



BRILL

Recollecting Sam-ness and Watt-ness

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Prelude

In 1966–1967, having temporarily relocated to Paris on a Johns Hopkins University doctoral fellowship to pursue my research on Samuel Beckett, I rushed to ferret out every word he had penned and published or abandoned in manuscript form. This misconceived approach to writing a dissertation was enabled by my dissertation advisor René Girard who, on sabbatical leave in Paris, generously left me to my own devices. It made for an unforgettable year. Because many of the pre-*Murphy* texts had disappeared from circulation, I crossed the Channel to pore over *More Pricks than Kicks* among other writings in the British Museum's reading room, and asked for delivery of Nancy Cunard's *Negro Anthology* from an off-site location, the librarian remembering the stir it caused at its appearance in 1934. Access, however, to the French typescripts held at the Éditions de Minuit—*Mercier et Camier* and *Eleutheria* (*Premier Amour* was not on offer)—required the author's consent. In my letter of 7 April 1967 requesting permission, I wrote of having fallen under the spell of the French *Molloy* in a *Nouveau Roman* seminar four years earlier. Would he come to dinner with his wife in our pied-à-terre on avenue Elysée-Reclus (in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower) so that we could meet? A no would be taken gracefully. He is not much of a dinner man, Beckett explained in his reply of 24 April, mailed from the post office near Ussy-sur-Marne, and instead invited me and my spouse for a drink to his place on boulevard Saint-Jacques, time and date to be arranged by telephone. He ended with what I already knew, that he did not discuss his work, but I was taken aback by his expression of interest in my views on it.

Variations: 3 May 1967, 38 Boulevard Saint-Jacques, 6 to 7:30 p.m.

When Beckett opened the door, our hands met in the uneasy handshake of two shy people. To dissipate the awkwardness, I blurted out my relief that he doesn't discuss his work. If he did, what would that leave for students to do? He visibly relaxed and smiled, as he showed us the familiar view from his study's seventh-floor window, the high walls of the notorious Santé prison and, in the distance, the Latin Quarter and a vast expanse of blue sky that May evening. He thought the prison would soon be torn down, but five decades later, it's still there, undergoing renovations. As we turned back from the window, I noted the impeccable tidiness of his desk. During our conversation, he would move from sitting on the corner of his desk to an easy chair near the window and back.

When, after forty-five minutes, we offered to leave, Beckett asked us to stay for a drink. Our choice of Irish whiskey, straight, brought on a quizzical look in my direction. Perhaps he realized it was bravado on my part. He disappeared into the kitchen returning with three glasses.

On leaving after another forty-five minutes, we headed for La Coupole, without knowing it was one of Beckett's haunts, to record our conversation. So the words quoted below are not verbatim, but as recalled shortly after our meeting.¹ From this version, I have excerpted what may be of interest five decades later, editing out the by now too familiar but leaving variations intact. The cast, besides SB and AM, includes Kishin Moorjani (KM).

No Yes

oui non oui non non non

BECKETT, *Comment c'est*

Taking seriously the interest Beckett expressed in my views (I was young), I opened the discussion with a comment on no/yes in his work:

AM. In your work you say neither no nor yes but the two simultaneously.

You don't only say no.

SB. The word appears a lot.

¹ At times, I have kept the turn-taking format SB and AM as recorded in our notes. At other times, I have cited Beckett's words in descriptive paragraphs, placing only his words in quotation marks for the sake of clarity.

AM. So does yes.

SB. Do you remember in *Murphy* I wrote yes or no, the eternal tautology?

AM. But what about yes *and* no? If you only say no, Willie would definitely reach for the gun [at the end of *Happy Days*].

SB. That would be an affirmation.

AM. There's the tautology. (Laughter)

SB. Joyce is one who says yes.

AM. And Nietzsche.

SB. (Shrug of shoulders.)

AM. How can you go on if you only say no?

SB. Why not? (Long look out the window. Pause.)

Theatre and Film

We can speak French, Beckett offered, after I declared my partiality to his French writings. It was easier for me and especially Kishin to converse in English, but which language did he prefer? "It's about the same. I've been here long enough." We spoke for a while about his involvement with theatre, a topic with which he appeared at ease. Could it be that he's now ashamed of *Godot*? "The play is insufficient, but I wouldn't want to suppress it. The later plays are better visualized, as you can notice from the detailed stage directions. It's important to see the exact position of the characters. *Godot* was my first play; it's better not to talk about the one before that. I spend a lot of time at the rehearsals of my plays to make sure about the direction." We had recently attended the revival of the 1963 production of *Oh les beaux jours* (*Happy Days*) at the Odéon-Théâtre de France, with Madeleine Renaud and Jean-Louis Barrault in the roles of Winnie and Willie. Beckett seemed pleased to confirm he had a lot to do with directing it. Agreeing with me, more or less ("perhaps") that, at the play's end, the uncertainty whether Willie is reaching for the gun or for Winnie is more striking on stage than on the page, he added that either way, "It was meant to be left open." (And so it is, it seems to me, with everything after *Murphy*.) About *Endgame*, he volunteered that the best performance he had seen was at the Studio des Champs-Élysées with two Irish actors.² Does he go to the theatre? "No, not to performances. I attend rehearsals. Recently I helped direct the actor [Pierre Chabert] in *Pinget's*

2 Beckett is referring to the February–March 1964 run of *Endgame* with Patrick Magee as Hamm and Jack MacGowran as Clov. He suggested the two Irish actors to the company known as the English Theater in Paris and assisted with rehearsals in London (Knowlson, 455–458).

L'Hypothèse. He didn't have a director and was trying to direct himself. That just doesn't work; they need someone to look at them." I explained that my smile at this last remark was owing to the scenes from his own works it brought to mind. I was thinking of *Comédie (Play)* that I had recently seen on the same bill with *L'Hypothèse* at the Odéon.³ "I liked it too," was his response to the admiration I expressed for Pinget's play in performance. Treasured memories now, the productions witnessed in which Beckett had a hand in shaping the performance of remarkable actors.

We were happy, we told him, to have caught the recent screenings of *Film* along with the filmed version of *Comédie*, with Delphine Seyrig, Eleonor Hirt, and Michael Lonsdale giving scintillating performances. Beckett had participated extensively in the premiere production of the play by Jean-Marie Serreau (with the same cast), which preceded the filmed 1966 version by two years, a collaboration extended to Marin Karmitz during the filming. Beckett commented that we must have seen the films at the Pagode, the avant-garde movie theater on rue de Babylone.⁴ He seemed surprised when I told him that the French reviews of *Film* were generally positive.

Was he likely to make more films?

No, there has been no talk of it. This one [*Film*] has hardly been shown and mostly at film festivals. Grove Press decided to finance films by three of its writers, Ionesco, Pinter, and myself. I've read the other two film scripts. Somehow mine was the first to go into production. The others were never made. The money must have run out; it's a terribly expensive business.

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- 3 Robert Pinget's *L'Hypothèse*, under the direction of Beckett, was first performed by Pierre Chabert in 1965 at the Musée d'Art Moderne as part of the Biennale de Paris art festival. In 1966, the production was included in a Beckett-Ionesco-Pinget program at the Odéon-Théâtre de France, Petite Salle (reduced auditorium), comprising the premiere of Beckett's *Va et vient (Come and Go)* and a revised production of *Comédie (Play)*, Pinget's *Hypothèse*, and two plays by Ionesco. Beckett had more than a hand in Jean-Marie Serreau's direction of *Va et vient* and *Comédie* at the Odéon, the latter involving casting changes from the 1964 production of the play (see Cohn, 233, 287, n. 7, 294; Knowlson, 482).
- 4 While composing these reminiscences, having found no trace of the Pagode screening of February 1967 in the Beckett literature, I delved into my archives to uncover two reviews in *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur* of the Pagode's program of five shorts, including *Film* and *Comédie* (Baby, 14; Bory, 54–55). The Karmitz film, after causing an uproar when first shown at the Mostra of Venice in August 1966 (Karmitz and Beckett, 27), disappeared from view after the screening at the Pagode until 2000, when it surfaced at the "Voilà" exhibition at the Musée d'Art Moderne de la ville de Paris and the MK 2 Beaubourg, one of the Karmitz movie theatres.

There were many problems involved. I wanted a silent film. It's so difficult to see and hear at the same time; it's impossible. There were protests, but it was finally accepted.

Does he go to the movies? "No, my eyes aren't good enough. I don't see well enough."⁵ He remarked that the changing state of health of aging authors would be an interesting topic to pursue in commenting on their writings.

Of Intersubjectivity and (Anti)Metaphor

"They're thrown out into the world," he said matter-of-factly in response to my attempt to understand the 'intersubjective dimension'—my dissertation topic—of the expulsions and falls of his characters. Yes, but from what world are they expelled and always on their way back to, or at least, a surrogate thereof? And how does the waiting or not waiting in *Godot*, for instance, shape the relationship of the two pairs? I did not so much pose these questions to him as cite the themes I was trying to grapple with. Beckett, however, drew attention to the symbiotic relationships of the pairs in *Godot* and *Fin de partie/Endgame*, alerting me to the simultaneous time and timelessness of their ways of being: "There is, of course, a difference in the symbioses. Pozzo and Lucky evolve, but not the others. They don't even get older."

Not surprisingly, my bringing up metaphoric readings—Pozzo's blindness, Lucky's muteness as signs of their fallen existence—earned me the admonishing reminder of *Watt's* concluding words, "no symbols where none intended." Only later did I come to understand the significance of this oft repeated caution: his refusal to discuss meanings, symbols, metaphors, or, worst of all, allegory, in his fiction and plays—"That would be intellectualization," he told me—does not imply they aren't there, but instead of being "intended," they are (mostly) only there to be obliterated, annulled, or at least poked fun at, toyed with *fort/da* style, reduced to aporia, or "left open." The *via negativa* to unknowingness doubled by postwar irony bordering on the "next next to nothing" (Beckett, 194)? But all this I understood only later. When I dared the question why he made Pozzo blind, Beckett therefore countered with questions of form: "Can you imagine a second act without it? People, for instance, ask me why I introduced the boy at the end of *Endgame*. Is it a glimmer of hope? (Shrug of shoulders.) It's just to permit them to go on a little longer."

I nevertheless risked telling him of identifying the hats of his personages with the *surmoi*, using the French term for 'superego' as more graphically suggesting

5 Beckett's cataracts were not operated on until 1970 and 1971.

parental imposition of indelible social interdictions.⁶ I thought of the narrator of “L’Expulsé” (“The Expelled”) who, although regretting his hair blowing freely in the wind, holds on to his hat even after his father’s death, and the umbilical attachment of Molloy’s hat to his buttonhole. With a smile and a motion of his hand to the top of his head, Beckett mused: “They all wear hats?” And a little later: “But there are no more hats in my latest stories,” and concentrating, as if trying to see something from the inside: “No they’re gone.”

Academe, Teaching, Writing

My praise of his early essay on Proust, especially the part on the Narrator-Albertine relation, was met with disbelief. Because I referred to it as one of the best studies of Proust available, he thought I must not have read the French critics. But, of course, I had. “Anyway,” he continued, “that was written in the academic tradition. I was not at all qualified at the time. You see, I hadn’t started out planning to be a writer. I taught some time at the École Normale and then at Trinity. But I walked out. I signed up for three years and walked out after a year, leaving everyone in the lurch. In fact, I ran out.” How fortunate for us he did, I said, otherwise he might still be there teaching. And what accounts for his flight from teaching?

I was supposed to teach a mixed class of girls and boys about seventeen years old. They weren’t really interested. And I was supposed to teach things I didn’t know, although I did know somewhat more than they. I then started writing because there is nothing else I could do and I always liked writing. I did some translations at the time just to keep body and soul together.

The admission that he knew somewhat more than his students is something he did not often add. And yet his students’ notes have brought to light how much as a young lecturer he ‘knew’ about the material he was teaching, especially in his astonishing course on Racine and the Modern Novel.

I was then the same age as he was when he left teaching behind, but this being the sixties, I was looking forward to playing the gadfly to American students using French literary texts to raise questions in their minds. He agreed the Socratic method of teaching might have more to say for itself than lecturing.

6 The undercutting of *parental* inscription in Beckett, at least until the sixties, continued to intrigue me in defiance of the myopic vision of Lacanians, then all the rage.

What is his method of writing? Does it just flow?—"One decides what elements to use and puts them together."

Of Laughter and Tears

When I expressed interest in the trilogy's humor, Beckett interrupted to say he didn't write it to be a trilogy even though one book begins where the other one ended. I brought up the hilarious conversation between Moran and Father Ambrose in *Molloy*, during which the priest comments that Christ never laughed. "He's been known to have wept. I don't blame him," Beckett interposed with a chuckle. The ball then bounced back and forth:

AM. For Christ religious transcendence was a certainty, so he didn't need to laugh. When transcendence is in doubt, as increasingly at the end of the Middle Ages, laughter provides relief from sorrows.

SB. I know of a Greek philosopher who died of laughter.

AM. Perhaps at that time, too, values were disintegrating.

SB. Do you have any historical evidence for your theory? (Of course, I didn't, only a hypothesis worked out in a graduate paper on laughter in François Villon's *Testament*.)

SB. But we've been laughing together quite a bit here, and I'm sure we have transcending principles.

AM. I give up.

Later, Beckett would draw my attention to Nell's "Rien n'est plus drôle que le malheur." ("Nothing is funnier than unhappiness").

Next I commented on Father Ambrose's assertion that only humans laugh and Aristotle's claim that laughter makes us human:

SB. I know of dogs that laugh. We used to have a dog at home, a Kerry Blue Terrier. The same kind of dog had been in the family for a long time. He used to come down the driveway and smile to welcome us just like a person opening the door to someone he knows well.

KM. I had to convince her that goats weep. As a child with several siblings, my family maintained a goat for its more easily digestible milk. I once saw her weep.

SB. You actually saw the tears fall?

KM. Yes.

SB. Did you know why?

KM. She was mourning the stillbirth of a young one.

SB. Oh my God. (Visibly pained, he gazed long out the window. Pause.)

Residuals

AM. Are you writing anything at the moment?

SB. No, just a little translation.

AM. I was surprised to find your latest short fictions referred to as *romans* (novels). Soon after arriving in Paris, I found a notice of the publication of a new *roman* by Samuel Beckett in the *Quinzaine littéraire*,⁷ a shock for someone in the midst of writing a dissertation.

SB. Yes, more work (with a smile). But I don't call them that. Anyway, the volume in which they are collected tells what they are. Do you know what the title *Têtes-mortes* means?

AM. I found the words in *Comment c'est* (*How It Is*).

SB. Was it in there? With a hyphen?

AM. No, without.

SB. The hyphen is very important. It can be found in the *Littre* (pointing to the volumes of the dictionary on the shelves above his desk), under *tête* (head), an article several pages long. It's a chemical term meaning 'residue.' In the English translation, the collection will be called *Residuals*. I used the Latin term *caput mortuum* in one of the *Textes pour rien*.⁸

I admitted finding *Têtes-mortes* difficult to read. "Look for images," was his advice. That helped, as I had wondered whether they were as visual as I found them to be in the manner of non-representational art. A slow nod suspended the conversation.

As we were leaving, Beckett expressed his hope to see us again before we left Paris. We came away in a somewhat dazed, but elated state. Was it the effect of *darshan*, the Sanskrit concept defining the awe felt in the presence of someone deeply admired? It was that, no doubt, but it was also being witness to his attentive and vulnerable hereness, with no inkling of hierarchical distance—excepting his self-deprecating politeness—giving way at times to an elsewhere, the otherness from which emerges his writing, of which we had

7 The *Quinzaine littéraire* is a bimonthly literary journal founded by Maurice Nadeau in 1966. Beckett's *Assez* (*Enough*) appeared in the journal's first issue of 15 March. The *roman* announced in the 1 Dec. 1966 issue was *Bing*, published separately by Minit that year before being collected in 1967 in *Têtes-mortes* along with *Assez* and other short fictions.

8 Beckett's insistence on the hyphen in *tête-morte* served me well later in editing French essays for this journal, as French academics, too, in neglecting the hyphen, were working with the 'death head' meaning from which the hyphenated (al)chemical term derives.

intimations in the moments of meditative silence. A great privilege it was sharing in moments of Sam-ness and Watt-ness.

Interlude: Les Éditions de Minuit

Soon after Beckett gave me the go-ahead to consult his unpublished French typescripts, I had a taste of Jérôme Lindon's legendary protectiveness of his author. When I appeared, notebook in hand, at Minuit, number 7, rue Bernard-Palissy, in the Saint-Germain area (a former brothel, my dissertation advisor remarked), Lindon first checked with Beckett by phone about the permission I claimed to have been given. Then a few days later, on hearing the clicking of my Baby Hermes typewriter, Lindon rushed in to verify that I was not preparing a bootlegged copy of *Eleutheria*. Fortunately, my summary notes were in English.

At our meeting with Beckett, I had mentioned the difficulty of getting hold of *More Pricks than Kicks*: "I just don't see any reason for republishing it. The publishers have now made available one hundred typed copies for the use of students. Some of the stories are all right." Why didn't I ask him which ones, although it's possible to guess? He was, of course, to give reluctant permission to republish or publish the writings I had so much trouble locating in 1966–1967, although never relenting for *Eleutheria*.

Coda: The 'Coat Stand'

We next met Beckett two years later while visiting Paris after the defense of my dissertation. Having arranged in his note of 25 June 1969 to meet us at our hotel two days later, he arrived on the dot of 6 p.m at the Hôtel des Deux Continents on rue Jacob near Saint-Germain-des-Prés. Would we mind walking through the Luxembourg Garden to the Closerie des Lilas? He much preferred Montparnasse to Saint-Germain. Would we mind?! On our walk, I mentioned the doubles I found in *Watt* and *Molloy* in which one writer splits into two. He stopped and looked at me, and not unkindly: "schizophrenia?" I shook my head, no, not that, two poles of one psyche, Sam and Watt, Moran and Molloy. While sipping our whiskeys at the Closerie, I at one point asked hopefully whether there was a manuscript he was working on in the briefcase he had with him: "No, only a pair of socks." On seeing my unbelieving look, he opened the case and out tumbled a bright green pair of socks and a scientific magazine.



FIGURE 1 *Angela Moorjani, 1967*
PHOTO: KISHIN MOORJANI

“It’s all a misunderstanding,” he said after I made a complimentary remark about the appreciation his work was receiving, “I’m like a coat stand (pointing to the one near where we were sitting), on which people hang their coats.” “The coat rack is looking more and more impressive,” I wrote in my congratulatory note on the Nobel Prize later that year. The answer came on a postcard, dated 8 December 1969, from Nabeul, Tunisia, with a picture of sailboats out at sea, on which, adding to his thanks for my congratulations, he quipped if I could see the coat stand now, I would tremble for the coats. It was that lovely card and my wish to spare the stand from collapse that, despite his invitations to let him know when we’re in Paris, bolstered my resolve to keep in touch but no longer ask to meet him. I received notes of thanks for a recording we sent (Fischer-

Diskau singing Schubert lieder?) and another later for my *Abysmal Games in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* on doubling, *mise en abyme*, the *fort-da*, and other playful repetitions. He could not have known that I dropped off a bottle of Irish whiskey anonymously—I don't remember which—at Minuit, thinking he was still filling the glasses of academics at his place.

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