary work finds its fullest elaboration in Beckett's well-known letter (written in German) of 9 July 1937 to Axel Kaun, with complementary statements in letters (in English) to Arland Ussher and Mary Manning two days later. In the letter to Kaun, Beckett develops the idea, already articulated in *Dream*, of a literature in which it is not words but 'silence' or 'intervals' that play the key communicative – or, more precisely, experiential – role. The close connection between Belacqua's aesthetic in *Dream* and Beckett's own as expressed in the letter to Kaun is established not least by the reference to Beethoven in both texts. In *Dream*, Beethoven's early works are described as 'compositions where into the body of the musical statement he incorporates a punctuation of dehiscence'; as for Beethoven's later ('vespertine') compositions, they are, according to Belacqua, 'eaten away with terrible silences' (*Dream* 138). In the letter to Kaun five years later, Beckett writes in almost identical terms of 'die von grossen schwarzen Pausen gefressene Tonfläche' ['the sound surface devoured by great black pauses'] of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony (*LSB I* 514; our translation).

For all the continuity in both argument and example between 1932 and 1937, however, the letter to Kaun marks an important development in Beckett's thinking of the negative in literature. Whereas in his earlier comments on the matter, he sees the negative in the literary work as

‘communicating’ or ‘stating’ the gap between mind and world, in the letter to Kaun he conceives of the negative as opening a space in language through which an extra-linguistic reality might be glimpsed: language is now being thought of as a ‘Schleier’ [‘veil’] that has to be negated in order to disclose what lies beyond it. The negative thus concerns less the relation between *mind* and world than that between *language* and world. This development, and the sense that, with it, things have reached a critical state, is apparent in Beckett’s opening remarks on his predicament in the letter to Kaun:

Es wird mir tatsächlich immer schwieriger, ja sinnloser, ein offizielles Englisch zu schreiben. Und immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine Sprache vor, den man zerreißen muss, um an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen. [...] Ein Loch nach dem andern in ihr zu bohren, bis das Dahinterkauernde, sei es etwas oder nichts, durchzusickern anfängt – ich kann mir für den heutigen Schriftsteller kein höheres Ziel vorstellen. (*LSB I* 513–14)

[It is indeed becoming ever more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And my own language appears to me ever more like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get to the things (or the nothingness) lying behind it. [...] To bore one hole after another in it [language], until that which lurks behind it, be it something or nothing, begins to seep through – I cannot imagine a higher aim for the writer today.]

Such a literature, in which language is in some sense negated, is famously described later in the same letter as a ‘Literatur des Unworts’ [‘literature of the unword’], and, two days later, in the letters to Ussher and Manning, as ‘Logoclasim’. In the letter to Manning, Beckett clarifies his conception of this literature of the unword in the following terms: ‘The idea is ruptured writing, so that the void may protrude, like a hernia’ (*LSB I* 521). This new emphasis on the negation of language in order to disclose that which lies beyond it – ‘sei es etwas oder nichts’ – leads Beckett to introduce towards the end of the letter to Kaun a new model for the kind of writing he wishes to produce, namely ‘d[er] Nominalismus (im Sinne der Scholastiker)’

[‘nominalism (in the scholastic sense)’. He elaborates on this idea as follows: ‘Auf dem Wege nach dieser für mich sehr wünschenswerten Literatur des Unworts hin, kann freilich irgendeine Form der nominalistischen Ironie ein notwendiges Stadium sein’ [‘On the way to this literature of the unword, which is so desirable to me, some form of nominalist irony might well be a necessary stage’] (*LSBI* 515). Beckett’s philosophical interest in nominalism can be seen as originating in his note-taking on philosophy in the early 1930s,¹ and acquires a political complexion in the ‘German Diaries’ (1936–7) when he writes:

I am not interested in a ‘unification’ of the historical chaos any more than I am in the ‘clarification’ of the individual chaos, and still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. [...] the expressions ‘historical destiny’ and ‘Germanic destiny’ start the vomit moving upwards.²

With his identification in the letter to Kaun of nominalism as possibly a ‘necessary stage’ in the movement towards a radically new form of what might be termed *unwriting*, Beckett carries this philosophico-political interest in nominalism into the aesthetic sphere, signalling an aesthetics of the negative that would distinguish his own future compositional procedure from that of the writers whose influence he had felt so strongly in his early years, above all James Joyce.

Beckett’s invoking of nominalism in his letter to Kaun is especially significant because it has led some commentators to see the idea of a ‘Literatur des Unworts’ as having been derived from his reading of the three-volume 1923 edition of Fritz Mauthner’s *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* [*Contributions to a Critique of Language*] (1901–3).³ In their 2004 Grove/

- 1 For an excellent analysis of these notes, see Feldman 2006, especially ch. 3.
- 2 Samuel Beckett, ‘German Diaries’, notebook 4, 15 January 1937 entry; cited in Knowlson 1996, 244–5.
- 3 The relationship between Mauthner’s *Beiträge* and Beckett’s work has been extensively investigated (Ben-Zvi 1980; 1984; 2004; Feldman 2006; Garforth 2005; Hesla 1971; Lernout 1994; Pilling 1976a; 1992; 2006b; Skerl 1974; Van Hulle 1999; 2004; 2011a), and yet even after an examination of the copy of the *Beiträge* in Beckett’s library (Van Hulle and Nixon 2013) it is a subject that still requires further examination.

Faber *Companion to Samuel Beckett*, for instance, C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski describe Mauthner's work as a 'vital station' on the way to Beckett's conception of a literature of the unword, and the paragraph in the third volume of the *Beiträge* beginning 'Der reine und konsequente Nominalismus' ['The pure and logically consistent nominalism'] (Mauthner 1923, III.615–16),⁴ which Beckett copied into what has come to be known as the 'Whoroscope' Notebook, is identified as 'a passage underlying' the arguments made by Beckett in his 9 July 1937 letter to Axel Kaun (Ackerley and Gontarski 2004, 359). No mention is made in the *Companion* of the fact that, a decade earlier, Geert Lernout had published an essay in which he argued that Beckett's notes on Mauthner could have been produced no earlier than the summer of 1938.⁵ Further investigations into the dating (Van Hulle 2002; Feldman 2006; Pilling 2006b; Van Hulle and Nixon 2013) corroborate the argument that Beckett's Mauthner notes were probably written a year *after* the letter to Kaun. Even if Beckett did not read Mauthner until after his theorization of a literature of the unword in the letter to Kaun, however, there can be little doubt that his eventual movement towards the *practice* of such a literature was strongly influenced by his reading of Mauthner.

How, though, did the reading of Mauthner help Beckett to find his way towards a new kind of writing after *Murphy* (completed in the summer of 1936, although not published until 1938)? In the letter to Kaun, Beckett pits Joyce against Gertrude Stein, the latter's 'logographs' moving, according to Beckett, in the direction of a literature of the unword, in contrast to Joyce's 'apotheosis' of the word in the work that two years later would be published under the title *Finnegans Wake* (1939). This opposition is compared by Beckett to that between 'realism' and 'nominalism (in the scholastic sense)' (*LSBI* 515). The first passage from Mauthner copied into the 'Whoroscope' Notebook is from volume 3, and is on 'der reine Nominalismus' ['pure nominalism']. According to Mauthner: 'Der reine Nominalismus macht ein Ende mit dem Denken' ['Pure nominalism puts an end to thinking'] (III.616). In addition to this entry on nominalism in the 'Whoroscope' Notebook, there is also a typed verbatim transcription of material from

4 All translations from Mauthner in this volume are our own.

5 See Lernout 1994, 21–7.

the chapter on metaphor in the second volume of the *Beiträge*.⁶ This latter transcription is particularly important, since it contains Mauthner's interpretation of the history of philosophy as 'eine langsame Selbstzersetzung des Metaphorischen' ['a slow self-decomposition of the metaphorical'] (II.473). This self-decomposition is in fact a series of *failures* to achieve a genuine critique of language, with philosophers time and again simply replacing an old metaphor with a new one, rather than stepping beyond language as metaphor into genuine 'Welterkenntnis' ['knowledge of the world'].

The first decisive moment in the movement towards a critique of language within the philosophical realm came, according to Mauthner, with medieval nominalism: 'Der mittelalterliche Nominalismus ist der erste Versuch der wirklichen Selbstzersetzung des metaphorischen Denkens' ['Medieval nominalism is the first attempt at the real self-decomposition of metaphorical thinking'] (II.474). This form of nominalism, however, could not free itself from theology, and ended up making of God 'die oberste Metapher' ['the supreme metaphor'] (II.474). Following the medieval nominalists, the next important step in the movement towards a critique of language was Kant's critique of pure reason, with its insistence that we can have no knowledge of the 'Ding-an-sich' ['thing-in-itself'] – because, as Mauthner interprets Kant, our thinking is always both 'metaphorical' and 'anthropocentric' (II.476). Crucially, the Kantian critique is a 'negative[s] Denken' ['negative thinking'], and, as Mauthner puts it, 'In seinem negativen Denken ist Kant bereits der Alleszertrümmerer' ['In his negative thinking Kant is already the all-destroyer'] (II.476). Like the nominalists before him, however, Kant fails to carry this negative thinking through to its necessary conclusion, instead settling upon a new metaphor: in place of 'God' he installs 'reine Vernunft' ['pure reason'] (II.477). Thus, for all his critical energy, Kant remains standing '[v]or den Pforten der Wahrheit' ['before the gates of truth'], never quite living up to his billing as the 'Alleszertrümmerer'. According to Mauthner, it is not the critique of pure reason but only the thoroughgoing critique of language (*Sprachkritik*) that can 'diese Pforten aufschließen und mit lächelnder Resignation zeigen, daß sie aus der Welt und dem Denken hinaus ins Leere führen' ['open these gates and show, with a smile of resignation, that they lead beyond the world and beyond thought into emptiness'] (II.478).

6 Trinity College Dublin (TCD) MS 10971/5/1–4.

The last key figure in Mauthner's history of philosophy (as recorded by Beckett) is Schopenhauer, whose importance lies above all in his strenuous opposition to Hegel. According to Mauthner, 'in Hegels erstaunlich scharfsinniger Dialektik feiert der alte Wortaberglaube die tollsten Orgien' ['in Hegel's astonishingly astute dialectic the old word superstition indulges in the wildest orgies'] (II.478). In contrast, Schopenhauer, as Hegel's 'wilder und mächtiger Gegner' ['fierce and powerful opponent']:

hat den Weg Kants wiedergefunden und rüttelt oft und stark an den Pforten der Sprachkritik. Aber auch sein System gipfelt schließlich in Wortaberglauben, in einer mythologischen Person, in dem Willen, der nachher von Eduard von Hartmann den selbstverräterischen Namen 'das Unbewußte' erhalten hat. (II.478)

[rediscovered Kant's way and shakes often and strongly at the gates of the critique of language. But his system also ultimately culminates in word superstition, in a mythological person, in the will, which subsequently was to be given the self-betraying name of 'the unconscious' by Eduard von Hartmann.]

In this brief but coruscating history of philosophy as a series of failures to overcome metaphorical thinking, Mauthner makes no mention of Nietzsche. And yet, in his essay 'Über Wahrheit und Lüge im außermoralischen Sinn' ['On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense'] – written in 1873, but only published posthumously – Nietzsche famously claims that truth is '[ein] bewegliches Heer von Metaphern, Metonymien, Anthropomorphismen' ['a mobile army of metaphors, metonymies, anthropomorphisms'] (Nietzsche 1999, I.880; our translation), thereby anticipating Mauthner's own conception of the essentially metaphorical nature of language and the linguistic nature of all existing conceptions of reality (see Van Hulle 1999, 144–5). Nietzsche is included in the first volume of the *Beiträge*, however, in a section on which Beckett did not take any notes (or at least any notes that have survived); in this section, Mauthner presents Nietzsche's philosophy as one more failure to reach the heights of language critique, for the telling reason that Nietzsche remains tied

to the power of *his own* language: he is, as Mauthner puts it, a victim of ‘Wortfetischismus’ [‘word fetishism’] (I.368).

As for the idea in the letter to Kaun that ‘some form of nominalist irony’ might be a necessary stage on the way to a literature of the unword, Beckett’s Mauthner transcriptions contain the following important passage on Goethe’s style:

in seiner bewunderungswürdigen Prosa scheint er sich wirklich mehr als irgend ein anderer Schriftsteller vor und nach ihm über alle möglichen Grenzen der Sprache zu erheben, weil er die Worte in einer unnachahmlichen Weise gewissenmaßen ironisch gebraucht, das heißt mit der deutlich verratenen Klage darüber, daß er einfach dem Sprachgebrauche folgen müsse. (II.506)

[in his admirable prose he [Goethe] really appears, more than any other writer before or after him, to rise above all possible limits of language, because he uses words to a certain extent ironically, in an inimitable way, that is to say with the clearly betrayed complaint that he must simply follow linguistic usage.]

According to Mauthner, this ironic style reaches its peak in Goethe’s major autobiographical work, *Dichtung und Wahrheit* [*Poetry and Truth*] (written 1808–31), which is characterized by an ‘überlegene Art, die Worte als bloße Worte zu gebrauchen’ [‘superior manner of using words as mere words’] (II.507; see Van Hulle 2004, 331; Nixon 2011, 70–1). Mauthner’s championing of Goethe is crucial, since it suggests that he finds a certain form of *literary* writing capable of implementing a critique of language that remains unachieved in the history of philosophy. More precisely, Mauthner’s comments on Goethe’s ironical use of language locate the critique of language in *literary style*. That Beckett should have found such an argument attractive is not surprising. Towards the end of his 1931 monograph on Proust, he claims that ‘The rhetorical equivalent of the Proustian real is the chain-figure of the metaphor’, and that Proust’s style is characterized by ‘the crest and break of metaphor after metaphor’ (PTD 88). In other words, long before his extensive note-taking on Mauthner, Beckett

was already moving in the direction of a conception of literature as having the capacity to reveal the essential metaphoricity of thought, and to do so not only through the literary work's content but also through its manner or style. Mauthner's impact on Beckett was to reinforce this sense of the privilege to be accorded to literature (and, above all, to a certain, 'nominalist', way of writing), and to provide a philosophical underpinning to Beckett's movement from a mind/world to a language/world model.

As various commentators have observed, the first real fruit of Beckett's Mauthner-influenced conception of a literature of the unword was the novel *Watt* (written in the first half of the 1940s, but only published in 1953). According to Matthew Feldman, for instance, *Watt* is 'a wholly Mauthnerian exercise, one largely recasting Beckett's earlier scepticism and angst into linguistic terms' (Feldman 2006, 138). Similarly, Mark Nixon asserts of *Watt* that, 'With Mauthner's critique of language possibly at the back of his mind, Beckett set about dismantling coherence through language itself rather than through concepts' (Nixon 2011, 187). It is certainly the case that in *Watt* Beckett focuses specifically on the problem of language – in the famous passage on the 'pot', in particular (W 67–9) – in a way that he does not in his earlier works. The core Mauthnerian ideas that become central concerns in *Watt* are the impossibility of anything existing beyond language, the inevitable failure of communication, the metaphorical nature of language, and the emptiness of words (Ben-Zvi 1980; Van Hulle 1999, 150). It is, however, only with *L'Innommable / The Unnamable*, written in French in 1949–50, and translated into English by Beckett, with a number of significant interruptions, between February 1956 and June 1958, that he fully realizes the kind of literature of the unword outlined in the letter to Kaun. By this we mean that it is only in *L'Innommable / The Unnamable* that Mauthner's ideas are fully enacted at the stylistic level, in the language itself. For all its strangeness, the combinatorial art of *Watt* is not quite adequate to Beckett's vision of a literature of the unword, whereas what may be termed the 'unwriting' in *L'Innommable / The Unnamable* is of a different order.

As Ackerley and Gontarski observe, *L'Innommable / The Unnamable* exhibits an 'extreme nominalism' (2004, 598). That said, the precise nature of this nominalism has generally been seen as resulting in a reduction of all being to the linguistic. This is precisely how Ackerley and Gontarski see the matter, claiming, as they do, that 'Consciousness is explored but

it is consciousness without ground, as idea, self itself more language, constructed by language' (2004, 598). This view is in line with a critical tradition that extends all the way back to one of the very first reviews of *L'Innommable*, Maurice Blanchot's celebrated essay on the three novels, "Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?" ["Where now? Who now?"], first published in the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue Française* in 1953 and reprinted in 1959 in *Le Livre à venir* [*The Book to Come*]. According to Blanchot, the novel is 'expérience vécue sous la menace de l'impersonnel, approche d'une parole neutre qui se parle seule' ['experience lived under threat of the impersonal, the approach of a neutral speech that speaks itself alone'] (Blanchot 1959, 259; 2003, 213). The emphasis here falls on a reduction of being to language, and the disappearance of any referential function. What such a reading tends to obscure is the way in which Beckett seeks to achieve a literature of the unword in *L'Innommable* / *The Unnamable* not simply through such a reduction (which itself is never complete or unambiguous), but through an unwording procedure that turns language back against itself. Ruby Cohn alerts us to this when she argues that 'the nameless narrator of *L'Innommable* almost dissolves syntax itself in the search for a language to pinpoint himself, even while yearning for and rejecting a self beyond language' (2001, 185). Cohn also remarks upon some of the ways in which Beckett draws attention to questions of language in the novel: 'He [the narrator] notes the flowers of rhetoric, specifically summoning metaphors, apostrophes, and an apodosis. He calls repeated attention to grammatical syntax – particularly verbs and pronouns. He speaks of parentheses, although he uses them sparingly. Otherwise his only punctuation marks are (unmentioned) periods and commas run riot' (2001, 189). An analysis of the genetic history of the novel reveals unwording procedures at the most micrological level, procedures that take up the challenge laid down by Mauthner for a style of writing that seeks to achieve a critique not simply of reason or of consciousness, but of language. The unwording to be found in the genetic history of *L'Innommable* / *The Unnamable* aims to avoid the kind of 'word superstition' that, according to Mauthner, has beset philosophy from Plato to Nietzsche, and to do so not simply at the thematic or conceptual level, but also at the linguistic-stylistic level. In other words, rather than being a postmodern work in which being is reduced to language, *L'Innommable* / *The Unnamable* is a late modernist novel in which language itself is subjected to what, following Mauthner, may be termed

slow self-decomposition, with a view to glimpsing that – be it something or nothing – which lies beyond the linguistic. This process is evident not only in the published work in both its French and its English versions, but also in the genetic history of those versions.

With regard to the original French manuscript, our research hypothesis is that Beckett's writing method was not what in French genetic criticism is called 'écriture à programme' ['programmatic writing']. Unlike writers such as Émile Zola or Thomas Mann, Beckett did not start with a clear plan or programme that only had to be performed once it had been thought out. Instead, he proceeded in much the same way as the method described in the first paragraph of *The Unnamable*: 'By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later?' (*Un* 1). This 'écriture à processus' ['writing as process'] comes exceptionally close to the progression of the published text as it can be read from cover to cover. Beckett claims that he submitted himself to his subject matter, especially in the case of this novel: 'It was always submission with me, until I overdid it, with *L'Innommable*, I mean beyond the joke' (*LSB II* 544).⁷ The diachrony of the genesis almost coincides with the novel's synchronic structure, except for one notable passage (see chapter 2.2). For this reason, we considered it worthwhile to structure the analysis of the work's genesis according to the narrative structure of the published text. Since this narrative is notoriously fluid, we have divided the book into 14 sections for the pragmatic purpose of facilitating the analysis. Particular attention is paid to the incipit (and its revision) and the question of the ending. The material traces of the writing process seem to confirm the hypothesis that the final text was meant to be transparent about its genesis. From that perspective, it is arguably significant that (in the original manuscript) the end of the novel coincides with the

7 Letter to Aidan Higgins, 30 August 1955. Beckett also told Aidan Higgins, after the completion of the novel, but before its publication: '*L'Innommable*, due out probably in the spring, seems about the end of the jaunt as far as I am concerned, there being nobody left to utter and, independently perhaps, certainly superfluously, nothing left to utter about. These are hindrances to one deficient in the professional outlook. I used to think all [t]his work was an effort, necessarily feeble, to express the nothing. It seems rather to have been a journey, irreversible, in gathering thinglessness, towards it. Or also. Or ergo. And the problem remains entire or at last arising ends. Forgive these personal considerations, about no one' (letter to Aidan Higgins, 8 February 1952; *LSB II* 319).

final page of the notebook in which the first version was written. In other words, an initial question is: did Beckett terminate the text where he did because he had come to the end of the notebook?

In our analysis of the genesis of the French version of the novel (in chapter 2), we chart the process of composition, based on the observation of the peculiarly close connection between the diachrony of the genesis and the text's synchronic structure, which creates the suggestion (or the illusion) that Beckett proceeded as gropingly as his narrator. We adopt a different approach for the analysis of the English translation (in chapter 3). In part, this is owing to the fact that, when translating the text into English, Beckett can be said to have known, or at least to have had a better sense of, where he was going than he did when composing the original French, since he had the text to be translated on the desk in front of him. The many difficulties that he encountered – and which are, as we shall see, documented in his letters between 1956 and 1958 – were not difficulties pertaining to the unfolding composition of the text. With this in mind, and in order to bring out the various unwording procedures that characterize the English translation of *L'Innommable*, our analysis of that translation charts the linguistic (de)composition of the text across textual versions, mirroring its original composition. This analysis is organized according to the seven general forms of 'unwording' that we have identified in the genetic history of the translation, followed by a consideration of the other major forms of revision to be found therein. Some of these other forms of revision are particularly significant for the light they cast on Beckett's concern with resisting any unambiguous signalling of a cultural context from out of which the work might be seen to emerge, or within which it might be understood.

Before analysing the genesis of *L'Innommable* and *The Unnamable*, however, we need to describe the manuscripts and other textual versions containing the traces of the writing process. This bibliographic description is undertaken in chapter 1, 'Documents'.