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'Viewless Forms'/ Form-of-Life: Death, Story and *Poiēsis* in *Texts for Nothing*

Even the most cursory reading of Beckett's thirteen short prose pieces *Texts for Nothing* (henceforth TFN) gives the sense that we are shuttling between two discrete worlds that somehow bear upon each other, although the nature of the relation between them is highly mobile, to say the least. One possible approach to the work is through Beckett's reference to the idea of a 'form of life' in TFN6: 'Or to know it's life still, a form of life, ordained to end, as others ended and will end' (Beckett, 1995, 125). The phrase holds out the possibility of a graspable difference between the two worlds abovementioned: in one of them life has form, in the other, it does not.

This suggestion is complicated, however, by the phrase's wider usage in philosophy, biology and elsewhere. 'Form of life' can be found sporadically in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and, more consistently (and always hyphenated), in the work of Giorgio Agamben (Wittgenstein, 1986, 9; Agamben, 2013).

For Agamben form-of-life refers to a way of being that resists capture and administration by the disciplinary apparatus of capitalist modernity. In his work it stands in a subtle and tense relationship to his more well-known concept of 'bare life'. The latter signifies human existence as sheer material or organic persistence, that which is capable of being battened onto, canalised and tended by a social-symbolic apparatus: it is the 'bio' in 'biopolitics' one might say. In Agamben's recent work form-of-life often seems to be the inverse or shadow of bare life. It is virtual rather than material, in the sense that it can be grasped only as potential. Or rather what Agamben calls – drawing on Aristotle – impotential: that which an organism is capable of but does not practice in actuality. Indeed it often seems analogous to a life that is imaginatively or creatively evoked rather than materially realized. It is in this sense that I will use form-of-life as a guide to the complexities of TFN, and show how Beckett's writing demonstrates the concept's limitations and paradoxes as much as its viability as an idea. In this way the current essay will complement previous accounts of TFN while hopefully going beyond their opposition between archival/historical and philosophical approaches (Boulter, 2004; Kennedy; 2009; Langlois, 2015).

Beckett's source for the idea of form of life is Ernst Cassirer's *Kant's Life and Thought*, which he read in 1937, and seems to have gone back to in the 1950s, when writing the French *Textes pour rien* (Beckett, 2014; Cassirer, 1981).[1] Cassirer meanwhile owes his use of the term, as he notes in *Rousseau, Kant and Goethe*, to the latter's 'Xenien' where the poet writes that neither the philosopher nor the poet can be separated from their work: 'Is none but the poet born? The same applies to the thinker. All truth, in the end, is merely moulded, beheld' (Goethe qtd in Cassirer, 1963, 84 n.50). As Cassirer puts it explicitly in *Kant's Life and Thought*: 'the philosophers cannot present us with anything but patterns of life' (Cassirer, 1981, 5).

Kant's Life and Thought transfers this notion of 'form of life' to philosophical texts that adopt a highly personal style. Hence, reflecting on Descartes' *Meditations*, Cassirer writes that the distinctive power of that great work

> springs from the pure and indomitable energy of thinking itself. Thought exhibits itself in its objective structure, as a systematic linkage of concepts and truths, or premises and consequents – but in the process the total act of judging and reasoning come alive for us at the same time. And in this the personal *Lebensform* is explicated simultaneously with the form of his system […] ideal and real, world view and process of individual life, have become moments of one and the same indivisible spiritual growth (Cassirer, 1981, 7).

In his own philosophical reading Beckett was particularly attracted to highly literary texts, Bergson and Schopenhauer being the most obvious examples. He also knew Augustine's *Confessions* well and, from *Whoroscope* on, refers often to Descartes. Bearing this in mind, it is worth thinking of TFN as a literary version of the kind of philosophical texts that Cassirer cites. Just as those texts use literary devices like narrative, point-of-view and metaphor, so in TFN we find what Cassirer calls in the last quotation 'concepts and truths, or premises and consequents'. It is a work, in other words, that, by combining literary devices and philosophical apparatus, enacts or stages a form of life. More than that, it stages a continual *agon* between a virtual or potential or imagined 'form-of-life' and a material one, relentlessly pursuing the paradoxes and idealizations implicit in a recourse, such as Agamben's, to the virtual or impotential as panacea.

[1]In 1937 Beckett bought Kant's *Collected Works*, of which Cassirer's book was the final volume.

TFN is a difficult, obstreperous sequence. The texts, though short, are highly condensed; the diction, though for the most part simple, is often rendered opaque through syntactical play and repetition. Given the space available to me here I will be unable to do justice to the full range of TFN's complexity, nor can I examine every text. I will, however, take the sections that I do treat, mostly from the first half of the series, in the order of their appearance, and in doing so follow a single important strand that entwines the ideas of life, death and literary form that I want to pursue. I will then finish with a reading of the final text's final page.

In TFN1 we find our narrator sunk in one of the 'troughs scooped deep by the rains' on 'the top, very flat, of a mountain' (Beckett, 1995, 100). In TFN2, the narrator seems to remain sunk in the same 'quag' as TFN1. 'Go then' he says, and the natural assumption is that this refers to a straightforward movement from one place to another within the same world (what I will henceforth call the text's 'vector'). Then immediately: 'no, better stay, for where would you go, now that you know? Back above? There are limits' (105). This mention of limits is the first indication of a threshold between worlds that will henceforth define the sequence.

Soon after, the narrator begins to worry away at three terms that suggest different relationships to a terminus. Two of these terms are temporal: 'the last', and 'the end'. One is more spatial. The latter is 'the all', which I will understand here as 'the whole': ie a unified form or totality. The narrator is describing his anxiety about the approach to this unity, this form or whole, and in particular a potential discrepancy between 'the all', and 'the end/last'. More specifically he is concerned about the possibility that one might occur without the other: 'it's the dread of coming to the last, of having said all, your all, before the end, no, for that will be the end, the end of all, not certain' (Beckett, 1995, 106). Note here the way the disjunction between 'all' and 'end' is asserted then displaced, when 'saying all' is taken as in fact 'the end'. Then finally both options are doubted.

One reading of this dilemma concerns the notion of a life-story, a worry about the inadequacy of the narrativization of a life. More specifically there is the fear of words giving out, or the voice giving up, failing, even before the absolute silence of death. Or is it that, as Beckett tentatively suggests, the saying is in fact 'all', by which I mean that the point at which the limits of narrative have been reached, whatever the reason, is the point at which a meaningful life comes to an end? So much so that we should dread living on after that point? 'Not certain', says the narrator.

The narrator soon returns to reflecting on the state between 'end' and 'all', when the story is told but death has not yet come: 'to need to groan and not be able, Jesus, better ration

yourself' (Beckett, 1995, 106). This sentence qualifies the previous more abstract discussion of end and all with a specific and terrible scenario – the inability to express one's suffering, even if only as a groan, as one faces mortality. In the face of such a thought one can see why the coincidence of death and story would be ideal. The end of the aesthetically made 'all' of 'world' and the end of 'life' would mean that all suffering had managed to find expression, without remainder.

These reflections account for why the next text, TFN3, explicitly introduces the idea of a narrative, 'a story'. It is initially attributed to an impersonal someone, and then certain 'voices' as well as to the 'I' of the narrator. This text also now identifies the two worlds of TFN: one is virtual and one is material. TFN3 locates the narrator in a virtual realm where he seems to be immortal, but the narrator's assumption is that a story, whatever its source, will somehow create, or give access to, the material world in which he can physically exist. Both a world and a story are necessary for him to have an end that might coincide with an all. The result is that TFN3 affords us a much stronger sense than before of the nature of the dichotomy between the work's two distinct spaces, one of which the narrator inhabits and one into which he desires to go: 'There's going to be a departure, I'll be there, I won't miss it, it won't be me, I'll be here, I'll say I'm far from here, it won't be me, I won't say anything, there's going to be a story, someone's going to try and tell a story' (Beckett, 1995, 109). This passage gives a good sense of the blizzard of contradictions in which Beckett plunges many of his narrator's statements, although once we grasp the central principle of dual worlds that the narrator can inhabit some of these contradictions are slightly more tolerable.

What is of no doubt is that the second world is a physical, empirical one, and so the narrator must become material too: 'Start by stirring, there must be a body […] I'll say I'm a body […]. With a cluther of limbs and organs, all that is needed to live again' (Beckett, 1995, 109). Here we have the first indication that the desire for an organic, animate 'life' is a central component of the vector that points from 'here' to 'elsewhere'. Accordingly one also has a much more acute impression that the narrator's 'here' is somehow unreal or virtual or transcendent. Hence the narrator's tropism towards the material, his yearning to 'sprout a head at last', 'to be bedded in that flesh or in another' (113). But strong as this entelechy from the unreal to the real is, the story that seems to be its necessary corollary somehow founders, and the narrator is eventually he is forced to accept that 'there is no flesh anywhere, nor any way to die' (113). This is the most overt sign so far that behind the desire to 'live', to enter the physical world, is actually a desire to die. The narrator's failure, or the failure of the 'voices' to which his story is also ascribed, is blamed, paradoxically, on his and their lack of organic

life: 'Departures, stories, they are not for tomorrow. And the voices, wherever they come from, have no life in them' (113). It thus seems then that in order to facilitate his wish for an end the story told will need to have a specifically 'organic', 'living' form of some kind: a form of life.

After the first three texts the basic structural template for TFN as a whole is in place: a first person narrator, two domains, one of them virtual and one material, a threshold between these, with a vector from one to the other, and finally organic narrative form – form of life – as a means of actualization. TFN4 will take this structure and, by introducing a new concept, reconfigurethe play of forces across that initial template. The new element is the embodied imagination – let's call it 'the writer' – situated in the second, physical world:

> It's the same old stranger as ever, for whom alone accusative I exist, in the pit of my inexistence, of his, of ours, there's a simple answer. It's not with thinking he'll find me, but what is he to do, living and bewildered, yes, living, say what he may. [...] I'm not in his head, nowhere in his old body, and yet I'm there, for him I'm there, with him, hence all the confusion (Beckett, 1995, 114).

When I say this installs a new configuration, my point is that although the perspective is still the first-person narrator's, the centre of gravity and of agency has shifted to the material realm, to what I am calling the writer. The impulse behind the vector is now predominantly that of a constructing imagination, a 'making', rather than an organic entelechy. Also for the first time, the vector moves, or tries to move, not from the unreal to the real, but from the material to the virtual, from writer to narrator/character. For his part, however, the narrator defends himself against this new vector, resists this encroachment upon the virtual from the real. Thus he snaps that the writer 'tells his story every five minutes, saying it is not his [...]. He would like it to be my fault that he has no story, of course he has no story, that's no reason for trying to foist one on me' (Beckett, 1995, 115).

The narrator's resistance to this form of actualization is an important development, though he will remain vulnerable to such 'foisting'. Early in TFN4 the term and idea of a 'world' is introduced for the first time, together with that of 'form'. Both concepts seem to aid the writer rather than the narrator: 'he wants me there, with a form and a world, like him, in spite of him, me who *am everything, like him who is nothing*' (Beckett, 1995, 114; my emphasis). The opposition here between everything and nothing is one between the potential and the actual, with the narrator favouring the former. In claiming to be everything, the narrator – whether legitimately or not – exalts the power of the absolute imagination. By holding back from

actualization the narrator retains pure potential, the ability to be anything. In contrast the writer, by being instantiated, embodied, loses this power and becomes nothing, mere bare life. This point is absolutely fundamental to the sequence. Whereas in previous texts the narrator had hankered after physical embodiment, now actualization is seen as a diminishment of possibility and a kind of death (though not the kind of death the narrator desires): 'he's looking for me to kill me, to have me dead like him' (114). Taken together, these reservations suggest that a determinate form and world of the sort the writer offers would be a loss of possibility, of potential for the narrator. Where the writer would have him 'dead like the living', we might say, the narrator wants to live like the unborn. I will return to this dilemma when I attempt to conclude.

Despite all this, the writer's story is evidently endowed with the kind of power the narrator had hoped to secure in his own right in TFN3, and he suddenly finds himself embodied in the world, or 'on earth':

> That's how he speaks, this evening, how he has me speak, how he speaks to himself, how I speak, there is only me, this evening, here, on earth, and a voice that makes no sound because it goes towards none, and a head strewn with arms laid down and corpses fighting fresh, and a body, I nearly forgot (Beckett, 1995, 115).

With this development the central idea of 'life' comes to prominence in TFN4, and the experience engenders an important, if glancing, distinction between speech and story. The following passage is the crucial one:

> There's my life, why not, it is one, if you like, if you must, I don't say no, this evening. There has to be one, it seems, once there is speech, no need of a story, 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 (Beckett, 1995, 116)

A story is not actually necessary to life, the narrator now claims. Presumably this is a recognition of the fact that he has had the writer's 'story' (such as it is) 'foisted' on him. By recognising the artificiality of this story, and in the absence of a narrative of his own, he realises that it is life itself that is the 'compulsory' thing: as he puts it 'life alone' is enough, life without the mediation of narrative and *telos*. And yet there is the complicating factor of speech to take into consideration here. On the question of the latter's relation with life the text, with a little

bit of syntactical rearrangement, is forthright: ‘once there is speech’ ‘there has to be one’ (ie, ‘a life’). Speech engenders life, Beckett appears to suggest, though he leaves us in the dark as to the why and the wherefore of this.

At this point a brief comparison with *The Unnamable*, a closely related work, can be of help, however. In that novel, voices act sporadically on the passive body of the character Worm, in the attempt to elicit a normative mode of being from him. They address him, goad him with aural stimuli, trying to provoke him to thought and perception, but ultimately fail. In the end Worm appears to remain completely dormant and unknowable, beyond the form of life that the voices require of him. Subsequently *The Unnamable*’s narrator too is addressed by these or similar voices, though here we, as readers, are able to occupy his point of view. In this way we come to know that although he, unlike Worm, acknowledges the existence of the voices, he ‘endures’ rather than submits to them, and so is able to maintain his own kind of distance from them.

TFN appears to both build on and transform this final scenario in *The Unnamable*. As in the novel Beckett depicts a narrating, first-person point-of-view’s subjection to the voice of another. Yet in TFN the serial nature of the prose pieces, and a presiding duality of two domains that is more stable and consistent than *The Unnamable*’s elisions, seems designed to allow for a more methodical exploration of disparate modalities of being and the relations between them. The distinction in the passage above between speech and story signals one of these subtle gradations of being. It suggests that ‘speech’ might sponsor a form of life intermediate between that of the impossible, ‘unspeakable’ nature of Worm and the conventionally linear narrative structure of ‘story’ that is more obviously active than endurance.

The strong implication of the passage quoted above is that speech is available to the narrator in the way that story is not. Such an assumption must therefore rely on the difference between story and speech, presumably between the former’s consistency and coherence, and the latter’s putatively immediate, spontaneous, occasional aspects. Even with its improvisatory, vanishing qualities, speech can individualise a life, just as story can, locate it in a moment, a place, as *parole* does *langue*, through shifters and pronouns: ‘I’, me’, ‘here’ (TFN is absolutely saturated with such deictics). In the case of speech as somehow formative of or integral to a life, however, the emphasis will necessarily be on the performative rather than the constative, the iterative rather than the descriptive and the act rather than the outcome. These are the distinctions from ‘story’ relevant here, for the latter suggests, by contrast: development, the unities of time and place, a linear, goal-directed process that leads to a resolution. It is no coincidence that these are the narrative elements that TFN’s own form steadfastly refuses,

tending as it does more towards a practice that might, as we shall see, be more properly considered poetic.

And yet consider the way the idea of speech drops out at the end of the passage quoted above, when Beckett mentions 'life alone' in the final clause. It is as if speech, after performing a role as an actualizing force, disappears. Hence the final clause of the passage seems a touch disingenuous. The narrator is at the very least ambivalent about being without story, unsure of the efficacy of speech in giving form to life. Speech might somehow entail or register life, but can it render it, compose it in a manner that can hold out against the blandishments of story? Can speech be the basis of a form of life? Hence the question that the passage is posing is finally an aesthetic one: can there be a form of life without the determinism of a story, of an identity? Is speech without narrative capable of sustaining a form of life?

In TFN6 we are firmly in the virtual world, though unlike in the earlier texts there is no real confidence in any vector emerging from it. The corporeality that the narrator briefly attained in TFN4 is now completely absent: 'what can have become then of the tissues I was, I can see them no more, feel them no more, flaunting and fluttering all about and inside me' (Beckett, 1995, 124). There's also an initial tone of torpor and apathy: 'Leave it, leave it, nothing leads to anything […] I'll never get anywhere', and what is more, no sense of a boundary between worlds: 'what elsewhere can there be to this infinite here?' (123). This idea of the infinite is picked up when the narrator, locked in his virtual world, addresses the strange immortality of what he now calls 'this thing' (note: 'thing', not 'a life'), emphasizing his uncertainty about its narrative 'end', and in so doing raising explicitly the question of Cassirer's 'form of life':

> Ah to know for sure, to know that this thing has no end, this thing, this thing, this farrago of silence and words, of silence that is not silence and barely murmured words. Or to know it's life still, a form of life, ordained to end, as others ended and will end, till life ends, in all its forms. Words, mine was never more than that, than this pell-mell babel of silence and words, my viewless form described as ended, or to come, or still in progress, depending on the words, the moments, long may it last in that singular way.' (Beckett, 1995, 125).

Here the doubting, doubtful perspective of TFN4 is revised, and the nature of the exchange between story, speech and life found there is considerably deepened and clarified. At first it seems we have two mutually exclusive proposals concerning the structure of 'this thing' to

which the narrator is consigned. Either it has 'no end', or alternatively it is 'life', now explicitly defined as narrative, something 'ordained to end', which is then specified further as a 'form of life'. The logical implications are, first, that our narrator does not know whether this 'thing' he has is 'life' or not, because he does not know if it will end, and second, that he does not know if it will end or not, because it is, rather than an obviously formed entity, 'a farrago of words', a farrago being a 'confused group, a mixture, a medley or hotchpotch' (*OED*).

But the distinction between these two versions of 'the thing' – as formed or formless – soon begins to break down. Rather than a 'form of life', the narrator goes on to tell us, what he has is in fact a 'viewless form described as ended, or to come, or still in progress', a phrase that departs from the French original ('la mienne de vie') in favour of a nod to Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale': 'Away! away! for I will fly to thee/ Not charioted by Bacchus and his pards/ But on the viewless wings of Poesy,/ Though the dull brain perplexes and retards' (Keats, 1988, 346). Anne Atik tells us Beckett would often recite this poem in company (Atik, 2001, 70). And another favourite poem and poet mentioned by Atik is alluded to in the immediately following 'ended, or to come, or still in progress', a phrase taken from Yeats' description in 'Sailing to Byzantium' of the bird 'set upon a golden bough to sing / To lords and ladies of Byzantium / Of what is past, or passing, or to come' (Atik, 2001, 60; Yeats, 1994, 239–40). Like the Keats' poem, Yeats' deals with death, form and song and thus signals Beckett's own core concerns. As the poem has it: 'Once out of nature I shall never take/ My bodily form from any natural thing'.

Beckett's reference to Keats' 'viewless wings' reminds us that a 'viewless form' is still a form, still an articulating power, like the invisible nightingale in the poem, and indeed the poem that apostrophizes that bird. Yeats' golden bird meanwhile, with which the poet identifies, is ensconced in what the poem calls 'the artifice of eternity' and from there seems able to range freely into the future and the past. Both allusions hint that TFN6's narrator may be living in uncertainty, may not know his own end, may not have a linear narrative, and yet may still have a kind of form closer to song or poesy. This is further hinted at in the narrator's question whether what he is taking for a farrago might in fact be 'life, still', suggesting that 'the thing' he is enduring was a kind of life once and could be again, if its form is recognised.

Finally the close of the passage above renounces, for the first time, any idea of an end, with the narrator aspiring to a deferral of death rather than its consummation: 'long may it ['the thing'] last in its singular way'. As a declaration of singularity this phrase implies that the erstwhile structure of two antithetical worlds has now collapsed into immanence. This accounts for the way the narrator berates himself for previously naively proceeding 'as if there were two

things, some other thing besides this thing […] this unnamable thing that I name and name and never wear out' (Beckett, 1995, 125). Note too how here the narrator is given an active role in naming, not to mention the inclusion of the title of Beckett's previous novel. Form, immanence, active aesthetic labour and a deferred death: in a rare moment these are the set of conditions through which our narrator finally seems able to reconcile himself with the mode of being he has. It doesn't last long.

In TFN8, by contrast with TFN6, the two-world structure returns and with it a vector from the virtual to the actual that is stronger than ever. The narrator's attitude towards the interminability of the limbo in which he finds himself has likewise changed. Where in TFN6 he had triumphantly declared, of his endless speech, 'long may it last', now he decries 'the same murmur, flowing unbroken, like a single endless word and therefore meaningless, for it's the end gives the meaning to words' (Beckett, 1995, 131). In TFN9, meanwhile, the dual structure of worlds remains present, as does the speech/story binary, though now speech seems to be in the ascendant. The tone is markedly conditional, however. Beckett returns to the issue of the 'all', and specifically to the act of speech, of 'saying all', as an invocation or ordination that will prompt a movement from virtual to actual and thus bring about the terminus of death. Yet this 'saying all' is now dependent on the identification of a spatial boundary, the marker of an exit, or even only the possibility of one, and the tone is wistful, tentative, half-hearted: 'if only I could say, There's a way out there, there's a way out somewhere, then all would be said, it would be the first step on the long travelable road, destination tomb, to be trod without a word' (137). In this text too the narrator self-reflexively admits, for the first time, what should be evident from my account of TFN so far: that this solution is provisional, merely one among many others that are and will be explored in the series: 'The way out, this evening it's the turn of the way out' (136).

I want to end by turning to the final text in the series. The theme of 'making' runs through the TFN13, a significant choice in terms of the argument about form I have been pursuing, for 'making' translates the Greek abstract noun *poiēsis*, as Beckett well knew ('from the Gr. verb *poieō*, infinitive *poiein*, "to make form"'; Greene, 2012, 1070). Thus TFN13 begins, referring to the one I have been calling 'the writer': 'Weaker still the weak old voice that tried in vain to make me' and later describes how this voice 'wants to leave a trace […] it's with that it would make a life' (Beckett, 1995, 152. Finally, the narrator talks of 'Last everlasting questions, infant languors in the end sheets, last images, end of dream, of being past, passing and to be, end of lie. Is it possible, is that the possible thing at last, the extinction of this black nothing and its impossible shades, the end of the farce of making' (154). This

passage is part of a final furious rush of images that anticipates the imminent close of the series. The 'end' of making here is both positive goal and negative conclusion, the paradoxical extinction of a nothing that implies the inception of some kind of presence, the latter being what the very final sentence of the text calls 'unmakable being'.

As an image this is a radicalization of the Keatsian 'viewless form' encountered earlier. The latter, as we saw, refers to a discernible if evasive, form-of-life that is non-narrative in structure. Staying with this link between 'unmakable being' and the earlier passage on Keatsian poetics, we should also note that Yeats' golden bird also returns negatively in the passage last-quoted: 'end […] of being past, passing and to be, end of lie'. This is the despairing nadir of the sequence, when the 'dream' and the 'lie' of making, the whole modernist idea of an 'artifice of eternity' that had seemed a possibility in TFN6 is rejected. And yet the making goes on, the text continues, albeit with the onset of a welter of self-cancelling motifs that scramble all logic even as they anticipate an 'end': 'its ended, we're ended who never were, soon there will be nothing were there never was anything'; 'it's not true, yes, it's true, it's true and it's not true, there is silence and there is not silence, there is no one and there is someone, nothing prevents anything' (Beckett, 1995, 154).

The final phrase in this passage – 'nothing prevents anything' – captures the sense of *poēisis* as unmaking that Beckett now pitches against the narrative determinations of story. As such it forms part of a continuum with phrases such as the earlier 'viewless form' and the later 'unmakable being', though it is more difficult to parse than the former, suggesting as it does two diametrically opposed readings. To claim that 'nothing prevents anything' is to say at once everything is possible and that nothing is. And if we recall the opposition in TFN4 between virtual narrator and actual writer – 'me who am everything likehim who is nothing', it seems that is the tension being evoked (Beckett, 1995, 114). But the phrase also rewrites, in a much more ambiguous manner a moment near the beginning of TFN13, where speech is given a tremendous power 'once you've spoken of me you can speak of anything' (152). And yet 'Nothing prevents anything' retains something of the charge of the earlier assertion. In any event its undecidable layering of possibility and impossibility prepares the way for the final lines.

In these lines, the conclusion of TFN13 and thus of the whole series, Beckett addresses for a last time the relation between 'all', 'end' and speech: 'And were there one day to be here, where there are no days, which is no place, born of the impossible voice the unmakable being, and a gleam of light, still all would be silent and empty and dark, as now, as soon now, when all will be ended, all said, it says, it murmurs (Beckett, 1995, 154). This final sentence explicitly

refers to what I have been calling the virtual world ('where there are no days, which is no place'), and anticipates two events. One of these is the familiar, now imminent, though still deferred 'end' of 'all'. What is imagined here, in other words, is the completed form which had once seemed to be contingent on both embodiment and story, but is now at last seemingly achievable within the virtual.

But what is the relation between that achievement and the other moment the passage looks forward to? This other event is the birth of an 'unmakable being' that is also, and unlike the first, specified as conditional ('and were there one day to be…'). Why, we may ask, if the first event, the end of all, that has preoccupied the narrator throughout is imminent, does Beckett insist on intertwining it with this second conditional moment? A clue lies in the parallel invited by the words 'as now, as soon now'. The comparison, between on the one hand the paradoxical co-existence of unmakable being and nothingness, and on the other the co-presence of the end of all with a continued murmur, stresses the way both events or moments are split. In each case the antithesis is between on one side nothingness (the end of all, silence, end of speech, emptiness and darkness) and on the other a vestigial form (unmakable being, the murmur). The doubled, involuted, *topos* of the final sentence thus enacts, in its closed form, event and potential event, said and saying, nothing and anything.

As such it comes close to describing a concept that has been shadowing my whole discussion of TFN up to this point: Giorgio Agamben's notion of impotentiality, unemployed potential, potential that has not been actualized and never will be. Drawing on Aristotle, Agamben sees potentiality as shaped pre-eminently through the capacity to refrain from actualization, to be, in Beckett's term, unmakable. As mentioned in my introduction, Agamben also poses his own notion of a form-of-life. For him the latter is intimately bound up with the concept of potentiality. As he puts it in *The Use of Bodies*: 'if act is never totally separated from potential […] then a form of life can become, in its very facticity and thingliness, form-of-life' (Agamben, 2016, 211).

Beckett's notion of 'unmakable being', where 'nothing prevents anything' understood as something his text shelters yet does not definitively instantiate or 'make', bears comparison with impotentiality. Likewise Agamben's version of form-of-life can help us to begin to understand what Beckett finds compelling in Cassirer's much more humanistic notion of *Lebensform*. In TFN, drawing on Cassirer's Kant but pushing far, far beyond it, Beckett stages an anguished version of form-of-life's play between impotentiality and actualization that takes artist and oeuvre as paradigmatic and stresses, in ways Cassirer's humanist biography could never do, the risks, imponderables, deceptions and rigours entailed in the construction of a

form-of-life. These texts' pursuit of an impossible coincidence between all and end, which is also a drive towards death, finally reaches a point where, on its last page, after enraged despair and a furious barrage of brute contradictions, that impossibility finds a tentative, subtle and ambiguous form, a fragile making that is also an unmaking, a form-of-life that is a form of death.

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