A **HJEAS** book

Erika Mihálycsa

“A wretchedness to defend”

Reading Beckett’s Letters

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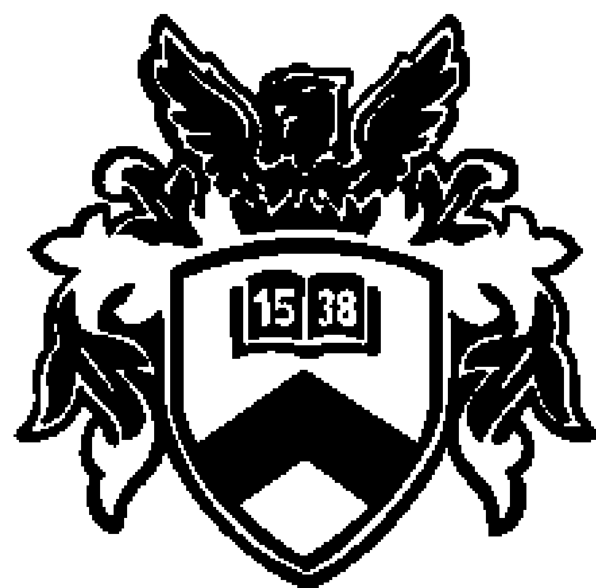

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"'*A wretchedness to defend': Reading Beckett's Letters* is the first book-length study to take the full measure of Samuel Beckett's correspondence. As Mihálycsa's assured writing highlights, this multilingual correspondence provides an essential insight into Beckett's life and work. Along the way, profound insights into one of literature's greats are yoked to recent developments in Beckett Studies . . . . For scholars of Beckett Studies, and indeed modern literature more generally, this monograph is an assured guide to the wit, insight, and stoicism offered in Beckett's letters."

—Matthew Feldman, author of *Beckett's Books* (2006); *Falsifying Beckett* (2015); and *Politics, Intellectuals and Faith* (2020).

"Throughout his career, Beckett remained loyal to one genre in particular that is provisional, improvised, and self-questioning by nature—the letter. Mihálycsa's engagement with his letters goes beyond the biographical into a provocative, rich, and illuminating account of the forms in which, over a long writing life, Beckett achieves, renounces, and reinvents the mastery that holds his oeuvre together across all its multifariousness. Theoretically informed but warmly human too, *'A wretchedness to defend'* is a rewarding and original study of the epistolary Beckett."

—David Wheatley, contributor to *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Poetry* (2012), *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (2013), *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry* (2007), *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney* (2009), and *The Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2003)

“A wretchedness to defend”

Frontispiece: *Sacco e bianco* (1953) by Alberto Burri. Photograph by Centre Pompidou, MNAM-CCI, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais (used by kind permission of the rightful owner).

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Reading Beckett’s Letters

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To Karim, in friendship

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Illustration

Frontispiece

Sacco e bianco (1953) by Alberto Burri

List of Abbreviations

CDW *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)
CIWS *Company/Ill Seen Ill Said/Worstward Ho/Stirrings Still*, ed. Dirk Van Hulle (London: Faber and Faber, 2009)
CP *The Collected Poems of Samuel Beckett*, ed. Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber and Faber, 2012)
CSP *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove, 1995)
Dis *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, ed. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove, 1984)
LSB 1 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 1: 1929-1940, ed. Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Dan Gunn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009)
LSB 2 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 2: 1941-1956, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011)
LSB 3 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 3: 1957-1965, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014)
LSB 4 *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 4: 1966-1989, ed. George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016)
MPTK *More Pricks Than Kicks*, ed. Cassandra Nelson (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)
Mu *Murphy*(New York: Grove, 2003)
NO *Nohow On. Company, Ill Seen Ill Said, Worstward Ho* (New York: Grove, 1996)
Unn *The Unnamable*, ed. Steven Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2010)
W *Watt* (New York: Grove, 2003)

Introduction
Dangerous Neatness of Identifications: Beckett Scholarship Out of the Archive

"The danger is in the neatness of identifications," begins young Samuel Beckett's first major critical venture, the essay "Dante… Bruno. Vico.. Joyce," exagmining Joyce's *Work-in-Progress*, and continues with the rhetorical question, "Must we wring the neck of a certain system in order to stuff it into a contemporary pigeon-hole, or modify the dimensions of that pigeon-hole for the satisfaction of the analogymongers?" (*Dis* 19). This warning is especially valid for attempts to address, not to say *re*dress, the constructions of Beckett so as to do justice to the stubborn indeterminacies of the oeuvre. With the archival turn that has dominated scholarship over the past two decades, Beckett studies have come to face the need for redefinitions. The questions are many. Have criticism and literary theory exhausted the language in which to utter the (non)relation/(in)difference at work in texts that Deleuze deemed themselves "exhausted"? What is the task of the critic, translator, and theater-maker vis-à-vis the bilingual, bitextual oeuvre that defies genre distinctions, the differences between English and French, received frameworks of philosophy and aesthetics, and the critical paradigms of avant-garde/(late) modernism/postmodernism if the goal is to re-affirm and not reduce or refine out of existence its radical elusiveness? Does the becoming-global of Beckett indeed provoke novel, empowering responses in international theater, literature, and the visual arts, or are we witnessing the commodification of a cultural icon turned into a "classic" and featuring in school textbooks and compulsory syllabi, decades of repetitive staging having domesticated the texts into the broad middle-class cultural mainstream?

The past two decades of Beckett studies have been largely a narrative (out) of the archive, as previously unpublished material—manuscripts, drafts, letters, notebooks, marginalia, the diaries kept during his 1936-37 journey through Germany, as well as the theater notes of his collaborators in various European theaters, the BBC and the Süddeutscher Rundfunk—became available for research and were partially published. This "gray canon" in Beckett studies draws attention to vital *loci* in the interests, language, imagery, and forms of Beckett's work-in-(re)gress, areas which respond to, interact with, and echo literary, artistic, and philosophical issues

across his vast and eclectic readings. Genetic studies have drawn attention to the stratification of texts and the variants of bilingual composition, while excavations of Beckett's library and notebooks yielded a whole pantheon of previously unsuspected influences and contingencies—writers, artists, critics, and philosophers whom Beckett took years to "unlearn," in pursuit of "a syntax of extreme weakness, penury perhaps" (*LSB 3* 211). Such a program of unlearning and progressive paring down, however, presupposes the existence of a prior knowledge, of systematic thinking, which Beckett gained through years of meticulous self-education in Western thought, literature, and the visual arts through the 1920s and 1930s, as evidenced in his letters, in the *German Diaries*, and in the annotations in two notebooks, the so-called "Dream Notebook" and "Whoroscope Notebook," as well in the typed notes he kept through this period (the "Interwar Notes"). With this learning his journey started *from*, and not *to*, to borrow a phrase from his letters—a journey that would turn all this learning and reading systematically on its head.

Beckett's correspondence, spanning the six decades from 1929 to his death in 1989, a selection of which was published by Cambridge University Press between 2009 and 2016 under the editorship of Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Lois More Overbeck, George Craig, and Dan Gunn, with translations of letters written in French by George Craig, is undoubtedly the most important find for scholars, students, and readers of Beckett since the publication of James Knowlson's authorized biography; its importance is highlighted by the fact that the four volumes have since been published, or are being published, in German, French, and Italian translations as well. The correspondence offers unparalleled insights, in Beckett's own words, into the shaping of the sensibility that informs the text-world; illuminating the contexts, subtexts, and transformational creative practices behind the (self-translated, and often author-directed) texts—as well as allowing the reader an intimate and proximate experience of the voice of this legendarily reclusive author. The following chapters propose an overview of the thought processes and the articulation of a poetics, pursued stubbornly and with rare radicalism, evidenced in the letters, which nuance and often significantly complicate widespread critical views of the Beckettian work. At the same time, while trying to resist the temptation of a reductive biographical reading, as well as the pull of the "retrospective illusion" (Casanova 29), of attributing to the work an internal logic that builds up a totality which can be

conferred only retroactively, I wish to highlight the consubstantiality not only of the published work and the letters, but, more broadly, a co-belonging of Beckett's singular work and his exercise of life. As a prominent writer and Beckettian, James Maxwell Coetzee, bluntly put it, commenting on Beckett's photographs, "soul can shine through flesh only if soul and flesh are one" (31).

In 1985, when Beckett yielded to the insistence of publishers and academics and agreed to have a selection of his letters published, to be curated by Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, he stipulated that only such letters or passages that have bearing on the work be published—a constraint that confronts any editor with well-nigh unsolvable dilemmas, especially since letters with more personal content can display a quality of writing that comes astonishingly close to Beckett's fiction. There are many revelations. These include Beckett's many letterwright's voices, tuned to his addressees, from close literary friends with whom he felt at ease, to the children of his longtime friend, lover, and collaborator, Barbara Bray. They include also the surprising choices and plans he entertained at various stages of his early life, often in straitened circumstances, as when, in April 1946, he seriously considered applying for the editorship of the Irish Retail Grocery Dairy and Allied Trades Association "for experience in trade journalism" (*LSB 2* 29). But the most important are certainly Beckett's far from infrequent comments on his own work and his understated and self-savaging professions of faith in an art that gives up pretensions to mastery, to accept "ignorance, pure weakness." In the summer of 1948 during work on *Malone meurt/Malone Dies*, at the beginning of an extraordinary exchange of letters with the art critic Georges Duthuit, in a somewhat Murphyesque fashion he reports a heated (and whiskey-fueled) intellectual argument with members of the Dublin modernist coterie, who cite all the "usual untouchables" in order to "br[ing him] back to decent behaviour":

> I could hear voices grave, sweet and reasonable, taking advantage of the loudmouth to become even more stinkingly poisonous than usual. I seem to remember that St Francis of Assisi was quoted in order to show me the ancient nature of what I was calling for with my bellowings. Now there is poverty! There exists, in our National Gallery, a portrait of him, supposedly by Rubens, that one might just about allow to be by Teniers' groom … eyes bright with a studied wildness, the inevitable stigmata well on display, unable for love of Jesus to buy a round, poveretto! (*LSB 2* 84-86)

The fact that in ridiculing the run-of-the-mill analogy with St. Francis Beckett should resort to a highly conventional pictorial representation by the

Baroque artist least given to impoverishment of technique, who remained anathema for Beckett, further discredits the attempt of appropriation into the existing cultural repertory, the tradition of "the pen- and brush-holders" (84) and suggests that at the time Beckett felt a need to look for a method that lay outside the established categories of criticism, literature, and the arts, in a zone that is inchoate and without available models.

The four essays in this book, each dedicated to one of the volumes of Beckett's correspondence, set out to trace the articulations of this poetics from the early ventures into writing to the years in which Beckett completed the body of work for which he remains best known, and finally to the writer of the late plays and prose; showing the literary, philosophical, and visual influences, affinities, and dissociations; the practice of translation and self-translation; and Beckett's complex involvement in theater and in the radio and television productions of his plays.

Reading is by its nature multi-directional and transformative. Accordingly, immersion in Beckett's letters over a considerable period of time not only recast my own reading of the Beckett oeuvre; it was also colored by acquaintance with current critical constructions of Beckett. Not so much a state-of-the-discipline—which would inevitably be selective and at best tentative—the following is an overview of lines of engagement with Beckett's text-world, whose insights composed a secondary frame of reference for my reading of the letters.

Beckett's work has often been described as a writing of liminality, a writing that is on the way to an unattainable ending(-yet-again), but also as a writing that inhabits and traverses the margins of literature, philosophy, and even art criticism, as a writing at the limit—of our conception of the literary and even of the human. Since the millennium turn there has been a marked shift of accent in criticism's attempts to (re)think and reassess Beckett's text-world, a turn away from the poststructuralist interpretive paradigm of Heideggerian-Blanchovian extraction—likely a product of untroubled global optimism regarding the envisioned end of history and triumph of liberal democracy—that dominated Beckett studies in the 1980s-1990s. While the previous exegetical models of "pure" criticism, sometimes described as "borderless"—also the title of a representative collection of essays marking Beckett's centenary, *Borderless Beckett/Beckett sans frontières*—proposed concepts like the "neuter" (Blanchot)/the "indifferent" (Leslie Hill) as privileged points of entry into, or fulcra of, Beckett's texts; the gaining

traction of rehistoricizing, archival scholarship, and genetic criticism, and the interconnections of these with a more ethically oriented philosophy (including corporal and disability studies, theories of posthumanism and the posthuman, New Materialism and Object Oriented Ontology, ecocriticism and Animal Studies, cultural memory and trauma studies) can also be seen as a mode of reading more attuned to newly darkening times. Also, a sobering reminder that most of Beckett's work itself was written in dark times, and with Beckett, "showing the marks of what it is to be and be in face of" ("For Avigdor Arikha," *Dis* 152) is no abstract predicament expressed by a near-transcendental voice of literature, but embodied in real scars and exterminated beings.

Around the millennium turn it became almost a critical fashion to speak about the crisis or "death of 'Theory'"—that is, the sanitized variety, stripped of its erstwhile subversive potential and reduced to a set of discourses, entrenched in the (mainly Anglophone) academy. At the same time, many voices called for recalibrating theory "after Theory," not *of*, but *as* literature, "a literature raised to the power of speculation" (Rabaté, *The Future of Theory* 8), for a theory that could inhabit literature as a "constantly renewed mise-en-scène of human intellective failure by means of semantic lacks," which enacts the defeat of meaning, the very "defensiveness of logos" (Dubreuil 240). While there are signs of such a genuine intellective and speculative turn, and forms of new theory are tried out, it is easy to see that Beckett's texts have always been that: enactments of the failure of meaning and meaning-making, of overarching metadiscourses, as much as explication and explicitation, which test all theoretical and post-critical approaches and which can provide, precisely for that reason, models for thinking through, and against the working of, the untrustworthy medium of language.

The most significant recent rereadings of Beckett's work, by prominent scholars in the field who engage at least partly in archival and recontextualizing research, answer not only the Blanchovian, Deleuzian, or deconstructivist framings, but importantly also the rival construction of Beckett by Alain Badiou. Discretely bracketing poststructuralism's claims that Beckett's texts perform a linguistic subjugation, and at the same time countering Pascale Casanova's thesis that Beckett's texts are essentially formalist, an enactment of literary abstraction that seeks to bring literature on a par with the avant-garde visual arts and modernist music by breaking

with all residual narrative and dramatic conventions, with signification and the referent,[1] the contextually and microtextually sensitive recent readings of Beckett seem to both withhold the texts from Badiou's positive claims and nevertheless allow for a reading of a however hesitant, recalcitrant positivity, or, in Simon Critchley's terms, a "weak messianic power" (22) that stems from a radical skepticism toward all forms of totalizing, discredited positivity.

One of these polemical rereadings, against philosophy and philosophical constructions of Beckett, especially by Badiou and Deleuze, comes from Steven Connor, an earlier exponent of the poststructuralist, postmodern framing of Beckett alongside Leslie Hill, Carla Locatelli, Thomas Trezise, H. Porter Abbott, to name but a few. Connor offers a provocative reading of Beckett's radical finitude in the essay "'On such and such a day… ,'" later developed into the framing argument of *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination*, which became a reference work for subsequent new materialist investigations of Beckettian texts. Following philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy's tenets of finite thinking as impoverished/disabled thinking, Connor warns against theorizing Beckett's *in*finitude for its inability to grasp finitude seriously—the point of Beckett's finitude being, on the contrary, to resist the tendency of exegesis of drawing the texts out "into validation, authorization, explication—into public relations" ("'On such and such a day'" 44). Focusing on the last piece of writing Beckett published in his lifetime, the bilingual short poem "Comment dire" / "What is the Word," which gravitates towards the word "ceci/this," naming a "this" which is both unbearably proximate and unnamable, too close for naming, Connor argues that the only way not to do violence to what may easily be the most difficult provocation of Beckett's work is to acknowledge its radical finitude, "both predicament and choice" (49). Beckettian readings, Connor contends, should be "*unborderless*" (46), respecting the oeuvre's most obvious form of finitude, the insistence on distinctness, exception, and apartness; they should not fall into the error of linking, of relation, but should hold Beckett's work *back* from philosophy, allowing it to fall short of philosophy precisely because of its desire not to infinitize finitude. At the same time *Beckett, Modernism, and the Material Imagination*, together with Julie Bates's seminal *Beckett's Art of Salvage*, provokes the reader to consider the non-abstract, non-linguistic matters at stake in Beckett's work, a work singularly able to not merely represent but

perform and embody destitution, disabled corporeality, and indigence. Connor’s and especially Bates’s books approach the Beckett corpus from the (waste) matter and the few objects of salvage that criss-cross the texts and which multiprismatically reveal the economy of this writing—one that resists the (capitalist) cultural logic of relentless production.

In contradistinction to Connor’s, at face value, anti-philosophical proposal that deploys Nancy to counter what he sees as the tendency of philosophy/theory to validate and explicate, Andrew Gibson’s *Beckett and Badiou* is both complementary to, and at times polemical toward, Badiou’s Beckett, his reading supporting, by and large, Badiou’s inscription of a residual positivity in Beckett’s texts, even advancing the claim that Badiou’s philosophy is “more important to some of Beckett than Badiou himself seems to have noticed” (Gibson, *Beckett and Badiou* 5). If Gibson wrings back the Irish writer from Badiou’s *événementialité* [eventality], he does so by stressing the sobering fact that the world of Beckett’s texts—notably, of *Waiting for Godot*, where the tree sprouts a leaf, “yet nothing happens”—is “that of the big non-event” (40). At the same time, Gibson couples Beckett’s writing with Badiou’s philosophy as a “problematic vestigial, melancholic modernity,” one characterized by the “pathos of intermittency”:

> In the era of the end of metaphysics and the collapse of the grand narratives, truth and value logically emerge as intermittent or rare. Badiou and Beckett are what I call vestigial or melancholic modernists in that each commits himself to truth and value, in spite of their occasional unpredictable character. (40)

A similarly complicating and complementary argument with Badiou is found in Jean-Michel Rabaté’s *Think, Pig!*, which rereads the Beckett canon across Adorno (who died before the late work was written) and Badiou, the two philosophers who stress Beckett’s ethics and antiformalism, identifying the neuralgic point of Badiou’s theorizing of Beckett in the applicability of *événementialité* to the end of *Worstward Ho*. Rabaté points out how Badiou’s reading of the late texts—“a rare feat of close reading allied with a radical translation” (159)—misses nuances of (self-)irony and parody, and that locating the “event” in the word “sudden,” which supposedly tears up the text of *Worstward Ho* for the emergence of truth, is an infiltration from Badiou’s theorizing of Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés* [*A Throw of the Dice Will Never Abolish Chance*]. Instead Rabaté suggests that Adorno could fill in Badiou’s lacunae, even if going against the grain of the latter’s *Ethics*, since, in contradistinction to Badiou, Adorno represented the absolute event

with the name "Auschwitz." Identifying, in the wake of Hélène Cixous, a silent quote of Primo Levi's *Se questo è un uomo* [*If This Is a Man*] in a passage of "Le Dépeupleur"/ "The Lost Ones," Rabaté suggests this as a possible "event": if Auschwitz is indeed the absolute event, then it cannot be named, only alluded to obliquely (*Think, Pig!* 152-53).

For Rabaté, at stake in Beckett's oeuvre is the relentless groping for the *better worse* word that alone can give expression to life at the limit of the human, divorced from what Beckett himself called "anthropopseudomorphism." To this end he pinpoints, among Beckett's jottings on Kant in the Trinity philosophical notebooks, "*der Bathos der Erfahrung*"—the "low place" that works by exhibiting the body in its base functions—as the fertile site inhabited by Beckett's works. Accepting the animal other in itself, Beckett's specimen of "broader humanity" becomes better fitted to resist oppression (*Think, Pig!* 195).[2] Rather than an "anethical" response in a double movement, both converging with and drifting away from an ethical position vis-à-vis the animal other, as Shane Weller postulates ("Not Rightly Human" 219), for Rabaté the embracing of the animal, or the limit of the human, in Beckett's work is empowering and an ethical practice *par excellence* of critical thought.

Beckett's writing as an exemplary attempt at postwar, post-Holocaust blank writing or writing degree zero, governed by an overarching ethics of the low, of nonvalue and nonrelation, has become the dominant reading in both Beckett and new modernism(s) studies. Few writers have enjoyed the distinction of being promoted as exemplary of both the modernist and postmodernist aesthetic, as happened with Beckett during the academic debates that played out in the 1980s and 1990s regarding the putative modernism and/or postmodernism of canonical authors. If Beckett proved a recalcitrant object for the latter debates, he proves every bit as awkward to pigeonhole for the newly diversified and counter-hegemonic new modernism(s) studies, or for a redrawn category of a postwar late modernism, while his texts suggest themselves almost by default as their testing ground. Recent surveys of the field, the collections *Beckett and Modernism*, edited by Olga Beloborodova, Pim Verhulst, and Dirk Van Hulle, *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett*, edited by Dirk Van Hulle, or *The Bloomsbury Companion to Modernist Literature*, edited by Ulrika Maude and Mark Nixon, reconsider how Beckett's dismantling of core conventions of narrative and theater stretches current concepts of

modernism, however elastic; what makes or breaks all rationales about Beckett's modernism is whether modernism can accommodate the "literature of the unword," which Beckett famously calls for in his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun (Weller, "Language Revolution" 41-42). This concern puts Beckett in the company of Celan, Blanchot, and Sebald, inhabiting an ascetic and radical postwar late modernism very different from the aesthetic category proposed by Tyrus Miller: one that hinges on language skepticism and, pursuing the tradition laid down by Nietzsche, Mauthner, Hofmannsthal, and Mallarmé, but also by Kafka and (Adorno's) Hölderlin, "stages, embodies, or enacts the experience of the failing attempt to repair what is taken to be the radical division of word and world" (Weller, "Language Revolution" 44). For Van Hulle, Beckett departs from an aesthetics of the Joycean epiphany, aligned with a philosophy of teleological ambitions, in order to carve out a poetics of "pejorism," of writing "worser" (Beckett, *Company* 97), which engenders and is in its turn the product of a "logoclastic" aesthetic. However, even in defiance of a philosophical tradition of Leibnizian meliorism, Beckett uses a vehicle learned from Joyce: enactment, his performative texts dismantling traditional literature's urge to explain and comprehend.

However much Beckett might have protested against statements describing his writing as "philosophical," even going to such lengths as to disclaim any understanding of Western philosophy altogether, his works remain deeply permeated and haunted by specific philosophical interventions which go well beyond the narrow path stretching from Democritus the Abderite to Geulincx, as a privileged entry to his work (Beckett to Sighle Kennedy: *Dis* 113). In a July 1930 letter to Thomas MacGreevy about being ridiculed by his *Normalien* colleagues for reading Schopenhauer, Beckett writes almost apologetically, "I am not reading philosophy," adding that "an intellectual justification of unhappiness" is more worth immersing oneself in than the fashion for Carducci or Barrès (*LSB 1* 33). The disavowal places Beckett's philosophical reading in a realm away from the disciplinary, that of existential relevance—something that characterizes the echoing of a wealth of philosophical texts in his work.

Although the philosophical influences in the Beckett canon have received ample treatment in Hugh Kenner's classic study of Beckett the Menippean satirist of Cartesian philosophy; in the existentialist readings; in the alternative constructions of Beckett by Adorno, Blanchot, Deleuze,

Lyotard, and Badiou; and in the latest reassessments of Beckett's philosophy/philosophy's Beckett by Anthony Uhlmann; the excavations of Beckett's 1930s notebooks and the "Interwar Notes," followed by the recent integral publishing of the "Philosophy Notes," have supplied an idiosyncratic range of previously unacknowledged sources, besides greatly complicating the acknowledged ones, which surface in his work from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to the late television plays, as evidenced in the volumes *Beckett and Philosophy*, edited by Richard Lane, and *Beckett/Philosophy*, co-edited by Matthew Feldman and Karim Mamdani. One of the insights yielded by the close investigations of these notes is the relative importance of a cluster of pre-Socratic Greek philosophers, echoes of whose thoughts permeate *Krapp's Last Tape*, while the Trilogy's rhetoric of contradiction is more easily referred to the oppositional worldview found in the pre-Socratics than to the Cartesian mind-body duality habitually used as frame of reference (Fifield, "Of Being—or Remaining" 84-87). Moreover, Peter Fifield shows that the persistence of a poetics of the fragment from *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to *Foirades/Fizzles* can be traced back to philosophical fragments, often quotes in the work of Aristotle, the pre-eminent form in which most early Greek philosophy has been handed down to us. It is on the basis of such correlations that Matthew Feldman proposes a "methodological paradox," at work in the philosophy of Heraclitus, as a potential method of approaching Beckett's texts, since "paradox and inconsistency" are built into it (*Falsifying Beckett* 47)—a method that might eschew the contradictions and limitations of poststructuralist framings.[3] Similarly to Fifield, Feldman concludes on the basis of the "Philosophy Notes" that Cartesianism fades in importance as a decisive philosophical influence, when compared to the combination of early Greek thought and post-Kantian Nominalism. He argues that the most extreme form of Nominalism, Terminism, provided Beckett with the grain of radical language skepticism; even Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, which Beckett read in 1938, is an extreme form of Terminism. Likewise, rather than a critique of Cartesian thought, *Murphy* sets Nominalism's demented particulars against the universal norms residing in Mr Willoughby Kelly's oversize head ("Samuel Beckett, Wilhelm Windelband and Nominalist Philosophy" 99).

The recent repositioning of a Beckett of philosophy and of the philosophers' Beckett tends, almost symptomatically, to return to Adorno.

While in his notes on *Endgame*, Adorno stressed the impossibility of anchoring Beckett's work in well-contoured historical and political referents, which never become directly thematic in the writing, at the same time he does link that writing to Auschwitz ("Notes on Beckett" 163), even claiming in a televised interview that Beckett's texts were born "in the ashes of Auschwitz" (qtd. in Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination* 130). Beckett's texts have been read as a privileged testing ground of trauma studies, recently by Rhys Tranter, while Rodney Sharkey suggests that they enact a "refugee subjectivity," of a state of dissociation from the ego, the breakdown of the knowable world, and the characters' expulsion from their own stories (Sharkey 288-89)—a state that can be described with Agamben's concept of "destituent power," a paradoxical power that is born from relinquishment rather than mastery and which alone can resist the (bio)political operations of power through "inclusion and capture of anarchy and anomy" (Agamben 28). This tendency is underpinned by groundbreaking scholarship that delivers a political and intensely politicized Beckett in place of the well-worn image of the apolitical recluse in whose works even the constitutive historical events and traumas are refined out of recognizability. Andrew Gibson's *Samuel Beckett*, followed by Emilie Morin's *Beckett's Political Imagination* and James McNaughton's *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath*, the recent collection *Beckett and Politics*, edited by William Davies and Helen Bailey, together with a shoal of essays by Declan Kiberd, Luke Gibbons, David Wheatley, Feargal Whelan, to name but a few, demonstrate rather that Beckett's work is studded with historically and politically overdetermined referents and sardonic comments on nativist or racialist propaganda in Ireland and in continental Europe, and it was published in intensely politicized venues which played a key role in drawing attention to collaborationism in Vichy France, to colonial policies and wars before and after World War II, as well as to the ultimate scandal, the naturalization of discourses of torture and extermination.[4]

The most momentous achievement of Morin's *Beckett's Political Imagination* is its tracing of Beckett's creative engagement with the Shoah and its occultation and with the "murky period[s] of political transition in France" (144), both after World War II and during the Algerian War, recovering the polysemic allusiveness of the French texts and the various manuscript versions. In sensitive contextual close readings Morin shows that it was precisely the specific political coding and overtones in the French

texts that proved untranslatable, resulting in reified, occasionally heavily cut English texts, especially in the case of *Mercier and Camier* and the four novellas of the 1940s. *Beckett's Political Imagination* vitally reveals the extent to which Beckett's entire work, starting from the aborted early projects, is steeped in testimonial writing of something Beckett didn't witness first-hand, and how far the texts of the 1940s and 1950s raise the same questions that fueled Hannah Arendt's work: about the ability of totalitarianism to infantilize and depersonalize its subjects and breed collaborationism.[5] Morin's work highlights with unprecedented clarity how the problem of witnessing suffuses Beckett's whole writing: of how his awareness of the plight of his deported friends placed him in a situation impossible for testimony, yet didn't exonerate him from the moral obligation of bearing witness. This aporia, a veritable fulcrum of Beckett's whole aesth/ethic, recasts our reading of the much-quoted call for "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express . . . together with the obligation to express" ("Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," *Dis* 139) and acquires a political edge through the frictions between Beckett's post-humanist texts—harnessing the conventions of detective fiction, their willed impotence and ignorance in "ill saying" the scandal of occultation—and French memory politics crystallized in the dominant pattern of camp memoirs.

The passage from "Three Dialogues" and more generally, Beckett's writings and thinking about, and through, the visual arts have long been recognized as the principal vehicle of articulating his own poetics. With important research in the field—Lois Oppenheim's seminal phenomenological analysis, *The Painted Word*; *The Edinburgh Companion to Samuel Beckett and the Arts*, edited by S. E. Gontarski; David Lloyd's *Beckett's Thing*; Conor Carville's *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts*; Alan Warren Friedman's monograph on Beckett's often underrated engagement with Surrealism, *Surreal Beckett*; as well as important studies, among others, by John Pilling, Angela Moorjani, Porter Abbott, Enoch Brater, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Kevin Brazil, and collections dedicated to Beckett's essays on art (most importantly, *"Three Dialogues" Revisited*, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 13, edited by Marius Buning, Matthijs Engelberts, Sjef Houppermans, and Danièle de Ruyter-Tognotti)—Beckett's lifelong interest and immersion in the visual arts came to be discussed not only as a window on his aesthetic, but also as polemical interventions in the dominant art

historical, critical, and political discourses of the time of their writing, particularly the 1930s *rappel à l'ordre* across Europe, and in similar intellectual developments in the immediate aftermath of World War II and of the incipient Cold War period. Both Lloyd and Carville document how much of Beckett's nascent aesthetics of stillness and the inhuman is rooted in his hostility to the vitalist, organicist neo-humanism pervasive in French art history during his *Normalien* year; his key texts on Cézanne, Watteau, and Jack B. Yeats can be considered an elliptical argument against their integration into an authentically "French/Irish" tradition, stressing instead that Cézanne's paintings are "unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of atoms" (*LSB 1* 222-23).[6]

Of even more importance are Beckett's postwar texts about the visual arts, the 1946 essay "La Peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon," "Peintres de l'empêchement," and the well-known 1949 "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit." As a wealth of recontextualizing and rehistoricizing research shows, largely relying on the letters from this period and the publication history of the revived postwar *Transition* and other venues where Beckett's texts and translations appeared, in these works Beckett takes issue, on the one hand, with a post-occupation French cultural nationalism with vitalist overtones, à la Malraux, and, on the other hand, with the fundamental tenets of Sartrean existentialism colored by Marxism and proposed as a new humanism. Both these intellectual broad churches sought to address the changing role of literature and the arts in the social world, as well as the possibility of salvaging certain elements of the pre-war avant-garde aesthetic. Beckett's essays from the 1940s reveal not only a commitment to the heritage of the internationalist École de Paris of the 1930s, preferring to the new postwar French non-figurative school's celebrated formal elegance an impoverishment of means akin to "willed creative mismaking" (qtd. in Carville 156) and refusal, on ethical grounds, of any aesthetic recuperation of disaster (see Rabaté, "Beckett's Masson"), but by and large a refusal of totalizing, triumphalist intellectual and artistic accounts for the human condition, as increasingly seen in Marxist and existentialist humanist thinkers.

As Peter Fifield shows, the consistent rejection, in these essays on art, of the claims of existentialist and/or Marxist humanism, converges with the stance of Emmanuel Lévinas in his philosophical essays of the same years, repudiating both Heideggerian ontology and the foundations of Sartrean

existentialism, the absolute and unalienable freedom attributed to the human being (*Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emmanuel Levinas*). Moreover, Beckett's texts are also situated at an angle to the discourse that was gaining ground in art criticism in the 1940s and 1950s, pivoting on Clement Greenberg's narrative of modernism that privileged Abstract Expressionism and its European forerunners, rapidly instrumentalized in the symbolic vying for cultural supremacy that began with the Cold War (see Kevin Brazil, *Art, History, and Postwar Fiction*). The Beckett essays' sardonic and provocative attack on academic and institutional authority engenders Beckett's radical claim that the painting of the van Velde brothers does nothing less than disregard the central subject-object relation that had animated the modernist tradition of the new, shifting the point of interest from epistemological concerns to a radical "flat" ontology where the subject exists as one object among the objects of the world (Carville 210; Lloyd 121-33).

At the time when Beckett is looking at prewar avant-garde artworks for models or visual approximations to that "adventure . . . of the failed form" (*LSB 2* 596) that he himself is engaged in creating, an embodied and performative aesth/ethic of indigence and finitude, an Italian artist exhibits his burlap collages that were to inspire not only *arte povera* but also such defining artists of the material imagination as Robert Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns, Antoni Tàpies, or Cy Twombly. Alberto Burri's *Sacchi* of the late 1940s and early 1950s exemplify a similar post-humanist aesthetic of the low, of impoverishment, and failure as the Irish author's coeval texts, writings on art and comments on artworks in the letters, and so they come close to that painting envisioned by Beckett, "poor, undisguisedly useless, incapable of any image whatever, a painting whose necessity does not seek to justify itself" (*LSB 2* 166). Just as Burri's collages of cast-off, torn burlap sacks previously used for shipping food aid to a country devastated by war tear up and recast the Cubo-Futurist collage and the Constructivist grid, foregrounding the inadequacy of form in their manifestly ineffectual stitches, so Beckett's texts rupture modernist formalism and frameworks of mastery. Both treat the heritage of the past as detritus or salvage, a tradition that can no longer provide any viable interpretive scaffolding.[7] See the frontispiece that points at this proximity, displaying one of Burri's *Sacchi* as a visual reminder of the foundation on which Beckett's texts invite us to reimagine

the human condition as well as the condition of art: a ground zero of finite, perishable matter, of detritus.

In all archival excavations, the letters constitute one of the most important—and in the 1940s and early 1950s, around the time of writing the "Three Dialogues," *Godot*, the *Nouvelles*, and the Trilogy, easily the most important—documents of Beckett's positions, his intellectual and ethical qualms about the ongoing cultural and political debates, as well as the principal sources of his relentless testing of his own writing and his own stances, including his misgivings about appropriating Bram van Velde's painting for his own ends. These letters provide vital co-texts to the body of work and supplement it with both material and textual traces, elements, presences. They are neither unproblematic clues nor stage directions to reading Beckett's texts, although at times they may provide both, as in the many letters dispatched to his directors and actors. Many of the letters linger on the margin of the "literary" texts Beckett wrote, as they not only illustrate and document the concerns of the work but often, by their quality of writing, approximate it, displaying versions, pre-texts, textual solidifications that would find their way into the Beckett corpus and not infrequently show the trace of erasures. They often accompany fragments of works in (re)gress, sent by their author not as gifts but, rather, as the thank-you notes of someone who received a gift from his addressee.

In August 1951 Beckett writes to his former *Normalien* colleague and friend, George Pelorson, who changed his name to Belmont to deflect attention from his collaborationist past, closing his letter with a warm wish to meet in person, when he would be better able to express himself: "On paper all I'm good for now is going into silliness, ignorance, impotence, and silence" (*LSB 1* 279). These papers that, to our immense luck, have become available nevertheless include us in the conversation—fraught with silences, self-disparaging "silliness," and splintered statements—that Beckett held over the years with his various correspondents and, through them, with his own work. The essays that follow propose to indicate a few signposts in this conversation and to mark the ways in which the letters recast our understanding of Beckett's texts and their place in the vaster, infinite conversation also called literature.

Chapter 1
The “journey from”: Beckett’s Letters, 1929-1940

. . . what I am on the look out for . . . is nowhere, as far as I can see.
—Beckett, MPTK

“Beauty is a blank wall with Paste No Bills. I am tired dashing my skull against it. I run the gauntlet of galleries, up and down the highly waxed calvaries, a cockshy and an Aunt Sally of art” (*LSB 1* 383). Beckett is writing these lines to Mary Manning Howe from Hamburg in November 1936, at the beginning of a six–month journey through Nazified Germany which he spent mostly in galleries, museums, and museum deposits chock-full of *entartete Kunst* [degenerate art]. As though treading Paul Celan’s poetic meridian dividing *Kunst* from *Dichtung*, the thirty-year-old Beckett, whose *Murphy*, finished in July of that year, is being turned down by publisher after publisher, seems to be in the process of articulating a poetics that he would pursue with singular insistence and integrity from the 1940s onwards. The journey through Germany is an existential turning point as well as a journey to a sense of writing, to a sense of the failure of all claims to expression and to the ethical imperative of addressing the “mess,” which Beckett the letterwright and the diarist of the 1936-37 *German Diaries* records years before Beckett the novelist and playwright trips in his wake:

> It has turned out indeed to be a journey *from*, and not *to*, as I knew it was, before I began it. I can’t begin to make it clear to you, I haven’t the energy to make it clear to myself. An instinctive respect, at least, for what is real, & therefore has not in its nature, to be clear. Then when somehow this goes over into words, one is called an obscurantist. The classifiers are the obscurantists. (to Manning Howe, 13 Dec. 1936; *LSB 1* 397)

The letters cover a decade of Beckett’s life, from his resigning his Trinity lectureship to his decision to return to Paris before the outbreak of World War II—a decade of writing *More Pricks Than Kicks*, *Murphy*, and the poems that would go into *Echo’s Bones* as well as the first poems in French. They are not simply the prime source of information about the formative experiences of the author of the Trilogy. One is struck by how much every experience—of life unlived mostly, or lived *into* reading and facing painted or musical surfaces—is turned into an experience of grappling with words, of almost-but-not-quite throwing in the word-towel. As Beckett writes to Mary Manning Howe in January 1937, midway in his travels, “When the problem has quite vanished in the data, or better in the trovata;

when to have ever left one's village ceases to seem a folly; perhaps it is only then that the writing begins" (*LSB 1* 423).

The letters give the reader a glimpse of the amazing breadth and the wildly erratic nature of the young Beckett's reading—mainly in the original language: from Darwin to Geulincx, from Dante to Sartre, the list is as long as it is surprising. Beckett is not one to lavish praise too easily, and certainly not on contemporaries: he dubs T. S. Eliot "Télégraphie sans égal, Télégraphie sans éther" [Peerless Telegraphy, Telegraphy Without Ether] (*LSB 1* 83); Huxley's much-hailed, but to him "painstalling" novel, "Cunt Pointercunt" (111); Lawrence is scathingly referred to with the Italian word for testicles. In Goethe's *Faust* Beckett notes with displeasure the wealth of irrelevance (366). Jung, whose lecture he attends in October 1935, strikes him as a kind of "super AE," essentially of the same mindset as the Irish writer and theosophist George Russell, whose nationalist mysticism is memorably caricatured in the "Scylla and Charybdis" chapter of Joyce's *Ulysses* and in Beckett's own *Murphy*; the impression Jung's theory of the collective, archetypal unconscious leaves on him is of an evasion or "cuttle-fish's discharge" performed by a like-minded "methodical rhapsode" (*LSB 1* 282). While working on his study of Proust and reading *À la recherche* twice over in the summer of 1929, he somewhat exasperatedly reports that the author is "so absolutely the master of his form that he becomes its slave as often as not," and his writing "more heavily symmetrical than Macaulay at his worst," rancorously comparing what he perceives to be Proust's "loquacity" to diarrhea, "a maudlin false teeth gobble-gobble discharge from a colic-afflicted belly" (11-12). Such remarks as these make it clear that Beckett's turn away from an art of mastery and possession predates the traumatic experience of World War II. A striving to "*under*come," to use Steven Connor's coinage ("'On such and such a day'" 36), a resistance to what in the "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit" (1949) would be termed "two old maladies"—"the malady of wanting to know what to do and the malady of wanting to be able to do it" (*Dis* 140)—makes an early appearance in Beckett's correspondence, even if it would be turned into performative texts only from *Watt* onwards.

Beckett's allegiances, few and far between, are no less unexpected, from the "divine" Jane Austen to Sade's *Sodome*, of a composition "as rigorous as Dante's," which inspires in him nothing less than "metaphysical ecstasy" (*LSB 1* 607). There is no book that is discussed at more length than

Thomas a Kempis's *Imitatio Christi*; even the writing of the Cartesian philosopher Geulincx comes second, worth reading because of its "conviction that the *sub specie aeternitatis* vision is the only excuse for remaining alive" (319). The wealth of references to Sade in particular demonstrate the seriousness of Beckett's engagement with him; as Knowlson informs, his plans to translate *Les 120 jours de Sodome* for Obelisk Press in 1938 were eventually abandoned for fears of compromising his literary career (*Damned to Fame* 269). These references corroborate the insight that the French author's model of negative theology was a vital ingredient, together with Geulincx's supremely important ethics of impotence and humility on the one hand, and a radical language skepticism on the other hand, in allowing Beckett to dismantle Cartesian and Kantian rationalism. In *Watt*, a series of Sadean torture fantasies, modeled on the mechanization of ethics in Kant's practical reason, would "stage Reason as torture" (Rabaté, *Think, Pig!* 112). All these formative readings feed into the disruptive humor of *Watt*; with their help Beckett would hammer out an ethics of poverty, humility, and impotence, a zero-point of values that alone could counteract the avant-gardes' muscular display of competence and the newfangled postwar humanism advocated by Breton and the existentialists. In September 1935, one month into the writing of *Murphy*, he records with evident satisfaction his friend Nuala Costello's observation, "You haven't a good word to say for anyone but the failures" (*LSB 1* 275), pronouncing it the highest praise he had received in a long time.

His own work hardly fares better, the invariable verdict being "tant pis(s)" [Fr. *tant pis*, so much the worse"] or, paraphrasing Martial, "*carmina quae legunt cacantes*" [verses which people read while shitting] (*LSB 1* 94). Deep in the writing of *Murphy* (in the first month alone he manages some 20,000 words—a huge amount for one permanently complaining of the chores of writing), he issues one dismissive understatement after another, noting how every chapter provokes merely irritation and boredom after the next one is begun (283) and, once completed, the novel reads "horrid" (340). More telling than his symptomatic self-ironies are passages that bemoan a lack of "something arborescent or of the sky . . . written above an abscess and not out of a cavity, a statement and not a description of heat in the spirit to compensate for pus in the spirit" (134) in the greater part of his verse output, labeled "*facultatif*" [optional] (133). Beckett's outcry for *integrity*,

and his anchoring of a quality of authenticity in the helpless, low, animal, and material body, acquires weight in light of his later work:

> I suppose I'm a dirty low-church P[rotestant] even in poetry, concerned with integrity in a surplice. I'm in mourning for the integrity of a pendu's [Fr. "hanged man"] emission of semen . . . the integrity of the eyelids coming down before the brain knows of grit in the wind. (Oct. 1932; *LSB 1* 134-35)

The one author who is present by his conspicuous absence in such micro-treatises is James Joyce, with whom Beckett exchanged few and surprisingly bland letters during this period. Trudging on *Our Exagmination* and involved in the translation of *Anna Livia Plurabelle* into French, Beckett in his correspondence produced few and elusive statements on its author. On publication of *More Pricks*, he rejects, tongue-in-cheek, allusions that his first fictional work is indebted to Shem the Penman. The sources he defensively, and rather pedantically, acknowledges (Dante, Chaucer, Mandeville, the early Renaissance painter Paolo Uccello) align the *accidioso* Belacqua with the Romance scholar's preferences: "my *More Pricks* are as free from Joycean portmanteaux as from allusion, and that I NEVER contract, can't do it my dear, I only bid" (to Nuala Costello, May 1934, *LSB 1* 208). At the same time, a casual phrase can demonstrate how embedded Joyce's texts are in his memory. He reports from Munich, the last leg of his journey through Germany, that he knows the Alte Pinakothek so well that "I can walk through the entire collection without having to pass a Rubens" (479)—possibly a clowning variation on Bloom's conundrum, "Good puzzle would be cross Dublin without passing a pub" (*Ulysses* 4.129), not to say a remarkable feat, given the Baroque master's 64 paintings hanging in the gallery.

Literature, however, is not the prime interest of Beckett's letters through the 1930s: after giving up the "grotesque comedy of lecturing" at Trinity in 1930 (*LSB 1* 53), he toys with the idea of filmmaking, actually sending an application to Eisenstein in March 1936 to be admitted to the Moscow State School of Cinematography, but also with a variety of teaching positions from Cape Town to Massachusetts and, most importantly perhaps, with finding a position at the National Gallery. These choices may well baffle in hindsight, even though Beckett's straitened circumstances at the time of his application for a position of lecturer in Italian at the University of Cape Town may have made such change of life desirable. His fascination with Russian avant-garde cinema—difficult to see in Dublin or Britain for

reasons of censorship and protective taxes—has been traced by Emilie Morin to the interests and political sympathies of his circle of friends; while in Germany, Beckett's apparent initial obliviousness to the realities of the USSR also shifted, perceiving the Nazi propaganda apparatus as imitating Soviet techniques (*Beckett's Political Imagination* 43-48). As an author whose only poetic "manifesto," the "Three Dialogues"—apart from the early spoof "Le Concentrisme," parodying the manifestoes of the 1930s—is concerned with painting rather than writing, it is vital to assess the acuteness and training of Beckett's eye, the vast knowledge of art history he builds up during these years. In Dublin, London, Paris, or travelling through Germany, he takes to the galleries: in Braunschweig he visits Giorgione's *Self-portrait as David* daily for a week; in Dublin he keeps returning to the Flemish old masters. His affinities, here as elsewhere, are minor and surprising, even for the decades when the Flemish and Dutch Old Masters were reassessed in the wake of the monumental work of art historians Wilhelm von Bode, Max Friedländer, Georg Dehio, Wilhelm Fraenger, to name only a few. In Berlin Beckett writes about the Brouwers rather than the Vermeers or Ter Borchs; he prefers the Dirk Boutses, the Masters of Tired Eyes, Bassano, the Patiniers and Elsheimers, shunning the "acres of Titian" and writing to Thomas MacGreevy in January 1937 that Berlin will have reinforced his "impatience with the immensely competent bullies and browbeaters and highwaymen and naggers, the Rembrandts & Halses and Titians and Rubenses, the Tarquins of art" (*LSB 1* 428). He lays out a rigorous plan for himself for covering all major sites of the Harz Romanesque as soon as he arrives in Hamburg; one of the few regrets voiced at the end of that six-month journey is not to have seen Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece. The acuteness of his eye is in evidence: in Dresden he spots that the putto with armor at the feet of Giorgione's Venus had been painted over in the 19th century, before the X-ray photographs corroborate his verdict. His visual memory is more than remarkable in an age when reproductions were not easy to obtain. Often he would refer to the hanging of a painting in a gallery or comment on lighting and the annoying habit of covering paintings with a protective glass sheet. Tellingly, one of his aborted literary projects, the dramatic fragment "Human Wishes" on the life of Dr. Johnson, was also triggered by a portrait in the National Portrait Gallery, which struck Beckett with the "mad terrified face that I feel was the truth a very little below the adipose" (352).

The recipient of most of these essay-length excursions into literature and especially art is Thomas MacGreevy, a critic and poet of the Dublin modernist school, who would become the director of Dublin's National Gallery. Thirteen years Beckett's senior, he met Beckett in Paris in 1928 and introduced him to Joyce and later to the painter Jack B. Yeats. Their close friendship, demonstrated by a dense crop of letters written over decades, was based on shared literary and artistic interests and affinities. These letters are the prime point of entry into the young Beckett's thought processes. It is to MacGreevy that he sends his poems or writes about the painstaking progress of *Murphy*, and it is MacGreevy's judgment that he most eagerly awaits. On receiving his appreciation of *Proust*, which he values above the expertise of the "Sorbonagres," Beckett expresses his gratitude for his friend's praise of the "mutilated statement of an identification & a participation effected a summer's day of fathoms deeper than the little cormorant plunge of voracious curiosity" (*LSB 1* 72). And it is mostly to MacGreevy that this reticent young author opens up, in understatements cloaked in academic buffoonery, a life unlived or lived inwardly, whether writing pages about his reading of the *Imitatio Christi* and his own failed progress "*per viam pacis ad patriam perpetuae claritatis*" [by the way of peace to the country of eternal clarity/radiance] (257) or forever lamenting his impossibility to express himself in a straightforward manner, "without getting on a platform" (69).

Nevertheless, profound differences existed between "Slippery Sam" and "Tomtinker Tim"—their probable avatars in the Butt and Taff episode of *Finnegans Wake*, book 2—which Beckett's letters and his review of his friend's first volume of poetry (1934) silently gloss over. For all his modernist poetics, in his study on Jack B. Yeats's painting, the Catholic nationalist MacGreevy theorizes a continuous Irish artistic tradition, which finds little sympathy in the apostate Protestant Beckett forever at war with the country he not quite dotingly referred to as a "whoreless kip." In his response to MacGreevy's study on Yeats in January 1938, Beckett voices his "chronic inability" to seize seriously, let alone share in, a collective entity termed "the Irish people," or to countenance that said entity "ever gave a fart in its corduroys for any form of art whatsoever . . . or that it will ever care, if it ever knows, any more than the Bog of Allen will ever care or know, that there was once a painter in Ireland called Jack Butler Yeats," adding that "I, as a clot of prejudices, prefer the first half of your work, with its real and

radiant individuals, to the second, with our national scene" (*LSB 1* 599-600n).

Beckett almost compulsively turns away from any identification with "the Irish people." During the days of his convalescence in Paris, after being stabbed in the street by a drunk, he writes in January 1938 of a "sunlit surface yesterday brighter than the whole of Ireland's summer" (596). In August the same year he reports that the people and places of old in Dublin in make him feel like an "amphibian detained forcibly on dry land, very very dry land" (637); and, perhaps most tellingly, he writes that he is preparing to return "home" to Paris from Foxrock (636). In June 1938 Beckett sends his first French poems to MacGreevy. And it is in French that he would answer, much later, in a laconic *Hommage à Jack B. Yeats* (1957), his friend's incorporation of the artist in an assumed tradition of Irishness: "L'artiste qui joue son être est de nulle part. Et il n'a pas de frères. / The artist who stakes his whole being is from nowhere, has no kin" (*Dis* 148-49).

Such, perhaps unwitting, use of words as "home" written of Paris points to a delicate process of disidentification with Beckett's native Ireland, a process accelerated by the recent trauma of being publicly discredited as a writer and intellectual in the libel case against Oliver St. John Gogarty in 1937, where he testified as key witness.[8] As Emilie Morin uncovers, the "shrill and enshrined anti-Semitism" of the court proceedings, and Beckett's pillorying as an anti-Celticist literary figure who had lent his hand to writing about an immoral writer known to be both a Jew and a homosexual, Marcel Proust (*Beckett's Political Imagination* 73), left Beckett scarred and all the more willing to leave Dublin. The reactions from influential members of the Irish literary establishment, including Yeats's Irish Academy of Letters, to his hostile reviews and political satire (first and foremost, the 1934 "Recent Irish Poetry," where he famously accused the Celticist school of "flight from self-awareness," but also in his 1938 "Intercessions by Denis Devlin," where he dubs the same group "antiquaries" and "Geleerte"—a pun on the German *Gelehrte*, the learned, and *leer/Geleerte*, empty/the emptied-out, hollow men [*Dis* 71, 91]) probably also contributed to his feeling that he had burnt his bridges in Dublin (*Beckett's Political Imagination* 76-78). An occasional, scathing remark in a letter, for instance on reading an article that fashions Dr. Johnson into a "John Bull, the orthodox balls" (*LSB 1* 488), throws into sharp relief the nature of the dramatic project "Human Wishes," centered on the figure of the English philosopher, which was born midway in Beckett's

journey through Germany and to which he returned in 1940 in occupied France, against a backdrop of growing acceptance of fascism in Europe and at home. Beckett's choice of the figure is implicitly a reaction to the political program of Dublin's far-right-leaning Protestant intelligentsia, of reappraising Ireland's national history and reappropriating such writers into the Irish national canon as Berkeley, Swift, Edmund Burke, or Goldsmith, exploiting them for a fabricated vision of a new, nationalist Ireland. In contrast, the Dr. Johnson reimagined by Beckett is, as Morin shows, an elusive humanist anguished in the face of the vacuity of life and of death as complete annihilation, and interested in the limits of philosophy, in that narrow margin between reason and unthought that the Descartes of "Whoroscope" also articulated ("Beckett, Samuel Johnson and the 'Vacuity of Life'" 232-50). The figure outlined in Beckett's notes in his first attempt at the dramatic form would haunt much of his later work, from Lucky's monologue, where he appears as a counterpart to Berkeley and Voltaire, to *Krapp* and the ending of *Breath*. In the letter quoted above, he is described as "very quiet . . . Perhaps his nigger [sic] Frank Barber was the only person he never bellowed at" (*LSB 1* 489), the allusion being to a recollection of Dr Johnson's black slave boy about his master.

Given his reaction to MacGreevy's book, it is highly illuminating to consider Beckett's own reading of the painting of Yeats, whose landscape *Morning* he buys in 1936 when having practically no source of income but the tight-fisted family apanage. This reading exists in two versions, in two letters dispatched the same day (14 August 1937) to his aunt Cissie Sinclair and to MacGreevy; the process of compression from the one to the other mirrors Beckett's later writerly practices. At the same time, the metamorphoses of the phrases between letters allow a glimpse into the self-conscious textual reworking invested in these missives.

> A painting of pure inorganic juxtapositions, where nothing can be taken or given & there is no possibility of change or exchange. I find something terrifying . . . in the way Yeats puts down a man's head & a woman's head side by side . . . the awful acceptance of 2 entities that will never mingle. . . . One does not realize how still his pictures are till one looks at others, almost petrified, a sudden suspension of the performance, of the convention of sympathy & antipathy, meeting & parting, joy & sorrow. (to MacGreevy, *LSB 1* 540)

What Beckett sees in(to) Jack B. Yeats's paintings has to do, significantly, with "ultimate hard irreducible inorganic singleness . . . handled with the dispassionate acceptance that is beyond tragedy" (to Cissie Sinclair, *LSB 1* 536). This emphasis on the unapproachable otherness of the artwork, which

renders the human object of representation almost mineral, available to a gaze on, and palpation of, the surface alone, already contains the germs of a later post-humanist poetics, of ideas that would surface in "Three Dialogues," in a call for an art turning away from representation "in disgust, weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing," preferring "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express" (*Dis* 139). Among the many "pre-texts" to his 1940s essays on art—the 1945 "La Peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon" [The Painting of the van Veldes, or, The World and a Pair of Trousers], the 1948 "Peintres de l'empêchement" [Painters of Impediment], and the "Three Dialogues"—one has to include the letters on Cézanne's deanthropomorphized, well-nigh mineral landscapes, "incommensurable" with human expression, in which Beckett identifies an intent of radical alienation. In Cézanne Beckett recognizes the first painter to radically strip landscape—and by extension, the object world—of anthropomorphism and its organicist, vitalist guise, whose concerns are set worlds apart from the domesticating pursuits of the Capability Browns:

> Atomistic landscape with no velleities of vitalism, landscape with personality à la rigueur, but personality in its own terms, not in Pelman's, *landscapality*. . . . How far Cézanne had moved from the snapshot puerilities of Manet & Cie when he could understand the dynamic intrusion to be himself & so landscape to be something by definition unapproachably alien, unintelligible arrangement of atoms, not so much as ruffled by the kind attentions of the Reliability Joneses. (*LSB 1* 222-23)

These passages from the letters, alongside those written on Watteau, belong among the most visited by criticism to illustrate Beckett's advocacy for a de-anthropomorphized image that disorients and estranges the viewer instead of eliciting a response of empathy that closes the gap between artwork and beholder. David Lloyd and especially Conor Carville show how Beckett's early texts on the aesthetics of stillness and the inhuman in Cézanne and Yeats can be considered an elliptical argument against their integration into an authentically "French/Irish" tradition in the tenor of an organicist, vitalist cultural nationalism, the "New Humanism" championed by French art historian Waldemar Georges, editor of the magazine *Formes*, of which MacGreevy was the English-language secretary (Carville, *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts* 79-90). The 1930s letters' early articulations of an anti-humanist aesthetic are bound up with painted surfaces which render

figure and ground, figurative (anthropomorphic) themes and landscape background as isolated and an object of "petrification" by paint, often in the form of indistinguishable brushwork and thick impasto, which materially confounds the human element with its inorganic environment. Beckett's profession of faith in an art criticism that "can lift from the eyes, before rigor vitae sets in, some of the weight of congenital prejudice" ("MacGreevy on Yeats," *Dis* 95) explicitly links vitalism's "rigor vitae," with its belief in a sensorial and epistemological continuity between self and world, with prejudice obscuring sight.

One of the striking features of the Beckett correspondence is its multilingual nature: Beckett sometimes turns to writing in other languages apparently for the sake of play: for example, writing to his cousin Morris "Sonny" Sinclair first in French, then in German, and always tuning his writing to the sensibilities and linguistic prowess of his correspondents. The English letters are suffused with other languages—French, Italian, German, Provençal mostly; yet the layering of linguistic surfaces seems more than a display of polyglot virtuosity and academic clowning and more than "an occasion of wordshed," to quote the suppressed opening line to what was to become the poem *Cascando* (*LSB 1* 355). Even at his most personal, as when writing on his father's death, Beckett resorts to another language to evoke, shield, and shroud that which he confesses to be unable to put into words: "All the little things come back—*mémoire de l'escalier* [memory of the stairs, with a probable reference to Diderot's *esprit de l'escalier*].[9] I can't write about him, I can only walk the fields and climb the ditches after him" (165).

The multilingual tension, the cross-linguistic hybridization at work in the letters and in much of the poems Beckett first sends his friend (*Cascando* and *Weg du Einzige* are a case in point) give a haunting sense of one who is at a loss for words, already turning himself into the writer of "a tongue that is not mine" (*Unn* 17), obstinately boring hole after hole into the terrifyingly arbitrary materiality of the "veil of words." In occasional phrases such as "this *vitaccia* is terne beyond belief," playing on the diminutive of *vita*, "life" [It., appr., "this heck of a life"], "so my life is the complete Comédie à tiroirs-vides"—his smart variation on *roman à tiroirs* [Fr., "novel of/with drawers," nested narratives; appr., "comedy made of empty drawers/narratives"]—and multilingual puns like "tant *piss*" [Fr. *tant pis*, "so much the worse"], one can easily identify the author of *More Pricks* and

Murphy, with all his love for the recondite, creating compacted messages whose meaning is produced along linguistic, cultural, and literary interfaces; but also the intent of sinning against the language of writing, since its best use is to *abuse* it most efficiently, as the 1937 German letter to Kaun claims (*LSB 1* 518, 520). Something of a tentative approach can be traced to the latter text, long regarded as a poetic manifesto by an author notoriously shy about making statements about his work. Not incidentally, the linguistic surface to be torn is likened there to the terrifying black pauses "devouring" Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, a performance of which, Beckett attends and attacks with vitriolic élan precisely for its alleged "buttoning up" of the silences, as early as January 1934. The concert's conductor, the "good Nazi" Wilhelm Furtwängler, he writes,

> cannot tolerate mysteries, and it was rather like a fried egg, or, if you prefer, like a foot put in it, that he presented this music. He played the last movement like the most elegant of Ständchen. . . . Not only did he button up that poor symphony to the point of strangulation, but he took the liberty of giving it a colourful buttonhole. And with what, in God's name? A Würstchen ["sausage"]. (182)

The reflection on the Beethoven pauses is a key part of Belacqua's aesthetic theorizing in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, Beckett consenting for the passage to be included in *Disjecta*: here the Beethoven oeuvre of the mature years displays, instead of the putative unity of classicism, "dehiscence, flottements, the coherence gone to pieces," to be riddled in the late compositions with "terrible silences, a music one and indivisible only at the cost of as bloody a labor as any known to man" (*Dis* 49-50). Furtwängler, dubbed one of the "Tarquins" (*LSB 1* 430), whose political ambiguity obviously did little to endear him to Beckett, is also savaged in his quality of composer attempting a synthesis of the post-Wagnerian German tradition and modernism. His playing of the "GROSSE SONATE" [sic] in D minor, nr. 1, for violin and piano (1935) in Hamburg in March 1937 triggers nothing but sarcasm in Beckett: "The maximum determination (to get it all off his chest in a modern manner) & the minimum ability, a frenzy of impotence, with reverberations from everyone from Berlioz to Bartok" (470), the block capitals being a likely side-thrust at the composition's post-Romantic grandiloquence. The physical description of the composer-conductor at the piano—"like an invertebrate trying to sprain its back" (470)—further underlines Beckett's hostility to the cultural icon of the Third Reich performing the role of high priest of autonomous art. No less

revealing is his enthusiastic report of a concert he attended in Hamburg in November 1936, with music by Richard Strauss, Brahms and Bartók, where Toscanini's pupil Victor de Sabata was "more conducted than conducting" (388) and where the suggestion of a less controlling approach to conducting is probably also positively colored by Toscanini's anti-Nazi credentials.

The extent to which the aesthetic aversion to an ethos of mastery and the political aversion to totalitarianism and the theatricalization of politics converge in Beckett is also illustrated by his disenchanted look at some of the artworks commonly considered to be the apex of the German Renaissance: the Nürnberg sculptures of Adam Kraft, Peter Vischer the Elder, Hans Riemenschneider, Veit Stoss, and even some of Dürer's paintings. For Beckett, the proud townsburgher ethos expressed, for instance, in the Lorenzkirche's famous Ciborium Altar by Adam Kraft, or in the St. Sebaldus Monument by Peter Vischer in the Sebalduskirche, shows disturbing overlaps with the city's medieval history of persecuting the Jews, and its symbolic role in the Third Reich, with a Wagner flourish added: "terribly guildy and complacent and jealous zealous artisan . . . . Not only Meistersinger, but Meistermaler & Meisterbildhauer & Meistererzgiesser [mastersingers, master painters, master sculptors and master brassfounders]. Stairpainting & draperies" (*LSB 1* 460). His disdain at the ostentatious artisanal nature of this art, cloaked in the discourse of German exceptionalism, probably contributed to his loss of enthusiasm for another chief work of the German Renaissance, Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece, which he originally planned to visit. The altarpiece, an emblem of the pathos that joins the image and the beholder, was constructed by one of the influential voices in art history whom Beckett reads, Wilhelm Fraenger, as a bridge between the Northern Gothic and the Baroque, a quintessentially German stylistic phenomenon which thus bypassed the "foreign" Renaissance (Carville 110-115). In light of this growing distanciation from a vitalistic and *Geistesgeschichte*-inspired aesthetic, it is all the more significant that from the Hamburg modernists Beckett should single out Hans Ballmer's *Head in Red*, in which he recognizes the same deanthropomorphized "metaphysical concrete" quality as in one of Picasso's 1929 *Bathers* series he had seen in Paris (*LSB 1* 387; see Carville 98-105)—at the furthest possible remove from images that seek to involve the spectator by the persuasive power of empathy.

However much aesthetics and politics may converge in Beckett's judgments, the letters from Germany are also reminders that, political sympathies notwithstanding, Beckett could be highly critical of, and at times even inclement to, intellectuals of the German modernist scene if he detected a metaphysical, totalizing streak in their thinking. A "real little German pedant" he meets, who writes her Ph.D. on symbolism in Proust's work, deserves appreciation solely for her choice of subject matter, in 1936, "not merely an 'exquisite' but a non-Aryan" (*LSB 1* 389), Beckett remarking acidly that his own work is not deemed either positive or elevated enough for the "disciples of Curtius" (390). The critic and collector Dr. Rosa Schapire, whose collection of Expressionists, mostly Schmidt-Rottluff, he visited and who opened many doors for him during his Hamburg stay—and who, much to Beckett's chagrin, showed a marked preference for Rembrandt over Brouwer—is scorned on grounds that "the metaphysical alone can claim her interest" (427). In the same sweep he vents his frustration with the grievances of the Hamburg modernist circle, dismissed from their earlier positions in 1933: "They are all great proud angry poor putupons in their fastness, and I can't say yessir and nosir any more" (427). In contrast, he is won over by the attitude of one of the foremost German art historians, Will Grohmann, whose books he reads and who introduces him to the Ida Bienert collection, for Grohmann is "too interested in the phenomenon" to choose exile (478). Grohmann's theories of the circle in abstract painting would be echoed in *Watt*, in the painting hanging in Erskine's room, which mysteriously achieves an effect of perspective and paradoxically moves Watt to an emotional response that Constructivist abstraction forecloses.[10]

Recording the "phenomenon" was also one of Beckett's initial objectives when he undertook the journey to Germany, but his planned "Journal of a Melancholic," in which he experimented with a mode of writing stripped of extraneous comment (Nixon 122), probably foundered, as Morin shows, because of the wealth of testimonial literature, or literature parading as testimonial and written in a mode of realist verisimilitude, that Beckett had always been uncomfortable with (*Beckett's Political Imagination* 51). And yet, the journey was also a *Lehrjahr* [study year] in the working of totalitarianism, especially the capacity of its seemingly innocuous rhetoric to infantilize its subjects, breed collaborationism, and naturalize extermination. Mark Nixon documents Beckett's practice of sampling Nazi propaganda in the *German Diaries* (136-37), and James

McNaughton uncovers the ubiquitous allusions in *Watt* to the Nazi advertising of lifestyles, the ideal Aryan body, and propaganda around racial hygiene as well as Beckett's caustic treatment of the underlying rapacious and exploitative economic system in the litany of starving (under)dogs kept to eat what is left of Mr. Knott's stew (*Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath* 61-78). Beckett's smart variations on the Nazi salute (to George Reavey, his agent, negotiating *Murphy* with publishers, "Heil und Sieg u[nd] fette Beute," that is, rich booty, *LSB 1* 441) have to be seen in this context: for Morin, they represent a mode of modernist "oblique subversion," like the Nazi salute with the wrong hand, and probably served to evade potential censorship (*Beckett's Political Imagination* 49). They can also be read as early exercises in the radical black humor in harnessing such charged propagandistic speech that would dominate Beckett's texts from *Watt* onwards.

Whether discussing music, painting, literature, or the toils of his own writing, Beckett sides with a type of reading and writing which demands the utmost from its addressee and, more importantly still, which strains its medium to the limit. When in the fall of 1936 a Boston publisher suggests extensive cuts in *Murphy*, Beckett unequivocally states that the novel's opacity is deliberate and explains at length in a letter to Reavey why he refuses to touch the incriminated passages: "There is no time and no space in such a book for *mere* relief. The relief has also to do work and reinforce that from which it relieves. . . . [Am I to] crowd the last chapter with oyster kisses and Murillo brats?" (*LSB 1* 381).

The letters written during the months of work on *Murphy* emphasize their status as *texts*, a quality which, to be sure, is felt on virtually every page of the correspondence included in this first volume. One month into the work, in September 1935 Beckett dispatches a long description of a singular lyricism, of the old men flying kites in Kensington Gardens, a scene that would find its way into the novel's ending. Several phrases and neologisms coined in the novel appear here, revealing the extent to which the two kinds of writing interpenetrate:

> The little shabby respectable old men you see Saturday afternoon and Sunday, pottering about doing odd jobs in the garden, or flying kites immense distances at the Round Pond, Kensington. . . . They fly them almost out of sight, yesterday it was over the trees to the south, into an absolutely cloudless *viridescent* sky. . . . My next old man, or old young man, *not of the big world but of the little world*, must be a kite-flyer. (*LSB 1* 274, emphases added)

Apart from their crucial importance as sub-text and context to the work, these letters also offer themselves as intertexts and, indeed, as *avant-textes* to be read alongside the autograph work. One feels that these letters must often have served Beckett as an outlet for formulations not decanted into his fiction, yet somehow lingering on the threshold of the literary—however much Beckett resented that word. The rare confessions show the highest degree of self-conscious writing at the most personal. So Beckett, describing his Murphy-like state of sitting motionless or lying on the floor, unable to work and unwilling to keep up the pretense of working, to Mary Manning Howe in August 1937 and even referring to himself as a monad, turns himself into his hero in a passage of a density often consubstantial with the novel:

> There is an ecstasy of *accidia* ["sloth"] . . . . There is an end of making up one's mind, like a pound of tea, an end of patting the butter of consciousness into opinions. The real consciousness is the chaos, a grey commotion of mind, with no premises or conclusions or problems or solutions or cases or judgments. (*LSB 1* 546)

More than anything, the letters of the late 1930s offer invaluable insights into the surprisingly consistent crystallizing process of Beckett's poetics, which is inextricably linked to his existential choices. However skeptical, or sliding into compulsive self-disparagement, the voice speaking of life events in these letters—on the margin of artworks, or through poignant silences—is the voice of the radical, and ethical, project of (self-)examination, impoverishment, and the search for "integrity" (*LSB 1* 134) that alone could lead to the extraordinary body of work of the 1940s and the 1950s. Days before fleeing from occupied Paris, Beckett writes to Marthe Arnaud, Bram van Velde's partner, who is experimenting with a new form of expression: "Today it will be something different. You think you are choosing something, and it is always yourself that you choose; a self that you did not know, if you are lucky. Unless you are a dealer" (*LSB 1* 684). The sentence has the ring almost of a prophecy: indeed, all Beckett's enmeshed aesthetic and life choices from his *Normalien* year onward seem directed, with a consistent internal logic, toward his moving to Paris, joining the Resistance, and shifting to writing in French to be better ill-equipped to address the indigence, impotence, ignorance he speaks of in the interview with Israel Shenker. Besides archiving the intellectual preoccupations of one of the most original and subversive 1930s post-Joycean experimental novelists, Beckett's letters from this period reveal the trajectory toward this

self and his creatures, to emerge in the writings from *Watt* onward, giving the measure of the immense cultural inheritance discarded to write Lucky's ruin of discourse, the few trinkets of Winnie, or the "miscellaneous rubbish" of *Breath*.

Chapter 2
"The no doubt calm language of the no": Beckett's Letters, 1941-1956

Anything that lessens me, starting with my precious memories, makes access to it easier. . . . It will be boundary work, passage work, in which as a result the old rubbish can still be some use, while the dying is going on. A long slow fading. One ceases. But with the help, all the same, of another being who, if he is never to find expression (and who knows?), is nonetheless heavily involved in . . . the business. If that is what death is, let's have it.

—*Beckett,* LSB 2

"I really have no wish to be set free, nor be helped, by art or by anything else. Young people, after reading *Eleutheria*, have said to me, but you are sending us away discouraged. Let them take aspirin, or go for long walks, before breakfast. Nothing will be ever sufficiently against for me, not even pain, and I do not think I have any special need for it" (*LSB 2* 97). Beckett wrote this in 1948, the year when *Malone meurt* [*Malone Dies*] was completed and *Godot* begun. One is struck by the utter refusal to hold on to the illusion of an art that is therapeutic, empowering; the direction Beckett follows is nothing less than an art—and ethics—of emancipation from such promises and expectations and a full-fledged commitment to a radical poetics of negativity. He is 42—sufficiently old not to include himself in the group of "young people" and sufficiently young to embark on a creative program that he will pursue through his life, against whatever odds circumstances might present him with.

Literature owes "Beckett" to the one and a half decades that followed this statement, since between 1947 and 1956 most of his best-known work was written—*En attendant Godot* [*Waiting for Godot*] (completed in 1949, translated into English in 1954), the novels of the Trilogy (1947-50; in English: 1953-55), *Fin de partie* [*Endgame*] (1956; in English: 1958). By the mid-fifties Beckett starts experimenting with new forms—mimes, the radio play (*All That Fall,* 1956)—and slowly returns to writing in English. During these years he changes from an author known only to a small Anglo-American coterie to an internationally acclaimed novelist and playwright, one of the major stylists of the French language; most of the correspondence of the 1940s and 1950s, just like Beckett's writing in this period, is carried out in French.[11]

It is a period of major changes in Beckett's circumstances and life events as well: from the vagrant intellectual to his being permanently settled in Paris, in the small apartment at 6 Rue des Favorites, and, unexpectedly for many Beckett readers, to a homeowner in Ussy-sur-Marne, a village some 30 miles from Paris, where he relishes gardening—the possessive adjective making a cursory appearance whenever this least proprietorial of authors writes about his trees. Between 1950 and 1954 Beckett loses two of his closest family members. His mother's death ends a fraught and fierce love; he nurses his brother, terminally ill with lung cancer, in his final months, writing from his deathbed, "My life here—nothing; better not mentioned. It will end like everything else, and the way will again be free that goes towards the only end that counts" (to Jacoba van Velde, *LSB 2* 495). Their deaths, leaving Beckett deeply scarred, dissolve whatever feeble ties Beckett still had to "home," Ireland; no sustained visits would follow. The decision to make Paris his home had already been taken before World War II; as he wrote to MacGreevy in April 1939, in the event of a war "I shall place myself at the disposition of this country [France]" (*LSB 1* 656).

The single most decisive event is, however, the experience of World War II, which certainly added its immeasurable share to Beckett's already existing preoccupation with destitution, decay, solitude, and death, and to his postwar program of the deconstruction of the self. It is well-known that Beckett had risked his life in the Resistance and was forced to take refuge together with his partner, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, in Roussillon, Beckett working as a farmhand; that his second full-fledged novel, *Watt*, was written during these years, as Beckett claimed, to keep his sanity (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 303).[12] While letters and notes from the period between 1941 and 1945 are naturally very scarce, and there are significant lacunae in the biography, much in the later works and letters throws some light on the ways in which the traumatic events of the war affected Beckett's life and thought, reinforcing his sense of the commonality of loss and the reversibility of roles of victim and victimizer. It seems symptomatic that, despite losing close friends in the concentration camps (Paul Léon and Alfred Péron, with whom he translated *Anna Livia Plurabelle* and his own *Murphy* into French), he would not let his eventual resentment against those who threw in their lot with Vichy France surface. His correspondence with his former Normalien friend and colleague Georges Pelorson, who changed his name to Belmont after the war, remains every bit as empathetic,

encouraging his friend's literary endeavors and voicing his misgivings about his own. The spectacle of "humanity in ruins" Beckett saw at close quarters while volunteering for the Irish Red Cross in bombed-out Saint-Lô, Normandy in 1945 probably determined the change in tone of these letters as well as the shift from his former self-centeredness. Indicative in this sense is a remark to MacGreevy sent from the desolation of Saint-Lô, where reconstruction work was progressing at a snail's pace to minimum effect, complaining not of the dismal conditions but of the attitude of the two doctors he shared a room with, of the "classical anglo-saxon exasperation. It is a tune of which I am tired" (*LSB 2* 19). As Dan Gunn suggests in his Introduction, "[l]ess narcissistic and self-consciously literary, [Beckett's] letters are more thoroughly literary too—if literary in a way that can be recognized as such only because their author is at the same time writing works that will change our very conception of *the literary*" (lxvi). In "The Capital of the Ruins," written from Saint-Lô for Irish Radio but never broadcast, he sought to introduce to the Irish audience, largely ignorant of wartime and postwar conditions across Europe, the plight of the displaced who subsisted on a "heap of rubble," as he described the town to MacGreevy in August 1945 (18). Seemingly matter-of-fact, the text records with caustic humor the interpenetration of reconstruction and destruction, as some of the materials used for fitting out the Red Cross hospital came from recycled military equipment: "The walls and ceiling of the operating theatre are sheeted in aluminium of aeronautic origin, a decorative and practical solution of an old problem and a pleasant variation on the sword and ploughshare metamorphosis" (*CSP* 275). This sentence acquires added emphasis in light of the history of the town's bombing, by Allied, not German, forces (Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination* 163). At the same time, Beckett's witnessing of the material and physical devastation and the culture of denial of the aftermath, the near-consensual amnesia regarding Vichy collaborationism, certainly played a part in his biting dismissal not only of official discourses of reconstruction but also of postwar attempts at resuscitating humanism with a Marxist and/or existentialist hue. Beckett's acid remarks to MacGreevy, as well as to Arland Ussher, who was trying to place an essay on existentialism, about the continuities between the former military regime and De Gaullism, "prepared to forget and forgive—the so rude interruption" (to Ussher, December 1946, *LSB 2* 47), evince his awareness of the fictitious nature of the myth of a nationwide resistance.[13]

His first-hand experience of physical destitution and his witnessing of the duplicitous nature of postwar triumphalism obviously color his hostile reaction to the anthropological program of the reconstruction of the self, epitomized by the postwar humanism of Marxist and/or existentialist hue; his *Nouvelles* point instead emphatically at the ground from where the human condition needs to be rethought—leftover, castoff matter, the finite, impotent, abject body, in an anti-humanist aesthetic of the low, "an ethic that is also a bathetic" (Rabaté, *Think, Pig!* 158). Perhaps no letter is more outspoken than Beckett's acerbic comments on a series of high-profile, upbeat articles in *Combat* published by André Breton, returned from his US exile, where the high priest of Surrealism recorded the rebirth of his optimism brought by spring in wartime, and used the grandiloquent topos of the ship of humanity in peril of foundering in the age of nuclear warfare: "To wait until the atomic age before feeling really worried, that is indeed surrealist. And that certainty of spring that did his heart good in the worst moments of the Occupation. Lucky thing" (to Georges Duthuit, March/April 1950, *LSB 2* 196).

Lines unforgotten

One of the surprises of the second volume of Beckett's correspondence is that, when compared to the young scholar-in-becoming's effusions about his vast reading and encounters with visual art in the 1930s, there are so few comments by the reader Beckett. Largely gone are the abrasive side-thrusts at authors he dislikes: the postwar Beckett seems to have left behind the unease of the prospective young author seeking recognition and to have become both more cryptic and more generous with his praise. He reads Faulkner (in French) and Agatha Christie's whodunits with equal relish; among the few authors he recommends both to his friends and publishers are Ionesco, Adamov, Camus, Cioran's *La tentation d'exister*, and especially Salinger, whose *Catcher in the Rye* he fervently recommends to friends (*LSB 2* 419). When George Devine from the Royal Court Theatre London requests, in 1956, another short mime by Beckett to go with *Actes sans paroles* [*Act Without Words*] and Ionesco's *The Chairs*, Beckett suggests that they take on another one-act play by Ionesco rather than committing themselves to "too much wordlessness." Failing that, they should consider an old favorite, Yeats's *The Hawk's Well*, a play with "so much great poetry" (683). More surprising is his enthusiasm for Racine's *Andromaque*, a play he used to teach at Trinity and in which he finds new confirmation of his creed

of a theater reduced to its means. He rereads it with "more understanding of the chances of the theatre to-day" (624). The work to which he returns regularly is, however, *Effi Briest*, which moves him to the "same old tears in the same old places" (621). His admiration for Fontane's novel is only matched by his esteem for Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau's rendition of Schubert's *Winterreise*, which he and Suzanne listen to in Ussy (640) or for Bartók's *Music for Strings, Percussion and Celesta*, which he hears on the radio in 1951 (310).

The letters also provide scattered testimonies of Beckett the scholar, who, despite having abandoned the academy a decade earlier, is still able to identify, off the cuff, a stray quote. Lingering echoes of his beloved classics pop up almost symptomatically, soothing his loss of heart in his own writing. In 1955, before the publication of *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* [*Stories and Texts for Nothing*], with all his pots boiling over at the same time ("It is time now I made big changes in my way of living, but I doubt if I have the energy"), he writes to MacGreevy of a Milton verse that haunts him: "Insuperable height of loftiest shade" (565). At other times, he half-jokingly clothes his writerly impasse in an erroneous Leopardi quote: *Non che la speme il desiderio è morto*—instead of *spento* [not only hope, but desire too is dead], where his writing from the side of his brother's deathbed might have colored the choice of verb (509). When he receives the doctoral thesis of a young academic, David Hayman—soon to become a major Joyce scholar—on Mallarmé's influence on Joyce, he proves, despite his excuses of being out of touch with Joycean exegesis, what a fine scholarly ear he still has. He tactfully suggests that Hayman might be attributing too exclusive a role to the French Symbolist poet in Joyce's use of allusion and points him in the direction of the *Divina Commedia* and Bruno instead (537).

In February 1954 German translator and editor Hans Naumann, Beckett's first admirer in Germany, writes to him inquiring about the motives behind his exile and change of language, distinctive literary influences, and the role of Joyce. To the issue of influence Beckett defensively claims to have been an "incurably inattentive" reader "on the lookout for an elsewhere," whose decisive reading experiences have therefore been the ones "best at sending me to that elsewhere" (465). He also confesses that those who occasioned his formative *journeys from* differ from the expected names—Proust and Kafka, as suggested by Naumann. The comment on his relationship to Proust, who "impresses and irritates" him,

might seem a send-off for one whose first serious scholarly venture was dedicated to this author: to Naumann he points out how Proust's "obsessive need" to reduce everything to "laws" (464) puts him off. Even more interesting is the issue of Kafka, whose *The Castle* Beckett claims to have read in German, losing a great deal and eventually giving up precisely because he felt "too much . . . at home" but at the same time alienated by the "imperturbable" writing: "I am wary of disasters that let themselves be recorded like a statement of accounts" (465). This revealing statement of resistance fueled by proximity seems to foreshadow a confession Derrida was to make *re* Beckett—that he felt too close to Beckett to write on him—as well as an awareness of difference in their poetics, Beckett's texts and creatures, in Hélène Cixous's words, being too "tortured, lacerated," and bound up too much with both predator and prey, producer and waste-product, "the cat and the mouse, or the seagull and the filth," to be comprehended in an account (qtd. in Bryden 78). When in early 1956 a graduate of Trinity, Alec Reid—one of the first Irish academics to dedicate a volume to Beckett—sends him an article comparing Beckett's prose to Kafka's and concluding, "the more precarious the form, the nearer it approaches to disintegration, the truer is the emotional content" (*LSB 2* 597n), Beckett returns a compressed poetics which illuminates the crucial difference between the two kinds of writing: "The trouble about my little world is that there is no outside to it. Aesthetically the adventure is of the failed form (no achieved statement of the inability to be)" (596).

No more writing about

If "the lines that matter are those one forgets" (*LSB 2* 91), as Beckett writes, quoting a verse from Baudelaire's *Réversibilité* on the troubled poetry, fear, and pain of aging, then probably the most significant *unforgotten* line that echoes through Beckett's letters and the great outpouring of works after World War II is "the cry common to those in purgatory . . . *Io fui* [I was]" (92). The nostalgia and yearning for being, forever imperiled, ruined, and stifled, and the intimation of mortality that Beckett found enshrined in Dante—perhaps on Joyce's suggestion, who considered this, rather than the longing for Paradise, to be essential in the *Divina Commedia* (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 638)—runs through the letters written in the late 1940s, as in this August 1948 letter probing for a direction in writing,

> to be sought now in the eternally larval, no something else, in the courage of the imperfection of non-being too, in which we are intermittently assailed by the temptation still to be, a little, and the glory of having been a little, beneath an unforgettable sky. Yes, to be sought in the impossibility of ever being wrong enough, ever being ridiculous and defenceless enough. (*LSB 2* 102)

Beckett's most poignant description of a *réveil mortel* appears in a letter sent from Dublin only one week earlier, from the bedside of May Beckett struggling with terminal Parkinson's disease, his painful vigil alleviated only by long walks along the strand and the hills that follow mostly the itineraries of his childhood and youth. The letter, begun with an irritated account of the learned chatter of the local intelligentsia on matters of art history "understood, overstood" ["*entendu, surentendu*"], concludes with a statement of a withdrawal from the combative ideology of mastery:

> I keep watching my mother's eyes, never so blue, so stupefied, so heartrending, eyes of an endless childhood, that of old age. Let us get there rather earlier, while there are still refusals we can make. I think these are the first eyes that I have seen. I have no wish to see any others, I have all I need for loving and weeping, I know now what is going to close, and open inside me, but without seeing anything, there is no more seeing . . . Perhaps we can do something by not fighting . . . In the free-for-all, of course, rankest of rankers, not above it, indifferent to causes, caught up since the beginning in another war, without hope of leave or armistice, banished from the gains and the losses yet without falling into the New Testament. (*LSB 2* 92)

The addressee of this formidable letter is Georges Duthuit, French art critic specialist in Byzantine, Oriental, and fauvist art, son-in-law of Matisse and editor, from 1945, of the revived *Transition*. As MacGreevy's role as intellectual partner and confidant fades in the late 1940s due to their altered circumstances and the growing ideological gap between them, Beckett turns increasingly to Duthuit to pursue his thirst for theorizing, his need to test his own positions, as well as his human need for friendship with this "voice from another world" (*LSB 2* 84). It is on the basis of their sustained arguments about the prospects of avant-garde art and its formalist aesthetic in the postwar world that the "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit" was written in 1949. Their real-life dialogue, carried on from 1947 into the mid-1950s, was prompted by their responses to the work of Duthuit's favorite Fauves, postwar non-figurative artists, and Beckett's painter friend Bram van Velde, both being on the lookout for an art that turns its back on traditional Western mimesis and its ethos of mastery. Between 1949 and 1950 Beckett translated many essays on avant-garde art for *Transition*, including some by Duthuit, and retranslated Duthuit's volume-length study *Les Fauves*. He would end his letters to *mon cher vieux*, "dear old fellow," with moving

statements of “a friendship into which . . . whatever is best in me has long gone” (*LSB 2* 173). The letter quoted is one of the most eloquent records of this intellectual and ethical endeavor, rejecting both the military metaphor of the avant-gardes and all programmatic, ideological positions, abiding by the “unmasterable weakness of the negative” (Hill 250).[14]

The first “proper” letter to Duthuit selected in this volume dates from July 1948, when Beckett spent the summer in Dublin with his mother, finding it impossible to work, feeling cut off from a wished-for “self-devouring, ever-reducing thought,” and generally miserable. It is studded with unexpected forays into the personal: “I had a dream about Matisse—he was saying, in Dublin slang, that he was exhausted (‘I’m bet’). My father, in his final coma, kept saying Fight, fight, fight” (*LSB 2* 86-87). But it was over the abstract painting of the van Veldes that their correspondence would come into its own; the painting of Bram and his brother, Geer, heirs to the 1930s internationalist experimentation of the École de Paris and somewhat at odds with the climate of postwar French cultural nationalism, was the subject of Beckett’s first published French text, “La Peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon” (“The Painting of the van Velde brothers, or the world and the pair of trousers”), written in January 1945, a mere two months after Beckett was able to return to a liberated, and starving, Paris. The exchanges with Duthuit provoke Beckett to crystallize an aesthetic against the trope of mastery that involves the unlearning of a vast cultural inheritance—soon to turn into a veritable program of casting off the weight of the literature of omnipotence, omniscience in order to achieve a literature of “impotence, ignorance” and, increasingly, of “unwording” in a foreign language that put him in the position of learner. Here Beckett would first use the topos of a painting of *empêchement* (obstruction, preventedness, impediment) and of *coincement* (“stuckness”).[15] Probably appropriating van Velde’s painting for his own ends, he makes it the vessel of a negative aesthetics of the refusal to express—as he would write to van Velde in 1949, “I am searching for a way of capitulating without giving up utterance—entirely” (*LSB 2* 114). His letters to Duthuit read almost like a blueprint for his writerly practice: violently rejecting what he sees as abstract art’s facile trading the outward “object” of the old mimetic tradition for the interior to be “expressed,” he is groping for an art that would shed mastery and the urge to overcome altogether, employing a topos from the *Purgatorio*:

> We have waited a long time for an artist who is brave enough . . . to grasp that the break with the outside world entails the break with the inside world, that there are no replacement relations for naïve relations, that what are called outside and inside are one and the same. . . . [Bram's painting is] the impossibility of reconnecting. There is, if you like, refusal and refusal to accept refusal. . . . For my part, it is the *gran rifiuto* that interests me, not the heroic wriggling to which we owe this splendid thing. (*LSB 2* 140)

In two vital August 1948 letters, he writes, "You speak of all those closed, achieved worlds that give off a grinding of solitudes, prides. And at the same time of a possible totality of being. For me all the Titans are in agreement, the Herculeses, whatever the kind of labor" (102-03), since the "mistake . . . is perhaps to want to know what one is talking about" (98). As Rabaté shows, Beckett's dismissal of André Masson, the second painter discussed in "Three Dialogues," long associated with Bataille and his journal *Acéphale*, who found a way out of the crisis of imagination by blending Oriental art with a new mysticism tainted with Bataille-style excess, stems from ethical qualms about Masson's, and implicitly Bataille's, creed regarding the aesthetic recuperation of destruction, an acquienscence that couldn't but sound "glib" to somebody like Beckett (*Think, Pig!* 88-89). The direction he would set himself is, on the contrary, "Not to have to express oneself, nor get involved with whatever kind of maximum, in one's numberless, valueless, achievementless world; that is a game worth trying, all the same, a necessity worth trying, and one which will never work, if that works" (103). Instead of accepting being tugged back into "hateful criteria," Beckett sets out on a *via negativa*, whose permanent attribute will be its *calm*: "One must shout, murmur, exult madly, until one can find the no doubt calm language of the no, unqualified, or as little qualified as possible" (*LSB 2* 98). And, even more strikingly, the total withdrawal from conquest and the "loathsome combat," from "the pure manstuprations [sic] of Orphic and abstract art," from all kinds of formalism, at the end of an extraordinary letter from March 1949: "What if we simply stopped altogether having erections? As in life. Enough sperm floating about the place" (131).

The marvelous crop of letters to Duthuit between March and June 1949 constitute the immediate *avant-texte* of the "Three Dialogues" that Beckett starts writing in June, complaining that writing in English knots him up: "Horrible language, which I still know too well" (170). In these letters, one can read Beckett's painful awareness that what in his reading is a refusal of relation might lock van Velde's art back into a relation with the very lack of relation: into a relation with the very impossibility of painting. The one

passage-in-progress of the future text of the "Three Dialogues" he sends to Duthuit—the one that famously describes the situation of the artist as that "of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint" (*Dis* 142), and ends with "B" accepting, "warmly," that he is mistaken—is the text's neuralgic point.[16] Both Beckett and the text's "B" are wary about the suggestion that van Velde's painting might be "inexpressive," indicating that Beckett had a highly ambivalent attitude to his own theorizing. However, in the sequence Beckett's exasperation at the perpetuation of the old "ward-ho" aesthetics of achievement becomes ever more pronounced—even stylistically, in the fervent onrush of the sentence—as does his option for an art of *empêchement*: for him, the paramount question to address is,

> what lies behind the two attitudes, that is on the one hand the passion of the achievable, in which the noblest researches are vitiated by the need to extend its limits, and, on the other, perhaps, well, soon, respect for the impossible that we are, impossible living creatures, impossibly alive, of whom neither the time of the body, nor the investment by space are any more to be retained than the shades of evening or the beloved face, and painting quite simply a destiny, which is to paint, where there is nothing to paint, nothing to paint with, and without knowing how to paint, and without wanting to paint, and all this in such a way that something comes of it, while they are at it. There, I am going too far, I shall always go too far, and never far enough. (*LSB 2* 156)

That his attempted theorizing of the refusal of theorizing, or rather, resignation in the inevitable failure of "watertight" (140) theorizing, places him in the midst of an aporia he cannot overcome is evident in his ever more frequent rhetorical admissions and no less rhetorical questions, if it is possible to have a painting which is

> poor, undisguisedly useless, incapable of any image whatever, a painting whose necessity does not seek to justify itself? The fact that I should have seen it where there is really no more than an unprecedented renewal of the relationship, of the banquet, is of no importance. Never again can I admit anything but the act without hope, calm in its damnedness. (166)

Tellingly, he ends his long letter of 9 March, 1949, about the absence of relation in van Velde's painting, conceding that he is "no longer capable of writing *about*. . . . But bear in mind that I who hardly ever talk about myself talk about little else" (141).

A wretchedness to defend

One theme that permeates many of these letters is a deeply felt sense of responsibility for the text-world Beckett has authored. Writing about his

relationship with Joyce to Naumann he, somewhat surprisingly, stresses his moral rather than literary indebtedness to the author of *Work-in-Progress*, explaining: "He gave me, without in the least wishing to do so, an insight into what the words 'to be an artist' mean" (*LSB 2* 463-64). That the young Beckett learned his lesson in terms of uncompromising artistic integrity is all too evident from his early mordant critique of the 1929 Censorship Act, which, according to Beckett, went hand in glove with the total ban on contraception to express the Irish Free State's stifling conservatism—the "sterilization of the mind and apotheosis of the litter" (*Dis* 87). His later, 1958 decision to ban all performance of his plays in Ireland as a sign of his revolt against the boycott of Joyce and O'Casey, but also his lifelong refusal to mitigate aspects of his work that occasionally endangered his chances of publishing or producing, speak of a consistent anti-censorship stance.[17] To Barney Rosset, soon to become his American publisher, Beckett made it crystal clear in June 1953 that he was unwilling to negotiate any obscenities, "which may not have struck you in French as they will in English" (*LSB 2* 385). When the new *Nouvelle Revue Français* cut a passage about *The Unnamable*'s Mahood—on the tumefaction of the penis, carefully chosen by the author to give the filthy censors an occasion to commit their filthy synecdoche—Beckett feels "literally ill" (361) and seriously plans suing the review. Considering his aversion to publicity, especially after his traumatizing court appearance in his uncle Boss Sinclair's libel case in Dublin in 1937, one may assess his outrage, barely mollified by his publisher Lindon's diplomacy and the *NRF* editor's defense that the suppressed passage would have endangered their review.

An important mutation can be seen, however, in the terms in which Beckett defends his sense of artistic freedom before and after the war: if with the early Beckett the accent falls on intellectual principle, after the war he spoke rather of protecting his "creatures"—a responsibility to the "ruinedness and stifledness and impudicity" (688) brought to *life* in the texts becoming almost a trope. Two examples illustrate this point: in November 1936, after several publishers turn down the manuscript of *Murphy*, the Boston-based company Houghton Mifflin expresses interest in the book on condition that heavy cuts are made, especially touching the sixth chapter—a parodic Leibnizian-Cartesian account of the structuring of Murphy's mind. Beckett's answer to George Reavey, acting as his agent, is unequivocal: no tampering with any of the passages in question, and instructs Reavey, in

singularly unhelpful terms, to be “astonished, firm, & up to a point politely flexible”: “Do they not understand that if the book is slightly obscure, it is so because it is a compression, and that to compress it further can only result in making it more obscure?” (*LSB 1* 380). In 1946, the high-profile review *Les Temps Modernes* accepts an (unfinished) short prose work, “Suite,” later to become “La Fin” (and later still, “The End”), thus publishing for the first time a prose text written by Beckett in his newly adopted language. In July the first part of the novella comes out, but when Beckett sends in the second part on July 2, Simone de Beauvoir, the editor of the journal, rejects it, treating it as a second submission and regarding the published text as complete. Of the four novellas written between 1945 and 1956 and later published together with *Textes pour rien*, this is the most imbricated with specific historical, contextual references to the Holocaust and the aftermath of the war in France, including the camp survivors’ short stay at the converted Hotel Lutetia in Paris (Morin, *Beckett’s Political Imagination* 166-69). The first-person narrator’s journey to a state of *bare life* is a sobering reminder of the ongoing catastrophe of contemporary history, of a world hastily obliterating the traces of an unspecified event vaguely allusive of the Holocaust. Its ending, in a vision experienced in an act of excretion, of the story the protagonist might have written of his life, “pushes realism to the point of confusing the death of the narrator with the disappearance (or non-existence) of the text” (Casanova 66). The letter Beckett sends to Beauvoir makes no attempt to lecture the *grande dame* of French literature and criticism on principles of writing but is an extraordinary statement of Beckettian ethics. Writing out of a “duty I feel towards a character of mine” who is “denied his rest,” Beckett assumes a position of vulnerability when he states, “If I were afraid of ridicule I would keep quiet”:

> You are giving me the chance to speak only to retract it before the words have had time to mean anything. You are immobilising an existence at the very moment at which it is about to take its definitive form. . . . I find it hard to believe that matters of presentation can justify, in the eyes of the author of *L’Invitée*, such a mutilation. . . . It is simply that there exists a wretchedness which must be defended to the very end, in one’s work and outside it. (*LSB 2* 41-42)

Responsibility towards the “wretchedness” penned and “respect for the impossible we are, impossible living creatures, impossibly alive” (156) is a constant in letters Beckett sends his editors and directors in these years. Whether in the form of self-translations (which he finds hard enough labor) or meticulously precise instructions in the theater (given, when consulted,

always with second thoughts about the author's being right) about pauses, accents, pitches, intonation, postures: Beckett argues his stance for every comma and every bit of idiosyncratic punctuation. Yet the tone is not of an author acting as the supreme controller of the work, but of one safeguarding a living being. Beckett's singular determination to see his work published as it was written—without being improved behind his back by "well brought-up young blue pencils" (629)—nevertheless leaves the way open for his reworkings and interventions, even at relatively late stages of composition. *Fin de partie*, for instance, shows such a series of reworkings, which David Wheatley has compared to *pentimenti* (painting over). The play would only acquire its final form in French, before being rewritten as *Endgame*, after Beckett had seen and heard it performed, as though it had to lumber into a life of its own before it could be settled. In 1956, for example, he writes to Stefani Hunzinger of Fischer Verlag that he needs to see several rehearsals before he can "settle" the text (668), and, earlier, to Pamela Mitchell, that hearing and seeing the play performed is indispensable to knowing what its final, published form should be (657). After translating it into English, Beckett toyed with the idea of leaving the title hyphenated and thus more indeterminate, seeming only with difficulty to have reconciled himself to the word "end." In his first letter to the painter Avigdor Arikha, one of his closest lifelong friends, he writes in September 1956, shortly after having shown Arikha the manuscript, about his wariness to use the word "end'" (650).

Having in view his acute sense of responsibility towards the language in which he writes, whether originally or in translation, it is curious to see how Beckett the translator—who hardly ever signed his translations in Duthuit's *Transition*—is more protective of his autograph than the Beckett who starts translating his own work into English/French. Whereas in October 1956 he writes to Edith Greenburg about a planned anthology of Mexican poetry, which was to include many of his contributions, asking for his signature to be removed from any of the texts that were retouched by a corrector, no matter how small the correction, and offering to refund the corresponding portion of his emoluments (666), in the beginning he seems to have been much more open to collaboration in translating his own work. In 1952-53 he revises Elmar Tophoven's German translation of *En attendant Godot* and Patrick Bowles's English rendering of *Molloy*.[18] Beckett's position wavers: reluctant at first to conceive of someone else handling his text, he is

unwilling at the same time to take on the task of translation, feeling it would turn into a genuine rewriting of the text in the other language, as he would soon discover. In February 1953 he confesses to Alexander Trocchi his misgivings about translating *Molloy* into English: “It won’t go into English” unless he completely recasts the text, a work of translation and rewriting which only the author can tackle, adding: “My English is queer” (356). In four months’ time he would warm up to the idea of revising someone else’s translation, asking for specimens of their English text to be sent to him and stressing that the work requires a “professional writer and one prepared to write in his own way within the limits of mine, if that makes any sense, and beyond them too, when necessary” (385). However, revising Erich Franzen’s German *Molloy* in 1954, with its “irritating way of turning the unusual into the usual” to ward off the impression of a translated text (456), strengthens his former determination to shoulder the task himself, even if he frequently complains of exhaustion from tampering with the “queer kind of English that my queer French deserves” (592). This would often push him to postpone self-translation, as he later decides to do with *Fin de partie*, after the sore experience of the “misunderstanding” (628) around *Godot*.

Above all, these letters offer a unique insight into the subtle metamorphoses, transmutations, to and fro traffic between Beckett’s two languages, exemplarily discussed by George Craig in his translator’s introduction. Writing to Duthuit of a request for a radio interview for *La Vie des lettres* in July 1951, Beckett expresses his jocose horror at the prospect:

> J’entends d’ici mes bêlements de plus en plus nasaux à mesure que les conneries s’acumulent: l’exil: connais pas; la ruse: pour d’autres; silence: volontiers.
>
> I can hear my bleating from here, more and more nasal as the nonsense accumulates: exile? don’t know; cunning? not my style; silence? gladly. (269-71)

The quotation and questioning of the iconic keywords of Stephen Dedalus’s *non serviam* in Beckett’s chosen language completes the self-imposed exile of Joyce’s hero, while comically undercutting the residual grandiloquence of Joyce’s text and stressing the secondariness that attaches to all translation.[19] The self-ironic commentaries on the nasal voice and linguistic mimicry articulate a detachment both from Ireland, the country that Stephen chooses to leave behind, and French, the language of arrival. Beckett resorts to clowning (and ultimately, to silence, as he declines the interview) to distance himself from the newfangled template of Joycean, modernist exile, while also signaling, in French, his simultaneous estrangement from the translated

"mother" tongue and from the translating language, French. The letter starts with Beckett's observations on an article by Duthuit that he was translating for *Transition* ("Vuillard and the Poets of Decadence"), voicing his timid objection to the use of the adjective "pure" as equally characteristic of Mallarmé's poetry and Vuillard's painting; the skepticism toward the word also reveals underlying attitudes in Beckett's practice of self-translation and bilingual (re)writing, which comes to occupy more and more of his time in the 1950s. The series of his self-translations/rewritings starts with *Murphy*, undertaken with Alfred Péron, followed by *Watt*, which he helped Daniel Mauroc translate, and *En attendant Godot* and *Molloy*, both translated into English with Patrick Bowles[20]; these and his subsequent self-translations, carried out single-handedly, suspend the hierarchical relationship between original and translation, disclosing rather the difference always already at work in the original.[21]

Beckett's bilingual work has been seen since the 1990s as split into two modes of writing: one characterized by increased textual activity, figuration, incorporation, residual idiomaticity, and the resulting vestigial linguistic humor that characterized the English-language corpus, and a starker, more austere and abstract, bared-to-the-bone textuality in French, (Anglo-American) exegesis tacitly or explicitly attributing more value to the English texts (Connor, Leslie Hill, Ann Beer, Brian Fitch, Allan Warren Friedman, to name but a few). Against this stance that aestheticizes the incarnation of meaning, Pascale Casanova and Shane Weller (*Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity* 66-77) formulate the thesis that, in so far as we equate Beckett's aesthetics with indigence, the "abstractivation" (Casanova) and defiguration that Beckett carries out in the starker French-language texts, where he is better "ill equipped," should be seen as the prime instantiation of his will to radical impoverishment.[22] These contrasting arguments have been significantly nuanced by recent research, most importantly by Sinéad Mooney's and Emilie Morin's microtextual investigations of the bilingual work. Morin in particular charts Beckett's Hibernicizing of both the English and the French texts, partly counteracted by the gradual suppression of the traces of (the narrator's) foreignness in the French texts. While the work remains sprinkled with elements of a pronounced cultural specificity (realia, Irish names, toponymy), there is a perceptible shift toward a hazier effect of disorientation and defamiliarization in the French text. Yet, rather than relegating the elements of Irishness, under ironic attack in the English text,

to a realm of general, more neutral exoticism and foreignness in the French-language text (as argued by Leslie Hill), Morin's meticulous case studies reveal patterns reminiscent of Hiberno-English in the emphatic structures of the French. Conversely, an Irish "flavor" is added to the English-language texts wherever the French "original's" cultural and linguistic playfulness is addressed—for example, in language effects signaling the narrator's sensitivity to the literal meaning of verbal clichés, indicative of a non-native speaker's position in the language (*Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* 63-79). The letters also document Beckett's collaboration with Mania Péron, the widow of his late friend and fellow translator Alfred Péron, in the genesis of the French Trilogy: Morin traces her editorial suggestions and interventions that placed Beckett under pressure not to Hibernicize the French text, and to mute his caustic attacks on the Irish Free State's conservatism (*Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* 88-89).

"no longer wholly dark"

The period spanned by the second volume of Beckett's correspondence is, above all, marked by the growing recognition of Beckett as the author of *En attendant Godot*, written between October 1948 and January 1949, published in the fall of 1952, and first performed on 5 January 1953 at the Théâtre de Babylone. Throughout his writing career, Beckett displays a legendary aversion to requests that he clarify his work, sometimes putting off inquirers with no more than "I have no ideas about theatre" (*LSB 2* 316). On the other hand, he was known as the most meticulous and demanding director of his plays, treating his own texts almost like musical scores, using a metronome to ensure the accuracy of the pace. Much as he loathed requests for the "low-down on Pozzo, his home address, his curriculum vitae" (507), and the theater pundits and critics' eternal calls to clarify whether by Godot he had meant God ("crrritic" is, after all, the worst abuse Didi and Gogo can fling at each other), he was more than usually willing to give a hand to any of his directors, provided that "he is the kind of man to whom my kind of hand can be given" (569-70). So, contrary to the stereotype of the word-shy author, the letters to a number of privileged correspondents on his work—his American director Alan Schneider, his publishers Jérôme Lindon and Barney Rosset, as well as some close friends—show a felicitous amount of "his kind of hand" lent, mostly in the line of *no symbols where none intended*, insisting on the stubborn particularities, the grotesque comedy, and the pace at which his texts should be delivered.

Writing to Duthuit in January 1951 about the planned setting for *Godot* when still wavering between the more overtly Frenchified "Godeau" and "Godot," Beckett professes his belief in a theater of poverty and a poetics of being ill-equipped, flying in the face of both symbolism and aestheticism. Theater, he states, must by no means be "a spectacle of place"—even if this meant turning down a collaboration with one of the most daring experimental abstract painters in postwar France, Nicolas de Staël, who, to Beckett's chagrin, approached the task at hand "with a painter's eye," and even if his refusal likely led to the souring of his relationship with Duthuit,[23] since for him that would be

> aestheticism. They have turned ballet and theatre sets into a branch of painting, and done them a great deal of harm, I think. It is Wagnerism. . . . I want a theatre reduced to its own means, speech and acting, without painting, without music, without embellishments. . . . The setting has to come out of the text, without adding to it. . . . In *Godot* it is a sky that is sky only in name, a tree that makes them wonder whether it is one, tiny and shrivelled. I should like to see it set up any old how, sordidly abstract as nature is, for the Estragons and Vladimirs, a place of suffering, sweaty and fishy, where sometimes a turnip grows, or a ditch opens up. (*LSB 2* 218)

Hostility to the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is not new with Beckett: when Reavey's small Europa Press published *Echo's Bones* in 1935, Beckett rejected the offer to have his poems illustrated, as the other volumes of the series were (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 208). When in 1954 composer Edouard Coester writes to Beckett asking permission to put *Godot* to music for voices and a small orchestra, he rejects the idea of stage music altogether but encourages Coester to venture into "pure music" (and even into pure silence) that would be not merely an illustration of the text, demurring that the play pivots on "a speaking whose function is not so much that of having a meaning as of putting up a struggle, poor I hope, against silence, and leading back to it" (476). Later in life Beckett would relent on the idea of stage music, consenting to his close friend the Romanian-born Marcel Mihalovici's integrating several of his texts, *Krapp's Last Tape* most importantly, into his compositions, and using John Beckett's music in several radio plays.

There seems to be hardly anything Beckett was more up at arms about than symbolic interpretations; his letters to his directors in various languages repeat the same warning against metaphysical simplifications. His exasperation at "the endless misunderstanding" (540) runs through his correspondence with close friends: "How anything so skeleton simple can be made so complicated is beyond me. Like a lot of seaside brats digging for

worms people are," he sulks to Mary Manning Howe over responses to *Godot* (541n), and he ironically plays down Aidan Higgins's enthusiasm over the London production in 1955, "I did not know I had doctrines, but I wouldn't know" (544). Instead, he stubbornly stresses the finitude and particularity of his text, populated by characters who are living beings, "only just living perhaps, they are not emblems," and insisting that they should be seen as "less the result of an attempt at abstraction, something I am almost incapable of, than a refusal to tone down all that is at one and the same time complex and amorphous in them" (391).

These complex and amorphous particularities come out best in Beckett's letters to the one who was to benefit most from "his kind of hand"—Alan Schneider, the director of the January 1956 American premiere of *Godot* in Miami, "the laugh sensation of two continents" booed by the largely socialite audience and its like-minded critics. Beckett reassures his director and friend of his unwavering support and resolution to go on in a letter of exemplary integrity and empathy, carefully toning down the extent of Schneider's indebtedness to his clarifications and emphasizing the director's kindred recoil from the "half-measures and frills" that "90% of theatre-goers want":

> Success and failure on the public level never mattered much to me, in fact I feel much more at home with the latter. . . . And I cannot help feeling that the success of Godot has been very largely the result of a misunderstanding, or of various misunderstandings, and that perhaps you have succeeded better than anyone else in stating its true nature. (594)

Even if their correspondence had been accessible to scholars for decades and their collaboration exhaustively chronicled in Schneider's book, *Entrances* (1986), it solicits different readings in the corpus of Beckett's published correspondence. The author's legendary meticulousness in the performative close reading of his text is best illustrated by the long list of specifications he sends to Schneider in the weeks before the Miami opening, where each item speaks volumes about the degree of realism, vagueness, connotation, and indeterminacy Beckett seems to have desired. Regarding Pozzo's monologue in act 2 about the difficult birth astride the grave he gives the instruction "much more lyrical"—one of the rarest words in the corpus of Beckett texts; in the same scene he also makes a significant correction, "Not *The air is full of cries* but *The air is full of our cries*," the first person plural insisting on common mortality. In act 1, to Didi's shower of questions, "But what Saturday?" and such, he instructs, "Much slower and

more broken. Pause after each question. Each question a banderilla. Let each day sink in before passing on to next." He insists on the foreign accent with which the two tramps should pronounce adieu as "adioo" but also on the clownish thickness of "the English say cawm" (*CDW* 17), enhancing the sense of their foreignness from both French and English in a play where he allegedly tried "to retain the French atmosphere as much as possible," as he claims to Rosset (*LSB 2* 398). Another hole in this apparent desire to reify the space of *Godot* is created by Beckett's correction of the boy's "sir" to "mister"—a characteristically Dublin form of address (575-78). He would also insist that a realistic nucleus be observed; corresponding with Donald McWhinnie of the BBC on the future sound effects of his first radio play, *All That Fall*, he objects to the artificiality and de-particularization of the bruitage, of using man-made imitations for animal sounds, arguing that the sought-for "unreal quality" should derive from a "realistic nucleus," their absurd contexts guaranteeing an effect of defamiliarization, or "denaturaliz[ation]" (687-88).

The correspondence over *Godot* and, later, *Endgame* reveals some curious indications of how Beckett may have conceived of his plays. Selective as a rule about granting permissions to directors (saying no without hesitation to a plan of a Broadway revival of *Godot* with Buster Keaton and a delightfully renamed "Marion Brando" in the roles of Didi and Gogo in 1955; *LSB 2* 524), he could nevertheless extend his generosity to young, underfinanced companies, as in 1954, when he intercedes with Lindon to grant a young Toulouse company the right to perform *Godot*, claiming acerbically that "it seems unfair to leave the monopoly of botch-ups for foreigners" (512). Given his revulsion from the Irish Free State's cultural policies, it is surprising to read about his delight in a planned all-Gaelic *Godot* in Dublin that Cyril Cusack announced to set "in bleakest Connemara"—although he objects to Cusack's original idea of presenting the play in Gaelic *and* English, inviting a reading of Pozzo as an English landlord brutalizing his Irish tenants (534). He reacts enthusiastically to the news of the 1956 New York revival with an all-black cast, including a "2-metre-tall Lucky" (686), although he would not travel to New York for the opening.

Withdrawing ever more often to his orchard in Ussy, he nevertheless seriously considers traveling to see one particular production, translated and staged by an inmate of Lüttringhausen prison near Wuppertal, performed

several times between November 1953 and Easter 1954 (preceding by a few months the "official" German premiere). Two letters, received in October 1954 inviting him to attend a private performance in the prison, make Beckett aware of this "extraordinary Lüttringhausen affair." One is from the prison chaplain, Ludwig Manker, in whose sacristy the stage tree is kept, having become his "tree of life," and which Manker ends by quoting the play, "For I too must often ask myself: Did I sleep while others suffered?" The other is from prisoner Karl-Franz Lembke, the man who "in his cage, read, translated, put on my play" (*LSB 2* 506) and who enthuses, "Votre Godot ce fut 'Notre' Godot, à nous! bien à nous!" [Your Godot, it was 'our' Godot, really ours!] (504n). It is as if the symbolism Beckett feared so much from German theater had got the upper hand: Pastor Peter Schippel recollected that during one of the 1954 performances "the walls became transparent. In the end, the whole prison was a 'Waiting for Godot'. In a certain sense, so was the whole world to which we returned" (505n). Beckett's answer, addressed to "Mon cher Prisonnier" [my dear Prisoner], is easily the most moving testimony of his strong sense of solidarity with "humanity in ruins," his sheer human warmth, as well as his abhorrence of pathos and patronizing:

> In all my life as man and writer, nothing like this has ever happened to me. To someone moved as I am, phrases come easily, but from a sloppy way of talking, not at all your style, given that I am no longer the same, and will never again be able to be the same, after what you have done, all of you. In the place where I have always found myself, where I will always find myself, turning round and round, falling over, getting up again, it is no longer wholly dark nor wholly silent. That you should have brought me such comfort is all that I can offer you as comfort. I, who am what is called free to come and go, to gorge myself, to make love, I shall not be fatuous enough to dispense to you words of wisdom. To whatever my play may have brought you, I can add this only: the huge gift you have made me by accepting it. (506)

Although he would not attend the performance, which Lembke's "Spielschar der Landstrasse Wuppertal" also performed at the *Deutsche Evangelische Kirchentage* in Frankfurt in August 1956, Beckett intervened with the chief drama editor at Fischer Verlag and arranged that a sum of 200 DM be sent to Lembke from his royalties (*LSB 2* 636) and simultaneously tried promoting Lembke as one of the German translators of his poems, with Limes Verlag. The translation project came to an abrupt end by September 1956 when it was revealed that Lembke had embezzled the company's funds, this meaning that the Wuppertal performance could not go forward (634-38). On the other hand, Beckett might have felt guilty about the fact

that, when a penniless and half-frozen Lembke unexpectedly turned up at the Théâtre de Babylone in the winter of 1954, asking to see Beckett, he instructed Roger Blin to give him money, warm clothes, and offer him shelter, but could not bring himself to confront the man in person, so Lembke disappeared a few days later, leaving a note saying that he was going south where it was warmer (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 368-70).

In more general terms, in the productions of his plays, beyond simply preserving a realistic grain, Beckett tries to ascertain that grotesque touches do not get refined out of existence, instructing directors to exploit the play's underlying comedy: "Let people laugh by all means, and then be reminded it is no laughing matter" (*LSB 2* 617). Later, when he sends a still unfinished *Fin de partie* (under the provisional title "HAAM") to his young writer friend Robert Pinget, whose *La Manivelle* he was to translate and adapt as *The Old Tune*, he is "really very pleased" that the play, which he described earlier to close friends as a "hairandroofraiser," a "one-act howl," "black as ink" (621, 626, 619), "gave you pleasure and—most of all—made you laugh" (653). The element he returns to most often in the Théâtre de Babylone's *Godot*, which he prefers to the London production because it was "more like what I wanted, nastier" (611), is the ending when Estragon's trousers should drop off "properly." After the opening—attended by Deschevaux-Dumesnil—he sends a letter congratulating to Blin, in which he goes to considerable length about this issue, which is "vital" to him, hearing that the actor holds on to them:

> it's utterly inappropriate. It wouldn't occur to him at that moment—he doesn't realise they have fallen down. As for any laughs that might greet their falling right down, to the great detriment of that touching final tableau, there's absolutely no objection to them. . . . The spirit of the play, in so far as it has one, is that nothing is more grotesque than the tragic, and that must be put across right to the end, and particularly at the end. (*LSB 2* 350)

How much this mollification galled Beckett can be seen from a subsequent letter to Mitchell, bemoaning the fact that the trousers also stopped halfway in the performance he attended: "Technical accident. That finished me" (444).

". . . per lungo silenzio parea fioco"[24]

When *L'Innommable* was making its way to print in early 1952, Beckett writes to Irish writer Aidan Higgins that the book may be the "end of the jaunt" for both the writer and the man, with

> nobody left to utter and, independently perhaps, certainly superfluously, nothing left to utter about. . . . I used to think all this work was an effort, necessarily feeble, to express the nothing. It seems rather to have been a journey, irreversible, in gathering thinglessness, towards it. . . . And the problem remains entire or at last arising ends. (*LSB 2* 319)

The letter evinces a turn away from the earlier creed in a literature gravitating towards silence and the naught so pervasive in the early prose, and an awareness of the irreversible, yet impossible journey "nohow on," towards thinglessnes, defiguration, the stripping of language to the bone, yet always short of the yearned-for stasis—what Blanchot termed *le pas au-delà* [the step not beyond]. The awareness of this tense impossibility apparently peaked with the writing of *L'Innommable*. That Beckett conceived of his novels in terms of a series as early as May 1947 is evident from a letter he sent to Reavey, in which he inserts *Watt* into that series (55), and certainly in January 1948, with *Malone meurt* barely begun, when he writes to MacGreevy that *Molloy* is "the second last of the series begun with *Murphy*" (71). The use of the personal pronoun "him" when referring to *Molloy* the novel in the same letter is revealing, as it suggests that the writing is a living being. When in 1954 Suhrkamp planned to publish the three novels of the Trilogy in one volume in German, Beckett writes: "this work is a complete whole only in so far as one takes for granted the impossibility of going on" (442). In June 1956, sending Nancy Cunard news of the completion of *Fin de partie*, he describes himself with one of the verses from Dante that he would return to, again and again, in his texts from *Mercier et Camier* to *Stirrings Still*, "per lungo silenzio [parea] fioco" (626). The quote, increasingly pared down, is persistently linked in Beckett's manuscripts to Dante's homage to Virgil's stylistic authority; thus the translation/quotation of "fioco" as "faint" (since "fioco" can be read both aurally, as "hoarse," and visually, as "faint, barely seen") comes to epitomize, as Dirk Van Hulle shows, Beckett's textual procedures of "undoing, subtracting and taking away, often by means of translation," and the double movement of inscribing Dante's authority in his work and confirming his own authority by "unwording" Dante ("Undoing Dante" 93).

How impossible it was to go on Beckett would feel ever more intensely, once he embarks on translating *Godot* and the Trilogy into English and has to face the ensuing depression of being unable to write, a depression which takes the place of the earlier exhaustion resulting from overwriting. Instead of the self-bashing and occasional self-commiseration of the letters in the 1930s, a new tone of exasperation verging on repudiation of the completed

work pervades the letters to all those to whom he feels close, starting in 1954 at the earliest. His letters to Mitchell—a young American woman he met in the fall of 1953 and with whom he had a brief but intense love affair—from the bedside of his dying brother, through the fateful summer and fall of 1954, mix his resignation, lacerated by frustrated erotic longing, with violent outbursts of self-loathing: "never so revolted at the thought of the work done. Sometimes feel like letting myself be sucked in this exquisite morass," before adding, "The old Irish slogan, 'Die in Ireland.' It's a dangerous place to come back for any other purpose" (*LSB 2* 487n). Revising Bowles's translation of *Molloy* has "[his] soul drowned in vomit" (514), and he is ever more painfully aware that writing *L'Innommable* spelt out his "finishedness" (497). Echoing his intuition that there was no outside to his little world, he confides to Mitchell that he is "absurdly and stupidly the creature of [his] books," with *L'Innommable* capping his predicament and writer's block (514n). To Rosset, who, however empathetic, was undoubtedly expecting new work from him and gently prodding him with the self-translation of the Trilogy, he reports his progress assembling the *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* for Minuit that express "the failure to implement the last words of *L'Innommable* ['il faut continuer, je vais continuer']"—but also, his misgivings about turning to writing in English again, which would be a mere evasion:

> It's hard to go on with everything loathed and repudiated as soon as formulated, and in the act of formulation, and before formulation. . . I'm horribly tired and stupefied, but not yet tired and stupefied enough. To write is impossible but not yet impossible enough. That's how I cod myself these days. (456-57)

The solution that Beckett finds—either for securing a nearly complete withdrawal from the time-devouring social chores, for his spells of writing or for the frequent depressive periods partly resulting from his inability to write—is to remove himself to Ussy, endlessly digging holes for his trees, and giving comically self-deprecating accounts of his gardening skills. Indeed, one of the great surprises of this volume is finding Beckett going out to dig in a frenzy between two paragraphs, giving haunting, if cryptic, reports of his distractions, as in this 1955 letter to Mitchell: "Visited by partridges now daily, about midday. Queer birds. They hop, listen, hop, listen, never seem to eat. Wretched letter, forgive me," before ending, as usual: "Much love" (*LSB 2* 531). How much isolation in the plain house, fitted out with a gramophone and chess-board, and the garden suited him can

be seen from a letter he sent Duthuit from Ussy in April 1951, sketching an "apprenticeship" in progressive withdrawal:

> Fifteen or twenty years of silence and solitude, brightened up by gardening and walks, shorter and shorter, I feel this evening that that would suit me, and suit me the least badly possible. I keep an eye on the love-life of the Colorado beetle and work against it, successfully but humanely, that is to say by throwing the parents into my neighbour's garden and burning the eggs. If only someone had done that for me! (232)

Yet, however "melancholy mad" Beckett might feel (444), the letters' gloominess is relieved by touches of acid humor. Trying to convince Mitchell to put an end to their affair so as not to take upon himself inflicting pain, he describes his routine, "back in the Marne mists with piles of texts to revise and nothing in my head but false teeth" (420). When on the lookout for two actors to play Nag and Nell in the Paris staging of *Fin de partie* in 1956—"a little old man and a little old woman for the dustbins . . . toothless if at all possible," suggesting rather uncharitably that Marthe Arnaud (Bram van Velde's companion) take on the role—he adds, "What a life, when that's the best that can be hoped for" (686). Even in the midst of devastating personal losses and crippling depression, he always has an eye for small, comic oddities, as when he copies an announcement from a newspaper's "Personal" column to Mania Péron: "Black sheep disappointed in life would marry scapegoat with troubled past" (394), or when he reports the fortunes of the re-staging of *Godot* in Paris, in the fall of 1956, to Rosset, with "our 3rd Pozzo and second boy who has to play in long trousers his legs are so bandy. When he makes a mistake in the text his alcoholic father comes rushing from the wings and hits him with a bottle, screaming 'Schweinhund'" (643). Beckett, whose Boy reassures Vladimir that Mister Godot does not beat him but only his brother, could not have missed the grim irony of the tyrannical, drunken father-figure storming onstage.

At the end of the period covered in this volume of the correspondence, Beckett turns 50. His sense of his "finishedness" as a writer after *L'Innommable* becomes ever more acute; the loss of his brother in 1954, and the subsequent demise of his painter friend, Jack B. Yeats, augmented the intimations of his own mortality.[25] Beckett's need, while caring for his brother in Dublin, to make it clear to Mitchell that their involvement had to end left him shattered. There are few more "literary" letters in the volume than the ones written to her before, and in the immediate aftermath of ending their affair. In August 1954 he writes:

> Should have made quite a good butler, no, too much responsibility, but a superior kind of house-boy, a head house-boy, no, just an ordinary house-boy. Soon the leaves will be turning, it'll be winter before I'm home, and then? It'll have to be very easy whatever it is, I can't face any more difficulties, and I can't bear the thought of giving any more pain. (*LSB 2* 493-94n)

Even if they may have little direct relevance to the work (however problematic it may be to observe this stipulation in practice), the fragmentary messages reproduced give a sense of Beckettian understatement and the tone of the later theater work—and also illuminate crucial facets of Beckett's personality. His subsequent letters to Mitchell record his elegiac, yet resolute withdrawal from relationship: "I don't want you to forget me, but I think it would be the best thing for you. I'm over, as sure as if they were on their way to measure me for the box. I wish you were happy, you have all the equipment for happiness—it seems to me. All the mad things I wish—and the sad things I know. Cheerful correspondent I am" (658). And some have a distinct Krapp note, as the one written in March 1956 while toiling on the translation of *L'Innommable*, which often proves impossible:

> Shall be fifty (50) in a month's time and can well believe it. 18.000 days and not much to show for them . . . Just jog along, on the flat of my back 15 hours of the 24. Often think of our brief times together. Cold comfort. Forgive wretched letter. At least it's a sign of life. (606-07)

It is all too easy to say in hindsight that, in spite of the prolonged depression that set in before 1956, there would be more "signs of life" to come: *Krapp's Last Tape*, the extraordinary musical textures of the later plays, the radical experiment in cutting back language(s) and narrative to a "mere-most minimum" (*NO* 91) in the short prose. What the second volume of Beckett correspondence proves beyond doubt is that the author's place among literature's letterwrights is on a par with his status among the world's novelists and playwrights.

Chapter 3
"Back down to the bottom of all the hills again": Beckett's Letters, 1957-1965

I'm struggling along with the new moan, trying to find the rhythm and syntax of extreme weakness, penury perhaps I should say.
—*Beckett,* LSB 3

One of the most inventive fictional games with literary biography, Julian Barnes's *Flaubert's Parrot*, jocoseriously presents three alternative and, it is implied, equally (un)truthful chronologies of the French novelist's life: one of achievements, one of losses, and one made up of miscellaneous reflections. Following its lead, one might toy with writing the account of Beckett's life in the late 1950s and early 1960s—the period, still before the Nobel Prize, when he became established as one of the most important writers of the century—as, in one sense, the narrative of a relentless "going on," a radical experimentation with narrative and dramatic form, what Pascale Casanova calls "abstractivation," starting with *L'Innommable* and extending to *Comment c'est*, which eventually leads up to the late prose and theater texts and their dismantling of language. This chronology could weave in his forays into different media, into co-opting music in his texts, and into the joint creative adventure represented by the theater. It would be studded with the data of his growing international reputation (most importantly, the 1961 Prix International des Éditeurs, shared with Borges, but also the honorary doctorate awarded by his alma mater, Trinity College, in 1959), a triumphant forward march for an author committed to achievementlessness. It would speak of new departures in every field of life and activity: from collaboration with artists in and out of the theater and radio, the cementing of decisive life-long relationships (most importantly, with Barbara Bray, lover, first—and favorite—reader, critic, ally, friend), an opening-up of life opportunities (including travel, a thickening of the social agenda, a steady inflow of royalties, even a change of domicile).

A second, tentative narrative might stand under the sign of, "Always went to the dogs but never quite like this" (*LSB 3* 360). In 1957 Beckett is fifty; over the next years, the loss of close friends (the first love of his Trinity years, Ethna McCarthy; Jack B. Yeats; Denis Devlin) and his ever more frequent physical ailments painfully confront him with his mortality. (It is no surprise that his letters to the dying Ethna, or his letters of

condolence to a bereaved Bray, to Alan Schneider, or to Jacoba van Velde in times of crisis, belong to his most intensely "literary.") In July 1964, exhausted from work on the revival of *Endgame* in London, he writes to his friend and host John Calder: "Thank you with all my old rags of heart for your great kindness to the old man I am becoming so fast now. This morning at breakfast a tooth fell out, did you notice?" (*LSB 3* 608n). Despite Beckett's many-faceted output, the tenor of these years seems to be one of prolonged impasse, of "all past instead of in store" (76), not helped by the demands on his time by agents, publishers, translators, and theater makers that leave him "corpsed"—the one word Clov uses to describe the world.[26] In November 1958 he complains to his American publisher Barney Rosset of getting ever more ensnared in "professionalism and self-exploitation," while being painfully aware of the toll this takes on his creative energies and convinced that the only way to continue writing is to "get back into the state of mind of 1945 when it was write or perish" (177). Neither is his old-new *empêchement*, impediment, alleviated by burying himself in Ussy where, apart from battling the moles in the garden, cycling on the hills, or playing chess with himself, he spends "the best (!) part of my time looking through the window, sometimes this one, sometimes the other. Can't even be called daydreaming" (320). This narrative could be fitted out with the countless expressions of loss of faith in his writing, the accumulating "abortions" and *faux départs*, to borrow the title of a 1965 text, the vast majority of which do not display that "necessary wrongness" that he tells MacGreevy he feels in *Happy Days* (391). Added to this is the endless frustration of trying to put through his conception in the productions of his own work. Overall, one could construct a seductive narrative of renunciations—acceding to a life less unlived, one that the complex and at times strained relationship with Bray could offer. Yet Beckett gently but unequivocally warns Bray,

> how little there remains now of the being and the writer, how little of the little there ever was. It is like being in a wheel chair rolling slowly down and putting on the brakes every now and then to have a look round or just out of pusillanimity and then letting them off and waiting for the descent to resume, which it does not immediately the slope is still so gentle, and all the things one may say to oneself then, while waiting. (*LSB 3* 364)

A third narrative might enlist the many voices of "sad Sam" the letterwright, as a caveat to readers and scholars, not to absolutize any of them. One memorable reminder of his versatility is the Irish-inflected, jovial gossip sent to his cousin Molly Roe in February 1959, after the depressing one-week visit to Dublin to sit by the dying Ethna: after plaintively

describing the drives along the old roads and the brief visit to Cooldrinagh, the house of his childhood, he gives a somewhat surprising résumé of his circumstances, letting drop casually that the revenues from his works allow him to keep up an "independent and rather indolent way of living," going on to comment on costs of living and ending on the hopeful note that he might yet have a game of golf with Molly's brother Jack "before the great bunker whence no recovery" (201, 202). No less delightful are his occasional notes to Bray's daughters—as this 1960 one to thank Julia for sending a drawing of a "very prettily drawn and coloured" lake: "I imagined one too once, but I much prefer yours" (369). There are countless examples of Beckett placing himself at his friends' disposal even at times when he is deep in chores, always ready to offer moral, intellectual, and financial support. For this narrative one might compile a Beckett bestiary, its vignettes ranging from the gripping to the buoyant. From Ussy he reports seeing an "old donkey known locally as Le Ministre, no doubt because of his ministrations to cows (work that out)" (222); he tries to entertain Ethna with details of his trip to Berne to a major Bram van Velde exhibition, jotting down a visit to the bears, "yawning, initiating an absent-minded copulation that looked as if it must last 48 hours at least" (147); in Renard's diary he singles out "the pigeon *helping* with its wing the too frail branch on which it lights" (623). It might be a catalogue of Beckett's mischievous humor, not always black: for instance, describing to Barney Rosset a prolonged conversation on the street in London, all the while "calculating with anguish the chances of my bladder's holding out to the only public lavatory known to me in the West End . . . (it did almost)" (180), or complaining to Bray of chronic shortage of books to read from Berlin, where he is involved in the revival of *Godot* in February 1965: "A German treatise on suicide. Statistics. Unexciting. Uninformative. Unhelpful" (654).

Writing "the making relation"

Starting in the second half of the 1950s in his letters Beckett is no longer principally a reader of the work of others but increasingly of his own texts and, despite his protests, that of his interpreters. On the one hand, an unprecedented opening-up about the problems and process of writing, the intentions and aimed-for effects, begins with the writing of *Comment c'est*, the addressees being mainly his close friends, theater directors, translators. On the other hand, despite claims of having nothing to say about his own work, he becomes more and more involved in the texts of his interpreters.

He reads and responds to them, sometimes reluctantly and cautiously, but sometimes with genuine interest, as in the case of two early Beckett scholars, Kay Boyle and Lawrence Harvey, whom he befriends. Harvey's 80-page study of "Whoroscope," as he somewhat elegiacally writes to a third friend, brings back pleasant old memories of his École Normale Supérieure days "when the fucking old world was young. Twas then my aunt Cissie said she envied me 'young and in Paris and the ball at your feet.' Answer (a fortnight later): 'What a ball. What feet'" (*LSB 3* 473).

The picture that emerges from these letters is not as unequivocal as Beckett's claim that "the only line is to refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind" (82), which has been elevated to a thesis by some Beckett scholars.[27] In 1962, Beckett sends a letter to Irish academic Arland Ussher, in which a note of impatience can be detected: "my unique relation [with my work]—and it a tenuous one—is the making relation. I am with it a little in the dark and fumbling of making, as long as that lasts, then no more. I have no light to throw on it myself and it seems a stranger in the light that others throw" (511). As it probably didn't escape him, "making relation" can be read either as an adjectival phrase or actively, as a verb phrase; Beckett's relation to his own texts and their interpreters, in and out of the theater, could at times be both.

In early 1957 Beckett answers an insightful note on *Fin de partie* from critic Georges Neveux saying "We make the noises we can, that's all. It's not possible that people will like it. But it may move them. I aim no lower" (37). At the end of the same year, he writes to Schneider on *Endgame* that the play—and his work in general—is "a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended), made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin" (82). In the light of his later theater work even these emphatically inarticulate sounds gain a new context: that of the dramatic text understood as a tissue of rhythms and silences, akin to music. However noncommittal the terms, at times Beckett's answers to academics come with suggestions that can be read as clues—like his admonition to English poet and translator Michael Horovitz that, unlike the writing of Joyce, his own work does neither invite nor repay scholarly analysis (122). One recurring feature is an irritation at the use of his biography, a track he at times attempts to veer his commentators off, even asking Harvey that he drop references to his brother Frank's lung cancer, or to the car accident in

which he and Ethna were injured (503). While he is reserved about Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd* (which he finds "biographically and bibliographically accurate for once at least," [368]), he reads Hugh Kenner's *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* with genuine interest and liberally offers him background info on the veteran cyclist Godeau (235). By far the most interesting case is his meeting with Adorno. Even if his first reaction to the prospect of featuring in an "hommage with profundities from Adorno" (401) in Darmstadt in 1960 provokes comic horror, and even though he politely disagrees with Adorno's tracing of Hamm back to Hamlet, a very cordial letter follows in 1961, in which Beckett thanks the philosopher "for your friendship and for your belief in my work" (403).

A tantalizing find for many Beckett scholars is the letter to Bray that Beckett sends with *Le Livre à venir*—the book where Blanchot arguably developed his concerns through Beckett[28]—confessing not to have read it for fear it might "get in [his] way" of writing *Comment c'est* (August 1959, *LSB 3* 237). In March of the same year, when Blanchot's seminal essay on the Trilogy, "Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?" [Where now? Who now?], comes out in English translation in the *Evergreen Review*, he recommends it to Bray as the best criticism written on his novels (222). And to Bray, whose review of *Comment c'est* ranks among the most insightful early responses,[29] he writes with gratitude in February 1961: "You have 'understood' the book as no one so far," pointing out that her insight into the novel's performative text, "not about something, but something," is an exact match to his own assessment of Joyce's *Work-in-Progress* in the 1928 essay prepared for *Our Exagmination* (397). It is as if the tenor throughout were that of the "ideal epigraph" he finds in Schlegel's letter to Schleiermacher, "I am delighted when someone whom I love and respect has a reasonable notion of what I want or sees who I am. . . . If my writings give you only cause to battle the hollow ghost of understanding or not understanding, put them aside" (497n).

What is apparent from these letters is that Beckett's (refusal of) involvement in interpretation emerges from the same source as his reading of other writers, and as his decisive encounters with painting or music. To Kay Boyle's allegorical reading of Joyce's "The Boarding House" he cautiously responds with the last line of his "regrettable" novel *Watt* ("no symbols where none intended" [*W* 214]) and points out that the details Boyle exploits might only serve to establish the climate, being "chunks of Dublin, its air and light and scene and voices" (*LSB 3* 49). From the wealth of his

reading—much of which comes by mail from Bray with her recommendations—there emerges a keen critical eye and a commitment to an aesthetics at odds with the "closed worlds that give off a grinding of solitudes, prides" (*LSB 2* 102). He keeps returning to old favorites—Dante, Fontane, Dr. Johnson—and avidly reads classics and contemporaries alike: from an "often insufferable, often moving and convincing" Gottfried Benn he singles out one essay "on the Aging Artist" (*LSB 3* 282). Unimpressed by *Dr. Zhivago*, he squarely refuses George Reavey's request to write something in support when Pasternak is forced to decline the Nobel Prize in 1958. He is moved by Ionesco's *Le Roi se meurt*, despite a performance he judges abominable. One of his most interesting responses is to *La Jalousie* by Robbe-Grillet, an author with whom he was frequently associated as a representative of the Nouveau Roman, and whose importance he instantly recognizes despite his misgivings about Robbe-Grillet's penchant to self-theorizing: "I'm afraid hallucination won't wash, here, except in so far as scrutiny at this intensity partakes of it. It is systematic Sachlichkeit, which of course has nothing to do with realism" (*LSB 3* 222). Equally revealing is his reaction to Sviatoslav Richter's first Paris recital, where he plays the late piano sonatas of Schubert, one of Beckett's most prized composers, including the B flat major (D 960). Much as he is impressed by the pianist's rendering, there is a penetrating critical touch—"Too interior was as near as I could get, though this sounds queer for Schubert, when the interior is as genuinely poetic as Richter's"—especially where it comes to the last, 1828 sonata, "heart-breakingly beautiful till he seems to throw his poor hat at it in the final rondo" (438). Richter's interpretation, with extreme slow tempi and fully co-opting the silences and pauses, was decisive in changing the perception of Schubert's repetitive, serial structures as music grappling with the inexpressible; of the major musicians active in the 1950s and 1960s, he comes closest, at first sight, to Beckett's preoccupation with the devouring pauses in Beethoven that Beckett writes about in the Axel Kaun letter and in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*.

Yet none of his readings prompt such effusive praise as the works of a few young, aspiring writer friends: Robert Pinget, first of all, but also the experimental dramatist Fernando Arrabal, the Irish Aidan Higgins, and the Israeli Matti Megged, all of whose careers he tries to promote. At the beginning of their friendship, in 1955 Beckett writes to the chronically unconfident Robert Pinget, "Say yes or no and be shot of the whole business.

Surviving—I know that that's not the point, and that it's not an argument. But perhaps being able to go on shouting is, for those who cannot keep silent. You must take a longer view of it all" (*LSB 2* 581-82). On receiving Pinget's novel *L'Inquisitoire* in 1962 he compares it to a reminiscence of the Perugino Pietà he often admired in his youth in the Dublin National Gallery, "the air of Umbria caressing an entombment," adding that the book is the work of "a great heart" (*LSB 3* 475). To a struggling Higgins he sends a formidable letter of reassurance, in which he warns of a "straining towards depth and inwardness" (142), before going on to sketch the problem of discursive setting-apart of "a world which is not to be revealed as object of speech, but as source of speech" and finally urging him to "[w]ork, work, writing for nothing and yourself, don't make the silly mistake we all make of publishing too soon" (143).

As far as the tortuous progress of Beckett's own work is concerned, perhaps at no time did his statement in the famous interview with Israel Shenker ring more true: "For some authors writing gets easier the more they write. For me it gets more and more difficult. For me the area of possibilities gets smaller and smaller" (Graver and Federman 162). During these years his program, if there is one, is to "get back down to the bottom of all the hills again, grimmer hills tha[n] in 45 of cherished memory and far less than then to climb with, i.e. nice proportions" (*LSB 3* 181). The battle with *Comment c'est*, his most radical work to that date, a writing which is increasingly unreadable and does not lend itself to the critical tools applied to the earlier work, marks a decisive departure from the voices of the earlier fiction.[30] As he writes to Rosset in May 1959, he struggles to get rhythms and minimal elements of the text to paper, reworked in successive stages of a "demolishing process" (230), cutting and redistributing. It is from these rhythms of a stripped-down language, and from a rigorous process of unlearning both his imposing cultural inheritance and the almost automatic figuration and wordplay that come with English, that he will labor for the next year, managing an average half a page per day (244), proceeding to break up the text into "packets" of a few lines separated by blank spaces, and complaining of the headaches given him by "all the conjunctival elements" (285), difficult to suppress. What he pursues with singular insistence, here as elsewhere, is "the rhythm and syntax of extreme weakness, penury perhaps" (211). It is probably the same weakness beyond style and writing that he means when praising a short story by Higgins: "some day perhaps many

years hence from the terrible urgency of weakness, being and utterance all gone to the dogs, you'll come across it and say how the hell did I ever have the strength to do that" (296).

Translation across French and English

Starting with the late 1940s Beckett becomes an increasingly francophone writer whose texts and letters in French, as their translator George Craig writes, stop depending on translation from English (*LSB 3* xxv). In line with his fabled "*Au contraire*" when asked if he was English, he answers a 1964 query from Európa Publishing, Budapest—about whether his plays belonged in their anthology of contemporary French or British theater—suggesting that they be placed according to the language in which originally written and, if that was not possible, he expresses his preference to be included in the French anthology (602). In the same letter he rejects any national belonging, let alone attachment, stating laconically, "I am an Irishman (Irish passport) living in France for the past 27 years" whose work is split between English and French (601). A tentative return to English starts with "From an Abandoned Work" and *Krapp's Last Tape*. Writing across two languages, Beckett responds to the pull of both. The letters in English are chock full of Gallicisms in syntax and vocabulary, sometimes accompanied by the comment "awful English this"; often they are tongue-in-cheek like his evocation of the French idiom *la fin des haricots* [at the end of one's tethers] in his complaint that, unless he manages to free himself from the work in the theater, it will be "the end of all the stringy beans" (172), or, in the other direction, when he describes the portraits of him included in a volume, "plus gruesome les unes que les autres" (622). Gone is the self-conscious display of erudition and interlingual proficiency that his early letters exude; rather, the languages have become second nature, most tellingly in his letters to Bray, herself a distinguished translator from French to English, the person to whom he writes without reserve, in an increasingly telegraphic style that is fraught with both Frenchified syntax and Hiberno-English frontings and inflections—and which also belong to his most "literary" in the sense that they enact a syntax of penury. Hangoverish from "sudden hopeless midnight bucket of brandy" he writes from Ussy,

> in head grinding old poem in vain by Hölderlin influenced entitled Dieppe . . . . Work no good, hammer hammer adamantine words, house inedible, hollow bricks, small old slates from demolished castle, second hand, couvreur fell off backward leaning scaffolding and burst, fat old man, *instantaneous* the things one has seen and not looked away. (203-04)

Since throughout this period he spends almost as much time self-translating as he does writing, translation provides a way out of the constant impasse of writing but also reinforces it. In 1958, after listening to Patrick Magee's reading of "From an Abandoned Work" and fragments from *Molloy*, Beckett starts planning a monologue for the Irish actor, but finds that there is something "infuriat[ing]" in his English writing that he can't eliminate, akin to a "lack of brakes" (98n). At about the same time, he complains that from the English *Endgame* "all sharpness [is] gone" (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 393-94). He reports to Alan Schneider the desire to return to writing in French, "where control is easier for me, and probably excessive" (103-04), and voices his misgivings to several correspondents about the possibility of achieving in English the rigor required by *Textes pour rien*, which he starts translating in 1958. These confessions underscore the systemic difference in levels of "textual activity" versus control and cutting back, the incarnation of meaning, wordplay and linguistic humor versus abstraction and "writing without style," between Beckett's English and French texts, that criticism has codified since the 1980s, generally agreeing that in the French-language texts the lean author set himself the "anorexic" goal of becoming "ever slimmer" (Cixous, *Zero's Neighbour* 56), even though much of English-language criticism tended to treat this putative "anorexia" as inferior to an aestheticized, denser textual surface in English (see especially Brian Fitch, Leslie Hill, Ann Beer; see also Shane Weller's critique of the prioritizing of Beckett's English-language texts in *Beckett, Literature, and the Ethics of Alterity* 66-77). To Bray he describes a sign of this lack of brakes in English in the draft of *Happy Days*: "It's inclined as always in English to shit and pullulate—but there's a play there, all right I think—if I can restrain my native vulgarity" (*LSB 3* 366). How much he considered the *Endgame* text secondary to *Fin de partie* is clear when he urges his Danish translator Christian Ludvigsen to adhere to the "original" French text as far as possible, even if he needs at times to disregard the "often unsatisfactory" English version, and if possible to include Clov's song, missing from the English text (168, 169). But his attitude towards self-translation and his own bilingual corpus does not remain consistent throughout this period. Whereas in 1962 he wholeheartedly approves of a trilingual edition of his plays by Suhrkamp, even suggesting that the texts be grouped by language rather than chronologically, he is much warier when it comes to being presented as a

bilingual author in one of "his" languages. In 1965 he turns down Faber and Faber's project of a bilingual edition, feeling that it would frame his work as a "linguistic curiosity, or an adventure in self-translation," neither of which finds favor with him (665).

That Beckett was by no means a linguistic purist when it came to translating his own work or advising his translators is attested by his constant prodding to either exchange the English/French cultural references and place names in his texts with more easily recognizable ones or to consistently replace them with domestic ones. He instructs his Dutch translator Jacoba van Velde working on *All That Fall* to "keep the feel of England—or else transpose *everything*" (471). While it is at least surprising that he would authorize such translatorial choices, he provides plenty of examples of interventionist, domesticating trans-creation and even trans-dapting himself: replacing the verses of "one of the Elizabethan songbirds" in *All That Fall* with Ronsard in the French version (19) and, most famously, in his Hiberno-English adaptation, or "impertinent translation" (293), of his friend Pinget's *La Manivelle* as the radio play *The Old Tune*, which he described to Bray as too free and Irish, claiming that this was the only way to render Pinget's rhythms and "loose syntax" (255). Asked to elucidate the breach between setting (England) and language (Hiberno-English), Beckett simply suggests that it be treated as a conceit: "I can't put them in Ireland. I can't do it either without the help of Irish rhythms and inversions" (260). In both radio plays, as Morin shows, Beckett's idiosyncratic, highly stylized, and ironic form of Hiberno-English echoes the model of Synge in treating Hibernicized speech patterns as a dead language; the cadences and rhythms of Hiberno-English, rather than markers of location, are instrumental in a broader exploration of the form of the radio play, of speech punctuated by sounds resonating in abstract space. In this way, the adaptation comes to "illustrate a uniquely Irish predicament, as the text becomes a reflexion upon exile and linguistic displacement in the transfer from French to Hiberno-English" (*Samuel Beckett and the Problem of Irishness* 91).

By 1958 Beckett opts to dispatch all his texts between French and English, rather than authorizing the translations of others (although he revises Richard Seaver's English translation of his four *Nouvelles*, he makes it clear that he would undertake the *Textes* himself), as only he is capable of producing the "queer kind of English that my queer French deserves" (*LSB 2* 592). The sequence of letters to Seaver in particular are also indicative of the

thin line between authorial control and translator's creativity in the Englishing of the *Nouvelles*, Beckett intervening in Seaver's translations, but at the same time agreeing to reconsider any corrections—"author's license" (*LSB 3* 209n)—that his translator might disagree with, trying to find a joint solution or reverting to Seaver's text. His translation of the short prose piece "Imagination morte imaginez" [Imagination Dead Imagine] in 1965 involves putting in many Gallicisms, yielding a text that "[r]eads weird" (670). How much (self-)translation and writing are cognate activities for him is evident when reading his letter of encouragement to Matti Megged, who took on the translation of *Endgame* and *Happy Days* into Hebrew. Expressing hope that, however daunting, the work of translation could shed some light on Megged's own writing, Beckett also makes the existential stakes of his kind of texts clear to his younger friend:

> How difficult the transfer is, even into a kindred tongue, I know only too well. And I, when I can't translate, have the right to try and reinvent. . . . Writing I suppose for some of us . . . is only possible in the last ditch and in complete désespoir de cause and at a depth where one's "living" not only is gone, but never was. Either it comes to that or it doesn't—and one couldn't wish it for anyone. (518-19)

"All wrong, but word perfect": New departures in the theater

Beckett sends this optimistic note to Bray from the first rehearsal of *Play* at the Old Vic in 1964 (*LSB 3* 596), his first collaboration with actress Billie Whitelaw. What emerges from reading the letters from 1958-65 is not some neat narrative arc pointing worstward, systematically undoing all theatrical conventions from *Endgame* to *Eh Joe*, but rather a self-lacerating reworking of much the same field and fundamental questions, with a few blind alleys or "abortions"—among them, what would become *Rough for Theatre I-II* but also an initial triadic project for *Krapp* in which failure on all fronts (including marriage and children) was to be exploited. Perhaps surprisingly, this itinerary also brings ample evidence of the late modernist controller's willingness to co-opt effects not originally intended but emerging in performance. The 1964 resolution of never releasing a play for publication before seeing it through rehearsals in the theater (598) was the outcome of a long immersion in the technicalities of an art form to which Beckett maintained a relationship that often seems ambivalent at best. Pinget recalls him snapping in disgust at the "ugly come-ons or wheedlings" required when one writes for performance and at minding the audience's reactions, concluding that in the theater "one doesn't say what one wants to,

as in novels or poems" (167n). The sense that theater curbed the radicalism of his intentions[31] was certainly fueled by his bitter battle with censorship, first and foremost with the Lord Chamberlain ("Lord Chamberpot," to give him his Beckett moniker) around the London production of *Endgame*, which eventually forced him to mitigate phrases that were deemed either obscene or blasphemous.

To get an idea what kind of theater Beckett believed in, one might list a few expressions of distaste. Not only does he read Brecht's *The Mother* "with loathing" (and walk out of the Berliner Schaubühne's performance in June 1960), but he is even unwilling to go to *Rhinocéros*, partly because of Ionesco's readiness to "lap up the whole silly business" of interviews (290). Bafflingly, considering his respect for the groundbreaking theater director, he is sorely disappointed by Brook's "very sloppy" and uneven production of Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade* (658). His few words of praise are invariably directed toward younger or less-known dramatists. Apart from Pinget's work, which he considers "full of first-rate theatre" (360), and Fernando Arrabal, another experimentalist and protégé, he enthuses about (and probably convinces Barbara Bray to translate) Marguerite Duras's *Le Square*, a play lacking all action but the "most marvellous and moving dialogue" (15), Albee (several of whose plays premiere under the direction of Alan Schneider), and the still relatively unknown Harold Pinter, whom he befriends, writing him a moving letter after the January 1961 Paris guest-performance of *The Caretaker*, whose mixed response from French critics dismays him (396). Pinter will become one of Beckett's references, whose work he follows and whose opinion he is eager to have: he sends a congratulatory letter after seeing *Homecoming* in London in January 1965, praising the play as Pinter's best since *The Caretaker*, adding in characteristic self-disparagement: "Wish I could tell you better how I feel about it and how glad I am. But too tired and stupid and have been waiting too long to be less so, before writing, to wait any longer" (649-50).

What matters to him above everything else in the theatre is, as he writes to Jacoba van Velde in 1962, "knowing at every moment *exactly* what is happening on stage, seeing and hearing *exactly*, from the auditorium" (481). How seriously that *exactly* is meant is amply illustrated by the multi-page elucidations sent to his collaborators. As before, Alan Schneider is the beneficiary of most of the hand given, starting with the rehearsals for the first English-language production of *Endgame* (January 1958, Cherry Lane

Theater, New York). Beckett offers meticulous and often surprising explanations, consistently demolishing attempts at stage realism and psychological motivation—pointing out, for instance, that the stage instruction describing Hamm and Clov's faces as red is patently illogical for characters living in confinement but that "scenically it serves to stress the couples and keep them apart" (94). Memorably, he is concerned with the sound of Hamm's whistle and schemes to have Roger Blin's (the Paris Hamm) whistle sent over to Schneider (94-96). With unusual forthrightness he offers Nell's speech "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness" as a clue to his Danish translator and director, Christian Ludvigsen, cautiously adding, "*Endgame* is not *Godot*, and any clowning or playing for a laugh would I think be quite wrong. It doesn't matter whether the audience laughs or not" (169)—defying his imperative to *Godot* directors, to stress the knockabout element and "let the audience laugh by all means, and then be reminded it's no laughing matter" (*LSB 2* 617).

However, this period is one of significant departures from the plays which gave birth to "Beckett." Apart from involvement in productions and revivals in more languages, Beckett's creativity is channeled into breaking with what might be described as the remains of traditional dramaturgy in his two full-length plays and forays into different media—most importantly, the radio play, a somewhat antiquated medium, having the advantage of the team at the BBC's Third Programme, coordinated by Barbara Bray. The broadcasting of Beckett's prose and dramatic texts and of their critical interpretations during the 1950s and 1960s arguably contributed more to the circulation of his work and to the cementing of his reputation in the Anglophone world than all the London stagings; more than offering him a creative outlet into a form of dramaturgy reduced to sound, the BBC very probably commissioned *All That Fall*.[32] Pointing the way were his mimes (*Acte sans paroles I-II*, often performed as overtures to *Endgame* or later, to *Krapp*), for which his cousin John Beckett composed the music. As regards their performance, Beckett insists that music and mime have to be thought anew together, and that unless they can work with John Beckett, directors should rather provide their own music, fearing the eventual derailment caused by employing John Beckett's composition "in a way that was not intended" (*LSB 3* 169). His first radio play would be *All That Fall* (broadcast in January 1957, published in English and French the same year), almost instantly solicited for adaptation to the stage—an idea Beckett vehemently

opposes: "It is no more theater than *End-Game* is radio and to 'act' it is to kill it. Even the reduced visual dimension it will receive from the simplest and most static of readings . . . will be destructive of whatever quality it may have and which depends on the whole thing's *coming out of the dark*" (63). In the same breath, he refuses to give permission to the filming of the mime *Act Without Words*, a form of "primitive" theatre, a "codicil to *End-Game*," which would require that "this last extremity of human meat—or bones—be there, thinking and stumbling and sweating, under our noses, like Clov and Hamm, but gone from refuge" (64).[33] However, his stern stance against adaptation softens and as early as January 1958 he authorizes Alan Simpson from Dublin's Pike Theatre―the first theater to present *Godot* and Brendan Behan in Ireland―to do a stage reading, suggesting "a stage in darkness with a spot picking out the faces" (102). The project falls through when Beckett bans all production of his plays in Ireland in 1958, sickened by yet another instance of theocratic censorship: the removal of an adaptation of *Ulysses* and a Sean O'Casey play from the program of the Dublin Theatre Festival, at the insistence of the Archbishop of Dublin. Perhaps guided by his deep respect for O'Casey, whose *Windfalls* he had enthusiastically reviewed in 1934, Beckett gives his permission to his fellow playwright's daughter to stage "From an Abandoned Work" in the US, and even gives her the backbone for a strange dramatization, of a tramp fishing a crumpled script out of a litterbin and reading it out in expressionless voice under a streetlamp (647).

The first major play to come out of this period, as well as Beckett's first English-language play, was *Krapp's Last Tape*: the most lyrical and most intensely autobiographical of Beckett's career. Conceived to be a monologue for Patrick Magee, it was likely prompted by the news of Ethna McCarthy's terminal cancer (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 397-99). "I feel as clucky and beady and one-legged and bare-footed about this little text as an old hen with her last chick," Beckett wrote to Barney Rosset as soon as the text was ready (*LSB 3* 123) and described it later to Jacoba van Velde as a "nice little entrée of artichoke hearts, to be followed by the tripe à la shit of Hamm and Clov. People will say, Well, well, he has blood in his veins, who would have thought it, it must be age" (131). Magee premiered it as a curtain-raiser to the much-delayed London Royal Court Theatre production of *Endgame* (October 1958), regaling Beckett with what was for him the most satisfactory experience in the theatre (176). The details of his performance

were incorporated into the published text, Beckett being eager to set a "standard of fidelity" (123) before releasing the play. In his letters, he supplies Magee with detailed advice over all minutiae, including the banana skin of the stage instructions, and advises both actor and director (George Devine) to aim at "expressiveness in blankness" (124). For Beckett such "blankness" should, however, rely on the stage presence of a Magee, as evidenced by his angry dismissal of the Paris Krapp played by René-Jacques Chauffard (whose casting nearly led to a break with his longtime director Blin): "No voice, no face, no eyes, no presence, no dexterity, no weight, no violence, no madness" (317). Most importantly, he is ready to adopt accidental effects of performances. To Schneider, who is preparing the play's American premiere, in January 1960 he describes the London show's "luminous eye" of the tape-recorder being extinguished very slowly with the light going down, and notes that exploiting this effect requires a slow fade-out at the end (278). He advises that the stage design be based on the "simple antithesis" of "black and white (both dirty)" (279). He also recommends that a circus-like effect be brought out in the acting, all Krapp's gestures, from his walk to his opening of the drawers, whose contents should be fully visible to the audience for an instant, being "almost (only almost!) like a conjuror exhibiting his innocent material" (279). This tantalizing *almost* is another constant of Beckett's clarifications in and out of the theater: he answers Kay Boyle's question on a repartee in *Happy Days*, stressing the dramatic opportunity in the ambiguity, since "[a]ll that is necessary as far as I'm concerned—technically & otherwise—less too little, more too much—is the ambiguity of motive," adding that his creatures are as much a secret to him, their author, as to any reader or theatre-goer (435, 436).

It is revealing that, while assisting directors in producing the double bill *Krapp* and *Endgame*, he should have started drafting the work that would become *Happy Days* having in mind, on the one hand, the situation of a female character "alone on stage talking neither to herself nor to the audience nor to an imaginary character" (366) and, on the other hand, the deployment of objects from a bag, and it is writing the latter in stage directions that he finds unusually difficult. Once the writing is underway, the chief question becomes how to enlist the sole dramatic "help" of the objects to sustain the ongoing speech of Winnie (Mildred in the earlier version). The fundamental continuity between speech and (minimal) stage movement is driven home in his letter to Suhrkamp, asking that stage directions be not set

separately as usual, because in this play "text and movement are closely linked, each continuing, supporting, and illuminating the other" (447). These shortening plays tend to emerge from images: not only does Beckett draw the proportion between Winnie's mound and the rest of the stage and fill entire pages for Schneider detailing the colors and fabric of the umbrella and other requisites, but he starts by vividly describing the overall view of the plain scorched by the sun: "Scene extended to maximum by painted backcloth in trompe-l'oeil as pompier as possible" (383)—even if at the first Paris production he eventually agrees to the immixture of orange for the sky, as no blue can be found to render the wished-for effect of scorching sun. Some of these stipulations can alter significantly in the course of rehearsals: so he adopts Schneider's suggestion that Winnie should sing an aria from Lehár's *The Merry Widow*. With the iconic couple of Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault preparing for the role in Paris, Beckett significantly revises his conception of the role and of Winnie's physical bearing, despite his initial reservation about Renaud's Comédie Française acting style, sending her an enthusiastic note after the opening in November 1963 (579).[34] We get a delightful glimpse of the exactness of his conception in a casual remark to Bray, of how he demonstrated the Willie crawl in all its four successive stages, "with nose & balls in the dust . . . Barrault crawls too high" (569).

In his earlier explanations to Schneider in August 1961, Beckett seems to have had a very different acting style in mind—one described in almost exclusively musical terms and foreshadowing his later plays, asking for "vocal monotony and relying on speech rhythms and speech-gesture complexes, eyes, switching on and off of smile, etc., to do the work" (*LSB 3* 428). The word he tentatively offers for the desired tone is "mild," and even for the double entendres he stipulates: "No irony. Mild blank tone" (429). His involvement in Devine's London production, with actress Brenda Bruce, significantly deviates from this conception. The performance very nearly put Beckett off of future participation in the staging of his work. It was likely born from the clash of divergent aesthetics as well as of a demanding—and intimidating—author and an actress caught in an unenviable position and in need of reassurance (Knowlson, *Damned to Fame* 446-48). Despite the critical acclaim Bruce's performance received, for Beckett it was to remain a sore experience of failure in finding an acting style that accommodated his needs. The letters reveal something else besides Beckett's determination,

during the strained rehearsals, to speed up Bruce's delivery with a metronome: an early enthusiasm for the "amazing improvement" brought by the "half Scots, half Cockney" Bruce trying out a Scottish accent (*LSB 3* 507), something Beckett would insist on, even though it clashed with Devine's view, who had the actress revert to her "puke English" (510). Such a concern bespeaks an interest in minorizing the voice, something also seen in the Hibernicizing of *The Old Tune* and *All That Fall*.

Arguably the low point in the experience of helping his directors was the Berlin Schillertheater revival of *Godot* (1965) with actors "3rd rate, miscast, lost & worried to death," a thorough lack in exactness, and on top of it all, an undirectable star actor in the role of Pozzo, "another Beckett specialist" (651). The following account of the rehearsals, pure and unadulterated slapstick, needs to be qualified by the performance's critical acclaim and by Beckett's later close association with the theater that was to premiere *Come and Go* in 1966:

> The boy is 21 and towers over Vladimir! Every time Pozzo jerks on rope Lucky's hat falls off. Pozzo gets tied up in rope . . . Yesterday Lucky tripped & fell on his arse, dropping basket which flew open emitting bottle. They use an enormous crank to hoist moon which rises with creaks and rattle. All this organized by veritable gangs of technicians. Vive Hitler. (659-60)

Beckett's almosts and the rigors of minimalism: *Play*, *Film*

While entangled in the 1962 London rehearsals of *Happy Days*, Beckett begins drafting his most experimental play yet, the future *Play*. He sends it to Barbara Bray, who could not fail to perceive its harrowing (auto)biographical subtexts, with the recommendation: "Try and take it at it's [sic] word and see the jumping light" (*LSB 3* 500). The play, with its *da capo* repetitions, is a study in the thorough musicalizing of language and goes further than any of Beckett's previous dramatic texts in disembodying the voices speaking—paradoxically, moving further in the direction of formalism and of the postwar break with humanism, but at the same time also pointing beyond formalism. To Judith Schmidt of Grove Press, who fears it might be the bitterest Beckett play yet, he writes that there is something in the play that has "nothing to do with writing (no attempt at writing there) or with more or less compassion or humour, but simply in the way of theatrical contrivance and attitude" (593). The play's three actors are completely immobilized in urns, with almost indistinguishable faces, their thick makeup recalling the mineral-looking surfaces Beckett discussed in Cézanne, Watteau, or Jack B. Yeats: "all in the same dinghy at last and should be as little differentiated as possible. Three grey disks" (584). Eager

to see the play staged before settling the text, Beckett attends the rehearsals of Deryk Mendel's Ulm and Serreau's Paris productions; most of his criticism, and his later caveats to Schneider, are about the tempo, the carrying-out of the repetitions, and the interaction of the speakers with the inquisitorial spotlight—specifying even the shape of the urns and that they need to touch. Although the Ulm performance manages to deliver the whole text, repetitions included, within a staggering 25 minutes, Beckett worried about the tempo being too slow, threatening the operation of the *da capo* repetitions. He asks Mendel to cut all the pauses, so that speech reaction to the light stimulus would be instantaneous—that is, "all those three second pauses cancelled with sacrifice of effect of *effort to speak* and all the five seconds reduced to two or three" (584). One can already discern here the conception behind *Not I*. Apart from the tempo, his utmost concern in the play is the treatment of the light: paramount is to achieve a "bewildering outburst of light and speech fragments" (560). He clarifies the text extensively to Christian Ludvigsen, suggesting that the light be conceived as an "inquisitorial intelligence" with a probing quality like "an accusing finger levelled at [the characters] one after another" (573, 574). Therefore, it is a single mobile spot belonging to the world of the characters, not three fixed independent spots, and by no means originating in the auditorium space; he also stipulates that this light has to be sufficiently strong and violent to have the faces "fusillés [shot]" (574). With the Paris rehearsals underway, Beckett develops an understanding of his text as more and more of a musical gradation, a study in that key-word "almost." In March 1964 he sends a set of detailed explanations to Devine, who is working on the London production, suggesting a "slight weakening" of tone and pitch, and a corresponding weakening and slowing-down of the light, in the *da capo* repetitions. He sends a score-like encoding of strength of tone and light, ranging from "A plus" to "C plus" to delineate an "impression of falling off . . . with suggestion of conceivable dark and silence at the end, or of an indefinite approximating towards it," which is to be reinforced in the repetitions' hesitancy, "perhaps not so much in a slowing down of actual débit as in a less confident movement of spot from one face to another and less immediate reaction to the voices" (595). Thus, as he toils on *Comment c'est* and the first fragments of "Le Dépeupleur," Beckett moves toward a subjection of the inquisitorial light to the same limbo, or Dantean purgatory of (non)remembrance and isolation, that the voices inhabit, and where the

light (the "inquirer") appears "no less a victim of his inquiry than they and as needing to be free, within narrow limits, literally to act the part, i.e. to vary if only slightly his speeds and intensities" (595).

The best illustration of the process whereby Beckett would come to fundamentally re-assess a creative venture is his only excursion into the field of cinema, *Film* (shot in 1964, premiered at the 1965 Venice Film Festival). Ross Lipman's 2015 documentary *Notfilm* reveals most of the paths not taken, the abandoned ideas and footage. The letters show the process from within the creator's workshop, from the first synopsis sent to Barney Rosset (April 1963), in which the small incidents of the street scene are still included and the time is set "about 1939," later changed to about 1929—a choice that inevitably raises the issue of historico-political overtones—to Beckett's mixed reactions when seeing the rough-cut version. To Rosset he also explains the film's pursuit of *esse est percipi*, as being essentially "the old metaphysical doctrine to the effect that being consists in being perceived and that without some perceiving intelligence there would be nothing," emphasizing that the film seeks to dramatize "a naive human being involved in the [aforementioned] situation, so unphilosophically minded as to take it literally" (*LSB 3* 549). However exhausting Beckett finds the shooting —for which he undertakes his first-ever flight to New York—the hands-on experience of the techniques of the film medium, assisted by some of the best professionals, first and foremost cinematographer Boris Kaufman, profoundly shaped the progress to an exact shooting script. This can be seen in Beckett's meticulous notes explaining the difference in intensity to distinguish O's vision from E's. Although his first reaction to the rough-cut version is a glum "C'est raté [it's a flop]" (627), a second look allows him to discern how "it gains by its deviations from the strict intention and develops something better," namely, a "strangeness and beauty of pure image" (629-30). Still unsatisfied by the solution to the problem of the double vision, he toys with the idea of a clicking sound to mark the transition from E to O, before deciding that the film should be silent except for the "hssh," which is to be "uninsistent" as far as possible (631). More importantly, he concludes that the initial intention, to demonstrate an "intellectual schema," is secondary and the resulting images benefit in suggestiveness from ceasing to be "ideograms" (631), thereby acquiring an autonomous presence and validity that is more valuable than however successful a transposition of his authorial intentions could have been (631).

The third volume of Beckett's letters records the writer's convoluted progress from *Krapp* to "Imagination Dead Imagine" (with some of his mid-1960s letters to Bray looking like excerpts from the latter) and of the human being facing the weight of age "même pas la mort dans l'âme," as he writes to Bray on his flight "over the pond" to New York (with wordplay on "la mort dans l'âme" [appr. with a heavy heart, heartsick; reticent; 607]). It is a treasure trove of Beckett commenting on writing and theater, with everything they involve—but also a formidable testimony to the sheer generosity and outgoingness of the man, whose gestures of friendship are always free of pretense. It is these gestures, as much as the poetics that can be gleaned from his correspondence, that render Beckett one of the most admirable letter-writers, worth reading and rereading and not only by scholars but also by the Beckett enthusiast and the common reader. Moving forward in time, the letters appear more and more consubstantial with the work.

Chapter 4
"Petits pas. Nulle part. Obstinément" [Small steps. Nowhere. Obstinately]: Writing finitude, writing on. Beckett's letters, 1966-1989

go where never before
no sooner there than there always
no matter where never before
no sooner there than there always
—*Beckett,* mirlitonnade, CP

"Failing mind, in other words, improved possibilities"[35]: A poetics of writing finitude

"Giacometti dead. George Devine dead. Yes, drive me to Père Lachaise and go straight through the red lights" (*LSB 4* 6). The year is 1966, Beckett has recently turned 60, and with every demise and every visit to Paris's historical cemetery he feels more and more "promoted to the role of chief mourner" (327). His remaining three decades could be summed up, as they are to Ruby Cohn, with a loose quote from *Mercier et Camier*, "One corpse after another, there's my life for you" (323), riddled by silences of grief. When Henri Hayden, with whom the Becketts share a close friendship cemented during the Nazi occupation, dies in hospital in May 1970, Beckett reports from Sardinia: "Burial was today at Montparnasse. She [Josette Hayden] sounds quite broken on telephone . . . Silemus. . . . Nelly Sachs dead. Celan suicided" (232). As the corpses accumulate—his lifelong friends Tom MacGreevy, Con Leventhal ("A friendship of over 50 years through thick & thin. Now ashes in urn nr. 21501 in the basement of Père Lachaise Colombarium. . . . An hour's dead silence, apart from hum of furnace, in a freezing chapel" [513]), all the way up to his companion, Suzanne, dead six months before Beckett ("The end was gentle. The very end. Before the first rest at last" [722])—Beckett himself, soon "wholly ghost" (632), would recur to the Irish lament for his self-account: "Ochone ochone, / Dead and not gone" (713). Grief, however, pours out for the dying rather than the dead, often pronounced luckier. He sends his sympathies to an afflicted friend, Herbert Myron, who lost his mother, "if you're grieving. But how can one? Mine went in '50, I was with her and through many nights before. It was good to see the poor old face & body calm at last, after 80 years of it" (328). Among the dying but not yet gone, one of the most poignant presences—a figure almost cut out of *Endgame*—is Beckett's paternal uncle,

Jim ("if I wasn't so grieved I'd say unlucky," Beckett writes with a sly allusion to Kingsley Amis's novel [79]), seen on Beckett's last visit to Dublin for a family funeral in 1967: "Legless, blind, almost deaf, interested in all, glad to be still in it. Apparently" (121). His plight resonates with Beckett painfully enough that he speaks about him in an interview late that year (102). Whether describing imaginary golf in Ireland, which he knows he will not see again, with the erstwhile eyes, or writing to friends and relatives he knows he will not meet anymore, the valedictory tone is soft-spoken, reserved. From the funeral visit to Dublin seen through a cataract mist, he writes to Barbara Bray: "What's left of the old lovely familiar through the mist. Saw the beaten silver last night. Heard waking in the night that sea again" (35). To the Haydens: "Nothing to laugh about—how it's all turned out, how we have all turned out. Nothing to cry about. Not sad. Mindless. . . . The poor blind amputated uncle appeared at the funeral" (37).

If one were to look for a single word to describe the tone permeating Beckett's letters written in the last two decades of his life, it would be endingness. Facing mortality and writing "unlessenable least best worse" (*Worstward Ho, CIWS* 106), splintered narrative and theatrical texts that do away even with the referent—"Le Dépeupleur"/"The Lost Ones," "Lessness"/"Sans," the *Nohow On* trilogy, *Stirrings Still*, the *mirlitonnades*, to mention but a few—impoverishment ceases to be a poetic precept and becomes the condition of the texts' emergence. As he writes to his friend Lawrence Shainberg, a brain surgeon in whose work he took a keen interest,[36] the gradual loss of cognitive faculties caused by aging may prove to be "the last and by far best chance for the writer. Gaping into his synaptic chasms" (*LSB 4* 506). Or to poet Franz Wurm, erstwhile friend of Paul Celan and "Kindertransport" refugee in Britain: "I try to think, with what mind remains, that now is the time at last, the chance at last, in these remains, with those remains, though think is not the word, at last not the word" (528). In this "long farewelling" (*4* 567), the existential stakes (and heroics) of writing *on*—"On. Say on. Be said on. Somehow on. Till nohow on. Said nohow on" (*Worstward Ho, CIWS* 89)—become abundantly evident. Even if "end" may be the word treated with the most suspicion in Beckett's text-world, and ending always indefinitely deferred, nevertheless, these texts articulate, and perform, finitude—of lived time, of individual and cultural memory, of the body, of being, of language—under the forms of mortality and deficiency, of being-short-of-world, as probably no other texts of the Western canon do.

Writing to his painter friend Avigdor Arikha and his wife, the poet Anne Atik, on his birthday in 1984 (uncharacteristically in English), he inserts a few lines from *Stirrings Still*, in progress, to describe his condition—topping it with an impish wordplay: "My old head nothing but sighs (of relief?) of expiring cells. A last chance at last. I'll try. 'From where he sat with his head in his hands he saw himself rise and disappear.' Ineffable departure. Nothing left but try & eff it" (*LSB 4* 639). Three years earlier, to a question by Shainberg, who took an interest in Zen, "Why is it that looking at a wall makes writing seem obsolete?"—a question that implicitly values the choice of silence beyond words—Beckett answers, from the throes of wording *Company*: "When I start looking at walls I begin to see the writing. From which even my own is a relief" (546). Another aside on the difficulties of writing *on*, voiced in 1983 to his future biographer James Knowlson, shows that this wall is no abstraction: "The wall won't recede and I have no reverse gears. Can't turn either" (612).

With his writing showing progressive (or, to adapt Ruby Cohn's term, "retrogressive" [280]) stages of stripping to the bone, Beckett's letters themselves become more and more condensed, akin to the late prose. The process is well illustrated by a September 1970 account of his Ussy activities to Cohn, summed up somewhat in the vein of Krapp's computation of what his life yielded; Beckett enclosed with the letter the beginning of *Pour finir encore* [*For to End Yet Again*], the future *Fizzle* 8, whose earlier variant bore the title "Sup of Foul Draft from Work in Regress":

> Have written 200 sentences all different[,] anything from 20 to 30 words apiece and hope—fear to continue.
>
> Painted white with a roller 6 inner faces less broken window of spacious outhouse or anything from 80 to 90 m2. Cut grass or rather weeds 3 times = 10 hours pushing and 6000 m^2 approx. Committed to Dieu and Dupuytren hand Haydn's G minor sonata 2 movements = 200 bars odd not all different by any standard. (239)[37]

However bogged down by correspondence (especially after the Nobel, when he is buried in requests for interviews, rights, and adaptations) and entangled in directing his plays, Beckett's first and foremost commitment remains to the page. In a 1985 special issue of *Libération*, put together by Jérôme Lindon's son Mathieu, writers were asked "Why do you write?" Beckett gives a characteristically curt answer: "*Bon qu'à ça*" [that's all I'm good for] (652). As in the earlier volumes, it is easier to tease out a poetics of writing from his—rare and reluctant—advice to younger writer friends and protégés than from Beckett's statements on his own work, which, with

few exceptions (as when he writes to academics to whom he is bound by a close friendship, such as Kay Boyle, Ruby Cohn, Lawrence Harvey, Herbert Myron, and later his biographer, James Knowlson), boils down to repeated statements disclaiming any privileged knowledge of his work, his only contact to it being "from the inside" (120). His words of encouragement to a doubt-torn Robert Pinget in 1966 deserve quoting at length:

> We are not literati. If we take such dire pains, it is not for the result but because that is the only way to keep going on this wretched planet. With that kind of need, a great deal of misery, but no problems. Maybe you have lost it a bit, but it will come back and leave you once again not giving a tinker's curse for any of these questions of value. . . . Forget all that, stop re-reading your writing and get back to work. (29-30)

When he gives advice, with however many qualms about his right to arbitrate the work of others, it is mostly to "pare down" and avoid explicitation. Responding to young British poet Nicholas Rawson's shamanistic poems with quiet demurral, Beckett stresses the remoteness of his own artistic creed from Rawson's "entanglements & abundance," which he fears he cannot do justice to (529). Indeed, "abundance" and any form of grandiloquence are such anathema that the verse he picks from a collected volume of Pessoa read on a Madeira holiday is "Thy silence is a vessel with swollen sails," to which he adds sardonically, "Glad I wasn't there when it broke" (148). To the French playwright and novelist Raymond Cousse, who sends him his novel-in-progress *Stratégie pour deux jambons* (published by Grove in Richard Miller's translation under the quizzical title, *Death Sty: A Pig's Tale*), heavily influenced by Beckett, the monologue of a pig who ecstatically foresees becoming cured meat, he sends his support—"Cochon très prometteur" [pig very promising]—and cautious admonitions to "watch out for the unduly mechanical-smooth" (290). On an earlier occasion, when Cousse sends him what was to become the play *Péripéties* [Adventures/Vicissitudes], Beckett writes a page of one-line comments and encouragement, asking for minimalism of means as though dispatched from his own workshop:

> Cut out the merely decorative: everything that has no direct relation to the problem of movement (music, poem, cigarette for example).
>
> Even in the part bearing on the essential, simplify further by cutting superfluous repeats.
>
> Avoid anything that slows the movement down (over-long pauses for reflection, etc.).
>
> Key: gag funny at the start, then tiresome . . . *Principles*: remove the superfluous and move fast . . .
>
> Bring your 22 pages down to 12 or 14 at the most. (209-10)

When Rawson, one of the emerging writers he follows for several years, sends him a sequence of poems, "Hunting for the Soul," in 1976, Beckett comments, "Dark. You put words together like a wall. Defensively?" (422). He energetically supports B. S. Johnson, recommending his fiction to several publishers with emphatic praise, but not even his prestige is enough to further the career of the writer who would commit suicide in 1973, before seeing his *Matrix* trilogy in print. He also gives his wholehearted support to a collection of stories, *The Track to Bralgu* by B. Wongar (the pseudonym of the Yugoslavian-born anthropologist Sreten Bŏzić, who lived for a period among Australian Aborigines), suppressed in Australia, a book that "moved & impressed [him] strongly" (502). His literary recommendations to friends range from Nadezhda Mandelstam's *Hope Against Hope* (to a grief-stricken Josette Hayden) as "a book that gives courage" (310) to the merciless black humor of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, from which he quotes a limerick in a letter to Bray:

> There was a young man from Stamboul
> Who soliloquized thus to his tool:
> You took all my wealth,
> and you ruined my health,
> And now you won't pee, you old fool (309).

Those to whom he always responds with genuine admiration are Harold Pinter—one of his first readers in these decades, whose plays he praises for their "precarious" writing (158) and "for how movingly they utter . . . this obscure distress known as life" (533)—and Emil Cioran. After reading the latter's *Le mauvais démiurge* [translated into English as *The New Gods*] in 1969, Beckett writes to him, "In your ruins I feel at ease" (157), and in 1973 he sends a stirring response to the "fraternal voice" of the author of *The Trouble with Being Born* (348).

Avigdor Arikha, survivor of the Transnistria camps, is the artist closest to his poetics in these years (see Lloyd, *Beckett's Thing* 154-220) and the friend to whom he offers his unconditional moral and financial support as Arikha struggles with his aesthetic dilemmas of leaving abstraction behind, aggravated by encroaching depression. Beckett would repeatedly write about Arikha's "incomparable grasp of the past and of the problems that beset continuance. // It is perhaps in this double awareness, at once transcended and implicit in his work, that he is in a sense heroically alone" (577)—a statement that rings just as true of his own post-1954 work.

The writing he admires and endorses he often weighs in terms of plight and predicament; one recalls a thirtyish Beckett bemoaning the "facultatif" nature of his poetry, mourning for the "integrity" of a hanged man (*LSB 1* 134-35). Thus he would write, at a loss for words, on reading the poems of Charles Juliet, "I bow my head before this great distress" (*LSB 4* 162). But this is also his description of the great 1970 Bram van Velde retrospective at the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris: "Very splendid. 50 years of suffering" (242). His own writing would be framed similarly by those academics to whom he feels closest, as belonging to a category somehow beyond "literature." Lawrence Harvey, for instance, writes in April 1972: "Your writing, as you well know, is not 'fiction' in the usual sense. Those who have the courage to confront it, and themselves in it, are greatly affected by it" (291n). Kay Boyle, who confesses weeping over reading the copy of *Compagnie* that Beckett sends her in March 1980, says: "the declaration of the work itself shattered me, telling as it does of the fearful loneliness of all mankind, even more lonely in death (if possible) than in life. I wanted the final words to be 'Pas seul' but Ruby [Cohn] did not for a moment agree" (524n). Beckett's writing, as so many of his first readers intuit, gives precedence to ethics or, rather, turns aesthetics into aesth/ethics governed by a "meta-ethics" (see Rabaté, "Love and Lobsters" 168-69). When Shainberg writes to him in October 1987 about feeling his creativity shackled, Beckett seems to rearticulate the foundational predicament of his text-world, "I can't go on, I'll go on" (*Unn* 134), also making clear that he can offer no solution to his friend's problems: "perhaps one day like me you will cherish your ruins. And like me listen sadly to their silence. Disappointed. / Clov saw his light dying. Standing. Standing still" (*LSB 4* 693).

This is also a time when Beckett returns to old favorites—first and foremost, Dante, read again and again on seaside holidays "like 50 years ago—& unlike" (402n), with progressively reduced echoes, quotations, transformative translations populating the late prose work (see Daniela Caselli, *Beckett's Dantes*). It is also a time that evinces a change of heart toward Kafka, from whom he had long kept a wary distance, on the grounds that with him "the form is not shaken by the experience it conveys" (590). Prompted by Ronald Hayman's biography (1981), and possibly Siegfried Unseld's (1982), he evidently feels close to "this luckless great man." Scenes from Kafka's life—the public reading of "The Penal Colony" in Munich to icy indifference, "that possible impossible" (590), among others—are

reported through several letters, together with Kafka's desire to marry Dora Diamant shortly before his death: "tubard ['tuberculotic'], sleeplesser than ever, with hopeless hope of making it with Dora, 3rd and last. He longed for childers!" (592). He quotes a passage from Kafka's diaries: "'Gardening. No hope for the future.' At least he could garden. There must be words for it. I don't expect ever to find them" (604). The latter 1983 note to Shainberg was written, interestingly, from Ussy, his habitual retreat for writing and gardening, which he would be soon forced to give up due to failing health. The lines summon up, again, *Worstward Ho*: "No future in this. Alas yes" (*CIWS* 91).

"Minimum of colour": Stage directions

In February 1966 Beckett writes in distress to Thomas MacGreevy from London, "trapped" in work on a recording of his TV play *Eh Joe* and feeling the imperative need to get "back to the page" (*LSB 4* 11). In the years that follow, this would prove more and more to be wishful thinking, as already in March of that year he is in Stuttgart grappling with the same play with the Süddeutscher Rundfunk. His involvement in staging and broadcasting his theater, radio, and TV plays will only intensify up to 1985. While agreeing, now resignedly, now grumblingly, to sacrifice generous amounts of his time to help directors, actors, and technicians on the set or via meticulous production notes, Beckett cannot but see the costs in terms of his creative work: "Forget what Ussy looks like. Forget what writing is about" (23). The latter aside follows his multi-page instructions, complete with drawings charting the character's movement, to his veteran American director Alan Schneider, who was working on the New York production of *Eh Joe*. The notes include formidable guidelines warning, as usual, against "acting," concerned with tempo, pitch, timbre, stressing that the voice rendition should be a whisper and the chief means of dramatizing, slightly varying the length of the pauses: "A dead voice in [Joe's] head. Minimum of colour. Attacking. Each sentence a knife going in, pause for withdrawal, then in again." (22). The London and Stuttgart recordings result in simplifications and a few significant changes to the initial script, such as "a smile [at the end] (oh not a real smile). He 'wins' again. So ignore direction 'Image fades, voice as before'" (23). During a 1979 Stuttgart taping he sardonically reports his "desperate innovations": the addition of "a chamberpot & a hand mirror" (497). Such changes nevertheless allow us to discern a pattern, of the texts becoming more and more porous and open to alterations following

rehearsals. Beckett will increasingly refrain from "fixing" and publishing the texts before testing them on stage. When in 1970 Minuit prepares a new edition of *Godot*, he introduces changes based on the insults hurled at each other by Didi and Gogo at the first Paris performance directed by Roger Blin, largely improvised by the actors; as a result, Estragon's "architecte" concludes the list (221n). In this vein in 1966 he responds to a query by Christian Ludvigsen: detailing that the optimal conceivable work would be to write plays in full familiarity with the "real conditions" of the theater—stage and audience space, lighting, actors, technical details—he points toward an open, inclusive conception of theater, one clearly at an angle to the widespread view of Beckett as the exacting arch-modernist controller of his own texts:

> I dream of going into a theatre with no text, or hardly any, and getting together with all concerned before really setting out to write. That is to say a situation where the author would not have a privileged status, as is the case when he arrives with a text already set, but would simply function as a specialist of neither more nor less importance than the other specialists involved. (55)

Even as late as 1986, when Barry McGovern sends him an audio recording of "Dante and the Lobster," the opening story from the 1934 collection *More Pricks Than Kicks*, Beckett muses about changing the concluding sentence—an extradiegetic, authorial voice that reminds the reader of the lobster's plight, an imagined "quick death" by boiling alive (*MPTK* 14)[38]—by replacing "It is not" with "like hell it is": "Better? Worse? Can't decide" (674).

With the increasing demands for Beckett to direct his plays across Europe—especially at the Schillertheater in Berlin, the Süddeutscher Rundfunk in Stuttgart, and the Royal Court in London—he is painfully aware of getting ensnared in unending self-exploitation. Working on a revival of *Godot* in Berlin in January 1975, he sends his resolution to stop self-directing to his longtime friend, lover and one of his closest collaborators in the theater, his stage designer at the Royal Court, Jocelyn Herbert: "The way I have to go about it means I can think of nothing else. And the result is quite out of proportion with the efforts I make, so unfitted am I to direct actors. . . . I owe the little time that remains to the one thing I am a little fitted for" (384). Yet one consideration repeatedly prevails against the responsibility he feels to the "creatures" of his writing, as they are sometimes described, a living "wretchedness to defend" (*LSB 2* 42): his

sense of responsibility towards a handful of extraordinary actors who came to embody those "creatures," and for whom Beckett would not only return to directing and writing new plays, but also suspend his strict no-adaptation policy. Foremost among these actors are Billie Whitelaw, whom Beckett pictures as the Mouth in *Not I*, and for whom he writes *Footfalls* (and of whom he would write in 1977, "[a]fter Billie goodbye" [*LSB 4* 474]); and the bilingual David Warrilow, whose idea of standing before an audience to talk about death galvanizes him into writing *A Piece of Monologue* in 1979; but the company also includes the multilingual Greek actress Christine Tsingos (whose death by asthma, occurring shortly after a series of *Happy Days* performances, Beckett plaintively describes to Mary Hutchinson [333]). When the veteran Beckett actor Patrick Magee ("None ever rendered my moans & groans like you" [392]) is sacked from the Royal Court for drunken acting in October 1976, Beckett hastens to assure him of his unwavering support and friendship, stressing the commonality of his insecurities and distress: "It overcame you, some very acute & complex it, as it does us all, some time or another, one way or another, violently or gradually" (444), and continues to offer his unconditional support and purse to a struggling Magee through the years: "Can I help? Old friend, tell me if I can. How I can" (568). In return, these actors would lend their being to the "wretchedness to defend" envisioned by Beckett, testing the limits of their physical endurance, as Whitelaw did in her inhumanly fast performance in *Not I*, experiencing breakdown during one rehearsal (she recalled Beckett holding her after she came to, saying "Oh Billie, what have I done to you?" [321n]). Whitelaw would record *Happy Days* for BBC in 1979 without rehearsal, battling fever, "through sheer will power" (507). American actor and innovative theater-maker Joseph Chaikin, founder of the co-operative The Open Theater, receives Beckett's blessing to dramatize *Texts for Nothing* in the aftermath of a stroke that left him aphasic in 1984, an enterprise which "moved & impressed" Beckett (649).

Even more than for them, Beckett goes to great pains to provide advice, suggestions, and frequently financial and logistical support, to Rick Cluchey, the founder of the San Quentin Drama Workshop, who first directed parolees at San Quentin prison in Beckett plays while serving a life sentence for armed robbery. In his theater, Cluchey trained "over 100 former inmates, none of whom have been returned to prison" (360n), and it was on account of this work that his life sentence was commuted and he was released in

1966. The intertwining of the two men's creative work testifies to the liberating potential that Beckett's allegedly "nihilistic" or "anethical" (Weller) work has for human beings in desperate conditions, among them, prison inmates. Beckett was to work with Cluchey's company on *Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Krapp*. When in 1988 the San Quentin Drama Workshop did a revival of *Godot* for the film series *Beckett Directs Beckett*, Cluchey's son Louis Beckett played the Boy (707).

After a hard-negotiated pause from Berlin's Schillertheater in 1977, Beckett reverses his decision in order to direct Cluchey there in *Krapp*, as "it is for him & his future of such importance that I cannot refuse, though I crave a long rest from theatre" (466). Some of the rehearsals even take place in Beckett's own studio at the Akademie der Künste (469). The production tests both men, for what Beckett asks from his actor in a "very strict & stylised production" was "clearly against his temperament" (469), while Cluchey himself notes that "nothing I have undertaken in theatre can match the intensity, preparation and search for character here implied" (470n).

The next autumn the San Quentin Drama Workshop get Beckett "in their Clutcheys again," playing *Endgame* in Berlin "in a church near the National-Galerie, patched up by me as best I could (the performance). First time I smoked and drank scotch before the altar. The bastard took no notice" (489), quotes Beckett Hamm's unfond appellation of the divinity. When they tour the performance in London, Beckett asks the Royal Court in the most emphatic tones to lend them their *Endgame* props (488). Despite his own resolutions, Beckett even authorizes Cluchey to perform the TV play *Eh Joe* on stage in 1985, being crystal clear that he makes that exception "solely on your account." In the same letter he sends detailed instructions about the light, the set, and, most importantly, the acting style required, which pivots on rendering stillness and "mounting tension with minimum of movement," so that even the slightest gesture expresses "lightening stranglehold" (665).

Confined to an "old crocks [sic] retraite" at the end of his life (706), Beckett reads and edits Cluchey's prison memoirs, correcting misspellings and studding the text with suggestions to pare down ("[r]oom for considerable pruning" [721]), including even the proposed title *Letters from the Dead*: "Why not simply *From the Dead*, with benefit of double-edged From" (719). As always with his actors and friends, the underlying tone when sending them his texts is of receiving, not giving, a gift: "To give you a little pleasure w[oul]d give me much" (500).

However “stylized” these productions may have been, Beckett insists on hyperspecific materialities. In the Berlin production of *Krapp* with Cluchey, he even asks for a particular fabric for the curtain behind which Krapp keeps disappearing for a sip, to ensure that it remains in motion for the longest possible time (468). When Cluchey sends a video tape of a 1981 American performance of the play, Beckett is irritated not only by the techniques which in his opinion fall short of both media—filmed theatre and genuine film—but also by the “wrong” sound of the falling banana peel (564). How closely props, materialities were imbricated with meaning for him is also demonstrated by Beckett’s elucidations to the German actress Nancy Illig in *Happy Days* in 1983, to whom Beckett expresses concerns regarding Winnie’s hat:

> Too solid. Winnie is birdlike. Ihr Reich ist in der Luft [her realm is in the air]. If she were not held this way she would simply float up into the blue. She is all fragility, flimsiness, delicacy. This [weightlessness] should be suggested (discreetly) whenever possible—costume, gesture, speech… In the production I directed in London I established a recurrent Haltung [“posture”] of the arms . . . suggesting wings. She *poises* over the bag. Hat is [in] keeping. Flimsy, lacy, feathery. (608)

The precision and intensity of Beckett’s work in conceiving his texts for the stage, radio, and television is well illustrated by *Breath* (1968), a one-page play without words, whose “action” consists of a sequence of two “faint brief cries,” inspiration and expiration over a stage “littered with miscellaneous rubbish,” accompanied by the “slow decrease of light” (*CDW* 371), lasting only a few seconds. To Schneider he stipulates that the rubbish should be strictly horizontal, “all scattered, leaning and lying,” the two cries should be identical, “[i]nstant of recorded vagitus . . . switching on and off strictly synchronized light and breath,” and that the maximum light should move between “3 to 6 and back” on a 1-10 scale (134-35).

As he moves toward writing ever more radical, theatricidal texts that do away with the last vestiges of dramatic conventions, Beckett also asks his long-time directors to “pare down the self-serving burlesque” and, indeed, anything that might be seen as merely self-serving. Telling in this regard are his detailed instructions to Roger Blin, rehearsing *Fin de partie* at Théâtre 347, Paris in April 1968, where Beckett even asks him to cut Clov’s parting song together with a number of gags (123-25). Explicitation is taboo. Beckett finds the filmed extracts of the opening of *Catastrophe*, written in support of the imprisoned Václav Havel, at the 1982 Avignon Festival “depressing,” with the silent protagonist “all trussed up with screaming

white bonds to facilitate comprehension," all too transparently recalling a strait-jacket (584-85). The same resistance to explicitness and tendency towards vaguening characterizes Beckett's use of literary allusions, reduced to mere traces. He is only talked into including the whole final quatrain of Yeats's *The Tower* in the play . . . *but the clouds* . . . when not even Pinter is able to identify the initial clipped quote (466), and he treats musical material similarly—most importantly, the closing musical phrase of Schubert's Lied *Nacht und Träume* in the eponymous play.

Departing from authorial stipulations in the name of theatrical liberties provokes a sharp reaction, even when done by revolutionary theater-makers. He is "revolted" (607) by reports of Giorgio Strehler's 1982 *Happy Days* in the Teatro Mercadante in Naples, where, among other declared changes to the setting, undulation replaces the mound and white dust silts on actors and audience. Innumerable requests for adaptation of virtually all his works into media other than they were originally written for are turned down: among others, Beckett refuses Laurence Olivier and Joan Plowright's insistent requests to dramatize his radio play *All That Fall*, and with regrets, his old friend and veteran actor Jack McGowran's (and filmmaker Roman Polanski's) proposal to film *Godot*—"it is simply not cinema material. And adaptation would destroy it" (114n). When—harried into relenting with a heavy heart, "la mort dans l'âme"—he eventually allows an adaptation, he almost implores that they salvage his conception of the text. He writes to the director of a 1984 New York dramatization of the late prose piece *Worstward Ho*: "With all due respect to Philip [Glass], no music, for pity's sake. It's my last gasp" (643n). When, however, the creator is young and in need of support, his tone changes. Seeing the German film director Ernst Reinboth's puppet animation, with music by György Ligeti, largely based on "Der Verwaiser" ("Le Dépeupleur"/"The Lost Ones"), he intercedes with Suhrkamp for permission, admitting that the film is cinematographically unsuccessful and does not do justice to his text, but "he's a young man and needs a helping hand" (390).

Above all, the letters to directors, as well as to the two women closest to him and his work in this period, Barbara Bray and Jocelyn Herbert, prove that with Beckett every performance is an unrepeatable, singular event that thinks the play anew. The performance of *Das letzte Band* [*Krapp's Last Tape*] in the fall of 1969 at the Schillertheater in Berlin was groundbreaking for a series of future collaborations with the theater, but also for the discreet

departures from earlier directing practices. Whereas his first letters exude frustration with the actor Martin Held ("Not bright, slow and the bull of Bashan voice. Very massive. No natural neatness or grace in the Kleistian sense" [169]—an allusion to Kleist's famous essay "On the Marionette Theater"[39]), in letters to friends, he warms to Held's "willingness . . . to do it this strange way" (169), ultimately bestowing on him the title of "[a]cteur excellent" (172), comparable in strength to Patrick Magee but "less alarming" (193). Beckett finally resolves to work with him on a revival of *Godot*. During the rehearsals Beckett seems open not only to suggestions from the actor and technicians, but also from Bray, who briefly visits; so one of Krapp's phrases, "sink auf sie nieder" ("I lay down across her" [*CDW* 221]), will come "from the air before look at the machine" (*LSB 4* 174), while some of the pauses in the passage are lengthened. At the risk of taking some liberties, all in all, Beckett reports, he "learned a lot about the play and its distant author along the way. . . . I staked my last penny on the filly 'immobility,' and Held went along with it very graciously" (178). The Berlin *Krapp* prompts meticulous notes for a TV production planned by Schneider, in which Beckett conceives two cameras—a Camera A that would serve as a "mere eye," and a Camera B to scrutinize "from all angles and often from above, details of table situation, hands, machine, ledger, boxes and tapes. This camera listens and its activity is affected by the words spoken." The alternation of A and B distinguishes recorded moments of little and enormous importance to Krapp (156n). The legacy of these notes will be seen in his future investigations of the medium in the TV plays *Ghost Trio* and *. . . but the clouds . . .*

One of the most important avant-garde works for the theater to emerge from this period is *Not I*, first mentioned in a February 1972 letter to Bray as an indeterminate nucleus of an image that could lend "10 min. strangeness if text found": "lit face (mouth) with ? to say and a cloaked hooded figure, sex unclear, completely still throughout, listening and watching" (287). The image of what was to become the Auditor, as he specifies, was suggested by the memory of an "Arab woman all hidden in black absolutely motionless at the gate of a school in Taroudant and by watching figures in the Caravaggio Malta *decollation*" (287)—Caravaggio's *The Beheading of St. John the Baptist* in the cathedral of Valletta, which Beckett saw the previous fall. As he recalls in 1986, the painting that prompted the play's conception shows

> outside & beyond the main area, at a safe distance from it, a group of watchers intent on the happening. Before the painting, from another outsidedness, I behold both the horror & its being beheld. (671)

The witness, isolated in his/her outsidedness, beholding the other witnesses eerily articulates another of the foundational predicaments of Beckett's writing, of "ill seen ill said," the existential and political implications of which archival research has been tirelessly bringing to the forefront.[40] Already in late April of 1972 Beckett reports having nearly finished the play, which by his estimation would take fifteen minutes (almost exactly the metronome time it took in Whitelaw's breathless rendering) and imparts a "nice posthumous feel" (299n). Originating in a ghostly image, the play seems to aggregate around the tempo rather than according to a strictly textual logic. As Beckett writes to Schneider, to whom he sends the play in July, "the text must go very fast, no pause except for breath & the two big silent holes after the screams" (302n). As soon as Schneider begins to work on the play with actress Jessica Tandy, Beckett obliges with elucidations, although he makes it clear that "I no more know where she is or why thus than she does," before conveying that the text should frustrate interpretation, aiming rather to jar the audience's nerves directly:

> "She" is purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and purveyor of a stage text. The rest is Ibsen. . . . Her speech a purely buccal phenomenon without mental control or understanding, only half heard. Function running away with organ . . .
>
> I hear it breathless, urgent, feverish, rhythmic, panting along, without undue concern with intelligibility. Addressed less to the understanding than to the nerves of the audience which should in a sense *share her bewilderment*. . . . She does not *listen to screams*, she screams herself in illustration of what she might have done if able, if not 'numbed.' . . . Voice should begin before house quite quiet & contribute to its quieting. (311-12)

After the January 1973 *Not I* with Billie Whitelaw he writes reassured that "in some strange way it's theatre in spite of all" (324). When in February 1975 a film version is recorded by the BBC, Beckett consents to do "the reverse image"—that is, giving up the figure of the Auditor altogether and, instead of a tiny lit mouth on a completely dark stage, to have a close-up on that relentlessly speaking mouth which, in Whitelaw's words, appeared "strangely sexual and glutinous, slimy and weird, like a crazed, over-sexed jellyfish" (qtd. in *LSB 4* 405n). On at least one more occasion Beckett would consent to remove the figure of the Auditor, given the smallness of the venue, admitting that all his/her previous stage presences have been somewhat unsatisfactory (680).

Shortly after *Not I*, Beckett writes *Footfalls* for Whitelaw, similarly triggered by an image.[41] Here, too, he would insist on withholding the text from understanding: for him the play is a "strange affair, perhaps unduly elliptic & elusive," since it is "not aimed at the intelligence" (430). To Whitelaw, whom he insists on directing alone, he writes, "The pacing is the essence of the matter, to be dramatized to the utmost. The text what pharmacists call excipient" (424)—even, as Whitelaw recollects, making a demonstration of the pacing in a crowded bistro.

Starting in the 1970s Beckett embarks on a sequence of "serial" or modular plays and dramatizations which do away with the last remnants of theatrical representation, occasionally even with words, making a decisive move toward abstraction in literature or, in the words of Roger Blin, "musical geometries" (qtd. in Casanova 99)—their organizing principle being syntactic and semantic rhythm, repetition working on the analogy of musical movements. Even here, however, obstinate embodiment, residual figuration in the "ruins" of language and of image keep the texts from ever becoming the linguistic equivalent of a Mondrian painting (what in Blin's view the Beckett play resembled; qtd. in Casanova 99), so that they perform the same finitude that so imbues the late prose and poetry. Telling in this respect is Beckett's involvement in the first-ever production of his easily most abstract play, *Quad*, with Süddeutscher Rundfunk, "a crazy invention for TV. . . . A collective undertaking if there ever was one" (*LSB 4* 522). After his arrival in Stuttgart to oversee the production and realizing that his initial conception—of colored light on costumes changing to the rhythm of percussions and footsteps—runs into insurmountable technical difficulties, he abandons direction in April 1981, to return in June and take up a suggestion of dropping color and experimenting with costumes in tatters instead. So they would "make do with constant neutral light on maximally luminous figures. By reducing the square so as to bring them closer together and accelerating tempo an impression of mingled light and colour could be given while these remain separate" (551); Beckett even suggested that circumambient light be tried out for achieving an effect of shining costumes.

The production resulting from this collective undertaking—two versions—shows a clear move away from the initial scheme of abstraction, towards progressive ruin: of the two versions, the first was "fast, with colour & percussion," the second "plain & slow with faint metronome & footsteps alone. 9 and 4 minutes respectively" (553). As Konrad Körte of

Süddeutscher Rundfunk recalled, the second version, “in grey, in tatters, without percussion,” was “the same thing 1,000 years later” (554n). Beckett even envisions a *Quadrat* III, in which “they would be scarcely moving. And the robes falling off them” (562). The elucidations on the successive versions also reveal the extent to which a Kleistian vision of creatures moving as puppets also converge with a theatre of disability, of decrepit bodies in Beckett, a form of “Resistanz.”[42]

The coupling of maximum “abstractivation” with the “posthumous” feel of “humanity in ruins” (“The Capital of the Ruins” [*CSP* 278]), is perhaps the most striking feature of these theatrical departures that approximate most closely the radicalness of the late prose. “Ghostliness” and indistinction, a lack of color (or “gray”) are the recurring instructions Beckett sends to his directors—one might recall that “ghostliness” is also a term of praise in Beckett’s response to Louis Le Brocquy, the artist who paints his portrait and who is to become, besides Arikha and Jasper Johns, his closest collaborator on artist books and illustrations: “Very moving in its ghostliness. That’s my pineal eye on its way out” (*LSB 4* 553). Thus, in 1984, he describes his conception of “this perhaps most hazardous of our undertakings,” the TV play *What Where*, to Reinhart Müller-Freienfels, the artistic director of Süddeutscher Rundfunk involved in the Beckett productions in Stuttgart, asking in two successive letters that it be performed not by actors but by mimes:

> Marionettes. No “interpretation.” A balletistic approach. . . . In a word a discipline and selflessness hardly to be expected of “seasoned” actors and indeed too much—or too little—to be asked of them. . . . Perhaps the clue to the whole affair is its ghostliness. The 4 are indistinguishable, visually & vocally, as ghosts are indistinguishable. Ghostly garments, ghostly speech. (631-32, 637)

To Schneider, who was working on *Come and Go* in 1981, he insists: “Same toneless voices same for Oh!s. Stiff, slow, puppet-like” (566). And it is in very similar terms that he describes the voice in *Ghost Trio* in 1977 to Antoni Libera, his Polish translator, as “distant, anonymous, indifferent . . . A sort of astral presenter. The tone is colourless and unvarying from start to finish, ‘the color grey if you wish,’ very hard to get right and keep up” (464).

“I think we’ve heard enough about my so-called despair”: Beckett and the academy

So does Beckett prune the Grove edition’s blurb of *Worstward Ho* of one word in particular that must have grown obnoxious; it is not recorded

how he reacted to the replacement, "anguish and isolation" (*LSB 4* 597). One of the major, and clearly unwelcome, changes in Beckett's life that comes with growing international fame, especially after the Nobel, which he receives as a catastrophe ("Curses fail me" is his comment to Pinter [193]), is the academic and institutional exploitation of his text-world and its corollary, the inescapable involvement in the exegesis of his own work. If institutionalization comes with moments of unintentional comedy, as when, for the first time in the play's performance history, the set of *Godot* collapses in at the 1978 Comédie-Française production, when the prestigious theater finally includes it in its repertoire—"Takes the Maison de Molière" is Beckett's sardonic comment (484)—the same is hardly true of the avalanche of requests to publish and the pressure to translate previously unreleased texts. How ubiquitous are the queries to clarify his work is illustrated by a wry note from a holiday in the Italian Alps, where a "local Signorina" accosts him to elucidate *Godot* for her university work: "Mi rincresce ['sorry']" (554). Seasoned scholars, however, could not be brushed off so easily: a note from Richard Ellmann, who included *Murphy* in his syllabus, elicits comic horror from Beckett: "I tremble from here. Keep off me, Dick, keep off me" (148). His answers to endless inquiries about the intention behind his works and about the influence of specific authors and books on his writing generally range from the laconically dismissive to the irritated, but occasionally he does give illuminating insights into the genesis of his texts, even autobiographical details. So, in a reply to the same Ellmann, he identifies the moment of "vision" encapsulated in *Krapp*, that moment when, as he claims in interviews, he understood that his way lay in impoverishment: "the jetty and howling wind are imaginary. It happened to me, Summer 1945, in my mother's little house, named New Place, down the road from Cooldrinagh" (669). To Rubin Rabinovitz, whose thesis on Cartesianism and Schopenhauer in *Watt* he politely circumvents, he stresses the traumatic circumstances of the novel's writing, a mere exercise in "turning to words, during the occupation, after my days in the fields, with a view to not losing my reason" (316). He rejects the assumption that Sartre's *La Nausée* (which he read shortly after its publication) may have impacted *Watt* (*LSB 4* 137), but admits that Camus's *The Myth of Sisyphus* was in his mind when writing the Trilogy (651). He repeatedly disclaims influence of language skepticism, especially of Wittgenstein, writing somewhat irked to Shainberg, "I begin belatedly to wonder if I ever got anything from anybody,

so stupid was I" (640). Linda Ben-Zvi's inquiry about his use of Fritz Mauthner's *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* [Contributions to a Critique of Language] (1901-03) hardly fares better, being privately labeled as a "wild goose or a red herring" (509n), and in his answer to Ben-Zvi brushed aside as a "notesnatching operation" carried out on behalf of Joyce: "For me it came down to: Thought words / Words inane / Thought inane. Such was my levity" (509).[43] He even goes as far as to claim to James Knowlson that the ever-present intertextual allusions in his work are to be read, as it were, independently of their sources: "The 'eye' of the mind in [*Happy Days*] does not *refer* to Yeats any more [than] the 'revels . . .' in *Endgame* to *The Tempest*, they are just bits of pipe I happen to have with me" (291).

His answers can be vitriolic ("I don't attack critics" [473]) or little short of nauseated when it comes to the early work, as when he suggests that Ruby Cohn might drop from the volume *Disjecta* that she was editing, the 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, which has been read ever since as a Beckettian negative aesthetics of a literature of the unword *in nuce*, dismissing the text as "embarrassing kitchen German bilge" (578). However, his replies can also be acute in their terseness, as when countering an off-the-mark parallel between Noh theater and his own: "Noh drama presupposes audience complicity, mine audience resistance" (568). Occasionally he takes evident relish in bizarre queries, like one from a student about the reason why Clov cannot sit down in *Endgame*:

> It cannot be because he cannot bend his knees. He could sit with outstretched legs. In squatting there is no seat.
>
> Contact with seat would therefore seem to be the problem.
>
> The sea-captain in Knut Hamsun's *Hunger* arrives standing in a taxi. His trouble severe chronic piles might also do the trick. (575)

Nonetheless, for all his recoil from being drawn into exegesis, Beckett does reveal inroads into the texts, especially to academics he is at ease with, among them Herbert Myron, to whom he elucidates the origin of the title "Le Dépeupleur" [*The Lost Ones*], "alluding to Lamartine's 'un seul être vous manque et tout est dépeuplé,' pinched unacknowledged . . . from his forgotten contemporary Léonard with change of only one syllable (*vous* for *me*). Quite untranslatable" (250-51). Or to his Swedish translator, C. G. Bjurström, to whom he communicates the origin of "grifane" in the French *Foirades*, as the French version of *grifagno*, a species of falcon, used as an adjective for frightening eyes and the attribute of Julius Caesar's eyes in

canto 4 of the *Inferno* (338). To Magnus Hedlund, another Swedish translator, working on *More Pricks Than Kicks*, he sends a page's worth of explanations regarding literary echoes (297). Most of these elucidations touch on his late, modular or serial prose and theater work, and are as often dispatched to translators and actors working on dramatizations as to academics. Of "Lessness" (1969) he writes in 1974,

> *Lessness* consists of 6 families or categories of statement each containing 10 sentences. Each category has its "signature" incorporated in all sentences belonging to it: "true refuge," ". . . lessness," "little body," future tense, etc. This material (60 sentences in all) is presented first in one order (disorder), then in a different, in the form of 2 x 12 paragraphs of varying length (never less than 3 sentences, never more than 7). The disorder of sentences and paragraphs is obtained by hazard. (355)

To Joseph Chaikin, to whom in 1980 he suggests dramatizing *Texts for Nothing*, he offers the following foothold, together with a tongue-in-cheek title after Virgil, "*Inania Verba,*" and a few ideas for staging: "The idea was to caricature the labour of composition. The concentration is on one particular inanity to be accomplished before the next can be undertaken" (532). And in 1980 he answers Antoni Libera's intriguing question on *Company/Compagnie*, about the appearance of the first person plural in the text, so rare in Beckett: "'Mettons' is spoken by the 'creator.' It is his 'creature' that has never used the first person, singular or plural" (537).[44]

One of the most irksome pressures from the academy on Beckett was that he consent to his biography being written, with all the involvement such a venture presupposes on his part. After successfully turning down first Knowlson's, then Mel Gussow's proposal to write his biography, he explained his decision to the former in 1972, claiming that his life can be considered by and large irrelevant to his work (277). As he cannot actively oppose such a project, he eventually chooses a policy of strict non-involvement in what was to become a highly controversial book by Deirdre Bair, arguing to George Reavey at the outset of Bair's research in 1972 that this was his only possibility to "avoid a sponsoring censoring situation" (306), unacceptable to him. As details emerge, he sours to the enterprise, labeling Bair's book "nescience fiction" (556) of "unerring inaccuracy" (618). It is partly against its impact that he authorizes Knowlson's biography in the year of his death ("To biography by you it's yes" [717]) and agrees to the publishing of his selected correspondence, stating in a March 1985 letter to Martha Fehsenfeld, who was to become the principal editor of the corpus, that he has full confidence in her editorial judgment, explicitly equating the

work to publishing “those passages only having bearing on my work” (654). This, by now oft-quoted, stipulation is uniquely open to debate, for it is easy to see how a wealth of passages apparently personal in content reverberate with the concerns and sensibility of the published work. It doesn’t take much explaining to see how the mordant black humor in describing the betrayals of the body evokes innumerable passages in the novels: so Beckett writes of his cataract-stricken eyes with an echo of *The Tempest*, “These are plugs that were my eyes” (30), or reports in December 1988 from the nursing home where he spends the last months of his life, “still here with the down & not quite outs receiving education in the lost art of keeping on my feet. I envy the quadrupedes [sic]” (710). Most striking of all are the vignettes from the habitual seaside holidays that offer a “change of void” (456n) and where Beckett sticks to the rule, “[t]own[s] to be avoided like literature” (375), as in the one below sent to Bray from Morocco in March 1972, evocative of the Beckett creatures’ plight:

> Visited yesterday a *noria* worked by a blindfold camel with whom I collided as I peered into the depths. Does he think he is making a beeline for his native oasis? No Arab being in sight and on he revolves. (288)

“There’s remains of English for you”[45]: Self-translation

These decades would also bring an onslaught of self-translation. If writing feels increasingly “laborious. Like small handsaw in knotty timber” (*LSB 4* 474), this is no less true of self-translation, to and fro between the two languages, as most of the theater and some of the late prose, including *Company*, is now written in English first and later translated into French. The Nobel adds to this bulk the translation of the earlier and previously unpublished texts. As he writes in April 1969 to Suhrkamp’s Siegfried Unseld, who recommended him for the prize, the prospect of being bogged down in that work would mean to relinquish “the possibility of writing anything else. No doubt I shall not manage to do that in any case. But I am obliged to go on trying right to the end” (160).

In 1966 he undertakes the English translation of *Texts for Nothing*, fifteen years after writing them, a work that “knocked [him] silly” (52). This is followed by the translation into French of *Watt* (started in 1967), with Ludovic Janvier and his wife, who prepare successive drafts that Beckett would “massacre” (70), covering them in handwritten notes, in weekly sessions—in a way that recalls Joyce’s involvement in the French translation of *Ulysses* and, later, of *Anna Livia Plurabelle* by Beckett and Péron,[46] but

obviously retaining much more control of the final text. In March 1968, he can report to Ruby Cohn that *Watt* is finished, including the "Nelly madrigal" (115). He would occasionally intervene in translations into third languages, as in the case of Elmar Tophoven's German *Endgame*, where he substitutes the echo from *The Tempest*, "our revels now are ended," in August Schlegel's translation ("Das Fest ist jetzt zu Ende") for the initial version, "Der Spaß ist jetzt zu Ende" (80n). Such concern for the identifiability of quotations throws into sharp relief the way in which Beckett diminishes their importance to Knowlson. He frequently airs his frustration with Elmar and Erika Tophoven's German translations, which he regularly revises—writing of *Nicht ich* [*Not I*] in March 1973, "A few mistakes and little fire. Does the lack of present participles explain Hitler?" (329), and of *Geistertrio* [*Ghost Trio*] in 1977, "all normalised and banalised" (456). In all his revisions and interventions, just like in his own translation work, he resists the pull of domestication, suggesting to Luigi Majno, the Italian translator of *Still*, to foreignize his text: "Such writing lends itself with but an ill grace to your reasonable language" (339).

That translation, just like work in theater, did turn into an open-ended and sometimes collaborative venture is proven by his exchange of letters with Bray, who occasionally contributes ideas and phrases to (among others) the English versions of "Le Dépeupleur" and *Mercier et Camier*. Regarding the latter translation, probably Beckett's most interventionist with its extensive cuts and alterations,[47] Bray made several suggestions—including "Raleigh," a brand of bicycles for the French slang for bicycle, "petite reine" (231)—while sending passages and phrases that Beckett would confront with his own versions in the English "Le Dépeupleur" ["The Lost Ones"], some making it into the final text (272). Transposing "Sans" of *Têtes-mortes* into English proves hellish; Beckett reports his successive abortions and abandonings to Bray as he works on sentence families, in modular fashion. One of the stumbling stones proves to be the phrase "*tête par l'oeil calme toute sa raison*" (in the final version, "Head through calm eye all light white calm all gone from mind" [*CSP* 199]), which he repeatedly gives up, and which sours the work: "No work ever brought me less echo, I feel it still falling in bottomless pit" (*LSB 4* 215). The pressure of one language on the other is ever-present: while proofing the French "Bing" ["Ping"], Beckett finds that it is "less bad in English. Nothing to equal the mother tongue" (44n) and confesses his recoil from the prospect of "massacring" *Not I* in

translation ("Can't imagine it in French" [323]). In 1977 he reports to Ruby Cohn the completion of a "rough draft" of *That Time* in French, "but loss so great not the heart so far to finalize" (457)—all the while continuing to write the *mirlitonnades*, the "odd dribble and doggerel in French, sinister stuff" (457). As he delves into the late prose, untranslatabilities accrue, up to the point where he gives up on *Worstward Ho* as "untranslatable" (657n) into French, and "[a]s for 'on'—nohow" (673).[48] He writes to Bray in August 1979 from Tangier, working on putting *Company* into French, "French feels rusty. Perhaps time to try with it again" (510) and singles out "speechlessness" in the phrase "Then a speechlessness whereof the gist . . ." as one of the "[i]nsoluble problems" (510). When Bray suggests "obmutescence," he counters, "no willfulness here. Have translated 'informulable angoisse don't l'essentiel'" (511)—apparently having recourse to the kind of periphrastic, interpretive translation to which French, its analytic syntax tending to resolve indeterminacies and resist synthetic constructions, all too often pushes him and which he bemoans to Herbert Myron: "Did you ever hate a conjunction? If so you'll understand my feelings about *jusq'à ce que*" (429).

A similar problem occurs when looking for an adequate French title for *Lessness*, where Cioran gives a hand, suggesting "Sinéité," a neologism derived from the Latin *sine*, "without," but, as Cioran recollects, the search was eventually given up as there was "no noun in French capable of expressing absence in itself, pure unadulterated absence," so that the author eventually had to make do with "the metaphysical poverty of a preposition"—*Sans* (356n). At the same time, the English-language letters show a heightened hybridization between the two languages, English sometimes breaking down in calques under the pressure of French syntax.[49] Something else that can be gleaned from these letters is a pervasive strategy of responding to untranslatabilities with (sometimes excessive) pruning and creative departures from the original—in both directions, something that complicates the narrative of progress "[f]rom ex[c]ess to lack of colour," terms in which Beckett describes his gradual turn to French (593). Thus the French version of "A Piece of Monologue" was eventually cut down to a "free version, shorter, entitled *Solo*" (579). At the same time creativity and excess of language are also something he encourages in his translators, for instance, when he agrees to Libera's option for the Polish "*cham*" (approx.

"brute") for translating "the bastard" (Hamm's reference to God) in *Endgame*, a homophone and homograph for the biblical Cham (555).

How closely translation is intertwined with writing in these decades can be seen in Beckett's sustained preoccupation with Chamfort's maxims—to be included among his collected poems in the cycle *Long after Chamfort*, in-between translation, adaptation, and appropriation, reflecting his progressive stripping of language and form to the bone that to Arikha he dubs "[s]enile quintessentialism" (99). He sends one "doggerelised" (343) variant after another to friends in parallel with his "mirlitonnaded" texts (529), before they take their final shape; thus in the fragment from Pascal's *Pensées* based on "Que le coeur de l'homme est creux et plein d'ordure" [That the heart of men is hollow and full of filth] (anomalously included among the Chamfort maxims), Beckett would toy with more strident low colloquialisms before returning to his initial version, "How empty heart / and full of filth thou art" (345). The other recurring presence in these letters is an Apollinaire poem, from *A la Santé* in *Alcools*—the Paris prison that his 38 Bd. St. Jacques apartment overlooks—which he repeatedly tries his hand at and gives up, and of which an echo is included in the abandoned monologue written for Rick Cluchey, "Epilogue" (see *LSB 4* 560-61):

> Que lentement passent les heures
> Comme passe un enterrement
> Tu pleureras l'heure où tu pleures
> Qui passera trop vitement
> Comme passent toutes les heures.[50]

While working on *Company* in Ussy in 1977, Beckett even physically jettisons his baggage of knowledge, as if mirroring the future words of *Worstward Ho*—"Unknow better now. No knowing how know only no out of. Into only" (*Worstward Ho, CIWS* 92): "Enjoying myself throwing everything out, books & other rubbish, not absolutely indispensable. All pictures out of sight including big G[eer] [van] Velde, behind the piano" (471). This progressive lessening, down to the last "consternated scribble" (709), the poem "Comment dire" ("What is the word") sent to Louis Le Brocquy in December 1988, the last of his texts that he would see published, proceeds in the texts of the letters, too, from the cryptic-elegiac to the consternated, in difficulty's clutch: "Still dim still on. So long as still dim still somehow on" (*Worstward Ho, CIWS* 103).

Conclusions

Reading Beckett's correspondence as a blueprint for the author's perceived intentions, whether in his prose, plays, poetry, in his self-directing and self-translating practice, or in his few critical texts on art and literature provocatively stated from the viewpoint of the amateur "cochon [pig]" (*Dis* 120), runs the risk of providing a "solution clapped on problem like a snuffer on a candle" (92). Rather than facilitating such neat extinguishing of problems and polyguities, it is in the nature of archival findings to complicate the work of theorizing and of exegesis—something even truer of an oeuvre so resistant to conceptual reductions as Beckett's. While one should be aware of a certain "retrospective illusion" (Casanova 29) present in all approaches of reading together the autograph work and the archives, the biographically imbricated materials of the correspondence nevertheless shed light on the, often indirect, paths by which a poetics we identify as Beckettian emerged, as well as on the complexities and flexibilities in Beckett's self-translation and self-directing.

The 1938 review previously quoted, "Intercessions by Denis Devlin," has one more caveat for the reader of Beckett and of his letters. It opens with the somewhat obfuscating phrase, "With himself on behalf of himself, with his selves on behalf of his selves" (*Dis* 91). Apparently speaking against appropriations for one cause or another, the review and this particular phrase are also early reminders that the "I" in Beckett is never immune to the decomposition that the selves in Beckett's texts so often undergo. In April 1949 Beckett writes to Georges Duthuit from Ussy: "I cycle frantically, that is, the person who is supposed to represent me" (*LSB 2* 150). The letter is dated a few days after finishing *Godot*, whose forever-delaying title character partially owes his name to the champion cyclist Roger Godeau. Curiously, it is the Cartesian centaur, the mechanized combination of person plus bicycle and perfect illustration of Descartes's rigid mind-body division, to invite this splitting of the pronoun. At the same time, the peeling off of Beckett's persona from the grammatical personal pronoun is a playful illustration of Beckett's relentlessly acute critical sense of language and of the chasm between word and world, even in the most banal jottings. One may as well read the phrase as an instance of interpenetration between Beckett's body of work and his personal letters, a signal that there are no watertight divisions between the writing shaped "to accommodate the mess," as Beckett puts it in the famous Israel Shenker interview, and the writing

destined to one particular addressee; the same type of radical interrogation operates in both. After all, the work of few authors enacts the ultimate failure of the obsessive archive, a product of the desire to capture, justify and validate the self, with such radical refusal to "close the gap between 'I' and 'not I'" (Locatelli 78) as Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, *Not I*, or *Eh, Joe*.

Beckett's correspondence provides valuable links between features of his contemporaneous writing and intellectual debates that shaped Irish, French, or European culture, and the none too lofty political and economic contexts in which the latter played out. On March 1, 1949, Beckett vents his frustration to Duthuit over an essay by Francis Ponge on Braque's painting, "Braque, or Modern Art as Event and Pleasure," which he is translating for *Transition.* Here Ponge hails a return to the principles of prewar modernist formalism as a genuine artistic rebirth, writing, "We are once again flung naked, like primitive man, face to face with nature. The canon of Greek beauty, the charms of perspective, historiography, *fêtes galantes*, concern us no further. Not even decoration. What is there to decorate? Our dwelling is destroyed, and our palaces and temples; at least in our mind, they revolt us" (qtd. in *LSB 2* 124n). Beckett's caustic comments are aimed both at Ponge's Marxist credentials and at his aesthetic views, suffused with humanism and postwar reconstruction optimism. His scathing paraphrase of Ponge's enthusiasm—"What a relief to know that we are back for good and all from the fête galante, and pitched, naked once more, in front of the dead fish (and the lump of coal)" (122)—refers at once to Braque's Cubist still lifes and to recent scandals related to the chronic shortage of food and fuel in Paris and war-torn France (Brazil 39), a base materiality Beckett was not disposed to sidestep or aestheticize into neat compositions in his writing either. Ponge the critic is dubbed in the passage "our great thinger" ("notre grand chosier" [*LSB 2* 122, 120]), with a mordant edge to Ponge's glib abstracting of "nature" and the object world acknowledged as raw material for the artist to recast and recreate. The fact that Beckett begs to differ goes beyond a particular stance taken by a writer he has little sympathy for, and allows a noteworthy insight into Beckett's sensibilities in reading contemporary painting and literature or philosophy. The objects of scarcity and salvage in his texts are no mere aesthetically shaped matter and certainly no abstractions: they are that ground zero from where the human condition has to be rethought in the long aftermath of the disaster, and the destroyed dwelling, palaces and temples of pre-modernist styles and regimes of

representation evoked in Ponge's essay must have rung hollow for Beckett, who spent six months as a volunteer in bombed-out Saint Lô, where the destroyed dwellings were no metaphor but palpable material debris, cleaned away by hand by the survivors alongside prisoners-of-war in a shared destitution ("The Capital of the Ruins," *CSP* 277).

There is no modern writer who has so decisively changed literature and our contemporary conception of the literary as Beckett. Arguably there is no other modern writer who remained so thoroughly faithful to the spirit of the avant-gardes, with whose aesthetic legacy he maintained an ambivalent relation—of relentless experimentation, of never falling back on artistic solutions and recipes that had proved successful before. In an age that saw the museumification and commodification of once-disruptive modernism and the rise of the "culture industry," Beckett unabatedly continued his radical ethical (self-)interrogation and worked against expectations, against consolatory forms, putting his readers and audiences on trial in works like *Lessness*, *Not I*, *Quad*, *Breath*, *Nacht und Träume*, and *Worstward Ho*. To the incipient Cold War and the triumph of global consumerist capitalism he responded with an *arte povera* that Julie Bates characterized as an art of salvage and gleaning, concerned with the valorization of castoffs, of ruins, of textual and cultural detritus, or, in the words of Hélène Cixous, with *détritextes*, whose economy has to do not with acquisition or productivity inside a capitalist order but with an "excremental economy" of evacuation and dispersal (qtd. in Bryden 78).

It is all the more important to trace the development of this progressive subtraction, relinquishment, and "willed creative mismaking" ("*malfaçon créatrice voulue*," in "La Peinture des van Velde ou Le Monde et le Pantalon," *Dis* 122) that starts in the 1930s and whose principal catalysts are the artworks that Beckett shows a preference for—paintings by Cézanne, Watteau, Jack B. Yeats, Ballmer, the 1930s semi-anthropomorphic Picasso, together with favorite Old Masters, Surrealists and German Expressionists. The letters to MacGreevy are the primary documents for unraveling this process and many essayistic passages and satirical references of the early prose draw on ideas first exchanged and crystallized in their correspondence. The single most decisive event in this process was the journey through Germany, an apprenticeship in learning as well as unlearning a vast cultural baggage; one signal of the inner shifts of thinking is the critically well-worn 1937 German letter to Axel Kaun, in which the dichotomy between Joyce's

"apotheosis of the word" and Beckett's own progress towards "the literature of the non-word" ("Literatur des Unworts" [*LSB 1* 519-20]) makes an early appearance. The process itself can best be followed, however, through the correspondence along those years with MacGreevy and a few confidants—among them, Mary Manning Howe, Cissie Sinclair, and Nancy Cunard. There, among jottings concerning various (re)readings old and new and even acerbic comments on common acquaintances, a tendency to relinquish modernist grandiloquence, pretentiousness and an ethos of conquest comes into view, together with a fidelity to a principle of dissent and a resistance to authority of every type, including those of learning and authorship.

Closely intertwined with early affirmations of a poetics of indigence and impotence are Beckett's sardonic comments on politics and cultural politics, whether in Ireland, in the Paris of his Normalien year, or after his permanent move there. The 1930s correspondence with MacGreevy is an especially valuable mining ground for such choices, for rarely would Beckett in later life write in letters at such length about his readings, enthusiasms, and irritations, such as his often irate, often sarcastic reaction to stagnant Irish politics, where the true question, as Declan Kiberd reminds us, was "how to end: and the search for a way of putting an end to things was what allowed the discourse of nation-building to continue. The people were seeking not an answer to the Irish Question but . . . a meaning to their question" (*After Ireland* 16). This can be traced in satirical images and tropes of the early and mature work, of entrapment, death-in-life, and purgatorial circular journeys through a vague landscape with a few recognizable Irish references, realia, and accents.[51] The letters of the 1920s and 1930s document the steps of Beckett's gradual disidentification with his native Ireland, both with his own Protestant Ascendancy upper middle class complete with its intellectual avatars, and with the new national bourgeoisie's sanctimonious conservatism and traditionalist official culture. At the same time, his response to the new conservative turn in criticism and the arts during his one-year exchange lectureship at the École Normale Supérieure adds granular details to the areas of exploration in the early poetry and prose, as well as to the ways in which his sustained preferences for artists and artworks developed, significantly coloring his parody of Cartesian rationalism and Eliot's model of high modernist collage of learning under the aegis, "Fallor, ergo sum!" (*CP* 243).

Once Beckett embarks on writing the body of work he is best remembered for, and his career in theater starts, his correspondence also becomes the principal vehicle for dispatching insights and instructions to his directors and actors on two continents—despite repeated protestations of knowing nothing about his work outside the "making relation" (*LSB 3* 511)—as well as for collaborating with translators into third languages. Of no less interest for the Beckett reader and scholar than the latter category of letters are those in which Beckett details his problems of self-translation or writing across French and English: these can reveal the porousness of his authorship and the degree to which he was prepared to adopt and co-opt editorial and translatorial suggestions—those of Mania Péron in the French Trilogy, frequently those of Barbara Bray in the Englishing of the late theater and prose pieces alike. Such surprising findings, going from the creatively playful to the willfully "grey" and "colorless," also significantly complicate long-standing critical constructions about Beckett's poetics of self-translation, which tend to attribute to his French-language texts a higher degree of "writing without style" and suppression of residual figuration, whereas to the English-language texts, higher degrees of wordplay, allusiveness and "textual activity." Instead of allowing however minimally essentialist dichotomies, these archival examples highlight the practice-oriented nature of Beckett's (self-)translation and the multiprismatic choices involved in "violating" both French and English—to quote the formula of the Axel Kaun letter where Beckett speaks of his willingness to "violate a foreign language as involuntarily as, with knowledge and intention, I would like to do against my own language" (*LSB 1* 520). Closely connected to his writing and self-translating across two languages is the constant provocation of linguistic standards in both the English and French correspondence, his harnessing of interlingual and often multilingual wordplay, his jocose Gallicisms and miscegenation of his two languages; these also morph from the academic clowning and erudite in-jokes of the 1930s to an intensifying and free-handed mingling of idioms, lexis, and turns-of-phrase from the 1940s onwards, so much so that it is not far-fetched to say that from the 1960s the language of the letters becomes an idiosyncratic, utterly personal, and playful Frenchified English.

Equally revealing is the crop of letters concerned with performing Beckett's plays, teleplays, and radio plays: the correspondence makes visible the often tortuous ways and byways, the trial-and-error involving

author/director, actors and technicians alike, that led to the final, settled and published texts and Beckett's preferred staging practices. These invite a careful recalibration of the myth of the controlling last modernist and bring to attention cases where Beckett was ready to adopt third parties' suggestions, chance solutions hit upon during rehearsals, and even the emergence of allusive stage images derived from the scarce props and their intensely mined materiality. Indeed, one of the lessons of these letters is how much Beckett used particular materialities in order to achieve the desired hues, textures, tones, and rhythms of "almost," of dimness or greyness or shabby gentility for his stage spaces and characters. There are occasions where he asks for particular fabrics for the curtain in *Krapp* that could remain in motion for the longest possible time, for peculiar bruitage suggestive of a thickness of atmosphere and a realism of effects; the histories of the production of *Film* and *Quad* testify to the changes, at times substantial, that occurred during the shooting and studio work, which Beckett came to consider superior to his initial ideas, and which also originated in difficulties related to materialities. Above all, these exchanges highlight Beckett's attention to granular details covering all aspects of theater, radio, or television production, from the pace of the actors' speech delivery and the length of pauses to the peculiar quality of lighting, the appearance of small details of costume or light change, or even sounds made by falling objects.

The one Beckett text whose genesis can be clearly traced through the letters is the "Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit," based on the correspondence and live exchanges with Duthuit; it is also a text that reveals Beckett's ethical qualms about misrepresenting and appropriating not only Duthuit's ideas but also those of the painter Bram van Velde for the ideas ventriloquized by the dramatis personae "B" and "D." On more occasions Beckett sends his friend ideas or fragments from the work-in-progress—symptomatically, the passage where "B" clowningly admits defeat. The text and the extraordinary crop of letters around its composition also testify to Beckett's conscious self-positioning in an aporia: the awareness of the withdrawn, inscrutable nature of the artwork, divorced from translatability into words (itself originating in the awareness of the non-representability of the object of representation and the inadequacy of language for naming the world), and the ethical obligation of expression, the position also assumed in the 1940s essays on art. The awareness of this foundational impossibility of

translating the painted image into words is complemented by the awareness of the interventions implied in the interlingual and interpersonal translation, of transforming Duthuit's and Bram van Velde's stances into an English-language text authored by him, and of the ethical stakes involved. It is partly for these misgivings, and partly because of the souring of their relation in time, that in later life Beckett would try to resist republishing "Three Dialogues" and regularly downplayed in his letters a text that is as striking an art critical stance in the context of postwar abstraction as it is illuminating for Beckett's own artistic creed.

Even more than the 1930s letters to MacGreevy and a few close friends, the letters to Duthuit are an invaluable corpus for following the articulation of Beckett's poetics of impoverishment, of resistance against the display of mastery and the authority of authorship. Written in a foreign language that situated Beckett in the position of a learner, however proficient and learned, and translated with exemplary sensitivity and creativity by George Craig, these letters also testify to Beckett's radical language skepticism, combined with an undoing of authoritative conceptual and compositional grids of interpretation. This process, which in Beckett's writing led to a rupturing of the continuity of space and time, of the Cartesian self and of the word surface starting from *Watt* and *Texts for Nothing*, finds parallels in the texts of the letters, which likewise show the signs of a progressive impoverishment and de-aestheticizing, becoming increasingly riddled with syntactic holes and silences. From the 1960s Beckett's letters dispatched to Barbara Bray, to his directors, actors, and friends would become even stylistically consubstantial with the autograph work, growing ever more "anorexic," more clipped and more intense, at times reminding of the *mirlitonnades* or of passages of the *Stirrings Still* trilogy. Therefore, apart from offering the Beckett reader important insights into the shaping of Beckett's published work, these letters can be read also as an experience of the creator's workshop, of the same radical belaboring of the word surface as witnessed in the late prose. To add to the surprises of the Beckett correspondence is the versatility of Beckett the letterwright's voices, always tuned to the addressees.

The revisions of this book, which involved rereading many of Beckett's letters, happened at a time marked by the endlessly horrifying news of the genocide and cultural genocide suffered by neighboring Ukraine at the hands of an anachronistic, expansionist empire. The experience of cities reduced to

rubble and their erstwhile inhabitants to refugees, something that Beckett witnessed first-hand in Saint-Lô, is at present the traumatic everyday reality of hundreds of thousands; the specters that Europe hoped to have buried with WWII and Srebrenica prove to be undead. Rereading Beckett's prose, theater, and letters in newly darkened times one is forcefully reminded that this body of work was written at a time of catastrophe and its murky aftermath—an aftermath that cast a long shadow over the present and future and made visible the continuity of the catastrophe. As Herbert Blau reminds, Beckett may have been writing for the void, but that void is nevertheless populated by "the untold numbers dead, not in a text, no text for nothing, but in the brutal material world" (50). Those same texts and the letters also speak of a resilient and paradoxical creaturely freedom; they speak from a position of responsibility toward that creaturely, destitute other, urging "respect for the impossible we are, impossible living creatures, impossibly alive" (*LSB 2* 156), hence even in their radical dismissal of consolatory ideologies, creeds, and forms they can nevertheless bear witness to, and enact, that freedom. Among the understatements and self-disparagements, Beckett's letters speak unrelentingly and eloquently of that defenceless "wretchedness" which he himself defended "to the very end" (41-42), exemplarily, in both his work and outside it.

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“A wretchedness to defend”: Reading Beckett’s Letters

“A wretchedness to defend”: Reading Beckett’s Letters is an in-depth study of the correspondence of Samuel Beckett, selected and published by Cambridge University Press between 2009 and 2016. The volume treats the letters as inroads to Beckett’s poetics, stressing that, apart from their value as key documents to the Beckett canon, these are of a literary quality consubstantial with the output of one of the most radical modern writers. Reading Beckett’s pronouncements on works of literature and art, his first-hand accounts of grappling with his own writerly material, as well as his—invariably reserved—clarifications to theater-makers, translators, and interpreters of his work, in the context of his published fiction and plays and in light of recent advances in archival Beckett studies, the present book focuses on Beckett’s sustained self-education in literature, the visual arts, and philosophy, which imbricates his writerly choices, his lifelong commitment to critical reading, as well as his dilemmas in the practice of writing, self-translating, and theatrical performance. It points at the multiple ways in which this vast and many-faceted correspondence reveals previously unknown contexts, over- and undertones of the work and illuminates the processes of knowledge and “unknowing” on which Beckett’s singular aesthetics of impoverishment, of the low, of finitude, of ethical blank writing and achievementlessness is premised. Given its multiple foci on Beckett the reader, the self-translator, and the self-director, the book is of potential interest to Beckett researchers, scholars working in the field of modernism and translation studies, as well as readers of Beckett.

About the author

Erika Mihálycsa is Associate Professor at Babeș-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania, where she teaches modern and contemporary British and Irish literature. She has mainly published in the field of Joyce and Beckett studies, Anglophone and European Modernism, and translation studies; her articles and reviews on Joyce in translation, Beckett and the visual arts, Beckett's language poetics, and various aspects of literary and visual modernism appeared in *Word and Image*, *Joyce Studies Annual*, *European Joyce Studies*, *Textual Practice*, *Joyce Studies in Italy*, *James Joyce Quarterly*, *HJEAS*, as well as in numerous edited volumes. Together with Jolanta Wawrzycka (Radford University) she co-edited the volume *Retranslating Joyce for the 21st Century* (*European Joyce Studies* 30, Brill, 2020). In 2021-22 she edited Rareș Moldovan's new Romanian translation of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which is forthcoming in December 2022 with the translator's and editor's annotations and introduction. She is editor of the biannual online literary and arts journal *HYPERION—On the Future of Aesthetics* issued by the New York-based independent publisher Contra Mundum Press. She has translated works by Beckett, Flann O'Brien, Patrick McCabe, Anne Carson, among others, into Hungarian as well as novels by Miklós Szentkuthy and Zsuzsa Selyem into English; her translations of contemporary Hungarian prose and poetry have been published in *World Literature Today*, *Asymptote*, *Words Without Borders*, *Envoi*, *Numèro Cinq*, *Two Lines*, *Trafika Europe*, and elsewhere. She is currently co-editing the collection of essays *Flann O'Brien: Palimpsests* together with Anne Fogarty and Scott Hamilton and working on a project on Beckett, posthumanism, and *arte povera*.

Megjegyzések

[←1]

Casanova advances the thesis that the most radical pursuit of Beckett's work is one of "unwording" and dismantling the subjects of writing, in pursuit of a de-anthropomorphized formalism and literary abstraction on a par with the radical modernist aesthetics of contemporary (abstract) painting and music; and that the narrative form, and French, were the privileged vehicles of his rigorously minimalist poetics. In comparison, his (English-language) dramaturgy constitutes a secondary direction, "certainly subversive, but which remained on the figurative road, respecting the major dramatic conventions" (Casanova 98).

[←2]

Rabaté also extends and contextualizes earlier inroads into Beckett's posthumanist turn (starting with Steven Connor's 1982 "Beckett's Animals"), which interrogated the putatively absolute borderline between human and non-human animal subjects that the Western philosophical tradition has stipulated, from Aristotle to Descartes to Heidegger and beyond, recognizing the very essence of the human in the animal, in the suffering body.

[←3]

Feldman describes the contradiction at the heart of poststructuralist interpretive frameworks as "critics loosely tied by a philosophic approach and methodology applying a system (however asystematic) to Beckett's texts in order to demonstrate that system's unclassifiability. Yet asserting what is not is still an assertion, and not having an essence is still locating an essence, albeit a negating one" (*Falsifying Beckett* 47).

[←4]

Morin in particular corrects numerous myths in Beckett studies, including that Beckett's translations for Nancy Cunard's *Negro* and Octavio Paz's Mexican anthology in the 1930s were little more than hackwork, tracing instead Beckett's creative, interventionist translations of these intensely political texts, which tended to sharpen the originals' political edge. Morin shows that Cunard's activities placed Beckett in a network, vital for his postwar French career, that brought together Surrealists and international anti-fascist and anti-imperialist platforms; she uncovers the vibrant subversive politics of French Surrealism—one of whose most important 1930s English translators was Beckett—mostly invisible in the tamer, nihilistic version created in its English-language reception (see also Friedman, *Surreal Beckett* 62-120). Morin also uncovers Beckett's rich petition-signing activity down to 1989, his condemnation of the *fatwa* against Salman Rushdie, documenting the numerous causes Beckett endorsed from the 1930s, including Cunard's trend-setting "Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War" (1937), a collection of statements of international solidarity by writers and intellectuals on what was perceived as a world war in miniature.

[←5]

See also Joseph Anderton, *Beckett's Creatures: Art of Failure after the Holocaust.* Both Morin and McNaughton investigate Beckett's close study of the political rhetoric of Nazism with its innocuous euphemisms. Morin meticulously documents the employment, in the French *Nouvelles* and the Trilogy, of the coded language of racial labeling and epuration; such referents

are nearly invisible in the English version, as in the Britain of the 1940s and 1950s no public debates comparable to the ones that harrowed French cultural life took place.

[←6]

In particular, Carville draws attention to Beckett's reconfiguring of the concepts of the plastic and coenaesthesia—undifferentiated, pre-conceptual sensation, a pivot of twentieth-century ideas about the authentic. Rather than by affirmative Bergsonian aesthetics, Beckett's understanding of these two concepts was colored by his reading of Max Nordau's *Degeneration*, whose associations of a pathological blocking out, or extreme subjective distortion, of the outside world, and thus of utter withdrawal from the world, is co-opted into Beckett's negative account of the image as disorienting and inscrutable (12-20, 122-38). The fact that, for Roger Fry, Cézanne represents the epitome of the "plastic," the opposite of the conventionally realist "pictorial," reveals the angle at which Beckett's interpretation situates itself in relation to influential theories of the time, and his determination to salvage the singularity of artists close to him, wresting them away from these discourses.

[←7]

On the affinities of Beckett's and Burri's postwar aesthetic see Mihálycsa, "'Art of confinement': Samuel Beckett, Alberto Burri."

[←8]

In his memoir, *As I Was Going Down Sackville Street*, the former senator Gogarty portrayed Beckett's late uncle, the art dealer William "Boss" Sinclair, a prominent member of the modernist art scene in Dublin in the 1930s, with the full array of anti-Semitic stereotypes, culminating in allegations of pedophilia; the family initiated the case to defend the reputation of a man whom racial laws had recently forced to leave Germany.

[←9]

The phrase *esprit de l'escalier* [Fr. spirit of the stairs], usually translated as "spirit/structure of the afterthought," originates in Diderot's "Paradoxe sur le comédien" [Paradox of the Actor], where it describes the situation of a disconcerted man reduced to silence, sitting at the bottom of the stairs, incapable of acting (compare Lie).

[←10]

"A circle, obviously described by a compass, and broken at its lowest point, occupied the middle foreground, of this picture … In the eastern background appeared a point, or dot. The circumference was black. The point was blue, but blue! The rest was white. How the effect of perspective was obtained Watt did not know. But it was obtained" (*W* 104). Carville discusses the passage as a thwarted ekphrasis which paradoxically manages to elicit the empathic response that geometrical abstraction precludes by definition (148-81).

[←11]

George Craig, the English translator of the letters in French, analyzes the occasional oddities and the coinages in Beckett's French, as well as the ever more frequent Gallicisms in his English writing in his fascinating "Translator's Preface." Craig later published a book-length

essay, *Writing Beckett's Letters* (2012), on the challenges of finding the peculiar, slightly Hibernicized English that Beckett's "queer French" (*LSB 2* 592) demands.

[←12]

At the 2014 Samuel Beckett Festival in Enniskillen James Knowlson revealed some previously unpublished archival material on Beckett's involvement in the French Resistance; see "Samuel Beckett's Biographer Reveals Secrets of the Writer's Time as a French Resistance Spy."

[←13]

See Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett* 109-25; Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination* 130-83.

[←14]

Under Duthuit's editorship, the postwar *Transition* was recast as a representative venue for postwar French art and literature, showcasing Sartre's existentialism and new French non-figurative painting, at a time when the question of the social role of art and its relation to formal mastery—thus implicitly, the question of the viability of the prewar avant-gardes' formalism—acquired new urgency (see David Lloyd, *Beckett's Thing* 85-109; Carville, *Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts* 182-213). Beckett's writings on art, especially the "Three Dialogues," as well as his body of work produced in the 1940s fly in the face of both abstract formalism and existentialist new humanism. In his book *Late Modernist Style in Samuel Beckett and Emmanuel Lévinas*, Peter Fifield shows how his stance converges with Emmanuel Lévinas's writings on ethics and aesthetics published in the same years; both Lévinas and Beckett radically contest the totalizing Sartrean vision of literature born out of absolute, inalienable freedom, whose subject is freedom; both place the artwork in the realm of the non-conceptual, non-knowable, non-transparent at the limit of the human. Kevin Brazil has also unearthed the vital cultural and political contexts of the immediate aftermath of World War II and of the incipient Cold War in France, where Beckett published his essays on art in venues where some of the key texts of the new, Marxist-oriented existentialist philosophy with its deification of the human being, so mercilessly derided in "The End," also appeared: see Brazil, "Pig Vomit: Beckett's Art Historical Necessities," in *Art, History, and Postwar Fiction*, 33-45.

[←15]

As David Lloyd poins out, the term *peinture d'empêchement* [painting of impediment] may have originated in an earlier review of van Velde's painting by critic Jan Greshoff, where it implies a visual barrier between the painting's and the spectator's space, a hindrance that thwarts the illusion of the continuity of space and contributes to a sense of spatial, visual disortientation (*Beckett's Thing* 113). Morin reveals the term's intersection with a politicized intellectual framework vital for Beckett's writing in the late 1940s: French critic Jean Cayrol's concept of a "Lazarean" art of literature of impediment [*empêchement*]. The writer, poet, screenwriter and critic Cayrol, a survivor of the Mauthausen camp, published two essays in 1948 and 1949, later republished together in the volume *Lazare parmi nous* [*Lazarus Among Us*, 1950], where he denounced the proliferation of "concentration camp romances" and called for a literature born from a recognition of the indelible effects of dehumanization on the subject, a state of continuing death-in-life, whose narrative corollary would be a voluntary impoverishment and a radical disorientation of the rationalist order—falling thus very close to

the kind of literature Beckett was engaged in writing since *Watt*. See Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination* 181-82, and Cayrol, "Lazarean Literature" 60.

[←16]

In the famous pronouncement of the "Three Dialogues," Beckett probably echoes/appropriates a passage from Maurice Blanchot's *Faux Pas*, published in 1943, a book that he knew, where Blanchot writes, "the writer finds himself in the increasingly ludicrous condition of having nothing to write, no means with which to write it, and being constrained by extreme necessity always to write it" (*Faux Pas*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, 3; qtd. and mod. by Leslie Hill, "Reading between the Lines" 246.

[←17]

The one exception was Beckett's eventual agreement to some of the cuts and mitigations required by the Lord Chamberlain's Office when the London premiere of *Waiting for Godot* was threatened in 1954. The rephrasings and cuts agreed on are listed in a June 23, 1954 letter to Donald Albery (*LSB 2* 482-84).

[←18]

Curiously, Rosset had in mind an alternative translator for Beckett's text, a Belgian by birth who started writing in French and turned to English, following his emigration to the United States, performing the reverse of Beckett's linguistic exile. Compare *LSB 2* 387.

[←19]

See my more detailed discussion of this passage in "'Writing to the self-accompaniment of a tongue that is not mine'" 344-47.

[←20]

For the Grove Press edition of *Waiting for Godot*, by September 1953 Beckett prepares a "pretty litera[l]" (*LSB 2* 417) draft translation; in October of the same year, Alan Simpson prepares a working English translation for the Dublin premiere of Godot at the Pike Theatre. Gerry Dukes and Anthony Roche have pointed out Beckett's bold departures, in contrast to which Simpson's English translation comes across as a generally more faithful version of Beckett's French autograph text, even if it Hibernicizes the two tramps' idiom even more markedly than Beckett's version, which also includes many (Dublin) Irish English turns-of-phrase. In contradistinction to Beckett's English text, however, the idiom of Pozzo and Lucky in Simpson's translation corresponds to standard English, favoring a reading of Pozzo as an Anglo-Irish landlord. Roche's conclusions about Beckett's interventionist, creative self-translation are also supported by the examples discussed by Weller.

[←21]

In the words of Steven Connor, the translation becomes a "supplement" or "sequel" to the original, which, "while appearing to guarantee the integrity of that original, actually subverts that integrity by opening up areas of absence or 'lack' in it," revealing "the inherent self-division of an original text which is itself a process of internal repetition and self-translation" (*Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory, and Text*, 113-14). Adopting a similarly deconstructivist, Derridean framework in his seminal *Beckett and Babel*, Brian Fitch argues that the second, self-

translated text variant renders the "original" retroactively unstable, "unfinished," as if the author had suspended his creative enterprise when completing the first text. This observation is underscored by the frequent re-creative departures—minor or extensive cuts, re-ordering of pre-existing textual matter, recasting, Hibernicization (in the case of self-translations into English). For Fitch, the bilingual Beckett oeuvre exists like myth that survives the sum of its differences, with degrees of secondariness and supplementarity only (130-34, 140). The double, bilingual oeuvre thus occupies the space of oxymoron best described with the French word *répétition*: while the first version, in light of the second, appears to be a rehearsal for what is to come, the second version, grounded in the former, will appear as its repetition, re-enactment, ulterior performance (Fitch 157).

[←22]

Jean-Michel Rabaté, however, overturns the myth that Beckett's "writing without style" originates in his switch to French. On the one hand, he demonstrates that the early French pieces, including the spoof "Le Concentrisme," are "as pedantic and allusive" as Beckett's early English fiction. On the other hand, he offers an insightful survey of Beckett's (self-)translation practice from Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology to the *Nohow On* trilogy, pointing out both the lack of a consistent protocol and important parallels with the new "morality of form" of the Nouveau Roman, setting out to destroy the grandiloquence of the previous generation. In the light of Beckett's trans-creative approach to translation, he compellingly argues that Beckett's writing is not formalist (in the sense that Oulipo is), its central concern for style being relayed by the ethical program of "giving form to the non-form" (*Think, Pig!* 185, 167).

[←23]

See the Interview with Dan Gunn, *The Quarterly Conversation* 31 (4 March 2013).

[←24]

Dante's description of the first appearance of Virgil, *Inferno*, canto 1, 62-63: "dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto / chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco." In Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's translation, "Before mine eyes did one present himself, / Who seemed from long-continued silence hoarse" (*Dante Lab Reader*, Dartmouth, web, 5 Feb. 2020).

[←25]

Among the great losses of the volume one has to count the farewell to Jack B. Yeats: the letter, "written with tears, feeling it was perhaps goodbye," as he confided to MacGreevy in July 1956 (*LSB 2* 640) on receiving the news that he was terminally ill, has not been found.

[←26]

"What all is? In a word? Is that what you want to know? Just a moment. [*He turns the telescope on the without, looks, lowers the telescope, turns towards HAMM*.] Corpsed. [*Pause*.] Well? Content?" (*CDW* 106). Andrew Gibson draws attention to the meaning of "corpsed" in actors' slang: "to put an actor out, or spoil a scene by making a blunder" (*Beckett and Badiou* 2n).

[←27]

See Connor, "'On such and such a day . . . in such a world.'"

[←28]

In his article examining the ethics of enunciation in critical constructions of Beckett by Blanchot, Foucault, and Agamben, Russell Smith shows the blind spots of Blanchot's desubjectified model of enunciation, attributed entirely to a literature/language voicing, conceived as transcendental. According to Russell, Blanchot's "ventriloquistic model of enunciation" is "derived from the text of *The Unnamable* itself," without acknowledging the novel's plurality of enunciative acts; in consequence, the Blanchovian model of pure exteriority, of speech without a speaker, erases the Beckettian aporia altogether. "If no one is speaking, then *The Unnamable*'s formula 'It's not I speaking' ceases to be a paradox; if there is an occasion but no artist, a representee but no representer, then there can be no 'ferocious dilemma of expression'" ("The Acute and Increasing Anxiety of the Relation Itself" 345). In the same article, Russell also addresses the tendency of Blanchot and Blanchovian-Heideggerian criticism to sidestep Beckett's theater in favor of his prose work.

[←29]

Bray had introduced *Comment c'est* on the BBC Third Programme on February 2, 1961, in terms reminiscent of Beckett's "Dante … Bruno . Vico .. Joyce," writing, "*Comment c'est* isn't *about* anything. It is something," and claiming: "This is a piece of total writing, in which all the apparently contradictory powers, rational and irrational, of a uniquely rich and delicate sensibility and a uniquely piercing intelligence are brought together to give as pure a rendering of modern consciousness as words have yet been made to convey" (qtd. in *LSB 3* 398 n). Bray's assessment of *Comment c'est* would resurface in her introductions of Beckett's late prose, broadcast on the Third Programme, for example, in her introduction of "Imagination Dead Imagine" (broadcast 18 March 1967), where she refutes the thesis that the "gradual reduction" in Beckett's writing is equivalent to a "mutilation," stating that, on the contrary, "the gradual whittling away of externals . . . is primarily a way of making, and marking, an approach to 'being' itself, with everything extraneous, as far as possible, eliminated . . . . The writer is approaching as near as can be got to imagination unalloyed. His creatures, with more loss of symbolism about them than ever, are shapes that are 'the thing itself'" (qtd. in Feldman, "Beckett's 'Non-Canonical' Radio Productions" 27-28).

[←30]

It was *Comment c'est* that prompted Blanchot to recognize the need for a radical reinvention of criticism that sets itself the goal of responding to Beckett's work, and to introduce his central working concept in his critical response to *Comment c'est*, the *neuter*, in *The Infinite Conversation*—difference without identity, affirmation without assertion; its workings in the text render all provenance uncertain, merely a fragmentary sum total of nomadic phrases, language fragments ("brief packets" Beckett calls them) with multiple and indeterminate connection points, attributable to a voice without identity or place.

[←31]

Another of the long-lived theses of Beckett criticism, also underscored by the lack of engagement with Beckett's plays on the part of Blanchot, Bataille, Foucault, and much poststructuralist criticism coming in their wake. Casanova even divides the Beckett oeuvre in two, into a corpus of predominantly prose texts, written mostly in French, which demonstrate Beckett's alleged formalist program of "unprecedented literary combinatory," of creating a literary abstraction by breaking with the referent, and another corpus, "a dramaturgy that was certainly subversive, but which remained on the figurative road, respecting the major dramatic

conventions (characters, scenery, articulated text, and so forth) . . . capable of bearing the ‘richness’ of English” (98).

[←32]

See the editors’ Introduction to *Samuel Beckett and BBC Radio*. As the editors stress, the broadcasting (usually repeated, often several times) of Beckett texts by the BBC Third Programme introduced more people in Britain to his work than either publishing or attending live performances, effectively “dous[ing] its audience in programs by, or on, Beckett” (7, 11). What is more, the later prose texts, especially *Comment c’est* or “Lessness” show multiple overlaps with the radio plays’ composition. In his introduction of the 25 February 1971 broadcasting of “Lessness,” Martin Esslin stresses that “It it thus only by hearing ‘Lessness’ that we can become fully aware of its structure and indeed of its full meaning which is expressed by its formal pattern” (qtd. in Feldman, “Beckett’s ‘Non-Canonical’ Radio Productions” 31).

[←33]

However, he gives permission to the repeated broadcasting of *Endgame* (also in French) and, surprisingly, of *Play* (11 October 1966), where the inquisitorial spotlight amounts to another character, and the stage presentation of the three characters, with faces made up so thickly as to suggest inorganic matter, is such an integral part of the text. See Feldman, “Beckett’s ‘Non-Canonical’ Radio Productions” 26.

[←34]

As Knowlson points out, in contradistinction to the English performances of Brenda Bruce and, later, Ruth White, Renaud embodied middle-class decorum by a reliance upon form and a code of manners, and instead of the British actresses’ earthiness and humor she rendered the role with a lyricism and musicality of voice and gesture that Beckett couldn’t but appreciate (*Damned To Fame* 454).

[←35]

To Herbert Myron, April 1980, *LSB 4* 527.

[←36]

Shainberg published a book on neurosurgery, *Brain Surgeon: An Intimate View of His World* (1979), and would later publish an essay on Beckett in the *Paris Review*, “Exorcising Beckett” (1987).

[←37]

In late life Beckett suffered from Dupuytren’s Contraction, causing the bending of fingers toward his palm, which would eventually make playing the piano impossible.

[←38]

For a discussion of the original sentence’s ethical interruption of the text, see Rabaté, “Love and Lobsters” 158-59.

[←39]

Reading Kleist in 1969 prompted Beckett to return to his lifelong interest in the occasionalist philosopher Geulincx's *Ethics*, which he had described in a November 1956 letter to Mary Hutchinson as "fascinating guignol world" (qtd. in Tucker, "Beckett's Guignol Worlds" 175). As David Tucker argues, in the late plays' imagery the mechanized guignol world of Geulincx is connected to Kleist by puppet strings operated by God the supreme puppet-master, on whose agency the occurrences and occasions of the world depend, and whose operations impart a state of grace to the powerless, unself-conscious puppets unattainable in the human world in Kleist's vision. At the same time, Beckett's Marionettentheater also echoes the 1913-17 ape experiments of Austrian psychologist Wolfgang Köhler, whose *The Mentality of Apes* Beckett annotated in his 1935 psychology notes; this book added its own quota of autocratic cruelty to the unique world of grace and horror that Beckett's stage creatures inhabit (Tucker, "Beckett's Guignol Worlds" 187-92).

[←40]

See Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*; Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett*; Joseph Anderton, *Beckett's Creatures*; James McNaughton, *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath*; all of which reinscribe Beckett's texts in the historical, political (and politicized) coordinates of their genesis and first publication. Morin in particular draws attention to how Beckett's texts engage with a debate in postwar France and Europe around the ethical representation of the Holocaust and its occultation. On how Beckett's (especially late) work can be inscribed between two paradigms of witnessing, a theological one epitomized by Dante's *Divine Comedy* and a secular one framed in Giorgio Agamben's *Remnants of Auschwitz*, see Russell Smith, "Bearing Witness in *How It Is*" 351-60.

[←41]

Or, rather, several representations of Mary Magdalene covered in her own hair down to the ankles, the visual imprint for M's tattered nightshirt, among them, Don Silvestro Gherarducci's *Assumption of St. Mary Magdalene* in Dublin's National Gallery, which Beckett often saw during his Dublin years (Croke 18-19).

[←42]

Evelyne Clavier has persuasively argued that Beckett's disabled bodies are a response to the author's exposure, in the 1930s, to the German variety of modern dance, increasingly instrumentalized by the Third Reich's propagandistic imagery of perfect, heroic bodies, where dance's modeling role became synonymous with manipulation (203).

[←43]

Genetic criticism has considerably nuanced this "notesnatching operation": see Van Hulle and Nixon, *Samuel Beckett's Library* 158-63, and Van Hulle, "'Eff it': Beckett and Linguistic Skepticism."

[←44]

"Mettons" occurs three times in *Compagnie* (66, 67, 86), being translated as "say" (with the meaning, "let's say") in the English text: "Finally say left knee moves forward six inches thus half halving distance between it and homologous hand"; "Knee hand knee hand two. One foot. Till say after five he falls"; "a stranger suffering say from Hodgkin's disease," *NO* 39, 40, 50.

[←45]
LSB 4 635.

[←46]
See Liliane Rodriguez, "Joyce's Hand in the First French Translation of *Ulysses*."

[←47]
These, as Morin suggests, were largely due to the unavailability in English of analogies for the historically and politically hyper-specific referents, code-words, and allusions teeming in the French *Mercier et Camier*, all evoking the ubiquity and occultation of collaborationism and racialist discourses under the occupation (*Beckett's Political Imagination* 130-83).

[←48]
The tentative title given was *En pire toute*; the prose piece would eventually be published posthumously by Minuit in 1991, in Edith Fournier's translation, as *Cap au pire*. Rabaté offers a possible, Oulipian solution for the polysemic "on" in French with the multiply punning "con/on le con" (*Think, Pig!* 155-56).

[←49]
See George Craig's "French translator's preface" to the volume (*LSB 4* xxxii–xliii) and Craig, *Writing Beckett's Letters*, an excerpt from which is also accessible online on *Music and Literature* (13 June 2019).

[←50]
In Donald Revel's translation: "As slowly as a burial / Hours pass / You will mourn the tearful / Hour ended so quickly / As every hour ends." Qtd. in *LSB 4* 561n.

[←51]
Clair Wills sees in Beckett's early English fiction a "mannerist, or even post-modern afterlife" of modern Irish writing and a disenchanted alternative to revivalist ideas of continuous revolutionary struggle: "The Dead, the Undead, and the Half-alive" (321). Anna Teekell theorizes *Watt* as an unending purgatorial journey without the possibility of purgation, through a fictional world that is reminiscent of the state of emergency decreed in neutral Ireland through WWII, with strict censorship regulating information about the combating sides, which results in the country "missing" the war: "Beckett in Purgatory: 'Unspeakable' *Watt* and the Second World War."