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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5444>

DOI: 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5444

ISSN: 2259-8863

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Caen

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 May 2018

ISBN: 978-2-7535-7578-3

ISSN: 0183-973X

Electronic reference

Ciaran Ross, « “Miracles Of Frenzied Impotence”. Samuel Beckett’s Letters (1941-1956): Portrait Of ambivalence », *Études irlandaises* [Online], 43-1 | 2018, Online since 30 May 2018, connection on 29 September 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesirlandaises/5444> ; DOI : 10.4000/etudesirlandaises.5444

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- 1 Samuel Beckett's growth as a writer had always been a perilous balancing act between endorsing negation as a principle of composition and fending off destructiveness. Even at the height of his fame, Beckett's writing—"that bitter folly"¹—always left him with an incurable and irreducible feeling of frustration, disappointment and fundamental failure. As John Pilling outlines:

Nor could he ever rid himself of the knowledge that with every achievement (insofar as he could permit himself to think of it as such) went a sense of failure. Even with *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable* and *Waiting for Godot* written, Beckett can be found, in the third of the *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, saying: 'There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said'².

- 2 Beckett's second volume of letters for the 1941-1956 period, which will be the focus of this article, offers a much more nuanced picture of his vexed relationship with his writing and with himself as writer. While Beckett continues to predict failure and dread success, to doubt the result and purpose of his work, we also see a writer who is unflinchingly certain about the need to write, and who will remain committed to his art throughout. To use a painterly analogy, given Beckett's well-documented passion for art and the role of "visual thinking" in his narrative and theatrical writings³, he is the reluctant "subject" of his own critical self-portraiture, someone who feels radically ambivalent about his writing practice, an ambivalence that lies between an uncompromising commitment to writing, to success, to expression, albeit to what Beckett will term a "non-expressive" art, and on the other hand, a growing apathy, a revulsion that turns into hatred of the work and of its undoubted success. My contention is that Beckett's commitment and revulsion are not so much opposed as interdependent⁴.

- 3 The letters under consideration constitute some six hundred pages of correspondence with friends, lovers, publishers, translators, aspiring writers, critics, academics, actors and theatre directors. One obvious reason for their profusion is that Beckett from 1949 spent a lot of his time in his secondary residence, near the village of Ussy sur Marne (East of Paris) and was obliged albeit reluctantly to visit his family in Foxrock—his mother died in 1950 and his brother, Frank, in 1954⁵. They cover the most turbulently creative period during which the Irish author produced his two most famous plays (*En attendant Godot*, *Fin de partie*) and his great prose writings (trilogy) that established and secured his reputation in the academy. It is also the period that brought about the most defining transformations in Beckett's writing career: from the English language writer only known by a narrow group of readers to the writer known best for works first written in French⁶; from the writer of prose fictions to arguably the most important dramatist of his era admired by a growing international audience. The 1941-1956 period is therefore a time when Beckett was forced to come to terms with success and to publically defend, if not explain, his work.
- 4 More specifically, from the watershed of *Godot's* success (1953), the letter that will be increasingly common is one that is informative and direct rather than exploratory and complex, the 'post *Godot*' letters being a means for Beckett to 'protect' his work by orchestrating and controlling the shifting boundaries between professional and private, between Beckett the writer and Beckett the man. Consequently the backbone of the volume in question is provided by a sequence of exploratory letters written between 1946 and 1948 to the art critic Georges Duthuit. This is the crucial period of innovation where Beckett turns to French and writes short stories, a trilogy of novels and the first of the plays *Eleutheria*.

"Getting oneself in perspective"

- 5 In an extraordinary moment of lucidity in 1948, Beckett writes to his great friend Thomas MacGreevy:

I see a little clearly at last what my writing is about and I feel I have perhaps 10 years courage and energy to get the job done. The feeling of getting oneself in perspective is a strange one, after so many years of expression in blindness. Perhaps it is an illusion⁷.
- 6 While it is never clear what Beckett sees "at last" about his writing, the letters show a writer trying to wring sense from his writing, for what he knows cannot make sense in any obvious, formal or rational manner. "Where can one find the terms", asks Beckett, "the rhythms, the pantings, without leaving the treasure-house of our vulgar nonsense, which does rather show us up"⁸. Even words such as "poverty" and "bareness" are still redolent of excess: "I feel myself moving away from ideas of poverty and bareness. They are still superlatives"⁹. Yet Beckett will choose terms, preferring the least superlative ones, to give "expression" to his predicament and to his wider aesthetic concern with inexpressiveness, such as: refusal, no, indigence, impotence, impossibility, passivity, absence of relation, inexpressiveness. These are a clear extension of an earlier aesthetic domain that Beckett had been mapping out since his essay on Proust (1931), his interest in Geulincx when writing *Murphy*¹⁰ and his German letter to Axel Kaun (1937).

- 7 In his early Proust essay Beckett assumed that art had to enact a labour of radical negation, the undoing of every (pseudo-) relation, the destruction of every surface¹¹. In the German letter Beckett developed the idea that literary language must negate itself, that is, be self-destructive and that literature must in fact be turned against itself¹². This fidelity to negativity was to inspire his views on art and on the role of the artist that will be expounded in *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, (1949) albeit in a tongue-in-cheek fashion. There in his discussion about Van Velde's painting, Beckett aphoristically reminds us that "to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world"¹³. But, despite Beckett's rhetoric of negatives and nothings, (that "there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express"), the artist's "fidelity to failure" is anything but negative¹⁴. Artistic failure is "an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation"¹⁵.
- 8 The letters, rooted as they are in Beckett's personal life, in his relationships and friendships, are much less declamatory and aphoristic than the earlier pronouncements, particularly when it comes to discussing art and the role of the artist. The shift in tone is markedly more humble, even apologetic. "I used to think all this work was an effort, necessarily feeble, to express the nothing", explains Beckett in his first reply to the then unknown Aidan Higgins:
- It seems rather to have been a journey, irreversible, in gathering thinglessness, towards it. Or also. Or ergo. And the problem remains entire or at last arising ends. Forgive these personal considerations, about no one¹⁶.
- 9 As Dan Gunn explains, there is always an intimate correlation between what Beckett is living and what he is thinking through in the literary and aesthetic fields¹⁷. The letters written from Dublin in 1948 to the art critic and friend, Georges Duthuit, testify to this.

"Beneath an unforgettable sky"

- 10 The letters Beckett sends to Duthuit are the starting point of what will turn out to be a long passionate debate between writer and critic about what could be loosely called non-expressive art. But while Beckett strives to formulate ideas about inexpressiveness, he is also emotionally coming to terms with what could be described as the pre-mourning of his mother, May Beckett, who will die two years later. So we find Beckett at his most expressive, his most lyrical, even his most intimate when describing his mother:
- I keep watching my mother's eyes, never so blue, so stupefied, so heartrending, eyes of an endless childhood, that of old age. (...) 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 seeing¹⁸.
- 11 and at his most intellectually passionate when thinking about himself as a writer:
- You know I really have no wish to be set free, nor to be helped, by art or by anything else (...) Nothing will be sufficiently against for me, not even pain...¹⁹ (...) I shall never know clearly enough how far space and time are unutterable, and me caught up somewhere in there. (...) The mistake, the weakness at any rate, is perhaps to want to know what one is talking about. In defining literature, to one's satisfaction, even brief, where is the gain, even brief²⁰?
- 12 Having stated this impossibility he adds: "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"²¹. Such personal and critical insights are immediately rubbished by the first sentence of the next letter from Dublin: "yesterday I wrote you an unbelievable silly letter" (in French: "une lettre on ne peut plus con"). Notwithstanding, a mood and tone of wistfulness pervades his description of the Dublin mountains as Beckett gets us to feel the almost epiphanic quality about his romantic surroundings: "dripping bracken, in this light from the setting sun, illuminating the storm from below", before giving expression to the urgent feeling that:

we need a motive to blow up all this dismal mixture. It is surely to be sought where everything must 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 (...). *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 works²².

- 13 As we can see in the letter's manner of performance, expressing the non-expressive can only incur disavowals, deflections ("no, something else") and negatives as if the act of saying can only be subjected to further failure ("a necessity worth trying, and one which will never work"). The letter ends by returning to this epiphanic setting of nature: "a great weariness suddenly, and need for darkness (...) and the slow letting go of things, the trees, the wind, failure of nerve and efforts of will past and to come"²³. And, predictably enough, in the next letter we have Beckett undermining his previous missal, and pleading with Duthuit for forgiveness:

Forgive me now and always for all my stupidities and blanknesses, I am only a tiny little part of a creature, self-hating vestiges, remains of an old longing, when I was little, for rounding out, even on a small radius. That shuts you in your whole life long. And one drives in vain towards figurelessness²⁴.

'The avalanche of one's impossibility at every fragment of a moment'

- 14 The Duthuit debate continues throughout 1949 giving rise to Beckett's most lyrical ardent outpourings which form the fiery core of his letters.
- 15 Duthuit had asked Beckett to write something to promote the artist Bram Van Velde, whose abstract paintings Beckett greatly admired because it is an art made of major and drastic renunciation, "an absence of relations of whatever kind"²⁵. The personal affinity Beckett feels is explicitly expressed when he says: "and I shall tend irresistibly to pull Bram's case over towards my own, since that is the condition of being in it and talking about it, and then for other reasons less easy to admit"²⁶. Even more directly, in a letter to the painter himself, Beckett admits: "I am searching a way of capitulating without giving up utterance—entirely"²⁷.
- 16 A debate ensues in the letters as to what Van Velde's qualities are. The premise for both men is what Beckett calls "the avalanche of one's impossibility at every fragment of a moment"²⁸, that is, human experience cannot be captured in art, so mimetic art is always a failure, when not complacent and mendacious²⁹. By contrast Van Velde's art refuses and disallows the very possibility of having any relation with any discernible reality:

It is not the relation with this or that order of opposite that is refused, but the state of being in relation as such, the state of being in front of. 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 same³⁰.

- 17 However, Beckett is not simply attracted to Van Velde because the latter is the first to repudiate relation in all its forms, the one who "paints the impossibility of painting, the lack of all relation, object, subject"³¹. In fact Beckett doesn't deny the fact that Van Velde may even attempt to reconnect the outside with the inside. But, as Beckett claims:

What matters is that he does not succeed. His painting is, if you will, the impossibility of reconnecting. There is, if you like, refusal and refusal to accept refusal. That perhaps is what makes this painting possible. For my part, it is the *gran rifiuto* that interests me, not the heroic wriggling to which we owe this splendid thing. It is awful to have to say so. What interests me is what lies beyond the outside-inside where he does his striving, not the scale of the striving itself³².

- 18 Such lengthy formulations terminate with the familiar disclaimer "I am no longer capable of writing in any sustained way about Bram or about anything. I am no longer capable of writing *about*"³³. Indeed years later Beckett will dismiss the whole sequence of the art letters with Duthuit as having been a failure:

In the end, I think that our preoccupations are of two very different orders as if separated by a zone of shadow where, exiled from each other, we vainly seek a meeting point (...) I am not someone to talk art with, and on that subject I am not likely to utter anything other than my own obsessive concerns³⁴.

'To write is impossible but not yet impossible enough'

- 19 The letters from and about Ussy show us a Beckett who needs to find a space that concretely facilitates such "obsessive" or "impossible" concerns with writing: "I am not very sure when I shall go back", writes Beckett to Jérôme Lindon from Ussy, "I need a thousand years of silence, my own above all"³⁵. If there is no major letter mourning the death of May Beckett, it is perhaps because living out in Ussy creates for Beckett a space where he can mourn, "a space where the sort of dispossession or impossibility—not strictly nameable as such—(...) is the more readily perceived and achieved", to quote Dan Gunn³⁶. Indeed it is nature's inarticulateness, its speechlessness in the form of the garden at Ussy that enables Beckett to acknowledge absence and loss (his mother's and his brother's):

tired, inert and of a stupidity hitherto unequalled even by me and with no other desire than to potter about in my walled field until the black oxen comes home³⁷,

- 20 and also to symbolise the *impossibleness* of writing:

My little texts are at a standstill... Decidedly I am sick of writing, the way I write. I feel like burying myself, burying ourselves, in this beet-root growing hole... what a spineless creature³⁸. (...)

I cannot manage to interest myself in work; past, present and to come. I ask for nothing more than to be able to bury myself in this beetroot-growing hole, scratch the earth and howl at the clouds³⁹.

- 21 Other times when the work does advance, however slowly, such as *L'Innommable*: "little fly-splashes against the window", it is "when hoeing and weeding permit"⁴⁰. Whenever

he feels it would be better to give up writing, disgusted as he is by his inability to achieve the goal he has set himself, Beckett at least takes refuge in "digging" holes or what he calls "ground-clearing"⁴¹, even if this is not always possible: "impossible to do anything with the earth, half frozen, half muddy. I long to be digging, digging over (in French "labourer") as they say here"⁴². When he does dig, the holes he digs are graves of a sort, an objective correlative perhaps of his negative side, of his instinct for mourning and melancholia: "the holes are ready but no trees as yet (...) they'll all die long before the Spring to judge by the look of the holes"⁴³. Yet for all that, digging "over" or digging "in" provides an antidote to the stress and strain of rehearsals in Paris:

I am tired and depressed with all this fuss of rehearsal and the feeling of barking up the wrong monkey-bread and look forward to the moment when I can dig in again here and see are there any bits left of the solitary worth trying to stick together⁴⁴.

- 22 Whether sent from Ussy or Paris, letters that comment either the work in progress or the work already published, are accompanied by the same despair and crippling self-disparagement. As always with Beckett the impossibility of writing is paradoxically that which makes writing still possible. So in a letter to Barney Rosset, in 1954, shortly before the death of Frank Beckett, we find Beckett musing over the various ongoing Spanish and German translations of the trilogy wondering if he will return to writing in English before admitting that: "it's hard to go on with everything loathed and repudiated as soon as formulated, and in the act of formulation and before formulation". After evoking his *Textes pour Rien*—"very short abortive texts that express the failure to implement the last words of *L'Innommable*: 'il faut continuer, je vais continuer'", he finishes by alluding to his current writing:

At the moment I have a man crawling along a corridor in the rock in the dark, but he's due to vanish any day... 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 days⁴⁵.

- 23 Unsurprisingly, in the letters he sends from Foxrock around the time of the death of his brother, Frank, Beckett sees his own life and indeed his literary career entering into some fantasised terminal stage. Writing from Dublin to Jacoba Van Velde, in 1954, he notes: "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"⁴⁶. On completing *L'Innommable* he laments to Barney Rosset: "You know, Barney, I think my writing days are over. *L'Innommable* finished me or expressed my finishedness (...) my only interest in life at the moment is to keep on my feet until it is over"⁴⁷.
- 24 At times the voice we hear in these letters becomes uncannily close to that of Beckett's fabled incapacitated narrator-characters where there is no longer any distinction between "living" and "writing". "Forgive all these details about my work", Beckett tells his old friend MacGreevy in January 1948, "my life seems to be little else"⁴⁸. Like Molloy, Beckett feels he is in "a ditch somewhere near the last stretch and would like to crawl up on it"⁴⁹. The reader familiar with the postures of impotence and self-deprecation that characterize the trilogy, will easily identify the author of the following self-descriptions:

That there are superior minds (no irony) which know and are able to. I can readily grant. But when one is not gifted, really stupid and clumsy, what is one to go in for? Cunning, Art? Keeping quiet? Silence will come soon enough, not from pride, but

from weariness of speech⁵⁰. (...) On paper all I'm good for now is going on into silliness, ignorance, impotence, and silence⁵¹.

Commitment and revulsion: Beckett's public posture of authorial diminishment

25 However "deficient in the professional outlook"⁵², Beckett unavoidably becomes a public figure, and will be irremediably "damned to fame", to quote the title of James Knowlson's authorized biography. However, this will not prevent him from showing his gratitude, as he does, to those who support him and will continue to support him in his writing career such as Roger Blin: "if I ever get there, it will be thanks to you. I've never been able to put into words how fond I am of you, or show it"⁵³ and Jérôme Lindon with whom he was to develop a life-long friendship: "Lindon in the great kindness of his heart is dealing with everything himself and I must say I am grateful to him"⁵⁴.

26 When fame comes, as it does, almost overnight, such recognition is something from which Beckett constantly distances himself by putting it down to "misunderstandings":

I am really very tired of *Godot* and the endless misunderstanding it seems to provoke everywhere. How can anything so skeleton simple be complicated as it has been is beyond me ⁵⁵ (...) I cannot help feeling that the success of *Godot* has been very largely the result of a misunderstanding, or of various misunderstandings⁵⁶.

27 Yet disparagement and disgust quickly kick in: on *Godot*'s instant box-office popularity, Beckett writes to his friend cum mistress Pamela Mitchell: "how I dislike that play now. Full house every night, it's a disease"⁵⁷. Indeed the more successful Beckett becomes and the brighter his international aura shines, the more vicious the self-revulsion seems to become. "My God how I hate my own work. Have started the impossible job of translating *L'Innommable* and gave it up the other day in loathing", Beckett writes confidentially to his mistress, before ending with: "forgive wretched letter. At least it's a sign of life"⁵⁸. Similarly, in the midst of his supervision of the German and Spanish translations of the trilogy (1954), Beckett is: "sick of all this old vomit and despair(s) more and more of ever being able to puke again"⁵⁹. Similarly, while working on the proofs of *Malone meurt*, he finds that "the work is profoundly distressing, now that it is too late to bury it"⁶⁰.

28 Notwithstanding, the letters have us hear the public voice of a recognised author who remains adamantly attached to his work, to protecting its integrity or its "wretchedness", to quote Beckett from a rare letter of indignation he sends to one Simone de Beauvoir who decides not to publish the second part of Beckett's story "Suite":

I am not asking you to go back on your decision. But it is quite impossible for me to evade the duty I feel towards a creature of mine. Forgive these grand words. If I were afraid of ridicule I would keep quiet. I have sufficient trust in you, in the end, simply to tell you what my feelings are. They are as follows: you are giving me the chance to speak only to retract it before the words have had time to mean anything. You are immobilizing an existence at the very moment at which it is about to take its definitive form. There is something nightmarish about that ... It is simply that *there exists a wretchedness which must be defended to the very end, in one's work and outside it*⁶¹.

29 The strong authorial stance Beckett takes here contrasts dramatically with what will become his familiar public posture, examples of which we have already seen, that is to

say someone who projects "for himself instead an image of authorial impoverishment, indigence and impotence, a diminished author-ity", to quote Gontarski⁶². While Beckett's legendary resistance to explication and interpretation, "a resistance to and incapacity for self-reflection"⁶³, might also be seen as an aspect of the care he takes to protect his "creatures"⁶⁴, it must also be seen as Beckett's resistance to the supposed privilege of authorship.

- 30 An example of how Beckett uses a public posture of diminished authority as a means of deflection for him, can be seen in his response to Michel Polac who had written asking Beckett for ideas about *En attendant Godot*. Recoiling from the role of omniscient author, Beckett undermines having any knowledge of what the play is about, his defense consisting of disentangling himself completely from his characters and stories, as if he no longer "knows" them. The Polac letter is a peculiar letter in that Beckett takes a new paragraph for each statement as if responding to a criminal indictment, so we have four paragraphs beginning with protests of ignorance (in French, "je ne sais pas"). For example, as regards his ideas about theatre, Beckett replies: "I have no ideas about theatre. I know nothing about it. I do not go to it. That is allowable". As to the play, he explains that he wrote it, "having no ideas about it either":

I know no more about this play than anyone who manages to read it attentively.

I do not know in what spirit I wrote it.

I know no more of the characters than what they say, what they do and what happens to them.

- 31 As regards his four illustrious characters, Beckett can only manage: "I have only been able to know a little about them by staying very far away from the need to understand; they owe you an explanation perhaps. Let them get on with it. Without me. They and I have settled our accounts"⁶⁵.
- 32 Fortunately, Beckett's legendary resistance to explication is as frequently resisted as it is asserted and one finds Beckett actually extending his authority, often insisting on the primacy of the playwright in the process of performance, and, so projecting an authorial presence into the theatrical process. In certain letters Beckett takes up the role of "advisor" on productions of his work offering insights, even inviting discussion and questions from friends like Roger Blin, Alan Schneider, Georges Duthuit or Barney Rosset and also from his translators (Jacoba Van Velde, Elmar Tophoven) with whom he starts lifelong key collaborations. "Don't think of me as a nietman", he explains to Barney Rosset in a discussion about symbols in *Godot*, "The idea is all right. But I think the variety of symbols is a bad mistake"⁶⁶. Particularly bothered by the way Estragon's trousers don't fall down properly, Beckett explains to Roger Blin, the first director of *En attendant Godot*, that "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"⁶⁷. To Alan Schneider who requests some technical indications as to how to play Pozzo, Beckett's reply comes as an instruction: "he is a hypomaniac and the only way to play him it to play him mad"⁶⁸. Yet when contacted by the actor who plays Pozzo, Sir Ralph Richardson, Beckett is disinclined to oblige:

Too tired to give satisfaction I told him that all I knew about Pozzo was in the text, that if I had known more I would have put it in the text, and that this was true also of the other characters. Which I trust puts an end to that star⁶⁹.

- 33 Paradoxically when he is saying no to Edouard Coester who approaches him with a view to producing a musical accompaniment to *Godot*, Beckett's no turns out to be a generative starting-point for would be adaptations of the play. After reiterating his

position to Coester: "that would be a great mistake (...) you speak as a musician, I as a writer, I fear that our two positions are irreconcilable"⁷⁰, Beckett remains open to the idea of musical interpretation reminding Coester that the wider musical issue in *Godot* is no other than that of silence:

For what is at issue is 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. I find it hard to see it as an integral part of a sound-world.

But this drama which you seem to have felt so keenly, if you thought fit to translate it, however freely into pure music, that would interest me a great deal and give me great pleasure. And then what about silence itself, is it not still waiting for its musician⁷¹?

- 34 Inevitably, it is to Georges Duthuit that Beckett will outline his most explicit theatrical credo of art as non-expression, this coming as a response to Duthuit's request for directorial details concerning the stage set of *En attendant Godot*:

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... *Nothing*, it expresses *nothing*, it is an opaque no one bothers to question anymore. Any formal specificity becomes impossible. If it really is essential to know where they are (and in my view the text makes it clear enough), let the words look after that (...) *Indigence*, we can never say it often enough, and, decidedly, painting is incapable of that. Please do not mind my unloading all this: it must irritate you. I am spilling my guts out (...)

I do not believe in collaboration between the arts, I want a theatre reduced to its own means, speech and acting, *without* painting, *without* music, *without* embellishments. That is Protestantism if you like, we are what we are. The setting has to come out of the text, without adding to it⁷².

- 35 Similarly, to Carlheinz Caspari who is staging the German première of *Godot*, Beckett gives a magisterial explanation of why the play is not, and never can be expressionist:

Nor is it for me a symbolist play, I cannot stress that too much. First and foremost, it is a question of something that happens, almost a routine, and it is this dailiness and this materiality, in my view, that need to be brought out In any event there is nothing to be gained by giving them clear form. The characters are living creatures, only just living perhaps, they are not emblems⁷³.

- 36 As to the identity of *Godot*, Beckett contents himself with the tantalising comment:

I myself know him less well than anyone, having never known even vaguely what I needed. If his name suggests the heavens, it is only to the extent that a product for promoting hair growth can seem heavenly. Each person is free to put a face on him⁷⁴.

Conclusion

- 37 The letters portray Beckett as a writer who invariably performs a perilous balancing act between writing and living⁷⁵, and those uneasy compromises between love and hate, attachment and revulsion, commitment and despair. Replete with disavowals, apologies, contradictions, and denials, the epistles are as irreconcilable, paradoxical and self-effacing as the work and the life they allude to.
- 38 If we choose to read them as having a dialogic relation to the work, the letters function, at least rhetorically, to extend the work, to repeat its voices and mirror back its postures of impotence. Despite the revulsion and aversion they express, they also serve

to defend and protect the work by being paradoxically open and closed to "dialogue", encouraging and discouraging explication and interpretation. They are ultimately a means for Beckett to stake control "over" a work in relation to which he can choose to be "present" (as authoritative omniscient author) or "absent" as "diminished authority" or maybe both.

- 39 Above all, the epistles are ambivalent about themselves, about their very possibility as "letters" and about the relations that they establish albeit reluctantly. They are, in the final instance, creative miracles, "miracles of frenzied impotence", to quote Beckett's description of one of Van Velde's paintings⁷⁶. It is not that they always say "No", for if they do, this is Beckett's way of paradoxically saying "Yes" to the necessity to write, even if that means, as it must, saying yes to the impossibility and hopelessness that underlie "that bitter folly"⁷⁷. "never again can I admit anything but the act without hope, calm in its damnedness"⁷⁸.

NOTES

1. Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *The Beckett Trilogy*, London: Picador, 1979, p. 276.
2. John Pilling, *Beckett before Godot*, Cambridge U.P.1997, p. 2.
3. I am referring here to Lois Oppenheim's fine study: *The Painted Word: Samuel Beckett's Dialogue with Art*, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2000. On the question of Beckett's visual thinking, see: pp. 157-161. For Beckett's interest in artist's self-portraits and self-portraiture, see Mark Nixon's study, *Samuel Beckett's German Diaries, 1936-1937*, London: Bloomsbury, 2011, pp. 152-160. Reading the letters in terms of a painterly genre is all the more apt given the fact that painters through the ages have endeavoured to probe into the mysteries of their own selves by painting themselves (one thinks of Rembrandt and Van Gogh). See Nixon on this point, p. 153. Beckett's letters therefore lend themselves to be read as ambivalent "self-interpretations" rather than conventional self-representations, the writer writing about himself and his writing.
4. Freud characterized ambivalence in terms of the simultaneous stress on contradictory aspects: contradiction, opposite, negation. In general, the term refers to the co-existence of love and hate in someone but differs from mixed feelings in that the two halves of the ambivalent feeling are interdependent. See, Ross Skelton (ed.), *The Edinburgh International Encyclopedia of Psychoanalysis*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh UP, 2006, p. 20.
5. *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1941-1956*, eds George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dans Gunn and Lois More Overbeck, Cambridge and New-York: Cambridge UP, 2011, p. lxxiv. See, by the same editors and publisher, the other three volumes of Beckett's correspondence: *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1929-1940* (2009), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1957-1965* (2014), *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, 1966-1989* (2016).

6. "It is perhaps the fact of writing directly in English which is knotting me up. Horrible language, which I still know too well", SB to Georges Duthuit, 28 June 1949, p. 170.
7. SB to Thomas MacGreevy, 18 March, 1948, p. 75.
8. SB to Georges Duthuit, 12 August 1948, p. 102.
9. SB to Georges Duthuit, 30 March or 6 April 1950, p. 195.
10. Commenting upon the irrationality and negativity of his first novels for Sighle Kennedy, Beckett explained that the real point of departure of any investigation into *Murphy* should be the concept of "nothing", a "nothing" that appears in Democritus's famous "Nothing is more than nothing", (and later in *Malone Dies*) and in Guelincx's statement, *Ubi nihil vales, nihil veli* [you will not want anything where you are worth nothing] (*Disjecta. Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment by Samuel Beckett*, ed. Ruby Cohn, New York: Grove Press, 1984, p. 113).
11. Shane Weller, *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism*, Oxford: Legenda, 2005, p. 45.
12. In that letter, Beckett had abstractly opposed a literature of the *Unwort*—"Unword"—to Joyce's "apotheosis of the word" Beckett likening (his own) language to "a veil which one has to tear apart in order to get to those things (or the nothingness) lying behind it". SB to Axel Kaun, 9 July 1937, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929-1940*, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, and Lois More Overbeck, (eds), Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009, p. 518.
13. Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, London: Calder, 1970, p. 125.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
15. *Ibid.* Another important moment or stage in Beckett's *via negativa* was the self-acclaimed vision he had in his mother's room, towards the end of the war. There he realized the importance of accepting the dark side he had struggled to repress and use it as a source of creativity. In other terms, we could say he had formally decided not to conquer the negative, but to use it.
16. SB to Aidan Higgins, 8 February, 1952, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1941-1959*, p. 319.
17. *Ibid.*, p. lxxiv.
18. *Ibid.*, SB to Georges Duthuit, 2 August, 1948, p. 92.
19. SB to Georges Duthuit, 11 August, 1948, p. 97.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 98.
21. *Ibid.*
22. SB to Georges Duthuit, 12 August 1948, pp. 102-103, (my emphasis).
23. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
24. SB to Georges Duthuit, 13 August 1948, p. 104.
25. SB to Georges Duthuit, 9 March, 1949, p. 139.
26. *Ibid.*
27. SB to Bram Van Velde, 14 January 1949, p. 114.
28. SB to Georges Duthuit, 12 August 1948, p. 103.
29. In the course of one discussion, Beckett reminds Duthuit of an earlier "angry article" he had written criticizing modern Irish poets for their unawareness of "the vanished object", "the only terrain accessible to the poet, (being) the no man's land

that he projects round himself, rather as the flame projects its zone of evaporation" (SB to Georges Duthuit, 2 March 1949, p. 131).

30. SB to Georges Duthuit, 9 March 1949, p. 140.

31. *Ibid.*

32. *Ibid.* (Beckett's emphasis). The intertext here is Dante's *Inferno*: in Canto 3, Dante describes the neutrals as people who failed to choose either good or evil in their lifetimes and so are condemned to exist in a kind of ante *Inferno* or a pre-Hell of a sort both Heaven and Hell having denied them entry.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 141 (Beckett's emphasis).

34. SB to Georges Duthuit, 2 March 1954, p. 473.

35. SB to Jérôme Lindon, 19 August 1952, p. 338.

36. *Ibid.*, p. lxxii.

37. SB to Barney Rosset, 18 October 1954, p. 507.

38. SB to Mania Péron, 18 September 1951, p. 298.

39. SB to Georges Belmont, 28 September 1951, p. 298.

40. SB to Georges Duthuit, 10 September 1951, p. 295.

41. "Beautiful weather for the past few days. Orgy of digging, ground clearing rather" (SB to Georges Duthuit, 10 January, 1951, p. 224).

42. SB to Georges Duthuit, 3 January 1951, p. 217.

43. SB to Pamela Mitchel, 25 November 1953, p. 420.

44. SB to Barney Rosset, 1 December 1956, p. 681.

45. SB to Barney Rosset, 11 February 1954, p. 457.

46. SB to Jacoba Van Velde, 20 August 1954, p. 495.

47. SB to Barney Rosset, 21 August 1954, p. 497. Around this time, Beckett frequently quotes Leopardi's: "can't manage anything at the moment, not just the hope but the *desire* is dead" (SB to Patrick Waldberg, 29 June 1955, p. 536 (Beckett's emphasis)).

48. SB to Thomas MacGreevy, 4 January 1948, p. 71.

49. SB to Alan Schneider, 21 June 1956, p. 628.

50. SB to Georges Duthuit, 30 March 1950, p. 196.

51. SB to Georges Belmont, 8 August 1951, p. 279.

52. SB to Aidan Higgins, 8 February 1952, p. 319.

53. SB to Roger Blin, 29 January 1955, p. 518.

54. SB to Barney Rosset, 21 August 1954, p. 497.

55. SB to Pamela Mitchell, 18 August 1955, p. 540.

56. SB to Alan Schneider, 11 January 1956, p. 594.

57. SB to Pamela Mitchell, 31 October 1953, p. 413.

58. SB to Pamela Mitchell, 12 March 1956, p. 606 and p. 607.

59. SB to Barney Rosset, 23 January 1954, p. 448.

60. SB to Maria Péron, 18 September 1951, p. 298.

61. SB to Simone de Beauvoir, 25 September 1946, pp. 41-42, (my emphasis).

62. S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (eds), *Beckett after Beckett*, Gainesville, University Press of Florida, 2006, pp. 142-143.
 63. *Ibid.*, p. 141.
 64. Such resistance "can be viewed either as an aspect of the revulsion or as an aspect of the care and defence—or even perhaps of both", writes Dan Gunn, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, p. lxxxii.
 65. SB to Michel Polac, 23 January 1952, p. 316.
 66. SB to Barney and Loly Rosset, 14 December 1953, p. 431.
 67. SB to Roger Blin, 9 January 1953, p. 350.
 68. SB to Alan Schneider, 27 December 1955.
 69. SB to Barney Rosset, 18 October 1954, p. 507.
 70. SB to Edouard Coester, 23 March 1954, p. 477.
 71. SB to Edouard Coester, 11 March 1954, p. 476. Even if Coester will be finally turned down, we find Beckett, two years later, approving Goddard Lieberman's gramophone recording of *Godot* which he considers to have been "done with success and discretion" (SB to Goddard Lieberman, 23 September 1956, p. 655).
 72. SB to Georges Duthuit, 3 January 1951, pp. 218-219 (my emphasis).
 73. SB to Carlheinz Caspari, 25 July 1953, p. 391.
 74. *Ibid.*
 75. "My weakness for the limping and my fear of the achieving" (SB to George Belmont, 8 August 1951, p. 279).
 76. SB to Georges Duthuit, 10 September, 1951, p. 294. (In French: "miracles d'impuissance forcenée").
 77. *Ibid.*
 78. SB to Georges Duthuit, 9 June 1949, p. 166.
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ABSTRACTS

In this article devoted to Samuel Beckett's second volume of letters (1941-1956), I trace the development of a highly ambivalent relationship between Beckett and his own work, of his growing commitment to a non-expressive art, and question Beckett's use of his public posture of "diminished author-ity".

Dans cet article consacré au deuxième volume de la correspondance de Samuel Beckett (1941-1956), j'explore l'évolution du rapport qu'entretient Beckett avec lui-même et avec son écriture, un rapport fortement marqué par l'ambivalence et par l'intérêt croissant qu'il montre pour une esthétique ancrée sur la non-relation. J'interroge également le fonctionnement de sa posture publique en tant qu'auteur dit 'impotent' ou 'diminué'.

INDEX

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, writing, letters, theater, art, literature, Dublin, Paris, Ussy, Godot, ambivalence, commitment, success, failure, revulsion, non-expression, inexpressiveness, posture, author

Mots-clés: Samuel Beckett, écriture, lettres, théâtre, art, littérature, Dublin, Paris, Ussy, Godot, ambivalence, engagement, succès, échec, révulsion, non-expression, posture, auteur

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