

Exorcizing Beckett

By Lawrence Shainberg

I met Beckett in 1981, when I sent him, with no introduction, a book I'd written, and to my astonishment he read the book and replied almost at once. Six weeks later, his note having emboldened me to seek a meeting, our paths crossed in London, and he invited me to sit in on the rehearsals of *Endgame* which he was then conducting with a group of American actors for a Dublin opening in May.

It was a happy time for him. Away from his desk where his work, he said (I've never heard him say otherwise) was not going well at all, he was exploring a work which, though he'd written it thirty years before, remained among his favorites. The American group, called the San Quentin Theatre Workshop because they had discovered his work — through a visiting production of *Waiting for Godot* — while inmates at San Quentin, was particularly close to his heart, and working in London he was accessible to the close-knit family that collects so often where he or his work appears. Among those who came to watch were Billie Whitelaw, Irene Worth, Nicole Williamson, Alan Schneider, Israel Horowitz, Siobhan O'Casey (Sean's daughter), three writers with Beckett books in progress, two editors who'd published him and one who wanted to, and an impressive collection of madmen and Beckett freaks who had learned of his presence via the grapevine. One lady, in her early twenties, came to ask if Beckett minded that she'd named her dog after him (Beckett: "Don't worry about me. What about the dog?"), and a wild-eyed madman from Scotland brought flowers and gifts for Beckett and everyone in the cast and a four-page letter entitled "Beckett's Cancer, Part Three," which begged him to accept the gifts as "a sincere token of my deep and long-suffering love for you" while remembering that "I also hold a profound and comprehensive loathing for you, in response to all the terrible corruption and suffering which you have seen fit to inflict upon my entirely innocent personality."

The intimacy and enthusiasm with which Beckett greeted his friends as well as newcomers like myself — acting for all the world as if I'd done him an enormous favor to come — was a great surprise for me, one of many ways in which our meetings would force me to reconsider the conception of him which I had formed during the twenty years I'd been reading and, let's be honest about it, worshipping him. Who would expect the great master of grief and disenchantment to be so expansive, so relaxed in company? Well, as it turned out, almost everyone who knew him. My surprise was founded not in his uncharacteristic behavior but in the erroneous, often bizarre misunderstandings that had gathered about him in my mind. Certainly, if there's one particular legacy that I take from our meetings it is the way in which those misunderstandings were first revealed and then corrected. In effect, Beckett's presence destroyed the Beckett myth for me, replacing it with something at once larger and more ordinary. Even today I haven't entirely understood what this correction meant to me, but it's safe to say that the paradoxical effects of Beckett incarnate — inspiring and disheartening, terrifying, reassuring, and humbling in the extreme — are nowhere at odds with the work that drew me to him in the first place.

The first surprise was the book to which he responded. Because it was journalism — an investigation of the world of neurosurgery — I had been almost embarrassed to send it, believing that he of all people would not be interested in the sort of information I'd collected. No, what I imagined he'd really appreciate was the novel that had led me to neurosurgery, a book to which I had now returned which dealt with brain damage, and I presented it with an ambiguity and dark humor that, as I saw it, clearly signaled both his influence and my ambition to go beyond it. As it turned out, I had things exactly backward. For the novel, the first two chapters of which he read in London, he had little enthusiasm, but the nonfiction book continued to interest him. Whenever I saw him he questioned me about neurosurgery, asking, for example, exactly how close I had stood to the brain while observing surgery or how much pain a craniotomy entailed or, one day during lunch at rehearsals: "How is the skull removed?" and "Where do they put the skull bone while they're working inside?" Though I'd often heard it said of him that he read nothing written after 1950, he remembered the names of the patients I'd mentioned and inquired as to their condition, and more than once he expressed his admiration for the surgeons. Later he did confess to me that he read very little, finding what he called "the intake" more and more "excruciating", but I doubt that he ever lost his interest in certain kinds of information, especially those which

concerned the human brain. "I have long believed," he'd written me in his first response to my book, "that here in the end is the writer's best chance, gazing into the synaptic chasm."

Seventy-four years old, he was very frail in those days, even more gaunt and wizened than his photos had led me to expect, but neither age nor frailty interfered with his sense of humor. When I asked him one morning at the theatre how he was doing, he replied with a great display of exhaustion and what I took to be a sly sort of gleam in his eye, "No improvement." Another day, with an almost theatrical sigh, "A little wobbly." How can we be surprised that on the subject of his age he was not only unintimidated but challenged, even inspired? Not five minutes into our first conversation he brought us round to the matter: "I always thought old age would be a writer's best chance. Whenever I read the late work of Goethe or W. B. Yeats I had the impertinence to identify with it. Now my memory's gone, all the old fluency's disappeared. I don't write a single sentence without saying to myself, 'It's a lie!' So I know I was right. It's the best chance I've ever had." Two years later — and older — he explored the same thoughts again in Paris. "It's a paradox, but with old age, the more the possibilities diminish, the better chance you have. With diminished concentration, loss of memory, obscured intelligence — what you, for example, might call 'brain damage' — the more chance there is for saying something closest to what one really is. Even though everything seems inexpressible, there remains the need to express. A child needs to make a sand castle even though it makes no sense. In old age, with only a few grains of sand one has the greatest possibility." Of course, he knew that this was not a new project for him, only a more extreme version of the one he'd always set himself, what he'd laid out so clearly in his famous line from *The Unnamable*: "...it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on." It was always here, in "the clash," as he put it to me once, "between can't and must" that he took his stand. "How is it that a man who is completely blind and completely deaf must see and hear? It's this impossible paradox which interests me. The unseeable, the unbearable, the inexpressible." Such thoughts of course were as familiar to me as they would be to any attentive reader of Beckett, but it was always amazing to hear how passionately — and innocently — he articulated them. Given the pain in his voice, the furrowed, struggling concentration on his face, it was impossible to believe that he wasn't unearthing these thoughts for the first time. Absurd as it sounds, they seemed less familiar to him than to me. And it was no small shock to realize this. To encounter, I mean, the author of some of the greatest work in our language and find him, at

seventy-four, discovering his vision in your presence. His excitement alone was riveting, but for me the greatest shock was to see how intensely he continued to work on the issues that had preoccupied him all his life. So much so that it didn't matter where he was or who he was with, whether he was literally "at work" or in a situation that begged for small talk. I don't think I ever had a conversation with him in which I wasn't, at some point, struck by an almost naive realization of his sincerity, as if reminding myself that he was not playing the role one expected him to play but simply pursuing the questions most important to him. Is it possible that no one surprises us more than someone who is (especially when our expectations have been hyperbolic) exactly what we expect? It was as if a voice in me said, "My God, he's serious!" or, "So he's meant it all along!" And this is where my misunderstandings became somewhat embarrassing. Why on earth should he have surprised me? What did it say of my own sense of writing and reading or the culture from which I'd come that integrity in a writer — for this was after all the simple fact that he was demonstrating — should have struck me as so extraordinary?

Something else he said that first night in London was familiar to me from one of his published interviews, but he said this, too, as if he'd just come upon it and hearing it now I felt that I understood for the first time that aspect of his work which interested me the most. I'm speaking of its intimacy and immediacy, the uncanny sense that he's writing not only in a literary but an existential present tense, or more precisely, as John Pilling calls it in his book *Samuel Beckett, an imperfect tense*. The present tense of course is no rare phenomenon in modern, or for that matter, classical fiction, but unlike most writers who write in the present, Beckett writes from the present and remains constantly vulnerable to it. It is a difference of which he is acutely aware, one which distinguishes him even from a writer he admires as much as he does Kafka. As he said in a 1961 interview, "Kafka's form is classic, it goes on like a steamroller, almost serene. It seems to be threatened all the time, but the consternation is in the form. In my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form." It is for this reason that Beckett himself is present in his work to a degree that, as I see it, no other writer managed before him. In most of his published conversations, especially when he was younger and not (as later) embarrassed to speak didactically, he takes the position that such exposure is central to the work that he considers interesting. "If anything new and exciting is going on today, it is the attempt to let Being into art." As he began to evolve a means by which to accommodate such belief he made us realize not only the degree to which Being had been kept out of art but why it had been

kept out, how such exclusion is, even now, the *raison d'être* of most art and how the game changes, the stakes rising exponentially, once we let it in. Invaded by real time, narrative time acquires an energy and a fragility and, not incidentally, a truth which undermines whatever complacency or passivity the reader — not to mention the writer — has brought to the work, the assumption that enduring forms are to be offered, that certain propositions will rise above the flux, that "pain-killers," which Hamm seeks in vain throughout *Endgame*, will be provided. In effect, the narrative illusion is no longer safe from the narrator's reality. "Being," as he said once, "is constantly putting form in danger," and the essence of his work is its willingness to risk such danger. Listen to the danger he risks in this sentence from *Molloy*: "A and C I never saw again. But perhaps I shall see them again. But shall I be able to recognize them? And am I sure I never saw them again?"

The untrustworthy narrator, of course, had preceded Beckett by at least a couple of centuries, but his "imperfect" tense deprives *Molloy* of the great conceit that most authors have traditionally granted their narrators — a consistent, dependable memory, in effect a brain that is neither damaged in that it doesn't suffer from amnesia, nor normal in that it is consistent, confident of the information it contains and immune to the assaults that time and environment mount on its continuities. But Beckett's books are not about uncertainty any more than they're about consternation. Like their author, like the Being which has invaded them, they are themselves uncertain, not only in their conclusions but in their point of view. Form is offered because, as he has so often remarked, that is an obligation before which one is helpless, but any pretense that it will endure is constantly shown to be just that, pretense and nothing more, a game the author can no longer play and doesn't dare relinquish. "I know of no form," he said, "that does not violate the nature of Being in the most unbearable manner." Simply stated, what he brought to narrative fiction and drama was a level of reality that dwarfed all others that had preceded it. And because the act of writing — i.e., his own level of reality, at the moment of composition — is never outside his frame of reference, he exposes himself to the reader as no writer has before him. When *Molloy* changes his mind it's because Beckett has changed his mind as well, when the narrative is inconsistent it's not an esthetic trick but an accurate reflection of the mind from which that narrative springs. Finally, what *Molloy* doesn't know, Beckett doesn't know either. And this is why, though they speak of Joyce or Proust or other masters in terms of genius, so many writers will speak of Beckett in terms of courage. One almost has to be a writer

to know what courage it takes to stand so naked before one's reader or, more importantly, before oneself, to relinquish the protection offered by separation from the narrative, the security and order which, in all likelihood, are what draws one to writing in the first place.

That evening, speaking of Molloy and the work that followed it, he told me that, returning to Dublin after the war, he'd found that his mother had contracted Parkinson's Disease. "Her face was a mask, completely unrecognizable. Looking at her, I had a sudden realization that all the work I'd done before was on the wrong track. I guess you'd have to call it a revelation. Strong word, I know, but so it was. I simply understood that there was no sense adding to the store of information, gathering knowledge. The whole attempt at knowledge, it seemed to me, had come to nothing. It was all haywire. What I had to do was investigate not-knowing, not-perceiving, the whole world of incompleteness." In the wake of this insight, writing in French ("Perhaps because French was not my mother tongue, because I had no facility in it, no spontaneity") while still in his mother's house, he had begun Molloy (the first line of which is "I am in my mother's room"), thus commencing what was to be the most prolific period of his life. Within the first three paragraphs of his chronicle, Molloy says "I don't know" six times, "perhaps" and "I've forgotten" twice each and "I don't understand" once. He doesn't know how he came to be in his mother's room, and he doesn't know how to write anymore, and he doesn't know why he writes when he manages to do so, and he doesn't know whether his mother was dead when he came to her room or died later, and he doesn't know whether or not he has a son. In other words, he is not an awful lot different from any other writer in the anxiety of composition: considering the alternative roads offered up by his imagination; trying to discern a theme among the chaos of messages offered by his brain; testing his language to see what sort of relief it can offer. Thus, Molloy and his creator are joined from the first, and the latter — unlike most of his colleagues who have been taught, even if they're writing about their own ignorance and uncertainty, that the strength of their work consists in their ability to say the opposite — is saying "I don't know" with every word he utters. The whole of the narrative is therefore time-dependent, neurologically and psychologically suspect and contingent on the movement of the narrator's mind. And since knowledge, by definition, requires a subject and an object, a knower and a known, two points separated on the temporal continuum, Beckett's "I don't know" has short circuited the fundamental dualism upon which all narrative, and for that matter, all language, has before him been constructed. If the two points cannot be separated on the continuum, what is

left? No time, only the present tense. And if you must speak at this instant, using words which are by definition object-dependent, how do you do so? Finally, what is left to know if knowledge itself has been, at its very root, discredited? Without an object, what will words describe or subjugate? If subject and object are joined, how can there be hope or memory or order? What is hoped for, what is remembered, what is ordered? What is Self if knower and known are not separated by self-consciousness?

Those are the questions that Beckett has dealt with throughout his life. And before we call them esoteric or obtuse, esthetic, philosophical or literary, we'd do well to remember that they're not much different from the questions many of us consider, consciously or not, in the course of an ordinary unhysterical day, the questions which, before Molloy and his successors, had been excluded, at least on the surface, from most of the books we read. As Beckett wrote once to Alan Schneider, "The confusion is not my invention ... It is all around us and our only chance is to let it in. The only chance of renovation is to open our eyes and see the mess ... There will be a new form, and ... this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that it is really something else."

At the time of his visit with his mother, Beckett was thirty nine years old which is to say the same age as Krapp, who deals with a similar revelation in his tape-recorded journals and ends (this knowledge, after all, being no more durable than any other) by rejecting it: "What a fool I was to take that for a vision!" That evening, however, as we sat in his hotel room, there was no rejection in Beckett's mind. In the next three years, he told me, he wrote Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable, Stories and Texts for Nothing, and — in three months, with almost no revision of the first draft — Waiting for Godot. The last, he added, was "pure recreation." The novels, especially The Unnamable, had taken him to a point where there were no limits, and Godot was a conscious attempt to reestablish them. "I wanted walls I could touch, rules I had to follow." I asked if his revelation — the understanding, as he'd put it, that all his previous work had been a lie — had depressed him. "No, I was very excited! There was no effort in the writing. I worked all day and went out to the cafes at night."

He was visibly excited by the memory, but it wasn't long before his mood shifted and his excitement gave way to sadness and nostalgia. The contrast between the days he had remembered and the difficulty he was having now — "racking my brains," as he put it, "to see if

I can go a little farther" — was all too evident. Sighing loudly, he put his long fingers over his eyes, then shook his head. "If only it could be like that again."

So this is the other side of his equation, one which I, like many of his admirers, have a tendency to forget. The enthusiasm he had but moments before expressed for his diminishments did not protect him from the suffering those diminishments had caused. Let us remember that this is a man who once called writing "disimproving the silence." Why should he miss such futile work when it deserts him? So easy, it is, to become infatuated with the way he embraces his ignorance and absurdity, so hard to remember that when he does so he isn't posturing or for that matter "writing" that which keeps his comedy alive, the pain and despair from which his works are won. The sincerity of writers who work with pain and impotence is always threatened by the vitality the work itself engenders, but Beckett has never succumbed to either side of this paradox. That is to say, he has never put his work ahead of his experience. Unlike so many of us who found in the Beckett vision a comic esthetic — "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," says Nell in *Endgame* — which had us, a whole generation of writers, I think, collecting images of absurdity as if mining precious ore, he has gazed with no pleasure whatsoever at the endless parade of light and dark. For all the bleakness of *Endgame*, it remains his belief, as one of the actors who did the play in Germany recalls, that "Hamm says no to nothingness." Exploit absurdity though he does, there is no sign, in his work or his conversation, that he finds life less absurd for having done so. Though he has often said that his real work began when he "gave up hope for meaning," he hates hopelessness and longs for meaning as much as anyone who has never read Molloy or seen *Endgame*.

One of our less happy exchanges occurred because of my tendency to forget this. In other words, my tendency to underestimate his integrity. This happened three years later on a cold, rainy morning in Paris, when he was talking, yet again, about the difficulties he was having in his work. "The fact is, I don't know what I'm doing. I can't even bring myself to open the exercise book. My hand goes out to it, then draws back as if on its own." As I say, he often spoke like this, sounding less like a man who'd been writing for sixty years than one who'd just begun, but he was unusually depressed that morning and the more he talked, the more depressed I became myself. No question about it, one had to have a powerful equanimity about his grief remaining intact. When he was inside his suffering, the force of it spreading out from him could feel like a tidal wave. The more I listened to him that morning, the more it occurred to me that he sounded

exactly like Molloy. Who else but Molloy could speak with such authority about paralysis and bewilderment, a condition absolutely antithetical to authority itself? At first I kept such thoughts to myself, but finally, unable to resist, I passed them along to him, adding excitedly that if I were forced to choose my favorite of all Beckett lines, it would be Molloy's: "If there's one question I dread, to which I've never been able to invent a satisfactory reply, it's the question, 'What am I doing?'" So complete was my excitement that for a moment I expected him to share it. Why not? It seemed to me that I'd come upon the perfect antidote to his despair in words of his own invention. It took but a single glance from him — the only anger I ever saw in his eyes — to show me how naïve I'd been, how silly to think that Molloy's point of view would offer him the giddy freedom it had so often offered me. "Yes," he muttered, "that's my line, isn't it?" Not for Beckett the pleasures of Beckett. As Henry James once said in a somewhat different context: "My job is to write those little things, not read them."

One of the people who hung around rehearsals was a puppeteer who cast his puppets in Beckett plays. At a cast party one night he gave a performance of *Act Without Words* which demonstrated, with particular force, the consistency of Beckett's paradox and the relentlessness with which he maintains it. For those who aren't familiar with it, *Act Without Words* is a silent, almost Keatonesque litany about the futility of hope. A man sits beside a barren tree in what seems to be a desert, a blistering sun overhead. Suddenly, offstage, a whistle is heard and a carafe of water descends, but when the man reaches for it, it rises until it's just out of reach. He strains for it but it rises to elude him once again. Finally he gives up and resumes his position beneath the tree. Almost at once the whistle sounds again and a stool descends to rekindle his hope. In a flurry of excitement he mounts it, stretches, tries grasping the carafe and watches it rise beyond his reach again. A succession of whistles and offerings follow, each arousing his hope and dashing it until at last he ceases to respond. The whistle continues to sound but he gives no sign of hearing it. Like so much Beckett, it's the bleakest possible vision rendered in comedy nearly slapstick, and that evening, with the author and a number of children in the audience and an ingenious three-foot-tall puppet in the lead, it had us all, children included, laughing as if Keaton himself were performing it. When the performance ended, Beckett congratulated the puppeteer and his wife, who had assisted him, offering — with his usual diffidence and politeness — but a single criticism: "The whistle isn't shrill enough."

As it happened, the puppeteer's wife was a Buddhist, a follower of the path to which Beckett himself paid homage in his early book on Proust when he wrote, "the wisdom of all the sages, from Brahma to Leopardi ... consists not in the satisfaction but the ablation of desire." As a devotee and a Beckett admirer, this woman was understandably anxious to confirm what she, like many people, took to be his sympathies with her religion. In fact, not a few critical opinions had been mustered over the years concerning his debt to Buddhism, Taoism, Zen and the Noh theatre, all of it received — as it was now received from the puppeteer's wife — with curiosity and appreciation and absolute denial by the man it presumed to explain. "I know nothing about Buddhism," he said. "If it's present in the play, it is unbeknownst to me." Once this had been asserted, however, there remained the possibility of unconscious predilection, innate Buddhism, so to speak. So the woman had another question which had stirred in her mind, she said, since the first time she'd seen the play. "When all is said and done, isn't this man, having given up hope, finally liberated?" Beckett looked at her with a pained expression. He'd had his share of drink that night, but not enough to make him forget his vision or push him beyond his profound distaste for hurting anyone's feelings. "Oh, no," he said quietly. "He's finished."

I don't want to dwell on it, but I had a personal stake in this exchange. For years I'd been studying Zen and its particular form of sitting meditation, and I'd always been struck by the parallels between its practice and Beckett's work. In fact to me, as to the woman who questioned him that evening, it seemed quite impossible that he didn't have some explicit knowledge, perhaps even direct experience, of Zen, and I had asked him about it that very first night at his hotel. He answered me as he answered her: he knew nothing of Zen at all. Of course, he said, he'd heard Zen stories and loved them for their "concreteness," but other than that he was ignorant on the subject. Ignorant, but not uninterested. "What do you do in such places?" he asked. I told him that mostly we looked at the wall. "Oh," he said, "you don't have to know anything about Zen to do that. I've been doing it for fifty years." (When Hamm asks Clov what he does in his kitchen, Clov replies: "I look at the wall." "The wall!" snaps Hamm. "And what do you see on your wall? ... naked bodies?" Replies Clov, "I see my light dying.") For all his experience with wall-gazing, however, Beckett found it extraordinary that people would seek it out of their own free will. Why, he asked, did people do it? Were they seeking tranquility? Solutions? And finally, as with neurosurgery: "Does it hurt?" I answered with growing discomfort. Even though I remained convinced that the concerns of his work were identical with

those of Zen, there was something embarrassing about discussing it with him, bringing self-consciousness to bear, I mean, where its absence was the point. This is not the place for a discussion of Zen but since it deals, as Beckett does, with the separation of subject and object ("No direct contact is possible between subject and object," he wrote in his book on Proust, "because they are automatically separated by the subject's consciousness of perception. . ."), the problems of Self, of Being and Non-being, of consciousness and perception, all the means by which one is distanced or removed from the present tense, it finds in Beckett's work a mirror as perfect as any in its own sphere of literature or scripture.

This in itself is no great revelation. It's not terribly difficult to find Zen in almost any great work of art. The particular problem, however, and what made my questions seem — to me at least — especially absurd, is that such points — like many where Beckett is concerned — lose more than they gain in the course of articulation. To point out the Zen in Beckett is to make him seem didactic or, even worse, therapeutic, and nothing could betray his vision more. For that matter, the converse is also true. Remarking the Beckett in Zen betrays Zen to the same extent and for the same reasons. It is there that their true commonality lies, their mutual devotion to the immediate and the concrete, the Truth which becomes less True if made an object of description, the Being which form excludes. As Beckett once put it in responding to one of the endless interpretations his work has inspired, "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds. Hamm as stated, Clov as stated ... That's all I can manage, more than I could. If people get headaches among the overtones, they'll have to furnish their own aspirin."

So I did finally give up the questions, and though he always asked me about Zen when we met — "Are you still looking at the wall?" — I don't think he held it against me. His last word on the matter came by mail, and maybe it was the best. In a fit of despair I had written him once about what seemed to me an absolute, insoluble conflict between meditation and writing. "What is it about looking at the wall that makes the writing seem obsolete?" Two weeks later, when I'd almost forgotten my question, I received this reply, which I quote in its entirety:

Dear Larry,

When I start looking at walls, I begin to see the writing. From which even my own is a relief.

As ever,

Sam

Endgame rehearsals lasted three weeks and took place in a cavernous building once used by the BBC called the Riverside Studios. Since it was located in a section of London with which I was not familiar, Beckett invited me that first morning to meet him at his hotel and ride out in the taxi he shared with his cast. Only three of his actors were present that day — Rick Cluchey, Bud Thorpe, and Alan Mandell, (Hamm and Clov and Nagg respectively) — the fourth, Nell, being Cluchey's wife, Teresita, who was home with their son, Louis Beckett Cluchey, and would come to the theatre in the afternoon. The group had an interesting history and it owed Beckett a lot more than this production, for which he was taking no pay or royalties. Its origins dated to 1957 when Cluchey, serving a life sentence for kidnapping and robbery at San Quentin, had seen a visiting production of *Waiting for Godot* and found in it an inspiration that had completely transformed his life. Though he'd never been in a theatre — "not even," he said, "to rob one" — he saw to the heart of a play which at the time was baffling more sophisticated audiences. "Who knew more about waiting than people like us?" Within a month of this performance, Cluchey and several other inmates had organized a drama group which developed a Beckett cycle — *Endgame*, *Waiting for Godot*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* — that they continued, in Europe and the United States, after their parole. Though Cluchey was the only survivor of that original workshop, the present production traced its roots to those days at San Quentin and the support which Beckett had offered the group when word of their work had reached him. Another irony was that Mandell, who was playing Nagg in this production, had appeared with the San Francisco Actor's Workshop in the original *Godot* production at San Quentin. By now Beckett seemed to regard Rick and Teri and their son, his namesake, as part of his family, and the current production was as much a gift to them as a matter of personal or professional necessity. Not that this was uncharacteristic. In those days much of his work was being done as a gift to specific people. He'd written *A Piece of Monologue* for David Warrilow, and in the next few years he'd write *Rockaby* for Billie Whitelaw and *Ohio Impromptu* for S.E. Gontarski, a professor at Georgia Tech, who was editor of the *Journal of Beckett Studies*. When I met him later in Paris he was struggling to write a promised piece for Cluchey at a time when he had, he said, no interest in work at all.

In my opinion, this was not merely because he took no promise lightly or because at this point in his life he valued especially this sort of impetus, though both of course were true, but because the old demarcations, between the work and the life, writing and speaking, solitude and social discourse, were no longer available to him. If his ordinary social exchanges were less intense or single-minded than his work, it was certainly not apparent to me. I never received a note from him that didn't fit on a 3 x 5 index card, but (as the above mentioned note on Zen illustrates) there wasn't one, however lighthearted, that wasn't clearly Beckett writing. Obviously, this was not because of any particular intimacy between us but because, private though he was and fiercely self-protective, he seemed to approach every chance as if it might be his last. You only had to watch his face when he talked — or wait out one of those two or three minute silences while he pondered a question you'd asked — to know that language was much too costly and precarious for him to use mindlessly or as a means of filling gaps.

Wearing a maroon polo sweater, grey flannel pants, a navy blue jacket, no socks, and brown suede sneaker-like shoes, he was dressed, as Cluchey told me later, much the same as he'd been every time they'd met for the past fifteen years. As the taxi edged through London's morning rush hour, he lit up one of the cheroots he smoked and observed to no one in particular that he was still unhappy with the wheelchair they'd found for Hamm to use in this production. Amazing how often his speech echoed his work. "We need a proper wheelchair!" Hamm cries. "With big wheels. Bicycle wheels!" One evening, when I asked him if he was tired, his answer — theatrically delivered — was a quote from Clov: "Yes, tired of all our goings on." And a few days later, when a transit strike brought London to a standstill and one of the actors suggested that rehearsals might not go on, he lifted a finger in the air and announced with obvious self-mockery, "Ah, but we must go on!" I'm not sure what sort of wheelchair he wanted but several were tried in the next few days until one was found that he accepted. He was also unhappy with the percussion theme he was trying to establish, two pairs of knocks or scrapes which recur throughout the play — when Nagg, for example, knocks on Nell's ashcan to rouse her, when Hamm taps the wall to assure himself of its solidity, and when Clov climbs the two steps of his ladder with four specific scrapes of his slippers. For Beckett, these sounds were a primary musical motif, a fundamental continuity. It was crucial that they echo each other. "Alan," he said, "first thing this morning I want to rehearse your knock." Most discussions I was to hear about the play were like this, dealing in sound or props or other tangibles, with little or no mention of

motivation and none at all of meaning. Very seldom did anyone question him on intellectual or psychological ground, and when they did, he usually brought the conversation back to the concrete, the specific. When I asked him once about the significance of the ashcans which Nagg and Nell inhabit, he said, "It was the easiest way to get them on and off stage." And when Mandell inquired, that morning in the taxi, about the meaning of the four names in the play — four names which have been subject to all sorts of critical speculation, Beckett explained that Nagg and Clov were from "noggle" and "clou," the German and French for nail, Nell from the English "nail" and Hamm from the English "hammer." Thus, the percussion motif again: a hammer and three nails. Cluchey remembered that when Beckett directed him in Germany in Krapp's Last Tape a similar music had been developed both around the words "Ah well," which recur four times in the play, and with the sound of Krapp's slippers scraping across the stage. "Sam was obsessed with the sound of the slippers. First we tried sandpapering the soles, then layering them with pieces of metal, then brand new solid leather soles. Finally, still not satisfied, he appeared one day with his own slippers. 'I've been wearing these for twenty years,' he said. 'If they don't do it, nothing will.'" More and more, as rehearsals went on, it would become apparent that music — "The highest art form," he said to me once. "It's never condemned to explicitness." — was his principal referent. His directions to actors were frequently couched in musical terms. "More emphasis there ... it's a crescendo," or, "The more speed we get here, the more value we'll find in the pause." When Hamm directs Clov to check on Nagg in his garbage can — "Go and see did he hear me. Both times." — Beckett said, "Don't play that line realistically. There's music there, you know." As Billie Whitelaw has noted, his hands rose and fell and swept from side to side, forming arcs like a conductor's as he watched his actors and shaped the rhythm of their lines. You could see his lips move, his jaw expanding and contracting, as he mouthed the words they spoke. Finally, his direction, like his texts, seemed a process of reduction, stripping away, reaching for "fundamental sound," transcending meaning, escaping the literary and the conceptual in order to establish a concrete immediate reality beyond the known, beyond the idea, which the audience would be forced to experience directly without mediation of intellect.

What Beckett said once of Joyce — "his work is not about something. It is something" — was certainly true of this production. The problem, of course, what Beckett's work can neither escape nor forget, is that words are never pure in their concreteness, never free of their referents.

To quote Marcel Duchamp, himself a great friend and chess partner of Beckett's, "Everything that man has handled has a tendency to secrete meaning." And such secretion, because he is too honest to deny it, is the other side of Beckett's equation, the counterweight to his music that keeps his work not only meaningful, but (maniacally) inconclusive and symmetrical, its grief and rage always balanced with its comedy, its yearning for expression constantly humbled by its conviction that the Truth can only be betrayed by language. Rest assured that no Beckett character stands on a rug that cannot be pulled out from under him. When Didi seeks solace after Godot has disappointed them again — "We are not saints, but at least we have kept our appointment. How many people can say as much?" — Vladimir wastes no time in restoring him to his futility: "Billions."

But more than anyone else it is Hamm who gets to the heart of the matter, when he cries out to Clov in a fit of dismay, "Clov! We're not beginning to ... to ... mean something?"

"Mean something!" Clov cries. "You and I, mean something! Ah that's a good one!"

Hamm responds, "I wonder. If a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough? (Voice of rational being.) 'Ah good, now I see what it is, yes, now I understand what they're at!' (Normal voice.) And without going so far as that, we ourselves ... we ourselves ... at certain moments ... to think perhaps it won't all have been for nothing!"

As promised, Nagg's knock was the first order of business after we reached the theatre. This is the point in the play where Nagg has made his second appearance, head rising above the rim of the ashcan with a biscuit in his mouth, while Hamm and Clov — indulging in one of their habitual fencing matches — are discussing their garden ("Did your seeds come up?" "No." "Did you scratch the ground to see if they have sprouted?" "They haven't sprouted." "Perhaps it's too early." "If they were going to sprout they would have sprouted. They'll never sprout!"). A moment later, Clov having made an exit and Hamm drifted off into a reverie, Nagg leans over to rouse Nell, tapping four times — two pairs — on the lid of her bin. Beckett demonstrated the sound he wanted using his bony knuckle on the lid, and after Mandell had tried it six or seven times — not "Tap, tap, tap, tap," or "Tap ... tap ... tap ... tap," but "tap, tap ... tap, tap" — appeared to be satisfied. "Let's work from here," he said. Since Teri had not arrived, he climbed into the can himself and took Nell's part, curling his bony fingers over the edge of the can,

edging his head above the rim, and asking, in a shaky falsetto that captured Nell better than anyone I'd ever heard in the part: "What is it, my pet? Time for love?"

As they worked through the scene, I got my first hint of the way in which this Endgame would differ from others I'd seen. So much so that, despite the fact that I'd seen six or seven different productions of the play, I would soon be convinced that I'd never seen it before. Certainly, though I'd always thought Endgame my favorite play, I realized that I had never really understood it or appreciated the maniacal logic with which it pursues its ambiguities. Here, as elsewhere, Beckett pressed for speed and close to flat enunciation. His principal goal, which he never realized, was to compress the play so that it ran in less than ninety minutes. After the above line, the next three were bracketed for speed, then a carefully measured pause established before the next section — three more lines — began. "Kiss me," Nagg begs. "We can't," says Nell. "Try," says Nagg. And then, in another pause, they crane their necks in vain to reach each other from their respective garbage cans. The next section was but a single line in length (Nell: "Why this farce, day after day?"), the next four, the next seven, and so on. Each was a measure, clearly defined, like a jazz riff, subordinated to the rhythm of the whole. Gesture was treated like sound, another form of punctuation. Beckett was absolutely specific about its shape — the manner in which, for example, Nagg and Nell's fingers curled above the rim of their cans — and where it occurred in the text. "Keep these gestures small," he said to Cluchey when a later monologue was reached. "Save the big one for 'All that loveliness!'" He wanted the dialogue crisp and precise but not too realistic. It seemed to me he yearned to stylize the play as much as possible, underline its theatricality so that the actors, as in most of his plays, would be seen as clearly acting, clearly playing the roles they're doomed to play forever. The text, of course, supports such artifice, the actors often addressing each other in language which reminds us that they're on stage. "That's an aside, fool," says Hamm to Clov. "Have you never heard an aside before?" Or Clov, after his last soliloquy, pausing at the edge of the stage: "This is what they call ... making an exit." Despite all this, Beckett wanted theatrical flourish kept to a minimum. It seemed to me that he stiffened the movement, carving it like a sculptor, stripping it of anything superfluous or superficial. "Less color please," he said to Alan while they were doing Nagg and Nell together, "if we keep it flat, they'll get it better." And later, to Thorpe: "Bud, you don't have to move so much. Only the upper torso. Don't worry. They'll get it. Remember: you don't even want to be out here. You'd rather be alone, in your kitchen."

Though the play was thirty years old for him and he believed that his memory had deteriorated, his memory of the script was flawless and his alertness to its detail unwavering. "That's not 'upon.' It's 'on.'" He corrected "one week" with "a week," "crawlin'" with "crawling." When Cluchey said to Thorpe, "Cover me with a sheet," Beckett snapped: "The sheet, Rick, the sheet." And when Clov delivered the line, "There are no more navigators" he refined, "There's a pause before navigators." He made changes as they went along — "On 'Good God' let's leave out the 'good'" — sometimes cutting whole sections, but had no interest in publishing a revised version of the play. For all the fact that he was "wobbly," he seemed stronger than anyone else on the set, rarely sitting while he worked and never losing his concentration. As so many actors and actresses have noted, he delivered his own lines better than anyone else, and this was his principal mode of direction. When dealing with certain particular lines, he often turned away from the cast and stood at the edge of the stage, facing the wall, working out gestures in pantomime. For those of us who were watching rehearsals, it was no small thing to see him go off like this and then hear him, when he'd got what he wanted, deliver his own lines in his mellifluous Irish pronunciation, his voice, for all its softness, projecting with force to the seats at the back of the theatre:

"They said to me, That's love, yes, yes, not a doubt, now you see how easy it is. They said to me, That's friendship, yes, yes, no question, you've found it. They said to me, Here's the place, stop, raise your head and look at all that beauty. That order! They said to me, Come now, you're not a brute beast, think upon these things and you'll see how all becomes clear. And simple! They said to me, What skilled attention they get, all these dying of their wounds."

To say the least, such moments produced an uncanny resonance. Unself-conscious and perfectly in character he was, one felt, not only reading the lines but writing them, discovering them now as he'd discovered them thirty years before. And that we, as audience, had somehow become his first witness, present at the birth of his articulations. If his own present tense — the act of writing — had always been his subject, what could be more natural or inevitable than showing us this, the thoughts and meaning "secreted" and rejected, the words giving form, the form dissolving in the silence that ensued. For that was the message one finally took from such recitations, the elusiveness of the meanings he had established, the sense of the play as aging with him, unable to arrest the flow of time and absolutely resolved against pretending otherwise.

Why should Hamm and Clov be spared the awareness of Molloy: "It is in the tranquility of decomposition that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life."

Perhaps it was for this reason that he was never far removed from what he'd written, that if an actor inquired about a line, his answers could seem almost naïve. When Cluchey asked him why Hamm, after begging Clov to give him his stuffed dog, throws it to the ground, Beckett explained, "He doesn't like the feel of it." And when he was asked for help in delivering the line "I'll tell you the combination of the larder if you promise to finish me," he advised, "Just think, you'll tell him the combination if he'll promise to kill you." Despite — or because of — such responses, all four members of the cast would later describe the experience of his direction in language that was often explicitly spiritual. "What he offered me," said Cluchey, "was a standard of absolute authority. He gave my life a spiritual quotient." And Thorpe: "When we rehearsed, the concentration was so deep that I lost all sense of myself. I felt completely empty, like a skeleton, the words coming through me without thought of the script. I'm not a religious person, but it seemed a religious experience to me. Why? Maybe because it was order carried to its ultimate possibility. If you lost your concentration, veered off track for any reason, it was as if you'd sinned." Extreme though such descriptions are, I doubt that anyone who watched these rehearsals would find in them the least trace of exaggeration. More than intense, the atmosphere was almost unbearably internalized, self-contained to the point of circularity. In part, obviously, this was because we were watching an author work on his own text. In addition to this, however, the text itself — because *Endgame* is finally nothing but theatre, repetition, a series of ritualized games that the actors are doomed to play forever — was precisely about the work that we were watching. When Clov asks Hamm, "What keeps me here?" Hamm replies, "The dialogue." Or earlier, when Hamm is asking him about his father, "You've asked me these questions millions of times." Says Hamm, "I love the old questions ... ah, the old questions, the old answers, there's nothing like them!" If the play is finally about nothing but itself, the opportunity to see it repeated, again and again for two weeks, offered a chance to see Beckett's intention realized on a scale at once profound and literal, charged with energy but at the same time boring, deadening, infuriating. (A fact of which Beckett was hardly unaware. While they were working on the line, "This is not much fun," he advised Cluchey, "I think it would be dangerous to have any pause after that line. We don't want to give people time to agree with you.") To use his own percussion metaphor, watching these rehearsals was to offer one's head up for *Endgame*'s cadence to be

hammered into it. Finally, after two weeks of rehearsal, the play became musical to a hypnotic extent, less a theatrical than a meditative experience in that one could not ascribe to it any meaning or intention beyond its own concrete and immediate reality. In effect, the more one saw of it, the less it contained. To this day the lines appear in my mind without reason, like dreams or memory-traces, but the play itself, when I saw it in Dublin, seemed an anti-climax, the goal itself insignificant beside the process that had produced it. If *Waiting for Godot* is, as Vivian Mercier has written, "a play in which nothing happens, twice," it might be said of *Endgame* that it is an endless rehearsal for an opening night that never comes. And therefore, that its true realization was the rehearsals we saw rather than its formal production later in Dublin. Could this be why, being one reason at least, Beckett did not accompany his cast to Ireland or, for that matter, why he has never attended his own plays in the theatre?

He left London the day after rehearsals ended, and I did not see him again until the following spring in Paris. At our first meeting he seemed a totally different person, distant and inaccessible, physically depleted, extremely thin, his eyes more deeply set and his face more heavily lined than ever. He spoke from such distance and with such difficulty that I was reminded again of Molloy, who describes conversation as "unspeakably painful," explaining that he hears words "a first time, then a second, and often even a third, as pure sounds, free of all meaning." We met in the coffee shop of a new hotel, one of those massive gray skyscrapers that in recent years have so disfigured the Paris skyline. Not far from his apartment, it was his favorite meeting place because it offered a perfect anonymity. He wasn't recognized during this or any subsequent meeting I had with him there. Early on in our conversation I got a taste of his ferocious self-protection, which was much more pronounced here, of course, where he lived, than it had been in London. "How long will you be here?" he said. "Three weeks," I said. "Good," he said. "I want to see you once more." Given his politeness, it was easy to forget how impossible his life would have been had he not been disciplined about his schedule, how many people must have sought him out as I had sought him out myself. What was always amazing to me was how skillful he was in letting one know where one ranked in his priorities. Couching his decision in courtesy and gentleness, he seemed totally vulnerable, almost passive, but his softness masked a relentless will and determination. He left one so disarmed that it was difficult to ask anything of him much less seek more time than he had offered. Though he promptly answered every letter I wrote him, it was three years before he gave me his home address so that

I would not have to write him in care of his publisher, and he has never given me a phone number, always arranging that he will call me when I come to town. Why not? Rick Cluchey told me that whenever Beckett went to Germany, a documentary film crew followed him around without his permission, using a telephoto lens to film him from a distance.

As it turned out, however, there was now another reason for his distance. In London, the only unpleasant moment between us had occurred when, caught up in the excitement of rehearsals, I'd asked if I could write about him. Though his refusal, again, had been polite ("Unless of course you want to write about the work ... ") and I had expressed considerable regret about asking him, it would soon become clear that he had not forgotten my request. Even if he had, the speed with which I was firing questions at him now, nervously pressing all the issues I had accumulated since I'd seen him last, would have put him on his guard. Beckett is legendary, of course, for his hatred of interviews, his careful avoidance of media and its invasions (The Paris Review has tried for years, with no success, to interview him for its "Writers at Work" series), and the next time we met, he made it clear that before we continued he must know what I was after. "Listen, I've got to get this off my chest. You're not interviewing me, are you?"

We had just sat down at a restaurant to which he had invited me. The only restaurant he ever frequented, it was a classic bistro on the edge of Montparnasse where he kept his own wine in the cellar and the waiters knew his habits so well that they always took him to the same table and brought him, without his having to order, the dish he ate — filet of sole and french fries — whenever he went there. Though I had my notebook in my pocket and upon leaving him would, as always, rush to take down everything I could remember about our conversation, I assured him that I was certainly not interviewing him and had no intention of writing about him. At this point in time, there was nothing but truth in my disclaimer. (And I might add that he obviously trusted me on this score, since he gave me permission to publish this article, and as far as I can see, has never held it against me.) Since I was not yet even dimly conscious of the ambiguous, somewhat belligerent forces that led to this memoir, the notes I took were for myself alone, as I saw it, a result of the emotion I felt when I left him and the impulse, common if not entirely handsome in a writer, to preserve what had transpired between us. Taking me at my word he relaxed, poured the wine and watched with pleasure as I ate while he picked at his food like a child who hated the dinner table. "You're not hungry?" I said. "No," he said. "I guess I'm not too interested in food

anymore." And later, when I asked if he'd ever eaten in any of the Japanese restaurants that were just beginning to open in Paris: "No. But I hear they make good rice."

Considering how thin he was, I wasn't surprised to hear that the desire for food — like almost all other desires, I believe, except those which involved his work — was a matter of indifference to him. What did surprise me, as the wine allowed us to speak of things more commonplace, was the view of his domestic situation — evenings at home with his wife, and such — which emerged during the course of the evening. He told me that he'd been married for forty years, that he and his wife had had just two addresses during all their time in Paris, that it had sometimes been difficult for them — "many near-ruptures, as a matter of fact" — but that the marriage had grown easier as they'd gotten older. "Of course," he added, "I do have my own door." Since I'd always thought of him as the ultimate solitary, isolated as Krapp and as cynical about sex as Molloy, I confessed that I couldn't imagine him in a situation so connubial. "Why should you find it difficult?", he said with some surprise. In fact, he seemed rather pleased with his marriage, extremely grateful that it had lasted. It was one more correction for me, and more importantly, I think, one more illustration of the symmetry and tension, the dialectic he maintains between his various dichotomies. Just as "can't" and "must" persist with equal force in his mind, the limitations of language no more deniable than the urgent need to articulate, the extreme loneliness which he's explored throughout his life — the utter skepticism and despair about relationships in general and sexuality in particular — has had as its counterpoint a 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 if he had ever wanted children, "that's one thing I'm proud of."

For all my conviction that I did not intend to write about him, I always felt a certain amount of shame when I took up my notebook after I left him. For that matter, I am not entirely without shame about what I'm writing now. One does not transcribe a man like Beckett without its feeling like a betrayal. What makes me persist? More than anything, I believe, it is something I began to realize after our meetings in Paris — that the shame I felt in relation to him had not begun with my furtive attempts to preserve him in my notebook, but rather had been a constant in our relationship long before I'd met him. To put it simply, it began to strike me that Beckett had been, since the moment I discovered Molloy, as much a source of inhibition as inspiration. For all the pleasure it had given me, my first reading of the trilogy had almost paralyzed me (as

indeed it had paralyzed any number of other writers I knew), leaving me traumatized with shame and embarrassment about my own work. It wasn't merely that in contrast to his, my language seemed inauthentic and ephemeral, but that he made the usual narrative games — the insulated past tense, the omniscient narrator, form which excluded reference to itself and biographical information — seem, as he put it in Watt, "solution clapped on problem like a snuffer on a candle." More than any other writer I knew, Beckett's work seemed to point to that which lay beyond it. It was as if, though its means were Relative, its goals were Absolute, its characters beyond time precisely because (again and again) they seemed to age before our eyes. And such accomplishment was not, it seemed to me, simply a matter of talent or genius but of a totally different approach to writing, a connection between his life and his work which I could covet but never achieve. It was this union — the joining, if you like, of "being" and "form" — that I envied in him and that caused me finally to feel that the very thought of Beckett, not to mention the presence of one of his sentences in my mind, made writing impossible. And once again: it was not merely a matter of talent. I could read Joyce or Proust or Faulkner without such problems, and I had no lack of appreciation for them. It was just that they were clearly writers, while Beckett was something else, a sort of meta-writer who, even as he wrote, transcended the act of writing.

Oddly enough, if there was anyone else I knew who stood in such relation to his own work it was Muhammad Ali, who seemed to laugh at boxing even as he took it to higher levels of perfection, who not only defeated but humiliated his opponents, establishing such possession of their minds that he won many fights before the first round even began because he stood outside the game in which his adversary was enclosed. One cannot play a game unless one believes in it, but Ali managed such belief without the attachment to which it usually leads. You could say that he found the cusp that separates belief from attachment, concentration from fixation and, on the other hand, play from frivolity and spontaneity from formlessness. And it seems to me that Beckett has done the same. No writer has lived who took language more seriously, but none has been more eloquent about its limitations and absurdities. Like Ali, he shows us where we are imprisoned. The danger is that, in doing so, he will imprison us in his example. If some fighters tried to imitate Ali by playing the clown and had ended up by making fools of themselves in addition to being defeated, writers with Beckett too much in mind can sound worse than the weakest student in a freshman writing class. After reading Joyce or Proust one can feel

embarrassed about one's lack of music or intelligence, but in the wake of one of Beckett's convoluted, self-mocking sentences, one can freeze with horror at the thought of any form that suggests "Once upon a time," anything, in fact, which departs from the absolute present. But if you take that notion too far you lose your work in the ultimate swamp, the belief that you can capture both your subject and your object in the instant of composition: "Here I am, sitting at my desk, writing 'Here I am, sitting at my desk.'"

None of this of course is historically unprecedented. Every generation of artists has to do battle with its predecessors and each such battle has its own unique configurations. What made it so vivid for me was that now, twenty years after that first reading, his presence affected me much as his work had. Happy though I felt to see him, however amazing I found our time together, I always left him with an acute sense that I'd come up short, failed him somehow, as if the moment had passed before I had awakened to it. As if my conversational and psychological habits had stood between us. Or more to the point, as if the form of my social habit had violated the nature of his Being in much the same way that literary form, as he'd concluded years before, violated the being it excluded. Sitting across from me in the cafe, his eyes fierce in their concentration, his silence so completely unapologetic, he seemed to occupy, according to my reverential opinion, a present tense — this space, this moment in time — that I could merely observe from afar. Despite — no, because of — his humility, his uncertainty, the "impotence" which, as he'd once put it, his work had set out to "exploit,"¹ he manifested for me as for years he had for Rick Cluchey, a kind of ultimate authority, a sense of knowledge very near to Absolute. Neither egoism nor self-confidence — the opposite, in fact, of both — seemed a by-product of suffering, the pain that was so evident on his face an earned if not entirely welcome result of having explored and survived an emptiness that people of less courage, if they acknowledged it at all, considered by means of intellect alone.

Exaggerated and romantic though all this seems, I'm sure it's not entirely unjustified. Beckett is indeed an extraordinary being, a man who has travelled in realms that most people don't want to hear about much less explore. A true writer, an artist who pursues his vision so

¹ "The kind of work I do," he explained to Israel Schenker in a New York Times interview in 1966, before he'd closed the door to media, "is one in which I'm not master of my material. The more Joyce knew the more he could do. He's tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past."

courageously and with such disregard for easy gratification that his work becomes, in the purest sense, a spiritual practice. What my responses showed, however, in light of my idealization of him and the self-criticism it evoked, was that such authority was nothing if not a hazardous experience. Like all great wisdom it could bring out the best or the worst in you, challenge or intimidate you, toughen you or make you self-effacing. Finally, if you were a writer it could inspire you to listen to your own voice or trap you into years of imitating his. Like Joyce or Proust, or for that matter any other great artist one adopts as a teacher, Beckett is an almost impossible act to follow, but more so than most, I think, because his work is so subjective, so seductive in the permissions it grants because his apparent freedom from plot and character and his first person present tense can draw you into a swamp in which art and self-indulgence begin to seem identical. It is so easy to think that he opens the gates for anything you're feeling or thinking at the moment you sit down at your desk. How many writers could I count who had books like mine — the one I'd shown him, the one he'd criticized because the voice was "not believable" — which would not be written until the Beckett had been removed from them? The great irony is that, for all his rejection of authority and knowledge — precisely because of such rejection, in fact — Beckett is almost too much an authority, he knows too much that one must discover on one's own. If you aren't to go on imitating him, you either face the fact that there is nothing you really need to say and find yourself another vocation, or you dig for something truer in yourself, something you don't know, at the bottom of all you do. In other words, you start where he started after meeting his mother in Dublin. The trouble is that since most of such digging, if you're an ordinary mortal, is surely doomed to fail, it can seem as if he's taken you out of the game you're capable of playing and signed you up in one for which you've neither the courage, the talent, nor the appetite. Finally, his greatest danger — and his greatest gift — may be his simple reminder that writing is not about reiteration.

But of course there is also the other side to it, the one which has explicitly to do with the nature of his vision, the "being" he allows into the work, the void he's faced, the negation he's endured, the grief he's not only experienced but transformed with his imagination. "Yes, the confusion of my ideas on the subject of death," says Molloy, "was such that I sometimes wondered, believe me or not, if it wasn't a state of being even worse than life. So I found it natural not to rush into it and, when I forgot myself to the point of trying, to stop in time." Once we'd got over our laughter and exhilaration, how were we to deal with such a statement? For

Beckett, such negation had fueled the work, but for many who presumed to be his successors it had often become an easy, a facile nihilism, less a game you lost than one you refused to play. Indeed for some of us, true disciples, it could become one you were ashamed to play. As if, having finally been enlightened as to the absurdity of life, you were too wise to persist at its illusions, too wise to allow enthusiasm, occupy space, to feed the body you knew to be disintegrating. In effect, if you misread him well enough Beckett could turn you into a sort of literary anorexic, make you too cool or hip, too scared, too detached and disenchanting to take, by writing, the only food that nourished you. But the irony is that he himself, as he'd shown me in London in our very first conversation, is anything but anorexic. That's obvious, isn't it? This man who writes, in *Molloy*, "you would do better, at least no worse, to obliterate texts than to blacken margins, to fill in the holes of words till all is blank and flat and the whole ghastly business looks like what it is, senseless, speechless, issueless misery," has published six novels and fourteen plays during his lifetime, not to mention a great body of short prose, poetry, criticism, a number of television and radio plays and a film script. Just fifteen pages later in *Molloy* he writes, "Not to want to say, not to know what you want to say, and never to stop saying, or hardly ever, that is the thing to keep in mind, even in the heat of composition." Much as he can recognize the tyranny of hope or meaning, he cannot deny that there is hope and meaning within such recognition and he cannot pretend that this hope and meaning is any less exciting or more enduring than the others. It's all part of the equation, however absurd, of being alive, and he's never rejected that condition for its alternative. After all, when Nell says "Nothing is funnier than unhappiness," we laugh at that statement, and — if only for an instant — are less unhappy as we do so. In a sense Beckett is the great poet of negation, but what is poetry for him can easily become, if we use him incorrectly, if we make him too much an authority or if we underestimate the integrity of his paradox, a negation so extreme and absolute that it threatens the very source of one's energy and strength.

Of course, it's not easy to speak of these things. It's always possible that his greatest gift, not only to those of us he's challenged but also to the readers we might have enlisted, is the silence toward which he's pressed us. If you can't accept his example and allow Being into your work, why add your lies to the ocean of print which is already drowning the world? In my opinion, most writers deal with his challenge in one of two ways. Either they ignore his example, go on making — as I had, for example, in writing journalism — forms that exclude Being,

accepting the role of explainer, describer, or else they try — as I was trying with my novel — to play his game despite the astronomical odds against any possibility of success. For those who take the latter path, the entry of Being into the form often means the entry of self-consciousness, writing about writing about writing. Too late we discover that Beckett, Molloy, Malone, et al, though they may be mad, haven't a trace of neurosis or narcissism about them, that their present tense is shaped and objectified by an inherently classical, concrete mind, a sense of self which differs radically from our own. In effect, that the present tense which becomes, inevitably, an imperfect tense for them, remains a merely present — a merely reductive, a totally self-absorbed — tense for us. If you can't take the leap from present to imperfect, you remain rooted in the present. An honorable intention, of course, but if you're honest about it, you have to admit that writing and being in the present are not necessarily compatible, that in fact you're always flirting with contradiction and dishonesty. Tantalized by what amounts to a desire to write and not-write simultaneously, you may be equally loyal to form and being, but you may also be a mother who would keep her child forever in her womb. It's the sort of game in which defeat can lead to farce that's not only hypocritical but blasphemous toward the master one has pretended to revere.

These are just a few of the reasons, I think, I took notes when I left him, and despite my disclaimer, am writing about him now. Why? Perhaps because Beckett himself, as I said earlier, freed me from the Beckett myth. Not entirely, for sure, but enough at least to help me resume a voice that differed from the one he once inspired in me. Not for nothing did he show me that he enjoyed my journalism. "Look here, Larry," he said to me once in London, "your line is witnessing." By which I understood him to have meant: take your object and be done with it. Be content to write what you know without acknowledging every moment that you don't. So here I am, witnessing him. Maybe this is all just rationalization, but getting him down like this may be the best homage and the best revenge, the only weapon I have against the attack he mounted on my mind. I can't forget him, and I can't think of anything else to do with his example but reject it. Just as Buddhists say about their own ultimate authority, "If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him," I say of Beckett that a writer can only proceed from him by recognizing that he is, having taken his work to all of its ultimate conclusions, now utterly emptied of possibility. As Hamm says, "All is absolute. The bigger a man is, the fuller he is ... and the emptier."

The next time we saw each other, a year later in Paris, our conversation continued, where it had begun and where it had left off, with the difficulties of writing. Because my work (the

same novel) was going as badly as his, there wasn't a whole lot of joy in the air. For a moment, in fact, it became a sort of sparring match between us, agony versus agony, but then remembering whom I was in the ring with and how much he outweighed me, I backed off. "It's not a good time at all," he sighed, "I walk the streets trying to see what's in my mind. It's all confusion. Life is all confusion. A blizzard. It must be like this for the newborn. Not much difference I think between this blizzard and that. Between the two, what do you have? Wind machines or some such. I can't write anything, but I must." He paused a moment, then suddenly brightened, once again repeating a famous Beckett line as if he'd just come upon it, "Yes, that's it! Can't and must! That's my situation!"

He spoke of a sentence that haunted him. "It won't go away, and it won't go farther: 'One night, as he sat with his head on his hands, he saw himself rise, and go.'" Except for this, however, there was nothing. "It's like the situation I spoke of in my book on Proust. 'Not just hope is gone, but desire.'" When I reminded him — quoting the line I mentioned earlier ("The wisdom of all the sages ... consists not in the satisfaction but the ablation of desire.") — that according to the book he'd remembered, the loss of desire was not an entirely unwelcome development, he replied, "Well, yes, but the writing was the only thing that made life bearable." Sighing as if in tremendous pain, he seemed to drift off for a moment. "Funny to complain about silence when one has aspired to it for so long. Words are the only thing for me and there's not enough of them. Now it's as if I'm just living in a void, waiting. Even my country house is lonely when I'm not writing."

Occasionally when he talked like this there was an odd sense, absurd as it seems, that he was asking for help, even perhaps advice, but this time was different. Now seventy-eight years old, he appeared to have reached a sort of bottom-line exhaustion. He seemed smaller to me, the lines in his forehead more deeply etched, like a grid. Every gesture seemed difficult, every word a struggle. His blue eyes were shy, gentle, youthful as ever, but incredibly pained and sorrowful. I told him that sometimes I found it amazing that he went on. "Yes," he replied, "often I think it's time I put an end to it. That's all through, the new work. But then again ... there are also times when I think, maybe it's time to begin." He said there had always been so much more in the work than he'd suspected was there, and then added, in what seemed an almost unconscious afterthought, a phrase I've never forgotten, which may have summed up his work as well or better than any other: Ambiguities inquired as they're put down ... "

"Which is more painful," I asked him, "writing or not writing?"

"They're both painful, but the pain is different."

He spoke a little about the different sorts of pain, the pain of being unable to write, the pain of writing itself, and — as bad as any — the pain of finishing what he'd begun. I said, "If the work is so painful when one does it and so painful when it's done, why on earth does anyone do it?"

This was one of those questions that caused him, as I've mentioned already, to disappear behind his hand, covering his eyes and bending his head toward the table for what must have been two full minutes. Then, just when I'd begun to suspect that he'd fallen asleep, he raised his head and, with an air of relief, as if he'd finally resolved a lifelong dilemma, whispered, "The fashioning, that's what it is for me, I think. The pleasure in making a satisfactory object." He explained that the main excitement in writing had always been technical for him, a combination of "metaphysics and technique." "A problem is there and I have to solve it. Godot, for example, began with an image — of a tree and an empty stage — and proceeded from there. That's why, when people ask me who Godot is, I can't tell them. It's all gone."

"Why metaphysics?" I said.

"Because," he said, "you've got your own experience. You've got to draw on that."

He tried to describe the work he wanted to do now. "It has to do with a fugitive 'I' [or perhaps he meant 'eye']. It's an embarrassment of pronouns. I'm searching for the non-pronounial."

"Non-pronounial.?"

"Yes. It seems a betrayal to say 'he' or 'she.'"

The problem of pronouns, first person versus third, which had been so much explored and illuminated throughout his work, was also the one he addressed in mine. That morning, as always, he was extremely solicitous, asking me question after question about the progress of my novel. Though the book continued to defy me, so much so that I'd begun to wonder if brain damage, as I wanted to approach it, might not be beyond the limits of art, he seemed to know exactly what I wanted to do. It wasn't surprising, of course, that the man who'd once described tears as "liquified brain" should be familiar with the subject of brain damage, but his questions were so explicit that it was difficult to believe that he hadn't considered, and rejected, the very book I wanted to write. The chapters I'd shown him in London had been written in the first

person, which he had considered a mistake. "I know it's impertinent to say this, please forgive me ... but this book, in my opinion, will never work in the first person." When I told him, here at the cafe, that I had now moved it to the third person, he nodded, but he knew that problems of point of view were never resolved with pronouns alone. "Still," he said, returning to the point he'd made when we met in London, "you need a witness, right?"

He excused himself from the table — "pardon my bladder" — but when he returned it was clear that he'd taken my book with him. "Well, do you see the end of it?"

"No," I said, "not at all."

He sighed. "It's really very difficult, isn't it?"

He sipped his coffee, then homed in on the principal issue in my book as in so much contemporary fiction — the need for objectivity and knowledge in conjunction with the need for the intimacy and immediacy of a naked subjectivity. "You need a witness and you need the first person, that's the problem, isn't it? One thing that might help ... you might have a look at an early book of mine, perhaps you know it, Mercier and Camier. I had a similar problem there. It begins, 'I know what happened with Mercier and Camier because I was there with them all the time.'"

After I returned from Paris, I looked at Mercier and Camier again but found no place for his solution in the problems I had set myself. Still, I wrote an entire version of my novel in the third person, and I can say without a doubt that there were very few days I didn't feel him looking over my shoulder, whispering, "It's really very difficult, isn't it?" or when things were going worse, commenting on me as Nagg comments on Hamm, "What does that mean? That means nothing!" Halfway through, I knew it wasn't working, suspecting strongly that my only hope, despite what Beckett had said, was in the first person, but I pushed on. Certainly, it wasn't merely his recommendation that kept me going in that direction, but how can I pretend it didn't matter? When finally — a year and a half and an entire manuscript later — I turned it around and started over, in the first person, I could not, though I wrote him more than one letter about the book, bring myself to mention it to him. To my mind, the book worked, not only because it was in the first person but because I had finally succeeded in weaning myself from him. Given all this, I felt no small trepidation when I sent him the manuscript, but as before, he read the book at once and replied with generosity and enthusiasm. There was no sign of his original disappointment and none of his position vis-a-vis my point of view. His note, as always, was confined to a 3 x 5 index card, and his scrawl, which had grown progressively worse in the years

that I'd corresponded with him, was not completely legible. To my chagrin, in fact, its most important sentence was only half accessible to me. After offering his compliments and appreciation, he concluded with a sentence that drifted off into a hopeless hieroglyphics after beginning with "And on with you now from . . ."

After "from" was a word which looked like "this," but might have been "thus" or "phis," then a word which looked like "new" but might have been "man" or "ran," a word which looked like "thought" or "bought" or "sought" and finally a word which looked like "anew." "And on with you now from this new thought anew"? It didn't sound like Beckett at all. I asked several friends to have a look but none could read his writing any better than I. What absurd apocryphy that a note from Beckett should conclude, "And on with you now from [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]." Finally, unable to stand it any longer, I wrote to ask if, by some chance (after all, more than three weeks had passed since he'd written the note) he could remember what he'd written. Again he answered promptly, ending our dialogue, as I will end this memoir, with a note that was characteristic, not only in its economy and content, but in what it says about his (failing?) memory and the attitude with which he approached his correspondence:

Dear Larry,

I believe I wrote, 'And on with you now from this new nought anew.'

As ever,

Sam.

