

7. Knowing Nothing:

Wilde and Beckett Deranging the Aphorism

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Lady Bracknell. [...] I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack. [After some hesitation.] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady B. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. [...]

– Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Act I (1895; 1899; *Earnest* 265)

Vladimir. [...] At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. [Pause.] [...]

– Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, Act II (1956; *Waiting* 84-85)

To admit to ‘knowing nothing’ might be taken as a calculated appeal to populism, especially in the rarefied situation that is ‘play-going’.¹ In most intellectual *milieux*, to confess to ignorance invites the sympathy if not of one’s interlocutors then of one’s auditors. What could possibly get an audience – even, or especially, a bourgeois audience – onside more than the admission of being outside all this ‘cleverness’, all this ‘literariness’? Most obviously, to ‘know nothing’ is a comic ploy, and offers the promise of comic relief: ‘I am a fool; watch me be made fun of.’ Its promise may even be explicitly theatrical: ‘I am a Fool; watch me *make* the fun.’ There is a long

theatrical tradition behind the Fool's claim of/to 'knowing nothing' which, here, links two Irish comic playwrights whose relationship is surprisingly underexplored: one belonging to the Victorian *fin-de-siècle*, the other belonging to the period that characterises modernism or (as some scholars have contested) postmodernism. Rarely are Oscar Wilde and Samuel Beckett discussed in the same breath, even under the aegis of 'Irishness' or of 'humour'. And yet what unites their self-proclaimed textual ignoramuses is an unexpected urge towards aphorism, especially the kind of aphorism that tries to undo everything the usual aphorism does: typically, to convey an acknowledged wisdom artfully and memorably. If that sounds disingenuous of these figures, then it is true that disingenuousness plays its part. It is also true that the protagonists of Wilde and Beckett are generally not dissimulating when they confess ignorance; more often, they are being 'honest', as honest as they can be, and are wanting to claim something – call it the virtue – of simplicity. This is consistent with the type of ignorance being invoked in the examples that follow, a wilful or else *willed* ignorance which relates more to life-knowledge (experience) than to book-knowledge (erudition).

These characters consider themselves not just unschooled but unworldly, unsophisticated, artless. They find themselves at sea among the more knowing aesthetes who populate and/or author the texts they are in. Their strident admission of 'knowing nothing' in some ways connects them with the epistemological Nihilists: they know Nothing more intimately than they know something, which of course frames Nothing as a kind of something. But from their own vantage point, they do not subscribe to anything so arch. This is not to say they are totally estranged from the effort towards Truth, philosophically understood, nor from the aphoristic instincts of the most memorable truths presented or represented. The truths they utter are

apparently unwitting, and yet desperately witty, and what they contribute to knowledge and the nature of knowing is seemingly accidental, in true comic spirit. Part of their claim, and part of their appeal, lies in their refusal, ultimately, to concern themselves with the material world, and in this respect characters such as Wilde's 'Jack/Ernest' and Beckett's Vladimir have Harold Skimpole from Dickens's *Bleak House* (1853) as their forebear. Skimpole, too, displays an aptitude for aphorism at the same time as he overtly denies having any knowledge of anything, which invites the question of the aphorism's connection to knowledge and truth. The first part of this essay will consider this question as it relates to Wilde and Beckett, and the second part will look closely at a set of aphoristic disavowals of knowledge which, when put alongside each other, lends the two writers a personal relation.²

The relationship of aphorism to truth is not straightforward. In his *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (2013), J.A. Cuddon defines 'aphorism' as 'a terse statement of a truth or dogma; a pithy generalization, which may or may not be witty' (46). He elaborates: 'a successful aphorism exposes and condenses at any rate a part of the truth, and is an aperçu or insight' (46). This is somewhat destabilising, as far as definitions go, not merely because it introduces quite different synonyms ('aperçu', 'insight') but because it hints at 'partial' truths and *unsuccessful* aphorisms. The online *OED* is less qualifying: 'a "definition" or concise statement of a principle in any science'; 'a short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import'. W.H. Auden advises us, in the preamble to his *Faber Book of Aphorisms* (1964), that, unlike the epigram, which 'need only be true of a single case', the aphorism 'must convince every reader that it is either universally true or true of every member of the class to which it refers' ('Foreword' vii). Its claim to truth is what makes the aphorism a sober form by comparison with its cousin: 'an epigram must be amusing

and brief, but an aphorism, though it should not be boring and must be succinct in style, need not make the reader laugh' (vii).

The collection *Oscar Wilde's Wit and Wisdom* does not make such a distinction, but instead offers up 'Epigrams, aphorisms and other bon mots gleaned from Wilde's enduringly popular plays, essays and conversation'— 'gleaned from' obscuring the radical decontextualisation that occurs in any book of quotations.³ Leaving this point aside for the moment, the collection promises 'amusing, thought-provoking observations that resonate with truth and profundity beneath their comic surface'.⁴ Clearly, for the editors of this volume, truths may be witty; however, an observation that 'resonates' with truth is not the same thing as 'a general truth succinctly stated', as the synopsis to Auden's book has it, or 'a truth of general import' (*OED*). But then we already know, because Wilde's Algernon memorably informs us, that the aphorism is a truism that undermines a general truth. As Algy says of one of his own aphorisms in Act I of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: 'It is perfectly phrased! and quite as true as any observation in civilized life should be' (*Earnest* 268). Truth, for Algy, is only incidental to its stylishness, its formal perfection.

Wilde himself would have objected to any suggestion of 'dogma' or scientific 'principle', for dogma has no place in aesthetics. In his early review of Pater's *Appreciations* (1889) Wilde wrote that 'in matters of art, at any rate, thought is inevitably coloured by emotion, and so is fluid rather than fixed, and, recognising its dependence upon moods and upon the passion of fine moments, will not accept the rigidity of a scientific formula or a theological dogma' (qtd. in McGowan 428). In light of this remark, the typical fixity of the aphorism would have been most uncongenial to him. Gary Morson observes that for Oscar Wilde, unlike for earlier

aphorists such as La Rochefoucauld or (to a lesser extent) Swift, ‘truth is just another empty moral category or another form of prudery’ (*Long* 87). It is typically paradoxical of Wilde to render truth-telling as a form of narrow-mindedness. Sandra Siegel underscores the unusualness of Wilde’s position by explaining that the ‘Wildean universe’ is ‘a world governed by an ironic principle of the perpetual reversal of the truth of all utterance’ (21).

Wilde’s project, conceived as a recalibration of all truths, resembles the contemporary Nietzschean ‘attempt at a revaluation of all values’: Nietzsche’s subtitle to his work, *The Will to Power* (1901), as adverted to in his *Genealogy of Morals* (1887) (160). Such a project, tied as it is to ‘utterance’, would need to begin at the level of grammar. As several critics, notably Cristina Saffiotti, have already noticed, Wilde dispenses with categories such as truth and history ‘with a flick of the subordinate sentence’ (211). In this case, the subordinate sentence to which Saffiotti is referring is from *The Critic as Artist* (1891), Part I: ‘But, to get rid of the details of history, which are always wearisome and usually inaccurate, let us say generally, that the forms of art have been due to the Greek critical spirit’ (*Major* 255). Others might object that this kind of formulation hardly dispenses with history; it merely highlights the original nature of Wilde’s proposition, in a way that is supremely knowing about its own naughtiness, as if Wilde were to say: annoying things, those ‘details of history’, that only impede the flow of my argument.

But to return to the ‘sentence’ that is the root word of the *OED*’s definition of ‘aphorism’ (‘a short pithy sentence containing a truth of general import’). In his book on Kafka’s aphorisms, *Constructive Destruction* (1987), Richard Gray pinpoints the historical moment at which the aphorism’s potential for undermining established values starts to become its defining feature, and admirably charts the ‘critical,

destructive posture’ of late nineteenth-century aphorists such as Nietzsche and Karl Kraus. Gray also helpfully deconstructs the idea of a ‘unified trans-national aphoristic tradition’ (39), identifying a libertarian German model that goes against the French model as practised by La Rochefoucauld and Chamfort, for example, with their moralising ‘sentences’ that reformulate received ideas in a ‘striking and rhetorical manner’, with ‘brilliant form’ taking precedence over original content (38). Again, the *OED* is helpful here (under sense 4a): ‘sentence’: ‘a quoted saying of some eminent person, an apothegm; also, a pithy or pointed saying, an aphorism, maxim’ (after the Latin *sententia* as the rendering of Greek γνώμη *gnome*).

This proximity of the apothegm and the sentence invokes an earlier century of courtly wit: the eighteenth. During this period, in the courts that also functioned as theatres and auditoria, the wittiness of one’s pronouncements went a long way towards securing the utterer a favourable royal ‘pronouncement’ – in the larger sense of ‘decree’, delivering one into a state either of social favour or disgrace.⁵ The judicial overtones of a term like ‘sentence’ were not lost on Wilde, who was ruefully to remark in his prison letter *De Profundis* (1897): ‘All trials are trials for one’s life, just as all sentences are sentences of death’ (*Soul* 156). This observation has a deadly irony, given that Wilde’s two-year sentence of hard labour was in effect a death sentence for the writer, whose health on being admitted to prison was in a delicate state. But there is a more subtle irony at work here, too, if one admits the *double entendre* of ‘sentence’ (as ‘aphorism’), which self-reflexively unsettles the aphoristic first half of Wilde’s quip (‘All trials are trials for one’s life’) in order to suggest the moribundity of all aphorisms (‘all sentences are sentences of death’).

Clearly, sententiousness – ‘abounding in pointed maxims, aphoristic; affectedly or pompously formal’ (sense 3 in the *OED*) – as a feature of discourse or style,

bothered Beckett as much as it bothered Wilde. The aesthete Algernon may be heard in Beckett's redefinition of what an exemplary 'sentence' should be (i.e. shapely), as rehearsed to theatre critic Harold Hobson in 1956: 'I take no sides. I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. [...] "Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned"'. That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters' (Hobson 153). It is significant that this sentence (or sentences) are not to be found in faithful translations of Augustine, even though English dramatist Robert Greene famously attributes them to him (in a much less aphoristic form).⁶ At other times, Beckett would kill a 'sentence' when it was proving unshapely, or just too long, as in this example from his post-war novella *First Love* (1946; English translation of 1973):

It had something to do with lemon trees, or orange trees, I forget, that is all I remember, and for me that is no mean feat, to remember it had something to do with lemon trees, or orange trees, I forget, for of all the other songs I have ever heard in my life, and I have heard plenty, it being apparently impossible, physically impossible short of being deaf, to get through this world, even my way, without hearing singing, I have retained nothing, not a word, not a note, or so few words, so few notes, that, that what, that nothing, this sentence has gone on long enough. (*First Love* 76)

A sentence such as this one re-enacts in its very circuitry (or circuitousness) what Beckett perceives went wrong with the Victorian novel. Part of the pleasure of these sentences – a pleasure Beckett surely shared – is that they not only gleefully critique

circumlocution but they also impishly thwart the aphoristic, one of Beckett's keynotes, in order to make their point. This they do by repetition, variation and revision, and by substituting the mental acuity of the aphorism for amnesia. Elsewhere, Beckett's corrective spirit took another form: *aphorismus*. This is a rhetorical device whereby 'a point is made or a description amplified by questioning the force or applicability of a word or an aphorism' (Lanham 17). Often this kind of manoeuvre takes the form of a close attention to the proverbial – and *The Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* reminds us that 'The proverb is often aphoristic' (Cuddon 46) – as a means of questioning its continued relevance or puissance: to surprise it in the way that its novelty had once surprised. Beckett's habit of correcting clichés performs just this kind of cultural revision. Consider the clichés 'No way in' / 'No way out' as they emerge in 'Imagination Dead Imagine' (1965): 'No way in, go in, measure' (182). As Rubin Rabinovitz reflects, Beckett 'was not content merely to quote his favourite aphorisms: he often revised them'; 'It must have occurred to Beckett that with sufficient repetition one generation's witticisms become another's clichés; and so he added polish to those that had lost their lustre' (204). The idea of revising or polishing an aphorism to make it more truthful (or pleasing) seems somehow irreverent, self-aggrandising, ultimately doomed. And yet, this is just what Beckett does, in instance after instance, in the greater service of setting up a new imaginative *topos*.⁷

If Beckett's complex relationship with aphorism emerged, on the one hand, in the frustrating of the old clichés and, on the other, in pithy Eliotic complaints such as 'I grow gnostic. It is the last phase' (10 May 1934, *Letters* 1:209) – recalling the poet's 'I grow old...I grow old ... / I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled' (Eliot, *Poems*, 9) from 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock' (1915) – Wilde's

equally complex relationship with aphorism materialised in similar reversals. As Wilde cautioned in a letter to Whistler dated 23 February 1885, ‘Be warned in time, James; and remain, as I do, incomprehensible: to be great is to be misunderstood’ (*Letters* 171). Owing to its embrace of obscurantism, this is the type of aphorism that might be described as an *anti*-aphorism. It works by a simple substitution (in this case, ‘To be great is to be *understood*’), and has the effect of mocking the aphorist. Henry James found this to be a ‘spurious’ method of talk, ‘witty’ but not really ‘clever’: ‘Wilde was frequently guilty of the *trick* of inverting a commonplace’, he informed an audience at the University Club of St Louis not long after Wilde’s death (Lionberger 6; my emphasis). Yet while Wilde is praising opacity with his remark, the line has a wonderful clarity: it *says* so much, implicitly, about its author, who wanted to be apprehended if not by the many then certainly by the few.⁸

Possibly Beckett had Wilde in mind when he wrote in *The Unnamable* (1958), ‘Dear incomprehension, it’s thanks to you I’ll be myself, in the end’ (37), which relies on the paradox of attributing to someone or something else the essence of one’s selfhood, although Beckett’s jest may have had more to do with the incomprehensibility of death, figured as ‘the end’.⁹ It is likely – and James does not give Wilde credit for this – that Wilde was opting out of the Victorian frenzy for the scientific method, for clarity and logic, for facts and cleverness. In an exchange like the following, between Algernon (the aphorist) and Jack (the fool), which functions (in a similar way to Wilde’s criticism) as a parody of the Socratic dialogue, it is not immediately clear whose side Wilde is on, if anyone’s:

Algernon. All women become like their mothers. That is their tragedy. No man does. That’s his.

Jack. Is that clever?

Algernon. It is perfectly phrased! and quite as true as any observation in civilised life should be.

Jack. I am sick to death of cleverness. Everybody is clever nowadays. You can't go anywhere without meeting clever people. The thing has become an absolute public nuisance. I wish to goodness we had a few fools left.

Algernon. We have.

Jack. I should extremely like to meet them. What do they talk about?

Algernon. The fools? Oh! about the clever people, of course.

Jack. What fools!

(Earnest 268)

The idea that 'cleverness' has become socially unacceptable ('an absolute public nuisance') is highly amusing and a small victory in repartee for Jack; and yet Jack's ignorance of his own 'foolishness' means that once again we are back to laughing *at* him. Algernon-qua-aphorist is roundly mocked by the epithet 'clever', and yet he is no ordinary aphorist since he has no desire to tell the truth. His aphorisms are decidedly anti-aphoristic, or pseudo-aphoristic; like his love-interest, Gwendolen, he embodies the cynical stance that 'In matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing' (*Earnest* 295). Algy's facetiousness brings to mind that of Wilde's other great contrarian Lord Henry in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), when he says of the actress Sibyl Vane: 'There are only two kinds of people who are really fascinating – people who know absolutely everything, and people who know absolutely nothing' (*Picture* 73). But how can Jack, or Sibyl, be deemed ignorant when the categories of 'knowing everything' and 'knowing nothing' are themselves

entirely artificial and rhetorical, and the characters who make the judgements are hardly sympathetic?

Beckett, like Wilde, presents aphorisms that both resemble and resist aphorism. 'Nothing to tell that's not better untold' he notoriously quips in a letter to Barbara Bray of 1971 (Beckett, *Letters* 4:256), which takes Macbeth's 'tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing' (V.iv) to its natural conclusion. There are those who maintain that Beckett is not so much vexed by aphorism as *beyond* aphorism. Such is the position of Hugh Kenner, who writes of *All That Fall* (1957) that it 'is too terrible for apothegm, epigram, cadence, or plaint' (174). In Kenner's view, 'dead language' (174) might supply Beckett with plenty of material to revivify, but language itself is ultimately defeated by the terribleness of death, a fact registered in this play through silence or, elsewhere, through the post-apocalyptic stage that defines so many of Beckett's *mise-en-scènes*. The aphorism, ordinarily understood, not to mention the notion of 'truth', has no place in such a setting.

All this is merely to suggest the inadequacy of 'aphorist' as a designation for Wilde or Beckett. I am not the first person to make this point. Sandra Siegel is right to remark that 'As a Celt, Wilde could not utter aphorisms without unsettling them' (21), which invites one to view the aphorism as an imperialistic form. Of course, the same could be said for Beckett. Both writers clearly had an unsettled, adversarial relationship with English culture and the English language. Irish critic Declan Kiberd authoritatively demonstrates that an 'Anglo-Irish antithesis informed Wilde's world of opposites and doubles' (292), and explores Wilde's interest in the art of 'lying'. This substitution of 'lying' for 'truth-telling', which many put down to Wilde's perversity, is deeply informed by the writer's (own) stance as a contrarian. In 'The Truth of Masks' (1891), Wilde insists, aphoristically, that '... in art there is no such thing as a

universal truth. A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true' (*Complete* 1986:1078). In a similar spirit, the bookish Mr Erskine in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, who has 'the world' not on his shoulders but on 'his shelves', quips: 'Well, the way of paradoxes is the way of truth. To test Reality we must see it on the tight-rope. When the Verities become acrobats we can judge them' (36). The figure of the acrobat creates an image of truth turned on its head, which certainly seems to capture the tenor of the Wildean paradox. As an apparently absurd or self-contradictory statement which investigation may nevertheless prove to be well-founded or true, the paradox, not the aphorism, seems to be temperamentally closer to Wilde. Thus, in the Wildean universe, 'the lie' is always more expressive of truth than any truism could aim to be.

In 'The Decay of Lying' (1891), one of his two relentlessly epigrammatic aesthetic dialogues, Wilde invents what is perhaps his (or his character Vivian's) most controversial 'aphorism': 'Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things, is the proper aim of Art' (*Major* 239). Like many of Wilde's axioms, it is controversial because it is decontextualized: removed from its dialogic setting by being cut loose from the deliberately posturing aesthetic critic, Vivian, and instead attributed to Wilde himself.¹⁰ Taken at face value, as Wilde perhaps wants it to be taken, it is the kind of aphorism that works by contradicting a received wisdom. Embedded within it is a rebuttal of Keats's aphoristic 'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' ('Ode', 1820, l. 49, 289). However, since Keats's line, like Wilde's, is uttered by someone other than the author of the text (in Keats's poem, the urn) and hence overlaid with irony, Wilde's reversal of this so-called Keatsian sentiment might in fact be closer to an *echo*.¹¹

Ultimately, what Wilde might be said to object to is the insipidity of abstract truths; lies simply have more personality, and more life (urns, after all, are the receptacles of ashes, as Beckett reminds us in his one-act drama of 1963, *Play*, in

which the characters appear in urns and mock the idea of truth). And this squares with Vivian's view of the ancients: 'Lying for the sake of gaining some immediate personal advantage, for instance – lying with a moral purpose, as it is usually called – though of late it has been rather looked down upon, was extremely popular with the antique world' (*Major* 237). By writing in praise of lying – in all its guises but especially lying 'for its own sake' – Wilde is in effect putting contemporary expressions of aestheticism in sympathy with the antique.

If Wilde believed that lies were more artful and more telling than truths, particularly when it came to self-fashioning, Beckett would have been in complete agreement: 'all these lies and legends – ' he confessed to his biographer Deirdre Bair, 'the more there are [surrounding me], the more interesting I become' (2). Both writers were uncompromisingly mysterious – a quality belonging equally to their lives and work – and did little to dispel the mendacities and mythologies that others spun around them. Yet for Beckett, the creative effort was closer to contamination than fabrication or deception. Again, as he admitted to Bair: 'I couldn't have done it otherwise. Gone on, I mean. I could not have gone through the awful wretched mess of life without having left a stain upon the silence' (640), where 'gone on' is suggestive both of enduring and of prattling, with 'stain' offering further shades of suggestion (is it simply a 'tint' or more troublingly a 'taint'?), and resulting in the confusion of 'silence' (does it refer to the 'wretched mess of life' or the hush after death?) and the conundrum of synaesthesia (how is *silence* even able to be *stained*?). There is also the suggestion in this remark of what words might do *posthumously*, of what they leave behind in the silence that follows death; but then this would imply that words went on living after their authors ceased, and we know what Beckett felt about this. On this subject, critics remind us that Beckett thought language had

already been ‘abstracted to death’ (qtd in Ricks 53), which is to say, become generalised, impersonal, disengaged, distracted, to the point of becoming, as it were, *post-mortem*. The registration of the death of language, or at least the end of an expressive relationship between language and the self, what the historian of aphorism and Kafka scholar Richard Gray calls ‘linguistic scepticism’ (60-62), was deeply felt by both Wilde and Beckett. This might account for their customary ambivalence to the aphorism – which tended in the past to have a kind of supreme faith in its own trenchancy – despite a shared diet of Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and other masters of the form. Whether motivated by this type of scepticism or something else (pessimism? perversity? contrariness?), both writers took pleasure in deranging the aphorism and making its limits visible/risible. In doing this, it is possible that they had in mind the Greek roots of the term aphorism: *apo* + *horizein*, to limit, define. In this understanding, theirs was a programmatic exposure of the *limitations* of aphoristic thought and expression. But it is equally possible that they wanted to salvage something from the aphorism, out of its ruins, in order to overcome another set of limitations, this time connected to their own individual crises of ‘knowing’. The result was the collision of modernist doubt and iconoclasm with eighteenth-century sureness of wit and confectionary flourish.

At times it is the confectionary flourish, or broken-off piece of such, that one encounters in Beckett. In this vein, Beckett’s paean to the aphoristic spirit of Samuel Johnson, the unfinished dramatic sketch ‘Human Wishes’, collected in his *Disjecta* (1983) – the title is taken from the Latin phrase, *disjecta membra*, or ‘scattered remains’ – never actually features Johnson (or the character known as Levett, who is also a proto-Godot figure), although it takes its truncated title from Johnson’s long poem *The Vanity of Human Wishes* (1749). Itself a fragment, ‘Human Wishes’ is full

of the decontextualized, de-historicised fragments of sub-Johnsonian ‘sentences’ which emerge from the mouths of several women who wait in a drawing room for this character to appear.

Miss Carmichael: Upon my soul, Madam, your perceptions are very fine, very fine indeed, uncommonly fine in all respects.

Mrs Williams: I may be old, I may be blind, halt and maim, I may be dying of a pituitous defluxion, but my hearing is unimpaired.

Miss Carmichael: And your colloquial powers. (*Human* 156)

Recalling the demurrals against Dr Johnson in his day, Mrs Williams is here being mocked for her prolixity and Latinate language (her ‘pituitous defluxion’), and Miss Carmichael is surely being ironic when she commends Mrs Williams for her ‘colloquial powers’ – for ‘colloquial’ Mrs Williams is not. On the other hand, the elder woman’s tendency towards cliché (‘I may be old, I may be blind’, etc) does suggest that her powers of colloquialism are undiminished, in which case Miss Carmichael may be hinting that Mrs Williams would do well to ‘clear her language,’ in the words of Johnson himself, ‘from colloquial barbarisms’.¹² But there is an earlier sense of ‘colloquial’: ‘pertaining to colloquy; conversational’ (*OED* sense 1). Not only does Beckett wish to compete with Johnson in his familiarity with the dictionary and his facility for the crystalline ‘sentence’, he also manufactures a kind of posthumous salon, where he and Johnson get to converse, even collaborate.¹³ While the aphorism, viewed one way, may seem to limit and fix, viewed another way, it appears to cut loose, to invite dialogue and riposte and extension, rather like the fragment – modernist form *par excellence* – itself.

One of the first critics to juxtapose the modernist fragment with the ancient form of the aphorism was Simon Critchley. Somewhat against the grain, Critchley makes a case not for the polish or ‘finish’ of the aphorism but for its contingency: ‘Fragments are traces of an intense and agile aphoristic *energy*, a power of absolutely unlimited extension and intensity’ (125). This has ramifications for authorial selfhood, since ‘The fragment opens up the possibility of collective and anonymous writing, the possibility of genius as a multiple personality’ (125). As much as one recognises the attraction in Beckett to multiplicity, to abandon and profusion, to ‘genius as a multiple personality’, one senses an even greater attraction at work: to genius as a *negative* personality. Here is Malone at his self-effacing best: ‘The loss of consciousness for me was never any great loss’ (*Malone* 7). Casting the fragment as aphoristic suggests, conversely, that an aphorism could somehow be unfinished, abbreviated, broken apart or broken off, cut short. This is perhaps why both Wilde and Beckett are fond of aphorisms (or else anti-aphorisms) that substitute received wisdoms about life for quips about *death*: ‘Birth was the death of him’ (*Piece* 425) is a supreme instance of this tendency in Beckett’s *A Piece of Monologue* (1982). ‘Thinking is the most unhealthy thing in the world, and people die of it just as they die of any other disease’ (*Major* 216), Vivian tries to convince Cyril in Wilde’s ‘The Decay of Lying’.

In Wilde’s final days he is reputed to have quipped, at the mention of an exorbitant fee for a surgical procedure, ‘Ah, well, then, I suppose that I shall have to die beyond my means’; and then, finally, of the wallpaper in the hotel room where he lay dying: ‘One of us must go’.¹⁴ While aphorisms, and, for that matter, anti-aphorisms, undoubtedly show the presence of mind that characterises the sharpest wit, they also show, as Garrett Stewart argues, the admission of absence that comes with a

peculiarly postmodernist straining towards self-deconstruction: these characters (and personae, in the case of Wilde) are aware that they are born simultaneously with the utterance and so die coterminously with it (320). Yet, it is not quite as simple, or as prescriptive, as that, either. When Malone quips ‘Soon I shall be quite dead at last, and so on’ (*Malone* 35), the juxtaposition of the trite verbal formulae ‘at last’ and ‘and so on’ suggests that, on the contrary, nothing is ever over, at least not for the characters with the most memorable lines.

* * *

Facetiousness in the face of death is surely the final stage in any programme to puncture the illusions, and illusoriness, of life. In this context, it is not surprising to discover in the work of Wilde and Beckett a series of disavowals of knowledge and/or wisdom itself. Beckett was perhaps more committed to this deliberate procedure of un-knowing, as it were, than Wilde, since Beckett often opined that the living and the dead were as one, and that nothing was worth knowing, or (in his terms), that Nothing was the only thing worth knowing, whereas Wilde could never pretend to total desolation. ‘The truth is he’s looking for me to kill me, to have me dead like him, dead like the living’, asserts one of Beckett’s nameless narrators: ‘He knows all that, but it’s no help his knowing it, I don’t know it, I know nothing’ (‘Texts for Nothing: 4’, 114). According to Beckett’s biographer, James Knowlson, this tendency in the writer’s work partly came about after a ‘revelation’ Beckett had as a young man of that ‘the dark’ was his ‘most precious ally’, which led to his subsequent resolve to show ‘man as non-knower’ existing in a state of rational contradiction (Beckett qtd. in Knowlson 352-53).

There are characters in Sartre and Camus who may have been at home in the kind of world Beckett imagined; in the Anglophone novel, by contrast, the ‘non-knower’ is often a purely comical figure, the subject of biting satire. Dickens’ Harold Skimpole certainly seems the natural progenitor of the Wildean if not the Beckettian ignoramus. Skimpole first appears in *Bleak House* in an early chapter entitled ‘Quite at Home’, where he is described by the narrator, Esther Summerson, as ‘being not at all like the manner or appearance of a man who had advanced in life, by the usual road of years, cares, and experiences’ (89), and from the first shows himself to be quite adept at making the most of other characters’ hospitality and charity. In the following exchange with the pragmatic John Jarndyce, Skimpole states his philosophy most succinctly:

‘The universe,’ [Jarndyce] observed, ‘makes rather an indifferent parent, I am afraid.’

‘O! I don’t know!’ cried Mr. Skimpole, buoyantly.

‘I think I do know,’ said Mr. Jarndyce.

‘Well!’ cried Mr. Skimpole, ‘you know the world (which in your sense is the universe), and I know nothing of it, so you shall have your way. But if I had mine,’ glancing at the cousins, ‘there should be no brambles of sordid realities in such a path as that. It should be strewn with roses; it should lie through bowers, where there was no spring, autumn, nor winter, but perpetual summer. Age or change should never wither it. The base word money should never be breathed near it!’ (93)

Of course, Skimpole is a hypocrite, a naked opportunist who is much better at calculating the profit of any given situation than even the trained accountants and lawyers in the novel. Yet his sham idealism, arrayed in the odic terms of an Enobarbus ('Age or change should never wither it'), or in the bardic strains of a Southey or Longfellow ('perpetual summer'), offers an antidote to the materialism of the Victorian novel, not to mention Victorian society. In the passage above, Skimpole pays lip-service to something like the stirrings of British Aestheticism – at one point he calls himself an 'epicure' (95) – but wants to align himself more with the Wordsworthian naivety of the child. As the magnanimous John Jarndyce explains to his young charges: 'He is a child – an absolute child. [...] The idea of Harold Skimpole with designs or plans, or knowledge of consequences! Ha, ha, ha!' (101). Skimpole's own recourse to, and identification with, 'the child' naturally leaves him open to the charge of 'childishness', commonly understood,¹⁵ and the other characters have much jest with this term, in the same way that Jack in the second act of *The Importance of Being Earnest* unwittingly puns on the adjective 'childish' by wanting to be christened (as 'Ernest') so late in life and for the wrong reasons: 'Oh! I don't see much fun in being christened along with other babies. It would be childish' (*Earnest* 279).

An exceptionalist, with no idea of time or money, the simpleton Skimpole wants just to be allowed to 'live' (91). Yet, as a person who wants simply *to be* (rather than *to do* or *to earn*), he is much closer to the aesthete than to the child in his posture of cultivated idleness. The height of his disingenuousness occurs when he insists: 'I will do anything to give you pleasure, but it seems an idle form – a superstition' (675). He certainly displays an aesthete's fondness for the aphorism. While Dickens' reader is invited to see through Harold Skimpole, he or she is at the same time

encouraged to be seduced by, or at least charmed by, Skimpole's cynical misreading of proverbs such as: 'Live, and let live, we say [...]. Live upon your practical wisdom, and let us live upon you!' (677). While he claims to know nothing, Skimpole reveals a propensity for argument and thought to which a real philistine like the bailiff 'Coavinses', by contrast, who comes to escort Skimpole to debtors' prison, simply has no access:

'But what did you think upon the road?' [asked Skimpole.]

'Wot do you mean?' growled Coavinses, with an appearance of strong resentment. 'Think! I've got enough to do, and little enough to get for it, without thinking. Thinking!' (with profound contempt). (98-99)

Skimpole is worth sustained consideration here because he is a brilliantly exaggerated study of the comic faux-naïf type, and so introduces a set of questions about ignorance that may also apply to the 'conscious' fools of Wilde and Beckett. While these characters all share a certain claim to simplicity, what perhaps makes Skimpole a closer relative of Wilde's simpletons is period-specific. Skimpole is the subject of a typically Victorian satire on self-interest, of the kind Wilde trained on his most empty-headed aesthetes; by contrast, Beckett's 'non-knowers' are troubled by a more modernist malaise: a total lack of interest in things, a pathological 'incuriosity' (a term Beckett uses in *Molloy*). To be sure, such incuriosity existed in Wilde's day, and he was one of its fervent attackers, but the absolute desultoriness of which it is born seems more characteristic of (representatives of) the modernist period. And while Wilde (under his post-prison pseudonym, Sebastian Melmoth) is reputed to have quipped that '[t]here is more to be said for stupidity than people imagine. Personally,

I have a great admiration for stupidity. It is a sort of fellow-feeling, I suppose’
(*Miscellaneous* n.p.), the lines actually belong to Lord Goring in *An Ideal Husband*
(*Earnest* 192); Wilde said too much in praise of the intellect, specifically his own
intellect, to take this seriously.¹⁶ However, something both Wilde and Beckett
believed, and something Skimpole certainly felt, lurks behind all these slurs upon
knowledge: the aphorism ‘Where Ignorance is bliss, / ’Tis folly to be wise’.

Attributed to Thomas Gray, ‘ignorance is bliss’ is the kernel of the closing
couplet of his ‘Ode on a Distant Prospect of Eton College’ (1742). The final stanza
runs as follows:

To each his suff’rings: all are men,
Condemn’d alike to groan,
The tender for another’s pain;
Th’ unfeeling for his own.
Yet ah! why should they know their fate?
Since sorrow never comes too late,
And happiness too swiftly flies.
Thought would destroy their paradise.
No more; where ignorance is bliss,
’Tis folly to be wise. (ll.91-100, 46)

Here, the ‘bliss’ that comes after ‘ignorance’ has no acoustic counterpart; the line has
no rhyming partner (except perhaps for the assonance supplied by ‘swiftly’ two lines
earlier), and so leaves its trace – as does the line ‘’Tis folly to be wise’, which restores
the trimeter, with its knell-like finality. The poem is a wistful reminiscence of Gray’s

time spent at Eton, and his happy ignorance of those worldly cares ('Anger', 'Fear', 'Shame', 'Jealousy', 'Envy', 'Sorrow', 'Infamy', 'Falsehood', 'Remorse', 'Madness', etc) that culminate in Death. An earlier stanza's line about 'The thoughtless day, the easy night' (l.48) refers not so much to the lack of learning that went on inside, or the heedless solipsism of each boy – although there is an ironic suggestion of both these things – as to the schoolboy's lack of foreknowledge of his 'doom' (l.51). Earlier again, are lines that worry over the 'graver hours that bring constraint / To sweeten liberty' (ll.33-4). The Eton ode is in part a topical reflection on the subject of 'liberty' and the question of whether it is better to be innocent and free (from rules and responsibilities) or knowing and bound (by laws, by fate).

Curiously, Wilde and Beckett both chose to adopt the Greek term for 'liberty', 'Eleutheria', as the title for texts that programmatically explore the question of whether ignorance is better than knowledge, albeit in two quite different contexts. Wilde's youthfully impetuous 'Sonnet to Liberty', from his sequence of eight short poems entitled *Eleutheria* (1881), runs its irreverent course as follows:

Not that I love thy children, whose dull eyes
See nothing save their own unlovely woe,
Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know,—
But that the roar of thy Democracies,
Thy reigns of Terror, thy great Anarchies,
Mirror my wildest passions like the sea
And give my rage a brother—! Liberty!
For this sake only do thy dissonant cries
Delight my discreet soul, else might all kings

By bloody knout or treacherous cannonades
Rob nations of their rights inviolate
And I remain unmoved—and yet, and yet,
These Christs that die upon the barricades,
God knows it I am with them, in some things. (*Complete* 1:149)

The sonnet is classic Wilde-qua-contrarian. How many sonnets begin ‘Not that I love’, or have in their opening lines a barrage of ‘nothings’, the frequency of which only T.S. Eliot has since matched?¹⁷ The double ‘nothing’ that marks the midpoint of the chiasmic line ‘Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know’ is certainly aurally ‘unlovely’ – unaesthetic – and as unhearing as the eyes of the children of The People are unseeing. As a self-consciously-styled aesthete and self-titled Professor of Aesthetics, Wilde naturally had what might be termed a career objection to ‘ignorance’, to the class of people ‘Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know’. These objections aside, Wilde adopts the more conservative Burkean stance, contra Thomas Paine, of cautioning The People, whom he addresses in the poem, always careful to qualify his fretful remarks (‘Not that’, ‘But that’, ‘For this sake only’, ‘and yet, and yet,’ ‘in some things’).¹⁸ He arranges his sonnet into two septets, not the more common form of octet-sestet, with ‘Liberty!’ at/as the crux of the poem. With its two parts presenting two sides of the problem (i.e. whether one should pursue liberty at all costs), one might say that the poem enacts a kind of formal hesitation over it. Wilde’s reference to the ‘unlovely woe’ of the revolutionaries anticipates lines from his admittedly more libertarian but still profoundly ambivalent essay, ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism’ (1891), in which he repeatedly describes ‘the poor’/‘the People’/‘the Public’ as ‘hideous’ (1, 5, 30) and suggests that ‘All sympathy is fine,

but sympathy with suffering is the least fine mode' (*Soul* 33). Here, Wilde's sympathies are finally won over by the rioters: 'God knows it I am with them, in some things' – a line that Karl Beckson in his and Bobby Fong's edition of the poem identifies as an allusion to Matthew Arnold's 'To a Republican Friend, 1848': 'God knows it, I am with you' (Wilde, *Complete* I:288). Given this reference to the February Revolution in France, it is surprising that Beckson goes on to identify Wilde's revolutionaries in this poem as Russian Nihilists (about whom Wilde had just finished a play, *Vera; or, The Nihilists*, published in 1880), although the battery of 'nothings' and indeed the 'bloody knout' ('knut' being a Russian whip, here given the French spelling) may urge this reading. I cannot help but think, however, that the substitution of 'cross' for 'barricades' in the penultimate line ('These Christs that die upon the barricades') is arresting, and the Francophone overtones of the word are unmistakable.¹⁹

Wilde's poem anticipates Beckett in a number of ways, nowhere more plangently, perhaps, than in its ultimate line: 'God knows it I am with them, in some things.' The resounding affirmation of 'God knows it' resolves, by the line's end, on a bathetic note: 'in some things'. This kind of diminishing cadence, through which an invocation of the Almighty is reduced to a commonplace, a mere conversational tic, has all the hallmarks of the Beckett of *Comment c'est* (1961), published in English in 1964 as *How It Is*: "...God knows I'm not intelligent otherwise I'd be dead." (54).²⁰ In Beckett's early play *Eleutheria*, composed in 1947, just after 'Human Wishes' and immediately before *En attendant Godot* (1948), the protagonist Victor Krap [*sic*], who absconds from his old life before the play opens, recounts that 'knowing' was one of his 'prisons'. Pinned down by an 'Audience Member' in the final act and asked how he managed to 'leave himself' behind, he responds:

By being, as little as possible. By not moving an inch, by not thinking, by not dreaming, by not speaking, by not listening, by not perceiving, by not knowing, by not wanting, by not being able, and so on and so forth. I believed that was where my prisons lay. (*Eleutheria* 165)

Victor Krap may have imprisoned himself in a thicket of literalised clichés ('as little as possible', 'not moving an inch', 'not being able') but he has divested himself of the customary pursuits of Western Civilisation. Construed as a prison house in popular wisdom, here ignorance ('not knowing') is a form of freedom. S. E. Gontarski finds echoes of Gray's lines – not just 'Where ignorance is bliss, / 'Tis folly to be wise' but also 'To each his sufferings: all are men, / Condemned alike to groan' – in *Happy Days* (1961), and traces Beckett's response to what Gontarski calls the 'oppression of knowing' back to Ecclesiastes 1:18: 'For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow' (239). However, Beckett had explored this topic earlier, in his novel *Molloy* (1955), the first book in his 'Trilogy': 'For to know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker' (64). Here the tautology 'To know nothing is nothing' – rather like the problem posed by 'Vanity of vanities' (Ecclesiastes 1:2): is it proposition or exclamation? – creates two competing readings, one philosophical and one practical: 'To know that nothing is nothing, rather than something, is a relief' and 'To know nothing is no big deal, in the scheme of things'. The syntax and sense of the rest of the sentence supports the second reading, but the interesting point is that the apotheosis of incuriosity is a quasi-mystical, blissful state, not a perplexing one

(‘when peace enters in’), phraseology that invites a Biblical reading, this time with Philippians 4:7 and ‘the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding’ in mind. This kind of peace harks back to *Murphy* (1938): ‘His other senses also found themselves at peace, an unexpected pleasure. Not the numb peace of their own suspension, but the positive peace that comes when the somethings give way, or perhaps simply add up, to the Nothing, than which in the guffaw of the Abderite naught is more real’ (168).

Other critics, notably Shane Weller in his essay of 2009, ‘Phenomenologies of the Nothing: Democritus, Heidegger, Beckett’, have discussed Beckett’s fascination with Democritus, who cheerily advocated ‘verily we know nothing’ and who was himself known as ‘the laughing philosopher’ (either for his fondness for ridicule or because he was a native of Abdera, in Thrace, which the Ancients considered to be populated by fools). The eponymous hero of the final novel in Beckett’s ‘Trilogy’ explores all the ramifications of the pre-Socratic and Socratic paradoxes of Nothingness (e.g. ‘I know that I know nothing’), and has a melancholy philosophical relationship to questions of knowledge: ‘I, of whom I know nothing, I know my eyes are open, because of the tears that pour from them unceasingly’ (*The Unnamable* 14), i.e. ‘I weep, therefore I am’, to bastardise Descartes. Or this, the grandeur of which, despite its posture of self-effacement, is of Biblical proportions: ‘At no moment do I know what I’m talking about, nor of whom, nor of where, nor how, nor why, but I could employ fifty wretches for this sinister operation and still be short of a fifty-first, to close the circuit, that I know, without knowing what it means’ (*Unnamable* 52). Ergo: ‘All is vanity’.

The relationship of knowledge to meaning, like that of knowledge to truth, is one of Beckett’s abiding nodes of interrogation. The common reader might ask: is it

ever possible to know *nothing*? Isn't this a contradiction in terms? And the answer would be, yes, in a Beckettian text it is possible; and no, there is no contradiction. 'Knowing nothing' is a form of drift in which we all participate, a kind of peace for a secular world. This is just as things are, but it is also, in *Waiting for Godot*, how they are *designed* to be; at least, that is the unshakeable instinct (or lazy assumption) of the protagonists:

Vladimir. Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now?
Tomorrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon my friend, at this place until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? [*Estragon, having struggled with his boots in vain, is dozing off again. Vladimir stares at him.*] He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. [*Pause.*] Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. [*He listens.*] But habit is a great deadener. [*He looks again at Estragon.*] At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. [*Pause.*] I can't go on! [*Pause.*] What have I said?
(84-85)

This passage exhibits the overwhelming inertia of the rest of the play – with the doubt-stricken Hamlet and infant-turned Lear standing over it – especially in its bipartite refrain 'let him sleep on; I can't go on!', so that even Vladimir's very slumber is troubled ('I can't go on [sleeping]!'), not to mention his speech (to 'go on')

is one of Beckett's favourite colloquialisms), and his suicide threat ('I can't go on [living]!') is as troubling to himself as it is (presumably) to his listeners. There is something touchingly earnest about Vladimir's confession immediately before this – 'I don't know what to think any more' (84) – which may be seen as a fuller elaboration of Estragon's constant complaint – 'I don't know' – which in turn culminates in Estragon's frustrated 'I don't know why I don't know!' (62).

Vladimir and Estragon are not alone among Beckett's creations in their experience of mental decline; Beckett made the topic one of his life's studies. On 14 January 1979 he wrote to Alan Schneider, the American theatre director, of his 'acute perception of mental blunting' (qtd. in *Letters* 4: lxxii), revealing, on the contrary, that he was still at his most acute or sharp-witted.²¹ Yet, by comparison with another compatriot, James Joyce, Beckett's writing technique, and his writerly ethos, were characterised by knowing less and not knowingness, diminution rather than accretion:

I realised that Joyce had gone as far as one could in the direction of knowing more, [being] in control of one's material. He was always adding to it; you only have to look at his proofs to see that. I realised that my own way was in impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding (qtd. in Knowlson 352).

Many of Beckett's most striking characters remark on how little they know, some more ruefully than others. Others again, like Winnie in *Happy Days*, are not quite ready to face the void of knowing nothing. Winnie only accidentally reveals, through an unfortunate choice of grammar and punctuation, the insignificance of what she knows:

Winnie. [...] That is what I find so wonderful, that not a day goes by – [*smile*] – to speak in the old style – [*smile off*] – hardly a day, without some addition to one's knowledge however trifling, the addition I mean, provided one takes the pains. [...] (143)

While she tries to make the claim – valiantly, vainly – that it is the daily ‘addition’ to her reserves of knowledge that is the paltry thing, not her knowledge itself, what she has said cannot be unsaid or unheard. One senses that the pursuit of knowledge for Winnie has been painful, if not effortful; both of these impressions are signalled by the phrase ‘takes the pains’. In any case, the sum total of her knowledge – some would call it her mind – is embodied on-stage in the quintessential comic prop: a handbag. The capaciousness of the handbag in this play is a visual cue that, before long, the protagonist will struggle under its freight/symbolic weight. In this respect, it might have been lobbed straight from Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*. Like Jack – who is, comically-speaking and according to Lady Bracknell, ‘born, or at any rate bred’ (*Earnest* 267) in the handbag he produces for his potential mother-in-law's inspection, in lieu of a lineage – Winnie keeps her bag close:

Winnie. [...] There is of course the bag. [*Looking at bag.*] The bag. [*Back front.*] Could I enumerate its contents? [*Pause.*] No. [*Pause.*] Could I, if some kind person were to come along and ask, What all have you got in that big black bag, Winnie? give an exhaustive answer? [*Pause.*] No. [*Pause.*] The depths in particular, who knows what treasures. [*Pause.*] What comforts. [*Turns to look at bag.*] Yes, there is the bag. [*Back front.*] [...] (151)

Aside from its oxymoronic jest that yokes an abstraction to a particular, the phrase ‘the depths in particular’ calls to mind Democritus’s most well-known aphorism: ‘In reality we know nothing – for truth is in the depths’ (Barnes 210). But Winnie is not looking for ‘truth’, only ‘treasures’ and/as ‘comforts’. In this play, as in Wilde’s farce, the bag shuttles between being just a thing and standing for something else: in the former, say, the ragbag of the mind, and in the latter, a womb. Compare Winnie’s vague musings on her bag with the forensic description of the hand-bag in *The Importance of Being Earnest*:

Jack. [Rushing over to Miss Prism.] Is this the hand-bag, Miss Prism? Examine it carefully before you speak. The happiness of more than one life depends on your answer.

Miss Prism. [Calmly.] It seems to be mine. Yes, here is the injury it received through the upsetting of a Gower Street omnibus in younger and happier days. Here is the stain on the lining caused by the explosion of a temperance beverage, an incident that occurred at Leamington. And here, on the lock, are my initials. I had forgotten that in an extravagant mood I had had them placed there. The bag is undoubtedly mine. I am delighted to have it so unexpectedly restored to me. It has been a great inconvenience being without it all these years.

Jack. [In a pathetic voice.] Miss Prism, more is restored to you than this hand-bag. I was the baby you placed in it. (*Earnest* 304-05)

Significantly, in the context of this essay, the handbag represents for Miss Prism, despite her literalist insistence on its physical marks and markers, her ‘happier days’ (305). But whereas the handbag signifies for Jack what he does not know about his origins, it symbolises for Winnie simply what she does not *know* – in the infinitive form of the verb – especially in the sense of what is to come. ‘Ah well, not to know, not to know for sure, great mercy, all I ask. [*Pause.*]’ (161). The fact that she plucks a revolver from the bag, at random, suggests the bag is a kind of lucky dip – she even uses the expression ‘one quick dip’ (151) – and like Vladimir, she is startled at how close she skates to self-annihilation. Importantly, the bag contains her fate as well as what remains of her past.

Wilde was as fond as Beckett of the character who ‘knows nothing’ better than he or she knows anything else. ‘[M]y experience is that as soon as people are old enough to know better, they don’t know anything at all’ (*Earnest* 24) – remarks Cecil Graham in Act II of *Lady Windermere’s Fan* (1893), adapting the cliché about being ‘older and wiser’ in order to taunt his elders. ‘I love talking about nothing, father. It is the only thing I know anything about’ (*Earnest* 173) – retorts Lord Goring to the elderly Lord Caversham in Act I of *An Ideal Husband* (1895; 1899), recycling a joke that Wilde uses elsewhere. Yet in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Wilde’s most farcical society comedy, ‘knowing nothing’ is the principal occupation of more than the token dandy in the play:

Lady Bracknell. [...] I have always been of opinion that a man who desires to get married should know either everything or nothing. Which do you know?

Jack. [*After some hesitation.*] I know nothing, Lady Bracknell.

Lady Bracknell. I am pleased to hear it. I do not approve of anything that tampers with natural ignorance. [...] (*Earnest* 265)

Clearly, Wilde's mockery is universal throughout this play: not a single character is spared, from the aristocrats to the servants, the aesthetes to the wards, the governesses to the reverends. In this passage, Lady Bracknell is mocked for her snobbery, her conceitedness, her usurpation of the rôle of patriarch, her too-schematic 'all or nothing' approach to life, and her praise of ignorance. Jack, by contrast, is only lightly mocked for the philistinism which, after all, is a national trait and something he cannot, in all earnestness, escape. Of course, much depends on the delivery of Jack's lines, 'I know nothing, Lady Bracknell'. Should they be sounded triumphantly or sheepishly?

'She is a veil', Vivian says of representation in 'The Decay of Lying', 'rather than a mirror' (*Major* 228), offering a categorical denunciation of realism in Art, here figured as an elusive woman. Wilde seemed content with this image of the painted veil for his aesthetic creed of shimmering surfaces, of maximalist opacity and decorative embellishment, but it would not do for the minimalist Beckett. As the latter wrote to Axel Kaun (translated by Martin Esslin from the German): 'more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it' (*Disjecta*, 171-72; qtd in Ricks 56). For Wilde, 'knowing nothing' led to the consummate comic scenario, a fitting crisis with which to unseat his audience's complacency about knowing everything (and everyone) there is to know. For Beckett, 'knowing nothing' was part of his own crisis not only of knowing but of being, which we discover was a procedure of 'un-knowing' that he performed in text after text. The notion of the 'veil' that conceals,

for better or for worse, takes us far from the Romantic conception of the expressive nature of ‘voice’. If voice does persist in either of these modern writers, it is heard not so much in the truth-conveying aphorism with which both have become associated as in its frustration, its derangement.²² Perhaps this is exactly what the modernist aphorism wants to be: a conscious reorganisation that veers into disorganisation, and that proposes – as Beckett writes in ‘The Capital of the Ruins’ – ‘the terms in which our condition is to be thought again’ (278).²³ In other words: a reassembly of the traditional aphorism, that most lapidary and seemingly rational of forms, to allow in flux and fragmentation and what it means – humbly, nutritively – to live and play in the ruins of a decaying culture.

¹ This essay is a version of a paper originally entitled ‘Strokes of Mercy: Wilde, Beckett and the Coup de Grâce’ and presented at the ‘Aphoristic Modernity’ conference held at King’s Manor, University of York, on 4 July 2015. I owe an enormous debt of gratitude to Alex Dougherty for his extensive comments on both versions.

² We know that Beckett read Oscar Wilde, though not as avidly as he read other Irish writers: Joyce for example. He wrote in a letter to his friend, the Irish poet and critic Thomas McGreevy, from his Paris hotel in the summer of 1929: ‘I could’nt [*sic*] sleep last night and read “Sir Arthur Savile’s Crime”, “The Something Ghost”, & “Poems in Prose”, this last enormous I thought’ (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. I: 1929-1940*, 12). The comic ‘Lord Arthur Savile’s Crime’ and ‘The Canterville Ghost’, both first published in *The Court and Society Review* in 1887 and in book form (with two other tales) in 1891, and the parabolic ‘Poems in Prose’ (after Baudelaire’s *Petits poèmes en prose* of 1869), first published in *The Fortnightly Review* in 1894 and privately in Paris in book form in 1905, are all products of Wilde’s engagement with Aestheticism. A few years later Beckett again wrote to McGreevy about Wilde, this time from Dublin, on 18 October 1932: ‘They are doing Romeo & Juliet at the Gate [Theatre] when they have finished idealizing Wilde’s husband’ (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. I: 1929-1940*, 136). In Beckett’s library were copies of *More Letters of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), *The Importance of Being Earnest* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987) and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, ed. Peter Ackroyd (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1987). These newly published editions were most likely presented to Beckett all at once, in 1987, by Katherine Worth. See Van Hulle and Nixon 37. Also present in Beckett’s library were critical studies of Wilde; and Beckett’s biographer Anthony Cronin informs us that Beckett was reading Ellmann’s biography of Wilde shortly before he died (587).

³ This quote is taken from the back cover of the edition (see Wilde, *Oscar Wilde’s*).

⁴ As above.

⁵ As superbly dramatized in Patrice Leconte’s film *Ridicule* (1996), a study of the way in which an ill-judged or ill-timed sentence is literalised as a social death sentence within court society. Auden shrewdly remarks on the ‘aristocratic’ nature of aphorisms: ‘Aphorisms are essentially an aristocratic genre of writing. The aphorist does not argue or explain, he asserts; and implicit in his assertion is a conviction that he is wiser or more intelligent than his readers. For this reason the aphorist who adopts a folksy style with “democratic” diction and grammar is a cowardly and insufferable hypocrite’ (‘Foreword’, *Faber Book of Aphorisms* vii-viii).

⁶Ackerley and Gontarski inform us of this in their *Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (31), and direct us to *The Repentance of Robert Greene, Master of Arts* (1592) by Robert Greene: ‘There was (saith he) one thief saved and no more, therefore presume not, and there was one saved, and therefore despair not’ (n.p.).

⁷ Cf. Stern, *Lichtenberg*, 217: ‘The area of obscurity which aphorisms clarify eventually loses some of its puzzling quality and enters our thinking as a stable and lucid insight. Sometimes it may even become a new topic’.

⁸ This chimes with Auden’s understanding of the elitism of aphorisms. However, there were times, especially later in his career, when Wilde actively courted popularity, which may be seen in his willingness to listen to the advice of actor-manager George Alexander, at whose urging he began writing comedy rather than verse drama (Raby, *The Importance of Being Earnest and Other Plays* viii).

⁹ Cf. Johnson in *The Rambler* No. 175, §3: ‘The excellence of aphorisms consists [...] in the comprehension of some obvious and useful truth in a few words’ (*OED* online: entry for ‘comprehension’, *noun*).

¹⁰ Wilde was attuned to such misappropriations. Witness Vivian in ‘The Decay of Lying’, 228: ‘They will call upon Shakespeare – they always do – and will quote that hackneyed passage forgetting that this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters.’

¹¹ T.S. Eliot, for instance, in his 1929 essay on ‘Dante’, thought the urn’s pronouncement was ‘untrue’ and ‘meaningless’ (*Selected* 230-31) and Earl Wasserman wrote that ‘The aphorism is all the more beguiling because it appears near the end of the poem, for its apparently climactic position has generally led to the assumption that it is the abstract summation of the poem [...] But the ode is not an abstract statement or an excursion into philosophy. It is a poem about things’ (13-14).

¹² See Johnson, *The Rambler* No. 208, §11: ‘To refine our language to grammatical purity, and to clear it from colloquial barbarisms’ (*OED* online, entry for ‘colloquial’, *adj.*). The parable of ‘the halt and the lame’, from the Gospel according to St. Luke, is probably the origin of the expression ‘the halt and the maim’: ‘But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind: / And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just’ (King James Version, Luke 14: 13-14).

¹³ Johnson’s *Dictionary* (1755), as it happens, has no entry for ‘colloquial’, only ‘colloquy’. See <http://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com/page-view/?i=408>

¹⁴ The first of these is recorded by R. H. Sherard in Ch. 18 of his *Life of Oscar Wilde* (London: T. W. Laurie, 1906); the second is apocryphal, and is related by Richard Ellmann in his biography *Oscar Wilde* in this variant form: ‘My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One of us has got to go’ (546). See the quotations listed under ‘Death’ in *The Oxford Dictionary of Humorous Quotations*, 82.

¹⁵ For instance, there is this protestation, much later in the novel (Ch 31): ‘You’ll say it’s childish,’ observed Mr. Skimpole, looking gaily at us. ‘Well, I dare say it may be; but I *am* a child, and I never pretend to be anything else. [...]’ (494) In addition to the wonderful play on ‘childish’ as both ‘childlike’ and ‘puerile’ (*OED* senses 1 and 2), there is the play on ‘pretend’ as both ‘lay claim to’ and ‘feign’ (*OED* senses 3 and 8). This also goes some way towards explaining Esther’s observation (in Ch. 6) that Skimpole hasn’t advanced ‘by the usual road of years, cares, and experiences’ (89).

¹⁶ Technically, Wilde only wrote two collections of aphorisms: ‘A Few Maxims for the Instruction of the Over-Educated’ (*The Saturday Review*, 17 November 1894); and ‘Phrases and Philosophies for the Use of the Young’ (*The Chameleon*, December 1894), the latter recycling some already published material. The volume *Miscellaneous Aphorisms*, of 1911, was published posthumously, under Wilde’s post-prison pseudonym, Sebastian Melmoth, without Wilde’s authorisation.

¹⁷ The lines I am thinking of are from *The Waste Land* (1922), Part II. A Game of Chess:

‘What is that noise?’

The wind under the door.

‘What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?’

Nothing again nothing.

‘Do

‘You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember
Nothing?’ (lines 117-123) (*Complete Poems and Plays*, 65)

Or later, in Part III: The Fire Sermon: ‘...I can connect / Nothing with nothing...’ (lines 301-02) (70)

¹⁸ This is a stance from which Wilde later distances himself. When an interviewer asked Wilde, during the latter’s American tour, ‘Does the Sonnet to Liberty voice your political creed?’ Wilde replied: ‘You mean the sonnet beginning:

‘Not that I love thy children, whose dull eyes

See nothing save their own unlovely woe,

Whose minds know nothing, nothing care to know,—”

‘No; that is not my political creed. I wrote that when I was younger. Perhaps something of the fire of youth prompted it.’ (Daily Examiner, March 27, 1882; qtd in Mason 289).

¹⁹ Victor Hugo, who was embroiled in the Paris Uprising of 1832, made famous the *mise-en-scène* of the ‘barricades of Paris’ in his *Les Misérables* (1862); while the phrase itself has referred to many periods of French revolutionary action since “La Journée des barricades” (“The Day of the Barricades”) in the sixteenth-century Wars of Religion to “La semaine sanglante” (“The Bloody Week”) during the fall of the Paris Commune in May 1871, one also thinks of the English poets, Romantic and Victorian, namely Tennyson’s *In Memoriam* (1850), canto CXXV, lines 195-97: ‘Tho’ thrice again / The red fool-fury of the Seine / Should pile her barricades with dead.’ (*Selected Poems* 191) My colleague, the Wilde scholar Josephine Guy, with whom I discussed this poem, points out that Wilde’s references to revolutionaries (French, Russian, Balkan), here and elsewhere, were often generalised.

²⁰ See Elizabeth Barry on ‘God knows’ in *Beckett and Authenticity: The Uses of Cliché* (2006) as ‘one of the throwaway phrases that Beckett’s characters use [...] which [...] guarantee[s] neither knowledge or help but in fact impl[ies] God’s failure to do either’ (183).

²¹ Further examples include: Beckett’s remark to American novelist Lawrence Shainberg, in a letter dated 15 July 1979: ‘here in the end is the last and by far best chance for the writer. Gaping into his synaptic chasms’ (*The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Vol. IV: 1966-1989*, 506); or to American book dealer Herbert Myron, in a letter of 26 April 1980: ‘I work on, with failing mind, in other words, improved possibilities’ (527); or to the American scholar and curator of French literature Carlton Lake, in a letter dated 3 October 1982, which serves in part as an explanation for why Beckett had begun writing in French after the Second World War: ‘Impoverished form in keeping with revelation & espousal of mental poverty’ (593).

²² Cf. Rimbaud’s ‘dérèglement’. In a classic statement of modernist subversion, Rimbaud writes in a letter to Paul Demeny, dated 15 May 1871, of the way in which the poet must arrive at the ‘unknown’ (l’inconnu) through a paradoxically ‘rational *disordering of all the senses*’ (or all ‘sense’): ‘raisonné *dérèglement de tous les sens*’ (*Collected Poems* 10). Beckett had a lifelong admiration for the French poet and translated his long poem ‘Le Bateau ivre’ (‘Drunken Boat’) in the early 1930s, and as late as 1983 based part of his play, *What Where*, on

Rimbaud's sonnet 'Voyelles'. See *Damned to Fame*, pp. 160; 686. I am grateful to Alex Dougherty for these observations.

²³ This is a piece of war reportage written by Beckett in 1946 (for Irish radio) about the total aerial bombardment of Saint-Lô by the Americans during the Battle of Normandy.

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