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“ENTRE LE GALET ET LA MER”:
READING A BECKETT POEM
BETWEEN TWO LANGUAGES

Patricia Coughlan

je suis ce cours de sable qui glisse
entre le galet et la dune
la pluie d'été pleut sur ma vie
sur moi ma vie qui me fuit me poursuit
et finira le jour de son commencement

cher instant je te vois
dans ce rideau de brume qui recule
où je n'aurai plus à fouler ces longs seuils mouvants
et vivrai le temps d'une porte
qui s'ouvre et se referme

my way is in the sand flowing
between the shingle and the dune
the summer rain rains on my life
on me my life harrying fleeing
to its beginning to its end

my peace is there in the receding mist
when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds
and live the space of a door
that opens and shuts

1948¹

[...] an infinity [...] which, after the loss of a transcendental economy of salvation and return, can manifest itself only in the form of Hegel's *bad infinity*: as the thorn of yearning woven or driven into discourse, and as the boundlessness of being underway, without an absolute goal.²

Beckett's poem "je suis ce cours de sable qui glisse" was first published in the post-war special issue of the magazine *transition*, which was edited by Georges Duthuit in 1948. Accompanied by two other brief pieces, entitled "que ferais-je dans ce monde sans visage sans questions"/"what would I do in this world faceless incurious" and "je voudrais que mon amour meure"/"I would like my love to die", it appeared in French and English, the two versions on facing pages. The poem has not attracted much commentary, though critics who have discussed it agree about its outstanding quality. Marjorie Perloff borrows the phrase "the space of a door" from its penultimate line for a chapter title in her study *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, and discerns in it the dream sequences of *How It Is* "existing in embryo". She finds the oddity of "the door, enigmatically planted on the empty beach" to be a classic instance of deferral, a simultaneous offering and withholding of meaning.³ Lawrence Harvey also briefly discusses the poem, comparing some elements of the French and English versions and, unlike Perloff, finding the English one superior.⁴ The present essay examines the poem more closely, as a particularly eloquent articulation, in a small compass, of Beckett's thought in the period. My purpose is especially to explore the interpretative possibilities, or chinks, offered by the fact of the poem's two versions and their small disparities: wrinkles, flaws, tiny folds or scratches in its smooth and enigmatic surface, offering a little purchase in the reader's scramble towards the interpretation of a particularly recalcitrant work. The very existence of the twin texts may also be taken as an instance of the way Beckett's imagination always tends to dualities and generally leaves them unreconciled.

Let us begin by looking at their temporal context in Beckett's work. In January 1948 he had finished *Molloy*, the first novel of the trilogy, and during the same year he was working on *Malone Dies*, the second. In 1946 he had completed the four *nouvelles*, of which *L'Expulsé* and *Premier Amour* are the best known, and also the novel *Mercier et Camier*. Besides these fictions and others, he also wrote during these years some important pieces of criticism, in particular, in 1948 itself, the essay *Peintres de l'empêchement*. In this piece, as elsewhere, he praises the work of the Dutch brother painters Abraham and Gerard van Velde as paradigm examples of modern art; but, as with his other art criticism, the discussion is of intense primary interest to interpreters of Beckett's own work.

At the beginning of the essay Beckett sardonically pretends to be seeking a clear and simple "formula" to define modern art, and thus to pin it down. He affects to be resisting any notion of overdetermination in aesthetic phenomena, or of indeterminacy in their interpretation. In this passage we find him using what is one of the governing metaphors of our poem. Ironically propounding a wish for certainty in criticism by means of adopting a fixed "formula" for characterizing acceptable art, he says:

Savoir ce qu'on veut dire, voilà la sagesse. Et le meilleur moyen de savoir ce qu'on veut dire, c'est de vouloir dire la même chose tous les jours, avec patience, et de se familiariser ainsi avec la formule employée, dans tous ses sables mouvants.

[Knowing what you want to say, that is wisdom. And the best way of knowing what you want to say is to want to say the same thing every day, patiently, and thus to familiarise yourself with the chosen formula, with all its shifting sands.]⁵

What, if anything, can we make of this coincidence of metaphorical language? Beckett's position in the essay would appear to be that even a "formula" would not definitively pin down the character of modern art, and that a formula would itself escape determinacy and the control of its very proponents. So we may say that while the poem presents a state of radical uncertainty and flux which, taken in isolation, we would be likely to understand as a psychological matter—reading the signals of the solitary speaker within the conventions of the lyric—the prose piece describes the condition of critics, would-be users of discursive and authoritative language, as one of equal shiftingness, both before the phenomenon they are attempting to describe and in the formulation of their own thought.

I shall return explicitly to the preoccupation with indeterminacy. Meanwhile, another passage in the critical essay provides an even more striking gloss on the poem. Beckett finds in the two brothers' work two different but matching processes. In Gerard's art he discerns "un dévoilement sans fin, voile derrière voile, plan sur plan de transparences imparfaites, un dévoilement vers l'indévoilable, le rien, la chose à nouveau [an endless unveiling, veil behind veil, plane after plane of near-transparencies, and unveiling towards that which cannot be unveiled: nothing, the thing all over again]", while in Abraham's work there is "l'ensevelissement dans l'unique, dans un lieu d'impénétrables proximités, cellule peinte sur la pierre de la

cellule, art d'incarcération [burial in the singular, in a place of impenetrable proximities, a cell painted on the stones of a cell, the art of incarceration]" (p. 136). These descriptions with their different metaphors invoke a process of infinite regress: just as the cherished moment, the "peace" desired by the speaker, can only be fruitlessly sought "in the receding mist", so the two painters and their respective audiences are ceaselessly drawn onwards towards an ever-receding revelation, or shut inside the monadic cell of perceptual repetition.

If at this stage we propose provisionally to define the poem's theme, we may say that it concerns liminality, a condition of being set at a border, neither sea nor land. The word "seuils/thresholds" expresses it well. It explores the instability of the self: made of sand and/or made of water: neither definite. Sand is not cohesive: it crumbles, absorbs water, and, of course, shifts. There is a difficulty in making prose sense of the first line, a difficulty exacerbated—no doubt intentionally on Beckett's part—by the ambiguity of the verb "suis" in the French version: "I am" or "I follow".⁶ That is, either the speaker is a kind of river of sand (itself a paradoxical notion) or he follows one. The English—"my way is in the sand flowing"—is no less unresolved: what is it that flows, the sand or the "way"? This opening statement thus gives the impression of the self as something never finished, of its perpetual indefiniteness. The sand, the summer rain (line 3), and the mist (lines 6, 7) are all traditional images of transience.

Like most of Beckett's other poetry (except perhaps the Chamfort translations, *Huit Maximes*), this poem is studiously non-discursive; generalizations, or anything in the nature of a sententious summing-up, in the manner of the solitary-self-in-nature meditations at the centre of the lyric since Romanticism, are withheld. We have only the beach-scape, if indeed we have that. As I have said, Perloff apprehends the "door" at the end as surrealist, "enigmatically planted on an empty beach", in the manner of Magritte, and quite correctly remarks that in the poem "Beckett's dream images refuse to divulge what he called a 'notion'" (pages 246–47). The poem might be said to be nearly all vehicle, and scarcely at all tenor (as in I. A. Richards's theory); or rather, a straightforward distinction between tenor and vehicle cannot here be made.⁷ The only approach to the provision of a "tenor" seems to be in lines 3–5 and the corresponding penultimate line, with their necessarily generalizing references to "ma vie/my life" and "où je [...] vivrai/when I may [...] live". One might put it another

way and say that if we were to treat the poem as a narrative text, we should say that it is all scene and no summary. In this eschewing of a summing-up or vantage-point, the form of the poem mimics the theme of evanescence, with its absence of full stops, irregularity of metre and line-length, and ambiguity of syntax.

Appropriate too is a specific consideration of the differences between the French and English versions. At the end of the first stanza, the French version makes a definite, though quirky, statement that the speaker's life "finira le jour de son commencement [will end the day of its beginning]" while the English merely disposes the end and the beginning as a parallelism, without definite syntactic pinning-down: "to its beginning to its end". Further, in the first line the English is vaguer again: it chooses a participle rather than the finite statement of a relative clause: "flowing" versus "qui glisse". In line 4 the English is also more ambiguous, less definite, leaving the notions of "harrying" and "fleeing" to float, as it were, as participles which we may attach either to "the summer rain" or to "my life". The French ties them down in a relative clause, giving the more precise information that it is "*ma vie qui me fuit me poursuit*" (my italics).

In the French, the second stanza performs an address: an intense interpersonal exchange, suggesting to many readers an amorous encounter; a moment of high rhetoric, which is in turn carefully cancelled by the revelation that the fulfilment of this desire would be, precisely, the ultimate removal of agency—the lifting of the obligation to act at all—along with the state of duration which only prolongs yearning. In the English, the expression "my peace" is more diffuse, already having given up the possibility of action from the start. In the penultimate line "le temps d'une porte" becomes "the space of a door": this imaginative interchangeability of time with space recalls Beckett's account of the Proustian subject as one extended in time as though it were space.⁸ In both cases, duration is problematic and causes pain; we should also recall how intensely the Proust essay renders the suffering caused by the near-impossibility of making the desiring subject coincide with the desired object. The misty recession of the beloved moment, of the speaker's peace, vividly recalls these passages.

In both versions the mist conceals, but paradoxically also contains, or perhaps intimates, the speaker's "peace", or his "cher instant". Are we to understand that as the mist recedes/retreats, instead of uncovering and making manifest the wished-for fulfilment

it further removes it? Its recession would, thus, remove the "cher instant", which remains tantalizingly withheld. This figure reverses or cancels a whole topos or motif in Western religious and literary thought: the figure of truth as temporarily concealed behind the veil of appearances, a Christian theological and Platonic idea. But whereas in traditional versions an ultimate unveiling is most decidedly envisaged, when the *telos* or end of this world is reached, Beckett, characteristically, imagines no effective end to this withholding. The veil (here the mist) is never rolled away, nor, if it were, would there be anything behind it at all—but another form of postponement, as in the trilogy there is always another narrative, another author inventing another character, another other-self. We may here recall Beckett's own invocation in his early poem *Alba* of the specifically Dantean unveiling, a paradigm case of this topos. In this anti-*aubade* it is, characteristically, summoned only to be cancelled—what in Dante is a cosmic revelation is supplanted in Beckett by the woman's actual physical presence, experienced as a kind of anti-revelation:

whose beauty shall be a sheet before me
a statement of itself drawn across the tempest of
emblems
so that there is no sun and no unveiling
and no host
only I and the sheet
and bulk dead⁹

The beautiful passage detailing the endless unveilings—"voile derrière voile"—in Gerard van Velde's painting irresistibly reminds readers acquainted with post-structuralism of Derrida's infinite chain of signification, or what Umberto Eco calls endless semiosis, according to which every signifier suggests a signified, which is itself of course no more than another signifier with another signified beyond it, and so on, in a universe pullulating with meanings, as the trilogy pullulates with voices.¹⁰ Barthes's famous coat-trailing manifesto for deconstructive interpretation in his 1968 essay "The Death of the Author" is appropriate:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be disentangled, nothing deciphered: the structure can be followed, "run" (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is

nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning;¹¹

or, in Beckett's expression, an "empêchement".

In the poem before us, the essentially paradoxical quality of these formulations is represented by a peculiar temporal contradiction. More evident in the English version, this has the mist "receding", thus suggesting a past event, but simultaneously promising a possible future respite from the transient condition of the self on the beach, always "flowing". Thus the recession (one would normally understand, a recession into the past) is here puzzlingly a recession into the future. As a result we may see the poem as happening twice, particularly in the French version, where the end of stanza two ("qui s'ouvre et se referme") repeats that of stanza one ("et finira le jour de son commencement"), and where opening and closing is synonymous with ending and beginning. There are two countervailing impulses in the poem. One is centripetal, stressing the presentness of the self, the sense and the suffering of duration: his life both flees and pursues him, he can neither catch it nor escape from it. The other is centrifugal: there is a draining-away towards "beginning" and towards "end". Is this an attempt to reinstate a teleology? If so, we may remark further that this "beginning" and "end" are inaccessible, unknowable.

The beautiful long line "où je n'aurai plus à fouler ces longs seuils mouvants/when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds" (lines 8 and 7) is the climax of the poem. It suggests a breaking wave—an impression partly generated by the wave-like variation in the line-lengths, which rise from eight to thirteen syllables, then die away to five in the last line (six in the French text). This long climactic line poignantly expresses both suffering at the effort of duration (and the duration of effort) and an imagined, longed-for release. A door has only two modes, open and shut, and one precludes the other. This craving to inhabit a binary system is, of course, a Beckettian constant. It is formulated humorously in the early text *Murphy* as follows: "Humanity is a well with two buckets, one going down to be filled, the other coming up to be emptied."¹² But in spite of this and other more elaborate assertions of rational order, all of which simultaneously breathe a wry scepticism, the position of the Beckettian subject is inadequately rendered by such a dualist mathesis. In the

present poem, we might see the speaker as being in a condition of Heideggerian "thrownness" upon the beach, and unable to incorporate himself into the system either of the land or of the sea. The novel *Molloy* (which, as we have seen, belongs to the same period in Beckett's work) contains a relevant passage:

There are people the sea doesn't suit, who prefer the mountains or the plain. Personally I feel no worse there than anywhere else. Much of my life has ebbed away before this shivering expanse, to the sound of the waves in storm and calm, and the claws of the surf. Before, no, more than before, one with, spread on the sand, or in a cave. In the sand I was in my element, letting it trickle between my fingers, scooping holes that I filled in a moment later or that filled themselves in, flinging it in the air by handfuls, rolling in it. [...] And that my land went no further, in one direction at least, did not displease me. And to feel there was one direction at least in which I could go no further, without first getting wet, then drowned, was a blessing.¹³

Like *Molloy*, though without the air of bitter resignation, the speaker in the poem is precisely *between*: neither properly on land nor at sea, and (at least in the French version) actually composed in substance either of sand, or of the water flowing in it.¹⁴ Hubert Dreyfus's recent commentary on Heidegger is illuminating here. Considering Heidegger's understanding of mood as all-pervasive, and how traditional philosophy has overlooked it, he stresses how mood reveals thrownness. He goes on to reiterate how for Heidegger being, or *dasein*, is "always already given" and is "a self-interpreting foundness" which Heidegger calls "thrownness". The terms Heidegger uses are strongly reminiscent of Beckett's in this poem: "This characteristic of *Dasein*'s being—this 'that it is'—is veiled in its 'whence' and 'whither', yet disclosed in itself all the more unveiledly; we call it the *thrownness* of this entity into its 'there' [...]. The expression 'thrownness' is meant to suggest *the facticity of its being delivered over*."¹⁵

This condition of the inescapability, and unwilling continuance, of a painful subjectivity is, of course, one very frequently rendered in Beckett's work. Despite his ostensible dismissal of philosophical influence, Beckett's kinship with phenomenology is evident in his work—a fact which in the last decade or so has at last been receiving appropriate critical attention. The presence of phenomenological language is most evident in the early monograph on Proust, where he

constantly stresses the multiplicity of selves, or "subjects" (the word is his), and emphatically rejects the understanding of the self as an essence and the empiricist notion that objects make up the phenomenal world. Throughout that essay, he concurs raptly with Proust's representation of the world as constituted by consciousness, and also of the precarious and problematic mode of existence of that consciousness.¹⁶

All Beckett's work simultaneously struggles for, and endlessly casts doubt on, the notion of a completed and secure selfhood; this is perhaps most evident in the splintered and deferring narrators of the trilogy.¹⁷ In his Hegelian interpretation of the fiction, Hans-Joachim Schulz sees the protagonists as embattled Cartesians, struggling continually to preserve a humanist psychic order against the forces of disintegration. Schulz includes Beckett himself among the rearguard fighters for the rationalist Western philosophical tradition, as does Leo Bersani, who presents Beckett as the melancholy last champion of the traditional unified subject.¹⁸ Other critics increasingly disagree, and these critics—most effectively Angela Moorjani and David Watson—discern in Beckett's definitive dismantling of fictional form a deconstructionist project *ante verbum*, since the trilogy precedes by nearly two decades the full development of post-structuralist thought.¹⁹

The best way to view this issue is surely to note the fierce refusal of Beckett's text to give up either position, whether that of desiring determinate meaning and a blissful arrest of deferral and duration ("cher instant je te vois"), or the conviction of actual indeterminacy and infinite semiosis ("dans ce rideau de brume qui recule"). There is a passage in *Murphy* which applies to this uncomfortable dilemma: "The repudiation of the known," said Neary, 'a purely intellectual operation of unspeakable difficulty'" (page 124). We leave the protagonist of this poem in his double, ceaselessly riven state, between the shingle and the dune (and French and English), forever longing for the mist to lift, and meanwhile continuing wearily to tread the thresholds of consciousness. The door at the end of the poem is a virtual door, which can be expected to open—and, which is worse, to shut—only in the realm of unfulfilled desire, that is to say, in a fiction. It is this fiction, however, which saves: a paradox held in place with that steely insistence which is Beckett's most distinctive quality.

NOTES

- 1 Samuel Beckett, *Poems in English* (London, Calder and Boyars, 1961), pp. 48–49.
- 2 M. Frank, “The Infinite Text”, translated by M. Schwerin, *Glyph*, 7 (1980), 96; quoted in A. Moorjani, *Abysmal Games in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Department of Romance Languages, 1982), p. 131, n. 71.
- 3 M. Perloff, *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1981), pp. 245–47. There is a brief mention in J. Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett’s Art* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1967), p. 39.
- 4 L. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett, Poet and Critic* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1970), pp. 225–28. Harvey’s discussion is sensitive but leans somewhat questionably on biographical data.
- 5 Samuel Beckett, “Peintres de l’empêchement”, in *Disjecta*, edited by R. Cohn (London, Calder, 1983), pp. 133–37.
- 6 L. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett*, notes the, perhaps unavoidable, resolution of this suggestive ambiguity in the Italian (“segno”) and German (“ich bin”) versions (p. 226).
- 7 It will be recalled that the “tenor” is the purport or general drift of thought regarding the subject of a metaphor, and the “vehicle” that which serves to carry or embody the tenor.
- 8 “I would describe men [...] as occupying in Time a much greater place than that so sparingly conceded to them in Space, a place indeed extended beyond measure, because, like giants plunged in the years, they touch at once those periods of their lives—separated by so many days—so far apart in Time”: Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1931), p. 12.
- 9 Samuel Beckett, *Poems in English*, p. 23. In Dante (*Purgatorio*, xxx. 22–33) the poet compares the veiled Beatrice to the rising sun shrouded in a haze.
- 10 See U. Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1976), pp. 69–72, 125–28.
- 11 R. Barthes, *Image Music Text*, edited and translated by S. Heath (London, Fontana, 1977), p. 147.
- 12 Samuel Beckett, *Murphy* [1938] (London, Calder, 1962), p. 37.
- 13 Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy* (London, Picador, 1979), p. 68.
- 14 Harvey, I think quite mistakenly, dispels this crucial indeterminacy by literalizing the setting of the poem: “Out of [...] such a walk on Killiney beach under such characteristically Irish conditions came the present

- poem” (L. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett*, p. 226). This reduction of the text by shackling it to a biographical locale also bedevils Eoin O’Brien’s enterprise in his sumptuously photographed *The Beckett Country* (Dublin, Black Cat Press, 1986). See the discussion of these and related matters in my essay “‘The Poetry Is Another Pair of Sleeves’: Beckett, Ireland and Modernist Lyric Poetry”, in *Modernism and Ireland: The Poetry of the 1930s*, edited by P. Coughlan and A. Davis (Cork, Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 173–208.
- 15 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [1927] (Oxford, Blackwell, 1962), p. 174; quoted in H. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* (Boston, MIT Press, 1992), p. 173.
 - 16 See Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, pp. 13–19, 21, 29, 31, 47 for specific examples of these themes, which are, however, present everywhere in Beckett’s discussion.
 - 17 See P. Coughlan, “‘A Noise of Wet Kisses and Washing in a Tub’: Beckett’s Trilogy and the Idea of Fiction”, *Maynooth Review*, 6 (1980), 35–48.
 - 18 H.-J. Schulz, *This Hell of Stories: A Hegelian Approach to the Fiction of Samuel Beckett* (The Hague, Mouton, 1973), pp. 104, 106, 110; L. Bersani, *Balzac to Beckett: Center and Circumference in French Fiction* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1970), Ch. 5.
 - 19 D. Watson, *Paradox and Desire in Samuel Beckett’s Fiction* (London, Macmillan, 1991). Watson and Angela Moorjani, *Abysmal Games*, give highly suggestive and rigorous post-structuralist and psychoanalytic readings of Beckett.