

Translating for nothing

A new Spanish translation of Samuel Beckett's *Texts for Nothing*

José Francisco Fernández
University of Almería

The starting point of the present article lies in a question posed by Raymond Federman in a well-known essay on *Texts for Nothing*: “What form can fiction take when it encounters everywhere nothing but verbal dust?” (Federman 2001:161). Any critical description of this collection of Beckett's short pieces points to the worn-out quality of the language, as if the process of negation had deeply affected style with the result of having a text in its final stages of decomposition, of being the remnants of a conscience in the process of dissolution. Apropos of a new translation into Spanish of *Texts for Nothing / Textos para nada* (2015), the author of the new version wants to reflect on the impossibility of translating words that seem to be so fragile and exhausted that the act of moving them to another language would necessarily entail the definitive shattering into pieces of an already thin fabric of words. The questions that will be addressed are related to the theoretical framework needed to handle this frail material: How can the translator negotiate the conflicting meaning of words without reinforcing its inconsistency even further? By which mechanisms can a translator of *Texts for Nothing* support his/her work considering, in the words of Hannelore Fahrenback and John Fletcher, “the ghostly dimension of space/time inhabited by this disembodied voice”? (Fahrenback and Fletcher 1976)

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, *Texts for Nothing*, *Textes pour Rien*, translation into Spanish, Samuel Beckett's poetics

If the translation of a literary work is always a risky business, fraught with many perils that have to do with matters of fidelity, precision, and even trustworthiness, this enterprise is even more daunting if we take into account the fragile nature of *Texts for Nothing*, which is, arguably, the piece of literary writing most prone to crumble at the slightest touch. The initial impression is that extreme care is

required in order to work on this “verbal dust” (Federman 2001:161) without unsettling it even further.

As the translator of the first version of the work into Spanish from English (there is a previous version of the book translated from French by Ana María Moix – Barcelona: Tusquets, 1971), I searched for a method, for theoretical support to guide me in the task ahead. I therefore turned to criticism on Beckett’s work for some clues as to how to handle the material.

A survey of the letters that Beckett wrote when he was composing the book in French throughout 1951 provided an insightful starting point. The *Texts* were born under the pressure of diminished expectations. Beckett’s characteristically derogatory attitude towards his own writing was at work here, but in this case it was particularly relevant as the *Texts* were intended to be the remnants of a larger book. He was trying to figure out how to continue after *The Unnamable* (first published, in French, in 1953, written three years earlier) and these fragments were like the last drops of ink that remained in the pen and had to be shaken out of it. The fact that they were dependent on a previous, larger text would, for many years, have an adverse effect on the reception of the 13 pieces, as if they were denied a solid entity to stand on their own: “Viewed in a wider context” wrote Brian Finney (1975:72) “the whole work is a coda to the trilogy”. However, there are grounds for believing that even if Beckett’s initial intention was to expand on the topics and themes of *The Unnamable*, as the work progressed, he began to consider the *Texts* in a different, more positive light.

As the publication of the book approached (November 1955, Minuit, *Nouvelles and Texts for Nothing*), his letters of that period showed an uncharacteristic appreciation for his own literary production. Surprisingly, Beckett seemed satisfied with the result of his writing. True, he called them his “very short abortive texts” in letters to George Reavey and Barney Rosset (Beckett 2011:376; 457) but, prior to their publication, he wrote to Pamela Mitchell saying that “some of the little *Textes pour Rien* of 1951 are all right I think” (Beckett 2011:531) and to Con Leventhal he said that “the *nouvelles* are uninteresting. But I think the *Textes* were worth publishing” (Beckett 2011:572).

While attempting to figure out what, for the author, constituted the added value in these pieces, it became evident to me, even after a first cursory reading, that with *Texts for Nothing* Beckett had reached the last stages of his poetics of failure, and that he was effectively circling around nothingness, which is exactly what he had set himself to do. The 13 texts do not follow a coherent plot and only separately can they be said to delve into a particular discursive strategy. What they have in common is the presence of a first person voice who questions any bit of information that may be uttered by that same voice. The result is a kind of prose which is fully fragmented and deconstructed. There are no temporal

references and hardly any spatial coordinates to contextualize the story. Perhaps some episodes are reminiscent of the own author's childhood, but in a very vague manner. The "I" who follows a circular discourse is bent on dismantling his own entity, as if he were going deeper and deeper into his own disintegration by means of questions which not only lack proper answers, but whose formulation is pointless as well: "Each of the texts introduces a question and ends with a provisional conclusion which does not so much answer the query as remove the possibility of its being properly asked. Ultimately, the narrator's questions concern his inability to pose them" (Levy 1980:72-73).

The succession of texts manages to transmit the idea of how absurd our outlooks on life are, our memories of the past, our building of protective schemes, our plans for the future. The voice posits itself in a place "below", where human ambitions do not apply, and everything is reduced to its essence here: the frailty of human relations, the inconsistency of self, the volatility of our possessions, and above all, the empty sound of so many words that we utter and listen to, as expressed in Text IV:

There has to be one [life], it seems, once there is speech, no need of a story, a story is not compulsory, just a life, that's the mistake I made, one of the mistakes, to have wanted a story for myself, whereas life alone is enough. (Beckett 1999: 24)

In these circumstances, as no progress in any direction is possible, the speaking voice of the texts has no option but to hold on to its discourse: "Strictly speaking, as we shall see, he is not trying to do anything but merely go on giving up" (Levy 1980:72).

An additional element of disquiet is produced by the fact that in this attempt to comprehend the emptiness that surrounds human beings, some kind of creation is at work, which acts against the speaker's intentions. By the use of words and questions, some action or achievement, however twisted, is accomplished. This contradiction between searching for non-being and, at the same time *being something* precisely because of that quest, provokes a neurotic dislocation that is at the heart of every sequence:

The narrating voice alternates between alarm and frustration. It manifests the creeping fear that something may turn out to be nothing (...); and the awareness that nothing is unobtainable, which would also put any possibility of relief and release off-limits. (Sheehan 2000)

Fragmentation and the lack of a ground to stand on were the aspects that were initially defined as the main features of the *Texts*. Thus, Geneviève Bonnefoi wrote in 1956:

With *Texts for Nothing* we leave the domain of fiction (...) to enter into a desperate monologue, without beginning or end, in the indistinct world of thought in its pure state, caught at its very source and transcribed as is, still hesitant and amorphous: feelings, words, images, memories, regrets, doubts, sarcasm, all jumbled together and overlapping in a hellish saraband.

(Bonnefoi 1979:143)

Other critics have also connected the unintelligibility of the text with well-known Beckettian obsessions. For Elliot Krieger, there is no speaking person in the whole sequence of fragments, the “I” is nothing but the black print itself, but he admitted nevertheless that:

The *Texts* fit very neatly in among the received ideas about Beckett’s sense of human despair, resignation and isolation. (Krieger 1977:987)

Despite the aura of dissolution and belatedness associated with *Texts for Nothing*, however, the prose is far from being carelessly written. The main topic, if the concept of main topic can be applied here at all, may well be the futility of any attempt to extract meaning from the experience of being, but this belies the attention to detail and the precision with which the fragments are composed. Far from being fragile, they are held together by a subtle but consistent fabric of language. Hannelore Fahrenbach and John Fletcher noticed that in the texts, “grammar and syntax are elements of genuine stability”, and remarked on the consistency of the language used “however random the treatment of the subject-matter” (Fahrenbach and Fletcher 1976). They pointed to the presence of interjections and connectors, and also to the shape of the sentences, which tend to return to their starting point, as important elements in the interweaving of the fragments: “Similarly, the text as a whole has a ballistic shape, with the last sentence of all providing a sense of completeness, like the coda in a musical composition” (1976). The same idea was summarized by James Knowlson and John Pilling in *Frescoes of the Skull* when they wrote that:

It is, as elsewhere in Beckett, the sense of a wild and whirling content battering and eroding an increasingly fragile but resistant formal barrier that gives the *Texts* their exciting and astrigent tension and prevents them from being merely inchoate and diffuse. (Knowlson and Pilling 1979: 43)

For the translator, as I considered the problem, special attention had to be paid to the lexical connections within each text and among the different pieces. This meant that, among other things, exactly the same words had to be repeated when required: If Text IV begins with “Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be if I could be” (Beckett 1999:22) [“¿Dónde iría, si pudiera ir? ¿Quién sería,

si pudiera ser?” – Beckett 2015:95], the same sequence had to appear at the end: “That’s where I’d go, if I could go, that’s who I’d be, if I could be” (Beckett 1999:25) [“Allí es donde iría, si pudiera ir, ese es el que sería, si pudiera ser” – 2015:97]. Any minimal variation, which in any other translation might perhaps have passed unnoticed, like the inclusion of the personal pronoun subject, [“Allí es donde iría si yo pudiera ir”] or the inclusion of the object pronoun [“Ese es el que sería si pudiera serlo”], would break the spell and would render the translation ineffectual. But also expressions that appear in one text are bound to appear in another one further on in the book, and again, exactitude is essential. In Text I we read, “And this evening again it seems to be working” (Beckett 1999:11) [“Y esta noche de nuevo parece que funciona” – Beckett 2015:83] and the expression is repeated in Text XI, “when I think, no, that won’t work” (Beckett 1999:53) [“Cuando pienso, no, eso no va a funcionar” – 2015:125]. In a conventional translation perhaps it would have been possible to use a similar expression like “esto no va a ir bien” or “esto no marcha”, but here the echo of Text I would have been lost and an important cohesive element in the composition would have been neglected.

Similarly, the translator must be aware that there is a linguistic tension within each text by means of which words enact their particular game of opposing forces. Take for instance *Text II*; here the narrative voice examines the differences between the kind of life that takes place “above” and “below” (it is in the latter realm where the speaker seems to find himself). The tension between antagonistic elements is developed through a range of different textures of light. If the world above is characterized by some kind of luminosity, “a kind of light, sufficient to see by” (Beckett 1999:12) [“una especie de luz, lo suficiente para ver” – Beckett 2015:85], the world below is marked by its opacity, “it’s as dark as in a head before the worms get at it, ivory dungeon” (Beckett 1999:13) [“está oscuro como en una cabeza antes de que le entren los gusanos, una mazmorra de marfil” – 2015:86]. At the end of the fragment some kind of fragile equilibrium is achieved, a sort of truce in the tug-of-war between lexical fields, represented by the tenuous shimmer of the light of a lamp through a window: “a glow, red, afar, at night, in winter, that’s worth having, that must have been worth having” (Beckett 1999:15) [“un fulgor, rojo, a lo lejos, de noche, en invierno, merece la pena, debe haber merecido la pena” – 2015:87–88]. Any attempt to translate the fragment without understanding that words are subjected to this kind of additional stress may result in a flabby, unfaithful version of Beckett’s tight prose.

Once the fine mosaic of the different pieces had been brought under close scrutiny and secured, the next issue that had to be addressed was my attitude as a translator for the handling of the material. How far should I intervene to reproduce in all their stark beauty Beckett’s 13 pieces? In her analysis of the lyrical

structure of *Texts for Nothing*, Marilyn Gaddis Rose insisted on the solipsistic quality of the voice in the different fragments. It is in fact a voice pursuing its own obsessions without a clear order. Immersed in the turmoil that it has created, it follows a pattern of “assertion, denial, modified reassertion. The voice systematically constructs, annihilates, and reconstructs its concomitants space, time and matter” (Rose 1971: 228). Particularly revealing was this critic’s opinion that “In Beckett’s texts the voice does not speak to us; it is simply within our earshot” (Rose 1971: 224), because for me this implied a drastic reduction (in my translation, at least) in the range of actions to be carried out on the text. I had to avoid, as far as possible, what I understood as a “literary translation”. This term is most widely understood as referring to a translation which “lets one consistently share in the creative process” (Landers 2001: 5). In a literary translation, the person in charge joins forces with the author in the same aesthetic endeavour, contributing with his/her own wisdom and expertise to reproduce the artistic value of the work in a new language. A literary translator, in this sense, does exert an enormous power on the given text: “The primary business of the translators” writes literary scholar Robert M. Adams “is to bury, far from the reader’s consciousness, the whole difficult range of problems that students of translation are actively at work exhuming” (Adams 1973: 20). According to this view, the translator would be given almost *carte blanche* to work on an original text in order to recreate its play of verbal associations in the target text, he/she would be doing something similar as the author, “something of the same order, so that one feels no unexplained gap, nothing strained or strange” (1973: 20).

In the case of *Texts for Nothing* it was obvious for me that this could not be the case. Indeed, at certain moments during the translation process, I was aware that I would not be able to convey the same range of nuances as the source text, and I felt that other Beckett translators would share this frustration with me: “There is something in the poem that I can understand but that I cannot translate into Turkish” said Güven Turan (in van der Weel and Hisgen 1993: 358) about his translation of the Nobel Prize winner’s poem “Neither” into that language. Similarly Elmar Tophoven, the famous translator of Beckett’s work into German confessed: “His [Beckett’s] verbal precision has led me to ask questions about German that I had never asked before” (in Garforth 1996: 50). The most notorious case of bafflement in a translator of Beckett’s work is the American Richard Seaver. As is well-known, in 1953, he and his colleagues of the journal *Merlin* asked Beckett if he could translate for their English-speaking publication the *nouvelles* that he had already published, separately, in French. Beckett naturally denied the offer: “I couldn’t face those old chesnuts again” he said. “All I see is their shortcomings” (in Seaver 2012: 164) but suggested that perhaps Seaver could do the translation himself, with Beckett going over and revising the result. The American immedi-

ately accepted the challenge: “Some references obscure, the prose daunting but not impossible, I concluded. Such is the cockiness of youth” (Seaver 2012:164–165). Some weeks later, after only a first draft of “La Fin” / “The End”, Seaver had to admit how far he was from achieving in English the mastery of the original: “I misjudged the damn thing” (Seaver 2012:165).

Therefore, while I was translating *Texts for Nothing*, although I often had the feeling that I was heading towards failure, I kept going, forcing myself to maintain the rhythm imposed by the frantic voice of the text, trying not to modify the words that I was translating with my own interpretation. Spanish scholar Antonia Rodríguez-Gago translated *Rockaby* for its premiere in Spain at the Beckett Festival in Madrid in April 1985, and more than a decade after the event she reflected upon her struggle with the Beckettian text: “I reached the rather strange conclusion that if I looked after the rhythm the meaning would look after itself, and this was very much what happened” (Rodríguez-Gago 1999:233). The voice in *Texts for Nothing* at one point, I felt, was transmitting this same message: “That’s where the court sits this evening, in the depths of that vaulty night, that’s where I am clerk and scribe, *not understanding what I hear, not knowing what I write*” (Beckett 1999:29. My emphasis). By choosing not to produce a literary translation, by opting for minimum interference, I was also aware that any translation “articulates within itself the conditions of reception of all texts” (Fitch 1988:25), and that I was proposing an approach to Beckett which combined a background of scholarship with a transparent delivery of words.

For the translator of *Texts for Nothing* from English into another language, it is vital to bear in mind that the author had already translated the first French version into his mother tongue. The English version he created had an intensified edginess. As James McGuire states:

If French had a ‘weakening effect’ on Beckett’s style, (...) translating (or rewriting) a work conceived in French back into English accomplishes a doubling back of that ‘weakening effect’, that is to say, Beckett’s English becomes estranged, no longer native.
(McGuire 1990:259)

A further translation (into Spanish, in my case) would necessarily seek to follow the nature of the text’s own inertia towards distress. The translation, ideally, would not try to sand off the rough surface of the syntax or to smooth the irregularities of the style, but to keep the unfamiliarity of the language in a way that sends the reader back to a previous composition, just as Beckett did as a translator: “In general, Beckett’s translations do not go gently into their target language” writes Sinéad Mooney, “but retain like textual birthmarks the traces of their ‘rendering’ into English, advertising the presence of another language beneath the translated text in their undomesticated syntax” (Mooney 2011:67).

Incidentally, it has to be said that the syntax of *Texts for Nothing*, when rendered into Spanish, intensifies the feeling of uneasiness. The succession of very short sentences, separated by commas, which is the most salient linguistic feature of *Texts for Nothing*, jars naturally on Spanish ears because in its written form Spanish favours long sentences with many subordinates in protracted and lingering verbal sequences. This, I believed, played in my favour.

So far this paper has been skirting an issue that should also be a matter of reflection. How should any translator of Beckett's writings react to the fact that the author they are translating already translated his own texts? In other words, how does Beckett's work as a self-translator affect the translator of his literary production? The translator must certainly be aware that Beckett's career as a writer is inextricably linked with translation (of his own work and others') and that it allowed Beckett "to pursue his repudiation of received notions of origins, originality and authorship" (Mooney 2011:24). Instead of feeling daunted by the challenge, the translator could perhaps seize the opportunity to get closer to Beckett's way of dealing with texts and even get ideas for his/her own translation. In the aforementioned translation of *Rockaby* into Spanish, Antonia Rodríguez-Gago worked directly with the English text, but she kept the French version close at hand for consultation: "Contrary to what has been frequently said I have found Beckett's bilingualism a great help, for one can always turn to the author and see how he, as translator, has solved a particular problem and, if possible, follow his example" (Rodríguez-Gago 1999:232). It is interesting to notice that Rodríguez-Gago sent her translation of *Rockaby* (together with her Spanish versions of *Ohio Impromptu* and *Catastrophe*) to the author himself, and Beckett only suggested changes in the structure of the sentences; he did not comment anything on the meaning of the words that she had used (Rodríguez-Gago 1999:234). If there is a message for the translator to be extracted from Beckett's experience in the same field, then, it is the need to be alert to the "fundamental sounds" of his work, and to consider aspects such as rhythm and repetition of words as essential features when translating Beckett.

Apart from that, it certainly removes pressure for the translator to know that it is not possible to consider anybody's version of a work by Beckett to be the definitive one. Just as there is not only one official version of Beckett's texts, whether in French or in English, both being equally valid (as Brian T. Fitch has written with regard to the two texts of *Compagnie/Company*: "neither version can be appropriately substituted for the other by the critic: each has to be studied in its own right, together with the precise relationship existing between the two" – 1987:25), the translation of one of his works into another language is immersed in a continuum that multiplies forever. As Dirk van Hulle has said, when the writing was over, Beckett went on writing, "which resulted in an oeuvre that is marked by multiple

versions” (van Hulle 2008: 97). And this, I feel, necessarily affects the translations of his work by other people. I am also inclined to apply to translation what van Hulle says about Beckett’s versions: “the concept of ‘variants’ is not just a textual issue but often has an existential dimension as well” (2008: 97). The translations of his work into multiple languages would be contributing slightly, but significantly, to the “decomposition process” (van Hulle 2008: 104) that Beckett himself started when he wrote two versions of his work. It should be clearly stated that the translator’s agency in the continuation of Beckett’s project should be of course no more than that of a mere vehicle that facilitates the reception of his work in another language. Beckett’s inquiry into the essence of being is, above all, tentative and unassuming, and the translator should be imbued with the same spirit. But it is not difficult to imagine that by translating his work from one of the versions that Beckett produced, the translator is bringing forward, however minimally, the dissolution of meaning which is one of the tenets of his thinking.

The concept of “original repetition” coined by George Steiner in *After Babel* (“We re-enact, in the bounds of our own secondary but momentarily heightened educated consciousness, the creation of the artist” 1998: 27) gains a new dimension when a version of one of Beckett’s texts is rendered in another language, because the translator is expanding, more than with any other author, the rippling effect of his words until they dissolve into nothing.

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Résumé

Cet article prend comme point de départ une question posée par Raymond Federman dans un célèbre essai consacré à *Texts for Nothing (Textes pour Rien)*: « Quelle forme la fiction peut-elle prendre quand elle ne rencontre partout que de la poussière de verbe? » (Federman 2001:161). Toute description critique de ce recueil de nouvelles de Beckett met en avant la qualité vieillie de la langue, comme si le processus de négation avait profondément affecté le style, avec comme résultat un texte aux derniers stades de la décomposition, les restes d'une conscience dans le processus de dissolution. En ce qui concerne la nouvelle traduction en espagnol de *Texts for Nothing / Textos para nada* (2015), l'auteur de la nouvelle version veut réfléchir à l'impossibilité de traduire des mots qui semblent si fragiles et si épuisés que leur transposition dans une autre langue entraînerait nécessairement la mise en pièces définitive d'un tissu de termes déjà délicat. Les questions qui seront abordées sont liées au cadre théorique nécessaire à cette matière fragile: comment le traducteur peut-il négocier la signification contradictoire des mots sans renforcer davantage son incohérence? Quels sont les mécanismes qui permettent à un traducteur de *Texts for Nothing* de soutenir son travail étant donné, selon l'expression de Hannelore Fahrenback et John Fletcher, « la dimension fantomatique de l'espace-temps habité par cette voix désincarnée »? (Fahrenback et Fletcher 1976)

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Address for correspondence

José Francisco Fernández
University of Almería
Departamento de Filología
04120 Almería
Spain
jffernan@ual.es