

I The Novel Voice

If someone speaks, it gets lighter.

Sigmund Freud, *General Theory of the Neuroses*¹

By the voice a faint light is shed. Dark lightens while it sounds.

Samuel Beckett, *Company*²

I

I want to start a discussion of the value of the novel, then, by thinking about the voice in which the novel speaks to us, and I want to ask, more specifically, what the experience of attending to that voice is like – to ask, in effect, what you *hear* when you read. Do you hear what you are reading as a voice in your head? Does the novel speak in a particular kind of voice, a voice specific to its form, which is proper to the novel itself? Is the novel as a form particularly well adapted to creating the conditions of voice and of hearing, to producing a scenario in which a speaker addresses us in what George Eliot has called our ‘inward voice’?³ And does this inward voice talk to us in a particularly intimate way, entangling itself with the voice with which we think, with which we speak to ourselves? As Don DeLillo’s narrator puts it, at the shattering opening of his novel *Underworld*, is it the case that the novel ‘speaks in your voice’, entering into the most private spaces in which you give sound and form to thought and words?⁴ Does the value of the novel emerge in some way from its uncanny capacity to animate voice, to capture the rhythms and modulations not only of the voices of others, but of our own voice as it sounds in our head?

These, in a sense, are questions we have trained ourselves not to ask. Ever since Michel Foucault began his famous 1969 lecture 'What Is an Author?' with Samuel Beckett's question, 'What does it matter who is speaking?', we have become accustomed to treating the question of the speaking voice, as it relates to reading and writing, with suspicion.⁵ Both Foucault, in 1969, and Roland Barthes, in his equally influential 1968 essay 'The Death of the Author', insist that it does not matter in the least who is speaking. The writing that we attend to as critics and readers of fiction is not linked to some individual speaker, some human bearer of a voice, but is rather to be thought of as a series of dispersed meaning effects, whose dispersal frees us from the illusions and restrictions of embodied being. Foucault insists, in answer to his own Beckettian question, that the 'essential basis' of writing is not the recovery of voice, but its disappearance. Writing, he says, 'is primarily concerned with creating an opening where the writing subject disappears' (p. 116). As Barthes wrote in 1968, it is axiomatic that we 'shall never know' who is speaking, 'for the good reason that writing is the destruction of every voice, every point of origin'.⁶ Indeed, it is clear that, for both Barthes and Foucault, the new forms of literary analysis that emerged in the late sixties, and that continue to shape critical thinking today, are based upon our capacity to rid ourselves of the tendency to associate narrative with voice. The long history of humanism, to which the structuralism of Barthes and Foucault sought in part to offer a corrective, has been organised around the primacy of the voice, as the marker of human exceptionalism. In making a fundamental distinction between the speaking subject and the effects of discourse – in insisting that 'voice' is 'not the true place of the writing' (p. 147), that 'writing begins' when 'voice loses its origin' (p. 142) – Barthes and his contemporaries make the uncoupling of voice and narrative the inaugural act of structuralist criticism. It was the task of 'theory', if one can generalise to this extent, to deconstruct what Mladen Dolar calls 'the voice as the source of originary self-presence', to overthrow the myth of voice as 'self-transparency, the hold in presence' that was central to the metaphysical humanist tradition.⁷

So, to raise again the question of the relationship between novel and voice, to ask what we hear when we read, is to set oneself against a critical current that runs at least from the sixties, and to risk re-animating a series of humanist assumptions that we might have thought were long dead. The argument about whether there is or is not a voice in the text has already been had, and the humanists have lost. Andrew Gibson is thus emboldened, in a 2001 essay on voice and narrative, to state categorically that 'there are in fact no narrative voices and no voices in literary narrative, whether the voices of authors, narrators or personae'.⁸ Narrative is not the place where someone speaks, but quite definitively the opposite; 'narrative', Gibson writes, 'is the tomb of speech' (p. 643). If there is any persistent or residual belief in the presence of a voice in the text, then this might be understood as the stubborn persistence of a residual humanism that lives on after its own demise. 'Humanists', Gibson writes, 'would find it hard indeed to relinquish the belief that they "hear" a text' (p. 641); so to suggest that the question of voice is something that is still pertinent to us today is to align oneself with that deluded, reactionary rump of critics and readers who can't quite disabuse themselves of metaphysical myth. This indeed is part of Gibson's argument in his 2001 essay. But while Gibson asserts and assumes the absence of voice in literary narrative, what is most striking about his attention to narrative voice is his acknowledgement that, however effectively we have dispensed with it as an aesthetic or narrative category or effect, it nevertheless continues to exert a peculiar hold over the literary imagination. It is not just doddery old humanists that are susceptible to the 'dream of "hearing" the other in the text'; this dream lives on 'even in the most advanced, contemporary, narratological work' (p. 641). It may be the case that narrative is the tomb of speech but, Gibson argues, this does not mean that we have yet learnt fully to accept its silence, or to hear the absence of the voice within it. A question remains, he says, about 'whether it is currently possible to think narrative *without* thinking voice'. 'Do we know', he asks, 'how to attend to the muteness of narrative, how *not* to hear it?' (p. 643).

It is this persistent hearing effect, this voice that lives on after the death of voice, that I want to address here, as it relates to the imperatives of contemporary criticism. I argued earlier that the

critical mood of the first decades of the twenty-first century is dominated by the question of the legacies left to us by the critical movements of the twentieth – that we are led at this ‘post-theoretical’ moment to take stock, to assess how a past generation of thinkers has shaped the critical landscape in which we now live. And as we enter this period, the question of the voice, and its relation to narrative, once again becomes key. If, as Andrew Gibson suggests, there is something insistent about the experience of hearing in relation to reading, if we have struggled to learn ‘how *not* to hear’ narrative, this might touch on the way that we receive the legacies of theory. It may be that this stubborn persistence of voice is simply due to the potency of humanist myth noted by Barthes – it may be nothing more than a humanist residue that theory has failed to sublimate. Or, more interestingly, it may be that our understanding of hearing now has to do with a relationship between speech and writing that has always been at stake in the novel, that theory has only partially codified, and that remains compelling as a legacy of theory; a question of the way that novels make meaning that lies at the heart of critical theory, as it lies at the heart of the novel itself, and that emerges now into a new kind of thinkability.

II

In addressing this question here, I am going to discuss two writers, working at different moments in the history of the novel – writers who have conventionally been regarded in opposition to one another. I am going to look at the work of Charles Dickens, particularly his great novel *David Copperfield*, alongside that of Samuel Beckett, particularly his trilogy of novels written a century later, and the fizzles of prose that emerged from the 1950s to the very late 1980s. *David Copperfield* was published in 1850, at a high point in the history of the novel. Nathaniel Hawthorne published *The Scarlet Letter* in 1850, Gustave Flaubert began work on *Madame Bovary* in 1850, Elizabeth Gaskell published *Cranford* in 1851, Herman Melville published *Moby Dick* in 1851 and Harriet Beecher Stowe published *Uncle*

Tom's Cabin in 1852. This is a moment in the history of the novel at which the possibilities of realism, the capacity of the novel to depict and fashion a world, were reaching new heights. In contrast, Beckett's writing by many accounts oversees the failure of the modern novel, as fashioned by Defoe and perfected by Austen, Brontë, Flaubert, Dickens, Melville, Tolstoy, Eliot and James. His 1950s trilogy, particularly *Malone Dies*, might be seen as the moment in the postwar period when the fortunes of the novel, transformed as they were by the modernist experiments of Woolf, Joyce, Kafka and Stein, went into a kind of terminal decline. It is in *Malone Dies*, one might suggest, that the very possibility of telling stories expires. In telling the story of Malone – an old man who lies, bedridden and paralysed, trying and failing to write stories as he prepares to die – Beckett is telling the story of the death of storytelling, imagining the death of the imagination. To read Beckett and Dickens together, then, is to compare writers who belong to such different historical moments, and to such different literary traditions, that they might promise to shed little light on each other. But, in suggesting a dialogue between them, one that has eluded most genealogies of the novel, I hope it might be possible to listen for something like a common voice that they share, something that we might think of as a voice that is native to the novel – the voice, perhaps, that we hear when we read.

Of course, any reader of both Beckett and Dickens will recognise at once that, despite their manifest differences, they both worked in the same narrative mode. In three of his most significant novels – *Great Expectations*, *David Copperfield* and *Bleak House* – Dickens employs a first-person narrative voice (although this is mixed, intriguingly, with present-tense third-person narration in *Bleak House*). Pip, David Copperfield and Esther Summerson are all narrators who write from a vantage point beyond the far horizon of the text, telling the story of their own maturation, the process by which they grow into themselves; and in all three novels the narrative works by drawing attention to the process of observation, remembrance and notation, the process by which the novel itself comes to be written, as a kind of analogue or adjunct to the process by which the narrator him- or herself grows up. Pip, Esther and David all draw attention to their

weaknesses: Pip to his snobbish maltreatment of his loving guardian Joe, Esther to her own weakness of understanding concerning the events surrounding her, David to his foolishness, his gullibility, his imperfect understanding of his life as he lives it. As Esther remarks that 'I have not by any means a quick understanding', despite admitting that she can observe things around her closely – that she has 'had always a rather noticing way'⁹ – so David repeatedly remarks on the fact that, even as he closely observes the world around him, he doesn't fully understand it as he is in the process of living in it. 'I could observe, in little pieces, as it were', he says of himself as a child, 'but as to making a net of a number of these pieces, and catching anybody in it, that was, as yet, beyond me.'¹⁰ But the reflection back, from a mature vantage point, on the partiality and waywardness of the younger self is what allows the narrator to balance judgement against ignorance, full seeing against partial seeing. Narrating the story of his or her own becoming, these narrators watch their lives, as David puts it, 'rising before my older judgement' (p. 256), allowing the narrative to re-create both the uncertainty of youthful becoming, and the mellow fullness of age. In *David Copperfield*, as in Dickens' other first-person narratives, the story that is told is thus in part that of the process by which the older incarnation brings his or her judgement and experience to bear on the younger, shaping the passage of the protagonist towards his or her own becoming as narrator.

This is a well-recognised narrative mode – what narratologists have come to call homodiegetic or autodiegetic narration. And it is also the mode in which much of Beckett's most significant prose is written, in the period after the war, and with his turn to French language composition. Beckett wrote three stories, in French, in the final months of 1946, which he went on to translate into English as *The Expelled*, *First Love* and *The Calmative*. It is in these stories that he fashioned the first-person narrative voice in which he wrote *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, and which survives in a somewhat altered form in *How It Is*. It is also a version of this voice that continues to recur in Beckett's prose after *How It Is*, although the first-person mood of late works such as *Company* is channelled through a kind of neutral second person. Like Dickens' first-person

narratives, all of these works involve the retrospective telling of a story, in which a narrator describes his own becoming in time and his progress towards the place in which he writes the narrative. The narrator of *The Calmative*, for example, describes how he sits down one late evening to 'tell myself a story', which contains the 'myth' of 'another age in which I became what I was';¹¹ and a version of this scenario is repeated in almost every major prose work that Beckett writes from this point on.

So, both Beckett and Dickens deploy a first-person narrative voice, in order at once to capture in narrative the process of self-becoming, and to reflect critically upon the narrative mechanics of that becoming. But, if this suggests some broad similarities between Beckett's and Dickens' narrative modes, it is of course the case that they use this mode to remarkably different effect. In Dickens' writing, one might argue, the narrative voice is crafted to produce the experience of an extraordinarily powerful *presence*, in which narrator and narrated come together in a fullness of being, one which has its foundations in the magically evocative power of voice itself. This is what Henry James calls, in describing his own spellbound and illicit over-hearing of a recital of *David Copperfield* as a child, Dickens' 'presence and power', which left an 'imprint in the soft clay of our generation', and 'entered into the blood and bone of our intelligence'.¹² The voice in Dickens, as the narrator of *Bleak House* puts it, is so 'rich and mellow', the narrative has such material 'weight', that the 'words' of the text 'really had come to sound as if they had something in them' (p. 576). By contrast, the narrative voice in Beckett's work might appear to tend in the opposite direction – not towards the recuperation of a kind of clayish presence that is proof against the corrosive effects of time, but towards the evacuation of presence, the dismantlement of the myth of the self-identical subject. Take, for example, the opening of the first novel of the trilogy, *Molloy*: 'I am in my mother's room. It's I who live there now'.¹³ This opening follows the pattern I have been describing, in which a first-person narrator occupies the scene of narration (here, the mother's room) in the present tense, and tells the story of himself as a character in the past. It is in this room that Molloy writes the narrative that describes his struggle to reach his

mother, to make his difficult way to the room in which he finally comes to write the narrative. But even here in the opening breath of *Molloy*, one can see that something has gone wrong with this schema. There is something immediately odd about Molloy's failure to own the room in which he writes. If Molloy now lives in his mother's room, if he has in effect taken her place, then should it not be more properly described as *his* room? And if this makes Molloy's occupation of the room seem strangely partial or out of joint, then of course the use of the word 'there' – 'It's I who live *there* now' – only compounds this sense that Molloy is in some sense absent from the scene of his own dwelling. Molloy is in his mother's room 'now', it is in this room that he writes the narrative, as David Copperfield occupies his own homely room in the narrative present as his story draws to a cadent close, remarking in his final paragraph that 'my lamp burns low, and I have written far into the night' (p. 882). But the 'now' of *Molloy* takes place at a peculiar distance; the room in which the writing takes place is shifted from 'here' to 'there', as the relationship between the incarnations of self in the text – the I that tells the story, and the I that wanders in search of the mother – become confused. Even as we set out, the process of self-capture that animates Dickens' first-person novels, that sets the first person on a journey to himself, becomes skewed, as the narrating I abdicates his fatherly role, refusing to offer a settled here and now, a narrative home, to the character in whose name he speaks. And as we move to the second half of *Molloy*, which is narrated in the first person by another persona named Moran, a private detective of some kind who has apparently been charged with tracking Molloy down, this effect becomes much more drastic. The first lines of Moran's narrative, like those of Molloy's, prepare the narrator for a kind of violent evacuation of self. The opening itself might seem unremarkable on first reading; like many of Beckett's narratives, it simply sets the scene in which Moran writes his story, or what he calls his 'report'. 'It is midnight', he writes. 'The rain is beating on the windows... I get up and go to my desk... My lamp sheds a soft and steady light' (p. 92). If this paints a homely picture of the scene of narration, however, one that might recall the image of the elderly David Copperfield writing into the night at his lamp-lit desk, the

close of the narrative blankly cancels this effect, casting the narrative out of the shelter of its own architecture, its own dwelling place. 'I went back into the house', Moran says at the end of his narrative – after his exhausting attempts to find Molloy have failed, and at that critical, cleft moment at which we are trained to expect the reunion of narrator with narrated self – 'I went back in to the house and wrote, It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. It was not midnight. It was not raining' (p. 176). The moment of cleft conjunction becomes, instead, as J.M. Coetzee puts it in another context, a "'decisive moment" of rupture when the past fails to run smoothly into the present".¹⁴

It is perhaps this catastrophic failure in *Molloy* of the narrator-narrated schema that has led some readers to conclude that Beckett's writing marks a shift in the way that narrative voice functions – a shift in the very texture and timbre of the novel voice itself. Monika Fludernik, for example, suggests that there is a trajectory that we can trace in the history of the novel that takes us gradually away from the 'realistic' and illusionistic devices which give us the impression that we can hear a voice in the text that speaks to us, and towards a recognition that text is in fact made of language, not voices. *David Copperfield*, Fludernik writes, is a classic example of 'natural' narration, in which the narrator replicates a 'real-life schema' where the 'narrative engages in a pretense of authentic autobiography'.¹⁵ With the historical passage from realist to modernist fiction, however, Fludernik suggests that this schema becomes eroded. 'Those modernist texts', she says, 'who present us with the very subjective world of a protagonist through whose consciousness the narrative is focalised', are manifestly 'different from real life' (p. 623) and abandon the pretence that the narrative captures an autobiographical voice that addresses us directly. The passage from realism to modernism and beyond is one that helps us to realise that the voice has always been a fantasy, in which we need no longer believe. 'The text', she says, 'is not a tape recording'; 'attributions of voice', she goes on, are 'realistic or illusionistic interpretive moves' that 'start to flounder' as we move from George Eliot to Henry James, and eventually 'run aground' as we shift from realism to modernism, when 'the usefulness of the

narratological concept of voice is exhausted' (p. 635). For the novelist Christine Brooke-Rose, this moment can be rather precisely located (somewhat late in the history of modernism) at the opening of Beckett's novel *Molloy*. It is with Beckett's adoption in *Molloy* of a first-person present tense, she says, that what she calls the 'old regime' of realistic narration was subjected to a kind of coup, an assault in which Beckett was flanked by the newly assembled powers of the *nouveau roman*. Where 'nineteenth-century fiction' shaped first-person narration by casting the narrator in the present tense and the narrated in the past, Beckett's adoption of a peculiarly evacuated present tense, which blurs the distinction between narrator and narrated, between 'here' and 'there', produces just that failure of vocal presence remarked on by Fludernik, and presents readers, Brooke-Rose writes, with the 'astonishing' prospect of an 'I-narrator' who was 'so empty, so "absent from himself"'.¹⁶ This understanding of the passage from realism to modernism, from the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, suggests that fiction over this period went through a kind of demystification and staged a revelation of the mechanics of its own mimicry of vocal presence. If the second half of the twentieth century saw the emergence of a new insistence on the theoretical impossibility of voice, then this critical development matches a longer trajectory in the novel itself – away from a fiction which sought to maintain the idea that the narrator is able to speak to us, and towards a kind of writing which consistently exposed its own artificiality, its own emptiness of self and of voice.

III

There is much truth in this characterisation of the history of the novel, and the critical disavowal of voice that emerges in the 1960s is in some sense a response to this trajectory that had already been established in literary fiction. But what I want to explore here, in relation to our current understanding of the value of the novel, is the possibility that our recognition of this trajectory has made us inattentive to the ways in which voice persists from Defoe to George Eliot to

Beckett and beyond. The no doubt proper sense that the novel, over the course of its history, has become increasingly sceptical of the conditions of its own production has perhaps blinded us to two things: both to the fact that the realist novel, so called, was not uncritical of its own mimetic procedures, and to the fact that neither the modernist nor the postmodernist novel have completely freed themselves from the coils of such procedures. To focus on the present comparison between Dickens and Beckett, it might be that the novel voice in Dickens is not as committed to the reproduction of presence and self-identity as it has sometimes appeared to be; and it might be that Beckett's work, however much it empties or evacuates the narrative self, cannot quite free itself from the strains of the voice which, as George Eliot has put it, 'go deeper into us than other things'.¹⁷ If there is some kind of remainder, some element of voice which theory has not dismantled, and which the novel itself has not silenced, then perhaps, in part, it is in the submerged vocal resonance I suggest we can detect between Beckett and Dickens that this remainder might lie.

One way to approach this resonance, this shared vocal ground, is to attend to the voice of the parent, as it is heard in both Dickens and Beckett, and to the related association in both writers between fathers and mothers and origins. This, of course, is to risk disturbing the shallow sleep of the most powerful ontotheological myth in the history of metaphysics, that which finds the origin of presence in the voice of the father. In the beginning, as John will tell you, was the Word, and the Word was God. But I risk this here not to posit any structural association between Christian theology and narrative voice, but to suggest that both Beckett and Dickens are fundamentally concerned with the way that voice gives rise to being in the imagined world of the novel. It is not the case, I think, that Dickens draws from voice, and from the voice of the father, some mythical or ontological grounds upon which to build his fictional world, or to stage some kind of recovered presence; nor is it the case that Beckett's writing simply reveals the absence of such grounds. Rather, I think that both writers offer extraordinarily powerful self-reflexive analyses of the ways in which their imagined worlds are shaped by a progenitive voice, analyses which, taken together, offer a kind of moving picture of the way that the novel voice works.

Now, whatever Dickens' investment in the paternal voice might be, it is notoriously the case that parents in Dickens are notable for their absence. The missing father is a recurrent obsession throughout *David Copperfield*, as he is in *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House* and elsewhere. This absence makes itself felt in many ways, but perhaps most intriguingly in what we might think of as a kind of nominative insufficiency. As David Copperfield recalls the scenes of his birth, six months after his father's death, into his family home, it is this insufficiency that insistently recurs. 'Looking back', he says, 'into the blank of my infancy', he is able to picture the house, even the scene of his birth: 'There comes out of the cloud', he says, 'our house – not new to me but quite familiar in its earliest remembrance' (p. 25). He cannot construct the house as a new or unfamiliar thing, even upon his first beholding it, so deeply is it woven into his remembrance of his childhood, so closely associated with the vaporous origin of self; but even as the house emerges in this way from the cloud of non-being as always already known, it carries in its signs for itself the trace of the father's absence. The house was named 'The Rookery' by the late David Copperfield, because, David's mother says, 'when he bought the house, he liked to think there were rooks about it' (p. 17). But, as David's indomitable aunt and surrogate parent remarks, there are in fact no rooks anywhere about the house. It is, the aunt tells us, in the only characterisation of Copperfield senior in the book, 'David Copperfield from head to foot!'. He 'calls a house a rookery when there's not a rook near it' (p. 18). As the house emerges in David's memory, this gap between name and thing, or this emptiness at the heart of named things, repeats itself; there is a 'back yard', he remembers, 'with a pigeon-house on a pole, in the centre, without any pigeons in it', and a 'great dog-kennel in a corner, without any dog' (p. 25). And throughout the novel, there is a recurrent disjuncture between signs and things, a heightened awareness of the possibility that the name does not quite capture the thing named, or sits at a peculiar, mistaken angle to it. Catching an echo of the misnamed rookery, David himself is misnamed, by the murderous Murdstone, as 'Brookes of Sheffield'; and the many other names that David is given through the narrative – Daisy, Davey, Doady, Trotwood, Mr Copperful – all suggest an ill fit between name and thing.

The way that we encounter presence in *David Copperfield* is shaped by this central schism or fault-line, this failure of the patronymal glue that binds names and things. The rooks that failed to appear at the Blunderstone Rookery, that fled the scene of their naming, recur throughout the narrative, carrying with them always the ghost of the dead father, banished both from body and from name. In insistently recurring in this way, it might appear that the rooks – as emblems at once of the dead father and of his resistance to the proper name – are seeking some kind of return, some kind of re-entry to the novel's economy of signs. But what I think is intriguing about this fluttering, flighty non-appearance of the father, disguised under a false name – or, more accurately, named only by an original association with misnaming – is that it maintains its distance and its muteness; it achieves its paternal power not by speaking, but precisely by refusing to speak, or by marking the failure of the narrative voice to summon it to presence. The father does not seek embodiment, but instead shelters in a kind of shaped absence in the text, a recess of a kind which the narrator defends against the threat or irruption of presence. The arrival of Mr Murdstone, the hated stepfather, offers just such a threat, presenting to David the ghastly spectacle of the father made flesh. Murdstone's presence, his physical manifestation, is evoked with palpable disgust. His black hair and brows, strong beard and fleshy white face make him appear as a kind of superabundance of pale, doughy stuff. Murdstone's presence overwhelms David's mother, and it threatens also to saturate the narrative itself, to swamp those delicate recesses where the father lives on, unknown and unnamed. When David first discovers that Murdstone has moved in to his home, he finds at the same time that one of those treasured repositories of namelessness has been brutally stuffed (in an ugly echo of the nuptials). He finds, as he wanders disconsolately in the yard, that the 'empty dog-kennel was filled up with a great dog – deep mouthed and black-haired like Him' (p. 55).

The arrival of Murdstone – the first of many scenes of parental substitution in *David Copperfield* – is doubtless the most brutal. As the novel continues David learns to adapt to fatherlessness, and to train himself to accept the skewed relationship between names and things that is his father's legacy to him. But what I want most

centrally to argue here is that, as David makes his journey towards himself, he maintains that absence that inhabits the name in this novel. He defends it as the site of a kind of latent aesthetic potential – the very possibility of narrative – rather than as an insufficiency that must be overcome. The voices that come to supplement that absence at the origin – the voice of the mother, of Agnes, the narrator's own voice – all turn around a cherished, guarded silence, a muteness which is threaded into the strains of the voice itself, and which makes an intrinsic part of the voice that we hear when we read. David finds his love both of Agnes and of his mother preserved in the particular pitch and modulation of their voices. 'There was always something in her modest voice', David says of Agnes, 'that seemed to touch a chord within me, answering to that sound alone' (p. 374). But even as he responds inwardly to the music of voice, this musicality contains within it something that cannot be sounded, a kind of unspeakable remainder which troubles the very conception of an inner being that is fully present to itself. When David returns to his childhood home to find that his mother and Murdstone have had a child, this remainder, this absence in the homeland of the voice, is given its most poignant expression. David hears his mother singing as he enters the house, not yet knowing that she had become a mother again, not yet knowing that she was singing not to him, but to someone who has taken his place. 'God knows', he says as he hears her voice,

how infantine the memory may have been, that was awakened within me by the sound of my mother's voice in the old parlor, when I set foot in the hall. She was singing in a low tone. I think I must have lain in her arms, and heard her singing so to me when I was a baby. The strain was new to me, and yet it was so old that it filled my heart brim-full; like a friend come back from a long absence. (p. 121)

The voice of the mother calls here to that earliest self, the self who can only register newness – the newness of the house, the newness of the parent's voice – as something infinitely ancient, always already known. This is a fantasised self that has known no absence, no lack. But in singing this ancient song, the mother demonstrates to David that this call is never addressed to us alone, and never quite strikes that chord within us, that inner place where we have our most secret

being. David longs at this moment to become his baby brother, to find himself secreted within himself by becoming the addressee of that voice. He lies 'upon her bosom near the little creature', so that 'her eyes looking down upon its face' should also look down upon him; and he experiences briefly the feeling of presence that such a gaze seems to bestow, that feeling of having one's heart 'brim-full'. 'I wish I had died', he says, 'I wish I had died then, with that feeling in my heart' (p. 121). But the burden of his narrative, the experience of guiding himself towards his own mature self, carried only by his own voice, is the recognition that this fullness is not available to him. This is not how we make ourselves from the resources of our own narration. His mother's cryptic parting gesture to him as he drives away from her for the last time – he last sees her standing 'at the garden gate alone, holding her baby up in her arms for me to see' (p. 133) – tells him as much. In heading towards himself, he leaves this infantine version of himself behind, the version summoned into being by the sound of the mother's loving voice. When mother and baby die, David tells himself he has had his wish, that he too has died, with that brim-fullness in his heart. 'The mother who lay in the grave', he thinks, 'was the mother of my infancy; the little creature in her arms, was myself, as I had once been, hushed for ever on her bosom' (p. 144). But if this is death, then it is death into narrative, death into the experience of partial being that is the only kind of birth that the narrative voice, composite of sound and silence, can give to itself.

Insofar as narrative voice in *David Copperfield*, and in Dickens' novels more generally, seeks to conjure a kind of presence, then it is this partial presence, this coming to being that is inhabited by an emptiness, an originary lack, that it evokes. The very condition of narrative voice, its phenomenological and aesthetic architecture, means that it carries a forsaking within it. When David reflects on what he calls the 'making' of 'his imaginative world' (p. 180), he recognises that the voice cannot constitute this world as a whole, cannot make it into a haven in which he will find a home. Rather, he dwells throughout on the tendency of body, place and voice to disassemble themselves, to re-stage that self-estrangement, that recognition of self as other, that happens so poignantly as David

listens to his mother singing. Those moments when the body comes most strikingly asunder – when young David falls asleep as his school master plays his hypnotic flute, for example, or when he experiences his first bout of drunkenness – are not exceptions to the rule of bodily inhabitation in Dickens but the norm, the very condition of narrative being. As young David begins to nod off to the strains of the flute, his ‘imaginative world’ fades, to leave a yawning blank that is the evacuated ground of being in the novel, the always empty space intervening between narrator and narrated. ‘She fades’, he says, ‘he fades, and all fades, and there is no flute, no master, no Salem House, no David Copperfield’ (p. 88). And as he gets drunker during what he calls his ‘first dissipation’, he traces with exquisite comic touch the snapping of the bonds that hold the narrative world together, that bind young David to himself. ‘Somebody was leaning out of my bed-room window, refreshing his forehead against the cool stone of the parapet’, he says. ‘It was myself.’ ‘Now’, he goes on, ‘somebody was unsteadily contemplating his features in the looking-glass. That was I too.’ And of his subsequent passage down the stairs, he says ‘near the bottom, somebody fell, and rolled down. Somebody else said it was Copperfield. I was angry at that false report, until, finding myself on my back in the passage, I began to think that there might be some foundation for it’ (p. 370). This body in parts, this being at a remove from itself, this is the condition of narrative invention in Dickens. It is this continually moving difference between self and self, the continual failure of the narrator to take full ownership of himself, that is the still breath on which the narrative voice is carried. Such insufficiency is not an epistemological void that the voice must banish by its claims to presence or omniscience, but the delicate blindness woven into sight, silence woven into sound, non-being woven into being, that is the very condition of the novel voice.

It is perhaps in its re-appearance in the work of Samuel Beckett, a century and more later, that we might see the strange persistence of this balance between sound and silence as it is woven into the phenomenology of narrative voice. The scenario that Dickens presents, in which a speaking I only partly shares its being with the I of which it speaks – in which the speaking I seeks to become its own

parent, to give partial and fitful birth to itself as character – this is the archetypal scenario in Beckett’s fiction. It is not, perhaps, that Beckett strips the novel of its characteristic features – that he takes the fully realised imaginative world he inherits from Dickens and others, and dismantles it, steering it from voice to silence, from light to dark. Rather, what Beckett offers is a distillation of a novelistic condition, a starker, more naked depiction of a kind of ur-predicament that one finds also in Dickens, in Eliot. It is perhaps the case, as Maurice Blanchot has suggested, that ‘works such as these, and first of all Beckett’s, come closer than is customary to the movement of writing and the movement of reading’, that with a work such as *How It Is*, ‘we have returned to the source of the novel’.¹⁸ Where, in Dickens’ novels, the peculiar junction between voice and silence is hidden deep within the folds of the text so that we have to gently part them to see it, in Beckett’s work it is precisely this that is revealed, thrust into view. As Malone oversees the death of his storytelling, as an effect of his own dying, it is this strange suture, this exploded bridge between narrator and character, that he strives to show us. ‘I began again’, he says, to undergo the trials of narration, ‘to be another, in myself, in another’. But ‘little by little’ he goes on, as his decrepitude overcomes him, he undertakes this journey towards himself as other ‘with a different aim, no longer in order to succeed but in order to fail’.¹⁹ He seeks not to maintain the illusion of presence, the illusion of identity between narrator and character, not to find himself, as an earlier Beckett narrator puts it, ‘bedded in my old flesh’.²⁰ Rather, he seeks to expose the mechanics of the process by which the striving for identity in narrative endlessly fails, releasing him to a kind of suspended emptiness, allowing him, as he puts it, to ‘die alive’. ‘What I sought’, he says,

when I struggled out of my hole, then aloft through the stinging air towards an inaccessible boon, was the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness. (p. 195)

What Malone seeks is not to be at one with himself, not to find himself, like David, returned to an infantine fullness of self, lying on his mother’s breast, beneath her loving gaze; rather, he sets out to relive the ejection from such selfhood into the freedom of narrative

absence, the freedom into which David is cast as he heads away from that graven image of his mother holding his small self aloft. He wills that ejection from the mother's dwelling place that glimmers in the opening line of *Molloy*. But what is so striking about this will in *Malone Dies* is that it opens onto a strange persistence of the very elements that it seeks to eradicate. With the relapse to nothingness comes not simply silence, but an inrush of paternal presence, a reassertion of that very paternal geist that is not cancelled by the urge towards nothingness, but finds its unspeakable home there. As the above passage runs on, it moves seamlessly from self-abnegation to a kind of prayer to a loving, missing father. He seeks, Malone says,

the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home, to him waiting for me always, who needed me and whom I needed, who took me in his arms and told me to stay with him always, who gave me his place and watched over me, who suffered every time I left him, whom I have often made suffer and seldom contented, whom I have never seen. (p. 195)

Again and again, as Beckett's narrative structures tighten and sparsen after the word frenzy of *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, we see this effect re-emerging as the underlying condition of narrative voice. The more forcefully the speaking narrator seeks to free himself from the architecture of his own utterance, the more forcefully this architecture reasserts itself. In *Texts for Nothing*, in *How It Is*, in the agonisingly short prose of the sixties and seventies, Beckett's narrator sets up narrative systems in order to allow them to fail, to allow them to commit a kind of suicide, which releases him from the requirement that he should speak, that he should go through the terror of self-loss that is the experience of self-enuciation. And in each case, the collapse of the narrative system leads not to some final release from voice, but to a fresh encounter with it, as the origin and remainder of the narrative scenario, an original remainder that cannot be eradicated – a remainder that is, as a late narrator puts it, 'unlesseable'.²¹

In an oddly sentimental scenario that recurs in *The Calmative* and *Texts for Nothing*, Beckett's narrator imagines this struggle to free himself from voice as a version of the process by which his father would lull him to sleep, when he was a child, by reading to him every

night the same story – the story of Joe Broom or Breen, the son of a lighthouse keeper. ‘This evening’, the narrator of *The Calmative* says, ‘it has to be as in the story my father used to read me, evening after evening, when I was small, and he had all his health, to calm me’ (p. 53). The story that the narrator tells himself, he says, will calm him in the same way, will send him to a sleep in which he can free himself from himself, free himself from the narrating scenario into the calm sleep of childhood, that sleep that Dickens’ David succumbs to as he listens to his teacher’s flute, a sleep in which ‘he fades, she fades, and all fades’. As the narrator of *Texts for Nothing* puts it, he tells himself stories, ‘to lull me and keep me company’, as ‘when my father took me on his knee and read me the one about Joe Broom, or Breen’;²² and in these stories, the narrator plays the part both of father and of son, both he who talks and he who listens. ‘I’m in my arms’, he says, ‘I’m holding myself in my arms, without much tenderness, but faithfully, faithfully’ (p. 104). And in this embrace – as David lies in the dead embrace of his mother, as he is inhabited by the voice of himself as his own father – Beckett’s narrator imagines that he might ‘Sleep now, as under that ancient lamp, all twined together, tired out with so much talking, so much listening’ (p. 104). But, as David’s deathly sleep only projects him into the narrative condition of partial being, of a voice which speaks in a language composed of silence rather than quenched by it, so the narrator of *Texts for Nothing* recognises that to sleep is to return to the lap of an endless and ancient voice, a voice that is familiar at first hearing, but that he has never heard. At those moments of calm and sleep, the narrator says, one might think that ‘there is only silence’; but this is true only to the extent that it is untrue, as this silence is that which inhabits the narrative voice; a silence which sounds even as the voice is in full flow, just as the voice infests the silence even after it has ceased to speak. ‘It’s true’, the narrator says, ‘it’s true and it’s not true, there is silence and there is not silence, there is no one and there is someone And were the voice to cease quite at last, the old ceasing voice, it would not be true, as it is not true that it speaks, it can’t speak, it can’t cease’ (p. 154).

It is this voice, that can’t speak and can’t cease, composed at once of sound and silence, that I suggest we might call the novel voice,

the voice that we can hear when we read. It is this voice, as Mladen Dolarić has recently argued, that is the 'element that ties the subject and the Other together, without belonging to either'.²³ It is this voice that goes on, even after the novel has rid itself of its illusionistic devices, even after half a century of theoretical work has helped to rid us of the pervasive myth that writing recreates speech as the province of spiritual self-presence. If, as Andrew Gibson argues, we have found it difficult, in our 'post-theoretical' age, to find a way 'not to hear' narrative voice, if narrative continues to be bound up with voice, even in the full understanding that it is the 'tomb of speech' rather than its preservative, it is perhaps because the novel touches, in the most intimate way, on this ineradicable boundary between sound and silence, being and non-being. The novel does not contain voice – as Fludernik says, it is 'not a tape recording'. But it does bring us closer than any other medium or art form to the process by which we make ourselves out of the stories we tell ourselves, the process by which we 'make' our 'imaginative world'. In hearing the novel, we are of course hearing our own voice, hearing the process by which consciousness binds itself, with the utmost fragility, to material being, the process by which we tell ourselves who and what we are and were. For the novel voice to approach this most intimate, most hidden of infinite conversations, it does not need to pretend that it can speak. The novels that achieve the most searing proximity to our self-making mechanisms are those that hear their own silence, and live in the rather terrible gap, endlessly opening and as endlessly closing, between words and things, speaking and listening. The speaker and the hearer, in Beckett and in Dickens, the spoken word and the silent, they are 'all twined together'; it is this twining that allows us to suffer the privilege of living. But they also and forever come asunder, which allows us to hear the tombal silence of spoken words, and endlessly to perform the binding that is reading, thinking, being.