

# HOW TO TREMBLE BEYOND SOVEREIGNTY: DERRIDA'S BECKETTIAN SPECTRE

¿Cómo temblar más allá de la soberanía? El espectro beckettiano de Derrida

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## **Abstract:**

Our main hypothesis says: in order to understand the singular trembling of Derrida's philosophical work, and with it, the philosophic-political significance of it, one has to examine not only Derrida's own conception of writing and, specifically of literature, but also the resonance of his work with that of an author who appears as his own writerly ghost: Samuel Beckett. This examination will follow the trembling between the two authors up to its utmost conclusion, where not only the limits of language, but also those of any kind of sovereignty break through this spectral quake.

## **Keywords:**

Jacques Derrida, Samuel Beckett, Hauntology, Poetic, Sovereignty.

## **Resumen:**

Nuestra principal hipótesis sostiene que, para comprender el temblor singular de la obra filosófica de Derrida y, con él, su significado filosófico-político, hemos de examinar no solo la concepción derridiana de la escritura y, específicamente, de la literatura, sino también la resonancia de su trabajo con el de un autor que aparece como su propio fantasma: Samuel Beckett. Esta indagación seguirá el temblor entre ambos autores hasta sus últimas consecuencias, donde no solo los límites del lenguaje, sino también los de cualquier forma de soberanía, se quiebran a través de este seísmo espectral.

## **Palabras clave:**

Jacques Derrida, Samuel Beckett, hauntología, poética, soberanía.

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## INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of Laurence Simmons' 2013 article "Comment ne pas trembler?: Derrida's Earthquake," appear two epigraphs, one from *The Gift of Death* ("A secret always makes you tremble"), and one not from Derrida, but from Samuel Beckett's *Ohio Impromptu*. As we know, the latter one is a play about two identical figures ("as alike in appearance as possible" state the directions), where one, Reader, reads to Listener a story from an old book about other two identical figures, and where at the end they all disappear in the confusion of their limits. Echoing Simmons' epigraphic insight, the main hypothesis of this article will be that, in order to understand the idiomatic trembling of Derrida's philosophical work, and with it, the philosophical-political significance of said trembling, one has to examine not only his own conception of writing and, specifically, of literature, but also, and especially, the resonance of his work with that of an author on whom he never wrote directly, yet who appears –like Reader and Listener in *Ohio Impromptu*– as his own writerly ghost: Samuel Beckett. This examination, however, has to follow the trembling between the two authors not only as a violent quake at the limits of language, but also where such an agitation reveals the fragility and evanescence of the limits of the sovereign subject, or of the subject understood as sovereign in its ontological and semantic autonomy.<sup>1</sup> Our ultimate hypothesis is, thus, that the fragilities of literary and sovereign limits are particularly exposed, in their significance for modern philosophy and literature, at the juncture where Derrida's and Beckett's oeuvres appear to fade into each other.

Even though the examination of Beckett's work as a political oeuvre is fairly recent,<sup>2</sup> perhaps the best explanation of the political significance in Beckett's work resides not on a monographic study of his oeuvre, but instead on Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's "What Is a Minor Literature?" If in this text Beckett is described as a writer of a minor literature (just as Joyce, but in a different way), it is because his work shares with Kafka's the three characteristics of a minor literature as defined by Deleuze and Guattari: 1) its "language is affected by a strong co-efficient of deterritorialization," 2) "everything in [Beckett's texts] is political," and 3) in it, "everything has a collective value" (1983: 16-17). Now, if for a long time Beckett's work could be interpreted as almost apolitical, this is precisely because critics missed the connection between the trembling of the limits of language and literature, and the one of the limits of the sovereign subject that Beckett was exposing. In what

<sup>1</sup> In its purportedly autotelic movement, this ontological and semantic sovereignty is in tune with the main trait that Derrida gives to the sovereign at the beginning of his seminar *The Beast and the Sovereign*: "a certain power to give, to make, but also to suspend the law [...]" (2009: 16).

<sup>2</sup> As a matter of fact, this political angle has been imposing itself recently with a conference on *Beckett and Politics* organized at the University of Reading in 2016, a collective volume of the same title (edited by William Davis and Helen Bailey) set to appear later this year, and Emilie Morin's 2017 *Beckett's Political Imagination*. As recently as May 30<sup>th</sup> 2020, during the protests for the murder of George Floyd in the USA, Cornell West brought up Beckett's commonly quoted line "Try Again. Fail Again. Fail Better" as the current "conclusion" to the failing experiment called American Democracy.

follows, we will try to show how a) at the juncture of these two types of tremor (the linguistic/literary and the sovereign, political one) there is the figure of the spectre or ghost, b) how this figure gives us a particular insight into the similarities of Beckett's and Derrida's written projects, and c) what kind of signifying space the spectre creates in both oeuvres, a space we will term "the poetic."<sup>3</sup> Eo ipso, understanding these similarities (up to the point when they step into a spectral blurriness) will help us understand Derrida's own-literary-uncanny relation to Beckett's work, and point toward what can be gained in the study of these two oeuvres in tandem.

#### BECKETT IS A DERRIDEAN SPECTRE AND VICE VERSA

This hypothesis has been ventured for a long time now. Not only that there is something ghostly<sup>4</sup> about Derrida and Beckett, but also that perhaps they might share a ghost or even be the ghost of each other. Coetzee summoned it by speaking "if not of Beckett's direct influence on Derrida, then of a striking case of *sympathetic vibration*" (Beckett 2006d: xiii). Anthony Uhlmann wrote on the similarity of Beckett's "between" and Derrida's *différance*, and on the possibility of a Derridean instance of justice inhabiting *The Unnamable*. In the concluding pages of *Beckett, Derrida, and the Event of Literature*, Asja Szafraniec wrote of a shared "*phantasm of matricide, of arresting time, of mastery or of sovereignty*" (2007: 191); and Nicholas Royle described them as indistinguishable laughing ghosts, repeating and effacing themselves and perhaps each other (1995: 169). Even Cixous wrote a book on Beckett (*Le voisin de zéro*, 2007) just after writing her philosophico-literary farewell to Derrida (*Insister*, 2006), counterpointing her double eulogy to her familiar,

<sup>3</sup> As we will see, and as Derrida made clear in "Che cos'è la poesia", the poetic is not exactly poetry or *poiesis*.

<sup>4</sup> If, in what follows, I use somewhat indiscriminately the terms ghost, phantasm, and spectre, is precisely because in both, Beckett's and Derrida's oeuvres, the conceptual and ontological barriers that separate these terms are carefully and significantly undermined. A perfect example of this blurring of conceptual limits between these terms appears in Derrida's second volume of *The Beast and the Sovereign* when considering the impossibility of the affect and of being affected without life and the contradiction of the living-dead: "It is precisely because this certainty is terrifying and literally intolerable, just as unthinkable, just as unrepresentable and unrepresentable as the contradiction of the living dead, that what I call with the obscure word 'phantasm' imposed itself upon me. I do not know if this usage of the word 'phantasm' is congruent or compatible with any philosophical concept of the *phantasma*, of fantasy or fantastic imagination, any more than with the psychoanalytic concept of the phantasm, supposing, which I do not believe, that there is one, that there is only one, that is clear, univocal, localizable" (2011: 149; FR 218, translation slightly modified). Naturally, this does not mean that there are no semantic and contextual differences between the terms, it just means that such differences are not enough to create and sustain clear-cut distinctions. As Derrida explains in the same seminar: "The logic of the phantasm [...] (be it about living death, the ghost or revenant, about cremation or the posthumous) [this logic of the phantasm] is not strictly speaking a logic, it resists the *logos*, the *legein* of the *logos* [...] the logic of the phantasm resists, defies and dislocates *logos* and logic in all its figures [...]. There is no *logic of the phantasm*, strictly speaking [...]" (184-5; FR 262). Whenever possible, I give the title pages of the original French version (FR) after the translation's.

spectral writers. From the first recognized appearance of the name of Beckett in a Derridean text (the earlier quote from *Molloy* in *Glas* [1974] omitting Beckett's name),<sup>5</sup> the reference was linked to trembling as a question:

[...] when I speak of literature it is not with a capital L; it is rather an allusion to certain movements which have worked around the limits of our logical concepts, certain texts which make the limits of our language tremble, exposing them as divisible and questionable. This is what the works of Blanchot, Bataille or Beckett are particularly sensitive to (Kearney, 1995: 62; interview from 1981).

And when some years later (1989) the question of Beckett appeared directly in an interview with Derek Attridge, it was addressed again in the context of an author who makes “the limits of our language tremble.” But how are we to understand this shared trembling within their work, especially as it concerns not only the limits of language, literary and philosophical (and in between fiction and philosophy), but also of the sovereign subject? How do we understand the trembling between subjects, sovereign or writerly, and especially in our current times, in the middle of a pandemic that turns everybody potentially and actually into a ghost, and of a series of riots, protests, and violence, that summon –yet again– the spectre of communism? Because, as we feel from the amount of poetry, literature and art flooding into our screens in the midst of images of the quarantine and potential revolution, this is a time when, as Derrida said at the beginning of the war in Iraq in 2003:

[...] the poets, more than ever, more rare than ever, are more touched by the truth than the politicians, priests and soldiers. The armed word of politicians, priests and soldiers is more than ever incompetent, unable to measure up to the very thing it is speaking and deciding about, and that remains to be thought, that trembles in the name “world,” or even in saying good-bye to the world (2011: 260).

Let me lay down the spectral hypothesis again, driven by the acknowledged (at least by Derrida in his interview with Attridge) similarities between our two authors' oeuvres. Let me rephrase it in a visible way –taking advantage of the shared visual etymology of both “theatre” (*theáomai*) and “theory” (*theoria*) and summon, like Laurence Simmon, an image taken from *Ohio Impromptu*. This theatrical-theoretical image is simple: “*L = Listener. / R = Reader. / As alike in appearance as possible*” (Beckett, 2006c: 473). The anonymity of the characters in this image allows us to make the necessary substitution for our hypothesis: as Listener is a ghost of Reader, “Derrida is a ghost of Beckett,” and vice versa. This hypothesis implies further that the relations between Reader, Listener, and the characters mentioned within the “Book” are of the same kind as the relations between Derrida and Beckett, and the characters they can “represent” in their work. That is to say, it is not only the complex narcissistic relations between Reader and Listener that are mirrored in our Derrida/Beckett ghosts, but also the essentially convoluted relations between the empirical characters embodied on stage and their written or imagined counterparts

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<sup>5</sup> For a detailed analysis of this omission, see chapters 4 and 5 of my (2019) *Modernism, Self-Creation, and Matricide*. Routledge: New York.

within the "Book" and those in the "worn volume." As I mentioned before, according to the first theatrical direction, both characters are "[a]s alike in appearance as possible" (473), and the two of them seem to also be the characters referred to within the book on stage—read by Reader—and inside the "worn volume" of the story being read (475). Furthermore, within the play's textual and visual spaces (within its world), any attempt at a clear and definitive differentiation between the two (four, or six) characters is thwarted in advance the moment Reader utters: "With never a word exchanged they grew to be as one" (475). If the physical or at least figurative identities of the characters are thus inexorably confused in their referentiality, the text itself complicates furthermore all of these relations through its own performative status. In the play the text is not really spoken impromptu by Reader. Most sentences are read as any text always is: as a repetition.<sup>6</sup> Through this repetition without identifiable origin, the text is in an undecidable narcissistic relation with itself similar to the relations between the characters with themselves and each other. In other words, there is no way of deciding if the characters are ultimately the same one (as each other and/or their written counterparts), if their similarity has the form of the copy or representation, of the ghost or *doppelgänger*, and, in this case, who is the copy or ghost of whom, or if the book on the table is the "worn volume" of the story, or if the story's "sad tale" is the text being read by Reader. For all we know, the book Reader "reads" could be empty or full of images. However, there is also no way to assert that the text being read is *not* the physical book or "worn volume," nor that the characters are *not* the same one. The undecidability of the relations does not mean that within our chosen texts and images we can exclude the possibility of a correct reference, and thus, of the already cited sentence being accurate: "With never a word exchanged they grew to be as one." "They" could always be the same one, any one or pair of them, or even all of them: Reader and Listener, "he," "a man" —or in and as our hypothesis— Derrida, Beckett, and me and you as readers of their texts. In the spectral and narcissistic logic of nouns, pronouns and images — especially when they appear in pairs— while it is always possible that we are not seeing clearly and are confusing terms and subjects, there exists always the possibility too that the image is indeed correct, that it is a perfect match or a fair reflection. For our hypothesis this means that, without ever referring to each other in a clear way, or even using the second person (using a "you," "tu" or "vous"), without any instance to corroborate a direct exchange or reference between the two, the possibility will always remain that Derrida is, indeed, a ghost of Beckett, and vice versa.

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<sup>6</sup> Except, perhaps, an isolated "Yes..." (Ibid., 475), if "yes" was not also always already a quote, especially in the space of Irish exile literature.

Reader	Listener	Script of OH
"he"	"a man"	The story read by Reader (the or a book)
"he"	"a man"	The "worn volume" with the "sad tale" told by "a man" from the story above

*Levels of the dialogical relations between the characters of Ohio Impromptu.*

Derrida/Beckett	Derrida/Beckett	Their corpora
Beckett/Derrida	Beckett/Derrida	Their corpora
You/I	I/You	Their corpora and our subsequent commentaries of them

*Ghostly relations between Derrida and Beckett as well as between their readers as addressers and addressees.*

## LOGICS OF GHOSTS

Now, this imaged, theatrical (and thus theoretical) hypothesis is not only questioned by the different ways in which both authors and their ghosts appear in their respective work. Even before these differences appear, there is the more fundamental risk: how we are to differentiate between our authors within their ghostly relations? This is the first question because, in order for the hypothesis to hold, we must first be able to determine the possessive relation, to tell who the ghost is of whom. In other words, we must be able to see this ghost without being possessed or dispossessed by its sight or theory.

One must have the ghost's hide and to do that, one must have it. To have it, one must see it, situate it, identify it. One must possess it without letting oneself be possessed by it, without being possessed of it [...] But does not a specter consist, to the extent that it consists, in forbidding or blurring this distinction? in consisting in this very indiscernibility? Is not to possess a specter to be possessed by it, possessed period? To capture it, is that not to be captivated by it? (Derrida, 1994: 132).

Thus, we must see, situate and identify the ghost in order to be sure to have it. But, the ghost being an image of dispossession, undecidability and undiscernability, every "I have a ghost" implies immediately an "I am a ghost" where the "am" is (the) suffering (itself) from a un-clear participation in Being or "to be," from a ghostliness that affects its limits, its independence, and thus, its sovereignty. "I am a ghost" means thus: I am a certain "object/subject," a phenomenon the essence of which is, in its visibility, not to be clear, not to be discernible, to be seen without the spectator/theorist ever being sure of having seen it, or at least without the possibility

of ever confirming it. As a consequence, "I have a ghost" –which, as we saw, translates into "I am a ghost"– ends up dispossessing us so much as to blur the distinction between subject and object. Thus, what would it mean for us, as Derridean scholars (Horatios to a certain Hamlet), to confirm the hypothesis: Derrida is a ghost of Beckett, and vice versa? In order to confirm it we have to be sure of the unambiguity, in other words, of the univocity of our thesis. But how are we to determine this univocity?

A first step in addressing the question of univocity in Derrida and Beckett is to consider one of the most striking similarities between them, the fact that, in their own way, they both made the limits of language and knowledge tremble. Both Derrida and Beckett positioned themselves continuously at the limits of their own work as (philosophical and/or literary) writers, which implies that they conceived of language as not only a transparent medium but also as their object of investigation and query. As Derrida remarked, early in his career, in his Introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*, when the writer focuses on language as an object of study, the first problem to surface is the opposition between language's equivocity and univocity. Complete equivocity prohibits historicity or narration, since, through it, language would sink into absolute darkness. While absolute univocity makes of language only a perfect repetition of an ideality, cancelling history as well as stories, narration, and discourse itself. Language must be both equivocal and univocal up to a certain point, since it is both historical and in process of becoming. As a consequence, the question for the writer is how to use it while taking into account its past dimension as well as its future process, thus conveying something new that can ideally remain the same; or in other words, how to be modern vis-à-vis a tradition, where being modern means, as Jean-Michel Rabaté has shown,<sup>7</sup> to be obsessed with this tradition's ghosts. Derrida describes this stance of the modern writer or thinker vis-à-vis tradition and its ghosts, that is to say, this stance in front of language –and literature– and step into it as an attempt<sup>8</sup> to "assume and *interiorize* the memory of a culture in a kind of *recollection* (*Erinnerung*) in the Hegelian sense" (1989: 102). It is an attempt to come to terms with a language that not only contains an incalculable spectral history, but that also includes the writer within its own phantasmatic space where the living and the dead (readers/listeners) become indistinguishable. This attempt has the form of a recollection in a Hegelian sense (*Erinnerung*) because it is a striving to control the spectral and all-permeative impersonal, technical memory (*Gedächtnis*) of language that does not respect the limits of the writer nor of any particular time and place: of any idiomaticity. Now, while we can name particular or even common instances of such an attempt (a work of mourning, a particular relation to a culture, a rite, etc.), the two examples Derrida gives in the Introduction are neither particular nor common cases. With the authors Derrida mentions, Joyce and Husserl, we are dealing with an attempt at the *complete* assumption and

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<sup>7</sup> See his (2010) *Ghosts of Modernity*. Interestingly enough, as Derrida explains in a footnote, he had been reading this book by Rabaté at the time he was composing *Specters of Marx*.

<sup>8</sup> This is an attempt that Derrida describes in terms of a wish or desire: "when one wishes [*quand on veut assumer*] to assume [...]" (102; FR 104)

interiorization, the *absolute* comprehending of a *whole* culture, potentially of every culture and *all* of history. As the ultimate fulfilment of a discourse –philosophical (Husserl) or literary (Joyce)– this complete assumption would be the realization (in both senses of the term) of the sovereignty of language and truth, the moment the sovereign subject gives, makes –and potentially suspends– it/himself all its/his laws. In other words, it would be the fulfilment of all the possibilities of language as the medium of the final apprehension of the ultimate truth of the world (and the self), its autotelic, immune conclusion. This would be a world that, excluding or cancelling each of its tremors, would include the self in it, not only the personal self of the writer but also the transcendental form of any self –and consequently of all of ghosts or doublings. The way this ultimate truth is conceived in its relation to language and knowledge, is, however, what would determine the whole discursive enterprise as literary, scientific, or philosophical.

The first attempt to complete the absolute interiorization and assumption of the totality of culture that Derrida describes, Joyce’s literary project, is an attempt, according to Derrida,

to repeat and take responsibility for *all* equivocation itself, utilizing a language that could equalize the greatest possible synchrony with the greatest potential for buried, accumulated, and interwoven intentions within each linguistic atom, each vocable, each word, each simple proposition, *in all wordly cultures* and their most ingenious forms [...] to make the structural unity of *all* empirical culture appear in the *generalized* equivocation of a writing that, no longer translating one language into another on the basis of their common cores of sense, circulates throughout *all* languages at once [...] (102; my italics)

While this Joycean attempt would utilize “generalized equivocation/equivocity” in order to do its assumption and interiorizing of all worldly cultures, according to Derrida, Husserl tries –at least in *The Origin of Geometry*:

to reduce or impoverish empirical language methodically to the point where its univocal and translatable elements are actually transparent, in order to reach back and grasp again at its pure source a historicity or traditionality that no de facto historical totality will yield of itself. This historicity or traditionality is always already presupposed by every Odyssean repetition of Joyce’s type, as by all *philosophy of history* (in the current sense) and by every *phenomenology of spirit* (103).

We have here thus two attempts at the fulfilment of the extreme possibilities of language as the final apprehension of the ultimate truth of the world and the self as sovereign thinker. The Joycean one takes charge of all equivocity and, instead of trying to limit it, allows it to explode in the most variegated and synchronic forms, without trying to translate ideal meanings from one language to another, but rather allowing the circulation of energy and meaning to run simultaneously through all the languages (i.e., *Finnegans Wake*). This is an attempt or a way of writing that, instead of trying to leap historical spaces by transmitting an ideal and atemporal meaning, recognises historical, temporal and spatial differences in themselves and, in the obscurity of equivocity, allows them to appear “clearly” in/as the noise they create. The Husserlian path, on the other hand, is an attempt not only to control equivocity,



but also even to eliminate it, to efface it in order to arrive at the point where univocity, in all its ideality and iterability, will finally emerge. Univocity in this way will end up being not an extreme case, but the condition of possibility of historicity, and thus of discourse and the diachronic itself. In other words, it is what will allow any particular case, either successful in its ideality (univocal) or unsuccessful in its non-diaphanous transmission (equivocal), to take place. Within this Husserlian scheme, univocity will be truth itself. Any other attempt at interiorizing and assuming a (or every) culture –included the Joycean or Homeric Odyssey– will have univocity, at the end, as its unique truth, and thus as its horizon of possibility. Even the most extreme assumption of general equivocity, the Joycean project, “could only succeed by allotting its share to univocity, whether it might draw from a given univocity or try to produce another” (103). Therefore both projects, even if by different paths (synchronic forces/transparent elements) will have at the end the same goal, since the assumption and interiorizing of a memory as *Erinnerung* (a safe, particular memory; not an impersonal, ghostly *Gedächtnis*) must be true, belong to truth, and thus be determined by the positive value of univocity; it must be just one voice without spectral echoing. In this way, even if, because of the necessary interplay between univocity and equivocity both projects will ultimately fail in their extreme attempt to assume and interiorise a complete culture, it is ultimately through the Husserlian one that –according to Derrida– we discover this positive value of univocity as the ideal horizon of all equivocity. Hence, univocity stops being an effacing of all equivocity, and becomes the ideal infinite horizon of any possible truth or fiction. In other words, the possibility of just one voice lies as the horizon of any spectral echoing or ghostly polyphony.

But what about the value of univocity within Derrida's own work and writing? Our hypothesis is that it is this status of univocity and truth as horizon that gets complicated through what we call the Beckettian spectral character of his writing. According to this hypothesis, since the beginning of his work (even if the question of the ghost or spectre would not come to the main stage until later on), univocity and truth took a phantasmal or spectral character, and these blurry traits –or the plasticity of the trait itself<sup>9</sup> as a ghostly line– kept questioning what the positive ideal value of univocity and truth could be, both for philosophy and for writing in general. In other words, in its spectral figurations, univocity in Derrida is always other: a univocity of, from, and to (the) other. It is a uni-vocity that questions ceaselessly the limits and number of voices within each voice: a univocity that doubles, and thus, also spectres or ghosts. The spectrality or doubleness of this uni-vocity appears early on in Derrida's work with his use and resignification of footnotes or accompanying texts as mirroring or dialogical devices in texts like “Tympan” (accompanied by a text by Michel Leiris), “Ousia et grammè: note sur une note de Sein und Zeit,” in the way “La double séance” in *La dissemination* is framed, in the wondrous double discourse on Hegel and Genet of *Glas*, the scattered letters of “Envois” in *La carte postale*, or in later texts like *Mémoires d'aveugle* and *Droit de regards*, constructed as a dialogue between two (or more) anonymous voices that, in their unnamable traits, are always blurring into each other. As we know, this spectrality or doubleness affects too all

<sup>9</sup> See Jacques Derrida. (2010). *Heidegger et la question*. Paris: Flammarion.

the texts that he co-signed with different authors like Cixous, Roudinesco, Malabou, etc., where it appears sometimes as the spectral space (spacing, typography) or time of their conversation.

In the case of Beckett, even if (like with Derrida) his relation to language shifted with time, there is one early formulation that remains significant throughout. It appears in the now famous 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, where his own language is said to come to him like a veil “which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it” (2009: 518), and where grammar and style seem to have become decrepit, invalid: “*Eine Larve*” (514) (a mask or larva). According to this letter the highest task of the writer is “[t]o drill one hole after another into [language] until that which lurks behind it, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through” (518). But what exactly are these “*hinterliegenden Dinge [...] oder das hinterliegende Nichts* [those things [or the nothingness] behind it]” (514)? What is “that which lurks behind” that one hopes could start seeping, oozing out (*durchsickern*) like mud? And what is the importance of this distinction, or rather of this lack of distinction: things or nothing, “*etwas oder nichts*”? It seems as if behind language, at its foundation or depth, both things would be the same: some-thing or no-thing, existence or nothingness, as if behind language all the ontological values of existence, values which are always economical –in the sense of the naming or acknowledging of what belongs to the home or world– were the same. But if these values and their existence or truth hierarchies are indistinguishable, if behind language something and nothing are the same, what is the reason for the distinction or even for mentioning the lack of distinction?

The beginning of an answer can be found in an earlier letter in which Beckett visualises the character of Mr. Kelly in *Murphy*:

My next old man, or old young man, not of the big world but of the little world, must be a kite-flyer. So absolutely disinterested, like a poem, or *useful in the depths where demand and supply coincide*, and the prayer is the god. Yes, prayer rather than poem, in order to be quite clear, because *poems are prayers*, of Dives and Lazarus one flesh (2009: 274, my italics).

The first thing that strikes us in its resonance with the other letter are “the depths,” what is behind (*hinterliegende*) or under the surface, where something is always different, where things do not happen in the same way as on the superficial world, and from where “that which lurks behind [...] starts seeping through” (2009: 518). The reference to supply and demand underscores the economical constitution of ontology, that is to say, of a world where relations are always potentially determined by exchange/value, and consequently, by debt and credit: something or nothing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This always latent exchange and value dimension of ontology can be thought in an anthropological way through the role of faith or belief in all forms of knowledge and even perception, or in a more Simondonian way, as one of the main forms of interaction among (not necessarily human, animal, nor even organic) individuals in their passage toward transindividuality. See Derrida’s *Foi et savoir* (1996), and George Simondon’s *L’individuation à la lumière de notions de forme et d’information* (2017). For a description of the necessary

Furthermore, there is here a distinction too between two worlds, and this distinction is made again through a measurement: big/little. It is as if the world as taxonomical horizon were split already in two, big and small, and had thus two different kinds of inhabitants and horizons. Yet this character of the "little world," Mr. Kelly, would not pay attention to this or any other division, he would be disinterested, "like a poem," and his usefulness would not be determined by his value, his belonging to the big or small world, his offering/demanding. Like a poem he would have a use but, existing outside of economical exchange, he would work instead as an utmost asymmetrical relation: as a prayer, an address to the absolutely transcendent, separate, the non-relation. Mr. Kelly as a poem is an absolute prayer because it is not even addressed to a divinity who could answer. It is a prayer "in the depths where demand and supply coincide," where it is indifferent if a demand is answered or if a supply is bestowed as a grace. This is the prayer as complete asymmetrical relation to what is absolutely separate from us. This prayer is not to a god. It is itself, in its hopelessness, the god of/as separation. But if this non-religious prayer is a poem, to whom could it be addressed, if to anyone or anything? Mr. Kelly is a kite-flier, who looks up, trying to see from underneath, from the unseen. In effect he is like Dives who "in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom" (Luke 16:23, my italics). He looks up like Goya's *Half-submerged dog*, from the underdetermined mud that covers him, to the undecidable sky above, and this gesture is the prayer/poem itself: the separation. The poem is the gesture that includes both the one who sees (Dives/Mr. Kelly), and the one who is seen (Lazarus/the kite), because "poems are prayers, of Dives and Lazarus one flesh" (Beckett, 2009: 274). Mr. Kelly is thus the poem/prayer of Dives and Lazarus, he is made of the same flesh of both of them, literally. He is the poem of the gesture of prayer, of the looking from the unseen to the seen: where unseen and seen meet.<sup>11</sup>

Returning to Derrida, in the attempt to "assume and interiorize the memory of a culture [...]" (1989: 102) as an attempt to come to terms with the spectral dimension of language, what role does the poem or prayer have? What could it mean to assume and *interiorize* a memory when we are talking about a poem, a prayer, and ultimately –as we will see– the heart? As we know, an absolute assumption and interiorizing of language is impossible. Yet if we were to entertain the possibility of an extreme limit-case of univocity, of something, a memory or fact that could be assumed and interiorized completely<sup>12</sup> (thus communicated by all cultures at all times), we can think of two limit-cases. The first is a thing that is absolutely one in itself, "immutable and natural [...] an existent whose unity, identity, and Objectivity would in themselves be prior to all culture" (1989: 103). But if this "natural" thing could ever

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economical traits of an anthropology and ethics see Pierre Klossowski's *La monnaie vivante* (1994).

<sup>11</sup> "[...] now he was in a position to determine the point at which seen and unseen met" (Beckett, 2006a: 167).

<sup>12</sup> This is a kind of interiorization that is not unrelated to the incorporation/introjection distinction that Derrida examines in "Fors" in Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok's *Le verbier de l'homme aux loups* (1999).

appear in the world, it would stop immediately being “absolutely one” and natural, since the moment one talked about it, it would have entered at once into culture. The second limit-case would be an ideal case in which the opportunity of its univocity would be not in nature, but in an ideality across cultures. It would be a trans-cultural (trans-linguistic: image-like) object, e.g.: the Husserlian geometrical object. But as with the presumed natural-object, this one would also be necessarily inscribed within a system of relations, and thus even if all these relations were ideal, “they do not therein give rise any less to some singular placings in perspective [*mises en perspectives*], some multiple interconnections of sense, and therefore some mediate and potential aims” (104).

Now, in front of language’s task for the writer, the task of coming to terms with its past and transmitting it while augmenting it, what if an object as noema could appear as both limit-cases? What if it could appear as an impossible “natural-universal object” before any cultural determination, and as an ideal, trans-cultural object? If a noetic object shared both of these traits in some way (trans-culturality and naturality-universality), could it finally be a limit-case of univocity that would not be polluted or even destroyed in its ideality by language’s necessary equivocality? In front of this hypothetical, trans-cultural, semi-natural object, what could the writer do? How could she/he apprehend it with words, assume and interiorise it in writing?

In *Aporias* Derrida mentioned an example of what could be such a trans-cultural noetic object, neither completely natural nor completely ideal; an “object” sharing something of both traits, since it is embodied in the culture of a natural-universal event:

Dying is neither entirely natural (biological) nor cultural. And the question of the limits articulated here is also the question of the border between cultures, languages, countries, nations, and religions, as well as that of the limit between a universal (although non-natural) structure and a differential (non-natural but cultural) structure (1993a: 42).

Death/dying as a semi-cultural/semi-universal “natural” noetic object (undecidable between the two) is the limit-case between all borders, all limits of any culture or memory that one would want to assume, interiorise or appropriate. Death is not only what can never be appropriated (being ex-propriation itself), but also what, while allowing the marking of limits (ending/limiting) makes them ultimately impossible, ruins the proper, making it improper, underdetermined (*a priori*) like Beckettian or Biblical mud. It does not matter how much one tries to appropriate, name or swallow it, death will always escape any utterance, any appropriation by language. As the mud in Beckett’s corpus, death is what language (*la langue*) will try vainly to swallow, as well as the “thing” on which all movements and distinctions are made both possible and impossible. It is the absolute lack of border –the great separation, gulf or chasm<sup>13</sup>– where all encounters between characters, writers, names, pronouns, particles, etc. can occur. In the same way as within Beckett’s corpus death shares a

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<sup>13</sup> For a presentation of death as a passage and separation between the seen and the unseen (ᾗδῆ : un-see : Hades), see the “great chasm” (χάσμα μέγα) between Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16:26.

potentiality of imagination and meaning with mud, this mud in its relation to language can be related to the recurrent fluids in Derrida's work (especially to the fluid "gl" of *Glas*).

#### IN DEATH "[...] THEY GREW TO BE AS ONE"

Our initial hypothesis finds here its core: If Beckett is a Derridean ghost and vice versa, it is through (the question of their own) death that they become spectral, or that Derrida becomes a ghost of Beckett, with his words dictated from an irretrievable past, from a "worn volume," or a memory not his own. It is in the question of death and in how both of them wrote on/from/through it, that they share a spectral, written, and imagined body. In other words, it is in the question of death as the ultimate dissolution of the sovereignty of the subject that they expose –at the limits of literature and philosophy– how such a supposed sovereignty was never so, since it was haunted from the beginning by the spectral, trembling character of its limits. Let us listen to the resonance of this trembling in "Circumfession," when, juxtaposing Augustine's narration of the death of his mother with the imminent death of his own, Derrida speaks of his own relation to death:

SA [...] he does not recount his death, it is still too near, *the only ally*, the most secure, it's to death that already I owe everything I earn, I have succeeded in making of it, as I have with god, it's the same thing, *my most difficult ally*, impossible but unfailingly faithful once you've got him in your game, it costs a great deal, believe me, a great deal of love [...] (172-173; my italics).

Death is thus here for Derrida that to which he owes everything that he has earned (just as to god, it's the same thing). According to this confession, since the beginning Derrida has invested in this belief in his ally, in death as god. This confession means that all his knowledge or understanding (linguistic, literary, philosophical, and other) ultimately comes out of death, that everything he has written comes from this last trembling limit–this last veil or hymen–that watches over all the other limits. Here, without completely surrendering his secret ally, Derrida exposes the secret belief of all his corpus and life. Because this secret would have ultimately watched over all his life –perhaps being the only thing able to summarize it– after confessing it Derrida can tell himself like Reader from *Ohio Impromptu*: "Nothing is left to tell" (2006c: 476).

If, thus, the secret, the pledge of all his life from the beginning –what could "assume and interiorize it" (Introduction, 102)– is death, this transforms him immediately, even if retroactively, from birth, into a ghost. This original death (even prenatal, and the figure of the unborn is common to both Beckett and Derrida) turns him too into a ghost of Beckett's Krapp hinting as well at his secret belief:

What I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely– [...] clear to me at last that the dark I have always struggled to keep under [*refouler*] is in reality my most –(*Krapp curses, switches off, winds tape forward, switches on again*)– unshutterable association until my dissolution of storm and night with the light of the understanding and the fire [...] (2006c: 226).

But since these are Krapp's words, what about Beckett himself? Years after composing this play, in talks with James Knowlson, he also –like Derrida with St. Augustine– doubles himself in Krapp's words, becoming too the confessional ghost of Derrida when he fills in the blanks of Krapp and exposes the secret as an alliance: "the dark [I have always struggled to keep under] was 'in reality my most– "[...] *my most precious ally*"" (Knowlson, 1997: 319).

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When we read these three confessions (Derrida's, Krapp's, and Beckett's) connected through filial, generative ties (author-character, author-author), or through semantic themes, how are we to understand "death," "dark," and "dissolution" taken as allies, and, especially as the most precious, difficult, the only one? It seems as if, in our sovereignties purportedly limited only by our mortality, there could be only one unique ally, a spectral double of myself, (my) death. If Krapp discloses it as what he has "always struggled to keep under," or in French to "*refouler*" (repress), how are we, as readers or spectators, to understand this gesture? In other words, how does one repress, keep in the dark, darkness, death itself? And if this secret lies there, darkness in darkness, unseen in unseen, how has it been through all the lives of these authors and characters their "most precious ally"? When this belief is expressed within a philosophical discourse, that is to say, in the naked voice of the writer, without the veil of a fiction or narrative, are we talking about the same death, darkness, or repression as when we hear and "see" them on stage? How are we to understand all these terms (death, dark, etc.) when they are expressed as an intention, notion or image that, apocalyptic, tries to *finally* clarify ["clear to me at last..."] (Beckett, 2006c: 226) the life, art, philosophy or discourse of a sovereign subject? The relation to language here as object and medium is different from what Derrida described in the introduction to Husserl's *Origin of Geometry*. This relation to the secret ally is a different relation to both univocity and clarity. Our initial spectral hypothesis means thus that this secret (death) that hides the secret (alliance of/with death) distinguishes our confessors (Derrida, Beckett, and Krapp) from other literary and philosophical attempts to explain or clarify a true "object" or truth itself. This relation in the form of the most difficult, the only alliance with what cannot be determined but which rather blurs any determination (with death as with one's [own] ghost) is what makes them and their texts spectral, making all the traditional epistemological and ontological forms of relation, as well as the notion of sovereignty tremble. If sovereign is the one who can give, make, and ultimately suspend the law, this legislative power only comes from this secret alliance with death, an alliance with the repressed secret that automatically unsettles all these laws. In other words, this spectral form of relation is thus a secret that, lying beyond or behind language, ultimately contains all language, all laws, and sovereign individuals in what Derrida terms a hauntology.<sup>14</sup> Living thus inside a space in some way vaster than any ontology, the terms of these relations do not possess this secret but are rather possessed by it. As the *unique* ally, and consequently, the only true form of

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<sup>14</sup> See Derrida, 1994: 161.

alliance, death and the dark are what both allows and ruins (simultaneously) any attempt at univocity, what allows univocity as the desire of a singular survival, while simultaneously making any attempt at *univocity* always other, giving it a behind or a beyond, making any univocal statement equivocal, a double or spectre of itself.

The secret relation or alliance cannot take the form of a relation to language like the one of Joyce's project, where the goal was to repeat and to take hold of the totality of equivocity in itself.<sup>15</sup> Here, language cannot be used in this semantic-accumulative way, because death and the dark are the impossibility of any synchronicity, and thus of any possibility of adding any quantity of meaning or signification in time. In death there is no one point where we could meet, in it we wait always for each other, knowing that it will be a failed rendezvous. But this secret does not imply a Husserlian reduction of language to "univocal and translatable elements" (Derrida, 1989: 103) either, because death or the dark cannot be univocal nor translatable, because every death is the impossible absolute idiom and, simultaneously, the lack of a singular voice. In other words, inside the dark secret of death, one cannot say, demarcate, or even trace a singular line. As with Proust's "double and mysterious furrow" (1329), the line here is always double and implies at least one repercussion, or, in other words, a quake, a tremor, a trembling of all lines and limits. In a relation to language dictated by death's secret: "expression is an impossible act" (2006d: 561) as a singular utterance without spectral indetermination, without a ghostly double haunting its very possibility.

#### A SPECTRAL HEDGEHOG

Nevertheless, if this secret with the form of a hauntology extends beyond any clear judgement of the type S/P, how does one say it, and to whom? To look at a possible answer, let us go back briefly to Beckett's stance in front of language, and particularly to his conception of *Murphy's* kite-flyer, Mr. Kelly, as "a poem useful in the depths where demand and supply coincide, and the prayer is god" (2009: 274). If Krapp is, like Mr. Kelly, a textual event, is his confession also a poem/prayer? And if Derrida's confession is also a prayer, was his secret ally revealed in "Circumfession" with the form of an apocalyptic poem exposing too the unseen as unseen? Let us remember the Beckettian poem/prayer: "the prayer is the god. Yes, prayer rather than poem, in order to be quite clear, because poems are prayers, of Dives and Lazarus one flesh" (2009: 274). The poem/prayer is constituted of the same flesh of Dives and Lazarus, inside death, where both characters dwell. The poem/prayer is this statement, the secret saying of the secret "in the depths where demand and supply coincide." This Beckettian poem is also, like Derrida's only ally, death, or the god. And if "the prayer is the god," this ultimately means that there is no god, no divinity or transcendence but the prayer/poem or the text as absolute separation. It is in the absolute separation of death where the poem/prayer is said or read. But in the secret that is separation (behind/beyond), in the dark secret of

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<sup>15</sup> This means that, if according to Deleuze and Guattari, both Joyce's and Beckett's work can be seen as minor literatures, it is in very different ways that they are minor and, thus, political.

dissolution and death, what is the essential trait of the prayer/poem? In other words, what is the poetic? For Derrida: “The poetic, let us say it, would be that which you desire to learn, but from and of the other, thanks to the other and under dictation, by heart” (1991: 227). The poetic performs thus a scene like the one of *Ohio Impromptu*. It is this moment when we learn (from/of the other) what we already know by memory. The other in this play is not only Reader reading to us, Listeners. It is also the spectral scene itself that allows and fosters the confusion. The other acts as the person with the unnamed “dear name,” or with the “dear face!” who says the “unspoken words” and, in its indetermination, projects spectral traits over Reader/Listener, and on “he” and “the man” who “appeared to him” as told in the reading. The other is who or what teaches the one the poetic, in the indetermination of who reads (to whom) and who listens (to whom). This indetermination is not an accident, but the essential effect of the poetic as the teaching and learning from/of the other. To learn by memory or by heart means to be constituted by this learning, to be, in the core or heart of one’s self: the other (it)self, the non-sovereign one or the impossibility of sovereignty. To learn this means to learn that the heart as the most proper, one’s own absolute and sovereign singularity (one’s impossible absolute idiom), is not such since it always comes and belongs to the spectral other. The other, according to Derrida, is thus nothing else but death itself, what refuses to be named “as such” (Derrida, 1993a: 76) in pure univocity. Therefore, the secret of death is the secret of the other; and our learning from, thanks to the other, is our learning from/of death, our unlearning of sovereignty as a learning of the poetic.

While this learning, the poetic, takes a wide variety of forms, to end let us follow briefly one of its incarnations. As Asja Szafraniec points out (50-53) the poetic appears in both Derrida’s and Beckett’s corpora as a hedgehog. The most significant trait of this poetic avatar is that *you*, as the addressed reader, can take it home. As the voice of *Company* explains: “You take pity on a hedgehog out in the cold and put it in an old hatbox with some worms” (2006d: 436). If you read the French version, “with some worms” becomes “avec une provision de vers” (2004: 38), with a provision of worms/verses, making this image a swarm between the figural and the literal, simultaneously literary images and bio- and zoo-logical words, as if these worms could never stop becoming verses, words already, and vice versa. As Derrida explains in “Che cos’è la poesia,” in the figure of the hedgehog, the poetic would be the chance of learning “out in the cold,” on “the road, absolute, solitary, rolled up in a ball, next to (it)self” (223). This is the chance of what risks itself in the utterance, between self and other, between culture and nature, ghostly *Gedächtnis* and living *Erinnerung*, in the automatism and mechanics of language. As a chance, this hedgehog would risk itself as the image of a “shared” separation, a “shared” singularity, and, potentially, of a “shared” sovereignty. Throughout our literary traditions, it would have said through Jules Renard’s hand: “You have to take me as I am and not squeeze too tightly” (Beckett, 2009: 254), and through Schlegel, it would have appeared as an essential trait of modernism, the fragment: “A fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog” (1991: 206). Thus, even while describing the absolute singularity or the separation from any totality or final tally, the poetic image of



the hedgehog cannot stop being translated from, of, and towards the other –like death.

The hedgehog as the poetic is thus this chance of an impossibility, of a secret alliance or a shared secret (the “dear face,” name, or “unspoken words” between Beckett and Derrida, as well as between all Readers and Listeners, between you and me). More importantly, it is the chance of both, the one and the other, the learned-by-heart dictation that absolves them of the interior/exterior that separates them, in other words, it is the chance of a disappearance or, at least, of a suspension of (the wish or desire of) sovereignty. The poetic-hedgehog is the secret of death/other risking itself every time on the road or way (*Weg*), risking to be smashed, run over, as it is pronounced. It risks itself as Derrida's response to the question “What is poetry?": “It sees itself, the response, *dictated to be poetic, by being poetic*. And for that reason, *it is obliged to address itself to someone, singularly to you* but as if to the being lost in anonymity, between city and nature, an imparted secret [...]” (1991: 223).

The poetic is, thus, necessarily an address. It is this singular address to *you*, but to a *you* “lost in anonymity” (1991: 223), in other words, to you, Listener, the spectre of Reader –and vice versa. It is through this addressed notion of the poetic that other/death risks itself to be said or written –or to be given a law by a sovereign. Consequently, because of the absolute anonymity/separation, the poetic always “costs a great deal.” One has to pay a lot for writing death or the spectral other in the way they are written: in a poetic address. But what exactly is this price? What happens when we take the poetic-hedgehog home, into the economic house (*οἶκος*), and put it in an old hatbox, full of worms/verses? How do we “assume and interiorise,” ingest what we have attempted to get out of the road, of the general path of translation and expression? Once we have this poetic-hedgehog, once we try to apprehend its value or meaning above the “depths where demand and supply coincide,” back in the economy of our home (*οἶκος*), we discover “something wrong there” (2006b: 500). As Beckett's *Company* tells you: when you wake up the next day, a suspicion takes hold of you, “[t]hat rather than do as you did you had perhaps better let good alone and the hedgehog pursue its way” (2006d: 437). But how to let (it) go, especially when it (*ça*), the poetic, has traversed your heart as memory, that is to say, when it has transformed any personal *Erinnerung* as a singular/idiomatic memory into a ghostly *Gedächtnis*, an anonymous, technical general memory? How to let it be alone when it exists only as that which, by letting itself be dictated to you, by giving you your own voice, has taught *you* to you, giving you your heart, a monstrous gift? “You did not yet know the heart, you learn it thus” (1991: 231).

What did you learn when you went back to the hutch where you left the hedgehog? “You are on your back in the dark and have never forgotten what you found then. The mush. The stench” (Beckett, 2006d: 437). “*Cette bouillie. Cette infection*” (Beckett, 2004: 41). You learn thus: the hedgehog, the poetic, should not be appropriated or taken home, even if it teaches you your heart, self, and image. The image of the hedgehog as the poetic is not of a pure language, or of univocity again. It is not the dream of a singular univocity achieved through reduction or agglomeration, an univocity that could found sovereignty again. The chance of the

poetic-hedgehog is not something to be done or created, a product of the will or labour, nor is it “pure poetry.” Humble, on the ground, there is nothing pure about the poetic. It is a stench, a mush, an infection, mud, a catastrophe: “nothing to be done (*poiein*), neither ‘pure poetry,’ nor pure rhetoric, nor *reine Sprache*, nor ‘setting-forth-of-truth-in-the-work.’ Just this contamination, and this crossroads, this accident here. This turn, the turning round of *this catastrophe*” (1991: 233, 235). We remain on that country road and begin again with Estragon: “Nothing to be done” (2006c: 3).

As we said, above all the poetic should not be brought back to the economy of the home, the absolutely sovereign land or the circle. It should not be appropriated as another term of a relation, assumed or interiorized as a negative moment of a dialectic, the opposite of reason, knowledge, or spirit. Before transforming our “failure” to incorporate, assume, or interiorise it into another instance of a general definition of art, poetry, or theory, it will always be better to leave, let things go, even at the risk of appearing mad, monstrous, like a psychiatrist’s case:

I know that all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation. I know that my inability to do so places myself, and perhaps an innocent, in what I think is still called an unenviable situation, familiar to psychiatrists. (*Prepares to go*) (2006d: 563).

Thus, the poetic should not be brought back neither to philosophy, literature, poetry, nor to art. Even if it always does. It is not a term in any of these relations. It is the other/death, and the secret of both. It is not part of fiction, theatre, or theory, even if it appears there. It is rather the price to pay in between all discourses, the price of attempting to say, to apprehend it, to give it a law. If as a secret it is still a poem, it is the Beckettian/Derridean poem-prayer: lying under language, below the economy of exchange where something and nothing are different, underneath all calculation, a poem-gift “useful in the depths where demand and supply coincide” (Beckett, 2009: 274). The poem/prayer is god itself only as separation. It is addressed always to *you*, anonymous and spectral, to whom the memory of this secret/death/other, this birth of the heart entrusts and imparts itself, opening and tearing our –and all– sovereignty apart. The poem/prayer is the separation and desire of this absolutely anonymous *you*, and it appears in the absolute distance, in the uncrossable “great gulf” (χάσμα μέγα) between Dives and Lazarus. This poem “is confided like a prayer –that’s safer– to a certain exteriority of the automaton [...] to the automobile that surprises your passion and bears down on you as if from an outside: *auswendig*, ‘by heart’ in German” (1991: 231).

The heart and the memory, coming from the other, come always from without, *aus*, and not from the inside of a sovereign self, to whom they do not belong. As subjects and lands, we do not know, we cannot legislate this “without,” this “exterior,”

this secret desert growing inside of us.<sup>16</sup> As it happens with the person who sends the man to Listener in *Ohio Impromptu*, the unpronounced “dear name,” we never learn it. In both Beckett’s and Derrida’s corpora, it remains unpronounced, secret, but always there. As a secret “outside” that creates and teaches the heart, it is your most intimate ally, the only, unsovereign, *you*.

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<sup>16</sup> “The desert grows / Awe to whomever harbours deserts [...]” as Nietzsche says.

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