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'The Poetry is Another Pair of Sleeves': Beckett, Ireland and Modernist Lyric Poetry[1]

Patricia Coughlan

> 'God love thee, Tom, and don't be minding me. I can't think of Ireland the way you do. Ever, Sam'
>
> (Letter from Samuel Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy. 31 January 1938).

Beckett's poetry and his relations with Ireland have both been rather neglected subjects. This essay takes the occasion of the re-examination of Irish modernist poetry in general to investigate the two by each other's light, and to analyse Beckett's 1930s poetry in particular within this context. The 'Irish Beckett' has fared less badly than the poetry: after the invaluable pioneering work of J.C.C. Mays, and John Harrington's book-length study, comes W.J. McCormack's recent incisive probing of the problem of Beckett and Ireland, all of which serve in a salutary way to complicate the narrative account in Deirdre Bair.[2] But the sheer intensity and importance of Beckett's reaction to Ireland can do with further exploration, especially as the too-often ignored or suppressed social and ideological ground of his work. Against this background this essay addresses the poetry Beckett wrote during the crucial decade from his early twenties to his early thirties (i.e. 1929–1939), while his own individual aesthetic project within European modernism was being developed and tested in his work. A further task also needs to be performed: to bring that body of writing into detailed relation with the projects, gradually and variously diverging from his, of his fellow

Irish poets whose work is the subject of the rest of this volume, with whom he shared some common goals, and with whom he was in close contact at times during the period. Much thought and some research still remains to be done before we can achieve this second task; my aim is to move towards it by means of the discussion below.

I have said that the poetry remains neglected by criticism; it is worth reflecting on why this is so. There is a number of reasons, some good and others less acceptable. There is the general judgement that Beckett is a very much more distinguished writer of narrative and of drama than of poetry, and the view that the war marks a watershed in his development and his thirties' writings are more or less prentice-work. Both of these are, however, debatable points, as I shall go on to argue. More indisputable are the following factors: the uneven quality of the very early poetry, its relative inaccessibility, the uncertainty of the canon (some poems which appeared in the 1930s, later effectively suppressed by Beckett himself, others rumoured to be still awaiting publication in any form), the very long delay of the promised collected edition, and the poems' formidable intellectual difficulty, obscurity of allusion and quality of gnomic resistance to interpretation. There is, finally, the fact that the best work, from late in the decade, is in French: while it is probably not tactful to say so, this may have helped to deter many primarily Anglophone critics from venturing there.

Further, the existence of a long and very thoroughly researched book, by a scholar – Lawrence Harvey – who was privileged to have a wealth of information direct from Beckett, has unfortunately and paradoxically not stimulated a process of active ongoing interpretation of the poems.[3] The information in Harvey covers the whole range of facts which could conceivably be of relevance in a commentary, from the biographical background, intentions as to theme, and circumstances of composition of the work, on the one hand, to specifically literary considerations – such as allusions of all kinds and formal influences – on the other. A particular difficulty is that a close analysis of Harvey's text reveals both a large number of disambiguating decisions about semantic and syntactic matters, and a certain tendency to fall back upon biographical explanation (see my discussion below of the poem 'Arènes de Lutèce'). Beckett's poems are usually difficult texts, sometimes because of their obscure vocabulary both English and French, sometimes on account of a looseness in syntax which is a highly characteristic effect of this work, and sometimes from an equally Beckettian ellipsis both in syntax and in referential function. Is the reader to take it that Harvey's readings emerged during his conversations with Beckett, and how far should one, as a result, accept them and build one's own interpretation of the poems on them? Assuming that we do take these readings to be sanctioned by the author Beckett, then to adopt them to the exclusion of others which might be textually justifiable or possible would be to take a strongly intentionalist position and impoverish the texts. It is particularly ironic that this situation should arise in the interpretation of a writer so dedicated to opposing the whole institution of the unitary self and to its tyrannical continuities, and one who in his later narrative writings conducted a virtual test to destruction on the transcendental subject. Ann-Marie Lecercle has remarked on the centrifugal quality of Harvey's discussion of the collection *Echo's Bones*; he provides so much detail that it is hard for the reader to gain a sense of the poems (often fragile and volatile objects anyway) as general, properly aesthetic utterances, however unsatisfactory.[4]

Besides Harvey's nevertheless indispensable study, there is a surprisingly small body of criticism specifically on the poetry. This is of varying quality, and has tended to keep recommencing at the same point: it is still true – as John Pilling's searching and sensitive essay, the best single discussion, observed in 1976 – that we have little sense still of the 'shape' of the poetry as a whole.[5] A routine disclaimer, almost an apology, about the quality of the poetry in itself is almost universal at the outset of the discussion, as if by a self-denying ordinance we were obliged to pretend that the poems exist in some kind of generic vacuum and we could only judge them by pretending that Beckett had written nothing else.[6] In my view the result of this has been the loss of the opportunity offered by these texts, as a body of writing produced at the outset of his career, for a fuller understanding of his literary thought in general. Furthermore, the negative valuation of the poems which has prevailed is unwarranted in many cases, especially in the work of the later thirties. Certainly some of the poetry is not fully realized aesthetically, but that in itself, in the case of an author whose texts offer so much resistance to interpretation, affords a view of Beckett's distinctive vision and techniques in the making. Further, as I have said, there

is room to develop our discussion of the Irish contexts of the early work, whether literary, cultural or to do with the formation of Beckett's aesthetic ideas in relation to and in contradistinction from his Irish background. W.J. Mc Cormack has remarked on the domination of Beckett criticism by what he calls 'rival campaigns' which link him to 'French existentialism, the British theatre, an Anglo-Irish tradition'; the institution of literary criticism is, unfortunately, at least as much governed by competing interest groups and unthought conventions as by disinterested intellectual attention to the disorganized, enigmatic, and half-apprehended processes of history and ideas in it.[7] My own attempt to gain a clearer view of the poetry, and the particular nature of its modernist aims, has been greatly helped by reflecting on Beckett's letters to MacGreevy during the decade insofar as they concern Beckett's own sense of the creative process, his discussion of painting and literature, his expressed responses to Ireland, social, topographical, and cultural-ideological, and his judgements at the time of the quality and direction of his own work.

It is, of course, part of the project of this whole volume to investigate what relations may be proposed between the master narratives of international modernism, with all their internal variations and contested issues, and the nature of Irishness and how it was framed in terms of institutions, on the one hand, and selfhoods, on the other. How may we locate Beckett in those relations? It was within the ideological macrocosm of newly assured Irish national legitimacy that he lived his formative years – he was fifteen in 1921 – and it was against this background that he had to embark upon his own early self-placing in terms of culture and ideology. As David Lloyd has persuasively argued, the narrative of Irish nationalism, which had been inaugurated as one of difference and otherness – a narrative perforce subordinate to that of hegemonic imperialism – from an early stage had itself begun to mirror the features of that dominant rhetoric which it sought to displace.[8] By their mirroring of the adversary's face, a perhaps unconscious and virtually unavoidable fate, Irish nationalists had after all been doing no more than seeking to assert the validity and viability of their own vision as a totalizing one which would be adequate and therefore genuinely alternative to that of their opponents. Post-colonialist theorists, Lloyd and others, argue that this replication or mirroring happened because

both, albeit competing, visions and discourses were being produced within the framework of identity thinking, which held as self-evident the origin of meaning in a unitary self. From this point of departure, liberal ideology enjoined it upon individuals as an ethical imperative to seek unity between that self and a social world (even in Hegel, specifically a state) felt, however mutely or obscurely, to be ultimately benign.[9] Nationalism had to move towards, to promise the acquisition of, the institutions which defined legitimacy in late nineteenth-century terms. This process took place in spite of the other, revolutionary and creatively destabilizing moment within Irish nationalism (and also within specifically Literary Revivalism), whose disruptive energies are also apparent at this distance.

It is evident that this latter characteristic, of making or discerning a radical break in the given continuities, which allows us to perceive Irish nationalism between the 1840s and 1921 as the working out of a revolutionary process resembling those elsewhere in Europe and in the world, became less and less a prominent feature of the ideological and cultural life of Ireland from 1922, at the founding of the new state, onwards. Nationalism seemed, in terms of its own previous aims, to have succeeded: it had displaced and toppled the institutions of its oppressor, and could now become, like that quondam oppressor, itself a dominant ideology. The official over-printing at independence of British George VI postage stamps with 'Saorstát Éireann' is a piquant emblem of the situation; though we should perhaps acknowledge that our late twentieth-century awareness of the extent to which one form of hegemony may come to resemble, even mirror, another in all its repressive solidity is a form of hindsight.[10] Certainly, as Terence Brown again shows in his essay in this volume, by the 1930s the intense sense of newness and of more or less Utopian experimentation – which at least some Irish cultural revolutionaries had had in common with the prophets of the European avant-garde in the period of high modernism – no longer figured prominently in the public discourse of Irish letters and culture generally.

What of the other term in the nationalism-modernism relation? The danger of taking modernism as having a monolithic referent is rightly emphasized by other contributors here; but some tentative placing is necessary. Thus, attempting to classify and order the

various modernisms or modernist phases, Fredric Jameson considers Charles Jencks's category of 'late modernism', in which one would put the 'last survivals of a properly modernist view of art and the world after the great political and economic break of the Depression', when various brands of social realism were gaining cultural dominance. In this category Jameson finds

> names like Borges, Nabokov, Beckett, poets like Olson or Zukofsky, composers like Milton Babbitt, who had the misfortune to span two eras and the luck to find a time capsule of isolation or exile in which to spin out unseasonable forms.[11]

If we consider the 'engaged' poetry of the 1930s in England and the still-urgent nationalist ideological imperatives enjoined on Irish writers, especially, for example, the felt urgency to depict Irish local realities – Corkery, O'Connor, the Abbey's testing for 'Peasant Quality' – as variants of these social realisms, we can readily place Beckett's implacable resistance to the Yeatsian influence in Irish writing as a classic modernist refusal to allow what David Lloyd calls 'ethical'[12] demands to deflect him from his commitment to what were, after all, between 1930 and 1939 not yet evidently 'unseasonable forms'. The applicability of post-colonialist theory to the Irish situation in general and in particular to Ireland's literature in English is, of course, debatable. But the underpinnings of that theory, in its more sophisticated forms, from the German philosophical tradition and in particular from the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School provide, insofar as they deal with self-world or subject-object mediation, very suggestive insights into the problems of disintegrating subjectivity in modernity. These problems were recognized and faced, in different ways, by the Irish modernists of the second generation in their poetic practice; Beckett himself argued in 1934 that they were evaded by the neo-Revivalists. The nature of subjectivity is necessarily a central preoccupation of lyric poets, being the ground whereon lyric is built.

In that essay 'Recent Irish Poetry', considered in detail by other contributors and now being understood as an Irish modernist manifesto, Beckett is eloquent on the 'flight from self-awareness' entailed by Revivalist thematics with their 'cut-and-dried sanctity and loveliness': the nationalists' mission of constructing and expressing a national identity is the antithesis of Beckett's sense of the self

as process and of the gulf between the welter of consciousness and the equally disunited world.[13] He insists in the first paragraph (prefiguring Lyotard and his concept of the *événement* rather as Adam in the Bible is said to prefigure Christ) on a 'thing that has happened', namely the 'breakdown of the object'. He then, with rhetorical scorn, offers the reader the option of thinking of this as 'the breakdown of the subject' if that is easier. In other words, he insists on the processual qualities of *both* self *and* world. His account of Proust three years before was already emphasizing the constantly changing character of both subject and object, with its explanation of how the action of time on the subject results in 'an unceasing modification of his personality, whose permanent reality, if any, can only be apprehended by a retrospective hypothesis' and its definition of habit as 'the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects'.[14] Reading Schopenhauer, who proposes to dissolve both the body–mind and self–world dichotomies, and whose language pervades his writings in this period, can only have worked to exacerbate his detachment.

Dougald MacMillan rather surprisingly defines Beckett's work in *Echo's Bones* (1935) as antithetical to the project of modernism in its various forms, marking in particular Beckett's distance from both Pound's and Eliot's strategies. He finds a restless, 'dynamic' quality in the work which he sees as an implicit rejection of imagism and of centripetal poetry whose centre is metaphor.[15] He rightly notices Beckett's insistence on the relation between terms and not the substance of the terms themselves, a point to which I shall return. But he is on shakier ground when implicitly defining modernism by its moment of *com*position, its claims to hegemony and self-constitution as a new master-narrative, rather than by what one might argue is its equally characteristic and constitutive moment of *de*composition and radical disjunction from a totalizing aesthetic. (Or, one might say, he is thinking of Eliot's modernism rather than Joyce's, and at that of Eliot's criticism rather than his earlier poetry.) In fact that aspect of modernism which is mythopoeic is deeply uncongenial to Beckett's mind. He is quite outside the kinship of Eliot and Yeats in shoring fragments against their ruins or seeking Unity of Being, just as he cannot share his Irish contemporaries' enthusiasm for the nation. In the letters we see him towards the end of the decade

regretfully but gracefully distancing himself from MacGreevy's positing of, and willing identification with, forms of national aesthetic expression: in January 1938 he responds equivocally to MacGreevy's essay on Jack Yeats, apologizing for his own 'chronic inability to understand as member of any proposition a phrase like "the Irish people"'. It is characteristic, however, of the strong affection he shows towards MacGreevy that, in a turn of phrase perhaps humorously, though not sarcastically, Hiberno-English he adds, at the end of the letter: 'God love thee, Tom, and don't be minding me. I can't think of Ireland the way you do. Ever, Sam' (31 January 1938). As his eventual opting in to Ireland in 1941 shows, MacGreevy, born in Tarbert, County Kerry, son of a primary teacher and a policeman, shared even with the likes of Daniel Corkery a sense of belonging, an identification of things Irish, however dismaying, being his, 'ours'; Beckett, for a whole range of reasons, could not.

It is worth recalling his actual social position in Dublin, where on reaching adulthood he found himself on the margins in several senses: by background a Protestant in a state increasingly and aggressively Catholic in ideology, by conviction an atheist in a family devoutly low-church and Evangelical, member of the suburban middle class in a cultural milieu officially devoted to enthusiastic imaginative celebration of the rural peasantry, bohemian and cosmopolitan by taste and inclination, and, in a household governed by respectability and propriety, valuing the life of the intellect and the arts above bourgeois professional status or security. 'They want me to wear a bowler hat', he complained to MacGreevy upon one of his returns from Paris; and, more plaintively: 'I don't want to be a professor.' This marginality and the resultant self-alignment athwart Dublin social life in almost all of its available manifestations is quite clear in the Belacqua of both *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, and no doubt it contributes to Beckett's negative aesthetic judgements in 'Recent Irish Poetry'; but his position is first of all a principled and intellectually coherent one, and of a piece with his radical and philosophically well-grounded scepticism. He scornfully convicts the antiquarians (followers of Yeats) of a belief that 'the first condition of any poem is an accredited theme, and that in self-perception there is no theme'. From this relegation to the 'circumference' only MacGreevy, Devlin and Coffey are given partial exemptions, in Devlin's and Coffey's

case based on their potential rather than actual achievements. The terms in which he praises MacGreevy – whom with acute critical perception he places in a position intermediate between the 'antiquarians' and the 'others' – will serve as the best point of departure for our examination of Beckett's own poetic project in these years. MacGreevy, he says, 'neither excludes self-perception from his work nor postulates the object as inaccessible. But he knows how to wait for the thing to happen . . . And when it does . . . whatever happens to be dispensed, *gile na gile* or empty hearths, it is the act and not the object of perception that matters' (*Disjecta,* p. 74).

This privileging of the act rather than the object of perception is echoed in *Dream of Fair to middling Women* where a concern with the relations between terms rather than the terms themselves is celebrated in a virtuoso passage as the only *modus vivendi*:

> poised between God and the Devil, Justine and Juliette, at the dead point, in a tranquil living at the neutral point . . . For me the one real thing is to be found in the relation: the dumb-bell's bar, the silence between my eyes, between you and me . . . I can only know the real poise at the crest of the relation rooted in the unreal postulates, God-Devil, Masoch-Sade (he might have spared us that hoary old binary) . . . On the crown of the passional relation I live, dead to oneness, non-entity and unalone. . . . (*Dream,* pp. 27-8)[16]

This recalls the emptying out of the plenums of tradition performed by the modernist avant-gardes in general, and the surrealists and Dadaists in particular, down to the Sadeian references, which come from the period's vocabulary of resistance to normative bourgeois identity. This inventive refusal of the 'unreal postulates' finds its own flowering in those aporias, the staging of which is so intensely characteristic of Beckett's imagination and in which his skill was to grow in the various genres from decade to decade.

He insists upon the breakdown of a notionally pre-existing unity: this can be recognized as the founding bourgeois accommodation of self and world, achieved *par excellence* by classic-realist works of art, and which further is structurally parallel to Geulincx's pre-established harmonies, themselves to be the objects of Beckett's ironic protest in *Murphy*. He sees the Revivalists' recourse to myth ('Oisin, Cuchulain, Maeve, Tir na n-Óg . . . the Crone of Beare') as an unwarranted and inauthentic regression to enslaving forms. For him

the need for radical breaks and fissures is not past: the imperative is to resist a unity he sees as like the waters closing over his head, the forming all over again of a seamless world of 'cut-and-dried sanctity and loveliness'. The very early text 'For Future Reference', said to be a dream-record, presents a narrative of the terror of drowning in or scarification by the rocks surrounding a deep pool, into which the narrator fears being thrown by one of a succession of jeering male authority figures, the first a chemist, the second a jeering, predatory anatomy professor, the third a mathematician (a figure identified as based either on Beckett's father or on his Portora swimming and mathematics teacher by Harvey and Bair respectively). Here, by extension, we can see an Oedipus in the making, rehearsing as yet only one phase of his destined plot, the fear of threatening, castrating fathers. The other phase, of fantasized symbolic parricide and union with a perhaps equally threatening feminine, is yet to follow, and does indeed manifest itself in the poems of the next four or five years; in 'Recent Irish Poetry' we see the break with the fathers of Irish Revivalism being staged with aggressive decisiveness.

In the long view, Mays's identification of Beckett's scepticism as especially Anglo-Irish, placing him in the tradition-rejecting lineage of Swift and Shaw, among others, is of course right.[17] There is a further specific content to his style and vision, however, which is the product of other influences. These are partly to do with the course of study he followed both officially at Trinity College, Dublin and later, concentrating on European rather than English literature, and with a strong philosophical emphasis. The letters of the mid-1930s show him only then, in his late twenties, reading English writers, especially novelists, of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Richardson, Johnson, Fielding, Dickens); the texts which left the earlier and deeper impression on him were evidently those of Dante and Provençal poetry, of Racine and the German and French philosophers, and, however antithetically it is often invoked in his work, the Bible. His extensive reading during the thirties of the Austrian nominalist philosopher Fritz Mauthner – the '*Whoroscope* Notebook' has his many longhand transcriptions of lengthy passages – will have confirmed his existing position of scepticism.[18] The loss of positive content in language itself, matching the hollow claim of literary forms to ideological plenitude, was leading philosophers

including Wittgenstein to Mauthner's signpost pointing towards 'laughter and silence'. Beckett's own steely rejection of false consolation led him both to extremes of disruption in his writing, and to amused acknowledgements of his own steadfast intellectual asceticism, such as the engaging remark to MacGreevy, while attacking 'Jesuitical' poems (referring to Mallarmé), that 'I suppose I'm a dirty low-church P.[rotestant; *sic*] even in poetry: concerned with integrity in a surplice' (18 October 1932). There is an irony in the atheist Beckett's lack of appreciation of Mallarmé, the atheist poet so admired by the Catholic writers MacGreevy, Coffey and Devlin. Further, the terms of the self-description are striking: while conducting a purely literary meditation he comically gives himself a label from the rhetoric of Irish sectarianism, which at the time could be virulent.[19] This derivation of an intellectual position from the givens of family religious background is mostly a joke, but not entirely so; the remark shows a very Irish and rueful sense of the ineradicability of confessional origins, at least in the eyes of the Irish majority.

Apart from his actual life in a literary Paris still devoted to creative *épatement* of the bourgeoisie, Beckett's versions of Crevel and Breton, made early in 1932, show his thorough exposure to the surrealists' radical eschewing of privileged topics, discourses or registers in poetry. In the short term this may perhaps only have increased the pressure on his own imagination, with its tendency both to seek and simultaneously to disparage forms of potential order; and the systematic and philosophical character of his mind must have limited the degree of his satisfaction with the playful automatist high jinks of surrealism and his sense of their adequacy.[20] Besides, his apprehension of the indivisibility of consciousness from material being and of the ferocious energies of the unconscious must have been all too vivid, tormented as he was by his own body's painful announcements of mental distress, translated into its own speech as fistulas, night terrors, and bouts of suicidal despair. For all his subscribing to the idea of 'Orphic creation' advanced by the 'Verticalist Manifesto' in Jolas's *transition* 1932, his own eventual direct recourse to psychoanalysis as a suffering analysand puts him in a rather different position from that of, say, André Breton, with his glad annexation of Freud's arguments to his own advocacy of the inner self, and at a distance from the willed experiments of the group

in the simulation of states of mental disturbance.[21]

In this connection, Beckett's way of talking in the letters about his own poetry and about the creative process is revealing: it emphasizes the involuntary ('Orphic?') nature of the event of composition, and it simultaneously relates the process of composition metaphorically to the body, especially to sexual release, sometimes to disease. Thus: 'I'm enclosing the only bit of writing that has happened to me since Paris' (referring to a version of 'Serena I', letter of 8 October 1932) and one of the French poems 'dictated itself to me' (27 January 1938). In August 1932, discussing the merits of his own poems, he judges 'all the early ones – the Caravan ones' as 'talk' (except *Whoroscope*); later that year, making an exception also of 'Moly', alias 'Yoke of Liberty', from this negative judgement, he sets up an opposition between poems which seem merely willed (his word is *construits*) and those which do not, but 'represent a necessity'. He uses images of dirt and infection to characterize the successful poems 'the 3 or 4 [*sic*] I like and that seem to me to have been drawn down against the really dirty weather of one of these fine days into the gutter of the "private life", Alba and the long Enueg and Dortmunder, even Moly, do not and never have given me that impression of being *construits* . . . ' These, he says, have been written 'above an abscess and not out of a cavity' and are 'a statement not a description of heat in the spirit to compensate for pus in the spirit'. These disease metaphors ('abscess', 'pus') are an implicit rejection of conventional dualisms which would segregate an intellectual-aesthetic sphere from the physical, and strikingly replicate the exact form of his own acute physical illnesses in those years (literal abscesses and pus). Poetic creation is associated, then, with suffering, despair and deracination: in the same letter he quotes a couplet from Eluard:

> Quel est le rôle de la racine?
> Le désespoir a rompu tous ses liens.

The actual production of text, however, is also associated with ejaculation. He calls the production of two poems composed within a short space of time 'a double-yoked orgasm in months of aspermatic nights and days' (21 December 1931). The letters make little verbal doodles – in doggerel – about a sexualized creative process,

with a comic-grotesque conceit of the brain as an erectile organ, even while 'my algos is puss in the corner', that is, emotional suffering is temporarily suspended.[22] He makes jokes about the Freudian, or mock-Freudian, symbolic equation of faeces and art object, each as something precious to its creator and something physically produced (or perhaps on other occasions blocked), for example the elaborately casual and self-deprecating remark in an early letter telling MacGreevy that four poems had been accepted for *European Caravan*: 'Bronowski [the co-editor, with Reavey and Putnam] says he is using three turds from my central laboratory [scored through, but so as to remain legible] lavatory' (7 July 1930). This body-talk with its studied crudity is one of the ways he marks his sense of difference not only from the life of Foxrock and its analogues, but also on occasion, as the letters show, from the contained polite dignity of his Irish contemporaries' poetic utterance. On 9 October 1933 he writes to MacGreevy about a meeting with Brian Coffey and Denis Devlin:

> I'm afraid I didn't get much kick out of Coffey and Devlin, their pockets full of calm precious poems . . . I gave them the Enueg [*Enueg I*] and we went to the Gallery (grosse erreur). . . . Coffey seemed to find the Enueg highly delightful amusing enlightening. Devlin didn't know what an algum tree was and I couldn't enlighten him . . .

In his continuing dialogue with MacGreevy he also makes a habit of commenting admiringly on the heroic representation of male figures in Renaissance religious painting; I would read this insistence on the sexualized body as a combination of the schoolboy's rebellious gesture, still being elicited by the various repressions of his Irish upbringing, and the impulses of the period towards systematic blasphemy and various forms of outrage against decency. Thus, on 22 December 1931:

> I've been three times to look at the new Perugino Pieta in the National Gallery here. . . . A dream-laden, potent Xist [*sic*] and a passion of tears for the waste. . . . But a lovely chee[r]y[23] Xist full of sperm, and the women touching his thighs . . .

It is difficult to imagine how such passages as this may have fallen on MacGreevy's ear, with his capacity for delicate reverential

attention to art and his strong religious feeling. Six years later, writing from Germany at the beginning of 1937, Beckett regards with a similar attention the works he had just seen at Sanssouci: 'the Mabuses are sublime, there is one big bevelled penis, I forget whether Adam's or Neptune's'. In the same context of enthusiasm and even gaiety, he finds an insouciant group of female figures: 'And the Caryatids are all laughing, pretending to be bowed down' (18 January 1937). However facetious such passages may be, it is nevertheless clear that his figuration for art is a specifically male potency, a 'spermatic' production.[24] This is all aggressively masculinist, as are also the speaking selves of most of the poems up to 1936 and some later, and the Belacqua of the thirties' narratives; it is a quality which I shall argue is, however, considerably tempered in the 1937–39 poems. The laughing Caryatids, adjacent in his letter, imply his sense, here a charming and delighted one, of the coolness and envied paradoxical impenetrability of women. This is a theme evident elsewhere in the work of the period – clearly, for instance, in the poem 'à elle l'acte calme', and in the two pendents 'Dortmunder' and 'Alba'. It is one of the countercurrents running in the turbulent stream of mingled desire, disgust and anxiety about the feminine which sweeps along the masculine speakers of several of his works: yearning for and fear of erotic-infantile attachment to, and being overpowered by, a powerful feminine.[25] His analysis with Wilfrid Bion would cause him intense pain by dwelling on these themes, but it did begin to show him a route out of misery.[26]

This analysis during 1934 and 1935 – pursued very intensively, sometimes at an astonishing six sessions a week – has been usefully discussed by Didier Anzieu.[27] Anzieu finds parallels between Beckett's working out of his creative philosophy in the thirties and forties and Bion's account of the 'vortex' of inward selfhood. Bion, who was not much older than Beckett at the time of their dealings with each other, had yet to develop his own, later important, theories, and was working within Kleinian perspectives. Melanie Klein's accounts of the self's defence against fundamental anxieties in what she calls 'the paranoid-schizoid position' by 'mechanisms of dissociation, denial, omnipotence, idealization and projective identification' seem (perhaps apart from the projective identification) a strikingly good description of the lyric personae, taken collectively, in Beckett's 1930s' poems.[28]

I turn to the nature of the material itself. The vast majority of the poems in English belong to the first half of the decade, and the period can be further divided into phases as far as Beckett's poetic production is concerned: there is a first phase, inaugurated in 1930 with *Whoroscope* and two other poems, then a group of four appeared together in the 1931 collection of experimental work, *The European Caravan*, and a further two appeared individually in magazines in that year. Then thirteen poems, the first nine of which had been completed before the end of 1934, were gathered and carefully juxtaposed in the 1935 collection *Echo's Bones*. This is the bulk of the poems in English: 1936 and 1938 produced only a further two, 'Cascando' and 'Ooftish' respectively. The most important works written from 1936 to 1939 are the group of twelve short lyrics in French, written between 1937 and 1939, which did not appear until after the war in 1946.

In the first phase, there are, then, nine very early pieces which did not find their way into *Echo's Bones*. These are: 'For Future Reference', 'From the Only Poet to a Shining Whore', 'Return to the Vestry', the four from the *European Caravan* – namely 'Hell Crane to Starling', 'Casket of Pralinen for the Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin', 'Text', and 'Yoke of Liberty' – the sonnet Belacqua addresses to the Smeraldina in *Dream* (70–1), which is a rather special case, and another poem in *Dream*, 'Calvary by Night'. Few of these nine are successful in themselves; nevertheless a more determined and widespread analysis of them would pay dividends.[29] Beckett chose to exclude all eight from Calder's *Collected Poems 1930-1978*, which has made them difficult to find for readers who do not have easy access to the original. Harvey very helpfully provides texts of all the poetry, including these – in a category of 'Jettisoned Poems' – but they are dispersed throughout his discussion and consequently gaining an impression of them as a whole is difficult: this accidental constraint makes the permeability of the poem-commentary boundary in all criticism, *pace* formalism's well-wrought urns, even more apparent than usual.[30]

With the exception of the *Dream* sonnet, these earliest poems are clogged, obscure exercises in multiple allusiveness, often furiously choleric in tone and jagged with awkward movements which seem aimed at undermining the lyric speaker even at the very moment he is being constituted. They lurch uncertainly from irony to irony,

constantly offering, and then ironically snatching away, instants of prospective beauty, order or fulfilment. This passage from 'Casket of Pralinen for the Daughter of a Dissipated Mandarin' (1931) will illustrate the less than effective handling of the procedure:

> . . . Now me boy
> take a hitch in your lyrical loinstring.
>
> What is this that is more
> than the anguish of Beauty,
> this gales of pain that was not prepared
> in the caves of her eyes? . . .
>
> Tonight her gaze would be less
> Than a lark's barred sunlight.

And more in a similar plangent lyric tone, ending:

> Fool! do you hope to untangle
> the knot of God's pain?

– which is immediately followed by:

> Melancholy Christ that was a soft one!
> Oh yes I think that was perhaps just a very little inclined to be
> rather too self-conscious.
>
> Schluss!
> Now ladies and gents
> a chocolate-coated hiccough to our old friend.
> Put on your hats and sit easy.
> ('Casket', 25-30, 32-3, 43-8; *schluss* means 'an end')[31]

The texture of these *Caravan* poems is a veritable montage, each passage violently at odds with its predecessor and successor. Montage is often described as the quintessential modernist technique, but even among modernist works Beckett's early texts are exceptionally close to Eisenstein's classic conception of sequence as a succession of disruptions, explained in his 1929 essays. As film historians point out, Eisenstein 'viewed montage as a kind of collision or conflict, particularly between each shot and its successor. He sees each shot as having a kind of potential energy . . . [which] becomes kinetic when the first shot collides with the succeeding one. . . . This conflict produced the tense, violent rhythms that became an Eisenstein trademark.'[32] It is argued that this conflict 'was also important to Eisenstein because he took it to be an expression, in the realm of images, of the Marxist's dialectical principle'. While Beckett does not identify his own method as dialectical, its valuing of breaks and ruptures above continuity nevertheless keeps constantly before our consciousness the 'new thing that has happened' (*Disjecta*, p. 70) to lyric utterance. It is, however, unfortunately true that in many of the very early poems both the poetic method and the handling of theme emphasize disjunction in such a forced way as to wreck the whole enterprise of sequential or comprehensible utterance. This is the case in three of the four *European Caravan* poems, for example, all except 'Yoke of Liberty', which escapes it for reasons I suggest below. It is true to a somewhat lesser extent of *Whoroscope*, where the Descartes material acts as a unifying narrative, as Johannes Hedberg points out in his very useful discussion of the poem.[33]

The poems up to and including *Echo's Bones* are also full of often bewildering allusions: Dantean, biblical, Greek mythological, and orientalizing: in fact almost everything *but* Oisín, Maeve, and the Crone of Beare. Beckett's resort in this early phase of his work to such 'colours' recapitulates the earlier history of modernism; he progresses towards finding these effects more or less dispensable by the late thirties. Many practitioners of the various arts in modernism's first generation sought, especially in their earlier work, to estrange the reader's, viewer's, or listener's response by exotic and deliberately esoteric references, and thus to decompose the oppressive unities of the bourgeois phenomenal world.[34] The strategy was already present in *fin de siècle* aesthetics and in French symbolist writings, especially in the work of Rimbaud, whom, as we have seen, Beckett admired much more than Mallarmé.[35] As the decade advances Beckett develops instead his more characteristic resources, of spare laconic syntax and verbal patterns involving repetition with ironic variation.

What all the poems have in common is the continual dispersement of the lyric subject of the *énoncé*, which is matched by the wilful scattering of the lineaments of the phenomenal world into disorder.[36] There have been some, I believe ill-judged, attempts to compose these shards into a coherent narrative. For example, Dougald McMillan (1976) reads the whole collection *Echo's Bones*, starting from

a rather literal interpetation of the Ovidian story to which the title alludes, as devoted to the theme of lost love, an alleged episode of which in Beckett's life (evidently the relationship with Peggy Sinclair) McMillan treats as the *clef* to unlock the puzzles of the book – as if it were a *roman*. The psychological origins of the poems, so far as they are capable of being discussed, are in any case evidently much more complex and dialectical than McMillan allows. One might point out that the lyric speakers in the poems are anxious to an exactly equal extent about the failure of attachment – the loss of love – and the failure of *de*tachment: erotic desire and longing are matched by moments of recoil and fear of destructive immersion in the Other.[37] Besides the emphasis on the relations between terms (subject and object, body and mind, self and world, 'Shilly and Shally', son and mother) we should keep in mind Belacqua's hilarious attempts near the beginning of *Dream* to muster an adequate sense of loss at the departure of the Smeraldina on the Dun Laoghaire boat (*Dream*, pp. 3-6).[38]

All the poems of the period construct – with varying clarity of vision yet quite in accordance with his own 1934 requirement for 'self-awareness' – one isolated self, a frantic centrifuge, faced with many other, usually female, subjects or potential subjects, often defensively debased and crushed in the representation into mere objects, or more rarely, elevated in beauty, grace and composure above the narrators. The selves in these poems yaw between attempts at mastery and abject self-abasement, while simultaneously, as we have seen, oscillating between moments of lyrical poise and dishevelled interior antagonism and self-mockery. In theme, the texts perform an intense, even obsessive, rehearsal of male-female erotic confrontations, quite without arriving at any reconciling mediation. One might easily anatomize their misogyny, but to see Beckett's representation of sexual relations as offering him the paradigm case in which to interrogate and break apart the composed surfaces of the unitary, controlled self, is I believe, a more productive strategy.

It is worth remarking that these 1930s' poems attend more to sexual love and male-female relations than any other body of Beckett's work; this theme provides an especially clear lens through which to view the development of his competence in the genre. Partly this is because his preoccupation at this time with the obligation to arrive at adequate representations of interiority meets and clashes

creatively with the central role played in Western culture by the sexual imperative to join together individual selves, those discrete particles, in pairs, with all the familiar and powerful resonances of cosmic complementarity (which, however, coexists with a familiar asymmetry in terms of power and status between women and men). The poems certainly exhibit signs of the mixture of fear, disgust and felt alienness of women all too familiar in masculine attitudes, adolescent and adult; we should also recall that modernism's great iconic works, in their different ways, are not themselves free from these disfigurements of misogyny. It is, however, striking that in *Dream* the anti-feminine invective is accompanied by an equally virulent self-denigration on the part of the protagonist Belacqua, an emotion not so prevalent in the poems, at least in those from *Whoroscope* on.

In many of the *Echo's Bones* poems Beckett systematically appropriates the whole system of Provençal poetry, itself largely or wholly predicated on the importance of a codified male-female encounter. As Lawrence Harvey shows in very helpful detail, this is done by a series of pastiches of individual forms: the *aubade*, the *serena* or evening-poem, the *enueg* or *planh* – the poet's complaint against the world about his desperate situation.[39] The Provençal influences play an important formally sustaining role in the collection, and offer, as Harvey well says, such resources as the constitutively discontinuous movement of the *Enueg* form, which answers so well to the pressing inherent demands of Beckett's own aesthetic. On the level of theme, by means of a courtly vocabulary and a set of conventional gestures which are heavily laced with scarcely adapted metaphors of religious adoration and desire for the divine, the originals compose an idealized vision of transfigured sexual desire. In these fictions the wished-for unity of self with self (subject and its other) makes up a powerful totality; it is highly characteristic of Beckett's imagination that he chooses such a set of conventions as his framework, and combines it with many allusions to Dante's version of idealized sexual love precisely in order to resist that world-formation *à deux* which is the central ethical and emotional presupposition of this tradition and of the subsequent centrality of the *topos* of romantic attachment in the European literatures.[40]

The very early writings repeatedly stage Stephen Dedalus-like encounters of a young male poet-protagonist with female figures characterized as Other, in classic and stereotypical struggles which

rehearse the simultaneous need, and fear, on the man's part, of a kind of immersion in an overhwelming feminine which is matter (and mater) itself. The 1929 short story 'Assumption', Beckett's first work published in *transition*, deals with an initiation such as this, played out with a typical 'hesitation betwen fear and desire'.[41] More achieved works such as the poems 'Alba' and 'Dortmunder', significantly placed on facing pages in *Echo's Bones*, complicate such encounters: 'Alba' is the nearest Beckett comes to a capacity to represent the erotic as a route to, rather than away from, the ideal; but it is notable that in his hands what constitutes that ideal has become a blankness, a silence after the 'tempest of emblems' (*CPB*, p. 15). A certain dry apprehension of the emptiness of the mere structures persisting like the bones of Echo after the demise of values, especially of tenable collective or communal ones, becomes more and more evident throughout these poems, recalling the Saussurean axiom that 'in language there are only differences; there are no positive terms'. Thus, the many invocations of the aesthetically and metaphysically ordered and luminous (albeit morally flawed and corrupt) worlds of Dante only throw up in a clearer light Beckett's own present conviction of a complete absence of reliable system, whether metaphysical, moral, or aesthetic. It is this discovery which is rehearsed in 'Alba' (1931), early though it is. The ceremony of revelation, the Dantesque angelic vision, does not happen; instead what with hindsight we can see as a characteristic Beckettian aporia occurs: the desired woman's beauty produces a blank sheet and 'bulk dead', instead of the conventional 'sun' and 'unveiling'; the 'tempest of emblems' is quite obscured – like the whole inheritance of European poetic devices and the vision they were developed to express.

The pastiche sonnet Belacqua addresses to the Smeraldina in *Dream* deserves attention in this connection. In it, by contrast, the moment of ecstatic conjunction is duly envisaged in proper form (both thematically and prosodically). Belacqua, speaking in the parodic persona of the enamoured sonneteer, acknowledges his inadequacy as a single self, finding in his 'dark confused soul' the 'certitude that I cannot be whole' unless 'I be consumed and fused in the white heat / Of her sad finite essence' (*Dream*, pp. 70–1). Having undergone this process of erotic immolation, the couple will be granted, by virtue of their new wholeness – described by figures of assimilation into the sky and into elemental, cosmic fire – a stellar

apotheosis: 'Like syzygetic stars, supernly bright,/Conjoined in the One and in the Infinite!' This very credible essay in the philosophical idealization of eros (a skilful pastiche recalling Sidney, Donne and Meredith, which is rather unjustly disparaged by Pilling) is, of course, surrounded in *Dream* by sardonic distancing, labelled in advance 'some of the finest Night of May hiccupsobs' and succeeded by a passage of equally perfectly phrased 'Nausicaa'-inspired prose.[42] Yet the effect of the sonnet is somehow not quite eradicated by these juxtapositions: it remains as evidence of Beckett's preoccupation with versions of philosophy's old problem of the One and the Many in terms of the self-world struggle in general and the problems of intersubjectivity and sexuality in particular.

The figures of female power constructed in these poems are more often transcendent and enigmatic than merely dominant (versions of the terrible mother become more frequent in Beckett's work of the 1940s onwards).[43] The early 'Yoke of Liberty' (1931), the best of the Caravan poems, does, however, propose a predatory woman as sexual antagonist. Its alternative title is 'Moly', the herb Ulysses carried to protect him from the power of Circe: the poet imagines himself as armed with a power (the poetic faculty itself?) which prevents him from succumbing to the woman's attraction, but which is also a kind of burden (the paradoxical 'yoke of liberty' of the other title). Using atmospheric colour in a way similar to 'Dortmunder', the poem constructs the woman as a grey moon-goddess; it uses a chain of displaced metaphoric terms for the female genitals: 'lips', 'loop', 'wound', 'snare', 'crescent'. In a very brief compass of thirteen lines, it sets up, in subtly shifting perspectives, a gender confrontation in which the woman's power, while natural, animal-like, beautiful, 'will be broken' by the poet's capacity for detachment. He is one of the 'sensitive wild things' endangered by her 'grey, grave silk crouch' (a vocabulary recalling that used about the woman in 'Alba'). This poem addresses a theme similar to that in the later 'à elle l'acte calme', namely the problem presented for the self by its twin and antithetical impulses towards detachment and attachment. Here, as so often in earlier European love-poetry, but not in Beckett's poems from 1937 on, the fascinated description of the female Other serves to give boundaries to the speaking, masculine, self, who can define himself as that which eludes her threat of incorporation ('lips', 'loop', 'snare', even 'wound' – the last temptation, of compassion

for the ultimately pitiable). The poem strikingly avoids the ranting, sneering tone and wild oscillation of others in the *Caravan* group, but is still dependent on an erotic thematics which Beckett will pass beyond.

'Serena II' (*CPB*, pp. 234) stands out amid the work of the decade in that it is concerned with a maternal figure, or more accurately splinters of one, consisting of a pet Kerry Blue bitch in pup, the earth as mother, and at the close a human mother, kneeling by whom the male protagonist says his night prayers. The resistance to linear sequence (the poem unreels backwards in time, ending in early childhood) and to unitary characterization in the poem, should be noted: too often interpreters, faced admittedly with texts of formidable difficulty, seek to recompose what Beckett has very carefully put asunder. This poem is also unusual in that it ranges over Irish landscapes, from those of the West (Clew Bay and Croagh Patrick) to 'Meath shining through a chink in the hills'. Among Beckett's works of the period it comes nearest to a symbolic deployment of the geography of Ireland which might be assimilated to the use of scenery and topography in Revivalist texts and the translations of early Irish material; it also shows interesting resemblances to MacGreevy's handling of landscape and place-names generally. Meath, besides 'shining' in an unreachable distance, is also described as a land of 'fairy tales'; half-suggesting its ancient role as the seat of Irish kingship; the language of the Mayo passage invokes equally blurred, distant images of numinousness, associated with the bitch's time of delivery (ll. 16 ff.) The bitch is simultaneously the narrator's pet (there shall be no loss of panic between a man and his dog') and an instance of femininity and the maternal (the 'she' who 'took me up on to a watershed' is not distinguishable from the 'she' who 'drops her young'); likewise the narrator himself shifts between adulthood – 'posses of larches there is no going back on' – and an infancy secured by rituals, luminously constructed in the closing passage:

> the fairy tales of Meath ended
> so say your prayers now and go to bed
> your prayers before the lamps start to sing behind the larches
> here at these knees of stone
> then to bye-bye on the bones.

Irony and disillusionment, however, are never far: the displacements between canine and human mothers are intentionally grotesque, the distant glory of 'Meath' shines only in the child's deluded vision, and the maternal knees in the poem are 'of stone': cold, hard, and associated with death.[44] Yet, in spite of Beckett's own verdict that it did not 'represent a necessity' (letter, 18 October 1932) the poem's sardonic harshness does not quite displace its poignancy – an effect present throughout his writings up to the last.

Matching 'Alba' – they are printed on facing pages in the original *Echo's Bones* (1935), though not in the Calder *Collected Poems* – is the undervalued 'Dortmunder', written in January 1932 in Kassel (*CPB*, p. 16). Set at dusk rather than dawn, it recounts the narrator's hurrying past a church towards a 'bawd' who is represented in orientalizing language with references to Chinese ('K'in') music and to 'jade'. Her strangeness is thus emphasized, and, as with the 'Alba' woman, a quality of repose which the protagonist himself lacks; her mystery, contrasting and matching that of the 'Alba', is associated with night and 'the eyes the eyes black'. A powerful associative context of exotic, almost narcotic sensuality and profane quasi-magical wisdom is skilfully established. Both poems invoke textuality and solemn scriptures, with the ambiguous twice-used 'sheet' and 'Logos' in 'Alba' and the 'scroll, folded' in 'Dortmunder'. Both use music and light in their symbolic texture, though differently. But unlike the way 'Alba' steers itself successfully towards white counter-revelatory emptiness, 'Dortmunder' ends with a kind of fall into a bitter moment in which the narrator finds himself the carrier, representer, of 'the glory' of the bawd's 'dissolution': a Habbakuk. Habbakuk names a short prophetic text in the Bible which is particularly choleric and notoriously obscure. He attacks the cruelty, excesses, and corruption of the Babylonians, and, like Job questioning God's providence, angrily interrogates God's having delivered the Jews into their hands. Beckett's narrator thus claims a prophetic role, while simultaneously abasing himself as 'mard [cf. *merde*] of all sinners'; and Schopenhauer, advocate of passing beyond desire to an unillusioned peace, 'is dead' and hence presumably defeated in the protagonist's inner self-debate. The exact nature of the encounter between poet and 'bawd' is obscure: he survives the occasion, but bitterly, in a stance of rage and disillusionment. The bawd, by contrast, remains a figure of enigmatic power, retaining an indeterminate

mystery against which the self-arrogated and self-righteous prophetic anger batters in vain; at the end she 'puts her lute away'. In terms of technique in the representation of subjectivity, 'Dortmunder' and 'Alba' both represent a major advance not only on earlier work but also on most of the other *Echo's Bones* pieces; this may be because the theme of the erotic encounter provides for the poem a fixed position which can contain the decentring of the self he needs to stage. By contrast, in the journey-poems of the collection – conspicuously in 'Enueg II', 'Sanies I' and 'Serena I' – a disordered world, a veritable 'spray of phenomena', as Molloy calls it, forces an unwelcome wholeness of perspective on the self which observes it.

The twelve French poems represent a major advance on the previous two thirties' groups. There is a striking poise and spareness about the group as a whole: no more flagrant rafflesias or, for that matter, asses lepping with stout (as in 'Enueg I' and 'Hell Crane to Starling' respectively). The poems start to behave differently as to setting: the Dublin and occasionally London settings, topographically laden and often cumbersome, have also gone, and in the best of the French poems, with two exceptions, it is simply not appropriate to speak of setting at all. The exceptions are 'Ascension' and 'Arènes de Lutèce', which both emphasize urban actuality as a scene of alienation and self-fragmentation. In all these poems Beckett has solved the problem he wrestled with so strongly in his first poems, in which the speaking self is a frantic centrifuge. It is important to notice that the series is not uniform in method; he presents a range of means and tactics, all of them more assured and satisfying than those of the uneven earlier work. Sometimes it is done by diminution and sometimes by a kind of incremental repetition in reverse, paring away instead of adding material. In the most gnomic of the pieces – the second, sixth, seventh, and twelfth poems – he makes the skeletal structure of the syntax persist and complete itself in the mind, but with a degree of ambiguity or indeed polyvalence which mostly eluded his earlier, too fully furnished, efforts. What he wrote in 1937 (about Beethoven's Seventh Symphony) of how 'the sound surface is torn by enormous pauses . . . so that through whole pages we can perceive nothing but a path of sounds suspended in giddy heights, linking unfathomable abysses of silence' applies, on what is as yet a smaller scale, to the suite of French poems on which he was then beginning.

Turning to write in French is one of Beckett's few aesthetic decisions on whose motives we have very explicit comments of his own. These are in the 1937 letter to Axel Kaun from which I have just been quoting, itself, perhaps significantly, written in distancing German.[45] The key passages rehearse, with a pure intensity still recalling the sheer demolition drive of earlier modernism and in terms perhaps recalling Mauthner, the impulse against language itself:

> As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – begins to seep through. (*Disjecta*, p. 172)

Noting that literature has lagged 'in the old lazy ways, so long abandoned by music and painting', he asks more or less rhetorically: 'Is there any reason why that terrible materiality of the word surface should not be capable of being dissolved . . .?' and with a highly characteristic witty sarcasm bemoans the 'lack of silence': 'For in the forest of symbols, which aren't any, the little birds of interpretation, which isn't any, are never silent.' At the end of the letter he remarks that he has, against a current incapacity to produce writings, 'the consolation, as now, of sinning willy-nilly against a foreign language, as I should love to do, with full knowledge and intent against my own . . .' (*Disjecta*, pp. 172–3). In this same year his silence was followed by a set of consistently effective gestures in the poetic genre towards 'the literature of the unword': the twelve French poems, only two of which he provided with English versions. There is a striking biographical event in the background of these poems. On 7 January 1938 Beckett was stabbed by a pimp in Montparnasse, late at night, as he walked home from the cinema with his friends Alan and Belinda Duncan. In his letters of 27 and 31 January to MacGreevy, he enclosed copies of 'Ascension', 'La Mouche', and the poem 'musique de l'indifférence', which he then called 'Prière' (which come fourth, fifth, and sixth in the series); he also describes how another poem 'dictated itself to me the night before last', and further mentions the first poem, 'elles viennent', by its English title 'they come'. 'Son sang gicla avec abondance', as the dying woman's does in 'Ascension': was this gush of inspiration a kind of 'dictation' produced by the trauma of the stabbing, a serious wound

delivered by a stranger in the street (who when asked in court why he had done it, replied 'Qui sait?'); or was it that the stabbing allowed him to release the poems to MacGreevy?[46] On the other hand, real life is a complex and continuous collusion between event and insight, the adventures of the body and those of the imagination: a letter written two days before the stabbing tells MacGreevy that 'the entire works of Kant arrived from Munich' (5 January 1938); see poem 8, 'ainsi a-t-on beau', 1.8: 'sur Lisbonne fumante Kant froidement penché' (*CPB*, p. 48).

The first three of the series are misogynistic to varying degrees; these are the best-known piece – the relatively limpid 'elles viennent' – and the third ('être là sans mâchoires sans dents') a poem about sexual disgust and panic at the loss of positive affect which presents a lyric persona with a furiously choleric tone, and which, set as it is in an alienated urban milieu, is rather reminiscent of the Roman elegists. The second poem, 'à elle l'acte calme' (*CPB*, p. 42) is an example of elliptical ambiguity where, if one accepts Harvey's reading, the poem's liquid grace is disfigured by what seems scorn of the feminine, whereas another interpretation is possible which leads away from misogyny to suggest a common fate of sad detachment. Prefacing his interpretation with some rather jejune generalizations proposing to fit the poet into a stereotype of masculine psychological development – 'Beyond thirty a man's fancy turns, less than lightly, to more serious affairs. Not without a backward glance, however, for Eros still has its uses' – Harvey discerns in the poem a male subject who is expressing his state of world-weariness and his lack of erotic affect in comparison to his female partner. To my mind, this is a good example of a reading which diminishes the poem by disambiguating its poised indeterminacy: here, as elsewhere, Harvey offers us an emotional biography into which we can fit the poem and so disarm it of its disturbing *textual* qualities, such as the question of who owns the 'pores savants' and the 'sexe bon enfant' which are ambiguously allocated 'à elle': is this *to* her as in 'they belong to her, are her attributes', or is it *to* her as in 'this is what I have to bring to her'? Is it he or she who is capable of the 'calm act'? The text of the *poem* seems to me not to decide this question, and to be all the more effective an aesthetic object for not doing so. Finally, we might read the speaker's attitude here as an attempt at the detached stance of the Schopenhauerian

artist-saint: the rain which stops at the end of the day is the moisture of the body and specifically of sexual arousal, while the blue sky which briefly supplants it offers cool elevation and the promise of transcendence; I would argue, however, that the point is precisely the failure, a *necessary* failure, of the attempt.[47]

The fourth poem, 'Ascension', is less elliptical and presents, at first sight, as narrative: it represents a coherent scene with an observing, listening speaker, already like Molloy and M[alone] a solitary man in a room. Through a thin partition he hears a radio football commentator and through the open window the crowd's passionate howls at the sporting spectacle; meanwhile a woman dies, her blood spurting out over the bedsheets and the sweet peas. Her eyes are closed by 'son mec' (equivocally a lowlife boyfriend, pimp, pal) during the noise.[48] A moving profane ascension concludes the poem, very sparely imagined in a mere seven words:

> elle rode légère
> sur ma tombe d'air (*CPB*, p. 44)

The girl rises and floats lightly above the young man's tomb of air: *her* spirit is freed to rise, albeit at the cost of her death, as his is not; he is confined in quotidian life, his very breathing entombs him, set between the intolerable antinomies of the crowd's brutish enthusiasm for spectacle and his solitude in the room. As elsewhere in this series, and especially in the trilogy, the geography of the text suggests an allegorical gesture towards the psychophysical being of humanity: the 'mince cloison' (thin partition) suggests the skull, which would mean that what he overhears is other parts of himself, and in the 'next room' of his being the 'doigts dégoûtants' of the 'mec' are closing the large green eyes of the girl. She transcends his being, but again at the cost of her death. We may discern a reprise of the erotic-mystical encounter already rehearsed in earlier work, most notably in the sonnet to the Smeraldina (also green-eyed) and in 'Alba' and 'Dortmunder'. Like a Jungian *anima*, the female figure here is spiritually enabled as the poet is not; but he cannot as yet incorporate her being within his: she floats away above him angel-like in a moment of great aesthetic grace.

The lovely 'Arènes de Lutèce', penultimate of the series, shows a thematic development over 'Ascension': while initially allotting the woman the characteristically feminine role of an irresolute wandering

about, it shows her as meeting the protagonist's gaze at the end in a kind of mutual clarity which passes beyond the prescriptions of neoplatonist eroticism and stages a recognition scene in which she can be taken as a splinter of himself rather than an Other:

> . . . Elle hésite,
> fait un pas vers la sortie de la Rue Monge, puis me suit.
> J'ai un frisson, c'est moi qui me rejoins . . .
>
> (*CPB*, p. 52)

The protagonist reacts here a little as one who has seen a ghost, an Other returning as himself. Following the poem's opening self-fragmentation: 'de là où nous sommes assis . . . / je nous vois entrer . . .' – 'from where *we* are sitting *I see us* coming in' – this transforms his vision, so that he now looks with 'd'autres yeux'. Like the earlier 'Ascension', but more insistently, this surely asks to be read as an *anima* encounter in which the male poet discovers how to accommodate the woman, with her not-him-ness, into his own state of being, and her strangeness and wandering away from him is overcome by self-recognition in mutuality. From that position he can recognize the world afresh, especially the poignant detail of the little girl dragging after her her toy hoop (a circle, a frame like the Paris square, near the Museum of Natural History, in which the poem is set, an 'arène' for experience and understanding). Transcendence is, once again, specifically ruled out of this enlightenment: the sky 'nous claire' only 'trop tard'. This recalls, though more drily, the poignant sentence which describes Murphy, excluded, circling round and round Pentonville prison: 'Even so, at evening, he had walked round and round cathedrals it was too late to enter'.[49] In each case a literal detail of the anecdote becomes vehicle and mask of the symbolic meaning: literally, the cathedrals are closed because it is after six o'clock and the sky brightens on the lovers too late not to have spoiled their walk; but symbolically it is too late to enter cathedrals because faith has been definitively lost, and the tardy hint of divine illumination postdates the understanding they have themselves secularly arrived at. The irony of this recalls the celebrated letter to Lord Chesterfield by Johnson (whose work preoccupied Beckett in this period).[50] The presence of the statue[51] of 'le savant Gabriel de Mortillet' – famous natural historian – and the name of the square – that of the Roman city which preceded Paris – places the poem's

events in a long perspective which is reminiscent of the poem 'ainsi a-t-on beau' earlier in the sequence; there is an immemorial quality to all the items of the represented scene.[52] The content of the understanding reached, however, is still sombre: the woman he finds beside him still has a 'triste visage'.

Beckett's mature handling of the genre of poetry does not consist, however, simply of a linearly increasing minimalism. As I have said, the series shows a range of poetic means and techniques; the seventh poem, 'bois seul' (*CPB*, p. 47), is a paradigm example of his elliptical method and of the resultant resistance to interpretation. The poem is a first-person utterance, but even the 'je' required by normal speech is lopped off (an early example of, 'not I'), which trips up unsuspecting readers by leaving them undecided as to the grammatical category of 'bois': is it the verb '[I] drink' or the noun 'wood'? Line 2 clears this up, but not without leaving one radically unsettled and concentrating very closely on the meagre clues offered by syntax in the remaining six lines. The poem might be described as a philosophical meditation, as also are 'La Mouche' and 'ainsi a-t-on beau', which succeeds it in the series. It describes a series of activities of the body, all performed alone: drinking, scoffing food, burning (presumably with sexual desire in the manner of St Paul's account, since it is followed by fornication); then dying ('crève', an example of 'low' vocabulary, as also are 'bouffe' ([I] 'scoff' or 'stuff myself') and 'puent' ('they stink')). The poem represents existence as exclusively to do with what is actually there at a given moment: 'les absents sont morts' ('the absent are dead') an ironic revision of the more usual sententious complaints that the dead are absent. Faced with this account of the nature of life, the reader is familiarly and brusquely told to look aside from all this, towards the reeds: natural objects which nevertheless have some kind of intersubjective life, 'teasing' and therefore real and immediate relations with one another, as, by implication, people do not (we should note that sex, despite the fact that the sense of 'fornique' would seem to indicate a partner, is included in the list of acts one performs in an essential solitude):

> sors tes yeux détourne-les sur les roseaux
> se taquinent-ils ou les aïs

This passage is difficult because of the shortage of syntactic signals and also for a semantic reason. Are we to read 'détourne-les sur les

roseaux . . . ou les aïs' or, on the other hand, 'se taquinent-ils ou [taquinent-ils] les aïs'? If the latter, then which of the two likely meanings of 'aïs', a plural noun, is the appropriate one?[53] Both Harvey and the 1959 German translator Elmar Tophoven interpret 'aïs' as referring to the three-toed sloth, a sense which puts some strain on our interpretative ingenuity, not least because it is a plural form, where mentioning one sloth would have been enough to make the point; surely another sense – a turbulence, a disturbance caused in running water by an obstruction – is at least equally, if not more appropriate? The intentionalist problem reasserts itself here (did Beckett tell Harvey he was thinking of the sloth? Should we take this as authoritative and obediently abandon the much more metaphorically appealing brief scene of reeds in a river disturbed by the wind?) The biblical injunction to consider the lilies of the field may lurk more or less ironically in the background, but in any case the advice is immediately cancelled: 'pas la peine . . .' ('not worth it'). The haunting ending, 'il y a le vent/et l'état de veille' ('there is the wind and the state of waiting') withholds all interpretatively comforting detail and thus produces a powerfully disturbing indeterminacy: one might read it either as a description of nature's indifference to human feelings, its anti-Romantic blankness – there is *only* or *nothing but* the wind and the state of waiting – or as a consolatory moment: there is *at least* the wind and the 'état de veille', which are an opening, other and better than the closed space between 'bois' and 'crève', drinking and dying. The semantic field of 'veille' is not readily conveyed in English, covering the ideas of vigil, of watching, perhaps anticipation, and of the eve of a religious feast. Here again, then, an instance of possible transcendence is held suspended, perhaps promised, perhaps not. These successive glimpses of escape, each time withheld from a subject more and more economical of utterance, and more and more cogently suffering and grieved, anticipate the protean guises of hope and disappointment endured together by the reader-narrator couple in the trilogy.

The final, haunting, poem, 'jusque dans la caverne ciel et sol' (*CPB*, p. 53) is based on a mythological, perhaps via a Miltonic, reference to the rape of Proserpina, but in spite of this recognizable cultural reference-point it resists facile decoding. The quintessential female victim-figure, Proserpina, is stolen away underground, but along with her go Atropos, the scissors-wielding Fate who cuts off life,

and everything from the ancient world and the modern one following it: all the old voices, hair-raising wrongs ('qui . . . macérait naguère les capillaires') the old laws, the light itself: all disappear into 'la bouche d'ombre', the mouth of darkness. There is no possibility here of instants of transcendence and recognition, however fragile, such as irradiate 'Ascension' and 'Arènes de Lutèce'. (Indeed we might take it as a negative pendent to 'Ascension' in that it deals with an anti-moment of death as disappearance into extinction, rather than as a preface to any kind of ascension whatsoever.) The poem is especially striking because, rather like the zero-focalized 'Time Passes' section of Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*, it appears to manage without a narratorial or personal lyric speaker: here Beckett has solved the problem of arriving at a habitable and speakable subjectivity which bedevilled his first poetry and produced its incessant and awkward perspectival shifts and its gross ironies. This consciousness just barely voiced has been freed from that busy, intrusive, selfhood, but without falling back on any of the kinds of centred, assertive lyric mastery such as dominated the whole inherited tradition of previous lyric, even up to and including the late work of Yeats. The governing image presents this whole earth as a cavern's mouth ready to engulf not just a Proserpina but the myths themselves that generated her, and in its turn all human consciousness which generated them, in an indeterminate void:

> Proserpine et Atropos
> adorable de vide douteux
> encore la bouche d'ombre[54]

The implicit ideological position, of extreme, systematic and principled scepticism, is a recognizable and coherent development of that voiced in the furious snatches of the first poems; but the poetic means have changed almost out of recognition, and the tone and emotional colouring are irradiated by a sombre compassion and an incomparable sense of lyric repose. Beckett has not eliminated language but has 'bore[d] one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it – be it something or nothing – [has begun] to seep through . . .' (*Disjecta*, p. 172).

Notes

1 From Beckett's letter to MacGreevy, 9 January 1935, relating a visit to Paris by Brian Coffey: 'I found him very *fort* on his subject but the poetry is another pair of sleeves.'

2 See especially J.C.C. Mays, 'Les racines irlandaises du jeune Beckett', Jean-Michel Rabaté, ed. *Beckett avant Beckett*, Presses de l'Ecole Normale Superieure 1984, Paris, pp.11-27, and 'Mythologized Presences: *Murphy* in its Time', Joseph Ronsley ed., *Myth and Reality in Irish Literature*, Wilfrid Laurier University Press, Waterloo, Ontario, 1977, pp. 197-218. John P. Harrington, *The Irish Beckett*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 1991; Deirdre Bair *Samuel Beckett: A Biography*, Vintage Press, London, 1978.

3 Lawrence Harvey, *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1970.

4 Anne Marie Lecercle, 'La formidable symètrie de l'oeuf pourri or ou Une poétique de la suture', in Rabate, pp. 47-78.

5 John Pilling, 'Beckett's Poetry', in *Samuel Beckett*, Routledge, London, 1976, pp. 159-83. Roger Little's briefer recent essay illuminates the neglected territory of the poems' formal strategies and usefully yokes together the work in English and French: 'Beckett's poems and verse translations or: Beckett and the limits of poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 184-95. See also my '*Entre le galet et la mer*: A Beckett Poem between Two Languages', in *Cross-Currents in European Literature*, ed. Catherine O'Brien, Dublin Italian Institute, Dublin, forthcoming 1995. Marjorie Perloff's two essays 'Between Verse and Prose: Beckett and the New Poetry', *Critical Inquiry*, 9, 1982, pp. 415-33; and 'The Space of a Door: Beckett and the Poetry of Absence,' *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1981, pp. 200-47, though neither discusses the earlier poetry, do important and highly relevant work towards perceiving the nature and influence of Beckett's general aesthetic project in the context of possible literary practice after modernism.

6 A point noted by Melvin Friedman, 'Introductory Notes on Beckett's Poetry', Edouard Morot-Sir et al. eds., *Samuel Beckett: The Art of Rhetoric*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1976, pp. 144-9.

7 W. J. McCormack, *From Burke to Beckett: Ascendancy, Tradition and Betrayal in Literary History*, Cork University Press, Cork, 1994, pp. 385-6.

8 David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment*, Lilliput Press, Dublin, 1993.

9 See the excellent discussion by Stanley Aronowitz, *Dead Artists Live Theories and Other Cultural Problems*, Routledge, London, 1994, ch. 8, 'Reflections on Identity', pp. 191-209, which addresses itself to the establishment of the category of the individual as 'the outcome of a long dialectical process in which the state is the material embodiment of the unity of humankind' and notes how 'for Hegel, individuality is *produced*, but neither by God nor the law but by social interaction with significant others' (p. 194).

10 I thank Piaras Mac Éinrí for bringing to my attention the overprinting of the stamps, which continued in the case of high-value denominations until well into the 1930s.

11 Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; Or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 305.

12 See Lloyd, especially pp. 41-7.

13 Reprinted in *The Lace Curtain*, 4, Summer 1971, pp. 58-63, and now available in, *Disjecta*, pp. 70-6.

14 Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (1931), Calder and Boyars, London, 1965, p. 15.

15 Douglas MacMillan, '*Echo's Bones*: Starting Points for Beckett', in Morot-Sir, pp. 165-6. J.C.C. Mays remarks elsewhere in this volume on MacGreevy's hostility to imagism, and casts doubt on his alleged enthusiasm for Pound (see Mays, p. 125 n.13 and n.33).

16 The passage anticipates the knife-rest in the trilogy which consists of two 'x'es joined by a line.

17 Mays, 'Les racines irlandaises', pp. 23-4.

18 See Linda Ben-Zvi, 'Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language', Harold Bloom ed., *Samuel Beckett: Modern Critical Views*, Chelsea House, New York, 1985, pp. 193-218: 'the highest forms of critique are laughter and silence'. The '*Whoroscope* Notebook' is in Reading University Library. MS 3000, and contains very long transcriptions from vols. II and III of Mauthner's *Betrage Zu einen Kritik der Sprache*, Leipzig, 1923. Richard Ellmann notes Beckett's reading aloud of Mauthner in the period 1932-35 to an interested Joyce (*James Joyce*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, pp. 648-9).

19 See J.J. Lee, *Ireland 1912-1985: Politics and Society*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1989, p. 77, on the existence of militant anti-Protestantism in the Irish Free State in the 1920s and on the claim to control of Protestant consciences by the Catholic bishops; see also the account by Beckett's contemporary, Mervyn Wall, both of the bigotry and philistinism of Irish public opinion and discourse, and of the ferocity of social regulation in the era of the Censorship of Publications Act 1929. Wall vividly describes the impression left on his generation of the hypocrisy and hollow patriotic triumphalism of certain public figures. See 'Michael Smith Asks Mervyn Wall Some Questions About the Thirties', *Lace Curtain*, 4, Summer 1971, pp. 77-86.

20 See Anna Balakian, *Surrealism: the Road to the Absolute*, revised edition, Allen and Unwin, London, 1972, and Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1991 for lively accounts of the communal dream-sessions, avant-garde costume parties, and other characteristic forms of aesthetic play and protest.

21 See Balakian, pp. 125 ff., on Breton and Freud; for Verticalism, see McMillan (1975), pp. 62-75.

22 Prefiguring 'love love love thud of the old plunger/pestling the unalterable/whey of words' in the 1936 poem 'Cascando'.

23 I have not been able to decipher the word, which may be either 'cheesy' or 'cheery'.

24 A sharp contrast with Coffey's 'maker'-poet: see Alex Davis's essay above.

25 The 'Becky' with whom the speaker pleads to be spared in 'Sanies II' is a rawer version impoverished, for once, by explicitness. 'Becky' alludes to Becky Cooper, madam of a Dublin brothel, where a picture of Lugarno depicting Dante and Beatrice hung: an ironic contradiction not lost on the author of Belacqua, for whom during a fevered meditation – owing a lot to the Stephen of Joyce's *Portrait* – on the Smeraldina and the whores, the one and the many, he thinks: 'a Beatrice lurked in every brothel' (*Dream* p. 40). See also the letter of 9 October 1931 which refers to consuming an overpriced bottle of stout at 1/- at Becky Cooper's.

26 The letters make clear the extreme difficulty and dismay he experienced during the analysis; and see Bair.

27 'Beckett et la Psychanalyse', *Revue Francaise de Psychanalyse*, fasc. 5, 1989, pp. 1405-14. Anzieu's monograph *Beckett et Bion* is, I think, less helpful, at least to those primarily interested in Beckett; I found its procedure of constructing a series of imaginary conversations between the two a good deal less illuminating than the more conventional discussion in Anzieu's article.

28 See Leon Grinberg et al, *Introduction to the Work of Bion*, Jason Aronson, New York, 1980, pp. 53-60.

29 J.C.C. Mays's interesting comment in this volume that they engage in a complicated dialogue with MacGreevy's work should be pursued further.

30 Texts of all the sanctioned poems and of some of his translations from French – Rimbaud and Eluard, but not Crevel or Breton – appear in *CPB*; a new, fuller collection of the poems has been for some time awaited from Calder.

31 *The European Caravan*, eds. Samuel Putnam et al., Part I, Brewer, Warren and Putnam, New York, 1931, pp. 476-8.

32 Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds. *Film Theory and Criticism*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1979. Eisenstein's 1929 essays, reprinted in Mast and Cohen, are 'The Cinematic Approach and the Ideogram' and 'A Dialectic Approach to Film Form'. Beckett considered film as a possible avocation during this period, and in 1936 actually wrote to Eisenstein, about whom he was enthusiastic, on the subject (Bair pp. 215-6).

33 Johannes Hedberg, *Samuel Beckett's* 'Whoroscope': *A Linguistic-Literary Interpretation*, Moderna Sprak, Stockholm, 1972. I have not discussed *Whoroscope* because of the magnitude of the task and the existence not only of Harvey's vast commentary, but also of Hedberg's eminently sensible essay.

34 Debussy's use of Javanese music in the 1890s is one among many examples. Beckett's deployment of such estranging effects should be carefully distinguished, however, from primitivism, to which he was strongly antipathetic.

35 Letter, 18 October 1932: 'I was trying to like Mallarmé again the other day, and couldn't'.

36 Compare Beckett's review of Rilke, *Criterion*, 13, July 1934, pp. 705-7: 'There is no position here, no possibility of a position, no faculty for one. He changes his ground without ceasing . . .'.

37 A structure similar to that outlined by Walter Benjamin (discussing the possible modes of approach to the aesthetic, rather than the erotic object) in his idea of the 'aura' as 'a phenomenon of distance, however close it may be'. See 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' (1936), reprinted in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, Fontana, London, 1970, pp. 219-53 (especially p. 224).

38 '. . . the hyphen of passion between Shilly and Shally, the old bridge over the river', *Dream*, p. 27.

39 See Harvey, pp. 67-169 for the fullest discussion of Beckett's use of Provençal poetry and of Dante.

40 In the case of 'Da Tagte Es' [Then came the dawn], whose title is from the medieval German poet Walter von der Vogelweide, Harvey shows helpfully how Beckett alters the optimistic view of dawn and of the glories of love in the original to a death-figure by replacing the lovers' temporary parting with death's definitive departure which will supplant 'surrogate goodbyes' with the real thing (pp. 84-5).

41 *transition* 16-17 June 1929, pp. 268-71.

42 Pilling: '. . . there is a fatigue in rhymes and scansion that suggests no formal mode would ever have suited Beckett' (p. 163).

43 See the excellent discussion by Angela Moorjani, *Abysmal Games in the Novels of Samuel Beckett*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1982.

44 Besides recalling the bones of Echo, which in Ovid are turned to stone but still sing. Pursuing that allusion gives us a poet-child figure who only sleeps lying upon the 'bones' and is not even the echo-author of culture's texts.

45 Given in both the original form and in English translation in *Disjecta*, pp. 51-4 and 170-3.

46 Letters of 27 and 31 January 1938; Bair, pp. 294 ff.

47 And hence Harvey's presentation of a rather smug dispassionate thirty-year-old man is misconceived. On the weather of the poem, he somewhat puzzlingly comments: 'For Beckett a day of light rain with skies that clear just before dusk is a typically Irish phenomenon. From this climactic starting-point he develops the theme of "too late" . . .' (p. 187).

48 I find the scene equivocal: does the 'mec' murder the girl? Or is she dying, as Harvey reads it, presumably with authorial sanction, of phthisis like Peggy Sinclair, also green-eyed? This is a classic case of disambiguation by revealed authorial intention. The perhaps phantom murder a reader tends to discern has an imaginative truth: the poet is alive, the woman dead; his fingers are not felt to be clean, whether or not she has been murdered by his splinter-figure the 'mec' (Harvey pp. 190 ff.). Pilling, on the other hand, to me inexplicably, has the man penetrating the 'thin

partition' in a sexual act, whereupon 'an unequivocally human, sexual ascension takes place' (pp. 173 f.).

49 Beckett, *Murphy* (1938), Calder, London, 1977, p. 46. The idea of divine belatedness is a recurrence: see also 'Enueg II': 11.6, 28, 'too late to darken the sky' and 'too late to brighten the sky'. The 'Arènes de Lutèce' line was originally 'qui *vous* éclaire trop tard' (my italics); see *CPB*, p. 175.

50 The letter, a masterpiece of icy wit, points out the utter uselessness and hypocrisy of the powerful patron's belated offers of assistance. There are three notebooks full of Johnson material, meant for a play about his life, of which Beckett wrote in 1937 the fragment called 'Human Wishes'; see *Disjecta*, pp. 155-166.

51 Or perhaps merely of its plinth. The poem refers only to 'le socle' of the statue, and in March 1995 when I visited the Arènes de Lutèce, only the plinth remained. I have not to date succeeded in ascertaining whether the plinth was already vacant during the 1930s.

52 We should compare this long view, which shrinks human life to a fly-sized miniature, to the fine 'ainsi a-t-on beau', eighth in the suite, with its sardonic assumption of a transcendental philosophical viewpoint from which the ice ages and the Lisbon earthquake are viewed with equal detachment, and Kant leans coldly over the ruined city. The two similar meditations on the fly from this period (see 'La Mouche', poem five, and the conclusion of 'Serena I') are also part of a developing strain of more poised theological satire, which will culminate in the indifferent God-figures of *Watt* and the trilogy.

53 There are actually four dictionary senses: the others are a Champagne wine and an inflammation of the tendons, intriguing but not really assimilable even in Beckett's writerly poetic practice. I thank Paddy O'Donovan for finding out and discussing with me these various senses of 'aï'. See Harvey, pp. 202-3 and Elmar Tophoven and Eva Hesse, trans. *Beckett: Gedichte*, Limes Verlag, Wiesbaden, 1959.

54 Pilling reads this poem as a kind of allegory of subjectivity which concerns the persistence of the old dichotomies in the cavernous depths of the self: 'the same tension of sky and earth, the same light that consumes the darkness, and the same laws of attraction and repulsion' (pp. 177-8). But one could equally well interpret the plot of the poem as the loss of habitable structure or recourse ideologically, theologically, politically. Adorno's defence of Beckett thirty-seven years ago against Lukacs's charge of escapist bourgeois formalism comes to mind: see Adorno's 1962 essay 'Commitment', reprinted in Ernst Bloch et al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, Verso, London, 1965, pp. 177-95, especially pp. 190-1, where he insists that Beckett's works 'deal with a highly concrete historical reality: the abdication of the subject.' He contemptuously contrasts the effect of Kafka's and Beckett's art with 'officially committed works': 'Kafka and Beckett arouse the fear which existentialism merely talks about'. This curiously echoes Beckett's own early words about Joyce's *Work in Progress*: 'His writing is not *about* something. *It is that something itself*' (author's italics, *Disjecta*, p. 27).