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S. E. Gontarski
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1 Overview: A Genealogy of Intervention

Samuel Beckett was something of an accidental dramatist, or at least his earliest completed plays were written almost as a sideline, a diversion from the long narrative flights he was developing in a white heat in the aftermath of the Second World War, the trio of breakthrough French novels now loosely called *The Trilogy*. Theatre, he would subsequently say, was 'a relaxation from the awful prose I was writing at that time'; it offered an escape from 'the wildness and rulelessness of the novels', and he would call it 'a marvelous, liberating diversion' because of its plasticity, its concreteness, its thereness, particular people (more or less) in particular spaces (more or less) (Beckett qtd in Cronin, 1997, 390). He could not have anticipated how thoroughly these diversions, these exercises in creative relaxation, his dabbling in the most public and collaborative of the literary arts, a hybrid genre between a necessarily incomplete script and its performative, commercial realisation, would force him, uncomfortably at first, into a public sphere. The inevitable transition from an artist's private production to the commodity-driven economics of performance would come to violate what he tended to call, his legacy from James Joyce, perhaps, 'artistic integrity', his perceived creative autonomy. Theatre's collaborative nature, on the other hand, invites, indeed relies on a division of labour, serial creative interventions, and more overt alliances with commerce than either the narrative or the lyrical arts, the path to theatrical realisation suggesting, as well, something of theatre's instability, fragility, and vulnerability. Theatre, an afterthought in the late 1940s, would grow to dominate Beckett's creative life. While the Nobel Prize committee announced its award to Samuel Beckett on 24 October 1969 for his writing 'in new forms for the novel and drama',[1] he is designated as a 'playwright' in *The Times* announcement: 'The Irish-born playwright Samuel Beckett [is] acknowledged as one of the greatest living dramatists for his pioneering new modes of theatrical expression' (qtd in Faber, 2019, 303).

When *En attendant Godot* (*Waiting for Godot*), the second of these creative diversions or exercises in relaxation, finally premiered in Paris at the Théâtre de Babylone on 5 January 1953, the 47-year-old debutant playwright had been a full-time writer and translator for some 23 years. He published his first separate piece, the long poem *Whoroscope*, in 1930, which he wrote in several hours on 15 June for a contest on the subject of time sponsored by Richard Aldington and Nancy Cunard. The poem ridiculed the personal peccadillos of the philosopher René Descartes (1596–1650) and, with its awkward, intrusive

[1] The Nobel Prize in Literature 1969. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2021. Saturday, 24 July 2021. www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1969/summary/

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footnotes, laid waste to T. S. Eliot's landmark, cut-up mosaic of Western decline, *The Waste Land*; it won first prize. Soon after *Godot*'s modest Parisian success and its subsequent European tour, Beckett began to translate the play into English in response to interest from an American publisher and London and New York producers. Despite the difficulties of placing his early English fiction, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (segmented or cut up into *More Pricks than Kicks*), *Murphy*, and *Watt*, with publishers (economic issues, mostly), and their subsequent banning in his native Ireland (political issues, mostly), Beckett seemed less fully aware of the politics of art and the interface of art and commerce than one might expect given that his initial full-length excursion into drama, the still-unproduced *Eleutheria*, mocked what Adorno and Horkheimer would call *The Culture Industry*. *Eleutheria* would travesty the conventions of commercial, boulevard entertainments and posit an overt counter-commitment to bohemianism and so to decadence. That is, in Beckett's dealings with production, he seems not to have comprehended fully the move from creation as private labour to art as a product of multiple social forces or, that is, the degree to which theatre production entailed commodity production, art as a product mediated by a market, although he was savvy enough to warn his French publisher of 'this adaptation business' as requests for English-language performance rights began to arrive in Paris in 1953 (Beckett, 2011, 379; qtd in Van Hulle and Verhulst, 2018, 267). He did, however, speak with Michel Polac on Radiodiffusion Française in February 1952, that is, on the eve of his overt involvement in theatre, on the issue of art and commerce. Beckett's comments were designed as something of an introduction to a reading of extracts from *En attendant Godot*, almost a year before the play officially opened in Paris, and he was asked specifically for his ideas about theatre. He began as follows: 'I have no ideas about theatre. I know nothing about it. I do not go to it'; but he did follow with a prescient insight into the performance contradiction: 'It is not given to everyone to be able to move from the world that opens under the page to that of profit and loss then back again, unperturbed, as if between the daily grind and the pub on the corner'. This was the world he was on the threshold of entering, and he was aware as well, at least in the abstract, that he was about to lose control of his product, and willingly so, at least at this point: 'I am no longer part of it, and never will be again. [. . .] Let them get on with it. Without me. They and I have settled our accounts' (Beckett, 2011, 316).

While the French staging of *Godot* was plagued by economic delays, political infighting, and the author's reluctance to let go of his product, or at least to turn full control over to others and declare his 'accounts' with this new work 'settled', the path to English production and subsequent publication was littered with forced divestment, with various curiosities emerging

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More Information

through the process, including altered scripts, competing translations, cultural prohibitions, various interventions, and other struggles for creative control that seem to have caught Beckett unawares as he struggled to maintain some level of artistic integrity for his vision of humanity in decline, something of an atavistic comedy, what we today might call dystopian modernism. Such a vision of human regression is articulated (if that is the word) by a former intellectual now menial artist-figure, tied (literally) to an economic power, displayed for entertainment purposes, and finally offered as an object for sale, Lucky. Beckett's dealings with the insular coteries of the Paris avant-garde, which were not without their own economic issues and political conflicts, were poor preparation for the adepts, the businessmen and businesswomen of the Anglo-American theatre world, the American agents Marion Saunders and Georges Borchardt, the British literary agents Curtis Brown and Rosica Colin, and producers of Broadway and the West End, namely Peter Glenville and Harold Oram (who dropped out early), Donald Albery, and the American impresario Michael Myerberg. They would all treat the originating artist with suspicion, as unnecessary for their purposes, an encumbrance almost, even an impediment to the work's full and final realisation. Responding to Howard Turner, the publisher Barney Rosset's office assistant, on 2 August 1955, on the eve of the London opening of *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett assessed his creative isolation:

> I am not very optimistic about the Arts Theatre production, though I have not much to go on. The London people have treated me with studied unfriendliness from the outset, leaving me in the dark as to their intentions (never the same two weeks running) and not consulting me at any stage about cast, setting and production generally. I suppose the payment of what may be regarded as a handsome advance on royalties entitles them to all extremes of offhandedness. I shall not go over for the opening. I think their intention is to run until the end of this month only [August 1955]. I surmise this production is in the nature of a try-out in place of the usual try-out in the provinces and that, if the play is well received, it will be transferred to a larger theatre. But this again is just my own idea, based on nothing more tangible than the assumption that [producer Donald] Albery would like his money back, and perhaps even a little over. (letter not included in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*; see SULSC, Box 104)[2]

[2] Letters for this period between Samuel Beckett and Barney Rosset (and other employees at Grove Press) are found in and available at Grove Press Records, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries, cited hereafter as SULSC. In particular, the Beckett–Rosset correspondence on *Waiting for Godot* of this period is available in Box 104, *Waiting for Godot*, 'Correspondence 1953–1969' and 'Correspondence, re: Michael Myerberg 1955–1956, 1962, 1966–1969'. In 2010 and 2014, Columbia University purchased the Barney Rosset Papers, now in the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University Library, and substantial portions

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More Information

Beckett wrote almost an identical assessment a few days later, 18 August 1955, to Pamela Mitchell, who for a time represented Harold Oram:

> I think, though I don't know, not having been told, that the Arts production is in the nature of a try-out (in place of the pre-westend provincial tour) and that the play may be transferred to a larger theatre later on, this ingenuous theory being based on nothing more serious than the assumption that Albery and Co. would like to get their money back and if possible a little over. They have been markedly unfriendly to me throughout, leaving me in the dark as to their plans and not consulting me at any stage, though their contract specifies they must, about cast, settings and so on. (Beckett, 2011, 539–40)

Writing to Rosset on 19 April 1956, Beckett recounted his continued isolated status, now from several *Godot* productions, especially, at this stage, from business and financial matters:

> Not a fluke so far from Saunders or Colin, I think it's against their principles. No news from Pike [Theatre in Dublin] either, though they should have by now lodged my royalties with my Dublin bank and sent you your whack. I don't want to chivvy them yet a while. No news from Albery whose production should be touring or preparing to tour the provinces. (letter not included in *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*; see SULSC, Box 104)

Beckett's French theatrical experience was quite the opposite, as Van Hulle and Verhulst report: 'He spent much of the following months [of late 1952] working with director Roger Blin and the actors, during which he made considerable changes to the text of the first edition in his personal "prompt copy"' (Van Hulle and Verhulst, 2018, 80–1).

Such issues of keeping the author at bay in the commercial theatres of Britain and the United States have a particular irony given that a central feature of what had become Beckett's first produced play was the enslavement and monetisation of an artist/intellectual/teacher/performer by an overlord/businessman who in Act I was in the process of leading his now-damaged commodity to market for sale ('Guess who taught me all these beautiful things. [. . .] My Lucky';

overlap the Syracuse collection: https://findingaids.library.columbia.edu/ead/nnc-rb/ldpd_7953908/dsc/6#subseries_1.

The author has worked with material from Barney Rosset's personal archive since 1985. In May 2013, the author's Rosset and Grove Press material was transferred to and is currently available at Florida State University (FSU), which also includes material related to the 'Beckett–Rosset Correspondence' project prepared for Faber and Faber with the cooperation and approval of the Beckett and Rosset estates. The analysis here draws on that material as well: FSU Special Collections & Archives / MSS 2013-0516, Stanley E. Gontarski Grove Press Research Materials / Literary Manuscripts, Box: 10, Folder: 1: https://archives.lib.fsu.edu/subjects/2364.

Some of the 'previously unpublished' letters cited in this study have appeared and have been cited in Gontarski (2011, 374–82). All previously unpublished letters are currently reproduced with the permission of Edward Beckett and the Samuel Beckett and the Rosset estates.

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More Information

Beckett, 1954, 22), although in the play's visual imagery it is Pozzo who is being led. The producers and other adepts of the Anglo-American theatrical world would take it upon themselves, blatantly at times, to reshape the work of a neophyte playwright to increase the product's accessibility, and so its monetary value, even as Beckett's creative thrust continued single-mindedly towards a counter goal, the development of what would become his Dystopian Trilogy, *Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*, something of a theatrical cluster featuring human and environmental decline, what Estragon calls a 'muckheap', or a 'landscape' dominated by 'worms' (Beckett, 1954, 39b) in Act II of *Godot* after Lucky's prophetic pronouncement in Act I that humanity 'wastes and pines' (29). Such visible signs of degradation, then, parallel the ontological dispersal amid Beckett's post-war sequence of French novels.

But the process, the machinery of theatrical production and the economic forces that drive it, stands, as well, as testimony to Beckett's artistic resilience. As he wrangled with and became entangled by the forces that constitute theatre and commerce, or theatre as commerce, say, he would evolve into his own interventionist, staging his plays and, like other interventionists, rewriting or reshaping them in the process of their realisation, their spatial articulation, revalidating thereby an aesthetics of serial process, excising whatever he deemed untheatrical clutter, and so sharpening the outlines of his vision. Such a preoccupation ran counter to that of Beckett's commercial handlers who constantly engaged in attempts to fill theatrical gaps as if those perceived absences reflected creative deficiencies. Beckett's own intervention into his first dramatic success was the result of his accepting an invitation from Berlin's Schiller Theater in 1975. In Berlin, he was part of a system where the writer was included in the theatrical process. He could thus limit interventions into the artwork by others, and he could work outside the usual economic strictures of fully commercial theatre. He would return to stage that play in English in 1984, directing, or at least overseeing, a production with the American actor Rick Cluchey at the Riverside Studios, London.[3] Beckett's London participation was essentially a favour to the actor who headed the San Quentin Drama Workshop. In September 1988, Beckett gifted copies of the textual and theatrical revisions for both Berlin (1975) and London (1984) productions to Cluchey, and since 1 July 2014 those documents have been

[3] See Beckett's structural outline of the play: https://samuelbeckettsociety.org/2017/12/08/beckett-annotated-godot/ . See also 'Manuscript Annotations by Samuel Beckett in a Copy of *Waiting for Godot* for a Production by the San Quentin Drama Workshop': www.bl.uk/collection-items/manuscript-annotations-by-samuel-beckett-in-a-copy-of-waiting-for-godot-for-a-production-by-the-san-quentin-drama-workshop.

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More Information

archived at Washington University, St. Louis. The archivist's note on these performance revisions offers the following overview:

> Beckett had long believed the play to be confusing [actually not] and clumsily visualized [only somewhat], though, and he used the opportunity his directorial debut [actually not] provided to clarify both the text and stage directions. Copiously marked up with colored underlining and autograph notations, the book reveals in vivid detail the extensive revisions Beckett made to his original work, which included dialogue changes, the excision of entire scenes, new directorial emphases, and alterations to the staging. (WU, Rick Cluchey Collection of *Waiting for Godot* Materials, Box VMF 20, folder 4)[4]

Beckett's interventions, however, his emendations, say, tended not to be commodity-driven, nor to have much to do with commerce at all. With the initial *Waiting for Godot* experience, however, he was drawn deeper into such commerce, the economics, the business of art production, and he began to function less as an author working in isolation than as a company manager, the CEO, perhaps, of Beckett Enterprises, as he negotiated salaries, royalties, and other emoluments, engaged in quality control, headed product research and development, and engaged, to some extent, in community relations. Barney Rosset in turn would function as Beckett's CFO, keeping him apprised and so involved in the economics of art production and management, even as Beckett, on occasion, tried to distance himself from those roles.

Collectively, these economic, political, and aesthetic processes that intersect theatrical production form their own archaeological mosaic, a set of often material curiosities that details not only Beckett's developing theatrical art but the process of art, particularly commercial theatrical production in a monetised, commodity-driven culture often called late capitalism. T. S. Eliot could embrace what he saw as creative intervention in the rearrangement and reshaping of his poetic, cut-up mosaic or collage, and he would celebrate the interventionist, Ezra Pound, as the *better* craftsman. But Pound's interventions were done openly.

[4] 'Rick Cluchey Collection of *Waiting for Godot* Materials, 1954–1965'. Washington University Libraries (cited hereafter as WU), Department of Special Collections (https://aspace.wustl.edu/repositories/6/resources/607/collection_organization). This is one of four texts revised by Beckett for performance, two for the Schiller production in 1975 and two for Riverside in 1984. Beckett had also given a photocopy of the Cluchey text to the University of Reading Beckett Archive, and it, along with the three other revised copies of *Godot*, forms the core of the text of *Waiting for Godot* that James Knowlson, with Dougald MacMillan, used to establish the final revised acting text that appears in *The Theatrical Notebooks of Samuel Beckett* (Beckett, 1994). All the revised texts are available in that volume in facsimile, transcription, and translation. Cluchey's '2nd prompt book' used for the Riverside production is also on deposit at Washington University, but this document was not consulted for the *Godot Theatrical Notebook* (Van Hulle and Verhulst, 2018, 162–3). Another copy is on deposit at DePaul University (Van Hulle and Verhulst, 2018, 165) and one remains in private hands (163).

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More Information

Beckett, on the other hand, would try to resist such intervention as best he could, but he was often overwhelmed by the invisible machinery of art and the matrix of cultural forces that, finally, throw into question the integrity and autonomy of authorship since changes, revisions, and adjustments were often made by stealth, that is, without authorial knowledge or approval. Commercial theatre, Beckett would find, was an economic machine through which private labour was transformed and the author/labourer at times marginalised or alienated as additional labour entered the process of commodity production, the entire machine designed to generate surplus value for investors even as art appeared to maintain its distance from the utilitarian and the material. It is pertinent to recall, for example, that in his *Aesthetic Theory* Theodor Adorno called art the 'absolute commodity', or more fully, 'The absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity' (Adorno qtd in Suther, 2017, 104). Jensen Suther summarises the critic Stewart Martin on such convergence:

> For Martin, this striking claim is key to understanding Adorno's theory of modernism, and explodes the antinomy between two contemporary, countervailing aesthetic theories, one that insists that the work of art is, as a commodity, insuperably determined by capital, and one that claims that the artwork is autonomous and insulated from the process of exchange. (Martin qtd in Suther, 2017, 104–5; see also Martin, 2007, 18)

In Martin's terms,

> autonomous art effectively comes into being with commodification, which frees certain products from their heteronomous determination by the church, state or other forms of patronage, and, through the indeterminacy of their ultimate buyer, such works acquire an independent sense of their end and value. Autonomous art is thus an ornament of capitalist culture. On the other hand, there is the position that autonomous art is destroyed by developed capitalism. According to this view, the development of commodification as a general principle of society reduces all values to exchange-value, including the value of art, and thereby destroys art's autonomy. Capitalist culture is consequently the death of autonomous art. (Martin, 2007, 16)

Such curiosities detailed herein offer an alternate genealogy of the 'antimony' between or the convergence of art and commodity, or at least of their unstable and shifting alliances, as Martin details in the quote above, not only, that is, of a single work per se but of a cultural process, the machinery of commodity-driven art competing in a marketplace with other commodities, an object for investment with an expectation of a greater return, and so they alter an artistic and critical landscape in terms of the interface of private labour, commodity economics, and the generation of surplus value through artefacts displayed for sale to an anonymous public. Beckett seems to have wanted it both ways: the

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Excerpt
More Information

integrity of the individually produced, autonomous artwork, on the one hand, and the rewards of communally produced commodity production and sale, on the other. In this regard, we might argue that Beckett's challenge was close to that of Marx and part of the 'dissonance' that Adorno saw as inherent to modernism, at least as summarised by Suther:

> The artwork conceals its social determination and origin in the division of labor and does so precisely as a commodity, in accord with the logic of commodity fetishism. Because, however, the work insists on its autonomy from any external end, it mobilizes fetishism against its own commodification. In this way, as Martin argues, the exchange value of the artwork is the only possible value. (Suther, 2017, 107)

The initial stagings of *Waiting for Godot*, American, British, and Irish, constituted Beckett's full immersion into the Anglo-American theatre business, and once entering the process, his entanglement in the machinery of commercial art production with its economic balance sheets, he very quickly lost creative autonomy as his literature of dissonance, as Adorno might have called it, was appropriated and capitalised. He would spend the remainder of his creative life recovering, struggling to re-establish the autonomy of his artworks in a marketplace, and much of his strategy was not only to restrict interventions contractually, that is, to turn the machinery of commercial theatrical production back on itself, but to become his own interventionist. The process that generated his own productions and their inevitable self-interventions was in part an attempt to resolve the tensions between the artwork as autonomous 'from any external end', with its aesthetics of dissonance, and the collaborative aesthetics and monetised demands that constitute commercial theatre.

2 Broadway and other Theatrical Adepts

On 4 November 1954, the American publisher Barney Rosset informed his new author that

> [the American producer Michael] Myerberg informs me that *Godot* is due to open, providing that contracts get signed, in Miami, Florida on January 3rd [1956] and then make two additional stops en route to New York. This all sounds very wonderful and I will keep my fingers crossed until all arrangements are completed. If all goes well I will print a new edition of the play, to look like the old one excepting that it will be done with a paper jacket and will sell for something like $1.00. (Rosset, 2017, 92)

As production neared the following year, 22 November 1955, Beckett had got word that the American playwright Thornton Wilder was involved with the American staging of *Godot* and wrote to the play's newly named American

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