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# Samuel Beckett and the Writers of Port-Royal

Melanie Foehn

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Melanie Foehn. Samuel Beckett and the Writers of Port-Royal. Literature. Université de la Sorbonne nouvelle - Paris III; University of Kent (Canterbury, Royaume-Uni), 2012. English. NNT: 2012PA030077 . tel-00915119

**HAL Id: tel-00915119**

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UNIVERSITY OF KENT /  
UNIVERSITÉ SORBONNE NOUVELLE-PARIS 3

SCHOOL OF EUROPEAN CULTURE AND LANGUAGES (UNIVERSITY OF KENT)  
ECOLE DOCTORALE EDEAGE/ED 514 (SORBONNE NOUVELLE-PARIS 3)

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**SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE WRITERS OF PORT-ROYAL**

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July 9, 2012

**PhD Thesis / Thèse de Doctorat**

Comparative Literature / Littérature anglophone

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Carle Bonafous-Murat and Shane Weller, without whose advice and knowledge this thesis would not have been possible, and for allowing me to undertake this PhD project under their joint supervision. I am also grateful to Tom Baldwin for his help, particularly with Proust, and foresight.

At the Beckett International Foundation, for introducing me to Beckett's manuscripts, Mark Nixon, and Dirk Van Hulle; at the Department of Manuscripts at Trinity College, Jane Maxwell and Paula Norris.

I am grateful to Marylène Bournine, Siegfried Bois, Grégoire Cauchy, Agnès Cornélie, Thibault Deheuvels, Fredline Laryea, Sofia Lindström, Caroline Morillot and Caroline Wepierre, who kept me going at the beginning. I feel a lasting gratitude for all my friends in Canterbury, and cannot thank Anastasia Deligliani and Peter Fifield – who have been sharing my passion for Beckett and kept encouraging me these past years – enough.

I am forever indebted to my parents, sister and brother, for their endless patience, understanding and support.

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## INTRODUCTION

Les choses valent toujours mieux dans leur source. (Pascal,  
*Lettres provinciales*)

It has been observed that ‘the literary influences on Beckett have been far more important than has been acknowledged, and more important indeed, than the philosophical influences’ (Smith 2002: 3). The truth of this statement is evidenced by the description that scholars have given of Samuel Beckett’s relationship to seventeenth century French classicism. To date, critical interest has been limited for the most part to the figure of the philosopher René Descartes on the (fragile) grounds that Beckett was exclusively concerned with the Cartesian imperative of clarity and order, the fundamental dualism between body and mind, and Nominalism.<sup>1</sup>

Together with the assumption that Beckett’s vision was essentially Cartesian, his literary filiation with Pascal was suggested by critics, but only in terms of Beckett’s formal approach to the theatre. In his short article on *En attendant Godot* in 1953, the playwright Jean Anouilh was among the first reviewers to suggest that Beckett’s drama synthesizes the encounter between ‘classicism’ and a ‘modern’ form of art.<sup>2</sup> It is well known that Beckett retained a lifelong admiration for Pascal – indeed, Pascal was one of his ‘old chestnuts’ (Knowlson 1997: 653). Little attention has been paid, however, to the originality of Pascal’s thought, the specific nature of his prose, and the impact these might have had upon Beckett’s

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<sup>1</sup> According to *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (2004), the ‘Nominalist’ irony that Beckett mentions in his July 1937 letter to Axel Kaun as he alludes to the Mauthnerian denial of the capacity of language to represent either particulars or universals (see Ackerley and Gontarski 2004: 152). In *Damned to Fame*, James Knowlson confirms that Cartesian philosophy continues to be a necessary reference in the trilogy, although ‘philosophical, literary and artistic material is used in these enigmatic books in a way that is strikingly different from the earlier work’ (Knowlson 1996: 375). Indeed, the comic propensity of Beckett’s writing insists upon hesitation, one of the only elements that distinguish the pedagogical purposes of Arnauld and Nicole’s *Logique de Port-Royal* from Aristotle’s own *Logic*. In this distancing from philosophical language and discourse, however, ‘the shadow of the Cartesian man, the rationalist, reaching certainty through doubt, looms over the trilogy’ (Knowlson 1996: 375). The parodic quality of Beckett’s writing remains one of the foremost aspects studied to date – particularly the systematic ‘attack’ on rationalism at work in his prose.

<sup>2</sup> Beckett’s art has often been described through these polarities. This assertion is problematic nonetheless because it relies on terms that have seldom been appropriately defined by commentators. In the course of this study I will seek to clarify its implications.

mature work, especially the trilogy and the subsequent short prose. Yet, in the literary and philosophical context of post-war France, Beckett's filiation with Pascal, their corresponding preoccupations, were evident to his contemporaries, who identified Pascal as an underlying presence in his works.<sup>3</sup>

Anouilh famously observed that the deepest philosophical preoccupations in Beckett's first-performed (and most baffling) play are essentially Pascalian.<sup>4</sup> The Romanian-born writer E. M. Cioran, who befriended Beckett in the early 1960s, also perceived deep resonances with Pascal in the Beckettian themes of sickness, solitude and death.<sup>5</sup> Didier Anzieu sees an intimate connection between the two writers in the opening sequence of his recent book on Beckett (2004); as does Alain Badiou, who remarks (but only in passing) that Beckett's aporetic style is reminiscent of Pascal (see Weller 2009: 35).

With the release of substantial archival material, scholars are beginning to challenge the centrality of Descartes in the so-called 'Beckett canon'. Genetic studies have made these reassessments possible. These new readings converge in their disqualification of the earlier and enduring assumption that Beckett had read philosophy thoroughly. A major part of previous criticism gave no credit to Beckett's dismissal of the idea that his work was philosophical in essence: in his 1961 interview with French journalist Gabriel d'Aubarède, on 16 February 1961, for instance, Beckett observed that 'I wouldn't have had any reason to write my novels if I could have expressed their subject in philosophic terms' (reprinted in Graver and Federman 1977: 216-217).

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<sup>3</sup> This is no mere coincidence. Beckett was associated with French existentialism, even as early commentators had placed emphasis on the nihilistic tenor of his work (see Weller 2009: 35). Since Kierkegaard, Pascal has been widely considered as the forerunner of (Christian) existentialism. In 1958, William Barrett argued that 'when we come to Pascal [...] we are no longer dealing with a precursor of existentialism. Pascal *is* an existentialist' (Barrett 1990:111).

<sup>4</sup> Anouilh understood that the nature of this 'new classicism' resembles a form of pessimism that derived from Pascal's observations on 'la condition de l'homme', together with the Jansenist quest for an absolute and evanescent purity. This anticipation of 'modern' preoccupations is prevalent in the denunciation of the cruelty and injustice of the modern world and in the reiteration of the absurdity of a purposeless existence, invariably prone to boredom.

<sup>5</sup> Knowlson points out that Beckett later put some distance between them, 'finding that he had less in common with Cioran in terms of outlook than he had at first thought' (Knowlson 1997: 654).

In *Beckett's Books* (2006) Matthew Feldman rejects the assumption that Beckett was well-versed in Cartesianism.<sup>6</sup> Feldman observes that Beckett discarded systematic thought, and rightly adds that 'the effects of this reading continue to bedevil Beckett studies' (Feldman 2006: 149). According to Feldman, 'there is no reason to think Beckett's understanding of philosophy between 1929 and 1930 was any more than this: cursory. There is no evidence of philosophical studies before Beaufret and the Ecole and no explicit mention of Descartes in Beckett's prose later than Murphy's unspectacular 'dream of Descartes linoleum' (Feldman 2005: 51). The detailed study of the 'Philosophy Notes' provides unquestionable evidence that Beckett's knowledge of philosophy was largely derived from secondary sources. Feldman goes on to argue that 'with the exception of Schopenhauer, and to a much lesser extent Descartes, Beckett did not undertake any philosophical excursus prior to the composition of the 'Philosophy Notes' (Feldmann 2006: 60).

Of crucial importance here is the strategy of concealment in Beckett's use of primary philosophical or literary subtexts, as described by Mark Nixon.<sup>7</sup> Although they are unacknowledged by the author, these texts provided material for the early works. The importance of Pascal for Beckett may be grounded in this repeated gesture of erasure. That the Pascalian reference should have been a *hidden* reference only becomes apparent in a close reading of the texts.

The genetic approach to Beckett's work calls for a reconsideration of his understanding of the seventeenth century, and of implicit yet constant allusions to Pascal in particular. From the earliest critical writings to the later short prose, references to the *Pensées* can be found in Beckett's work. They take the form of either direct quotations or adaptations.

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<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Harvey is counted among the many critics (Mercier, Kenner, Calder, Helsa, etc.) who stressed the fundamental role that the 'Whoroscope' poem (and, by way of consequence, Descartes) played in Beckett's later aesthetics. He observes that the treatment of Cartesianism in Beckett's work is mixed, because it is characterized by 'the half-comic touch in the play on words within the title; the profound commentary on time and the human condition that lies scarcely concealed beneath the sardonic humour; the nationalisms that dissolve into the universal, the aspatial and atemporal qualities of an art that is at once highly stylized and very concrete; and the ironic *préciosité* of the correspondence between subject, title and press' (Harvey 1970: 3).

<sup>7</sup> See Nixon 2006 (accessed 21 September 2009).

Beckett distorts phrases that are taken from the most famous fragments. Some are so perfectly fitted to the overall frame of the text that the reference can be (and has been) missed by readers.<sup>8</sup> Chapter 3 will provide evidence that Beckett was haunted by Pascal's thoughts on disproportion as well as his depiction of the universe as a 'sphère dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nulle part' (Pascal 2004: #185).

In the course of the present study it will become clear that, for all its scientific accuracy, genetic research cannot serve as the only means to account for Beckett's use of the works of Pascal, together with his understanding of the role that Port-Royal played in elaborating a major aesthetic trend in French literature. An overview of Beckett's literary interests indicates that he was drawn to the philosophy of Port-Royal, and that he had an acute awareness of the evocative power and poetic potency of literary Augustinianism as it is manifested in the works of the French writers he most admired. But this has seldom been highlighted, or led to an in-depth study of the correspondences.

On the contrary, one of the most recurrent critical assumptions has been that the role Pascal played in the elaboration of Beckett's vision and in his relationship to art is secondary, in contrast to such thinkers as Descartes, Spinoza, the Gnostics or even the pre-Socratics. Bruno Clément, for instance, sought to define a specific practice in Beckett's use of quotations, including those from the *Pensées* (Clément: 1994). More recent analyses of Beckett's use of Pascal presume that the latter's thought is likely to have been a target of parody (see Cordingley 2006).

I will address the question here differently, as my purpose is to show that Pascal's influence becomes truly decisive in the trilogy, that is, when Beckett began to write in French,

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<sup>8</sup> S. E. Gontarski and Chris Ackerley have enumerated occasional references to Pascal in *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*. Diverse occurrences of the 'roseau pensant' are indicated in the 'Whoroscope Notebook' and in its parodied form in 'Les Deux Besoins'. In addition, an allusion to Pascal's use of a probabilistic argument in the fragment on the wager occurs in *The Unnamable* and *Waiting for Godot*. Other textual occurrences have, surprisingly enough, been left aside: for instance, the expression 'enough concessions, then, to the spirit of geometry' in *Molloy* (Beckett 2003: 183). The list remains incomplete at this stage, because I will be indicating additional uses of Pascalian quotations in the course of this study.

after *Watt*. I will carry out a close study of the primary texts in order to show not only that Pascal's philosophy of human existence appealed to Beckett, but also that he was haunted by the *Pensées* at the level of both content and style in his major post-war works .

## I. ARGUMENT AND METHODOLOGY

The title of this thesis is inspired by a remark made by the great nineteenth century literary critic, Charles-Augustin de Sainte-Beuve, whom Samuel Beckett deeply admired. His major work, *Port-Royal*, remains an authoritative reference for seventeenth century specialists. In a characteristic outburst of sincere admiration, Sainte-Beuve writes:

N'admirons-nous pas que sortent également de Port-Royal, ou du moins que s'y rapportent de si près, Racine et Pascal, la perfection de la poésie française et la perfection de la prose?

(Sainte-Beuve 2004 (II): 354)

For the historian of Port-Royal, the cultural, literary, philosophical and spiritual aura of Port-Royal, and beyond it, of the seventeenth century, culminates in the works of two exceptionally gifted writers: Pascal and Racine. Pascal brought French prose to the state of an art, 'il a établi la prose française', just as Racine's work is a thing of unsurpassed beauty: 'la poésie de Racine est au centre de la poésie française: elle en est le centre incontesté' (Sainte-Beuve 2004 (II): 352). Thus, for reasons that will become apparent in the course of this study, Sainte-Beuve is taken as the key to understanding Beckett's apprehension of the history of Port-Royal and Jansenism.

My purpose is to demonstrate that Beckett's reading of Pascal and Racine played a fundamental role in his literary formation, and that seventeenth century French classicism, prefigured as it is in these two writers, worked unfalteringly as a model which enabled

Beckett to define an aesthetic of reduction and impoverishment. I posit that Beckett's closeness to the seventeenth century, and Port-Royal in particular, is based on a skepticism towards language, which is subjected to the tyranny of the body and the passions.

From the outset, I have chosen to consider Beckett's relationship to French seventeenth century classicism through the filter of an element that, from his different readings, proved central in the account of that influence made in this study: Jansenism. Consequently, the encompassing philosophical, literary and theological context in which two of the most significant writers of the French seventeenth century, Pascal and Racine, were related – Port-Royal – provides the backdrop.

Moreover, the object of my research is to determine how Samuel Beckett's reading of Pascal and Racine actively shaped his understanding of twentieth-century literary art, and how this renewed encounter with their works came to shape his own experience of writing. I will demonstrate that his French prose is inspired by aesthetic imperatives of classical eloquence as it was defined by Port-Royal – for instance, the rejection of metaphor for the sake of clarity.<sup>1</sup> I will therefore restrict my analysis to the main question of Pascal's influence, as well as the impact of Racine upon Beckett's conception of the tragic in the early years.<sup>2</sup>

In this study, the interpretation of Beckett's response to the seventeenth century is elaborated upon different types of correspondences. The philosophical legacy appears in Pascal's counteracting Cartesian metaphysics. They mainly reside in the treatment of

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<sup>1</sup> Many fragments would illustrate this aesthetic stance, as Pascal wrote for instance: “Eteindre le flambeau de la sédition”: trop luxuriant. “L'inquiétude de son génie”: trop de deux mots hardis’ (Pascal 2004: #543). Louis Marin mentions that the aesthetic principle behind the rejection of the metaphor at Port-Royal is alluded to in the *Logique de Port-Royal*, in which the trope is conceived as ‘l’expression de surface d’une proposition aberrante’ (Marin 1975: 327). The distinction Beckett made between the English language and French should be recalled at this stage. As John Pilling writes, the young Beckett had addressed the differences between the two languages in his Trinity lectures, ‘emphasizing that English had more flower value’ whereas French was ‘more of a work language’, by which statement is meant that French is an idiom ideally less inclined towards lyricism, as ‘English was a matter of ‘looking well’, French not’ (Pilling 1997: 201).

<sup>2</sup> I concentrate exclusively on the figures of Pascal and Racine – particularly the first writer – because other sources, philosophical and literary alike, have already been considered by Beckett commentators. Repetition with previous studies must be avoided. I will, nonetheless, indicate from time to time in this study a number of other authors whose influence upon Beckett is already known.

subjectivity through a questioning of the body/mind relationship, and in the demonstration of the (in)capacity of reason to uncover truth. Literary analogies appear in the recurrence of specific words and images that find their source in the *Pensées* and their many variations in Beckett's prose. Pascal's evocation of existence as essentially an enigma should therefore be studied in detail, since this conception led the author of the *Pensées* to build up a tension that is maintained through the use of the figures of contradiction, antithesis and oxymoron, and of repetition.

Lastly, I would like to specify the underlying approach to Port-Royal undertaken in the course of my research. General assumptions on Pascal and seventeenth century classicism to date have served previous Beckett commentators. My arguments are elaborated out of the remarkable range of recent Pascal scholarship. Therefore, the predominant place given to the writer of the *Pensées* in my work is the result, firstly, of a detailed enquiry into the literary context of early twentieth century literary circles that Beckett knew, indirectly as well as through his own literary acquaintances in Paris. I have drawn from Beckett's sources on Port-Royal so as to extract philosophical and literary aspects that would later inspire his prose in French. Secondly, the interpretation of Beckett's work is based on fundamental aspects of Pascal's thought that anticipate his own preoccupations with literary expression. All the assumptions and developments made in this thesis are, as a result, based on a close study of manuscript sources and of the primary texts chosen.

## II. MANUSCRIPTS AND OTHER PRIMARY SOURCES

### A. *The figure of Pascal in Mahaffy's Descartes*<sup>1</sup>

Adrien Baillet's *Vie de Monsieur Descartes* (1691) was long thought to be Beckett's main source on the life of Descartes, until more recent scholarly studies showed that the poem 'Whoroscope' (1930) was directly inspired by John Mahaffy's biography, *Descartes* (1880).

Occasionally, the account of the philosopher's life is described with a form of derision that becomes evident in the author's account of Descartes's character. Indeed, the presentation Mahaffy gives of the established philosopher is often ironic. An interesting example can be found in the recounting of Descartes's meeting with Pascal in 1648: 'It was during this stay at Paris that he met and conversed with Pascal and claimed to have suggested to him his famous experiment on the weight of the void' (Mahaffy 2004: 127). Mahaffy recalls that a more humble Pascal attributed the source of his discovery to Torricelli's own experiments.

In a later section entitled 'His Temper', the study of character comically reinforces negative traits of Descartes's personality. Mahaffy's judgement about the philosopher is uncompromising. Descartes was as convinced of the infallibility of his method as the insuperable originality of his thought. As a consequence, he was contemptuous of 'the works done by others, both ancient and modern' (Mahaffy 2004: 142). Harvey, Galileo, Vieta, Pascal, and Campanella are listed as some of the foremost figures dismissed by Descartes as secondary. In a brief interlude, Mahaffy specifies that his judgement of Pascal's scientific capacities relied on an arbitrary criterion, that of age: 'he says of Pascal that he was evidently taught his conic sections by Desargues, and that probably his father helped him' (Mahaffy 2004: 142).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Since Lawrence Harvey, the idea that Baillet provided the essential material for *Whoroscope* became a widespread critical topos among subsequent anglophone and French critics (for instance, Michel Bernard Thomas Hunkeler as well as Genet and in their history of modern Irish literature). See also Doherty 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Pascal composed his *Traité sur les Coniques* in 1640, when he was only sixteen. Much of my subsequent argument on the influence of Pascal's scientific writings will be based on Pierre Guenancia's study, *Du vide à Dieu* in the fourth chapter.

The suggestion that Descartes's genius was becoming obsolete underlies the above-mentioned passage. The ageing philosopher is incapable or unwilling to discern true advances in (scientific) thought, or to acknowledge his own mistakes. This form of blindness comes close to Pascal's diatribe against self-love in the *Pensées*.<sup>3</sup> 'In the great quarrel with Fermat, he is believed to have stoutly maintained a false position, and yet in that long correspondence shows not a trace of doubt in his cause' (Mahaffy 2004: 143). Pascal, aged twenty-four at the time of their first encounter, thus seems to have represented, even for that eccentric scholar, the first genius of the modern age.<sup>4</sup>

#### B. *References to Descartes, Pascal and Port-Royal in the 'Philosophy Notes'*

In 1977, Beckett told Charles Juliet about his profound attachment to writers who set out to break down the positive image that man had built of himself, writers such as Schopenhauer, Leopardi and 'others', adding that the only difference, perhaps, is that theirs was a search for an 'exit' when his no longer was.<sup>5</sup> I have argued elsewhere that Beckett could only have thought of Pascal and Montaigne, and how their derisive treatment of reason underlies the trilogy.<sup>6</sup>

Brunschvicg's study of the influence of Montaigne upon Pascal and Descartes is an interesting reference to bear in mind as it could shed light on Beckett's understanding of the study of the 'sources' of French thought – a major trend in scholarly studies of the period. Eminent scholars at the time that Beckett was studying at Trinity College and lecturing in France attempted to define the specificity of French thought and classical undercurrents in

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<sup>3</sup> The most powerful example of that condemnation is to be found in the unfinished fragment on the 'moi haïssable' in the *Pensées* (Pascal 2004: #509).

<sup>4</sup> Pascal contradicted Descartes, a plenist and an anti-atomist, in the controversy on the void. See Le Guern 1971 and Rodis-Lewis 1991.

<sup>5</sup> 'Issue' is the French word Beckett had used in their first conversation (Juliet 1999: 24). This is taken up in their last conversation, as Juliet writes: 'Oui, concède-t-il, il y avait peut-être encore chez eux l'espoir d'une réponse, d'une solution. Pas chez moi' (Juliet 1999: 68).

<sup>6</sup> See Foehn 2011.

contemporary philosophy and literature. It cannot be ascertained, however, that he had read Brunschvicg's work as a student although Knowlson does specify in his biography that much later, in 1936, Beckett would be directed to read Brunschvicg's works on Spinoza by poet and scholar Brian Coffey whom he had recently met (Knowlson 1996: 219).

Even if the use of Pascal in his early writings suggests that Beckett favoured his conception of the 'irrational' and (ontological) complexity, he could not have ignored the fundamental ambivalence of Pascal's stance towards rationalism, the coincidence of his vision with that of Augustine in his readings of the works of Port-Royal, and the influence of both Augustine and Montaigne in Pascal's writings (notwithstanding the presence of Descartes).

There can be no doubt therefore that, as a student, Beckett knew that Pascal had opposed some of Descartes's positions, particularly in the demonstration of the existence of God. At the same time, he adopted some of the most radical innovations developed in Cartesian thought.<sup>7</sup> Pascal's collaboration with Arnauld and Nicole on the *Logique ou l'art de penser* (1670) is evoked in Beckett's 'Philosophy Notes'. For Windelband, all three writers belonged to the 'Cartesian School' (see Windelband 1893: 383). They embody two distinct categories of thought: Pascal represents the 'Mystics', while Arnauld and Nicole are referred to as the 'Jansenists'.

In the section entitled 'Natural Science Period', Jansenism is presented as the offshoot of Augustinianism and Cartesianism. Arnauld and Nicole are identified as immediate

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<sup>7</sup> It is interesting that Beckett should have drawn the reader's attention to the scholastic nature of Descartes's argument in the 'Whoroscope' poem. Beckett mentions in a footnote his 'Eucharist sophistry in reply to the Jansenist Antoine Arnauld who challenged him to reconcile his doctrine of matter with the doctrine of transubstantiation' – a problem later transposed to language in the *Logique de Port-Royal* (Beckett 2002: 7). Pascal's (anti)-Cartesianism was the subject of much debate and controversy amongst scholars and intellectuals in the early twentieth century. It is only with more recent studies that the question of the influence of Cartesianism on Pascal was taken up in a more objective way. Commentators agree that, while Pascal embraced the principal tenets posited by Descartes in his conception of metaphysics, he nonetheless elaborated a vision of his own. Subverting his predecessor's ideas was an inaugural step. See among many other examples, the publication of the proceedings of the 1999 conference on Pascal's scientific work in the period evoked by Mahaffy, i.e. 1640-48, *Les Pascal à Rouen*. Additional references will be given in the course of this study.

‘disciples’ of Descartes and, according to Windelband, combined Descartes’s ‘mathematical philosophy’ with ‘Euclidean rigidity of demonstration’ so as to elaborate ‘an *ars demonstrandi* based on the definition of terms and axioms’.<sup>8</sup> A few lines further down, Beckett wrote: ‘Positive beginnings towards transformation of Cartesian method into Euclidean line of proof are found in Port-Royal *Logic* and in logical treatises of Geulincx, but system of Spinoza the first to perfect this methodical schematism’ (TCD MSS 10962-10971).<sup>9</sup> The writings of Pascal on the geometrical method, mainly *De l’esprit géométrique* and the fragment entitled ‘géométrie/finesse’, are included in that category.

There is sufficient material available from Beckett’s notes to suggest that Port-Royal’s defence of Cartesianism was acknowledged by Windelband as a clear manifestation of its intellectual openness. Windelband highlights the ‘allurement to find the significance of mathematics for the philosophical method in the circumstance, that is, the *ideal of demonstrative science*’ (Windelband 1893: 415). This conception of mathematical reasoning as an ideal form of discourse was most powerfully at work in Cartesianism and ‘became even a lever for scepticism and mysticism under the direct influence of Descartes, in the case of men like Pascal’ (Windelband 1893: 395).

Beckett’s contemporaries considered Pascal’s work as a cultural landmark because of its direct filiation with Augustine and Montaigne. As such, his work became fundamental in defining the meaning of ‘modernity’ – as a rupture in our communication with being and the real.<sup>10</sup> Beckett unambiguously takes up this view in his early criticism, mainly in the 1931 *Proust* monograph. In the ‘Philosophy Notes’, the section on Augustine’s philosophy sheds light upon the meaning of Windelband’s categorization of Pascal as a ‘mystic’. Beckett

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<sup>8</sup> TCD MS 10962-10971. I reproduce Beckett’s own underlining.

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed analysis of these notes and their usage in Beckett’s own work, see Feldman 2005. Insofar as the object here is to account for the references to Pascal and Port-Royal in the manuscripts, I will not attempt to account for the philosophical implication of these statements, nor their application in the later fiction.

<sup>10</sup> See Thierry Leterre’s ‘Preface’ to the electronic version of Brunschvicg’s work: [http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/brunschvicg\\_leon/descartes\\_et\\_pascal/brunschvicg\\_descartes\\_et\\_pascal.pdf](http://classiques.uqac.ca/classiques/brunschvicg_leon/descartes_et_pascal/brunschvicg_descartes_et_pascal.pdf) (last accessed December 7, 2011).

copied extensively from that paragraph in his notes. On the doctrine of grace we read: ‘In the doctrine of predestination [...] the absolute causality of God suppresses the free will of the individual. The latter is refused both metaphysical independence and also all spontaneity of action; the individual is determined either by his nature to sin or by grace to the good’ (Windelband 1893: 285).<sup>11</sup>

Windelband then stresses the strong antagonism (in his own words, the ‘clashing opposition’) between ‘individualism’ and ‘universalism’. The contradiction is further emphasized in the ambiguity of the word ‘freedom’, which designates both the ‘psychological’ reality of man and the ‘ethico-religious’ state of corruption after the Fall. This makes it possible to explain Beckett’s subsequent interest in the section on miracles in the *Pensées*.

### C. *Beckett’s Notes on the Proofs of Religion in the ‘Whoroscope Notebook’*

The ‘Philosophy Notes’ suggest that Beckett had knowledge of the intricate link between science and metaphysics in seventeenth century French thought, and the way in which it features in the writings of Descartes, Pascal, along with Arnauld and Nicole’s *Logique de Port-Royal*. Beckett’s edition of the *Pensées* has, to date, never been identified by critics nor has any attempt been made to situate the fragments and sections concerned in the ‘Whoroscope Notebook’. He may have kept the same edition throughout his life, although, as Daniella Caselli reminds us, he gave away a considerable part of his library before he died.

If this is the case, he could have known some of the major fragments only in their altered version. No less than seven editions appeared in the twentieth century, each time constituting an effort to reconstruct the original order of the fragments and restore the text in

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<sup>11</sup> The conception of language at Port-Royal will be studied further in the final chapter. Rachel Burrows’s notes indicate that in his lectures on Racine, Beckett had mentioned Pascal’s Augustinian denial of free will on several occasions.

its ‘authentic’ version.<sup>12</sup> I would only suggest that the reason that Beckett preferred the Port-Royal version, though its authority was increasingly contested, was because he considered Pascal in the context of his own times, and the *Pensées* as one of the monumental works of the seventeenth century.

Even as he was writing art criticism in the late 1930s, Beckett copied out fragments of the *Pensées* in his ‘Whoroscope Notebook’. His reading of the 1670 Port-Royal edition is essentially linear. This is manifest in the ways that quotations are listed, as they are successively taken from the sections entitled ‘Juifs’ (Pascal 2004: #256; PR X, 9); ‘Jésus-Christ’ (Pascal 2004: #290; PR XIV, 1); ‘Preuves de Jésus-Christ par les prophéties’ (Pascal 2004: #417; PR XV, 8); ‘Diverses preuves de Jésus-Christ’ (Pascal 2004: #163; PR XVI, 4 and Pascal 2004: #196; PR XVI, 5).<sup>13</sup> Taking notes, Beckett either paraphrases or reduces the original text. The only fragment he copied out in its entirety is the fragment on the ‘roseau pensant’, which comes in a later section entitled ‘Grandeur de l’homme’ (Pascal 2004: #186; PR XXIII, 6).

Mary Bryden is, to my knowledge, the only scholar who has attempted to explain the reasons Beckett may have had in writing down these fragments.<sup>14</sup> It is significant for Bryden that the fragment on the ‘roseau pensant’ should be the only one that Beckett reproduced in its entirety. It provides undeniable evidence that his interest in Pascal lies, for the most part, in the idea of the inner frailty of man, together with the inadequacy of reason to explain the foundational problem of Christianity – the alliance between the human and the divine in Christ.

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<sup>12</sup> It is important to bear in mind that the original text underwent considerable modifications upon Pascal’s death. Beckett, as a consequence, may not have known it until later. For a history of the different versions of the *Pensées*, see Pérouse 2009.

<sup>13</sup> I would like to thank Mark Nixon and Dirk Van Hulle for providing the information I needed to confirm that the edition of the *Pensées* that Beckett held in his Paris library, an undated copy published by Flammarion, was the 1670 Port-Royal edition. The structure per chapter that Beckett reproduced in the ‘Whoroscope Notebook’ allowed me to discriminate it from any other, together the slight emendation within the text of the fragment he copied in the ‘Sottisier Notebook’ (‘je ne tends’ instead of the original ‘je ne tiens’).

<sup>14</sup> See Bryden 1998: 17.

As for the remaining fragments Beckett copied, Bryden essentially sees reluctance in this choice of fragments to give any weight to the argument. The intention Beckett had by reproducing these passages was essentially critical, as it consisted of a deliberate distancing from the apologetic and mystical elements of Pascal's 'prophetism'. Bryden assumes that the study of miracles was only 'prudent' on Pascal's part in order to suggest that Beckett's main intention is to question the relevance as well as the significance of such evidence (Bryden 2004: 19). This explanation seems relevant given the complexity of Beckett's stance towards religion, but it overlooks a number of aspects that elicit the specificity of Pascal's thought for Beckett, mainly the motivations that led the author to write these fragments and their actual role in Pascal's apologetic project.

The quotations reproduced in the 'Whoroscope Notebook' are one of the few instances that testify to Beckett's reading of the *Pensées*. This implies that the reasons for Beckett's selection can be interpreted differently, and given more weight than is the case in Bryden's account.<sup>15</sup> I would propose an alternative interpretation of the significance of this choice. Firstly, it is important to note that, contrary to the assumptions Bryden makes, Pascal's consideration on the meaning of prophecies is a corner stone of his main apologetic argument. It is a variant on the attempt to disclose the shortcomings of human communication in the *Pensées*. The conception of prophecy as a 'miracle subsistant' makes it possible to consider the nature of language and the transmission of meaning through signs. As one scholar notes,

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<sup>15</sup> As Philippe Sellier observes, the study of prophecies in the *Pensées* is a necessary step in the elaboration of an apologetic argument based on four series of facts that form the very foundation of Catholic faith: the ontological contradictions of man in the section 'Connaissance de l'homme', the superiority of Christianity, the ontological state of the Jews and finally, 'prophetism' and the Scriptures. See, for instance, fragment 455, in which Pascal observes that 'les Prophètes ont un sens caché'. Sellier recalls that Pascal's interest for prophetic discourse inspired much of his own style: 'les prophètes juifs ont eu recours à un type de parole, à une écriture singulière, avec lesquels Pascal se sent souvent en pleine harmonie' (Sellier 2010: 461). The problem at heart therefore concerns the communication of meaning through words. It is described in terms of a 'gulf' between direct (divine) communication and imperfect linguistic expression. My own interpretation of Beckett's choice of fragments in the 'Whoroscope Notebook' also looks at the question of language as the key to understanding the full meaning of that meticulous selection.

‘les preuves de la religion n’ont pour objet que de convaincre et non de faire croire’ (Gouhier 1986: 90).

Beckett’s interest in the continuity between past and present literary expressions could have determined this reading of the *Pensées*. In this regard, Paul Valéry may be a key figure to understand Beckett’s interest in prophetic/poetic speech. He wrote in *Variétés*, for instance, that ‘je n’aime rien tant que ce qui va se produire’. The attention given to the future is in essence prophetic; it is that of the seer whose prospective conscience, characterized by its yearning for the future, seizes potential manifestations. It is interesting to bear in mind, moreover, that the evocations of prophecies seem to anticipate the theme of waiting that will characterize Beckett’s mature works.

I would argue that Beckett’s reasons for carefully writing down entire passages from generally lesser-known sections of the *Pensées* are in fact related to his own probing of the nature of language. Beckett was certainly interested in the conception of language as figurative, which is based on the example of prophecies in the *Pensées*, as it implied that the body works an impediment to the direct communication of thought. This aspect is correlated with Pascal’s insistence on the inherent insubstantiality of thought, and reverberates in the idea of the hollowness of the reed – which Bryden recalls in her study: ‘La raison s’offre, mais elle est ployable en tous sens ; et ainsi il n’y en a point’ (Pascal 2004: #274). Pascal’s explanation therefore corresponds to the Augustinian interpretation of the Fall as a historical event leading to the discovery of the ontological duality of man.

Following this point of departure, reason has lost its sovereignty but remains the manifestation of the greatness in man. There is no foundation to the primacy of reason. Yet reason is, besides the heart, the only means to access truth, however partial it may be, even as Pascal sees the necessity of asserting man’s dignity in his fallen state. Beckett’s choice of fragments on miracles can be explained through his earlier introduction to philosophy through

Windelband. In the section on ‘Medieval Philosophy’ Augustine’s conception of History is described in the following terms:

[i]n the light of the doctrine of predestination the grand picture of the historical development of humanity [...] takes on dark colours and particularly stiff, inflexible forms. For if not only the course of the history of salvation taken as a whole, but also, as in Augustine’s system, the position which every individual is to occupy within it, has been previously fixed by divine decree, one cannot rid one’s self of the gloomy impression that all man’s volitional life in history, with all its thirst for salvation, sinks to the play of shadows and puppets, whose result is infallibly fixed from the beginning. (Windelband 1893: 285)

Not only is this explanation taken up by Beckett in his lectures on Racine, particularly as he studies the tragic in *Phèdre*,<sup>16</sup> but there are, in addition, elements that he would later introduce in his own work: these include the motifs of darkness, stillness and the absence of free will (embodied in the immobility of the characters in the plays), and of physical confinement and restraint.<sup>17</sup> The fragments chosen by Beckett either illustrate or reinforce this last point. In the ‘Whoroscope Notebook’, Beckett wrote down the following lines from the Port-Royal edition of the *Pensées* (XV, 5):

L’Etat où l’on voit les juifs est encore une grande preuve de la religion. Car c’est une chose étonnante, de voir ce peuple subsister depuis tant d’années et de le voir toujours misérable: étant nécessaire pour la preuve de J.C., et qu’ils subsistent, pour le prouver, et qu’ils soient misérables puisqu’ils l’ont crucifié:

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<sup>16</sup> *Phèdre*, along with *Andromaque*, is singled out by Beckett in his lectures. This preference is later confirmed in one of his letters to McGreevy, which he wrote in 1956. This detail, however slight as it may appear, is enough proof to ascertain that Beckett was struck by the vision developed by Port-Royal. He must have been acutely aware that some of the major works of the seventeenth century are weaved implicitly or consciously, around the core elements of that vision. See, among others, the works of Le Guern, Sellier, Michon, Susini, and Gheeraert, which all ascribe an important part to the Augustinian source in the shaping of the literary aesthetics of Port-Royal.

<sup>17</sup> Augustine’s theory of language is based on a necessary relation of consequence between linguistic signs and the original sin. In the state of grace, the communication between God and Adam needed no mediation whatsoever through articulated speech, but by a direct impression of divine substance upon the human mind (Reguig-Naya 2007: 57).

et quoiqu'il soit contraire, d'être misérable et de subsister, ils subsistent néanmoins toujours, malgré la misère. (*Diverses pensées*)

An additional element that stirred Beckett's interest is the way Pascal traces a tragic pattern of misunderstanding in history. The 'carnal' Jews work as an ontological category in the *Pensées*, which in itself is a particular manifestation of the folly ('aveuglement') of man. The individual history of this people sheds light upon the contradictions that define the human condition, as they were incapable of interpreting divine messages, demanding physical signs (miracles, for instance) that would prove the veracity of God's existence. Their 'misery' comes from the failure to acknowledge the veracity of these signs, given that the clearest sign, that of the Cross, has always remained inconceivable – a 'scandal' – to them.

Henri Gouhier explains that there is a permanent existential bond between the Jews and the Bible, and that consequently, in Pascal's view, 'ce peuple n'est pas seulement gardien des témoignages sur les origines de l'humanité: il est lui-même témoin' (Gouhier 1966: 228). Hence, the historical method developed by Pascal in his study of the Scriptures brings evidence of a 'tragique malentendu' in the understanding of the identity and historical advent of the Messiah. The Jews were mistaken in awaiting 'un grand prince temporel' instead of the manifestation of the hidden God (Gouhier 1986: 117).

Pascal adopts the Augustinian categories of the 'singular' and the 'universal'. The evocation of 'misery' through the persistence of prophecies comes together with a probing of the 'distance' between the singularity of a given, distinctive feature that only applies to one case, and the generic feature that is comprised in all parts of the whole. The 'carnal' Jews represent at once the most and the least specific of all human groups, because history has shown that their particular vocation escapes them.

Thus the Jews not only are taken as a historical example, but also as an ontological category, which the author probes so as to reveal a superior truth, namely that of the survival

of prophecies, just as the 'roi sans divertissement' epitomizes the present condition of man in his fallen state, the permanent flight from negativity. This argument is illustrated in another fragment (XV, 8) recorded by Beckett:

Dilemma of Jews: their repudiation of Messiah essence of the prophecies:

Les Juifs, en tuant Jésus-Christ pour ne pas le recevoir comme Messie, lui ont donné la dernière marque de Messie. En continuant à la méconnaître, ils se sont rendus irréprochables: en le tuant et en continuant à le renier, ils ont accompli les prophéties...

*(Preuves de JC par les prophéties)*

At this early stage Beckett endeavoured to identify the fundamental pattern of the tragic in Pascal's thought, drawn from an earthly, hence profane example. These fragments show the strategy of demonstration at work within the text, wherein the corruption of nature, once it is denounced, reveals the possibility of redemption through its contrary. Beckett, therefore, seems to have been most attentive to the structural patterns of the tragic as comprised in Pascal's theological reflections.

This interest was literary, as it stems from a desire to probe the core of Pascal's conception of language and his condemnation of reason. The repetitive, historical cycle of miracles and prophecies is developed as a variation motif on the 'misery' of man. Moreover, repetition and stasis, themes to which Beckett returned time and again in his Trinity College lectures, can be discerned as the 'plis and replis' of the human condition (Pascal 2004: #185) and are broken by the manifestation of a hidden, inexplicable element. In history, this element is the figure of Christ. In matters of faith, it corresponds to salvation through divine grace.

Following Augustine, Pascal points out the absurdity of signs, and establishes that the only adequate hermeneutic task should be to discover the underlying meaning of the

Scriptures before the diversity of signs.<sup>18</sup> He remarks that there are two types of wrong interpretation: ‘Deux erreurs. 1. Prendre tout littéralement. 2. Prendre tout spirituellement’ (Pascal 2004: #22). The parallelism is repeated throughout the *Pensées* and perhaps provided Beckett with a paradigm for writing in the trilogy and the subsequent prose texts. As we have seen, the failure of reason to explain the human condition was one of the philosophical *topoi* of the time; images extracted from the *Pensées* were used to invoke an anticipatory vision that had been actualized in time.

In the mid-1940s Albert Camus, referring to the fragment quoted above, argued that Pascal expresses the dilemma of the philosopher confronted with the conventional or arbitrary nature of words (the ‘unreliability of language’).<sup>19</sup> The failure of thought, as it is manifested in the history of philosophy, leads to a form of surrender (‘soumission’) to a language imposed by God, that is, non-discursive. For Camus, Pascal stands alone in his denunciation of language. Camus explains that, ‘incertain du langage [...], incapable de raisonner le paradoxe, [...] Pascal s’assure seulement qu’il existe. Mais il le dénonce mieux que personne [...]. C’est pour cela qu’il ne propose pas de solution mais une soumission. Soumission au langage traditionnel parce qu’il nous vient de Dieu, humiliation devant les mots pour trouver leur véritable inspiration’ (Camus 2004: 1676).

Beckett’s main interest in the fragments on the accomplishment of prophecies resides, therefore, in the implicit critique of language undertaken in these fragments. Pascal considers that, because it is based on convention, language can only give an arbitrary and impoverished account of the real. Together with the tragic pattern of misunderstanding and failed communication studied in the sections on miracles and prophecies in the *Pensées*, Beckett

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<sup>18</sup> For a detailed account of Pascal’s hermeneutic doctrine, see Force 1989.

<sup>19</sup> As Louis Marin observes in *La critique du discours* (1975), Pascal focuses in his geometrical writings on the arbitrary relations between word and object. The idea provides the correspondence between these two: ‘le mot reste un signe arbitraire, un représentant qui ne renvoie à son représenté que par la convention linguistique initiale. Mais, en quelque sorte, il se substitue à la chose grâce à une *pseudo* visibilité de la relation arbitraire de la représentation. [...] Emissions sonores, non seulement ils valent pour le sens dans la mesure où ils le signifient dans le procès de communication, mais ils sont le sens’ (Marin 1975: 195). This problematic correlation between thought, language and the real is taken up by the aporetic discourse elaborated in the trilogy.

was grappling with a second problem: the tautological nature of the real, which is implied throughout the fragments he reproduced in his notebook. Pascal's considerations demonstrate that there is no mystery in things, but in our interpretations of things.

The real is an entity defined by itself. It has no double. It is based on an identity principle that postulates that A is A – or, the divine principle thus enunciated: 'I am that I am'. Tragic experience begins when the real reveals itself in its most insuperable insignificance. It excludes an ontological discourse, and cannot be escaped. As Rosset explains, 'dire d'une chose qu'elle est identique à elle-même, c'est ne rien dire du tout' (Rosset 1997:13).

Thus, defining identity can only be articulated around a form of logic that necessarily becomes reversible and which is articulated in empty discourse: 'le réel a beau exister, on ne sait ni préciser lequel, ni préciser où, car le réel est plat' (Rosset 2003: 75). The model of the cross embodies paradoxical logic, which corresponds to God's logic, expressed in the following terms in the *Pensées* 'tout ce qui est incompréhensible ne laisse pas d'être' (Pascal 2004: #215) proceeds in the reverse order of the logic of meaning. In that first order meaning can only be found in the synthesis of opposites.

It is perhaps through the reading of these specific fragments that Beckett discovered the evocative power of contradiction, and the *Pensées* as a model of its expression. This particular choice of fragments may have played a major part in the elaboration of Beckett's mature style. The evocation of an interval, a void, that resides between the 'I' and the real would lead to the creation of an aporetic style that Blanchot would characterize as 'neutral'.

### III. OUTLINE

In the following chapters I hope to show how Pascal and Racine, as well as the philosophy of language at Port-Royal, influenced Beckett in important, and hitherto unnoticed ways. My

purpose is to demonstrate that, despite Beckett's apparently more discreet use of Pascal in his work, Pascal is to prose what Racine was to the theatre for Beckett. Straying from the 'geometric' method, Pascal came to question the very *possibility* of a transparent, abstract language. The result in the *Pensées* is fragmentation, discontinuity, and a reliance on the brevity of expression; the assertion of the necessity of a figurative and digressive language instead of a clear, articulated idiom.

Chapter 1 of the thesis describes the intellectual context in both Ireland and France, in an attempt to identify Beckett's sources on seventeenth century literature, and to suggest that Beckett borrowed the ideas developed by an entire critical tradition in France. The study of the 'sources' of French thought as they were conceived by Beckett's contemporaries, whose search for an ideal literary idiom certainly inspired some of his own ideas, is essential to reconstruct his intellectual formation. The critical works of Gide, Valéry and Thibaudet, and the philosophical approaches of two contrasting figures, the philosophers Benda and Bergson, are chosen as examples of Beckett's secondary sources on seventeenth century classics.

Chapter 2 aims to show that in the early period of Beckett's career Pascal *did* play an essential role in his apprehension of literature, despite the apparent lack of manuscript evidence. I will look at Sainte-Beuve's major works, which Beckett read thoroughly and with admiration: the *Conversations du Lundi* and the novel *Volupté*, as well as *Port-Royal*. Sainte-Beuve's influence proves to be fundamental to Beckett's perception of Port-Royal and Jansenism. I will then study the 1931 *Proust* monograph in the context of literary Augustinianism and argue that Pascal's *Pensées* are an essential subtext.

In Chapter 3, I discuss the influence of Pascal on Beckett's major French prose texts by identifying similarities between Pascal's thought and the elaboration of philosophical images in the trilogy. The themes I have chosen take up recent Pascal scholarship and are organized according to three fundamental aspects: (1) the dissolution of the Cartesian subject;

(2) the image of man as ‘milieu’; and (3) the question of a tragic philosophy based on chance (‘le hasard’) and play (‘le jeu’), each of these aspects having been analysed by Laurent Thirouin in his remarkable study of the *Pensées*, *Le hasard et les règles*. I also argue that the encounter with Pascal’s work profoundly shaped Beckett’s relationship with the French language, and will therefore consider the literary impact of the *Pensées* upon Beckett’s own writing, essentially through an anti-Cartesian stance and in particular the movement towards aporia and fragmentation. Chapter 4 focuses on the prose texts written after the trilogy, such as the *Textes pour rien* and *Le Dépeupleur*. In the case of the latter text, I shall consider how its structure recalls a fragment from the *Pensées* on grace by referring to earlier manuscripts, and then pursue the analogies with the theme of disproportion in the late short text *Sans*.

Chapter 5 discusses the impact upon Beckett of the Augustinian element in Arnauld and Nicole’s *La Logique ou l’art de penser*, so as to suggest that the ‘Jansenist’ stance towards language was a necessary component in the influences that inspired Beckett to define a ‘literature of the unword’. The purpose here is to show that the enactment of an aporetic discourse grew out of this literary encounter between Beckett and the conception of language at Port-Royal, leading to the elaboration of an art that relies fundamentally upon aporia. I will therefore look at the anthropological and theological dimensions so as to bring out a sense of coherence between Pascal and Racine.

The intention behind the definition of an ‘art of thinking’ can be seen as overcoming the constant threat of doubt and error by conducting thought gradually towards the most abstract form of reasoning. As one critic has pointed out, language, deriving from man, has an inherently problematic status: ‘La rhétorique tragique démontre que rien ne se résout par le langage, alors même que celui-ci est a priori l’unique recours: le seul moyen de conjurer le destin s’avère donc tout à fait illusoire’ (Heyndels 1984: 200).

## CHAPTER 1

### The Cultural and Literary Context in 1930s Ireland and France

Ruby Cohn observes that Beckett is ‘one of today’s rare classicists’ (Cohn, 1980: 207). This ambiguous term requires clearer definition. Insofar as the notions of avant-garde and classicism are diverse and complex, it seems necessary to clarify the meanings given to these words by authors and critics alike. The foremost playwrights of the period continued a tradition within the theatre through which they rediscovered the fundamental laws of dramaturgy, creating a form of theatre that is comparable in terms of achievement to that of the Greeks, Shakespeare, or Racine.

This discourse dates back to an earlier period. Despite the different meanings it has been given (for instance, order, measure and harmony, or, reason, restraint and the domination of instincts and emotion) most critics agree that the essential definition of ‘classicism’ is articulated around the problem of totality. The most adequate definition of classicism, according to Gide in *Incidences*, is that classical art embraces totality although it is expressed by an individual artist, taking Ancient Greece as the main paradigm: ‘L’esprit et l’art grecs étaient tout à la fois individuels et universels, ils étaient classiques parce qu’ils tenaient compte de tout’ (Gide 1924: 41).

Critics, including Beckett commentators, have often pointed out that the most radical transformation undertaken in the post-war era concerns language. The imperatives of style and eloquence are abandoned to produce the impression of disorder, an inner chaos that is highlighted in both dialogue and monologue. The theatrical situation can no longer be defined in terms of psychological depth, but through direct confrontation with words, the sense of incommunicability that separates individuals.

I intend to show in the present chapter that in the 1930s Beckett’s understanding of the seventeenth century was shaped by his various readings of foremost contemporary writers,

particularly their theoretical writings or literary criticism. The way in which he included classical references in his early writing corresponds to the lucid partiality of a number of French writers and intellectuals in the early decades of the twentieth century, who sought to define an 'authentic' literary art through, in Pascal's own words, 'un point fixe pour en juger' – the classical aesthetic imperatives of the seventeenth century (Pascal 2004: #591). As had Proust, Gide and Valéry (among others) before him, Beckett tends to characterize Racine as the paradigmatic figure of the 'modern' writer, who inaugurated a literary tradition that emphasized the 'incomprehensibility of the real' and the 'solitary nature of every human being' (TCD MIC 60).

Firstly, there can be little doubt that, like the writers he admired, Beckett also appreciated Pascal's closeness to modern thought. The study of student lecture notes will evidence that Beckett himself took up this conception of literary invention which Pascal defined in the *Pensées*.<sup>1</sup> Hence, a number of literary and philosophical works related to French classicism situate themselves in the wake of Sainte-Beuve's critical method. They take up, at one point or another, his ideas on Port-Royal as a defining influence on seventeenth century aesthetics. Seldom is his representation of Pascal and Racine questioned.

Beckett's interest in French classicism was the result of his intellectual training at Trinity College, Dublin. It was further motivated by a need to grasp the fundamental principles of true creativity with the paradigm of classical perfection as a possible means of adequately expressing and representing experience. I would argue that he first did so by integrating contemporary considerations on the seventeenth century into his own teaching and early critical writings.

The contrast between Ireland and France in the reception of Pascal's work highlights his reliance on secondary sources to develop a perception of an authentic literary expression

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<sup>1</sup> See Barrère: 1972.

that resembles Continental (or ‘modern’) aesthetics. That said, he gradually sought a voice of his own, and he differed from his predecessors, mainly Joyce, in his belief that literary expression must rely on measure and balance.

## I. THE RECEPTION OF PORT-ROYAL AND PASCAL IN IRELAND<sup>2</sup>

### A. *Jansenism in Ireland in the early 1920s and 1930s*

Jansenism has long been controversial in Ireland. Thomas O’Connor defines it as ‘a complex, multi-faceted movement within early modern Catholicism that responded to fundamental challenges of contemporary experience of religion’ (O’Connor 2008: 15). It contributed to the shaping of a nation’s history, memory, identity and politics. Generally understood by Catholics as ‘a heretical movement amply warranting its repeated condemnation by Rome’, and by Protestant polemicists as ‘symptomatic of dysfunctional Catholicism’ (O’Connor 2008: 15), Jansenism was dismissed by free-thinking scholars as an archaic derivative of Catholicism.

Historically, Jansenism was associated with the institutional and moral oppression endured by the Irish people. This association had little, if anything, to do with the actual doctrine and philosophy of Port-Royal, but it is still predominant today. In a brief passage from his study on Irish cultural life, Terence Brown evokes the ‘strange marital abstemiousness of the Irish countryman and woman’ (Brown 1985: 18) . He also points out the negative impact the word ‘Jansenism’ had (and still has) in rural Ireland, and observes that its use is intrinsic to colonial prejudices towards the Irish people, ‘a Celtic people whose religious tradition had included masochistic excesses of penitential zeal and whose mythology and imaginative literature had combined male solidarity with heroic idealism’ (Brown 1985: 18).

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<sup>2</sup> The present section on Jansenism in Ireland is taken from Foehn 2009.

The word, then, was closely associated with the idea of social and intellectual paralysis, strict religious morals and sexual repression, and a reductive representation of the Irish as a mirthless people whose temperament was to submit in the face of historical adversity. Moreover, Jansenism became synonymous with a tendency for (self)-repression that characterized daily life, gender relationships and religion. James M. Wilson specifies that Jansenism also ‘signified Irish *cultural* as well as political failure’ to match the advances of ‘other European cultures that had entered with far less trauma onto the cosmopolitan riches of modernity’ (Wilson 2007: 36). Ireland thus stood on the periphery of modernity and was seen from within the country as a ‘provincial, backward, and wounded state that refused to recover from its sutured legacy of military defeat and Catholic piety’ (Wilson 2007: 36).

Within literary circles, Jansenism recalled the subservient condition of art, which was prone to failure because of its subsidiary status in Irish cultural life since the advent of nationalism and the priority given to political issues. The articles that Beckett wrote in the 1930s on Irish poets and artists underline their effort to find a voice of their own, or inversely their conformity to the ideas of the Irish revival, displaying ‘a rupture of the lines of communication’ between Irish art and European modernism (Beckett 2003: 70).

In ‘Recent Irish Poetry’, Beckett also rejects the idea that art could bring meaning and coherence to the modern existence, whether in a specific (Irish) context or not. Contrary to the situation in Ireland, Beckett emphasizes that art should be thoroughly dissociated from ‘social reality’, and rather than joining the critical consensus on Beckett’s desire to promote McGreevy’s work, Beckett and McGreevy, according to Sean Kennedy, ‘differ quite sharply in their views of poetry’ (Kennedy 2005: 273). These diverging views, he argues, can be explained by a tension sprung from different attitudes towards religion (see Kennedy 2005: 273).

B. *Trinity College, Dublin: Rudmose-Brown's teaching of the French classics*

One of the most plausible reasons why Beckett may only have discovered Pascal's work indirectly is the author's status as a 'Jansenist' writer. In Ireland, Pascal's works were considered as unambiguously subversive, especially the *Lettres Provinciales* (1656).

Beckett began his undergraduate studies in the Department of Romance Languages at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1923, the year when the tricentennial of Pascal's birth was celebrated throughout Europe. But in the aftermath of the Civil War, the commemoration of Pascal had little resonance in Dublin intellectual life. The few references to Pascal, Jansenism or Port-Royal were to be found in theological reviews such as the *Irish Theological Quarterly*, *The Dublin Magazine*, and the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*. Irish commentators at that time unanimously condemned Pascal's commitment to the cause of Port-Royal, along with his defence of Jansenism in the *Lettres Provinciales*, on the grounds that 'he was totally unqualified to deal with theological questions, and though perhaps sincerely convinced of the good of his cause, was not quite upright in his method'.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike Racine, Pascal was not included in the French undergraduate curriculum.<sup>4</sup> Beckett's professor of French at Trinity College, T. B. Rudmose-Brown, had strong feelings against 'religious' writers. Described by James Knowlson as a 'highly unorthodox, even controversial figure', Rudmose-Brown was known for his opinionated views on religion, being 'a staunch believer in individual freedom', and he 'could become apopleptic with rage when speaking about the increasing stranglehold that he saw the Catholic Church exerting on the newly created Irish State' (Knowlson 1997: 85). Together with the deep-rooted conviction

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<sup>3</sup> This was the most widespread accusation against Pascal. See Sommerville 1935. From the 1950s onwards, scholarship has sought to break down the image of Pascal as a mere 'secrétaire de Port-Royal', showing, particularly in the works of Phillippe Sellier, Hélène Michon and Michel Le Guern (to name but a few), that Pascal's knowledge of Augustinian theology was fundamental. Complementary to this research is the philosophical discussion and focus on the elements of Cartesianism that define his thought, and determine his stance towards metaphysics (mainly Laporte, Lafuma, and more recently Carraud).

<sup>4</sup> There are no traces of lectures on Pascal in either the French, Philosophy or Theology departments in the *Dublin University Catalogue* for the years Beckett attended as an undergraduate, from 1923 to 1927.

that ‘religion is a matter of faith and must not interfere with matters of reason’ (Rudmose-Brown 1956: 31) he evokes at length his reliance on Kantian reason and the mind’s capacity for autonomous judgement. He manifests a visceral defiance of the ‘monopolists of truth’, only to conclude that ‘I accept no dogma and deny none’ (Rudmose-Brown 1956: 31).

Insofar as he never mentions Pascal, deliberately leaving aside the role that Port-Royal played in the intellectual formation of Racine, and avoiding at the same time any use of the word ‘Jansenism’, Rudmose-Brown’s portrayal of the playwright befitted this attitude.<sup>5</sup> In an essay on seventeenth century French literature, he represents Racine as a fellow free-thinker. Rudmose-Brown seems to have reproduced the image of Racine, widespread after Sainte-Beuve, as an ambitious man who abandoned his closest acquaintances at Port-Royal, but who was endowed with an exceptional genius that was nurtured against his will by his education at Port-Royal.<sup>6</sup> Beckett’s professor sought to explain the choices made in the course of his artistic career solely in terms of temperament and ambition, taking up the representation of Racine as an egotistical ‘carriériste’.<sup>7</sup>

Rudmose-Brown saw in Racine an independent mind seeking ‘la gloire’, someone who privileged his career at Court, following the customary view of the times: ‘individual values were of little importance compared with social perfection’ (Rudmose-Brown 1917: 14).<sup>8</sup> This

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<sup>5</sup> Insofar as Sainte-Beuve was the only authority to preside over the account of the years that Racine lived in Port-Royal, Rudmose-Brown may not have been aware, like many of his contemporaries, that Racine had spent his entire childhood and youth there, i.e. eight years, instead of three. Raymond Picard demonstrated that Sainte-Beuve’s account was erroneous because he had relied heavily on the hagiography Louis Racine wrote of his father. See the Introduction to Sainte-Beuve’s *Port-Royal* in Sellier 2004.

<sup>6</sup> A representation that scholars from the 1950’s onwards to the present day – ranging from Raymond Picard and Jean Mesnard to Georges Forestier – have progressively discarded because of its partiality and inaccuracy before historical facts.

<sup>7</sup> I give the full quotations from the letters here, as Knowlson provides a truncated version of Beckett’s sentence. In his first (unpublished) letter to McGreevy, Beckett wrote that ‘I think a course of Racine would do me good. *Andromaque* and *Phèdre* in particular. There are two new biographies much talked about; *Racine carriériste* and *quietly haunted by Port-Royal*’ (TCD MS 10402-198; The italics are mine). In the second, we learn that he concentrated on *Andromaque*: ‘I read *Andromaque* again and with greater admiration than ever and I think with more understanding, at least more understanding of the chances of the theatre today’ (TCD MS10402-199).

<sup>8</sup> George Forestier’s recent biography (2006) is in the line of Raymond Picard’s (then) innovative study of Racine’s life and work, *La Carrière de Jean Racine*, written in 1956. As we shall see, Beckett knew Picard’s study. As scholarly work on Racine became less prone to partiality, his relationship with Port-Royal became more easily accepted. Picard was the first to analyse Racine’s attitude towards Port-Royal and Jansenism in a

attitude came from a strong desire to preserve himself from needless pressure and his art from censorship in an age when lifestyle and social behaviour were heavily codified: ‘Racine’ he writes, ‘is a very great poet. He accepted the seventeenth century ideal outwardly; he may even have believed he accepted it inwardly. But he was too great a poet to act upon it’ (Rudmose-Brown 1917: 18). There is no outright condemnation of Jansenism as a regressive sect.<sup>9</sup> Beckett followed Rudmose-Brown’s thought when he pointed out to his students the playwright’s complete independence from Port-Royal.

The playwright, then, according to Rudmose-Brown, never allowed religion or politics to ‘corrupt’ his art and would not defend the Jansenist cause. Rudmose-Brown unambiguously states that Racine stands alone in seventeenth century literary history, as ‘in his tragedies [...] – he did express himself – his vision of the world and his attitude towards God and man and love and death. [...] But Boileau and the seventeenth century persisted in misunderstanding him and praising him for the qualities of conformity he did not possess. They took *Phèdre* as a moral lesson [...] and *Athalie* as the illustration of a Christian doctrine’ (Rudmose-Brown 1917: 14). Rudmose-Brown here seems to be going against Sainte-Beuve, who had exaggerated in *Port-Royal* Boileau’s role in enabling the writer’s precocious genius to reach its fullest creative capacity early on in his career: ‘On lui doit, à coup sûr, d’avoir eu le Racine parfait, et de l’avoir eu, dans sa perfection même, plus continuellement ferme et plus inaltérable’ (Sainte-Beuve 2006(II): 350).

Beckett, in turn, adopted this representation, and expressed on various occasions in his Trinity lectures the widespread argument that the impact of Jansenism was only incidental in

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dispassionate, objective way, relying exclusively on proven historical facts instead of the mythology created by the playwright’s son, Louis Racine. He shows that it is complex. Racine, although he was haunted by that legacy, overtly adopted an ironic, even hostile stance towards its doctrine and people, but he wrote *Phèdre* (1677) in the aftermath of his reconciliation with Arnauld and Nicole. He understood religion through the doctrine of Port-Royal. The inner torment endured by his characters echoes the suffering of being as it is described by Pascal in the *Pensées*.

<sup>9</sup> In his 1961 interview with Tom Driver, Beckett mentioned the rupture between the contemporary experience of the tragic and its seventeenth century evocation. A full vision of the human condition and a complete understanding of the real are no longer possible, as he pointed out that ‘for those of us who are not Jansenists nor Greeks, no such certainty exists’ (Beckett, quoted in Pilling 1976: 136).

the development of Racine's art.<sup>10</sup> He describes, for instance, Racine's reconciliation with Port-Royal as a result of circumstance: '[Racine] probably thought Jansenism would <serve> him as shelter from Louis XIV' (TCD MIC 60). The explanation given for Racine's reconciliation with Port-Royal is purely circumstantial: 'from 1675 on, Racine was losing his place in the court, so he may have gone back to Jansenism – *faute de mieux* – knowing the precarious faith of the king' (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 307). Rudmose-Brown's idealization of Racine as an exemplary figure on account of his artistic independence, and as anticipatory of the modern intellectual (or artist), is present in Beckett's discussion of the 'modern' novel in French literature.

### C. *On Beckett's Conception of Port-Royal and Jansenism (1923-1931)*

Beckett never clearly articulates his position on Jansenism in his Trinity lectures. His notes contain only a few references to Jansenism and Pascal.<sup>11</sup> Rachel Burrows wrote down (in passing) that 'Jansenism limits man's free will' and that 'Pascal wrote against it' (TCD MIC 60). What deductions can be made derive from his comments on *Phèdre*, where Jansenism is given a 'tragic' function in the elaboration of the heroine's temperament. Beckett is likely to have mentioned the doctrine of grace several times in the course of his lectures, for the notes indicate that he emphasized the way in which it added to the development of the tragic in Racine's plays.

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<sup>10</sup> In 'Homage to Jack B. Yeats' Sean Kennedy has argued that, unlike McGreevy, Beckett resisted any attempt to politicize the work of painter Jack B. Yeats', calling for 'a deracinated reading of Yeats's art' (Kennedy 2006: 65). The insistence upon the irrelevance of the criterion of 'Irishness' to characterize his work, in keeping with his reluctance to contextualise any work of art, is evidence that 'in this reading Yeats's artistic development is the gradual realization of an innate process of maturation wholly unrelated to political events surrounding the birth of the Irish Free State, and Beckett concedes what McGreevy had already told him many times, that he has "no sense of history"' (Kennedy 2006: 65). Also worth pointing out is that Beckett used the image of Pascal's wager in his evocation of the rootlessness of the artist as a vocational necessity, as he wrote that 'the artist who stakes his being is from nowhere'.

<sup>11</sup> Beckett was probably following Rudmose-Brown closely on this point. According to Sean Kennedy, his 'belief that the Irish were a nation overrun by the Catholic clergy is also typical of the Protestant sensibility'. The relationship was felt to be one of 'unhealthy subservience', and the majority of Irish Protestants would have concurred silently with the hostile observer who held the Irish were 'of all people the most completely drilled and absorbed in the Christian religion as it is distorted by the Churches' (Kennedy 2006: 71).

By far Racine's most admired work, *Phèdre* is, according to the lecture notes, 'the first play of Racine to bring in the sense of sin' (TCD MIC 60), which is distinct from the sense of guilt. As Rachel Burrows noted: '*Phèdre* [is] more than ever study of the mind with [an] added element of sin' (TCD MIC 60). For Beckett, the sense of sin is a new component of the tragic; were he to have remained concerned only with guilt (which stems from moral values), Racine would have been no different from Corneille. Beckett argues that the acknowledgement of sin is 'a false awareness', and suggests that it is this awareness that provokes the inner conflict. The role of Jansenism in *Phèdre* is therefore solely contextual. It is an 'added element'<sup>12</sup> to Racine's exploration of the 'hermetic' mind, a variation he made upon the claim that each individual is 'isolated' from others. Beckett suggested, however, that it is this 'added element' that enabled Racine to conduct his tragedy with unprecedented mastery and depth of vision.

## II. THE INTELLECTUAL CONTEXT IN FRANCE

The reception of Pascal's work in Ireland in the early twentieth century reflects the controversial debate on the essence of 'modernity' that preoccupied French intellectuals at that time. Indeed, the celebration of the tercentenary of his birth in 1923 showed that the representation of the author of the *Pensées* both as a thinker and a writer was ambivalent, even contradictory. This was most apparent in the general uneasiness at the thought of his professed sympathy for the Jansenist cause.<sup>13</sup>

Given the limited manuscript evidence, it is necessary to take a historiographical

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<sup>12</sup> The words in inverted commas refer to Beckett's own terms according to Rachel Burrows's lecture notes.

<sup>13</sup> An issue of the *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, entitled 'Études sur Pascal', was published for the occasion. Even in this scholarly study of Pascal, internal ideological divisions are perceptible. In the opening articles, Maurice Blondel and Léon Brunschwig strive to rid Pascal of his association with the Jansenists, the one arguing that Pascal's 'Jansenism' was nothing more than superficial, and the other evoking the solitude that unique 'genius' inevitably brought upon the 'man'. In a recent article, Antoine Compagnon gives an overview of the debate that took place for the tridentenary (see Compagnon 2007: 425–9).

approach in order to understand Beckett's conception of seventeenth century classicism. The question of classicism and its relationship to modernity is so complex that to elaborate an exhaustive account of the debate that took place in the early twentieth century would exceed the purpose and object of the present study. I have therefore chosen to concentrate on authors and ideas that are indirectly mentioned in the lecture notes and, in the next chapter, the *Proust* monograph, written in the aftermath. Beckett consciously initiated a dialogue with these writers, drawing from the discussion on 'modern classicism' ('classicisme moderne') as it came to be defined in Gide's *Nouvelle Revue Française*, in Thibaudet's writings on literature, and in Paul Valéry's definition of 'pure poetry' ('poésie pure'), as well as in Benda's attack on the 'anti-intellectualism' of Bergson.

In *Beckett avant la lettre*, Brigitte Le Juez suggests that Beckett may not have followed the teaching he received from Rudmose-Brown as closely as could have been expected from him, and instead followed his own line of thought, adding that his emphasis on certain aspects of Gide's work reveals his own literary preferences. He implied in the lectures on the contemporary novel that a 'characteristic strain almost Jansenistic' (TCD MIC 60) underlies the Protestant background in *Les Nourritures terrestres*. With this allusion, Beckett highlighted the permanent oscillation between desire and the need for inner purification in Gide's novel, echoing Pascal's phrase in the *Pensées*: 'L'homme n'est ni ange ni bête, et le malheur veut que qui veut faire l'ange fait la bête' (Pascal 2004: #572).

Le Juez also shows that Beckett often cited contemporary writers to illustrate his point. He turns to Gide, who also believed that Racine was one of the only playwrights capable of reproducing the psychological complexity of the human mind (Le Juez 2007: 92).<sup>14</sup> More significantly, Beckett later associates Gide and Racine in their use of dialogue, specifying

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<sup>14</sup> Pascal was haunted by the idea of that same 'complexity'. In the section on 'Misère de l'homme' Beckett would have found an expression of this concern in Gide's *Les faux monnayeurs*, (1925) as the following quote is given as a chapter opening: '[...] rien n'est simple, de ce qui s'offre à l'âme, et l'âme ne s'offre simple à aucun sujet' (Pascal 2004: #50).

that, in Gide's major novel, *Les Faux-Monnayeurs*, dialogues have a 'didactic' function. Gide's conception of writing permeates the conversation between the four principal characters, Edouard, Sophroniska, Bernard and Laura (Le Juez 2007: 103).

This, he argues, is reminiscent of Racine's tragedies, where 'la technique du dialogue et l'usage des confidents permet d'exprimer la division de l'esprit de ces personnages. Les questions et exclamations ou objections des confidents représentent autant de doutes dans l'esprit des protagonistes et les obligent à y faire face' (Le Juez 2007: 103). The dialogue ends when confusion is dispelled. Le Juez concludes that Racine's modernity lies, according to Beckett, in 'the explicit demonstration of complexity' (Le Juez 2007: 103).

Beckett remarks that the major characters in Racine's plays are inconsequential in the choices they make. Because they are subjected to desire they are inconsiderate of the suffering of others. He takes the example of characters whose frustration leads to irrevocable decisions, building up insurmountable obstacles of silence and conflicting intentions. It is possible to study the examples that Beckett took from his favourite play, *Andromaque*, in order to illustrate his point with the quotations Rachel Burrows copied out in her notebook.

The first example Beckett takes is the sequence where Hermione asks Orestes to murder Pyrrhus (Act III, scene 3). Hermione's actions are subjected to 'the madness of desire', and Orestes is the 'obvious motive for Pyrrhus returning to Hermione' (TCD MIC 60). They are bound together by 'hate' and self-interest – Rachel Burrows isolated the first word in her notes. The second example is taken from Act IV, scene 5, i.e. the final scene between Hermione and Pyrrhus. The latter intends to 'apologize for break of promise. She first controls herself. He wonders how he is going to get out of it [...] the extraordinary outburst when he suggests its finally best for all parties [...]' at which point Beckett points out the irony in Pyrrhus' attitude towards Hermione. Burrows wrote down Hermione's speech: 'Je ne t'ai point aimé, cruel!' (TCD MIC 60). In both cases, the dialogue leads to the final

catastrophe in a crescendo: ‘osc[illation] in mind of Hermione [...] temporisation of cries. Each trying to use the other too – no impact or cohesion possible’ (TCD MIC 60).

There is another example taken from the same play in which all the aspects that Beckett was so keen to study in his lectures are brought together. In Act III, scene 6, the evocation of a subdued antagonism between the two main characters, Pyrrhus and Andromaque, is all the more poignant that here, the author uses words sparingly. The tension is built up through the stichomythic exchanges as well as the pauses that the dialogue calls for:

PYRRHUS, à PHOENIX.

Où donc est la princesse?  
Ne m'avais-tu pas dit qu'elle était en ces lieux?

PHOENIX  
Je le croyais.

ANDROMAQUE à CEPHISE.  
Tu vois le pouvoir de mes yeux!

PYRRHUS  
Que dit-elle, Phoenix?

ANDROMAQUE  
Hélas! tout m'abandonne.

PHOENIX  
Allons, Seigneur, marchons sur les pas d'Hermione.

CEPHISE  
Qu'attendez-vous? Rompez ce silence obstiné.

ANDROMAQUE  
Il a promis mon fils.

CEPHISE  
Il ne l'a pas donné.

ANDROMAQUE  
Non, non, j'ai beau pleurer, sa mort est résolue.

PYRRHUS  
Daigne-t-elle sur nous tourner au moins la vue?  
Quel orgueil!

ANDROMAQUE  
Je ne fais que l'irriter encor.  
Sortons.

PYRRHUS

Allons aux Grecs livrer le fils d'Hector.

(Act III, scene 6, lines 815-900)

The isolation of the characters stems from their refusal (or incapacity) to address the other. Instead, the dialogue seems to take place indirectly, through the mediation of the secondary figures, Phoenix and Phénice. It is only when Céphise urges her mistress into action that the dialogue truly takes place. Suffering is implied in the evocation of helpless tears 'tu vois le pouvoir de mes yeux'; 'j'ai beau pleurer', 'je ne fais que l'irriter encor' and the brief allusion to a broken promise. The 'hermetic' nature of the characters is suggested in the mutual incomprehension between the characters: in the absence of direct communication, the gestures, the gaze, the entire expression of the body, or the modulations of the voices, all lead to incomprehension: a grief-stricken Andromaque is persuaded that Pyrrhus abhors her presence, while her own desperate silence is interpreted as mere arrogance. According to Rachel Burrows's notes, Beckett argued that Racine 'uses dialogue to state deviated mind' (TCD MIC 60). He turns to the example of Pyrrhus, who is torn 'between [a] lust for vengeance' and a 'lust for passion' (TCD MIC 60). Then, Beckett observes that 'when fragmentation merged to integral state', there is 'no use for [a] confident' (TCD MIC 60). In this sequence, the tension is momentarily subdued as Andromaque breaks her silence in a desperate plea for her son's life.

#### A. *Sources Identified from References in the Lecture Notes*

Le Juez observes that 'dans sa classification du contexte littéraire de Gide, Beckett qualifie les romantiques et les naturalistes d'artificiels, et les prénaturalistes d'authentiquement complexes' (Le Juez 2007: 58), but does not consider Beckett's actual sources. In the following sections I propose to identify secondary sources that lie behind Beckett's account of

contemporary literature. The examples chosen will show that underlying his method of finding systematic echoes between past and contemporary authors is an entire critical tradition, issued from Sainte-Beuve.

### 1. Gide's *NRF* and 'le classicisme moderne'

James Knowlson observes that the course taught by Rudmose-Brown was devoted to 'modern authors like Proust, Gide, Viéél-Griffin, Léon-Paul Fargue, Louis le Cardonnell and Francis Jammes' (Knowlson 1996: 50). Knowlson also mentions that Rudmose-Brown 'corresponded with a number of practising French poets and kept closely in touch with what was happening in current French writing' (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 50), but he does not specify that most of these writers belonged to the *NRF* circle, or were close collaborators, as was, for instance, Valéry Larbaud, whom Rudmose-Brown knew personally.

The *Nouvelle Revue Française* has never been considered a direct source for Beckett's reflections on literature and the parallels he makes in his lectures and early writings, particularly *Proust*, between 'modern' literature, and the most emblematic figures of the French seventeenth century. Nevertheless, a comparison with some of Gide's statements on classicism reveals that, situated in a wider literary context, Beckett's remarks on contemporary literature in his lectures undeniably find their source in the controversy on classicism, reflected in Gide's critical writings and Proust's correspondence.<sup>15</sup>

This twentieth-century 'querelle' sought to define an authentic literary art by probing the tension between 'classicisme' and 'romantisme'. As Antoine Compagnon observes in *Les Antimodernes* (2005), the problem of Pascal's (anti-)Jansenism was one of the clear

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<sup>15</sup> Historically, Gide and the other major figures that gathered around the *NRF* (Ghéon, Copeau, Drouin, Ruyhters etc.) sought to counteract the reactionary offensive of Maurras, Barrès and *L'Action française*. To a shared aversion to the excesses of Romanticism, Naturalism, and Symbolism was added an even stronger aversion to these reactionaries who called themselves neo-classicists. They set out to define 'another version of classicism, one that would rejuvenate the spirit of the French classical tradition without conceding to a retrograde, nationalistic revival of the past' (Apter 1983: 29).

manifestations of that debate. His empiricism was preferred to Cartesian pragmatism (Compagnon 2005: 46), a characteristically ‘anti-modern’ stance. ‘Anti-modern’ writers, according to Compagnon, were the first to embrace Schopenhauerian pessimism as the direct corollary of the Pascalian scepticism towards reason. Among the foremost intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Ferdinand Brunetière argued that the Schopenhauerian negation of the will to live derived from Jansenist ascetism. The pervasive theme of the Fall along with a political and moral vision of the world inspired by the idea of evil are the religious components of that characteristic attitude (Compagnon 2005: 17).

Pascal, ‘la référence anti-moderne’, remains a tutelary figure for most of these writers: ‘avant Schopenhauer, seul Pascal, en rappelant que “le cœur a ses raisons”, avait soupçonné que l’intelligence ou l’entendement ne suffisait pas à rendre compte de notre nature’ (Compagnon 2005: 84). Compagnon suggests that this ‘anti-modern’ attitude is the French counterpart of European modernism. It is characterized by an intellectual resistance to the idea of progress in its many forms, mainly scientific and philosophical (embodied in Bergsonism and positivism), and finds its primary aesthetic criteria in the formal reappropriation of the classical idiom and conventions.

As an ideological resistance ‘qui oscillait déjà entre le pré-modernisme et l’ultramodernisme, entre Thomas d’Aquin et Pascal et Bergson’ (Compagnon 2005: 9), it is therefore characterized by doubt, ambivalence, and nostalgia.<sup>16</sup> Accordingly, the *NRF* strove to attain what Camus would later term a ‘classicisme créateur’ (Camus 1965: 780), and came to define a type of writing that would ideally transcend the dichotomy between tradition and artistic innovation in the modern age. This modern poetics sought to achieve a synthesis of form and eloquence inspired by the canonical writings of the seventeenth century. The

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<sup>16</sup> This description corresponds to Beckett’s own understanding of the literary intention at the heart of *A la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust, ‘a solitary and independent figure’ (Beckett 1999: 80) is a great writer because of that characteristic ‘retrogressive tendency’ that Beckett sees in him, which eventually operates a form of synthesis between his preference for ‘affectivity’ instead of intelligence through the revelatory nature of experience.

paradigm of classical perfection would enable the creation of a new idiom that would be reminiscent of its purity, elegance, clarity and intense concentration. This perfect balance forms something of a musical ensemble that would similarly be classical in appearance.

Among the virtues of its foremost representatives (for instance, modesty), Gide admires in classicism that unique capacity to contain feeling that enhances the suggestive power of words. He writes: 'l'œuvre d'art classique raconte le triomphe de l'ordre et de la mesure sur le romantisme intérieur. L'œuvre est d'autant plus belle que la chose soumise était d'abord plus révoltée' (Gide 1977: 281). The seventeenth century thus came to master a form of art that is empirical and demonstrative of ontological incoherence, but that would not impose a given truth upon its subject.<sup>17</sup>

Classicism is taken as a fundamental paradigm, intrinsically related to French culture, a necessary reference in order to enable literary invention. This identification leads to the rejection of another paradigm: Romanticism and its offspring, Naturalism, as it was developed by Zola and taken up by his followers. Both movements are the 'symptoms' of moral 'degeneration' (*dégénérescence*), a weakening of the artistic potential because Romantic writers are 'slaves' to sentiment, and because Naturalism is based on the principle of coherence as well as moral and ethical prejudices. In seventeenth century classicism, individual impressions are made to recede so as to liberate true emotion, all the more intense as it is contained – the classical style is most admired for its 'restraint' ('retenue').<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to Romantic lyricism, classicism manifests a superior ethic as it aims for pure objectivity. It embodies an aestheticization of life, which is conveyed in a 'purified'

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<sup>17</sup> Beckett remarks that Gide considers the 'worst' (*le pire*) as the only organizing principle. He may be alluding to Gide's consideration of the worst in *Les Cahiers d'André Walter* (1891). According to Rachel Burrows's notes, he had defined the 'worst' as 'the acceptance of coexistence of apparently mutual exclusive states' (TCD MIC 60). 'Modern' authors lay emphasis on a 'self understanding through art' that differs from the fabrication of '[the] conscious mind of the Romantics' (TCD MIC 60).

<sup>18</sup> The vehement denunciation of the excesses of *le romantisme* as a breaking down of rules in the intellectual discourse of the early 1920's, particularly in the works of Gide, Valéry and Brunetière. The notions of 'symptom' and 'degeneration' mentioned above are also developed in Gide's *Journal*. See in addition to Compagnon, Marty's article, 'Gide et les classiques; (2005)

expression, stripped bare of rhetorical ornaments, and untouched by sentimentalism. As such, the voluntary loss of one's individuality grants access to an unparalleled purity of vision.<sup>19</sup> Like Valéry, Gide establishes a hierarchy between authors in terms of creative authenticity and worth. In *Incidences* (1924), he prefers Montaigne to Ronsard, Racine and Pascal to Corneille, Stendhal to Hugo, Baudelaire to Gautier, and argues that 'le vrai classicisme n'est pas le résultat d'une contrainte extérieure; celle-ci demeure artificielle et ne produit que des œuvres académiques' (Gide 1977: 281). Rachel Burrows's lecture notes make clear that Beckett shared a critical complicity with Gide. This methodological affinity emerges from the choices he makes to illustrate the main tendencies in literature. The writers that Gide opposes in the tension between 'true classicism'<sup>20</sup> and 'Romanticism' are the very ones chosen by Beckett, who prefers Gide to Balzac and shows the superiority of Racine's art over that of Corneille.

Le Juez specifies that the major difference between Racine and Corneille, according to Beckett, is the emphasis on psychological reality: 'pas de mélodrame, ici, c'est la confession ou la prise de conscience' (Le Juez 2007: 98). Beckett sees no sense of duty in Racine's characters, but an irresistible inclination to follow instinct. Like Gide, moreover, he turns to Corneille and Balzac so as to show that an art that imposes order and coherence, along with value judgements, is superficial (Le Juez 2007: 51). Beckett considers that the 'prenaturalists' (Stendhal, Flaubert) and the 'postnaturalists' (Gide, Proust, Bourget and Maurice Barrès) share a similar stance, precisely because of their reaction to Balzac and the Naturalists (Le Juez 2007: 58).

Another point of convergence between Beckett and Gide is the rejection of rational

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<sup>19</sup> A similar statement appears at the very beginning of Rachel Burrows's notes. Beckett argues that classical artists are 'most intensely individual' (TCD MIC 60).

<sup>20</sup> Gide opposes 'le vrai classicisme' to the intellectualism of the seventeenth century. 'True classicism' is characterized by a preliminary statement that impedes what Beckett would refer to as 'the progressive discovery of the real' that he found in Racine, Dostoevsky, Gide and Proust (TCD MIC 60). Also quoted in Le Juez 2007: 52.

demonstration based on causality.<sup>21</sup> In the same article on classicism, Gide concludes that ‘si la matière est soumise par avance, l’œuvre est froide et sans intérêt’ (Gide 1977: 281). Beckett in his lectures took up the same argument: ‘When French artists abdicate as critics everything goes wrong. Corneille [and] Balzac abdicated as critics. Racine is always present as critic. Balzac considers humanity as so much vegetable inertia. [He] examines sources of momentum, not body of it’ (TCD MIC 60).

This is in keeping with Beckett’s rejection of Naturalism as a partial, limited expression of human reality. Indeed, he never fails to point out that writers such as Zola overlook that same human complexity that is present in Gide and Racine because they treat the subject matter of their work scientifically, in an attempt to impose structure upon the inexplicable and to exclude the irrational. In *Proust*, Beckett also discards the ‘realists and naturalists’ for their excessive reliance on description. Proust’s work is classical in a very Gidean sense for Beckett. In his absolute mastery of language, the author can delve into the very depths of being and reveal essential truths, ‘capturing without the sentiment the essence’ (Beckett 1999: 79). This unambiguously echoes back to the ‘romantisme dompté’ that Gide identifies in ‘pure’ classicism (Gide 1977: 281).

## 2. ‘Intuitionism’ according to Bergson and Pascal’s ‘esprit de finesse’<sup>22</sup>

There can be no doubt that Pascal’s thought was of major interest to Beckett, if only because it enabled him to grasp the movement of contemporary thought and understand the main

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<sup>21</sup> Rachel Burrows recalled that Beckett saw in Proust and Gide a filiation with Dostoevsky, because they also refused to deform the incomprehensibility of the real (Le Juez 2007: 54).

<sup>22</sup> The philosophical validity of this filiation is still questioned. For instance, Henri Gouhier argues that Bergson’s alleged ‘anti-intellectualism’ is distinct from Pascalian thought: ‘on se tromperait à mettre son auteur aux côtés de ceux qui proclament “la banqueroute de la science”’ (Gouhier 1980: 86). Compagnon, on the other hand, specifies that Bergson did approve the comparison: ‘Auparavant, Pascal était absent des ouvrages fondateurs du philosophe de l’intuition, [...] mais, à partir de 1915, il est exact que Bergson tend à identifier l’intuition à l’esprit de finesse’ (Compagnon 2007: 423).

strain in modern literature and criticism. Just as he turned to Gide's theorization of classicism, so Beckett knew that a filiation had been drawn between Bergson and Pascal.<sup>23</sup>

In his response to the controversy on 'modernism', Beckett took up the 'anti-intellectual' principles defined in Bergson's works, and manifested in the novels of Gide and Proust. The students' lecture notes show that Beckett used contemporary thought, including opinions he seems to have disagreed with – for instance, Benda's condemnation of Bergson and his defence of rationalism – to elaborate a singular conception of 'modern' literature. Rachel Burrows wrote down that the impossibility to reconcile intelligence and intuition was mentioned on several occasions, insofar as 'intuition is [the] highest [form of] intelligence, l'intelligence personnelle'. On the other hand, the 'fonctionnement de l'esprit is [the] lowest form of intelligence' because the mind is slow to grasp what intuition apprehends immediately: 'intuition can obtain a total vision that intelligence can't' (TCD MIC 60).

Benda, one of the most controversial thinkers of the period, had originally established the distinction between 'emotional romanticism' (Pascal) and 'intellectual classicism' (Descartes), and violently attacked Bergson for encouraging 'emotional romanticism', even as he condemned Pascal for being the precursor of that tendency. Previous descriptions of the lecture notes demonstrate that Beckett did not agree with Benda's wholesale rejection of 'intuition'.<sup>24</sup> Beckett cites Julien Benda's work *Le Bergsonisme, ou une philosophie de la*

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<sup>23</sup> I will not expand on the connections between Bergsonian thought and Beckett's later work. This would only lead me away from the immediate purpose of the present discussion. I would therefore refer the reader back to S.E Gontarski's recapitulation of the similarities between Beckett and Bergson: firstly, that Beckett was particularly interested in Bergson's definition of perception and 'durée' and in the demonstration that representation, being fragmentary, 'falsifies life's flow' and is thus bound to failure (Gontarski 2006: 94); secondly, that Beckett's keen interest in Bergsonian thought is essentially derived from the opposition built up throughout between 'method intuition' and 'the scientific, quotidian functioning of the mind' (Gontarski 2006: 96); thirdly, that 'the Bergson connection to his *Proust* is not often acknowledged by Beckett and so has remained underexplored by critics' (Gontarski 2006: 96) – a fact that tends to be confirmed as regards Pascal. Finally, Gontarski points out that Beckett strove to differentiate Bergson's conception of time from Proust's, and firmly resisted the 'mystical' element in Bergson and 'his insistence on a total vision' as he would with Proust (Gontarski 2006: 97).

<sup>24</sup> Following this line of thought, Benda sees in Pascal a 'corrupter' of modern taste and thought, not only as a thinker but also as a writer. He argues that Pascal produced a literature that, in its chaotic, fragmentary form, goes against the Cartesian organization of discourse. As such, the modern preference for Pascal is a sign of the times' decadence. In an article written for the  *NRF*  in 1923, Benda emphatically condemns the contemporary

*mobilité* (1912), developing upon Benda's account of Bergsonian philosophy several times in his lectures.

Beckett's effort to establish systematic parallels between the seventeenth century and modern thought pervades his lectures. He alludes to Bergson's interest in the conflict between intelligence and intuition, comparing it with the expression 'esprit géométrique'. This is a clear allusion to the short text written by Pascal, as well as the famous, but very complex, distinction he further establishes between 'esprit de géométrie' and 'esprit de finesse' in the *Pensées*.<sup>25</sup>

Put briefly, Pascal distinguishes between two modes of perception in the following terms: 'en l'un les principes sont palpables, mais éloignés de l'usage commun', they are few and easily palpable, 'si gros qu'il est presque impossible qu'ils échappent' (Pascal 2004: #466). In contrast, the principles deriving from the 'esprit de finesse' are numerous and based on an observation of nature, relating to the infinite: 'les principes sont dans l'usage commun et devant les yeux de tout le monde' (Pascal 2004: #466). In other words, the geometrical spirit deals with abstract principles ('principes inaccoutumés'), whereas the 'esprit de finesse' deals with direct, everyday experience. The memorization of abstract principles requires an effort of the intelligence, whereas the principles of the 'esprit de finesse' are grasped immediately: 'il faut tout d'un coup voir la chose, d'un seul regard, et non par progrès de raisonnement, au moins jusqu'à un certain degré' (Pascal 2004: #466).

At this point, Pascal abandons the visual metaphor to evoke non-visual perception. These principles are so fine and intricate that they can only be grasped instinctively: 'on les voit à peine, on les sent plutôt qu'on ne les voit, on a des peines infinies à les faire sentir à

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idolatry for Pascal as he exclaims: 'ce Pascal qui devait attendre l'intrusion chez nous de la philosophie pathétique pour être salué de père de la pensée française (voilez-vous, Voltaire et Montesquieu!). L'auteur des *Pensées*, lui aussi, eût pu dire: "Je serai compris vers 1880"' (Compagnon 2007 : 415).

<sup>25</sup> Pierre Force suggests that the reason for this familiarity is that the most widespread editions of the *Pensées* included it in their opening sections. In the justification he gives for his thematic classification of the works, (1922), Léon Brunschvicg highlights the essential aspects of the interrelationship between rhetoric and psychology in Pascal (Force 2003: 121).

ceux qui ne les sentent pas d'eux-mêmes' (Pascal 2004: #466). The 'esprit de finesse' is distinguished by its capacity to attain the most hidden truths ('pénétrer vivement et profondément les conséquences des principes'). Beckett defines the creative endeavour in strikingly similar terms in *Proust*, stating that 'the only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contradiction of the spirit, a descent' (Beckett 2001: 65). The approach Beckett develops throughout his lectures, in which primary *correspondances* between past and contemporary authors are constantly established, directly echoes the critical tradition issuing from Sainte-Beuve, and his representations of Pascal and Racine inherently correspond to the predominant image elaborated at the time.

The manuscripts provide evidence that Pascal's reflections on intelligence and the limitations of thought in the *Pensées* worked as the philosophical equivalent of Racine's statement on the primacy and incoherence of desire. In fact, this conception reflects the intellectual debate that has just been evoked, wherein both writers were consistently brought together in the assumption that a common 'psychology', based on pessimism and the primacy of instinct over reason, characterized their closeness to modern thought. The study of the *Proust* monograph in the next chapter will show that their literary impact was just as essential.

#### B. *Formlessness as an Aesthetic Imperative*

The final aspect I would like to discuss is the artistic response to classicism. As we have seen, it was taken as the model from which an authentic literary language could be elaborated. In *Du côté de chez Swann* (1913), one of Marcel's most vivid reminiscences of Bloch is related, significantly, to the figure of Racine. In a well-known sequence, Bloch laughs at the narrator's naive conception of poetic beauty: 'moi qui n'attendais d'eux rien d'autre que la révélation de la vérité' (Proust 1988: 72). Besides being 'assez bien rythmé', Racine's verse

has at its best ‘le mérite suprême de ne signifier absolument rien’ (Proust 1988: 73). According to Bloch, then, the most remarkable line in Racine – ‘la fille de Minos et de Pasiphaé’ – outshines any other because of its very banality. This provocative stance anticipated a tendency that would confirm itself in the early 1930s.

The reception of Racine characterized the complex and problematic relationship between the poetic nature of a literary text and the rhetorical function of language. Gilles Declercq points out that twentieth century readings of Racine, which adopted either a poetical or a rhetorical perspective, epitomized the debate on the definition of literature: ‘en opposant une vision *lyrique* et *dramatique* à une vision *oratoire* et *dramatique* des tragédies, la critique racinienne du vingtième siècle est un champ d’observation privilégié du débat relatif à l’essence poétique et rhétorique de la littérature’ (Declercq 2001: 19).

1. Racine as the archetypal figure of Paul the notion of ‘poésie pure’ according to Valéry and Brémond

In an interesting essay, entitled *Les écrivains contre l’écriture* (2006), Laurent Nunez considers at some length Valéry’s attack on literary expression as pure artifice, and elicits aspects that are strikingly reminiscent of Beckett’s early critical writings. In Valéry’s view, style emerges when the effort to clarify and explain overcomes the desire to express thought authentically. A more mature Valéry would eventually observe, in *Tel Quel*, that ‘je n’aime pas l’éloquence, ce n’est pas la forme de la pensée’ (Valéry 1941: 198). This ‘terrorist’ stance towards writing leads to the utter rejection of ‘style’, insofar as early in his career, Valéry prefers to forsake the idea of writing ‘well’ in order to come closer to the truth of being: ‘les médiocres esprits deviennent toujours plus habiles, ne cessant de parcourir leur médiocre lieu. Mais celui qui d’habile se fait gauche... Voilà l’homme’ (Valéry, quoted in Nunez 2006: 47).

Valéry’s impact upon Beckett seems to have been overlooked by previous

commentators who stressed, on the other hand, the importance of Mauthner's influence upon Beckett (Ben-Zvi, Hunkeler, Feldman).<sup>1</sup> Beckett's rejection of rhetoric is first manifested in his adoption of the French language. He declared, in his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, that 'Grammar and Style' were irrelevant, 'a mask'. To Lawrence Harvey he reiterated the idea two decades later: 'in French, without all the old associations English has for me, I was able to get at it more clearly, the outlines were clearer' (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 110). Interestingly he simultaneously adopted the counterpoint to Valéry's stance. Indeed, Beckett's preference for the formulation of an idea over the very idea itself would bring him to discard the eminent poet's belief that the mere act of utterance taints the primordial beauty of an idea for 'le vrai devient le vague' (Nunez 2006: 47). Beckett famously stated that 'I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe in them... It is the shape that matters'.<sup>2</sup>

Henri Brémond articulated the concept of 'poésie pure'. The Jesuit scholar turned to Valéry's work to extract its essential features. Brémond related the mystical state achieved through prayer with the contemplative attitude of the poet. The article dedicated to Brémond's understanding of pure poetry in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis* mentions an interesting distinction made by the author. Poetry comes from the divine, and thus corresponds to a movement of elevation. Brémond opposes the 'music of silences' to the 'noise' of words. In a similar way, Valéry developed a substantial analogy between 'prose' and 'walking' on the one hand, and 'poetry' and 'dance' on the other.<sup>3</sup>

For Brémond, the notion is not a mere abstract product of the mind; it is intrinsically linked with the literary domain, and, as such, 'on peut analyser le discours de la prose, celui qui relève de l'*animus*, l'intellect ne peut rien pour mettre à nu le secret du chant, qui est l'apanage du poème et relève de l'*anima*' (see URL in the Bibliography). Correlative to his

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<sup>1</sup> To my knowledge, the affinities between Beckett and Valéry have been the object of only one article published in the *Journal of Beckett Studies* by Robert Posnock, 'Beckett, Valéry and Watt' (see URL in Bibliography).

<sup>2</sup> Samuel Beckett quoted by Harold Hobson, 'Samuel Beckett: Dramatist of the Year', *International Theatre Annual* 1 (1956), pp. 153.

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, 'Poésie et pensée abstraite' included in *Variétés V* (Valéry 1961: 152-156).

reflexions on Racine is Valéry's controversial article on Pascal, opposing one paradigm of the times to the other. In 'Variations sur une Pensée' (1923), Valéry quotes Pascal's phrase, 'le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie', arguing that it is, in essence, a poem. In a significant movement, Valéry begins to praise the poetic genius of Pascal's idiom, only to condemn the omniscience of the classical artist embodied by Pascal: 'à ce que dit Pascal qu'il éprouve, et à quoi la légende le borne, j'ajoutai simplement qu'il le dit avec art. J'ai vu distinctement l'écrivain et même le poète, et presque le rhéteur, dans les quelques mots du Silence éternel' (Valéry 1963: 465).

Valéry then formulates a paradox that reveals a crisis of language: verisimilitude ('vraisemblance') can no longer be taken as an adequate criterion to define modern literature, which leads him to concentrate on the incommensurability between the real and thought, the hiatus between lived experience and its evocation. The author attacks the illusion that language is omnipotent, argues that it is powerless to grasp the complexity of the individual, and defines language as indirect. Expressing an emotion, even visceral anguish, may be artificial, a mere effect of rhetoric. Hence, a distance exists between the writer and true individual feeling from the very outset.

Interestingly, Valéry's response to Pascal goes against the favourable prejudices of his times, as he sees in Pascal a master of rhetoric, condemning him because his description of man is artificial: 'Quand je vois l'écrivain reprendre et empirer la véritable sensation de l'homme, y ajouter des forces recherchées, et vouloir toutefois que l'on prenne son industrie pour son émotion, je trouve que cela est impur et ambigu' (Valéry 1963: 465).<sup>4</sup>

Valéry deliberately emphasizes the poetic nature of the text over its original dramatic or representational purpose. Following Mallarmé, he strives to define a new poetics that, in

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<sup>4</sup> In *La part du feu* (1949), Blanchot objected to Valéry's vehement criticism of Pascal, arguing that the effect upon the reader stems from 'la participation de l'existence à la parole' (Blanchot 1949: 256) rather than the authenticity of emotion. He identifies a correlative movement between the objectification of the author and the active participation of the reader, in order to complete the gap in the rupture between life and narration.

the search for its own essence, first has to distinguish itself from a discursive, prosaic language. This choice was purposely provocative, according to Declercq, given that the text itself is not merely poetic, but thought in terms of theatrical performance, or action. Declercq points out that, ‘pour Valéry, l’œuvre racinienne n’est que formellement dramatique, et sa rhétoricité est le visage apparent d’une poéticité qui tend à la pureté. Cette poéticité constitue sa modernité, tandis que son classicisme réside dans cette séduction du discours au chant, qui la distingue des écritures modernes, où l’ornement brise ostensiblement la ligne du discours’ (Declercq 2001: 23). The poetic quality of a text comes from the harmonious submissiveness of the idea to the musical nature of the text.

The distinction between ‘chant’ (the poetic quality of the text) and ‘drame’ (its theatricality or its representational vocation) is at the core of Beckett’s reflections on Racine. The impact of this particular conception of literature, and seventeenth century theatre in particular, reverberates in Beckett’s own plays, in which arguably the ‘poetic’ nature of the text predominates. ‘Poésie pure’ is the ideal that comes closest to the desire he expresses in his July 1937 letter to Axel Kaun, that the ‘terrible materiality of the word surface’ must be dissolved to reveal the poetic nature of language in an ‘assault against words in the name of beauty’ (Beckett 2001: 172).

Beckett’s fascination with the classical idiom is manifest in passages of his correspondence and in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, where the narrator distinguishes two opposing forms of writing. On the one hand, we find the figure of the ‘stylist’, whose style is witty or sophisticated, carefully elaborated to convey the impression of novelty (‘the contempt of the tag or the ready made’), and on the other hand the perfect form of authentic literary expression which deals with depth. It is embodied most characteristically in the idiom of the French seventeenth century, where expression reaches an ideal form of simplicity through the unique clarity, proportion and balance of classical eloquence:

The uniform, horizontal writing, flowing without accident, of the man with a style, never gives you the margarita. But the writing of, say, Racine or Malherbe, perpendicular, diamanté, is pitted, is it not, and sprigged with sparkles; the flints and pebbles are there, no end of humble tags and common places. They have no style, they write without style, do they not, they give you the phrase, the sparkle, the precious margarita. Perhaps only the French can do it. Perhaps only the French language can give you the thing you want. (Beckett 1993: 48)

This passage also makes clear that Beckett derides attempts to theorize literature insofar as these ideas refer to dominant stereotypes.<sup>5</sup> One of the lasting stereotypes concerns the musicality of the Racinian line, which is based on natural eloquence.<sup>6</sup> It is therefore possible that Beckett had in mind the use of the rhetorical figure of the *litote* that, in contemporary discourse, symbolizes the excellence of the classical style. He might also have been aware of the quarrel between Gide and Cocteau that had taken place in the previous decade, the outcome of which led to the definition of the classical style as precisely lacking in style.<sup>7</sup> Beckett points out the consistent use Gide made of the *litote* in his teaching.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Since Sainte-Beuve, who pointed out its quasi-prosaic nature, the 'impersonality' of the classical writer became a widespread theme at the end of the nineteenth century. It was developed by Ferdinand Brunetière and Gustave Lanson in his monumental *Histoire de la littérature française*, who characterized it in the following terms: 'le style est sans pareil: simple et naturel avant tout, juste, précis, intense, rasant la phrase comme disait Sainte-Beuve. Une admirable poésie, dont on parlera plus tard, s'y fonde et s'y résout en langage poétique. Point de sublime; point de mots à effets, de sens à détacher, à retenir' (Lanson, quoted in Rosellini: 10). Lanson goes on to observe that 'Racine ne fait pas de "pensées" ni de maximes. Le "qui te l'a dit?" d'Hermione, le "Seigneur, vous changez de visage" de Monime, le "Sortez" d'Hermione [Rozane?] voilà le sublime de Racine, des mots de situation, terribles et pathétiques par les causes que l'on saisit et les effets que l'on pressent. On serait étonné. Si l'on y regardait de près, de ce qu'il y a chez Racine de mots familiers, de locutions de tous les jours la musique délicate de son vers nous empêche de remarquer les formes de la conversation courante qui souvent le remplissent' (Lanson quoted in Rosellini: 10). In his novels as well as in his lectures, Beckett again reproduces these ideas. The parodic slant in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* might have been the only way for him to distance himself from this overwhelming academic representation of the seventeenth century writer, although the reflections on the paradoxical prosaic quality of Racine's style paved the way for his own approach to the elaboration of a dramatic language.

<sup>6</sup> For a study of the different representations of Racine from the eighteenth century to the late nineteenth century, see again Michèle Rosellini's article on the myth of the literary figure.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of that episode, see Apter 1983.

<sup>8</sup> Rachel Burrows noted in the margins that Gide was 'always stylistically faithful' to classical writers in his use of the *litote*, which is rhetorically efficient insofar as it consists in 'saying less to mean more' (TCD MIC 60).

## 2. On Thibaudet's *Réflexions sur la littérature*

The parallels established between Beckett's representation of modern literature and these chosen examples of contemporary literary theory confirm that Beckett had been an avid reader of the *Nouvelle Revue Française* in the early decades of the twentieth century.<sup>9</sup> It is also likely that he knew of Albert Thibaudet's *Réflexions sur la littérature*, which had, in the early decades of the twentieth century, become an important reference throughout Europe in terms of the representation of French literature. Bearing in mind Beckett's understanding of French literature and particularly the Classics as previously discussed, there are two aspects of Thibaudet's work that are worth pointing out: his dualistic conception of representative authors within a century, and the emphasis made on style, in which Pascal is taken as the epitome of creative genius.

Thibaudet had an important impact upon the first group of the *NRF*. He contributed actively to the discussion on the essence of literature through his responses to contemporary works as well as diverse critical writings. As one commentator recently pointed out, his originality lies in an unsystematic, almost fragmentary approach to literature.<sup>10</sup> Thibaudet wrote on diverse subjects and sought to bring out, like Gide, the idea that a 'dialogue' had been elaborated throughout the centuries between the foremost French writers, that is, from Montaigne to his own contemporaries. His persistent endeavour to delineate the clear continuity which exists within French literature is a fundamental trait of his critical approach, enabling 'necessary coexistences' to be broached through parallels between past and present.

In order to elicit meaning from these distinctive patterns of style, theme, and genre, he defines this dualistic conception as a deliberate *a priori* choice, whose function is precisely to establish the main features of creative evolution in the French 'literary geography'. In an

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<sup>9</sup> Brigitte Le Juez mentions that Beckett could have been referring to an article by Jacques Rivière on Dostoyevski published in the *NRF* in the issue of February 1922 (Le Juez 2007:72).

<sup>10</sup> See Leymarie: 2006.

article published for the April 1921 issue of the *Revue Critique des Idées et des Livres* entitled ‘Les Deux Ordres’, Thibaudet argued that the elaboration of antithetical, yet complementary, couples of writers, however artificial, enables the critic to bring forward the continuous movement of change in the configuration of the literary landscape through the ages, and extract the true essence of literature. He writes:

[...] précisément ce qui nous intéresse, ce n’est pas la réalité en partie illusoire de ces couples, c’est la tendance des contemporains et de la postérité à créer ces couples, c’est la disposition subjective de la critique spontanée à aimer cette vision ou cette idée du couple. Cette idée, cette vision est en partie donnée dans la figure vraie de notre littérature, mais en partie seulement. C’est de notre propre fonds que nous l’achevons: nous sollicitons la réalité dans le sens vers lequel la réalité déjà penchait.<sup>11</sup>

In an article written in April 1929 for the *NRF*, entitled ‘Pour une géographie littéraire’, Thibaudet elaborates a conception of literature as a whole (‘un ensemble’) made of components that, as a rule, can be assembled together to bring out fundamental analogies. The major writers are considered as ‘antithetical or symmetrical geniuses’ who answer and complete each other in a perpetual dialogue between past and present: ‘On chercherait en vain depuis le dix-septième siècle un génie littéraire placé autrement que sur le tableau d’une balance, sur l’autre plateau de laquelle un autre génie lui fasse équilibre et opposition’ (Thibaudet 2007: 1240). Establishing dualisms is something of an irresistible tendency in (French) literary criticism, because it reflects a ‘natural’ strain within French literature: ‘Le système des parallèles, auquel Plutarque contraint artificiellement sa biographie gréco-latine, il est suggéré, imposé, avec une manière de nécessité, par le génie de la littérature française. C’est Descartes et Pascal, – Corneille et Racine, – Bossuet et Fénelon, – Voltaire et Rousseau, – Lamartine et Victor Hugo’ (Thibaudet 2007: 1240).

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<sup>11</sup> Thibaudet in Pradeau 2005 [accessed 21 March 2010].

A number of examples demonstrate that Beckett reproduced this dualistic approach to literature. This is illustrated in his discussion on Racine. Looking at *Bérénice*, he seems to have suggested that the work has none of the baroque exuberance of Corneille's version of the story – Rachel Burrows wrote down that the creation of *Bérénice* was an experience carried out by Racine to downplay Corneille's own version of the story, 'a fanfare of triumph'. For Beckett, Corneille's theatre relies on an outdated ethic, in which the relationship between the characters is based on an 'old elevation type of sentiment', that is, on the triumph of reason, as in Descartes. On the contrary, there is an 'implied pessimism' in most of Racine's works that anticipates modern preoccupations. Moreover, Beckett opposes Corneille's exaggeration to the establishment of a perfect, (classical) equilibrium in Racine's play, from which he concludes that 'Racine beat Corneille on his own ground'.

At the same time as he attacked the writers of the Irish Revival for their lack of creativity and dependence on politics, Beckett sought to define an authentic literary idiom by finding paradigmatic figures from the past (Dante, Stendhal, Dostoyevsky) and the present (Joyce, Proust, Gide). In 'Recent Irish Poetry', Beckett distances himself from the realist genre of the novel and the endeavour to promote a 'national' canon implemented by the Revival. He again establishes a distinction between two categories of writers: the 'Antiquarians' who conform to the model set by the Irish Revival, and the more isolated, independent figures who stray from convention and cultural stereotypes.

Lastly, Beckett retained that sense of duality in the account he gives of his own literary accomplishment. The Beckett-Joyce relationship has been defined psychologically, that is, in terms of paternity – what Harold Bloom defined as the 'anxiety of influence' – and more accurately as a temporary 'effet de miroir' (Rabaté 1984: 8). Matthjis Engelberts has pointed out to me, Beckett elaborates an antithetic couple, composed of himself and Joyce in a way so deliberate that it may recall Thibaudet's own conception of literature. It is indeed striking to

see that Beckett himself reproduced the dualistic pattern set up by Thibaudet to characterize his own literary situation. He wrote in his German diaries, on February 1, 1937, that '[I] realized that Joyce had gone so far as one could go in the direction of knowing more, in control of one's material [...] I realized that my own way was impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, subtracting rather than adding' (Beckett quoted in Knowlson 2003: 48). Moreover, Beckett told James Knowlson that the idea that Joyce is to be taken as a counter-example was not his: 'it was Maurice Nadeau who said it was an influence *ab contrario*'.

In his lectures on Gide, Beckett pointed out that 'style argues the man' (TCD MIC 60). It is interesting to note that in one of his early 'Réflexions', Thibaudet uses this well-known phrase from Buffon to show that the dualism is confirmed even in terms of style. He argues that 'lorsque Buffon écrit que le style c'est l'homme, il entend, naturellement, l'homme comme volonté consciente autant que l'homme sensibilité spontanée, l'homme tel qu'il se pense comme fin, tel qu'il se formule à lui-même comme idéal [...]' (Thibaudet 2007: 264). He goes on to point out that one type exemplifies 'l'extrême du naturel et du spontané dont le style est capable', while the other demonstrates 'par son extrême de possible de volonté et d'artifice' the second aspect of style.

Revealingly, Thibaudet considers that a literary work cannot be characterized as a fixed form or that it necessarily falls into one of the defining patterns of expression. Both aspects can be found within a single author: a writer's style is neither entirely 'natural' nor 'artificial'. It is no coincidence that Thibaudet turns to Pascal to illustrate his point.<sup>12</sup> He observes that 'le style des *Provinciales* paraît plus naturel, plus immédiat que celui des *Pensées*, et pourtant les *Provinciales* ont été extrêmement travaillées, chacune réécrite

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<sup>12</sup> It was Pascal who originally elaborated the distinction in *De l'art de persuader* and *De l'esprit géométrique*, as well as in a series of fragments in the *Pensées* that will be the object of our study in chapter ???. Montaigne serves as a paradigmatic figure, anticipating the 'style de l'honnête homme', that Pascal defines as his own.

plusieurs fois, tandis que les *Pensées* sont généralement des notations rapides' (Thibaudet 2007: 264).

The final example I will give is taken from the *Réflexions sur la littérature*. In an article entitled 'Le roman de la douleur', written in 1922, Thibaudet defines three stylistic categories, to which he assigns one characteristic figure: the first category is the 'style de certitude', which is based on traditional rhetoric (or, as he terms it, 'le style oratoire'). Its movement is identifiable insofar as it is altogether 'uniform' and 'progressive' (Thibaudet 2007: 659). Thibaudet sees its most significant conveyor in Bossuet, 'qui expose ce qu'il croit voir clairement, ce qu'il croit être indubitablement'.

The second style is 'le style de découverte', which is based on the impression that the author is progressively discovering truth. As a consequence, language spontaneously renders the different phases of that discovery because the immediacy of expression is the only way by which thought can take shape on the unwritten page: 'l'auteur aperçoit, comprend ce qu'il dit au fur et à mesure qu'il écrit, transporte dans l'écriture le graphique même de l'invention' (Thibaudet 2007: 652). This is the style of Montaigne and Sainte-Beuve.

Lastly, 'le style d'inquiétude' corresponds to the third category. It is a discontinuous form of expression. The sentences are characteristically brief ('pressées'), yet they build up a form of coherence ('uniformes'), a style that distinguishes itself from the other types because it contains an element of mystery, revealing 'la présence d'une figure anxieuse'. Pascal, unsurprisingly seen as a tragic figure, is chosen to illustrate it.

Thibaudet then summarizes the attitudes typical of each style: 'le premier style extrait, de l'image ou de l'idée, la décision de l'homme qui a raison et qui propage cette raison toute faite: le deuxième le point où se plaît l'homme qui aime chercher et pour qui les trouvailles ne sont qu'un moyen de chercher plus loin, le troisième l'angoisse où se consume l'homme qui est perdu dans un mystère [...]' (Thibaudet 2007: 652). He sees in Pascal an authentic creative

genius whose impact could only have been unforeseen by immediate posterity. ‘Pascal est l’extraordinaire pur, la création pure’, he writes, the inventor of every distinctive form of literary style known in the French language.

All these elements show that Beckett’s understanding of seventeenth century classicism coincides with the representations elaborated by the foremost writers of his time. He found a relevant method in Gide’s approach to classicism, and elaborated his own opinion upon the subject by following that method closely. Because of the particular emphasis he puts on the irrational in his lectures and in *Proust*, there can be no doubt that Beckett involved himself in the controversy, albeit indirectly. The *Proust* monograph, although reluctantly written, could have been an opportunity for him to render the different aspects of that controversy to an English-speaking public that was for the most part unacquainted with it.

Even if Pascal is almost absent from Rachel Burrows’s lecture notes, established and likely sources provide evidence that Beckett was profoundly interested in his thought before he turned to him as a writer. The literary uniqueness of Pascal comes about in most of his contemporaries’ writings, indeed the age was fascinated with (and repelled by) the author of the *Pensées*. Judging by the manifestations of this fascination, it can be inferred that Beckett, through his readings and conversations in the 1920s and 1930s, retained the image of Pascal as a remarkably gifted writer and the forerunner of ‘modern’ thought. But this remains insufficient evidence of an actual literary and aesthetic influence of the writer of the *Pensées* upon Beckett’s work. In Chapter 3 I will seek to demonstrate that Beckett found material in the *Pensées* that inspired him directly when he would write (or express himself) in the French language.

### III. CONCLUSION

Beckett’s sources on Pascal and seventeenth century classicism are only indicated in archival

material. The study of the cultural history of Beckett's formative years proves necessary to show that he took up the reflections on style and on the perfection of form he found in the publications of the major writers of the times in his lectures and some of his critical writings, mainly the *Proust* monograph. One is led to conjecture how this omnipresent reference to Pascal and Racine eventually helped him define his own creative endeavour. This would confirm what genetic studies have brought to light: a form of continuity is found between Beckett's scholarly note taking and readings, and the subsequent process of creative composition. Both as a student and later as a tentative literary critic, and at a moment where such a debate was taking place in France, Beckett took up the widespread idea that the ethical, moral and philosophical principles of classicism were reproduced in the elaboration of language as pure form, and, more precisely, in certain archetypal figures of speech.

Furthermore, the research undertaken on Beckett's sources on Racine at this stage has indicated that Pascal was an inevitable reference. Beckett's conception of seventeenth century French classicism, and the references he makes to it, reveal that the controversy over 'modernity' pervades not only his teaching, but also the 1931 *Proust* monograph and his first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, completed in 1932. One way of accounting for the choice of quotations in the 'Whoroscope Notebook' is that Beckett's knowledge of the *Pensées* was intimate, as his interest went beyond recording the most famous passages. Moreover, he did not limit himself to reading that work. He was prone to read Pascal's scientific writings as a result of his keen taste for mathematics. The next chapter will show that Beckett brought the parallel between the two writers into his own criticism: there is textual evidence that Beckett's lectures and the 1931 monograph on Proust are built upon an implicit, but fundamental parallel between Pascal's anthropological vision in the *Pensées* and Racine's art.

Beckett not only kept to the description of a literary continuity between past and present, which he expressed in the manner of Gide and the circle of the *NRF*, but he elaborated his own conception of the tragic in Racine's tragedies, which is mainly manifest in his remarks upon the psychology of desire. Even if there are only a limited number of elements in his lectures that enable us to determine his understanding of Pascal's work, a general survey of the intellectual context has shown that many ideas on art and experience were directly related to the *Pensées*.

## CHAPTER 2

### Beckett and French Literary Augustinianism

The preliminary study of Rachel Burrows's lecture notes revealed that Beckett retained from his readings a vision of the seventeenth century that shaped his views on modern literature. Lawrence Harvey also points out that Beckett inherited a vision of the world from Rudmose-Brown, 'who preferred the poets of darkness: Racine, Baudelaire' (Harvey 1970: 17), without linking it to a specific tradition in French literature inaugurated in the seventeenth century. In 1951, Jean Dagens, had defined the seventeenth century after Sainte-Beuve, as 'le siècle de Saint-Augustin' (Dagens 1951: 31).

Even if, like Gide, Beckett warned his students against the 'demon of analogy' (TCD MIC 60), he nonetheless relied on a comparative approach to literature with the aim of establishing a series of parallels between past and present thought and aesthetics, bringing up, like Thibaudet, antithetical couples of writers. In doing so, he sought the authority of contemporary writers (principally Gide, Proust, and Valéry) and thinkers (Benda and Bergson) who praised classicism for its awareness of limitations, thus helping him to determine his own approach to the period. The influence of major figures of the nineteenth century (Sainte-Beuve and Schopenhauer) who turned to classicism as a (counter)-reference also became apparent. Just as his fascination with the oscillation between the 'classical' and 'modern' elements within an authentic literary art finds an exemplary figure in Racine, so his understanding of modern thought derives from the association made with Pascal in the philosophical works he is known to have read, mainly Schopenhauer and Bergson.

As we have seen, the method Beckett adopted in his teaching was not entirely his own. He reproduced an antithetical and dualistic approach to literature that had become standard in France, but which was new in Ireland – an additional sign of his distancing himself from the Irish context. His reflections on modern literature (particularly his depreciation of realism and

its derivatives) deliberately go against the Irish conception of canonical French writers. He prefers, for instance, the ‘impersonality’ of Flaubert’s style, and the sense of desolation that comes out of his novels, to Balzac, whose ‘realism’ based on descriptions conforms better with the preoccupations of contemporary Irish novelists. Accordingly, Le Juez observes that ‘son intérêt commence précisément par l’impersonnalité de son [Flaubert] écriture, ce que O’Faoláin décrit comme le point de démarcation avec la plupart de leurs semblables’ (Le Juez 2007: 43). Le Juez also underlines that, in choosing Flaubert and Stendhal, Beckett echoed Ezra Pound’s preferences,<sup>1</sup> a position that enabled him to be on the side of modern European writers.

The relationship between literary Augustinianism and the description of an aesthetics based on failure will be the object of the following sections. With this aim, I turn to two authors whom Beckett read and admired (Sainte-Beuve and Proust) to highlight aspects that shaped Beckett’s understanding of the seventeenth century. I will then look in some detail at the *Proust* monograph, to show that Beckett saw a direct continuity between Proust, Pascal and Racine. Indeed, he makes explicit use of the *Pensées* as a primary subtext, and implicitly refers to Racine throughout.

## I. SAINTE-BEUVE

It is important to bear in mind that throughout the twentieth century scholars essentially continued to follow Sainte-Beuve’s line of thought on the history of Port-Royal.<sup>2</sup> The attempt to discuss the role of Jansenism, and to study (in relatively unbiased ways) the very impact of Port-Royal itself on the circles immediately related to it, is only recent. Since the work of

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<sup>1</sup> In one of his letters to James Joyce, Pound wrote that ‘there is a school of prose writers and of verse writers whose forerunner was Stendhal and whose founder was Flaubert. The followers of Flaubert deal in exact presentation [...]’ (Pound 1970: 28, cited in Le Juez 2007: 47).

<sup>2</sup> See Sellier’s remark in the ‘Preface’ to *Port-Royal*: ‘Presque toutes les recherches historiques et critiques qui ont suivi la publication du *Port-Royal* sont demeurées tributaires de ce monument.’ (Sellier 2004: xxix)

Phillipe Sellier, the different repercussions of what is now known as ‘l’augustinisme littéraire’ on later literature, from French romanticism to Baudelaire to some of the foremost twentieth century writers, have been acknowledged as the clearest manifestations of a distinctive moment in French literature.<sup>3</sup>

Although it was first perceived as a ‘sect’ propagating a rigorous morality that stifled everyday life and artistic creativity,<sup>4</sup> Port-Royal became progressively rehabilitated in the decades that preceded Sellier’s study. Scholars endeavoured to bring to light the many traits that gave a more precise idea of its role and impact during the century. Continuous discoveries revealed that Port-Royal was, as Sainte-Beuve had argued in his opening discourse, a thriving manifestation of autonomous intellectual and literary development. Some of the most recent studies have aimed to show that Port-Royal stood independently from any definite form of influence, be it Augustinianism or Jansenism.<sup>5</sup>

The work of Sainte-Beuve was perhaps Beckett’s only source on Port-Royal and Pascal.<sup>6</sup> We know from his letters to Thomas McGreevy that Beckett was familiar with the

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<sup>3</sup> Put briefly, the history of Port-Royal was, as Vincent Carraud recently pointed out, written first and foremost by its adversaries. Arnauld knowingly rejected the term ‘Jansenism’. As the precedent chapter has shown, Pascal was still the object of controversy in the early decades of the twentieth century.

<sup>4</sup> This type of discourse was particularly prominent in the early twentieth century. For an illustration of the debate that took place in the first decades, see, for instance, Maurice Blondel’s article ‘Le jansénisme ou l’anti-jansénisme de Pascal’. Léon Brunschwig’s choice of fragments in his 1922 edition of the *Pensées* is likewise known to have been partial and inaccurate. More examples from that period abound. The same form of debate took place around Racine, whose major tragedies, mainly *Phèdre* (1677), were considered to be the most powerful expression of that extreme Augustinian pessimism, particularly through the evocation of guilt, and the sense of inadequacy that derives from it. Upon its first performance, Arnauld approved of the play. *Phèdre* thus became, in Arnauld’s words, the very embodiment of ‘un juste à qui la grâce a manqué’. Vossler, Klossowski, Goldmann, were among those scholars who took up the image.

<sup>5</sup> As in, for instance, Philippe Sellier’s 1979 article on Racine, in which it is argued that the tragedies, and not only *Esther* and *Athalie*, but also the ‘profane’ plays, embody a specific type of tragedy. Sellier shows that elements echoing both doctrines can indeed be found, but that evidence of a direct influence is uncertain. Racine’s tragedies as they evoke the persecution of innocence, embody as such a unique type: Port-Royalist.

<sup>6</sup> Scholars still consider that the effort to reconstruct the historical moment of Port-Royal, the determining role it had in introducing Augustinianism as a cultural and literary reference during the entire Classical period, and its poetic attempt to describe the spiritual aura of the place and its people remains unprecedented. As Philippe Sellier observes (after Valéry) in his introduction to *Port-Royal*, Sainte-Beuve did not escape the Romantic myth that established Pascal as a solitary, tormented figure ‘en proie à l’angoisse, voire à la terreur: Hamlet du pied de la Croix’. This (stereotypical) representation would persist until the mid 1950s, although it was progressively brought to light that, even at his most intimate relationship with Port-Royal, Pascal remained a ‘mondain’. He never broke off his friendships, carried on scientific experiments until his health would no longer permit it. Moreover, his writings, particularly the ‘Mémorial’, bear testimony to the most intense manifestation of Christian joy.

*Conversations du lundi* and *Volupté*, and that he went back to reading Sainte-Beuve in the early 1930s. In his letters, Beckett never refers explicitly to *Port-Royal* but his keen interest in the critic's work and vision is evident in a letter to McGreevy on 5 December 1932, in which he writes that 'I have a great admiration for Sainte-Beuve & I think he was the most interesting mind of the whole *galère* but I can't help regretting that it was applied to criticism [...]' (Beckett 2009: 150). In that same letter Beckett considers *Volupté*, Sainte-Beuve's only novel, to be 'very beautifully written', and recommends it to his friend. A few lines further down, Beckett compares Sainte-Beuve with Rousseau and adds that he prefers Sainte-Beuve's novel to Musset,<sup>7</sup> because 'it's more like Rousseau's *Rêveries* than the *Confessions d'un Enfant du Siècle*, but without the madness and distortion' (Beckett 2009: 150).

Sainte-Beuve, for Beckett, was more than a mere critic. The aptitude to revive the past was beyond the task of a simple commentator, for his works displayed a powerful imagination and a closeness to the writers he admired. Beckett also appreciated the depth of Sainte-Beuve's portrayal of individual subjectivity and admired his style, particularly the visual element that the prose conveys: 'the images are so well framed and the colours so numerous, like a faded kaleidoscope' (Beckett 2009: 150).<sup>8</sup> These lines suggest how deep an impression was left on Beckett's understanding of the seventeenth century by his reading of Sainte-Beuve.

#### A. *The Conversations du lundi*

In one of the most influential pieces in the *Conversations du lundi*, entitled 'Qu'est-ce qu'un

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<sup>7</sup> The editors of the first volume of Beckett's *Letters* suggest that 'writing from memory, [Beckett] has conflated Rousseau's *Les Confessions* (1782) with the autobiographical novel *Les confessions d'un enfant du siècle* by Musset [...]' (Beckett 2009: 146). Given that Beckett had just referred to the 'whole galère' of French Romantic writers, such a confusion on his part seems unlikely. What is significant, however, is that Beckett should distinguish Sainte-Beuve from other French Romantics because of the restraint found in his writings – no doubt because of the pictorial quality of his prose.

<sup>8</sup> The study of the mind is Beckett's most persistent interest in the formative decades of the 1920s and 1930s. From this information, we may also infer that he was drawn to seventeenth century Augustinianism which Sainte-Beuve praised for its acute description of human nature.

classique?’, Sainte-Beuve addresses the question of literary singularity, arguing that it can only be accounted for if it is placed under the category of the universal.<sup>9</sup> A ‘classical’ writer is endowed with a unique individual talent. He transcends historical periods because of that capacity to concentrate on the essence of human reality. Seventeenth century France, Sainte-Beuve claims, ‘savait ce que c’était qu’être classique, mieux que par tous les raisonnements’ (Sainte-Beuve [undated]: 42). The imperative of innovation must bring about, at least ideally, the dialectical tension between continuity and change, in terms of ideas and expression:<sup>10</sup>

un vrai classique, comme j’aimerais à l’entendre définir, c’est un auteur qui a enrichi l’esprit humain, [...] qui a découvert quelque vérité morale non équivoque, ou ressaisi quelque passion éternelle dans ce cœur où tout semblait connu et exploré, qui a rendu sa pensée, son observation ou son invention sous une forme n’importe laquelle, mais large et grande, fine et sensée, saine et belle en soi, qui a parlé à tous dans un style à lui et qui se trouve aussi celui de tout le monde, dans un style nouveau sans néologismes, nouveau et antique, aisément contemporain de tous les âges’. (Sainte-Beuve [undated]: 42)

Sainte-Beuve turns to Pascal to give a more precise definition of true artistic innovation: ‘Les plus grands noms qu’on aperçoit au début des littératures sont ceux qui dérangent et qui choquent les plus certaines des idées qu’on a voulu donner du beau et du convenable en poésie’ (Sainte-Beuve [undated]: 55). It is significant therefore that Pascal epitomizes, in his view, the very figure of the ‘classical’ writer; he was remarkable not only as an extraordinary literary talent, but because his entire existence was tragic, and as such bound to failure.

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<sup>9</sup> Sainte-Beuve uses the latin etymology to build up his reflection. The latin term ‘classicus’ came to designate ‘first-class’ writers, whose pure idiom made them worthy of being imitated.

<sup>10</sup> As Antoine Compagnon argues, ‘Sainte-Beuve’s definition of the Classic is polemic or contradictory in a word, romantic, or anti-academic. [...] It accommodates tradition and innovation altogether, the present and the eternal. [...] He attempts earnestly to capture the particular process whereby a writer in whom his or her readers spotted a revolutionary comes to light as a continuator of tradition who restored equilibrium for the benefit of beauty’ (Compagnon 1995: 1992).

For Sainte-Beuve, Pascal was not spared from being subjected to human weakness, as he was driven by a distinctive passion, ‘une poursuite ardente et comme acharnée de la vérité’ which led to his downfall. Pascal, for Sainte-Beuve, had the qualities of an exceptional human being, perhaps more so than Racine: ‘Pascal était un grand esprit et un grand cœur, ce que ne sont pas toujours les grands esprits ; et tout ce qu’il a fait dans l’ordre de l’esprit et dans l’ordre du cœur, porte un cachet d’invention et d’originalité qui atteste la force, la profondeur, une poursuite ardente et comme acharnée de la vérité’ (Sainte-Beuve [undated]: 523). The course of that remarkable existence is reflected in the beauty of Pascal’s work, and lies in its predilection for the tragic. Sainte-Beuve is irresistibly brought to draw a historical parallel with Port-Royal which was bound to failure on account of its passionate defence of truth.<sup>11</sup> Pascal and Port-Royal represent the inevitable failure of authentic genius.

As the analysis of *Volupté* reveals, an emphasis on failure is one of the most important elements that Beckett retained from his reading of Sainte-Beuve.<sup>12</sup>

## B. *Volupté* (1834)

There is further evidence that Beckett was very much aware of the evocative power of Augustinianism in Sainte-Beuve’s novel, *Volupté*. In his letter to Thomas McGreevy, he writes: ‘I could never see why it was rated as dark and sinister’ (Beckett 2009: 150). The argument of the novel is based on the confession of a sin (lust), but its true subject is the disproportion between the narrator’s avowal of sin and the excessive remorse that follows.

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<sup>11</sup> See Philippe Sellier’s introduction to *Port-Royal*, in Sainte-Beuve: 2005. Sellier shows that the obsession with truth, that defines both the literary endeavour and existence of Pascal, also characterizes Port-Royal’s stance towards political and religious authority. For Sainte-Beuve, it foreshadows its ineluctable decline, together with its failure to defend its stance. Not uncoincidentally, Pascal – many years prior to that ‘downfall’ – had abandoned the writing of the *Provinciales* letters when he realized that controversy was fruitless, leading nowhere.

<sup>12</sup> The statement of the ‘fidelity’ to failure is one of Beckett’s working methods, which enables him to probe the incomplete nature of experience, leading to the development of a fragmentary form of writing. Beckett may have discovered its first premises in his readings of Sainte-Beuve.

Sainte-Beuve's underlying purpose was to give an adequate representation of an entire generation's temperament.

In his 'Preface', the author forewarns the reader that his work, contrary to what its title seems to imply, is not a 'sensual' novel, and he explains that the narrator, Amaury, blames himself for a fault committed in his youth. Haunted at the thought of having caused the suffering of the three women he has loved, but to whom paradoxically he denied any form of intimacy, the narrator seeks solace in politics. As his decision is made to return to the world, he becomes involved in an obscure conspiracy that precipitates him into further failure, but of a different order. In the final sequence of the novel he renounces all mundane activities to become a priest. This decision is clearly inspired by the solitaries of Port-Royal, depicted as broken souls who attempted to find themselves in the intimacy and undisturbed peace of the bleak, monotonous life of the monastery.

Sainte-Beuve's writing depends on a literary transposition of Christian spirituality and while Augustinianism underlies the narrative structure of the novel, it is subverted in a subtle ironic twist. As Jean Molino points out, the Beuvian vision of man corresponds to the Jansenist representation of post-lapsarian man. The author only differs in his reluctance to explain the fallen state of man. In his intimate dialogue with Port-Royal, Sainte-Beuve eventually came to adopt a narrative pattern that recalls that fundamental Augustinian theme. As a result 'les schèmes chrétiens sont naturalisés' (Molino 1992:188). His acute judgement of character and his understanding of the importance of the Fall as a literary theme make him an insightful psychologist.

Molino adds that 'c'est seulement parce que Sainte-Beuve en éprouvait en lui l'évidence qu'il avait pu, qu'il pouvait comprendre Port-Royal comme peu de ses contemporains pouvaient le faire. Il apparaît comme le représentant, assez isolé à son époque, d'une famille d'esprits un peu en marge, celle qui va des moralistes français du dix-septième à

Baudelaire et à Nietzsche' (Molino 1992:188). Thus, Sainte-Beuve's affinities with the writers and thinkers that Beckett most admired are apparent, as they sought to probe the depths of the human heart.

The successive tribulations of Amaury confirm the absence of divine grace. In the opening sequence, the narrator sympathizes with the mental distress of a younger acquaintance: 'vous désespérez de vous ; avec l'idée du bien et le désir d'y atteindre, vous vous croyez sans retour emporté dans un cercle d'entraînements inférieurs et d'habitudes mauvaises' (Sainte-Beuve [undated]: 3) – an expression that elaborates on Pascal's remark that 'nous sommes incapables de vrai et de bien' (Pascal 2004: #27). Amaury then writes: 'cela rabat l'orgueil de voir à quel point le fond de nos destinées, en ce qu'elles ont de misérable, en est le même' (Sainte-Beuve [undated]: 5). The words used are again reminiscent of Pascal, who claims that 'la misère se persuade par le désespoir, l'orgueil persuade la présomption' (Pascal 2004: 333), and who defines 'le cœur' as 'le vilain fond de l'homme' in its corrupted state (Pascal 2004: #453).

Sainte-Beuve takes up the theme of disenchantment with reality with the aim of initiating a dialogue with Chateaubriand's *René*, even as he insists on failure. The text is wrought with allusions to the Fall and divine grace, guilt and redemption. From a Jansenist perspective, Amaury represents the figure of the damned (les 'réprouvés'), and, for Sainte-Beuve, 'le vrai René, le René sans gloire', the founder of an entire 'race' of artists (Sainte-Beuve 1948: 290). The vacillating faith before a receding God echoes the scepticism of the modern writer: the surrender to failure, as well as the renunciation of classical objectivity and absolute mastery of the subject.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Thus the full meaning of the novel's title is revealed. As Jean Molino points out, Sainte-Beuve 'comprend aussi bien les mouvements vers le haut que les mouvements vers le bas, l'amour épuré de la femme idéale et la fréquentation des prostituées, les élans mystiques et les appels du plaisir' (Molino 1992: 193). But the term 'volupté' also designates the perverse pleasure of knowing others to the very core of their being. This analysis of character depends on the exploration of inner experience through the tension between Christian spirituality and sensuality.

Furthermore, in the *Conversations du lundi*, Sainte-Beuve describes the suffering of the modern artist, which comes from the experience of an ontological void in an article on E. T. A. Hoffmann. This emptiness becomes manifest in an unbearable nostalgia, together with a lack of purpose and a yearning for the future: ‘Les artistes modernes sont inconsolables sous l’expression terrestre, amoureux à la folie de ce qui n’est plus, aspirant sans savoir à ce qui n’est pas encore, mystiques sans foi, génies sans œuvres, âmes sans organes’ (Sainte-Beuve 1950: 384). This withdrawal of God necessarily results in melancholy and a radical dissociation between the senses and the heart. Later, Port-Royal is evoked with a similar sense of regret. As one critic argues, pleasure is ultimately found in perdition: ‘Si se refuser au désir revient à s’empêcher de vivre, consentir à lui c’est se vouer à la perdition’ (Labarthe 1999: 108).

There are striking similarities between the narrator, Amaury, and the portrait of Pascal that Sainte-Beuve elaborated in *Port-Royal*. In the third book of the first volume of *Port-Royal*, Sainte-Beuve develops a characteristic narrative technique, as he introduces Pascal *in medias res*, focusing on Pascal’s first encounter with M. de Sacy. He observes that Pascal is a complex figure whose attitude to existence radically changed after his conversion in 1654: ‘on n’a pas d’emblée ce solitaire austère et contrit qu’on se figure; la première fois qu’il nous apparaît au sentier du désert, il est brillant, presque à la mode encore, et un vrai bel esprit en regard de M. de Sacy qui en tire mille étincelles’ (Sainte-Beuve 2004: 477).

In *Volupté*, the insistence on the intensity of the suffering endured by the main protagonist suggests that Pascal is something of a Romantic hero: ‘certains endroits de Vauvenargues me causèrent une inexprimable sensation par leur convenance parfaite avec le train d’esprit et de conduite où j’étais. Lorsqu’il écrit à son jeune ami Hippolyte sur la gloire et sur les plaisirs, je l’entendais, le philosophe de trente ans, dévoré, muri, comme Pascal, par la douleur’ (Sainte-Beuve 1986: 183). The religious unrest that Amaury feels and his

fascination for the ‘solitaires’ of Port-Royal is, as Jean Mesnard underlines, a manifestation of the quiet agnosticism at work in the later part of Sainte-Beuve’s literary career.<sup>14</sup>

Port-Royal has a symbolic function in the last sequence of the novel. It represents a haven of peace from inner conflict. The memory of it gives the narrator a peacefulness of mind he had lost in the course of his tribulations. He is eventually taken to ‘a belle bibliothèque sacrée’, with original seventeenth century manuscript holdings (Sainte-Beuve 1986: 323). His initiation to the history of Port-Royal through the Jansenist writings collected there is the high point of the story.<sup>15</sup>

The term ‘sacred’ also refers to the symbolic significance of a mythical past: ‘c’était dans la rue des Maçons-Sorbonne, au premier étage de l’une de ces maisons sans soleil où avait dû demeurer Racine, la même peut-être où il avait dû monter bien des fois l’escalier inégalement carrelé’ (Sainte-Beuve 1986: 323). Amaury discovers the tragic history of Port-Royal and realizes that ‘cet esprit contentieux, qui avait promptement aigri tout le Jansénisme au dix-huitième siècle, était moins sensible ou moins aride dans la première partie de Port-Royal réformé et durant la génération de ses grands hommes’ (Sainte-Beuve 1986: 324).

The portrait of M. Hamon, ‘médecin de la Faculté de Paris qui à l’âge de trente-trois ans vendit son bien et se retira à Port-Royal des Champs’ is also something of a culminating point in the novel. Although Monsieur Hamon remains a minor presence compared to Saint-Cyran, Arnauld, Mère Angélique, Nicole, Pascal and Racine – the foremost figures among those who shaped the spirit of Port-Royal – Sainte-Beuve chose the figure of the humble and wise doctor as a symbol of the exceptional spiritual radiance of the ‘first’ Port-Royal generation. This eminence remained, in the author’s view, even after it was dismantled; it is carried on through the nurturing of a later literary genius:

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<sup>14</sup> See Mesnard’s ‘Introduction’ to the volume dedicated to Sainte-Beuve’s Port-Royal in the *Chroniques de Port-Royal* series, entitled *Pour ou contre Sainte-Beuve: Le Port-Royal?*

<sup>15</sup> Beckett may have had that passage in mind when he describes the narrator’s ‘mystical experience and meditation in the Cartesian hotcupboard in the Guermantes library’ in *Proust*.

cet homme de bien, consommé d'ailleurs dans les *Lettres*, avait pris en amitié le jeune Racine, qui était aux écoles de Port-Royal, et il se plaisait à lui donner des conseils d'études. Racine s'en souvint toujours ; il apprécia cette sainteté couronnée de Dieu dans l'ombre, et par testament, il demanda à être inhumé à Port-Royal aux pieds de M. Hamon. Image et rétablissement du règne véritable!' (Sainte-Beuve 1986: 325)

As the narrator looks back, a mystical halo gradually forms around Port-Royal and he reaches the first phase of spiritual enlightenment. The spiritual emanation of the place has revealed a superior mode of existence, shaped by self-abnegation.

Sainte-Beuve's thoroughly researched fictionalization of Port-Royal appealed to Beckett. Even if he did not read *Port-Royal*, there is sufficient material in both *Volupté*, and the *Conversations du lundi* for Beckett to have grasped the most fundamental elements of Jansenism, and the key role that Pascal played in the shaping of French spirituality and a modern idiom.<sup>16</sup>

Some descriptions in *Port-Royal* are striking for their beauty. In the preliminary discourse of the first volume, Sainte-Beuve sets out to convey the poetical nature that came out of its unique spiritual context, a quality that he evokes in his 'Preface' to *Port-Royal* as follows: 'à l'origine, en pénétrant le mystère de ces âmes pieuses, de ces existences intérieures, y recueillir la poésie profonde qui s'en exhalait' (Sainte-Beuve 1955: 673).

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<sup>16</sup> See Mesnard: 1992. Mesnard points out two essential aspects in Sainte-Beuve's portrait of Pascal: the eminent role he played in a broader literary, philosophical and religious context, and his originality as a writer. Therefore, 'pour connaître Pascal, il ne suffit pas de l'aborder isolément, il faut encore le situer dans son milieu intellectuel, littéraire, moral, religieux. Sainte-Beuve a pleinement le sens d'une totalité à explorer. Il a situé Pascal au sein de Port-Royal, l'insérant ainsi dans son univers le plus proche, le plus intime' (Mesnard 1992: 30). Fundamentally, the capacity Pascal had for literary innovation is Sainte-Beuve's second point of focus: 'il a aussi, avec plus de liberté, en suivant davantage son goût et sa fantaisie et en se situant surtout sur le plan littéraire, procuré à Pascal un entourage idéal, formé de prédécesseurs, de contemporains, de successeurs, tantôt proches par l'esprit, tantôt, plus souvent, opposés, qui tous ensemble composent, avec consonances et dissonances, une sorte de symphonie pascalienne' (Mesnard 1992: 30). The concluding remark that acknowledges the exceptional quality of his portrayal of the writer 'le Pascal de Sainte-Beuve est toujours demeuré irremplaçable' (Mesnard 1992: 37) is thus Crucial for our study of Sainte-Beuve's influence upon Beckett.

It is no coincidence that, in his monograph on Proust, Beckett should have relied on the *Pensées* as well as on *Phèdre* in order to account for the artistic endeavour that underlies the *Recherche*. Proust's narrator, like Amaury in *Volupté*, suffers from an absence of vocation. This lack of purpose eventually becomes the very object of literary expression. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, however, the question of vocation is left unresolved, suggesting, perhaps, that the nature of the 'modern' predicament is the absence of purpose. Marcel realizes that 'toute ma vie jusqu'à ce jour aurait pu et n'aurait pas pu être résumée sous ce titre: une vocation. Elle ne l'aurait pas pu en ce sens que la littérature n'avait joué aucun rôle dans ma vie' (Proust 1990: 478).

In the next section I shall continue my analysis of Beckett's understanding and use of Augustinianism by referring to his monograph on Proust. A close reading of *Proust* will show that Beckett's analysis of the *Recherche* relies heavily on Pascal and Racine.

## **II. THE INFLUENCE OF LITERARY AUGUSTINIANISM AND PASCAL ON PROUST (1931)**

The purpose of this section is to demonstrate that Beckett retained Sainte-Beuve's admiration for Pascal and his reliance on the Augustinian vision of Port-Royal in the *Proust* monograph. As one Port-Royal specialist puts it, the seventeenth century 'apparaît comme une culture de l'intériorité', especially in the years 1660–80, when the study of man and human nature was inspired by Augustinian reflections. The heart of man is impenetrable and holds secrets that need to be uncovered. Interiority, therefore, is the authentic place of being.

To move away from it by exteriorizing it, then, is the movement that reveals the vacuity of man, his lack of substantiality. But it is also the channel through which divine grace operates, symbolizing charity: 'une ambivalence pèse donc sur l'intériorité, caractérisée tour à tour par deux types de termes et d'images, les uns positifs (recueillement, lieu propre,

authenticité), les autres négatifs (corruption, abîme, plis et replis)’ (Guion 2002: 40). Philippe Sellier likewise remarks that the most compelling aspect of Pascal’s writing is that his theology ‘se trouve en parfaite correspondance avec son univers le plus intime, avec son imaginaire, révélateur le plus fondamental de son rapport au monde’ (Sellier 1988: 291).

Interestingly, James Knowlson also insists upon the fundamental role that Beckett’s inner world would play in the definition of the subject matter of his work, as ‘outside reality would be refracted through the filter of his own imagination, inner desires and needs would be allowed a much greater freedom of expression, rational contradictions would be allowed in, and the imagination would be allowed to create alternative worlds to those of conventional realists’ (Knowlson 1996: 353).

#### A. *Proust and the Seventeenth Century*

Proust had an enduring passion for seventeenth century writers, and his admiration for Pascal was almost boundless. Sylvie-Landes Ferrali has demonstrated that he considered Pascal as the precursor of a strain in modern literature concerned with the irrational. Although he seldom refers to Pascal in the *Recherche*, Proust displays an intimate knowledge of Pascal’s life and work in his correspondence. He praises, for instance, the movement of the Pascalian sentence. According to Landes-Ferrali, the implicit nature of the Pascalian subtext shows that his admiration for the author of the *Pensées* was genuine. Unlike other major writers of the period such as Racine and the motherly figure of Madame de Sévigné, Proust never distances himself from Pascal through parody. Overall, Pascal’s influence upon Proust’s conception of style and his understanding of the literary vocation was considerable.

Proust’s interest in the poetic nature of Pascal’s sentence is a critical element in our discussion of the influence of Pascal on Beckett. Landes-Ferrali observes that ‘Proust [...] est sensible au mouvement et aux sonorités de la phrase pascalienne et il ne manque pas de

l'exprimer dans sa correspondance. L'écrivain très tôt se préoccupe de style, et à propos de Pascal' (Landes-Ferrali 2005: 411). Like Gide, Proust envisaged Pascal as one of the first 'modern' writers, mainly because of his considerations on the irrational, and of the primary role he assigned to style. Ferrali notes, however, that unlike Proust Gide avoids using the most famous quotations and that references to Pascal provide profound meditations on the human condition (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 44). Proust retains the idea that writing is a unique task for Pascal, and that it demands the acuity of genius. A tutelary figure, Pascal indeed observed that 'ceux qui sont capables d'inventer sont rares' (Pascal 2004: #88).

In this we find the seventeenth century imperative that both Proust and Beckett adopted together. Writing on Proust, Beckett shares his sensitivity to Pascal's style, as the rhythm of his prose is based on that of the *Pensées*. This stylistic influence can be sensed in the use of maxims, amplification and antitheses. For instance, Pascal observes that 'nous sommes incapables et de vrai et de bien' (Pascal 2004: #26) and Beckett wrote 'we are incapable of appreciating our joy by comparing it with our sorrow' (Beckett 1999: 4).

References to Racine are invariably more present in Proust's literary production. Not only is Racine a constant reference in his creative work, but Proust manifests a lifelong admiration in his letters and critical writings. Racine's presence forms 'le lien entre deux types d'écritures, privée et littéraire [...] nourrit les échanges les plus variés, remplit les fonctions les plus riches' (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 197).<sup>17</sup> It enables the establishment of a solid continuity between the critical reflections undertaken in the letters and essays, and the work of art itself. Because it is used consciously, its crucial symbolic importance is maintained and also favours an aesthetic reflection within the work. This consideration is focused on the problem of artistic vocation and the authenticity of the statement defining the (projected) work of art. An

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<sup>17</sup> Beckett may have read some of Proust's published letters. Luc Fraisse, in *La correspondance de Proust* (1998), recalls that American scholar Philip Kolb began the editorial work for the publication of the correspondence in the 1930s (Fraisse 1998: 14).

inevitable reference, which finds its roots in the author's relationship with his mother, the work of Racine impacts upon all thematic and aesthetics aspects of the *Recherche*:

La référence à Racine parcourt tous les types des écrits proustiens, en y revêtant toutes les formes, traçant un réseau serré depuis les autres textes, prise comme point d'appui ou de comparaison dans les commentaires stylistiques qui alimentent bon nombre de critiques, aidant à aborder les notions de Classicisme, fournissant enfin un puissant outil littéraire dans le roman où elle recouvre les champs social, affectif, poétique, tout en ouvrant le chemin qui peut conduire au cœur de la singularité de l'homme écrivain. (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 197)

That said, the discovery of Pascal is the most formative of all for Proust. In the novels, the narrator only considers Pascal when he strives to elicit meaning from past experience, particularly in *Le Temps retrouvé*. Landes-Ferrali observes that Proust systematically returns to Pascal when he evokes the problem of existence: 'en ce qui concerne la référence à Pascal,' she points out, 'même si à l'occasion elle se double de la plaisanterie et du jeu habituels, il est indéniable qu'en règle générale elle s'inscrit sur fond de discours sérieux et de réflexion profonde' (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 190). Landes-Ferrali suggests, moreover, that the 'serious' discourse on Pascal is found in the correspondence, while a process of erasure takes place in the literary work. When explicit references are made, '[elles] font apparaître la volonté du créateur: utiliser au mieux de ses choix, de sa culture, de ses contacts anciens, les références à Pascal' (Landes-Ferrali 2005: 300).

Just as Proust's need to return to Pascal's writings determined his apprehension of the artistic vocation, Marcel's final renunciation of worldly life echoes the decision Pascal made to adopt a lifestyle that was radically different from the one he had known so far – an absolute withdrawal. This indifference is akin to death, as the expression 'mourir au monde' suggests.

The narrator craves for a form of solitude that is reminiscent of Port-Royal.<sup>18</sup> Beckett could not have ignored this lifelong admiration for Pascal, if only on account of the extensive biographical research he undertook on Proust prior to the composition of his essay. The preliminary step, then, is to identify the themes that visibly denote the Augustinian background to Beckett's essay through some of the major themes developed by Pascal. Beckett's insistence on the tragic nature of experience in the *Proust* monograph relies on images and specific words taken from the *Pensées*: grace and the evocation of the fallen state of man, time and the study of the 'perpetual movement' of the passions.

#### B. *'Literary Pessimism' in Beckett's Proust*

Although critics have written on Beckett's predominantly negative vision of the Proustian conception of human existence, the tradition of French literary Augustinianism has never been considered as a possible source for Beckett's apprehension of the *Recherche*. In *Beckett and Proust*, for instance, Nicholas Zurbrugg argues that similarities between the two authors are, despite appearances, only superficial, and situates Beckett in a postmodern context, only to highlight the essential differences between his evocation of experience and the modernist stance towards perception. This essential divergence resides in the denial of the possibility of a transcendental experience as it is manifested, for instance, in Joycean epiphanies or in the revelations experienced through involuntary memory in Proust.

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<sup>18</sup> Proust reflects upon the use that Gide makes of the classical reference in his *Journal*, and ponders on Gide's understanding and use of Pascal in his private writings and his works. Landes-Ferrali draws a parallel with Proust's tendency to include literary references in his private writings: 'le Pascal de Gide, outre qu'il échappe aux citations les plus connues des *Pensées*, n'apparaît dans le texte que pour nous tendre une méditation profonde sur la condition de l'homme et alimenter ses propres interrogations' (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 44). Racine is invoked by Gide in his remarks on style and syntax 'qui laissent entendre une fois de plus la pertinence et la minutie des observations gidiennes' (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 44). The reference to Gide ultimately reveals that, for Proust, form and meaning are inseparable – an idea that Beckett would reiterate in his monograph.

This leads to the assertion of ‘perceptual confusion’ and failure as the essential criteria of an art that is founded not so much upon the artist’s capacity to elicit meaning out of absolute experiences as on the ‘post-modern hero’s subjection to randomness’ (Zurbrugg 1990: 8). The incomprehensible nature of experience is therefore transcribed negatively in the process of writing. Zurbrugg then points out that a readjustment is necessary in order to retain the original intention behind the *Recherche*. As such, Beckett’s argument in *Proust* is nothing less than a deliberate manipulation of the Proustian text and ideas, which nonetheless reveals a clear insight into the achievement of the author.

Zurbrugg argues that Beckett radicalizes, and even simplifies, Proust’s vision inasmuch as he relies on a chiasmic pattern to explain some of the most complex aspects of the novel. Proust’s work is based on a fundamental relativism, rather than the predominantly dualistic perspective that Beckett strives to maintain throughout his essay. This relativism in turn asserts the existence of an exact equivalence between authentic art and life. Both the exemplary artist and the non-artist grapple with the same difficulties of experience, a moral struggle to find, progressively, a form of attainment that is reached through pure selflessness.

The critic further argues that these ‘analogous sacrifices culminate in different modes of exemplary self-realisation’ (Zurbrugg 1990: 11), referring to the ‘incompatible vocations’ of Marcel and his altruistic grandmother, as well as Saint-Loup for friendship. These two ideal modes of existence are paralleled in the study of their negative opposites, represented by those characters given to ‘habitual hedonism’ (Zurbrugg 1990: 23), mainly M. de Charlus and Albertine – subjected as they are to ‘their inhuman appetite for the superficial and frequently cruel satisfaction of immediate pleasure’ (Zurbrugg 1990: 25).

Beckett’s ‘erroneous’ apprehension of Proustian ideas led him to exaggerate Proust’s literary pessimism, which in turn leads Zurbrugg to argue that ‘this is most apparent in Beckett’s rejection of the concession made throughout the *Recherche* to individual

perfectibility through “positive forms of self-sacrifice” (Zurbrugg 1990: 55).<sup>19</sup> The capacity that some characters have for self-improvement, which the narrator seems to lack, leads to one of the forms of ‘authentic self-realization’, in either art or life. For Zurbrugg, Beckett’s refusal to bring out Proust’s more compromising attitude in the *Recherche* reveals a blatant, regrettable partiality, an ‘antithetic compulsion’ in his approach to Proust. Beckett’s remarks on the moral insensibility of Proust’s characters are too literal, resulting in ‘a one-sided, amoral and utterly pessimistic perspective’ (Zurbrugg 1990: 103).

Zurbrugg also points out that ‘what seems to have interested Beckett much more was the confusion resulting from the imperfect non-habitual actions reversing these ideals (goodness, scrupulousness and sacrifice) and the plight of those few Proustian characters who are trapped in nihilistic actions, a realm of inactivity corresponding to Swann’s concept of ‘une fange dont il ne serait plus possible à la meilleure volonté du monde de se relever’ (Zurbrugg 1990: 181). Zurbrugg omits to consider whether Beckett might have done so purposely, which is hinted at throughout the work. Swann, for instance, refers to Pascal’s darkest descriptions of human nature:<sup>20</sup> ‘une fange’, ‘plus possible’ as well as the theme of collapse (‘plus possible [...] de se relever’) invokes specific fragments of the *Pensées* describing ‘le cœur’ and human desires (both conscious and unknown).<sup>21</sup>

Thus far, my purpose has been to show that Beckett recognized the importance of the references to the seventeenth century in the *Recherche*. I would argue that, unsettling though

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<sup>19</sup> Previous commentators, including James Acheson and John Pilling, have sought to justify Beckett’s imprecision by invoking circumstantial difficulties, a lack of motivation and time to write a full-length critical essay. See Pilling 2009 (accessed 16 November 2009) and Acheson (1978: 165). They explain that many of Beckett’s preoccupations in this early study anticipate the subsequent prose. There may be a form of continuity between the *Proust* monograph and Beckett’s first novel, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, completed in 1932. But, as Zurbrugg points out, similarities are only superficial, for Beckett eventually strays from the Proustian statement on epiphanic experience.

<sup>20</sup> In the central fragment on disproportion that describes postlapsarian man as an earthbound creature, equivalent or identical words appear. Pascal writes: ‘l’homme est si visiblement égaré et tombé de son vrai lieu sans pouvoir le retrouver [...]’ (Pascal 2004: #184). In this condition of abasement, man finds himself in a world of filth (‘fange’) that reflects the horror of his condition: a ‘cloaque d’incertitude et d’erreur’ (Pascal 2004: #122).

<sup>21</sup> Phillipe Sellier makes an accurate distinction between the heart and the other cognitive faculties, ‘le cœur représente la profondeur de notre intimité véritable, par opposition à deux autres facultés qui, dans l’anthropologie pascalienne, demeurent irrémédiablement prisonnières de la surface: l’imagination et la raison’ (Sellier 1988: 285).

it may appear, this defining aspect resulted primarily from a deliberate choice on Beckett's part. This partiality in his interpretative decisions is consistent with his desire to extract aspects in literature that define the task of the modern artist.

The essay was the first occasion for Beckett to enter into a playful relationship with his literary sources, by masking the reference to Pascal in the *Recherche*, so obvious was it to any reader of Proust. A comparison of Beckett's text with Proust's approach to the seventeenth century will reveal that some of the most fundamental themes analysed by Beckett are rooted in his own reading of Pascal and Racine. I also intend to show that, more important than the development of his strategy of concealment, the *Proust* monograph is the first text in which Beckett explicitly develops a strategy of argumentation inspired by the antithetical style of the *Pensées*.

### C. *Augustinian Themes in the Proust Monograph*

Only the most obvious references to Pascal in *Proust* have so far been pointed out. In the *Companion to Samuel Beckett*, Gontarski and Ackerley give one unmistakable reference to Pascal in the monograph on Proust. Beckett observes that the author of the *Recherche* 'makes no distinction between the *Pensées* of Pascal and a soap advertisement' (Beckett 1999: 33). Another two quotations from the *Pensées* have remained unnoticed. The first unidentified reference to the *Pensées* is the distinction Beckett makes between first and second nature in his definition of Proustian 'Habit'.

To any reader of the *Pensées*, Beckett's text here is built upon allusions to, even direct quotations, from Pascal. Such borrowings are illustrated, for instance, in the description of individual experience as inexorably subjected to time. The function Habit plays in their apprehension of experience would, in addition, tend to confirm this. Quoting Proust, Beckett goes on to examine its ontological consequences of Habit:

Between this death and that birth, reality, intolerable, absorbed feverishly by his consciousness at the extreme limit of its intensity, by his total consciousness to avert the disaster, to create the new habit that will empty the mystery of its threat – and also, of its beauty. ‘If Habit, writes Proust, is a second nature, it keeps us in ignorance of the first, and is free of its cruelties and enchantments’. Our first nature, therefore, corresponding [...] to a deeper instinct than the mere animal of self-preservation, is laid bare during these periods of abandonment. (Beckett 1999: 24)

Let us observe, to begin with, that this entire passage is directly built upon one of Pascal’s most famous remarks: ‘la coutume est une seconde nature qui détruit la première’ (Pascal 2004: #117). The underlying tension shows that Beckett retained, from his readings of Augustine and Pascal, the emphasis in their works upon the monstrous state of fallen man, as opposed to a former, ideal state of innocence and splendour. Human mortality is a constant reminder of a recurrent feature in the *Pensées*: the haunting evocation of the Fall – mankind driven towards the gulf – and, as Philippe Sellier points out, the dream, in the midst of turmoil, of finding some kind of stability (‘repos’).

Moreover, the second conscious reference to the *Pensées* is the image of ‘the insane barrel organ always playing the wrong tune’ (Beckett 1999: 53), adapted from Pascal’s own variation on Montaigne to express the inconstancy of man: ‘On croit toucher des orgues ordinaires en touchant l’homme. Ce sont des orgues, à la vérité, mais bizarres, changeantes, variables. Ceux qui ne savent toucher que les ordinaires ne feraient pas d’accords sur celles-là. Il faut savoir où sont les marches’ (Pascal 2004: #51). Beckett’s writing is mimetic of Proust, who, as Landes-Ferrali points out, had taken up the expressions himself in the *Recherche* and adapted them to fit the context of his prose.

## 1. The Fall

Beckett's choice of a religious vocabulary in *Proust* evidences the underlying presence of Pascal. The text visibly revolves around the Augustinian themes of grace and of the Fall insofar as tragedy is identified as 'the statement of an expiation'. In the opening paragraphs, Beckett takes up the literary theme of the downfall of man when he seeks to define the essential traits of Proust's main protagonists, two-dimensional creatures 'confronted with the mystery of height' (Beckett 1999: 12).<sup>1</sup> The words 'creatures', 'mystery' and 'height' have a clear religious undertone that recalls the anthropological vision of the *Pensées*. Indeed, Pascal uses similar words to describe man's discovery of his fallen state: the mystery is 'celui de la transmission du péché', which we are unable to understand, 'la chose la plus éloignée de notre connaissance', which is at the same time a defining trait of our nature, 'une chose sans laquelle nous ne pouvons avoir connaissance de nous-mêmes!' (Pascal 2004: #122).

Because they are 'creatures', Proust's characters become 'victims as lower organisms, conscious only of two dimensions and suddenly confronted by the mystery of height, are victims: victims and prisoners' (Beckett 1999: 12), an expression that recalls Pascal's many evocations of the frailty of man, confronted to 'un univers tout prêt à l'écraser' (Pascal 2004: #61). The antithetical terms Beckett uses to initiate his discussion of Proust ('lower organisms'/'the mystery of height') also echo the ontological contradictions in the *Pensées*,<sup>2</sup> and allude to Pascal's evocation of grace and 'deux instincts contraires'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In *Pascal et Saint-Augustin*, Sellier shows that the polarity between verticality and horizontality is one of the foundational elements of Pascal's anthropological vision. Sellier writes: 'Pascal ne communique pas le vertige seulement en conduisant l'incroyant au bord de l'abîme ou aux pieds de cimes inaccessibles qui l'écrasent, en faisant régner les images, déjà présentes chez saint Augustin, de la *verticalité (altitudo)*; il va placer l'être humain au milieu d'un infini tourbillonnant. [...] Il est comme un point dans des espaces dont la grandeur le frappe d'un effroi sacré, et son univers intérieur n'est pas moins immense. Mais il est aussi frappé de stupeur par l'infiniment petit' (Sellier 1995: 30).

<sup>2</sup> These contradictions pervade Pascal's entire anthropological vision. The themes of 'corruption', 'bassesse' and 'misère', 'obscurité' and 'aveuglement', 'ignorance', 'désespoir' and 'malheur' define the fallen state of man. The state of innocence, or grace, is described in terms that evoke plenary vision and experience: 'clarté' 'bonheur', 'connaissance', 'vérité'. A revealing example can be found in the following paragraph: 'Car enfin, si l'homme n'avait jamais été corrompu, il jouirait dans son innocence et de la vérité et de la félicité avec

Several elements indicate that the development of a religious comparison throughout the monograph is deliberate. Beckett defines involuntary memory as an unfallen state: ‘What is attainment?’ he writes: ‘The identification of the subject with the object of his desire’ (Beckett 1999: 14). Later, he refers to involuntary memory as ‘that accidental and fugitive salvation’ (Beckett 1999: 35). The desired object (profane in Proust) is restored with the fullness of his vision of past moments and impression. A challenge to the characters caught in contingency, this form of attainment is seldom realized. The frustration felt before this incapacity to fulfil desire eventually leads to the realization that its object was inadequate, as Swann, preceding the narrator, eventually admits to himself.

It is striking how often Beckett playfully reminds the reader of Proust’s unabated admiration for the writings of seventeenth century Moralists.<sup>4</sup> Turning to the question of habitual perception in the *Recherche*, Beckett writes that ‘we are incapable of appreciating our joy by comparing it with our sorrow’ (Beckett 1999: 24), an incapacity which – from an Augustinian perspective – is bound to the tragedy of man’s downfall. Using similar language, Pascal observes that ‘nous sommes incapables de ne pas souhaiter la vérité et le bonheur et nous sommes incapables ni de certitude ni de bonheur’ (Pascal 2004: #380). Man is unable to elicit meaning, and his ontological ‘incapacity’ and the contradictory impulse echo the desire for transcendence, the contrasting image of man bound to the earth. Marcel experiences this throughout the *Recherche*.

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assurance. Et si l’homme n’avait jamais été que corrompu, il n’aurait aucune idée ni de la vérité ni de la béatitude’ (Pascal 2004: #122).

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the following fragment: ‘J’ai voulu créer l’homme saint, innocent, parfait, je l’ai rempli de lumière et d’intelligence, je lui ai communiqué ma gloire et mes merveilles. [...] Il n’était pas alors dans les ténèbres ni dans la mortalité et dans les misères qui l’affligent. Mais il n’a pu soutenir tant de gloire sans tomber dans la présomption’ (Pascal 2004: #139).

<sup>4</sup> See Landy: 1999.

## 2. Time and its corollaries: ennui and divertissement

It seems that Beckett critics have neglected to consider Pascal as a primary source for Beckett because of Marcel's admiration for Schopenhauer and the explicit reference to the philosopher's work made in the monograph, although, as we have seen, the vision of the *Pensées* remained a cultural landmark in France, and a fundamental model for Proust's writing. A close attention to the language used in Beckett's text makes clear, however, that the powerful dualistic conception of human existence underlies Beckett's explicit use of Schopenhauer, through the themes of *ennui* and *divertissement* which were inaugurated in the *Pensées*.

From the outset, Augustinianism is a pervasive backdrop to Beckett's argument. He defines 'Time' as the 'double-headed monster of damnation and salvation' (Beckett 1999: 11). Beckett defines Time as the 'predominating condition and circumstance' (Beckett 1999: 12), to which Proust's characters are necessarily subjected, for 'there is no escape from the hours and the days' (Beckett 1999:12). The two (inseparable) concepts of 'ennui' and 'divertissement' are the inaugural themes of Pascal's reflection on the existential plight of man (see Carraud 1992: 330). Therefore, even if Beckett explicitly refers to Schopenhauer, it is also certain that Pascal is a fundamental source, because Beckett knew of Proust's admiration for the *Pensées*. One of the main focal points of Beckett's analysis of Proust is the intrinsic relationship between 'Boredom' and 'Time', and its direct consequence, the flight from negativity. Writing in English, Beckett refers to 'Divertissement' as the 'flight from self'. For Beckett, Proust's characters are the 'victims' of contingency, of an inexorable 'process of degradation' that becomes manifest in their attempt to forget 'the calamity of yesterday' (Beckett 1999: 13).

Beckett's alleged 'pessimism', however, does not simply imitate the tone of the *Pensées*, but is *knowingly* reminiscent of Pascal's meditation on time. This meditation is

alluded to in Beckett's reflection on the subjective perception of Time and of the other. Imagination is, according to Beckett, the clear manifestation of a desire to exceed the real, to break its hermetic nature so as to escape from the torments of quotidian life. 'Imagination', Beckett writes, 'applied – a priori – to what is absent, is exercised in vacuo and cannot tolerate the limits of the real' (Beckett 1999: 74).

It is the expression of a frustration, of an unfulfilled desire to be liberated from 'intolerable' reality, a manifestation that Pascal had observed and which he powerfully expressed in a fragment dedicated to our incapacity to be satisfied with the present – a fleeting moment that is poised between two extremes, past and future:

Nous ne nous tenons jamais au temps présent. Nous anticipons l'avenir comme trop lent à venir, comme pour hâter son cours, ou nous rappelons le passé pour l'arrêter comme trop prompt, si imprudents que nous errons dans les temps qui ne sont point les nôtres, et ne pensons point au seul qui nous appartient, et si vains que nous songeons à ceux qui ne sont rien, et échappons sans réflexion le seul qui subsiste. C'est que le présent d'ordinaire nous blesse [...] Le présent n'est jamais notre fin: le passé et le présent sont nos moyens; le seul avenir est notre fin. Ainsi nous ne vivons jamais, mais nous espérons de vivre ; et, nous disposant toujours à être heureux, il est inévitable que nous ne le soyons jamais. (Pascal 2004: #43)<sup>5</sup>

Variations on the theme of the yearning of man for another state underline the role that imagination plays in creating suffering. The tragedy of our condition lies in our incapacity to fully acknowledge the present. In this fragment, the root of our suffering is imagination, because it distracts our attention from the present moment, and leaves us in a state of permanent expectation

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<sup>5</sup> A similar temporal impasse is evoked by Molloy, when he cries 'My life, my life, now I speak of it as something over, now as of a joke which still goes on, and it is neither, for at the same time it is over and goes on' (Beckett 1997: 36).

Il n'y a que les craintes que nous nous donnons nous-mêmes, et non pas la nature, qui nous troublent parce qu'elles joignent à l'état où nous sommes les passions de l'état où nous ne sommes pas. La nature nous rendant toujours malheureux en tous états, nos désirs nous figurent un état heureux parce qu'ils joignent à l'état où nous sommes les plaisirs de l'état où nous ne sommes pas; et quand nous arriverons à ces plaisirs, nous ne serions pas heureux pour cela, parce que nous aurions d'autres désirs conformes à ce nouvel état. (Pascal 2004: #543)

In these vivid evocations of the state of ontological misery where the constant aspiration for an unattainable moment is prevented by frustration, imagination is identified as a false palliative ('les craintes que nous nous donnons nous-mêmes [...] et qui nous troublent') which cannot remedy our incessant suffering even as it nurtures it by creating more illusions. Beckett describes this unending cycle in his analysis of frustrated desire.

Beckett's technique of condensation is apparent in the image he later uses to introduce the theme of imprisonment. He describes memory as 'that ultimate and inaccessible dungeon of our being [...]. But here, in that "gouffre interdit à nos sondes", is stored the essence of ourselves, the best of our many selves and their concretions that simplists call the world' (Beckett 1999: 31). The allusion to Baudelaire's evocation of the past in 'Le Balcon'<sup>6</sup> further hints at the underlying presence of literary Augustinianism and the *Pensées* in Beckett's account of Proust. The image of the gulf is directly taken from the fragment on disproportion, in which the ontological vacuity of man is described as 'ce gouffre infini' that can only be filled by 'un objet infini et immuable' (Pascal 2004: #185). For the (unbelieving) Swann and Marcel, that object was initially a woman, Odette or Albertine, whom they idealized, only to end up feeling the most extreme disillusion.

For Pascal, the condition of man is the source of permanent longing and misery. The state of happiness or fulfilment eludes him because his attention is focused on the object he

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<sup>6</sup> Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 'Le Balcon', [1857], Paris, Garnier Flammarion, 1991, p. 87: 'Ces serments, ces parfums, ces baisers infinis, / Renaîtront-ils d'un gouffre interdit à nos sondes, / Comme montent au ciel les soleils rajeunis / Après s'être lavés au fond des mers profondes ?'.

cannot possess. Life is frustration and desire; and experience is all the more desperate because nothing that lies within reach can bring satisfaction: ‘quelque terme où nous pensions nous attacher et nous affermir, il branle, et nous quitte, et si nous le suivons il échappe à nos prises, nous glisse et nous fuit d’une fuite éternelle’ (Pascal 2004: #185). The infinite variations that experience offers are a source of perpetual disillusion, inasmuch as the gap can never be filled. The subject’s alienation from himself is thus prolonged throughout life, until the emptiness inside is fulfilled in death:

Une épreuve si longue, si continuelle et si uniforme devrait bien nous convaincre de notre impuissance d’arriver au bien par nos efforts. Mais l’exemple nous instruit peu. Il n’est jamais si parfaitement semblable qu’il n’y ait quelque délicate différence, et c’est de là que nous attendons que notre attente ne sera pas déçue en cette occasion comme en l’autre: et ainsi, le présent ne nous satisfaisant jamais, l’expérience nous pipe, et de malheur en malheur nous mène jusqu’à la mort qui en est un comble éternel.

The definition Pascal gives of time for experience is tragic, as our existence impoverished by our incapacity to live in the present which is revealed by our constant tendency to invoke unreal lives.

The yearning for knowledge is a theme that Beckett takes up in his consideration of the role of time in the *Recherche* as he reflects upon the tragic necessity of the slow decline towards death. The ambivalence of time takes up a Pascalian undertone as the inconsistency of the present, situated between ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’, is evoked in similar terms.<sup>7</sup> Involuntary memory, on the other hand, is pure presence of the moment, an ‘evasion from time’ (Beckett 1999: 35), the only exit from the dullness of habitual existence. The suffering

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<sup>7</sup> Beckett also implicitly alludes to Augustine’s development on the measurement of time in the *Confessions*. Time is defined as a steady flux of discontinuous moments. As such, it is ‘le défilement régulier mais discontinu des *maintenants* [...], qui isolent à chaque fois la pure limite d’un instant, produirait par effet cumulatif le continu du flux temporel’ (Marion 2008: 285).

of the Proustian character, which itself is intrinsically linked to boredom, originates in want. What Beckett defines as ‘the comedy of substitution’, in which the changeable self finds no satisfaction in the reality of the desired object, is set in contrast with the ‘ideal object’ it has constructed.

Earlier, I mentioned the use of another Pascalian concept: imagination. ‘Fantaisie’ is a derivative, a lesser manifestation of imagination, while imagination is defined by Pascal as the ‘superbe puissance ennemie de la raison’.<sup>8</sup> It counteracts any presentiment of truth derived from reason: ‘elle fait croire, douter, nier la raison’, reaffirming the powerlessness of reason before imagination – a destructive force that, along with the ‘mouvement perpétuel’ of the passions (Pascal 2004: #53), has overwhelmed perception. When Beckett writes that ‘the suffering of being’ is the ‘free play of every faculty’ (Beckett 1999: 20),<sup>9</sup> he is once more referring to the Pascalian definition of imagination as ‘maîtresse d’erreur et de fausseté [...] d’autant plus fourbe qu’elle ne l’est pas toujours’ (Pascal 2004: 41).

Turning to the episode of Marcel’s reminiscence of his grandmother, Beckett insists that her actual presence is dissociated from his remembrance of her, and he proceeds to describe meticulously the process of Marcel’s realization that the absence of his now departed grandmother is permanent. This gradual acknowledgement is brought about in the description of the illusion to which Marcel falls ‘victim’ as Beckett writes that ‘he hears his grandmother’s voice, or what he assumes to be her voice, because he hears it now for the first time, in all its purity and reality, so different from the voice that he had been accustomed to follow on the open score of her face that he does not recognise it as hers’ (Beckett 1999: 25). Marcel is taken aback by the experience of hearing a voice despite the physical absence of the

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Gérard Ferreyrolles’s study on the workings of imagination and habit, *Les reines du monde: l’imagination et la coutume dans les Pensées de Pascal* (2000). In *Beckett’s Metaphysical View*, Ulrich Pothast observes that this is one of the two explicit references to Kant in Beckett’s essay.

<sup>9</sup> The equivalent French expression in Edith Fourier’s translation is ‘le jeu libre de l’intelligence et de la sensibilité’, a variation on the dyptic ‘raison’ et ‘coeur’ in the *Pensées*, that also recalls Bergson.

person: ‘this strange real voice is the measure of its owner’s suffering’ and ‘the symbol of her isolation, of their separation, as impalpable as a voice from the dead’ (Beckett 1999: 26).

Another illustration of the frequent adaptation from the *Pensées* is the study of jealousy in *Du côté de chez Swann*, where imagination is the underlying cause for Swann’s suffering. ‘Swann,’ Beckett writes, ‘suffers more grievously than ever at the misery of his present condition’ at the thought of Odette’s potentially betraying him with his rival, Forcheville. The narrator will, years afterwards, also share this fear of potential deceit. The apprehension of time, for Proust, as Beckett strives to make clear, has no ideal objectivity; it is contained within the individual, and because it is irremediably subjective, it leads to personal tragedies and losses, incomprehension and missed encounters.

Beckett knew that Proust distanced himself from Bergson in the endeavour, like Pascal, to evoke the relativism (or ‘multiplicity’) of time. Time is addressed in Proust’s work as a ‘local’ reality rather than an ‘absolute’ one, from which Beckett derives that ‘Bergson insists on absolute time. Proust denies it. For Proust it’s a function of too many things’ (TCD MIC 60). The closeness with the author of the *Pensées* is here again implicit, as Pascal had argued that the appreciation of time is necessarily subjective – and therefore approximative. It lacks the exactness that only mechanical clockwork can give. In a famous fragment, Pascal evokes the irrevocable passage of time and its final outcome:

Ceux qui jugent d’un ouvrage sans règle sont à l’égard des autres comme ceux qui ont une montre à l’égard des autres. L’un dit: ‘Il y a deux heures’; l’autre dit: ‘il n’y a que trois quarts d’heure.’ Je regarde ma montre et je dis à l’un: ‘Vous vous ennuyez’; et à l’autre: ‘Le temps ne vous dure guère; car il y a une heure et demi’. Et je me moque de ceux qui disent que le temps me dure à moi et que j’en juge par fantaisie.

Ils ne savent pas que j’en juge par ma montre. (Pascal 2004: #472)

Pascal distinguishes time as an objective mathematical measure from the inner ‘sentiment’ of its passing, anticipating the Bergsonian concept of ‘durée’.<sup>10</sup> Among the most notable elements he brought forward is the idea that ‘intuition can achieve a total vision that intelligence can’t’ (Gontarski 2006: 97).<sup>11</sup>

All these textual elements indicate that Beckett’s account of the Proustian vision was based upon a clear knowledge of the writer’s sources. As a critic, Beckett had an acute awareness of the importance of seventeenth century classicism for Proust, in its capacity to observe the most imbedded reasons behind human motives, the shaping of his style. It seems, moreover, that Beckett knowingly reproduced that vision and ‘manner of writing’ in his English prose.<sup>12</sup>

#### D. *On Love and the Multiple Self*

Beckett’s account of Proustian relationships reveals the fundamental impact that seventeenth century writers had upon him. He evokes love, for instance as ‘that desert of loneliness and recrimination’ (Beckett 1999: 54), which echoes his own definition of Racinian tragedy in the lectures he gave at Trinity College, Dublin. Incomprehension is the foundational element in the relationship between characters, as well as conflicting desires and aspirations that reveal the problematic nature of being.

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<sup>10</sup> It has been observed earlier in this study that Beckett alluded to Bergson because he established a connection between ‘intelligence’ and ‘intuition’. In doing so, he referred to the geometrical spirit, (‘esprit géométrique’) and pointed out the major role Bergson played in the contemporary debate on philosophy. In the *Données immédiates de la conscience*, Bergson opposes ‘durée’ (‘duration’) to ‘temps’ (‘time’) through the following distinction: duration is ‘le caractère même de la succession telle qu’elle est immédiatement sentie dans la vie de l’esprit, ‘durée pure, durée concrète, durée réellement vécue’ and time, ‘l’idée mathématique que nous nous en faisons pour raisonner et communiquer avec nos semblables, en le traduisant en images spatiales’ (Lalande 2002: 255).

<sup>11</sup> This point will be essential in the discussion of art as a mystical experience in the following section. Burrows also wrote that, according to Beckett, Proust was ‘detached from Bergson’s conception of time but interested in his opposition instinct/conscious intelligence’ (TCD MIC 60).

<sup>12</sup> The expression (‘manière d’écrire’) is taken from the *Pensées*.

The presence of both Pascal and Racine is hinted at in various ways: Beckett's reliance on the *Pensées* is most apparent in his analysis of Proustian suffering, while the reflections on love and its immediate derivatives (desire and jealousy) echo both the themes of 'misère' in the *Pensées* and the predominance of 'instinct' in Racine's tragedies. In each writer's respective vision, love leads to indifference and is thus inexorably bound to failure. It is a prelude to death: '[l'amour] est la découverte de l'échec. [...] L'amour est la vérité la plus tragique de l'homme, sa condition la plus fatale, la condition où finalement il se dénude' (Heyndels 1985: 841). The references to Pascal and Racine strengthen that laying bare of being which becomes the central idea of the entire essay, the perspective from which an overall coherence can be found.

#### 1. *Pascal's Discours sur les passions de l'amour*

In a lesser-known text, published in 1653, the *Discours sur les passions de l'amour*, Pascal defines the many ways to love, arguing that love is more vital to the human heart than pure thought, which irrevocably leads to suffering, for 'les pensées pures, qui le rendraient heureux s'il pouvait toujours les soutenir, le fatiguent et l'abattent' (Pascal 2006: 200). Beckett may not have read Pascal's *Discours sur les passions de l'amour*, but he certainly knew that Proust had.<sup>13</sup> It is worth considering the passages in Beckett's monograph that evoke human relationships in the light of Pascal's text to shed light upon his account of particular episodes in the *Recherche*. One passage from the *Discours* contains the essence of Pascal's thought on love:

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<sup>13</sup> The *Discours sur les passions de l'amour* was discovered in 1843 by Victor Cousin. In an article entitled 'Un fragment inédit de Pascal', published in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Cousin marvelled at the idea that Pascal could have been the author of a text whose subject is 'l'amour, et non pas l'amour divin, mais l'amour humain, avec le cortège de ses grandeurs et de ses misères, sublime et grossier tout ensemble, et s'adressant au corps et à l'âme'. Proust is known to have read the article, and Pascal's text therefore, as it was published with Cousin's article. Landes-Ferrali explains that this was precisely the type of stereotypical and partial approach to the seventeenth century that Proust reviled (see Landes-Ferrali 2005: 22).

Nous naissons avec un caractère d'amour dans nos cœurs, qui se développe à mesure que l'esprit se perfectionne, et qui nous porte à aimer ce qui nous paraît beau sans que l'on nous ait jamais dit ce que c'est. Qui doute après cela que nous sommes au monde pour autre chose que pour aimer? En effet, l'on a beau se cacher à soi-même, l'on aime toujours. Dans les choses mêmes où il semble que l'on ait séparé l'amour, il s'y trouve secrètement et en cachette, et il n'est pas possible que l'homme puisse vivre un moment sans cela.

L'homme n'aime pas à demeurer avec soi. Cependant il aime: il faut donc qu'il cherche ailleurs de quoi aimer. Il ne peut le trouver que dans la beauté; mais comme il est lui-même la plus belle créature que Dieu ait jamais formée, il faut qu'il trouve dans soi-même le modèle de cette beauté qu'il cherche au-dehors. [...] Cependant, quoique l'homme cherche de quoi remplir le grand vide qu'il fait en sortant de soi-même, il ne peut pas se satisfaire par toutes sortes d'objets. Il a le cœur trop vaste. Il faut au moins que ce soit quelque chose qui lui ressemble et qui en approche le plus près. C'est pourquoi la beauté qui peut contenter l'homme consiste non seulement dans la convenance, mais aussi dans la ressemblance: elle la restreint et elle l'enferme dans la différence du sexe. (Pascal 2006: 200)

In the opening paragraph, love is defined as an emanation as well as a transcendence of the self, in which the object of love plays a role just as essential as the subject who loves. As one of the deepest emotions known to man, love is irrational because it escapes the realm of reason. Its reality can only be sensed: '[l]on se demande s'il faut aimer. Cela ne doit pas se demander, on doit le sentir; et l'on ne délibère pas là-dessus' (Pascal 2006: 201).

Passions belong to the realm of emotions that find a bodily stimulation, although they originate from the mind: 'Les passions n'étant que des sentiments et des pensées qui appartiennent purement à l'esprit, quoiqu'elles soient occasionnées par le corps, il est visible qu'elles ne sont plus que l'esprit même, et qu'ainsi elles remplissent toute sa capacité' (Pascal 2006: 201). There are subtle degrees of hierarchy in love, one of the highest passions known to the human heart (the second being ambition, according to Pascal). Ideally, it suffers no selfishness, but is the privileged occasion for a form of spiritual emulation that emerges from

the contemplation of beauty, for, as Pascal observes, ‘dans une grande âme, tout est grand’ (Pascal 2006: 201).

Pascal explains that ‘un esprit grand et net aime avec ardeur, et il voit distinctement ce qu’il aime’, and then suggests that the purest kind of love emerges from the rare combination of the spirits of geometry and ‘finesse’, which discerns the inner movements of emotion and feeling: ‘Le premier a des vues lentes, dures et inflexibles; mais le dernier a une souplesse de pensée qui l’applique en même temps aux diverses parties aimables de ce qu’il aime. Des yeux il va jusques au cœur, et par le mouvement du dehors il connaît ce qui se passe au-dedans’ (Pascal 2006: 201). As is made clear in the above passage, love is inseparable from a natural movement of empathy towards the other, although this feeling stems from a response to a pleasing vision of the physical beauty of the other.

I would argue that the understanding of love as an ideal palliative for suffering in the *Discours sur les passions de l’amour*, together with the evocation of love as a manifestation of ‘misère’ in the *Pensées*, underlies Beckett’s apprehension of love in Proust. Man is prone to love a being other than himself. In its highest form, love corresponds to what Pascal describes as a spiritual emulation through an encounter. Similarly, Swann’s love for Odette is stirred by his idealization of the woman who inspired a painting he admires. But the lack of spiritual affinity between Swann and Odette will provoke his indifference as the episode reaches its conclusion. Once he is no longer blinded by imagination, Swann wearies of Odette because of the discrepancy between her ideal physical beauty and her temperament, causing a new form of suffering, and then hatred.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pascal’s influence on Proust is once again visible here. Because of the ephemeral nature of human attachments, Pascal considers that failure is inherent in love, and that solitude is preferable, insofar as it may encourage a closeness to God. He calls upon the inconstant nature of man and his propensity for boredom to explain the brevity of attachment: ‘L’attachement à une même pensée fatigue et ruine l’esprit de l’homme. C’est pourquoi, pour la solidité et la durée du plaisir de l’amour, il faut quelquefois ne pas savoir que l’on aime [...] Il faut pourtant avouer que c’est une misérable suite de la nature humaine, et que l’on serait plus heureux si l’on n’était point obligé de changer de pensée, mais il n’y a point de remède’ (Pascal 2006: 204).

By contrast, the narrator's incapacity to love selflessly is brought out in Beckett's negative description of human attachment. Beckett observes that the first impressions are the most permanent, and that habitual perception does not take into account the effects of time. If reality cannot be experienced without mediation, it is because 'the old ego dies hard' (Beckett 1999: 21), a process that is brought to light in the following statement: 'Deprived by nature of the faculty of cognition and by upbringing of any acquaintance with the laws of dynamics, a brief inscription immortalises this emotion. The creature of habit turns aside from the object that cannot be made to correspond with one or another of his intellectual prejudices' (Beckett 1999: 23).

Likewise for Pascal, the estrangement in love is the result of the passage of time. This conception applies not only to Marcel's relationship with Gilberte, but also to the successive phases of his attachment to Albertine: 'Il n'aime plus cette personne qu'il aimait il y a dix ans. Je le crois bien: elle n'est plus la même ni lui non plus. Il était jeune et elle aussi: elle est tout autre. Il l'aimerait peut-être telle qu'elle était alors' (Pascal 2004: #567). In a similar way, Beckett focuses on the multiplicity of selves to explain Marcel's progressive estrangement from Albertine. The description of the narrator's 'terror of separation' perfectly illustrates the implicit Pascalian strain of this interpretation, as Beckett writes that 'when the alchemy of Habit has transformed the individual capable of suffering into a stranger for whom the motives of the suffering are an idle tale, when not only the object of his affection has vanished, but also that affection itself' (Beckett 1999: 25).

Pascal's reflections on love, subjectivity and imagination clarify Beckett's interpretative choices, particularly his study of the multiple self. This theme can be read through the reflections on the changing self in the *Pensées*. Individual existences are haunted by a suffering that invariably comes from that radical solitude of being to which all

individuals are ‘condemned’, and that resides at the same time in a continuation of frustration and desire:

This terror at the thought of separation – from Gilberte, from his parents, from himself – is dissipated in a greater terror, when he thinks that to the pain of separation will succeed indifference, that the privation will cease to be a privation when the alchemy of Habit has transformed the individual capable of suffering into a stranger for who the motives of that suffering were an idle tale, when not only the objects of his affection have vanished, but also that affection itself; and he thinks how absurd is our dream of a Paradise with retention of personality, since our life is a succession of Paradises successively denied, that the only true Paradise is the Paradise that has been lost, and that death will cure many of the desire for immortality. (Beckett 1999: 26)

Beckett turns to ‘the pictorial multiplicity of Albertine’ as an example of a memory that ‘will duly evolve into a plastic and moral multiplicity’ (Beckett 1999: 49). The ‘object’ of desire is impossible to grasp on account of the temporal distance. The permanent loss of Albertine leads him to ‘re-enact the stations of a diminishing suffering’ (Beckett 1999: 60), but it is the first impression of her that memory ultimately cherishes: ‘This Albertine risen from the sepulchre, the only inviolate sepulchre, in the unkempt cemetery of the heart. Albertine is the first and the last, the Bacchante of the shore, as seen by the narrator in that pure act of understanding – intuition’ (Beckett 1999: 61). Beckett turns to the dissociation between memory and reality to show that the narrator’s failure to love Albertine is the result of a ‘whole processus of sufferings and emotions that have been associated with her person and attached by Habit’ (Beckett 1999: 53).

Imagination, understood in its Pascalian sense, enhances the unaccountable nature of man. Furthermore, Beckett remarks that experience reveals the impenetrable essence of the real: ‘all that is active, all that is enveloped in time and space, is endowed with what might be described as an abstract, ideal and absolute impermeability’ (Beckett 1999: 57). The

perception of the other as an unattainable ideal is corrected when the effort of voluntary memory recedes. The reality of the individual is hermetic to the subject because of its multiplicity, which implies a radical solitude, a complete and unsurpassable distance between one individual and another.

## 2. The Racinian motif of jealousy in *Phèdre*

The connection between Beckett's interpretation of Proust and the Racinian tragic sustains the underlying argument of the essay, in terms of both theme and structure. The study of Beckett's description of relationships in the *Recherche* has usually been considered as secondary. Inasmuch as the question is only briefly evoked through the Marcel/Albertine relationship, it seems that critics have neglected this filiation, essentially because the most visible of Beckett's reflections concerns the Proustian treatment of time and involuntary memory.<sup>15</sup>

There is evidence, however, that Beckett establishes a direct parallel between Proust's most interesting characters (M. de Charlus, Gilberte, Albertine) and Racine's evocation of being as 'hermetic', insofar as the characters are blinded by their obsessions (or passions). The paradox lies in the fact that there is, as Rachel Burrows wrote, the 'suggestion in Racine [that the] state of mind can't be concealed', and that the evolution of the situation resides 'simply [in] a progressive awareness' (TCD MIC 60). This opacity at the core of other characters' motivations is fully illustrated in *Un amour de Swann*.

On the subject of love and desire, there are also recurrent allusions to Racine. The spiritual unison described as the most perfect form of love for man, experienced by Swann and the narrator, is explored in its negative aspect through references to Racine. As in the

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<sup>15</sup> See Rachel Burrows's notes, in which the 'madness of desire' (TCD MIC 60) is given as a characteristic trait of Racine's characters, driving them towards a resolution that reaches a perfect balance in the absence of explanation.

structure of the tragedies, Beckett distinguishes distinctive moments in the evocation of Marcel's discovery of love and also refers to the theme of predestination. The final revelation ('dénouement') is anticipated in the initial situation: 'the tragedy of the Marcel-Albertine liaison is the type of tragedy of the human relationship whose failure is pre-ordained' (Beckett 1999: 18).

The reference to predestination was probably, for Beckett, a way of emphasizing those aspects of psychological reality in the *Recherche* that appeared as the most significant to him. Evidence showing that Beckett considered Jansenism to be a fundamental component of the tragic in *Phèdre* and that he was aware of its later resonance in French literature was provided earlier. According to Rachel Burrows's notes, he briefly contextualized Racine's major tragedy in the light of the doctrine of Port-Royal. He indicates that Pascal rejected free will, and introduces *Phèdre* as the 'first play with [the] sense of sin'. He mocks the observation that Racine makes in his Preface to *Phèdre* that his heroine is 'ni tout à fait coupable, ni tout à fait innocente' (TCD MIC 60).

In doing so, he undermines the importance of that statement. This denegation is paradoxical, as it seems that Beckett omits to consider how the fundamental ambivalence of character is an integral part of the study of 'complexity'. It is illustrated in the feeling of despondency expressed by Phèdre in the following lines: 'Faut-il que sur le front d'un profane adultère / Brille de la vertu le sacré caractère?' (IV, 2). Beckett adds, however, that the play is 'more than ever [a] study of the mind with [an] added element of sin' (TCD MIC 60). Beckett's analysis suggests that he kept in mind the classical imperative of characterization in the elaboration of a dramatic work. Even as he pursues the implicit analogy with the theatre of Racine, Beckett describes the resolution of the 'Marcel-Albertine' tragedy in terms that recall the *dénouement* of a typical Racinian tragedy. Beckett writes that 'this final confirmation of the original perspective is typical of Proust's characterization' (Beckett 1999: 61).

Marcel is thus depicted as the typical figure of the jealous lover, whose permanent suspicions are the primary cause of his unhappiness in love. Beckett dwells on the example of a broken promise, one of the first episodes in which Albertine fails to visit Marcel. When describing this episode, Beckett observes that ‘her non-arrival exalts a simple physical irritation into a flame of anguish’ (Beckett 1999: 50). Albertine only temporarily corresponds to that ‘caractère’ whose innocence and beauty are traditionnally reinforced by her moral integrity and sincerity, ironically contrasting with the typical virtuous ‘jeune fille’ (embodied in the figures of Aricie, or Junie in Racine’s plays).

The parallel between Swann and Marcel is again implicit here. Beckett mentions the mutability of sentiment, the ephemeral nature of feelings that Marcel experiences: ‘the narrator,’ he explains, ‘[...] can establish no common measure between these three aspects of Albertine: the passionate, unreal Albertine of the shore, the real and virginal Albertine as such as she appeared to him at the end of his stay at Balbec, and now this third Albertine that fulfils the promise of the first in the reality of the second’ (Beckett 1999: 36). This is what Pascal observes when he writes that ‘le temps guérit les douleurs et les querelles parce qu’on change. On n’est plus la même personne: ni l’offensant ni l’offensé ne sont plus eux-mêmes’ (Pascal 2004: #664).

Keeping to Proust’s vision, Beckett draws a parallel between the narrator and the tragic figure of Phèdre. This correspondence is implicit throughout the essay, along with the idea that the main characters are, like Racine’s heroine, helpless, unable or unwilling to cope with adversity or Fate. It is significant that the evocation of the Venice episode should be reconstructed in its implicit theatricality, before a sequence taken from Phèdre’s famous monologue is included. The style abruptly changes at this stage, as Marcel’s decision to ‘go to Venice to his dream of Gothic time on a Vernal sea’ is immediately followed by a stage direction: ‘Enter Françoise’ (Beckett 1999: 59). The Proustian maid, Cœnone-like, is the

mediator who counteracts the narrator's resolution to put an end to the relationship with Albertine. The reversibility of the passions from one extreme to the other are described by Beckett as a characteristic Racinian oscillation,<sup>16</sup> ranging from desire and love to indifference and hatred. Françoise's intervention stirs contradictory emotions in Marcel, which, in Beckett's words, uncover an inward necessity to 'return and re-enact the stations of a diminishing suffering' in order to forget her.

Beckett pursues his exploration of the Racinian motif in Proust's work through a brief study of one of the principal themes in the *Recherche*: jealousy. Beckett implicitly compares Marcel's passion for Albertine with Phèdre's distress at her own attachment for Hippolyte, and makes that parallel apparent to the reader when he quotes lines from the second Act (see Beckett 1999: 54). *Phèdre* is the narrator's favourite play in the *Recherche*. Consumed by desire, and tormented by guilt, the heroine suffers at the thought of the love Hippolyte has for Aricie: 'Je ne souffrirai point de rivale,' she declares (Racine 1999: 849). Beckett establishes visible similarities between the inaccessibility of Albertine for the narrator, and of Hippolyte for Phèdre. Her jealousy is kindled once more when she realizes that Hippolyte's 'aversion' for her is irrevocable: 'Hélas! Ils se voyaient avec pleine licence! Le Ciel de leurs soupirs approuvait l'innocence' (Racine 1999: 869).

Beckett, then, articulates the paradox of love and desire in Racinian terms: 'one can only love what one does not possess' (Beckett 1999: 55). The analogy between the Proustian situation of frustrated desire and the 'madness' of desire in Racine that causes Phèdre momentarily to lose her lucidity, and to falsely accuse Hippolyte, underlies Beckett's description of the narrator's suffering and the negative impact of imagination upon Racine's characters.

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<sup>16</sup> This brings to mind the sequence Beckett had studied in his lectures on *Andromaque* where Hermione expresses herself in Act V, scene 1: hesitation is punctuated by a series of very brief questions, 'Où suis-je? Qu'ai-je fait? Que dois-je faire encore?' The climax leads to the final decision that manifests the triumph of hate over love: 'Qu'il périsse. Aussi bien il ne vit plus pour nous'.

According to Rachel Burrows's lecture notes, Beckett described unfulfilled passion as an 'obsession' in Racine's characters, a 'fever that can't be stated nor realized' (TCD MIC 60). It follows that they are unable to elucidate the situation through discourse and that they are bound by a certain ethic that prevents them from quenching it, like Phèdre or Andromaque. Beckett remarks that the situation in Racine's plays is ambiguous even as he suggests that Andromaque's aversion for Pyrrhus may be dwindling in that there is, as Beckett puts it 'the implication that Hector is losing weight as an obsession' (TCD MIC 60).

In the concluding remarks of his essay, Beckett observes that Proust's characters 'seem to obey to an almost insane inward necessity' (Beckett 1999: 81). Pursuing this analogy with Racine, Beckett draws a parallel between the deaths of Albertine and Hippolyte. He concludes that 'when it is a case of human intercourse, we are faced with the problem of an object whose mobility is not merely a function of the subject's, but independent and personal: two immanent and separate dynamisms related by no system of synchronisation' (Beckett 1999: 6-7).

That there should be an implicit reference to a Jansenist ethic does not contradict Beckett's assertion that the Proustian world is amoral. Indeed, he was careful to observe that 'Proust is completely detached from moral considerations' (Beckett 1999: 66). Human relationships are steeped in tragedy, because they are inherently bound to failure: the essay emphasizes throughout that the essence of singular beings is incommunicable. The theme of the absolute solitude of Racine's characters, whose 'hermetic' mind prevents them from communicating with others leading to mutual incomprehension, is introduced in opening sequence through the image of 'the dungeon of our being'. It is later repeated in the account of Proustian love and friendship, as shown in an English adaptation of one of the narrator's remarks on the impenetrability of self and others to oneself: "Man is the creature that cannot

come forth from himself, who knows others only in himself, and who, if he asserts the contrary, lies” (Beckett 1999: 66).

#### E. *The Mystical Experience of Art*

I will now turn to the impact of these references upon Beckett’s understanding of Proustian art. Allusions to the Pascalian reflections on the ‘heart’ as a superior form of rationality are evident in Beckett’s study of *intuitive* perception. The argument of this section is built upon the idea that Pascal’s conception of the ‘esprit de finesse’ along with ‘l’ordre du cœur’ plays a key role in the concluding section of Beckett’s monograph.

Studying the *Pensées* as an underlying source sheds light on the final sequence of the essay. Beckett’s aim to demonstrate the lesser importance of rationalism stems from a reaction against the canon of major French writers in Ireland.<sup>17</sup> I will therefore look at Beckett’s apprehension of the figure of Pascal through Proust and Schopenhauer, and, secondly, concentrate on the idea that a similar experience of writing for Pascal and Proust was implicitly conveyed in *Proust*.

Beckett retained from earlier philosophical and literary readings (including his reading of Proust) the idea that the underlying vision of the *Recherche* depends, at least in part, on a Jansenist ethic. The narrator’s decision to give up the idea of friendship and to embrace his artistic vocation is inspired by the ethic of Port-Royal; that is, the retreat (‘retrait’) from worldly life. The moment of revelation in *Le Temps retrouvé* occurs as a disillusioned Marcel attends a mundane gathering. What is striking in Beckett’s account of the sequence is that he pursues the analogy with the mystical experience of involuntary memory, as the ‘communicant’ (Beckett 1999: 75) finally receives ‘the oracle that had invariably been denied

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<sup>17</sup> *Proust* was banned in Ireland under the 1929 Censorship Act. Knowlson indicates that Beckett stated that he had never discovered the reason for that exclusion (Knowlson 1996: 278-9).

to the most exalted tension of his spirit' (Beckett 1999: 69). The definition of the final Proustian revelation as 'a religious experience, in the only intelligible sense of that epithet, at once an assumption and an annunciation', in which the 'dolorous and necessary course of his own life is revealed to him and the infinite futility – for the artist – of all that is not art' (Beckett 1999: 69), should, as a consequence, be seen in relation to the fundamental role that the text of the 'Mémorial' had for Proust, as he adopted a stance towards art and life that recalls the Beuvian evocation of the spirituality of Port-Royal.

1. The ideal of asceticism: Pascal as an exemplary figure in Schopenhauer and Proust

Beckett knew that time and memory were the most original aspects of Proust's vision, and turned to Proust's 'anti-intellectual attitude' in the final sequence of the monograph. This enables us to enquire further into the use that Beckett makes of the reference to Pascal to account for the vision in the *Recherche*. There is textual evidence that Pascal was an underlying source, insofar as Beckett insists upon the similar nature of both artistic and religious vocations. He observes that 'art is the apotheosis of solitude for Proust' (Beckett 1999: 63)

Establishing the different ways in which the figure of Pascal was taken as a model by Beckett in his account of Marcel's spiritual evolution is possible through the study of both Beckett's and Proust's sources on mystical experience. Beckett was aware that Schopenhauer recommends (twice) the reading of Gilberte Périer's (Pascal's sister) *Vie de Monsieur Pascal* because he had read (in French) *The World as Will and Representation*.<sup>18</sup> Schopenhauer takes

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<sup>18</sup> Alexis Philonenko studied the opposing visions of Schopenhauer and Descartes through the dialectics of regret. For Descartes, the ego is the absolute value that is able to constitute its own truth, because it acknowledges its own metaphysical value. For Schopenhauer, however, regret stems from the bitter thought that the self has no value as such, 'la pensée amère que mon moi ne vaut rien' (Philonenko 1999: 218) while, for Descartes, the world is revealed through the ego. Schopenhauer comes closest to Pascal, therefore, when he observes that the ego is essentially characterized by its inherent emptiness, an emptiness that must be filled to

the figure of Pascal as a model of superior ethical behaviour, and adapted, as we have seen, concepts developed in the *Pensées* in *The World as Will and Representation*, especially in paragraphs 56-58 (Schopenhauer 2004: 379-420).

In this sequence Schopenhauer demonstrates that it is an intuitive feeling of ontological lack that provokes an intolerable suffering of being. The analysis of man's permanent state of need and dissatisfaction leads on to an analysis of boredom, which, as we have seen, is inspired by the Pascalian concept of 'divertissement'. Nietzsche observed that the fundamental correspondence between Pascal and Schopenhauer lies in the proposed solution, the negation of the will to live. Indeed, Schopenhauer considered Pascal to be the archetypal figure of the ascete (Schopenhauer 2004: 1384), an idea taken up by Proust, and, as we shall see, by Beckett after him.

For both Schopenhauer and Proust, Pascal is a tutelary figure who paves the way for the definition of an artistic vocation, in that he embodies the purest form of asceticism. On the 'profound seriousness of asceticism' from which the negation of the will to live originates, Schopenhauer states that 'true christianism' is comparable to quietism and asceticism (Schopenhauer 2004: 1384). It shares the same clarity of vision as oriental religions, utterly dispossessed of the workings of the will, an enviable indifference to others. Schopenhauer never fails to express his admiration for Pascal as an emblematic figure, whose personal vision allowed him to reach that final stage where quietude is attained in selflessness and resignation:

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prevent boredom from weighing down upon our thoughts. Both thoughts are built upon the statement of the tragedy of life as corrupted and plagued by desire and boredom. The insistence on the underlying negativity of Proust's vision of existence may explain why Beckett considered Descartes as an optimist and Pascal as the precursor of pessimism, as there was a wide consensus that he was the first to observe the fragility of reason is revealed in the different situations of experience. It should also be pointed out that late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century commentators on Descartes and Corneille (for instance, Gustave Lanson, Ernst Cassirer, René Bray or, more recently, Paul Bénichou) have probed the moral and 'psychological' affinities between the two writers.<sup>18</sup>

A son degré le plus haut, la justice, la droiture d'âme, ne se sépare déjà pas de la bonté proprement dite, laquelle n'est pas un caractère purement négatif; elle va alors jusqu'au point de nous faire mettre en doute nos droits sur un bien qui nous vient par héritage; jusqu'à nous inspirer de subvenir aux besoins de notre corps par nos propres forces, physiques ou intellectuelles; de refuser, comme n'y ayant pas droit, les services d'autrui, le luxe sous toutes ses formes, et enfin à nous vouer à une pauvreté volontaire. Nous en avons un exemple dans Pascal. (Schopenhauer 2004: 267)

As earlier quotations have shown, allusions to mysticism pervade Beckett's essay, but they are particularly concentrated in the final section, which is dedicated to the analysis of artistic experience. Happiness, as Beckett writes, lies 'not in the satisfaction but in the ablation of desire' (Beckett 1999: 18). In the mystical approach to art as consolation, most fully expressed in *Le Temps retrouvé*, Proust's identification with Pascal is evident.

Landes-Ferrali points out that the narrator's trajectory is akin to that in the final years of Pascal's life: Marcel decides to renounce mundane existence and withdraw into solitude for the sake of art, a 'retrait du monde au nom de "l'art véritable"' (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 301). Marcel's rejection of the world, his decision to detach himself from the earthly bonds of love and friendship, is prefigured in Pascal's denunciation of self-love ('amour-propre') as the most destructive passion. Human relationships are motivated by the *moi*, and self-love, a false instinct 'qui le porte à se faire Dieu' (Pascal 2004: #52). As a consequence, 'tout ce qui nous incite à nous attacher aux créatures est mauvais, puisque cela nous empêche, ou de servir Dieu si nous le connaissons, ou de le chercher si nous l'ignorons' (Pascal 2004: #525).

According to Landes-Ferrali, in Proust's work 'la révélation est spontanée et peut se passer de preuves et là où la joie qu'elle provoque paye l'être de sa souffrance et lui permet d'envisager l'éternité' (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 301). The text referred to here is known as 'Le Mémorial'. The narrator's desire to withdraw from the world echoes one of Pascal's lines: 'Oubli du monde et de tout hormis DIEU' (Pascal 2004: #711).

The *Pensées* evoke, particularly through the theme of ‘divertissement’, the absolute solitude of the individual even in the midst of society, and the illusion of fulfilment that company brings, the impossibility of accessing the innermost reality of others and of ourselves, or of understanding the real: ‘Nous sommes plaisants de nous reposer dans la société de nos semblables, misérables comme nous, impuissants comme nous; ils ne nous aideront pas, on mourra seul. Il faut donc faire comme si on était seul’ (Pascal 2004: #141).<sup>19</sup>

Beckett defines the revelatory nature of involuntary perception as ‘that miraculous relief and clarity that no effort of deliberate remembrance can impart or restore’ (Beckett 1999: 43).<sup>20</sup> Some of the images that pervade the text recall Pascal’s writings on religious experience; for instance: ‘the infinite futility of all that is not art’ (Beckett 1999: 69).<sup>21</sup> Withdrawal and sacrifice,<sup>22</sup> the failure of love and the narrator’s disillusionment with friendship are the themes in the monograph that enable to discern the presence of Pascal in Beckett’s account of human experience. Marcel progressively comes to discover that knowledge of and communication with others is impossible. More evident than any other parallel is the statement that ‘we are alone, we cannot know and cannot be known’ (Beckett 1999: 66).

If the world and the other are both unattainable, and if one is likewise subject to permanent misunderstanding, then the only solution ultimately resides in solitude and silence.

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<sup>19</sup> The italics are mine.

<sup>20</sup> Pascal highlights the fact that fixed definitions and axioms are imperfect because they are based on an arbitrary convention and cannot be absolute expressions of truth. This he opposes to an immediate apprehension of truth: ‘Il faut d’un coup voir la chose, d’un seul regard, et non pas par progrès de raisonnement, au moins jusqu’à un certain degré’ (Pascal 2004: #477).

<sup>21</sup> In this sense Beckett refers to the apologetic purpose of the *Pensées* without mentioning it explicitly. In the sections entitled ‘Vanité’ and ‘Transition de la connaissance de l’homme à Dieu’, Pascal declares the vanity of any human activity that is foreign to faith.

<sup>22</sup> The most frequent descriptions of Pascal’s life distinguish two phases: in his youth, a dedication to ‘une certaine activité physique, mondaine sociale ou littéraire, de travail et d’occupation matérielle, puis tournée vers ce qui est de l’être humain et du ressort de l’âme’ (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 292). Proust naturally cites Pascal’s example. The parallel established between Marcel and Pascal in the *Recherche* is a significant element because it suggests that Beckett sought to reproduce it in his own argument. Landes-Ferrali specifies that ‘il est vrai que par rapport à la vocation du héros narrateur de la *Recherche*, on peut voir, sous-jacente, l’idée future que la vie ne pourra trouver sa justification que dans l’art: c’est en fait la résolution dans le *Temps Retrouvé* qui apporte sa justification à tout le reste de l’œuvre et à la vie mondaine du héros’ (Landes-Ferrali 2004: 292).

Beckett strove to define incommunicability as yet another aspect of reality through the example of friendship in the *Recherche*. For Proust, friendship is nothing more than ‘a false movement of the spirit’ (Beckett 1999: 64). In order to pursue his artistic vocation, Marcel must break free from earthly bonds and detach himself from ‘the material and the concrete’, the vulgar phenomena of ordinary existence, in order to adopt the only attitude favourable to creation: ‘a contraction of the spirit, a descent’ (Beckett 1999: 65).

Beckett’s study of intuition in Proust’s novel is defined in terms that are reminiscent of Pascal: ‘the primacy of instinctive perception – intuition – in the Proustian world’ (Beckett 1999: 83). Involuntary memory, on the contrary, allows the discovery of pure essence – in Beckett’s words, ‘the ideal real, the essential, the extra-temporal’ (Beckett 1999: 75). The object of perception is seized in its entirety, through experience at once ‘empirical and imaginative’, a recreation of the past that results from ‘a participation of the ideal and the real, imagination and direct apprehension, symbol and substance’ (Beckett 1999: 74).

## 2. The ‘heart’ in Pascal and the Proustian ‘anti-intellectual attitude’

As we have seen, Beckett envisages the characteristics of a ‘modern’ literary form of art, established by contemporary French writers, which is opposed to the conservative and ideological strain he found in Irish literature. He thus evokes Proust’s ‘contempt for the literature that describes, for the realists and naturalists worshipping the offal of experience’ (Beckett 1999: 79).

Beckett also rejects the Baudelairean art of *correspondances*, which ‘is determined by a concept’ and is therefore ‘strictly limited and exhausted by its own definition’ (Beckett 1999: 79). He even turns to Dante to show that the elaboration of allegorical figures, ‘whose significance is purely conventional and extrinsic’ in the *Divine Comedy*, reveals a similar tendency to rely on conceptual and symbolic representation.

With the example of Proust, Beckett can assert his belief that art should not seek to explain the real, but only express it. 'Proust does not deal in concepts', Beckett writes, 'he pursues the Idea, the concrete' (Beckett 1999: 79). The suspension of thought – 'the act of intellection' associated with habit and ordinary perception – reveals itself as a 'mysterious' element (Beckett 1999: 72), which the synthesis of past with present sensations alone can bring to light in the act of mental reconstruction.

The passage in which Beckett refers to Proust's adaptation of the Pascalian distinction between 'first' and 'second' nature to account for the effects of involuntary memory upon habitual perception was quoted earlier. The 'first' nature is irrevocably lost, like the state of grace. The 'second' nature is the present state of man steeped in corruption. Beckett highlights at the same time the fact that Proust adapted the original theological meaning to his own artistic purpose. Habit impoverishes perception, but its weight upon our perception of reality prevents us from suffering: 'it keeps us in ignorance of the first, and is free of its cruelties and enchantments' (Beckett 1999: 22).

This Schopenhauerian 'veil' is sometimes lifted by involuntary memory, wherein the loss of habitual perception leads to a momentary vulnerability where 'between this death and that birth' the moment reveals reality as it truly is. The substitution of a new image 'will empty the mystery of its threat – and also its beauty' (Beckett 1999: 22), in a cycle that is seldom broken. The momentarily perceived truth will eventually be replaced by the evanescent perception of another truth, yet there is a sense of liberation, for the suffering caused is momentarily suspended. The effect of this unsteadiness can only be suffering, as 'the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being' (Beckett 1999: 19).

For Beckett, it is that stasis of the mind that defines human relationships in the *Recherche*, an inaccessibility experienced not only in the attempt to communicate with others but in the protagonists' endeavour to attain self-knowledge. This incapacity is the result of

their ‘smug will to live’, as they are caught in the quotidian; Habit, as Beckett terms it, is ‘the compromise between the individual and his environment, or between the individual and his own organic eccentricities, the guarantee of a dull inviolability, the lightning conductor of his experience’ (Beckett 1999: 18). True attainment is reached, by contrast, with the refusal of such compromise.

The impression of balance and proportion that accompanies the vision is reminiscent of Pascal’s evocation of an integral mystical experience in the ‘Mémorial’, ‘signe d’une âme en plein élan, quelque chose vient d’arriver qui la bouleverse encore’ (Gouhier 1971: 13), a meditative state similar to what Bergson called ‘émotion créatrice’, which, Gouhier adds, ‘n’est pas l’effet d’une idée, d’un souvenir, d’un projet naissant, mais qui est source d’idée, surgissement de souvenirs, invention de projets’ (Gouhier 1971: 14).

There is, however, an *initial* difference in the nature of revelation. For Pascal it implies a complete surrender and incommunicable joy, but for Proust, it consists of a complete rupture with previous selves. As Shane Weller observes, ‘without the experience of an “intolerable disintegration”, there would be for Proust no work of art at all’ (Weller 2005: 37). What is shared is the experience of revelation as a point of departure: when ‘art emerges [...] only out of the experience of the worst (the ‘intolerable’)', ‘salvation’ is nonetheless found in involuntary memory that overcomes disintegration inasmuch as it ‘effects a communion of “subject” and “object”’ (Weller 2005: 28) and communicates the coherence of self. Similarly, Beckett expressed his ‘joie d’écrire’ to a bewildered Cioran (Jejcic 2006: 176).

Beckett’s understanding of involuntary memory as ‘direct perception’ recalls Pascal’s definition of a non-discursive order, where truth reveals itself spontaneously to the heart, straying from the ordinary forms of thought. The ‘heart’ in Pascal designates an immediate, intuitive and natural apprehension of the absolute (God), the ‘sentiment du cœur’ in matters of faith. It is an order that exceeds reason, for reason has proven itself to be incapable of

uncovering truth and essence. Pascal famously wrote that ‘le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ignore’ – faith, or the creative endeavour for Proust, is an order that exceeds reason, and displays an inner coherence, a synthetic view revealing essence, that is unparalleled in rational discourse.

The heart symbolizes the voluntary surrender of reason to a superior order of knowledge, given that ‘le moi pose un acte transcendant, car il se révèle capable d’accueillir la transcendance’ (Michon 1996: 234). The plenary vision that involuntary memory provokes can only come from the memory of the senses. In *Le Temps retrouvé*, Proust designates truth, or ‘la vie spirituelle’, as ‘quelque chose qui, commun à la fois au passé et au présent, est beaucoup plus essentiel qu’eux deux’ (Proust 1990: 179), where the ‘essence des choses’ – that is, life in its authentic state – can be felt, which Beckett describes accordingly in the following passage:

[...] if by some miracle of analogy the central impression of a past sensation recurs as an immediate stimulus which can be instinctively identified by the subject with model of duplication (*whose integral purity has been retained because it has been forgotten*) then the total past sensation, not its echo nor its copy, but the sensation itself, annihilating every spatial and temporal restriction, comes in a rush to engulf the subject in all the beauty of its infallible proportion. (Beckett 1999: 73)

As John Pilling remarks, ‘the Marcel imagined by Beckett, and indeed dramatized by him, seems [...] a curiously Beckettian figure, the first in a long line afflicted by “enduring boredom”, “fruitless solitude”, “futility”, “depression and fatigue”, disquiet, and “a minute a sterile lucidity”’ (Pilling 1997: 45). Beckett, like Proust, was undoubtedly drawn to Pascal as a ‘mystic’, so that the *Pensées* inspired much of his style – like many of his contemporaries.

Reading Beckett’s essay on Proust in the light of the *Pensées* shows that, far from being unappreciative of Proust’s literary endeavour, ignorant of his sources, Beckett was

aware of his reliance on seventeenth century thought and aesthetics, and above all the significant role it played in his conception of art. It also shows that he respected Proust's textual use of the *Pensées* and at times indicated this awareness in the phrasing he chose, the images he used, the use of antithesis and the building up of contrast, and the predilection for general statement that recalls moralist writings.<sup>23</sup>

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In the foreword to his monograph on Proust, Beckett informs his reader that he will not refer to biographical facts or to the correspondence and critical works: 'There is no allusion in this book to the legendary life and death of Marcel Proust, nor to the garrulous dowager of the Letters, nor to the poet, nor to the author of the Essays' (Beckett 1999: 9). Even if his intention was to conceal his scholarly knowledge, this does not mean that Beckett ignored the major characteristics of Proust's life or his intellectual interests (in particular, his personal engagement with the writers of the seventeenth century). Beckett's analysis contains detailed arguments on the status of the subject and the question of perception, and takes into account the (seventeenth century) influences and the modern philosophical sources (Bergson, Schopenhauer) to which the author was indebted.

I have suggested that the predominant place Pascal occupied in the thought and literature of the early twentieth century necessarily implies that Beckett, in much of his reading, found indirect or explicit references to Pascal's life and work. His study of Proust's work is characteristic in that sense, as it conformed to the general tendency to see in Pascal's 'anti-Cartesianism' an anticipation of modern thought. As such, Beckett's account of Proust is

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<sup>23</sup> Augustinianism is not the only tragic vision implied here. Beckett quotes two lines from Calderón's *La Vida es sueño*, and critics have not failed to notice that he immediately juxtaposes this with a reference to Schopenhauer: the 'sin of having been born is 'the original and eternal sin of him and all his 'soci malorum' (Beckett 1999: 63). The analogy with *Phèdre* is once again relevant. When *Phèdre* first appears on stage in Act III, she is weary of life (lines 158–62) and yearning for death: 'J'en ai trop prolongé la coupable durée' (Racine 1999: 828, line 217).

a continuation of the ideas he had already encountered in his readings and in his introduction to French literature at Trinity College, and which he developed in his lectures there. It provides ample material for one to show that he knew, and deliberately alluded to, the French canon. The evocation of a ‘romantic strain in Proust’ (Beckett 1999: 81) that comes from ‘his substitution of affectivity for intelligence’ (Beckett 1999: 81) is further proof that Beckett was reflecting on the consequences of the aesthetic rupture between classicism and Romanticism in contemporary French literature and philosophy.

A number of critics have argued that Beckett was essentially preoccupied with the search for an art relying upon the intellect.<sup>24</sup> Elements from his lectures, however, and from his early literary criticism, indicate that Beckett dismissed the ‘esprit de géométrie’ in the same way that he derided Cartesianism, Corneille, and realist writers such as Balzac. He defended the idea that reality is fundamentally incoherent and unfathomable.

It is probable that, early on, Beckett strove to acquire an idiom that would enable him to initiate a dialogue with a culture that was not his own. His affinities with the writers to whom he systematically returns are made explicit in his early writings. This was already a category of writers with whom he felt that there was ‘une même façon de subir l’inintelligible’ (Juliet 1999: 55). As regards the author of the *Pensées*, there can be no doubt that Beckett was struck by Pascal’s apprehension of man as weakness, and his insistence on the fallibility of reason.

The *Proust* monograph reveals the extent of this impact upon Beckett’s understanding of the human mind. Textual evidence shows that he found in the description of the loss of totality and order vibrant anticipations of his own apprehension of being as fragmentary (as ‘unfinished’). There is ample evidence in his successive readings and in his account of Proust

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<sup>24</sup> In fact, textual evidence clearly points to the contrary. Beckett’s deliberate characterization of the Proustian statement as anti-intellectual is explained, as has been suggested earlier, by the critical response to the work. For a rationalist approach to Beckett’s account of *A la recherche du temps perdu*, see Pilling, ‘Beckett’s Proust’, *Journal of Beckett Studies*, <http://www.english.fsu.edu/jobs/num01/Num1Pilling.htm> [last accessed September 23, 2010].

that the closeness Beckett felt to Pascal's vision is due to Pascal's elaboration of an art 'portraying man's inadequacy and flawed nature' – that form of modern literary expression that Beckett mentioned to Lawrence Harvey some two decades later (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 134).

### CHAPTER 3

#### **Pascalian Influences in the Trilogy**

Moving to France, Beckett came to adopt the literary paradigms in which the discourse of the French avant-garde was embedded. This tendency was already apparent, as we have seen, in the references he made in his Trinity lectures and his early writings to French literary Augustinianism and to the debate on ‘modern classicism’.<sup>1</sup>

Insofar as the reference to French seventeenth century classicism was a necessary moment in the definition of contemporary aesthetics, it is significant that Beckett should have established analogies with the writers of that period, other than the philosophers, Pascal and Racine in particular, with the intention to conform to the practice of the Parisian circle to which he felt closest intellectually. I have also sought to demonstrate the centrality of Sainte-Beuve’s work, haunted as it is by Port-Royal, and the lasting impact it had on Beckett’s conception of Jansenism – not least because it developed failure into a literary theme.<sup>2</sup>

The search for, and identification of, sources known from the manuscripts (Sainte-Beuve, Proust, Gide, Benda) and other probable ones (Valéry, Bergson, Thibaudet) on the Port-Royal authors has shown that Beckett’s response to seventeenth century classicism was diversely articulated. How did Pascal creatively inspire Beckett? Having established that the familiarity Beckett developed with these writers in these formative years allowed him to apprehend Pascal and Racine in relation to modernism and contemporary French literature, we can turn to the question of the literary continuity with Port-Royal in his own work.

Accordingly, we may suggest that Beckett’s post-war prose was not only inspired by his reading of Pascal while a student and during his first stay in Paris, but that it also stemmed from a personal engagement with Pascal’s work and an increasing awareness of the

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<sup>1</sup> For a detailed discussion of Beckett’s knowledge of the avant-garde see the Introduction in P. J Murphy: 1990.

<sup>2</sup> A likely reference to the dwellers of Port-Royal (whom Sainte-Beuve called ‘les solitaires’) is to be found in *The Unnamable*, when the voice seeks to move on to a new subject, and creates a new ‘solitary’, Worm (Beckett 1997: 340).

foundational role of Pascal's thought and the aesthetics of the *Pensées*, particularly in France. The *Pensées* provided Beckett with images and themes that would serve as subtexts for the three novels and the subsequent shorter prose.

Pascal sought to convey the difference between pure thought and actual discourse by elaborating a prose mathematically measured to elicit meaning (or its lack) in the permanent balance between opposites – a tension that is built upon the underlying antinomy between 'rien et tout'. The purpose of this chapter is to show that Beckett's admiration for the author of the *Pensées* was not limited to the latter's anthropological vision. Contrary to a general assumption among scholars, I do not merely contend that Beckett's prose 'echoes' the *Pensées*. It is only through a study of fundamental stylistic patterns common to Pascal and to Beckett's French prose that the most profound impact of the author of the *Pensées* on Beckett can be glimpsed. Although I concentrate on the influence of Pascal in what follows, other inspirational models have not been left aside in the elaboration of the present argument.<sup>3</sup>

I shall discuss in this chapter the ways in which Pascal can be considered a literary model for Beckett, in the shaping of an 'aporetic' style in the major novels *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable*, and in creating a prose that gradually moved towards the aesthetic imperatives of reduction and impoverishment.<sup>4</sup> A close reading will reveal that a Pascalian strain underlies the trilogy. Beckett's trilogy of post-war novels also shares with Pascal an attempt to find an appropriate language in which to express experience in its most accurate

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<sup>3</sup> French Moralistic writings, particularly the works of La Bruyère and La Rochefoucauld, also provided Beckett with examples of seventeenth century wit and stylistic concentration. Equivalent uses of aphorisms in English can be found in Shakespeare and Wilde.

<sup>4</sup> As we have seen, the author of the *Pensées* was a fundamental reference in the twentieth century, even for the most unlikely writers. It may be worth bearing in mind, therefore, that even the writer who most radically revolutionised style at the dawning of the twentieth century, Louis-Ferdinand Céline, was nurtured by seventeenth century classics. A more detailed study of Céline's stylistic impact would mean that I stray from my subject, so I have probed the question further. The centrality of Pascal upon the shaping of Céline's vision is, along with that of other foremost seventeenth century writers, quite undeniable. The critic Ifri observes that 'Céline et son œuvre s'inscrivent dans le mouvement classique également grâce à deux caractéristiques bien particulières: son humour cruel et satirique qui n'est pas sans rappeler celui de Molière et une conception de la condition humaine proche de celle de Pascal [...]' (Ifri 1998: URL <<http://www.celine-etudes.org/pdf/ardenne/ifri.pdf>>, accessed September 2, 2011).

form. The correspondence between both authors is particularly visible in the way that Pascal seeks to break down the primacy of reason through language, adopting images and terms that Descartes had used in the *Meditations* and the *Principles of Philosophy*, but to a different, sometimes satirical, purpose.

The interplay of philosophical and theological terms is a clear indication from the outset that the trilogy is thematically embedded in the *Pensées*. I will first question the idea of Beckett's alleged dependence on Cartesianism, to show that the difference between Pascalian and Cartesian stances towards metaphysics yields a number of interpretative possibilities. The study of Beckett's adaptation of Pascalian themes in the three novels will come in the second section (on ontological indeterminacy and the image of 'milieu'). The third section will examine Pascal's stylistic impact upon Beckett.

## I. A READING OF BECKETT'S APPROACH TO CARTESIANISM THROUGH PASCAL

Pascal's interpretation of Cartesian metaphysics is of interest for a study of Beckett because it opens up new perspectives in the study of the trilogy. The 'I' both in the *Pensées* and in the trilogy undergoes a linguistic undoing as the foundation of a *problematic* interiority, an infinite 'gulf' that must be filled, recalling the idea of an infinite distance developed in the fragment on disproportion: 'un tout à l'égard du néant où l'on ne peut arriver' (Pascal 2004: #185).

### A. Pascal's 'Moi Introuvable' in the Trilogy

Cartesian readings of Beckett have focused on the dualism between mind and body. In *Saying I No More*, Daniel Katz examines Beckett's questioning of logocentrism through the use of pronouns, in order to show how his 'attack on the cogito in the trilogy and the later works

comes from within the first-person structure necessary to the cogito's success, but it takes the form of voiding – systematically – all of the cogito's assumptions and deductions' (Katz 1999: 10). Katz's principal aim is to examine the self as 'a network of echoes' through the paradigm of the cogito, bearing in mind that 'Beckett's prose continually harps on the problem of the spacing and the temporality of a fictive narrative voice on which textual production depends' (Katz 1999: 10).

This inevitably leads to the aporetic form of expression that characterizes the language of the three novels. The essential problem that the writing poses lies in the dual status of the voice as the source of utterance and the object around which discourse revolves. The denegation of subjectivity is all the more prevalent in the trilogy, since the rejection of both thought and feeling pervades the discourse. This is illustrated in the well-known episode of the Pomeranians: 'The less I think the more certain I am' (Beckett 1997: 17)<sup>5</sup> and in one of the Unnamable's statements: 'I'm sorry, I feel nothing' (Beckett 1997: 356).<sup>6</sup> This division is exemplified in the distinction between the 'I' and the 'head' as two separate entities.<sup>7</sup>

The Beckettian voice is confronted with an intractable problem: the reconciliation of these distinct entities through language. Unlike the moment of the revelation of the self as substance in the Cartesian *cogito*, there is a complete absence of coincidence between the

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<sup>5</sup> Molloy's distortion of the 'Cartesian statement' is less obvious in the French version: 'Je n'en étais pas sûr au moment même et encore aujourd'hui je ne le suis pas, bien que j'y aie très peu réfléchi' (Beckett 1953: 15).

<sup>6</sup> There can be little doubt that Beckett remembered Montaigne's praise of indifference in the chapter entitled 'De l'expérience' in the third book of the *Essais*. At one point Montaigne highlights the necessity in which he found himself to break habits that become deeply rooted with old age. Later on in this chapter I highlight further allusions made to Montaigne, through the figure of the 'incurious seeker'. The reason why I do not expand upon the many, profound similarities with the author of the *Essais* here is that the subject requires to be fully developed on its own. In a forthcoming article, I have looked at the piece on Devlin's collection of poems, *Intercessions*, in which many allusions to Montaigne can be found. Beckett refers to the praise of confusion in the *Essais*, when he writes for instance that 'art has nothing to do with clarity' (Beckett 2003: 94). Montaigne is the figure that foreshadows Devlin's artistic values, modesty and integrity. Like Montaigne, Beckett clearly privileges what Pascal calls 'natural eloquence', observing that 'art has always been this – pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric' (Beckett 2003: 91).

<sup>7</sup> Beckett pursued the theme throughout his life, inventing new forms to express it. This is apparent in both the prose and the dramatic works. McMullan, for instance, rightly argues that 'his [Beckett's] subject is differentiated and alienated from the skull enclosing it, from the words it utters or the memories or narratives it tells, from every form or representation of existence, unable to escape or identify with either the body or language' (McMullan 1993: 17).

moment of utterance and the certainty of existence in the trilogy, which itself is the source of endless discursive meanderings in *The Unnamable*, where the voice remarks that ‘there will not be much on the subject of Malone, for whom there is nothing further to be hoped’ (Beckett 1997: 294).

My point of departure in the study of the filiation between the Pascalian ‘moi’ and the evocation of subjectivity in the trilogy is the comparison between the argumentative structure of the fragment, which is reflected in the dissociation between the first-person pronoun, the speaking subject ‘I’, and the empirical subject ‘me’ throughout the trilogy. The voice depends on an ‘other’ to be persuaded of the reality of its presence. This pattern strays from the Cartesian conception of subjectivity, in which the autonomy of the subject is ascertained in its status as essence.

The correspondence with the Pascalian reading of the second *Meditation* in the fragment on the ‘moi introuvable’ emerges from the rupture between speech and its source, the uttering voice, the ‘I’ that is linguistically inscribed as subject of enunciation but which evokes a problematic ‘confusion of identities’. What could be taken as mere conceptual coincidence, then, is confirmed as a deliberate textual continuity in the evocation of the problem of perception: the reality of the empirical self is only acknowledged by the mediation of a third entity, an indeterminate ‘they’: ‘perhaps all they have told me has reference to a single existence, the confusion of identities being merely apparent due to my inaptitude to assume any’ (Beckett 1997: 333).

### 1. The Pascalian destitution of Cartesian metaphysics and *The Unnamable*

Richard N. Coe has pointed out that a clear filiation exists between the depiction of the *ego* in *The Unnamable* and the evocation of the ‘moi introuvable’ in the *Pensées*, suggesting that

commentators should look into it.<sup>8</sup> In what follows, I shall take up Coe's invitation and look into the different ways in which the questioning of the metaphysical primacy of the ego inspired the philosophical backdrop to the trilogy. Three aspects will be studied: the evocation of self as object, perception, and the impossibility of determining a *locus* for the self.

Since he had read the *Logique de Port-Royal*, Beckett necessarily associated the French expression 'le moi' with Pascalian thought. Nicole famously wrote that Pascal held the view that, out of politeness, the words relating to the concept of the self had to be suppressed from the vocabulary of an 'honnête homme'. The 'moi', for Pascal, must be discarded rhetorically (III, 6, §6):<sup>9</sup>

Feu M. Pascal, qui savait autant de véritable rhétorique que personne en eut jamais su, portait cette règle jusqu'à en prétendre qu'un honnête homme devait éviter de se nommer, et même de se servir des mots de *je* et de *moi*, et il avait accoutumé de dire à ce sujet que la piété chrétienne anéantit le moi humain, et que la civilité humaine le cache et le supprime. (Arnauld and Nicole 1981: 267)

In Book II, 1, the authors of the *Logique ou l'Art de Penser* specify that the purpose of pronouns is to avoid the repetition of nouns: 'comme les hommes ont reconnu qu'il étoit souvent inutile & de mauvaise grâce de se nommer soi même, ils ont introduit le Pronom de la première personne pour mettre en la place de celui qui parle; Ego, moi, je, pour n'être pas obligés de nommer celui à qui on parle, ils ont trouvé bon de le marquer par un mot qu'ils ont appelé Pronom' (Arnauld and Nicole 1983: 106).

This is echoed in *The Unnamable* as the voice reflects on the inadequacy of pronouns to express the relationship between the self and others. The latter is all the more complex as

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<sup>8</sup> Coe sees, like many critics of the period, a continuity between the two authors in terms of the vision of existence insofar as he points out that there is an essential difference between Beckett and Pascal, for Beckett differs, ultimately, from Pascal's 'solution' to the problem of existence (Coe 1964: 12).

<sup>9</sup> See Carraud's development on that particular passage: 'le moi doit être rhétoriquement anéanti 1/ par civilité, c'est-à-dire utilité (accommodement) dans les relations interpersonnelles: éviter envie et jalousie [...] 2/ [...] par piété en signe de son anéantissement spirituel: contre l'amour de soi origine, Jésus-Christ nous apprend la haine de soi' (Carraud 1997: 311).

the existence of the uttering ‘I’ is itself called into question, and as the unnamable protagonist claims that there is no name for him: ‘someone mentions confusion, it is a sin, all here is a sin, you don’t know why, you don’t know against whom, someone says you, it’s the fault of the pronouns, there is no name for me, no pronoun for me, all the trouble comes from that, that, it’s a kind of pronoun too, it isn’t that either, I’m not that either, let us leave all that [...]’ (Beckett 1997: 408). The notion of sin, introduced in the midst of that statement, may derive from the Christian perspective that lies at the heart of Arnauld and Nicole’s work. The parodic intention lies in the rejection of the idea that language enables the direct expression of essence. Pascal’s remarkable capacity for linguistic and conceptual innovation, purposely inventing the expression ‘le moi’ in French, as well as his constant probing of language, opens up many possibilities for interpretative analogies with Beckett, insofar as it suggests a powerful alternative to Cartesian egology.<sup>10</sup> In the fragment on the ‘moi introuvable’, Pascal considers the relationship between perceiver and perceived.

The ‘I’ in Beckett’s three novels becomes a distinct object of observation, unrelated to the self as essence, ‘this meaningless voice that prevents you from being nothing and nowhere’ (Beckett 1997: 374) – a grammatical absurdity that reverberates the ontological inadequacy of the subject as essence, as the following statement in *The Unnamable* clearly illustrates: ‘I say I, unbelieving’ (Beckett 1997: 293). At the present stage I will posit that the influence of Pascal upon Beckett essentially resides in the subversion of the Cartesian ‘I’ and in Pascal’s endeavour to ‘de-conceptualize’ the idea of self as essence.

I have drawn my account from Vincent Carraud’s study of the fragment on the ‘moi introuvable’ because the reading undertaken therein directly echoes the evocation of subjectivity developed in the trilogy. Pascal’s argumentative strategy is to uncover the inadequacy of the metaphysical enterprise at work in the *Metaphysical Meditations*. The

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<sup>10</sup> See Carraud 1993:116.

conception of the self as essence is altered as the self becomes a mere object, which only exists if it is perceived by an other.<sup>11</sup> The self, as such, is inherently empty.<sup>12</sup>

In the fragment on the ‘moi introuvable’, a passer-by describes the moment when he sees a man sitting at his window whose existence remains unnoticed by that figure. Through the metaphor of an observing subject, Pascal brings about a radical change of perspective from the original Cartesian stance, in the distinction he comes to establish between the original aspects of a personality and its ‘qualités empruntées’, illusory and evanescent, suggesting, at the same time, the impossibility of any genuine human attachment:

Qu’est-ce que le moi?

Un homme qui se met à la fenêtre pour voir les passants: si je passe par là, puis-je dire qu’il s’est mis là pour me voir ? Non: car il ne pense pas à moi en particulier: mais celui qui aime quelqu’un à cause de sa beauté, l’aime-t-il ? Non: car la petite vérole, qui tuera la beauté sans tuer la personne, fera qu’il ne l’aimera plus.

Et si on m’aime pour mon jugement, pour ma mémoire, m’aime-t-on? moi ? Non, car je puis perdre ces qualités sans me perdre moi-même. Où est donc ce moi, s’il n’est ni dans le corps, ni dans l’âme ? et comment aimer le corps ou l’âme, sinon pour ces qualités, qui ne sont point ce qui fait le moi, puisqu’elles sont périssables ? car aimerait-on la substance de l’âme d’une personne, abstraitement, et quelques qualités qui y fussent ? Cela ne se peut, et serait injuste. On n’aime donc jamais personne, mais seulement des qualités.

Qu’on ne se moque donc plus de ceux qui se font honorer pour des charges et des offices, car on n’aime

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<sup>11</sup> A number of critics have already studied Berkeley’s influence upon Beckett. It is well known among critics that Beckett’s tutor at Trinity College, Dublin, A. A. Luce, was a Berkeley scholar. Beckett explicitly turned to Berkeley as he mentioned a sense of ‘being absent and of living existence by proxy’. He added that he ‘made an association between this feeling and the idealist philosophy of Berkeley. Perhaps it is an Irish thing, basically a skepticism before nature as given, complicated by a skepticism about the perceiving subject as well’ (Harvey 1970: 247). For an account of Beckett’s understanding and use of the philosophy of Berkeley, see for instance Frederick N. Smith’s article, ‘Beckett and Berkeley: A Reconsideration’ (Smith 1998: 341).

<sup>12</sup> In *La critique du discours*, Louis Marin emphasizes that the problem of the subject is articulated by Pascal ‘comme remplissement de son lieu vide par les mots “je” et “moi”’ (Marin 1975: 19). The subject’s vacuity is designated through language, as we seek to erase this vacuity by reaching outwards to others. Marin observes that ‘ce remplissement est pour Pascal le principe même de la vraie rhétorique, espace où se profère le discours à l’autre dans un indescriptible mélange d’amour et d’agressivité, lieu du sujet d’énonciation constamment investi par une “secrète complaisance”’ (Marin 1975: 19). This account provides an accurate description of the movement of Beckett’s prose in the trilogy.

personne que pour des qualités empruntées.

(Pascal 2004: #586)<sup>13</sup>

The shift from the discovery of the ego as a metaphysical substance, to the reflection on individual identity (Pascal), occurs in the initial inversion the role of the observer and his object, discarding the problem of essence, because ‘la substantivation du moi est le point de départ de sa désubstantialisation’ (Carraud 2007: 115).

Initially, this is brought about in the substitution of the ‘I’ as the object of observation, leading to the questioning of its substance through the opposition between ‘personne’ and ‘qualités’, that is, the actual reality of an individual, and the imagined attributes bestowed on them, upon which human attachment is founded. The notion of accidental qualities (‘qualités empruntées’) refers the reader back to the domain of logic as accidental qualities are first examined through the example of physical attributes: to be a passer-by is an exterior determination, as are perishable qualities (beauty). Neither participates in defining ‘me’, i.e. a singular individual identity. Pascal then moves on to consider a second category: intellectual qualities or the attribute of the soul, which are represented in ‘judgement’ and ‘memory’. They also fall short in defining ‘me’, the essential qualities of the self, and so are eliminated, for Pascal soon establishes that the ‘I’ differs from its qualities, just as the nature of the self is illusory, based on appearances.

From that first attempt to define its qualities, Pascal concludes that the locus of the ‘moi’ cannot be found in abstract generality and even observes that it is indefinable: ‘le moi

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<sup>13</sup> It should be recalled that Port-Royal amended this fragment in the first edition of the *Pensées* because it was thought to be excessively innovative. Arnauld and Nicole proceeded to change words in the original text to, the point that its title (‘Qu’est-ce que le moi’) was suppressed, the consequence of which was to weaken the final statement by adding a conclusion that aims to subdue the abruptness of the assertion: ‘Ou si on aime une personne, il faut dire que c’est l’assemblage des qualités qui fait la personne’ (Carraud 2007:113). Carraud explains that the invention of the self stems from a linguistic shift in which the latin word *ego* is replaced by the expression ‘le moi’, by which the self loses the substantiality it had acquired with Descartes: ‘Pascal a objectivé l’*ego* en un moi, mais il n’en a fixé lexicalement la substantivation qu’afin d’en destituer la substantialité L’*ego* n’est devenu un objet – le moi – que pour perdre la substantialité que la métaphysique cartésienne lui avait conférée’ (Carraud 2007: 116).

n'est ni dans le corps, ni dans l'âme'. The self is no longer apprehended as a substance, inasmuch as the substitution of the first-person pronoun for the expression 'le moi' immediately discards the privileged status of the original Cartesian 'I': 'le moi est d'emblée recherché comme sujet [...] et non dans sa fonction de sujet, *je* [...], sujet privilégié premier sans aucun doute, de l'être et de tout affirmation, tel que le *cogito* peut seul en assurer la certitude' (Carraud 1992: 316), so that the knowledge of self is sought 'dans la visibilité et non dans une présence intérieure de soi à soi (pensée ou conscience de soi)' (Carraud 1993: 316). As a result, the discourse on self is not authorized, since 'il ne pense pas à moi en particulier' (Pascal 2004: #582) on account of the lack of correspondence between the words 'je' and 'me'.

In the third *Meditation*, the demonstration of the substantiality of the ego could only be undertaken by first discarding the empirical human ego. Pascal takes into account this gesture only to reject any foundation to the idea of substance. This change of perspective highlights the conceptual divergence between the two authors. The immobile observer is to be seen as Descartes, 'ou plutôt l'ego', and the passer-by as Pascal, 'ou plutôt le moi' (Carraud 1993: 317), who feels subjected to the omniscient gaze of the observer: 'le locuteur ne domine plus de la fenêtre les apparences passantes, il marche parmi elle et voit le regard d'un *je* qui surplombe la rue, se pose sur lui et le réduit à la posture d'un moi' (Marion 1984: 345).

Pascal posits that the existence of our personal self can only be acknowledged when we are being perceived by an other inasmuch as 'seul importe le rapport entre le regard et l'existence, la permanence, et la définition de l'instance regardée' (Carraud 1992: 317). The notable similarity between the two texts resides in the 'staging' of the situation. Carraud observes that the Pascalian text observes the same structure as the original passage in the *Metaphysical Meditations*:

La recherche pascalienne du moi s'organise exactement de la même manière que celle de la connaissance du morceau de cire dans la *Meditatio* II: problème de la permanence sous les changements, même perception de la seule apparence, même primat de la vue, même incognoscibilité de l'extension et de la substance du moi, même incertitude quant au sujet de l'existence de ce qui apparaît. (Carraud 1993: 316)

The radical subversion of the original Cartesian subtext occurs in the final sequence of the fragment: 'd'une exigence de définition métaphysique [...] nous en arrivons à la recherche de l'objet de l'amour, toujours entendu comme moi' (Carraud 1992: 319). This 'subversion', as Carraud defines it, can only take place through words, for the movement of language is made to accompany the crucial displacement of perspective in which the 'I' loses its status as substance. This is the first step towards the undoing of its metaphysical primacy (Carraud 2007:116). A second linguistic subversion occurs at the end of the passage. Through the expression 'substance de l'âme', Pascal endeavours to highlight the inner vacuity of the self:

la personne ne désigne personne, aucune singularité déterminée et repérable comme telle (d'où le glissement: ne pas aimer *la* personne, c'est n'aimer personne); l'âme n'est le substrat d'aucune immortalité, purement réductible aux qualités (périssables) qui (ne) la manifestent (pas), elle n'est principe de rien, lieu aussi inhabité par le moi que le corps; la substance, ce qui demeure sous les qualités successives, ce qui est permanent semble n'avoir plus rien de substantiel (Carraud 1993: 320).

In the trilogy, the (voluntary) loss of identity is inextricably linked to the linguistic designation of that identity, insofar as the term 'myself' is interchangeable with 'another' and the exhaustion of one fiction leads to the invention of another – 'a life which vanishes once the subject is changed' (Beckett 1997: 356). In the Unnamable's statement, language as the embodiment of the Word can no longer account for the situation described. The pronoun will disappear in *Worstward Ho*, where an unrepresented subjectivity struggles with words while it is caught in them: 'Whose words? Ask in vain, or not in vain if say no knowing. No saying.

No saying. No words for him whose words. Him? One. No words for one whose words. One? It. No words for it whose words' (Beckett 1983: 19). This presence is the 'unnamable, a source of utterance yearning to reach a wordless state – 'nohow on'.

The creation of subjectivity through language is literally inscribed in the opening statement of *The Unnamable* and yet immediately called into question: 'I say I, unbelieving'. Beckett takes up the convention of an 'I' as the subject of the ongoing discourse of the narration, but as soon as the word is uttered, it is transformed into an object, 'say I'. From the outset, then, the unity of the first person pronoun is disintegrated and there is an uncertainty as to the actual location of the voice: 'I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not I about me' (Beckett 1997: 293).

The personal pronoun cannot simply be omitted; it has to be affirmed in order to be denied, it is always the foreclosed subject of utterance, the (non)-I, that speaks. The Unnamable states the paradox of utterance that will be at work throughout: although it is necessarily inscribed in language, the subject of enunciation denies itself, its personal being, and cannot occupy the place as subject of utterance. The neutrality of language effaces the self-identity of the 'I':

I shall not say I again, ever again, it is too farcical. I shall put in it's [sic!] place, whenever I hear it, the third person, if I think of it. Anything to please them. It will make no difference. Where I am there is no one but me, who am not. So much for that. Words, he says he knows they are words. But how can he know, who has never heard anything else? (Beckett 1997: 358)

Je ne dirai plus moi, je ne le dirai plus jamais, c'est trop bête. Je mettrais à la place, chaque fois que je l'entendrai, la troisième personne, si j'y pense. Si ça les amuse. Ça ne changera rien. Il n'y a que moi, moi que ne suis pas, là où je suis. (Beckett 1953: 114)

It becomes increasingly difficult to make the subject of enunciation appear in this blurring of subjective identities, to identify what it is saying or referring to – for the Unnamable, Malone is (ironically) a fictional entity in the last novel of the trilogy, where he is given no more substantiality than his own ‘inventions’.

The problem of the object of speech is posed in unsolvable terms, in a typically aporetic movement that is illustrated in successive affirmations and negations that sustain utterance. The voice declares its utter ignorance of the subject that allows discourse to carry on: ‘not only shall I have to speak of things of which I cannot speak [...] and at the same time I am obliged to speak. I shall never be silent’ (Beckett 1997: 294).<sup>14</sup> A movement that recalls the Pascalian fragment is initiated in the first paragraph of Beckett’s novel. It is evidenced in the dissociation of the ‘I’ with itself as reference: ‘I seem to speak, it is not I, about me, it is not about me’ (Beckett 1997: 293). The paradox is evoked in even more direct terms: ‘ce n’est pas moi qui parle’ (Beckett 1953: 191).

That speech should revolve around a vacuum created by the nonsensical ‘I’, the absent ‘person’, exacerbates the feeling of inadequacy that is implemented from the outset of the novel.<sup>15</sup> This is reiterated a few pages later, as the voice once again rejects the idea of building up a narrative about itself: ‘[a]bout myself I need know nothing. Here all is clear. No, all is not clear. But the discourse must go on. So one invents obscurities. Rhetoric’ (Beckett 1997: 300).<sup>16</sup> The distance between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’, which become two distinct entities, recalls the destitution of the Cartesian ego as substance undertaken by Pascal.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The original French text insists on the unending aspect of speech: ‘Je ne me tairai jamais. Jamais’ (Beckett 1953: 8).

<sup>15</sup> The powerlessness of language confronted with the ‘unnamable’ reality that cannot be described by words has been evoked by early admirers of Beckett like Blanchot and Bataille. Both insisted on the restless endeavour of Beckett’s protagonists to go beyond that sense of inadequacy in their yearning for silence.

<sup>16</sup> This particular observation is suggestive of the familiarity Beckett had with Pascal’s considerations on language in the early writings on the geometrical method and eloquence, *De l’esprit géométrique* and *De l’art de persuader*. But as we will see in the last chapter of this thesis, it also indicates how the *Lettres Provinciales* provided Beckett with fictional material incorporated in his own work.

<sup>17</sup> The intrusion of the alien voice of the Unnamable in *Molloy* is hinted at upon several occasions. This is illustrated in the passing remark that ‘Molloy could stay, wherever he may be’ (Beckett 1997: 96). The sudden

The obsession with the locus of the 'I' remains predominant throughout the novel. The voice states, for instance, 'I was never there' (Beckett 1997: 336), this being a variation on the final sequence of Pascal's fragment, in which the question of the locus of the 'moi' is brought up, as Pascal wonders: 'Où est donc ce moi s'il n'est ni dans le corps, ni dans l'âme?' (Pascal 2004: #582). The voice muses upon the hidden motivation of the woman who is attending it, wondering whether 'she [would] have put me in a cang, raised me on a pedestal, hung me with lanterns, if she were not convinced of my substantiality?' (Beckett 1997: 337).<sup>18</sup> Pursuing its reasoning, the voice considers another situation, asking itself whether 'she would rid me of my paltry excrements, protect me from the snow, change my sawdust, rub salt into my scalp, if I were not there?' (Beckett 1997: 337).

The voice's insistence on the impossibility of locating itself produces a radical displacement from the Cartesian stance:

it has not been our good fortune to establish with any degree of accuracy what I am, where I am, whether I am words among words, or silence in the midst of silence, to recall only two hypotheses launched in this connection though silence to tell the truth does not appear to have been very conspicuous up to now, I resume, not yet our good fortune to establish, among other things, what I am, no, sorry, already mentioned, what I'm doing, how I manage, to hear if I hear, if it's I who hear and who can doubt it, I don't know, doubt is present, in this connection, somewhere or other, I resume [...]. (Beckett 1997: 392)

Inasmuch as no distinctive voice comes out of the Beckettian text, 'je suis des mots parmi des mots' (Beckett 1953: 147), its relation to a literary tradition, or the study of Beckett's

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change of narrator sets up the ongoing tension between the necessity to establish coherence between the 'I' and the world, and invention. Discourse in the trilogy introduces differences between the speaking 'I' and the subject of enunciation as shown in Molloy's desire to remain indifferent 'I *shall* even try *not* to ask *myself* any more' (Beckett 1997: 64) or in Malone's introductory statement: 'to think I try my best not to talk about myself' (Beckett 1997: 181). 'Myself' here has the same grammatical value as 'me'. See also Garcia-Landa: 1991.

<sup>18</sup> The more abstract language used in the English version elicits the references made to Pascal through the dissociation between the 'I' and the 'me'. As it fears that there should be no interaction if the other did not acknowledge that it possessed a physical, empirical 'me', the voice grows increasingly uneasy before the idea that it would, at the same time, lose its status as an 'I'. As it doubts that that it can refer to itself as a 'me', the voice ponders whether it would cease to exist as both 'I' and 'me' – 'sans la certitude que j'avais de la consistance' (Beckett 1953: 94).

rewriting alongside that tradition, are interpretative options that remain uncalled for by the text. As this example shows, the prose engages in a deliberate confusion that traditional hermeneutics forbids, a process of erasure where an unlikely occasion is made for the varied forms of discourse to reveal their source, displaying a multiplicity of meanings within the very economy of the prose. The convoluted opening ‘it has not been our good fortune’, together with the vocabulary used, ‘establish’, ‘degree of accuracy’, ‘what’, ‘where’, ‘recall’, ‘hypotheses’, ‘connection’, recalls scholastic rhetoric, aiming for a precision that is undermined by parodic effects that stem from the repetition of the previous proposition, ‘I resume’, and a number of words that downplay the accuracy of the statement.<sup>19</sup> The questions of essence (‘what I am’) and location (‘where I am’) are formulated explicitly, but fail to be addressed. The voice emits the possibility that it may only be ‘words among words’, even as it formulates the second possibility, that is, its opposite, ‘silence in the midst of silence’.<sup>20</sup>

The humour that pervades this passage stems from the vagueness of some assertions, just as the tendency to comment on the situation in which it finds itself is elaborated to highlight the voice’s failure to reach its objective, as ‘silence does not appear to very have been conspicuous up to now’. The only thing that can be demonstrated is that between ‘the thing said and the thing heard’ there exists ‘a common source, resisting for this purpose the temptation to call in question the possibility of assuming anything whatever’ (Beckett 1997: 393).

In Beckett’s work, the text begins to elaborate a new fiction only to discard it, negating itself while it finds itself in the process of affirming its fiction through a gradual reduction of the representational component. Molloy is taken to the police station and asked to give his

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<sup>19</sup> There has been a general consensus among critics over the past two decades that the abundance of quotations in Beckett’s texts makes it particularly difficult to identify his literary and philosophical sources. Commentators have insisted on the parodic quality of his use of quotations. Ruby Cohn refers to them as ‘comic twistings of cliché and quotation’ (quoted in Rabinovitz 1984: 204). The unique way in which the prose weaves a ‘network of echoes’ to other literary or philosophical works has also been observed, together with the writer’s tendency to probe the theme absence through impoverishment, but escapes any theorization. In the later pieces, the voice is decentred of its initial authority, which cannot be made to correspond to an original source.

<sup>20</sup> On the subject of logical differencing in Beckett’s English novels, see Bonafous-Murat: 2011.

name. The way in which he terms his incapacity to do so echoes Pascal's reflection on the role of language in the fragment on the 'moi introuvable': 'I had forgotten who I was (excusably) and spoken of myself as I would have of another, if I had been compelled to speak of another' (Beckett 1997: 23). The dichotomy that resides in the self-cancelling polarity 'I'/'another' conveys the complete rupture between the subject as foundation, and the need to communicate. The voice of the Unnamable ponders, for instance: 'is it I now, I on me?'. Here, it clearly marks the difference between the two pronouns that recalls the fragment on the 'moi introuvable'.

As it is interchangeable with 'another', the term 'myself' echoes the linguistic substitution at the core of Pascal's fragment, given that the first-person pronoun 'je' is not directly associated with the pronoun 'moi'. The first-person pronoun refers to the speaker, the passer-by who sees the man at the window. This implies that the acknowledgement of self cannot be immediate and that it is necessarily dependent upon an 'other', the 'il' it needs to be perceived by in order to acquire a sense of existence. Pascal writes: 'si *je* passe par là, puis-je dire qu'*il* s'est mis là pour *me* voir? Non, car il ne pense pas à *moi en particulier*' (Pascal 2004: 582; my emphasis).

The speculative tenor of the text 'si je ... puis-je dire?' anticipates the remark that states the inexistence of both the empirical self ('moi en particulier') and the self as substance. The tension between the 'je' and an indeterminate third person, 'on', is reiterated a few lines further down as Pascal turns to the example of human attachment, pondering the nature of love: 'Et si *on* m'aime pour *mon* jugement, pour *ma* mémoire, *m'aime-t-on? moi?* Non, car je puis perdre ces qualités *sans me perdre moi-même*' (Pascal 2004: #586; emphasis added). The reflection on essence becomes irrelevant insofar as 'seule importe ici l'impossibilité d'identifier l'aspect, l'apparence, la silhouette et le moi; le moi est tel qu'il est vu et le "moi en particulier", c'est-à-dire non seulement distingué d'autrui [...] mais compris comme moi et

comme pure forme' (Carraud 1992: 318). It is implicitly suggested throughout the fragment that the encounter between the 'je' and the 'il' is, ironically, a mere product of chance, and as such reflects both the vanity of the 'moi' and the vacuity of the linguistic concept of the self as substance.<sup>21</sup>

It is as though the 'voiding' of Cartesian subjectivity can only be carried out through the abrupt suspension of the text's original impetus. Beckett always reluctantly grants his narrative the brief momentum that builds up in the accelerating rhythm of the prose. It is interrupted through imbalance, elaborated with the relentless accumulation of assertions, negations, and parataxis, together with the frequent use of tropes for interrupted speech, such as aposiopesis, reticence and suspension. On a microcosmic level, the tension towards stillness and the attempt to silence words is at work from the opening line of the last novel of the trilogy. As the narrative unfolds, its complexity increases. The restless voice comes to consider all its possible manifestations through the figures of Basil, Mahood and Worm surveying their several possible voices. These voices disrupt the disorderly narration at any given moment.

I am neither, I needn't say, Murphy, nor Watt, nor Mercier, nor- no, I can't even bring myself to name them, nor any of the others whose very names I forget, who told me I was they, who I must have tried to be, under duress, or thought of fear, or to avoid acknowledging me, not the slightest connexion. (Beckett 1997: 451)

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<sup>21</sup> Beckett would pursue the probing of the relation between perception, the sense of existence and acknowledgement of self in his short pieces. The anguish evoked by Pascal at the realization that one only enters in existence when one is perceived by an exteriorized other, the theatricality of the gaze, arguably underlie the problem posed in *Film*, along with the reference to Berkeley ('*esse est percipi*') in the opening stage direction. As in Pascal's fragment, the self is unsubstantial, an object elaborated from exteriorized perception, and the 'anéantissement du moi' necessary to accede faith. Beckett only partially departs from Pascal insofar as the protagonist tries to escape the inevitability of perceptibility. The theme of diversion ('divertissement') is implicit in the subject of the piece itself: the flight from self. In a letter to Alan Schneider, dated September 29, 1964, Beckett specifies that 'the search for non-being in flight from extraneous perception breaking down in inescapability of self-perception', and that 'when O enters *percipi* = experiences anguish of perceivedness only when this angle is established' (Beckett 1998: 167). It may be argued that the problem evoked in the fragment on the 'moi introuvable' is taken from the opposite perspective: the protagonist's attempts to be 'immune' from the inescapable gaze of the other to avoid the sense of existence. The failure of this flight from self is bound to fail, as 'the pursuing perceiver is not extraneous, but self' (Beckett 1998: 167).

The unsettled position of the status of the 'I', both as grammatical subject and as the object of the narrative, is particularly manifest in this passage where the multiplication of the 'I' introduces a distance between the teller and the story. This endless process creates an ambiguity as to who is the actual subject 'I', in its attempt to 'avoid acknowledging me'. The closed system of its language reinforces the centrality given to the voice's focus on the creation of (potentially) alternate identities.

## 2. 'Visibility' in Pascal and the problem of perception in the trilogy

In the trilogy, the relationship with the empirical self ('le moi') becomes even more problematic as it is contradictory. Molloy, for instance, uses the first person pronoun 'I' even as he speaks of himself as 'another'. This uneasiness recalls the role of the gaze in the fragment from the *Pensées*: once perceived out of a chance encounter, and soon forgotten, the 'I' is confronted with the reality of its own absence to the other. Similarly, the situation evoked by Pascal brings out the continuous displacement of Cartesian concepts by distorting the paradigm of representation. In Descartes, it is embodied in the universal model of the gaze, 'le regard' (Carraud 1992: 144-145). The first person pronoun 'je' is not directly associated with the personal pronoun 'me', because acknowledgement of self is not immediate, but only made possible by an 'other'. The self needs to be visually acknowledged by the man at the window, the entity upon which the actual presence of the empirical self depends. The 'I' can only elicit the meaning of the other's presence through speculation.

In *Molloy*, the problematic relation to the self is associated not so much with ontological questioning as with the problem of identity: the constant preoccupation with names, and with the very act of naming, is suggestive of the similarity between the description of a fragmentary subjectivity, dispersed as it is in language, and Pascal's 'moi introuvable'. Molloy anticipates the very moment of their encounter, sensing its imminence when the

protagonists seem not to: ‘So I saw A and C going slowly towards each other, unconscious of what they were doing’ (Beckett 1997: 9). Insofar as the continuance of discourse is the underlying purpose of the storytelling, the moment preceding the encounter is prolonged, delayed by the succession of words as the observer (Molloy) remarks, ‘They couldn’t have seen each other, even had they raised heads and looked about, because of this wide space, and because of the undulating land’ (Beckett 1997: 9).<sup>1</sup>

The description of the encounter emphasizes its accidental nature: ‘But the moment came when together they went down into the same trough and in this trough finally met. To say they knew each other, no, nothing warrants it’ (Beckett 1997:9).<sup>2</sup> This encounter is abstracted from the singularity of a given context, the anonymity of the protagonists. Molloy dismisses the importance granted to the notion of individuality when he observes that people are ‘hard to distinguish from yourself’ (Beckett 1997: 9). Accordingly, A and C are not seen as individuals, or single entities, but as figures, whose lack of singularity contrasts with the details in the description of the landscape, hardly striking in itself. These indistinct figures are distinguished only by visible physical criteria: ‘it was two men, unmistakably, one small and one tall’; ‘they looked alike but no more than others do’ (Beckett 1997: 9). As in the Pascal fragment, it is not physical proximity that defines the encounter, but the gaze: Molloy looking upon the scene, and A and C acknowledging each other’s presence: ‘they raised their heads and observed each other’ (Beckett 1997: 9).<sup>3</sup>

Significantly, Molloy attempts to account for the stranger’s ‘anxiety’: ‘I watched him recede overtaken (myself) by anxiety, by an anxiety which was not necessarily his, but of

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<sup>1</sup> Molloy forewarns the reader that his is not necessarily an exact account of ‘the way it was’ (Beckett 1997: 9), just as the Unnamable explicitly states that all versions are valid, even in their very contradiction.

<sup>2</sup> Some critics have read this passage as a parody of a conventional encounter sequence in realist novels that are mirrored throughout the novel (see Banfield, Begam).

<sup>3</sup> This is in keeping with Pascal’s own observation: ‘seule importe ici l’impossibilité d’identifier l’aspect, l’apparence, la silhouette et le moi; le moi est tel qu’il et vu et le “moi en particulier”, c’est-à dire non seulement distingué d’autrui [...] mais compris comme moi et comme pure forme’ (Carraud 1992: 318). The radical subversion of the original Cartesian subtext occurs in the final sequence of the fragment, because, ‘d’une exigence de définition métaphysique [...] nous en arrivons à la recherche de l’objet de l’amour, toujours entendu comme moi’ (Carraud 1992: 319).

which as it were he partook' (Beckett 1997: 11). Underlying these observations is the sense that individuals are incommunicable to each other, echoing Pascal's concern for the fundamental incomprehension between individuals, previously illustrated in the study of the 'Whoroscope Notebook' and the monograph on Proust. Molloy's reflections revolve around knowing whether one of the strangers saw him, in other words, whether they acknowledge his existence by looking at him, if, to paraphrase Pascal, they think of him in particular. He concludes that 'he certainly didn't see me, for the reasons I've given and because he is in no humour for that, that evening, no humour for the living' (Beckett 1997: 11).

As in the *Pensées*, so in the trilogy the search for company is bound to fail. Malone invokes a fictional and indeterminate 'other', 'whom I have often made suffer and seldom contented', which leads to the denegation of its potential presence, 'whom I've never seen' (Beckett 1997: 195). This renunciation results in the rejection of any form of human attachment. The need for 'company' is evoked in a form that is similar to Pascal's preoccupation with the nature of relationships. Indeed, the above-quoted sequence from Beckett's novel may recall the impossibility of nurturing any kind of human attachment expressed in the following terms in the *Pensées*: 'je suis coupable si je me fais aimer' (Pascal 2004: #142).

The similarities in both authors' approach to the question of subjectivity lie above all in the endeavour to annihilate the primacy of the 'I' as substance and as a subjective source for speech, and probe through language that subject's absence. Defining essence becomes as unachievable as preventing the frenzied utterance from going on. Beckett's literary transposition of the 'moi introuvable' is found in the questioning of the notions of self and essence, which he further complicates by the refusal to give them any authenticity and justification. As a result, speech revolves around the same empty centre, with the dull repetition of words whose meaning cannot be accounted for.

## B. *'Deserted' Subjectivity*<sup>4</sup>

Both writers have a tendency of using a fixed set of images is all the more interesting in that it suggests that several references to interiority reveal that his admiration for the *Pensées* played an active part in deciding the thematic and literary background for his work. A number of examples will illustrate that as he was writing the three post-war novels in French, Beckett retained the Augustinian element in Pascal's work, which he had developed in his 1931 monograph on Proust. As he envisaged man's alienation in the world, Pascal also seems to be suggesting that the human ego can never completely coincide with itself.

In *Molloy*, interiority is evoked as 'the within, all that inner space one never sees, the brain and the heart and other caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath' (Beckett 1997: 17).<sup>5</sup> Later on, Molloy observes that 'there are things from time to time, in spite of everything, that impose themselves upon the understanding with the force of axioms, for unknown reasons' (Beckett 1997: 61). Pascal writes about the surrender of reason in similar terms: 'Soumission. Il faut savoir douter où il faut, assurer où il faut, en se soumettant où il faut. Qui ne fait ainsi n'entend pas la force de la raison. Il y en a qui faillent contre ces trois principes' (Pascal 2004: #154). From the outset, then, a clear reference to Pascal becomes apparent in the use of a metonymic language reminiscent of the prose of the *Pensées*. Subjectivity is represented by the threefold division 'brain/'thought', 'heart'/'feeling', and imagination ('the other caverns').<sup>6</sup>

Even as it is acknowledged, interiority is discarded. Malone's acceptance of lifeless stories, still identifies with his protagonists, as he remarks that 'there is no use indicting

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<sup>4</sup> See Dubreucq 2005.

<sup>5</sup> The original French states 'tout cet espace intérieur qu'on ne voit jamais, le cerveau et le cœur et les autres cavernes où sentiment et pensée tiennent leur sabat (Beckett 1953: 12). The words 'sentiment' and 'pensée' may remind us of an observation Pascal makes upon the fallibility of reason: 'tout notre raisonnement se réduit à céder au sentiment' (Pascal 2004: #470).

<sup>6</sup> For reasons already explained, I *purposely* omit to mention any other likely philosophical sources from which these images might derive. Likely references from classical philosophy include for instance, Bacon's definition of imagination in the *Novum Organum*, as well as allegory of the cavern in Book VII of Plato's *Republic*.

words, they are no shoddier than what they peddle. After the fiasco, the solace, the repose, I began again, to try and live, cause to live, be another, in myself, in another' (Beckett 1997: 195).<sup>7</sup> The uttering subject seeks to implement, here again, distance from itself by inventing stories, even as it turns to itself by identifying with the object of his narration. As Chiara Montini explains, 'la recherche à travers les histoires, les mots, a échoué, mais après le repos, elle ne s'arrête pas. Par ce mouvement circulaire, identité et altérité sont représentés par les mots' (Montini 2007: 285).

For Pascal, these figures also represent the distinct faculties of cognition. The most perfect form of rationality is embodied in demonstrative argumentation, that is, the 'geometrical method' that is soon abandoned in the trilogy, while the 'heart' is the figure of affectivity and intuitive knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Lastly, imagination in the *Pensées* is problematic because, like the heart, it is inherently ambivalent. Indeed, it is manifested positively in its capacity for pure invention, but, as we have seen in relation to Marcel's perception of Albertine, it is also deceptive and the cause of utmost suffering.<sup>9</sup>

Pascal famously defines imagination as the 'maîtresse d'erreur et de fausseté, et d'autant plus fourbe qu'elle ne l'est pas toujours' (Pascal 2004: #41). The (aspiring) Cartesian Moran evokes his fear of lapsing into fanciful, therefore erroneous reasonings, to the point that he is constantly 'reining back his thoughts to the limit of the calculable so great his horror of fancy' (Beckett 1997: 114), and wonders that 'a man so contrived, for I was a contrivance, should let himself be haunted and possessed by chimeras, this ought to have seemed strange to me and been a warning to me to have a care, in my own interest' (Beckett 1997: 114).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> The French version states: 'Plus la peine de faire le procès aux mots. Ils ne sont pas plus creux que ce qu'ils charrient. Après l'échec, la consolation, le repos, je recommençais, à vouloir vivre, faire vivre, être autrui, être moi, en autrui, en moi' (Beckett 2004: 34).

<sup>8</sup> Sellier describes its principal function as the centre from which vital decisions are taken, insofar as 'de lui procèdent nos connaissances les plus intuitives, qu'il s'agisse de la certitude des premiers principes ou des fulgurations qui orientent de façon décisive l'existence des hommes' (Sellier 1988: 285).

<sup>9</sup> See Ferreyrolles 1995.

<sup>10</sup> The expression 'man so contrived' could be a reference to the image of the 'statue automate' in Book I, 10 of Arnaud and Nicole's *Logique ou l'art de penser* – a variant of the 'animaux-machines' evoked in the *Pensées*. It

In both texts this tension triggers another series of ontological dichotomies that defines the narrative discourse in *Molloy*. The yearning for knowledge is prevented by ignorance, truth and error combine to upset the familiar and reveal the unknown, while dissolution is preferred to existence that is synonymous with suffering, as ‘no one asks him to think, only to suffer, always in the same way, without hope of diminution, without hope of dissolution’ (Beckett 1997: 217). Instinctive or sensory perception is considered to be more acute than abstract knowledge, as is suggested by the recurrence of expressions related to vision, hearing and, to a lesser extent, smell.

Molloy identifies his life with a single emotion, which shows how intrinsically related life and emotion are to him as he recalls the ‘day when I thought I knew I was merely existing’ (Beckett 1997: 25) and persistently turns to the vocabulary of sensation and feeling in so doing, adding that ‘it is in the tranquility of decomposition that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life’ (Beckett 1997: 25).<sup>11</sup>

In a parallel sequence, Moran also evokes his own dissolution in a new image, where he ‘drowns in the spray of phenomena’ (Beckett 1997: 111). In Molloy’s encounter with the shepherd, ‘watching [him] and his herd’, visual and auditory perceptions are predominant and complementary. The passage is wrought with expressions related to sight, such as ‘I see’, ‘in my eyes and in my head’, ‘I watched’. Sound is also important here: Molloy awakes to hear the ‘sounds’ of the world, the ‘panting’ of the dog and the ‘bleating’ of the sheep. Both vision

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finds its source in Descartes. The authors seek to demonstrate that only reason can dissociate reality from illusion. This statement is undermined, however, by the acknowledgement of the difficulty of discerning properly. Beckett may have remembered the disquieting evocation of an isolated rational being in the midst of mechanical spectres, who alone masters and determines their puppet-like movements. This nightmare-like situation is imagined in the following terms: ‘il ne faut que considérer, que s’il n’y avoit au monde qu’un homme qui pensât, & que tout le reste de ceux qui auroient la figure humaine ne fussent que des statues automates, & que de plus, ce seul homme raisonnable sachant parfaitement que toutes ces statues qui lui ressembleroient exterieurement, seroient entierement privées de raison et de pensée, sût néanmoins le secret de les faire remuer par ressorts, & d’en tirer tous les services que nous tirons des hommes; on peut bien croire qu’il se divertirait quelquefois aux divers mouvement qu’il imprimerait à ces statues’ (Arnauld and Nicole 1983: 79).

<sup>11</sup> Frederick N. Smith points out the ‘subtle, ironic twist given to a well-known line from Wordsworth’s *Preface* to his *Lyrical Ballads*: “It is in the tranquility of decomposition that I remember the long confused emotion which was my life” and observes that Beckett’s understanding of the experience of writing can only be understood as ‘an act of post-modern decomposition’ (Smith 1998: 341).

and sound are eventually brought together in a dual structure: ‘I heard the shepherd [...] and I saw him’ (Beckett 1997: 29). As for smell, it is also invoked when Molloy furtively remarks: ‘I wished I smelt like a sheep’ (Beckett 1997: 29).<sup>12</sup>

These images all seem to have sprung from a common source: the Augustinian element in the *Pensées*, which a close study of the words used in descriptions confirms. The bleak landscape, for instance, may recall the desolate aspect of the world described in the *Pensées*.<sup>13</sup> Malone mentions yearning in terms that have Pascalian resonances: ‘What I sought, when I struggled out of my hole, then aloft through the stinging air towards an inaccessible boon, was the rapture of vertigo, the letting go, the fall, the gulf, the relapse to darkness, to nothingness, to earnestness, to home, to him waiting for me always’ (Beckett 1997: 195).<sup>14</sup> Not only is the vocabulary used identical to the predominant images in the fragments on man’s disproportion (‘inaccessible’, ‘vertigo’, ‘the fall’, ‘the gulf,’ ‘darkness’, ‘nothingness’), but the movement of oscillation within the prose in the allusion to a ‘relapse’, a return to a former state, recalls Pascal’s idiom more than it does Descartes’s.

## II. THEMATIC INFLUENCE OF THE PENSÉES IN THE TRILOGY: AGAINST THE ‘SPIRIT OF SYSTEM’

An additional comparison between the object of their work (i.e. the study of ontological contradictions – in Pascalian terms, ‘contrariétés’ – through language; the yearning for silence and its impossibility in the trilogy) and the manner in which this object is described (the emptying of subjectivity through language) is necessary to determine the breadth of Pascal’s influence upon Beckett. First, however, a number of elements must be noted: a mocking

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<sup>12</sup> I have suggested elsewhere that the preference given to animals derives from Beckett’s reading of Montaigne’s ‘Apologie de Raimond Sebond’.

<sup>13</sup> See Sellier’s chapter on ‘l’inconstance noire’ and the baroque element in Pascal’s vision of the world in the opening section of *Pascal et Saint-Augustin*.

<sup>14</sup> The French version reads: ‘ce à quoi je voulais me hisser, en me hissant hors de mon trou d’abord, puis dans la lumière cinglante vers d’inaccessibles nourritures, c’était aux extases du vertige, du lâchage, de la chute, de l’engouffrement, du retour au noir, au rien, au sérieux, au retour à la maison’ (Beckett 2001: 34).

discourse on philosophy, ignorance as a privileged means to apprehend veritable knowledge, and the evocation of the ‘incomprehensible’.

A. *Echoes of Pascal’s Mockery of Philosophy in the Trilogy*

Discourse in the trilogy simultaneously invokes and discards knowledge as imposed upon the speaker. In all three novels, this knowledge is the source that allows the discourse to continue: ‘lies, lies, mine was not to know, nor to judge, nor to rail, but to go’, says the voice in *The Unnamable* (Beckett 1997: 324). In *Molloy*, it is striking to see that similar literary devices are used to bring out that inherent inadequacy, As in the *Pensées*, truth can only emerge in negative terms:

[...] what I liked in anthropology was its inexhaustible faculty of negation, its relentless definition of man, as though he were no better than God, in terms of what he is not. But my ideas on this subject were always horribly confused, for my knowledge of man was scant, and the meaning of being beyond me. (Beckett 1997: 39)

Ce que j’aimais en anthropologie, c’était sa puissance de négation, son acharnement à définir l’homme, à l’instar de Dieu, en termes de ce qu’il n’est pas. Mais je n’ai jamais eu à ce propos que des idées fort confuses, connaissant mal les hommes et ne sachant pas très bien ce que cela veut dire, être. (Beckett 1953: 63)

The theme of voluntary ignorance can also be summoned in the analysis of this particular aspect of Pascal’s influence in the trilogy. Associated with the paradoxical expression ‘the joys of darkness’, it is reminiscent of Pascal’s and Montaigne’s ambivalent stance towards knowledge. Both spoke of a ‘knowledgeable ignorance’ – une ‘ignorance savante qui se connaît’ (Pascal 2004: #77). At the same time, pure ignorance is the envied

state of all Beckettian protagonists, who yearn for ‘darkness’. It is precisely the praise of darkness that is the essential subversion at work in Beckett’s text, as compared to Pascal’s statement symbolically attached to the theme of misery in the *Pensées*.

Furthermore, the expression ‘useless knowledge’ is an expression that is reminiscent of Pascal’s attack on Descartes as ‘inutile et incertain’, given that the philosopher was among those who, out of excessive pride, ‘approfondissent trop les sciences’ (Pascal 2004: #77), which recalls Beckett’s earlier characters: Murphy and Watt in particular. Like Pascal, who aims to uncover the failures of philosophy and develop a critical perception of man which resides in the affirmation of the paradox of his ‘miserable’ condition (Gouhier 2005: 149), the voices of the trilogy delve into the most abject aspects of reality and self, with the aim of undermining the primary assets of thought: being, knowledge and discourse.<sup>15</sup>

The continuity found between Beckett’s choice of words and the images elaborated in the *Pensées* is not coincidental. The reference to Pascal underlies the description of Molloy as a ‘chimera’ (Beckett 1997: 152), a ‘fabulous being’ (Beckett 1997: 156) that exists ‘ready made’ in his own mind, recalling the momentous sequence in the fragment on disproportion: ‘quelle chimère est-ce donc que l’homme? Etc.’ (Pascal 2005: #185). Another example can be found in *Malone Dies*. Most critics, from Kenner onwards, see Christ-like characteristics in Macmann: ‘the idea of punishment came to his mind, addicted it is true to that chimera and probably impressed by the posture of his body’ (Beckett 1997: 66).<sup>16</sup>

The satirical take upon the infallibility of rational knowledge is echoed in Molloy’s exclamation as he considers the reasons that made him stay with Lousse: ‘divine analysis that conduces thus to knowledge of yourself, and of your fellow men, if you happen to have any’ (Beckett 1997: 34). The phrase is characteristically elaborated upon a series of abstract

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<sup>15</sup> The correlation between Pascal’s condemnation of philosophy and the problematic status of rational discourse and knowledge in Beckett’s work will be discussed in the last chapter.

<sup>16</sup> As Goldmann would point out in *Le Dieu caché* (1956), Christ is the hypostasis of ‘milieu’. It is the only figure through which the reconciliation of opposites can be achieved. This is apparent in the long fragment known as ‘Le mystère de Jésus’ (Pascal 2004: #717).

expressions that call for interpretation. While the word ‘analysis’ may point to either philosophy or psychoanalysis, the emphasis introduced by the epithet ‘divine’ immediately narrows the possibilities of interpretation. The irony is doubled with the final restriction ‘if you happen to have any’, alluding once again to the solitary existence of Molloy.

Similarly, even as it declares the inanity of the reference to self and the use of the ‘I’, the voice of the Unnamable falls back into sarcasm, It abstractly evokes the attempt to account for the real that recalls Pascal’s satire of knowledge, the aim being to demonstrate that opinions and attitudes are nothing but ‘le ballet des esprits’ (Pascal 2004: #580). It is also perfectly illustrated in the second movement of the fragment on imagination, where authority derives not from merit or true knowledge, but from customary perception and unyielding habits, only to conclude: ‘Plaisante raison que le vent manie à tous sens!’ (Pascal 2004: 41).<sup>17</sup>

Why not then speak of something else, something the existence of which seems in a certain measure already established, on the subject of which one may chatter without blushing purple every thirty or forty thousand words at having to employ such locutions and which moreover, supreme guarantee, has caused the glibbest tongue to wag from time immemorial, it would be preferable. It’s the old story, they want to be entertained, while doing their dirty work, no, not entertained, sooted, no, that is not it either, solaced, no, even less, no matter, with the result they achieve nothing, neither what they want, without knowing exactly what, nor the obscure infamy to which they are committed, the old story. [...] So they build up hypotheses that collapse one on top of each other, it’s human, a lobster couldn’t do it. (Beckett 1997: 204)

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<sup>17</sup> See, for instance, fragment 122, in which Pascal confronts the validity of two philosophical opinions, that of the sceptics, and of the dogmatists. He dismisses both in order to bring into light the underlying confusion (‘embrouillement’) in human reasonings. In *Port-Royal*, Sainte-Beuve’s admiration exclusively goes to the *Lettres Provinciales* (particularly in book III, 3: 575-577). As will be suggested in the last chapter, the style of the *Lettres* may have served as an example for Beckett’s own use of irony, revealing the nature of the comic in Pascal’s writings. Behind the dialogical form there is a false ingenuity that leads to the discovery of truth by a subjective method based on clear argumentative rules, and the adversary exposed and ridiculed. Racine himself had attacked Nicole’s condemnation of the theatre by highlighting that quality: ‘Et vous semble-t-il,’ he wrote, ‘que ces *Lettres Provinciales* soient autre chose que des comédies?’. For a study of the method of irony at work in the *Lettres Provinciales*, see Jaymes: 1979.

Que ne parlent-ils donc d'autre chose, de quelque chose dont l'existence semble en quelque sorte établie, sur laquelle on peut bavarder sans rougir tous les trente ou quarante mille mots d'avoir à employer des locutions pareilles, et qui enfin, garantie suprême, a fait déjà marcher les langues les mieux pendues de tous les temps, ça vaudrait mieux. C'est la vieille histoire, ils veulent se distraire, tout en s'exécutant, non pas se distraire, s'apaiser, non plus, se consoler, encore moins, n'importe [...] Que voulez-vous, eux non plus ne savent pas qui ils sont, où ils sont, ce qu'ils font, ni pourquoi ça marche si mal, si abominablement mal, ça doit être ça. Alors ils échafaudent des hypothèses qui s'écroulent les unes sur les autres, c'est humain, une langouste n'en serait pas capable. (Beckett 1953: 141-142)

In both versions the sequence is built as a rhetorical period, but the rhythm and gradation expected is broken into two sentences. The theme elaborated upon – the tentative search for an indistinct object ('something') more prone to sustain random speech – allows a variation on the idea of 'vanity'. Convinced as it is of the uselessness of the enterprise, the voice endeavours to find a catalyst for speech, a theme 'on the subject of which one may chatter without blushing'. The yearning for idle discourse to go on is pursued throughout the passage; it is described in pejorative terms ('locutions', 'glibbest tongue', 'dirty work', 'obscure infamy') and derogatory expressions ('chatter', 'to wag', 'collapse'). The emphatic, pompous tone in the French version ('Que ne parlent-ils donc'/'Que voulez-vous') is downplayed by the immediate juxtaposition of words that introduce vagueness ('quelque chose'/'quelque sorte').

The inadequacy of words is highlighted in the use of the verbs 'entertained', 'sooted' 'solaced', the final surrender of the voice ('no matter') and the characteristic use of aposiopesis ('no, not entertained, sooted, no, etc.'). The apposition 'supreme guarantee' creates another effect of irony as it highlights the distance taken by the voice. The final sentence, 'they build up hypotheses that collapse one on top of each other', recalls the image of the collapsing tower in the fragment: 'Nous brûlons du désir de trouver une assiette ferme,

et un dernière base constante pour y édifier une tour qui s'élève à l'infini, mais tout notre fondement craque et la terre s'ouvre jusqu'aux abîmes' (Pascal 2004: #185). The final dismissal of that primary human enterprise to acquire knowledge ('time immemorial') culminates in the ironic explanation that emphasizes, once again, its inherent futility: 'it's human, a lobster couldn't do it'.

### B. *The 'Incomprehensible' as a Literary Theme*

Critics have noted the importance of primary images in Beckett's work.<sup>18</sup> Among these images, that of the Pascalian 'milieu' appears throughout the prose, from *Murphy* to the late short pieces, and in the plays, including the characters' position on stage. Together with the Augustinian understanding of post-lapsarian man as an ambivalent creature, lacking consistency (man as 'milieu'), Pascalian images operate as powerful catalysts in the trilogy. As in the *Pensées*, Beckett's universe is a world collapsing, 'un monde figé et en perte d'équilibre' (Beckett 1951: 63). These similarities, echoing the 'Augustinian' vision in the *Pensées*, initially appear in the resurgence of predominant themes ('misère', 'divertissement', the two infinities) through the repetitive use of isolated words or expressions.

Lawrence Harvey notes that Beckett 'spoke of depths of being where all is mystery and enigma', and then recalls Beckett's own words: 'we don't know what our personality is or what our being is, [...] the nostalgia for knowing remains, of course, even in the midst of the despair of ever knowing' (Harvey 2006: 134). Here, I would like to consider how the theme of the 'incomprehensible', which yielded many variations in the *Pensées*, also serves as the

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<sup>18</sup> Beckett adapted some of the most recurrent, even obsessive themes in the *Pensées* to his own prose, which have become fundamental components of his writing. The expression 'primary image' refers to Tony Gherraert, who remarks after Philippe Sellier that these 'images obsédantes' usually form a dyptic. Among images that Beckett adopted throughout his work are binary oppositions such as the infinite sphere (the recurrence of the image in Beckett's texts, prose and drama alike, appear throughout this study), movement, or flux ('fluidité') and stillness ('repos'); verticality (elevation and collapse), bodily corruption (illness and death), enclosed space (the image of the cell) as opposed to the infinite, the two infinities, and also perhaps, the figure of the 'esprit boiteux'. In the subsequent chapter, I offer a study of various Beckettian adaptations of such primary images.

thematic backdrop in the trilogy, insofar as it visibly bears upon the underlying poetics of the two works, elaborated ontologically in the figure of ‘milieu’.

### 1. The figure of the ‘incurious’ seeker

In the trilogy, the ontological enquiry (or what semblance there is of such an enquiry) is carried out by the figure of the ‘incurious seeker’. The latter is first called upon in *Molloy*, as the character reflects that ‘[t]o know nothing is nothing, not to want to know anything likewise, but to be beyond knowing anything, to know you are beyond knowing anything, that is when peace enters in, to the soul of the incurious seeker’ (Beckett 1997: 64). Beckett echoes Montaigne, who exclaimed ‘[ô] que c’est un doux et mol chevet, et sain, que l’ignorance et l’incuriosité, à reposer une tête bien faite’ (Montaigne 2005: 391). Confused knowledge is considered both in the trilogy and the *Essais* as the only means to access truth, as the perception of (subjective) reality requires the acknowledgement of its fragmentary nature.

This can be examined further in the sequence where a ‘misbehaved’ Molloy is released from police custody, and remarks that his estrangement is due to his ignorance of ‘the essence of the system’ (Beckett 1997: 25).<sup>19</sup> As a consequence, the real is experienced in a primordial, instinctive manner. Molloy realizes that he has had ‘only negative and empirical notions which means [he] was in the dark, and all the more completely as a lifetime of observations had left [him] doubting the possibility of systematic decorum’ (Beckett 1997: 25).

Here, the use of terms that suggest a deliberate, teasing reflection on the theme of ‘systematic decorum’ is directly related to a philosophical (Cartesian) account of the

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth recalling that, besides the structural discontinuity of the *Pensées* which scholars have demonstrated was deliberate (see Le Guern 2004), Pascal himself refused specialization as he sought to define the ideal of the ‘honnête homme’. He thus believed that ‘il faut savoir peu de tout, car il est bien plus beau de savoir quelque chose de tout que de savoir tout d’une chose. Cette universalité est la plus belle’ (Pascal 2004: #183).

individual's relation to the real and to experience, as illustrated in the expressions 'negative and empirical', 'doubting', 'observations' and 'systematic'. Recovery from a past error, i.e. to think that one knows when 'all that is incomprehensible' (Beckett 1997: 25), is possible only through the denial of all that is familiar, the surrender of knowledge and comprehension.

Correspondingly, Pascal writes that reason should yield before the incomprehensible, for man 'se considérant soutenu dans la masse que la nature lui a donnée entre ces deux abîmes de l'infini et du néant [...] tremblera devant la vue de ces merveilles, et [...] sa curiosité se changeant en admiration, il sera plus disposé à les contempler en silence qu'à les rechercher avec présomption' (Pascal 2004: #185). Another series of ontological dichotomies is set up here that evoke the existential plight of man – nostalgia and the yearning for knowledge and the acknowledgement of his ignorance, the polarities of truth and error, the evocation of the familiar and the discovery of the unknown, existence and dissolution – which are extended in the trilogy.

## 2. 'Milieu'

The process of voiding that Beckett's prose seeks to capture can be accounted for by a comparison with the rhetoric of the *Pensées*: the fragments on disproportion are strikingly reminiscent of Descartes's conception of the universe, which Pascal alludes to in the piece concerning the two infinities.<sup>20</sup> Significantly, the image of the sphere is invoked in the following passage:

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<sup>20</sup> Descartes wrote in the opening sequence of the fourth Meditation: '[...] je suis comme un milieu entre Dieu et le néant, c'est-à-dire placé de telle sorte entre le souverain être et le non-être, qu'il ne se rencontre, de vrai, rien en moi qui me puisse conduire dans l'erreur, en tant que le souverain être m'a produit; mais que, si je me considère comme participant de quelque façon du néant ou du non-être, c'est-à-dire en tant que je ne suis pas moi-même le souverain être, je me trouve exposé à une infinité de manquements, de façon que je ne me dois pas étonner si je me trompe' (Descartes 1953: 302).

I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain. In a sense I would be better off at the circumference, since my eyes are always fixed on the same direction. But I am certainly not at the circumference. [...] From centre to circumference in any case it is a far cry and I may be situated somewhere between the two. It is equally possible. I do not deny it, that I too am in perpetual motion [*emporté dans un mouvement perpétuel*], accompanied by Malone, as the earth by its moon. [...] But the best is to think of myself fixed and at the centre of this place, whatever its shape and extent may be [*Mais le plus simple vraiment est de me considérer comme fixe et au centre de cet endroit, quelles qu'en soient la forme et l'étendue*]. (Beckett 1997: 327; Minuit 14)

The French original indicates, though in a more direct way, that there are traces of the classic philosophical discourse ('forme'/'étendue'), and the desire to find a form of stability recalls Pascal's definition of the condition of man in the fragment on 'divertissement', where he famously distinguishes 'deux instincts contraires' (Pascal 2004: 126), drawn towards tumult and knowing, at the same time, that true felicity resides in rest ('repos'). The expression 'mouvement perpétuel' may be a reminiscence of the oscillating movement of the passions in the *Pensées*, and the impossibility to find an intermediate, ideally 'fixed' point: 'Qui aurait trouvé le secret de se réjouir du bien sans se fâcher du mal contraire aurait trouvé le point. C'est le mouvement perpétuel' (Pascal 2004: #52).

The 'intermediate category'<sup>21</sup> is the one that best describes the human for both writers,. The theme of milieu should be studied further through the figure of the 'incurious seeker' mentioned earlier to bring out additional elements that need more development. 'Incuriousness', or ignorance, is a word that takes us back to the Humanist tradition, and it is first mentioned in *Molloy*. It finds different names throughout the trilogy, but it is systematically evoked as the ideal state, akin to 'indifference' in *Malone Dies*. As such, it informs the thematic organization of the trilogy, and, more generally, Beckett's portrayal of

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<sup>21</sup> The term 'intermediate category' is taken from Lucien Goldman, who uses it as an equivalent for Pascal's original word 'milieu' in *Le Dieu Caché* (1956) – which is 'la catégorie humainement essentielle'. The figure of Christ is its hypostasis.

human reality.

This is explicit in the last novel in the trilogy, where Pascal's presence can effectively be proven, as the voice overtly depicts itself as a middle through the image of the tympanum: 'perhaps that's what I am, the thing that divides the world in two, on the one side the outside, on the other the inside [...], I'm neither one side nor the other, I am in the middle, [...] on the one hand the world, on the other the mind, I don't belong to either' (Beckett 1997: 386).

### C. *Tragic philosophy*

Drawing from Clément Rosset and Laurent Thirouin's definition of 'tragic philosophy' ('philosophie tragique'), I will discuss how Pascal's preoccupations coincide with Beckett's by first proposing parallels between the definition of tragic philosophy according to Rosset and Thirouin's readings of the *Pensées*, and Beckett's preoccupations with the meaningless.<sup>22</sup> I will look at *Malone Dies* in particular, but, taking up the concept of 'philosophie tragique' as developed by Rosset, my intention is to envisage how its different manifestations in Pascal can be related to Beckett's prose in more general terms.

I will mainly focus on two interrelated themes: 'le hasard' and 'le jeu', and then study the treatment of the wager as a theme. My purpose is to determine how it can be applied to Beckett's understanding of the artistic vocation and the experience of writing, the apprehension of being and nothingness. Finally, I will envisage the wager as a figure of absolute choice in the trilogy.<sup>23</sup> The paradigm of the game can be used to draw parallels

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<sup>22</sup> Harvey wrote in his notes at one point that Beckett highlighted the contradiction between the sense, or the experimenting, of a meaningless world, and the capacity to 'render a meaningful account of the world' (Harvey in Knowlson and Knowlson: 112). The aim to achieve an adequate representation of man's ontological situation implies that the writing must enact chaos: 'to render the world truly a man must represent himself as a part of this process, this movement of the unmeaningful, in whatever direction it seems to be moving, if any' (Harvey in Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 112). This idea of perpetual movement or of the 'still' point is characterized by Phillippe Sellier as one of the major (baroque) characteristics of Pascal's Augustinian influences, which he describes as 'inconstance noire'.

<sup>23</sup> This is certainly the way Beckett understood the meaning of the fragment entitled 'infini, rien', i.e. as a necessary existential choice. Mentioned earlier is the expression Beckett uses in his article 'Homage to Jack B.

between the evocation of existence by the two writers. In the *Pensées*, the wager suggests a choice before the absolute. Pascal opts for the worst ('le pire') while Beckett assigns to the notion of play a privileged place both in the prose and in the drama. Therein 'play' ('le jeu') takes on many forms; it is manifested in language through repetition and the circularity of discourse, and underlies the rhythm and the movement of the text as narrative, echoing previous episodes through reminiscences and the formation of images.

Parallels with this conception of tragic philosophy can be drawn from Beckett's conversations with commentators and friends. In the attempt to define Beckett's understanding of the universe as 'meaningless', Patrick Bowles suggested that '[t]he significant is reduced to a matter of what can be described, within the limits of our understanding, according to the structure of our language. What then do I feel myself to be? A matter of change, among other things. There we are back again, with this difference, that the meaningless is reduced to matters of chance which I describe to the best of my uncertainty' (quoted in Knowlson, 1996:112).

## 1. Definition

'Tragic philosophy' ('la philosophie tragique') posits that 'chance' ('le hasard') is constitutive of thought, and endorses failure as its primary metaphysical characteristic, a failure that is permanent, 'irréparable' (Rosset 2003: 13).<sup>24</sup> In this sense, there exists a complex and meaningful coincidence with Beckett's literary endeavour, as well as with the evocation of the very act of writing, mainly in *Malone Dies*, and 'tragic' philosophy. The tragic is a mystery

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Yeats', borrowed from the *Pensées*: 'the artist who stakes his being is from nowhere' (Beckett 2001: 149). I have given other examples of Beckett's use of the fragment of the wager in the trilogy earlier in this chapter.

<sup>24</sup> The parallel between the wager and gambling is the point of departure of Thirouin's reflection in *Le hasard et les règles*. The connection between 'pari' and 'jeu' is posed in the opening chapter of Thirouin's study, to which I can only refer the reader to. The introductory analysis of the etymological origin of the word 'hasard' brings to light the fundamental aspect of play. Thirouin explains that the argument of the wager is based on Pascal's probability calculations. The scientist seized the opportunity that his libertine friend, Damien Mitton, who was a gambler, to consider the problem of chance in mathematical terms (see the opening chapters).

(‘mystère’), impervious to interpretation. In Rosset’s words, the tragic is ‘un mystère que l’on ne peut que constater’ (Rosset 2003: 11). The ‘tragic’ leads to the refusal of moral values, and, in his rejection of the doctrine of free will, Pascal is the first tragic thinker insofar as he demonstrates that man is utterly irresponsible.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, according to Rosset, ‘la révélation tragique nous enseigne d’une façon définitive la ruine de cette idée en affirmant l’irresponsabilité totale de l’homme en matière morale’ (Rosset 2003: 45).<sup>26</sup>

In the *Lettres Provinciales*, with the absence of any form of Providence, chance becomes the principle of reality and of the very being of man. Rosset argues that ‘la philosophie tragique préfère pour l’homme la valeur à la compréhension, et renonce par là à toute idée de providence: elle cesse d’être providence aussitôt accompli son dessein, providentiel par excellence, qui était de nous plonger dans un monde sans providence’ (Rosset 2003: 103). The tragic thinker (‘penseur tragique’) is one who accepts the predominance of chance in all things. In *Logique du pire*, Rosset pursues his argument by studying in more detail the function of chance in Western philosophy. He observes that ‘la nécessité de l’issue tragique n’a de sens, pour le logicien du pire, qu’une fois admise l’existence d’une pensée: le postulat étant que, s’il y a de la pensée, celle-ci est nécessairement d’ordre désastreux’ (Rosset: 1997 11).

Tragic philosophy is defined by a complete acceptance of the idea of nothingness, and an unconditional refusal of life. The ‘worst’, therefore, consists in the refusal of thought in philosophy. Only a few thinkers set out to identify it and bring it to light. Pascal is an exception in the seventeenth century, insofar as, contrary to Descartes, he took up chance as the constitutive principle of his ontological reflections. At its most extreme, tragic philosophy

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<sup>25</sup> This corresponds to Beckett’s various statements on the absence of any morality in great works of art, particularly, as already underlined, in *Proust* where he observes that the world of the *Recherche* is devoid of any ‘moral’ statement (see Weller 2005).

<sup>26</sup> It should be recalled at this stage that according to Rachel Burrows’s notes, Beckett was particularly insistent on the denial of free will as the defining feature of Pascal’s vision, and, in more general terms, of Jansenism itself.

is the thought of the absolute absence of any form of nature,<sup>27</sup> ‘c’est la pensée du néant, de l’absence de toute nature, plus que celle de l’être ou de l’essence, qui fera l’objet de toute philosophie tragique en soi. En suivant cette logique, le pari est le choix en faveur de “ce qui est philosophiquement aussi perdant qu’il est possible de le penser”’ (Rosset 2005: 47).

In the *Pensées*, one of the most manifest signs of man’s misery is the loss of omniscience.<sup>28</sup> ‘Play’ (‘le jeu’) is based on chance. As such, it is a blatant sign of the powerlessness of reason. Thirouin evokes the ontological impact of ‘la pensée du hasard’, and suggests that ‘si le comportement de l’homme déchu, la contingence de son être, la rigueur arbitraire des lois singent un jeu de hasard, il reste la mort, certitude que le jeu sera brutalement interrompu, possibilité donc de prendre un parti. La mort est pour l’homme une intolérable perspective, mais sa nécessité ultime lui rend le pouvoir d’agir, de choisir malgré son ignorance, d’échapper au règne de l’aléatoire’ (Thirouin, 1991: 29).

The aim here will be to suggest that the relation between Pascal’s philosophy of the tragic and the evocation of existence in *Malone Dies* lies in the two writers’ stance towards the expression of ‘being’, for both came to acknowledge chaos and the inexpressible as its fundamental attributes – what Beckett referred to in one of his conversations with Charles Juliet as ‘une indécence ontologique’ (Juliet 1999: 32). The nature of Malone’s game is given from the outset: it is to make up stories as he waits for death. To proceed, he refuses to demonstrate the validity of any statement he makes: ‘I do not wish to prove anything’ (Beckett 1997: 219). The comic lies in this explicit reluctance to play by ordinary rules, in the endeavour to avoid using reason: ‘if I try to think again I will make a mess of my decease’ (Beckett 1997: 219).

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<sup>27</sup> For Rosset, Pascal is the first thinker (before Sade or even Nietzsche) to have denied man a proper ‘nature’, seeing him as a product of chance, caught in continuous flux. Thirouin takes up this idea, observing that, according to Pascal, ‘l’homme ne peut soustraire la vérité à la juridiction du hasard parce qu’il y est lui-même soumis’ (Thirouin 1991: 25).

<sup>28</sup> See the fragments on the disproportion of man, mainly fragment 185.

Playing, therefore, is devised in Beckett's novel to undermine the order that subtends rational discourse. As such, it is subjected to chance, for the reason that the very notion of order is set aside: 'all that pertains to me must be written here, including my inability to grasp what order is meant'. As he moves on to the first story, his initial intention is forgotten, or deliberately left aside: 'while I am with them [the Lamberts] the other [Sapo] is lost' (Beckett 1997: 217). Through the elaboration of fiction, the relativity of truth is made apparent in the incapacity to hold on to any continuous form of discourse.

Discourse is necessarily reduced to wandering and digression. In a remarkable fragment, Pascal accordingly describes thought as fleeting: 'Hasard donne les pensées, et hasard les ôte: point d'art pour conserver ni pour acquérir. Pensée échappée, je la voulais écrire. J'écris, au lieu qu'elle m'est échappée' (Pascal 2004: #473). The observation that 'tout notre raisonnement se réduit à céder au sentiment' (Pascal 2004: #470) is taken up by Molloy, who specifies that 'I preferred to abide to my simple feeling', which is itself 'based on nothing serious', and remarks that the most apparent truths 'remain to be proved' (Beckett 1997: 65). Malone's fear is no different. In the French version he declares that '[j]'espère n'avoir pas trop dénaturé ma pensée' (Beckett 2004: 9), even as he regrets not having known how to play.

The solution to the problem of the equal distribution of sucking-stones in his pockets is likewise 'imperfect', given that 'confusion is bound to reign' (Beckett 1997: 67). This echoes the observations Pascal makes on the ontological reality of man, where the two philosophical doctrines that endeavour to account for the complexity of the real are found wanting: 'qui démêlera cet embrouillement?' (Pascal 2004: #185). This is pursued throughout *Malone Dies*. Even as he 'feels it coming', Malone's discourse is based on images that imply that subjectivity is intrinsically linked to the heart: 'And softly my little space begins to throb again. You may say it's all in my head, and indeed sometimes it seems to me that I am in a

head [...] But thence to conclude that I am in a head, no never' (Beckett 1997: 222). The dissociation of thought and sentiment reaches a climax in *The Unnamable*, as indecisiveness and the erratic discourse lead to the fear that the two faculties have become separate: 'has my head lost all feeling?' (Beckett 1997: 347).

Digression is deliberate in *Malone Dies*. Malone explicitly mentions the subjection of the text to disorder as he declares that 'before leaving this subject and entering another, I feel it is my duty to say that it is never light in this place, never really light' (Beckett 1997: 221). Later on, another expression echoes Pascal's reflection: 'I wonder what my last words will be, written, the others do not endure, but vanish, into thin air' (Beckett 1997: 250). Just as the contingency of thought becomes a topos in *Malone Dies*, so Beckett himself remained preoccupied with it. In the 'Sottisier Notebook', Beckett wrote down one of Pascal's phrases for an entry in 1977: 'je ne tends qu'à connaître mon néant' (Pascal 2004: #555; PR XXVIII, 42).

## 2. Writing as play

The inadequacy of the subject is the backdrop to an ongoing search for literary form that would suggest the impossibility for the self to coincide with itself. In the trilogy, writing becomes a 'pensum'. An analogy with the *Pensées* is thus brought to mind. In the fragment on 'divertissement', Pascal describes the function of play in a marginal comment, writing the following: 'Tel homme passe sa vie sans ennui en jouant tous les jours peu de chose. [...] Faites-le donc jouer pour rien, il ne s'y échauffera point et s'ennuiera: ce n'est donc pas l'amusement seul qu'il recherche. Un amusement languissant et sans passion l'ennuiera' (Pascal 2004: #127). The themes of entertainment and boredom are central to Beckett's novel.

For Malone, it is necessarily ludicrous, but play, understood as 'divertissement', is distorted: 'this time I know where I am going, it is no longer a night, the ancient night. Now it

is a game, I am going to play. I never knew how to play, till now. I longed to, but I knew it was impossible' (Beckett 1997: 180). Hence, the first avowed purpose of writing is to delay the ineluctable. In the opening sequence, Malone decides to relinquish his former 'earnestness', and to play: 'I gave up trying to play and took to myself forever shapelessness and speechlessness, incurious wondering, darkness. [...] From now on it will be different. I shall never do anything any more from now on but play' (Beckett 1997: 181). Malone, in his predicament, yearns for death but only sees forebodings of his impending doom ('I feel it's coming'). As such, the experience of writing is paradoxical: the sole purpose of writing is 'to delay the ineluctable'. 'Divertissement' is the flight from negativity, the 'flight from self' that is mentioned by the voice of the Unnamable (Beckett 1997: 217) as it had been, much earlier, in *Proust*.

Beckett initiates a playful difference with the Pascalian concept of 'divertissement', insofar as writing works towards precipitating the end, rather than keeping track of thought: 'I would die to-day, if I wished, merely by making a little effort. But it is just as well to let myself die, quietly, without rushing things' (Beckett 1997: 179). The most apparent aspect of the game directly relates to tragic philosophy. Malone's game consists in setting up rules for the elaboration of stories, each of which will have a different subject. He will try to maintain them throughout. These rules evoke an ideal methodical order, which is undermined from the outset: he decides to tell four, and then three stories, then changes the topics: he will not begin with the story about 'the man and the woman', as 'there is not matter there for two' (Beckett 1997: 182).

As the discourse goes on, these preliminary intentions are forgotten, resulting in digression. Worrying little about the art of narration, Malone strays from the rule he imposes upon himself by first breaking the narrative in order to consider his 'present state' (Beckett 1997: 183). The endless fragmentation of discourse stems from this digression. Malone's

fictions are never finished, as one story is broached only for him to begin a new one. For instance, after he has described Sapo, Malone tries to move on to background elements: ‘The market [...] The peasants [...] I rummaged continuously through my things’ (Beckett 1997: 196). Facing his incapacity to maintain a continuous discourse, Malone relinquishes narrative authority, sensing that the story might escape him: ‘what tedium. And I call that playing. I wonder if I’m not talking yet again about myself’ (Beckett 1997: 189).

At this stage, I would like to suggest one last parallel between tragic philosophy and *Malone Dies*: the stance that Malone adopts likewise recalls the figure of the ‘semi-sage’ in *The Lost Ones*. In addition, the term that Beckett uses, ‘semi-sages’, evokes the figure of the ‘demi-habile’ in the *Pensées*. In *Le dépeupleur*, the narrative voice describes a category of dwellers whose indifference to the surrounding tumult distinguishes them from the constantly agitated ‘vanquished’. These ‘semi-sages’ seek nothing.

Pascal distinguishes three categories of mind (‘les trois catégories de l’esprit’): the people, the ‘demi-habiles’ (semi-sages), and the ‘habiles’ (sages).<sup>29</sup> Thirouin demonstrates that, while the people, or common mind, and the sage are similar in their acceptance of rules imposed upon the human order, the sage distinguishes himself from the apparent naivety of the people by what Pascal calls ‘la pensée de derrière’, and from the semi-sages by his acceptance of chance as a governing principle.<sup>30</sup>

It is by this hidden thought that the arbitrary is acknowledged. The acceptance of disorder is inconceivable to the semi-sages, who interpret the human condition in an erroneous way: ‘[l]es demi-habiles considèrent un homme d’avant la chute, un homme qui participait aux vérités essentielles. Il pouvait alors exiger de ses lois qu’elles traduisent des valeurs dont il avait connaissance. Mais sa déchéance l’a rendu aujourd’hui incapable

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<sup>29</sup> The English word is Beckett’s.

<sup>30</sup> For Thirouin’s full development, see pp. 28-30.

d'échapper au monde du relatif et du contingent. L'ordre arbitraire, aujourd'hui, le scandalise' (Thirouin 1991: 29).

According to Rosset, the player is one who accepts the worst, for 'celui qui approuve voudrait être sûr, non pas de tout voir, mais de voir tout le visible de l'horreur de ce qu'il approuve' (Rosset 2003: 48). I would like to suggest that Malone can be seen as a figure corresponding to Pascal's 'habile',<sup>31</sup> who, because he has accepted the worst, knows the vanity of logic and rules, and accepts the arbitrary and the inexplicable as the founding principles of existence. The French text highlights the correspondence with Pascal, as Malone seeks 'le salut dans les ténèbres', the 'deliverance' from thought (Beckett 1997: 24). In the trilogy, it is conveyed textually in the allusions to probability: 'No matter, provided there is something on the other side'. Pascal describes the wager as a game that is imposed upon us, a necessary constraint.<sup>32</sup> Malone seems to echo Pascal's statement 'vous êtes embarqués' when he declares that: 'I used not to know where I was going, but I knew I would arrive' (Beckett 1997: 182).

### III. PASCALIAN ELOQUENCE AND BECKETT'S ART OF 'DISINTEGRATION'

Much has been written on Beckett's description of the contradictory impulse out of which art originates, and how that impulse underlies any creative effort. In his 'Introduction' to the Grove edition of the *Collected Short Prose*, Gontarski writes:

Beckett set out to 'expurge' ornament, [...] to write less, to remove 'all but the essentials' from his art, to distill his essences and so to develop his own astringent, dessicated, monochromatic minimalism,

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<sup>31</sup> See Thirouin, pp. 28-30.

<sup>32</sup> Thirouin argues that the problem that lies at the core of the fragment is not to know whether mathematics can help decide in favour of the existence of God, but rather to discern who will interrupt the wager. See Thirouin, p. 156.

miniaturizations, [...] he continued his ontological exploration of being in narrative and finally being as narrative, producing in the body of the text the text as body. (Gontarski and Beckett, 2003: xv)

As explained earlier in this thesis, my contention is that, one of the strongest forms of Pascal's influence upon Beckett is stylistic. Beckett's definition of an authentic literary language is reminiscent of some Pascalian phrases. Beckett claimed that 'speech must always be in relation to silence' (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 115), whereas scientific language is only concerned with 'meaning something'. This opposition anticipates the elaboration of a prosaic idiom similar to that of the *Pensées*, which draws its evocative power from the absence of order, brevity, and stylistic weaknesses, verging on the tautological.<sup>33</sup> Beckett certainly knew that, straying from the seventeenth century canon of clarity and perfection, Pascal believed that 'la véritable éloquence se moque de l'éloquence'.

Before Beckett, Pascal purposely elaborated an aporetic idiom with the aim of illustrating the many symptoms of the wretchedness of man ('misère de l'homme'). The questioning of continuity becomes the corresponding stylistic part of the ontological criticism of substantiality. Bearing in mind the elaboration of discourse in the trilogy, and mainly in *Malone Dies*, it is essential to note beforehand that digression, for Pascal, is the only adequate means to evoke the ontological reality of man ('grandeur'/'misère'), since the *ego* is made of discontinuity and insubstantiality.<sup>34</sup>

Although Beckett disparages, as we have seen, 'Grammar and Style' as inadequate in his 1937 letter to Axel Kaun (Beckett 1983: 171), his reliance on rhetoric was consistent

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<sup>33</sup> In the next chapter I will be considering some of Pascal's fragments as prose poems, in relation to Beckett's own later prose.

<sup>34</sup> As Carraud observes: 'Traiter correctement de la connaissance de soi-même, bien parler de soi, c'est en parler confusément. Le discours confus et discontinu sur l'*ego* est le bon discours, car il est approprié à son objet: se connaître, c'est connaître sa misère. La confusion est la norme du discours vrai sur l'*ego*, comme l'abscondité est la norme du discours juste sur Dieu' (Carraud 1996: 194-95).

throughout his life, revealing a playful irreverence towards the French language.<sup>35</sup> The expression ‘a mocking attitude towards the word, through the word’ could echo, at least in terms of form, Pascal’s famous phrase: ‘la vraie éloquence se moque de l’éloquence’ (Pascal 2004: #467). Pascal remarked that an exaggerated use of rhetorical tropes leads only to misunderstanding and a stylistic disproportion: ‘Ceux qui font les antithèses en forçant les mots font comme ceux qui font de fausses fenêtres pour la symétrie. Leur règle n’est pas de parler juste mais de faire des figures justes’ (Pascal 2004: #480). To this artificial, convoluted style that characterizes an *auteur*, Pascal opposes the *style naturel* of the *honnête homme* (2004: #569), a form of expression that gains in persuasion and intensity through following the movement of thought. For Pascal, true eloquence does not impose meaning upon words. Imitating the movement of prophetic discourse, it seeks to ‘yield’ the reader’s heart towards truth, even as meaning suggests itself spontaneously through the very assemblage of words.

In the opening dialogue with Georges Duthuit Beckett would formulate the imperative of expressing the real in more radical terms. He may have remembered Valéry’s denunciation of the artifice of Pascal’s use of eloquence. For Beckett, art is ‘a thrusting towards a more adequate expression of natural experience, as revealed to the vigilant coanesthesia’ (Beckett 1999: 103), and Tal Coat’s work exemplifies an art that has accepted to represent ‘a total object, complete with missing parts’ (Beckett 1999: 10). The rejection of form and conventional representation as the artist finds himself ‘turning away from it in disgust, weary of puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able’ (Beckett 1999: 104) calls for the definition of a new aesthetics, and a new stance towards artistic representation. By elaborating a prose that would strive to represent disintegration and absence, although it never yields entirely to chaos, Beckett responded to the ambivalence of Pascal’s writing in which he saw the ‘classical’ mastery of language, at the same time that he acknowledged the endeavour to

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<sup>35</sup> Bruno Clément studied Beckett’s deliberate misapprehension of rhetoric. See Collinge for the translation ‘games’ at work in *Malone meurt/Malone Dies*.

express the reality of being as chaos, together with the ‘failure’ of reason to account for the real through language.

A. *Ontological Contradictions and the Elaboration of an Aporetic Style*

Both Beckett and Pascal believed that order and form were inadequate to evoke the reality of being (Pascal) and the disintegrative real (Beckett). After meeting with Beckett in the early 1950s, Patrick Bowles concluded that, for Beckett, ‘there are many situations which are not susceptible of lucid explanation or description. These can only be suggested, felt after, in obscure and apparently confused language’ (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 115). Lawrence Harvey recounts that Beckett (in the early 1960s) associated human beings with ‘weakness’, ‘surface illusions’ and, using the French word for ‘nothingness’, ‘le néant’ (quoted in Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 135). Pascal had likewise consciously elaborated an aesthetics of discontinuity, as he believed that writing had to show the reality of our chaotic nature. The form of writing he set out to elaborate would reveal disorder as the only possible order:

J’écrirai ici mes pensées sans ordre et non pas peut-être dans une confusion sans dessein. C’est le véritable ordre et qui marquera toujours mon objet par le désordre même. Je ferais trop d’honneur à mon sujet si je le traitais avec ordre, puisque je veux montrer qu’il en est incapable. (Pascal 2004: #472)

Because language is felt to be necessarily ‘obscure’, it needs deciphering and the search for a form of expression that can convey the reality of nothingness and disorder. The imperative to find a form that will convey the inherent chaos in man is evoked by Pascal, who seeks to create a ‘manner of writing’ that, while it expresses the confusion of being, cannot be

disorderly in itself. It has to be carefully measured, meticulously balanced, rhetorical artifice. Beckett made this aesthetic tenet his own.

Beckett could only have thought of the above-quoted fragment, along with Montaigne and Shakespeare, when he acknowledged in his 1961 interview with Tom Driver that ‘the confusion is not my invention [...]. It is all around us and our only chance now is to let it in. The only chance of renewal is to open our eyes and see the mess [...] there will be a new form and... this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else’ (Driver quoted in Weiss 1974: 505).

As we have seen, both writers construct their prose upon the theme of ignorance, symbolically taken up in the motif of obscurity. The tension built up between the yearning for knowledge and its impossibility determines the very writing of their works. Beckett told Tom Driver that ‘in my work there is consternation behind the form, not in the form’, eliciting once again the problem of the (in)adequacy of literary expression and the reality of being in a way that recalls Pascal’s own reflections on an ideal form of writing.

This tendency becomes clear in Beckett’s artistic development, as he sought to delineate how the problem of existence and the status of art could be expressed through the evocation of the inadequacy of language. Beckett is referring to the *Pensées* when he observes, for instance, that art stems from the need to escape that same interval where the feeling of nothingness becomes predominant, in the same ‘flight from self-awareness’ he had mentioned in his essay on the poets of the Revival (Beckett 1983: 71):

chaque fois qu’on veut faire faire aux mots un véritable travail de transbordement, chaque fois que l’on veut leur faire exprimer autre chose que des mots, ils s’alignent de façon à s’annuler mutuellement.

(Beckett 1983: 125)

Like Valéry, Beckett considers that the endeavour to produce meaning is bound to fail because the very *artifice* of literary expression is manifested in the self-cancelling nature of words. This may be why Beckett favours one of the most pervasive tropes of French classical discourse – the oxymoron. Inasmuch as literary language focuses on a primary isotopic opposition (reaching its own creative plenitude), language reveals an infinite ontological gap or opening ('béance'), even as ordered speech, together with the rules that define discourse, are progressively discarded as inadequate. While the writing strives towards silence, and is inevitably bound to silence, it nonetheless seeks to grasp it through an endless series of tentative approaches and approximations.

Similar poetic effects are visible in the choice of words for their resonance, verging on the metaphysical, together with the development of rhythm based on the figures of repetition, ellipsis and antithesis. Pascal's writing reflects the loss of totality and order, and the impossibility of 'un ordre absolument accompli' (Pascal 1985: 70). He came to rely on a regressive and combinatory mode of writing, on juxtaposition, repetition and parataxis, precise patterns of sound echoes and on an abrupt, broken rhythm to suggest the movement and expression of thought.

I suggest here that Pascal's use of the figures of paradox and oxymoron in the *Pensées* became a model for the prose of *The Unnamable*. Occurrences of paradox illustrate the manner in which Beckett's approach to literary expression is reminiscent of Pascal.<sup>36</sup> As such, paradox is a figure that is unacceptable to both logic and morality, a form of transgression

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<sup>36</sup> Without a doubt, Wilde's own use of paradox also inspired Beckett. Vivian Mercier states that 'in spite of all the irrational element of word play [...] a witty remark is both absurd and true. [...] It is paradoxical truth which distinguishes a witty remark from the mere absurdity of a humorous one<sup>36</sup>'. There are reverberations of Wilde's sophisticated use of language in Beckett's early plays. These are most prevalent in moments of an emotionally saturated nature. In these sequences, the elegance and desperation stems from the ponderings of the characters striving to grapple with the real. The common device is the enumeration of almost synonymous words in the chiasmic structure of the sentence, providing infinite variations on the same theme: 'The only way to behave to a woman is to make love to her, if she is pretty, and to some one else, if she is plain' (Wilde 1999: 371). The most likely character to voice such phrases is Wilde's key figure of the dandy, who, being endowed with an unprecedented capacity for observation and radiant wit, is given a superiority to the other characters, an ability to discern truth out of the intricate matrix of appearances and illusion.

because it undermines ontological unity. This transgressive quality could explain Beckett's interest in its different manifestations in Pascal's prose.

### B. *Form as 'Chaos'*

Pascal's aim was to illustrate the shortcomings of rational discourse. The poetics of the *Pensées* is therefore based on ambivalence in order to convey human duality as well as the instability and imbalance that characterize being. Its most powerful aspect is defined as the paradoxical "renversement continuuel du pour au contre" (Pascal 2004: #86).<sup>37</sup> The continual and reversible shift from one point of view to its opposite is visually conveyed in the following fragment:

S'il se vante, je l'abaisse,  
S'il s'abaisse, je le vante,  
Et le contredis toujours,  
jusqu'à ce qu'il comprenne  
qu'il est un monstre incompréhensible.  
(Pascal 2004: #121)

In this fragment, the absolute *renversement* (alternation) at the heart of Pascal's strategy of persuasion is fixed in poetic verse, revealing, in addition, the combinatory art that is fundamental to the rhetoric of the *Pensées*. It is striking to see how the prose clearly relies

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<sup>37</sup> This defining aspect of Pascal's writing is defined by Jean Mesnard in the following terms: 'Pascal fait résider la vérité dans l'affirmation simultanée des contraires, ce qui est très proche du raisonnement dialectique. Mais on n'y découvre pas proprement un enchaînement d'idées permettant une progression par dépassement de la thèse et de l'antithèse dans la synthèse. Les contraires sont plutôt à considérer comme deux excès, qui s'équilibrent en un milieu, sorte de lieu de la vérité' (Mesnard 1995: 184-185).

on space to visually impress the sense of contradiction upon the reader, in a way similar to Beckett's later *Mirlitonmades* poems.<sup>38</sup>

Written in a single sentence, the fragment is based on chiasmus, a figure in which repetition is doubled with the inversion of the order of the verbal expressions 'vante'/'abaisse'. It is reinforced in the first two lines by the hypothetical structure 'si ... si' that precedes the main proposition marked by the repeated use of the first-person pronoun 'je' ('I'). The 'I' itself is opposed to the third person pronoun 'il' in the last lines, where the impression of discontinuity is sustained by the use of antonyms: 'comprenne' and 'incompréhensible'.

Pascal came close to rendering 'the movement of the unmeaningful' as Beckett described it to Lawrence Harvey, who reported, in addition, that he was convinced that 'it's the extreme that's important. Only at the extreme can you get to grips with the real problem' (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 110). The recourse to 'literary' paradox is apparent from the opening sequence of *The Unnamable*. The voice first ponders 'generalisations' as it considers how it should proceed, 'par aporie pure et simple ou bien par affirmations et négations infirmées au fur et à mesure' (Beckett 1953: 9). This methodological inconsequence is carried out to avoid 'l'esprit de système' (Beckett 2003: 294).<sup>39</sup> As in the *Pensées*, the use of paradox becomes one of the most distinctive aspects of Beckett's prose as the hesitant nature of the discourse prevails upon the reader.

The tension is initially built up in the juxtaposition of opposites that evoke two exclusive attitudes – the reluctance to speak and the necessity of utterance: 'cependant je suis obligé de parler. Je ne me tairai jamais' (Beckett 1953: 9). Further down, we read: 'ce serait à désespérer de tout. Mais c'est à désespérer de tout' (Beckett 1953: 8), and the same form is taken up in the subsequent paragraph: 'le plus simple serait de ne pas commencer. Mais je

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<sup>38</sup> This aspect will be considered in the following chapter.

<sup>39</sup> The expression could refer to systematic thought as it is manifested in the writings of Descartes, as opposed to Pascal, whose own work was originally conceived as fragmentary.

suis obligé de commencer' (Beckett 1953: 9). This simple, binary structure also prevails in the *Pensées*, as in the fragment on the thinking reed that describes the duality of the human condition, combining two primary themes – misery and greatness: 'L'homme n'est qu'un roseau [...] mais c'est un roseau pensant' (Pascal 2004: #186), 'Il est donc misérable puisqu'il l'est, mais il est grand parce qu'il le connaît' (Pascal 2004: #113).<sup>40</sup>

These series of paradoxes aim to disorientate the reader. In Beckett's novel, this principle is exacerbated by the use of aporetic repetitions, and discursive hesitancy necessarily subtends the very act of writing. The themes of ontological indeterminacy and Beckettian 'indifference' both invoke the formal structure of the isosthenia (the balancing of opposite views). In the isosthenic antithesis, the strength of both opposite terms is equally maintained.<sup>41</sup> Let us first consider Pascal's celebrated description of the human being as chaos:

Quelle chimère est-ce donc que l'homme? Quelle nouveauté, quel monstre, quel chaos, quel sujet de contradictions, quel prodige? Juge de toutes choses, imbécile ver de terre, dépositaire du vrai, cloaque d'incertitude et d'erreur, gloire et rebut de l'univers. (Pascal 2004: #122)

The final sentence relies on the juxtaposition of three strong antitheses: 'juge de tout/imbécile ver de terre'; 'dépositaire du vrai/cloaque d'incertitude'; and 'gloire/rebut'. However, it is significant that neither negative nor positive terms should prevail, as this linguistic symmetry corresponds to Pascal's anthropological vision wherein ontological contradictions are instantly revealed. The fundamental ontological duality cannot be absorbed by either one of the contrasting terms – hence the image of inextricable confusion, an *embrouillement* that is later evoked in the fragment.

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<sup>40</sup> This is the only fragment that Beckett wrote out in full in the 'Whoroscope Notebook'.

<sup>41</sup> For a detailed analysis of the different aspects of Pascal's use of antithesis, see Sève.

In *The Unnamable*, the predominant antitheses revolve around the themes of absence and presence, clarity and confusion, speech and silence. The yearning for silence leads to a desire to cancel out the clamouring voice. This need for stillness and silence becomes one of the voice's permanent preoccupations in the final sequence of the novel:

La voix. Oui, je l'entends moins bien. Je connais ça. Elle va cesser. Je ne l'entendrais plus. Je vais me taire. Ne plus entendre cette voix, c'est ça que j'appelle me taire. C'est-à-dire que je l'entendrai encore, en écoutant bien. Ecouter bien, c'est ça que j'appelle me taire. Brisée, faible, je l'entendrai toujours, inintelligible, en écoutant fort. (Beckett 1953: 177)

The receding of the voice is no less prevalent than the continuing discourse. The passage culminates in a series of ternary oppositions – 'taire/ne plus entendre/taire'; 'entendre encore/écouter bien/taire' – and parallelisms and gradation: 'je l'entends moins bien'/'je l'entendrai encore'/'je l'entendrai toujours'.

The different elements that make this continuity, however, do not simply amount to a striking use of paradox. The poetic quality of both styles is apparent in the frequent use of contrast and oxymoron, conveying the sense of the inherent ambivalence of anything human. Human discourse is structured with polarities that revolve around affirmation and negation, truth and falsehood. Duality structures human thought and it becomes a material aspect of language.

Discourse in the trilogy seems, then, to confirm the following remark by Pascal:

La nature nous a si bien mis au milieu que si nous changeons un côté de la balance nous changeons aussi l'autre. Je faisons, *zoa trekei*. Cela me fait croire qu'il y a des ressorts dans notre tête qui sont tellement disposés que qui touche l'un touche aussi le contraire. (Pascal 2004: #57)

Charles Juliet had spoken to Beckett about the ways in which his writing was steeped in the evocation of the unintelligible, through a ‘*négation de la négation, faisant fuser dans l’entre-deux ce qu’il importe de saisir*’ (Juliet 1999: 33). The basis of the parallel between Pascal and Beckett lies in the idea expressed in these conversations that the essential, that is to say what must be expressed, is contained in an ‘*entre-deux*’, and that this particular instance can only be given through a specific rhetoric, that of paradox. Insofar as they are characterized by confusion and indeterminacy, it may be inferred that the textual space of the ‘*entre-deux*’ corresponds to the theme of the ‘*milieu*’ in the *Pensées*.

### C. *Towards a Combinatory Art*<sup>42</sup>

Because it strays from the dry discourse of logic, the poetic use of paradox depends on another unconventional figure of speech in the rhetorical canon: repetition. This, too, Beckett adopted in his French prose. Unlike his contemporaries, Pascal advocated the use of repetition. Far from being improper, repetition is seen as the ‘*mark*’ of the discourse undertaken in the *Pensées* (Pascal 2004: #61). The underlying principle is that a good writer has an intuitive understanding of the words that can, or should, be repeated. There is no ‘*general*’ or objective rule to define authentic literary expression.

This point is necessarily elusive, and escapes clear definition. There is no ‘*general*’ or objective rule to define authentic literary expression: ‘*Quand dans un discours se trouvent des mots répétés et qu’essayant de les corriger on les trouve si propres qu’on gâterait le discours, il faut les laisser, c’en est la marque*’ (Pascal 2004: #469).<sup>43</sup> As one commentator has pointed out, the need to establish rules corresponds to the desire for a still point that will artificially

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<sup>42</sup> See Olivier Jouslin’s article, ‘Pascal poète en prose’, in which the author recalls the fundamental role mathematics played in the shaping of Pascal’s elaboration of the combinatory verse: ‘*on peut noter dans certains versets pascaliens une technique de combinaison qui participe autant des mathématiques que de la musique ; la poésie devient alors, non plus évocatoire, mais argumentative*’ (Jouslin 2003: 735).

<sup>43</sup> See Riffaterre: 2008.

solve the problem of our chaotic nature (Thirouin 1991: 100). This point is necessarily elusive.<sup>44</sup>

In *The Unnamable*, the rejection of a coherent method and the lack of orientation in speech itself are explained by the predominance of words over discourse. Indeed, the voice observes that, despite all the confusion and indecision, the only remaining certainty is that ‘it all boils down to a question of words’ (Beckett 1997 : 308).<sup>45</sup> Repetition counteracts the linearity of discourse by imposing structural and thematic circularity. Repetition is a figure of discontinuity and implies that coherence and totality are to be constructed. Now, inasmuch as Pascal and Beckett seek to evoke the discontinuity of being, the denial of progress and regularity is one of the prevailing *formal* aspects of their works: irregularity becomes a narrative or argumentative principle characterized by the interruption of speech, the oscillating movement of language, its resistance to interpretation.

As shown in the above section, the structure of paradox often relies on the figures of repetition. There can be no doubt that Beckett was inspired by Pascal’s serial permutations, as shown in the following fragment:

La grandeur de l’homme est grande en ce qu’il se connaît misérable: un arbre ne se connaît pas misérable.  
C’est donc être misérable que de se connaître misérable, mais c’est être grand que de connaître qu’on est misérable. (Pascal 2004: #105)

The reflection is based on the structure of an enthymeme. It relies on the fundamental antithesis between ‘grand’ and ‘misérable’. Its structure is based on chiasmus and symmetry. What is remarkable is the exhaustive repetition of words to form the basic opposition between ‘grandeur’ and ‘misère’. The sense of finality is conveyed through the use of epanadiplosis in

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<sup>44</sup> See Susini: 2008, and Jean Mesnard’s article, ‘Discontinuité, contrariété, répétition: un modèle de l’écriture pascalienne’.

<sup>45</sup> The French version states: ‘tout se ramène donc à une affaire de paroles’ (Beckett 2005: 81).

the second proposition 'misérable/misérable'. In *The Unnamable*, a similar pattern can be found, but the sense of logical cohesion is broken: 'je ne suis pas dehors, je suis dedans, dans quelque chose, je suis enfermé, le silence est dehors, dehors, dedans' (Beckett 2005: 206). The sentence is structured around the antithesis 'dehors'/'dedans', wherein the 'I', traditionally the seat of subjectivity, opposes itself to the external silence.

One last aspect should be brought forward at this stage. Both Pascal and Beckett drew inspiration from the Bible to develop the poetic quality of their prose.<sup>46</sup> Consider the fragment:

Que l'homme donc s'estime son prix. Qu'il s'aime: car il a en lui une nature capable de bien: mais qu'il n'aime pas pour cela les bassesses qui y sont. Qu'il se méprise parce que cette capacité est vide: mais qu'il ne méprise pas pour cela cette capacité naturelle. Qu'il se haïsse: qu'il s'aime: il a en lui la capacité de connaître la vérité et d'être heureux: mais il n'a point de vérité ou constante ou satisfaisante.

And the following passage:

[...] Celui hors la vie qu'à la longue la longue vie vaine veut qu'on n'ait cessé d'être. Que n'épargne pas la rage de parler, la rage de penser, de savoir ce qu'on est, ce qu'on était, pendant le rêve éperdu, là-haut, sous le ciel, sortant la nuit. Celui qui s'ignore et se tait, ce qu'ignorant il tait, et n'ayant pu être ne s'y efforce plus. [...] Celui qui cherche son vrai visage, qu'il se rassérène, il le trouvera, convulsé d'inquiétude, les yeux écarquillés. Celui qui veut avoir vécu, pendant qu'il vivait, qu'il se rassure, la vie lui dira comment (Beckett 1953: 100).

The two texts take up the form of an interpellation, as the voices address, respectively, 'l'homme' and 'celui'. In the Pascalian fragment, the tone is injunctive, 'qu'il se haïsse, qu'il

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<sup>46</sup> For a study of Pascal's invention of the prose poem genre through his integration of Biblical verse into his writings, see Jouslin: 2003. The study of the poetic quality of Pascal's prose and the role it might have played as a model in Beckett's writing of poetry, particularly the *Mirlitonnades* poems, will be undertaken in further detail in Chapter 4.

s'aime', while Beckett seems to have imitated the French text of the Sermon on beatitudes. This is apparent in the formulation: the anaphoric structure is set on the demonstrative proposition, 'celui qui', as it is in the alternation between present and future tenses.

Moreover, they are articulated around three moments. A dialectical movement emerges from Pascal's text: man is prone to the esteem of self, but also to hatred of self, and finally to both, as he is incapable of complete knowledge. In the passage from *The Unnamable*, two complementary figures appear, one incapable of silence, and the other quiet. And, as in the conclusion of Pascal's reflection, the two merge into a third figure, 'celui qui cherche son vrai visage'. Moreover, the interplay of Pascalian images and themes – an interplay that takes place in the combination of contrasting polarities such as the void and the infinite, light and darkness; in the motif of verticality with the movements of elevation and collapse –, finds its own coherence in the juxtaposition of opposites.

The reliance on binary and ternary rhythms as well as distinct sound patterns may be noted. Assonances (i, a) and alliterations (l, m, s) pervade Pascal's text; the use of aggressive plosive sounds are strikingly predominant (d, p, b), and the effect is enhanced by the uneasy stridence of the 'i' and 's' sounds. This is counterbalanced, however, by softer sounds ('naturelle', 'aime'), in a further evocation of man's ontological ambivalence. Just as striking in the passage from *The Unnamable* is the accumulation of alliterations, as illustrated by the recurrence of labial sounds ('l'), along with plosives ('v') and the assonance in 'a', creating an effect of incantation: 'à la longue la longue vie vaine', echoed in the last sentence, 'celui qui veut avoir vécu'.

## V. CONCLUSION

I have sought to demonstrate here that Beckett had a lasting interest in the images that were developed by Pascal, particularly in the *Pensées*. The evolution from darkness towards light, which he had observed in Racine's plays, together with the tension between a craving for stillness and persistent movement, are the themes that establish that connection most visibly. The description of man as a prisoner in an infinite, yet confined (geometrical) space Beckett likewise took up in most of his subsequent prose and in his dramatic writings. He frequently came back to the celebrated image of the description of the universe as an infinite sphere which is present in earlier writings in both French and English. The purpose in the following chapter is to consider different examples that are suggestive of the ways in which this image yielded variations in the later works. It is taken up, for instance, to describe the nature of the artist's vision in 'La Peinture de Van Velde ou Le Monde et le Pantalon': 'Impossible de vouloir autre l'inconnu, l'enfin vu, dont le centre est partout et la circonférence nulle part, ni le seul agent capable de le faire cesser; ni le but, qui est de le faire cesser' (Beckett 2003: 100). It is translated literally in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, but related this time, to the question of beauty seen as all encompassing, 'with a centre everywhere and a circumference nowhere' (Beckett 2003: 35).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For a study of Pascal's adoption of the new paradigm of the infinite in his anthropological discourse, see Gardiès 1984: 75.

## CHAPTER 4

### Pascal in the Later Prose and Poetry

In James Knowlson's opinion, the French trilogy and *Godot* 'are almost certainly the most enduring works that Beckett wrote' (Knowlson 1996: 371). It is also suggested that, 'together with the French stories, they illustrate very well how deeply the approach that Beckett dated from his "revelation" in his mother's house after the war affected the writing' (Knowlson 1996: 371).<sup>1</sup> This period corresponds to the definition, formulated in these works, of the intermediate space ('l'entre-deux') as the only adequate space for the accomplishment of his writing, and to the period when the Pascalian reference was prevalent in his writings. One aspect I sought to demonstrate in the previous chapter was that the recurrence of the Pascalian theme of 'milieu' finds its textual equivalent in the Beckettian 'entre-deux', and that this space had been elaborated in the *Pensées*.

Pascal's influence also inspired the prose written in the aftermath of the trilogy. In this chapter my aim is to show the ways in which it is manifested by reading thematically a number of chosen texts. This chapter is structured in independent sections, each dedicated to the reading of a Pascalian theme in one of Beckett's later pieces. I will first consider the use of scientific images by Pascal (the infinite and the void) in the *Textes pour rien*, and then study *The Lost Ones/Le Dépeupleur* in relation to the question of grace, using its different manuscript versions. The aim of the third section is to establish that a connection exists between the poetic form of the fragment as it is conceived in the *Pensées* and the *Mirlitonades* poems. Lastly, a closer consideration of the poetic impact of the theme of disproportion will be undertaken, through a reading of *Sans/Lessness*.

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<sup>1</sup> The revelatory nature of the episode mentioned in *Krapp's Last Tape* as the pivotal moment where the protagonists attained the 'vision at last' has been compared with Beckett's own experience. John Pilling observes that 'Beckett was himself of the view that 1945 and 1946 were the years which conditioned his subsequent development as a writer' and that by then he had fully realized that 'a line was to be drawn between before and after, and between two kinds of knowledge divided by a sudden shaft of self-knowledge' (Pilling 1997: 1-2).

## I. ON THE IMPACT OF PASCALIAN IMAGES AND THEMES IN THE LATE PROSE

### A. *The void*

#### 1. Critical overview

Shira Woloski has summarized the interpretative tendencies that revolve around the question of the void and negativity, by pointing out the fundamental problem posed in Beckett's texts. The nature of this reiterated 'nothing' is the object of a constant interrogation on the voice's part: 'this axiological negative judgement of language in turn reiterates the, if not axiological negativity, then at best axiological ambivalence accorded to the created world itself – the world created and represented as language' (Woloski 1991: 226).

Woloski also observes that commentators have imposed a mystical frame upon Beckett's work, insofar as 'all these various interpretations, for all their differences, accept the structure of mystical axiology even when questioning mystical goals or their fulfilment. All concur that Beckett is attempting an ascetic disengagement from temporal reality in the name of essence beyond it. [...] All assume the negative valuation of language implicit in this axiology, such that to attain essence is to be unable to express it' (Woloski 1991: 225).

Beckett had posited in his earlier texts that the void is the necessary condition of any literary creation. That void takes up different manifestations. As Ciaran Ross observes, 'l'écriture dont rêve Beckett est intransitive et impersonnelle, sans "objet" ni "origine", sans "mémoire" ni désir et surtout sans "histoire". Une écriture "du dehors"' (Ross 2004: 12). So much so that, 'dans la trilogie, le néant, le rien et la négativité occupent une fonction structurante' (Ross 2004:17). Insofar as the trilogy concentrates on the relationship between the subject and the real, the void is constructed thematically as 'un retour du vide pris dans une dynamique intersubjective, devenant ainsi le sujet des histoires prétendument vécues' (Ross 2004: 26).

In 'Le Monde et le Pantalon', Beckett defines representation in Bram Van Velde's art as elaborated from fundamental antinomies: the inconceivable object becomes the only possible visual representation. He writes that 'la chose immobile dans le vide, voilà enfin la chose visible, l'objet pur' (Beckett 2003: 28). The object that eludes representation is, for Beckett, the true object of art, 'le nouvel objet' discovered in this 'new' relationship. As such, painting manifests this negative process, for it is characterized by an inexistent connection between art and the real because there is no actual object to be represented, 'dans l'absence de rapport, et l'absence d'objet' (Beckett 2003: 146-147). The void, then, is the only reality that writing can convey and which can be experimented upon, not in the failure to write, but in the tension between the possibility and the impossibility of writing (see Ross 2004: 84).

The pictorial asceticism of Bram Van Velde would thus be reverberated in the propensity towards nothingness, 'le rien', in Beckett's prose. Even as the search for the void reaches a point near complete exhaustion, it is renewed by an inner dynamic, and can thus be transformed into infinite forms of expression. In the trilogy, the reader is absorbed by the inner vacuity of the characters, in the dysfunction of 'thought' that is manifested in its inability to account for the real, or to establish relationships.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, the 'gulf' between inner and outer worlds, the body and the mind, words and reality, utterance and thought, becomes the central articulation of discourse. The text invents (or tries to invent) its own spaces, to fill them up with words, building up fictions, not in order to attain a lost unified self, but so as to reach the moment of inexistence that precedes it.<sup>3</sup>

This process of evacuation leaves nothing but a residue of words that is at times reminiscent of philosophical or literary references. Similarly, the intermediate colour grey

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<sup>2</sup> The voice of the Unnamable discards the figures it had previously summoned.

<sup>3</sup> The image of the 'wombtomb' in *Watt* or of women giving birth 'astride the grave' in Pozzo's speech are the usual examples taken by commentators to illustrate this point. The mock pathetic image of the 'drying sperm' in *The Unnamable*, 'perhaps I am a sperm, dying of cold in the sheets, feebly wagging its little tail between the sheets of a young boy' (Beckett 2003: 279), is thus to be understood as a manifestation, among many others, of the near exhaustion that the text strives to attain. The void is evoked as the lingering trace of a momentary release into the darkness of an unknown world, which cannot be dispelled, or completely obliterated.

evokes a form of writing on the verge of disappearance. The *Texts for Nothing* would continue to delve into the tension initially expressed in *The Unnamable*, between the yearning for the voice to extinguish itself, for sound to recede gradually until it reaches silence, and a minimal resistance, so that the movement towards silence is constantly thwarted. This groping towards reduction is expressed in the following lines: ‘Ah if only this voice could stop, this meaningless voice which prevents you from being nothing, just barely prevents you from being nothing and nowhere, just enough to keep alight this little yellow flame feebly darting from side to side, panting, as if straining to tear itself from its wick, it should never have been lit [...]’ (Beckett 1997: 374).

The first admirers of Beckett, such as Blanchot, Esslin, Mayoux and Coe insisted upon the recurrence of themes such as emptiness and negativity, and upon the idea that the Beckettian text is paradoxically elaborated in the voiding of language. The critical consensus upon the definition of the nature of the literary revolution Beckett would undertake in the years of intense creativity that followed (1945-51) therefore lies in the choice of the ‘negative’— as the core element of his work. Beckett’s prose is structured around the existential void behind phenomena that is evoked through the endless, repetitive patterns of language, the rarefication of discourse. With its correlative states, purgatorial nothingness, loss, and ideas of non-being, the ‘negative’ is diversely expressed.<sup>4</sup> It is only recently that critical studies have sought to rectify the image of Beckett as a ‘nihilist’. While Beckett’s early reflections on literature have visibly shifted from an interest in abstract language to its purely poetic and visual quality, words, as the necessary conveyors of that form, remain no less powerful. They act as symbols devoid of meaning.

John Pilling has suggestively described that voiding through language. The role repetition plays in conveying linguistically the impression of a gradual obliteration of the text

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<sup>4</sup> Such as, for instance, Evelyn Grossman’s *Esthétique de Beckett* (1998), Shane Weller’s *A taste for the negative: Beckett and Nihilism* (2005), and the collection of essays in *Beckett, Joyce and the Art of Negative* (2005) .

is central to understand the singularity of Beckett's writing: 'the repetitive technique carries within it a separating as well as combining factor since, at the same time as it insistently thrusts forward words and phrases, it effectively thrusts them into the background the more they are allowed to dominate the discourse. [...] It is as if the text, in being uttered, swallows itself, as a black hole swallows matter' (Pilling 1976:46). Therefore, the expression that there is 'nothing to express' does not state the 'nothingness' of being, but the 'lack of expressible content' (Weller 2005: 65).

Beckett must have known that Pascal intended to produce a literally fragmented work. In *La Critique du discours* (1975) Louis Marin evokes the symbolic gesture that consisted in cutting the continuous text into fragments. By that gesture, Pascal's intention was to create a new order as he attached these 'papers' to a string. The consequence of that gesture is to introduce a void within the body of the text. As Marin observes, 'l'œuvre a ainsi une sorte de liberté vide, dans l'espace de laquelle le commentaire s'instaure et peut se développer irrémédiablement. Dès "l'origine", le texte cesse d'appartenir à l'auteur, puisqu'il est fait oppositionnellement de silences, d'espaces vides dans lesquels l'auteur ne parle pas, ne s'écrit pas, ce qu'il dit et ce qu'il écrit ne se définit pas formellement que par ce rapport' (Marin 1975: 23). The symbolism of that gesture, by which the author subjects his work to an 'arrangement' of the material of his text, recalls the aesthetic strain of fragmentation and reduction at work in Beckett's own writing, particularly the late prose. It enables to posit that, from the very outset, Beckett was reminded of it constantly in the modernist aesthetics based on multiplicity and fragmentation.

## 2. Pascal's writings on physics and the Beckettian 'voiding' of the text

In this section, I will consider how Pascal's scientific work may have played an essential role upon the aesthetic choice to create a textual space for the void. In his article 'Beckett and the Port-Royal Logic', Frederick Smith observes that Beckett was likely to have read Pascal's scientific writings alongside Descartes's and the *Logique de Port-Royal*, and, in the 'Whoroscope Notebook', Beckett did indeed write down a fragment related to the knowledge of first principles, 'espace, temps, mouvement, dimension', but no trace exists of his readings of the shorter texts, at least to my knowledge.

Celia in *Murphy* is one of Beckett's earliest characters that illustrates the 'emptying out' of words. As Carle Bonafous-Murat observes, the discourse on the vacuum enables us to shed a different light upon the Beckettian void. In the episode that relates how Celia, left on her own after Murphy has moved out to the Magdalen Mental Mercyseat, feels the need to sit in his own chair, to 'tease the oakum of her history', the density of Celia's inner world is described in words that are taken from the scientific domain: 'the silence was not of vacuum but of plenum, not of breath taken by quiet air' (quoted in Bonafous-Murat 2009: 142).

Celia's experience and emotions are wrought together by a series of images, words, and ideas that form a network of allusions. As such, 'Celia est déjà, comme le seront peu ou prou tous les protagonistes des pièces, traversée de citations qui renvoient confusément à d'autres personnages et à d'autres textes, mais dont elle ne peut être posée comme l'origine énonciative, qui l'enserrent dans les rets de son impersonnalité tout en la rendant à une conscience paroxystique d'elle-même, celle que suggère la chaîne raccordant "Celia" à "sky" et à "cell"' (Bonafous-Murat 2009: 142).

As Bonafous-Murat observes, the use of a Latin expression can only refer the reader to back to a landmark in scientific history, 'l'une des plus célèbres controverses ayant ponctué

l'histoire de la science, celle qui a opposé depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'au début du xx<sup>e</sup> siècle, les partisans de l'existence d'un vide intra-mondain (ou vacuistes) aux défenseurs de la théorie selon laquelle "la Nature a horreur du vide"<sup>5</sup> (Bonafous-Murat 2009: 145). Pascal's role in the controversy was central, as the focus came to be centred on the mercury whose trace did not go under a certain point, regardless of the height of the tubes: 'le débat s'est donc cristallisé autour de cette mince zone au sommet du tube apparemment dépourvue de toute matière, les uns arguant qu'il s'agissait bien du vide, les autres, comme Descartes, y voyant la présence d'une matière subtile, invisible à l'oeil nu mais existant en fait partout dans les interstices entre les objets de l'univers' (Bonafous-Murat 2009: 144).

This deliberate reference in *Murphy* clearly indicates that 'les expériences formelles de Beckett ont partie liée avec l'observation scientifique. La polémique sur le vide fait ici figure de cas exemplaire, en ce qu'en poussant les expérimentations jusqu'à leur conséquences les plus extrêmes, la science pouvait offrir à Beckett le modèle d'une écriture et d'un espace, infiniment ténu et étrange, dans lequel faire tenir ses propres textes' (Bonafous-Murat 2009: 146). Inasmuch as 'il reste toujours un minuscule abîme d'air', *Murphy* cannot be considered as a vacuist novel: this abiding air is enough to allow the discourse to go on, the infinite renewal of writing: 'le petit goulet est comme la trace ultime et le paradigme de tous ces textes beckettien à venir, qui n'en finiront jamais de finir sans pour autant parvenir à tout abolir' (Bonafous-Murat 2009: 146).

The argument that Pascal's scientific works, particularly the *Expériences nouvelles touchant le vide*,<sup>5</sup> played an active role in Beckett's writing is all the more interesting given that, as observed earlier in this study, Beckett knew of Pascal's encounter with Descartes from

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<sup>5</sup> The discovery of the infinite and the mathematical argument that lies at the heart of the wager struck Beckett for its poetic potency. As we will see, he went back to using these themes in texts that were written after the trilogy.

having read Mahaffy.<sup>6</sup> The latter does not dwell upon the episode, but it is worth looking at it more closely. In *Pascal and Descartes* (1976), Michel Le Guern observes that, after Descartes's two successive visits, 'il ne saura certainement pas avant longtemps – en admettant un jour qu'il l'ait su un jour, ce qui n'est pas assuré – quel vif agacement les *Expériences nouvelles* ont produit sur Descartes' (Le Guern 1976: 124). Pascal was, then, primarily interested in science, and had read the *Principes de la philosophie*:

comme s'il s'agissait d'un manuel de physique, exposant une physique qu'il juge d'ailleurs discutable puisqu'elle s'appuie sur une conception erronée du rôle de l'hypothèse, et même inacceptable puisqu'elle refuse le vide. [...] Mais cette physique est soutenue par une philosophie qui fournit des cadres commodes à la pensée. L'esprit de Pascal, qui n'a pas été marqué par une formation scolastique, est de ce fait tout disposé à les adopter, le cartésianisme lui fournit un outil propre à augmenter son emprise sur tout ce qui est abstrait, et par conséquence à compléter une formation essentiellement orientée vers l'expérience et vers le concret. (Le Guern 1976: 125)

Essential to note here is the methodological nature of the divergences between Descartes and Pascal.<sup>7</sup> In *Du vide à Dieu* (1976), Pierre Guenancia observes that, at the time of the controversy with the Père Noël on the vacuum, Pascal came to formulate in the years 1646-7 a distinctive epistemological space, 'où le concept de vérité n'a plus le même sens que dans la métaphysique cartésienne' (Guenancia 1976: 28). Scientific truth for Pascal can therefore only derive from experimentation. Experience is established as a concept that is

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<sup>6</sup> In a recent article, Olivier Jouslin rehabilitates the figure of Pascal's adversary, the Jesuit father Etienne Noël, whose role was and continues to be downplayed by historians as an unworthy opponent for Pascal, relying on scholastics and tradition. At the time of the controversy, Pascal was somewhat at a disadvantage, both in terms of age and reputation, as well as in terms of scientific output. Not least is the fact that, at the height of his fame, Descartes continued to seek the opinion of Noël. This cautious attitude was due to censorship, Noël's interest for the philosopher's work persisted throughout (See Jouslin 2006: 346-351). Jouslin concludes that 'il s'agit bien d'un savant, peut-être pas un découvreur scientifique de premier plan, mais une personnalité dont certains membres éminents de la communauté scientifique (Descartes, Mersenne) cherchent à connaître les avis et les ouvrages' (Joulin 2006: 351).

<sup>7</sup> These methodological divergences led to the definition of a new anthropology, but do not exclude the original affinities with Descartes (Carraud 2007: 39).

opposed to ‘authority’. As such, ‘l’intervention de Pascal en physique et donc en philosophie constitue le lieu de rencontre critique, la révélation de l’opposition irréfragable avec la philosophie de système qui se nourrit de ce point de départ absolu et radical’ (Guenancia 1976: 28).

The occasion enables Pascal to designate in these texts ‘ce qui est à l’origine de la perversion de l’ordre véritable’ and to posit that ‘c’est le discours qui vise au fondement et qui imagine pouvoir satisfaire à cette pulsion de principes premiers des causes originelles des lois de la nature’ (Guenancia 1976: 28-29). One of the most striking features of Pascal’s progression towards knowledge is the endeavour to synthesize and demonstrate: ‘l’œuvre de Pascal témoigne dans sa progression d’une appréhension de plus en plus globale et unifiée des connaissances et de leurs procédures de contrôle. [...] Il ne s’agit pas seulement de synthèse, mais de l’établissement de concepts scientifiques par la voie démonstrative [...] une exigence de généralisation et de démonstration’ (Guenancia 1976: 29).<sup>8</sup>

Beckett’s desire to reach the ‘archetypal’ is, in this sense, similar to Pascal’s own approach. Although it originates from Descartes, his methodology is also defined in opposition to it. In the *Expériences nouvelles*, the problem of the vacuum is a welcome occasion for Pascal to reflect upon technical precision, departing from observation, and seeking to establish evidence (‘technique de la preuve’) against pre-established forms of rational discourse (Guenancia 1976: 41). As a consequence, observation is ‘un facteur de correction de préjugés entretenus par une trop grande attention au commentaire et à l’autorité, elle favorise l’éloignement vis-à-vis des débats spéculatifs et restitue la curiosité’ (Guenancia 1976: 41). The text provides additional evidence that ‘le dessein qui anime Pascal est d’ordre argumentatif’ (Guenancia 1976: 114), as he purports to alter conventional beliefs and question authority by demonstrating that experimentation alone provides valid criteria for truth: ‘Il

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<sup>8</sup> For a study of Pascal’s method of reduction in scientific experimentation, see for instance the 1976 conference proceedings, published under the title ‘Méthodes chez Pascal’.

s'agit de jeter le trouble dans la conscience traditionnelle des problèmes, d'assumer la validité d'expérience qui ouvrent une brèche dans les croyances partagées au sujet du vide' (Guenancia 1976: 114).

In his postface to the French version of Beckett's late television plays, *Quad et autres textes pour la télévision*, Deleuze argued that two attitudes can be extracted from Beckett's writing, corresponding to the early novels and the trilogy: the 'tired' (*le fatigué*) and the exhausted (*l'épuisé*) (Deleuze and Ullmann 1995: 3). The exhaustion of the possible leads to that of words, and their complex interrelation either depends on serial combinations or the silencing of the voices (Deleuze and Ullmann 1995: 5). As such, the intermediate position of the image, and its composition as a 'process' (Deleuze and Ullmann 1995: 9), imposes a kind of moveable limit to an endless flux of words – a 'hiatus' that cannot be clearly identified as it comes from indistinct memories, hesitations, and intertwining voices. Interestingly, Deleuze observes that the combinatorial is 'a science that demands long study' (Deleuze and Ullmann 1995: 5).

The experimentation on the void may well have provided a model for Beckett in the image of the mercury residue, which in turn can be understood as a metaphor for his writing. It is also worth considering the original form in which Pascal related his experiences, that is, in a correspondence, establishing a dialogue with his adversary. Using the references to the controversy that have been inserted in the text, I will argue that Beckett's prose is constructed dialogically on that model, as it takes up alternately each point of view, neither assenting or disproving them. This is conveyed in the tension between the continuance of speech, form, and order and the interfering impulse towards exhaustion, opening up a 'breach' to the infinite renewal of discourse through the 'presque vide'.

### 3. Against the ‘spirit of system’: the Nouvelles experiences sur le vide as an argumentative model in the Texts for Nothing

Beckett’s engagement with the controversy on the void comes out of the contradictory movements within the prose. Pascal’s stance could be seen as a model for the defiance of authority in the trilogy and the *Texts for Nothing*. Sequences abound in which characters systematically reject imposed knowledge, of which only indistinct memories subsist. Molloy, for instance, muses on the clarity of a sentence in a way that does recall the classical imperative, articulated in both Descartes and Pascal: ‘Everytime I say, I said this, or I said that, or speak of a voice saying, far away inside me, Molloy, and then a fine phrase more or less clear and simple, or find myself compelled to attribute to others more or less intelligible words’ (Beckett 2007: 87).<sup>9</sup> Malone comes to observe that ‘my mother [...] was always one of their favourite subjects of conversation. They also gave me the low-down on God’ (Beckett 1997: 300). The tension reaches a climax in *The Unnamable*, as the voice remarks that ‘I say what I’m told to say, that’s all there is to it, and yet I don’t know [...]’ (Beckett 1997: 386).<sup>10</sup> This clear language, (‘ce limpide langage’) is immediately called into question with the interference of specific words, ‘tant de chimères’ (Beckett 2006: 203) that introduce connotations, meanings, and allusions into the discourse only to discard them: ‘Je ne sais pas, je ne sais pas ce que cela veut dire, le jour et la nuit, la terre et le ciel, les appels et les adjurations’ (Beckett 2006: 168).

Beckett was undoubtedly attracted to Pascal’s vehement rejection of authority and tradition. Michel Le Guern observes that insofar as he was ‘plus libre dans son adhésion au cartésianisme, Pascal se sentira aussi plus libre de le critiquer. Parce qu’il a hérité de Roberval la méfiance à l’égard de l’esprit de système, et peut-être aussi parce qu’il n’est pas lui-même

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<sup>9</sup> The French version states: ‘Et chaque fois que je dis Je, je me dis telle ou telle chose, ou que je parle d’une voix interne me disant, Molloy, et puis une belle phrase plus ou moins claire et simple, ou que je me retrouve dans l’obligation de prêter au tiers des phrases intelligibles (Beckett 2001: 175).

<sup>10</sup> In the original French text, impersonality is marked by the use of pronouns, as the ‘on’ manifests the reality of the ‘other’: ‘je dis ce qu’on me dit de dire, un point c’est tout’ (Beckett 2005: 159).

philosophe, il pourra rejeter telle affirmation de Descartes qu'il jugera incompatible avec l'expérience' (Le Guern 1976: 127). In the most striking way, the voice of the Unnamable reiterates an axiom that all Beckettian protagonists seem to share at some point: 'the thing to avoid, I don't know why, is the spirit of system' (Beckett 1997: 333).<sup>11</sup>

It has been pointed out by previous Beckett commentators that the problematic nature of the relation to the real is explored in Beckett's prose through the persistent image of the 'I' caught in the middle. The impossibility of finding a meaningful language is enacted in discourse through negation: 'Mais qui dit [...] la voix le dit, qu'il est impossible que je ne désire rien, cela a l'air de se contredire, moi je n'ai pas d'opinion' (Beckett 2006: 170). It is not without provocation, therefore, that Beckett presented himself as a writer whose work would remain uncompromising and who articulated a vision of the literary enterprise as 'excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent', insofar as 'the artist is active, but negatively' (Beckett 1999: 65-66).

The rupture with our ordinary representation of the real, our basic understanding of what it is to be human, is therefore deliberate. The disintegration of the elements that constitute speech – the voice, the image, the exhaustive lists, potential spaces – becomes visual through the self-cancellation of language brought about in the invalidity of both assertion and negation, as is made explicit in the eighth *Text for Nothing*: 'l'avoir dit me convainc du contraire, je n'ai jamais vu le jour, pas plus que lui, voilà la beauté toute négative de la parole, dont malheureusement les négations en subissent le même sort, en voilà toute la laideur' (Beckett 2006: 171). Language fails to persuade, in the same way that utterance is no

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<sup>11</sup> The pedagogical function of Arnauld and Nicole's *Logique ou l'art de penser* will be studied in Chapter 5. Anthony Cordingley suggests that 'Beckett's reference to "l'esprit de géométrie" is certainly ironic because these figures/voices above are said to have no "pedagogical" function, yet they practice "the catechist's tongue" (356), that is, the tongue of one who instructs in religion and catechism. These theological instructors/voices are subsumed by Beckett into Pascal's esprit géométrique, for they are also corrupted within pedagogical transfer, becoming a species of habit and repetition when practicing their reasoned theology' (Cordingley 2010: 139).

longer a vehicle for truth. As a result, the dislocated body is seen as an impediment to thought, so much so that discourse becomes as disquieting as silence.

The implication, in the third *Text for Nothing*, that knowledge results from deduction can be seen as a direct reference to Pascal's intellectual autonomy: 'Qui m'a appris tout ce que je sais, c'est moi, lorsque j'errai encore, j'ai tout déduit, de la nature, avec l'aide d'un tout-en-un, je sais bien que non, les connaissances sont là, elles luisent tour à tour, proches et lointaines, clignent sur l'abîme, complices' (Beckett 2006: 132). As such, it seems that the narrative framework of the *Texts for Nothing* is constructed upon the denunciation of 'invention' as a product of imagination. In a similar way, in the last *Text for Nothing*, the voice dismisses all its previous elaborations, memories, hypotheses, by saying that 'c'est du roman' (Beckett 2006: 202).<sup>12</sup>

The dialogical quality in the narration in *Texts for Nothing* becomes apparent in the evocation of divergent opinions. As a result, the position of the uttering voice cannot be precisely determined, as it is made more complex by unresolved contradictions, questions and hypotheses. In the first text, the 'I' addresses the 'body' and the 'head', knowing that there can be no coordination between the two, and insists upon the necessity of 'finishing' ('cesser') – in an echo of Malone's desire to 'finish dying': 'Je devrais m'en détourner, du corps et de la tête, les laisser s'arranger, les laisser cesser, je ne peux pas, il faudrait que moi je cesse. Ah oui, nous sommes plus d'un on dirait, tous sourds, même pas, unis pour la vie' (Beckett 2006: 116).

The second text takes up the theme of solitude and the lack of company, only to reject the presence of others as vain: 'Et l'absence des autres, n'est-ce rien? Bah les autres, ça n'existe pas les autres, ça n'a jamais gêné personne. D'ailleurs il doit y en avoir, d'autres autres, invisibles, muets, c'est sans importance' (Beckett 2006: 125). The counterbalanced

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<sup>12</sup> Michel Le Guern thus recalls that 'Pascal a conscience que le système de son adversaire est vraisemblable, mais que, comme le système cartésien, c'est un roman du monde, une fiction' (Jouslin 2006: 355).

movement of the prose is visible here, even as the hypothesis contained in the initial question is dismissed so that the validity of the negation ('ça n'existe pas') is immediately questioned with the conjunction 'd'ailleurs'. In the fifth text, the reminiscing 'I' aspires, once more, to resume the process of reduction, by discarding memories: 'Me voilà hanté, qu'ils s'en aillent, un à un, que les derniers m'abandonnent, me laissant vide, vide et silencieux' (Beckett 2006:150).

The progression within the series of stories calls for a gradual reduction of space. In the absence of action, the advent of silence is brought about through a narrowing down of possibilities: 'voir ce qui se passe ici, où il n'y a personne, où il ne se passe rien, faire ici qu'il se passe quelque chose, qu'il ait quelqu'un, y mettre fin, faire le silence, aller dans le silence, un bruit d'autres voix que celle de vie et de mort qui ne veulent pas être les miennes, sans pouvoir en sortir, non, tout ça c'est des balivernes' (Beckett 2006: 135-6). All landmarks have been dissolved in the identity between utterance and action, 'le temps s'est fait espace et il n'y en aura plus, tant que je serai ici' (Beckett 2006: 168). The issueless space, together with the void, is the ideal condition for stillness and silence to be achieved: 'sortir d'ici, mais voilà, c'est vide, pas une poussière, pas un souffle, le sien seulement, il a beau se mouvoir, rien ne se fait' (Beckett 2006: 203).

The experience of reduction remains possible in the English novels *Murphy* and *Watt*, and in the first two novels of the post-war trilogy. Because Malone is certain that he is dying, discourse remains in the realm of the possible, as the opening line of the novel makes clear: 'Je serai quand même bientôt tout à fait mort enfin' (Beckett 1951: 7). But death is constantly deferred by an ongoing interplay of analogies, digressions, and interruptions in the progression of discourse. This is consciously taken up in the *Texts for Nothing*, as the voice makes clear that meaning is freely associated with words, 'selon ce que j'entendais par ici, par moi, par être, et là-dedans je ne suis jamais allé chercher des choses extraordinaires' (Beckett

2006: 117). In the second *Text for Nothing*, language, too, is dying, as it progressively reaches a form of stillness similar to that of the mind ('l'esprit lent, lent, presque arrêté') and the head ('dans la tête lentement la poupée qui se frippe') in an ineluctable but incomplete process, in which 'les mots aussi, lents, lents, le sujet meurt avant d'avoir atteint le verbe, les mots s'arrêtent aussi' (Beckett 2006: 125).

The void is, as such, a paradoxical model that configures the aporetic tension between a process of emptying out and the resistance of the real – 'l'inaugmentable imminimisable inempirable sempiternel presque vide' (Beckett). An additional parallel can be drawn here between this 'presque vide' and the 'matière subtile' put forward by Descartes to concur with the traditional view on the question of the void. To which Pascal opposes its existence in the *Nouvelles expériences*, and thereby the nullity of the axiom that nature abhors the void, as he writes in the opening paragraph that '[...] le vif-argent du tuyau descend en partie, laissant au haut du tuyau *un espace vide en apparence*' (Pascal 1998: 355; emphasis added). The Beckettian resistance to the void may come closer to the Cartesian position, only to be cancelled by the allusion to the opposite – Pascalian – stance, by which the existence of the void is acknowledged. This suspension, or refusal to take part, is comprised in Vladimir's remark in *Waiting for Godot* that 'there's no lack of void'.

## B. 'Grace' in *The Lost Ones/Le Dépeupleur*

An allusion to the theme of grace in the *Pensées* can be found in Beckett's first play, *Eleutheria*, as the Glazier exclaims: 'Pitié, pitié pour ceux qui rampent dans les ténèbres! Silence, on dirait l'espace de Pascal' (Beckett 1995: 137).<sup>13</sup> The first sentence echoes Pascal's

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<sup>13</sup> *Eleutheria* was reluctantly published in the original French in 1993 by Jérôme Lindon, a couple of years after Barnet Rosset had taken the initiative to have it released in an English version translated by Stanley Gontarsky. Most commentators (including Knowlson) have followed Beckett's condemnation of the piece (Knowlson 1996: 361-362) and dismissed it as a minor piece of writing. The play, however, parodies many theatrical genres and contains a wealth of literary allusions. Moreover, as Knowlson points out, it prefigures some of the major themes

evocation of the condition of post-lapsarian man: ‘L’homme ne sait à quel rang se mettre, il est visiblement tombé et égaré de son vrai lieu sans le pouvoir retrouver. Il le cherche partout avec inquiétude et sans succès dans des ténèbres impénétrables’ (Pascal 2004: #579), while the second is a playful echo of the fragment praised by Paul Valéry, quoted in the first chapter: ‘Le silence de ces espaces infinis m’effraie’ (Pascal 2004: #187).

Pascale Casanova observes that for commentators such as Weber-Caflisch and Badiou, ‘l’évidence intuitive du texte attribue, par exemple, à la notion de mouvement une connotation positive et à la notion d’immobilité une dimension négative, topique héritée notamment de Pascal et de sa formule fameuse: “notre nature entière est dans le mouvement; le repos entier est la mort”’ (Casanova 1997: 112). Such interpretations have avoided taking into account the fundamental ambiguity of Pascal’s conception of movement, as movement (or ‘agitation’) in fact defines ‘le malheur naturel de notre condition faible et mortelle’ (Pascal 2004: #181). Man, therefore, is incapable of attaining full stillness – ‘repos’ – in his present state: ‘tout le malheur des hommes vient d’une seule chose qui est de ne savoir pas demeurer au repos dans une chambre’ (Pascal 2004: #126). Casanova rightly argues that the significance of these categories (movement/immobility) has to be inverted so that the hidden coherence of the text may be brought out.

For Casanova, Pascal’s presence can be discerned in the allusions to the theme of ‘divertissement’. I will argue here, however, that the theme of the search, which pervades Beckett’s work, was also inspired by the *Pensées*: the Pascalian man is a searcher. The author of the *Pensées* observes, significantly, that ‘nous ne cherchons jamais les choses, mais la recherche des choses’ – a phrase that could be taken as the underlying motif of one of the later

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that Beckett would later explore, including Beckett’s usage of quotations in his drama. Along with this obvious allusion to the *Pensées*, the depiction of the main protagonist, Victor Krapp, a ‘personnage invraisemblable’, corresponds in his attitude to the figure of the Schopenhauerian ascet, almost two decades after Beckett wrote his 1931 essay on Proust.

prose works, *The Lost Ones/Le Dépeupleur*, which concentrates entirely on the theme of searching.

My aim is to demonstrate that *The Lost Ones/Le Dépeupleur* is perhaps the only text that is elaborated from the Pascalian evocation of grace, as the tranquillity of the ‘vanquished’ corresponds to Pascal’s withdrawal from the world evoked in the ‘Mémorial’: ‘Oubli de tout et du monde, hormis Dieu’. Even if Beckett parodies a longing for elevation, the text is built upon the powerful contrast elaborated in the *Pensées*, through the tension created between the extremes: agitation and repose, purity and corruption, reality and illusion, the importance of religious images cannot be overestimated in this particular text. Space is evoked through the motif of verticality, which is itself represented in the perpetual movement of elevation and descent (that of the ‘climbers’), the search for an exit, and the three categories of figures are the essential elements that allow for this interpretation.

Beckett defined the definitive structure of the text in one of the final drafts, in which it is clear that one section is dedicated to each new element and that, crucially, derision is directed at the need for (spiritual) elevation insofar as ‘le but des échelles est de porter les chercheurs aux niches’ (Beckett 2010: 10) and either to find the unattainable region where ‘le zénith garde encore sa légende’ (Beckett 2010: 56), or to wander aimlessly, or to submit to complete motionlessness:

1. Séjour « <Espace> Séjour où des corps... premier aperçu du séjour »
2. Population et notion « un corps par mètre carré donne un total de deux cents corps chiffre rond.... Voilà en gros pour ces corps vus sous un premier angle et pour cette notion et ses suites si elle est maintenue »
3. Séjour 2. « Intérieur d’un cylindre ayant cinquante mètres de pourtour et seize de haut pour l’harmonie soit douze cents mètres carrés de surface totale soit...une vingtaine de niches dont plusieurs reliée entre elles par des tunnels. »

4. Issue « Depuis toujours le bruit court ou encore mieux l'idée a cours qu'il existe une issue... Sa petite lumière inutile sera bien la dernière à les quitter si tant est que le noir les attende »
5. Zénith « Debout au sommet de la grande échelle développée au maximum... les amateurs de mythe une issue vers terre et ciel. »
6. Echelles vides « L'emploi des échelles est régi par des convention d'origine obscure.... Voilà un premier aperçu du code des grimpeurs »
7. Echelles transport « Le transport non plus ne se fait pas n'importe comment mais toujours en longeant le mur dans le sens du tourbillon... Et en se faisant le plus plats possible »
8. Sédentaires piste et vaincus « Il est curieux de noter la présence sur la piste d'un certain nombre de sédentaires debout ou assis contre le mur... [*manuscript revision end page 6*: « Collés au mur également les quatre cinquièmes des vaincus tant assis que debouts. On peut leur marcher dessus sans qu'ils réagissent »]
9. Population notion 2

*(MS p. 7 - Beckett's page numbering)*

The theme of wandering, together with the loss of landmarks, is a clear sign of the downfall of man.<sup>14</sup> The search for landmarks is a central theme in the trilogy. Molloy's attempt to define the object of his speech 'I did not lose sight of my immediate goal' proves to no avail as he indefinitely strays from it. He had formerly observed that 'I must have completely lost my sense of direction' (Beckett 2003: 29). Soon after, this ideal direction is lost from sight again, both literally and figuratively, as he finds himself hesitating once more: 'I did not know if I was on one of those right roads, and that disturbed me, like all recall to life' (Beckett 2003: 31).

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<sup>14</sup> For further reference, see for instance David Addyman's article on the theme of wayfinding and disorientation in *Waiting for Godot* and the fiction (URL <<http://www.gg.rhul.ac.uk/cultspaces/papers/Addyman.p.pdf>>, accessed 1/09/2011). This loss of orientation is, as François Paré argues, one of the characteristic features of the conception of existence that lies at the heart of the *Pensées*. Contrary to Montaigne, 'Pascal n'évoque le changement incessant et la diversité que comme les signes d'une déchéance morale. Loin de conduire à la vérité, ces manifestations de l'irrationnel témoignent plutôt de la soif d'illusion d'une humanité détournée des enjeux profonds de son avenir' (Paré 2001: 73).

As we shall see, the criticism that underlies *Le Dépeupleur* resembles Pascal's own observation that 'tous errent d'autant plus dangereusement qu'ils suivent chacun une vérité; leur faute n'est pas de suivre une fausseté, mais de ne pas suivre une autre vérité' (Pascal 2004: #413). In the preliminary description of the 'abode' – the first survey of the place that the narrator calls its 'first aperçu'<sup>15</sup> – the emphasis is put on searching as an underlying theme. It is set up in the opening line: 'Séjour où des corps vont cherchant chacun son dépeupleur' (Beckett 2010: 7).<sup>16</sup> While the object of this search is eventually given later in the piece (an 'exit'), it remains abstract and unfamiliar to the reader. In the English version the meaning is more explicit 'lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one'.<sup>17</sup> The 'abode' is described as both limitless and defined by precise contours, as its cylindrical shape is specified, as well as its major characteristics, in successive, and hesitant, movements of the voice towards a new aspect: 'la lumière', 'le halètement qui l'agite' and its consequences upon the behaviour of the 'dwellers', and, finally, 'la température'. The existence of an omniscient entity, capable of embracing a full view of the abode, is suggested by the speaker, only to be rejected: 'Harmonie que seul peut goûter qui par longue fréquentation connaît à fond l'ensemble des niches au point de posséder une image mentale parfaite. Or il est douteux qu'un tel existe' (Beckett 2010: 10-11).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> English words put in inverted comas correspond to Beckett's translation of the text.

<sup>16</sup> This sentence is a regular alexandrin, structured upon a remarkable harmony that is sustained by the regularity of the rhythm: it is composed of a six-syllable line (séjour où / des corps vont) that is perfectly balanced (3/3); the theme of the quest is introduced and isolated by the unexpected use of the present participle 'cherchant', only to be followed by another six-syllable line: 'chacun son / dépeupleur' (3/3).

<sup>17</sup> Ruby Cohn explains that 'each dweller seeks for his/her dépeupleur' although 'the search soon shifts to a possible exit from the cylinder' (Cohn 2004: 311). Pascal Casanova remarks that the 'odd' translation of the title indicates that 'le dépeuplement dont il s'agit est celui, progressif, qui s'opère dans les corps; c'est l'abandon, la séparation progressive de l'âme et du corps, du désir et du corps, du mouvement de la volonté et du corps' which is comparable to Murphy's 'exile' (Casanova 1997: 108).

<sup>18</sup> This inaccessible 'perfect mental image' (Beckett 1995: 204) coincides with Pascal's insistence on the necessity of *feeling* truth rather than attaining it through abstract reasoning as had, for instance, Descartes. The vision, however, can only remain imperfect, a mere figure: 'nous sentons une image de la vérité'. As suggested in the above-quoted line, the impossibility to fully grasp truth is echoed in Beckett's text.

The rhythm of the prose is based on a juxtaposition of contraries, in Beckett's own words, on a 'va-et-vient vertigineux entre des extrêmes se touchant' (Beckett 2010: 14),<sup>19</sup> even as its evolution is elaborated around a series of isolated terms: 'Séjour [...] Lumière [...] Le halètement [...] Température [...] Echelles'. These words punctuate the opening sequence until the voice moves on to the description of the 'little people'.<sup>20</sup> The constant oscillation from one extreme to the other is illustrated in the description of the abode, which is 'Assez vaste pour permettre de chercher en vain. Assez restreint pour que toute fuite soit vaine', just as, a few lines further down, the alternation between light and darkness is introduced in the figuration of the eye: 'l'oeil qui cherche' / 'l'oeil [...] ne cherchant plus' (Beckett 2010: 7).<sup>21</sup> The alternation between light and obscurity, and the oscillating temperature, 'coincide' so that the intermediate moments of rest prefigure a looming end, where stillness and silence become absolute: 'Tous se figent alors. Tout va peut-être finir' (Beckett 2010: 7). The oscillation between times of silence and the emergence of sounds bestows an unreal quality on anything that breaks the monotony and the uniformity of this universe: 'un baiser fait un bruit indescriptible' (Beckett 2010: 8).

The voice goes on to describe the environment in which these figures evolve, dwelling on the description of the chaotic disposition of ladders: 'elles s'appuient contre le mur de façon peu harmonieuse'. These ladders are of varying height and form: 'plusieurs sont à coulisses' (Beckett 2010: 9). The difficulty of climbing up and down these ladders

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<sup>19</sup> This expression was probably inspired by one of the images developed in the fragment on the disproportion of man, even if Beckett does not follow Pascal's essentialist conception, and proceeds to distort it through parody: 'Ces extrémités se touchent et se réunissent à force de s'être éloignées, et se retrouvent en Dieu, et en Dieu seulement' (Pascal 2004: #185).

<sup>20</sup> Hugh Kenner argues that Beckett's work was elaborated out of two theories of physics: the law of the conservation of energy and the second law of thermodynamics (entropy). This interest manifests the author's desire to develop different types of discourse in the later prose, on which a new form of writing is to be grounded, 'with emphasis on the highly special physical arrangements [...] a setting so overwhelming, so arbitrary, so referrable to mechanical superintendance perhaps, that it determines what little it can occur' (Kenner 1973: 180-181).

<sup>21</sup> In this text, Beckett literally transposes the ontological condition of 'l'aveuglement et misère de l'homme' – blindness becomes a physical attribute of the figures, for instance: 'loin de pouvoir imaginer leur état ultime où chaque corps sera fixe et chaque oeil vide' (Beckett 2010: 13).

emphasizes the lack of energy of these figures, ‘bodies’ that ‘brush together with a rustle of dry leaves’, along with the impression of finishing lives that are caught in a world full of lethargy and silence: ‘il leur manque à toutes la moitié des échelons et cela de façon peu harmonique’ (Beckett 2010: 9).

The study of the different manuscript versions is evidence of what Stanley Gontarky called Beckett’s method of ‘undoing’.<sup>22</sup> The author gradually reduced the final version of the piece to its most essential elements. He thus subdued the references to religion that were evident in the manuscript versions of the text, although some subsist: ‘Beckett set out to expurge ornament [...] to write less, to remove all but the essentials from his art, to distill his essences and so to develop his own astringent, dessicated, monochromatic minimalism, miniaturizations, [...] he continued his ontological exploration of being in narrative and finally being as narrative, producing in the body the text as body’ (Gontarski 1995: xv). Similarly, Rubin Rabinowitz had pointed out that Beckett ‘uses progressively simpler shelters – such as a house, room, shed, ditch, urn, cylinder, to create hierarchies that convey a sense of diminution or deprivation’ (Rabinowitz 1985: 326).

The need for elevation towards an ‘inviolable zenith’ (Beckett 1995: 207) is predominant, insofar as ‘le besoin de grimper est trop répandu. Ne plus l’éprouver est une délivrance rare’ (Beckett 2010: 9). It should be borne in mind that this sequence was originally conceived in a more descriptive (hence neutral) tone: ‘Car le besoin de grimper au mur est ressenti par le plus grand nombre et reconnu par ceux qui ne l’ont plus ou ne l’ont pas’ (MS 1536/2, p.2). The variation perfectly illustrates the characteristic tendency of the writing to move towards abstraction. It reveals the underlying satirical stance towards any manifestation of spiritual zeal, the craving for ‘a way out’ (Beckett 1995: 206). The subdued sarcasm is again apparent when the voice mentions the desire to explore ‘à loisir la zone

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<sup>22</sup> See Stanley Gontarski’s preface to the Grove Press collection of short prose.

fabuleuse dite inaccessible' (Beckett 2010: 17). Earlier in the text, this 'unviolable zenith' is described as 'le lointain plafond où il ne peut y avoir personne' (Beckett 2010: 7).

The ironical distancing becomes apparent in the recurrence of contraries, 'darkness'/'light', 'stillness' or 'motionlessness'/'restlessness' (Beckett 1995: 206), and the repetition of the word 'harmony' in the English version.<sup>23</sup> The word 'belief' replaces the more pejorative expression 'vue de l'esprit' (Beckett 2010: 11) to introduce the theme of the 'exit' alongside that of discouragement: 'A noter à l'appui de cette vue de l'esprit l'existence d'un long tunnel abandonné en cul-de-sac' (Beckett 2010:11). This is continued later on in the sequence where the object of the search is given, that is, an 'exit'. The voice explains that the dispute upon this subject is timeless: 'sur la nature de l'issue et sur son emplacement deux avis se divisent sans les opposer tous ceux qui restent fidèles à cette vieille croyance' (Beckett 2010: 16).

The abode is carefully structured, each type of dweller being assigned its place. Movement is provoked by the need to find a way out, just as order is precariously maintained by the delineation of space for each category. Beckett's text is, like the *Pensées*, wrought around the idea that movement is a sign of misery. Pascal, too, wrote that man no longer belongs to a fixed state: 'Il est tombé de sa place, il la cherche avec inquiétude. C'est ce que tous les hommes font' (Pascal 2004: #442). The entire sequence echoes fragment 122, where Pascal opposes the divergent opinions of the sceptics and the dogmatists to show that both sides are mistaken regarding truth.

In *Le Dépeupleur*, the voice concludes on the insignificance of these divergences by observing (ironically) that 'pour s'en apercevoir il faudrait être dans le secret des dieux' (Beckett 2010: 16). In fragment 139, the voice of divine wisdom remarks that: 'L'oeil de l'homme voyait alors la majesté de Dieu. Il n'était pas alors dans les ténèbres qui l'aveuglent

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<sup>23</sup> See the first sequence of *The Lost Ones*, in Beckett 2005, pages 202, 203, 204 and 205.

ni dans la mortalité et les misères qui l'affligent'. It seems that Beckett took up the image of the (un)searching 'eye of flesh' in the opening paragraph: 'conséquences pour l'oeil qui cherche [...] qui ne cherche pas' (Beckett 2010: 7).

These elements provide additional evidence that Beckett had initially envisaged maintaining an explicit religious background in the early drafts. The omnipresence of this specific vocabulary suggests that the text was originally conceived as a parody of religious sentiment, mocking disputes, which Pascal exposed as empty rhetoric. Additional passages tend to confirm this. For instance, the voice describes the shifting attitudes towards the question of the location of the inaccessible 'way out', using words that clearly belong to the religious domain: 'les conversions sont fréquentes et les reconversions si bien que tel qui à un moment donné ne jurait que par le plafond peut très bien dans l'instant qui suit <ne jurer que par la galerie> et sans être gêné ne jurer que par la galerie pour redevenir tout naturellement peu de temps après celui qu'il était et inversement' (MS 1536/2, p. 6).

In the second draft of the text, a manuscript dated 'Paris, 31 October 1965' and held at the Beckett International Foundation (MS1536/2), Beckett cut a passage that emphasizes the 'folly' of the 'âmes obsédées' (changed into 'cœurs possédés' in the published version) who engage in such futile disputes (referred to as 'cette tradition si remarquable' in the manuscript). This recalls the main argument of the *Lettres Provinciales*: 'toute la folie alors apparaîtra et même l'indécence de celui qui court après une voie de sortie problématique [...] C'est ainsi en tout cas qu'avec une lenteur infinie pour ceux coupables de cette faute l'issue se transfère des galeries à l'inaccessible centre du plafond avant de s'effacer tout à fait dans un avenir inconcevable' (MS 1536/2, p. 6). The vocabulary used ('folie', 'indécence', 'coupable', 'faute', 'inconcevable') is reminiscent of the pugnacious tone of the *Lettres* as Pascal sets out to uncover truth, and to denounce the 'impostures ignorantes' of Jesuit morals, assailing his adversaries with ridicule. In Beckett's draft, the satirical take is just as apparent

in the sequence in which the voice describes the source of this motivation: ‘De tout temps le bruit court ou encore mieux l’idée a cours qu’il existe une issue. Ceux qui n’y croient plus ne sont pas à l’abri d’y croire de nouveau conformément à la notion qui veut tant qu’elle dure qu’ici tout se meure mais d’une mort si graduelle et pour tout dire si fluctuante qu’elle échapperait même à un visiteur’ (Beckett 2010: 15).

In the same early manuscript version, Beckett suppressed a passage where the ‘searchers’ were initially divided into three categories. The choice of words indicates that it was clearly constructed upon a fragment from the *Pensées*. In this earlier version, Beckett had written the following specification:

Les grimpeurs sont de trois sortes. Ceux qui s’adonnent sans arrière pensée au simple plaisir de grimper <monter> et de descendre. Ceux qui veulent occuper un poste d’élévation sur-élevé. Ceux enfin qui ont besoin d’accéder aux niches. (MS1536/2)

Initially, the distinctions were delimited in a less complex way. The first group is defined as being prone to agitation and movement, to pure diversion (‘simple plaisir’), while the second seeks domination.<sup>24</sup> In addition, the division between searchers and non-searchers was explicit in the draft, as the voice specified that ‘chacune de ces trois familles a ses chercheurs et ses non-chercheurs. Rien n’empêche d’être immobile tout en dévorant du regard chaque corps qui passe et chaque visage ni d’errer sans trêve sans jamais lever les yeux du sol’ (MS 1563/2, p. 4).

This again recalls the compelling evocation of the Fall in the *Pensées*, as Pascal writes: ‘malheureux que nous sommes et plus s’il n’y avait point de grandeur dans notre condition, nous avons une idée du bonheur et ne nous pouvons y arriver, nous sentons une image de la vérité et ne possédons que le mensonge, incapables d’ignorer absolument et de savoir

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<sup>24</sup> The third category’s need to attain the ‘niches’ may be explained by a desire to remain isolated, which corresponds to the definition given in the final version of the text for the ‘non-searchers’.

certainement, tant il est manifeste que nous avons été dans un degré de perfection dont nous sommes malheureusement déçus' (Pascal 2004: #122).

One fragment in particular calls for an analogy to be established with Beckett's text. The earlier categorization in the draft seems to have been elaborated from Pascal's division of humanity into two categories, each comprising three subdivisions:

Il n'y a que trois sortes de personnes: les uns qui servent Dieu l'ayant trouvé, les autres qui s'emploient à le chercher ne l'ayant pas trouvé, les autres qui vivent sans le chercher ni l'avoir trouvé. Les premiers sont raisonnables et heureux, les derniers sont fous et malheureux, ceux du milieu sont malheureux et raisonnables. (Pascal 2004: #149)

This particular fragment is one of the most suggestive expressions of Pascal's conception of grace. All the necessary components to highlight Pascal's understanding of grace are comprised here; the question of predestination and divine election. In Beckett's text, the figure of the 'le juste' is somewhat downplayed as it corresponds to the 'happy few' among the dwellers who use the missing rungs 'mainly for attack or self-defence' (Beckett 19995: 205). Pascal distinguishes between those who are 'raisonnables' (for either they have already found or they are searching for God), and those who are 'malheureux' because they have not found God or are not preoccupied by religion. Those belonging to this last category remain indifferent to the question of salvation. Because it integrates elements from the opposite categories, 'raisonnable' and 'malheureux', the intermediate category defines mankind in its very essence.

A clear coincidence between the categorization of the figures in Beckett's text and the above-quoted fragment can be drawn from precise textual elements. Indeed, the population of the abode is divided into two distinct types of dwellers: the searchers and the non-searchers. The searchers remain in a blinded state of agitation, 'des intéressés étourdis soit par la passion qui les habite encore soit par l'état de langueur auquel insensiblement ils sont parvenus'

(Beckett 2010: 13). The French word 's'enfiévrer', which echoes the vocabulary of passions, seems to have been toned down in the English translation, as Beckett used the verb 'kindle'. Love, for instance, is referred to as a 'flamme funeste' by Phèdre in Act V, scene 7, lines 1625-1626.

The most evident parallels with Pascal's fragment can be drawn in terms of enunciation: within the category of the 'searchers' there are three types which the voice enumerates in a methodological order, following a hierarchy: 'Premièrement ceux qui circulent sans arrêt. Deuxièmement ceux qui s'arrêtent quelquefois. Troisièmement ceux qui à moins d'en être chassés ne quittent jamais la place qu'ils ont conquise et chassés se jettent sur la première de libre pour s'y immobiliser de nouveau'. These 'sedentary searchers' may be prone to experience that desire again, because 'il n'en est pas moins sujet à d'étranges résurrections' (Beckett 2010: 12). The climbers concentrate around the ladders. To continue the analogy with Pascal's conception of grace, this varying state echoes divine dispensation of grace in the *Ecrits sur la grâce*. Grace can be acquired and taken away insofar as, firstly, 'Dieu ne laisse jamais un juste, si le juste ne le laisse le premier' (Pascal 2000: 216) and besides this lack in perseverance, 'Dieu laisse parfois les justes avant qu'ils ne l'aient laissé; c'est-à-dire que Dieu ne donne pas toujours aux justes le pouvoir prochain de persévérer dans la prière' (Pascal 2000: 217).

The vanquished, however, are a distinct category, which is studied in the final sequence of the text: 'Collés au mur également les quatre cinquièmes des vaincus tant assis que debout. On peut leur marcher dessus sans qu'ils réagissent' (Beckett 2010: 24). Because they are overwhelmed by weariness, the non-searchers occupy the intermediate space of the cylinder, which, as for Pascal, is ontologically the most significant. The final episode anticipates such an ending: 'le vieux vaincu de la troisième zone n'a plus autour de lui que des figés à son image au tronc profondément courbé vers le sol' (Beckett 2010: 50).

In the sequence where the voice returns to the description of the inner organization of the cylinder, space is carefully delimited for each category and thus divided into different areas, which are designated as ‘zones’ in the French text.<sup>25</sup> The vertical organization of space is symbolically represented by the ladders and the niches, and horizontality by the arena: ‘A noter enfin le soin que mettent les chercheurs de l’arène à ne pas déborder sur l’espace des grimpeurs’ (Beckett 2010: 24). This is developed later on, when the existence of an intermediate zone is mentioned for the first time: ‘Ensuite une ceinture intérieure légèrement plus étroite où lentement défilent à l’indienne ceux qui las de chercher au centre se tournent vers la périphérie’ (Beckett 2010: 25-26). The impossibility of communicating is highlighted by the voice’s incapacity to achieve omniscience. This is brought out by a number of expressions: ‘il suffit de supposer’ (Beckett 2010: 13), ‘loin de pouvoir imaginer leur état ultime’ (Beckett 2010: 13), ‘il faudrait être dans le secret des dieux’ (Beckett 2010: 16), ‘si tant est que le noir les attende’ (Beckett 2010: 17), ‘tout n’a pas été dit et ne le sera jamais’ (Beckett 2010: 42).

The derisive tone targeting any rational attempt to account for the existence of the cylinder is foreshadowed by this remark and made all the more explicit when a comment on the (improper) use of words is inserted: ‘Et pour l’être pensant venu se pencher froidement sur toutes ces données et évidences il serait vraiment difficile au bout de son analyse de ne pas estimer à tort qu’au lieu d’employer le terme vaincus qui a en effet un petit côté pathétique désagréable on ferait mieux de parler d’aveugles tout court’ (Beckett 2010: 33).<sup>26</sup> While a

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<sup>25</sup> For a reading of *Le Dépeupleur* in relation to the tripartite division of Murphy’s zones, see Rabaté:1999). The author argues that the threefold division of the monadic self must be read primarily through the religious circles in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The historical dimension should not be left aside, as it is implied by the clear reference made to Primo Levi’s *Si c’est un homme*: ‘lorsque Beckett s’efforce de structurer et de mathématiser l’impensable de l’expérience limite telle que la survie des prisonniers d’Auschwitz, il vise d’une part à tester la force des structures qui peuvent rester prégnantes, d’autre part à les mettre en question’ (Rabaté 1999: 82). This tends to confirm that the religious background to the work is fundamental.

<sup>26</sup> The programmatic tone of the opening sentence in the first two drafts justifies a reading of the narrative as the account of an ongoing scientific experiment. Among other commentators, Weber-Klapisch has defended this interpretation. It was discarded, however, by Beckett: ‘Etablir un espace où réunis à demeure les corps pour la

concession is made, ‘en effet’, this scientific approach is deemed just as inadequate as any other attempt to elicit meaning: ‘estimer à tort’. The ‘rational being’ is nothing more than a stereotype, ‘venu se pencher froidement’, that the voice immediately discards as yet another ‘chimera’.

The different types of individuals amidst the searchers continue to be declined in various types: on the one hand, those who, because they are ‘sedentary searchers’, adopt the silence and the stillness of the non-searchers; on the other, the ‘semi-sages’, who isolate themselves from the frenzied activity of those who persist in circulating ‘dans le sens du tourbillon’. The voice observes that ‘Il est curieux de noter la présence d’un certain nombre de sédentaires assis ou debout contre le mur’ (Beckett 2004: 23). Although an inconvenience, ‘aussi bien pour le transport que pour l’attente’, these ‘semi-sages’ or ‘sedentary searchers’ have a privileged status because they have become an object of worship: ‘[ils] inspirent à ceux qui s’agitent encore sinon un culte du moins une certaine déférence’ (Beckett 2010: 24).

Interestingly, Beckett appears to have hesitated to elaborate the description of the central space at this stage of the writing. The final version evokes the agitated movement of the crowd of searchers in a ‘pullulement central’. This expression remains close to an earlier variant, ‘grouillement central’ (MS 1536/7). In a later variant, however, the focus is no longer set on the population but on the infinite depth of the abode, ‘abîme central’ (MS 1536/8), whereby the emphasis on the reference to Dante would have been more obvious, as many commentators observed.

The ‘non-searchers’ correspond, then, to the ‘vanquished’: ‘Ils peuvent attendre au pied des échelles et quand vient leur tour monter dans les niches ou tout simplement quitter le sol. Ils peuvent ramper à tâtons dans les tunnels en quête de rien. Mais normalement l’abandon les fige aussi bien dans l’espace que dans l’attitude’ (Beckett 2010: 26). Having

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plupart <puissent errer> errent à la recherche les uns des autres ou <par simple besoin de mouvement> pour toute autre raison’ (MS 1536/2, p. 1).

reached a state of indifference, their condition, even if it is subjected to the will of others, is the most enviable. Unlike the searchers, ‘ceux restés fidèles qui inlassablement vont et viennent sans jamais s’accorder le moindre repos’ (Beckett 2010: 29), and for whom ‘la passion de chercher est telle qu’elle oblige à chercher partout’ (Beckett 2010: 42), the ‘soi-disant vaincus’ (Beckett 2010: 29), are ‘figés pour de bon chacun à sa place et dans son attitude’ (Beckett 2010:28).

The ‘sedentary searchers’ arguably correspond to Pascal’s ‘demi-habile’, whereas the vanquished, in their indifference, have attained a superiority of judgement, a form of unmatched lucidity that invokes the figure of the ‘habile’ in the *Pensées*.<sup>27</sup> Here again, Beckett uses the theme of the wager to evoke the reasoning of the first type. This is all the more interesting in that the voice indicates that they are coming close to the second state, while the ‘searchers’, consisting of the majority, are less likely to attain it: ‘Quant aux chercheurs sédentaires s’ils ne circulent plus c’est qu’ils ont *fait le calcul et estiment avoir plus de chance* en restant à la place qu’ils ont conquise et s’ils ne montent presque plus dans les niches ou les tunnels c’est pour y être montés trop souvent en vain ou pour y avoir fait de trop mauvaises rencontres’ (Beckett 2010: 27).

This sequence provides evidence that Beckett remembered Pascal’s wager as a literary image that he was to explore throughout his work, in the insistence on probability (this is explicit in *Molloy* and *Waiting For Godot*). Here, the italics indicate the expressions that

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<sup>27</sup> Laurent Thirouin specifies that Pascal’s distinction between demi-habiles and habiles is to be understood in terms of an attitude towards established rules, beliefs and habits. The difference lies in their rejection, or acceptance, of an arbitrary order: ‘Les demi-habiles considèrent un homme d’avant la chute, un homme qui participait aux vérités essentielles. Il pouvait alors exiger de ses lois qu’elles traduisent des valeurs dont il avait connaissance. Mais sa déchéance l’a rendu incapable d’échapper au monde du relatif et du contingent. L’ordre arbitraire, aujourd’hui, le scandalise: il aimerait que soit tenu compte des mérites, que la richesse récompense les plus utiles à la communauté, que le pouvoir revienne aux meilleurs et aux plus capables. Mais il est bien en peine de reconnaître les meilleurs et les plus capables. [...] Demi-habiles et habiles s’accordent en fait sur l’analyse mais, n’étant pas également avancés dans la connaissance du monde, ils en tirent des conclusions opposées. Pour les premiers, la mise en évidence du hasard suffit à disqualifier l’ordre social. Pour les seconds, elle le déconsidère en effet, mais la sujétion au hasard étant une constante de l’humanité, la question reste inchangée. [...] Appliquant une règle qu’il sait impertinente, l’habile est véritablement un joueur: la pensée de derrière, qui le distingue du peuple, est ce qui constitue en règle de jeu la règle sociale qu’il observe, ce par quoi il obéit rigoureusement tout en la méprisant’ (Thirouin 1991: 29). The voice likewise distinguishes the figures in terms of the state they have adopted: agitation or acceptance.

evoke Pascal's wager which is famously constructed on a mathematical argument. The main strategy is to force the unbeliever into a necessary choice, 'vous êtes embarqué', and then to suppress one by one any reluctance to do so, by using concrete examples:

quand il y aurait une infinité de hasards dont un seul serait pour vous, vous auriez encore raison de gager un pour avoir deux, et vous agirez de mauvais sens, en étant obligé à jouer, de refuser de jouer une vie contre trois à un jeu où d'une infinité de hasard il y en a un pour vous, s'il y avait une infinité de vie infiniment heureuse à gagner; mais il y a ici une infinité de vie infiniment heureuse à gagner, un hasard de gain contre un nombre fini de hasard et de perte'. (Pascal 2004: #397)

The similarities with the plight described in *Le dépeupleur* are striking: firstly, the situation cannot be escaped, secondly, the most advantageous response is explicitly given: it is that of the 'vanquished'.

The 'vanquished' coincide with themselves in their acceptance of solitude. Their situation resembles Schopenhauerian will-lessness, in its uncompromised surrender to stillness and silence. In the final sequence there is an arresting portrait of a woman symbolizing that state: 'il existe un nord sous la forme d'un vaincu ou mieux encore d'une vaincue ou mieux encore de la vaincue' (Beckett 2010: 46). Her significance is suggested in the fact that, to others, 'elle est le nord. Elle plutôt qu'un autre vaincu en raison de sa fixité plus grande. A qui exceptionnellement veut faire le point elle peut servir' (Beckett 2010: 46). She forms a stark contrast with the other figures, who are described in a manner that calls to mind Pascal's remark that 'nous courons sans souci dans le précipice après que nous avons mis quelque chose devant pour nous empêcher de le voir' (Pascal 2004: #155).

Intermittent encounters in moments of respite allow the presence of the other to be acknowledged: 'encore plus curieux à ce moment-là s'ils n'étaient si peu visibles tous les yeux fureteurs qui se figent en chemin et se braquent sur le vide ou le haïssable de toujours

dont d'autres yeux et comme ils plongent alors les uns dans les autres dans des regards faits pour se fuir' (Beckett 2010: 44). It is repeated in the final sequence: 'le voilà donc si c'est un homme qui rouvre les yeux et au bout d'un certain temps se fraye un chemin jusqu'à cette première vaincue si souvent prise comme repère. A genoux il écarte la lourde chevelure qui n'offre pas de résistance' (Beckett 2010: 50).

The inversion of the narrative process is carried out with the greatest economy, by maintaining a sense of mystery through the absence of resolution.<sup>28</sup> The *dénouement* is once more delayed in the final coda: 'ainsi de suite à l'infini jusqu'à ce que vers l'impensable fin seul un dernier cherche encore par faibles à-coups' (Beckett 2010: 49). Relying on the theme of the quest, the text of *Le Dépeupleur* can also be read as a variation on one of Pascal's major themes, the tragic deferral of living presence: 'nous ne vivons jamais, nous espérons de vivre, et nous disposant toujours à être heureux, il est inévitable que nous ne le soyons jamais'.

The images initially developed are taken up in later sequences, to form a rhapsodic balance that sustains the gradual (Sadean) complication of figures, with the evocation of an activity whose multiple form (the sudden changes in temperature, the frequent lapses into darkness) leads to an even greater loss of physical and mental energy. Pascal insists upon our incapacity to feel any extremity: 'Nous ne sentons ni l'extrême chaud, ni l'extrême froid; les qualités excessives nous sont ennemies et non pas sensibles, nous ne les sentons plus, nous les souffrons' (Pascal 2004: #185). In this sense, the text of *Le Dépeupleur* embodies pure suffering. Insofar as irony targets 'les amateurs de mythes', who are identifiable in their urge to reproduce attitudes and 'beliefs' that are reminiscent of a religious attitude or of

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<sup>28</sup> Ruby Cohn points out that while focalisation remains external throughout the text, 'we sense an intensity of suffering [...] the cylinder dwellers are tortured by touch [...] the cylinder is impervious to human suffering. Yet human action is widespread: ladder climbers can be assaulted, sedentary ones react violently when stepped on, coition is frenzied, and infringement of rules excites mob action' (Cohn 2004: 312).

spirituality, the resulting comic tone plays down, at least intermittently, the cruelty and sense of an impending doom that pervades the piece.

## II. THE PASCALIAN BLANK VERSE POEMS AND BECKETT'S SHORTER TEXTS

The study of the formal correspondences between Pascal and Beckett that have been broached in the previous chapter will be continued in the present section. One of the central assumptions made in this study is that Pascal's writing was a model that inspired Beckett to elaborate his 'syntax of weakness'. Pascal is effectively the first (French) writer to have chosen brevity and simplicity, and to have worked at reducing his prose. The rejection of a convoluted, metaphorical style, in favour of more direct expression, is a first indication of this literary filiation. Pascal's preference for direct expression – simple even to the point of barrenness – is indicated in the following fragment: '“J'ai l'esprit d'inquiétude”. “Je suis plein d'inquiétude” vaut mieux' (Pascal 2004: #499).<sup>29</sup>

Beckett told Charles Juliet that the purpose of his art was to find a form that would enable him to evoke life and death with a maximum of economy: 'Pouvoir dire la vie et la mort en un espace extrêmement réduit à l'instar d'un Saint Jérôme méditant auprès d'une tête de mort' (Juliet 1997: 61). He was no doubt thinking of seventeenth century Dutch paintings – particularly the works of Vermeer, Rembrandt and Brueghel. French painters would include Georges de la Tour and Philippe de Champaigne, who was closely acquainted with Port-Royal.

The proper aim of art, in short, is to express the incommensurable. Echoing Montaigne's phrase 'je ne peins pas l'être, je peins le passage', the later Beckett sought to arrest in words that which cannot be suspended or represented, concentrating instead on

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<sup>29</sup> On February 16, 1962, Beckett mentioned a similar distaste for the kind of poetry that relies on illusory, convoluted images to author/stage director Valérie Novarina: 'la poésie est faite d'images, j'ai horreur des images' (Beckett quoted in Gavard-Perret 2001: 42).

absence. One critic has observed, accordingly, that in Beckett's late prose narratives, 'the process of lessening language is infused within the living-dying spectrum of human experience' (Robinson 1995: 217).

It seems that Pascal was one of the writers who taught him to write on the inexpressible. As we have seen, the themes they shared include the image of man as a 'milieu entre rien et tout', the incomprehensible, and complexity. The aim here then is to consider the different ways in which Pascal's influence remained as pregnant in the later decades as it was in the years of Beckett's 'frenzy of writing' (1946-51). As in the trilogy, there is evidence that Beckett's admiration was stirred by Pascal's remarkable ability to convey within a single image the extremes that characterize the human condition. Thematically, these later Beckett texts are reminiscent of Pascal's evocation of man's awe before the infinite universe, which is then contrasted with his innermost frailty.<sup>30</sup>

#### 1. Pascal as a forerunner of blank verse (Beckett and Claudel)

As Laurent Susini observes, 'la volonté de faire court et l'entreprise d'élagage qu'elle commande s'observent dans les *Pensées* tant au niveau micro-structural de la phrase, qu'au niveau macro-structural du fragment. Toujours soucieux d'alléger sa syntaxe, Pascal ne cesse en premier lieu de tendre vers l'allègement maximal, et partant, vers la plus grande simplicité (Susini 2003: 280). This desire to create a prose less subjected to convention, a 'manière d'écrire qui s'insinue le mieux, qui demeure le plus dans la mémoire, et qui se fait le plus citer' (Pascal 2004: #628), led Pascal to be particularly attentive to the formal qualities of his prose. The correspondence with the principle of internal harmony found between consonantal

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<sup>30</sup> According to James Knowlson, Goethe's poem 'Prometheus' is one of Beckett's sources that accounts for the outcry and resentment against a godhead in the text: 'Il maudira Dieu comme au temps béni' (Beckett 2007: 69).

sounds in prose is an aspect that Beckett took up in his own later writings in French. It indicates further what Beckett may have meant by deciding to forsake style.

Paul Claudel – an author whom Beckett admired – acknowledges his debt to Pascal in *Positions et propositions sur le vers français*, published by Gallimard in 1928 and 1934, and considered foremost prose writers such as Pascal and Rabelais to be greater poets than Racine, Chénier, Baudelaire or Mallarmé. The internal harmony of the line, ‘cet accord intérieur des sonorités’ (Claudel 1965: 36), ensures the fluidity of the sentence maintained by ‘une dominante choisie à un point variable de la phrase et la cadence finale’ (Claudel 1965: 36). This meticulousness anticipates later preoccupations on style (Rimbaud, Gide, Valéry, Claudel himself). In another essay Claudel builds up an unusual canon of writers: ‘Les grands poètes français ne s’appellent pas Malherbe ou Despréaux ou Voltaire, ni même Racine, André Chénier, Baudelaire ou Mallarmé. Ils s’appellent Rabelais, Pascal, Bossuet, Saint-Simon, Chateaubriand, Honoré de Balzac, Michelet ...’. It is likely that during his time as a student in Dublin and then as a *lecteur* in Paris, Beckett became familiar with these ideas.

Beyond the provocation, a fundamental assertion is made in these lines. Claudel believes that Pascal is the creator of the prose poem: ‘le principe de la rime intérieure de l’accord dominant, posé par Pascal, est développé avec une richesse de modulations et de résolution incomparable’ (Claudel 1965: 519). Thus the prose that is truly creative concentrates on expression rather than on the object of discourse, and is primarily concerned with rendering the fragmentary nature of thought, the ‘silences’ that punctuate the text: ‘la marche de la pensée aussi, qui procède non plus par développement logique mais, comme chez le musicien, par dessins mélodiques et le rapport de notes juxtaposées.’<sup>31</sup>

Beckett’s reflections on language in the 1937 letter to Axel Kaun echoes Claudel’s assertion that being (thought, feeling and existence altogether) is discontinuous and that art is

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<sup>31</sup> An example of this internal rhyme scheme will be studied in the next section on *Sans/Lessness*.

therefore incapable, ‘de donner une image exacte des allures de la pensée si l’on ne tient pas compte du blanc et de l’intermittence’ (Claudel 1965: 3). Moreover, Claudel’s subsequent remark that the intermediate unoccupied space is the essential space of poetic expression bears a particular resonance for the definition of his main preoccupation. He writes that ‘le vers essentiel et primordial, l’élément premier du langage, antérieur au mots eux-mêmes’ is ‘une idée isolée par du blanc’. Two years later, in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* Beckett would likewise write, that ‘the experience of my reader shall be between the phrases, in the silence, communicated by the intervals not the terms, of the statement, between the flowers that cannot coexist, the antithetical (nothing so simple as antithetical) seasons of words, his experience shall be the menace, the miracle, the memory, of an unspeakable trajectory’ (Beckett 1997: 140).

The notable difference between the two writers is that Beckett is concerned with the ‘problematic’ nature of the word, insisting on its failure, while Claudel sees an inherent spiritual quality in silence. Meaning is built up progressively as the work of art takes shape, so that, contrary to an ordinary perception of the creative act, words are given their meaning in the process of elaboration: ‘les mots ne sont que les fragments découpés d’un ensemble qui leur est antérieur’ (Claudel 1965: 30). Claudel rejects (as did Pascal) both verse count and the end rhyme, to focus on the patterning of sound echoes.<sup>32</sup>

Another element worthy of note is that in the ‘Mémorial’ and the text known as ‘Le Mystère de Jésus’, Pascal anticipates a second aspect of the prose poem, along with discontinuity, which is the establishment of lists: the ‘art de la notation’ (Jouslin 2003: 746).<sup>33</sup> This creates an equilibrium insofar as ‘la note la plus élevée en timbre [sert] élégamment de résolution à la note la plus basse’ (Claudel 1965: 56). The basic pattern, which allows

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<sup>32</sup> Illustrations can be found in the fragment on man’s disproportion, which are either doubled, for instance in the following proposition: ‘le néant dont il est tiré et l’infini où il est englouti’, or prolonged throughout a single segment, ‘rien ne peut fixer le fini entre les deux infinis qui l’enferment et le fuient’ (Pascal 2004: #185).

<sup>33</sup> Inasmuch as Beckett’s own lists have been much commented upon, a potential parallel between Beckettian enumerations and the lists elaborated in the *Provinciales* should be borne in mind.

modulations to be made, is found in the prose of the *Pensées*. Claudel observes that the sentence ‘Que de royaumes – nous ignorent !’ comprises, together with a 4-beat measure set before and after the caesura, an entire scale of notes, so that ‘la gravité de *l’au* et l’éclat de *l’o* sont encore accentués par les consonnes qui les suivent’ (Claudel 1965: 36).

A brief commentary on the famous phrase ‘Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis – m’effraie’ provides more insight into the poetic resonance of that principle: ‘Dissyllabe net et ouvert sur un blanc faisant équilibre à lui seul à cette grande phrase légère et spacieuse composée de quatre anapestes. Remarquez en soutien le choc sourd des deux nasales *an* et *in*. Aussi cette espèce de déhiscence sidérale entre *espaces* et *infini*’ (Claudel 1965: 37). This poetic mastery of language and musicality come close to what, in ‘Dante ... Vico . Bruno .. Joyce’ (1929) Beckett defined as the adequation between content and form.

It is worth observing here that Pascal specialists increasingly concentrate on the poetic nature of Pascal’s prose. Jouslin’s conclusions give a general idea of the evolution of the scholarly stance towards this specific aspect of Pascal’s work:

L’intérêt des poèmes de Pascal dans l’histoire littéraire se révèle extrêmement important et n’est peut être pas assez remarqué. L’auteur des *Pensées* occupe une place centrale dans l’histoire du poème en prose, comme passeur. Partant de la Bible et choisissant la langue prosaïque pour elle-même, comme peu d’autres avant lui, il en fait celle du poème. D’abord comme traducteur du Livre, à la façon de Vigenère, mais il n’en reste pas là. Ses productions propres annoncent les poèmes en prose à venir, ceux qui se trouvent du côté de l’illumination rimbaldienne, comme ceux qui font le choix strict du prosaïsme et, se refusant à tout lyrisme, affirment la poésie d’une prose à la gaucherie choisie, jusqu’à ne plus parfois affecter que la forme sèche d’une simple liste.

Jouslin establishes categories within the Pascalian verse that bring to light these formal similarities between Beckett’s *Mirlitonnades* and some of the poetic techniques at work in the *Pensées*. Most obvious in this respect is the brevity and density, and the studied rhythmic

sequences that mark the texts' specific status within the collection of fragments. Pascal elaborates 'une unité poétique en prose originale [...] dont la caractéristique majeure est l'attention prêtée au rythme qui, même lorsqu'on choisit de quitter le vers, fait encore danser le langage' (Jouslin 2003: 728). This unified whole finds various forms: anaphoric openings, as well as incantatory and combinatory verses, which are found in some of the most famous texts; for instance, this sequence from 'Le Mystère de Jésus':

Jésus souffre dans sa Passion les tourments que lui font les hommes. Mais dans l'agonie il souffre les tourments qu'il se donne à lui-même. Turbare semetipsum. C'est un supplice d'une main non humaine, mais toute-puissante. Et il faut être tout-puissant pour le soutenir. (Pascal 2004: #715)

Also worthy of note is Pascal's anticipation of the elliptical style, Jouslin remarking that fragmentation becomes a recurrent poetic means at the beginning of the modernist period, along with other defining traits:<sup>34</sup> 'les retours à la ligne concertés et la taille des marges indique bien que chaque alinéa résulte d'un choix' (Jouslin 2003: 741).<sup>35</sup>

As shown in the previous chapter, critics have for the most part not looked at formal correspondences between Beckett and Pascal, nor seriously considered whether Beckett might have taken Pascal's prose in the *Pensées*, together with the 'style coupé' of the *Lettres Provinciales*, as models for his own prose. Considering the anticipatory role he played in the elaboration of a modern poetic idiom, recent work on Pascal's style should be recalled here.

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<sup>34</sup> Jouslin writes that an aesthetic shift takes place in the late decades of the nineteenth century. A broken, imperfect style is preferred to the lyrical perfection of past poetic prose. Rather than achieving precision, literary expression progressively sought to express the shortcomings of language as a poetical feature. As Jouslin observes, 'une prose apparaît alors qui, renonçant à la discursivité et à l'hypotaxe, fera de la parataxe son principe actif. Ici encore, Pascal doit être vu comme un précurseur de ce style de l'ellipse' (Jouslin 2003 : 747).

<sup>35</sup> I will not quote the entire fragment given by Jouslin to illustrate this point, only the opening lines. The visual similarities with Beckett's own poems is striking, mainly in terms of the disposition of the lines upon the page, the unsparing use of blanks. Jouslin remarks that, even if this text is clearly a draft, its extreme coherence is remarkable, just as the writing is concentrated throughout (Jouslin 2003: 747):

L'Autorité.

Ils se cachent dans la presse et appellent le nombre à leur secours.

Tumulte.

Tant s'en faut que d'avoir ouï-dire une chose soit la règle de votre créance, que vous ne devez rien croire vous mettre en l'état comme si jamais vous ne l'aviez ouï.

Pascal's apologetic style has been defined as 'un art de la métaphore et du refrain, qui, refusant un usage neutre de la langue, attentif au choix des mots et de leur ordre, s'attache avant tout à émouvoir' (Grasset 2007: 7). The poetic quality of the *Pensées* was elaborated from one privileged source: the Bible. Pascal borrowed the 'language of God', which resulted in the elaboration of a distinct prose style: 'par son goût de l'expressivité, de la simple suggestion, de la densité, de l'éclair, du raccourci, de la brièveté, du fragment, le style concis et fulgurant des *Pensées*, inspiré de la Bible, annonce la poésie moderne dont Pascal doit être considéré comme l'un des précurseurs secrets' (Grasset 2007: 7).

The relationship between Beckett and religious poetry (or mystical writings) has been extensively studied by commentators. I will therefore briefly mention here conclusions that indicate the breadth of interpretative possibilities regarding the impact of the *Pensées* upon Beckett's later short prose.<sup>36</sup>

## 2. The Pascalian fragment and the Mirlitonnades poems

Beckett wrote the *Mirlitonnades* in 1977-8, in particularly trying times. These short pieces, which rely heavily on rhyme and meter, are, according to Knowlson, 'even gloomier than his translations of Chamfort' (Knowlson 1996: 645). As Knowlson remarks, 'the apparent slightness and playfulness of these late 1970s "poèmes courts" (*miniature poems*) should not disguise the seriousness, and to use Beckett's own words, "gloom" of the themes that are broached. Although they have been largely ignored by critics writing about Beckett's work, they offer startling insights into the darkness of his private moods at this time' (Knowlson 1996: 646).

Interestingly, during that period he turned to the *Pensées* at least twice, and translated

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<sup>36</sup> Beckett admired the poetic potential of the pray, stating that the purest form of literary expression is to be found in religious writings: 'yes, prayers rather than poems, because poems are prayers' (quoted in Feldman 2005: 80).

powerful or moving sentences that had a particularly strong resonance for him. One of them is included in his translation of Chamfort's *Maxims*, which he entitled *Long after Chamfort*, and the other is found in his 'Sottisier' notebook. Beckett was fascinated by Pascal's avowal that his aim, in writing, was to reach his own nothingness: 'Je ne tends qu'à connaître mon néant'. There can be no doubt that the choice of these sentences is also due to the sense of their (hidden) poetic quality. The internal rhyme scheme, 'tends'/'néant', along with the steady ternary measure, 'Je ne tends/'qu'à connaître/'mon néant', gives the impression of closure needed for the sentence to be qualified as poetic, a quality that Paul Valéry discerned and lengthily commented upon with regard to another celebrated phrase: 'Le silence/de ces espaces infinis/m'effraie', which Beckett, as we have seen, recalled when he wrote *Eleutheria*.<sup>37</sup>

According to Mattijs Engelberts, the *Mirlitonnades* are inspired by, or at least can be read as, light verse – formal evidence includes brevity, attention to rhyme, and humour. Beckett's light verse is particularly successful because of the gravity of the chosen subjects: 'jeux de mots, rimes, infraction à l'ordre, concision, tous ces moyens sont savamment maniés, mais c'est aussi le contraste entre le jeu littéraire et la légèreté du ton, d'une part, et la gravité des sujets d'autre part, qui donne un relief particulier au light verse beckettien'.

Engelberts rightly argues that the emphasis on negativity has been exaggerated by postmodern critics, in that Beckett's choice of fundamental themes, and his decision to treat them comically in the *Mirlitonnades*, should be borne in mind so as to bring out the full poetic impact of his endeavour: 'contre la tentative de ces critiques qui insistent trop exagérément

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<sup>37</sup> Jouslin summarizes the main characteristics of the Pascalian verse as follows: 'On remarque à chaque fois la brièveté du verset et la grande attention portée au rythme et aux assonances, ces rimes intérieures (i, s, r) qui permettent à Pascal de tresser un réseau d'échos qui va structurer le verset. Il est difficile de voir ici une écriture de moraliste, puisqu'on ne peut considérer comme des maximes des versets sans portée universelle et morale. Ces brefs versets, toujours isolés dans le texte pascalien, ont souvent une résonance lyrique, quels que soient les énonciateurs, les "je" ou les "on" qu'il faut se garder de confondre avec Pascal:

Le silence éternel de ces espaces infinis m'effraie (fr. 233).

L'écoulement.

C'est une chose horrible de sentir s'écouler tout ce qu'on possède (fr. 626).

sur l'absence dans le texte beckettien, il faut souligner le fait que la persistance de l'approche du moi devant la mort, dans l'ensemble de l'œuvre de Beckett, fait de cet auteur un "moderne" plutôt qu'un "postmoderne" (Engelberts 2007: 288). The peculiarity of Beckett's light verse is that any endeavour to approach 'serious' themes is soon abandoned.

It is perhaps no coincidence, then, that in his translation of Chamfort's *Maxims* (1999: 188-9), Beckett should have turned one of Pascal's sentences into poetic verse. The sentence in question is: 'Que le cœur de l'homme est creux et plein d'ordure' (Pascal 2004: #125). Beckett breaks down the natural order of the syntax with an anacoluthon in his English adaptation – a syntactical fragmentation that recalls the actual form of the *Pensées*:

how hollow heart and full  
of filth thou art

Engelberts underlines the corrosive action of humour that is at the heart of Beckett's poem, insofar as the irregularity of the rhythm, lessened if the poem is taken as a tercet rather than a couplet, makes it difficult to identify the actual form of the verse, so that 'ce distique très irrégulier (ni rime ni mètre régulier) cache évidemment un tercet un peu moins irrégulier' (Engelberts 2007: 282).

Added to this playful indeterminacy in the poetic form adopted is the contrast built upon the juxtaposition of the archaic second-person pronoun hinting at the formal, poetic address in English, and the characterization of the heart as 'hollow' and 'full of filth'. Engelberts argues that the humour comes from Beckett's comic distancing with the stern judgement of Pascal: 'Ce n'est bien sûr pas uniquement ce jeu sur la rime qui donne à ce poème sa force corrosive. La deuxième personne du registre élevé – *thou* – y met du sien, par le contraste entre la bassesse du cœur et le caractère solennel de l'adresse. Mais il est certain que sans la rime l'effet comique n'aurait pas été la même. L'amertume indignée de Pascal est

transformée en air de mirliton' (Engelberts 2007: 282).

Hall Bjørnstadt is, to my knowledge, the only critic to have established a formal correspondence between the hesitant stance found throughout the *Mirlitonnades* and the short fragment that defines the Pascalian 'renversement' (fragment 121). That Pascal conceived the fragment as a poem is clear, since a break is introduced between each segment of the sentence and each line opens with a capital letter (Jouslin 2003: 741):

S'il se vante, je l'abaisse,  
S'il s'abaisse je le vante.  
Et le contredis toujours  
Jusqu'à ce qu'il comprenne  
Qu'il est un monstre incompréhensible.

For Bjørnstad, Beckett and Pascal both attempt to address the problem of meaninglessness and adversity. The characteristic Beckettian indecisiveness between humour and the tragic echoes the Pascalian 'renversement'. Bjørnstad suggests that the opening *Mirlitonnade* has a programmatic function, underlining the attitude to be adopted: distancing oneself from the 'worst': 'ce rire n'est pas tellement éloigné du gémissement pascalien. L'œuvre entière de Beckett est en fait marquée par la proximité – et l'indécision – entre le rire et les larmes' (Bjørnstad 2005: 54).

En face  
Le pire  
Jusqu'à ce  
Qu'il fasse rire

(Beckett 2002: 72)

As Bjørnstad remarks, ‘le programme de Pascal évoque deux mouvements opposés: un abaissement et une élévation. Chez Beckett, par contre, c’est le seul abaissement, la dégradation, la déchéance qui semblent s’imposer. Et pourtant, il y a aussi le rire, justement ici, au centre de la gravité, où il ne faudrait que gémir, selon Pascal’ (Bjørnstad 2005: 53). In seeking to maintain a constant balance between two extremes, Beckett seems to be continuing the pursuit inaugurated in the *Pensées*.

For all these similarities, Beckett clearly keeps his distance from Pascal’s ontological statement: both critics presume that the tone of the *Pensées* is too serious to be compatible with the simultaneously ludicrous and tragic nature of the *Mirlitonnades*. How, then, is this characteristic Beckettian ‘lightness’ compatible with the ‘moralizing’ tone and severe (‘Jansenist’) judgement of humanity in the *Pensées*? The linguistic jest in the *Mirlitonnades* stems from the extreme reduction of syntax as well as from the repetition of certain prevalent words.

Yet there is playfulness in Pascal’s use of words that is worth studying in Beckett’s short pieces. Improbable though it may appear, a clear correspondence emerges if one is attentive to the lightness of the prose of the *Pensées*. Racine himself remarked that the *Lettres Provinciales* were the most exquisite comedies ever written in the French language. The source of laughter preoccupied Pascal, who evoked its enigmatic nature in the following fragment: ‘Deux visages semblables, dont aucun ne fait rire en particulier, font rire par leur ressemblance’. Repetition is identified as a fundamental process of the comic, and the comic stems from the interplay of similarities and analogies.<sup>38</sup> The denunciation of the illusion of complete knowledge enables the integration of the experience of the real as disordered and fragmented as it questions the validity of any attempt to organize material.

In order to maintain the tension between the rational content and the effect impressed

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<sup>38</sup> This anticipates Baudelaire and Bergson.

upon the senses, Pascal develops a broken and abrupt style. This is manifest, as we have seen, in the frequent use of ellipsis: ‘Diseur de bons mots, mauvais caractère’; ‘raison pourquoi figures’; and the disruption of order with the use of anacoluthon: ‘Le nez de Cléopâtre, s’il eût été plus court, toute la face de la terre aurait changé’ (Pascal 2004: #392). This constant renewal of style, the inclination to build up witticisms, *mots d’esprit*, also stems from his use of language: ‘Les hommes sont si nécessairement fous, que ce serait être fou, par un autre tour de folie, de n’être pas fou’ (Pascal 2004: #391). The pattern of repetition is echoed in Beckett’s short poems. The opening lines of the fifth and the sixth poem comprise words that recall the vocabulary of the *Pensées*: ‘néant’ and ‘silence’; and, in the tenth, the theme of movement is taken up:

flux cause  
que tout chose  
tout en étant  
toute chose donc celle-là  
même celle-là  
tout en étant  
n’est pas  
parlons-en.

(Beckett 2003: 83)

The comic stems from the deferral of meaning, with the reprise of the expression ‘toute chose’ at the core of the poem, in the variations ‘toute chose donc celle-là’ and ‘même celle-là’: the silence at the precise moment when the voice is about to discuss the problem further.

Reduction in the seventh poem is structured by the repetition of two terms: ‘pas’ and ‘mots’. The augmentation of words is ‘heard’ in the 2-beat measure, even as the circularity of the poem as a whole is maintained by the opening 3-beat measure:

écoute-les  
s'ajouter  
les mots  
aux mots  
les pas  
aux pas  
un à un

(Beckett 2003: 79)

In contrast, it is made more complex in the following example, as the erratic nature of the rhythm is accentuated:

Imagine si ceci,  
Un jour ceci  
Imagine  
Si un jour  
Un beau jour ceci  
Cessait  
Imagine

(Beckett 2003: 81)

An aspect that Beckett certainly retained from his readings of the *Pensées* is the variety of Pascal's style. As one critic observes, 'les jeux de mots des *Pensées* vont procéder en jouant soit sur des rapprochements de termes, soit sur le phénomène de la polysémie' (Natan 2003: 33). A celebrated example can illustrate this particular tendency: 'le cœur a ses raisons que la raison ne connaît point',<sup>39</sup> in which the semantic element is skilfully manipulated so as to bring together the different meanings of a single word ('raison'). This, according to

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<sup>39</sup> The entire fragment is considered by specialists as one of Pascal's prose poems.

Engelberts, is what Beckett does in the last *Mirlitonnade*. One of the most striking features of Beckett's poetry is that the obsession with nothingness is manifested in a concision that reaches towards silence through asymptote, the silence that subtends some of Pascal's most dire evocation of the human condition.

### III. THE DOUBLE INFINITIES ('LA DOUBLE INFINITÉ') IN SANS/LESSNESS

The full poetic potential of the correspondence between 'disproportion' and the short prose pieces can only be extracted from a comparison between the theme elaborated throughout the *Pensées* and the evocation of the unrepresentable in Beckett's later work. The thematic continuity between Beckett's late prose pieces and Pascal's evocation of 'disproportion' is already present in the trilogy. As we have seen, Beckett's texts provide evidence that the figure of the 'incurious seeker' finds a powerful antecedent, subjected to doubt, in the *Pensées*.

In *The Unnamable*, the voice alludes to a quest as it finds itself 'seeking once more'. In doing so, it takes up words that unmistakably belong to the vocabulary of the *Pensées*:

[...] seeking innocently, in yourself, outside yourself, cursing man, cursing God, stopping cursing, past bearing it, going on bearing it, seeking indefatigably, in the world of nature, the world of man, where is nature, where is man, where are you, what are you seeking, who is seeking, seeking who you are, supreme aberration, where you are, what you're doing, [...] who is talking, not I, where am I, where is the place where I've always been. (Beckett 1997: 389)

There is an ample use here of words referring to the theological domain ('innocently', 'cursing', 'seeking'), along with the structuring (Pascalian) polarities ('man/God', 'man/nature', 'inside/outside').

We have seen that the Pascalian description of the disparity between the infinite, inanimate universe and the frailty of man before a hostile nature is taken up in *The Unnamable*; for instance, as the voice invokes the image of an ‘enormous prison, like a hundred thousand cathedrals, never anything else anymore, from this time forth, and in it, somewhere, perhaps, riveted, tiny, the prisoner, how can he be found, how false this space is, what falseness instantly, to want to draw that round you, to want to put a being there, a cell would be plenty’ (Beckett 1997: 413). The relation to space can, as in the fragment on disproportion, only be expressed through a comparative metaphor as we read in the French version of Beckett’s novel: ‘Enorme prison, comme cent mille cathédrales, plus jamais autre chose, dorénavant, et là dedans, peut-être, rivé, infime, le détenu, comment le trouver, que cet espace est faux, quelle fausseté aussitôt, vouloir y nouer des rapports, vouloir y mettre un être, une cellule suffirait’ (Beckett 1953: 204). Another stylistic similarity can be found in this sequence, for it is built upon a fundamental opposition contained in the image of the two infinities. As in the *Pensées*, the scales of the infinite are embodied in the image of the ‘enormous prison’ that contains the ‘tiny, riveted’ figure of the prisoner, an image soon discarded as a ‘false’ product of the imagination because ‘a cell would be plenty’.

Pascal introduces the notion of ‘distance infinie’ to evoke man’s inherent and irrevocable ontological insufficiency, inasmuch as proportion and balance indicate an ideal state: ‘l’admirable rapport que la nature a mis entre ces choses’ (Pascal 2004: #185). What equilibrium can be found is set in contrast with the evocation of the human condition, as man, a frail creature, is caught between eternity and death: ‘ces deux abîmes de l’infini et du néant’ (Pascal 2004: #185); between knowledge and ignorance, movement and immobility, organised around a single principle: ‘toutes choses sont sorties du néant et portées jusqu’à l’infini’ (Pascal 2004: #185). This is set in a parallel with the image of the universe as an ‘immensité qu’on peut concevoir de la nature dans ce raccourci d’atome’ (Pascal 2004: #185).

I have sought to define the manner in which Beckett weaves essential components of Pascal's thought into his prose in the precedent chapter. Already in *Malone Dies*, language seems to be lapsing into a form reminiscent of Pascal's many elaborations on man's sense of alienation in the face of eternity: 'a last outpouring of misery, impotence and hate. The forms are many in which the unchanging seeks relief from its formlessness. Ah yes, I was always subject to the deep thought, especially in the spring of the year' (Beckett 1997: 198). Although there are evident sarcastic undertones in much of Malone's discourse (as the expression 'I was always subject to the deep thought' indicates), this passage seems to reduce the essential moments of Pascal's argumentation to a few sentences. The theological source (the Fall) accounts for the loss of man's original position: omniscience, for which Beckett's characters crave, is impossible.<sup>40</sup>

The expression 'all nature shines and smiles' corresponds to the opening lines, where Pascal entreats his reader to consider the infinite, first in nature: 'Que l'homme contemple donc la nature entière dans sa pleine majesté' (Pascal 2004: #185). Evocations of its beauty also surface in Malone's words, although they are immediately dismissed by the contrasting images of darkness and death: 'the rack lets loose its black unforgettable cohorts and sweeps away the blue forever'. Pascal's subsequent remarks on 'notre état véritable' are echoed in Molloy's acknowledgement of his predicament, as he states that 'my situation is truly delicate'. The incompatibility between the subject and its object of apprehension is developed later in the passage: 'Egalement incapable de voir le néant d'où il est tiré et l'infini où il est englouti, que fera-t-il donc, sinon d'apercevoir quelque apparence du milieu des choses dans un désespoir éternel de connaître ni leur principe ni leur fin ?' (Pascal 2004: #185).

A second point to be noted here is that both authors have studied the full evocative

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<sup>40</sup> Pascal denounces the presumption of man in thinking that truth may be attained by reason. The image of the centre is taken up to illustrate that incapacity: 'on se croit bien plus capables d'arriver au centre des choses que d'embrasser leur circonférence' (Pascal 2004: #185).

power of the image of the cell<sup>41</sup> The *Pensées* is a work wrought with images of imprisonment, as the evocation of ‘l’homme [...] égaré dans ce recoin de l’univers’ (Pascal 2004: #184) presents the situation of post-lapsarian man.<sup>42</sup> Its horror is evoked in the fragment preceding the lengthy consideration on ‘disproportion de l’homme’. The wealth of images that derives from it allowed Beckett to make many variations upon it: the description of the universe as silent (‘muet’) and infinite (‘tout l’univers’), of man as a solitary, disorientated and forsaken creature, incapable of understanding, and without the possibility of any way out:

En voyant l’aveuglement et la misère de l’homme, en regardant tout l’univers muet et l’homme sans lumière abandonné à lui-même, et comme égaré dans ce recoin de l’univers sans savoir qui l’y a mis, ce qu’il y est venu faire, ce qu’il deviendra en mourant, incapable de toute connaissance, j’entre en effroi comme un homme qu’on aurait porté endormi dans une île déserte et effroyable, et qui s’éveillerait sans connaître où il est et sans moyen d’en sortir. (Pascal 2004: #184)

Pascal relies on a succession of strong antithetical images so that the relentless enumeration conveys an impression of vertigo. The length of the sentence enhances the impression of suspense created at the outset, and prolonged in the juxtaposition of contrasting terms: ‘aveuglement’/‘misère’, ‘muet’/‘sans lumière’, ‘abandonné’/‘égaré’. An additional reference to Pascal is made in this piece: the image ‘roseau pensant’:

L’homme est un roseau, le plus faible de la nature, mais c’est un roseau pensant. Il ne faut pas que l’univers entier s’arme pour l’écraser, une vapeur, une goutte d’eau suffit pour le tuer. Mais quand l’univers l’écraserait, l’homme serait encore plus noble que ce qui le tue puisqu’il sait qu’il meurt et l’avantage que l’univers sur lui, l’univers n’en sait rien.

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<sup>41</sup> See *L’Innommable*: ‘Ce sera le cachot, c’est le cachot, ça a toujours été le cachot’ (Beckett 1953: 137).

<sup>42</sup> See Michel Le Guern: 1983. One possible structure of Pascal’s apologetic project was that the work be inaugurated with the consideration on the ‘cachot’ (Pascal 2004: #153), which is broached in fragment 152 (‘un homme dans un cachot, ne sachant si son arrêt est donné...’).

All these elements are combined in the short prose piece *Sans*. In his later prose Beckett seems to have remembered the hyperbolic emphasis laid on the two antithetic terms ‘immensité’/‘raccourci d’atome’, because he elaborates upon that tension in the opening sequence of *Sans*, through the combination of different segments of words and images in *Sans/Lessness*, originally written in French, to create an impression of randomness. These permutations, as we have seen in the previous chapter, was inspired by the prose of the *Pensées*. In Beckett’s own words, *Sans/Lessness* has ‘to do with the collapse of some such refuge as that last attempted in *Ping* and with the ensuing situation of the refugee. Ruin, exposure, wilderness, mindlessness, past and future denied and affirmed are the categories, formally distinguishable, through which the writing winds, first in disorder, then in another’ (quoted in Knowlson 1996: 562). The text is based, according to James Knowlson, on ‘the contrast between, on the one hand, eternity and fixity, and on the other, the feeble, if resilient, flicker of being’ (Knowlson 1996: 365).<sup>43</sup>

The collapse of certainty, which leads to the acknowledgement of the fallibility of reason, is, precisely, one of the main themes of the fragment on disproportion, as Pascal writes that ‘nous sommes incapables de savoir certainement et d’ignorer absolument’ (Pascal 2004: #612). The decision to compose the text by an aleatory technique reveals something of Beckett’s vision of existence: ‘Beyond the man-made or imposed order [...] lies an arbitrary and capricious world of chance’ thus ‘demonstrating the fallibility of supposed certainties’ (Pountney 1988: 16). Ruby Cohn considers *Lessness* to be one of the most difficult Beckett texts to read as a narrative, precisely because it challenges our approach to narrative: ‘rather than representing a progression towards the dimming of self – sans, lessness – *Sans* regenerates conflict: refuge versus ruins, past versus future, affirmation versus denial,

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<sup>43</sup> The experience of reading a fragmentary text like *Sans/Lessness* – ‘a mass of repeated elements in which no clear subordination of one to another is established’ – is paradoxical. It must be undertaken linearly so as to draw out meaning. Such a reading, however, does not correspond to the circumstances of composition – ‘the random selection of a limited number of units’ (Pilling and Knowlson 1979:176).

blessing in misfortune. The final sentence reads suspiciously like a residual catharsis' (Cohn 2004 307).

I have suggested earlier that the impact of the vision of the *Pensées* can be sensed in the variation Beckett makes on the themes of the two infinities, and the image of the 'roseau pensant'. Fixity and malleability are comprised in the original image of the reed as well as the antagonism between man and 'tout l'univers prêt à l'écraser'. The juxtaposition of contraries is, as we have seen, one of the most visible aspects of Pascal's style, which so vividly struck Beckett. It is a literary device that reinforces the sense of an insurmountable ambivalence, and sustains the anguished moves towards the reminiscence of a previous condition of bliss, since 'il leur reste quelque instinct impuissant de leur première nature' (Pascal 2004: #135).

An additional correspondence between Beckett and Pascal can be drawn indirectly through Sainte-Beuve in order to suggest deep affinities with the aesthetic vision of Port-Royal. In Sainte-Beuve's major works, *Volupté*, and *Port-Royal*, grey is the characteristic colour of Port-Royal's desolate landscape. It symbolizes the Beuvian attempt to define the aesthetics of Jansenism. He sees the exposed self as exhausted in all the manifestations of 'greyness' (Labarthes 2006: 139), and the motifs of grey and 'l'entre-deux' (the middle) as characteristic of Pascal's representation of the real. The probing of self and thought, intimately related to the experience of writing, constantly revolves around this intermediate, indefinable colour that abolishes perspective and depth.

I would now like to consider how these three elements (infinite space, the image of the thinking reed, and the dominant pattern of grey) would enable us to distinguish the underlying presence of the *Pensées* in Beckett's text. In *Sans*, the 'petit corps' is standing ('corps debout') before the 'true refuge of ruins' – at last constructed after so many false ones have preceded it. Unlike in *Ping*, the space in *Sans* is limitless and pervaded by silence: 'pas un bruit, rien qui bouge' (Beckett 2007: 69). Time is also at a standstill, as the evocation is

compared to an unchanging dream ('cet inchangeant rêve'), in which the moment ('l'heure qui passe') is sustained indefinitely.

A pictorial representation of the void, the image that is summoned up in the opening paragraphs, is dominated by the colour grey: 'Jamais ne fut qu'air gris sans temps chimère lumière qui passe. Gris cendre ciel reflet de la terre reflet du ciel' (Beckett 2004: 69). The 'petit corps', a 'mote' in the midst of silence and infinite space, can be seen as a variation on the image of humanity in the *Pensées*. Indeed, the figure is also a prisoner of an infinite, silent universe: 'lointains sans fin ciel confondus pas un bruit rien qui bouge' (Beckett 2004: 69). 'Par l'espace', writes Pascal, 'l'univers me comprend et m'engloutit comme un point, par la pensée je le comprends' (Pascal 2004: #104).

The repetition of the image of the 'petit corps' in the text is an important element in establishing the filiation with the *Pensées*. The disintegration of space is also constantly renewed. Each time the expression is taken up, an element is added that reinforces the principal theme: that of the ruin. As such, the opening image, 'ruine vrai refuge' (Beckett 2007: 69), is altered to bring out the impression of implicit chaos: 'vrai refuge sans issue ruines répandues' (Beckett 2007: 71).

This is made apparent in *Sans*, as the changing perspective and patterns of words result in the following situation: 'Ciel gris sans nuage pas un bruit rien qui bouge terre sable gris cendre. Petit corps même gris que la terre le ciel les ruine seul debout. Gris cendre à la ronde terre ciel confondus lointains sans fin' (Beckett 2007: 70). Strikingly, the blank image is formed by shapes that fade out into the grey. This process is repeated a few lines further down: 'terre ciel confondu infini sans relief petit corps seul debout' (Beckett 2007:70). A series of parallels is drawn to evoke this changelessness: the suspended moment, the absence of gesture, the 'quiet' eye, the absence of thought and of any capacity for remembrance: 'toute sa raison aucun souvenir' (Beckett 2007: 73).

A movement of transition towards a new disposition of the text is introduced with the variation on the characterization of the body, referred to as a 'petit vide'. All the initial motifs are taken up again, allowing the figure's torment to be subdued, as it is only given intermittently, confronted with an 'infini sans relief' (Beckett 2007: 73). The pattern of repetition is poised between the successive evocations of the infinities ('petit vide'/'infini sans relief') and unreality: 'cet inchangeant rêve' (Beckett 2007: 74). The indistinct environment is summoned up once again with the reiteration of the segment 'infini sans relief' and the opening sequence describing the true refuge of the ruins. To prove the inconsequence of man, Pascal had used similar expressions, writing of man as remembering 'un véritable bonheur, dont il ne lui reste maintenant que la marque et la trace toute vide', and evoking the 'gouffre infini' between that lost state and his present condition (Pascal 2004: #138).

In *Sans/Lessness*, moreover, the interplay of contrasts is apparent in the description of space and time, and the gradation between light and dark is comprised in the overwhelming presence of the colour grey. Underlying this aspect is the implicit realization of the instability of language and form, even as the Pascalian motif of the 'entre-deux' emerges as a predominant pattern, both thematic and structural. Writing, as a consequence, is possible only through the acknowledgement of contingency and uncertainty. While Beckett's late prose aims at objectivity, and is much commented upon for its mathematical precision, the evocation of an enduring existence in the face of adversity finds its source in the *Pensées*, a work which struck Beckett for having anticipated the experience of writing as subjected to chance.

Likewise in Beckett's text, there remains the impression of an apparent order, though difficult to discern (as observed by Pilling and Knowlson), but it is constantly thwarted by the verbal permutations. All the elements that had formed the original image, of a figure caught in an infinite space, are gradually dissolved. The syntactic rupture, therefore, provokes the

dislocation of representation, even as the frailty of being is maintained throughout. The dissolution of the hierarchy inherent to language is brought about through the absence of syntactical order, with the nominalization of sentences. At the same time, the fragmentary nature of the text is all the more apparent in that each paragraph appears to be complete in itself. This is partly due to the punctuation, as ‘there is no syntax apart from full stops’ (Pountney 1988: 18).

The absence of verbs reinforces the poetic nature of the text, as do the different forms of repetition: on a first level, the repetition of sentences; and, on a second, onomatopoeic structures or words echoing the title with the suffix *-less* in the English version, and the alliterative repetition of ‘sans’ (see Poutney 1988: 18). Pascal, too, used echoes, including the principal one chosen by Beckett, to suggest the immensity of space:

Que l’homme contemple donc la nature *entière* dans sa haute et pleine majesté, qu’il éloigne sa vue des objets bas qui l’*environnent*. Qu’il regarde cette *éclatante* lumière mise comme une *lampe* éternelle pour éclairer l’univers [...]. (Pascal 2004: #185)

Nominalized sentences are also incorporated to show, by contrast, the insignificance of man. The enumeration is built upon a distinct pattern that emerges from the placing of the words ‘tout’, ‘néant’, and ‘infini’, and the correspondence between ‘homme’ and ‘milieu’, to define the essence of man: ‘Car enfin qu’est-ce que l’homme dans la nature? Un néant à l’égard de l’infini, un tout à l’égard du néant, un milieu entre rien et tout, infiniment éloigné de comprendre les extrêmes’ (Pascal 2004: #185).

It is no coincidence that Beckett’s later prose resembles a *memento mori* in the manner of Montaigne and some fragments in the *Pensées*, as the meditation on the interval between existence and death is contained in the very shape of the writing. The predominant form of the

fragment that is made explicit through the use of artificial permutations is an image of finitude, sustained by syntax and the syncopated rhythm of the prose.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The comparative study of the late prose and poetry with some of the major themes of Pascal's work has confirmed the continuing influence of Pascal upon Beckett. The texts studied in this chapter reveal that the prose of the *Pensées* is a foundational element in Beckett's writing, and that Pascal remained a continuous source of inspiration as his work yielded images that nurtured Beckett's poetic stance towards the real. The interest Beckett had in the evocative power of Pascalian images, whether scientific or religious, is unreserved, regardless of their origin.

The collapse of rational knowledge and the upsetting of the ontological status of man as the cosmological centre in the fragment on disproportion provided fundamental themes for Beckett. He was clearly struck by the encompassing image of man caught between absolutes, and by the ontological polarities developed throughout the *Pensées* ('infini'/'rien'; 'néant'/'tout', 'homme'/'Dieu', etc.), and these returned in his later prose and plays.

## CHAPTER 5

### Beckett and the Port-Royal Philosophy of Language

This final chapter aims to determine aspects of a ‘Jansenist’ conception of language that inspired Beckett in his apprehension of French. A number of elements allow the different ways in which that influence is manifested in his own writing to be suggested. My purpose is not to contend, as has Frederick N. Smith, that Arnauld and Nicole’s *Logique ou l’art de penser* (1670) is the ‘missing link’ (Smith 1976: 101) for an understanding of the (mis)-apprehension of logic in Beckett’s work. However, it has become a widely accepted view among critics that ‘the intellectualism of the seventeenth century both fascinated and horrified him, especially Arnauld’s application of logic to everyday experience’ (Smith 1976: 99), and that ‘Beckett’s novels, *Watt* in particular, are very much about the failure of logic in dealing with the real world and seem to reflect their author’s reading of *The Port-Royal Logic*’ (Smith 1976: 100).

Smith admits that there is no evidence that Beckett actually used the *Logique* as a direct source for any of his writings. The argument that ‘Beckett not only recalled in a general way certain issues raised by seventeenth century philosophy, mathematics, and logic’ (Smith 1976: 100) remains relevant, because he looked at Arnauld’s philosophy as a counter-model of his own ‘thinking of the world’ (Smith 1976: 100). Smith’s contention is that ‘*Watt* is a sort of parody of the *Logique*’ (Smith 1976: 101).

Still; the idea persists among Beckett commentators that Pascal is only a continuator of Descartes’s philosophy. The most recent example provided by Anthony Cordingley’s analysis of the systematic disruption of the ‘natural order’ of the French language in *Comment C’est*. Concerning Arnauld and Nicole’s work, Cordingley repeats what Smith had already observed, that ‘Beckett’s noting the *Logic*’s “Euclidean line of proof” refers to its prescription for how to translate Rationalist principles in practical life situations’ (Cordingley 2006: 195).

Cordingley argues that there is an ideological continuity with Port-Royal's conception of eloquence. He points out that Pascal 'produced a Rationalism where the passions were accorded their place', as shown in the dichotomy between 'géométrie' and 'finesse' that is based upon the same structure as Cartesian dualism. These concepts are necessarily subverted in Beckett's text in a way that recalls the systematic parody of Descartes. Cordingley concludes that 'while Pascal's fideism sets him apart from Descartes, he distinguishes *l'esprit* from *le cœur* in a way analogous to Descartes's dichotomy of *l'esprit* and *matière*' (Cordingley 2006: 192).

This near-identification of Pascal with Descartes is questionable, first because Pascal's distinction between 'géométrie' and 'finesse' is far more complex than is implied in the above analysis. Amidst the different interpretations of the notion, Henri Gouhier agrees with Pierre Magnard that the heart is a superior form of rationality ('une rationalité supérieure) that *cannot* be opposed to reason (Gouhier 1986: 75). Pascal invokes the impossibility of contradiction between these two orders, as the heart gives a direct apprehension of truth, while reason allows an indirect knowledge of truth.<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the Augustinian scepticism towards language is ignored both by Smith and Cordingley, although it is prevalent in Pascal's early (scientific) writings.

In *De l'esprit géométrique*, Pascal writes that 'c'est une maladie naturelle à l'homme de croire qu'il possède la vérité directement; et de là vient qu'il est toujours disposé à nier tout ce qui lui est incompréhensible, au lieu qu'en effet il ne connaît naturellement que le mensonge' (Pascal 2000: 164). We are subject to error because of our fallen nature; this is, in addition, the way in which Beckett defines the 'essence' of Jansenism in his lecture notes: 'an exasperated sense of sin' (TCD MIC 60).

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<sup>1</sup> See Sellier 1966 and 1995, and Michon 1996.

The diversity of opinions concerning the meaning of a word, or the significance of a philosophical statement, prove that ‘la logique a peut-être emprunté les règles de la géométrie sans en comprendre la force’ (Pascal 2000: 180). The consequence is an error in terms of either judgement or reasoning, which can nonetheless be avoided by following a simple rule: ‘la méthode de ne point errer est recherchée de tout le monde, les logiciens font profession d’y conduire, les géomètres seuls y arrivent, et hors de leur science et de ce qui l’imite, il n’y a point de véritables démonstrations’ (Pascal 2000: 180).

As a result, Cordingley also simplifies the Pascalian conception of ‘l’ordre naturel’, for the ‘natural’ order of sentences differs from ‘la méthode géométrique’. Pascal does specify, however, that it should ideally reflect it, as discourse is irremediably caught in the limitations of language, the inadequacy of words to describe the real, and the fallibility of reason itself. The arbitrary nature of that order is emphasized as a consequence, as issuing from an established convention. Despite their ‘usefulness’, rules cannot prevent misunderstanding, as the interference of the body undermines communication.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Pascal denounces, at least implicitly, the presumption of reason to uncover truth and interpret reality accurately: ‘mais il ne s’ensuit pas de là qu’on doive abandonner tout ordre’ (Pascal 2000: 181). In the discussion of an ideal conduct of thought, the geometrical approach is included within the context of a wider reflection on the possibility of a perfect order in discourse, even as Pascal regrets that language should be incapable of achieving that ideal order, convinced as he is of ‘l’impossibilité de tout ordre accompli’ (Pascal 2000: 157). The ‘geometrical’ method can only be exemplary: ‘certainement cette méthode serait belle’, Pascal concedes, but it is insufficient to reveal the mystery of faith and it cannot prevent discourse from being poised between order and disorder, as indeed ‘nulle

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<sup>2</sup> See Bouchilloux 1996.

science ne peut le garder. [...] La mathématique le garde, mais elle est inutile en sa profondeur' (Pascal 2004, #588).

Beckett's 'anti-logic' stance and his deliberate distortion of Cartesian principles, have altogether become another critical topos throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Seen as a statement on the incoherence and absurdity of language expressed, in Beckett's prose, through structural dichotomy and contradictions, and illustrated in the engulfment of the speaking 'I' to its logical extreme, they lead to the absence of expression – a preference stated in the *Three Dialogues*.<sup>3</sup> As Devenney points out, 'this preference falters at the very limit of expression. There is no possibility of such an expression. None is presumed' (Devenney 2008: 118). What must be determined at this stage, then, is how Beckett's acknowledgement of failure as the essential material of artistic expression (as opposed to 'good housekeeping', was inspired by the philosophy of language at Port-Royal.<sup>4</sup>

In the introduction to his major study on language at Port-Royal, Louis Marin recalls the underlying presence of the Pascalian reference in Arnauld and Nicole's *Logique ou l'art de penser*. His argument will also serve as a reference to Pascal in the present chapter: 'des raisons textuelles justifient cette intervention particulière de Pascal dans le texte de la *Logique*: citations indirectes, emprunts, allusions, ces références pascaliennes en constituent une ponctuation privilégiée, un espacement qui le creuse de négativité dans le temps même où il est intégré à son mouvement démonstratif' (Marin 1975: 17).

Marin also points out that Pascal's presence is visible in the treatment of three

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<sup>3</sup> Beckett remarks to Duthuit that 'I speak of an art turning from [the plane of the feasible] 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' (Beckett 1999: 103).

<sup>4</sup> The epigrammatic statement that Beckett expresses in the *Three Dialogues*, in which he argues that 'to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living' (Beckett 1999: 145) may recall Sainte-Beuve's vision of Port-Royal ('ce lieu au destin tragique') as inherently bound to failure and of Pascal as a tragic figure. Moreover, it should be noted that Pascal, and the authors of the *Logique ou l'art de penser*, anticipated the failure of language as it takes itself as its own object.

fundamental problems of language: ‘celui de l’origine du langage avec les termes primitifs, celui de la limite du discours de science avec l’infini *ab quo* et *ad quem*, celui enfin du sujet du discours’ (Marin 1975: 17). All these elements subtend Beckett’s questioning of the adequacy of language to define the real. Beckett commentators have not considered the negativity that lies at the core of Arnauld and Nicole’s work as an alternative vision to Cartesianism that might explain his fascination for the author of the *Pensées*.

As I explained in the Introduction to this thesis, the main object of this chapter is to study the Augustinian aspect of the different writings of Port-Royal on language. This will be done through a comparative study of Pascal’s *Lettres provinciales*, *Watt*, and by taking the *Logique de Port-Royal* as the philosophical backdrop of this study. I intend to show that the influence of Port-Royal aesthetics upon Beckett can be shown in a study of purely formal aspects of Beckett’s writings. Port-Royal’s linguistic ‘pessimism’ towards language offers a counterpart to the metaphysical function implied in Cartesianism. Drawing elements from studies written by Port-Royal specialists, namely Louis Marin, and the more recent works of Delphine Reguig-Naya and Michel Le Guern, I will proceed to discuss Beckett’s treatment of language in its logical relation to reality and representation.

## **I. INFLUENCE OF PORT-ROYAL’S AUGUSTINIAN CRITICISM OF LANGUAGE UPON BECKETT**

### **A. Beckett ‘between’ Pascal and Wittgenstein**

In *La Raison et la grâce selon Pascal* (1999), Edward Morot-Sir argues that the comparison of Pascal’s, Wittgenstein’s and Beckett’s ideas on language is needed in order to understand ‘la réflexion du monde moderne sur lui-même’ (Morot-Sir 1999: 82). Starting with the necessity of silence (or the philosopher’s invitation to be silent) in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, ‘whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’, Morot-Sir studies the

couple of paragraphs that precede this phrase, on the necessity to elucidate language by identifying those words that lead to silence.

The image of the ladder that Wittgenstein uses to describe the appropriate relationship with language is recalled first: ‘mes propositions servent de la façon suivante: quiconque me comprend les reconnaîtra finalement quand il les aura utilisées – comme échelons – pour grimper au-delà (il devra pour ainsi dire rejeter au loin l’échelle après s’en être servi)’ (Wittgenstein quoted in Morot-Sir 1999: 61). Wittgenstein does not explain ‘en quel lieu de langage nous nous trouvons et quel en est le code’ (Morot-Sir 1999: 62). Likewise the motif of the ladder is dominant in Beckett’s own work.<sup>5</sup> The link between Wittgenstein and Beckett is, of course, silence, but lies more precisely in the motif of the ladder, which is found in *Murphy*: ‘Murphy monte par une échelle dans sa chambre où il s’exerce avec son rocking-chair à des ‘mouvements sans mouvements’ (Morot-Sir 1999: 63).

The image is taken up in *Watt*, ‘en relation avec l’image du changement’ (Morot-Sir 1999: 63). Pascal’s underlying presence in the image of the search is already apparent in the entire sequence, where the narrator explains that ‘ce qui était changé était l’existence hors l’échelle’. Morot-Sir also mentions the reappearance of the ladder in the short prose text *The Lost Ones*. Interestingly, the critic suggests that Beckett’s response to Wittgenstein is articulated around three points: the impossibility of silence, for ‘on ne peut s’empêcher de parler’; the fact that the ladder one has climbed up cannot be rejected, which means that ‘l’invitation à la rejeter est vaine’; and the absence of any possible refuge, given that the ‘niche’ provides only illusory comfort (Morot-Sir 1999: 65).

The later prose text eloquently suggests the underlying preoccupation that Beckett strove to bring out in *The Lost Ones*. Indeed, the use of Wittgenstein’s image in *The Lost*

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<sup>5</sup> Morot-Sir does not mention Marjorie Perloff’s work on Wittgenstein (1996) in which she recuses the idea that the philosopher elaborated the image of the ladder. Morot-Sir’s entire argument is based on its symbolic role in the works of the three authors he considers, which leads him to take the image of the Cross as the equivalent of the ladder in Wittgenstein and Beckett.

*Ones* reveals our dependence upon language:

L'échelle, c'est-à-dire le langage du sens commun et, pour Beckett, aussi le langage littéraire, ne peut être renversée [...] Elle est même en grande demande, avec une longue et permanente queue faite des écrivains qui se succèdent de génération en génération. Consciemment ou non, *Le Dépeupleur* répond au défi de Wittgenstein et à son interdiction, sinon par le silence, du langage empirico-sensoriel. Avec force et simplicité à l'intérieur du jeu allégorique, Beckett oppose un fait à un autre fait: le fait littéraire au fait scientifique, image comme expérience à sensation comme expérience.

At this stage of Morot-Sir's argument, Pascal's hypothetical role is considered. Morot-Sir invokes the image of the Cross, insofar as the ladder 'est tragiquement présente dans l'imagination métaphysique du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle, elle est appuyée à la Croix' (Morot-Sir 1999: 66), arguing that therein lies the most profound relationship between the two writers' imagination:

ce groupe d'images constitue le schème profond de l'imagination métaphysique pascalienne et [qu'il] sert de structure concrète de philosophie du langage: Pascal en a été parfaitement conscient et même a été convaincu de son originalité en face des grandes rhétoriques de son siècle. (Morot-Sir 1999: 66)

Pascal's exceptional status is explained by his stance towards language and rhetoric. For him, 'la rhétorique comme art du langage est identique à la logique comme art de penser' (Morot-Sir 1999: 67). After having presented Pascal's Augustinian conception of language (the two forms of language: divine and human, i.e. complete and wanting), Morot-Sir turns to Pascal's study of the principle of contradiction:

Cependant le langage humain se déchire spontanément en une multiplicité de couples furieux de oui et de non, de oui qui se découvrent comme des non accusateurs et des non qui cachent des dogmatismes

impérieux. Il est clair que les structures oui-non, vrai-faux sont universelles et forment l'essence du langage des hommes. (Morot-Sir 1999: 69)

Although their views eventually diverge, Beckett and Pascal come together in the belief that 'la problématique fondamentale de l'humanité est linguistique' (Morot-Sir 1999: 80). For Morot-Sir, however, Beckett stopped halfway through Pascal's reasoning. There is something Pascalian about his distrust of language. One of the most fascinating aspects of Pascal's thought concerns the moral repercussions of the theory of imagination. Behind the condemnation of the self ('le moi est haïssable') lies a linguistic argumentation: the self is 'odious' because to cherish it is to cherish a void, for the self is insubstantial. As Morot-Sir explains, "'Je" existe comme première personne du pronom personnel. Il a une existence grammaticale; mais il n'est pas une substance spirituelle, unique et immortelle, comme Descartes le prétend quand il organise son système autour de la formule "'je pense donc je suis'" (Morot-Sir 1999: 71).

Beckett's treatment of language comes close, however, to the Pascalian conception that 'le langage est un instrument naturellement perverti – origine des illusions que les hommes se donnent à eux-mêmes, illusion en son essence' (Morot-Sir 1999: 73). There is evidence that he considered Pascal to have played a fundamental role in uncovering the nature and purpose of language, for he writes down extracts from Pascal's reflections on the theory of figures ('théorie des figuratifs') in the 'Whoroscope Notebook'. In these fragments, there is a recurring image of humanity *waiting* for the revelation of truth and its own essence. Pascal also insists upon the fact that divine language is anything but clear to man, and that, if it were not an enigma, there would be no religious life.

Language is made up of signs, revealing both absence and presence, and is described by Pascal as a veil that must be lifted: 'Par lui-même le langage est un voile, et la religion n'est rien d'autre que la conduite humaine en correspondance avec l'essence du signe'

(Morot-Sir 1999: 75). Again, Pascal distinguishes himself from Descartes here, who did not acknowledge the difference between obscurity and confusion. Morot-Sir thus point out that, ‘à l’obscurité essentielle du langage, telle qu’elle caractérise la relation Dieu-homme, ce dernier [Pascal] ajoute l’incohérence; il change un monde linguistique qui lui est donné en un monde imaginaire d’images’ (Morot-Sir 1999: 75). Morot-Sir takes up the analogy he initially made between the corresponding symbols of the ladder and the Cross in Pascal’s religious writing to conclude that while a clear understanding of totality can be formed beyond language and silence, this full vision of reality and transcendence is only possible in a state of grace (Morot-Sir 1999: 79).

At this stage, the point that Morot-Sir strives to make about the actual connection between Wittgenstein, Beckett and Pascal becomes more speculative. He observes that both twentieth-century figures proceeded only halfway along Pascal’s reasoning (Morot-Sir 1999: 79). For Morot-Sir, Wittgenstein’s treatment of (religious) language as ludicrous and meaningless, together with Beckett’s negatively polarized account of human existence, is insufficient to account for the complexity of human existence (see Morot-Sir 1999: 80).

Even if it remains merely suggestive, and based on an arguably fragile analogy (the use of common symbols),<sup>6</sup> Morot-Sir’s essay is interesting because it points out original aspects of Pascal’s conception of language that Beckett critics have neglected: the added element of obscurity to the already incoherent nature of language, the understanding that essence is incommunicable by means of words, and a sense of the vacuity of words, and of pronouns in particular.

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<sup>6</sup> Critics have not failed to point out Beckett’s parcimonious use of symbols and metaphors, referring back to the statement made in the ‘Addenda’ that there are ‘no symbols where none intended’ in *Watt*.

## B. *Cartesian and Pascalian arguments on the rejection of logic*

A close study of the Port-Royal philosophy of language will allow us to shed light on Beckett's response to both Pascal's conception of the role of logic in the elaboration of discourse as well as to Arnauld and Nicole's *Logique ou l'art de penser*. I will now turn to Port-Royal more generally. The object of the following section is to define the function that Beckett's reading of Arnauld and Nicole's *Logique* had in this gradual 'voiding' of the substance of language and of metaphysical concepts.

I have already pointed out that critics have misused Pascal's geometrical writings by insisting exclusively on their filiation with Cartesianism. This quick analogy is more easily justified with the Port-Royal *Logique*, as it takes both Descartes and Pascal as tutelary figures. It seems necessary, therefore, to determine the specificity of Port-Royal's understanding of language, and definition of the purpose of logic, to avoid conceptual approximations. The poem *Whoroscope* provides tangible evidence that Beckett did distinguish Arnauld from Descartes, describing a Port-Royal theologian whose mind is more rigorous than the philosopher's 'Eucharistic sophistries'.

Pascal and Descartes have distinct views when it comes to determining the origin of those 'indéfinissables' (primary words) that exist regardless of cultural differences. As Hélène Bouchilloux remarks, the difficulty lies in deciding whether this clarity is, as Descartes would have it, an essence, or rather, in Pascal's words, 'une condition universelle d'appréhension des objets de l'expérience commune'. It seems that Beckett retained that definition in the trilogy, as Molloy refers to it: 'c'est là un langage que je comprends, ce sont là des idées claires et simples sur lesquelles il m'est possible de bâtir, je ne demande pas d'autre nourriture intellectuelle' (Beckett 1951: 70). The evocation throughout the trilogy, of the (Cartesian) imperatives of clarity and order contrasts with the description of an immediate knowledge, deriving from the senses that would stem from Beckett's readings of the scientific readings of

Pascal. Arnauld eludes the question, which is in fact of crucial significance, as ‘l’enjeu n’est pourtant rien de moins que la constitution de deux épistémologies divergentes: l’une visant la connaissance des essences, par leurs idées claires et distinctes déposées dans l’âme, l’autre la connaissance purement phénoménale des propriétés de choses dont l’essence reste inconnue, par l’âme jointe au corps’ (Bouchilloux 1995: 243). It is interesting to consider that Molloy, Moran, and Malone are Cartesian figures, while Sapo, with his ‘love’ for nature, comes closer to a Pascalian conception of knowledge.

At the end of the *Discours géométrique*, Pascal proceeds to prove the superiority of the geometrical method over logic by adapting Descartes’s argument. Like Descartes, Pascal rejects the constraints of logical forms of reasoning upon the mind, which are useless because they are empty: ‘ce n’est pas *barbara et baralipton* qui forment le raisonnement’ (Pascal quoted in Bouchilloux 1995: 236). Arnauld, on the contrary, attempts to justify in the *Logique* the pedagogical aim of this approach (see Bouchilloux 1995: 236). The key argument in Pascal’s rejection of logic is that it corrupts man’s capacity to reason. As Bouchilloux explains:

Pascal, quant à lui, va jusqu’à rapprocher les logiciens des fanatiques, des voleurs et des hérétiques, qui se forgent eux-mêmes les lois auxquelles ils obéissent plutôt que de recevoir celles de Dieu et de la nature. Et de fait, le blâme le plus grave encouru par la logique est qu’elle témoigne de la dénaturation de l’homme, obligé de se créer un ordre, faute de déférer à l’ordre naturel dont la géométrie offre le paradigme en ce qui concerne l’appréhension non des essences mais des phénomènes; on sait que cet ordre, d’après Pascal, ne saurait être purement discursif, qu’il renvoie à la naturalité phénoménale des indéfinissables et des indémontrables sur laquelle s’appuient les définitions et les démonstrations. (Bouchilloux 1995: 236)

Hélène Bouchilloux has given a clear account of Descartes’s and Pascal’s respective approaches to logic as a discipline. Pascal takes up the three major points that were made by

his predecessor in the *Discours de la méthode*, but introduces further arguments of his own. Thus, in the *Discours géométrique*, Pascal adopts the same definition of analysis and synthesis, ‘entre l’art de découvrir la vérité qu’on possède déjà, et l’art de démontrer la vérité qu’on possède déjà’ (Bouchilloux 1995: 235). He nonetheless strays from the Cartesian stance by arguing that the geometrical method is the only valid approach to truth: ‘cet art de l’exposition lui semble renfermer celui de la vérification par lequel on fait la part du vrai et du faux. Et cet art qui est donc à la fois celui de la preuve et celui du discernement de la vérité, Pascal l’attribue à la méthode géométrique, au détriment de la logique’ (Bouchilloux 1995: 235).

Another Cartesian idea that Pascal adopts is that of the uselessness of logic: it lessens the impact of the geometrical method by adding more rules to it. Thus, ‘la logique confond les règles subsidiaires avec les règles indispensables, que les seuls géomètres savent démêler, manifestant ainsi, par-delà leur pratique de la géométrie, un ‘esprit’ de la géométrie qui les achemine vers des considérations sur la nature ou l’essence de l’homme bien propres à leur faire reconnaître la vérité de la religion chrétienne’ (Bouchilloux 1995: 236). It is important to note, before moving on to Arnauld and Nicole, that the inherent contradiction pointed out by Bouchilloux regards the authors’ acknowledgement of their debt to both Descartes and Pascal:

Le paradoxe de la *Logique de Port-Royal* est qu’elle s’ouvre sur un double hommage à Descartes et à Pascal qui prouve qu’Arnauld a parfaitement repéré l’exigence de discernement présente chez l’un et chez l’autre. De Pascal, d’abord, Arnauld retient le primat qu’il accorde à la morale sur la science, et par là même, le primat qu’il accorde à la justesse d’esprit sur la discursivité: il y a une ponctualité de la vérité, à différencier entre des excès contraires et à maintenir fermement contre l’inconstance d’une pensée souvent soumise au prestige de l’imagination, la raison assignant en revanche son rang à chaque chose. De Descartes, ensuite, Arnauld retient le rôle qu’il confère corrélativement à l’attention et à l’évidence dans la saisie du vrai, ainsi que la primauté qu’il donne au jugement, par rapport au raisonnement. (Bouchilloux 1995: 237)

The structure of the *Logique ou l'art de penser* unambiguously echoes this conceptual dependence on both Descartes and Pascal. As Bouchilloux points out, the first discourse of the *Logique* is written after Pascal. It adopts a similar idiom: first that 'les sciences ne doivent pas être cultivées pour elles-mêmes, mais pour la raison qui elle même, doit prioritairement s'appliquer en morale'; and, secondly, that 'il ne faut pas se distraire à approfondir les sciences, mais il faut fortifier son jugement. Le jugement est l'instance par laquelle on discerne le vrai du faux entre des extrémités opposées' (Bouchilloux 1995: 237).

Arnauld, moreover, is particularly close to Descartes when he calls upon an adequate use of common sense, the use for logic in nurturing a practicality of the mind in quotidian life. Bouchilloux concludes that 'l'appréhension et l'évidence sont bien les deux conditions de l'appréhension du vrai. Et cette appréhension relève du jugement avant de relever du raisonnement, la plupart des erreurs des hommes ne consistant pas à se laisser tromper par de mauvaises conséquences mais à se laisser aller à de faux jugements dont on tire de mauvaises conséquences' (Bouchilloux 1995: 238).

Arnauld's discourse is not simply mimetic, incorporating concepts and definitions from his main sources. It adopts a third stance that seeks to contrast Pascal with Descartes:

Dans une conception originale de la logique qui intègre à la logique traditionnelle les acquis de leurs méthodes respectives, en faisait notamment du jugement le pivot de cette nouvelle logique, [...] la logique d'Arnauld étend le jugement, que Descartes bornait au clair et au distinct, à la morale et jusqu'à la religion, se proposant de déterminer en quoi une réglementation tout humaine de l'esprit peut contribuer à cette universelle justesse que Pascal attribuait au seul point de vue 'chrétien parfait'. (Bouchilloux 1995: 240)

There are the three distinct approaches that characterize Port-Royal's conception of language and discourse. Beckett was probably struck in particular by one of these assertions:

that logic is a useless intellectual discipline in which ‘forme et contenu sont disjoints’, as opposed to that in which ‘les règles et la pratique sont indissociable’. Arnauld contrasts two types of logic, the traditional practice derived from Aristotle, which insists on the formal nature of logic: ‘renfermer la logique dans la logique’ – a stifling position; and the approach proposed, which aims to ‘marquer les règles de la pensée en toutes ses applications, qu’elle soient valides ou défectueuses’ so as to renew logic (Bouchilloux 1995: 241).

### C. *The ‘art of thinking’ according to Malone*

Using Louis Marin’s analysis of Port-Royal’s conception of discourse, I will now suggest possible analogies with Beckett’s own work, bearing in mind that Pascal is ‘un lieu producteur de sens par sa “situation critique”’ (Marin 1975: 24). The first aspect of that conception of language, as it is articulated in Pascal’s works on the geometrical method, is that primary words need no definition. In Book I, Chapter 9, the authors take up the Pascalian definition in *Le Discours géométrique*: ‘nous concevons aussi clairement l’être, l’existence, la durée, l’ordre, le nombre [...] tout ces idées-là sont si claires, que souvent en les voulant éclaircir davantage, & ne pas se contenter de celles que nous voulons former naturellement, on les obscurcit’ (Arnauld and Nicole 1981: 71).

The endeavour to affix permanent meaning to words that the Port-Royal *Logique* strives to describe is considered in relation to the problem of the nature of communication and the referential meaning of language. As Louis Marin explains: ‘ce n’est pas le discours dans son agencement et son architecture qui est en question, mais l’unité minimale, porteuse de la signification référentielle, la phrase réduite à son noyau, l’acte de parole et de pensée par lequel un homme ne conçoit pas seulement les choses, mais les juge et les affirme’ (Marin 1975: 27). The conveyance of meaning through language implies that the nature and means for communication be questioned as well for Arnauld. It is first addressed in terms of a

tangible delimitation of language. Because pure thought cannot be communicated directly to others, it follows that an untainted connection from one mind to another is impossible. Words need to be defined in order to avoid misinterpretation, for reality can only be reached and described by language successively: no object can be apprehended as pure form.

Furthermore, Marin highlights the problematic relationship implied in the very title of the work, the equivalence between logic and the art of thinking, which, it may be observed, Smith has assumed unquestioningly. In the second Discourse, Arnauld and Nicole attempt to justify their use as equivalent expressions:

Il s'est trouvé des personnes qui ont été choquées du titre d'art de penser, au lieu qu'ils vouloient qu'on mît l'art de bien raisonner. Mais on les prie de considérer que la Logique ayant pour but de donner des règles pour toutes les actions de l'esprit, & aussi bien pour des idées simples, il n'y avait guère d'autre mot qui enfermât toutes ces différentes actions, & certainement la pensée les comprend tous [...].  
(Arnauld and Nicole 1981: 27)

The art of thinking consists of 'les réflexions que les hommes ont faites sur les quatre principales opérations de leur esprit: *concevoir, juger, raisonner* et *ordonner*' (Arnauld and Nicole 1981: 37). Now, the study of the nature of discourse is fundamental because language, in this primary role, constitutes both the nature and the essence of man. Insofar as it is necessarily and implicitly an art of thinking *well*, logic is based on the postulation that language corresponds to thought. 'Le langage est le plus expressif de cette valeur qu'est la pensée dans son effectuation, la pensée n'étant en contrepartie que la norme rigoureuse et rationnelle de ce donné naturel qu'est le langage' (Marin 1975: 40). This is why the object of logic is to describe reflexively, as Marin puts it, 'les opérations naturelles de l'esprit, ce sera le langage à tous les étages de son architecture' (Marin 1975: 39).

The section on the critique of judgement as an archaic view in which Beckett could not have been interested by commentators such as Mercier and Smith, and have generally concentrated on the second aspect implied by the expression ‘art of thinking’ – the capacity to reason well.<sup>7</sup> I, for my part, will concentrate on the elements that are implied in the second conception of such an art. There are many instances in Beckett’s prose work, particularly the novels, where the characters consider the question of truth and error, and imply, as has already been pointed out for *The Unnamable*, that they, as narrators, are unreliable.

Beckett may have been particularly struck by the persistent attempt to address the problematic nature of this relation, the communication of subjective thought to the other and indirect nature the apprehension of the real. My contention here, then, is that most of his novels could be seen as echoing the *Logique*’s explanation that ‘toute l’erreur ne vient que de ce que nous jugeons mal’ (Arnauld and Nicole 1981: 85). In *Malone Dies*, Beckett undoubtedly refers to Arnauld and Nicole’s uneasy distinction between the ‘art de penser’ and the ‘art de raisonner’:

He was sorry he had not learnt the art of thinking, beginning by folding back the second and third finger the better to put the index on the subject and the little finger on the verb, the way the teacher had taught him, and sorry he could make no meaning of the babel raging in his head, the doubts, desires, imaginings and dreads. And a little less well endowed with strength and courage too he would have abandoned and despaired of ever knowing what manner of being he was, and how he was going to live, and lived vanquished, blindly, in a mad world, in the midst of strangers. (Beckett 1997: 193)

Alors il regrettait de ne pas avoir voulu apprendre l’art de penser, en commençant par replier les deuxième et troisième doigts afin de mieux poser l’index sur le sujet et sur le verbe l’auriculaire,

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<sup>7</sup> Frederick Smith, followed by Mercier, concentrates exclusively on the fourth book of the Port-Royal *Logique*, arguing that ‘while no single piece of evidence proves Beckett’s use of the Port-Royal *Logic*, the frequency of parallels between Watt and the *Logique* argues that at least here Beckett not only recalled in a general way certain issues raised by seventeenth-century philosophy, mathematics, and logic, but that he remembered Arnauld as being especially antithetical to his own way of thinking about the world’ (Smith 1976 : 100)

comme le voulait son professeur de latin, et de ne rien entendre, ou si peu, au charabia de doute, désirs, imaginations et craintes qui déferlaient dans sa tête. Et pourvu d'un peu moins de force et de courage lui aussi aurait abandonné, renonçant à savoir de quelle façon il était fait et allait pouvoir vivre, et vivant vaincu, aveuglément, dans un monde insensé, parmi des étrangers. (Beckett 1951: 30)

However deliberate, these words seem to find an impetus of their own, as they subsequently submit to a sense of confusion and insignificance, which is immediately juxtaposed with Sapocat's craving for knowledge. Sapo's failed quest to understand the natural realm is also articulated around the idea of estrangement. His sense of alienation would become tragic if there had been no ironic distancing on Malone's part, 'he lived vanquished, blindly, in the midst of strangers'. Sapo's incapacity to grasp the 'art of thinking' echoes the impossibility in which he finds himself to relate to nature without being 'confused' (Beckett 2007: 193).

In this sequence, Beckett seems to take up a scheme which Carle Bonafous-Murat summarizes in the following terms, in which tradition builds upon 'un dispositif qui met face à face deux figures fictives: celle du professeur ou du maître, puisant son savoir aux origines même de la logique, et celle de l'étudiant ou du disciple, qui n'en retient que les règles purement mécaniques du fonctionnement de la pensée' (Bonafous-Murat 2011: 3). As Louis Marin writes, 'en son dessein initial, le mouvement de cette nouvelle logique est clair: rien n'étant plus difficile de distinguer le vrai du faux dans les sciences comme dans la conduite, "la principale application qu'on devrait avoir serait de former son jugement et de le rendre aussi exact qu'il peut être"' (Marin 1975: 27). From this perspective, Sapo is the worst case possible: his judgement is poor, as is his capacity to reason well. Little wonder, then, that he should be unfit for any 'proper' human activity or experience; and that, in a further comic exaggeration, he is rejected by nature itself.

A failed logician, Sapo is incapable of learning even the very basics of that art from his teacher. He nonetheless strives to relate to the real objectively first by addressing the question of quality. As an ‘esprit faible’, he is impeded in his endeavour to do so because reason fails to have a hold on him: his mastery of language is insufficient. The parallel established between learning and the capacity to reason well recalls the *Logique de Port-Royal*. At the same time, Sapo’s impotence calls into question the capacity to reach certainty through the mediation of words. A silent figure, Sapo’s apprehension of the real is necessarily limited because his understanding of verbal communication is wanting.

In the above quoted passage, logical nomenclatura is patent in the second sentence but it is undermined by the implication of its shortcoming – firstly, because of Sapo’s ‘natural’ imperviousness to logic ‘he attended his classes with his mind elsewhere, or blank’ (Beckett 1997: 187), and secondly, because Malone implies throughout that discouragement is inevitable. Terms such as ‘manner of being’, for instance, recall Descartes’s use of scholastic terms in the distinction he makes between body and soul – ‘modal distinction’ is necessary to distinguish substance from manner.<sup>8</sup>

Sapo’s experience goes against the avowed aim of Port-Royal, which is explicitly pedagogical; for Arnauld and Nicole, the purpose of logic is to become the measure of all human activity. Sapo is incapable of carrying out the four mental operations that are required for scientific knowledge: conceiving, judging, reasoning and ordering. He cannot *conceive*, which implies that he is at a loss to proceed to a simple apprehension of ideas by the understanding. It follows, since each operation is the result of the precedent, that he is incapable of judging the truth of a proposition. His inaptitude to formulate complex ideas results in an incapacity to reason, because he cannot form complex ideas out of simpler ideas, nor impose a hierarchical frame upon them.

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<sup>8</sup> See, for instance, Descartes 2002: 84-85. A parallel can be suggested with the concept of heroism as conceived by Descartes for the conquest of knowledge through the scientific method, in his writings prior to the *Meditations*. It could perhaps account for the ironic allusion to courage in this passage.

One of the principal assumptions at work in the *Logique*, the equivalence between Nature and Reason is undermined by the very experience illustrated by the (unreal) case of Sapo. This rule functions as a positive counterpart to the problematic relationship between language and thought, because it also consists of ‘ce qui est à restaurer dans le langage même; ce qui dans la relation du langage et de la pensée, doit être visé comme une fin du discours logique, sa puissance réformatrice, non plus *constitutive* mais *reconstituante* du discours humain’ (Marin 1975: 41). Thought is prior to language, words are external, conventional signs of subjective mental states. It follows that communication is enabled through this universal agreement, but, at the same time, the material nature of words allows the establishment of an anthropological correspondence with the dualistic nature of man. Sound is the primary source of elocution, insofar as the utterance of words necessitates the mediation of the body.

His imperviousness to reason results in an incapacity to determine his own essence, or a way of thinking that would allow him to relate to the real. A series of ironic paradoxes is built up to invoke the frustration of an avid desire for knowledge, and an incapacity to know. He is at a loss to discern meaning from ‘the babel raging in his head’ (Beckett 1997: 193). In *Malone Dies*, Sapo’s plight is comically exaggerated as he not only is incapable of determining his quality but also finds himself out of place. Malone first implies that ‘he had no friends’ only to check himself immediately ‘Sapo was on good terms with his little friends’ (Beckett 1997: 190).

Though ‘Sapo loved nature’, he ‘did not know how to look at all these things, the looks he rained upon them taught him nothing about them’ (Beckett 1997: 191). Incapable of intuitive understanding, he seeks to decipher the signs of nature, yet he remains utterly incurious of the universe, as ‘the sun, the moon, the planets and the stars did not fill him with wonder’. He is, as such, an earthbound creature, unwillingly separated from mankind, ‘his

little friends' (Beckett 1997: 190), and from nature, estranged from animals. As Malone observes, 'nothing is like me than this patient, reasonable child, struggling all these years to shed a little light upon himself, avid of the least gleam, a stranger to the joys of darkness' (Beckett 1997: 193).

The above-quoted passage shows Beckett's ambivalent stance towards the *Logique*: on the one hand, the metaphysical function of language is described in a way that also demonstrates that language is an approximation, while, on the other hand, Beckett seems to reject the idea of the transparency of words and discourse, as did Pascal. Departing from the Pascalian stance, the *Logique* aims to demonstrate the adequacy between nature and reason, order and discourse.

The work, as such, 'ne fait que dénouer cette équivalence de la nature et de la Raison, mais semble-t-il pour mieux en assurer la correspondance, pour mieux les amener dans une parfaite superposition' (Marin 1975: 40). ). Arnaud and Nicole envisage language as based on a double conceptual filiation: the absence of coherence between language and reality is explained by man's corrupted nature which has created a formidable distance, a 'gulf' in Pascal's words: 'La réflexion contrastée sur l'écrit et l'oral constitue le carrefour où ces deux point de vue se croisent et s'ordonnent par le biais de la forme commune d'un dualisme' (Reguig-Naya 2007: 224).

The distinction between written and oral communication is interesting insofar as discourse is written in the first two novels of the trilogy, *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, and oral, presumably, in *The Unnamable*. In the *Logique*, Arnaud and Nicole evoke the superiority of the written form over spoken discourse because it allows a critical distance to be introduced between thought and expression: 'la transmission matérielle de la pensée dans le langage soumet au poids des impressions corporelles qui la déforment: la présence de l'interlocuteur

existe donc par rapport aux éléments qui contribuent à brouiller le message puisqu'elle met en rapport deux corps en présence' (Reguig-Naya 2007: 237).

It is carried further, as speech is subjected to misunderstanding and confusion: 'cet espace de l'écrit n'est pas de même nature que celui de la présence orale. Il est la conséquence d'un espacement entre les locuteurs, c'est-à-dire de la stricte délimitation d'un espace individuel, propre à chaque conscience. L'espace oral impose un espace de discussion commun et aux limites incertaines; l'espace écrit permet l'intersubjectivité à partir de frontières nettement déterminées' (Reguig-Naya 2007: 239). The interference of the body is at the core of the trilogy. The relationship with the body becomes increasingly antagonistic to the voice in *The Unnamable*, as something that must be discarded and as an alien entity that prevents true speech: 'I'm sham dead now, whom they can't bring to life, and my monster's carapace will rot off me' (Beckett 1997: 298)

As Derval Tubridy observes, the implication behind the use of the image of the 'monstrous carapace' is 'the antithesis of what should be achieved in incarnation. The body is no longer a means by which the Word is made manifest to man. Only without the body can the voice truly speak' (Tubridy 2000: 96). Beckett suggests a duality within language that is articulated around the problematic status of the first-person pronoun:

The words these voices speak play a contradictory role in the novel. Words are both the means of escape from corporeality, and the means by which corporeality is introduced into the speaker. The visceral cannot be removed from language for each instance of speech necessarily binds it to the body that is its source. In rejecting the first person pronoun the unnamable strives to distance himself from the inevitable corporeality of spoken language, the incarnation of the word. But that distance is impossible since each instance of speech reincorporates language into the body. (Tubridy 2000: 96)

This particular aspect of the *Logique* certainly provided a counter-model for Beckett. The conception of the Eucharist as a symbol of the polarity between absence and presence is

assigned a central role in Arnauld and Nicole's work.<sup>9</sup> The theory of the 'idées accessoires' is developed in the second Book of the *Logique*. Nicole defines the purpose of nouns within the structure of the sentence and in terms of representation. It is repeatedly specified in the work that misunderstanding stems from a false, or faulty, definition of words, which, here again, are designated as fundamental sounds.

Word definitions are thus 'libres et arbitraires, parce qu'il est permis à chacun de se servir de tel son pour exprimer son idée, pourvu qu'il en avertisse' (Arnauld and Nicole 1981: 92). Beckett's characters adopt the same discourse; indeed, they strive to remember the sound of words, uttering to themselves or others, as Molloy observes, words that are more or less intelligible: 'And every time I say, I said this, or I said that, or speak of a voice saying, far away inside me, Molloy, and then a fine phrase more or less clear and simple, or find myself compelled to attribute to others intelligible words, or hear my own voice uttering to others more or less articulate sounds, I am merely complying with the convention that demands that you either lie or hold your peace' (Beckett 1997: 118). Beckett himself is known to have dealt with 'fundamental sounds' in his writing. But, in the trilogy, words are often discarded as inadequate. This 'ambiguous voice', which is, as Moran explains, 'within me' but which 'is not mine', is confronted to a faltering of words, 'something gone wrong with the silence' (Beckett 1997: 118).

Frederick Smith sought to demonstrate that Beckett unfalteringly questions the applicability of *both* types of logic (judgement and reasoning). It has been argued that he proceeded to describe the collapse of articulated discourse by 'undoing' the formal structures into which it was traditionally woven. As a result, much of his work is stylistically composed under erasure, by emptying the mind of traditional reference and structure – Beckett's key

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<sup>9</sup> Louis Marin assigns a central role in the evocation of the Eucharist. A entire section of his work studies the separation of the linguistic sign and the object in *La critique du discours*. See pp. 92-97.

word, as critics often reported, would have been ‘perhaps’. A further consequence is that the context of utterance in his texts is affected by vagueness.

John Pilling notes the way in which Beckett’s syntax ‘operates on our sensibilities by insinuation rather than assertion, by its infinite suggestibility rather than by its vehement rigour’ (Pilling 1976: 178). As we shall see in the next section, vagueness as an aesthetic component of Beckett’s writing finds its equivalent in Pascal’s criticism of ‘termes équivoques’ in the *Lettres Provinciales*.

## II. ON THE CONTINUITY BETWEEN THE *LETTRES PROVINCIALES* AND THE TRILOGY<sup>10</sup>

### A. *The ‘termes équivoques’ or, deliberate misunderstanding*

In the aftermath of his ‘first’ conversion, inspired and encouraged as he was by Antoine Arnauld, Pascal aimed to develop a style that would appeal to the wider literate public (even women, as Pierre Nicole pointed out), so as to suggest the triviality and futility of the theological disputes revolving around the question of grace, as revealed through the Jesuits’ discourse. His use of language, however, was no less controversial within the Port-Royal circle. Its combative tenor was thought to be unorthodox in the discussion of religion. Indeed, given that mockery and irony were excluded from the rhetorical canon, and thus condemned in the discussion of religious matters, the style of the *Lettres provinciales* was deemed by some as ‘un-Christian’.

Reasons for this disapproval were twofold: according to Mère Angélique, the all too frequent use of ‘improper’ and violent terms was an affront to the presiding ‘bienséances’, interrupting the duty of silence and withdrawal. Though serving a righteous cause, the letters

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<sup>10</sup> This section is partly taken from an article written for *Etudes Irlandaises* (Foehn 2009).

stirred needless agitation.<sup>11</sup> This was not Pascal's or Arnauld's view, however. Both aimed at proving that such strong rhetoric was necessary to foil their adversary's intentions: 'on ne saurait plus douter qu'on peut bien rire des erreurs sans blesser la bienséance' (Pascal 2005: 177).

Pascal's first letters about the debate on grace are remarkable in their subtle use of comedy; an apparent *insouciance* pervades the first ten letters. In the opening lines of the first letter, the author, Montalte, evokes his utter ignorance of theological matters and endeavours to see through the situation, telling his correspondent that 'je ne suis détrompé que d'hier' (Pascal 1995: 43). As he gains further insight into the matter, the uselessness of the dispute is suggested by endless disagreement on the meaning of given words. Thus, the entire articulation of the text (*grâce suffisante, grâce efficace, pouvoir prochain*) is composed of explicitly defined moments, succeeding one another in an ample movement of linguistic discovery: Montalte, startled by the intricate subtleties of the definition of specific words with which he is presented, concludes: 'il n'y aurait pas grand péril à le recevoir sans aucun sens, puisqu'il ne peut nuire que par le sens' (Pascal 1995: 47-48). Montalte is increasingly taken aback by a situation that is inconceivable to a methodical mind like his. At one point, he says: 'je ne dispute jamais du nom, pourvu qu'on m'avertisse du sens qu'on lui donne' (Pascal 1995: 47), a principle neglected by Arnauld's adversaries.

Not only does Pascal proceed to eliminate the possibility of the adversary's point of view being rationally justified, but he also succeeds in gaining the reader's acquiescence with a discreet, yet pervasive manipulation of language. Indeed, the reader is eventually led to conclude that the only plausible approach to these somewhat obscure debates is a pretence of ignorance and wonder (see, for instance, the many occurrences of words such as 'étonné' and 'surpris' in the text). The use of parallelisms is constant in the first letters, as the contrast is

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<sup>11</sup> See Descotes 1995: 35.

reinforced to show the discrepancy between words and deeds. Evoking the different contentions in the disagreement, Montalte eventually cries out: ‘c’est se jouer de paroles de dire que vous êtes d’accord à cause de termes communs que vous usez, quand vous êtes contraires dans le sens’ (Pascal 1995: 47).

If such a contradictory attitude towards words and meaning is possible, then it can only be concluded that these words lack substantial meaning. Montalte ironically says: ‘je suis devenu grand théologien en peu de temps, et vous allez en voir les marques’ (Pascal 1995: 43). As he eventually comes to discover, there is no underlying and authoritative argument that justifies the condemnation of Jansenism and even less so Arnauld’s orthodox position on religion: ‘Laissons là leurs différends. Ce sont là des disputes de théologiens, et non pas de théologie’ (Pascal 1995: 79). Even as his understanding of the essence of the debate on grace becomes more exact, Montalte explains that Arnauld’s adversaries relied upon the invention of new terms (*pouvoir prochain*, *grâce efficace*, *grâce suffisante*) to condemn him as an heretic. In the third letter, Pascal has a Dominican priest admit the fallacious nature of Jesuit morals, and yet persist in supporting them.

In order to discredit the Jesuits’ attack on Arnauld, Pascal’s fundamental argument lies in the distinction between the ordinary use of words and the various meanings with which these words have been endowed through the centuries; the diversity of opinions amongst the Jesuits themselves is but another significant manifestation of a confusion, which undermines the common stance they have taken. ‘Equivocal’ terms are not only a mark of the weakness of language; their inherent vacuity is the reason for their subversiveness, because it allows concepts to be invented or distorted. Montalte is constantly discovering new and unknown words: ‘Jusques-là j’avais entendu les affaires, mais ce terme me jeta dans l’obscurité’ (Pascal 1995: 45). His interlocutor’s convoluted answers, or silences, are revealing of the evasiveness

of these very words. Montalte eventually underlines the contradiction and lack of judgement in using words that have different meanings.

In the *Lettres provinciales*, Pascal's demonstration of the shallowness of Jesuit morals relies on a central idea: the absence of definition, and the arbitrary use of language for a devious purpose. Pascal intends to demonstrate that discourse is subjected to the desire to restore or corrupt 'le rapport entre l'institution linguistique et le signe' (Reguig-Naya 2007: 125). Ordinary language displays an insufficiency, which requires us to consider the problem of the validity and quality of words, while the uttering subject no longer masters language but instead finds himself amidst the dispersed nature of signs. A paradox emerges here, insofar as language extracts its persuasive force from the fundamental precariousness of this connection: 'les rapports du langage au pouvoir reposent en effet sur l'inversion de l'ordre rationnel qui doit structurer le signe: la force des mots est inversement proportionnelle à leur soumission à une pensée préalable' (Reguig-Naya 2007: 125).

Pascal's is an ongoing interrogation of the way in which the real, in its diversity, escapes our apprehension, and of how words cannot penetrate this diversity but solely categorize it, superficially, after the discovery of the mathematical infinite within the universe. In order to facilitate speech, men have simplified the patterns of reality: language is approximate and the nominative choices are necessarily arbitrary. In *De l'esprit géométrique*, Pascal observes that 'ce n'est pas avoir l'esprit juste que de confondre par des comparaisons si inégales la nature immuable des choses avec leurs noms libres et volontaires, et dépendant du caprice des hommes qui les ont composés' (Pascal 2000: 205).

The disjunction between the linguistic and ontological orders designates the essential vacuity in language, and the inferior realm to which all things human pertain. The impossibility of ascribing words to every object is partially resolved in the preliminary use of definition. Pascal undertakes to demonstrate this in a specific context, only to show later that,

in matters of religion, error due to linguistic confusion is all the more problematic, because its implications involve moral and even spiritual considerations. Moments abound in the trilogy in which thought is thwarted because of the body's (autonomous) presence, which can be compared to fragments of the *Pensées*, along with the centrality of speech as a defining element of humanity. The next section will aim to demonstrate that Beckett adapted Port-Royal's critique of language, based on the awareness that thought can never be properly conveyed by language. This anticipates the fundamental theme of the trilogy.

### **B. *The Invalidity of Words in Malone Dies***

An implicit correspondence exists between the figures of the Jesuit father in the *Lettres provinciales* and Father Ambrose in *Molloy*, who, according to Moran, 'was always very kind and accommodating' (Beckett 1997: 95). Moran, who had a beer with Gaber before his visit, and missed mass because of an 'untimely visitor' (Beckett 1997: 100), is almost certain that Father Ambrose 'would not ask' if he had fasted before coming to him for communion. But Moran knows that 'God would know, sooner or later' (Beckett 1997: 97). Opposed to Moran's moral scrupulousness, Father Ambrose 'flatters himself for being a man of the world, and knowing its ways' (Beckett 1997:100), and 'dispatched me without a moment's hesitation (Beckett 1997: 101) upon learning the reason for Moran's visit. The portrayal of the complacent priest recalls the 'doctrine bien commode' of Jesuit casuistics, and makes clear that Beckett is referring to a comic figure invented by Pascal.

In *Malone Dies* the problem of language is first addressed in terms of a tangible delimitation of the meaning of words, the implications of an uttered or articulated discourse.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Martine Pécharman observes that the Augustinian conception of language is characterized by a questioning of the nature of speech. The authors of the *Logique ou l'art de penser* have anticipated the idea of the intentionality of an enunciated discourse, which can be declined according to rules: 'nous ne parlons jamais sans que la parole prononcée ne se conforme à des règles et l'analyse de ces dernières doit elle-même reposer sur l'analyse générale de l'énonciation comme effet d'une énonciation' (Pécharman 2007: 101).

Malone's preliminary step is to define succeeding moments of his reflection by making a brief 'inventory' (Beckett 1997: 181). The ideal of an efficient discourse is immediately undermined by his 'old quibbles' (Beckett 1997: 182), when he says that 'It is better to adopt the simplest explanation, even if it is not simple, even if it does not explain very much' (Beckett 1997: 183), and 'at the last moment correct inadequacies' (Beckett 1997: 183), which he never does. Malone is at first unsure 'where to begin' – he soon points out that he is 'back at [his] old aporetics' – and hence decides to 'speak of the things that are in my possession' (Beckett 1997: 181).<sup>13</sup>

Consequently, the desire to follow the principle of a clear and ordered discourse is thwarted by an underlying, contradictory impulse, for Malone eventually admits that 'reason has not much hold on me right now' (Beckett 1997: 182). It is as though the wish to conform to the ideal of a rational language were instantly impaired, just as the four stories Malone had intended to tell will be successively interrupted, and then abandoned, each advent of a new story punctuated by the ongoing refrain, 'what tedium'. Malone's principal dread is to linger on something that might bring about meaning or an occasion for reasoning. Indeed, as he recapitulates, much in the way of Pascal, he particularly insists on the fact that 'There are things I do not understand. But nothing to signify' (Beckett 1997: 83), and concludes that 'I can go on' (Beckett 1997: 83) – at least temporarily.

### C. *The Faltering of Words*

The relation between speech and sound is the object of Augustine's enquiry into the nature of language. Martine Pécharman highlights that the act of utterance (speaking) corresponds, for Augustine, to giving a sign to one's interlocutor by means of an articulated speech ('parler

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<sup>13</sup> The French version states: 'Me voilà à nouveau dans mes vieilles apories' (Beckett 1951: 10); 'il vaut mieux adopter l'expression la plus simple, même si elle l'est peu, même si elle n'explique pas grand-chose' (Beckett 1951: 12).

c'est donner un signe au moyen d'un son articulé') which is to say that the reason for which signs such as articulated sounds are used is to designate our intention to communicate: 'le langage est institué pour se signifier les uns aux autres, le désir de chacun d'être entendu et d'être reconnu par autrui comme âme désirante' (Pécharman 2007: 103). Thus the voice 'ne peut remplir sa fonction de signe, autrement dit, ne peut, étant perçue, faire connaître autre chose qu'elle-même, que parce qu'elle est désignée de manière délibérée à produire cet effet cognitif' (Pécharman 2007: 104).

Augustine also underlines in *De Magistro* that the mere phenomenal act of speaking is the equivalent of 'pronouncing words', which however, is a far cry from verbal expression. Thus, as Pécharman observes, there is no relation of identity between words and the sounds they are made of: 'parler, c'est proférer des mots, mais cela ne revient pas à admettre que la signification des mots ne fasse qu'un avec les sons mêmes de ces mots' (Pécharman 2007: 107). Meaning is therefore the result of the mental content made intelligible through the word: 'c'est ce dont on a l'intelligence dans le mot, ce qui est appréhendé par l'esprit et nullement par l'oreille, qui permet l'aboutissement de la signification, et non pas le mot qui n'en est que le vecteur sonore' (Pécharman 2007: 108).

Direct communication however, is impossible because the subjective understanding of the meaning of words distorts the original content of thought: 'les mots en tant qu'ils font venir à l'esprit de l'auditeur les pensées dont ils sont les signes, sont des noms [...] les noms assurent le réveil des pensées qu'ils sont destinés à signifier, la "commemoration animi"' (Pécharman 2007: 108).<sup>14</sup> For Port-Royal, language is inherently contradictory: it was formerly apt to communicate essence but can no longer ensure the direct transmission of

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<sup>14</sup> The image of the evanescence of speech 'dust of words with no ground for their settling' developed in *The Unnamable* may find its source in Augustine's *Confessions* (XI, 6, 8), in which the ephemeral nature of spoken words is evoked: 'mais cette voix n'a retentit qu'un instant, et elle a passé ; elle a commence et elle a fini. Les syllables ont raisonné et elles ont passé: la seconde après la première, la troisième après la seconde, et ainsi de suite, jusqu'à la dernière, et après la dernière, le silence'. There is a variation on this image in the last paragraph third chapter of *Murphy*, as Celia feels 'spattered with words that went dead as soon as they sounded; each word obliterated before it had time to make sense, by the word that came next; so that in the end she did not know what came next' (Beckett 2003: 27).

meaning through words. The inadequacy of language derives from the antagonisms between body and mind, the spiritual and material natures of man, and as such, it questions the very possibility of representation.

Ordinary language displays an insufficiency which requires that the problem of the validity and quality of words be taken into account. Arnauld and Nicole remark that the reason for confusion is that ‘les hommes ne considèrent guère les choses en détail: ils ne jugent que selon leur plus forte impression, & ne sentent que ce qui les frappe davantage: ainsi lorsqu’ils aperçoivent dans un discours beaucoup de vérités, ils ne remarquent pas les erreurs qui y sont mêlées, & au contraire s’il y a des vérités mêlées, parmi beaucoup d’erreurs, ils ne font attention qu’aux erreurs, le fort emportant le foible, & l’impression la plus vive étouffant celle qui est plus obscure’ (Arnauld and Nicole 1981: 275).

As Delphine Reguig-Naya observes, ‘l’absence de fondement du langage garantit l’autonomie du signe mais pose également le problème de l’unité du corps linguistique, de l’accord de la cité parlante, problème qui a de nettes résonance théologiques et dont les Provinciales signalent l’acuité. [...]. La dualité du langage, dont la structure de chaque signe linguistique se fait l’image, est à l’origine de cette nécessité de conversion au sens, c’est-à-dire d’une décision ferme de la volonté dans un sens ou l’autre’ (Reguig-Naya 2007: 131). Words give meaning to speech, but what they imply depends upon the speaker, who may confuse (deliberately) expression and meaning. Language can either reveal or conceal meaning, and silence also has the capacity to express. This is taken up in *Watt*, where the narrator evokes the impossibility of direct communication – each individual retaining their own opacity:

And so always, when the impossibility of my knowing, of Watt’s having known, what I know, what Watt knows, seems absolute, and insurmountable, and undeniable and uncoercible, it could be shown that I know, because Watt told me, and that Watt knew, because someone told him, or because he found

out for himself. For I know nothing, in this connexion, but what Watt told me. And Watt knew nothing, on this subject, but what he was told, or found out for himself, in one way or in another. (Beckett 2005: 128)

Because it operates in the human realm language is merely a ‘prisme déformant qui projette sur les choses les contradictions et les disproportions humaines’ (Reguig-Naya 2007: 305), for it can only express reality from a human perspective. The impossibility of affixing meaning to words is a further illustration of the absence of an ontological centre that reverberates in the infinite multiplicity of meaning (*diversité*) comprised in language: ‘Le langage conserve son rôle à Port-Royal de clé anthropologique, ses conséquences et le problème qui définit la nature humaine’ (Reguig-Naya 2007: 297). The only solution for the subject seeking to define himself in this unsteady multiplicity of representations is to assume an identity. This implies that he accept the distance between the object of speech and the source of speech.

The authors of the *Logique* observe that ‘toutes les langues sont pleines d’une infinité de mots semblables qui, n’ayant qu’un même son, sont néanmoins signes d’idées entièrement différentes’ (Arnauld and Nicole 19781: 85). This idea is taken up in the last novel of the trilogy as the voice of the Unnamable refers to the emptiness of the word ‘I’ in the opening line: ‘I say I, unbelieving’ (Beckett 1997: 193). In a later sequence, the voice mentions the overwhelming presence of words that cannot be uttered: ‘you don’t feel a mouth on you, you don’t feel your mouth anymore, no need of a mouth, the words are everywhere, inside me, outside me, well well’ (Beckett 1997: 390). This stands in complete contradiction with the analysis undertaken in the *Logique* of the normative quality of the operations of discernment in language:

Nous ne pouvons rien exprimer par nos paroles lorsque nous entendons ce que nous disons, que de cela même il ne soit certain que nous avons en nous l'idée de la chose que nous signifions par nos paroles, quoique cette idée soit quelquefois plus claire et plus distincte et quelquefois plus obscure et plus confuse. [...] car il y aurait là contradiction entre dire que je sais ce que je dis en prononçant un mot et que néanmoins je ne conçois rien en le prononçant que le son même du mot.

Not only, then, is the word 'I' entirely distinct from the idea it is meant to convey in the Unnamable's opening assertion, but the idea of a subject, an 'I' capable of thought and of uttering it, is called into question. Marin observes that the 'unnamable', from the perspective adopted by Port-Royal, is 'God'. That Beckett may have inserted playful reminders of this is possible; the word 'God' is systematically pronounced in an ironic way. In *Watt*, Mr. Hackett remarks in passing, for instance, that 'God is a witness that cannot be sworn' (Beckett 1997: 386).<sup>15</sup>

In the Port-Royal conception of language, man has no name that designates him as such: 'il est une figure que l'on ne peut nommer directement, mais par l'échange et la substitution de ce qui se dit de lui, par des qualités que l'autre lui attribue et avec lequel il échange' (Marin 1975: 138). On the other hand, the noun 'God' is the paradigm set for any other noun, the unique name around which all other figures are arranged. Following Marin, the name of 'God' would be 'la figure ultime, la catachrèse, par laquelle ce qui ne peut être dit l'est quand même par une figure qui est sans équivalent, puisqu'elle est celle par laquelle "le signifié en trop" trouve son signifiant dans un déplacement substitutif de la série signifiante' (Marin 1975: 140).

While the parallel between the voice of the Unnamable and the absent God has been made by some commentators,<sup>16</sup> my contention here is that the linguistic transposition, as it is

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Barry observes that 'in Beckett's earlier fiction God, and later his equally unknowable 'delegates' are invoked to take responsibility for the words of the text to compel their continued production: Beckett finds a dramatic form to displace the locus of authority away from the author' (Barry 2000:174).

<sup>16</sup> See the *SBT/A* volume on 'Beckett and Religion'.

described by Marin, highlights the apprehension of language in Beckett's prose. Language is indeed both the foundation and the condition of his existence; the voice of the Unnamable is caught in 'words pronouncing me alive, since that's how they want me to be' (Beckett 1997: 308). The importance of utterance for Port-Royal has been pointed out earlier, as well as the way in which Beckett conjures up the idea that words are, in essence, sounds. From the perspective of Port-Royal, words are appropriated by the subject to communicate with his likes. It is precisely this intention that is called into question in the trilogy. First, Beckett's figures are 'solitaries' who seldom find company even when they experience the 'craving for a fellow' (Beckett 1997: 17). Company remains virtual, confined in memory or merely episodic. The very purpose of language is therefore called into question, as, added to the problematic idea of saying 'I', are the status and function of the name.

As Tubridy notes, 'the name operates in a similar way to the deictic in that it only makes sense when it denotes a specific referent (though it retains its signification beyond the instance of utterance). The narrator of the novel cannot be named for to name is to further amplify the strength of the deictic term that he seeks to abolish. Like a deictic, the name reaches the world of bodies. Through the name, the word becomes flesh' (Tubridy 2000: 98). The speaker is thus poised between voice and body, at what Tubridy calls the 'point of incarnation' (Tubridy 2000: 99). The very act of uttering the pronoun 'I' immediately invokes the contingencies of the body. The subsequent phase of Beckett's writing would be an attempt to leave the 'impasse' reached by the end of the trilogy, and to find an expression that would eventually correspond, or come closest, to being – even if 'being' itself has to be a void, an exceeding 'nothing' out of which Beckett's art initially takes its essential form.

## VII. CONCLUSION

The study of the Augustinian element of Port-Royal's philosophy of language has brought to light certain aspects that confirm that a continuity exists with Beckett's own approach to language. : 1) the shortcomings of language to reproduce ideas exactly; 2) the interference of the body that prevents transparent communication with others, and 3) the idea that, words being sounds, any meaning can be ascribed to them – sometimes to catastrophic consequences. The textual presence of the opening section of the *Logique* was made apparent in 1) the contrast between the Cartesian strain illustrated in Malone's 'desire henceforward to be clear, without being finical' (Beckett 1997: 181) and Sapó's incapacity to follow in the right order the four operations of the understanding.

The second phase of my reflection was to turn to the *Lettres Provinciales* as a literary illustration of the 'spirit of geometry' and a manifestation of the comic element at work in Pascal's prose. The first, evident filiation is the figure of the Jesuit father in *Molloy*. Even as he strives to conform to 'what reason counsels' (Beckett 1997: 181), the preoccupation to find the 'right' word is likewise reminiscent of Montalte's main argument against the Jesuits. Malone indeed is always preoccupied to follow 'what reason counsels' (Beckett 1997: 187). Thus he questions the validity of chosen words like Pascal's protagonist in the opening four letters, only to admit that he is 'back at my own quibbles' (Beckett 1997: 187).

To anyone familiar with the *Lettres Provinciales*, the word calls to mind the requisitory against sterile controversy in the epigraph letter: 'ce terme me jeta dans l'obscurité, et je crois qu'il n'a été inventé que pour brouiller' (Pascal 1998: 192). Thus, although discourse attempts to implement the perfect method defined and illustrated by Pascal, 'saying is inventing' (Beckett 1997: 37). Like Montalte who seeks the evidence of truth to elaborate his discourse, Malone admits that 'it is better to adopt the simplest

explanation' (Beckett 1997: 37).<sup>17</sup> This concession is immediately denied, 'even if it is not simple, even if it does not explain very much' (Beckett 1997: 183).

This oscillation creates the comic unbalance that characterizes Beckett's prose. As Ruby Cohn observes, 'the full flavour is obtained when sentences and paragraphs accumulate, in which the tone is sometimes riotously, sometimes grotesquely out of key with its subject' (Cohn 1959: 11). Pascal's most powerful argument that the possession of truth is 'toute ma force. Si je la perds, je suis perdu' (Pascal 2004: #796) is echoed in the concern with truth in the trilogy, that nonetheless, always remains the subject of satire: 'enough concessions [...] to the spirit of geometry'.

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<sup>17</sup> See Hélène Michon's article, 'Réflexion sur le statut de la rhétorique dans l'apologie pascalienne' (see URL in the Bibliography).

## CONCLUSION

Beckett's relation to Port-Royal has shown that some of the most fundamental influences are neither explicitly identified in the finished work, or contained at an earlier stage in manuscript evidence. The release of archival material has shed little light upon Beckett's understanding of Port-Royal, and his use of the works of Pascal in particular, because of the implicit nature of these references. Therefore, the genetic approach cannot be the only criterion to determine literary influences upon Beckett. A deep, though perhaps deliberately hidden by the author, literary affinity between Beckett's work and Pascal's emerges from a close reading of their works, but evidence was needed to demonstrate that Pascal was not an occasional reference to be found in the French prose, as has been claimed by Beckett scholars.

Manuscripts could not be read as evidence for Beckett's knowledge of Pascal, Port-Royal or Jansenism because the material is too restricted. There are strikingly few in-depth references to Pascal in Windelband's *History of Philosophy*, a source that determines most interpretations in genetic criticism today. In addition, the scholarly reluctance to acknowledge the possibility that the influence of Pascal upon Beckett's art was fundamental, in both philosophical and literary terms, may come from the *apparent* lack of textual evidence and primary sources. But it is also possibly owing to an unjustified attitude towards Pascal and Port-Royal that the assumption that neither could have directly influenced Beckett's art together with his conception of language.

Beckett's early approach to literature characteristically lies in the predominant role ascribed to failure. This much-discussed Beckettian 'pessimism' towards art and literary expression has provided elements that have enabled me to determine the breadth of his knowledge on seventeenth century French classicism by identifying his sources on Pascal and Racine. The study of Beckett's sources, moreover, requires that his statements be situated in a wider context, which was the twentieth century quarrel on 'modern classicism'.

The statements Beckett made on the ‘modern novel’ in his lectures on French literature, and the status given to both Pascal and Racine as literary paradigms in the discourse of his foremost contemporaries have enabled me to demonstrate that their influence was formative, particularly in terms of style, and that Pascal was to prose what Racine is known to have been to the theatre for Beckett. As a result, the most crucial impact of the *Pensées* on Beckett resides in the distinctive ‘anti-Cartesian’ tone of his prose and in the emphasis on the unintelligible essence of man after the Fall: ‘l’homme passe l’homme’ (Pascal 2004: #185).

A number of early sources have been supplied to support this hypothesis – the choice of which was verified in the archival material that comprises traces of Beckett’s readings, mainly the available student lecture notes and the correspondence. Elements from Beckett’s own critical discourse on literature have been provided to show that he developed an approach to literature inspired from the French critical tradition initiated by Sainte-Beuve and continued by Thibaudet.

The student lecture notes evidence that Beckett considered that the tragic, in its modern definition, was elaborated ‘conceptually’ by Pascal, and manifested in Racine’s major works through the subjection to desire. From Grace McKinley’s notes we learn that Racine, for Beckett, invented a new ethics of tragedy that directly addresses the reality of sexual desire. This is done without ornament ‘none of the fine Cornelian phrases’, so that ‘for the first time in the [French] theatre we have no heroic love. Sexuality is represented at last, and treated realistically’ (Knowlson and Knowlson 2006: 307).

The tragic within Racine’s own work lies, as in the *Pensées*, in the radical upsetting of ethics and laws, of human capacity to uncover truth, and, ultimately, of language to express accurately. Just as his characters are haunted by doubt, and just as this hesitation in the moment of confrontation makes the other characters collapse along with them, so Pascal

proceeded to demonstrate that any attempt to reconcile opposites is irrevocably bound to failure, except in faith, through the figure of Christ.

Given his interest in French literature, there can be no doubt that Beckett came to know and realise the importance of Pascal's vision in the definition of 'modern' thought, independently and despite the 'conservative' teaching of literature at Trinity College, Dublin. He drew his principal ideas on French classicism from writers such as Gide, Proust, Valéry, and Claudel, and that his conception of Pascal as the first 'modern' thinker was shaped by his familiarity with the philosophical manifestation of the debate on 'modern classicism'. I have included an analysis of the opposing figures of Benda and Bergson because of the crucial role they played in developing an idea of literature that was to be defined through the examples of classical 'perfection'. A crucial element was that both Pascal and Racine were seen as true poets, universal models because of the 'purity' of their idiom.

The importance of the Augustinian conception of language for Beckett was highlighted in the analysis of Pascal's geometrical writings and Arnauld and Nicole's *Logique ou l'art de penser*. Crucially, the definitive 'renversement' of Cartesianism is directed against the conventional classic idiom, as well as its ethics and values. It is through the conception of a 'Jansenist' aesthetics that the literary conjunction becomes apparent. This distinctive aesthetics is found in the dislocation of Cartesian metaphysics, along with the dismissal of the ethical optimism (as opposed to what Beckett in his Trinity lectures defined as Racine's 'Augustinian pessimism')<sup>1</sup> that underlies that particular philosophy. Adjoining Pascal's vision in the *Pensées*, Racine's work was perceived by Beckett as the purest embodiment of the classical *ethos*, as it strays from baroque literature and Corneille's rhetoric of *préciosité*.

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<sup>1</sup> Following Rachel Burrows's lecture notes, it seems that Beckett also adopted the view that this modern 'pessimism' distinguished, at least implicitly, Racine from his predecessor Corneille (TCD MIC 60).

The direct influence of Pascal and Port-Royal upon Beckett's own conception of art, use of the French language, and evocation of existence had to be determined next. The shift from an intellectual to a creative interest in Pascal may have been nurtured by his acquaintance with Surrealist circles. John Pilling observes that Beckett had signed the 'surrealistically orientated' 1932 manifesto *Poetry is vertical* which developed the idea of the loss of self in the following terms: 'the final disintegration of the 'I' in the creative act is made possible by the use of language which is a mantic instrument and which does not hesitate to adopt a revolutionary attitude towards word and syntax, going even so far as to invent a hermetic language, if necessary' (Pilling 1976: 19). The set objective, to annihilate the self, recalls Pascal's own intention in the fragment on the 'moi introuvable'. If situated in a more general context in the seventeenth century, it may be understood as a characterizing feature of the Port-Royal philosophy of language. Indeed, some of the major figures of Surrealism, including Breton, turned to Pascal's style to extract the premises of new forms of expression as, for instance, in *Arcane 35*.

I have taken the writing of the trilogy as the pivotal moment, in order to establish how the *Pensées* nurtured some of the principal themes of Beckett's major prose work. As Harvey's notes reveal, Beckett's preferred an 'unfinished art' to a realist perspective. Discontinuity, taken as an element that both writers's prose have in common, inspired the process of voiding captured in Beckett's prose is reminiscent of the rhetoric at work in the *Pensées*. Like Beckett, Pascal's writing is harmonic. The similarities initially appear in the resurgence of predominant themes, in the repetitive use of isolated words or expressions, in clearly defined stylistic patterns. Once the opening theme is set, variations are initiated through repetition, rhythmic alterations and sound patterns. The diversity of tone, ranging from a detached, impersonal expression to comedy, irony, and pathos, together with the powerful images that are the foundational elements of Pascal's vision, have been highlighted

in order to illustrate the poetic impact of the *Pensées* upon Beckett's three novels. i The image of man as a 'milieu' poised between the infinite and the void is a powerful catalyst that undoubtedly finds its source in the *Pensées*. The image of the infinite sphere is not only present in the early works, criticism and novels alike; it is overwhelmingly elaborated in the trilogy.

In the early twentieth century, one of the most vehement detractors of Port-Royal was the Jesuit Henri Brémond. He rejected the idea that Port-Royal had inaugurated a literary style. However, as the controversy around Jansenism and Port-Royal died down in the later decades of the twentieth century, scholars came to credit the Port-Royal group with literary merits that had previously remained unseen, although Sainte-Beuve's work on Port-Royal had contributed to shed positive light upon its history. Underlying aspects of a 'Jansenist' philosophy of language at work in Beckett's prose, deriving from both Cartesian and Augustinian traditions, have been highlighted.

The style developed at Port-Royal distinguishes itself by its preference for short sentences, always aiming for 'perfection'. Jean Orcibal's attempt to define Jansenism in an article written in 1953, 'Qu'est-ce que le Jansénisme?', focuses on Port-Royal's attempt to create an idiom that, in corresponding to the moral exigencies it had set itself, defined the essential traits of classicism: 'besoin d'ordre et de perfection, pauvreté des moyens, intention à l'intérieur plutôt qu'à l'extérieur'.

This description could also characterize Beckett's own idiom, that 'concise' quality of his style that critics referred to as a 'minimalist reduction' and that some have termed, perhaps after Orcibal, 'Jansenist'. In Enoch Brater's words, it is 'an abstract art and even by some measure geometric art form' which 'at best aims to do more and more with less and less' (Brater 1987: 9). Beckett consistently 'takes away', for he preferred, like Pascal and Racine,

to elaborate a more direct form of expression, which attains its full poetic impact in the careful arrangement of words. Beckett strives to ‘make sure that the nonessentials don’t creep back in’ as Alan Schneider put it (Schneider, quoted in Brater 1987: 9).

I have therefore taken a different perspective from commentators who have delved on Beckett’s use of Arnauld and Nicole’s *Logique ou l’art de penser*, in the aim to provide evidence that the concentrated beauty of his idiom, however, springs from a probing of the nature of speech, a questioning of the structure of discourse that have been anticipated by Pascal, and studied in Arnauld and Nicole’s work. My intention was to determine how that conception of language, together with the aesthetics it implies, inspired Beckett’s own creative purpose.

Additional elements would require an indepth study, but they exceed the subject of my thesis, or could not be carried out because of the lack of secondary sources. These consist of, firstly, the question of determining which author(s) Beckett considered to be the English counterparts of Pascal.<sup>2</sup> The answer is given implicitly in *The Unnamable*: Milton, Pascal’s direct contemporary. In *The Unnamable*, the voice introduces the conceit of the sphere in its attempt to define itself: ‘I like to think I occupy the centre, but nothing is less certain. In a sense I would be better off at the circumference, since my eyes are always fixed on the same direction. But I am certainly not at the circumference. *From centre to circumference in any case it is a far cry* and I may be situated somewhere between the two’ (Beckett 1997: 317, my italics).

The evocations of space as a ‘vast vacuity’ and a ‘boundless deep’ in *Paradise Lost*, and the ‘espaces imaginables’ in Pascal’s fragment on the disproportion of man underlie this

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<sup>2</sup> The works of Pascal and Milton have seldom been compared, although one scholar sought to bring them together in an article that established parallels between their respective poetic visions of space. See Catherine G. Martin’s article, ‘Boundless the deep: Milton, Pascal, and the theology of relative space’, *English Literary History*, 63.1 (Spring 1996) pp. 45-78.

passage. In the French version, the voice speaks of an ‘incompréhensible inquiétude’ before the changeable aspect of the real, echoing Pascal’s many haunting statements on the incomprehensible nature of man, the gulf, and ‘la distance infiniment plus infinie’ between man and God. The image of the centre comprises an infinite capacity of resonances and indeed acquires a haunting quality in both Beckett’s prose. Hence the initial contention in the Introduction that Beckett did not allude to Pascal without a clear purpose.

Secondly, the study of the *direct* influence of Racine upon Beckett would require further development as well, besides the study of the lecture notes undertaken by James Knowlson and Brigitte Le Juez. The research undertaken here has shown that the claim Beckett made in his lectures that Racine is a modern writer, foreshadowing Sade, can be resituated in the intellectual context of the times. What, then, remains of the originality of Beckett’s conception of Racine?

Some aspects remain hypotheses at this stage because they call for an in-depth study of general and complex questions that go beyond my immediate subject, mainly, performance theory. An exact knowledge of the productions of Racine that Beckett was familiar with would be necessary to compare their respective dramaturgies. This study would only be possible with a full access to Beckett’s French correspondence. I have looked at his letters to Madeleine Renaud in the Fonds Renaud-Barrault in the manuscript department of the Bibliothèque Nationale, but these do not contain the relevant information.

It is striking to see that Beckett initially considered Racine as a poet rather than as a playwright – a fact that has not drawn much critical attention. As he became more and more committed writing for the theatre, Beckett’s relation to the work of the seventeenth century playwright’s changed in the course of the decades that followed. We know that he wrote to McGreevy that going through Racine’s work enabled him to understand ‘the chances of the *theatre* today’. I would suggest that the problem of Racine’s influence upon Beckett can only

be accounted for through the artistic medium to which Racine dedicated himself: the theatre. Indeed, Beckett may not only have meant his *own* conception of the theatre but the genre of dramatic writing as such. He seems to have implied that the essence of a unique experience based on a primary element (the visual) could derive from a classical conception of the theatre, taking the example of Racine.

It would be necessary, therefore, to consider how Beckett gradually shifted from an intellectual to an artistic interest in Racine's work. Further research on the intellectual context would shed light on the impact of the renewal of the French stage in the twentieth century, originally initiated by Copeau and the Cartel on Irish theatre upon Beckett's own conception and early practice of of the theatre. In addition, Beckett and Roger Blin shared an admiration for Synge that has led me to consider the question of the relationship between Irish drama and the discourse on classicism by major French stage directors.

To my knowledge, however, no study of Racine's influence upon Synge has been undertaken recently. While Racine's influence upon the Irish playwright made no doubt to his contemporary Maurice Bourgeois, determining the extent of that influence through textual comparison, to establish parallels with Beckett's understanding of adaptations of Racine upon the stage, demanded a complex discussion that, because of the lack of secondary sources, could not be carried out at this stage.

Synge's role as a mediator between Ireland and Continental literature seems to have been essential for a number reasons: the interplay of Irish and European cultures in his theatrical work, and more specifically his interest in the French theatre, his love of seventeenth century playwrights in particular. For Beckett, both writers shared a non-didactic method' (TCD MIC 60). His plays are, like Racine's tragedies, a 'statement' on a given situation, but not a demonstration: neither author seeks to explain.

Grace McKinley's notes show that Beckett insisted that 'Racine's background is for the artist, not the psychologist' (in Knowlson 2006: 311). As in Synge's work, there no clear explanation of the psychological motive behind some of the characters' choices in *Andromaque*. Furthermore, Racine's and Synge's characters face the same predicament: they are bound to solitude and isolation, and this situation is elicited, even exhausted, through language. Racinian tragedy can, in this sense, be seen as an antecedent to both Synge and Beckett. Beckett was probably struck by that extraordinarily deep sense of the inevitable, and of the expression of desire as the main psychological force that underlies human actions.

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## SAMUEL BECKETT AND THE WRITERS OF PORT-ROYAL

This thesis examines Samuel Beckett's understanding of seventeenth century French classicism. The preliminary analysis of genetic material, that allows the identification of Beckett's primary and secondary sources on Pascal and Racine, leads to a discussion of literary and aesthetic connections between the works of Beckett and the writers of Port-Royal. The philosophical backdrop of that influence derives from the unique fusion of logic, eloquence, and passion manifested in the works of Racine, together with the conception of language in the *Pensées* and Arnauld and Nicole's 1662 *Logique ou l'art de Penser*. Literary theories on style and 'modern literature' that are contemporary to Beckett's Trinity College lectures and early critical writings are examined here in the aim to define the different aspects of that intellectual filiation. A close reading of Beckett's 1931 monograph on Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* follows the initial historiographical study, so as to show that the presence of French literary Augustinianism, manifested in the works of Sainte-Beuve, particularly his only novel *Volupté*, also underlies some of Beckett's later prose. This includes the trilogy of French novels, *Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, and *The Unnamable*, and pieces belonging to the later period, particularly *Le Dépeupleur/The Lost Ones*, and *Sans/Lessness*. Beckett's 'syntax of weakness', based on reduction and impoverishment, is inspired by the Augustinian pessimism towards language at work in the *Logique*. As such, the anthropological vision of Port-Royal anticipated Beckett's definition of being as chaos, so much so that Pascal's style crucially defined his use of the French language itself.

**Keywords:** literary influences – intertextuality – philosophy of language – style – Jansenist aesthetics.

## SAMUEL BECKETT ET LES ECRIVAINS DE PORT-ROYAL

L'objet de ce travail de recherche est de définir la relation de Samuel Beckett au classicisme français du dix-septième siècle. L'analyse préliminaire de différents manuscrits permet d'identifier les sources primaires et secondaires de ce dernier sur Pascal et Racine, et de mettre en avant, dans un second temps, les différentes correspondances, esthétiques et littéraires, entre l'œuvre de l'écrivain irlandais et Port-Royal. L'arrière-plan philosophique se définit par la conjonction de la logique, de l'éloquence et de la passion au cœur de l'œuvre racinienne, que l'on retrouve dans la rhétorique des *Pensées*, et l'analyse du langage dans la *Logique ou l'art de Penser* (1662) d'Arnauld et de Nicole. Les différents aspects de cette filiation intellectuelle sont établis à partir de l'analyse comparée des propos de Beckett dans ses séminaires sur la 'modernité' de Racine à Trinity College, Dublin, et des écrits théoriques de contemporains français parmi les plus illustres autour du 'classicisme moderne' et de 'l'anti-rhétorique'. L'étude de l'essai sur Proust, écrit en 1931, suivra ce bilan historiographique afin de montrer que l'œuvre de Beckett se situe dans le prolongement de l'augustinisme littéraire français, qu'il connaissait au moins à partir des écrits et en particulier du roman de Sainte-Beuve, *Volupté*. En outre, les thèmes augustiniens parcourent l'œuvre plus tardive, notamment la trilogie de romans français, *Molloy*, *Malone Meurt*, et *L'Innommable* comme les textes courts tels que *Le Dépeupleur* et *Sans*. L'intertextualité entre les écrits de Pascal et ceux de Beckett, doublée d'une analyse stylistique, démontrera que la syntaxe appauvrie de l'œuvre beckettienne est profondément inspirée du pessimisme augustinien vis-à-vis du langage. En effet, Beckett, adoptant le français comme principale langue d'expression, choisit le style des *Pensées* comme l'un de ses modèles les plus fondamentaux.

**Mots-clés :** influences littéraires – intertextualité – philosophie du langage – style – esthétique Janséniste.