

REVIEW ESSAY

“Petits pas. Nulle part. Obstinément”¹: Writing Finitude, Writing On
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go where never before
no sooner there than there always
no matter where never before
no sooner there than there always
(*mirlitonade*, *Collected Poems* 223)

“Failing mind, in other words, improved possibilities”: A poetics of writing finitude

“Giacometti dead. George Devine dead. Yes, drive me to Père Lachaise and go straight through the red lights” (6). The year is 1966, Beckett has recently turned 60, and with every demise he feels more and more “promoted to the role of chief mourner” (327). His remaining three decades could be summed up, as he does to Ruby Cohn, with a (loose) quote from *Mercier et Camier*, “One corpse after another, there’s my life for you” (323), holed 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. Tried to call again just now but impossible because of strikes. Silemus. . . . Nelly Sachs dead. Celan suicided” (232). As the corpses accumulate—his lifelong friends Tom McGreevy, Con Leventhal (“A friendship of over 50 years through thick and 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 down 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 self-description: “Ochone ochone, / Dead and not gone” (713). The sense of grieving, however, pours out for the dying rather than the dead, often pronounced luckier: so he writes to an afflicted friend, Herbert Myron, whose mother was recently dead: “My

heart goes out to you 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 and body calm at last, after 80 years of it" (328). Among the dying 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' 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)—a plight that obviously resonates with Beckett painfully enough to speak about him in an interview late that year (102). Whether describing imaginary golf in Ireland, where he knew he would not return, with the erstwhile eyes, or writing to friends and relatives he knows he would not meet anymore, the valedictory tone is soft-spoken, reserved: "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), he writes to Bray from the funeral visit to Dublin seen through cataract mist, and 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" (36–37).

If one looks for a single word to describe the tone permeating the last volume of Beckett's letters, it would be endingness. As he is nearing the end of his life and writing "unlessenable least best worse" (*Worstward Ho, Nobow On* 106), splintered narrative and theatrical texts that do away even with the referent—*Le Dépeupleur/The Lost Ones*, *Lessness/Sans*, the *Nobow On* trilogy, *Stirrings Still*, the *mirlitonades*, to mention but a few—impoverishment ceases to be a poetic precept and becomes the condition of the texts' emergence. As Beckett writes to his friend Lawrence Shainberg, a brain surgeon in whose work² he took a keen interest, 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" (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 farewell" (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, Nobow On* 89)—become abundantly evident. "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.³ 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 incomparable 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 and eff it” (634). 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*, from 1983 to his future biographer James Knowlson, shows that this wall is no abstraction: “Very barren patch for me. The wall won’t recede and I have no reverse gears. Can’t turn either” (612).

With his writing showing progressive (or, to appropriate Ruby Cohn’s term, “retrogressive”⁴) stages of stripping to the bone, Beckett’s letters themselves become more and more condensed, akin to the late prose—as this September 1970 account of his Ussy activities to Cohn shows, somewhat in the vein of Krapp’s computation of what his life yielded:

Have written 200 sentences all different[,] anything from 20 to 30 and hope—fear to continue.⁵ / 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 m² approx. Committed to Dieu and Dupuytren hand⁶ Haydn’s G minor sonata 2 movements = 200 bars odd not all different by any standard. Hit nothing with 2 CV. Slept last night and perhaps for weeks with a spider with no hurt to either. (239)

However bogged down by correspondence (especially after the Nobel when he is literally buried in requests for interviews, rights, and adaptations), and caught up in directing his plays, Beckett’s first and foremost commitment remains to the page. To a query to writers in a 1985 special issue of *Libération* put together by Jérôme Lindon’s son Mathieu, “Why do you write?”, he gives a characteristically curt answer: *Bon qu’à ça*—that’s all I’m good for (652). As earlier, it is easier to tease out a poetics of writing from his—rare and

reluctant—advice to younger writer friends and protégés than from his statements on his own work, which, with few exceptions (as when he writes to academics with whom he has 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, with which his only contact is “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: so he writes on young British poet Nicholas Rawson’s shamanistic poems, evidently remote from his own artistic creed: “the writing on the whole is so alien to me in its entanglements and abundance that I simply cannot see it fairly and know I have lost much through sheer nervous recoil” (to Rawson, 529). Indeed, “abundance” and any form of grandiloquence is anathema to such an extent that the one line 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 French playwright and novelist Raymond Cousse, who sends him his novel-in-progress *Stratégie pour deux jambons* [*Death-Sty*], heavily influenced by Beckett, the monologue of a pig who ecstatically envisions becoming cured meat, he sends his support—“Cochon très prometteur”—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*, he writes a page of one-line comments, asking for minimalism of means as though dispatched from his own workshop:

Very fine idea. / Overloading. / 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. Use it right at the beginning, not after that . . . Principles: remove the superfluous and move fast . . . / Bring your 22 pages down to 12 or 14 at the most. / Concentrated like that, could be very impressive. (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, “I find it very difficult. Dark. You put words together like a wall. Defensively? . . . You have always written densely—in the best sense. If here I feel kept at word’s length it may be because of my tiredness” (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 A. Wongar (pseudonym of Yugoslavian-born anthropologist Steten Bōzić, who lived for a period among Australian Aborigines), suppressed in Australia, a book that “moved and impressed [him] strongly” (502). His literary recommendations to friends range from Nadezda Mandelstam’s *Contre Tout Espoir* (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 sends a limerick 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—being one of his first readers throughout these decades, he praises his plays for the “precarious” writing (158) and “for how movingly they utter . . . this obscure distress known as life” (533)—and Emil Cioran: “In your ruins I feel at ease,” (152) he writes to him after reading *Le mauvais demiurge* in 1969, and in 1973, “*De l’Inconvénient* went straight to the heart on every page, as does everything that comes from you. I shall return often to this fraternal voice” (348). Avigdor Arikha, survivor of the Transnistria camps, is the artist closest to his poetics in these years⁷ and the friend to whom he offers his unconditional moral and financial support as the latter struggles with his aesthetic dilemmas of leaving abstraction behind and 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). 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: *Letters I* 134–35): so he would write, moved, on reading the poems of Charles Juliet, “I find nothing I can say, except that I bow my head before this great distress” (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). Much in line with the way his own writing would be framed by those academics he feels closest to, as belonging to a category somehow beyond “literature,” among them Lawrence Harvey, who writes, “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” (290–91), and Kay Boyle, who confesses she wept over reading *Compagnie* that Beckett sent her in March 1980: “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” (524). Beckett’s writing, as so many of his first readers sense, gives precedence to ethics or, rather, turns aesthetics into an aesth-ethics.⁸ When Shainberg writes to him about feeling his creativity shackled, Beckett replies (in October 1987), as if rearticulating the foundational predicament of his text-world, “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (*Unnamable* 134): “I can’t be of help with your problems. I suspect you prefer them insoluble. And 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” (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—and unlike” (402), but also, of a change of heart toward Kafka, from whom he had long kept a wary distance, on grounds that with him “the form is not shaken by the experience it conveys” (590). Prompted by Ronald Hayman’s (1981) and possibly Siegfried Unseld’s biography (1982), he feels evidently close to “this luckless great man”; scenes from Kafka’s life—the public reading of *The Penal Colony* in Munich to ice-cold indifference, “that possible impossible” (590)—are reported through several letters, together with Kafka’s desire to marry Dora Diamant shortly before his death: “tubard [tuberculosic], 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);

this 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 call up, again, *Worstward Ho*: “No future in this. Alas yes” (*Nobow On* 91).

“Minimum of colour” (22): Stage instructions

“Really trapped in all this theatre stuff and need badly to get away from it back to page” (11), Beckett writes to Thomas McGreevy in February 1966 from London working on a recording of his TV play *Eh Joe*. In the years that follow, more and more this would prove to be wishful thinking, as already in March he is in Stuttgart grappling with the same play with the Süddeutscher Rundfunk, and 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 for giving “his kind of hand” (*Letters II* 269) to directors, actors, and technicians on the set or via meticulous production notes dispatched, Beckett cannot but see the toll this takes on his creative work: “Forget what Ussy looks like. Forget what writing is about” (23). The aside follows his multi-page instructions, complete with drawings that chart the character’s movement, to his veteran American director Alan Schneider, who was working on the New York production of *Eh Joe*. These include formidable guidelines warning, as usual, against “acting,” concerned with tempo, pitch, timbre: “Voice should be whispered. A dead voice in his [Joe’s] head. Minimum of colour. Attacking. Each sentence a knife going in, pause for withdrawal, then in again. Dramatize by lengthening certain pauses within paragraphs.” The London and Stuttgart recordings result in simplifications and a few significant changes to the initial script, such as, “I asked . . . at the [end] for a smile (oh not a real smile). He ‘wins’ again. So ignore direction ‘Image fades, voice as before’” (23). From a 1979 Stuttgart remake he sardonically reports his “desperate innovations”: the addition of “a chamberpot and a hand mirror” (497). With these a pattern can be traced, of the texts becoming more and more porous and open to alterations following rehearsals; and Beckett will increasingly refrain from “fixing” and releasing 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 one another by Didi and Gogo at the first Paris performance directed by Roger Blin, largely improvised by the actors; so Estragon’s “architecte” will come to conclude the list (221). In this vein in 1966 he responds to a query by Christian Ludvigsen, pointing toward an open, inclusive conception of

theater—one clearly at an angle to widespread views of Beckett as the exacting arch-modernist controller of his own texts:

. . . if familiarity with mental stage, auditorium, lighting, acoustics, actors, set, etc. is indispensable to the writing of a play, the results are only valid in so far as they function satisfactorily under given real conditions. The ideal would be to work knowing in advance these real conditions. 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 *More Pricks Than Kicks*, Beckett considers replacing the closing line—an extradiegetic, authorial voice that reminds the reader of the lobster’s plight, a “quick death” by being boiled alive (*More Pricks Than Kicks* 14), associated with the ethical interruption of the text⁹—“It is not” with “like hell it is”: “Better? Worse? Can’t decide” (674).

With demand increasing 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 conscious of getting ensnared in unending self-exploitation. As he writes from Berlin in January 1975, working on a revival of *Godot*, to his longtime friend and lover, his stage designer at Royal Court, Jocelyn Herbert: “I have decided I must stop this theatre activity. 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 there is one thing that prevails again and again over the sense of responsibility to the writing sometimes described in terms of “creatures,” a live “wretchedness to defend” (*Letters II* 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 write new plays, but also make exceptions from his strict no-adaptation policy—Billie Whitelaw, the reference impersonator of Mouth in *Not I*, for whom Beckett would write *Footfalls* (and write in 1977, “after Billie goodbye” [474]); the bilingual David Warrilow (whose idea of standing before the audience to talk about death galvanizes him into writing *A Piece of Monologue* in 1979), and also 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 veteran Beckett actor Patrick Magee (“None ever rendered my moans and groans like you” [392]) is sacked from the Royal Court for drunken acting in October 1976, Beckett hastens to assure him of his unswerving support and friendship, stressing the commonality of his insecurities and distress: “It overcame you, some very acute and complex it, as it does us all, some time or another, one way or another, violently or gradually” (444); and he continues offering his unconditional support and purse to a still struggling Magee: “Virgil in Hell told Dante to stick it up, his impious pity for the damned. On their way through. 24 hours. Ha. Can I help? Old friend, tell me if I can. How I can” (568). In their turn, 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*, where once during rehearsals she experienced a bout of vertigo breakdown (she recalled Beckett holding her after she came to, saying “Oh Billie, what have I done to you?” [321]), and who 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 cooperative the Open Theater, would receive Beckett’s blessing to dramatize *Texts for Nothing*, which he took on in the aftermath of a stroke that left him aphasic in 1984, an enterprise which “moved and impressed” Beckett (649). Even more than for them, Beckett would go to great pains to help with writing, advice, recommendations, and frequently with financial and logistic support Rick Clutchey, 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, training in his theater “over 100 former inmates, none of whom have been returned to prison” (360); and it was on account of this work that his life sentence was commuted to lifetime parole. The entanglement of the two men’s creative work also testifies to the liberating potential that Beckett’s allegedly “nihilistic” work has for human beings in desperate conditions, among them, prison inmates. Beckett was to work with Clutchey’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*, Clutchey’s son Louis Beckett would play the Boy (707). After a hard-negotiated pause from Berlin’s Schillertheater in 1977, Beckett goes back on his decision in order to direct Clutchey there in *Krapp*, as “it is for him and his future of such importance that I cannot refuse, though I crave

a long rest from theatre” (465–66); some of the rehearsals even take place in his own studio at the Akademie der Künste (469). The production was to test both men, for what Beckett asked from his actor “in this very strict and stylized production” was “clearly against his temperament” (469), while Clutchey himself remembered, “nothing I have undertaken in theatre can match the intensity, preparation and search for character here implied” (470). The next autumn “San Quentin Drama Workshop got me in their Clutchey again” in Berlin, playing *Endgame* “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)—Beckett quoting Hamm’s unfond appellation of the divinity. When they tour the performance in London, Beckett asks the Royal Court in the most emphatic notes to lend them their *Endgame* props, as “they do need and deserve whatever help is to be had” (488). Against his resolutions, Beckett would even authorize Clutchey to perform the TV play *Eh Joe* in theater in 1985, being crystal-clear that “if I allow it there now in Chicago it is solely on account and because of you”; and in the same letter he sends detailed instructions on light, set, but most importantly, the acting style required: “[Joe’s] problem is how to express mounting tension with minimum of movement. Don’t feel you must invest each pause with some gesture or change of position. The stillness of intent listening belongs also to the silences . . . This is not to say there should be [no movement]. But minimal and always somehow expressive of lightening stranglehold” (665). Confined to an “old crocks’ retraite” at the end of his life (706), Beckett would read and edit Clutchey’s prison memoirs, correcting misspellings and studding the text with suggestions of paring down (“room for considerable pruning” [721]), including the proposed title *Letters from the Dead*: “That unvarnished tone puts it over . . . Don’t much like *Letters*. 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 would give me much” (500).

However “stylized” these productions may have been, Beckett insists on hyperspecific materialities: in the Berlin production of *Krapp* with Clutchey he even asks for a particular fabric for the curtain behind which Krapp keeps disappearing for a sip, so that it may remain the longest possible in motion (468). When the latter sends a video tape of a 1981 American performance of the play, Beckett is irritated not only by the filming techniques that in his opinion fall short of both media—filmed theater and genuine film—but also with the “wrong” sound of the falling banana peel (564). How closely props,

materialities were enmeshed with meaning for him is also demonstrated by his elucidations to German actress Nancy Illig performing 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 should be suggested (discreetly) whenever possible—costume, gesture, speech. This weightlessness. 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. / Willie the reverse: contentedly earthbound. (608)

The precision and intensity of Beckett's work in conceiving his texts for the stage, radio, or 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 stage "littered with miscellaneous rubbish," accompanied by the "slow decrease of light" (*Complete Dramatic Works* 371), which takes a few seconds only. To Schneider he stipulates that the rubbish should be strictly horizontal, "all scattered, leaning and lying," the cry should be "instant of recorded vagitus. Important that two cries be identical, switching on and off strictly synchronized 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 are his detailed instructions to Roger Blin, rehearsing *Fin de Partie* at Théâtre 347, Paris in April 1968, where he even asks him to cut Clov's parting song together with a number of gags (123–25). Explication is taboo: Beckett finds the filmed extracts of the opening of *Catastrophe*, written in support of imprisoned Václav Havel, at the Avignon Festival of 1982 "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 vagueing characterizes his use of literary allusions, reduced to mere traces: he is only talked into including the whole final quatrain of Yeats' *The Tower* in the play . . . *but the clouds* . . . when not even Pinter is able to identify the initial clipped quote [466].) Veering from stipulations in the name of theatrical liberties hardly

fares better, even where to engage with his texts are revolutionary theater-makers: he is “revolted” by reports of Giorgio Strehler’s 1982 *Happy Days* in Naples’ Teatro Mercadante, where among other poignant changes to setting undulation replaces the mound and white dust silts on actors and audience (607). Innumerable requests for adaptation of virtually all his works into media other than they have originally been 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 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. Please forgive me” (114). When—dogged into yielding with a heavy heart, “la mort dans l’âme”—he eventually gives permission, he almost beseeches to 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” (643). When, however, the creator is young and in need of support, his tone changes. Seeing German film director Ernst Reinboth’s puppet animation, with music by György Ligeti, largely based on *Le Dépeupleur* [Der Verwaiser], he intercedes with Suhrkamp for permission, commenting, “The Reinboth film is not good, and has no connection with *Der Verwaiser*. 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 Schillertheater, Berlin was path-opening for a series of future collaborations with the theater, but also for 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*), in letters to friends, he warms to “the willingness on his part to do it this strange way” (169) to “acteur excellent” (172), of comparable strength to Patrick Magee but “less alarming” (193), culminating in the resolution 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,” *Complete Dramatic Works* 221) will come “from the air before look at the machine” (176), while some of the pauses in the passage are lengthened. All in all,

Beckett reports, he “learned a lot about the play and its distant author along the way. Allowed myself a few liberties—even introducing a presence of which no trace in the text. . . . 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, for which Beckett conceives of two cameras—Camera A as a “mere eye,” whereas 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 to be used to distinguish recorded moments of little from those of enormous importance to Krapp (156). 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 theater to emerge from this period is *Not I*, the prompting idea of which is first mentioned by Beckett in a February 1972 letter to Bray: “Vague image for a short play of a lit face (mouth) with ? to say and a cloaked hooded figure, sex unclear, completely still throughout, listening and watching. . . . Might produce 10 min of strangeness if text found” (287). The image of what was to become the Auditor, as he specifies, was suggested “by 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 autumn. As he recalls in 1986, the painting shows

outside and beyond the main area, at a safe distance from it, a group of watchers intent on the happening. Before the painting, from another outsideness, I behold both the horror and its being beheld. This experience had some part in the conception of the Auditor in *Not I*. (671)

The witness, isolated in his/her outsideness, 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.¹⁰ Already in late April 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” (299). Originating in a ghostly image, the play seems to aggregate around tempo rather than dictated by strictly textual logic: as Beckett writes to Schneider, to

whom he sends the play in July, “All I feel sure of is the text must go very fast, no pause except for breath and the two big silent holes after the screams. . . . Don’t hesitate to ask for cuts or consult about difficulties” (302). 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 produce a direct jar on the audience’s nerves:

“She” is purely a stage entity, part of a stage image and purveyor of a stage text. The rest is Ibsen. . . . If I made a distinction it can only have been between mind and voice, not between mouth and voice. Her speech a purely buccal phenomenon without mental control or understanding, only half heard. Function running away with organ. The only stage apprehension of the text is Auditor’s. 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 and contribute to its quieting. (311–12)

After the January 1973 *Not I* with Billie Whitelaw he writes that he had “learnt what [he] hoped to learn, 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 from the one created in the theatre”—that is, of 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” (405). On at least one more occasion Beckett would consent to remove the figure of the Auditor, given the smallness of the venue, explaining, “He is very difficult to stage (light, position) and may well be of more harm than good. For me the play needs him but can do without him. I have never seen him function effectively” (680).

Hot on the heels of *Not I*, Beckett writes *Footfalls* for Whitelaw—similarly triggered by an image.¹¹ Here, too, he would insist on withholding the text from understanding: “*Footfalls* is indeed a strange affair, perhaps unduly elliptic and elusive. But 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 “showing” her the pacing in a crowded bistro, as Whitelaw recollects.

From 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.¹² Even here, however, obstinate embodiment, residual figuration in the “ruins” of language and of image withhold 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 is so poignant in 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 ever there was one” (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 percussion 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. . . . The problem then would be how to get the costumes shine. Light perhaps no longer from above but circumambient. (551)

The production resulting from this collective undertaking—two versions—shows a clear move away from the initial scheme of abstraction, towards progressive ruin: “We did two versions, one fast, with colour and percussion, the other plain and slow with faint metronome and footsteps alone. 9 and 4 minutes respectively (*Quadrat I & II*: the same thing, 1000 years later—in grey, in tatters, without percussion)” (553). Beckett even envisions a *Quadrat III*, in which “they would be scarcely moving. And the robes falling off them” (562).

The coupling of maximum abstractivation with the “posthumous” feel, of “humanity in ruins” (“The Capital of the Ruins,” *Complete Short Prose* 278) is perhaps the most striking feature of these departures in theater that approximate most closely the radicalness of the late prose. “Ghostliness” and indistinction, a lack of color (or “grey”) are the recurring instructions Beckett sends out to his directors—one might recall that “ghostliness” is also a term of praise in Beckett’s response to Louis Le Brocqy, 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” (553). Thus in 1984 he would describe his conception of “this perhaps most hazardous of our undertakings,” the TV play *What Where*, to Reinhart Müller-Freienfels, artistic director of SDR involved in the Beckett productions in Stuttgart:

As performers I would again suggest mimes. All four to be made as alike as possible by means of costume and make-up however excessive. Attitudes and movement strictly identical. Speech mechanical and colourless. NO “interpretation.” A balletistic approach. . . . In a word 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 four are indistinguishable, visually and vocally, as ghosts are indistinguishable. Ghostly garments, ghostly speech. This should be supplied by a single and invisible speaker, either live in conjunction with the “action,” or for post-synchronization. (631, 637)

To Schneider, who was working on *Come and Go* in 1981, he insists: “I see *Come and Go* very formal. Strictly identical attitudes and movements . . . 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: “It is a distant, anonymous, indifferent voice. . . . A sort of astral presenter. The tone is colourless and unvarying from start to finish, ‘the colour 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 academia

The line above is Beckett’s suggestion for pruning 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 solutions, “anguish and isolation” (597). One of the major, and clearly unwelcome,

changes in Beckett's life 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 with its corollary, his inescapable involvement in exegesis of his own work. If institutionalization comes with moments of involuntary comedy, as when, for the first time in the play's performance history, the set falls in *Godot* at the Comédie-Française production in 1978 when the prestigious theater takes it up in its repertoire ("It takes the Maison de Molière" is Beckett's sardonic comment [484]), the same is hardly true for the avalanche of requests to publish and the pressure to translate previously unreleased texts. How ubiquitous are queries to clarify his work is illustrated by a wry note from a holiday in the Italian Alps: "Request from local Signorina to discuss *Godot* for her thesis. Mi rincresce" (554). Seasoned scholars, however, could not be brushed off so easily: "Letter from [Richard] Ellmann from Yale saying he was 'teaching' *Murphy*, and (no connection) had accepted a chair at Oxford . . . I tremble from here. Keep off me, Dick, keep off" (148). Beckett's answers to endless queries about the intention behind his works, about the influence of specific authors and books on his writing generally verge 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 claimed 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 steps aside, he stresses the traumatic circumstances of the novel's writing: "I harboured no such deep thoughts when writing that work which is no more than a 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* (147), but admits that "Camus' *Mythe de Sisyphe* was in my mind" (651). He repeatedly disclaims influence from the philosophy of language skepticism, writing somewhat irked to Shainberg, "No, I got nothing from Wittgenstein]. Indeed 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* (1901-03) hardly fares better, being privately labelled as "a wild goose or a red herring" (509), despite the seriousness of Beckett's answer: "I skimmed

through Mauthner for Joyce in 1929 or 30. . . . It seemed just another notesnatching operation. / For me it came down to: Thought words / Words inane / Thought inane. Such was my levity” (509).¹³ 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:

I simply know next to nothing about my work in this way, as little as a plumber of the history of hydraulics. There is nothing/nobody with me when I’m writing, only the hellish job in hand. 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 (“Think seriously about omitting the Kaun letter. Embarrassing kitchen German bilge” [578], he writes to Ruby Cohn, who was assembling the volume *Disjecta*, about a 1937 text that had been read ever since as a negative aesthetics of a literature of the unword *in nuce*), but also, acute in their terseness, as in countering an off-the-mark parallelism between Noh theater and his: “Noh drama presupposes audience complicity, mine audience resistance. That is perhaps worthy of consideration” (568). Occasionally he takes evident relish in bizarre queries, like the one from a student on the reason why Clov cannot sit 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, with all his recoil from being drawn out into exegesis, he does show 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*]: “title untoward in effect, alluding to Lamartine’s ‘un seul être vous manqué et tout est dépeuplé,’ pinched unacknowledged . . . from his forgotten contemporary Léonard with change of only one syllable (*vous* for *mé*). Quite untranslatable” (250–51). Or to his Swedish translators C. G. Bjurström, whom he informs on the origin of “grifane” in the French *Foirades*, as the French version of *grifagno*, a species of falcon, used as an adjective of frightening eyes and the attribute of Julius Caesar’s eyes in Canto

IV of the *Inferno* (338), and Magnus Hedlund working on *More Pricks Than Kicks*, to whom 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 few ideas of 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. . . . The only title I can think of is *Inania Verba* (Virgil), no doubt unacceptable" (532). And in 1980 he answers his Polish translator 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).

One of the most irksome pressures from academia on Beckett was to consent to his biography being written, with 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 as follows: "There are lives worth writing, mine without interest in itself or relevance to the work is not one of them" (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. Writing to George Reavey early at the outset of Bair's research in 1972 he says: "I can't have anything to do with it, i.e. neither help nor hinder. She is free to write what she pleases and my friends and family are free to tell her what they please. This is the only way I can avoid a sponsoring censoring situation which would be unbearable" (306). As details emerge, he sours to the enterprise, labelling Bair's book "nescience fiction" (556) of

“unerring inaccuracy” (618). It is partly against its impact that he would authorize Knowlson’s biography in the year of his death (“To biography by you it’s yes” [717]), as well as agree to the publishing of his selected correspondence. Writing in March 1985 to Martha Fehsenfeld, who was to become principal editor of his letters, he states: “I do have confidence in you and know I can rely on you to edit my correspondence . . . i.e., its reduction to 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 sensitivity 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 from *The Tempest*, “these are plugs that were my eyes” (30), or reports to Jocelyn Herbert in December 1988 from the nursing home where he would spend the last months of his life, “still here with the down and not quite out receiving education in the lost art of keeping on my feet. I envy the quadrupeds” (710). Most striking of all are the vignettes from the habitual seaside holidays that offer “a change of void” (456), and where Beckett sticks to the rule, “town[s] to be avoided like literature” (375), like the one below sent to Bray from Morocco in March 1972, evocative of the Beckett creatures’ plight:

Visited yesterday a *maria* 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” (635): Self-translation

These decades would also bring an onslaught of self-translation. If Beckett wrote about writing—“laborious. Like small handsaw in knotty timber” (474)—no less is true of self-translation: now to and fro between the two languages, as most of the theater and some of the late prose, including *Company*, would be 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 Siegfried Unseld from Suhrkamp, who recommended him for the prize,

To accept publication of my unpublished texts, with the translation work that that would necessarily mean for me, would be, in view of my age and

the state of my carcass, to give up 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 would 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,¹⁴ but obviously retaining much more control of the final text. In March 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 was the case with Elmar Tophoven’s German *Endgame*, where he substitutes the echo from *The Tempest*, “our revels now are ended,” in Schlegel’s translation (“Das Fest ist jetzt zu Ende”) for the initial version, “Der Spaß ist jetzt zu Ende” (79–80); such concern for the identifiability of quotations throws into sharp relief the way in which Beckett diminished 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 normalized and banalized” (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 in this period, who (herself a prominent translator from French) would occasionally contribute ideas and phrases to the English versions of *Le Dépeupleur* and *Mercier et Camier*, among others. To the latter translation, probably Beckett’s most interventionist with its extensive cuts and alterations,¹⁵ 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). Broaching *Sans* of *Têtes-mortes* into English proves damning; Beckett reports his successive abortions and abandonings to Bray as he works on sentence families, in

modular fashion: “Again abandoned translation of *Sans* at ‘tête par l’oeil calme toute sa raison.’ No work ever brought me less echo, I feel it still falling in bottomless pit” (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” (44), and confesses his aversion from having to “massacre” *Not I* in translation (“Can’t imagine it in French” [323]). In 1977 he writes to Ruby Cohn that he had completed “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 *mirlitonades*, “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* into French as “untranslatable” (657), and “as for on: nohow” (673).¹⁶ He writes to Bray in August 1979 from Tangier, working on *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 “insoluble problem” (510); when Bray suggests “obmutescence,” he counters, “no willfulness here. Have translated ‘in formulable angoisse don’t l’essentiel’” (511)—apparently making recourse to the kind of periphrastic, interpretive translation to which French, with its analytic syntax that tends to solve 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 nonce noun derived from the Latin *sine*, “without,” but, as the former recalls, 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* (356). 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.¹⁷ 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 nuances the narrative of progress “from excess to lack of colour” (592), terms in which Beckett describes his gradual turn to French (592). Thus the French version of *A Piece of Monologue* “was reduced 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*” (appr.

“brute”) for translating “the bastard” (Hamm’s reference to God) in *Endgame*, a homophony and homography for the biblical Cham (555).

How closely translation is intertwined with writing in these decades one can see 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 “senile quintessentialism” (99). He sends one “doggerelized” (343) variant after another to friends in parallel with his “mirlitonnading” (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” (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 Clutchee, “Epilogue” (compare 560–61):

Que lentement passent les heures
Comme passé un enterrement
Tu pleureras l’heure où tu pleures
Qui passera trop vite
Comme passent toutes les heures.

While working on *Company* in Ussy in 1977, Beckett even physically unloads 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” (*Nohow On* 92)—: “Enjoying myself throwing everything out, books and other rubbish, not absolutely indispensable. All pictures out of sight including big Geer 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 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, Nohow On* 103).

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Notes

¹ “Small steps. Nowhere in particular. Obstinate.” The closure of a December 1983 letter to Ruby Cohn; Beckett quotes here his poem “pas à pas” (626).

² *Brain Surgeon: An Intimate View of His World* (1979). Shainberg would write a critical essay on Beckett, “Exorcising Beckett.”

³ Compare Steven Connor, “On such and such a day . . . in such a world?: Beckett’s radical finitude,” *Borderless Beckett/Beckett sans frontières: Samuel Beckett Today/Anjourd’hui* 19 (2008): 36–50.

⁴ Cohn used the term “retrogress” for a text Beckett sent her in late 1971, a “caput mortuum” which Beckett would title “Sup of Foul Draft from Work in Regress,” a variant of *Pour finir encore* [For to End Yet Again], the future *Fizzle 8* (280).

⁵ Enclosed with the letter he sends Cohn the beginning of *Pour finir encore* [For to End Yet Again], which would become *Foirade/Fizzle 8*.

⁶ 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.

⁷ See David Lloyd, “Siege laid again?: Arikha’s Gaze, Beckett’s Painted Stage,” *Beckett’s Thing* 154–220.

⁸ Compare Jean-Michel Rabaté, *Think, Pig!* 37–48.

⁹ Compare Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Love and Lobsters: Beckett’s meta-Ethics,” *The New Cambridge Companion to Samuel Beckett* 158–69.

¹⁰ See especially Emilie Morin’s seminal *Beckett’s Political Imagination*, but also Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett*; Joseph Anderton, *Beckett’s Creatures: Art of Failure after the Holocaust*; James McNaughton, *Samuel Beckett and the Politics of Aftermath*; all of which reinscribe Beckett’s texts in the historical and political (and politicized) coordinates of their genesis and first publishing. 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. The works of Beckett, a collateral victim/witness of the Holocaust to which he lost close friends, cannot exonerate themselves from the ethical imperative of bearing witness, while being barred from witnessing proper, condemned to “ill seeing.”

¹¹ 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* from Dublin’s National Gallery, which Beckett often saw in his Dublin years: *Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Painting* 18–19.

¹² Compare Pascale Casanova’s thesis that Beckett’s lifelong project was to bring literature on par with the radicalism of the pictorial avantgardes, to invent abstraction in literature via impoverishment, the divorcing of signifier from signified, “worsening,” a process which hinged on Beckett’s turning to writing in French: see especially 75–103.

¹³ Genetic criticism has considerably nuanced this “notesnatching operation”: see Dirk Van Hulle and Mark Nixon, *Samuel Beckett’s Library* 158–163, and Van Hulle, “Eff it: Beckett and Linguistic Skepticism.”

¹⁴ Compare Liliane Rodriguez’s “Joyce’s Hand in the First French Translation of *Ulysses*,” *Renascent Joyce* 122–42.

¹⁵ These, as Emilie 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 racist discourses under the occupation (130–83).

¹⁶ 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*. In *Think, Pig!*, Rabaté offers a possible solution for the polysemic “on” in French (149–70).

¹⁷ See George Craig's exemplary “French translator's preface” to the volume, xxxii–xliii, and Craig, *Writing Beckett's Letters*, also

<https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2019/6/13/writing-becketts-letters>.

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