Beckett and Shakespeare on Nothing
or, whatever lurks behind the veil

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In the past few decades, some of Samuel Beckett’s texts have obtained a special status, marked by the obligatory epithet “oft-quoted”. One of these oft-quoted texts is the German letter to Axel Kaun (9 July 1937), in which Beckett famously described his poetics in terms of boring holes into the veil of language (Beckett 1984, 52). But to some extent this metaphor of the veil was a self-deceptive artifice. What he called “das Dahinterkauernde” only exists thanks to the existence of the veil, which can easily lead to tautological reasoning: the very introduction of the metaphor of the veil creates the illusion that something (or nothing) lurks behind, which – consequently – can only be reached by removing the veil. Beckett employed this metaphor at a particular moment in the 1930s, at an important stage in his developing poetics. In this paper I would like to investigate whether (or to what extent) this metaphor still applies to his later...
works, focusing on the Shakespearean aspect of Beckett’s language. To show how Shakespeare played a role in Beckett’s endeavours to “eff” the ineffable worst, this essay zooms in on one single word of *Worstward Ho*, and eventually on the absence of a spectral word – or a hole in the “Wortfläche” (“word surface”; Beckett 1984, 53) – in the following text, *Stirrings Still*. In order to gauge the full significance of this spectral word, it is necessary to start from the opposite end, that is, the abundance of words that preceded it.

**Much**

At the end of his life, in the equally oft-quoted interview of 27 October 1989, Beckett told James Knowlson that the core of his poetics was a “lack of knowledge” (Knowlson 1996, 352) and he insisted on presenting his own way as opposed to James Joyce’s. Beckett’s insistence on this dichotomy has often been adopted in Beckett studies and the difference between the two authors has been presented as the antithesis of Joycean encyclopedism versus Beckettian “anti-encyclopedism” (Baker 1996, xiv). But it is becoming increasingly clear that this contrast is too black-and-white. On the one hand, Joyce’s attitude towards encyclopedism was not without irony; he realised his circular enterprise was “writing its own wrunes for ever” (Joyce 1939, 19). On the other hand, Beckett was most erudite, and even the barest of his late writings are still saturated with subdued, implicit intertextual references, as the closing lines of the late prose text *Company* illustrate:

labour in vain at your fable. Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were.
Alone. (Beckett 2009, 42)

While Beckett alludes to Love’s Labour’s Lost in the penultimate line of this particular passage, Shakespeare’s play sheds an interesting light on the issue of knowledge (or the lack thereof) in Beckett’s works in general. In the opening scene, the King of Navarra proposes the three noblemen devote themselves to study for the next three years and forsake the company of women. Berowne replies:

Why, all delights are vain, but that most vain
Which, with pain purchased, doth inherit pain;
As painfully to pore upon a book
To seek the light of truth while truth the while
Doth falsely blind the eyesight of his look. (Shakespeare 1997, 743)

The King’s reply to Berowne is particularly applicable to Beckett’s poetics of ignorance: “How well he’s read, to reason against reading!” (743). It was only because Beckett had read so much that he could write against erudition. Some of the traces of his extensive reading are still extant in what remains of his personal library. A remarkable characteristic of his marginalia is that, in spite of numerous markings, it is sometimes an unmarked passage that is plundered by Beckett to write a text. These spectral marginalia are sometimes referred to as “non-marginalia” (Gellhaus 2004).

An example of non-marginalia can be found in one of Beckett’s volumes with works by William Shakespeare. The volume is part of Beckett’s personal library and is marked on half a dozen of pages. What Beckett has marked is not necessarily anything he has ever used for his writing. And
what he certainly has used, is not marked. For instance “the bawdy hour of nine” in *All That Fall*, a reference to the classic example of sexual innuendo from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, when Mercutio points out to the “nurse” that “the bawdy hand of the dial is now upon the prick” (Shakespeare 1997, 899). In *All That Fall*, the bawdy remark is made by Mr Tyler, when he explains to Miss Fitt that the twelve-thirty has not yet arrived: “No, Miss Fitt, follow the direction of my index. [Miss Fitt looks.] There. You see now. The signal. At the bawdy hour of nine. [In rueful afterthought.] Or three alas!” (Beckett 1990, 186). Unlike Shakespeare’s “bawdy hand” the signal Mr Tyler’s index points at is merely half-erect, not on the way up, but on the way down, like “all that fall” – which is how Beckett explained the sexual innuendo to Jacoba van Velde when she was working on the Dutch translation (Van Hulle 2009, 12). At the same time the pun indicates the primal structure of the radio play, questioning the Ur-plot of the human species, which Porter Abbott has referred to as the “begat” structure. This primal plot is reflected in the narrative structure of the Book of Genesis: “and Irad begat Mehujael: and Mehujael begat Methusael: and Methusael begat Lamech” (King James Bible, Genesis 4:18).

But on a micro-level, the structure of *All That Fall* is modelled after the smallest cycle within this macro-genealogical process. Freytag’s pyramid with its “rising” and “falling action” is basically a narrative erection. In *Reading for the Plot*, Peter Brooks described the plot as a dynamic of “the motor forces that drive the text forward, (...) the desires that connect narrative ends and beginnings, and make of the textual middle a highly charged field of force” (Brooks 1984, xiii-xiv). The middle part of *All That Fall* is “highly charged” indeed. The reference to *Romeo and Juliet* is only one of numerous insinuations in the radio play. Thanatos is never far away – the
play’s opening and ending are marked by Schubert’s Der Tod und das Mädchen— but Eros is equally present.

At first sight Beckett seems to be shamelessly reducing the structure of the plot to that of a male orgasm, but what Tommy calls “excitedly” during the climax at the station is that “She’s coming,” to which Maddy reacts, exclaiming: “The up mail! The up mail!” (Beckett 1990: 187). The homophony with “up male!” is not coincidental, but apart from the “begat” structure, the play also shows signs of a “bare” structure, as in the Book of Genesis: “And Adah bare Jabal (...) And Zillah, she also bare Tubalcain” (Genesis 4:20; 22). Birth is a prominent theme in All That Fall. There is a short interval between the train’s arrival and the moment Dan Rooney “suddenly appears” (Beckett 1990, 187). When he appears, Maddy explains why she has come: she wanted to surprise him, for his birthday. Birth is being staged both on the way to the station and on the way back. Like a midwife, Tommy has to help Maddy out of Mr Slocum’s car: “Crouch down, Mrs Rooney, crouch down, and get your head in the open. (...) Now! She’s coming! Straighten up, Ma’am! There!” To which Maddy replies with the astonishment of a newborn baby: “Am I out?” (Beckett 1990, 180). On the way back she remembers the lecture by “one of these new mind doctors” (195) and the phrase “never really been born” (196), a variation on the theme from Jung’s Tavistock lecture (Melnyk 2005).

Ado

Earlier on in the radio play Maddy Rooney halts and says she can’t go on: “[She halts.] How can I go on, I cannot. Oh let me just flop down flat on the
road like a big fat jelly out of a bowl and never move again!” (Beckett 1990, 174; emphasis added) The “jelly” is soon followed by the adjective “vile”: “Let us halt a moment and let this vile dust fall back upon the viler worms” (175; emphasis added). A few decades later, Beckett was to combine “vile” and “jelly” with reference to the eye in Ill Seen Ill Said: “Suddenly enough and way for remembrance. Closed again to that end the vile jelly or opened again or left as it was however that was” (Beckett 2009, 73). Just like the “vile jelly” in Ill Seen Ill Said, the combination of “vile” and “jelly” alludes to the last scene in Act III of Shakespeare’s King Lear, when Cornwall pulls out Gloucester’s eyes: “Out, vile jelly! [He pulls out Gloucester’s other eye.]” (Shakespeare 1997, 2414). Maddy goes to the station to pick up her husband Dan, who turns out to be blind. He is helped by the young boy, Jerry. When Dan and Maddy are at the top of the stairs – which Maddy calls a “cliff” (Beckett 1990, 183) – Jerry gets a penny, the way Edgar (disguised as ‘poor mad Tom’) gets a purse with a jewel in King Lear (Shakespeare 1997, 2433).

When Edgar sees his blind father, before the latter asks him to the cliffs of Dover, he remarks as an aside: “O gods! Who is’t can say, ‘I am at the worst?’ (…) And worse I may be yet; the worst is not, So long as we can say, ‘This is the worst.’” (Shakespeare 1997, 2417) These are two of the King Lear excerpts Beckett jotted down in his ‘Sottisier’ notebook (UoR MS 2901, 14v). The excerpts coincide with the introduction of the reference to King Lear in the form of the “vile jelly” – which is actually a late revision. The text of Mal vu mal dit simply mentioned an “œil las” (Beckett 1981, 67). Originally, Beckett translated this as “weary eye” but in the second typescript he changed it into a “vile jelly”, probably around the time he made the excerpts from King Lear. Most of these excerpts are lines spoken by
Edgar, notably the line about the worst not being the worst, so long as one can say, “This is the worst.” Worstward Ho can be read as a kind of *exercice de style* on this important theme. The attempt to reach the very worst situation in literature turns out to be impossible; as long as you can still say or write ‘this is the worst’, it can always get worse.

**About**

That is why some of the textual variants in connection with the word “worst” in Worstward Ho are more than just philological or editorial matters. They have interpretive value and touch upon the thematic core of this remarkable text. The following textual analysis may be an example of what in Dutch is sometimes irreverently called “kommaneijken” (“comma fucking”), but it is a useful way to understand an infinitesimally small, and therefore important, aspect of Beckett’s works.

The final typescript of Worstward Ho, which Beckett sent to John Calder (kept at IMEC), has served as the base text for all of the American Grove Press editions. The English Calder edition differs in six instances, carefully analyzed by Ruud Hisgen and Adriaan van der Weel (1998, 66-7). According to John Calder the differences between the final typescript and the Calder edition are probably the result of last-minute adaptations by Beckett on the page proofs, but these are lost. One of the variants is the difference between “worse” (in the American editions) and “worst” (in the English edition) in paragraph 61. This variant epitomizes the whole asymptotic endeavour of Worstward Ho. Paragraph 61 ends as follows: “Never by naught be nulled. Unnullable least. […] Unlessenable least best
worse.” Between “unnicable least” and “unlessenable least” the consecutive versions show a few minor, but important variants:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Version</th>
<th>Text</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manuscript:</td>
<td>Say that best worst. (…) say least best worse. For want of worser worst. (…) least best worse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typescript 1:</td>
<td>Say that best worse. (…) say least best worse. For want of worser worse. (…) least best worse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typescript 2:</td>
<td>Say that best worse. (…) say least best worse. For want of worser worse. (…) least best worse.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final typescript:</td>
<td>Say that best worse. (…) say least best worse. For want of worser worst. (…) least best worse.</td>
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The Calder edition reads “Say that best worst” (just like the manuscript version, but unlike the typescripts). We cannot exclude the possibility that Beckett decided at the very last moment that “worse” had to be changed into “worst”, but since the page proofs are lost, there is no way to establish this with absolute certainty.

The next “worst” is also problematic. The question is how absolute the superlative “worst” can be. That problem is already touched upon in paragraph 59: “Worst in need of worse.” Since the “worst” is in need of worse, the text suggests a combination of a superlative and a comparative: “best worse”. It also suggests “least” as an alternative candidate to approximate the goal as closely as possible. Beckett could not find a word that would be even worse – and therefore had to coin a neologism, a double comparative, “worser”. Eventually, the text needed to put up with an “unnicable” or “unlessenable least” as the “best worse”.

Ruud Hisgen and Adriaan van der Weel suggest that the reading “worser worst” should be emended and changed into “worser worse”, because that is the reading in the previous two versions. This would imply employing the textual genesis to construct a pattern and using that pattern as an argument to choose a particular reading to establish the text. It is extremely difficult to
develop watertight criteria to determine which variant is the “best” – or, in this case, which variant is the “worst” and which is even “worse”. For the reading edition of the new Faber and Faber series, the final typescript – in the case of *Worstward Ho* – served as a base text, under the motto of Sam Slote’s “Soundbite against the Restoration” of *Finnegans Wake*: “Let us leave ill enough alone.” (Slote 2001) This motto may be even more applicable to the late texts by Samuel Beckett, who proposed in his “Sottisier” notebook in June 1981 to let ill alone (UoR MS 2901).

Nothing

As an attempt to reach the “worst” with words, the text is doomed to fail, for the “worst” can never be put into words. As long as one can utter the worst, it can still get worse. For a writer, then, that is the ultimate challenge: to utter the unutterable. Or as Beckett put it in a letter to Avigdor Arikha (27 April 1984): “Ineffable departure. Nothing left but try – eff it” (qtd. in Knowlson 1996, 697). Beckett was clearly aware that this was doomed to fail – fuck it – and yet he kept trying to eff it. The text he was writing at this moment was *Stirrings Still*. The earliest versions are written in a notebook, in which Beckett also wrote a few short dramatic fragments – a dialogue, in which one of the two protagonists asks the other one to come and read a sonnet to him/her (UoR MS 2934). First, Beckett explicitly mentioned Shakespeare as the author of the sonnets. But then he immediately cancelled the name again, thus turning Shakespeare into a sort of spectre. This particular cancellation is a special category of deletion, since the name of an important author is involved, but it brings a more general phenomenon to the fore. A cancellation does not necessarily mean a rejection by the author.
Every single crossed-out word can be regarded as a spectre that haunts the published text. And towards the end of his oeuvre, Beckett made these verbal absences thematic. In the dramatic fragments in notebook UoR MS 2934, one of the two protagonists first suggests they read sonnet 71 – “No longer mourn for me when I am dead” – but eventually they prefer sonnet 116 – “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit impediments …” However, they only remember “Let me not …” and then they ask themselves how it went on. So, the knowledge of the old masters is still partially present, but it is marked by oblivion, and Beckett is particularly interested in those holes in memory. His poetics of ignorance do not imply that his characters completely resign to their forgetfulness, because apparently there is always a remainder of an inexplicable curiosity to know how it went on.

This curiosity is also present in the last part of Stirrings Still, when the old protagonist sitting at his table hears this sentence “from deep within”: “oh how and here a word he could not catch it were to end where never till then” (Beckett 2009, 114). The sentence is almost complete, but it lacks the crucial word that will determine the nature of the “ineffable departure”. It depends on that single word whether it is best to stay alive or to make an end to it. Albert Camus wrote in the opening lines of his essay on the absurd, Le Mythe de Sisyphe, that the crucial question in philosophy was whether life was worth living or not – a variant of Shakespeare’s “To be or not to be”. In Beckett’s last works, that question depends not so much on the spectre of Hamlet’s father, but on a spectral word – a word that cannot be uttered, a “missing word” (Beckett 2009, 114). The ignorance Beckett works with is the fundamental impossibility to know this word, resulting in
existential doubt: “Was he then now to press on regardless now in one direction and now in another or on the other hand stir no more as the case might be that is as that missing word might be which if to warn such as sad or bad for example then of course in spite of all the one and if the reverse then of course the other that is stir no more” (Beckett 2009, 114-15). One does not know how it will be where never till then, so the existing situation, known as life, gets the benefit of the doubt. One presses on, keeps stirring, beating about the bush, voyaging “autour du pot” like Mercier and Camier – in short, much ado about nothing.

Regarding nothing, Shakespeare wrote an interesting dialogue in *Hamlet*, just before the opening of the *mise en abîme*. Hamlet abruptly suggests to Ophelia, without further ado: “Lady, shall I lie in your lap?” Ophelia’s immediate reaction is “No.” Hamlet’s subsequently asks: “Do you think I meant country matters?” – which gives rise to a short dialogue on nothing:

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Oph. I think nothing, my lord.
Ham. That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.
Oph. What is, my lord?
Ham. Nothing.
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Nothing is what it seems, and here, it clearly seems to be synonymous with what Gustave Courbet called *L’Origine du monde*. With reference to *Much Ado about Nothing*, Gordon Williams notes: “As Shakespeare’s title ironically acknowledges, both vagina and virginity are a nothing causing Much Ado” (Williams 2006, 219).
Most probably this was not the nothing that – as Beckett suggested in his German letter to Axel Kaun – might be hidden behind the veil of language (Beckett 1984, 52). In his letter he focused on the destruction of that veil, but he may also have realized that the metaphor of the veil was an artificial construction to create the idea of something that lurks behind – “das Dahinterkauernde, sei es etwas oder nichts” (52). He was certainly not the first to note that in order to discover “nothing”, it had to be covered first. One of his great examples was William Shakespeare, who showed him that the very act of writing about nothing simultaneously veils it, and this veiling has a potentially more titillating effect than the act of unveiling or discovering. In that sense, even the “need to seem to glimpse” (“de vouloir croire entrevoir”) in Beckett’s last work, Comment dire / what is the word, is at the core of a principle that does not fundamentally differ from the one that constituted the commercial success of the Parisian Folies Bergère – “folie que d’y vouloir croire entrevoir quoi –”. The “need to seem to glimpse” is said to be a folly and eventually one glimpses nothing.
Works Cited


Slote, Sam. ‘Soundbite against the Restoration.’ *Genetic Joyce Studies* 1 (Spring 2001).
