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Critical Likes and Dislikes: Barthes, Beckett, and the Resistance to Reading

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Abstract

Writers, readers, critics all have strong personal preferences. Roland Barthes was a case in point. Many were the texts he chose to affirm. Others he rejected, while some were left to hover in the margins of his thinking. Still others barely feature at all, among which, conspicuous by their absence, are the novels and plays of Samuel Beckett. This article examines the political, theoretical, and affective reasons for Barthes's apparent indifference to a writer who, despite early hostility on the part of the literary establishment, came to be seen as the abiding embodiment of late modernity. It contrasts Barthes's limited response to Beckett with that of another leading critic of the period, Maurice Blanchot.

Keywords: Barthes; Beckett; avant-garde theatre; politics; Blanchot; the neuter.

Writers, readers, critics all have their likes and dislikes, their spontaneous enthusiasms or pet hates which frequently defy proper explanation. Roland Barthes was little different. He was, however, more willing than most, in categorising the varieties of textual experience, to own up to various positive or negative preferences. He provides a lengthy list of such desirable or undesirable objects, belonging to cultural history or everyday life, in a provocative tongue-in-cheek digression in *Roland Barthes par Roland Barthes*.¹ Things or people Barthes likes, the

reader learns, include, among others: cinnamon and cheese, roses and lavender, champagne, Glenn Gould, Handel, Jackson Pollock, the whole of Romantic music, Sartre, Brecht, Eisenstein, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, the Marx Brothers, and ‘unassertive political statements’; while those he dislikes, which for some reason are less numerous, comprise ‘women in trousers’, geraniums, strawberries, Miró, tautologies, Arthur Rubinstein, Satie, Chopin’s Piano Concertos, Bartók, Vivaldi, fidelity, spontaneity, the politico-sexual, afternoons, ‘and so on’.

Drawing up lists of this sort, amusing as it is, Barthes hastens to add, is of course fairly meaningless, were it not that what it reveals by virtue of a general if somewhat circular dialectic is the extent to which, all experience being irreducibly singular, each of us nevertheless shares with other humans and other living creatures the singularity of our experience and of our bodies — of which each of us has several. In that respect, individual likes and dislikes, however much they may appear to others to be ruled by pure contingency, are anything but meaningless: they testify to that ‘bodily enigma’, as Barthes calls it, which each of us is to ourselves and to all others, and which, since it is an enigma (the word, from the Greek, as Barthes was aware, refers to a riddle intended to challenge the ingenuity of the reader), nevertheless asks to be unfolded, deciphered, and interpreted, without any guarantee that such a hermeneutic quest will ever be fulfilled. But we are nonetheless expected to try, if only so as to conclude the task is an impossible one.

Earlier in his writing career, Barthes was deeply suspicious of all supposedly self-evident preferences or prejudices, and committed to dismantling unthinking ideological assumptions on the part of such arbiters of taste as the mass media, the literary canon, or literary critics in general. Indeed, by virtue of his status as a writer dedicated to cultural or social critique, at least during that early phase in his work, before the role became too constricting, Barthes was enough of a closet Kantian, or simply enough of a semiotician, to know that all professions of

taste or distaste, however idiosyncratic, always implied a universalising, normative judgement to which listeners or readers (or students) were enjoined, even required, to give their assent, which they could always prefer to withhold, albeit sometimes at personal cost. This is why, from *S/Z* onwards, the concept of ‘evaluation’ — of ‘evaluation without values’ — plays such an important, but inescapably problematic role in Barthes’s later writing, much exercised by the desirability or inevitability of making choices, which forcibly involved establishing verifiable criteria, while yet somehow preventing them from becoming norms, and, as such, repressively normative.²

That margin of necessary uncertainty is what prompted Barthes to posit, as a third category, alongside such slippery or inconsistent, yet always potentially dogmatic headings as the *lisible* and the *scriptible*, the readable and the writeable, hovering as they do undecidably between the historical and the private, the quizzical rubric of that which cannot either be read or written (by ‘me’, that is), yet remains ‘receivable [*recevable*]’, as Barthes calls it, which also means, paradoxically, that, as well as being unwriteable, it is also obstinately unreadable: resistant therefore both to being written (or rewritten) and to being read. ‘The receivable [*le recevable*]’, Barthes puts it, ‘may be described as the unreadable [*l’illisible*] that snags or catches, the text that scorches, produced continuously outside of all verisimilitude, the function of which, one might say, visibly taken on board by its scriptor, is to challenge the mercantile constraint of the written text’. This explains why there is also an underlying affinity between the (merely) receivable and the (radically) unpublishable, in so far as neither the one nor the other can be properly positioned as an object of (my) reading or (my) writing. ‘I can neither read nor write what you produce,’ he tells the ardently aspiring scriptor, ‘but I *receive* it, like a fire, a drug, an enigmatic falling apart’ (IV, 694).

Many were the bodies of writing that, for diverse reasons, the Barthes of the 1940s and early 1950s chose to defend or affirm: those of Michelet, Camus, Jean Cayrol, Flaubert,

Queneau, Brecht, Robbe-Grillet, and others. There were also those he explicitly rejected, at least at first: Maupassant, Zola, Giraudoux, or Aragon, while others were left to inhabit the margins of his thinking as ambivalent objects of fascination and disdain. Still others barely feature in his critical work at all, among which some of the more conspicuous by their absence are the novels and plays of Samuel Beckett. In what follows, I want to explore further the reasons for Barthes's enduring resistance to a writer who, despite early hostility on the part of the critical establishment, came to be seen as the abiding embodiment of late European literary modernity.

References to Beckett in Barthes's collected works are few and far between. Apart from one solitary late instance in 1978, in which Barthes recalls the distant and rather unspecific memory of an auditorium, since then transformed into a garage, where he 'first saw something by Beckett' (V, 456), Barthes's half-dozen or so mentions of the writer all belong to the period between June 1954, when his article '*Godot* adulte [*Godot* Comes of Age]' first appeared in the left-leaning weekly *France-Observateur* (I, 497-99) and the autumn of 1963, when he mentions Beckett in passing in an interview with the experimental literary journal *Tel Quel* (II, 522). And even when Barthes mentions Beckett by name, it is invariably in tokenistic fashion, alongside such contemporaries as Eugène Ionesco and Arthur Adamov, all of whom are categorized as proponents of postwar avant-garde theatre. The only text by Beckett ever mentioned by Barthes, and even then repeatedly to make the same point about the problematic status of avant-garde art, is *En attendant Godot*. There is therefore no evidence that Barthes ever read, it seems, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, or *L'Innommable*, *Fin de partie*, *Comment c'est*, *Oh les beaux jours*, or any of the later plays or prose works.

This is perhaps less surprising than might appear. In the France of the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the Barthes of *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* (*Writing Degree Zero*) was establishing himself as a literary critic, Beckett was a little-known, marginal figure, a

foreigner to boot, whose work till then had proven virtually unpublishable. It was only when Jérôme Lindon of the fledgling éditions de Minuit famously took the typescript of *Molloy* home with him during his lunch break in November 1950, and fell apart laughing in the Paris métro that things began to change. Even then, despite a number of generally favourable reviews by influential critics such as Maurice Nadeau, Jean Blanzat, Bernard Pingaud, Georges Bataille, and Jean Pouillon, sales of *Molloy*, reaching 694 copies in the first year, remained disappointing, as did the even lower first-year figures for *Malone meurt* (241) and for *L'Innommable* (476).³ It was not until the *succès de scandale* associated with performances of *Godot* ('there's this play, ha-ha,' people would say, 'where the main character never bothers to turn up') that Beckett became, so to speak, a household name, prompting better first-year sales for the play of around 2,000, albeit with the unfortunate side-effect that it imposed on Beckett's work as a whole a rather facile interpretative frame, that of absurdist antitheatre or avant-garde shock tactics, which many readers or spectators, including, it would appear, Barthes himself, found it only too easy to adopt.

But if Barthes failed to read much of Beckett's writing, or, at the very least, saw no reason to address it in any detail in print, it is hard not to think of this as a missed opportunity. Here, after all, were two writers who, having now lost their Christian faith, shared, while still living in predominantly Catholic countries, a protestant Huguenot heritage, and remained powerfully bound to two admittedly very different maternal figures, loving and accepting on the one hand, stern and demanding on the other. Both moreover had studied languages to a high level, classical in the case of Barthes, modern in the case of Beckett, which left them both with a keen sense that there was no single, universal idiom, and with the realisation that language could just as much exclude as include, as Barthes would demonstrate in a famous essay on the Dominici affair (I, 708-11), and Beckett likewise show in his exploration of the asocial reality inhabited by many of his early protagonists. At the

same time, each was fascinated by the possibility, whether imagined or real, of a kind of literature that would be ‘without style’ as Beckett once put it, or might have the appearance, as Barthes phrased it, of ‘a blank mode of writing, no longer in bondage to a marked or binary order of language’, a kind of ‘absent’ ‘third term’ (I, 217-8).

This shared interest in the neuter or neutrality serves however to emphasize how far Barthes and Beckett were each committed to the idea that literature’s role, rather than to supply convenient answers, was to persist in asking questions. Both, then, were intensely aware of the way in which binary paradigms, these building blocks of meaning, were fundamentally unstable; and both were sensitive to the implications of such instability for personal identity, and, in particular, for the gendered male body which, albeit in diverse ways, endured for both writers as something dense and opaque, deeply resistant to social normalisation. Both, finally, had a deep affection for the Lieder of Schubert and Schumann, and each found a supporter in Maurice Nadeau, the critic, editor, and publisher, who commissioned the essays for Barthes’s first book and continued publishing his work in *Les Lettres nouvelles* throughout the 1950s, and who was also a staunch advocate of Beckett’s work, such that, when he launched the literary magazine *La Quinzaine littéraire* in 1966, its first issue carried Beckett’s unpublished story, *Assez (Enough)*, a gesture Nadeau would repeat a few years later with the text of *Sans (Lessness)*.

None of these areas of potential convergence, however, despite his commitment to artistic innovation and to anti-establishment politics, seem ever to have caused Barthes to want to take a closer look at Beckett’s writing, and in particular at his early French novels, which were almost exactly contemporary with the publication of *Le Degré zéro de l’écriture*.

What, then, one might ask, was the source of Barthes’s diffidence? Did Beckett’s work mark a Barthesian blind spot? And, if so, how, and why?

There are, I suggest, at least four main reasons for Barthes's resistance to Beckett's writing.

The first was political, and had to do with the often tense debate taking place in France in the 1950s regarding the social function of the theatre. Between 1953 and 1960, as well as writing for a range of other publications, Barthes was a leading figure in the campaigning journal, *Théâtre populaire*, and, as such, strongly committed to promoting the work of Brecht and the Berliner Ensemble, which had memorably visited Paris in 1954 and 1955. As Barthes put it enthusiastically at the time, in a July 1954 article for *France-Observateur*, 'I've often heard people deplore the fact that, supposedly, our age has yet to produce a theatre equal to its history. But that theatre already exists: it's the theatre of Bertolt Brecht' (I, 503). Between the aesthetically accomplished but politically vacuous bourgeois theatre of the time, and the politically progressive but aesthetically dour alternative theatre, according to Barthes, Brecht represented a radical third way, which made it possible to reconcile two separate demands, often seen as contradictory: formal innovation and political responsibility.

This endorsement of Brecht, shared at the time in France by numerous critics, directors, or dramatists owing allegiance to the left, frequently had a corollary, which was a deep-seated suspicion of so-called 'avant-garde theatre' of the type practised, in Barthes's view, by Ionesco, Adamov, and, of course, Beckett. The phenomenon was relatively widespread. Indeed, though for his part he remained hostile to Brechtian *Verfremdungs-effekte*, which he judged superfluous, Sartre, too, for instance, was notably dismissive of the 1950s theatrical avant-garde. As far as *En attendant Godot* was concerned, he told Bernard Dort in a 1955 interview with *Théâtre populaire*, though he admired the play, he said, he deemed its pessimism, as he called it, essentially apolitical and reactionary. 'All *Godot*'s themes,' he claimed, 'are bourgeois themes: solitude, despair, clichés, incommunicability, they are all the product of the inner solitude of the bourgeoisie.'⁴

Barthes himself was never entirely this dogmatic. He did argue consistently however that the avant-garde, as exemplified by Ionesco, Adamov, and Beckett, though liberating in some respects, was ultimately reliant on what it rejected. There was, in other words, an inescapable complicity between its purely intellectual or aesthetic rebellion and the dominant bourgeois world order. 'As its etymology suggests,' Barthes wrote in a 1956 article for *Théâtre populaire*,

the very word 'avant-garde' simply refers to a mildly exuberant or mildly eccentric contingent of the bourgeois military. It's as though there's a secret and underlying balancing act, a kind of zero-sum game, between the practitioners of conformist art and its daring acrobats on the trapeze. [...] The avant-garde is basically just another opportunity for catharsis, a kind of vaccine designed to inject a bit of subjectivity and a bit of freedom under the scab of bourgeois values: everyone feels better for recognising a clear but purely token case of the illness. (II, 340-1)

As a result, the subversive potential of the theatrical avant-garde, this 'parasite and property of the bourgeoisie', was forcibly short-lived, and it was simply a matter of time before it would be recuperated and assimilated by mainstream bourgeois society (as Beckett's 1969 Nobel Prize and Ionesco's election to the Académie française a year later were thought to confirm). Though its innovative approach to language and stage was entirely welcome, Barthes maintained, the end result was a provocative 'negativity' (I, 1098) that was not properly revolutionary at all. 'Avant-garde theatre [...],' he concluded in 1961,

brought to the French stage a wide-ranging degree of freedom regarding both techniques and language; and if the theatre were to forget the admirable things it has learnt, and revert to the self-satisfied conventions and knowing looks of the traditional stage, it would no doubt be a woeful regression. One can yet hope, however, that, as well as a new language, the new theatre might also offer new ways of thinking, and

that its emancipation of theatrical language might bring with it an exploration of the real world which is our own, and not some futile other one. (I, 1101)

In making these criticisms, Barthes was noticeably unwilling to dismiss or embrace Beckett's theatre for its supposed metaphysical or existential message, as was otherwise routinely the case during the 1950s. But though he did see *Godot* as an effective experiment in formal provocation, it was symptomatic, he implied, that, reaching beyond 'its natural audience of intellectuals and enlightened snobs' (I, 497), it had acquired, and uniquely so, if not the exact status of a boulevard comedy, then the capacity to attract something of the same audience. In the process, he observed, Beckett's play became more comical and more lyrical (I, 498), i.e., more entertaining, and more entertaining because what it gave its audience was a kind of zero degree of language, 'self-sufficient and perfectly replete, such that it leaves no room for symbolic gloss' (I, 499). But though such 'dense and expansive literalness' (I, 499), he argued, was entirely salutary, its challenge to existing theatre, he maintained, was inevitably limited:

The subversion of language in the end has no other outlet than human absurdity. The problem is not that absurdity is in any way shocking (that would be a moral judgement), but that it is impossible to sustain for very long: man [sic] is doomed to signify something. In the exact same way, avant-garde theatre is doomed to restore meaning to language — or to disappear. (I, 1100).

'As far as literature in particular is concerned,' he told his friends at *Tel Quel* in an interview, all attempts at subverting language are inseparable, in contradictory fashion, from a celebration of language, since to attack language by means of language itself only ever boils down to claiming to liberate a 'second-order' language which one could describe as the deep-seated, 'abnormal' energy of speech (withdrawn, that is, from all norms);

this is why attempts to destroy language often have something festive about them. As for attempts at 'deriding' language, these are only ever very partial.

Barthes did allow himself however to make a kind of exception, even if it was no more than tokenistic. 'There's only one I know of which really hits home,' he added, 'that is, which really makes one's head spin with the sense of a system falling apart, it's the slave [sic] Lucky's monologue in Beckett's *Godot*' (II, 522).

There is, as so often with the formalist approach adopted by the early Barthes, something profoundly circular or tautological about the argument, and it is this that probably explains his inability, and reluctance, to get to grips with Beckett's writing in more detail. His analysis began by positing as an unsurmountable norm the irresistible character of linguistic meaning. Anything that is deemed to depart from these norms can only be seen as something abnormal, having only negative value, which only serves to confirm that the norms in question are indeed unsurmountable. To emphasize the extent to which a play like *Godot* broke with expected norms and conventions was, in other words, simply a way of reinforcing those very norms. It is all the more striking as a result that, in all his brief comments on Beckett, Barthes nowhere considers whether the description 'avant-garde theatre' (or, perhaps more accurately, 'avant-garde bourgeois theatre') with regard to *Godot* was an appropriate or accurate one, rather than simply a reductive interpretation deriving from the 'culinary' theatre criticism Barthes, like Brecht, so fiercely disliked. The label is at any event taken by him, not only as an operative theoretical concept, but as an unproblematic empirical given, which is why he finds himself with little alternative than to repeat time and again the remark made above about Lucky's speech, which then takes on the timeworn status of a stereotype, that is to say, of the always already read, which is just another name for the unread or, even, indeed, for the unreadable.

These difficulties, severe though they were, were not however new ones, as Barthes would increasingly realize. They were already implicit in *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* itself. For there too the attempt had been made to identify how, notwithstanding the fact that any exit from meaning was in reality impossible, as the example of avant-garde theatre helped demonstrate, certain modern or contemporary texts might nevertheless supply their reader with a neutral, disengaged perspective that, placing itself beyond literature and history as presently given, might lead to some utopian reconciliation between them. It was a view to which Barthes continued to hold during most of the 1950s. Of Alain Robbe-Grillet's *Le Voyeur*, for instance, reviewed in 1955, he argued in appropriately dialectical fashion that while such a novel 'cannot set itself apart from the constitutively reactionary status of literature at the present time,' it nevertheless, 'by attempting to disinfect narrative form as such, perhaps opens the way, without as yet achieving it, towards a *deconditioning* of the reader with regard to the essentialist art of the bourgeois novel' (II, 331).

Remarkably, one of the few contemporary readers to have sensed both the importance of Barthes's position and its untenable contradictions, as may be seen from a September 1953 review article on *Le Degré zéro* in the recently revived *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, a periodical Barthes would attack two years later for its 'perfectly reactionary nature' (I, 596), was Maurice Blanchot, a writer frequently cited in *Le Degré zéro*, albeit without much in the way of sustained engagement, and towards whom Barthes maintained till the last a relationship of warm admiration and sceptical wariness.⁵ In his 1953 article, Blanchot made two principal observations. The first had to do with Barthes's reconfigured account of literary history. In *Le Degré zéro*, it will be remembered, Barthes had recast the long established assumption that literary modernity was the effect of a process of politico-historical regression, resulting in a loss of communicable transparency, a refusal of social reality, and a bewildering proliferation of mutually untranslatable artistic idioms. It was what Barthes,

retaining the same narrative but reversing its direction of travel, now described as the multiplication of writings (I, 208). But instead of lamenting this evolution, as did Lukács, Sartre, and numerous others, Barthes affirmed it. Modernity, in other words, was infinitely more plural, more diverse, more open to singularities than the world that had lost its socio-historical way with the failed 1848 revolution, and it was here, borrowed from his early understanding of Marx, that may be found at least one of the sources, and meanings, of what, at the time of *S/Z*, increasingly influenced by his friends at *Tel Quel*, Barthes would go on to describe as the difference between the *lisible* and the *scriptible*, between realist ‘work [*œuvre*]’ and modernist ‘text [*texte*]’, corresponding as it did to what was deemed at the time, problematically enough, it must be said, following Bachelard and Althusser, as an ‘epistemological break’, decisively marking the end of idealist ideology and the beginning of materialist science.

Blanchot in his article was less convinced, not least because Barthes’s revised scenario inevitably retained an implicit teleology by virtue of which a pluralistic modern text (the *scriptible*) was not only more radically affirmative than a given nineteenth-century realist work (the merely *lisible*), but also somehow truer to the real nature of literary language. Such a precariously dogmatic opposition, which others would quickly seek to challenge, Barthes would admittedly soon abandon once he embarked on a rediscovery, amongst others, of Romanticism, a period or mode of writing whose boundaries he generously extended from Chateaubriand, perhaps even Rousseau, to Proust, and ultimately to himself. In 1953, however, he was perhaps understandably more militant in his endorsement of modernity. ‘Literature’, today, however, Blanchot countered,

is not more diverse than in earlier times, it is even perhaps more monotonous, in the same way that night-time may be deemed more monotonous than day-time. It is not at odds with itself because supposedly more subject to arbitrariness on the part of those

who write, or because, beyond genre, rules, and traditions, it gives free rein to a multiplicity of unruly experimentation. The diversity, oddity, and anarchy of these endeavours are not what turn literature into a world dispersed. We need to find a different formula, and say: the experience of literature is exposure to dispersion itself, an approach to that which escapes unity, and the experience of that which is without shared understanding, agreement, or right — error and the outside, the ungraspable and the irregular. (488)

Mindful of the experience of his own writing as an author of fictional works, notably *Thomas l'Obscur*, *L'Arrêt de mort*, or *La Folie du jour*, Blanchot then went on:

the experience that is literature is a total experience, a questioning that tolerates no limits, and does not allow itself to be stabilized or reduced, for instance, to a question of language (unless everything then is put into crisis from that standpoint). It is the very passion of its own questioning, and it demands of those it attracts that they enter wholly into this questioning, that they sustain it by a sacrifice that goes far beyond just itself, since what it also sacrifices is its own wholeness. As a result, it is not enough that it cast suspicion on the ceremonial dimension of literature, its consecrated forms, ritual images, fine language, and conventions of rhyme, number, and narrative. (493)

‘It may be,’ Blanchot added by way of conclusion, ‘that what Roland Barthes calls the degree zero of writing is the moment, so to speak, when literature grasps itself; but if so, it would not only be because it is a blank writing, absent and neutral, but because it is the very experience of “neutrality” [...]’ (493-4). Blanchot’s objection was explicit enough, as was the original title of his review: ‘Plus loin que le degré zéro [Further Than Degree Zero]’, which he later revised, when the essay was republished in 1959, to read, less provocatively: ‘La Recherche du point zéro [The Quest for Point Zero]’. True enough, the conceptual language of Blanchot’s rebuff may seem relatively old-fashioned. As Derrida would observe in *De la*

grammatologie, the word experience has barely ever been understood other than to imply a metaphysics of presence, the presence of experience to the self, and of the self to his or her experience, and that the only way still to use the word was ‘under erasure’,⁶ that is, as Blanchot would similarly argue, as ‘neutralized’, set aside from itself, overwritten by what, speaking of Bataille, he once called an ‘experience of non-experience’.⁷ Experience, in this sense, testified not to presence, but to a passage to the limit, an abyssal lack of all foundation, and an encounter with radical otherness.

But most noteworthy of all is the final part of Blanchot’s concluding sentence. For when Blanchot completed that sentence, he did so quite explicitly by invoking Beckett’s *L’Innommable*, a text that, unlike Barthes, he had just been reading, and to which he would devote a lengthy article the very next month, again in the *Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, which Beckett himself would subsequently acknowledge, in a letter to his prospective German publisher Peter Suhrkamp, among all the early French reviews of the trilogy, as the one that was most ‘crucial’. ‘Ce qu’on a fait de mieux [the best anyone’s done],’ he added, in similar vein, in a letter to Barbara Bray in March 1959, ‘on that gruesome subject.’⁸ And as Barthes too would have read, Blanchot, at the end of his review of *Le Degré zéro*, announced his decision to address *L’Innommable* by emphasising precisely

the very experience of ‘neutrality’ which is never heard, for when neutrality speaks, only who imposes silence upon it prepares the conditions for its hearing, and yet all there is to hear is this neutral speaking, that which has always already been said, which cannot cease being said, and cannot be heard, a torment of which the pages of Samuel Beckett begin to give us an inkling. (494)

Whereas Barthes, then, was unable, or unwilling, to find in Beckett’s French prose something that might fit his early, loosely Marxist preconceptions regarding the tasks of the modern writer, or even, in terms he would popularize later, an object of pleasure or

jouissance, Blanchot, from the outset, found it essential to affirm an experience, experience without experience, admittedly, arriving nevertheless from the outlandish outside, an experience not of possibility, therefore, as Barthes would have much preferred, but of impossibility, and turned, not towards ‘our real world’, as Barthes had demanded in 1961, but, as Blanchot once put it apropos of Kafka, towards that which is ‘other than all world’.⁹ It is true that recent accounts of the extent and nature of Blanchot’s influence on early reception of Beckett have seen matters in a rather different light. It is however an egregious misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Blanchot’s thinking to claim that in his readings of *L’Innommable* and, subsequently, of *Comment c’est*, he sought to disregard any engagement with the outside, with history or with politics.¹⁰ For it was indeed Blanchot in 1947, in an essay Beckett is almost certain to have read, who offered the view, prompted by the example of Sade (whose novels Beckett had similarly been reading), that ‘any writer who, by the very fact of writing, is not driven to think: “I am the revolution, freedom alone makes me write,” is not really a writer at all.’¹¹

This did not mean *L’Innommable*, according to Blanchot, should be read primarily as an allegorical description of social distress, or of political events from the time it was written (though, by definition, that possibility cannot be excluded). Nor did it mean subordinating Beckett’s writing to some progressive or regressive historical dialectic. What was political, on Blanchot’s reading, was Beckett’s principled refusal to be domesticated, the resistance of his writing to reading itself.¹² This explains on the one hand why Beckett’s work resisted Barthes’s scrutiny, and on the other no doubt why Barthes in turn resisted Beckett’s writing; but it also explains, conversely, why Blanchot saw no alternative but to affirm that resistance itself. ‘There is a category of works’, he wrote, on reading *Comment c’est* (which he likened to the novels of Sade) at the height of the Algerian war, when resistance and refusal were no futile gestures, ‘which are more deeply misjudged by being praised than by being denigrated;

to disparage them is to come into contact with the potency of refusal [*la puissance du refus*] that has made them present and the distance that is their measure.¹³

There was moreover a final set of reasons for Barthes's continuing neglect of Beckett, having to do with his long-standing fidelity to *Tel Quel*, in particular to the novels of Philippe Sollers and the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva. For as Sollers and Kristeva turned their attention in the 1970s to the Joyce of *Finnegans Wake*, so Beckett became increasingly cast by them in the role of the anti-Joyce: not the joyously incestuous lapsed Catholic, but the morose and obsessive Protestant bogeyman. Let me illustrate this with a personal anecdote. In 1973, as I was considering undertaking doctoral work on Beckett's fiction, in which I hoped to counter the still dominant existentialist interpretation of Beckett by rethinking the question of the body, bilingualism, the aporetics of genealogy, and what Blanchot, in his essay on *Comment c'est*, called 'in-difference',¹⁴ Kristeva kindly agreed to meet me in Paris at the Closerie des Lilas, one of the city's swisher café-restaurants. Beckett's writing, she told me, as we sat drinking our cups of Lipton's tea, and using, she explained, a 'psychoanalytic vocabulary that was not [her] own', was, in her view, plainly that of an 'obsessional neurotic', admittedly, in dispensation (and as a concession to the Deleuze and Guattari of *L'Anti-Œdipe*, who had famously cited *Molloy* and *Malone meurt* as examples), 'with a psychotic fringe'. Kristeva illustrated the point by recounting how Beckett would also go to the Closerie, and sit silently for hours, slowly stirring the mustard in the mustard pot on his table, still mourning, Kristeva concluded, the death of the father.

This in turn was largely the reading adopted by Kristeva in her own, and only, intervention on Beckett, published three years later. 'How can one not see,' she asked, 'that, if Death is what gives meaning to the sublime story of *First Love*, what it does is to conceal the blocking of incest and take the place of where one might imagine a silenced woman to be: the wife (of the father) or the mother (of the son)?' 'That the sexual act,' she went on,

far from being eluded, should be assumed, but only as an impossible relation in which the protagonists are each condemned to that perpetual exile locking them each into the auto-erotic: this is what Beckett, in Duchamp-like fashion, has to tell us, after and against those militant bachelors of the early part of the [twentieth] century. But, against Joyce too, whose joyously mad plunge into incest, encapsulated in the jouissance of Molly [Bloom], or the *babytalk* of the father in *Finnegans Wake*, [Beckett] ascetically brushes aside.

Something, then, in Beckett's writing, Kristeva concluded, remained untouched or intact: what she called 'the jubilatory serenity of the mother'. That to which Beckett's work bore witness instead, she put it, 'beyond all derision and for the sake of a humankind searching for solitary community', was 'the derisory rigour of the Death of the Father'.¹⁵

It would not be hard to imagine the effect such heavily prescriptive language may have had on Barthes, though one may wonder what he made of Kristeva's allusion to militant bachelordom, and what it was in Beckett that Barthes may therefore have been able to recognize or feel moved to reject in the light of his own abiding family romance.

Perhaps, in the end, politics, ideology, and theory aside, it does then all come down to likes and dislikes, or, more precisely, to two different mothers, two different progenitors, two different bodies, and two different responses therefore to writing's resistance to reading. Perhaps this was all it took to render Beckett's prose, as far as Barthes was concerned, in the end, unreadable and unread, and in all senses of the word: *irrecevable*.

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- ¹ Roland Barthes, *Œuvres complètes*, edited by Éric Marty, revised edition, 5 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2002), IV, 692. Further references will be to this edition and given in the text. All translations are my own.
- ² On this vexed question of ‘evaluation’ in Barthes, see my *Radical Indecision: Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida, and the Future of Criticism* (Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 2010), 99-119.
- ³ See Anne Simonin, *Les Éditions de Minuit, 1942-1955: Le devoir d’insoumission* (Paris: IMEC Editions, 1994), 379.
- ⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Un théâtre de situations*, edited by Michel Conta and Michel Rybalka (Paris: Gallimard, 1973), 75.
- ⁵ For Blanchot’s review, see ‘Plus loin que le degré zéro’, *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, September 1953, 485-94. Further references will be given in the text. The essay is reproduced, with some modifications, in *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard 1959), 246-55; *The Book to Come*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 202-9. On the intellectual relationship between the pair, see Christophe Bident, ‘R/M’, *Paragraph*, 30:3 (2007), 67-83; and my *Radical Indecision: Barthes, Blanchot, Derrida, and the Future of Criticism*, 132-7, 174-8.
- ⁶ Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie* (Paris: Minuit, 1967), 89; *Of Grammatology*, translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, (1976) 1997), 60-1.
- ⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969), 311; *The Infinite Conversation*, translated by Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 210.

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- ⁸ For Blanchot's review of *L'Innommable*, see 'Où maintenant? Qui maintenant?', *La Nouvelle Nouvelle Revue française*, October 1953, 678-686; collected in *Le Livre à venir*, 256-64; *The Book To Come*, 210-17. For Beckett's reaction, see *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, edited by George Craig, Martha Dow Fehnsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009-16), II: 441; III: 222.
- ⁹ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Espace littéraire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 72; *The Space of Literature*, translated by Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), 75.
- ¹⁰ For more detailed assessment of Blanchot's essays on Beckett, see my "'Poststructuralist' Readings of Beckett?", in *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies*, edited by Lois Oppenheim (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 68-88; and for a more detailed account of Blanchot's own political and literary thinking, see my *Blanchot politique: sur une réflexion jamais interrompue* (Geneva: Furor, 2020).
- ¹¹ Maurice Blanchot, *La Part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), 311; *The Work of Fire*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 321; translation modified.
- ¹² I explore this reading in more detail in my "'Up the Republic!": Beckett, Writing, Politics', *MLN*, 112, 5, December 1997, 909-28.
- ¹³ Maurice Blanchot, *L'Entretien infini*, 481; *The Infinite Conversation*, 328 ; translation modified. 'Refusal' was the title used by Blanchot in 1958 to express his wholesale rejection of de Gaulle's return to power 'with the support not of the Resistance, but of [French] mercenaries'. The article is reprinted in Blanchot, *L'Amitié* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971), 130-31; *Friendship*, translated by Elizabeth Rottenberg (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 111-12.

¹⁴ As readers may have gathered, this was the project that, several false starts and a number of rejected submissions later, would finally culminate in my *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

¹⁵ See Julia Kristeva, *Polylogue* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 139-40, 147; *Samuel Beckett*, edited by Jennifer Birkett and Kate Ince (London: Longman, 2000), 251, 257; translation modified.