characters' private thoughts and motives. We infer that the couple are engaged in some unconventional sexual act, but it is impossible and unnecessary to know what exactly it is. The beginning perhaps consists of the woman's statement of her uneasiness; the middle of the narrator's self-justification and the woman's reiteration of her displeasure ("To me it stinks"); and the ending of her refusal to play the game of sexual dilettantism. But the story lacks the reassuring movement of "The Hand" towards the narrator's moment of truth. It is not clear why he is telling us this story, for he reports the woman's harsh strictures on him without comment. Whereas "The Hand" is instantly comprehensible, we have to re-read "All Right" several times to make sense of it, sounding the dialogue in our heads. ("She said, '*Like* I don't like . . . I won't live long enough for *all right*.'") The text seems to be about deadlock rather than discovery, and its unity owes more to its internal verbal echoes, especially of the word "right" highlighted in the title, than to its narrative structure. In that respect it offers itself as a kind of prose poem – either that, or a tantalizing fragment of some longer story.

49 Aporia

Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning. I, say I. Unbelieving. Questions, hypotheses, call them that. Keep going, going on, call that going, call that on. Can it be that one day, off it goes on, that one day I simply stayed in, in where, instead of going out, in the old way, out to spend day and night as far away as possible, it wasn't far. Perhaps that is how it began. You think you are simply resting, the better to act when the time comes, or for no reason, and you soon find yourself powerless ever to do anything again. No matter how it happened. It, say it, not knowing what. Perhaps I simply assented at last to an old thing. But I did nothing. I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me. These few general remarks to begin with. What am I to do, what shall I do, what should I do, in my situation, how proceed? By aporia pure and simple? Or by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered, or sooner or later? Generally speaking. There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless. I should mention before going any further, any further on, that I say aporia without knowing what it means.

SAMUEL BECKETT *The Unnamable* (1959)

APORIA is a Greek word meaning "difficulty, being at a loss", literally, "a pathless path", a track that gives out. In classical rhetoric it denotes real or pretended doubt about an issue, uncertainty as to how to proceed in a discourse. Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy is perhaps the best-known example in our literature. In fiction, especially in texts that are framed by a storytelling situation, aporia is a favourite device of narrators to

arouse curiosity in their audience, or to emphasize the extraordinary nature of the story they are telling. It is often combined with another figure of rhetoric, "aposiopesis", the incomplete sentence or unfinished utterance, usually indicated on the page by a trail of dots . . . In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, for instance, Marlow frequently breaks off his narrative in this way:

> "It seems to me that I am trying to tell you a dream – making a vain attempt, because no relation of a dream can convey the dream-sensation, that commingling of absurdity, surprise, and bewilderment in a tremor of struggling revolt, that notion of being captured by the incredible which is of the very essence of dreams . . ."
>
> He was silent for a while.
>
> ". . . No it is impossible; it is impossible to convey the life-sensation of any given epoch of one's existence – that which makes its truth, its meaning – its subtle and penetrating essence. It is impossible. We live, as we dream – alone. . ."

In metafictional narratives like "Lost in the Funhouse" or *The French Lieutenant's Woman* aporia becomes a structural principal, as the authorial narrator wrestles with the insoluble problems of adequately representing life in art, or confesses his own hesitation about how to dispose of his fictional characters. In Chapter 55 of *The French Lieutenant's Woman*, for instance, when Charles, having discovered that Sarah has disappeared from the hotel in Exeter, is travelling back to London to begin his search for her, the authorial narrator intrudes into the narrative as a rudely staring stranger in Charles's railway compartment:

> Now the question I am asking, as I stare at Charles, is . . . what the devil am I going to do with you? I have already thought of ending Charles's career here and now; of leaving him for eternity on his way to London. But the conventions of Victorian fiction allow, allowed no place for the open, the inconclusive ending; and I preached earlier of the freedom characters must be given. My problem is simple – what Charles wants is clear? It is indeed. But what the protagonist wants is not so clear; and I am not at all sure where she is at the moment.

In the fiction of Samuel Beckett, especially his later work, aporia is endemic. *The Unnamable* (originally published in French, as *L'Innommable*, in 1952) is a stream-of-consciousness novel, but not like Joyce's *Ulysses*, where the sights, sounds, smells and human bustle of Dublin are evoked for us, in vivid specificity, through the sense-impressions, thoughts and memories of the chief characters. All we have is a narrative voice talking to itself, or transcribing its own thoughts as they occur, longing for extinction and silence, but condemned to go on narrating, though it has no story worth telling, and is certain of nothing, not even of its own position in space and time.

The anonymous narrator is sitting in some vague, murky space, whose limits he can neither see nor touch, while dimly perceived figures, some of whom seem to be characters from Beckett's previous novels, move round him – or could it be that he is moving round them? He knows his eyes are open "because of the tears that fall from them unceasingly." Where is he? It could be hell. It could be senility. It could be the mind of a writer who has to go on writing though he has nothing to say, because there is nothing worth saying any longer about the human condition. Or are all these states essentially one and the same? *The Unnamable* seems to fit Roland Barthes' description of "zero degree writing", in which "literature is vanquished, the problematics of mankind is uncovered and presented without elaboration, the writer becomes irretrievably honest."

The discourse accretes rather than proceeds, by a kind of self-cancellation, one step forwards and one step back, contradictory statements separated only by commas, without the usual adversative *but* or *however*. "Keep going, going on," the narrator urges himself, and immediately adds the derisive rejoinder, "call that going, call that on?" How did he come to be where he is? "Can it be that one day . . . I simply stayed in." Immediately another question is raised: "in where"? He drops the original question: "No matter how it happened." But even this negative gesture presumes too much: "It, say it, not knowing what."

Beckett was a deconstructionist *avant la lettre*. "I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me." That sentence attacks the

foundations of the long humanist tradition of autobiographical fiction and fictional autobiography, from *Robinson Crusoe* through *Great Expectations* to *A La Recherche du temps perdu*, with its consoling promise of achieving self-knowledge. Beckett anticipated Derrida's notion of the inevitable "*différance*" (*sic*) of verbal discourse: the "I" that speaks always being different from the "I" that is spoken of, the precise fitting of language to reality always being deferred. "These few general remarks to begin with." That usually bland formula is blackly comic in this epistemological vacuum. How shall the narrator proceed, "by affirmations and negations invalidated as uttered" (i.e., self-contradiction) or "By aporia pure and simple?" Aporia is a favourite trope of deconstructionist critics, because it epitomizes the way in which all texts undermine their own claims to a determinate meaning; but the narrator's later admission, "that I say aporia without knowing what it means," is a trumping of aporia.

"There must be other shifts. Otherwise it would be quite hopeless. But it is quite hopeless." What is extraordinary is that this bleakly pessimistic and relentlessly sceptical text is not deeply depressing to read, but on the contrary funny, affecting, and in a surprising way affirmative of the survival of the human spirit *in extremis*. Its famous last words are: "you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."

50 Ending

The anxiety, which in this state of their attachment must be the portion of Henry and Catherine, and of all who loved either, as to its final event, can hardly extend, I fear, to the bosom of my readers, who will see in the tell-tale compression of the pages before them, that we are all hastening together to perfect felicity.

JANE AUSTEN *Northanger Abbey* (1818)

Ralph looked at him dumbly. For a moment he had a fleeting picture of the strange glamour that had once invested the beaches. But the island was scorched up like dead wood – Simon was dead – and Jack had . . . The tears began to flow and sobs shook him. He gave himself up to them now for the first time on the island; great, shuddering spasms of grief that seemed to wrench his whole body. His voice rose under the black smoke before the burning wreckage of the island; and infected by that emotion, the other little boys began to shake and sob too. And in the middle of them, with filthy body, matted hair, and unwiped nose, Ralph wept for the end of innocence, the darkness of man's heart, and the fall through the air of the true, wise friend called Piggy.

The officer, surrounded by these noises, was moved and a little embarrassed. He turned away to give them time to pull themselves together; and waited, allowing his eyes to rest on the trim cruiser in the distance.

WILLIAM GOLDING *Lord of the Flies* (1954)