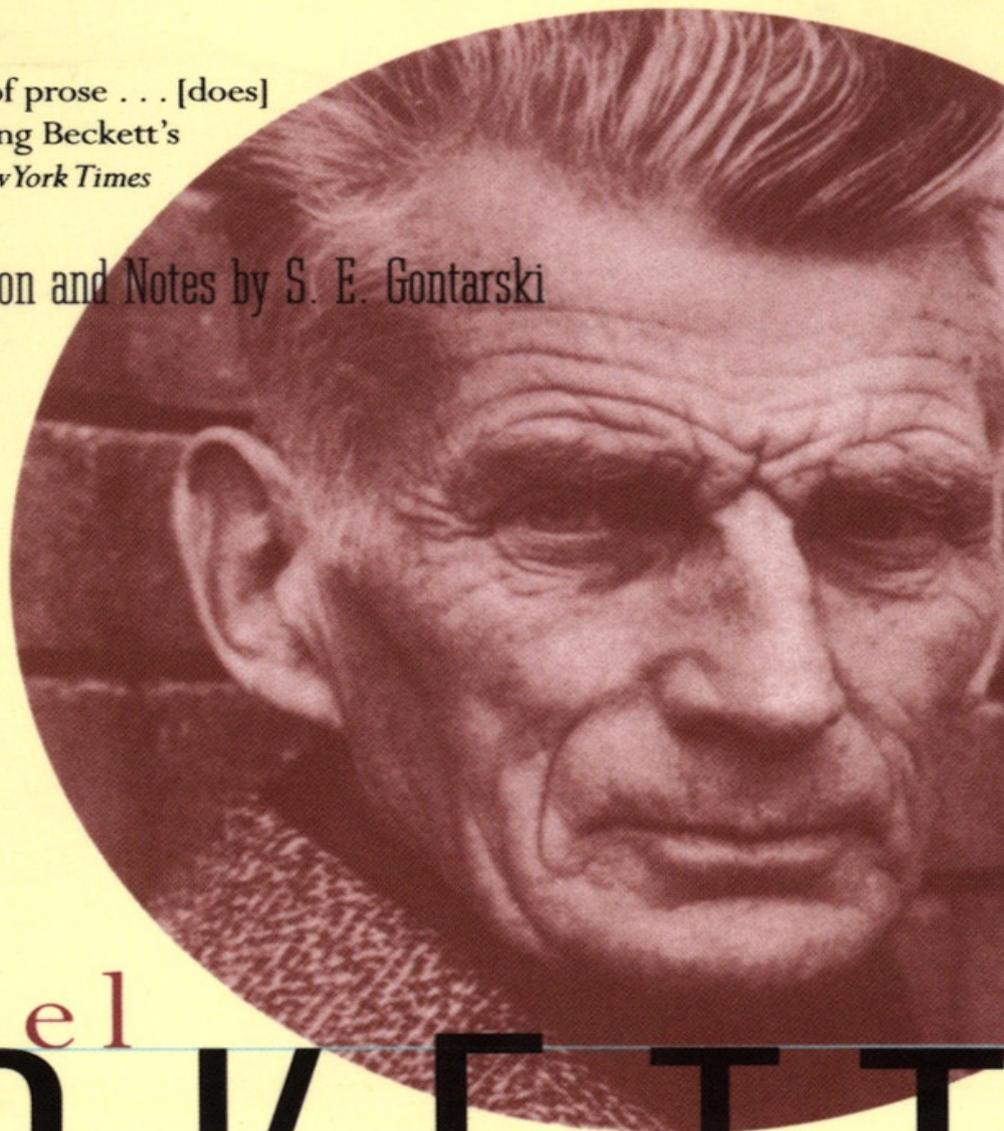


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Edited and with an Introduction and Notes by S. E. Gontarski



Samuel
BECKETT

THE

COMPLETE

1929 - 1989
SHORT
PROSE

The Complete Short Prose,
1929–1989

Works by Samuel Beckett published by Grove Press

COLLECTED POEMS IN ENGLISH AND FRENCH

THE COLLECTED SHORTER PLAYS

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THE COMPLETE SHORT PROSE: 1929–1989, edited by S. E. Gontarski (Assumption, Sedendo et Quiescendo, Text, A Case in a Thousand, First Love, The Expelled, The Calmative, The End, Texts for Nothing 1-13, From an Abandoned Work, The Image, All Strange Away, Imagination Dead Imagine, Enough, Ping, Lessness, The Lost Ones, Fizzles 1-8, Heard in the Dark 1, Heard in the Dark 2, One Evening, As the story was told, The Cliff, neither, Stirrings Still, Variations on a "Still" Point, *Faux Départs*, The Capital of the Ruins)

DISJECTA: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment

ENDGAME AND ACT WITHOUT WORDS

FIRST LOVE AND OTHER SHORTS

HAPPY DAYS

HOW IT IS

I CAN'T GO ON, I'LL GO ON:

A Samuel Beckett Reader

KRAPP'S LAST TAPE

(All That Fall, Embers, Act Without Words I, Act Without Words II)

MERCIER AND CAMIER

MOLLOY

MORE PRICKS THAN KICKS

(Dante and the Lobster, Fingal, Ding-Dong, A Wet Night, Love and Lethe, Walking Out, What a Misfortune, The Smeraldina's Billet Doux, Yellow, Draff)

MURPHY

NOHOW ON

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THE SHORTER PLAYS: Theatrical Notebooks, Edited by S. E. Gontarski (Play, Come and Go, Eh Joe, Footfalls, That Time, What Where, Not I)

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THREE NOVELS

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WATT

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The Complete Short Prose, 1929–1989

Samuel Beckett

Edited and with an Introduction and Notes by S. E. Gontarski



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Introduction

From Unabandoned Works: Samuel Beckett's Short Prose

WHILE SHORT FICTION was a major creative outlet for Samuel Beckett, it has heretofore attracted only a minor readership. Such neglect is difficult to account for, given that Beckett wrote short fiction for the entirety of his creative life and his literary achievement and innovation are as apparent in the short works as in his more famous novels and plays, if succinctly so. Christopher Ricks, for one, has suggested that the 1946 short story “The End” is “the best possible introduction to Beckett’s fiction,” and writing in the *Irish Times* (11 March 1995), literary editor John Banville has called “First Love” “the most nearly perfect short story ever written.” Yet few anthologists of short fiction, and in particular of the Irish short story, include Beckett’s work. Beckett’s stories have instead often been treated as anomalous or aberrant, a species so alien to the tradition of short fiction that critics are still struggling to assess not only what they mean—if indeed they “mean” at all—but what they are: stories or novels, prose or poetry, rejected fragments or completed tales. William Trevor has justified his exclusion of Beckett from *The Oxford Book of Irish Short Stories* (1989) by asserting that, like his countrymen Shaw and O’Casey, Beckett “conveyed [his] ideas more skillfully in another medium” (p. xvi). But to see Beckett as fundamentally a dramatist who wrote some narratives is seriously to distort his literary achievement. Beckett himself considered his prose fiction “the important writing.”² The omission is all the more curious given that Beckett’s short pieces exemplify Trevor’s characterization of the genre as “the distillation of an essence.” Beckett distilled essences for some sixty years, and through that process novels were often reduced to stories, stories pared to fragments, first abandoned then unabandoned and “completed” through the act of publication. When that master of the Irish short story Frank O’Connor noted that “there is something in the short story at its most characteristic[—]something we do not often find in the novel—an intense awareness of human loneliness,”³ he could have been writing directly about Beckett’s short prose. As Beckett periodically confronted first the difficulties then the impossibility of sustaining and shaping longer works, as his aesthetic preoccupations grew more contractive than expansive, short prose became his principal narrative form—the distillate of longer fiction as well as the testing ground for occasional longer works—and the theme of “human loneliness” pervades it.

Beckett’s own creative roots, furthermore, were set deep in the tradition of Irish storytelling that Trevor valorizes, “the immediacy of the spoken word,” particularly that of the Irish *seanchaí*. Although selfconsciously experimental, self-referential, and often mannered, Beckett’s short fiction never wholly divorced from the culturally pervasive traditions of Irish storytelling. Even when his subject is the absence of subject, the story the impossibility of stories, its form the disintegration of form, Beckett’s short prose can span the gulf between the more fabulist strains of Irish storytelling and the aestheticized experimental narratives of European modernism, of which Beckett was a late, informative, part. Self-conscious and aesthetic as they often are, Beckett’s stories gain immeasurably from oral presentation, performance, and so they have attracted theater artists who, like Joseph Chaikin, have adapted the stories to the stage or who, like Billie Whitelaw and Barry McGovern, have simply read them in public performance.

Much of Beckett’s short prose inhabits the margins between prose and poetry, between narrative and drama, and finally between completion and incompleteness. The short work “neither” has routinely been published with line breaks suggestive of poetry, but when British publisher John Calder was about to gather “neither” in the *Collected Poems*, Beckett resisted because he considered it a prose

work, a short story. Calder relates the incident in a letter to the *Times Literary Supplement* (24–30 August 1990): He had “originally intended to put [“neither”] in the *Collected Poems*. We did not do so, because Beckett at the last moment said that it was not a poem and should not be there” (p. 895). The work is here printed for the first time corrected (q.v. “A Note on the Texts”) and without line breaks, the latter to reinforce the fact that at least Beckett considered “neither” a prose work.

“From an Abandoned Work,” furthermore, was initially published as a theater piece by the British publisher Faber and Faber after it was performed on the BBC Third Programme on 14 December 1951 by Patrick Magee. Although “From an Abandoned Work” is now generally anthologized with Beckett’s short fiction, Faber collected it among four theater works in *Breath and Other Shorts* (1971). That grouping, of course, punctuated its debut as a *piece for performance*.⁴ It might be argued then, that “From an Abandoned Work” could as well be anthologized with Beckett’s theater writings. It is no less “dramatic,” after all, than “A Piece of Monologue,” with which it shares a titular admission of fragmentation. Even as Beckett expanded the boundaries of short fiction, often by contracting the form, his stories retained that oral, performative quality of their Irish roots. Many an actor has discovered that even Beckett’s most intractable fictions, like *Texts for Nothing, Enough, or Stirrings Still*, share ground with theater and so maintain an immediacy in performance that makes them accessible to a broad audience.

With the exception, then, of *More Pricks Than Kicks*, which with its single, unifying character, Belacqua Shuah, is as much a novel as a collection of stories,⁵ and the 1933 coda to that collection, “Echo’s Bones,” which Beckett wrote as the novel’s tailpiece but which was rejected first by the publisher, Chatto and Windus, then by Beckett himself for subsequent editions, and most recently by the Beckett Estate for this collection, this anthology gathers the entire output of Beckett’s short fiction from his first published story, “Assumption,” which appeared in *transition* magazine in 1929 when he was twenty-three years old, to his last, which were produced nearly *sixty* years later, shortly before his death. In failing health and stirring little from his Paris flat, Beckett demonstrated that there were creative stirrings still, the title he gave three related short tales dedicated to his friend and longtime American publisher, Barney Rosset. In between, Beckett used short fiction to rescue what was in 1933 a failed and abandoned novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, salvaging two discrete segments of that unfinished and only recently published (1992) work as short fiction, adding eight fresh, if fairly conventional, tales (or chapters) to fill out *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934), a work whose title alone, although biblical in origin, ensured its scandalous reception and eventual banning in Ireland. In 1945–46 Beckett turned to short fiction to launch “the French venture,” producing four *nouvelles*: “Premier Amour” (“First Love”), “L’Expulsé” (“The Expelled”), “Le Calmant” (“The Calmative”), and “La Fin” or “Suite” (“The End”). These stories, “the very first writing in French,”⁶ seemed to have tapped a creative reservoir, for a burst of writing followed: two full-length plays, *Eleuthéria* and *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*), and a “trilogy” of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* (*Malone Dies*), *L’Innommable* (*The Unnamable*). When the frenetic creativity of that period began to flag, Beckett turned afresh to short fiction in his struggle to “go on,” producing thirteen brief tales grouped under a title adapted from the phrase conductors use for that ghost measure which sets the orchestra’s tempo. The conductor calls his silent gesture a “measure for nothing”; Beckett called his prose stutterings *Texts for Nothing*. For Beckett these tales “express the failure to implement the last words of *L’Innommable*: ‘il faut continuer, je vais continuer’”⁷ [“I can’t go on, I’ll go on”].

By the 1940s Beckett had apparently abandoned the literary use of his native tongue. Writing to George Reavey about “a book of short stories,” Beckett noted on 15 December 1946, “I do not think I shall write very much in English in the future.”⁸ But early in 1954 Beckett’s American publisher,

Barney Rosset, suggested that he return to English: "I have been wondering if you would not get almost the freshness of turning to doing something in English which you must have gotten when you first seriously took to writing in French."⁹ Shortly thereafter, Beckett began a new English novel, which he first abandoned then published in 1958 as "From an Abandoned Work." In a transcription of the story, a fair copy made as a gift for a friend, Beckett appended a note on its provenance: "This text was written 1954 or 1955. It was the first text written directly in English since *Watt* (1945)."¹⁰ Almost a decade intervened between "From an Abandoned Work" and Beckett's next major impasse, a novel tentatively entitled *Fancy Dying*, portions of which, in French and English (with German translations of both), were published as "Faux Départs" to launch a new German literary journal, *Karsbuch* in 1965.¹¹ That abandoned novel (q.v. Appendix II) developed into *All Strange Away* (where although "Fancy is her only hope," "Fancy dead") and its sibling, *Imagination Dead Imagine*, but was the impetus for several other *Residua* as well. Although these works were apparently distillations of a longer work, Beckett's British publisher treated the 1,500-word *Imagination Dead Imagine* as a completed novel, issuing it separately in 1965 with the following gloss: "The present work was conceived as a novel, and in spite of its brevity, remains a novel, a work of fiction from which the author has removed all but the essentials, having first imagined them and created them. It is possibly the shortest novel ever published."

In between Beckett completed an impressive array of theater work, including *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*) (1957), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Happy Days* (1961), and *Play* (1964), and another extended prose work, *Comment c'est* (*How It Is*), itself first abandoned, then "unabandoned" in 1960. A fragment was published separately as "L'Image" in the journal *X* in December 1959. The English version, "The Image," is here published for the first time in a new translation by Edith Fournier (q.v. "Notes on the Texts"). Another segment of *How It Is* was published as "From an Unabandoned Work" in *Evergreen Review* in 1960.¹² For the next three decades, the post—*How It Is* period, Beckett would write, in French and English, denuded tales in the manner of *All Strange Away*, stories that focused on a single, often static image "ill seen" and consequently "ill said," *Residua* that resulted from the continued impossibility of long fiction. As the titles of two of Beckett's late stories suggest, these are tales "Heard in the Dark," stories that were themselves early versions of the novel *Company*. And in a note accompanying the French manuscript of "Bing," translated into English first as "Pfft" but quickly revised to the equally onomatopoeic "Ping," Beckett noted: "'Bing' may be regarded as the result of the miniaturization of 'Le Dépeupleur' abandoned because of its intractable complexities." Abandoned in 1966, *Le Dépeupleur* was also unabandoned, "completed" in 1970, and translated as *The Lost Ones* in 1971. Throughout this period Beckett managed to turn apparent limitations, impasses, rejections into aesthetic triumphs. Adapting the aesthetics of two architects, Mies van der Rohe's "less is more" and Adolf Loos's "ornament is a crime," Beckett set out to expunge "ornament," to write "less," to remove "all but the essentials" from his art, to distill his essences and so develop his own astringent, desiccated, monochromatic minimalism, miniaturizations, the "minima" he alluded to in the "fizzle" called "He is barehead." As Beckett's fiction developed from the pronominal unity of the four *nouvelles* through the disembodied voices of the *Texts for Nothing* toward the voiceless bodies of *All Strange Away* and its evolutionary descendant *Imagination Dead Imagine*, he continued his ontological exploration of being in narrative and finally being as narrative, producing in the body of the text the text as body. If the *Texts for Nothing* suggest the dispersal of character and the subsequent writing beyond the body, *All Strange Away* signaled a refiguration, the body's return, its textualization, the body as voiceless, static object, or the object of text, unnamed except for a series of geometric signifiers, being as mathematical formulae. The subject of these late tales is less the secret recesses of the repressed subconscious or the imagination valorized by Romantic poets and painters

than the dispersed, post-Freudian ego, voice as alien other. As the narrator of “Fizzles 2,” “Horn came always,” suggests, “It is in the outer space, not to be confused with the other [inner space or the Other?], that such images develop.”

Despite such dehumanized immobility, these figures (one hesitates to call them characters) and their chronologically earlier disembodied voices retain a direct and fundamental dramatic quality of which Beckett was fully aware. Despite occasional protestations to the contrary, Beckett encouraged directors eager to stage his prose and developed several thematically revealing stage adaptations of his short narratives. When the American director Joseph Chaikin wrote for permission to stage *Stories and Texts for Nothing*, for example, Beckett encouraged him in a letter of 26 April 1980 to mount a single *Text*, for which he proposed a simple, precise staging: a single figure, “[s]eated. Head in hands. Nothing else. Face invisible. Dim spot. Speech hesitant. Mike for audibility.” Beckett wrote again on 1 August 1980 developing his adaptation:

Curtain up on speechless author (A) still or moving or alternately. Silence broken by recorded voice (V) speaking opening of text. A takes over. Breaks down. V again. A again. So on. Till text completed piecemeal. Then spoken through, more or less hesitantly, by A alone.

Prompt not always successful, i.e., not regular alternation VAVA. Sometimes: Silence, V, silence, V again, A. Or even three prompts before A can speak.

A does not repeat, but takes over where V leaves off.

V: not necessarily A’s voice. Nor necessarily the same throughout. Different voices, 3 or 4, male and female, might be used for V. Perhaps coming to A from different quarters.

Length of prompt (V) and take over (A) as irregular as you like.

V may stop, A break down, at any point of sentence.

Chaikin ultimately rejected Beckett’s staging, preferring his own vision of a medley of texts, and Beckett conceded in a letter of 5 September 1980, “The method I suggest is only valid for a single text. The idea was to caricature the labour of composition. If you prefer extracts from a number of texts you will need a different approach.” Chaikin finally chose another, more “theatrical” approach, but Beckett’s adaptation of his story remains astonishing, a dramatic foregrounding of the mysterious voices, external to the perceiving part of self. What is caricatured in Beckett’s adaptation is at least the Romantic notion of creativity, the artist’s agonized communion with his own pure, uncorrupted, inner being, consciousness, or imagination. In Beckett’s vision the author figure “A” has at least an unnamed collaborator, an external Other. “A” is as much audience to the emerging artwork as its instigator, as he folds the voices of Others, origins unknown, into his own.

Shivaun O’Casey, daughter of dramatist Sean O’Casey, worked with Beckett to dramatize *From an Abandoned Work*, and Beckett likewise detailed a staging for her. O’Casey’s initial impulse was to mount the work on the analogy of *Play*, but Beckett resisted. “I think the spotlight face presentation would be wrong here.” He went on to offer an alternative that separated speaker from spoken: “The face is irrelevant. I feel also that no form of monologue technique will work for this text and that it should somehow be presented as a document for which the speaker is not responsible.” Beckett’s

outline is as follows:

Moonlight. Ashcan a little left of centre. Enter man left, limping, with stick, shadowing in paint general lighting along [sic]. Advances to can, raises lid, pushes about inside with crook of stick, inspects and rejects (puts back in can) an unidentifiable refuse, fishes out finally tattered ms. or copy of FAAW, reads aloud standing “Up bright and early that day, I was young then, feeling awful and out—” and a little further in silence, lowers text, stands motionless, finally closes ashcan, sits down on it, hooks stick round neck, and reads text through from beginning, i.e., including what he had read standing. Finishes, sits a moment motionless, gets up, replaces text in ashcan and limps off right. Breathes with maximum authenticity, only effect to be sought in [sic] slight hesitation now and then in places where most effective, due to strangeness of text and imperfect light and state of ms.¹³

In such an adaptation the narrative offered to the audience is, as Beckett says, separated from the stage character, who is then only an accidental protagonist in the drama, more messenger, say, than character. It was a form of staging that Beckett preferred for most of his prose, a compromise between an unadorned stage reading and a full, theatrical adaptation where characters and not just the text are represented on the stage. When the American theatrical group Mabou Mines requested permission through Jean Reavey to stage *The Lost Ones*, Beckett approved at first only a “straight reading.” In rehearsals, however, the work developed into a complex, environmental adaptation with a naked actor “demonstrating” the text with a host of miniature figures. Beckett’s comment on the adaptation was finally, “Sounds like a crooked straight reading to me.”¹⁴ With O’Casey, Beckett resisted the resurrection of a dramatic structure he himself had by then rejected, the monologue, a form he developed in prose with the four *nouvelles* in 1947 and adapted to the stage with *Krapp’s Last Tape* in 1958. The monologue form embraced an ideology of concrete presence, a single coherent being (or a unified ego or, in literary terms, a unified character), an idea with which Beckett was increasingly uncomfortable (witness the tapes themselves in *Krapp’s Last Tape*) and all pretense to which was finally abandoned in the “trilogy” and the subsequent *Texts for Nothing*. In the theater Beckett gave full voice to that disintegration of character and the fragmentation of monologue in *Not I* and with the incorporeal, ghostly figure of May in *Footfalls*. When consulted about stagings of his prose, Beckett invariably rejected, as he did with Shivaun O’Casey, adaptations that posited a unity of character and narrative that the monologue form suggests. When I prepared with him stagings of first his novella *Company* and then the story “First Love,” he offered possibilities almost identical to those for Chaikin and O’Casey respectively.¹⁵ The central question to Beckett’s dramatization of “First Love,” for instance, was how to break up an unrelieved reading of the text, again discovered in a rubbish heap:

The reading can be piecemealed by all kinds of business—such as returning it to bin (on which he sits to read)—exiting and returning to read to the end—looking feverishly for a flea or other vermin—chewing a crust—‘getting up to piss in a corner with back modestly to audience—etc. etc. making the poor best of a hopeless job.¹⁶

Actors, then, have intuited what literary critics have too often failed to articulate, that even Beckett’s most philosophical and experimental short fictions have an immediacy and emotional power, “the immediacy of the spoken voice,” which makes them accessible to a broad audience and places them firmly within a tradition of Irish storytelling.

Beckett’s first short stories, “Assumption,” “A Case in a Thousand,” “Text,” and “Sedendo et

Quiescendo,”¹⁷ however, retain the rhetorical ornament and psychological probing characteristic of much high modernism. These stories, the latter two fragments of a then-abandoned novel, are finally uncharacteristic of the narrative diaspora Beckett would eventually develop, but they are central to understanding its creative genesis. Beckett’s first two stories, for instance, were written as if he were still preoccupied with literary models. In the first case Beckett seems to have been reading too many of Baudelaire’s translations of Poe; in the second, too much Sigmund Freud. But it was with such derivative short fiction that Beckett launched a literary career in 1929, less than a year after having arrived in Paris, in Eugene Jolas’s journal of experimental writing, *transition*. Jolas was in the midst of championing James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* by publishing not only excerpts from the *Work in Progress* but essays about it as well. Beckett had impressed Joyce enough that he was offered the opportunity to write an essay comparing Joyce to three of Joyce’s favorite Italian writers, Dante, Bruno, and Vico, for a volume of essays defining and defending the *Work in Progress*. Jolas (and evidently Joyce himself, for the essay would not have appeared without Joyce’s approval) thought enough of the essay to reprint it in *transition*. Along with the essay, Jolas accepted a short story from Beckett, “Assumption,” which opens with the sort of paradox that would eventually become Beckett’s literary signature, “He could have shouted and could not.”

The story details the fate of a young, anguished “artist” who struggles to retain and restrain “that wild rebellious surge that aspired violently towards realization in sound.” The silent, unnamed protagonist, however, commands a “remarkable faculty of whispering the turmoil down.” He can silence “the most fiercely oblivious combatant” with a gesture, with “all but imperceptible twitches of impatience.” He develops as well an aesthetic that separates Beauty from Prettiness. The latter merely proceeds “comfortably up the staircase of sensation, and sit[s] down mildly on the topmost stair to digest our gratification.” More powerful are sensations generated when “[w]e are taken up bodily and pitched breathless on the peak of a sheer crag: which is the pain of Beauty.” The remainder of “Assumption” develops just such an aesthetic of pain, which echoes the German Romanticism Beckett never quite purged from his art. As the artist struggles to restrain the animal voice that “tore at his throat as he choked it back in dread and sorrow,” an unnamed Woman enters. She flatters and finally seduces the artist manqué, and “SO [sic] each evening in contemplation and absorption of this woman he lost part of his essential animality.” After he is seduced, “spent with extasy [sic]” the dammed “stream of whispers” explodes in “a great storm of sound.” The story ends with the sort of epiphany that Beckett would recycle in the final line of “Dante and the Lobster”: “They found her caressing his wild dead hair.” “Assumption” works through (and finally against) the image of a Promethean artist: “Thus each night he died and was God [the Assumption of the title?], each night revived and was torn and battered with increasing grievousness....” But whether the artist transcends the worldly through this experience to unite with something like the Idea, or pure essence, transcends Schopenhauer’s world of representation to achieve the pure will, or whether the title refers simply to the arrogance of such desire may be the crux of the story. The protagonist’s romantic agony (in both senses of that phrase) may simply describe postcoital depression, and so travesty the belabored agonies of a would-be artist.

When Beckett came to publish another story in *transition* in March 1932, he selected an excerpt from the stalled novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, which he called “Sedendo et Quiescendo” (but which appeared as “Sedendo et Quiesciendo”). The story includes a sonnet from the protagonist, Belacqua Shuah, to his lover, the Smeraldina, which developed the same sort of yearning for transcendence and union with the “Eternally, irrevocably one” evident in “Assumption.” The means to this end was to “be consumed and fused in the white heat / Of her sad finite essence....” In the sonnet the speaker claims that he “cannot be whole ... unless I be consumed,” which consumption provides

the climax to "Assumption." The parallels between story and sonnet extend to the recycling of imagery and phrasing: "One with the birdless, cloudless, colourless skies" (untitled sonnet to the Smeraldina); "he hungered to be irretrievably engulfed in the light of eternity, one with the birdless cloudless colourless skies" ("Assumption"). Even the image of the "blue flower" reappears: "Belacqua ... inscribed to his darling blue flower some of the finest Night of May hiccupsobbs that ever left a fox's paw sneering and rotting in a snaptrap" ("Sedendo et Quiescendo"); "He was released, achieved [sic], the blue flower, Vega, GOD..." ("Assumption").

Beckett's fourth published story, "A Case in a Thousand," appeared in *Bookman* in August 1934 along with his critical article "Recent Irish Poetry," the latter, however, signed with the pseudonym Andrew Belis. "A Case in a Thousand" features one Dr. Nye, who "belonged to the sad men." Physician though he is, Dr. Nye "cannot save" himself. He is called in on a case of surgeon Bor who had operated on the tubercular glands of a boy named Bray, who had then taken a turn for the worse. "Dr. Nye found a rightsided empyema," and then another on the left. He discovered as well that the boy's mother, who has been barred from the hospital excepting an hour's visit in the morning and another in the evening but who maintains a day-long vigil on the hospital grounds until her appointed visiting hour, is actually Nye's "old nurse," who on their meeting reminds him that he was "'always in a great hurry so you could grow up and marry me.'" Mrs. Bray, however, "did not disclose the trauma at the root of this attachment." There are then at least two patients in this story, the Bray boy and Dr. Nye. As the boy's condition worsens and a decision about another operation must be made, the doctor regresses, "took hold of the boy's wrist, stretched himself all along the edge of the bed and entered the kind of therapeutic trance that he reserved for such happily rare dilemmas." At that moment Mrs. Bray "saw him as she could remember him," that is, as the boy she had nursed. The young Bray does not survive the operation, but after the funeral the mother resumes her vigil outside the hospital as if her child were still alive—as in a sense he is. When Nye appears, "she related a matter connected with his earliest years, so trivial and intimate that it need not be enlarged on here, but from the elucidation of which Dr. Nye, that sad man, expected great things." The undisclosed incident, at once a "trauma at the root of this attachment" and an incident so "trivial and intimate that it need not be enlarged on here," is at the root of the story as well. The matter is certainly sexual, particularly Oedipal, and at least one critic, J. D. O'Hara, has surmised that the "trivial and intimate" incident involves the young Nye's curiosity about female anatomy, in particular whether or not women have penises. Dr. Nye's nurse may have answered the question by anatomical demonstration, and the unexpected disclosure may have left the young Nye impotent, which condition would help explain why as an adult Nye was "one of the sad men." The "Case in a Thousand," then, is not (or not only) the young boy's empyema but Nye's disorder, impotence perhaps, as well.

Thereafter, Beckett returned to his stalled and incomplete novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Having published two excerpts as separate stories, "Text" and "Sedendo et Quiescendo," he now cannibalized two of its more detachable pieces, "A Wet Night" and "The Smeraldina's Billet-Doux," retaining the protagonist, Belacqua Shuah, to develop an episodic novel, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, whose lead story, "Dante and the Lobster," was published separately in *This Quarter* in December 1932. (The story "Yellow" was also published separately in *New World Writing* but not until November 1956, twenty-two years after the publication of the novel.)

Beckett's subsequent venture into short fiction began just after the second World War, after the writing of *Watt*, when he produced four stories in his adopted language. Originally, all four of the French stories were scheduled for publication by Beckett's first French publisher, Bordas, which had published his translation of *Murphy*. But Bordas dropped plans to issue *Mercier et Camier* and *Quatre Nouvelles* when sales of the French *Murphy* proved disastrous. Subsequently, Beckett suppressed for

time the French novel and one of the stories. The remaining three *nouvelles* of 1946 were finally published in France by Les Editions de Minuit (1955) and in the U.S. by Grove Press (1967) in combination with thirteen *Texts for Nothing* ("First Love" being published separately only in 1970). Although conjoined, the two sets of stories remained very separate in Beckett's mind, as he explained to Joseph Chaikin. Beckett resisted Chaikin's theatrical mixing of the stories, noting that "*Stories and Texts for Nothing* are two very different matters, the former the beginning of the French venture, the latter in the doldrums that followed the 'trilogy.'" When Chaikin persisted, arguing that *Stories and Texts for Nothing* could all be read as tales for "nothing," Beckett corrected him by return post: "Have only now realized ambiguity of title. What I meant to say was *Stories. Followed by Texts for Nothing.*"

The four stories, "First Love," "The Expelled," "The Calmative," and "The End," written before, almost in anticipation of, the "trilogy" of novels, and the thirteen *Texts for Nothing* form the bookend to Beckett's great creative period, which has memorably been dubbed the "siege in the room" and which in some regards was anticipated by the final two paragraphs of "Assumption." The "trilogy" seems almost embedded within the *Stories and Texts for Nothing* as Beckett's first two full-length plays, *Eleuthéria* and *En attendant Godot (Waiting for Godot)*, are embedded within the novels, the plays written, as Beckett confessed, "in search of respite from the wasteland of prose" he had been writing in 1948—49. In fact, the unnamed narrator of this four-story sequence, almost always suddenly and inexplicably expelled from the security of a shelter, an ejection that mimics the birth trauma, anticipates the eponymous Molloy, even in the postmortem story "The Calmative," and remains a theme through *Fizzles*, where in "For to end yet again," "the expelled falls headlong down. In these four stories what has been and continued to be one of Beckett's central preoccupations developed in its full complexity: the psychological, ontological, narratological bewilderment at the inconsistency, the duality of the human predicament, the experience of existence. On the one side is the post-Medieval tradition of humanism, which develops through the Renaissance into the rationality of the Enlightenment. Its ideology buttresses the capacity of humanity to know and adapt to the mechanism of the universe and understand humanity's place in the scheme. This is the world of the schoolroom and laboratory, the world of mathematics and proportion, the world of Classical symmetry, of the pensum. For Beckett's narrators, the punctum, the lived, sentient experience of existence, the being in the world, punctures and deflates that humanistic tradition, the empiricism of the classroom, although the latter never loses its appeal and is potentially a source of comfort (although it apparently destroys Watt). The opening of "The Expelled," for instance, focuses not on the trauma of rejection and forcible ejection but on the difficulty of counting the stairs down which the narrator has, presumably, already been dispatched. There is little resentment here at the injustice of having been ejected from some place like a home. The focus of injustice in Beckett is almost never local, civil, or social, but cosmic, the injustice of having been born, after which one finds one's consolations where one may—in mathematics, say. As the protagonist of "Heard in the Dark 2" (and *Company*) suggests, "Simple sums you find a help in times of trouble. A haven.... Even still in the timeless dark you find figures a comfort." The experience of living is dark, mysterious, inexplicable, chthonic, in many respects Medieval but without the absolution of a benign deity. Such a dissociation had preoccupied Beckett in his earlier work, chiefly in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, *Murphy*, *Watt*, and the long poem "Whoroscope," through the philosophical meditations of the seventeenth-century philosopher and mathematician Rene Descartes, that is, in terms of the conflict between mind (pensum) and body (punctum), although Schopenhauer's division of the world in terms of the will and its representations is never very far from the foreground. Here the hormonal surges in even a spastic body like Murphy's conspire against the idealism and serenity of mind (or soul or spirit). But in the

four *Stories* Beckett went beyond Descartes and descended further into the inchoate subconscious of existence, rationality, and civilization, beyond even the Freudian Eros and the Schopenhauerian Will into the more Jungian Collective Unconscious of the race, and the four separate narrators (or the single collective narrator called “I”) of these *Stories* confront those primeval depths with little sense of horror, shame, or judgment. The stories retain an unabashedly Swiftian misanthropy: “The living wash in vain, in vain perfume themselves, they stink” (“First Love”). In “The Expelled” grotesqueries acquire comic effect even as they disclose psychoanalytic enigmas: “They never lynch children, babies, no matter what they do they are whitewashed in advance. I personally would lynch them with the utmost pleasure.” The theme will resurface in the 1957 radio play *All that Fall* when Dan Rooney asks wife Maddy, “Did you ever wish to kill a child... Nip some young doom in the bud.” This is depersonalized humanity sunk in on itself: “It is not my wish to labour these antinomies, for we are, needless to say, in a skull, but I have no choice but to add the following few remarks. All the mortals saw were alone and as if sunk in themselves” (“The Calmative”). It is a descent, most often into an emblematic skull, from which Beckett’s fiction, long or short, will never emerge. The image anticipates not only the skullscapes of the “trilogy,” but the dehumanized, dystopic tale *The Lost Ones*, and what is generally called the post—How *It Is* prose. Such a creative descent into “inner space,” into the unconscious, had been contemplated by Beckett at least since the earliest stages of *Watt*. In the notebook and subsequent typescript versions of the novel, Beckett noted, “the unconscious mind! What a subject for a short story.” “The Expelled” seems a fulfillment of that wish to plumb “perhaps deep down in those palaeozoic profounds, midst mammoth Old Red Sandstone phalli and Carboniferous pudenda... into the pre-uterine... the agar-agar... impossible to describe.”¹

But while character names may shift in the four stories (Lulu, for instance, becomes Anna in “First Love”) the narrating consciousness, the “I” of these stories, remains more or less cogent, intact, coherent, psychologically and narratologically whole, and at least pronominally namable. And something like representable external reality still exists, even as it is folded in on itself and therefore inseparable from the consciousness perceiving it. Writing subsequently three interrelated and sequential novels dubbed the “trilogy,” Beckett continued to probe the “pre-uterine.” It is a period during which Beckett pushed beyond recognizable external reality and discrete literary characters, replacing them with something like naked consciousness or pure being (living or dead is not always clear) and a plethora of voices.

The *Texts for Nothing* are then, as Beckett tried to explain to Chaikin, a major leap beyond the four *Stories*. To use the current historical markers, they represent a leap from Modernism to Post-Modernism, from interior voices to exterior voices, from internality to externality. Beckett’s fragments are in fact no longer “completed” stories but shards, aperçus of a continuous unfolding narrative, glimpses at a never to be complete being (narrative). The *Texts for Nothing* would redefine at least Beckett’s short fiction, if not the possibilities of the short story itself, as narrative per se was finally discarded (as it was for the most part in the “trilogy” of novels), replaced by attempts of consciousness to perceive, comprehend, or create first a life, then a more or less stable, static image, an essence, failing at the latter no less often than at the former. “No need of a story,” says one of the voices, “a story is not compulsory, just a life, that’s the mistake I made, one of the mistakes, to have wanted a story for myself, whereas life alone is enough” (*Text IV*). The struggle of the protean narrators of the four *Stories* and the three novels was to create a narrative to capture or reflect, to represent at least a segment of a life in a work of art—that struggle has been abandoned with the *Texts for Nothing*. If “life,” and so story, assumes character, the voice has made yet another mistake, for the coherent entity that in literature we call “character” is itself disbursed amid a plurality of disembodied voices and echoes whose distinctions are unclear and whose sources are unknowable. The disembodied

voice captivated Beckett from his earliest creative years when he took the image of Echo as the literary emblem for his first collection of poems, *Echo's Bones*. Echo, an Oread or mountain nymph, pined away for the love of Narcissus until all that remained of her was her voice. *Texts for Nothing* could as easily be called *Echo's Bones* as well, and from there on Beckett would never again create anything like literary characters save for an unnamed (even unnamable) narrator straining to see images and hear sounds, almost always echoes—bodiless voices or later voiceless bodies, origins unknown. In Beckett's tribute to painter and friend Bram van Velde, the *témoignage* "La Falaise" ("The Cliff," published here in a translation by Edith Fournier), the window through which the observing "you" views the cliff both separates him from and joins him to the cliff in a process that blends perception and imagination. In these late works the artist figures inhabit a no-man's-land, "an unspeakable [because unnamable?] home" in "neither," which is neither wholly self nor wholly other. In theatrical adaptations of his prose, Beckett retained such paradoxes of self by insisting on the separation of character and narrative, and such separation was evident in almost every stage adaptation of his prose works that he himself had a hand in. These, then, are the limitations, the necessary incoherence and fragmentation within which the writer is obliged to work in the post-Auschwitz era in order to convey the punctum, the experience of living in the world: "I'm here, that's all I know, and that it's still not me, it's of that the best has to be made" (*Text III*). Because of such an impasse, narrative (at least as we've known and expected it, even amid the more experimental Modernists) "can't go on," and yet somehow is obliged to "go on." How it goes on is in fits, sputters, and not so much starts as re-starts, in imaginative ventures doomed to failure. As it had been in *The Unnamable*, all pretense to artistic completion was abandoned even in the titles of these later works to suggest not only that the individual works are themselves incomplete, unfinished, but that completion is beyond human experience. The thirteen *Texts for Nothing* are merely numbered, for instance, and Beckett went on to write stories with titles like "Lessness," "From an Abandoned Work," *Fizzles* (*foirades* in French), and *Residua*. But these tales are no more unfinished works of art than those paintings by Matisse that retain raw, unpainted canvas.

What one is left with after the *Texts for Nothing* is "nothing," incorporeal consciousness perhaps into which Beckett plunged afresh in English in the early 1950s to produce a tale rich in imagery but short on external coherence. "From an Abandoned Work" deals with three days in the life of the unnamed narrator, an old man recalling his childhood. That childhood was as uneventful as it was loveless, except, perhaps, for words, which "have been my only loves, not many."¹⁹ The father died when the narrator was young, and he lived with his mother until she died. The narrator's life is ordered by the daily journey and return: "in the morning out from home and in the evening back home again." He had taken long walks with his father, and those have continued even after the father's death. His motion, however, is directionless, "I have never in my life been on my way anywhere, but simply on my way." In contrast to his own patterned motion, he retains, "Great love in [his] heart for all things still and rooted." There is, however, a great deal of hostility in the parental relationship: "ah my father and mother, to think they are probably in paradise, they were so good. Let me go to hell, that's all I ask, and go on cursing them there, and them looking down and hear me, that might take some shine off their bliss." In fact, his admission that he may have killed his father, "as well as [his] mother," suggests a consciousness permeated with guilt. The events of the days grow more bizarre. There is "the white horse and white mother in the window." Another day, "I was set on and pursued by a family or tribe of stoats." The narrator, moreover, experiences inexplicable periods of rage: "The next thing was up in the bracken lashing out with my *stick* making the drops fly and cursing, filthy language, the same over and over, I hope nobody heard me." The most comprehensive reading of this enigmatic text is one offered by J. D. O'Hara in which he sees the word "work" of the title as referring not to a work

of art, the story itself, but to a session of psychotherapy. Freud often spoke of his therapy sessions, for instance, as working through psychological problems. What is abandoned for O'Hara, then, is not a narrative or story, which is in this reading complete, but the therapy, which is never completed and so abandoned. The emotional tensions are never resolved, the anxiety never relieved, the personality never integrated. For O'Hara:

the protagonist has divided his feelings for his parents into love and hatred, has expressed that hatred to us while concealing it from the world, and has repressed his love and displaced it into a love of words, of animals, of this earth, etc. In all this he has expressed his love of self while expressing his hatred of that self by youthful punishment in the walks, by future punishment in hell, and by present punishment among the rocks, isolated from all humans.

It took almost a decade for Beckett to put such psychological strangeness away. When he returned to short fiction in the early 1960s it was to reshape the remains of aborted longer fiction yet again, a work tentatively entitled *Fancy Dead*, a short excerpt of which, in French and English, was published in 1965 as "Faux Départs." The work suggests, however, less a false start than a major aesthetic shift: a rejection of the journey motif and structure (incipient in *Murphy* and *Watt* and fully developed in "First Love" and the fiction through "From an Abandoned Work"), a return to which might have signaled the death of creative imagination: "Out of the door and down the road in the old hat and coat like after the war, no, not that again." Instead, Beckett (or the narrator) announced a new literary preoccupation, "A closed space five foot square by six high, try for him there" in which he would conduct exercises in human origami, all with a rechristened pronoun through which to tell his story, "last person." For the opening of "All Strange Away" Beckett would delete the first three words of the sentence above, but "A closed space" ("Closed place" opens "Fizzles 5") would come close to describing the creative terrain that Beckett's short fiction would thereafter explore. And if an impass were reached in such imaginative spelunking, the light (of imagination?) go out, "no matter, start again, another place, someone in it...."

The British novelist David Lodge's analysis of one of Beckett's "closed space" tales, "Ping" ("Bing" in French), originally a segment of *Le Dépeupleur* (*The Lost Ones*), is a cogent reading of this cryptic tale, and so of much of Beckett's late prose: "I suggest that 'Ping' is the rendering of the consciousness of a person confined in a small, bare, white room, a person who is evidently under extreme duress, and probably at the last gasp of life."²⁰ Such is what passes for plot in Beckett's late prose, and Lodge goes on to suggest that:

"Ping" seems to record the struggles of an expiring consciousness to find some meaning in a situation which offers no purchase to the mind or to sensation. The consciousness makes repeated, feeble efforts to assert the possibility of colour, movement, sound, memory, another person's presence, only to fall back hopelessly into the recognition of colourlessness, paralysis, silence, oblivion, solitude.

Lodge struggles to situate "Ping" within a more or less traditional, realistic frame: an expiring consciousness in search of meaning. The questions that Lodge defers, however, are the narratological ones: Who is the figure to whom all is "known"? By whom is the image described "never seen"?; to whom is it repeatedly "invisible"? Certainly not the reader, to whom even these white-on-white images are strikingly visible, for the reader, like the narrator, sees them clearly if fleetingly in his mind's eye through the imaginative construct we call literature, fiction. The figure described, the

narrator hints, is “perhaps not alone,” and so the possibility exists of others, whose perceptions fail as well. Although the story lines of the late tales are fairly simple, as Lodge suggests, narratologically they are more complex. The reader’s focus is not only on a figure in a closed space, but on another figure and a narrator imagining them. We have, then, not just the psychologically complex but narratologically transparent image of a self imagining itself, but a self imagining itself imagining itself, often suspecting that it is being imagined itself.

In these late tales the mysterious narrator is often recorded in the midst of the fiction-making process. Beckett’s subject here is, therefore, less the objects perceived and recorded, a process, of necessity, “ill seen” and so “ill said,” but the human imagination. In his seminal study, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*, critic Frank Kermode quotes Hans Vaihinger on the human impulse of fiction making; fictions are “mental structures. The psyche weaves this or that thought out of itself; for the mind is invention; under the compulsion of necessity [in Beckett, the “obligation to express”], stimulated by the outer world, it discovers the store of contrivances hidden within itself.”²¹ Beckett’s late short fiction, the post—*How It Is* prose, constitutes a record of those discoveries, and so the late work may have more in common with that of American poet Wallace Stevens than with any of the writers of short fiction.

Such then is the rarefied world of Beckett’s late short fiction, from “All Strange Away” to *Stirrings Still*, short tales that in fundamental ways are almost indistinguishable from the late novels—as the late prose is almost indistinguishable from the late theater. Despite his early insistence on keeping “our genres more or less distinct,”²² Beckett seemed in this later phase of his work to have stretched beyond such limitations, beyond generic boundaries to examine the diaphanous membrane separating inside from outside, perception from imagination, self from others, narrative from experience, “neither” wholly the one nor wholly the other. Despite such psychological and philosophical flux, an almost frustrating thematic irresolution, the literary oscillation between waves and particles, these stories retain a direct dramatic and poetic simplicity as if they had been spoken into a tape recorder. Taken together, Beckett’s short prose pieces not only outline his development as an artist, but suggest as well Beckett’s own view of his art, that it is all part of a continuous process, a series. Writing to George Reavey on 8 July 1948, for instance, Beckett noted, “I am now retyping, for rejection by the publishers, *Malone Meurt* [*Malone Dies*], the last I hope of the series Murphy, Watt, Mercier & Camier, Molloy, not to mention the 4 Nouvelles & Eleuthéria.”²³ That series did not, of course, end with *Malone Meurt*. It continued for another forty years to *Stirrings Still*. The post—*How It Is* stories were just the latest in a series whose end was only Beckett’s own. In these generically androgynous stories Beckett produced a series of literary hermaphrodites that echo one another (and the earlier work as well) like reverberations in a skull. Taken together the stories suggest the intertextual weave of a collaboration between Rorschach and Escher.

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Notes

1. “Mr Artesian,” *The Listener* (3 August 1967): 148—49. Reprinted in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979), 286-291.
2. *No Symbols Where None Intended: A Catalogue of Books, Manuscripts, and Other Material Relating to Samuel Beckett in the Collection of the Humanities Research Center*, Selected and

described by Carlton Lake (Austin, TX: Humanities Research Center, 1984), 133.

3. *The Lonely Voice: A Study of the Short Story* (New York: Harper & Row [Harper Colophon Books] 1985), 19.
4. The work finally seems to have wound up anthologized with Beckett's prose via an exchange between publishers. The dramaticule "Come and Go" was originally published in the U.K. by John Calder, to whom the work is dedicated. Faber has subsequently published "Come and Go" in anthologies of Beckett's drama, and Calder published "From an Abandoned Work" in anthologies of Beckett's prose.
- Beckett's short story "Lessness" was also performed on the BBC, on 25 February 1971 with Don Donnelly, Leonard Fenton, Denys Hawthorne, Patrick Magee, and Harold Pinter.
5. Even Beckett's earliest critics like Dylan Thomas referred to *More Pricks Than Kicks* as a novel; see *New English Weekly* (17 March 1938): 454—55.
6. Letter to American publisher Barney Rosset dated 11 February 1954.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *No Symbols Where None Intended*, 81.
9. Rosset letter to Samuel Beckett, 5 February 1954.
10. *No Symbols Where None Intended*, 90.
11. A reference to this abandoned work appears in "Why Actors Are Fascinated by Beckett's Theater" *The Times* (27 January 1965): 14: "Mr. Beckett is at present finishing a novel called *Fancy Dying*, and also writing a play"—the latter presumably *Play*. The source of the information is apparently Jack MacGowran, who was not only playing in *Endgame* at the time but also preparing a one-man performance of Beckett's prose writings, which became *Beginning to End*.
12. "From an Unabandoned Work," *Evergreen Review* 4.14 (September—October 1960): 58—65.
13. Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 578.
14. *No Symbols Where None Intended*, 140.
15. For further discussion of adaptation of Beckett's prose to the stage see my "Company for Company: Androgyny and Theatricality in Samuel Beckett's Prose," *Beckett's Later Fiction and Drama: Texts for Company*, ed. James Acheson and Kateryna Arthur (London: Macmillan Press, 1987), 193—202.
16. Samuel Beckett letter to the editor dated 12 September 1986.
17. The title alludes to Dante's *Purgatorio*, "Sedendo et quiescendo anima efficitur prudens" (roughly sitting quietly the soul acquires wisdom).
18. Cited by Chris Ackerley, "Fatigue and Disgust: The Addenda to *Watt*," *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui: Beckett in the 1990s* II: 179.
19. Some twenty-two years later, directing his play *Footfalls* in Germany, Beckett returned to this theme as he told the actress playing May, "Words are as food for this poor girl.... They are her best friends" (Walter D. Asmus, "Rehearsal Notes for the German Premiere of Samuel Beckett's *That Time* and *Footfalls*," *On Beckett: Essays and Criticism*, ed. by S. E. Gontarski [New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1986], 339).

20. “Some Ping Understood,” *Encounter* (February 1968): 85—89. Reprinted in *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, 291—301. The original publication of the essay, however, contains line numbering to the original publication of “Ping” in *Encounter* 28.2 (February 1967): 25-26.
21. Hans Vaihinger from *The Philosophy of As If*, cited in Kermode (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 40.
22. This oft-quoted letter to Barney Rosset of 27 August 1957 objects to a staging of *All that Fall*. Beckett’s full wording is: “If we can’t keep our genres more or less distinct, or extricate them from the confusion that has them where they are, we might as well go home and lie down.” Beckett subsequently authorized several stage versions of *All that Fall*.
23. *No Symbols Where None Intended*, 53.

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The Complete Short Prose,
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