

SAMUEL BECKETT: THE VANISHING VOICE OF FICTION

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In one of Beckett's earlier stories, "The Calmative" (*Stories and Texts for Nothing*), the narrator-hero, at one point, after having wandered aimlessly through the half-deserted streets of an unidentified city, finds himself standing precariously on the ledge of the roof of a church, and says to himself: "Into what nightmare thingness am I fallen?". This statement not only refers to the protagonist's physical predicament, but also addresses his puzzlement as a fictional creature made of words, as a being trapped in his own fiction, since he is both the teller and the told of his own story.

Admittedly, there is nothing more absurd, more perplexing, more nightmarish than to write fiction. That is to say, nothing is more laughable than to sit in a room, between four walls, day after day, month after month, year after year, to create an imaginary situation (that "nightmare thingness", as Beckett calls it) and fabricate fictitious beings by the mere process of lining up words on pieces of paper.

Perhaps the only way for the writer to escape the absurdity, the tedium, and the anguish of such a self-imposed torture is to laugh at his own activity. Indeed, it is well known that many writers, even those whose work depicts the most oppressive, the most horrendous, the most pathetic situations (this was the case with Kafka, Céline, Proust even, and many others), could be heard laughing within the walls of the room where fiction was being shaped. Certainly, only laughter can save the fiction writer from jumping out of the window, from blowing his brains out, or from simply walking away from his absurd undertaking.

This laughter (fundamental and inherent to all great fiction) is not lost, however, in the chambers of the creation. It can either permeate the fiction in the form of humor, irony, parody, satire, or grotesque situations, or else it can become a critical dimension of the creative act itself. In other words, it can become, right there within the story, a reflection on fiction, on its form, its tradition, its rules, its conventions, its evolution, its subject, and ultimately its medium (language). All great art, to a large extent, is a reflection on itself rather than an imitation of nature or a representation of reality. All great art always contains its own mocking reflection, always admires itself with derision.

Samuel Beckett has been writing fiction for more than fifty years. Yes, since 1929, when he published his first piece of fiction (a short story entitled "Assumption"), he has been doing almost exclusively nothing else but sit in a room and toy with words. 1929-1986, fifty-seven years to be exact, fifty-seven years of words. An entire life of words! Beckett himself has noted this in one of his *Texts For Nothing*:

"How many hours to go, before the next silence... Ah to know for sure, to know that this thing has no end, this thing, this thing, this farrago of silence and words, of silence that is not silence and barely murmured words. Or to know it's life still, a form of life, ordained to end... Words, mine was never more than that, than this pell-mell babel of silence and words".

This anguished declaration sums up Beckett's existence (his biography). Words, words, his life was never more than that! Fifty-seven years of words since the publication of the first words, in 1929, and it's not finished yet, because, as the voice of Beckett's fiction laments elsewhere: "It's the end that is the worst, no, it's the beginning that is the worst, then the middle, then the end, in the end it's the end that is the worst". (*The Unnamable*).

Behind this "pell-mell babel of silence and words", the one who fills the pages, the one who accumulates words, the writer, the scribe ("I'm the clerk, I'm the scribe, at the hearings of what cause I know not", one of Beckett's creatures says of himself) gradually disappears, vanishes into the text to become the anonymous voice of fiction. For more than five decades, Beckett has endured what can be called THE SIEGE IN THE ROOM as he passed the time by stringing together words on pieces of paper, or as the voice of his fiction explains: "...a few old words on and off string them together make phrases". (*How It Is*). Or as The Unnamables tells us:

"I cannot be silent. About myself I need know nothing. Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities. Rhetoric".

During all that time, Beckett has stubbornly resisted all temptations to free himself from these words, all temptations to become involved with the material world (the world of good-house-keeping, as he calls it), to participate in those other activities which we (quasi-normal human beings) perform daily to justify our existence and cancel its absurdity. But for Beckett the only way to resist, the only possible way to go on, was to LAUGH at his own activity, which of course is also true of the fictitious creatures he has invented who constantly laugh at their own miserable predicament. However, if there is one thing Beckett was intent on laughing at, it was the very medium with which he was working, the novel form (or the play itself when he turned to the theater) —that very form which for centuries has sustained story-telling and fiction— even though he persisted in his pretense to write novels. From *Murphy* (1938) to *How It Is* (1964) to the more recent *Worstward Ho* (1983), Beckett has been systematically demolishing the novel form as we know it, as we have come to accept it, with all its possibilities as well as its imperfections. Relentlessly, Beckett has reduced the novel to its most basic elements, to its bare minimum, stripping it of all pretense of realism, of all mimetic illusion, dehumanizing its people, voiding its landscape, reducing its voice to a whisper, renouncing, in other words, all the essential properties of the novel. Even though many critics have tried repeatedly to reinstate Beckett's fiction within the rules and norms of the tradition by which the novel is defined, and have attempted to find in his work more meaning, more symbolism than he really put there (in spite of his ironic warning: "No symbols where none intended", he wrote in *Watt*), Beckett continued to laugh at the novel, to mock it, demolish it, to diminish its possibilities as he locked himself further and tighter into the "cylinder" of fiction.

Comment C'est (1961 —the English version translated by Beckett himself as usual, published in 1964 under the title *How It Is*) is Beckett's last book that can still be called a novel, in terms of its shape and its size. However, this book (some 180 pages of punctuationless prose presented in the form of disconnected stanzas) brings the novel (or what remains of it) to the brink of disaster. Nothing left here in terms of setting and character but a bare landscape of mud situated nowhere, and a naked remnant of a mumbling creature (hardly human nor fictitious) who manages to duplicate, to multiply himself to an almost infinite

number of replicas in order to better negate himself as he crawls in the mud of fiction, a sack full of sardine and tuna fish cans tied around his neck, as he crawls reptile-like towards a victim in order to become first a tormentor and then himself a victim for some other tormentor who is crawling towards him in the verbal mud of this no-man's land. *How It Is* is a remarkable novel, by the mere dexterity and poeiticity of its language, but above all because it cancels itself while explaining itself mockingly as it progresses. *How It Is* is a self-reflexive novel which laughs at its own misfortunes, its own inability, its own failure to constitute itself into a coherent story, as it keeps repeating "something wrong here... something wrong" with all this "quaqua". This amazing novel makes a clean sweep of the conventions of fiction, but not without an ironic self-conscious dimension —not without critical laughter which cancels the narrative, or what is called here "these scraps of other scraps of an antique rigmarole".

This mocking attitude of the writer towards his creation is possible, in Beckett's fiction, because there is present at all times, "an ear to hear even ill these scraps of other scraps", because there is present, not only outside the fiction but also inscribed in the text, an imaginary reader (or listener) with whom the author establishes a subtle, playful and ironic relationship which enables this reader/listener to hear the laughter of the discourse, to hear, as it were, the fiction fall apart to hear "these scraps of an antique rigmarole". It is through this connivance with the reader that the author is able to suggest to him, as though whispering in his ear: Watch me now!. Watch how I am going to work my way out of this paradox, out of the impasse of fiction. Watch what a beautiful mess I am going to make of the novel! This self-conscious voice, one could almost call it a voice-within-a-voice, is present throughout Beckett's fiction. It is always there whispering playfully in the ear of the reader/listener. In the early novels it took the form of flagrant self-conscious asides to the reader, but in the later works self-consciousness becomes integrated with the story and gradually merges with the texture of the fiction and eventually vanishes into the fissures of the text to become the haunting sound of the voiceless ruins of fiction.

It is with this mocking self-conscious attitude towards what he has been doing that Beckett has pursued his systematic decomposition of the novel. However, since everything in Beckett (as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, and this has been noted on numerous occasions) comes in threes, the evolution of the vanishing voice in his work also followed three stages. Just as Murphy's mind, in the

novel by that title, is divided into three zones, just as the three stories ("The Expelled/ The Calmative/ The End") represent three different versions of the same story, just as Molloy, Malone, and The Unnamable are the same being repeating three times different versions of his beginning and his end, and just as *How It Is* is divided into three parts (Before Pim, With Pim, After Pim), all of Beckett's fiction, as we look at it now (more than fifty years later), took shape in three specific moments, three definite stages.

These three stages can be called: *The Early Fiction* (the works written in English, up to 1945 *More Pricks Than Kicks*, *Murphy*, *Watt*), *The Middle Fiction* (the trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, as well as *First Love* and *Stories and Texts for Nothing*), and *The Later Fiction* (all the shorts texts written since *How It Is Enough*, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Ping*, *The Lost Ones*, *Lessness*, *Company*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Worstward Ho*). Two key works function as bridges from one stage to the next: *Mercier et Camier* (the first novel Beckett wrote in French around 1945, which remained unpublished until 1970) makes the transition from the early to the middle fiction, and *Comment C'est* marks the passage from the middle to the later fiction. But if the first passage was from a type of novel to another type of novel, that is to say from an outrageous parody of the realistic novel to a playful self-reflexive postmodern novel, the last passage is from a type of language to another type of language - from a discourse that still exploits the fictional voice to a type of anti-discourse that makes that voice vanish from Fiction. As such these three stages can be renamed as follows: Stage one *The Lie of Reality*, stage two *The Truth of Fiction*, and stage three *The Impossibility of Fiction*.

Stage one consists of works which are still situated in a semblance of social reality, even though they undermine that reality and denounce its fraudulence. Stage two consists of a fiction that reveals its own paradox as it progresses towards its own negation, and where a voice-within-a-voice mumbles to itself. And stage three is made of a non-referential fiction whose only fiction is its own mute language. The early fiction still tells stories with an ironic self-conscious voice, the middle fiction pretends to tell stories but in fact only tells the story of its own failure, and the later fiction tells no story but merely rattles the sounds of its own language - its own "rumors" and "ejaculations" to use Beckett's own terms.

The first two stages represent a progressive movement away



from reality, away from literary realism, away from plausible situations and credible characters, to end in the muddy landscape of *How It Is* where fiction, language, and humanity are reduced to reptilian contortions. Parallel to this progression towards what can be called the void of fiction, toward the silencing of the voice of fiction, there is also a movement from a third person narrative to a first person narrative and eventually to the total disappearance of the narrative person, that is to say the disappearance of the nominal and pronominal person - no more names and no more pronouns in some of the later fiction.

The early fiction written in English uses a kind of omniscient narrator (a sardonic teller) who tells us the story of the protagonist of the novel (Belacqua, Murphy, Watt). *Mercier and Camier*, the first novel written in French, also uses such a narrator, but this time no longer omniscient since he tells us at the beginning of the novel: "The journey of Mercier and Camier is one I can tell, if I will, for I was with them all the time". This narrator has now become part of the tale. However, beyond the novel *Mercier and Camier*, all the fiction of the middle stage uses the first person narrative, but a first person which can no longer tell whether it is "the teller or the told", as The Unnamable says of his own uncertain fictional predicament. In much of the later fiction, the texts speak without the support of a narrative person, as for instance *The Lost Ones* which opens with these seemingly impersonal lines: "Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one. Vast enough for search to be in vain. Narrow enough for flight to be in vain". The language of this fiction no longer relies on a third or a first person narrator to tell the story of a protagonist, but instead merely describes the conditions of its own voicelessness.

The first two stages of Beckett's creative evolution have received a great deal of critical attention, but little to date has been said on the fiction Beckett wrote since *How It Is*. Perhaps because this fiction defies logical and rational interpretation. And yet, Beckett himself has kept us informed of his progress (or perhaps one should say regress) towards this impossible fiction in which the narrative voice seems to vanish into speechlessness. The last part of *How It Is* opens with this statement which can be read as a warning of what is yet to come: "here then at last... part three how it was after Pim how it is part three at last and last... no more time I say it as I hear it... murmur it in the mud... I'm sinking sinking fast... no more head imagination spent no more breath..."

"...no more head ...imagination spent ...no more breath ..." we are indeed nearing the stage of impossible fiction. But what is this impossible fiction which causes the narrative voice to vanish, which makes the essential elements of fiction disappear, which renders story-telling obsolete? A few bibliographical precisions might be in order at this point. *Comment C'est* appeared in 1961 with the English version, *How It Is*, following in 1964. I consider this final work of the middle period to be Beckett's last true novel. Everything he has published after that up to this date can only be viewed as a kind of minimalist fiction (all the recent works are extremely short) which defies any classification as story or novel. In 1965, Beckett published *Imagination Morte* *Imaginez* (translation the same year as *Imagination Dead Imagine*) 10 pages of text in book form. In 1966, *Assez* (translation the same year as *Enough*) 21 pages of text in book form. Towards the end of 1966, *Bing* (translation early 1967 under the title *Ping*) 9 pages of text in book form. In 1969, *Sans* (translation in 1970 as *Lessness*) 14 pages of text in book form. Finally in 1971, a more substantial work, *Le Dépeupleur* (the translation in English in 1972, under the title *The Lost Ones*) 55 pages of text in book form.

All in all, from 1961 to 1971, Beckett published approximately 110 pages of new fiction. This is hardly a major production for a ten year period, but it is certainly major fiction within the body of contemporary literature. More recently, between 1980 and 1983, Beckett published three new works of fiction: *Company* (63 pages), *Ill Seen/Ill Said* (76 pages), and *Worstward Ho* (47 pages). In other words, since *How It Is* (in 1964) Beckett has produced less than 300 pages of fiction. However, if this work is to be judged on the basis of length or substantiality, then it is useless to talk about it. And it is also useless to discuss this later fiction by comparing it to Beckett's other major works, such as the trilogy of *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, which forms the core of his oeuvre. In fact, this body of fiction cannot be discussed in those critical terms which are normally used to elucidate what is commonly known as a short story or a novel. It demands an entirely new critical vocabulary - one which may not yet exist, and need perhaps be invented. For indeed, confronting these recent works of fiction one can no longer speak of setting, or characters, or plot, or even of story, one is forced to speak in terms of geometry, of mathematics, or else approach these texts with the critical language we have learned to use to discuss abstract painting. Even such terms as reduction, disintegration,

regression, negation, diminution, alienation which were used and abused by many critics (myself included) to apprehend Beckett's earlier fiction now seem suddenly totally inappropriate, totally inadequate to deal with the precision, the compactness, the meticulousness, but especially the bareness, the abstractness, and the apparent meaninglessness of such texts as *Ping* or *Lessness*, works in which even conventional syntax is abolished. *Lessness*, for instance, begins with these puzzling words: "Ruins true refuge long last towards which so many false time out of mind".

According to most critics, *How It Is*, in 1964, seemed to have led Beckett into an inextricable impasse. How could he possibly go any further with the novel? But this book also brought him to a danger point, one which critics were prompt in noting. This book was no longer fiction, it was said, this book, this writing no longer looked like fiction, but like poetry, or something resembling poetry. And it is true that the stanza-like aspect of the prose, the lack of punctuation, the lyricism of the language, the inverted and distorted syntax, the musicality of the discourse, the quasi-surrealistic situation, the lack of realistic elements made of this work if not a true poem, at least a kind of poetic work of fiction. But of course to say this is just an easy way out for dealing with a type of writing which refuses to be classified in any of the traditional genres. No, Beckett was not trying to become a poet again when he wrote *How It Is*, for as we all know, it is as a poet that he began his literary journey. He was simply trying to pursue stubbornly and uncompromisingly what he set out to do - demolish the very genre which he uses to write his fiction. *How It Is*, in many ways, is much too lyrical (Beckett told me that himself). It is too well written. It has too much style. The narrative voice in it is still too discursive. The words in it mean too much. The words are too consistent, too resistant, and as such allow themselves to be interpreted either at face value or else symbolically. "The words in *How It Is*", Beckett once told me in a conversation, "say too much, they say more than I wanted to say". In his effort to empty the language of fiction of its "dead" meaning so that it can renew itself, Beckett cannot allow his words to say too much or else they will speak again the same "antique rigmarole". Indeed, the voice in *How It Is* talks too much still, and too well about its own fictional predicament. Therefore, Beckett's next move was (if one may use such terms) to delyricalize, to destylize the language of fiction, to designify the words, and thus render the voice of fiction mute, voiceless. This is the goal Beckett set out to achieve in his more recent works

which consequently can no longer be classified by genre or by style.

These recent texts have indeed puzzled many readers and critics, and have been called many names: fragments of novels, prose poems, short-stories, residua, and even science-fiction tales because of their unrealistic setting, but in fact they are none of these. This futile effort to recuperate this later fiction within well established categories shows to what extent critics feel a kind of nostalgia, or a sense of regret for the traditional novel form which no longer exists in Beckett's writing, or for that matter is no longer recognizable in what is now called Postmodern fiction. Beckett's recent work also shows how the language of criticism cannot escape the narrow generic categories it has invented for itself. And yet, to say that with *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Enough*, *Ping*, *Lessness*, and *The Lost Ones* Beckett invents a new genre, as it has been suggested, is also a gross error. Beckett does not invent new genres, he destroys old ones, cancels them, renders them obsolete. For Beckett to invent a new genre would mean falling into the same old trap. To play the same old game by the same old rules, to say the same old thing the same old way, would merely be competence. Beckett is not trying to achieve competence in his work (only those who write best-sellers are competent writers), but like an acrobat on a highwire, he tries to balance himself without support, tries to walk across the abyss of space without the safety of a net. And this is why Beckett invents for his fiction more restraining and constraining rules, for he can only continue to write it he eliminates further, if he reduces further, if he silences further, but no longer within the scope of the novel form as such. Beckett is finished with the novel as we have known it. In fact, what he strives to abolish is that stubborn, persistent voice of fiction which always wants to tell stories, more stories to sustain itself within the illusion of realism, within the imposture of realism. Therefore, to insist on calling Beckett's recent texts novels, or fragments of novels which were abandoned, or prose poems, or residua, merely reveals the limitations of our critical language and of our imagination.

Imagination Dead Imagine is this title an exclamation? Is it a question? An interrogation an imperative? Or is it simply a statement of facts? Our critical imagination may be on the verge of dying if we do not renew it, but Beckett's imagination (as he has shown repeatedly over the past five decades) is far from being dead. Watch me now, says the old voice playfully: "No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there, imagination not

dead yet, yes, dead, good, imagination dead imagine". These are the opening words of *Imagination Dead Imagine* - a fictional text which, like all the other recent works, seems immune to conventional criticism, seems to demonstrate the impotence of criticism. Or perhaps, as some critics in despair confronting this impossible text might say, it only reveals fiction's own impotence. Not so, not as long (Beckett would say) as there are words — "a few old words on and off" — to string together to make phrases. However, what Beckett is after now, in this text as well as all the more recent ones, is another form of reduction (I use this term again for lack of a better one), a reduction not of setting, character or plot, but a systematic reduction and devaluation of the language of fiction.

From the voice-within-the-voice which was at the center of the middle fiction, Beckett now creates a voiceless fiction, which becomes, in George Steiner's terms, "a retreat from the word" that reduces language to "pure ratio". For if there was one aspect of Beckett's writing (in his fiction, drama, poetry) on which everyone agreed, it was the beautiful way in which the voice spoke, it was the beauty of the language - its richness of vocabulary, its syntactical complexity and originality, its rhythm, its inventiveness, its brilliance, in other words its *Style*. But now even this must disappear from the writing, and Beckett, as usual, has been warning us all along that someday even the language of fiction would have to undergo a final cancellation, and that words would have to witness their own downfall, for as one of the characters says in the radio-play *All That Fall*: "Sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language".

What Beckett is striving to achieve in his later fiction is what Roland Barthes used to call "the zero degree of writing". He now makes his promise come true, remembering what he said, many years ago, to a curious interviewer who asked him why he chose to write in French: "Parce qu'en français il est plus facile d'écrire sans style", (because in French it is easier to write without style). Thus, one could say that the recent texts are above all exercises in stylelessness - a form of discourse which represents the final assault on language, on words, the ultimate dismissal of the "old credentials", as they were called in the novel *Watt*. However, by rendering language styleless, voiceless —blank, as it were— Beckett also reduce fiction to a mathematical tautology. Since words can only demonstrate their own emptiness, fiction becomes an inaudible game, a seemingly gratuitous game of verbal permutations, and the less works there are the more

satisfying the game is. Moreover, in order to succeed in this system of repetitions with variations on a set of words (*Ping* is the perfect example), one must remove from the fiction all emotions, remove from it all human, humane, and humanistic elements, or else the fiction begins to tell a story again - the same old story, of love, of desire, of guilt, of violence, of rivalry, of envy, of loneliness which have been the subjects of fiction since the beginning, but are now exhausted (as John Barth would say). Therefore, Beckett's recent fiction, completely abandons all pretense of story-telling, all ties with social reality, with representation of humanity, and with the human voice. As such it reaches towards the impossibility of being. Yet Beckett makes of this impossibility an occasion as he lets language perpetuate itself out of its own non-sense. He does so, however, by silencing the voice of fiction, that stubborn old voice which throughout Beckett's early novels cried out repeatedly that it could not go on and yet somehow managed to go on, that cracked voice which in the *Texts For Nothing* said of itself: "Weaker still the weak old voice that tried in vain to make me, dying away as much as to say it's going from here to try elsewhere, or dying down, there's no telling, as much as to say it's going to cease, give up trying".

First step then in this process of "dying down" is to silence the voice, and thus prevent it from trying again, and then reduce the living being, the creature of fiction to whom that voice belonged—the *Subject* of fiction—to mere bits and pieces, a leg, an arm, an eye, which is all that remains of the old protagonist in such texts as *Ping* or *Imagination Dead Imagine*, bits and pieces of humanity without even a pronominal voice to speak with.

The key text in this ultimate silencing of fiction is the story entitled *Enough* which functions as a kind of farewell to the earlier fiction which still afforded the Beckettian creature (even when reduced to reptilian contortions) the possibility of speech, the possibility of telling stories, about itself or about its fellow-creatures. *Enough* is the farewell to the speaking subject, the dismissal of the familiar Beckettian voice. But it is also the farewell to the time/space dimension of all the preceding fiction.

From *Murphy* to *How It Is*, Beckett's fiction progressed in the form of a quest, a wandering in time and in space, even though it was a slow, painful wandering which led the Beckettian creature from the stifling confines of a pseudo-social reality to an absurd fictional landscape of mud. *Enough* is the last moment of that wandering. Beyond that story, all of Beckett's creatures become

static, stationary, locked in a geometrical space - a circle (as in *Imagination Dead Imagine* and *Company*), a cupola (as in *Ping*), a square or a cube (as in *Lessness* and *Quad*), a cylinder (as in *The Lost Ones*), but these geometrical figures can no longer be called rooms or landscapes, they are pure abstractions of space devoid of any realism, and as such they even refuse the possibility of symbolic interpretation.

Enough is also the farewell to the companion, to the brother, the double, the alter ego, the playmate, the voice-within-a-voice which permitted some verbal exchange, some sort of dialogue within the obsessive monologue of Beckett's earlier fiction. In other words, it is the farewell to the fraternal suffering of the couple. But it is as well the end of movement in narration, the end of continuation and duration (even though these may have been mere illusions). And finally, it is the dismissal of the pronominal person, the first person narrative of the middle fiction (the I of the teller and the told) which, to a great extent, was the source of humor, tragedy, pathos, and compassion in Beckett's fiction, that is to say the source of story-telling.

The opening sentence of *Enough* makes this dismissal quite explicit: "All that goes before forget. Too much at a time is too much. That gives the pen time to note. I don't see it but I hear it there behind me. Such is the silence. When the pen stops I go on. Sometimes it refuses. When it refuses I go on. Too much silence is too much. Or it's my voice too weak at times. The one that comes out of me. So much for the art and craft".

Yes, "All that goes before forget... so much for the art and craft", and the text goes on to tell, in the first person narrative, but for the last time in Beckett's work, the story of the wandering of a couple, one member of which has just been dismissed by the other. And it is this dismissed person who now relates, briefly and for the last time, what he calls "this last outing". The story is related in the past tense, but no longer the deceptive past tense of memory, but a curious form of the past tense which seems to bring us back constantly to the original and final peep-hole of the present, where silence and language begin and end. The narrator tells us how he (HE or SHE, for even the sex of the narrator is ambivalent) held hands as they wandered around the Earth for many decades: "We must have covered several times the equivalent of the terrestrial equator. At an average speed of roughly three miles per day and night. We took flight in arithmetic. What mental calculations we made bent double hand in hand". It is in this fashion, "hand in hand... Wedged together

bent in half... I on the inside. We turn over as one man when he manifests the desire... For we walked in a half sleep", (present and past tenses "wedged together" throughout the text) that this couple walked around the Earth, the tall one bent in half at the waist so that his mouth could reach the ear of the small one, exchanging, as it is specified, "an average of a hundred words per day and night. Spaced out. A bare million in all. Numerous repeats. Ejaculations. Too few for even a cursory survey". The narrator recalls this slow progress (in time, space, and language), or at least recalls the last part of it ("our last decade", he calls it), until the day of his "disgrace", until the day came when the tall one told the small one "to leave him". And the narrator concludes by saying: "If the question were put to me suitably framed I would say yes indeed the end of this long outing was my life". And now dismissed, halfless, voiceless, and perhaps even lifeless (Beckett's creatures often speak as if they were ghosts of themselves existing in some postmortem condition), this little wanderer can only fall into silence and oblivion, for as he says quite explicitly: "All I know comes from him... Gone from reach of his voice I was gone from his life". Therefore, dismissed from within the voice of his creator, the Beckettian creature can no longer speak, can no longer speak for itself, someone else or something else will have to speak for it. Within the body of Beckett's fiction *Enough* marks the end of the speaking subject, the end of the first person narrative, and consequently the end of memory which traditionally allowed fiction to extend from the past to the present, allowed fiction to progress from a plausible beginning to a possible end. Beyond *Enough*, there are no longer such possibilities. The fiction is locked in an inescapable space devoid of natural landmarks and temporality. Moreover, *Enough* also marks the end of movement, the end of that region of wandering (and suffering) in which all the previous Beckettian creatures had existed. Finally, and above all, it marks the end of any relation with the outside world - what we call the real world, that is to say nature, vegetation, humanity.

At the beginning of *Imagination Deal Imagine* (which was written immediately after *Enough*), one reads this statement: "Islands, waters, azure, verdure, one glimpse and vanished, endlessly, omit". In the original French version this gives: "Iles, eaux, azur, verdure, fixez, pff, muscade, une éternité, taisez". The French is much more revealing because of the word "muscade" which is a term used by jugglers or magicians to announce to

their audience that they have succeeded in their *tours de passe-passe*, in their tricks. And indeed, Beckett is here a true magician of fiction, for now he has made nature vanish from his writing. From that point on, the Beckettian discourse separates itself from its shadow, the shadow of nature, and it is in the blinding synthetic light that permeates the space of all the recent texts that the discourse will take place - a closed "issueless" space, where even language becomes totally disrupted and disconnected.

Lessness is spoken in an almost syntaxless language from the midst of grey ruins (probably the ruins of the rotunda of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, or the ruins of the circular chamber of *Ping* or the cylinder of *The Lost Ones*): "Ruins true refuge long last towards which so many false time out of mind. All sides endlessness earth sky as one no sound no stir. Grey face two pale blue little body heart beating only upright. Blacked out fallen open four walls over backwards true refuge issueless". But what are these ruins? What is this greyness? What is this "true refuge?" It is the last place, the ultimate space of fiction, the most remote corner of consciousness, the last refuge "issueless" from which the last few words can be spoken, or rather can be uttered, murmured, mumbled.

As we witnessed in *Enough* the rupture of the couple and the dismissal of the narrative voice, we find in the later texts such as *Imagination Dead Imagine*, *Ping*, or *Lessness* the remnants of that couple. We now encounter lonely faceless figures separated from one another, either lying on their sides, back to back, in the foetal position, or else standing "upright" in the middle of grey ruins. It is still a form of life, "experience proves it", we are told, but the most reduced, the most static and speechless form of life. For just as we were told at the beginning of *Imagination Dead Imagine*, "No trace anywhere of life, you say, pah, no difficulty there", the last sentence of that text states: "Leave them there, sweating and icy, there is better elsewhere. No, life ends and no, there is nothing elsewhere". Therefore, if "there is nothing elsewhere", then this must be life, or what is left of life in the work of Samuel Beckett, for we have indeed reached the extreme end of life, but also the extreme end of fiction. That does not mean, however, that we have reached mortality - the death of man and the death of fiction. After *Murphy* (in 1938), no character in Beckett's work ever dies. Even *Malone Dies* describes the process of death (in the present tense) but not death itself. In fact, one could say that, like Dante, Beckett in his work has managed to transcend mortality, for as he tells us himself, as long as "imagination not dead" fiction

will be able to transcend life (real life that is), even if it means reaching an absurd and meaningless state of immortality.

The faceless figure with a head which looks like a block of wood who stands "upright" in the endless, timeless, changeless ash grey ruins of the text curiously entitled *Lessness* (which is even less than less), may indeed resemble a moribund. Yet this voiceless being seems troubled by illusions or memories of a past and of past sufferings. Therefore, as it is stated on several occasions in the text, perhaps "by wild imaginings" he may still be able to dream of future change for himself, to invent another step forward so that he no longer remain upright and alone, and may even want "to curse God again as in the blessed days". Is Beckett suggesting here that fiction, or the voice of fiction may be able to speak again within its own ruins?

If in *Imagination Dead Imagine* and in *Ping* the discourse attempted to describe, in a fragmented manner, the relationship of twisted human bodies with their closed geometrical surrounding, in *Lessness* the space is total opening, total void, grey ruins, and therefore the relation of being with space (setting with character one would say if this were traditional fiction) merges into the greyness of the fiction. This is translated into the broken syntax, into the repeated phrases permuted in the text, but also into the future tense of the verbs: "He will curse... He will move... He will go... He will stir... He will live again", we are told repeatedly of the faceless creature standing alone in the grey ruins. It is as if the fiction, by repeating and repeating the same words, by projecting these words into the future, was attempting to rejoin the past, to reconnect with some form of ancient story-telling, was attempting to resituate itself in a pre-fictional state, or a pre-historic condition of story-telling beyond this devastated space of fiction.

Since memories of the past can no longer engender a credible fiction, or give birth to a coherent story, but only create a fragmented and meaningless fictional projet without beginning, middle, or end, then perhaps by clinging to the future, to the mystery of the future can this remnant of a fictitious being possibly extract himself from the greyness of this void: "He will stir in the sand there will be stir in the sky the air the sand. One step in the ruins in the sand on his back in the endlessness he will make it". However, since in this landscape of nothingness and silence which is but a shadow of the real world, the time/space dimension (essential to any progress, whether forward or backward) is non-existent, so that both past and future remain

static in an "endless and changeless" non-present, the faceless protagonist cannot move towards the new becoming of his story, and therefore he remains stranded in the ruins of fiction.

This then is the ultimate situation, the ultimate reduction and deprivation of fictional and linguistic possibilities. And indeed one wonders how Beckett's fiction can go on from there. Beyond this total reduction of the fictional discourse, beyond this total elimination of character and of narrative voice, beyond this linguistic purification and designification, how can Beckett possibly move any further? But Beckett, like the great magician of fiction that he is, always manages to extricate himself from the impasse in which he has locked himself, always manages to perform a new trick and have the last word, and the last laugh. *The Lost Ones*, in its geometrical perfection is the one work among the recent texts which manages to reinstate a semblance of fictional order. For as long as there will be words, as long as there will be a space in which to scribble a few more words, Samuel Beckett will never stop surprising us.

Having reduced fiction and humanity to their ultimate state of existence or "lessness", Beckett in *The Lost Ones*, suddenly confronts us—for the first time in his entire work—not with a single solitary being, not with an unseparable couple, not even with a few anonymous beings in search of one another, but with a crowd, a multitude of beings, an entire tribe of strange, voiceless, unnamed, naked "bodies". But he had warned us of this possibility, long ago, in 1950 in fact, when the vanishing voice of the *Texts For Nothing* proclaimed in a desperate last stand: "And yet I have high hopes, I give you my word, high hopes, that one day I may tell a story, hear a story, yet another, with men, kinds of men, as in the days when I played all regardless or nearly, worked and played". An indeed, *The Lost Ones* confronts us with a story (a kind of story), and a crowd of men (kinds of men) involved in yet another of Beckett's "wild imaginings".

Inside a giant cylinder ("Vast enough for search to be in vain. Narrow enough for flight to be in vain"), a closed space, fifty meters in circumference and eighteen meters in height, "for the sake of harmony", we are told, some two hundred "bodies", each occupying one square meter, are involved in a frantic activity which consists of climbing up and down a set of ladders (the only objects in this place, we are told) to reach little niches half-way up the wall ("above some imaginary line"), some of which are connected by tunnels where the climbing bodies rest for a while. That is the story, that is the situation, and these are the

characters. Obviously not a return to old-fashioned realistic fiction, that is no longer possible, in fact this is still the same "nightmare thingness", but nonetheless a semblance of a story.

The Lost Ones represents the culmination of Beckett's fiction as it moved relentlessly towards voiceless self-cancellation. The cylinder of fiction into which the "bodies" are locked is that perfect voiceless discourse which frees itself of all connections with the creator, the narrator, or the teller, and as such transcends its own fictional paradox - the paradox that says that all fiction must have an origin, a source, a voice out of the past that speaks the story through the functions of memory. This perfect text has no referential elements outside of itself, either in the past or in the real world. In this "Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one", there is no way out, no exit, no escape, and therefore no way to cheat. The cylinder calls the reader's attention only to itself. It refuses to be a representation of something other than itself - an illusion. It does not speak for something else, and no one speaks it or speaks for it. It is closed from all sides, and therefore creates its own arbitrary meaning or meaninglessness. The cylinder of fiction of *The Lost Ones* is an anonymous rhetorical machine which is set in motion only by the questions, affirmations, negations, speculations of its own language —by the semantic texture of the text. Therefore, unlike any other fiction, nothing takes place outside of it. That is the ultimate situation, the ultimate goal towards which Beckett's fiction has been progressing for the past five decades— total cancellation of human, fictional, and linguistic possibilities, and yet still permitting the words to go on in a voiceless state.

In a sense what has been reached in *The Lost Ones* (and that is also true of the other recent works of fiction, *Company*, *Ill Seen/ Ill Said*, and *Worstward Ho*) is the only form of utopia Beckett could conceive for fiction and for humanity: a kind of story with a kind of people that sustain themselves in the void of language. Along the ambiguous line of a future-past which transcends the present-future, Beckett's fiction has come full cycle back to a pre-historic condition of man and of story-telling. Locked in a last refuge which could also be called the original refuge (the issueless space of writing), Beckett's creatures no longer speak, no longer relate their own story, no longer have a memory and words to give themselves the illusion of existing. Nonetheless, Beckett's own magical words, once again, manage to mock the futile act of writing, for he succeeds in creating yet another possibility for fiction out of the impossibility and absurdity of fiction.

