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'A tangle of tatters': ghosts and the busy nothing in *Footfalls*

Stephen Thomson

Ends and processes

It has become commonplace to see Beckett's theatre as progressively reducing itself, stripping away inessentials of speech, decor and incident. The plays of the early 1970s – *Not I*, *That Time* and *Footfalls* – are sometimes thought of as the theatrical endpoint of this process, perhaps even delivering an essence of Beckett, albeit a typically negative essence. The glamour of this reductive élan surely stems in part from its tendency towards zero, and the quasi-Romantic lure of the abyss. One might even look here for the fullfilment of the literature of the unword,[1] in so far as Beckett privileges 'the way that the text is spoken' over the clear articulation of sense.[2] By the same token, what we see cannot be quite nothing, and our attention is drawn all the more to what remains. Thus, according to Stan Gontarski's highly influential account of the late Beckett theatre, as the 'literary' recedes, the 'performative' aspects – the auditory and the visual – come to the fore.[3] Indeed, the auditory itself is readily subsumed under the visual in the idea of the 'stage image'.

> From *Play* onward Beckett's stage images would grow increasingly de-humanized, reified and metonymic, featuring dismembered or incorporeal creatures. It became a theater *finally* static and undramatic in any traditional sense. It is a theater of body parts and ghosts, a theater striving for transparency rather than solidity.[4]

Gontarski concludes emphatically: 'In the theater, there may only be the late Beckett.'[5] Here, it seems we have finally reached a sort of end towards which Beckett was always tending by way of

reduction. Viewed in this light, *Godot* or *Endgame* start to appear positively 'baroque',[6] and must be retroactively reduced to fit. From now on, what counts as theatre is a striking disposition of figures in space: they may speak, but what they say is secondary. We may even infer that, in this line of thinking, theatre names what is distilled at the expense of drama. Thus, in a like spirit, Enoch Brater, though dedicated to locating the incipient *drama* in Beckett's prose, warns against theatrical adaptation where 'no *theater image* takes center stage'.[7] Perhaps it makes sense that an oeuvre so insistently dramatic, notably in its use of monologue, should reserve the theatre for something more precise.

The process of reduction as described by Gontarski does not stop at nothing; how could it? Something must be shown. But neither does it end with the process of writing: it does go on during the time of performance, producing a loss of 'solidity' that continues the slide towards nothing. Viewed in this light, the notions of finality and stasis that come with the idea of the stage image need to be complicated somewhat. There are, of course, some quite marked restrictions on movement in the plays of the early 1970s: Gontarski goes on to point out their 'delimited, ritualized' spaces.[8] But even the impressive brutality of the sorts of torture device used to keep Mouth in place in *Not I* should not distract us from the fact that the lips do move. Indeed, such drama as there is consists of their dynamic, syncopated flow of utterance: likewise May's pacing, as Beckett insisted, is the 'essence' of *Footfalls*.[9] This 'essence' would not, in other words, be a thing, but a rhythm, a movement to and fro. This notion has some authorial licence: when asked by composer Morton Feldman to produce the 'quintessence', it is just such a movement that Beckett sketches.[10] In *neither*, as in *Footfalls*, there is also movement between poles, between light and dark, self and unself, 'by way of neither': we are even told that 'unheard footfalls only sound'.[11] Indeed, in this curiously unclassifiable yet surprisingly blunt little piece it is not difficult to read something like a programme for *Footfalls*. The opera text has the advantage in being able to explain the trademark movement in conceptual terms. We see the 'to and fro' as a curious sort of dialectic, chronically bootless, never reaching its end, with the text only ending equivocally in 'unspeakable home'. Yet it is not for all that what we would usually call a negative dialectic. For the 'neither' that punctuates the piece does not so much effect a negation as leave in limbo both

positive and negative. If the play is in some measure a performance of essentially the same pattern, it does not explain this: rather it must act it out, produce it as an experience. If *Footfalls* does this, then perhaps the final lights-up on the strip reveals not nothing but 'that unheeded neither'. Even if it all seems to point, and to work, towards nothing, what we have seen is a remarkably busy nothing.

A back and forth movement, then, is crucial to this theatre, even if it is only the beating of time. The ostensively static nature of the stage images of *Not I* and *That Time* may be a decoy, distracting us from a more fundamental rhythm, and threatening to reinstate them in the confident solidity of objects; the very status they are supposed to resist or put in question. One is tempted to add that the problem is aggravated rather than resolved with the introduction of the idea of 'ghosts'. For while the ghost may indeed convey 'transparency', it also recuperates it in an idea that is familiar, ready-made and sufficient to itself. Does naming what we see a ghost not risk being premature, admiring the hoped-for outcome, when what we must endure is the agonising process?

The ghost, nevertheless, is more durable than this line of argument would imply, and its mention in criticism is now almost *de rigueur*. Indeed it has come to encapsulate this period in Beckett's theatre. Notably Ruby Cohn refers to the plays of the 1970s (and *Play*) as the 'post-death plays',[12] and the relevant chapter of James Knowlson's biography borrows the title 'Shades' from Beckett's own for the BBC birthday celebrations of 1976.[13] The text of *Footfalls* itself seems to authorise this identification by introducing a thoroughly anecdotal ghost in May's little tale of her 'semblance' Amy. The 'moon through passing rack'[14] which figures the church candle veiled by the passage of the vaporous Amy, underlines a process of dematerialisation. Yet it does so by conjuring a pointedly generic ghost-story setting. This may, to a certain extent, be an effect of character: May is to be seen as plundering a stock of ready-made ideas. In the Berlin rehearsals, Beckett tells a puzzled but willing Hildegard Schmahl she can imagine May has stored these words, as if written down; yet, at the same time, 'You are composing. It is not a story, but an improvisation.'[15] In some additions to the play text, Beckett himself seems to follow a similar method of composition. So, during the same rehearsals, the 'South door' of the church is replaced by 'Nordpforte', because, says Beckett, it sounds

colder.[16] The sheer thematic obviousness of calling Amy's mother 'Mrs Winter' is reinforced rather than diminished.

It is at least curious that a key play in a theatre famously stripped to the bones should not only contain such anecdotal elements, but even add to them during the process of revision. What is more, the generic nature of such additions risks authorising the interpolation of a familiar context that might, given free rein, tend to consolidate the image, bulking it out with the invisible ground of old stories. For though ghosts are not, of course, an everyday occurrence, ghost stories are. Beckett's own attitude towards allowing such explanatory structures to infect his theatre is perhaps inconsistent. According to Billie Whitelaw, in the rehearsals for *Footfalls* he quite happily points to 'a period between dying and grasping the message you're no longer *there*', and instructs her: 'Make it ghostly'.[17] Yet when Alan Schneider asks whether Mouth in *Not I* is to be seen as inhabiting 'some sort of limbo', Beckett rebuts the question with the now-famous formula, 'All I know is the text. [. . .] The rest is Ibsen.'[18] Beckett's theatre may indeed strive after a sort of limbo, the experience of the uncertainty of 'neither'. But, named too confidently, apprehended in too literal a manner, even a nominally spiritual entity like limbo is not immune to the pull of the realist tradition.[19]

The danger of this pull is arguably all the greater in the case of *Footfalls*; not least because more or less explicit reference to ghosts lends itself to thematising the play's procedures, but also because of a certain homeliness in its bedpans, pillows, carpets and so forth. A further door-related revision from the Berlin rehearsals illustrates the delicacy of striking a balance between reduction and anecdote. Beckett added a vertical strip of light in the background, ostensibly to prevent the audience from thinking the play was over at the penultimate fade. But he also suggested that the light might appear to be 'falling through the crack of a door'.[20] To the extent that what is shown is a light and not a door, the gesture is compatible with the notion of a stripped-down aesthetic, and indeed of the spectral. Yet, as an explanation of space it is curiously naturalising, and potentially lays the ground for further naturalisation. In Walter Asmus's version for the *Beckett on Film* project, the anecdote of the door has grown a landing around it.[21] In Asmus's film, the generic and the folksy coagulate around the increased coherence of materially organised space. The ghost of a door has materialised.

Such a vision is rather more encumbered with materiality than that seemingly conceived by Beckett's most acute critics. In *Footfalls*, it is of the essence that the space should be as little as possible given, for space is that which May's pacing is there to, in a sense, create. As Steven Connor has eloquently put it, the body is enacted 'not as presence, but as a spatial process which itself creates space'.[22] Beckett, indeed, criticises Hildegard Schmahl at one point in the Berlin rehearsals for being 'too much in the concrete space of the theatre, not absolutely enough concentrated in May, in this figure'.[23] Ruby Cohn intriguingly links the 'decreasing materiality' of Beckett's stage spaces with his 'unerring' sense of direction in life. As landmarks disappear in the later theatre, Cohn implies, the realisation of space is all the more intensely a question of 'direction'; not just stage directions but the bodily sense of orientation that informs these.[24] May's steps wear down to no trace at all, swallowed in darkness, yet, as Cohn remarks, they give 'radiance to the darkness of eternity'.[25] The ghosted space of the strip ought, at the final lights-up, to be definitively haunted in the precise sense that it is there by way of something now departed; present only as a ghostly excess, a homeopathic memory of form. This is the spectre that we seek well, and though ghostly appearance in terms of speech and costume may contribute to the effect, they also risk becoming something of a dangerous supplement.

By the same token, it should be noted that these critics are not interested in a formal purity entirely at the expense of attention to material. The material rather persists in an uncanny way which a more nuanced apprehension of the ghost than I have hitherto entertained may encapsulate rather well. For if, as may be casually inferred, the ghost serves as a marker of something become less substantial, it is equally true that it is something more substantial than it ought to be. Two insightful, and queerly complementary, comments of Steven Connor will bring out something of this doubleness. In an unpublished article Connor argues that the all-too material foot of earlier Beckett later pales to a more ghostly entity, and 'Nowhere is this spectral as opposed to abject foot shown more starkly' than in *Footfalls*.[26] But equally, in another place, focusing on walking rather than feet, Connor evokes a notion of the reanimation of properly inert matter: 'Rags are perhaps the busy life of decomposition, a dying that walks.'[27] Beckett perhaps makes a

similar point, slyly incisive under the guise of practical art direction: of May's costume he notes one 'could go very far towards making the costume quite unrealistic, unreal. It could, however, also be an old dressing-gown, worked like a cobweb.'[28] Crucially, staging *Footfalls* successfully demands that it should be neither. We have, then, a delicate balancing act between the conceptual purity of the space sketched by May's passage and the potential embarrassment of accoutrements that make up the *business* of the play, and produce this form. The reduction model on its own, I would suggest, struggles to articulate this double aspect of the work. For the approach to nothing that is to be produced in performance operates not by the simple removal of things but by their interaction, their 'busy life', even by their addition. In this chapter, I explore these twin headings – of schematic purity that may seem to point towards philosophy, and the clutter of incident and speech that is conventionally the province of literature – and ultimately ask how the two are related in *Footfalls*.

The philosophical stage

The idea that nothing may be the product of addition as well as subtraction makes an appearance in Beckett as early as *Murphy*. After his final and decisive chess game with Endon, Murphy lays his head on the board and shuts his eyes, seeing only after-images.

> Then this also faded and Murphy began to see nothing, that colourlessness which is such a rare postnatal treat, being the absence (to abuse a nice distinction) not of percipere but of percipi. His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace that comes when somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real. Time did not cease, that would be asking too much, but the wheel of rounds and pauses did, as Murphy with his head among the armies continued to suck in, through all the posterns of his withered soul, the accidentless One-and-Only, conveniently called Nothing. Then this also vanished, or perhaps simply came asunder, in the familiar variety of stenches, asperities, ear-splitters and eye-closers, and Murphy saw that Mr Endon was missing.[29]

The hierarchy between an authentic and a derived nothing is ostensibly quite clear. But given the incorrigibly serio-comic mode of *Murphy*, one may doubt whether he really is so lucky as to

have encountered the true, singular Nothing. Certainly, the eventual, bathetic coming-asunder seems to favour the somethings-adding-up model. At any rate, the contradistinction between a true Ur-nothing and a merely derived, factitious one which offers only a 'numb peace', along with the linkage of the nothing to a totality of things, may suggest a pastiche, if not specifically of the work of Martin Heidegger, at any rate of something very like it.

In his famous essay 'Was ist Metaphysik?', Heidegger suggests that our everyday definition of nothing – the negation of the totality of beings – cannot be the true one, for the true Nothing ought to precede, and indeed assist at the production of, beings in the first place. There are, nevertheless, instances in our everyday experience that point to the authentic. Profound, objectless boredom, for example, 'removes all things and human beings and oneself along with them into a remarkable indifference',[30] thus negatively intimating things as a totality. Yet such a mood conceals rather than reveals the Nothing. Only in *Angst* do we make contact with the true Nothing, 'at one with beings as a whole'.[31]

Angst is privileged to do this to the extent that it is not an everyday fear in the face of a banal, clearly defined object but an indefinite 'Angst vor . . .'.[32] The ellipsis indicates the radical absence of any object; of *this and that*. As elsewhere in Heidegger, the seemingly casual phrase *das und das* is used systematically, articulating a rhetoric of contempt for the dissipatory nature of everyday consciousness: we disseminate the authentic core of Being by investing it in trivial, anecdotal misattributions. In 'Was ist Metaphysik', however, this *das und das* has a dynamic counterpart in processes which go *hin und her* – to and fro. Indeed, our everyday chatter on nothing which produces its flawed definition – as the negation of the totality of beings – is 'dahin und daher reden'. The two adverbs, decoupled from two idiomatically unremarkable German verbs for aimless chatter (*dahinreden*, *daherreden*) and put together, produce a single phrase meaning 'to and fro'. This movement is no sooner isolated than it is dramatised in a figure that roves or tramps (*herumtriebt*).[33] Likewise Heidegger says we lose ourselves in the everyday drift (*Dahintreiben*), or in this or that circuit (*Bezirk*) of things;[34] and total boredom is like a silent mist drifting here and there (*hin- und herziehend*).[35] Indeed, philosophical discourse itself risks falling into an empty quarrel over words when it wanders into 'confused talk';[36] or, more precisely, a 'Hin und Her der Rede'.[37]

Faced with this, science must reassert its seriousness, and reject the Nothing as an 'outrage and a phantasm'. Indeed, the translation 'outrage' here is arguably underplayed: 'ein Greuel' suggests more a horror or abomination, crucially pitching 'eine Phantasterei' in the direction of the uncanny.[38]

But if 'science' is scared of the uncanniness of the Nothing, yet 'has recourse to what it rejects',[39] the homely to and fro seems to spook Heidegger's essay in a similarly uncanny manner. Though it is thetically disparaged, the everyday, distorted consciousness is what animates the essay, gives it a narrative. Heidegger's argument absolutely needs this pattern of movement that is said to characterise the everyday's avoidance of authentic experience, because the true Nothing, like the true Being, cannot be a static concept. It must unveil the Nothing gradually and obliquely, through the ostensibly disavowed to and fro that is itself presented as the characteristic movement of disavowal. At times this precarious doubling, whereby the allegedly derived species furnishes the *mise en scène* through which the underived is produced, seems on the brink of cancelling itself out to avow an identity. So, we have no sooner been chided for turning away from the totality of beings, and so from the Nothing, by escaping into the 'public superficies of our existence', than we are told that this very turning away, precisely as a species of negation, does 'within certain limits' the job of the Nothing anyway: 'In its nihilation the nothing directs us precisely towards beings.'[40] Here, an argumentative proposition from earlier in the essay threatens to rebound on Heidegger: 'if the nothing represents total indistinguishability, no distinction can obtain between the imagined and the "proper" nothing'.[41]

In Heidegger's essay, philosophy, or at any rate a scientific notion of philosophy, is explicitly coming up against its limits: it is precisely because something like the nothing cannot be neatly conceptualised, reduced to a point with a clear location, that this incipient theatricalisation is called for. Heidegger's relationship with art and literature is complex and I cannot hope to do justice to it here. But it is worth noting that, elsewhere in the oeuvre, the theatre is explicitly used to stand for an inauthentic acting out that travesties the authentic. When, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger looks for a way into authentic *Dasein*, he takes as his point of departure the call of conscience. This, he says, is a phenomenon which, once rescued from banalisation, may reveal a fundamental operation of, and

attestation to, *Dasein*. As things stand, however, the 'call' is misunderstood as discourse, and consequently veiled in chatter. What it says is more properly understood as nothing; not a word, least of all a soliloquy or trial.[42] For one mishears the call of conscience when 'it gets drawn by the they-self into a soliloquy in which causes get pleaded' ('in ein verhandelndes Selbstgespräch').[43] The language of theatre and lawcourt (*Selbstgespräch*, *Verhandlung*)[44] confirms what is elsewhere implicit: the ersatz consciousness of everyday life is a dramatic production.

Though Maurice Merleau-Ponty is arguably not quite so unforgiving of everyday self-forgetting as Heidegger, his conception of automatic behaviour as a backdrop against which the phenomenal appears is perhaps even more markedly theatrical. For Merleau-Ponty, we need something like an 'espace corporel': our bodies do not so much inhabit an already given space as carry it around with them through an underlying sense of the reach, grasp and possibilities of our members. The 'espace corporel' is the stage space within which we, as necessarily embodied beings, perform. More precisely, it is

> the darkness needed in the theatre to show up the performance, the background of somnolence or reserve of vague power aginst which the gesture and its aim stand out, the zone of not being in front of which precise beings, figures and points can come to light.[45]

Naming the theatre (*la salle*) here is little more than the acknowledgement of a persistent, Gestalt-inspired aesthetic whereby Merleau-Ponty opposes *forme* (what appears) to *fond* (backdrop). Reality is a production, and the analysis that seeks to penetrate it is a sort of dramatic reconstruction. To put it rather tersely, Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology does not believe there is anything beyond Plato's cave and its shadowplay. He does occasionally entertain concepts such as a 'primordial silence', but only so as to set up a notional final backdrop against which the apparent silence of 'pure thought' may be revealed as a thoroughly linguistic hubbub ('bruissant de paroles') of ready-made phrases that form the 'fond obscur' of language.[46]

Read with a certain bias of attention, then, phenomenology's account of our relation to this factitious nothing, which may even be the only one there is, can be made to yield most of the ingredients for the basic situation of *Footfalls*. Not only is there the

to-and-fro movement against a backdrop of darkness, but also the apprehension that there is something properly theatrical in this. It is perhaps tempting, then, to see Beckett's theatre as taking philosophy at its word, returning a metaphor to its proper stage. The argument would, however, require some fine distinctions. For one thing, Merleau-Ponty's *fond* is *obscur* not only in the sense that it is dark, but that being so it disappears, modestly doing its bit to make us believe that figures have just appeared on the stage, so annulling our active role as spectators.[47] The manifestation of a true silence or nothing, if we are to believe in such a possibility, would be of another order altogether. Being bored with a play is, let us remember, Heidegger's example of an experience that does not attain even the derived nothing.[48] But critics of Beckett's later theatre have often remarked on the visibility of its darkness, and of its tense relationship with the figures. As Ruby Cohn notes, a darkness 'envelops Beckett's post-death plays'.[49] That is to say, it does not politely recede into the background, or exist in some conceptual beyond, but encroaches on the spectacle, and indeed is part of it. Hence the play is 'wrested from the void'[50] but, in doing so, it 'uncovers a void'.[51] We are thus left suspended between the thickness of things and the nothing: what we see is both, and, as they eat into each other, neither.

To paraphrase into something like the language of Merleau-Ponty, what is staged is not, as is normal, *forme* at the expense of *fond*. But neither are we, nor can we be, offered the nothing at the expense of things. The signature movement here lies in the doubleness of the enveloping darkness: it is menacing and productive. Thus, for Anna McMullan the darkness surrounding Beckett's later plays, and the consequent lack of a coherent world or ideology, opens up 'a semiotic space from which image and then speech will emerge'.[52] Like Heidegger's proper Nothing, McMullan's version of Kristeva's *khora* is productive precisely because it encroaches or even menaces: having an 'area of darkness to surround the stage image means that the image is never "given", but must continually assert itself against the darkness'.[53] Objects thus have to prove themselves; or rather, we are all the more intensely aware of them because they are not objects, in the sense of patient, satisfyingly whole things that offer themselves to us reassuringly. A disembodied mouth hovering in the middle of an infinite blackness takes this perhaps as far as it can go. As McMullan notes, citing Paul

Lawley, Mouth in *Not I* is a part object, a 'no-thing' in that it cannot properly exist on its own.[54] In its uncanny intensity, the object, and theatre, are 'on trial'.

The plays of the 1970s, however, are not exclusively concerned with this physical trial, the passion of a figure against a backdrop of absence. These figures chatter and listen to chatter. Beckett's theatre does not condemn the *Verhandlung* (or *Prozess*) of soliloquy; rather it subjects it to a series of involutions which countenance a more nuanced entanglement of the self in its self than Heidegger's model will allow.[55] A 'Not I' is not a 'they-self' (*Man-Selbst*): the latter is a commonplace, off-the-peg subject that complacently takes itself for an 'I'. Mouth, on the other hand, narrates a third person which struggles to maintain a fiction of impersonality. This trial is not a diversion from a true existence, but the only existence this thing has. The truth, in the sense of what has to be said, appears here only as a pressure on what is said. Thus, 'that time in court', where the compulsion to speak came from without, merges into now: 'now this . . . something she had to tell . . . could that be it? . . something that would tell . . . how it was . . . how she– . . . what? . . had been? . . yes . . . something that would tell how it had been . . .'.[56] The moment is densely self-allusive, suggestive of a range of Beckett voices who are compelled to tell 'how it is', before, with and after, that time and others, but find themselves unable, even under pain of (self-) torture to say for sure what, where.

A tangle of tatters

Yet, as my analysis of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty has hinted, philosophy is also on trial when its metaphors are acted out on stage. Where philosophy can elect to bleach a metaphor of walking into a pure schema, maintaining the apparently accidentless functionality of algebra or grammar, theatre must take it at its word, flesh it out, and face the consequences of dipping into the accidental. To put this another way, philosophy has to work to do justice to the resistance of brute matter: theatre, on the contrary, must do work if it is to question the givenness of what is there in front of us. The uncanniness of *Footfalls* lies in its refusal to see the *hin und her* of May's pacing as *either* quite everyday or quite transcendent. There has been a notable tendency in recent criticism to insist that it is just this undecidable, uncanny quality in Beckett that poses

questions back to philosophy. Richard Lane's collection *Beckett and Philosophy*[57] is very much oriented towards seeing Beckett as related to philosophy, yet not reducible to it. Ulrika Maude's contribution on Merleau-Ponty and Steve Barfield's on Heidegger are alike in seeing Beckett as both convergent with, and crucially divergent from, the phenomenologists. In each case Beckett is seen to share with phenomenology a worrying at the bounds of everyday notions of materiality, yet to refuse the transcendence and authenticity countenanced by Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger respectively. Spectrality figures in both Maude and Barfield as an expression of this suspension between metaphysical categories.[58] Indeed, Barfield goes one step further to describe Beckett's very relationship with Heidegger as 'uncanny'.[59]

Jacques Derrida, when he explains why he cannot write on Beckett, produces a similar doubling of the uncanny, as theme and as relation. This brief but fascinating apology appears in an interview whose title points us towards the uncanny nature of all literature. The phrase 'cette étrange institution', which may be read idiomatically as 'that uncanny institution', recurs elsewhere in Derrida to denote literature's uncanny presentation of a secret that does not exist, that has nothing behind or beyond it.[60] Derrida's most explicit pronouncement on Beckett's text in the interview – that it maintains to an extraordinary degree a tension between nihilist and affirmative impulses – thus makes of him an exemplar of what is true of all literature.[61] Yet, precisely because Derrida feels 'too close' to Beckett, he feels he cannot speak of him, for fear of falling into the 'platitude of a supposed academic metalanguage'. [62] There is, in other words, a temptation to translate the Beckett text into so many philosophical themes, yet to do so would be to annihilate its difference, its singularity, its uncanniness *qua* literature. Derrida's argument is remarkable, then, in that it locates uncanniness both in literature's constitutional equivocation between materiality and transcendence, and in his own curious casting of Beckett as his own personal William Wilson.[63] Derrida confesses he will sometimes take two or three lines of Beckett with students, but finally give up. It is not honest to

> extract a few 'significant' lines from a Beckett text. The composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works, even the ones that seem the most 'decomposed', that's what 'remains' finally

> the most 'interesting', that's the work, that's the signature, this remainder which remains when the thematics is exhausted.[64]

What the gratifying recognition and enumeration of themes misses, then, is a 'rhythm', something dynamic which plays across the whole text. The situation is rather reminiscent of the wager set up with Geoffrey Bennington in the co-authored *Jacques Derrida*.[65] Bennington will try to explain Derrida, to capture his essence, and Derrida's part will be to struggle against being reduced to a matrix of ideas by pitching his writing in a way that will leave the reader constantly in doubt as to whether an anecdote or phrase is a matter of biographical ephemera, or of high philosophical import.

I would suggest that something similar is going on in Beckett's writing for theatre of the period with which I am concerned, and most especially with *Footfalls*. There is a pull towards the theatricalisation of philosophical ideas which will quite easily reward critical comparison. But a countervailing tendency towards a more trivial world of bedpans, lacrosse and clichéd ghost stories must also be attended to. Crucially, the two are not merely discrete forces but are inextricably linked. This, I think, brings us back to the spoken text of the play with renewed attention. There has, as I started by outlining, been a pull towards the 'stage image' as the bearer of meaning, and a corresponding diminution in the importance of speech, encouraged in part by Beckett's own relative lack of concern for full intelligibility. Yet this has never deterred critics entirely from literary criticism. Stan Gontarski's advocacy of the late, performative Beckett goes hand in hand with a commitment to establishing a more rigorous play-text, inscribing changes made in rehearsal, and pencilled by Beckett on to the published text. These changes are, indeed, often additions, extending the play on unnaccented, yet pointed, repetition of certain phrases. The 1976 text already repeats 'it all' in this way: the pause that separates the two utterances, and a studied lack of cadence are essential to holding in suspense the incipient 'oirish' idiom of 'it all, it all'.[66] Yet the threat of banality is arguably necessary to avoid the gnomic potential of 'it all'. The effect is picked up with 'sequel' and 'the semblance' in the third part of the new text.[67] Such emendations one might readily agree are concerned primarily with the music of the piece, and with the sense only contingently and secondarily. But when Gontarski's notes cite the mother's reference to 'lacrosse'

as an instance of 'the crucifixion imagery of the play',[68] something more like literary criticism is taking place: the banal and the metaphysically inflated intersect uncannily. The point rests on the gloss of 'His poor arm' as the transept of the cruciform church plan corresponding to Christ's wounded member. The unutterable capitalisation of 'His', not found in the 1976 edition, may be an attempt to retranslate Beckett's French version, 'son pauvre bras sauveur'.[69] As Pascale Sardin has pointed out, Beckett's French versions of English texts often make religious references more pointedly.[70] Gontarski's glossing even makes a brave attempt to sew Beckett's seemingly capricious pun on the word 'sequel' into other scraps of textual fabric: 'The "tangle of tatters" in May's narrative is her semblance which she seeks well. Amy herself is, of course, another semblance.'[71] Indeed, 'seek well' would seem to be an attempt to retranslate an invention from the Schiller Theater production, where the original 'Epilog' was replaced by 'Folge', which can equally be read as an imperative, an invitation to follow the path of the double.[72]

In light of all this evident care, Beckett's famous letter to Billie Whitelaw may start to seem rather crafty: 'The pacing is the essence of the matter. To be dramatised to the utmost. The text: what pharmacists call excipient'.[73] Whereas the figure of Mouth is a 'purveyor of a stage text', here the pacing would be the active ingredient, and the text a mere vehicle. But the words of *Footfalls* are certainly not any old words. Supposing they had been composed originally as 'excipient', as the bare minimum required to make the walking go, they go over the score, and take on a life of their own. In fact, they show a prodigious capacity to thematise themselves, as well as the action of the play. And no phrase is more inviting and capacious than 'a tangle of tatters' in that it narrates the play's own aspiration to produce dematerialising matter, and what is more gives this paradox a comforting generic home in the ghost story. For, as in the example of 'lacrosse', a poise between the glamour of the transcendental, and the derisory materiality of rags and wicker rackets, is what *Footfalls* cultivates.

The thickness of the text of *Footfalls*, not least its thuddingly thematic link to ghostliness, is necessary to maintain the indecision of the uncanny; the emergence of the strange within the very heart of the homely. Walking itself, indeed, is capacious of all these possibilities. Indeed, in this respect, literature may be said to

mirror a movement afoot in philosophy. In an enormously suggestive article on what she terms the 'ambulatory uncanny',[74] Susan Bernstein (with the help of Samuel Weber, Hoffmann, Nietzsche and others) examines the uncanny nature of the relation of Being to Nothing in Heidegger. Specifically, just as the opposition *heimlich* and *unheimlich* famously collapses into an identity at a certain point, so does Being (*Sein*) itself intersect with Nothing, in the sense that it can be no given being (*Seiend*). The dramatic element of the ambulatory, however, makes its arrival in Bernstein's analysis via a figure straight from a tale of Hoffmann. At a key point in his essay 'Zur Seinsfrage', Bernstein notes, Heidegger brings in Nietzsche's notion of nihilism as the 'uncanniest guest' and has it wandering around the house, haunting the everyday. Of the uncanny, then, one might say 'it walks', following the model of Heidegger's 'es gibt'. Walking, for Bernstein, dramatises the impossibility of reducing concepts like being, nothing and the uncanny to a point, the inevitability of their emerging through the unfolding time of narrative. Thus she speaks of 'the narrative spasms that allow the uncanny to come forth, over time, never whole',[75] and 'the syncopated structure which makes it impossible to define the uncanny'.[76] As in my analysis of 'Was ist Metaphysik?', philosophy's ambivalent turn towards narrative and literature is at stake. If a philosophical commitment to avoiding the hypostases of 'science' is taken at its word, a humble tale of the marvellous may even have the last word. So, as Bernstein argues, through 'The man of the crowd', Poe 'privileges the walking body, the signifying process, over any interior or meaning which might characterize it as a whole or replace it as its end'.[77]

And so does *Footfalls*. In these ways, Beckett's late theatre can be seen to hold a critical, rather than a merely allegorical, relationship with phenomenology. In a curious way, this can be said to be a more faithful response than would be the mere plundering of themes: for it is dedicated not to exemplifying or explaining but to delivering an experience that puts us on the spot. The idea of reduction is only half the story here: for it tends towards a notion of essence, and of nothing, that are ultimately philosophy's problem. If Beckett has something to say back to philosophy it is emphatically not because he deals in clean, hard concepts shorn of the contingencies of bodily existence; for neither, in truth, does philosophy.

Notes

1 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: John Calder, 1983). One might doubt how seriously this scribble to a pen pal, dismissed by Beckett himself as 'German bilge' (*Disjecta*, p. 170), should be taken. Yet the insistently negative moment of Beckett's oeuvre, which can moreover be seen repeated *en petit* in the genesis of any given text, seems to beckon in this direction, and this sets a price on any apparently programmatic statement dealing with the nothing. See also Shane Weller, Chapter 6 below.

2 Walter D. Asmus, 'Practical aspects of theatre, radio and television: rehearsal notes for the German première of Beckett's *That Time* and *Footfalls* at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt, Berlin', *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 2 (Summer 1977), 82–95, 84.

3 S. E. Gontarski, 'Staging himself, or Beckett's late style in the theatre', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Crossroads and Borderlines / L'œuvre carrefour / L'œuvre limite*, eds Marius Buning, Matthijs Engelberts and Sjef Houppermans, guest editor Emmanuel Jacquart, 6 (1997), 87–97, 87–8.

4 *Ibid*., 93. Emphasis added.

5 *Ibid*., 95.

6 *Ibid*., 94. See also Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 17.

7 Enoch Brater, *The Drama in the Text: Beckett's Late Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 12. Emphasis added.

8 Gontarski, 'Staging himself', 93.

9 Billie Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw . . . Who He?* (London: Hodder & Stoughton 1995), p. 139. See also Asmus, 'Practical aspects of theatre, radio and television', 83.

10 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996), p. 631. One can see something like this movement at either end of the oeuvre, in 'Ding Dong' in *More Pricks Than Kicks*, and in *Quad*.

11 Samuel Beckett, *neither*, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 4 (Spring 1979), vii. But see also Stan Gontarski, 'Editing Beckett', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 41:2 (1995), 190–207. See also Derval Tubridy, Chapter 5 below.

12 Cohn, *Just Play*, p. 53.

13 Knowlson, *Damned to Fame*, p. 635.

14 Beckett, *Footfalls* (1976), in *Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber & Faber, 2006), p. 402. This text credits the 1976 first edition but silently incorporates the changes published in *The Theatrical*

Notebooks of Samuel Beckett Vol. IV *The Shorter Plays* ed. by S. E. Gontarski (London: Faber & Faber, 1999).
15 Asmus, 'Rehearsal notes', 86.
16 *Ibid.*, 85.
17 Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw . . . Who He?*, pp. 143 and 146.
18 *No Author Better Served: The Correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider*, ed. Maurice Harmon (London: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 279 and 283.
19 The reference is usually taken as a direct swipe at realism's mapping of stage space on to domestic space, but the matter of 'limbo' may make one think of a rather more interesting conjunction of *Not I* and Ibsen's last play *When We Dead Awake*.
20 Asmus, 'Rehearsal notes', 88.
21 *Footfalls*, directed by Walter Asmus, filmed in Ardmore Studios April 2000, with Susan Fitzgerald and Joan O'Hara. *Beckett on Film*, produced by Michael Colgan and Alan Moloney (Blue Angel Films / Tyrone Productions for Radio Telefís Éireann & Channel 4: 2001).
22 Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), p. 162.
23 Asmus, 'Rehearsal notes', 88.
24 Cohn, *Just Play*, p. 17.
25 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
26 Steven Connor, 'Scribbledehobbles: writing Jewish-Irish feet', unpublished, online at http://www.stevenconnor.com/scribble/ last accessed 17 September 2008.
27 Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), p. 32.
28 Asmus, 'Rehearsal notes', 87.
29 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* (London: John Calder, 1969), p. 138.
30 Martin Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, trans. and ed. William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 86; Martin Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, second edition (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1978), p. 87; *Wegmarken*, pp. 109–10. See also Russell Smith, Chapter 11 below.
31 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, pp. 89–90; *Wegmarken*, pp. 112–13.
32 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 88; *Wegmarken*, p. 111.
33 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 86; *Wegmarken*, p. 108.
34 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 87; *Wegmarken*, p. 109. McNeill's translation of *Dahintreiben* as 'preoccupations' and *Bezirk* as 'region' misses the suggestion of patterns of movement.
35 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 87; *Wegmarken*, pp. 109–10.
36 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 84.
37 Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, pp. 105–6.

38 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 84; *Wegmarken*, p. 106.
39 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 84.
40 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 92; *Wegmarken*, p. 115. On 'nihililation' see also Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (Oxford: Legenda, 2005) and Erik Tonning, *Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama: Works for Stage and Screen 1962–1985* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007).
41 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 87; *Wegmarken*, p. 109.
42 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, [1962] 1999), p. 318; Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, second edition (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1929) p. 273.
43 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 319, §56 'The character of consicience as call'; Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, p. 274.
44 Heinrich von Kleist in particular frequently draws on and reinforces analogies between theatre and court of law.
45 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, [1962] 1981), pp. 100–1; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La Phénoménologie de la perception* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), p. 117.
46 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, pp. 183–8; *Phénoménologie*, pp. 214–19.
47 See Merleau-Ponty on the invisibility of the actress (p. 213) and the blind recognition of the spectator (p. 216).
48 Heidegger, *Pathmarks*, p. 87.
49 Cohn, *Just Play*, p. 53.
50 *Ibid.*, p. 57.
51 *Ibid.*, p. 95.
52 Anna McMullan, *Theatre on Trial: Samuel Beckett's Later Drama* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 9.
53 *Ibid.*, p. 11.
54 *Ibid.*, p. 75; citing Paul Lawley, 'Counterpoint, absence and the medium in Beckett's Not I', *Modern Drama*, 26:4 (1983), 412.
55 See Ruby Cohn's discussion of soliloquy: Cohn considers May's soliloquising a 'fiction', or 'subterfuge for avoiding soliloquy', but a sort of soliloquy none the less. Cohn, *Just Play*, p. 74.
56 Beckett, *Not I*, p. 381.
57 Richard Lane (ed.), *Beckett and Philosophy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002).
58 Ulrika Maude, 'The body of memory: Beckett and Merleau-Ponty' and Steven Barfield, 'Beckett and Heidegger: a critical survey', in Richard Lane (ed.), *Beckett and Philosophy*, pp. 108–22, p. 120 and pp. 154–65, p. 161, respectively.

59 Barfield, 'Beckett and Heidegger', p. 156.
60 Jacques Derrida, *Papier machine* (Paris: Galilée, 2001), p. 398.
61 Derrida, '"This strange institution called literature": an interview with Jacques Derrida', in *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 33–75, p. 61.
62 Derrida, *Ibid.*, p. 60.
63 My reference is, of course, to Edgar Allan Poe's tale 'William Wilson', perhaps the classic exposition in English letters of the attraction and danger of the Doppelgänger. See Edgar Allan Poe, *The Fall of the House of Usher and Other Writings*, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003).
64 Derrida, *Acts*, p. 61.
65 Jacques Derrida and Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993).
66 Beckett, *Footfalls*, p. 402.
67 *Ibid*.
68 *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett*, Vol. IV *The Shorter Plays*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), p. 286.
69 Samuel Beckett, *Pas, suivi de quatre esquisses* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1978), p. 13.
70 Pascale Sardin, 'Beckett et la religion au travers du prisme de quelques textes courts auto-traduits', *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd'hui: Beckett and Religion / Beckett / Aesthetics / Politics*, eds Mary Bryden and Lance St John Butler, 9 (2000), 199–206.
71 *Theatrical Notebooks*, p. 286.
72 Asmus, 'Rehearsal notes', 85.
73 Whitelaw, *Billie Whitelaw*, p. 139.
74 Susan Bernstein, 'It walks: the ambulatory uncanny', *Modern Language Notes*, 118:5 (2003), 1111–39.
75 *Ibid.*, 1117.
76 *Ibid.*, 1118.
77 *Ibid.*, 1119.