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Beckett, Feldman, Salcedo . . . Neither

Derval Tubridy

Writing to Thomas MacGreevy in 1936, Beckett describes his novel *Murphy* in terms of negation and estrangement:

I suddenly see that *Murphy* is break down [sic] between his *ubi nihil vales ibi nihil velis* (positive) & Malraux’s *Il est difficile à celui qui vit hors du monde de ne pas rechercher les siens* (negation).\(^1\)

Positioning his writing between the seventeenth-century occasion-alist philosophy of Arnold Geulincx, and the twentieth-century existential writing of André Malraux, Beckett gives us two visions of nothing from which to proceed. The first, from Geulincx’s *Ethica* (1675), argues that ‘where you are worth nothing, may you also wish for nothing’,\(^2\) proposing an approach to life that balances value and desire in an ethics of negation based on what Anthony Uhlmann aptly describes as the *cogito nescio*.\(^3\) The second, from Malraux’s novel *La Condition humaine* (1933), contends that ‘it is difficult for one who lives isolated from the everyday world not to seek others like himself’.\(^4\)

This chapter situates its enquiry between these poles of negation, exploring the interstices between both by way of *neither*. Drawing together prose, music and sculpture, I investigate the role of nothing through three works called *neither* and *Neither*: Beckett’s short text (1976), Morton Feldman’s opera (1977), and Doris Salcedo’s sculptural installation (2004).\(^5\) The Columbian artist Doris Salcedo’s work explores the politics of absence, particularly in works such as *Unland: Irreversible Witness* (1995–98), which acts as a sculptural witness to the disappeared victims of war. Her installation *Neither* draws on both Feldman’s music and Beckett’s text, creating a sculpture that has much in common
with the negative spaces of Beckett’s theatre. The American composer Morton Feldman’s *Neither* has been called an ‘anti-opera’, a stripped down, minimalist monodrama. Described as ‘shockingly beautiful as it is disorienting and distancing’ the music of *Neither* echoes the movement of Beckett’s text in an oscillation between two poles of impossibility.6

Samuel Beckett’s brief and evocative text was written for Morton Feldman in a collaboration initiated by Feldman. Commissioned by the Teatro dell’Opera in Rome to work on a composition, Feldman approached Beckett through a mutual friend and was offered some existing material. His response to the texts was that ‘they were pregnable, they didn’t need music’.7 Preferring to work with something else, Feldman met Beckett in 1976 at the Schiller Theatre in Berlin where Beckett was rehearsing *Footfalls* and *That Time*. Over lunch the writer and composer discussed the project. Just as with Beckett’s work with Jasper Johns on the artist’s book *Foirades/Fizzles*, the coming together of Beckett and Feldman was more a meeting of minds than an intimate collaboration. Feldman describes his discussion with Beckett, emphasising that there did not need to be any compromise on the part of either one of them since they were both in complete agreement about many things:

> For example – he was very embarrassed – he said to me, after a while, ‘Mr Feldman, I don’t like opera.’ I said to him, ‘I don’t blame you!’ Then he said to me, ‘I don’t like my words being set to music,’ and I said, ‘I’m in complete agreement. In fact it’s very seldom that I’ve used words. I’ve written a lot of pieces with voice, and they’re wordless.’ Then he looked at me again and said, ‘But what do you want?’ And I said, ‘I have no idea!’8

Feldman showed Beckett the score of a piece that he had written using lines from Beckett’s script for *Film*.9 Beckett, an assured musician himself, took a keen interest in the score and, as John Dwyer recalls, responded by saying that there was only one theme in his life:

> ‘May I write it down? [asked Feldman]. (Beckett himself takes Feldman’s music paper and writes down the theme . . . It reads ‘To and fro in shadow, from outer shadow to inner shadow. To and fro, between unattainable self and unattainable non-self.’) . . . ‘It would need a bit of work, wouldn’t it? Well, if I get any further ideas on it, I’ll send them on to you.’10
This was the beginning of the libretto for *Neither*. At the end of the month, while Beckett was still rehearsing in Berlin, a card arrived in Buffalo, New York, where Feldman was Professor of Music. On it was a brief note from Beckett: ‘Dear Morton Feldman. Verso the piece I promised. It was good meeting you. Best, Samuel Beckett.’

On the back of the card was the handwritten text *neither*: ‘To and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither’.

Beckett’s ten-line text opens with a movement of gentle undulation between two boundaries ghosted by darkness, a reflexive motion between a self and its negation. It is this movement within the space of negation that I would like to focus on in my readings of Beckett’s text, Feldman’s opera and Salcedo’s installation. Both Feldman and Salcedo respond to the structure of Beckett’s text which traces its lines of enquiry between indeterminate points of arrival and departure. The text focuses on the movement between these points which are characterised in terms of locus (‘inner to outershadow’, ‘two lit refuges’); subjectivity (‘impenetrable self to unpenetrable unself’); and agency (‘beckoned back and forth’).

Writing on *Worstward Ho*, Carla Locatelli examines ‘the implication of a movement of meaning’ in Beckett’s work, arguing that ‘we can find a precise, pervasive orientation which even then emphasized the temporal (diachronic and dynamic) dimension of the work of art’. Locatelli supports her argument by drawing on Beckett’s critical writing on the painters Bram and Geer van Velde, ‘La peinture des van Velde ou le Monde et le Pantalon’, in which he argues that ‘the work considered as pure creation, and whose function stops with its genesis, is destined to nothingness’. The nothingness that Beckett refers to in this piece is neither here nor there in Beckett’s 1976 text, echoing the movement of *Footfalls* with which Beckett was rehearsing at the time he wrote *neither*. The ethereal, insubstantial figure of May – ‘dishevelled grey hair, worn grey wrap hiding feet, trailing’ – in *Footfalls* prefigures the attenuated self of *neither* whose ‘unheard footfalls only sound’ leave minimal trace as they move toward ‘unspeakable home’. These ‘unheard footfalls’ of *neither* contrast with the importance of sound in *Footfalls* emphasised by May’s insistence on hearing her steps: ‘May: I mean, Mother, that I must hear the feet, however faint they fall. The mother: The motion alone is not enough? May: No, Mother, the motion alone is not enough, I must hear the feet,
however faint they fall.'16 Beckett directs that the steps in *Footfalls* are a ‘clearly audible rhythmic tread’, a rhythm picked up in *neither* by the rhythmic ‘back and forth’ of the text’s lines which gradually diminish to stasis and silence: ‘till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other / then no sound’. The progressive reduction of sound in *neither* echoes the ‘Sequel’ of *Footfalls* in which the ghostly figure of Amy paces unheard: ‘But many also were the nights when she paced without pause, up and down, up and down, before vanishing the way she came. [Pause.] No sound. [Pause.] None at least to be heard.’17

The paradox at the heart of *Footfalls* in which Amy denies her presence in church even as her mother, Mrs W, insists that she heard her voice: ‘Amy: […] I saw nothing, heard nothing, of any kind. I was not there. Mrs W: Not there? Amy: Not there. Mrs W: But I heard you respond. [Pause.] I heard you say Amen’ is reconfigured in Beckett’s *neither* in terms of a subject whose assertion – ‘self’ – and negation – ‘unself’ – are both ‘impenetrable’.18 The lighting of Beckett’s play, with its emphasis on shadow – ‘dim, strongest at floor level, less on body, least on head’ and again ‘fade up to dim on strip. Rest in darkness’19 – underlines the tenuous position of the protagonist of *Footfalls*, just as the self of *neither* is ‘intent on the one gleam or the other’ as she or he moves between the ‘two lit refuges’ which withdraw their sanctuary as they are approached: ‘as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once turned away from gently part again’.

The staging of Feldman’s opera *Neither* at the Teatro dell’Opera in Rome in May 1977, with a set designed by Michelangelo Pistoletto, has much in common with the aesthetics of Beckett’s theatre. Centre stage is the Soprano, Martha Hanneman, sheathed in a dress which extends beyond the limits of her body to encompass the stage, ending only where shadow encroaches. The image she creates is a visual parallel to the sense of continuity in Feldman’s composition. Feldman explains: ‘What I’m trying to do is hold the moment. […] I’m trying to hold the moment with the slightest compositional methodology. The thing is how do you sustain it, how do you keep it going?’20 Keeping going is a key Beckettian trope. The protagonist of *The Unnamable* agonises over the impossibility, yet necessity, of going on: ‘it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don’t know, I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.’21 Much later Beckett
himself reiterates this position in conversation with Charles Juliet, claiming ‘I have to go on [. . .] I am up against a cliff wall yet I have to go forward. It’s impossible isn’t it? All the same, you can go forward. Advance a few more miserable millimetres.’  At another point in the opera Martha Hanneman is shrouded in black holding two lights, each a point of illumination in the penumbra of the stage across which groups of men wander. William Weaver, writing for the International Herald Tribune, was underwhelmed by Pistoletto’s set, describing it as ‘not very arresting or enhancing: some thumbprints of light on an off-white background and an aimless crowd that wandered on and off the stage’.  Brian Northcott of The Sunday Telegraph was more engaged, noting the ways in which the set complemented Feldman’s music:

At the same time it was the old Feldman, the timelessness and hush (there are only six loud bars in the same score), that Michelangelo Pistoletto chose to emphasise in his staging: placing the young American soprano, Martha Hanneman, motionless downstage and faintly illuminating the gloom behind her with pools of light fluctuating in counterpoint with the slow breathing – as of some sleeping giant – that Feldman’s muted grindings and suspirations sometimes suggest, through which wandered lost groups of male figures like Giacometti statues vaguely come to life.

Northcott describes Feldman’s music in terms that remind us of Beckett. It is slow and quiet, little concerned with drama or self-expression ‘or anything except pure, contemplative sound’. The voice of the soprano traces a taught line through the orchestration, her pitch rendering the articulation of Beckett’s words almost impossible: ‘and the voice? At the beginning, while the cellos maintain a pulsating figure to convey “a feeling of quickness” characteristic of Beckett, the voice floats gently, unobtrusively, through the shifting orchestral texture, a fixed point within a changing context.

Feldman’s initial response to Beckett’s text was formal. He began to scan the sentences to get a sense of their position and their relation to each other: ‘First of all, like a conventional composer, I began to scan the first sentence: To and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow; it seemed to me as one long period of time.’ The key moment when text and composition came together for Feldman is when he ‘noticed that it fell into a grid’. The pattern of the grid as a
repetition of movement between points of intersection and empty space is critical to Feldman’s and Salcedo’s *Neither*. Writing about Beckett as a librettist, Howard Skempton remarks that ‘the “grid” is a notable feature of *Neither*’ describing the structure of Feldman’s opera as ‘a regular arrangement of bars within the system, each system containing half a line of text’. Catherine Laws, however, suggests that Skempton’s examination of Feldman’s score is not fully comprehensive. In an astute analysis of the structure inherent in Feldman’s *Neither*, Laws agrees with Skempton that the ‘grid starts from the basis of subdivisions lasting for twelve bars, and each of these covers the breadth of one page of score’ but argues that this ‘division of the text into half a line per twelve bars is not always strictly adhered to’.

Laws understands Feldman’s approach to Beckett’s text as an ‘attempt to render in musical terms the pendular motion of a single insubstantial idea, viewed in varying contexts’. However, Feldman had already begun writing the music for his collaboration with Beckett before he received Beckett’s text. That is why, as Feldman explains with some humour, ‘the piece begins textless. I was waiting for the text. I discovered what an overture is: waiting for the text!’ Reading Beckett’s *neither* Feldman focuses on the movement ‘to and fro’ between the ‘self’ and ‘unself’ (N). As the composer explains:

The poem is called *Neither* and if I may paraphrase it has to do with the fact – it’s not a narrative, it becomes like a narrative – that there is no understanding of the self or the unself nor is there a synthesis. They’re both on the outer shadows. We go back and forth between them. It became a narrative in defining a musical proximity to this thought.

Feldman’s approach to finding this ‘musical proximity’ to Beckett’s thought lies in his analysis of the ‘unself’ in impersonal, mechanical terms. He describes his compositional strategy thus: ‘I saw the “unself” as a very detached, impersonal, perfect type of machinery. What I did was to superimpose this perfect machinery in a polyrhythmic situation. So there’s a new element here, a periodic element, which eventually emerges.’ The pulsing nature of the orchestration underlines this periodic element while also unsettling the grid-like nature of the piece. There is a tension, then, between the role of the grid which, in Laws’s view, ‘would seem
to derive more importance from its value to the composer as a sequence of frames within which to arrange his material’ and the acoustic experience itself:

Given the constantly changing bar lengths, the varying pulses used within and against the metres, and the apparently arbitrary allocation of words or syllables within the sections, it has to be admitted that the regularity of many areas of the grid are not aurally perceptible.\(^34\)

At the close of his ‘Darmstadt Lecture’ given in 1984, Feldman describes his work in terms of two aspects that he sees as characteristic of art in the twentieth century: ‘One is change, variation. I prefer the word change. The other is reiteration, repetition. I prefer the word reiteration’.\(^35\) Feldman’s destabilisation of the grid structure which provided the impetus for his composition can be understood in terms of Derrida’s notion of a difference that is necessarily contained within repetition. Writing on form and meaning in the context of Husserlian phenomenology, Derrida argues for ‘the production of some elliptical change of site, within the difference involved in repetition’.\(^36\) He qualifies this difference as a kind of displacement, one which is ‘no doubt deficient, but with a deficiency that is not yet, or is already no longer, absence, negativity, nonbeing, lack, silence’.\(^37\)

Beckett’s writing is characterised by repetitions that range from the ebullient permutations of his novel *Watt* which seek to pin down signification even as the repeated phrases undermine the possibility of fully grasping what is being said:

Then he took it into his head to invert [the order] of the words in the sentence, now that of the letters in the word, now that of the sentences in the period, now simultaneously that of the words in the sentence and that of the letters in the word, now simultaneously that of the words in the sentence and that of the sentences in the period, now simultaneously that of the letters in the word and that of the sentences in the period, and now simultaneously that of the letters in the word and that of the words in the sentence and that of the sentences in the period\(^38\)

to the incremental changes characteristic of the late short pieces such as ‘What is the word’:

afar –
afar away over there –
afaint –
afaint afar away over there what –
what –
what is the word – 39

in which the repetition builds up a resonance and pressure that supports and strengthens our understanding of the text. Feldman describes his response to Beckett’s neither in terms of a reiteration that gradually reveals the thinking behind the work: ‘I’m reading it. There’s something peculiar. I can’t catch it. Finally I see that every line is really the same thought said in another way. And yet the continuity acts as if something else is happening. Nothing else is happening.’40 Feldman uses repetition effectively in Neither through the single note that the Soprano sings in the opening minutes of the opera, rendering the enunciation of Beckett’s words secondary to the sound itself. Later, as Beckett’s text speaks of the figure ‘beckoned back and forth’ ‘between two lit refuges’, the orchestra plays a series of brisk notes that ascend and descend as if on steps of a stair going nowhere, an urgent advance and retreat that prefaces the resignation of Beckett’s ‘till at last halt for good’. As the piece closes, Feldman plays more freely with Beckett’s text, repeating the word ‘neither’ nine times and the phrase ‘unspeakable home’ eight times.41 The ebb and flow of Feldman’s text echoes Beckett’s ‘to and fro’ in a movement of ‘rhythmic, dynamic, and textural flux back and forth’ which is:

matched by the linear and chordal expansion and contraction of pitch areas around points which are themselves unable to be fixed. Thus, even the audibility of the compositional procedures and the interdependencies of the material are subjected to the process of ‘coming and going’.42

Feldman was very taken with Beckett’s practice of translating his own work, and understood it as part of the creative process, as a way of thinking through the work. He drew an immediate parallel with his own composition practice, describing it as a kind of translation between different situations:

What I do then is, I translate, say something, into a pitchy situation. And then I do it where it’s more intervallic, and I take the suggestions of that back into another kind of pitchiness – not the original pitchiness, and so forth, and so on. Always retranslating and then saying, now let’s do it with another kind of focus.43
We can think of translation as a kind of repetition that incorporates difference, drawing a parallel between Beckett’s practice of translating his own work between English and French, and translating a thought from one medium to another – from writing to music, from writing to sculpture – rethinking it ‘with another kind of focus’.  

Doris Salcedo rethinks the focus of Beckett’s *neither* and Feldman’s *Neither* in sculptural form for her installation at the White Cube Gallery in London, 2004. In her proposal, Salcedo poses a question about the possibility of expression and articulation in the face of inhumanity. Echoing W. G. Sebald’s concern about ‘how to form a language in which terrible experiences, experiences capable of paralysing the power of articulation, could be expressed in art’, Salcedo formulates the question that animates her installation: ‘How to address the intolerable?’ ‘Since I found no definitive answer to this question,’ she continues, ‘I titled this piece *Neither*’. The context of Salcedo’s enquiry is the space of the concentration camp, both historical and contemporary. The form of her enquiry is the grid.

In *Neither* Salcedo transforms the white cube of the gallery into a cage. She reconfigures the walls of the gallery by embedding wire mesh fencing into the sides of the space, distorting and extending the structure to disorient the viewer. At times the mesh is almost buried in the white plasterboard that secures it, at other times it pushes out from the wall to create a double boundary, the pattern of grid upon grid creating an optical dissonance that disturbs our spatial sense. The dark grey of the wire and the off-white of the plaster create a palette of semitones that shadow the space, darkening where the mesh is doubled, brightening where the mesh merges with the wall. At the entrance to the installation the mesh extends beyond the wall to limit our movement, the ragged edges of the wire a threatening boundary between exhibition and foyer. Yet the formal abstraction of the grid has a beauty in the intensity of its repetition as our eye moves ‘to and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow’.

The indeterminacy of Beckett’s lines is echoed by Salcedo’s work, described in her proposal as ‘an indeterminate space, located beyond [her] powers to articulate, to understand and measure the political structure in which we live’. Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957) is conceived in similar terms by Theodor Adorno who argues that the play ‘takes place in a neutral zone between the inner and the outer,
between the materials without which no subjectivity could express itself or even exist and an animation which causes the materials to dissolve and blend as though it had breathed on the mirror in which they are seen'.49 Though written in 1958 and published in 1961 – predating Beckett’s neither by eighteen years – Adorno’s comments are a remarkably apt description of the 1976 text, drawing together the aesthetic and ethical concerns that link Salcedo’s and Beckett’s work, particularly in the context of Adorno’s deep unease about the possibility of subjectivity and artistic expression after the Shoah: ‘Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric, and this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today.’50

The negations in neither allude to the kind of impossibility that Adorno writes about which, as Elaine Martin argues, concerns the annihilation of the very concept of the individual. Beckett’s ‘impenetrable self’ gives way to an ‘impenetrable unself’, but neither position is tenable. Subjectivity is conceived of as a ‘refuge’, but one which is unreachable. The absolute solitude of the non-self is emphasised by ‘unheard footfalls only sound’, yet there are intimations of another agency in the doors that gently part and close, and the gleam of light that beckons ‘back and forth’. As Beckett’s text draws to a close the movement to and fro diminishes, finding stasis between ‘self and other’ in an indeterminate space that is neither one place nor another. This space exists beyond representation or expression: it is ‘unspeakable home’.

Salcedo’s transformation of the space of the gallery has an immediate and direct political charge. Her layering of mesh upon mesh in Neither is a visual counterpoint to Beckett’s movement ‘from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself’ as if the wire itself provides the ‘way of neither’. The space of her installation is ‘an interior space that negates the possibility of interiority, of intimacy and remembrance’.51 As an interior it evokes the idea of a refuge, but with walls fused with fencing asylum is refused: ‘as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once turned away from gently part again’. The negation of Beckett’s text is made manifest in Salcedo’s use of wire fencing and plasterboard: materials that create a space that ‘juxtaposes interiority with exteriority’.52 This confounding of inside and outside, of the private and the public, defines a politics of space in which the individual
and the community intersect. Salcedo underlines the connection between ethics and aesthetics in her work when she says: ‘I don’t believe that space can be neutral. The history of wars, and perhaps even history in general, is but an endless struggle to conquer space. Space is not simply a setting, it is what makes life possible. It is space that makes encounters possible. It is the site of proximity, where everything crosses over.’

The ‘site of proximity’ that Salcedo creates in Neither enables us to rethink the space of neither in Beckett’s text which, with an almost syllogistic precision, occupies a place between two modes of negation. Salcedo worked for a short time in theatre, designing stage sets, and it was ‘in the Colombian theatre of that time, with its political overtones, that [her] interests in art and politics came together’. Salcedo’s installation Neither echoes the grey light and bare interior of Endgame in which life is almost extinguished and outside of which all is corpsed. It recalls the space of Ghost Trio (written a year before Beckett’s neither) in which the light is ‘faint, omnipresent, no visible source’, and colour is absent: ‘Colour: none. All grey. Shades of grey.’

As Beckett directs:

3. Cut to close-up of floor. Smooth grey rectangle 0.70 m. x 1.50 m. 5 seconds.
4. v: Dust. [Pause.] Having seen that specimen of floor you have seen it all. Wall.
5. Cut to close-up of wall. Smooth grey rectangle 0.70 m. x 1.50 m. 5 seconds.

Beckett’s prose describes a similar territory. Lessness (1969) suggests the simplicity of the cell, a ‘refuge’ that is ‘four square all light sheer white blank planes all gone from mind’. The closed space of Salcedo’s Neither gains resonance with a reading of Beckett’s fizzle Closed Space (1973–75) in which ‘All needed to be known for say is known. There is nothing but what is said. Beyond what is said there is nothing. What goes on in the arena is not said. Did it need to be known it would be. No interest. Not for imagining.’

Discussing Salcedo’s series of works called Atrabiliarios (1991–96), Carlos Basualdo describes the artist’s interest in space as a ‘point of intersection’ between the public and the private spheres. He understands Salcedo’s space as ‘less a space for communication than for community, for sharing something akin to a secret,
and therefore to silence’. The role of silence in Salcedo’s *Neither* operates on two levels. It bears witness to the undoing of the individual subject for whom silence is the closest possible refuge to an ‘unspeakable home’; and it bears witness to the silence of a community in the face of the unspeakable, a silence that carries ethical implications. Jean-François Lyotard argues for a concept of silence that is dynamic and engaged even in the face of an impossible, incommensurable situation, one that he terms a *differend*:

> Why these encounters between phrases of heterogeneous regimen? Differends are born, you say, from these encounters. Can’t all of these contacts be avoided? – That’s impossible, contact is necessary. First of all it is necessary to link onto a phrase that happens (be it by a silence, which is a phrase), there is no possibility of not linking onto it. Second, to link is necessary; how to link is contingent.

Lyotard’s image of a phrase linking on to another is visually encapsulated by the overlapping wire that forms the structure of Salcedo’s *Neither*. The artist’s use of chain-link fencing is both beautiful and chilling: the even repetition of the diamond pattern has a meditative quality akin to Beckett’s *neither*, and the movement of pattern upon pattern at the points when the fencing overlap convey an optical illusion not dissimilar to Bridget Riley’s *Descending* (1965). Yet the material denotes barriers and exclusion. It has, as Rod Mengham explains, ‘been seen increasingly on our television screens, as a means of confinement in concentration camps in Bosnia and Guantanamo Bay, and in various parts of the world in the form of holding pens for illegal immigrants’.

In *Shibboleth*, commissioned by Tate Modern as part of the Unilever Series (2007–8) Salcedo once again uses chain-link fence, this time embedded in the fissure that intersects the floor of the Turbine Hall. The mesh supports the sides of the crack that Salcedo has inscribed in the concrete entrance ramp of the hall, at times visible, at other times obscured. Like the wire mesh of *Neither*, *Shibboleth* forms a boundary, here inverted in a ‘negative space’ that describes the radical objectification of the other in the ‘history of racism’ which, as Salcedo explains, ‘runs parallel to the history of modernity’: ‘Its appearance disturbs the Turbine Hall in the same way the appearance of immigrants disturbs the consensus and homogeneity of European societies.’

*Shibboleth* underscores the silence of these ‘others’ against which a community defines
itself. Its title refers to a turn of phrase or a social custom that acts as a test of, or impediment to, acceptance in a particular social group. The story from which the term gets its meaning describes the massacre of the Ephraimites by the Gileadites as recounted in chapter 12 of the Old Testament Book of Judges:

The Gileadites, having defeated the Ephraimites in battle, challenged any survivors seeking to cross the river Jordan to enunciate the word ‘shibboleth’. The Ephraimites, unable to form the ‘sh’ sound of the victor’s language, pronounced the word ‘sibboleth’ instead, and in so doing spelt their own death sentence: forty-two thousand of them were killed.63

Salcedo describes Neither as ‘a piece about uncertainty and ambiguity’.64 Neither and Shibboleth can be understood in terms of the ‘countermonument’, a memorial that addresses ‘the radical discontinuity between the event and its experiencing, a form that bears witness to that which cannot be accounted for’.65 Charles Merewether’s idea of the countermonument is part of what Rosalind Krauss the ‘negative condition’ of sculpture in the twentieth century. She describes it as ‘a kind of sitelessness, or homelessness, an absolute loss of place.’66

For Gabriele Schwab, Beckett’s politics are ‘an issue of territory, interpellation, and otherness’.67 Reread in the context of Salcedo’s art, Beckett’s neither gains particular relevance in the context of incarceration, asylum and immigration, as a text which explores the loss of identity, the refusal of sanctuary, the lack of another with whom to connect: of people ‘unheard’ and ‘unheeded’, silenced in this ‘unspeakable home’. Morton Feldman’s Neither explores the edges of this silence, the voice of the soprano pushed to the limits of her capacity in order to express what Feldman understands as the subject of Beckett’s text: ‘whether you’re in the shadows of understanding or non-understanding, I mean, finally you’re in the shadows. You’re not going to arrive at any understanding at all.’68

Feldman’s and Salcedo’s formal responses to Beckett’s text, each work echoing and reiterating the gridlike structure of his prose, provide a way to think about the negation inherent in these works. They contextualise the response that Lyotard urges us to make – even if that response is silence – and the responsibility we must take, particularly in the face of silence. In conversation with Charles Juliet, Beckett makes an uncharacteristically
specific analysis of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, arguing that ‘moral values are not accessible and not open to definition’:

To define them, you would have to make value judgements, and you can’t do that. [...] You can’t even talk about truth. That is part of the general distress. Paradoxically, it’s through form that the artist can find a kind of solution – by giving form to what has none. It is perhaps only at that level that there may be an underlying affirmation.69

Beckett, Feldman, Salcedo are each concerned with our response to silence, and the ways in which we can make audible, or visible that which cannot be expressed.

Through two works called Neither, each of them poised between alternatives about which a negative statement is made, Feldman and Salcedo respond to the challenge of a Beckettian aesthetic that situates itself between Malrauxian estrangement and Geulincxian negation. Feldman’s opera makes manifest the sounds of Beckett’s ‘unself’ in a music that evokes Malraux’s ‘solitude dernière’.70 Salcedo’s installation rethinks Geulincx’s principle that allies human want to worth, creating a space in which ethics and aesthetics conjoin. Each of these works called neither / Neither is ‘more and less, neither more nor less’71 and each brings us closer to that ‘unspeakable home’ at the heart of Beckett’s writing.

Notes
1 Samuel Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy, 16 January 1936, in Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (eds), The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 299. He changed his name from McGreevy (the spelling used in the Beckett Letters) to MacGreevy to approximate more likely the Irish spelling of the name.
2 Trans. George Craig, in Fehsenfeld and Overbeck (eds), The Letters of Samuel Beckett, p. 302, n. 5.
5 Samuel Beckett’s title is not capitalised, unlike Feldman’s and Salcedo’s.
Beckett, Feldman, Salcedo


8 Ibid.


11 Knowlson, Damned to Fame, p. 631.


16 Ibid., p. 401.

17 Ibid., p. 402.

18 Ibid., p. 403.

19 Ibid., p. 399.


25 Ibid.

26 Skempton, ‘Beckett as librettist’, p. 76.


28 Ibid., pp. 75–6.

29 Catherine Laws, ‘Morton Feldman’s Neither: a musical translation
Beckett and nothing


33 Feldman quoted by Skempton, ‘Beckett as librettist’, p. 76.


37 Ibid.


44 Ibid., p. 194.

45 White Cube Gallery Press release for Neither by Doris Salcedo, 10 September–18 October, 2004: ‘Neither also refers in part to an opera by American avant-garde composer Morton Feldman from 1977, which incorporates a libretto written by Samuel Beckett, whose sparse, nihilistic poetry conveys the weight of human existence.’


47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.


52 Ibid.
54 Ibid., p. 8.
56 Ibid.
58 Beckett, Fizzle 5: Closed Place, in The Complete Short Prose, p. 236.
69 Charles Juliet, Conversations, p. 149.
71 Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, p. 128.