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“I CAN MAKE NOTHING OF IT”: Beckett's Collaboration with *Merlin* on the English *Molloy*

Pim Verhulst and Wout Dillen

When the English *Molloy* was published in 1955, jointly by Olympia (Paris) and Grove (New York), a long and difficult translation process had ended, on which Beckett worked both alone and together with *Merlin* and Patrick Bowles. This article is the first attempt to approach this somewhat neglected topic by way of manuscripts, notebooks, letters and other related materials, in order to establish a basic chronology of the English *Molloy*. In so doing, our purpose is to shed more light on a relatively obscure period in Beckett's literary career and examine critically the role of each party involved.

Samuel Beckett culled his trilogy of novels for striking images and phrases throughout his later career, but during the 1950s he revisited *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* and *L'Innommable* in a more direct sense, when various parties requested English versions of his new work. What Beckett called “the losing battle” of translating the trilogy (Knowlson, 438) was fought in the period between 1950 and 1958. This article discusses *Molloy* because it forced Beckett to devise a long-term strategy to deal with the “hopeless thankless chore” of translation (Harmon, 355), while also leaving sufficient room for new creative endeavours. His decision from *Malone Dies* onwards to self-translate most of his work was largely the result of a troublesome collaboration on *Molloy* with Patrick Bowles, a young South African writer.

Until recently, little was known about this joining of forces. Bowles's article in the *P.N. Review* (1994) and James Knowlson's impressive authorized biography (1996) have outlined the basic facts, but the second volume of Samuel Beckett's letters (2011) and Richard Seaver's memoirs (2012), as well as information available in archives, offer new information that calls for a critical reassessment of both the text and the process through which it came about. The present article offers a first step in that direction, by approaching the English *Molloy* from the perspective of “letters, notebooks, manuscripts and the like,” also known as Beckett's “grey canon” (Gontarski, 143). Our purpose is to shed more light on a relatively obscure period in Beckett's literary career and to chart the textual history of *Molloy* in English. To this purpose, an overview of the translation's preserved draft stages seems in order:

	DATE	TYPE	NAME	SOURCE / LOCATION
A	Oct. 1950	Prepublication	“Two Fragments”	<i>Transition Fifty 6</i>
B	Late 1952/ early 1953	Manuscript	Tara MacGowran Notebook (TMN)	Ohio State University
C	Jul. 1953	3 Typescripts	Barney Rosset Specimen 1, 2 (clean copy of 1), and 3 (copy of 2)	Washington University, St. Louis
D	Sept. 1953	Prepublication	“Extract from <i>Molloy</i> ”	<i>Merlin 2</i>

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E	Nov. 1953	Typescript	Part I	Washington University, St. Louis
F	Mar. 1954	Prepublication	"Extract from <i>Molloy</i> "	<i>The Paris Review</i> 5
G	Apr. 1954	Prepublication	"Molloy"	<i>New World</i> <i>Writing</i> 5
H	Dec. 1954	Typescript	Part I and II	Washington University, St. Louis

A

As the chronological overview reveals, the textual history of *Molloy* in English does not begin with the Beckett-Bowles collaboration. The idea to translate the novel was already on Beckett's mind in the late 1940s, six months after its completion in French, but well before it found a publisher. George Reavey wrote to him in Dublin that Cyril Connolly was looking for a text of around 30,000 words to include in *Horizon*, but the plan never materialized. On 8 July 1948 Beckett replied that he would not be able to translate the first part of *Molloy* by that time (Bair, 402). Two years later the first English sample from *Molloy* appeared in the October 1950 issue of *Transition*, together with a specimen from *Malone Dies*. Again, the French novels had yet to appear, but Jérôme Lindon of Les Éditions de Minuit had by now accepted them. The fragments are identified not by their titles but the numbers "I" and "II." The ensemble is called "Two Fragments" and Beckett is credited as the author and translator. Shane Weller's recent Faber edition of *Molloy* discusses the "substantive differences" between the *Transition* specimen and the Grove/Olympia editions (qtd. in Beckett 2009, vii).

Equally interesting is Beckett's selection of text, beginning: "I left the shelter of the doorway and began to lever myself forward, slowly swinging through the sullen air" (1950, 103). In the Minuit first edition, this is when Molloy sets out on his crutches: "Ce qui par contre me paraît indéniable, c'est que, vaincu par l'évidence, par une très forte probabilité plutôt, je sortis de sous l'auvent et me mis à me balancer lentement en avant, à travers les airs" (1951, 97). The English rendition in *Transition* deletes the first part of the French sentence, to pick up pace in full syntactic swing. Molloy embarks on a series of ruminations that comes to a peculiar close: "And the cycle continues, joltingly, of flight and bivouac, in an Egypt without bounds, without infant, without mother" (1950, 105).

Beckett worked on the fragment between June and September 1950, when paying a sustained visit to his mother in Ireland (Cohn, 193). May Beckett was suffering from Parkinson's disease and eventually passed away on 25 August (Knowlson, 383). These biographical circumstances imbue the phrase "without mother" with special significance. The passage, featuring a Molloy whose "mind was still taken up with the question of my mother" and who is "bent on settling this matter between my mother and me" (1950, 103), perhaps served as a homage to the deceased May as well as a creative outlet for Beckett's frustrations and grief. The phrases about Molloy's mother of course feature in the original French, written in 1947, but translating them in 1950 must have been particularly poignant for Beckett given the circumstances. It is also telling that he singled out this particular section, ending on the phrase "without mother," for inclusion in *Transition*, as it resembled his own situation at that time so closely. As an isolated fragment, it enables a biographical reading that cannot be so easily extended to the novel in full.

B

The next fragment in the chronology of the English *Molloy* is located near the end of the 'Tara MacGowran Notebook' (TMN) held at Ohio State University (77v-85v). C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski's claim (556) that part of the TMN fragment appeared in *Transition* seems incorrect, as the TMN fragment and that in *Transition* represent different selections of text. In addition, the chronology of the notebook appears to rule out any connection with the publication in *Transition*. The only date occurs on the first folio, right above the prose fragment "Ici personne ne vient jamais" and reads

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"15.3.52" (1v). A later note, "Paris, beaucoup plus tard" (14v), suggests that all subsequent material was written no earlier than the second half of 1952.¹

This would situate the *Molloy* draft in the TMN around the time when Beckett gave permission to the young team behind *Merlin* to print extracts from his work in their review. On 7 October 1952, chief editor Alexander Trocchi wrote to his colleague Christopher Logue that Beckett was "quite willing to have us translate from his French!" (Collection Merlin B.3/F.11). The group agreed on *Molloy* for an extract and eventually wanted to include the novel in their Collection Merlin series, which Maurice Girodias took on as an imprint of his Olympia Press (Beplate, 103). It was probably also Trocchi who made a first attempt at translating *Molloy* into English, with Beckett painstakingly revising the result in the TMN. At one point, Beckett interrupted his revision to write Trocchi the following letter:

I have been thinking over the possibility of Molloy in English and feel that we had far better drop this project for the moment at least. It won't go into English, I don't know why. It would have to be entirely rethought and rewritten which is I fear a job only myself can undertake and which I simply can't face at present. You may of course publish the extract in Merlin, if you still wish to. I am revising the translation which has great qualities. I'm afraid I am making a lot of changes, probably too many. My English is queer.

(2011, 356)

As the editors of Beckett's correspondence state, the actual letter has not been found. Their transcription is based on an undated draft letter in the 'Sam Francis Notebook' at the Beckett International Foundation in Reading. The editors also note that "SB's struggle with the translation is reflected in his many false starts" (2011, 356n3). Especially the first sentence of the letter is relevant in this respect. Beckett hesitated between "Trying to reflect on Molloy in English" and "Trying to imagine Molloy in English" before deciding on the phrase: "I have been thinking over Molloy in English." Although Beckett writes that the translation has "great qualities" (356), this was not his first choice: "In spite of its wants I think it has good" and "The translation has great possibilities" were both crossed out (357). The many rewritings indicate the delicacy of the matter. Beckett was far more direct in his letter to Lindon of 5 February 1953: "The English translation of the passage from *Molloy* is not good" (2011, 358).² The obvious difference in tone suggests that Trocchi himself was indeed responsible for the preliminary version. In the end, Beckett let good manners prevail by blaming his dislike on his own "queer" command of English, instead of faults in the translation.

Beckett revised Trocchi's attempt in the TMN by writing it out in full, making changes as he went along. The revision abruptly ends with a short and frustrated letter to an unidentified recipient, which may well have been Trocchi. In this letter, Beckett gives permission to use the addressee's own translation of *Molloy* as an extract, saying: "I can make nothing of it" (qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski, 556). The letter also mentions a passage from the novel that begins on page 117 of the Minuit first edition and goes on until the end of part 1 (141). This is indeed where the *Molloy* draft in the TMN begins, but it ends much sooner, on page 126 of the French text. This suggests that Trocchi had reached the end of part 1 in his translation, whereas Beckett found himself stranded halfway through his revision.³

C

In the meantime, Barney Rosset had expressed the desire to publish *Molloy* in the US. He tried to work out an agreement with *Merlin*, which had secured the English rights to the novel. Since Trocchi was unsuccessful in his attempt and Beckett preferred not to face the task himself, a different solution had to be found. On 18 June 1953, Rosset wrote to Beckett about an unidentified "young man, Belgian by birth, who moved to this country some seven years ago" and offered to translate *Godot* (Beckett 2011 386-87). Since Beckett was producing his own version, Rosset suggested the young man try his hand at *Molloy*. One week later, Beckett replied: "Trocchi has kindly undertaken to produce three specimens of the first 10 pages of Molloy and Malone" and that the young Belgian

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should also join the competition, although he preferred a translator who lived nearby. Demands were quite high: "In any case it is a job for a professional writer and one prepared to write in his own way within the limits of mine, if that makes any sense, and beyond them too, when necessary" (385).

Only two of the three 'Merlinites' who produced a specimen translation matched Beckett's specific description: Alexander Trocchi, an aspiring novelist to be remembered for *Young Adam* (1957) and *Cain's Book* (1960), and Patrick Bowles, whose main interest was poetry. The third candidate, Richard Seaver, had no literary ambitions. It is generally understood that Bowles came out as the winner, although Seaver claims he was first pick:

I began work on a draft but had not progressed far when the financial pressures on *Merlin* became such that I landed a job that paid me enough not only to live on but to finance a couple of issues of the magazine. The hitch was that it took me out of Paris for six months, so I passed the task on to Patrick Bowles.

(qtd. in Beckett 1974, xxiii)

This hitch was supposedly a "teaching job" (Campbell 2005, 56). Seaver tells the story from a slightly different angle in his recent memoirs: "I had finally decided, perhaps again out of guilt for having accepted two Fulbrights ostensibly for that purpose, to finish my Sorbonne thesis on Joyce, with the oral defense scheduled for the following June" (212). Beckett understood his decision, and Seaver claims to have suggested Bowles as a replacement. The next month, on 18 July 1953, Beckett wrote to Rosset that he had found a translator for the novel, making a last enquiry about the young Belgian's attempt (2011, 387-88). Whether it was sent or not, 25 July 1953 is the first date recorded in Bowles's notes on his collaboration with Beckett, as published in the *P.N. Review* (1994).

The entry corroborates Trocchi's selection procedure, casting further doubt on Seaver's variably remembered series of events. As appears from the title, Bowles's "Notes on Talks with Samuel Beckett" is an eclectic document. It is structured around twelve dates, only four of which belong to the period when Bowles worked on *Molloy* with Beckett (July 1953-January 1955). On the one hand, it consists of notes taken down immediately after their meetings. Bowles vows they are "not inventions and nothing is fictitious," and that everything is printed verbatim "without embellishment" (1994, 24). On the other hand, the notes are interspersed with text in square brackets, later comments for the purpose of holding the notes together. Since the bracketed text accounts for almost fifty per cent of the article, the notes preserved by Bowles over the years must have been scant. An unpublished interview conducted by Martha Fehsenfeld in November 1990 reveals why so little was left:

I've lost nearly all the manuscripts and so on that I ever had because they were stored in the studio of a friend of mine, whom all the people in the Merlin group knew, her name was Shirley Wales. I believe that she is now deceased. But she kindly agreed to look after something like 14 suitcases of books and manuscripts, you see. And she stored them in her basement in her cellar and one winter in Paris there was a tremendous storm that lasted several weeks and the basement was flooded, completely, and she rescued some of my books and put them upstairs, but most of it I'm afraid she just had to throw away, it was – perhaps if she had known that the Beckett manuscripts were there – because that was where I kept the original manuscripts of the translation of *Molloy* with Beckett's corrections on it, you see. And that was all – in both our handwriting –

(Bowles, 1990)

This revelation sheds a different light on Bowles's article, and explains the paucity of information on *Molloy*, conveyed in both the notes and the editorial comments – mostly the latter.

As Campbell notes in his *Guardian* obituary, working with Beckett was "clearly the high point of Bowles's literary life," whereas "other [Merlin] juveniles achieved success in seniority" (13). With little to show for it besides the published translation of *Molloy*, Bowles's notes read like an apologetic

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mix of historical fact and recollection, motivated by a peculiar strategy to reveal information and conceal lacunae at the same time. Given this scarcity of material, (near) exhaustivity rather than selection, and a strange sense of authenticity emerge as the main drives of the article. Still, we do not so much aim to discredit the notes as place them in their proper historical context. In many respects, they are still the best source we have for an understanding of the Beckett-Bowles collaboration on the English *Molloy*.

The account of their working method – on part 1 at least – is quite detailed. Meeting regularly at various Paris cafés, Beckett's apartment and Bowles's tiny attic room, Bowles would translate a few pages on his own, then revise them with the author, debating almost every word. After each session, Bowles retyped the day's work. "Give it a bit of rhythm" was a common encouragement, Beckett approaching *Molloy* as if written by someone else (qtd. in Bowles 1994, 24). Bowles did not just follow instructions, as the episode of Lousse and her parrot shows. Having at last found a suitable equivalent for the bird's "Putain de merde!" ("Fuck the son of a bitch!"), Bowles was sorry to see Beckett's French expletive go. He "suggested there was no reason why the parrot should not have three masters in the English version," and a French owner was added (1994, 33). Such deviations were possible because Beckett defined their translation as an attempt "to write the book again in another language – that is to say, write a new book" (1994, 27). The entire process took about fifteen months to complete. But time was unevenly distributed over the two parts of the novel, the Moran part causing severe delay.

This asymmetrical evolution can be traced in Beckett's letters. The first report was sent to Mania Péron on 27 July 1953: "I am beginning to translate *Molloy* into English with a young South African. 'Je fais dans son vase' becomes 'I piss and shit in her pot'" (2011, 394) – a reference to page 8 of the Minuit edition. The very next day, Beckett sent Rosset a "specimen translation" of *Molloy* for his approval (Collection Merlin B.1/F.25). This specimen is preserved in three copies – Beckett's own with corrections and two clean reproductions – at Washington University, St. Louis (more on this later on). On 27 August 1953, Beckett told Rosset he and Bowles had just dealt with "the unpleasant Ruth or Edith idyll" (2011, 412). By now they had reached page 85 of the Minuit edition, with fifty-five pages remaining in part 1. The rest was finished at some speed, for Bowles's notes state that a clean draft was ready by 14 November 1953: "I met Beckett in the Select today at 10.30 a.m. [...] It should have been ten but I was late. I had stayed up till 8 a.m. this morning typing the first half of *Molloy*, which we finished a day or two ago" (1994, 26).

D, E, F and G

The first draft of part 1 was sent to Grove at the end of November. Washington University in St. Louis holds a typescript of this draft, which was probably meant as a clean copy, but has about seventy holograph corrections. This annotated typescript was the basis of three extracts: in *Merlin* (Autumn 1953), *New World Writing* (Spring 1954), and *The Paris Review* (Spring 1954). The first two are nearly identical and reproduce the opening pages of the novel. Although the *Paris Review* reproduced Molloy's sucking stones episode in a version that is clearly more advanced than the first typescript, we shall limit our discussion mainly to *Merlin*, which printed the longest extract. It runs until page 38 in the Minuit edition and takes a few interesting liberties with the French.

A first difference concerns Molloy's reference to his "beginning" in the first sentence of the novel's second paragraph: "This time, then once more I think, then perhaps a last time, then I think it'll be over, with that world too. Premonition of the last but last but one" (1953, 89). This is generally read by critics as a reference to the trilogy of novels. However, when Beckett wrote *Molloy* in French, he had only conceived of *Malone meurt*: "Cette fois-ci, puis encore une je pense, puis c'en sera fini je pense, de ce monde-là aussi. C'est le sens de l'avant-dernier" (1951, 9). The early specimen Beckett sent to Rosset on 28 July 1953 still follows the French original, so the decision to update the phrase to include *L'Innommable* was clearly a later decision, when the English version began to acquire its own distinct rhythm.

A similar dissonance between language versions occurs when Molloy speaks of the two men, A and C, "going slowly towards each other" (1953, 90). In the French text, they were named A and B.

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Cohn connects the letters A and C to Abel and Cain, as the biblical allusion fits the violent context of *Molloy* (399). This simple change from B to C in English is complicated because the typescript of part 1 replaces B with C in ink on just three occasions, retaining B in four places, thus jumbling A, B and C together in this intermediate version. If this is not an example of oversight, perhaps at some early point it was Beckett's intention to have Molloy confuse the letters in English, to further stress his unreliability as a narrator. The co-occurrence of A, B and C is also present in the *New World Writing* extract. It is strange that Beckett did not bring the extract in line with *Merlin*, but perhaps this is because he was not sent proofs for the extract in *New World Writing*. In any case, this is the only place where the *Merlin* and *New World Writing* prepublications are more advanced than the first typescript of part 1, as opposed to the *Paris Review* extract, which was published last.

H

With work advancing steadily, and the first draft yielding three prepublications, Beckett's comment to Pamela Mitchell on 25 November 1953 that "Pat Bowles is pleasant to work with" does not seem out of place (2011, 421). On 13 December 1953, he even assured Rosset that "part 2 will go faster" (2011, 432). However, by 26 January 1954, no progress had been made. At this point, Bowles's notes record that "the damned thing is only half-finished" (1994, 27). Beckett was slowly driven to the point of exasperation, as he complained to Rosset on 21 April: "With regard to translation I fear I have been very remiss. [...] I have not seen or heard from Bowles for a long time. I revised the first few pages of Part II of *Molloy* and that was our last contact" (2011, 480). Bowles only mentions "an interval when I went to Spain" (1994, 25). For more details we must turn to the Collection Merlin Files at McMaster University.

At the end of November 1953, having just finished the typescript of part 1, Bowles got into an argument over his position as board chairman of Collection Merlin. Trocchi felt that Bowles lacked commitment to his "rather onerous and (if they are to be done well) energetic duties" and decided to reprimand him in a group meeting (Collection Merlin B.3/F.9). Bowles felt "impeached" and wrote Trocchi a passionate letter of resignation, stating his commitment to Beckett and *Molloy* (Collection Merlin B.3/F.9). He continued: "We are reputedly in earnest and joined at your invitation on other assumptions," which may refer to the fact that Bowles "was against the production of dirty books for Olympia" (Campbell 1995, 13). Trocchi tried to make him reconsider, but the meeting agenda for 8 December 1953 notes "Pat's leave of absence" (Collection Merlin B.3/F.3). Bowles did not actually quit Collection Merlin, but he was replaced as board chairman first by Christopher Logue, and later by Austryn Wainhouse. In addition, combining his teaching position in Le Havre with the demanding collaboration on *Molloy* left hardly any room for his own literary ambitions and reading pleasures. In his original notes for 26 January 1954 Bowles looks back on the beginning of his collaboration with Beckett, in a section that was cut for the *P.N. Review* publication:

Admittedly I have done other things since then as well. But not enough to fill 6 long months. Besides which I want to read several thousand books! [...] I ought to be a hermit, fossilizing in a cave: and making journeys in three directions only per day: from the bed to the table, the table to the pantry, the pantry to the shithouse: and of course variations on these.⁴

Any writer who is too closely involved with the work of another is bound to emulate his style, and the passage above certainly evokes *Molloy*. Bowles's prolonged stay in Spain may well be the result of an anxiety of influence, with Trocchi's reproach adding insult to injury. As Seaver states, "Patrick turned his back on the project and reimmersed himself in his own work, the long-planned novel he had, two years before, sketched out in his mind from start to finish" (213).

In the past, the two had worked closely together, but from now on Bowles would irregularly mail in sections of the translation for Beckett to revise. That this was a more difficult task than before is shown by Beckett's letter to Pamela Mitchell of 30 June 1954, written from Dublin at the bedside of his dying brother Frank: "The least difficulty stops me, I start looking out of the window, at the old

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wordless world. Then can't turn back to Molloy" (Pamela Mitchell Correspondence MIT/031). The correspondence of this period offers many examples of frustration. On 21 August another report on Bowles's progress was sent to Rosset: "The last pages he sent me bring us up to p. 208 of the book" (2011, 496). If this number refers to the Minuit first edition, there were still about sixty pages left, but work had again ground to a halt.

According to Seaver, Bowles showed his pages to him before they went to Beckett: "I found them strong and faithful, returning them with a few emendations and suggestions, which he said helped greatly" (213). This would account for the delays, but no other evidence supports the claim. On 25 October 1954, Beckett confirmed to Lindon his receipt of the final pages of part 2 (Pilling, 112). He had worked on them for a month when he wrote to Rosset: "I thought you would like to know that I have finished revising Bowles's text and have sent it to him to type out clean. Then I go through it rapidly once again and then off it goes to you" (2011, 512). Beckett received the clean copy on 7 December, reporting to Grove: "I am not satisfied with it but have reached the stage when I simply do not see it anymore" (2011, 514). He thought another week's work would finish the job, but a letter to Pamela Mitchell shows that he was still at it on 27 December: "Putting the finishing daubs at last to Bowles's Molloy, that makes about the 10th re-reading and it has my soul drowned in vomit" (2011, 514n2).

A typescript of the complete novel at Washington University, St. Louis reveals just how minute this final overhaul was. With over five hundred corrections to the first part of the novel alone, it represents a more thorough revision than the earlier version. It contains all the previous changes, in addition to many new ones, bringing the text largely in line with the published editions. In contrast, the typescript of part 2, which Beckett revised on his own without using Bowles as a sounding board, has significantly fewer late changes, around two hundred and fifty. Most are tweaks, but a striking difference with the French text is significant, considering the different working method for part 2. Near the end, Moran plays a game of Q&A with himself to pass the time. He concludes: "Me rapportant maintenant en imagination à l'instant présent, j'affirme avoir écrit tout ce passage d'une main ferme et même satisfaite" (1951, 239). The English reads as follows: "Translating myself now in imagination to the present moment [...]" (1955, 212). For the past year, disconnected from Bowles, Beckett must have felt he was doing exactly that. Nevertheless, for a long time, the two remained on friendly terms, meeting and writing each other, as *Molloy* went its own way in French and English. Beckett grew sympathetic to Bowles's situation, realizing how self-translation taxed his own writing. In the meantime he had begun translating *Malone meurt* on his own and discovered it went much easier. The English version of *L'Innommable*, on the other hand, would take him even longer than the collaboration on *Molloy*. Further work is therefore to be done in order to disentangle the processes of translating the second and third novels of Beckett's trilogy.

Notes

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1. This hypothesis is consistent with the other drafts contained in the notebook, as identified by Ackerley and Gontarski (555-56): *Fin de partie* (18r-48r), *From an Abandoned Work* (48v-70v), the *Foirade* "il est tête nue" (70v-76v), and seven lines of dialogue for *En attendant Godot* (97v), probably related to its publication or

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performance in the 1950s. Since *From an Abandoned Work* and the *Foirade* were written upside down and back to front, they seem to have been cramped between "Ici personne ne vient jamais" and the *Molloy* fragment at the extremities of the notebook. The *Fin de partie* fragments, written in regular fashion, were probably added last. Filling first the rectos and later the versos (usually left blank for revisions), Beckett was clearly optimizing the little space he had left. We are grateful to Dirk Van Hulle for checking certain details of the notebook during a research stay at Ohio State University in January 2013.

2. All English translations of French letters are by George Craig in vol. 2 of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* (Beckett 2011).

3. This would also explain why folios 87-96 in the TMN are blank. Beckett correctly anticipated the number of pages needed for his revision but lacked the energy to finish it. With thanks to Dirk Van Hulle for checking the transcription of this draft letter during a research stay at Ohio State University in January 2013.

4. This information was conveyed to us by Lois More Overbeck, in an e-mail dated 8 Jan. 2013.

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