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## ‘Stations of a Mourner’s Cross’: Samuel Beckett, Killiney, 1954

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'Stations of a Mourner's Cross':  
Beckett, Killiney, 1954

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The recent archival turn in Beckett studies has focused attention on the many diverse sources Beckett drew upon to produce his remarkable body of work. This return to Beckett's unpublished notes and manuscripts coincides fortuitously with the long-awaited publication of Beckett's selected letters. One thing that is becoming increasingly clear is that the sources for many of Beckett's works are deeply personal, despite his principled insistence that his life was not relevant to understanding his art, and despite his systematic efforts through the stages of revision to erase, de-emphasize, obscure or sublimate initial sources drawn from his life. When Deirdre Bair first proposed writing Beckett's biography, he dismissed the efficacy of such a project. She recalls, 'He told me his life was "dull and without interest" and "best left unchampioned". "The professors", he said, "know more about it than I do".<sup>1</sup> One of the first professors who championed his work, Lawrence Harvey, encountered similar resistance: 'Beckett said that in his view his life had nothing to do with his art. He didn't at least see any relation.' Ultimately, however, Harvey elicited a concession to the contrary: 'But later in speaking of the Irish place names that occur [...] he said, "Of course, I say my life has nothing to do with my work, but of course it does".<sup>2</sup> In his groundbreaking manuscript study,

*The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts*, Gontarski observes,

the plays most often emerge from and rest on a realistic and traditional substructure, against which the final work develops dialectically. While Beckett labours to undo that traditional structure and realistic content, he never wholly does so. The final work retains those originary tracings and is virtually a palimpsest. What remains is the trace of an author struggling against his text, repenting his originary disclosure, effacing himself from the text.<sup>3</sup>

With the publication of the letters and increased accessibility to other archival material, there is greater critical capacity than ever before for retracing his tracks and restoring his self-effacements. These revelations open up new avenues into his works that were previously unknown or blocked off. Considered together, the correspondence, the manuscript drafts, and the final published works yield footprints that lead back to Beckett's intellectual, artistic and personal starting points.

The footprints I wish to follow in the present essay lead back to one of the most dreadful periods of Beckett's life, the four months he spent in Killiney in 1954 tending to his brother Frank who lay dying of lung cancer. Frank's dying stirred up other ghosts, most notably that of his mother May, who had died four years earlier. Beckett's morose state of mind was further exacerbated by his worries over Pamela Mitchell, an American woman 14 years his junior with whom he was having an affair, a relationship he was already regarding as impossible to continue much longer. On top of these difficulties, Beckett had also been mired for years in a crippling state of writer's block, which had only relented sporadically since his completion of *The Unnamable* in early 1950. Finally, add to all of this Beckett's acrimony towards Ireland and particularly Dublin, a forsaken homeland from which he felt increasingly alienated, and to which he always returned with reluctance

and regret. These multiple overlapping circumstances all contributed to a remarkable series of letters, many of them to Pamela Mitchell. In his introduction to the second volume of *Letters*, Dan Gunn remarks upon this striking segment of the correspondence: 'It is in 1954, when he returns to Ireland again in order to be with his ailing brother, that Beckett writes letters which, taken as a sequence, are almost like stations of a mourner's cross.'<sup>4</sup> What is remarkable in retracing these stations is how familiar the terrain seems. That is because so many of the thoughts, lines, images and themes articulated in the letters were later put to artistic use in Beckett's creative work. These affinities are most apparent in the earlier drafts and final script for *Fin de partie* [*Endgame*], the play Beckett launched into immediately after Frank's death.<sup>5</sup> A comparative analysis between the letters, various gestations of *Endgame*, and other dramas produced after Frank's death provides a revealing case study of how Beckett drew upon personal experience and adapted it for creative use. The personal threnody may be muted by the time his works are published and performed, but faint strains and echoes remain clearly discernible.

### 'Die in Ireland'

Beckett came to view his home city of Dublin as a necropolis. From the Second World War onward, his life was in France. Following the liberation, he chiefly made trips back to Ireland to visit his mother May, ailing from Parkinson's disease. After her death in 1950, Beckett wrote more than once in his letters that he hoped never to return to Ireland again. But four years later he received a frantic call from his sister-in-law Jean, informing him that his brother had been diagnosed with advanced lung cancer. Beckett rushed to Dublin and would remain resident in Frank and Jean's house for the final four months of his brother's life. The house overlooked Killiney Bay south of the city.

The Becketts knew this area well. Frank and Jean had lived their entire married life there and raised their children, Caroline and Edward. Beckett's childhood home of Cooldrinagh was in nearby Foxrock and the family used to rent a holiday home in the adjacent seaside village of Greystones.<sup>6</sup> Young Samuel Beckett also went on excursions to Killiney with his lover Peggy Sinclair.<sup>7</sup> However, during the summer and fall of 1954, Killiney became the very epicentre of death and loss for him, and these morbid associations would leave a lasting impact on his life and work.

Paradoxically, Beckett's professional reputation as a writer was peaking when he arrived at Killiney in 1954. He had already completed the work that would earn him the Nobel Prize for Literature 15 years later. *En attendant Godot* had premiered in Paris the previous year to major critical acclaim, and preparations were under way for the London premiere. The huge success of *Godot* was also finally drawing attention to Beckett's neglected fiction, particularly his 'trilogy' of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*. He had secured an indefatigable champion of his work in France with Jérôme Lindon of the publisher Éditions du Minuit and he had attracted the attention of maverick American publisher Barney Rosset, who signed a deal to publish and promote Beckett's work with Grove Press in America.<sup>8</sup> After years of toiling in obscurity, in his late forties Beckett was becoming a literary sensation – and he was thoroughly miserable. Even before Frank's illness, Beckett was in a hopeless state, no longer capable of producing any work he did not instantly hate. Aside from the piecemeal production of several short fictions (eventually published as *Texts for Nothing*), Beckett had failed to write anything new that he deemed publishable between the completion of *The Unnamable* in January 1950 and the multiple drafts of *Endgame* which he began working on extensively in 1955 but did not complete until 1957.

I propose that it is no coincidence that Beckett's intractable writer's block began just after the death of his mother in the fall of 1950

and finally began relenting after the death of his brother in the fall of 1954. In reviling everything he produced during this period, and in questioning his very decision to continue on as a writer, he took up the fallen standard of censure long carried by his mother, who had always hoped that her wayward son would return to his faith, his country and his family – in other words, that he would abandon his prodigal, dissolute, bohemian life and return home. Put another way, she wanted her youngest son to be a Trinity don, not a French *artiste*. She wanted him to embrace his responsibilities as a respectable member of the Irish middle class, following the examples of his father and brother, who had taken over the family surveying business after Bill's death. Alas, none of the correspondence between Beckett and his mother or his brother survives, but his letters to Irish confidante Tom MacGreevy make the family pressures abundantly clear. In 1932, for instance, Beckett frets to MacGreevy, 'Got a friendly letter from Mother, day after you left I think, written in Switzers: "Come home". [...] I wonder would my Father take me into his office. That is what Frank did. He went home after 3 years in India and went into the office. And now look at him. With a car and a bowler-hat.'<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, it appears that, at least at times, Frank may have shared their mother's disapproval. After returning home to Cooldrinagh from London upon conclusion of his psychotherapy, Beckett writes MacGreevy in 1936, 'Relations with M[other] as thorny as ever [...] The only plane on which I feel my defeat not proven is the literary. [...] Frank I feel censorious as not before. He is so successful' (*Letters 1* 299–300). Beckett clearly felt the burden of disappointing his family all the more keenly in comparison to his brother's more stable, conventional bourgeois life. His guilt was compounded by the knowledge that, in his absence, Frank was saddled with the lion's share of responsibility in looking after their mother during her declining years.

The published letters reveal very few intimate details about the brothers' relationship. But if Frank continued to harbour any

disapproval of his younger sibling's life, the reverse was also true. Beckett worried over the toll the family business was taking on Frank's health. Even before the diagnosis of cancer, Beckett fretted to MacGreevy, 'Poor Frank is laid up, dizzy attacks, low blood pressure, heart tired. I don't like it at all [...] He takes that old office too much to heart, like Father' (*Letters* 2 435). Furthermore, Beckett regarded Dublin itself as conducive to illness, complaining again to MacGreevy, 'I think it is impossible to have health in Dublin. Of any kind' (*Letters* 2 145). Most revealingly, after he was installed in Killiney for his brother's death vigil, he reflected to Pamela Mitchell, 'The old Irish slogan "Die in Ireland." It's a dangerous place to come back to for any other purpose' (*Letters* 2 487n.3). One would think from this passage that Frank was not dying of cancer, he was dying of Ireland – and Beckett feared the disease was contagious, if not indeed congenital.

### 'Something is taking its course'

Beckett arrived in Killiney already in a state of creative stagnation that had persisted with little respite since his mother's death in 1950. He lamented to Mitchell, 'Never felt less like writing and I haven't felt like it for years, and never so revolted at the thought of the work done' (*Letters* 2 487n.3). Yet a glance at his chronology shows that the creative log-jam was just about to break free. Without knowing it, Beckett was accumulating experiences and rehearsing ideas that would soon replenish his depleted creative reservoir. *Endgame* is fundamentally born out of Frank Beckett's death; 'the gravedigger puts on the forceps' (*CDW* 84). Before his brother's illness, he had worked unsuccessfully on multiple scenarios involving invalids and attendants, but had aborted these manuscripts.<sup>10</sup> The play 'had a difficult birth', as Ackerley and Gontarski rightly note.<sup>11</sup> But Beckett's harrowing experiences in Killiney between May and September 1954 provided him with the

necessary perspective, motivation and specific quickening agents to revivify previous efforts, add to them and reshape the lot into an eventually viable form. Frank's illness and death did not solve all of Beckett's creative problems by any means, but this personal experience did provide the impetus and direction to begin productive work again.

When Beckett was summoned to Killiney, he found himself cast in a servant's role – as if he had suddenly been plunged into a Beckett play. The experience clarified his identification with the character who would eventually become Clov, the exasperated factotum serving the irascible invalid eventually called Hamm. The play dramatises the life of Hamm, a blind tyrant who cannot stand, and Clov, his beleaguered servant and more-or-less adopted son who cannot sit, nor, it would appear, leave. They live in a shelter between the land and the sea, in a barren wasteland where nothing grows, where everything is either running out or breaking down, and yet the relief of a definitive end to the suffering remains elusive. Hamm also keeps his decrepit parents, Nagg and Nell, bottled up in ashbins on stage. They occasionally pop in to tell a story or share an anecdote, but for the most part, all the characters in *Endgame* are merely killing time, waiting to die or somehow otherwise to end. Knowlson briefly suggests in his biography that Beckett's experiences during this period anticipate the world of *Endgame*, and the publication of the second volume of letters substantiates this claim beyond doubt.<sup>12</sup>

The letters and play both capture the grinding tedium of waiting for death. 'Here things are taking their course' (*Letters* 2 492), Beckett writes in July 1954 to Jérôme Lindon, directly prefiguring Clov's assessment of the shared predicament in *Endgame*: 'Something is taking its course' (*CDW* 98, 107). There is also a shared sense of a brutal repetition from which none of the characters seem capable of escaping. Again, these lines from Beckett's letter to Mitchell might just as well be lifted from the script of *Endgame*: 'Here the damnable round

continues. Complications are beginning and God knows for what atrociousness we are bound' (*Letters* 2 493). Beckett even characterizes himself to Mitchell in Clov-like terms as Frank's servant: 'Should have made quite a good butler, no, too much responsibility, but a superior kind of house-boy, a head house-boy, no, just an ordinary house-boy' (*Letters* 2 493n.1). By late August, there could be no doubt that Frank's condition was deteriorating, yet the end remained beyond reach. Clov crystallizes this condition in the opening lines of the play, which also echo Christ on the cross: 'Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished' (*CDW* 93). Finally, on 13 September 1954, Frank Edward Beckett died. Four days later, Beckett reported the sad news to Barney Rosset. This same letter, however, contains the first hint of new creative inspiration: 'Re future work, I feel very doubtful, though sometimes have premonitions of a brief & final haemorrhage prior to what condolers call the higher life' (*Letters* 2 502). This 'final haemorrhage' would become *Endgame*.

'... the only survivor of my family ...'

Let me be clear: I am not suggesting a simplistic equation whereby Clov equals Sam, Hamm equals Frank, Nagg equals Bill and Nell equals May. Although Beckett's early inspirations do include strikingly personal material, he complicates and obfuscates those sources through multiple drafts and effacements. With each successive revision, the material becomes decreasingly revealing on a personal level and increasingly complex on a formal level. Complexity often ensues in part from dialectical interaction with other source texts that wrestle with analogous problems. For present purposes his most relevant source text is the account of Noah given in Genesis.<sup>13</sup>

The play is replete with references to Noah, his sons and their lives after the flood. The post-apocalyptic environment and hermetically

sealed shelter depicted in *Endgame* bear strong resemblances to the world Noah and his family occupied in the ark after God destroyed the rest of the world's human inhabitants. God charges his chosen survivors with repopulating the earth, a challenge that they accept. Conversely, procreation is a source of considerable anxiety in *Endgame*. Hamm alternately calls his father 'Accursed progenitor' and 'Accursed fornicator' (*CDW* 96), belligerently asking why he was born:

|             |   |
|-------------|---|
| <b>Hamm</b> | Scoundrel! Why did you engender me?     |
| <b>Nagg</b> | I didn't know.                          |
| <b>Hamm</b> | What? What didn't you know?             |
| <b>Nagg</b> | That it would be you. ( <i>CDW</i> 116) |

At one point Clov is afflicted by a flea in his crotch, or perhaps it is a crab louse, prompting a slapstick routine of pouring insecticide powder down his trousers, out of the hysterical concern that 'humanity might start from there all over again!' (*CDW* 108). Furthermore, when Clov looks out of the window late in the play and discovers, to his horror, a boy on the horizon, his immediate reaction is to grab the gaff and prepare to bludgeon this 'potential procreator' (*CDW* 131) to death. The anxiety surrounding regeneration in the play is in part attributable to Beckett's retelling of the Genesis story from the perspective not of Noah but of Ham, Noah's son – that same son who viewed his father naked and was thus cursed to bear a race of servants – a prospect which accounts for Ham(m)'s reluctance to get on with the task of begetting heirs. Beckett editorializes upon the Noah story in a letter to Mitchell, written months after Frank's death while he was working on drafts of *Endgame*. 'I've been reading [...] in the Holy Bible the story of the Flood and wishing the Almighty had never had a soft spot for Noah' (*Letters* 2 522).

There is no question of choosing between Frank's death vigil and the Noah story as to which is the correct inspiration for *Endgame*.<sup>14</sup> Rather, Beckett latches on to the Noah story as an ideal conduit for

dealing with the attendant anxieties of loss, sterility and regeneration raised by Frank's death, while simultaneously rechanneling the play's points of reference away from their personal origins. Beckett was acutely aware that, with Frank's death, he advanced to the head of the line as the last living member of his immediate family. He did not relish the promotion. In his first letter to Barney Rosset during the Killiney sojourn, he confronted the situation squarely: 'No there are no compensations for me in this country, on the contrary. And as so shortly to be the only survivor of my family I hope never to have to return' (*Letters* 2 486-7). Despite all Beckett's best efforts to renounce his Irish birthright, Frank's death threatened to confer upon him the burdens of legacy. These anxieties of lineage were potentially thrown into sharper relief by Beckett's own childlessness. By all accounts he and his long-time companion Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil had quite consciously chosen not to have children.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the frequency and intensity with which he turned to these themes reveal a preoccupation with barrenness, the various compulsions to propagate and the inevitable woe visited upon both parent and child once the call to reproduce is heeded.<sup>16</sup> Several of his plays from the late 1950s – *All That Fall* (1956), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958), *Embers* (1959) – are animated by kindred tensions, but none treat these themes with greater urgency or ruthlessness than *Endgame*, where the personal roots of the dilemma lie deepest. Despite familial pressures, and against a besieged Irish Protestant backdrop that saw childlessness as tantamount to class betrayal, Beckett personally resisted the reproductive imperative.<sup>17</sup> Frank's death may have stirred up latent concerns about regeneration, but there is no indication from either Beckett's life or work that he fundamentally departed from his original position: God did Noah no favours by sparing him, and the mandate to repopulate the earth was a doomed proposition from the start. As Hamm sums it up, 'you're on earth, there's no cure for that!' (CDW 125).

### 'It was I was a father to you'

Nevertheless, Beckett was in effect bound by Frank's different opinions and choices. Unlike the prodigal younger son, Frank stayed in Ireland, held down a steady job, married, bought a house and had children. Even had Beckett been of a different mindset with respect to the reproduction question, one might have supposed the existence of Edward, son of the eldest son, would have relieved any burden to produce an heir.<sup>18</sup> However, quite apart from the issue of producing children, there is also a deep concern in *Endgame* with the rearing of children. We must remember that Hamm is not the biological father of Clov but rather a foster father. Hamm reprimands Clov for his ingratitude by reminding him of this fosterage arrangement:

- Hamm** Do you remember when you came here?  
**Clov** No. Too small, you told me.  
**Hamm** Do you remember your father?  
**Clove** [*Wearily.*] Same answer. [...]  
**Hamm** It was I was a father to you.  
**Clov** Yes. [*He looks at HAMM fixedly.*] You were that to me.  
**Hamm** My house a home for you.  
**Clov** Yes. [*He looks about him.*] This was that for me. (CDW 110)

Hamm eventually tells an elaborate story about how a child, apparently Clov, came to be in his care. Near the play's end, another boy is spotted on the horizon, opening up the possibility that Hamm will assume custody of a new child. When Hamm responds, 'It's the end, Clov, we've come to the end. I don't need you any more' (CDW 131), the timing implies that Clov's replacement has arrived. With a line of succession seemingly in place, the play ends poised on the brink of possible regeneration.

Just as anxieties about bearing children spring from concerns surrounding Frank's death, so too do worries about being responsible

for someone else's offspring. Beckett's concerns over future support for his fatherless niece and nephew worm their way into *Endgame*. As is often the case, the earlier drafts reveal Beckett's fundamental concerns more nakedly. The interlocking themes of death, sterility, regeneration and fosterage are laid bare in the manuscripts, where the personal sources of these anxieties are not yet expunged. Most revealing is the two-act version of the play, first extant as a conflated typescript in the Reading archives (UoR MS 1660). Gontarski's study of this manuscript in the third chapter of *The Intent of Undoing* remains the most extensive treatment, and I draw upon it heavily in the ensuing discussion.

In the two-act version the play's roots in death are tangibly acknowledged in the form of a coffin, unmentioned upon by the characters A (later Hamm) and B (later Clov), but presiding over the entire play. At a few points a corpse's head peeks out from the coffin, as when A contemplates the possibility of introducing new characters to his story. Like the later *Endgame*, this version also contains a prayer, but not in this case to God but rather to Death [Thanatos].<sup>19</sup> The coffin is ultimately eliminated in revision, though it may well prefigure Beckett's later use of the ashbins. But as Gontarski notes, a residual reference to it remains in Hamm's line, 'Put me in my coffin,' to which Clov replies, 'There are no more coffins' (CDW 130).<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the appearance of the corpse in this earlier version precisely at the moment when A – the Hamm figure – is concluding his story of the child's arrival implies a direct link between the death and fosterage motifs.

The competing attractions of Thanatos and Eros are also more explicit in the earlier typescript. The Noah source text is invoked directly, as A directs B to read from Genesis 8.21–2 and 11.14–19, that is, from God's covenant with Noah and from the chronicle of Noah's generations.<sup>21</sup> Though the latter passage is far from erotic, its reference to propagation has an aphrodisiac effect on A. Determined to prove

his virility, he crudely calls for a woman: 'Mother, wife, sister, daughter, harlot. It's the same to me. A woman. Two breasts and a vulva.'<sup>22</sup> Instead of procuring an actual woman, B assumes the teasing voice and guise of 'Sophie'. 'Go get me Sophie,' responds A, 'I'm going to beget.'<sup>23</sup> This recipe for reproduction is obviously doomed to fail, as Gontarski summarizes: 'But to Sophie's eagerness, A detumescently demurs. He fears procreation and refuses Sophie's advances.'<sup>24</sup> Here sexual groping and impotence are treated as the stuff of farce, but with successive revisions these themes become more grim and resentful in tone. An intermediary set of revision notes (held at Ohio State University) marks the transition. Gontarski highlights one line from these notes for its 'particularly cutting edge': 'No one sterile in our family.'<sup>25</sup> Considering the play's personal sources, one can well imagine why such a line would be excised from the final version as cutting too close to home.

The most intriguing personal reference in the two-act typescript, later suppressed from the final play, concerns the arrival of the new boy at play's end. In *Endgame*, there is an inkling of doubt as to whether Clov's sighting of a boy in the distance is accurate: 'You don't believe me? You think I'm inventing?' (CDW 131). In this earlier version, however, all doubt is removed: B is definitely inventing. Just as the play is about to end, the closing curtain is suspended and raised back up, and B enters disguised as the new boy. He speaks in a child's voice, begs to be fed, and begins ingratiating himself as A's servant. Gontarski notes A's response, 'It will never end,' and comments, 'And so it does not. Another cycle begins, but with slight variation. B is simply playing the role of a younger servant.'<sup>26</sup> In spite of everything, regeneration of a kind has taken place, and now the farce is doomed to continue, along with all the responsibilities that inevitably ensue. But I have saved the most striking detail of this scene for last. When B enters, assuming the wardrobe and speech of a child, he also assumes a new identity, announcing that his name is *Edward*. Edward! So the representative of regeneration – he who ensures that the routines of



servitude, dependence and abjection will continue – just happens to bear the same name as Beckett's own nephew. The early two-act version of the play concludes with the pronouncement of an heir apparent; but rather than providing resolution to the play's problems, this new complication only assures the continuation of a dreadful cycle, and only adds to the responsibilities of the survivors.

Even after the so-called Edward is written out of the final version of *Endgame*, echoes remain in Hamm's final speech. There he returns to the story of how the first child (probably young Clov) arrived in the shelter. But whereas his first telling featured the father begging Hamm to take the child, this new retelling has the father begging to keep the child. Hamm reprimands the father, in words that may be directed more at himself for clinging to Clov for too long: 'You don't want to abandon him? You want him to bloom while you are withering? Be there to solace your last million last moments? [Pause.] He doesn't realize, all he knows is hunger, and cold, and death to crown it all. But you! You ought to know what earth is like, nowadays. Oh, I put him before his responsibilities!' (CDW 133). All the blame – for having a child only to abandon it, for forcing a child to suffer through one's own inevitable demise, for blindly expecting a child to bloom in an atmosphere of decay, for even conceiving a child into such a wretched, preposterous, dying world – all these raw accusations remain intact in *Endgame*, but by the final version their original sources are obscured.

Edward Beckett was only 11 years old at the time of his father's death. To his credit, as Knowlson's biography amply shows, Beckett was a highly supportive uncle to both his niece and nephew. In turn, and true to the script, Edward Beckett has served dutifully as executor of Beckett's literary estate ever since Jérôme Lindon's death. With the advantage of hindsight, we can see that family obligations were accepted, debts were paid, the legacy has been preserved and the estate has flourished. During the immediate aftermath of Frank's death, however, anxieties and recriminations – not only over death,

but also over the responsibilities left behind in the dead one's absence – haunted Beckett's imagination. Even though the more personal ghosts were eventually relegated to the archives, they remain palpable in the stage play that survives.

'... sucked in by this exquisite morass ...'

Palpable, too, is Beckett's despair over other responsibilities of his own making. It is no coincidence that the most intense letters written during this period are to Pamela Mitchell. He first met her in a business capacity in September 1953. When Mitchell moved to Paris in April 1954 for a nine-month stay, their relationship intensified, but so, too, did Beckett's scruples about conducting an affair under Suzanne's nose. As Knowlson characterizes it, 'The affair, although brief, was intense, both romantic and sexual. But it was brusquely interrupted.'<sup>27</sup> Beckett's abrupt removal to Killiney gave him occasion to reconsider the affair from a distance. Weighed down with worries, he would regularly take long walks up and down the beach. He reported to Mitchell that 'the nights are still long and fairly good with the old sea still telling the old story at the end of the garden and I can slip out of an evening and prowl without disturbing anyone' (*Letters 2* 493). While 'revolving it all' (CDW 400) on Killiney strand, he determined that the affair was doomed: 'Soon the leaves will be turning, it'll be winter before I'm home, and then? It'll have to be very easy whatever it is. I can't face any more difficulties, and I can't bear the thought of giving any more pain' (*Letters 2* 493–4n.1). According to Knowlson he did not definitively break off the affair as such until November, but he seems to have decided upon this course of action during his dark ruminations in Ireland.

Killiney becomes for Beckett and his characters what the heath is for Lear or, what Sandymount Strand is for Stephen Dedalus. This stretch

of shoreline expands to existential proportions and serves as a stage for wrestling with mortality; the death of specific loved ones, but more broadly the death of love itself. This is where he spent his childhood summers with Bill, May and Frank Beckett, all dead or dying. This is where he had dated Peggy Sinclair, who died a few years later in May 1933, where he decided to break Pamela Mitchell's heart, where he would later grieve over the passing of his beloved friend Ethna McCarthy, who died in May 1959. Walking into mortality on Killiney strand, his private 'stations of a mourner's cross', Beckett and his characters confront being and nothingness, contemplate responsibilities and regret choices and mourn past losses, as well as those to come, including his own. The allure of the sea of oblivion, to choose not to be, is ever present. Beckett was ruminating on more than Frank's looming death when he wrote Mitchell, 'Sometimes feel like letting myself be sucked in by this exquisite morass, just lie down and give up and do nothing more. Always felt that temptation here but never so strong as these last weeks' (*Letters* 2 487n. 3). He betrays suicidal thoughts in this passage, welcoming the prospect of death as preferable to taking up arms against a sea of troubles. He sounds a similar refrain in another letter to Mitchell, equating, 'the sound of the sea on the shore, and my father's death, and my mother's, and the going on after them.'<sup>28</sup> The ambiguity of 'going on after them', meaning either to continue living or else to follow them into death, is surely intentional.

Beckett eventually conferred his personal associations between Killiney and watery death to the characters in his post-1954 plays. For instance, Henry's father in the 1958 radio play *Embers* commits suicide in the sea at Killiney, and Henry himself is constantly lured back to the sea with the temptation of following in his father's footsteps. Hamm expresses a similar desire in *Endgame*, pining, 'If I could drag myself down to the sea! I'd make a pillow of sand for my head and the tide would come' (CDW 122). The most evocative treatment of

Killiney appears in the 1965 teleplay *Eh Joe*. Driven to despair by Joe's heartless jilting, his former lover sneaks out of her bedroom, much as Beckett did for his nightly walks, and wanders down to the sea. There she commits suicide, cupping out a place for her head in the shingle, and allowing the tide to wash her into oblivion just as Beckett had fantasized in his letters. As Eoin O'Brien first noted, specific geographical references to 'the viaduct' (CDW 365) and 'the Rock' (CDW 366) locate the lover's suicide near Whiterock Cove on Killiney strand.<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere I have elaborated upon Beckett's incorporation of Peggy Sinclair's untimely death and Ophelia's suicide in *Hamlet* as sources for *Eh Joe*.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, the published letters now make it readily apparent how Frank's pending death, the rejection of Pamela Mitchell's love and Beckett's own near-suicidal despair in Killiney likewise contribute seminally to the creation of *Eh Joe*.

'... cast a cold eye ...'

The confluence of Killiney associations is best captured in a 1956 letter to Aidan Higgins in which Beckett expresses bafflement at his friend's upcoming vacation to Ireland: 'Queer the way you all go to Ireland when you get a holiday. Piss on the White Rock for me and cast a cold eye on the granite beginning on the cliff face. Never been so miserable as on that strand, not even at Shankill, no solution and it unrealizable but just to walk out into the sea and not come back' (*Letters* 2 633). His associations with Ireland gravitate instinctively to Killiney, to the dark nights of the soul he spent there and the temptation to end all his problems by simply walking into the sea. Of course, instead of ending his problems and his life, Beckett instead began *Endgame*. The allusion to Yeats in the letter above ('cast a cold eye') is at once morbid and inspirational, in that it points the way through death towards art. Yeats's famous gravestone epitaph reads in full, 'Cast a cold Eye / On

Life, on Death. / Horseman pass by!<sup>31</sup> Obviously death cannot be avoided and must eventually be confronted, and this is no less true for great artists like Yeats and Beckett. But if an artist has the courage and discipline to 'cast a cold eye' on both life and death, then he might produce honest and lasting works of art, even from the most wretched personal experiences.

Knowlson shares an insight into Beckett's creative process gleaned from conversation with the author: 'It was one of the key features of Beckett's aesthetic that what he once described to me as "the cold eye" had to be brought to bear on a personal experience before it could be used in a work of art.'<sup>32</sup> By casting a critical eye at Beckett's letters and manuscripts in relation to his final published works, one can reconstruct how 'the cold eye' method worked. Rather than succumbing to total despair over the series of personal devastations he faced in the early 1950s, he instead drew upon these experiences as a creative launchpad from the mid-1950s onward. Beckett transformed his encounters with death and loss into important new works of art, including the masterpiece *Endgame* and several other innovative works that followed closely on its heels. Hamm laments, 'The end is in the beginning and yet you go on' (CDW 126). For Beckett, the opposite proved equally true: endings inaugurated creative new beginnings. Just when his letters would seem to indicate that his creativity was entirely spent, he managed to find inspiration from his own desolation. In so doing, Beckett followed his own advice to the struggling young French writer Robert Pinget: 'Don't lose heart: plug yourself into despair and sing it for us' (*Letters* 2, 605).

### Notes

1 Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), x.

- 2 James Knowlson and Elizabeth Knowlson (eds), *Beckett Remembering/Remembering Beckett* (New York: Arcade, 2006), 136.
- 3 S. E. Gontarski, *The Intent of Undoing in Samuel Beckett's Dramatic Texts* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985), 2.
- 4 Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett. Volume 2: 1941–1956*, edited by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), lxxvi. Subsequent references made parenthetically as *Letters* 2.
- 5 Beckett originally composed this play in French as *Fin de partie*, first published by Éditions de Minuit in 1957. He translated the play into English in 1957 as *Endgame*, which first appeared with Grove Press in 1958. References in the present essay draw from the standard English edition of *Endgame* in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), 89–134. Subsequent references to this volume are made parenthetically as CDW. When consulting *Fin de partie* manuscripts, I use S. E. Gontarski's English translations in *The Intent of Undoing*.
- 6 James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 46.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 89.
- 8 For a fuller account of Beckett's publishing history, see *Publishing Samuel Beckett*, edited by Mark Nixon (London: British Library, 2011).
- 9 Samuel Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1: 1929–1940*, edited by Martha Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 111–12. Subsequent references made parenthetically as *Letters* 1.
- 10 The dates, sequence and titles of these rejected drafts are notoriously difficult to pin down with certainty. The manuscripts include pieces sometimes referred to by critics as 'Mime du rêveur, A', 'Avant *Fin de partie*', 'Ernest et Alice', 'A et B' and 'X et F'. The most thorough analysis remains Gontarski's *The Intent of Undoing*. See also the scrupulous overview in Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2001), 220–5.
- 11 C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 196.
- 12 Knowlson, 363.

- 13 The most thorough considerations of *Endgame* in light of the Noah parallels remain those of Cohn and Cavell. See Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1962), 226–42; and Stanley Cavell, 'Ending the Waiting Game: A Reading of Beckett's *Endgame*', in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 115–62.
- 14 There are certainly other inspirations that lie beyond the scope of the present essay. For instance, Gontarski emphasizes the ruins around Saint-Lô, where Beckett volunteered as an ambulance driver in 1945, as an important inspiration for the decimated environment of *Endgame* (Gontarski, 33–7). More recently, Peter Fifield has made a compelling intertextual case for Beckett's influence from Georges Bataille's *Histoire de l'œil*. See Peter Fifield, "Accursed progenitor!": *Fin de partie* and Georges Bataille', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 22 (2010): 107–21.
- 15 Knowlson notes with discretion, 'Neither he nor Suzanne had ever wanted children' (Knowlson, 382). John Calder asserts this fact more forcefully as an extension of Beckett's philosophical beliefs: 'As Beckett speculated about the creation of the world, he increasingly envisaged the creator as a monster, but not necessarily a conscious one. The only way to frustrate that God (or nature) was to produce no children, and Beckett was true to his own principle' (Calder 130). Lawrence Shainberg professes more personal insight into Beckett's childlessness, offering this anecdote: 'The utter skepticism and despair about relationships in general and sexuality in particular which he has explored throughout his life has had as its counterpoint his marriage, which has lasted forty years. But lest one suspect that the continuity and comfort of marriage had tilted the scales so far that the dream of succession had taken root in his mind, "No", he replied, when I asked him if he had ever wanted children, "that's one thing I'm proud of"' (Shainberg).
- 16 Paul Stewart provides a comprehensive examination of these themes across Beckett's oeuvre in his admirable study, *Sex and Aesthetics in Samuel Beckett's Work* (Houndmills, Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

- 17 For an excellent analysis of Beckett's concerns with sterility and reproduction within the broader social context of Irish Protestantism, see Seán Kennedy, "A Lingered Dissolution": *All That Fall* and Protestant Fears of Engulfment in the Irish Free State', in *Drawing on Beckett: Portraits, Performances, and Cultural Contexts*, edited by Linda Ben-Zvi (Tel Aviv: Assaph, 2003): 247–61.
- 18 Just as anxieties over regeneration led Beckett to the Noah story as a model source text, his anxieties with respect to lineage and succession would naturally have led him to *King Lear*. A thorough analysis of Beckett's intertextual dialectic with Shakespeare is beyond the scope of this essay. The classic comparative analysis remains Jan Kott, 'King Lear, or *Endgame*' in *Shakespeare Our Contemporary* (New York: Norton, 1974), 127–68.
- 19 Gontarski, 50.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 51. Beckett, *Endgame*, 130.
- 21 Samuel Beckett, *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett, Volume IV: The Shorter Plays*, edited by S. E. Gontarski (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 57n.605.
- 22 Gontarski, 48.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 52.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 27 Knowlson, 361.
- 28 *Ibid.*, 362.
- 29 Eoin O'Brien, *The Beckett Country* (Dublin: Black Cat Press, 1986), 97.
- 30 I presented a version of this talk at the 'Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies' lecture series on 24 May 2011. An expanded version is published as 'Mourning Becomes Electric: Mediating Loss in *Eh Joe*', in *Beckett and Pain*, edited by Mariko Hori Tanaka, Yoshiki Tajiri, and Michiko Tsushima (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2012), 43–65.
- 31 W. B. Yeats, 'Under Ben Bulbin', in *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Second Revised Edition, edited by Richard J. Finneran (New York: Scribner, 1996), 328, ll.92–4.
- 32 Knowlson, 347.

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