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Mélanie Foehn

- 1 For even should I hit upon the right pensum, somewhere in this churn of words at last, I would still have to reconstitute the right lesson, unless of course the two are one and the same, which obviously is not impossible either¹.

Introduction: Traces of Jansenism in Ireland and Beckett

- 2 Jansenism has long remained a disruptive theme in Ireland. Recently arguing against the widespread notion that Jansenism had been imported to Ireland, Thomas O'Connor defined Jansenism as "a complex, multi-faceted movement within early modern Catholicism that responded to fundamental challenges of contemporary experience of religion²", which thoroughly contributed to shape a nation's history, memory, identity and politics. The later connotations it received, however, had something of a negative impact, as the term itself was subject to misapprehension. Generally understood by Catholics as "a heretical movement amply warranting its repeated condemnation by Rome³" while "Protestant polemicists tended to view it as symptomatic of dysfunctional Catholicism", it was indeed dismissed by free-thinking scholars as a rigorist and rather archaic derivative of Catholicism.
- 3 Historically, Jansenism was depicted and commonly understood as the very syndrome of the pervasive moral oppression which the Irish people had had to endure centuries throughout, and had little, if nothing, to do with the doctrine and philosophy of Port-Royal. Elements that illustrate this particular aspect are numerous. In a brief passage from his study on Irish cultural life, evoking the "strange marital abstemiousness of the Irish countryman and woman⁴", Terence Brown had also recalled the negative impact the

word had in Irish rural life. He illustrates this through the example of a stereotypical discourse on rural Ireland in which the "abstemiousness was somehow attractive to a Celtic people whose religious tradition had included masochistic excesses of penitential zeal and whose mythology and imaginative literature had combined male solidarity with heroic idealism⁵".

- 4 The very word, then, was closely associated with the idea of social and intellectual paralysis, of strict religious morals and sexual repression, of an overall dreary, mirthless, and submissive attitude of the Irish to existence in the face of historical adversity. Moreover, its widespread practice in terms of morals, gender relationships and religion inexorably led to a sense of inferiority and frustration. Taking up elements of a previous analysis, James M. Wilson points out that Jansenism moreover "signified Irish *cultural* as well as political failure" to meet up with the advances of "other European cultures that had entered with far less trauma onto the cosmopolitan riches of modernity⁶". Within artistic circles, the word likewise recalled the subservient condition of art, which itself was prone, moreover, to failure because of its subsidiary status in Irish cultural life – since nationalism and politics came foremost. Beckett's articles on Irish poets and artists underline their respective effort to either find a voice of their own, or conform instead to the ideas of the Irish revival, displaying then "a rupture of the lines of communication" between Irish art and European modernism⁷.
- 5 Samuel Beckett's mentor and friend in Trinity College, T. B. Rudmose-Brown, obviously shared this defiance towards religious thought. Rudmose-Brown is depicted by James Knowlson as a "highly unorthodox, even controversial figure⁸" who "interminably argued about religion⁹", was "a staunch believer in individual freedom¹⁰", and who "could become apopleptic with rage when speaking about the increasing stranglehold that he saw the Catholic Church exerting on the newly created Irish State¹¹". This belief found its way into his writings and lectures on 17th century French literature. In an essay, Rudmose-Brown fittingly represented Racine as a fellow free-thinker, avoiding to mention the French dramatist's complex relationship with Port-Royal¹². He argued that Racine shrewdly conformed to the social and religious conventions of his time only to preserve himself from needless pressure and his art from censorship: "Racine is a very great poet. He accepted the seventeenth century ideal outwardly; he may even have believed he accepted it inwardly. But he was too great a poet to act upon it¹³". Racine then, was too exceptional a genius to allow religion to pervade or corrupt his art. Grace McKingley's 1931 lecture notes on Racine indicate that Beckett also thought Jansenism to have only been incidental at one point upon Racine's writing, as "[F]rom 1675 on, Racine was losing his place in the court, so he may have gone back to Jansenism – *faute de mieux* – knowing the precarious faith of the king"¹⁴, and also pointed out that *Phèdre* "is the first play of Racine to bring in the sense of sin", or at least "appears to be" so, the point being that Racine states this same acknowledgement of sin as "a false awareness", which is "the final statement of the Racine invariable" where the tension between desire and the mind culminates to an unprecedented intensity.
- 6 Rudmose-Brown (and Beckett for that matter) was no isolated example of this kind of intellectual defiance towards the strictures of (loosely-defined) Jansenism, leading to a reappraisal of the place of seemingly religious writers in the European canon. Efforts to diminish the impact of Port-Royal upon authors of such unique genius as Racine and Pascal were pervasive throughout the first decades of the twentieth century – not just in a specific Irish context. In France, the 1923 celebration of Pascal's tricentenary

heightened a general uneasiness before the very idea of his professed sympathy for the Jansenist cause. Léon Brunschvicg and Maurice Blondel, amongst other foremost figures of that time, endeavoured to find some kind of compromise (as others did with Racine), and contended that what remained universal was his unique genius. Religion, then, would just have been an occasion for both to write in an unforgettable idiom. Full acceptance of both their attachment to Port-Royal only came later, after the late 1960's, as growing interest in Port-Royal's philosophy, as well as its literary and spiritual repercussions in the 17th century became a vast terrain for scholarly research.

- 7 On the other hand, the corresponding themes of solitude and withdrawal, of defiance towards authority and intellectual commitment to a given cause, were also closely connected with Port-Royal's *solitaires*, mainly through the figure of Pascal, something which certainly appealed to Beckett, just as Pascal's questioning of inherited forms of language did¹⁵. Indeed, Pascal wrote against the tedious and pompous rhetoric of scholastic treatises, advocating a style that would ideally respect an essential prerogative: "*Il faut de l'agréable et du réel, mais il faut que cet agréable soit lui-même pris du vrai*"¹⁶. Pascal's prose was admired and deemed unique for its brevity and clarity, and its haunting, syncopated and somewhat musical rhythm through repetition – as mainly illustrated in the *Pensées*. The *Letters* also encountered universal praise; in *Port-Royal* (1840-59), the work he dedicated most of his life to, still considered by many scholars as an invaluable source of information¹⁷, Sainte-Beuve considered it to be Pascal's true masterpiece – he quoted and approved Voltaire's phrase ("*toutes les sortes d'éloquence y sont renfermées*"¹⁸), and retained the idea that the work was unsurpassed in its brilliant display of all the forms of rhetorical virtuosity in the French language¹⁹.
- 8 Beckett had read passages from Sainte-Beuve's *Port-Royal* at TCD, and although his reticence to give sources has often been underlined, there is also evidence that he knew about the Logic of Port-Royal and its impact upon religious doctrine. Accordingly, Arnauld and Nicole's *La Logique ou l'Art de Penser* (1662) has often been mentioned for its likely appeal on Beckett, and critics such as Frederick N. Smith have even argued that Beckett's literary achievement could not be fully understood without the formalist description of language in the *Logique*²⁰.
- 9 Thus, Beckett's knowledge of, and engagement with the three major components of cultural Jansenism in the 17th century – the drama of Racine, the philosophy of Pascal and the logic of Port-Royal – cannot be disputed. My main concern in this essay, however, will be with the second of these, and more specifically with the vision and prose informing the *Pensées* or the *Lettres Provinciales*²¹. In particular I wish to confront Pascal's reflections on language with the interrogations which the reluctant choice of words leads to in *Malone Dies*, and consider the way in which the attitude towards language at once embraces and rejects the principles Pascal had laid out in his early works. In doing so, I will try and explain the reasons why Beckett, the arch agnostic, may have found in Pascal's work, and Jansenism at large, a paradoxical source of liberation – explain, in other words, how some of Beckett's writings could espouse the philosophical contours of Jansenism while simultaneously repudiating its religious tenets.

Pascal and the (in)validity of words

- 10 Although Pascal's ideas on language partly grew out of Descartes' contention that mathematical reasoning should ideally be adopted in all other intellectual disciplines, he

was keenly aware of man's failure to achieve such a sublime goal. In *De l'esprit géométrique*, he highlights the necessity, and difficulty, of arriving at consensus in language: insofar as ordinary words are inherently deficient, their validity and quality must be questioned so as to prevent the dispersal of meaning in signs, and the confusion that would follow. In order to do this, Pascal establishes distinctive rules for a clear and articulated discourse, relying on reason's capacity to discern truth from error. He then evokes the aspects of an ideal method in the art of thinking, consisting in the preliminary effort to define all the words and then prove each proposition. This method, however, remains inaccessible to man: "*méthode encore plus éminente et plus accomplie, mais où les hommes ne sauraient jamais arriver [...] méthode absolument impossible*²²."

- 11 This theoretical defiance against human language was partly compounded, however, by Pascal's own controversial use of language within the Port-Royal circle itself, for its combative tenor was thought to be unorthodox in the discussion of matters pertaining to religion. Thus, given that mockery and irony were excluded from the rhetorical canon and thus condemned in the discussion of religious matters, the style of the *Provinciales* letters was deemed (by some) "unchristian" and its inherent vehemence and subtle, relentless attack in the name of truth on moral duplicity, unsettling. Reasons for this disapproval were twofold: firstly, according to Mère Angélique the all too frequent use of "improper" and violent terms was, in many ways, an affront to the duty of silence and withdrawal owed to God; and secondly, it might have been a source of amusement but no way whatsoever towards conversion. As such, though serving a righteous cause, the letters stirred needless agitation²³.
- 12 Pascal's early endeavour to create an idiom based on the Cartesian principles of clarity and order, while remaining open to the uncertainties of polemics and humour, is reflected in the *Lettres Provinciales*. Letters I and XI are perfect illustrations of the spirit of geometry at work, and yet are no less remarkable for their subtle use of comedy to relate the contemporary debate on grace. From the opening passage of the first letter, Montalte evokes his utter ignorance of theological matters and endeavours to see through the situation, first telling his correspondent that "*je ne suis détrompé que d'hier*²⁴". In the subsequent pages, as he gains further insight into the matter, the uselessness of the dispute is suggested by endless disagreements on the meaning of given words. Thus, the entire articulation of the text (*grâce suffisante, grâce efficace, pouvoir prochain*) is composed of explicitly delimited moments, succeeding one another in an ample movement of linguistic discovery. Montalte, startled by the intricate subtleties in the definition of specific words he is presented with, comes to conclude that: "*il n'y aurait pas grand péril à le recevoir sans aucun sens, puisqu'il ne peut nuire que par le sens*²⁵." From the initial surprise, there arises a growing sense of incredulity and bewilderment before the unreality of the situation Montalte is confronted to. At one point, he says that: "*je ne dispute jamais du nom, pourvu qu'on m'avertisse du sens qu'on lui donne*²⁶", an elementary precaution which Arnauld's adversaries have evidently neglected.
- 13 In order to invalidate the Jesuits' attack on Arnauld, Pascal's fundamental argument from the onset lies in the distinction between the ordinary use of words and the various meanings these words have been endowed with – in the *Lettres Provinciales*, the diversity of opinions amongst the Jesuits themselves is but another significant manifestation of a somewhat overwhelming confusion which undermines the common stance they have taken. "Equivocal" terms are not only a mark of the weakness of language; they are subversive because of that inherent vacuity which allows concepts to be either invented

or distorted. As Montalte constantly discovers new and unknown words, he tells his friend that: "*Jusques-là j'avais entendu les affaires, mais ce terme me jeta dans l'obscurité*²⁷." Montalte eventually underlines the contradiction and lack of judgement in using ill-defined words, as this goes against one of the basic tenets laid down by Pascal in *De l'esprit géométrique*: "*Les définitions sont très libres, et elles ne sont jamais sujettes à être contredites; car il n'y a rien de plus permis que de donner à une chose qu'on a clairement désignée le nom qu'on voudra*²⁸."

- 14 Although this principle should be used with reasonable caution, insofar as endless definitions would in the end only serve to undermine meaning – "*Il faut seulement prendre garde qu'on n'abuse pas de la liberté qu'on a d'imposer des noms, en donnant le même à deux choses différentes*²⁹" – Pascal resorts to it in order to eliminate the possibility of his adversary's point of view being rationally justified. Similarly, after evoking various possible sources of disagreement with his Jesuit opponents, Montalte eventually cries out: "*c'est se jouer de paroles de dire que vous êtes d'accord à cause de termes communs que vous usez, quand vous êtes contraires dans le sens*³⁰." What is implied here is that if such a contradictory attitude to words and meaning is possible, then these words are utterly devoid of ontological stability.
- 15 Words are thus defined as a reduction of both meaning and reality even as this is the very condition for the possibility of language and communication. In order to facilitate speech, the patterns of reality have been simplified by men: far from holding the universal reach Descartes would have endowed it with³¹, language is approximate, and nominal choices are necessarily arbitrary³². In *De l'esprit géométrique*, Pascal says that "*ce n'est pas avoir l'esprit juste que de confondre par des comparaisons si inégales la nature immuable des choses avec leurs noms libres et volontaires, et dépendant du caprice des hommes qui les ont composés*³³".

On the (de)limitation of language in *Malone Dies*

- 16 Beckett's closeness to Pascal resides in the principle that the disjunction between the linguistic and ontological orders is a sign of the essential vacuity in language, the inferior realm to which all things human pertain. Since nominal definitions describe the tension of thought in the apprehension of things, no access to the nature of the objects of thought *per se*, or to the essence of verbal references, is ultimately possible.
- 17 Reflecting upon the nature of speech, the occasion that produces it, and the very moment in which it is produced, Beckett came to consider, in ways not unlike Port-Royal, the gulf between words and reality. That confusion should prevail upon the (Cartesian) endeavour to bestow permanent meaning ("signification") upon words and find an absolute language inspired from reason, brings about further correspondences with the ontological stance towards language and style the writers of Port-Royal sought to develop in their own time. Inasmuch as this ethical project is carried out in the early prose works and indeed throughout Beckett's writing career as a whole, studying the ways in which (probable) reference to the Port-Royalist philosophy of language and Pascal's influence are central will bring about possibilities of interpretation that go beyond linguistic formalism.
- 18 A revealing aspect in that respect is the thematic pattern of overwhelming incomprehension, the irreducibility of the real to words, that pervades the prose and indeed most of the drama. Watt, and Beckett's later characters, clearly express a sense of

alienation before habitual linguistic forms that seem to have been at one point imposed upon them and either search for a more adequate language or yearn to reach silence through the very exhaustion of words. Molloy, for instance, having (finally) broken away from Lousse, seems to be alluding to Pascal's insistence on axioms of order and incidence in a proposition, when he muses on the fact that "[T]here are things from time to time, in spite of everything, that impose themselves on the understanding with the force of axioms, for unknown reasons³⁴".

- 19 Malone, on the other hand, though striving to conform to "what reason counsels³⁵", comes close to Pascal's own endeavour in the *Provinciales*, as one of his constant preoccupations is to find the right word. In *Malone Dies* the problem is first addressed in terms of a tangible delimitation of language – Malone's preliminary step is to define succeeding moments of his reflection, by making a brief "inventory", and specifying from the onset, possibly in mock-recognition of the ineffectuality of Pascal's *esprit de finesse*, that his "desire is henceforward to be clear, without being finical³⁶". The ideal of an efficient discourse is immediately undermined by his "old quibbles", when he says that "[I]t is better to adopt the simplest explanation, even if it is not simple, even if it does not explain very much", and "at the last moment correct inadequacies", which he never does (or has time to). On finding a point (or points) of departure Malone at first is irresolute – he is soon to point out that he is "back at [his] old aporetics" – and hence decides to "speak of the things that are in my possessions". Consequently the desire to follow the principle of a clear and ordered discourse is immediately thwarted by an underlying, contradictory impulse, for Malone eventually admits that "reason has not much hold on me right now". It is as though the wish to conform to the ideal of a rational language were instantly impaired, just as the four stories Malone had intended to tell will be successively interrupted, and abandoned, the character having repeatedly failed to find the expected enjoyment (*divertissement*) sought with the advent of each new story, as the ongoing refrain ("what tedium") clearly suggests. Malone's principal dread is to linger on something that might bring about meaning or an occasion for reasoning. Indeed, as he recapitulates, much in the way of Pascal, his latest developments, he particularly insists on the fact "There are things I do not understand. But nothing to signify³⁷", and concludes that "I can go on" – at least temporarily.
- 20 The first story, interrupted by occasional digressions, is built up through contradiction. The expressions that are used can be related to Pascal through the very choice of words. In parallel fashion to Montalte's quest for truth, Sapo's quest for knowledge is doomed to fail from the onset, for "Somewhere in this turmoil thought struggles on³⁸" – hence, as Malone emphatically puts it, the desire to "let it wreak its dying rage" on others. Sapo's yearning for knowledge is somewhat contradicted by the fact that "He attended his classes with his mind elsewhere³⁹". Just as his taste for mathematics, however, seems to give him some kind of understanding of the real, so his interest in nature is held back because of an incapacity to grasp things coherently: "he did not know how to look at all these things, the looks he rained upon them taught him nothing about them⁴⁰". Impervious to rational methods, and alienated from the real (and others) as he is, Sapo still remains "tempted by the knowledge of these strange things" nature comprises, but emphasis is mainly put on his state of enviable stupefaction. Such subtle displacements, eventually leading to the destitution of metaphysics, seem to have become a constant aesthetic pattern in Beckett's own prose – albeit through the use of parody and humour. Even in the passages that most clearly refer to Cartesian principles we find that

inescapable Pascalian sense of contingency and misery that undermines the characteristic, formerly inalterable reliance on reason: this system of echoes, built throughout the entire work, finds one of its most significant forms in the impossibility to define essence, echoing back to the *Pensées*:

He was sorry he had not learnt the art of thinking [...] and sorry he could make no meaning of the babel raging in his head, the doubts, desires, imaginings and dreads. And a little less well endowed with strength and courage too he would have abandoned and despaired of ever knowing what manner of being he was, and how he was going to live, and lived vanquished, blindly, in a mad world, in the midst of strangers⁴¹.

- 21 Obviously, there are in this passage identifiable expressions that refer to specific Cartesian terms: phrases such as "manner of being", for instance, imitate Descartes' use of scholastic definitions as he establishes the actual distinction between body and soul – "modal distinction" being necessary to distinguish substance from manner⁴². Conformity with the Cartesian principle of method is respected and taken up insofar as the shape of language and discourse is concerned. However, the confusion that arises from that innermost incapacity or aversion to grasp the "first principles" of metaphysics enables language to give different shapes to the void. Negativity only becomes positive in the moment when that very incapacity or reluctance to approve the hypothesis deriving from the *cogito* and its consequences is irrevocably ascertained. The "art of thinking", with its Cartesian overtones, undoubtedly hints at Port-Royal as well. What is undermined here is the capacity to think adequately – allowing language to lapse into a form reminiscent of Pascal's many later elaborations on man's disproportion. Form and expression consequently become primary, displaying the ontological insufficiency of words, even as digression and hesitation are deliberately made to replace the defining principles of order and clarity.
- 22 In the *Pensées*, Pascal's fundamental argument is that the impossibility to affix meaning to words reflects the absence of centre: multiplicity (*diversité*) is but another declination of that inherent reality. The only solution for the individual seeking to establish his own subjective identity in the unsteady multiplicity of being is to accept an approximate one, because there always remains a discrepancy between the object of speech and the very source of speech itself, the 'I' that speaks. The prose therefore slips into a form of expression closer to Pascal, with the rejection of the very assets of Cartesian metaphysics, and logic.
- 23 Characters, or voices in the trilogy are therefore incapable of reasoning "*selon les lumières naturelles*", and their efforts are the constant object of mockery. In his description of Sapo's temperament Malone says: "Nothing is less like me than this patient, reasonable child, struggling all alone for years to shed a little light upon himself, avid of the least gleam, a stranger to the joys of darkness."⁴³

Conclusion

- 24 The most striking element of Pascal's prose and use of the comic is his unforgiving, mathematical precision in the demonstration he undertakes, leaving no alternative but for his adversaries to yield, or persist in error. Crucially, the comic participates in an aesthetic of imperfection, characterized by a systematizing function where endless listings of possibilities, pervasive paradoxes, digressions, and aporia, are combined with

the use of parody to subdue the voice of reason and undermine the classical imperatives of order and measure in a continuous exercise of impoverishment. Set in contrast with a clear and demonstrative style, the discourse of the Jesuits is characterized by the lack of coincidence between expression and meaning. If any connexions between Beckett's prose and the *Lettres Provinciales* were to be made, then, they would eventually reside in the Jesuits' use of words. As Malone knowingly says at one point, "Aesthetics are therefore on my side, at least a certain kind of aesthetics". All in all, the forms of discourse in Beckett's prose seem to fall short from corresponding to Pascal's (early) ideal of an absolute language, only to echo later with the *Unnamable* the (perhaps) more properly Jansenist theme of the absent centre.

NOTES

1. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (1959) in *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, (1966), London, Calder Press, 2003, p. 235.
2. Thomas O'Connor, *Irish Jansenists 1600-79: Religion and Politics in Flanders, France, Ireland and Rome*, Dublin, Four Courts Press, 2008, p. 15.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1985, p. 18.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
6. James Matthew Wilson, "Religious and Political Representations in Denis Devlin's poetry", *Eíre/Ireland*, 42.3-4, Fall/Winter 2007, p. 35-59.
7. Samuel Beckett, "Recent Irish Poetry", *Disjecta: Miscellaneous writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, [1983], London, Calder Press, 2001, p. 72. Beckett accordingly rejected the idea that art could bring meaning and coherence to modern life – whether in a specific (Irish) context or not. In his article on Denis Devlin's poetry, he says that art is to be thoroughly dissociated from "social reality", because it must stand by itself, as it emerges from the "need [...] whose end is its own end", requiring "minimum rational interference".
8. James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: the life of Samuel Beckett*, London: Bloomsbury, 1995, p. 48-50.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. See Raymond Picard, *La carrière de Jean Racine*, Paris, Gallimard/NRF, 1961. A (slight) readjustment is therefore necessary. Racine's attitude towards Port-Royal and Jansenism was indeed ambivalent throughout his life; though haunted by that heritage, he overtly adopted an ironic, even hostile stance towards its doctrine and people, but finally reconciled with Arnauld and Nicole, writing *Phèdre* (1677). However, throughout his life and work, he solely identified religion with the doctrine of Port-Royal, and in his plays,

the inner torment endured by his characters echoes in many ways the suffering of being Pascal described in the *Pensées*. Both Pascal and Racine struggled against the all too authoritative pressure that Port-Royal would have forced upon them, but eventually strove to defend it. Concerning the controversy on grace, Pascal himself had always vindicated his own freedom of thought: "Quelle raison en avez-vous? Vous dites que je suis janséniste, que le Port-Royal soutient les cinq propositions, et qu'ainsi je les soutiens. Trois mensonges." Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, ed. Michel Le Guern, Paris: Folio Classique, 2004, fragment 741.

13. T. B Rudmose-Brown, *French Literary Studies*, Dublin, Talbot Press, 1917, p. 14.

14. In *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett: uncollected Interviews with Samuel Beckett and Memories of Those Who Knew Him*, ed. James and Elizabeth Knowlson, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006, p. 307-308. The following quotations are taken from the same pages.

15. In addition, (discreet) references to Pascal and Jansenism can be found in his notes on Wilhem Windelband's *History of Philosophy*.

16. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (1670), éd. Michel Le Guern, Paris, Gallimard (Folio Classique), 2004, fragment 562.

17. See, for instance, Philippe Sellier's "Introduction" to *Port-Royal*, *op. cit.*, p. XXIX: "Aujourd'hui que les contestations tapageuses des nouvelles critiques des années 1960 et 1970 ont cédé la place à une intégration sereine de leurs apports, Sainte-Beuve s'impose comme le plus grand critique de notre histoire littéraire, et le Port-Royal comme son chef-d'œuvre."

18. Sainte-Beuve, *Port-Royal* [1840-1859], III.3, éd. Philippe Sellier, Paris, Laffont, 1994, p. 587.

19. From Beckett's correspondence we know that he also read Sainte-Beuve's *Conversations du lundi*, in which some articles are dedicated to the foremost figures of Port-Royal, mainly Racine and Pascal.

20. See "Beckett and the Seventeenth Century Port-Royal Logic", *Journal of Modern Literature*, Feb. 1976, Vol. 5.1, p. 99-109.

21. Another reference to Pascals writings can be found in "La Peinture de Van Velde ou Le Monde et le Pantalon", as Beckett directly quotes from the *Pensées*: "Impossible de vouloir autre l'inconnu, l'enfin vu, dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nulle part ; ni le seul agent capable de le faire cesser; ni le but, qui est de le faire cesser." The phrase is itself taken from the fragment on disproportion, with its depiction of God as a "sphère dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nulle part". Likewise, *The Unamiable's* "incompréhensible inquiétude" before the changeable aspect of the real, echoes back to Pascal's many musings on the incomprehensible nature of man, and the irrevocable disproportion between man and God after the Fall. See Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, *op. cit.*, fragment 185.

22. Pascal, *De l'esprit géométrique, Ecrits sur la grâce et autres textes*, Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 2000, p. 65-66.

23. See Dominique Descotes, "Force et violence dans le discours chez Antoine Arnauld", in *Antoine Arnauld, philosophie du langage et de la connaissance: études*, ed. Jean-Claude Pariente, Paris, Vrin, 1995, p. 35.

24. Blaise Pascal, *Les Provinciales* (1656-57), éd. Michel Le Guern, Paris, Gallimard (Folio Classique), 2005, p. 43.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 47-48.
26. *Ibid.*
27. *Ibid.*, p. 45.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Blaise Pascal, *De l'esprit géométrique*, p. 157.
30. Blaise Pascal, *Les Provinciales*, p. 47.
31. See Vincent Carraud, *Pascal, des connaissances naturelles à l'étude de l'homme*, Paris, Vrin, 2007, p. 153: "S'il [Pascal] révoque la scientia ou la sapientia universalis de Descartes, en tant qu'elle prétend accéder à l'universel, c'est parce qu'il découvre cet universel infini. L'infini (puissance de déconceptualisation), ruine ici l'accès proprement cartésien à l'universel. Dans "Disproportion de l'homme", l'infini subvertit le concept cartésien d'universel, Pascal y nie rien de moins que la *capacité* de l'entendement à tout constituer comme son objet".
32. See Delphine Reguig-Naya, *Le Corps des Idées: Pensées et poétiques du langage dans l'augustinisme de Port-Royal*, Arnauld, Nicole, Pascal, Mme de Lafayette, Racine, Paris, Honoré Champion, 2007, p. 69: "La pensée suscite le langage et lui donne sens mais elle ne peut régler la circulation effective de ce sens dans le dialogue qui peut se dérober au sens. [...] De fait, la définition du signe comme support sensible de l'idée interdit au langage de fonctionner d'emblée sur le mode d'une transitivité transparente. Le dualisme de la nature humaine se prolonge dans la faculté linguistique et peut priver la pensée de son exercice".
33. Blaise Pascal, *De l'esprit géométrique*, p. 80.
34. Samuel Beckett, *Molloy*, in *Three Novels*, p. 63.
35. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *Three Novels*, p. 181.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 181-2. The subsequent quotes are taken from the same pages.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
40. *Ibid.*
41. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
42. See for instance Descartes, *Les Principes de la Philosophie* (1644), Paris, Vrin, 2002, p. 84-5.
43. Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies*, in *Three Novels*, p. 192.

ABSTRACTS

Because of its doctrinal rigorousness and emphasis on penitential zeal, the pressure exerted by Catholicism in 1920's and 1930's Ireland has sometimes been likened to the growing influence of Jansenism in late 17th century France. In that respect, the biography and works of Samuel Beckett highlight an interesting scholarly dilemma. Although he went into a life-long exile precisely because he resented the culturally stultifying atmosphere of the Irish Free State, and may have found in the typically anti-religious stance of French intellectualism a confirmation of his own defiance against religious creeds, his early interest in the literary and philosophical manifestations of French Jansenism somehow complexifies the issue. As this article will argue, using a comparison between Pascal's *Pensées* and *Malone Dies*, Beckett's own brand of intellectualism seems to stand halfway between the fully antagonistic stance of the free thinker and the unconditional acceptance of an imposed doctrine.

En raison de la rigueur doctrinaire et de l'accent mis sur le zèle pénitent, la pression exercée par le Catholicisme dans l'Irlande des années 1920 et 1930 a parfois été assimilée à l'influence grandissante du Jansénisme sur la France de la seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle. De ce point de vue, la biographie et l'œuvre de Samuel Beckett présentent des ambiguïtés qui ne sont pas sans intérêt pour le chercheur. Si son exil durable fut largement motivé par le malaise que lui causait l'atmosphère culturellement étouffante qui régnait à l'époque de l'État Libre, et s'il a très probablement trouvé dans les positions traditionnellement anti-cléricales de l'intellectualisme à la française une confirmation de sa méfiance envers les croyances religieuses, l'intérêt qu'il a très tôt manifesté pour les productions littéraires et philosophiques du Jansénisme en France jette un éclairage plus complexe sur la question. Comme cet article entend le démontrer, en s'appuyant sur une comparaison entre les *Pensées* de Pascal et *Malone Dies*, la propre position intellectuelle de Beckett semble se situer quelque part entre le point de vue résolument conflictuel du libre penseur, et la soumission sans condition à une doctrine imposée.

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