

Performative Criticism: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit

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Samuel Beckett achieved worldwide recognition first as the playwright of *Waiting for Godot* by the mid-1950s, and the 1969 Nobel Prize for Literature secured his reputation as a novelist. It is less widely known that before this fame in other fields, he was a published critic of visual art, especially painting, from the year 1938 forward. Some of these writings on art were collected and published in 1984 as the third part of his book *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. This edition includes nearly forty pages of previously uncollected commentaries, reviews, and fragments about figures including Jack B. Yeats, Henri Hayden, Avigdor Arikha, and the brothers Geer and Bram Van Velde.¹ Various Beckett archives around the world hold more of this critical corpus, as well as much of the same material in its original context, including his contributions to *Les Cahiers d'Art* (1945-46), *Derrière le Miroir* (June 1948), and *Bulletin Galerie Michel Warren* (May 1957). Beckett's extensive correspondence with Georges Duthuit, a major figure of the 1950s postwar visual art scene in Paris and a close friend of Beckett's between 1948 and 1952, reveals that he had regular involvement in the translation of French art criticism for the literary magazine *Transition*, which Duthuit edited from 1948. Beckett did this for financial compensation, but not attribution, so its full extent remains unknown.² As has been widely discussed since the earliest stages of the now-institutionalized field of Beckett Studies, Beckett's works on paper and on stage are also saturated with cross-references to paintings.³ Finally, it emerges from all three of his major biographies that Beckett had lasting friendships with many artists, contributing to his evident knowledge of, and fascination with, both visual art and art history.

It is interesting that given this context, Beckett is not taken particularly seriously as an art critic generally, and is rarely considered as an Irish art critic specifically. There are several reasons for these interlocking absences from art historical discourse. First, Beckett's achievements in other literary areas clearly

¹ Ruby Cohn, ed, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, by Samuel Beckett, New York: Grove Press, 1984. Part III of this work, 'Words about Painters', takes up pages 115-52.

² Samuel Beckett to Georges Duthuit, 27 May 1948, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 2: 1941-1956*, eds George Craig, Martha Dow Fehsenfeld, Dan Gunn, and Lois More Overbeck, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011, 78-80.

³ The references are too numerous to list in full, but a useful summary of past scholarship can be found in the entry entitled 'art' in C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, eds, *The Faber Companion to Samuel Beckett*, London: Faber, 2006, 19-24. Deeper investigations have been made in book form (see Lois Oppenheim, ed, *Samuel Beckett and the Arts: Music, Visual Arts, and Non-Print Media*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1999) and in the curatorial arts (Fionnuala Croke, *Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Paintings*, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin, 2006).

overshadow his identity as a critic, in terms of where his lasting importance is most evident and where scholarly attention is likely to focus. His theories on painting are mostly mined for the ways in which they give clues to his own emerging aesthetic, or in other words, tacitly in subordinate status to his other works. Second, Beckett's achievement of literary stature as an Irishman writing in self-imposed geographic and linguistic exile, together with the legacy of censorship of his works and other public conflicts with the ideology of the Irish Free State, created a mutually adverse relationship between Beckett and Ireland that is still not fully resolved (though notably rehabilitated as of his 2006 centenary).⁴ Third, Beckett's critical voice, especially in his early criticism, simply does not adhere to rhetorical conventions of contemporary academic discourse, nor does it make any special bid for clarity. During Beckett's student years Trinity College Dublin was not a bastion of the professional critical diction that would become New Criticism by mid-century, and it is unlikely that this movement's 1920s avant-garde – figures like Ivor Richards and William Empson – were known to Beckett. Instead, as Steven Connor notes, Beckett's rhetoric in his non-fiction is notable for its 'crustacean antiqueness'. In a 2009 lecture reflecting on Beckett's ambivalent attitude toward academia in general, Connor writes, 'His is a language of smirking self-exhibition, of highly wrought phrases creased and corrugated by snarling self-disgust [...] it is a sort of poisoned bell-lettrism, a connoisseurship turned convulsively and self-mutilatingly on itself.'⁵ In short, while Beckett's theatrical style may have won the twenty-first century, his critical style did not win the twentieth. It is particularly difficult to secure a legacy as a scholar without a readership that can follow one's arguments.

This article will focus on Samuel Beckett's most famous work of art criticism, and the only one to which substantial study has already been devoted: his 'Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit', a work that first appeared in December 1949 in Volume 5 of *Transition* under the title 'Three Dialogues: Tal Coat – Masson – Van Velde'.⁶ The aim of this exploration is twofold. First, while intricate debates about this work have unfolded over many years within Beckett Studies, the current status of the work may not be as widely known among art historians. Second, the works were approached in a new manner in 2010 and 2011 in Dublin, with interdisciplinary links with art history and three distinct performances as part of a practice-based research project: recitation in architectural space, intervention in a conference setting, and more traditional 'theatrical' staging with a seated audience.⁷

⁴ There is evidence of a recent renewal in attempts to historicize Beckett's relation with Ireland more rigorously in works like Seán Kennedy's *Beckett and Ireland* (2010) and in events like the 'Samuel Beckett and the "State" of Ireland' conferences held annually 2011-13 at University College Dublin.

⁵ Steven Connor, 'Literature, Politics and the Loutishness of Learning,' a plenary lecture to the *Literature and Politics Conference* of the Australasian Association of Literature, University of Sydney, 6 July 2009 (available at <http://www.stevenconnor.com/loutishness>).

⁶ Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit, 'Three Dialogues: Tal Coat – Masson – Van Velde', *Transition Forty-Nine*, No. 5 (December 1949): 97-103 (University of Reading MS 3107).

⁷ The three performances directed by Nicholas Johnson were *Bram Van Velde*, 9 October 2010, Samuel Beckett Centre, TCD (Open House Dublin); *Performative Criticism: Beckett and Duthuit*, 20 November 2010, Swift Theatre, TCD (Writing Irish Art History/TRIARC); *Three Dialogues: A Textual Event*, 5-6 April 2011, Arts Technology Research Laboratory, TCD. The author wishes to acknowledge the funding of the Provost's Fund for the Visual and Performing Arts, TCD, as well as the collaborators, organizations and venues that provided in-kind support for this research.

In the content and form of this new work with the 'Dialogues', methodological questions of interest to both art historiographers and scholars of Beckett arise. In critical discourse now dominated by monologue and the tangible textual object, what is the legacy or possible role of dialogue and the ephemeral textual event? By investigating the context, the argument, and the performance of this text, it is hoped that some of the broader implications of 'performative criticism' may emerge.

'Three Dialogues': Context, Publications, and Scholarship

The issue of *Transition* in which the 'Dialogues' first appeared was dedicated to the visual arts, with multiple pieces referring in particular to the three painters that are discussed in each dialogue respectively: Pierre Tal-Coat, André Masson, and Bram Van Velde. With cover art by Henri Matisse, who was also George Duthuit's father-in-law, the edition included plates of paintings by Pablo Picasso, Joan Miró, Masson, Matisse, Tal Coat, and both Van Velde brothers, as well as essays and reflections on painting by Eugene Delacroix, Paul Eluard, Alfred Jarry, Stephane Mallarmé, and Duthuit himself. Structured as three separate exchanges between 'B' and 'D', ostensibly representing Beckett and Duthuit, the 'Dialogues' provide no framing of the *mise-en-scène* and only a few stage directions, some of which are clearly for comic effect (for example, the mid-dialogue note 'a fortnight later' before Beckett answers one question posed to him). Thus, both context and content of the 'Dialogues' place them not as part of Beckett's dramatic oeuvre, but rather within a tradition of philosophical dialogues going back at least as far as Plato. Certainly they are also responding in part to a philosophical work read and studied by Beckett as a student, the *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous* published in 1713 by Bishop George Berkeley, a fellow alumnus and later Fellow of Trinity College. Berkeley's own turn to the dramatic form was an attempt to restate in a more digestible manner his idealist and immaterialist metaphysics – the radical notion that nothing exists outside the mind – that had failed to have an impact in his *Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* in 1710.⁸ This shift from monologue to dialogue perhaps provides a clue to Beckett's situation in 1949, and also partly explains the popularity of this work compared to his other critical writings.⁹

A short history of publication and scholarship on Beckett's 'Three Dialogues' may help to illuminate some of the complexity of their present status, in which the works' title, authorship, accurate text, influences, significance, and meaning are all variously disputed. Though there is little documentation surrounding the small readership of *Transition Forty-Nine*, it is likely that for the journal's original audience, who would have known Duthuit as the editor of the journal and as an established public intellectual, Beckett's arguments were at an automatic

⁸ The motivations for Berkeley's shift to dialogue between 1710 and 1713 are discussed in both critical introductions of standard contemporary editions of his *Dialogues*; see Howard Robinson, 'Editor's Introduction', *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009; and Jonathan Dancy, 'Editor's Introduction', *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1998.

⁹ Beckett is reported to have said that he wrote *Godot* partly to 'get away from the awful prose I was writing at the time'. See Colin Duckworth, 'The Making of *Godot*', *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, ed Ruby Cohn, New York: Grove Press, 1967, 89.

disadvantage, before even accounting for their complex locution and paradoxical conclusions. In June of 1949, when Beckett began work on 'Three Dialogues' in earnest, he was in the midst of writing *L'Innomable* and had finished *En Attendant Godot* only months before; though these would both go on to be towering works of their genres, Beckett was still a relatively peripheral figure in the Paris literary circle of the time. After eight years of apparent irrelevance, the 'Dialogues' began to reappear in reprints, excerpts, and translations, sometimes with significant variations, either in the context of exhibitions and catalogues of Bram Van Velde's work, or else in publications by and about Beckett, upheld as an important key to the increasingly famous author's own aesthetic development. Several extracts of the first type emerged in 1957 and 1958 in Paris and the United States. First, a French extract from the third dialogue (translated by Beckett) was published as 'Dialogue Samuel Beckett-Georges Duthuit' in a brochure by Galerie Michel Warren for a Paris exhibit of Bram Van Velde's work (7 May – 1 June 1957). Also on 1 June 1957, the *Nouvelle Revue Française IX* excerpted a different translation (apparently not by Beckett) of the third dialogue and the long final response by B. A catalogue entitled *Bram Van Velde* including essays by Duthuit and Jacques Putnam was released in 1958 containing this same passage, published in French in Paris by Georges Fall, and later in English by Grove Press (1958) and Harry Abrams (1962); these latter texts have variants from the other published versions, but are notable especially for their abandonment of the dialogue format, reframing Beckett's statements on Van Velde as stand-alone commentary by him, rather than his character B. The texts continued to be used in this manner in exhibition contexts and catalogues through 1970 in both New York and Paris. The complete text of the 'Three Dialogues' first reappeared in 1965 in Martin Esslin's *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, again in 1965 in John Calder's Beckett series as *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*, in Ruby Cohn's *Disjecta* in 1984, in Edith Fournier's French translation *Trois Dialogues* in 1998, and finally in John Calder's *Beckett Shorts #2: Dramatic Works and Dialogues* in 1999. These latter two recent publications credited Beckett as sole author in spite of the publication history and the correspondence, which clearly reveals the extent of collaboration, with near-verbatim transcriptions from both men's letters appearing in the 'Dialogues'. This is a revealing inaccuracy, however, critiqued in the Faber *Companion* as 'specious'¹⁰ and signalling, for historicist scholars like David Hatch, the unthinking acceptance of the 'Dialogues' – some passages of which are quoted ubiquitously in Beckett studies – as a solo artistic manifesto rather than dialectic combat between equals.¹¹ Hatch is part of a clear movement over the past fifteen years to reconsider 'Three Dialogues' in a more historicized manner, galvanized by a conference on the 'Dialogues' in London in 2001 and a subsequent special section of the journal *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* entitled "'Three Dialogues" Revisited', published in 2003.¹²

¹⁰ Ackerley and Gontarski, 'Georges Duthuit,' *Companion*, 158.

¹¹ David Hatch has published several helpful articles on the 'Three Dialogues', and his PhD thesis *Beckett in (t)Transition: 'Three Dialogues' with Georges Duthuit, Aesthetic Evolution, and an Assault on Modernism*, Florida State University, 2003, provides a detailed historical and critical account of both genesis and reception (available at <http://etd.lib.fsu.edu/theses/available/etd-02262004-190546/>).

¹² The conference was held 10 November 2001 by the London Network for Modern Fiction Studies. Key publications in what I have called a trend in reconsidering the 'Dialogues' include: Lois Oppenheim,

'Three Dialogues': Content and Argument

Beckett and Duthuit's conversations do not have an analytic structure that is as easy to break down as either Plato's or Berkeley's dialogues, an instability that reflects both Beckett's style and the time and place of their development. Given its wartime upheaval, Paris in 1949 could be read as a cultural zone in which modernist aesthetics were increasingly contested, and philosophically, the meaning of the 'human', let alone 'artist', was a vital but unresolved question.¹³ Indeed, this generational and aesthetic division is one of the chief binaries in how the pieces have been read: D is a humanist against art-for-art's-sake and thus aligned with Masson (whose call to arms for artists to contribute to the postwar rebuilding of the human was published in the same issue of *Transition*), while B advocates for a poetics of 'indigence' and revalorization of 'failure.' B has a number of resonant lines that have found their way into theoretical discussions across many disciplines. In the first dialogue, the most famous exchange is as follows:

- B. — [...] The only thing disturbed by the revolutionaries Matisse and Tal Coat is a certain order on the plane of the feasible.
D. — What other plane can there be for the maker?
B. — Logically none. Yet I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.
D. — And preferring what?
B. — The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.
D. — But that is a violently extreme and personal point of view, of no help to us in the matter of Tal Coat.
B. —
D. — Perhaps that is enough for today.¹⁴

B's non-statement that ends the first dialogue sets up a repetitive structure through which it appears, both by the rules of traditional debate and by his own concession at the end of each dialogue, that B 'loses' the argument. The second dialogue ends with the stage direction 'Exit weeping' for B, following a beautiful passage of affirmative humanism from D; the third dialogue ends with 'B. — (remembering, warmly) Yes, Yes, I am mistaken, I am mistaken.'¹⁵ These serial refusals to compete or complete rhetorically can be read in one sense as a solution that demonstrates –

'Three Dialogues: One Author or Two', *Journal of Beckett Studies* 8.2 (Spring 1999): 61-72; the entire special section of *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 13 (2003); David Hatch, 'Beckett in Transition: "Three Dialogues", Little Magazines, and Post-War Parisian Aesthetic Debate', *SBT/A* 15 (2005): 43-56.

¹³ For placing historical context of this environment and its concerns, excellent further detail is available in Andrew Gibson, *Samuel Beckett*, London: Reaktion, 2010; and Kevin Brazil, 'Beckett, Painting, and the Question of the Human', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 36.3 (Spring 2013): 81-99.

¹⁴ 'Three Dialogues,' *Disjecta*, 139.

¹⁵ *Disjecta*, 145.

performatively – his argument’s success, however, since it is an object lesson in the failure of expression, regarded by B as inevitable. B’s stance has, as Ackerley and Gontarski note, ‘chimed with poststructuralist aesthetics’ and encouraged ‘a pessimism concerning the expressive powers of language: de-centring the discourse, deconstructing it, acknowledging vanishing structures, and seeking transient traces’.¹⁶ Such moments of caesura or void in the text are also some of the most inviting and suggestive for the live performer, since they offer an open space that can be filled by the actor’s energy or the audience’s gaze.

A central theme of the third dialogue, in which the axiomatic Beckettian line ‘To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail’¹⁷ appears, is that the ‘artist’ and the artist’s ‘occasion’ are both an ‘unstable term of relation’. The relevant passages, in context, are as follows:

B. — [...] I suggest that Van Velde is the first whose painting is bereft, rid if you prefer, of occasion in every shape and form, ideal as well as material, and the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act.

D. — But might it not be suggested, even by one tolerant of this fantastic theory, that the occasion of his painting is his predicament, and that it is expressive of the impossibility to express?

B. — No more ingenious method could be devised for restoring him, safe and sound, to the bosom of Saint Luke [...]¹⁸

A bit later, in the midst of B’s final lengthy statement, the term ‘occasion’ reappears:

B. — [...] The analysis of the relation between the artist and his occasion, a relation always regarded as indispensable, does not seem to have been very productive either, the reason being perhaps that it lost its way in disquisitions on the nature of occasion. It is obvious that for the artist obsessed with his creative vocation, anything and everything is doomed to become occasion, including, as is apparently to some extent the case with Masson, the pursuit of occasion [...] But if the occasion appears as an unstable term of relation, the artist, who is the other term, is hardly less so, thanks to his warren of modes and attitudes. The objections to this dualist view of the creative process are unconvincing.¹⁹

In characteristic fashion, Beckett seems to be using idiosyncratic terminology; a search for these ‘disquisitions on the nature of occasion’ in art history does not yield much. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides one definition of ‘occasion’ as ‘a need or necessity’ that seems at first to fit many of these uses in the dialogue. There is, typically, a hidden key: it is B’s line ‘ideal as well as material’ which shows that the code that Beckett is engaging here is a strictly philosophical one, lifted from the

¹⁶ *Companion*, 578.

¹⁷ *Disjecta*, 145.

¹⁸ *Disjecta*, 143.

¹⁹ *Disjecta*, 144.

debates of early modern metaphysicians, particularly Nicolas Malebranche and Arnold Geulincx, two founders of the doctrine of Occasionalism. In this formal usage, 'occasion' (the actions of God's creatures locally motivated) is differentiated from 'cause' (of which God is the sole origin), a distinction that has been enlisted both to solve Cartesian mind-body dualism and the theodicy problem (an omnipotent God's responsibility for evil in the world). There are lengthy exchanges on 'occasion' in George Berkeley's dialogues between Hylas and Philonous, whose names mean 'matter' and 'lover of mind' in Latin and thus represent the struggle between idealism and materialism, and which it seems lent something to Beckett in both locution and content:

HYLAS. [...] by *occasion* I mean an inactive unthinking being, at the presence whereof God excites ideas in our minds.

PHILONOUS. And what may be the nature of that inactive unthinking being?

HYLAS. I know nothing of its nature.

PHILONOUS. Proceed then to the second point, and assign some reason why we should allow an existence to this unthinking, unknown thing.

HYLAS. When we see ideas produced in our minds after an orderly and constant manner, it is natural to think they have some fixed and regular occasions, at the presence of which they are excited.

PHILONOUS. You acknowledge then God alone to be the cause of our ideas, and that he causes them at the presence of those occasions.

HYLAS. That is my opinion.²⁰

Though the Occasionalists have been discussed extensively in their link to Beckett's novel *Murphy* and traces of Berkeley are clearly visible in *Endgame*, the centrality of this source for Beckett's 'Three Dialogues' is less well known (beyond the obviously identical title). It reveals again the grave difficulty in rehabilitating Beckett's aesthetic ideas, fascinating as they are, in the context of art historiography: must the art historian read Malebranche, Geulincx, Berkeley, and only then approach Beckett, all in order to answer a minor question about the criticism of painting in Paris in 1949?

Performative Criticism and the Textual Event

Live performance opens new possibilities for the 'Three Dialogues', both in terms of how they are understood by Beckett scholars and how they are integrated by art historians investigating twentieth-century France or Ireland. Much of this development in learning will naturally accrue to the practice-based researchers themselves, who by design spend many more months studying, memorizing, designing, and embodying the text, in comparison to an audience that will attend for perhaps thirty minutes. However, if this preparation is undertaken studiously and the performance aesthetics deployed effectively, then much of the clarity achieved by the performers should be able to be communicated to an audience. Many of the questions that are asked of a text in preparation for performance are

²⁰ Berkeley, *Principles* and *Three Dialogues*, 161.

questions that scholars equally have a stake in. Like a genetic historian, the director asks: which is the most accurate text that actors should memorize? Like a close reader, the actor asks: what is the action or meaning behind a given line, and what is the heritage of any difficult words? Like a biographer, the designer seeks to illuminate: what is the relationship or emotional bond between or behind these characters? The process of exploring each of these in the laboratory/rehearsal context is a form of scholarship, a methodology with the potential to develop knowledge across the humanities, including in art history. But because it is embodied and expressed as a different form than what has conventionally come to be known as academic research – namely, because it is not secured in print, but rather communicated orally and ephemerally in time – it has been somewhat devalued since the Enlightenment. The expression ‘old wives’ tales’ as a rhetorical antonym to scientific knowledge reveals how oral, community, and embodied knowledge has been both aged and gendered out of cultural significance. The later triumph of distribution in the era of mechanical reproduction, the market forces of late capitalism, and the near-total integration of the university into the culture industry has further put the ‘event’ of knowledge creation in a subordinate position to the dissemination of objects.

This boundary between ‘objects’ and ‘events’ of knowledge, however, has never been completely binary, and it is growing increasingly blurred by practices in digital culture, where ubiquitous reproduction no longer provides an easy distinction between textual stability and lived experience. Performance studies since the 1980s has also provocatively questioned the division between practice and theory. One of the founders of that discipline, Dwight Conquergood, provides a key to the epistemological tension that informs these practices:

The ongoing challenge of performance studies is to refuse and supersede [the] deeply entrenched division of labour, apartheid of knowledges, that plays out inside the academy as the difference between thinking and doing, interpreting and making, conceptualizing and creating. The division of labor between theory and practice, abstraction and embodiment, is an arbitrary and rigged choice, and, like all binarisms, it is booby-trapped. [...] Our radical move is to turn, and return, insistently, to the crossroads.²¹

A credo of both practice-based research and performance studies applied to this project, then, would be that theorizing ‘Three Dialogues’ can be enriched by enacting it, and that performance of ‘Three Dialogues’ can be enhanced by theorizing it, and thus that these strategies are co-dependent, not exclusive. Merely the fact that the printed knowledge laid out in the present article arose from the experience of having to direct and perform these texts should be sufficient to demonstrate this claim.

Though the ‘Dialogues’ were read in full at the 2001 London conference focusing on them, there is not a substantial performance history of the texts beyond

²¹ Dwight Conquergood, ‘Performance Studies: Interventions and Radical Research’, *The Drama Review* 46.2 (T174) (Summer 2002): 153-54.

this.²² When asked for permission by John Calder to stage a reading at the launch of the 1965 London edition, Beckett responded, 'What ever you like, but please not the Duthuit Dialogues. We can always find something to replace them.'²³ Certainly they do not fit fluidly into a performance context, and it is clear that unlike the scripts published as part of Beckett's collected dramatic works, they were written for the print medium – to be read silently in a literary magazine – rather than for the context of performance. There is a reflexive position that such distinctions should continue to be respected, since Beckett was clearly an author highly attuned to the formal characteristics of each new medium in which he worked, and at times was openly resistant to adaptations in contravention of his stated aims and wishes. On the other hand, like Beckett's prose works, the presence of a voice and the suggestion of the body in space are coupled with an exquisitely wrought language that seems at moments to beg to be read aloud. For the practice-based researcher, the question is simply whether there is valuable knowledge to be gained or shared by performing the work. Such a researcher is Janus-faced, however, with one side concerned with confronting the work on its own terms and learning from it, and the other side occupied with the 'occasion' of presenting the work and communicating its ideas to others.

The first opportunity to present this work in performance was linked to the 2010 Open House Dublin architecture festival, in which Trinity College Dublin generally, and the Samuel Beckett Centre specifically, was one of the venues designated for public exploration. A dance studio at the top of this Centre was arranged to be opened for tours, but because 'inhabited' space is often more interesting to experience than 'empty' space, the organizers wished to fill the room with actors in rehearsal, ideally with text by Beckett.²⁴ As the idea to perform the 'Dialogues' was then in its nascent stages at the Beckett Centre, a reading of the texts was arranged with two actors and an assistant, using only the third dialogue and treating the event as a workshop for work in progress. The context suggested by the design and layout was a public debate between two ostentatiously intellectual figures. Though valuable as rehearsal to test the language in front of a non-specialist audience, this staging did not appear to help any understanding of the substance of the third dialogue, operating instead mostly as entertainment and general support for the creative aims of Open House Dublin.

The second stage of development was a performance on 20 November 2010 at a conference session of the 'Writing Irish Art History' conference organized by

²² The readers were Orlando Harrison and Will Cox. Given the conference context and the fact that texts were not memorized, this would not be viewed as a full-fledged staging, though it is performance.

²³ There appear to be two different performances rejected by Beckett in 1965. This exchange with Calder is quoted in Hatch, *Beckett in (t)Transition*, footnote 35, 219, and is sourced there to Gontarski. Peter Fifield, in his lecture *Switching On and Off: Beckett's Prose on the Radio*, Samuel Beckett Summer School 2013, Trinity College Dublin, 13 August 2013, also discussed correspondence from Curtis Brown (Beckett's agents) refusing a similar request from the BBC Third Programme, which sought to broadcast a reading. Fifield has supplied dates of the letters in question: 6 October 1965 (request for permission from BBC) and 27 October 1965 (rejection from Curtis Brown).

²⁴ A theoretical treatment of an earlier performance of Beckett in the Open House Dublin context that reflects on the significance of animating architectural space appears in: Nicholas Johnson, 'Unfrozen Music: Beckett in the Museum', *Museum Ireland* 19 (2009): 36-41.

the Irish Art Research Centre (TRIARC) at Trinity College. This version was more of an 'intervention' into a different discourse, a physicalization of some of the aims of the present article. In the midst of a conference plenary session in a lecture theatre, the actor playing B took the podium as though about to give a paper. With the actor playing D standing adjacent, the third dialogue was enacted as an emotional public debate, suggesting the position of the 'Dialogues' in an art historical discourse, while at the same time foregrounding its conspicuous lack of adherence to conventional rules of engagement. At a conference whose title suggests history as something specifically textual, the appearance of this event also brought home some of the ways in which art history is performed, and also stood as a reminder of the role of passion and emotion in academic debate that is upheld as 'objective' or besmirched as 'dry'. Both to aid in the audience's understanding of the argument and to mimic the conference form that was being lightly satirized, a PowerPoint presentation was included to support B's arguments with definitions, logic diagrams, and images of the paintings under discussion.

The third performance, 5-6 April 2011 at the Arts Technology Research Laboratory (ATRL) in Dublin, was not only formally funded practice-based research, but also actively intended as a stage adaptation of the 'Dialogues'. This entailed full memorization by professional actors, script production that preserved Beckett's text while creating context around it, and design elements to enhance the clarity of philosophy in the text. Reflecting on the origins of the 'Dialogues' as emerging from the informal relationship between Beckett and Duthuit and taking cues from each section of the text, three settings were devised: Scene One was a friendly discussion over a game of chess, Scene Two an emotional discussion over a bottle of whiskey, and Scene Three a public discussion in front of an audience. The chess game was borrowed from a climactic scene in Beckett's novel *Murphy*, and the actors memorized the moves between Murphy and the mental patient Mr. Endon as a 'pre-set' activity during the audience's entrance. There is strong resonance between this chess match in Beckett's 1938 novel and the way in which B conducts his form of debate, so B played the moves of Mr. Endon.²⁵ The structure of the performance space was fashioned to enhance distanced contemplation and debate, so the audience watched from a single row on two opposing sides. Four screens at the end of each row provided a live video feed of the chess game and the whiskey in scenes one and two. A much larger screen covering an entire wall was then used in the final dialogue (again, as in the second performance, to enhance clarity and help show the public and self-conscious nature of the debate), with a digital projection mocked up to appear as an analogue slide projector, placing the whole discourse on the uncomfortable edge between old and new technologies of art history.

Post-show discussions held on both nights revealed that while the performances themselves were engaging and textual understanding was enhanced

²⁵ For non-chess players who cannot follow the notation of these moves in the novel, the summary of the match is that Endon (whose name is the preposition 'within' in Greek) manages to make a series of legal moves that achieve as little as possible, his 'perfect' conclusion being a rearrangement of his own pieces on his own back row, with minimal shifting of his pieces required to arrive there. It is a model of indolence and inaction, of the closed system, of the 'little world' or 'microcosmopolitan' that Murphy envies, indebted to Occasionalism. It is chess minus chess, purely as philosophical expression and without any spirit of competition, and in this way it is analogous to B's rhetoric in 'Three Dialogues'.

over a first reading, the arguments nonetheless remain extremely difficult for first-time viewers to follow in the moment. The performance was most pleasurable for those who already had experience of the texts, and particularly revelatory for those who came to the text with substantial knowledge of Beckett's oeuvre. Certainly the knowledge gained by the performers from the interior of the text hugely enhanced their own understanding, so the objectives of 'research' through practice were certainly met. If a fourth performance in this trajectory were to be devised, the objective of the audience understanding would have to be placed foremost. Shifting from the theatrical model to an installation in the gallery context would be one solution, where the actors undertake an endurance project of repeatedly performing the 'Dialogues', and where the audience can engage to whatever depth or number of cycles they might wish. Over time, the exhaustion of the actors would also likely shift the performance from fidelity to the author (which was a main concern, in terms of maintaining textual accuracy, in 2011) to fidelity to audience (in which actors might intervene in the text to make their understood meaning plainer at times, something that happened during rehearsal but not performance).

The 'Three Dialogues' project in both its forms – presently as written object, and in 2010-11 as performed event – might serve to remind that art criticism, like literature, is itself an evanescent event, bounded in time. The current modes of exchanging art historical knowledge already include performative criticism, as embodied minds are applied to the task of reading, viewing, conversing, conferencing, and thinking about art. Activating written criticism consciously, however, can provide a powerful methodology for both research and pedagogy, and the dialogic form remains a vibrant stream where theatre and theory sometimes intersect.

For those who would write art history, there may be insights still to be gained from Samuel Beckett, not only as a critic in his own right, but also for the intricate and dynamic research happening around him. The first two volumes of Beckett's letters each hinge on one main correspondent from the world of visual arts: Thomas MacGreevy and Georges Duthuit respectively.²⁶ In their unguarded exchanges, these three men reveal the passion that undergirded their thought and action, and in the scholarly apparatus surrounding them, there are frequent gemlike insights that show how much more they were than the sum of their publications. There are numerous contemporaneous reports in these letters that capture the fervor and confusion of the art of the time, and their places within it. For example, Beckett wrote to Duthuit from Dublin on 11 August 1948:

[...] back home after 'living art' exhibition, with 'French' paintings, dud Manet, unthinkable Derain, pukeworthy Renoir (there is not just Pichette, you know), fine good sew-sew Matisse, painter who talked to me of Macakio with sperm in his cock, a Clavé (?) that had everybody oh-ing and ah-ing, painter (same) who talked at length about abstract art (only hope), art critic who had been (when) not unimpressed by the 'abstractionists' at Denise somebody's place, and more, and more, back I say after breakdown for lack

²⁶ This is discussed in the introduction to *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume 1: 1929-1940*, eds Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2009.

of petrol on main road at the hour of the earliest drunks, I find your long letter which makes up for everything, or many things, including not being drunk enough to go straight to sleep.²⁷

This sentence alone is accompanied by a twenty-four-line footnote that identifies, as nearly as possible, all of the references in this long sentence, including which specific exhibit was attended, which paintings were displayed, and which Denise is under discussion. It is precisely Beckett's stature as something other than an art critic that has made this material available, and that has interested scholars sufficiently to pursue so many of his peripheral activities. Viewing criticism as an ongoing performance suggests that a full picture of a critical period exists not only in text, nor in the formal readings of conference papers, but also in the late-night post-conference conversations, blog posts, text messages, and chatter of opinion, even (or perhaps particularly) when one interlocutor is inebriated. How does a historian or historiographer account for this Heraclitean flow, the process of thoughts being made and unmade? One must seek the traces of gatherings and dialogues, formal and informal, if a body of criticism is to be inhabited, rather than merely constructed.

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²⁷ Translated from the French by the editors, Beckett to Duthuit, 11 August 1948, *Letters Vol. 2*, 98-99.