

**Getting over Joyce in English:
'Proteus', *Portrait* and the Genesis of Samuel Beckett's Radio Play *Embers***

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The influence of James Joyce on Samuel Beckett's development as a writer has become a critical commonplace, often studied through the Bloomian framework of the 'anxiety of influence'.¹ Most accounts focus on the period ranging from the early fiction, in particular *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, and the young Beckett's complicity in the writing, critical reception and French translation of 'Work in Progress', until *Murphy*, with *Watt* – written during the Second World War – signifying the first clear stylistic break with Joyce. In this canonical view, Beckett's independence was consolidated by his subsequent switch to French and the 'frenzy of writing' that followed (1945-1950), yielding 'four stories, four novels and two plays', but also poems in his newly adopted language (Knowlson 1997, 358).² Although interpretations vary as to what the Joycean elements of his work are and where the fault line can be drawn exactly, the critical debate largely confirms Beckett's own view that his early output 'stinks of Joyce' (Beckett 2009b, 81) and that the promise he made to Samuel Putman in 1932 – 'I vow I will get over J. J. ere I die' (108) – was largely fulfilled by the end of the 1940s, aided by the untimely death of the 'penman' in 1941.

Less studied, and therefore less understood, is the relationship that Beckett developed with Joyce and his literary legacy once he returned to English as a language of composition

¹ Important studies of the subject include Barbara Gluck Reich, *Beckett and Joyce: Friendship and Fiction* (Bucknell University Press, 1979); Phyllis Carey and Ed Jewinski, *Re: Joyce'n Beckett* (Fordham University Press, 1992); Friedhelm Rathjen, *In Principle, Beckett is Joyce* (Split Pea Press, 1994); Dirk Van Hulle, *Joyce & Beckett Discovering Dante* (National Library of Ireland, 2004); Dirk Van Hulle, *Manuscript Genetics: Joyce's Know-How, Beckett's Nohow* (University Press of Florida, 2008); P. J. Murphy, *Beckett's Dedalus: Dialogical Engagements with Joyce in Beckett's Fiction* (University of Toronto Press, 2009).

² These were the stories 'La Fin' / 'The End', 'L'Expulsé' / 'The Expelled', 'Premier amour' / 'First Love', 'Le Calmant' / 'The Calmative'; the novels *Mercier et Camier* / *Mercier and Camier*, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* / *Malone Dies*, *L'Innommable* / *The Unnamable*; and the plays *Eleutheria*, *En attendant Godot* / *Waiting for Godot*.

in the mid-1950s, for the first time in roughly ten years. The purpose of this article is to show that ‘the Joycean shadow’, as Barbara Reich Gluck calls it (1979, 70), was not yet fully cast off in this period, and that Joyce continued to represent both a creative source of inspiration and an obstacle for Beckett. In order to illustrate this point, the following argument will trace how he re-engaged with Joyce in the 1950s and how this affected the genesis of his second play for radio, *Embers*, which draws significantly on the ‘Proteus’ chapter from *Ulysses* and *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.³

Revisiting Joyce in the 1950s

Beckett’s correspondence from the 1950s, a selection of which has recently been published, makes it abundantly clear that Joyce still held a prominent place in his life, on a personal as well as a creative level. Even though he had managed to articulate his ‘own way’ at this time, which lay in ‘impoverishment, in lack of knowledge and in taking away, in subtracting rather than in adding’ (Knowlson 1997, 352), it would not be exaggerating to say that the decade constituted something of a Joyce-revival for Beckett, one that he tried to stave off at first but which ultimately proved too strong to resist. Joyce features in the letters from this period in a variety of ways, but the articles and books that Beckett read about him are most important for the purpose of the present argument.⁴

Since the start of the 1950s, friends and academics regularly sent Beckett their pieces on Joyce, asking him for advice or comments because he had known the author personally. Though he often denied such requests, he sometimes also used them as an opportunity to articulate and sharpen his own poetics vis-à-vis Joyce’s. His letter to David Hayman of 22 July 1955 is a case in point for the light it sheds on Beckett’s attitude towards *Finnegans Wake*, twenty-six years after writing ‘Dante...Bruno.Vico..Joyce’ for *Our Exagmination Round His Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress* (1929). While he begins by stating the usual disclaimer – ‘I am quite out of touch with Joycean exegesis and it is a very long time since I last returned to the texts’ (Beckett 2011, 536) – he soon finds himself drawn into the discussion about ‘the importance of Mallarmé to Joyce’ (537), the topic of Hayman’s doctoral dissertation, published soon thereafter by *Lettres Modernes* as the two-volume *Joyce*

³ I would like to thank Mark Nixon, Onno Kusters, Dirk Van Hulle, Geert Lernout and Olga Beloborodova for their encouragement and feedback on the various draft versions of this paper.

⁴ For a discussion of Joyce’s importance to Beckett based on his correspondence from the 1950s, see my review of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett Volume III: 1957-1965* in the *James Joyce Literary Supplement* (Verhulst 2016).

et Mallarmé: les éléments mallarméens dans l'oeuvre de Joyce (1956).⁵ What moved Beckett to engage in literary criticism, it seems, was disagreement:

You have not altogether dispelled my scepticism as to the importance of Mallarmé to Joyce, but you have taken it down a great number of pegs. [...] I think perhaps you derive Joyce's use of the technique of suggestion too directly and exclusively from the Symbolists and Mallarmé. The device after all is as old as writing itself. The Divine Comedy is full of it. And one can well imagine the effect on Joyce, when he read it in Dublin as a very young man, of the Vita Nuova and its systematic trivalence, literal, allegorical and anagogical. [...]

In your identification in F.W. of Mallarmean elements the palpable hits fall thick and fast. Perhaps here too sometimes you seem rather to strain the point and solicit your texts, but I think you could hardly have done otherwise. For you had not only to resist the special pleading to which all thesis is an invitation, but at the same time texts into which almost anything may be read. And I think you are greatly to be praised for having kept it all as quiet as you have done. But it might be worth considering, in the published version, to nuancer here and there, or in a postscript. Unless of course you disagree, and perhaps very rightly, with what I have said. (537)

It may be the case that Beckett's friendship with Joyce, and his first-hand knowledge of his literary interests and reading habits, led him to be sceptical about Mallarmé's influence. Another reason, perhaps more important in this context, could be that some of Mallarmé's writing was anathema to Joyce's literary project of 'omniscience and omnipotence', as Beckett described it in an interview with Israel Shenker (2005, 162). This point of criticism is implicit in the advice he gives Hayman, namely to conduct an 'examination of how in Joyce the form of judgment more and more devoured its gist and the saying of all the saying of anything, in a way more consistent with Bruno's identification of contraries than with the intellectualism of Mallarmé' (Beckett 2011, 537). With 'intellectualism', Beckett may be referring to Mallarmé's essay 'Crise de vers', in which he deems all language to be imperfect and therefore doomed to fail. This 'arbitrariness of the signifier', Shane Weller contends, 'Joyce seeks to overcome in the radically paranomastic language of *Finnegans Wake*, in which the sound and the sense are, as Beckett observes [in "Dante...Bruno.Vico.. Joyce"], wedded together in a manner that is designed to make up for those very deficiencies of

⁵ Hayman later also sent Beckett a copy of the published book, which is still in his personal library (see <http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/HAY-JOY.html>), but since he had already gone through the dissertation, the pages remained uncut.

historical languages identified by Mallarmé' (2018, forthcoming). In Beckett's poetics, by contrast, as he explained to his painter-friend Avigdor Arikha,

All writing is a sin against speechlessness. Trying to find a form for that silence. Only a few, Yeats, Goethe, those who lived a long time, could go on to do it, but they had recourse to known forms and fictions. So one finds oneself going back to *vieilles compétences* [know-how] – how to escape that. One can never get over the fact, never rid oneself of the old dream of giving a form to speechlessness. [...] The logical thing to do would be to look out the window at the void. Mallarmé was near to it in the *livre blanc*. But one can't get over one's dream. (Atik 2001, 95)

This is the older and more experienced Beckett speaking in the late 1970s. However, it is clear that he already associated Mallarmé with a poetics of ignorance and impoverishment in the mid-1950s. When translator Hans Naumann asked him about his 'rapports' with Joyce and the reason for his adoption of French as a language of composition, Beckett gave the following answer in his letter of 17 February 1954: 'le besoin d'être mal armé' (2011, 462). The fact that Beckett is resorting to a Joycean type of pun, in French, to make a point about his 'need to be ill equipped' – as George Craig translates the phrase (464) – becomes all the more pertinent in light of Hayman's thesis on Mallarmé and Beckett's difficulties at achieving in his mother tongue the counter-Joycean effect he envisioned.

Beckett's most important Joyce-related reading of the period, however, was without any doubt the first volume of the *Letters*, edited by Stuart Gilbert. When Beckett received a copy of the book from Faber and Faber, he dismissed it somewhat to Mary Hutchinson, on 18 September 1957, claiming he did not have time to read it.⁶ At the end of October, however, when visiting Étretat in Normandy on a weekend break, he informed Thomas MacGreevy that he had been dipping into the correspondence and 'discovered two letters from Joyce written in that same hotel' (Knowlson 1997: 439). Indeed, on 7 September 1930, Joyce wrote to the composer Georges Antheil from Les Golfs Hôtels in Étretat (Joyce 1957, 292). The second letter cannot be so easily identified, but on 27 July 1925, Joyce wrote to his patron, Harriet Shaw Weaver, from the Grand Hôtel des Bains et de Londres in Fécamp, which is very close to Étretat (229). Whatever the case may be, Beckett's remark suggests that he had read at least half of Joyce's correspondence by 25 October 1957, when he told MacGreevy

⁶ This letter is not included in Beckett's published correspondence. It is preserved at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center (HRHRC) in Austin, Texas, where it is part of the Mary Hutchinson papers (TXRC98-A20), box 2, folder 4. Beckett's personal library still holds a copy of Gilbert's *Letters of James Joyce* (<http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/JOY-LET-2.html>), but it does not show any traces of reading.

about it, and chances are that he continued in the days or weeks that followed. Since he started drafting his second radio play at the end of November, it becomes worth exploring John Pilling's suggestion that Joyce's letters had 'a possible influence on *Embers*' (2006, 137).⁷

One aspect that stands out in the correspondence, and which Beckett cannot have failed to notice, is Joyce's constant references to his failing eyesight, almost in every letter that he writes, regardless of the addressee. In the sent letter from Fécamp, for example, after complaining of terrible weather, Joyce tells Weaver: 'my eye was troubling me yesterday' (1957, 229-230).⁸ Why these many invocations of diminished vision matter in the context of

⁷ In the years that followed, Beckett continued reading books on Joyce. Having procured a copy of the Viking Press edition of Stanislaus Joyce's memoir *My Brother's Keeper* (1958), prefaced by Richard Ellmann, Beckett was finishing the book by mid-February 1958 (Pilling 2006: 38). Next, he moved on to *Joyce's Dublin* (1958) by Hugh Kenner (Knowlson 1996: 454n45), after which he read Ellmann's famous biography *James Joyce* (1959), to which he had lent his cooperation in 1953 (Beckett 2011, 396; Beckett 2014: 254). There are copies of Stanislaus's memoir, (<http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/JOY-BRO-1.html>), Kenner's study (<http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/KEN-DUB.html>) and Ellmann's biography (<http://www.beckettarchive.org/library/ELL-JAM-1.html>) in Beckett's personal library, but they do not always match the editions he is known to have read. *My Brother's Keeper*, for example, is the Faber and Faber edition prefaced by T. S. Eliot, not the Viking Press one, and *James Joyce* is the 1982 revised edition, not the 1959 original. It is therefore possible that the copies Beckett originally read contained marginalia or other reading traces. For more details on the Joyce-related books in Beckett's library, see Van Hulle and Nixon 2013, 38-40.

⁸ During the period that covers the genesis of *Ulysses* (1914-1922) alone, which Beckett is certain to have perused, the following eye-related comments occur: '[eye] attack' (102); 'My eyes are fairly well' (103); 'eye specialist' (104); 'the condition of my sight is very unsettled' (106); 'I hope my sight will keep good' (114); 'laid up with my eyes again' (114); 'in bed for more than two months with an attack of my eyes' (117); 'une très grave maladie des yeux' (118); 'my eyes give me no trouble but my sight is very bad' (122); 'ill again with my eyes for the sixth time!' (123); 'frequent attacks of iritis' (123); 'I suffered a good deal with my eyes' (132); 'ill for the past few weeks with my eyes but luckily it did not reach the iris' (150); 'eye attack was hanging on and off for a fortnight' (151); 'troubles with my eyes' (156); 'five weeks of delightful vacation with my eyes' (168); 'My eyes seem to be all right for the next three weeks though I know that it is madness to work them as I am doing' (173);

Embers is that the radio play stresses the medium's lack of visual information and its reliance on sound alone for narrative development. Beckett already foregrounded this aspect in his first radio play, *All That Fall*, but in *Embers* it becomes the principle on which the entire experience hinges, as is made clear from the outset of the text.⁹ After we read or hear the protagonist Henry treading the shingle with his boots and sagging down on the shore, he addresses his blind and dead father – whom he imagines sitting next to him at the water's edge – in an aside that is equally intended for the 'blind' listener:

That sound you hear is the sea. [*Pause. Louder.*] I say that sound you hear is the sea, we are sitting on the strand. [*Pause.*] I mention it because the sound is so strange, so unlike the sound of the *sea*, that if you didn't *see* what it was you wouldn't know what it was [*Pause.*] (2009a, 35; emphasis added)

In the recording of *Embers*, the sound of the sea, which invades every moment of silence in the script, has been distorted with a kind of echo-effect, as if to emphasize that we are not hearing it directly, but filtered through Henry's perception.¹⁰ His comment to his father, who doubles for the listener, serves to remind us that, even though we cannot see in the medium of

'my wretched eye and a half' (176); 'I am writing this with one eye shut. These seems to be a very very slight improvement in the vision of the left eye' (186); 'sight of the left eye slightly better but not much' (186); 'my sight is getting better here' (187); 'here at present in the hope of regaining my sight' (190); 'yesterday my eye took a sudden turn for the better' (191); 'over 500 pages of revision when my eyes let me' (195).

⁹ *All That Fall* follows Maddy Rooney as she makes her way to the station and back to escort home her blind husband Dan. While she is waiting on the platform for the train to arrive, together with a small crowd of people that ignore her histrionics, she makes a comment that characterizes her quite explicitly as the focalizer of the radio play: 'Do not imagine because I am silent, that I am not present, and alive, to all that is going on. [...] Do not flatter yourselves for one moment, because I hold aloof, that my sufferings have ceased. No. The entire scene, the hills, the plain, the racecourse with its miles and miles of white rails and three red stands, the pretty little wayside station, even you yourselves, yes, I mean it, and over all the clouding blue, I see it all, I stand here and see it all' (Beckett 2009, 17). Through this outburst, Beckett marks her as the only source of aural information for both her husband and the listener, who see nothing.

¹⁰ The original recordings of Beckett's radio plays are available on CD from the BBC and the British Library (*Samuel Beckett: Works for Radio*, 2006).

radio and therefore rely wholly on sound, we should have no blind faith in our hearing and need to listen intently. In addition to other affinities, Beckett's play on the homophones *sea* and *see* in the passage cited above also establishes a connection with the beginning of the 'Proteus' chapter from *Ulysses*.¹¹

'Proteus' and the blind medium of radio

Stephen Dedalus makes the same pun when he shuts his eyes – the 'Ineluctable modality of the visible' – and precariously tries to make his way across Sandymount Strand (Joyce 1993: 31). Before he does so, Stephen contrasts vision or the 'diaphane' – 'Signatures of all things I am here to read, *seaspawn* and *seawrack*, the nearing tide' (31; emphasis added) – with the 'black adiaphane' or the darkness of his closed eyelids, forcing him to rely on his sense of hearing, which transforms into a kind of earsight: 'Shut your eyes and *see*' (31; emphasis added). The following paragraph renders his experience, which resembles the opening of *Embers*:

Stephen closed his eyes to hear his boots crush crackling wrack and shells. You are walking through it howsomever. I am, a stride at a time. A very short space of time through very short times of space. Five, six: the *Nacheinander*. Exactly: and that is the ineluctable modality of the audible. Open your eyes. No. Jesus! If I fell over a cliff that beetles o'er his base, fell through the *Nebeneinander* ineluctably! I am getting on nicely in the dark. (31)¹²

¹¹ There are many other topical resemblances between the published texts of 'Proteus' and *Embers* to bolster the case for an intertextual reading, but the manuscript of the radio play contained an additional parallel that was eventually dropped. Beckett intended to let Addie, the daughter of Ada and Henry, come to the beach after her lessons and bring with her the family dog, which Beckett describes as 'That horrid yelping brute' (15v). This resembles the characterization of Tatters in 'Proteus', the 'mongrel' darting across Sandymount Strand while he 'yelped' and 'barked at the wavenoise' (Joyce 1993, 38), much to Stephen's dislike, who inherited Joyce's cynophobia – a fact Beckett would have known about.

¹² In a letter to Harriet Shaw Weaver of 20 March 1918, written between two eye attacks, Joyce mentions having worked on *Ulysses*, namely 'the third episode of the *Telemachia*', which is the 'Proteus' chapter. Although it 'has been a long time in the second draft', Joyce told her, 'I spent about 200 hours over it before I wrote it out in full' (1957, 113). It is thus possible that during those revisions, Joyce's worsening eyesight prompted him to include the

What I would like to argue is that, by situating Henry's blind father – and by extension the 'blind' listener of *Embers* – in Stephen's sightless position, Beckett ingeniously uses this brief scene at the start of 'Proteus' as a template for an entire radio play – a genre he fittingly described as 'coming out of the dark' (Beckett 2014, 63).

Joyce critics have widely recognized this passage as an allusion to the 18th century philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's *Laokoon oder über die Grenzen der Mahlerey und Poesie* (1766), in which he develops an aesthetic theory of poetry in relation to painting – although Wim Van Mierlo (2007) has shown that Joyce probably did not use the original German text.¹³ Lessing defines poetry as a temporal artform, marked by chronology and duration, whereas painting is spatial and therefore simultaneous. Stephen enacts this theory in a very practical manner. By closing his eyes and taking one step after another, he is reminded of Lessing's *Nacheinander*, as sound – like poetry – is sequential. After opening them again, he is transported back to the visual world of the *Nebeneinander*, which is simultaneous, like painting.

Although Beckett is known to have read *Ulysses* in the late 1920s (Knowlson 1997, 97-98), the novel is conspicuously absent from both his critical writings and his letters. For José Francisco Fernández, this shows 'an author who fidgets uncomfortably around *Ulysses*, who recoils from admitting the influence on his work of a major landmark in literature' (2011, 79). In this respect, it is perhaps significant that the most important exception occurs in a deeply private document, namely Beckett's German Diaries from 1936-37. The passage in question reiterates the terminology of both 'Proteus' and Lessing, which suggests that this particular chapter from *Ulysses* had somehow stuck with him. On 26 March 1937, having conversed with art critic Will Grohmann and actor Kurt Eggers-Kestner in Dresden, Beckett invokes Lessing when he reflects on the difference between music and literature, in particular

episode on seeing and hearing at the start of the chapter, which genetic research by Sam Slote (2005) suggests was not yet part of the earlier drafts.

¹³ Van Mierlo writes: 'Usually attributed to Joyce's borrowing from Lessing's *Laocoön*, the words "*Nacheinander*" and "*Nebeneinander*" signify a distinction between the temporal aspects of poetry and the spatial aspects of the visual arts [...]. Lessing, however, does not use the word "*Nacheinander*", but says about action in writing that its "*verscheidene Teile sich nach und nach, in der Folge der Zeit, eräugnen*". Elsewhere he uses the term "*aufeinander*", which led Fritz Senn to speculate that rather than the actual book Joyce probably used a summary or a textbook, where "*aufeinander*" is rendered as "*nacheinander*"' (2007).

the dissonance that has become principle & that the word cannot express, because literature can no more escape from chronologies to simultaneities, from nebeneinander [sequential] to miteinander [simultaneous], than the human voice can sing chords. (qtd. in Nixon 2011, 167)

According to Mark Nixon (166), it is not clear who brought up Lessing in the conversation. Beckett did buy his six-volume complete works on a visit to Braunschweig (78), but he had already sent the books home on 8 December 1936, leaving them ‘unread’ by the time he met Grohmann and Eggers-Kestner (201n4).¹⁴ He would later also dismiss Lessing as ‘esthétique générale’, calling it ‘un jeu charmant’ (1984, 118) in ‘La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon’ (1945-1946) – his essay about the Dutch painters Bram and Geer van Velde – but these charming ‘general aesthetics’, in the words of Nixon (2011, 218n10), suited his present purposes well. In the passage that follows in the German Diaries, Beckett applies the analysis to Joyce’s work, quite explicitly and insightfully weighing the merits of *Finnegans Wake* against what he perceived to be the shortcomings of *Ulysses*:

As I talk & listen realise suddenly how Work in Progress is the only possible development from Ulysses, the heroic attempt to make literature accomplish what belongs to music – the miteinander & the simultaneous. Ulysses falsifies the unconscious, or the ‘monologue intérieur,’ in so far as it is obliged to express it as a teleology. (167)

Despite the fact that Beckett confuses the terms from ‘Proteus’ – replacing the chronological or *Nacheinander* with the ‘nebeneinander’ and the simultaneous or *Nebeneinander* with his own invention, the ‘miteinander’ – and extends the theory to music, the basic opposition remains the same. Language or literature is bound to express chronology in a way that music – like painting – is not. In Beckett’s view, Joyce’s ‘Work in Progress’ resembles music in that it manages to express simultaneity, whereas *Ulysses* is bound to a realistic framework that enforces sequentiality and teleology onto the stream of consciousness technique. The verdict of *Ulysses* as a whole remains negative, especially compared to *Finnegans Wake*, yet by referencing ‘Proteus’, Beckett may be acknowledging that this is (one of) the chapter(s) where *Ulysses* comes closest to subverting the chronology of the *monologue intérieur*. It is well known that Joyce deliberately situated ‘Proteus’ early in the novel, rounding off the first section (‘Telemachia’) after the more conventional ‘Telemachus’ and ‘Nestor’ episodes, to plunge the reader into Stephen’s chaotic and densely allusive mind. The main difficulty of the

¹⁴ Beckett’s personal library no longer contained these volumes by the time of his death in 1989 (see Van Hulle and Nixon 2013, 261-287).

chapter famously resides in distinguishing what is actually happening from what is just a figment of Stephen's imagination. The best example is probably the reference to his Aunt Sara, whom he thinks of visiting at one point but does not in reality, so the conversation he has with his Uncle Richie is entirely fanciful.

Embers uses a similar principle. In the radio play, it is equally difficult to separate fact from fancy because it relies so heavily on imagined dialogue, especially between Henry, his father, his wife Ada, their daughter Addie, and two additional characters called Bolton and Holloway. The central ambiguity of *Embers* revolves around the question whether Ada is physically on the beach with Henry or not. As the various drafts of the text reveal, Beckett constantly hesitated between revealing and concealing her presence, uncertain as to how far he could push the technique in radio before it became too confusing for the audience. When Ada first speaks, the directions indicate that it should be in a '*Low remote voice throughout*' (2009, 39), which Beckett further specified as 'expressionless' on the first page of the script he annotated for BBC producer Donald McWhinnie, in addition to lengthening all Ada's contracted verb forms (e.g. 'they're' becomes 'they are').¹⁵ These additions emphasize the monotonous, lifeless quality of her voice, suggesting it is coming from beyond the grave. When she later tempts her husband to commit suicide with the question 'why life Henry?' (43), and the assurance that underneath the water 'all is as quiet as the grave' (44), she seems to be speaking from experience, confirming she is dead and thus imagined by Henry. The scene that follows, however, upsets this straightforward reading:

ADA: You shouldn't be sitting on the cold stones, they're bad for your growths.

Raise yourself till I slip my shawl under you. [*Pause.*] Is that better?

HENRY: No comparison, no comparison. [*Pause.*] Are you going to sit down beside me?

ADA: Yes. [*No sound as she sits.*] Like that? [*Pause.*] Or do you prefer like that?

[*Pause.*] You don't care. [*Pause.*] Chilly enough I imagine, I hope you put on your jaegers. [*Pause.*] Did you put on your jaegers, Henry? (39)

The fact that she is seemingly able to slip a shawl under Henry gives her a certain physicality, which was even more prominent in the manuscript. When Ada mentions she has brought 'the rug', later changed to 'my shawl', Henry asks her if she means the old scarf he once brought her back from Lucerne as a gift, thus providing a realistic backstory for the object.¹⁶ Beckett eventually deleted the comment, but the passage continued to undergo revision. The direction

¹⁵ This typescript of *Embers* is held at the University of Reading (UoR MS 1396-4-6).

¹⁶ The manuscript of *Embers* is part of a notebook held at the Harvard Theatre Collection (MS Thr 70.3). Beckett's revisions occur on folios 9r and 12r.

that Ada makes no sound as she sits was added to the second typescript, where Beckett also lets her ‘imagine’ it is chilly (39), meaning that her presence on the beach is spectral.¹⁷ Ada’s manuscript comment that she is glad to have put on ‘jaegers’ herself, had also been deleted by this time in the genesis.¹⁸ While Beckett removed the majority of references that confirm her physical presence, the published text offers enough contradictory information to leave the ambiguity intact.

Two other scenes were similarly reworked in the drafts, being the music and riding lessons of Henry and Ada’s daughter Addie. When Addie’s name is mentioned for the first time, Ada wants to know what is keeping her. Henry answers the question tangentially by imagining Addie taking a piano lesson with her ‘music master’. When the short evocation is over, Ada merely notes her husband’s absence of mind by saying: ‘You are silent today’ (41). In the second typescript, Beckett briefly changed her reaction to ‘Poor Addie’, but the third typescript reverts to her former response. Likewise, when Henry is done imagining Addie’s lesson with the ‘riding master’, and Ada asks him ‘What are you thinking of?’ (41), Beckett has her saying ‘Poor Addie’ in the second typescript, before restoring her initial response.¹⁹ In both instances, Ada’s compassionate reaction to the tyranny her daughter endures in the lessons could mean that she has also witnessed the scenes played out in Henry’s mind, as yet another construct of his imagination. By leaving out this suggestion in the published text, Beckett relocates Ada to the physical world, outside of Henry’s thoughts, where she waits for the private scene to end. Yet her presence is once again ambiguated by two more revisions. When Henry gets up in the second typescript to approach the water’s edge, Ada tells him not to just stand there and look at her, which the published text vaguens to: ‘Don’t stand there staring’ (42). She repeats the comment when Henry returns, which Beckett later also revised, be it with a slight variation: ‘Don’t stand there gaping’ (42).²⁰

As a result, Ada is both present and not present on the beach. Beckett explained to the French director and actor Roger Blin that this was exactly the reason why *Embers* should not be adapted for the stage: ‘When you listen, you don’t know if Ada exists or not, whether she only exists in the imagination of the character Henry’ (1994, 310). Beckett thus uses a similar technique to that of ‘Proteus’, but he resourcefully exploits the possibilities of broadcasting. Because radio drama, an aural art form combining the spoken word with sound, is situated between poetry and music, thus sharing some aesthetic qualities of the latter, he is able to achieve the simultaneous or ‘miteinander’ effect that he so admired in *Finnegans Wake*. In applying the *monologue intérieur* not just to a different medium but also to a different literary

¹⁷ This typescript is preserved at Trinity College Dublin (TCD MS 4663). Beckett’s revisions occur on folio 3r.

¹⁸ Harvard Theatre Collection, MS Thr 70.3, 9r.

¹⁹ Trinity College Dublin, TCD MS 4663, 5r; University of Reading, UoR MS 1396-4-6, 6r.

²⁰ Trinity College Dublin, TCD MS 4663, 5r; University of Reading, UoR MS 1396-4-6, 6r.

genre, he is able to overcome what he identified as the main defect of *Ulysses*. In doing so, to a certain extent, *Embers* can be seen as a ‘remediation’ of ‘Proteus’ in the sense theorized by Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1998), i.e. a ‘refashioning’ of a text written for one medium (prose) in another (radio), which is at the same time a form of paying homage.

This would mean that Beckett managed to outdo the Joyce of *Ulysses* at his own game because, although ‘*Embers* reprises the meditative mode and littoral setting of the “Proteus” chapter’, as Alan Warren Friedman notes, it also goes further because ‘*Embers* has no world outside of Henry’s head’ (2007, 108). In ‘Proteus’, the realistic framework keeps everything firmly in place. When Stephen closes his eyes, he jokingly wonders what will happen to the world: ‘Has all vanished since?’ (Joyce 1993, 31). But when he opens them again, he finds that the world has simply gone on existing: ‘See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end’ (31). *Embers* does away with such restrictions. At first sight, it may seem as if Beckett is simply copying Joyce, thus undermining the antithetical poetics he had formulated in the 1940s. Yet in this respect it is important to keep in mind that he had chosen an ‘impoverished’ medium as his vehicle, a blind form of drama where, as Marjorie Boulton so aptly put it, ‘the words, perhaps with a few sound effects, again have to do all the work’ (1960, 4), deprived of the visual resources offered by the theatre. Although Beckett had managed to stay sufficiently clear from Joyce by opting for a different medium, it was more difficult to keep the same distance on a stylistic level, as the following section will show.

Portrait and the mind as a fading coal

Beckett temporarily abandoned *Embers* at the end of January 1958. He resumed the text later that year, and eventually finished it in mid-1959, but he struggled to find an appropriate title. After the tentative ‘He and She’, which he assured BBC Script Editor Barbara Bray was ‘not the title whatever it may be’ (2014, 184), he made the following suggestions, asking Bray for her opinion: ‘The Water’s Edge’, ‘Why life, Henry?’, ‘Not a Soul’, ‘All day all night’ (191). By 4 February 1959 he had ‘no other ideas for the moment’ (196), but more alternatives – not all serious – followed in his (drunken) letter of 17 February 1959:

[S]uggesting for title of Bolton-Holloway first The Last Ebb and next some hours later because enough of lasts that are never EBB simply without more which please for Christ’s sake approve, adopt, enterine & announce, though last night before dip occurred to me or was it again The Water’s Edge but no, The Elder Statesman and The Potting Shed, no, EBB for God’s sake, On the Strand is utterly impossible, why not Baile’s. (203)

After jokingly suggesting to cog the titles of recent plays by T. S. Eliot (1958) and Graham Greene (1957), he dismisses 'On the Strand' as too obviously reminiscent of W. B. Yeats's play *On Baile's Strand* (1903). Although Beckett hereby acknowledges that the seaside is a common site of literature, and that the word 'strand' carries all kinds of associations, it is telling that he neglects to mention Sandymount Strand or 'Proteus', as it is much closer to *Embers* in terms of content than Yeats's play, which is about the Irish folk hero Cuchulain. Therefore, one cannot help but think that these allusions function as a smokescreen, hiding Beckett's true affinities. When he announced the final title to Bray, she wanted to know if it had anything to do with the 'Ember days', to which Beckett responded the following on 11 March 1959:

The reason for Embers has really nothing to do with religious considerations. I did not realise my changes had made this element more apparent, for me in this text it is quite unimportant. This does not mean that the fasting overtone is not worth having. I decided on Embers because for one thing it receives light in the course of the piece and for another because embers are a better ebb than the sea's, because followed by no flow. The real title is the first line of the little poem, Again the Last Ebb, which I would accept, and Embers says that more or less in one word. I do not feel the old fashionedness of the word as you do and anyway what the hell. The sea and shore are so unreal, compared to Bolton's room and the dying fire etc., that I feel the reference should rather be to the latter. But again if you and Donald decide you prefer Ebb, keep it, and if you think Again the Last Ebb is acceptable, adopt it. The Last Ebb alone would not do. (211)²¹

Although Beckett dislikes the idea of finality, repeating the comment from his previous letter that the 'last' ebb is never the last, he also rejects the cyclical concept of a Wakean 'riverrun', implicit in the recurrent pattern of ebb and flow. This is Joyce's territory, and Beckett was unwilling to go down that road. Like Joyce, he was interested in a process, but an antithetical one of ending and dying down, not of endless return and renewal.

Although, again, this connection to Joyce is not made explicit, Paul Lawley suggests that, for the source of Beckett's title and its connotations of fire and light, 'we need to go no further than Joyce's Stephen Dedalus' (1980, 14). Lawley is alluding to the fifth chapter of *Portrait*, where Stephen explains to Lynch the term *claritas* used by Thomas Aquinas: 'The radiance of which he speaks is the scholastic *quidditas*, the *whatness* of a thing. This supreme quality is felt by the artist when the esthetic image is first conceived in his imagination. The mind in that mysterious instant Shelley likened beautifully to a fading coal' (2000, 231). In *A*

²¹ The poem that Beckett refers to in is 'Dieppe': 'again the last ebb / the dead shingle / the turning then the steps / toward the lighted town' (2012, 99).

Defence of Poetry (1840) Shelley wrote that ‘the mind in creation is as a fading coal, which some invisible influence, like an inconstant wind, awakens to transitory brightness’ (2002, 153). As Dirk Van Hulle remarks, ‘unlike the overconfident young Dedalus [...] Beckett’s works seem to have more affinity with the “fading” aspect of the coal than with its flaring brightness’ (2007, 23), the latter characterizing Joyce’s poetics. *Embers*, in particular, can be read as a stylistic exploration of the fading mind, especially in the sections about Bolton and Holloway.

When Henry’s father and Ada refuse to answer, the protagonist of Beckett’s radio play is reduced to conjuring up sounds in his mind and telling himself stories to pass the time. One such story is that of Bolton, a psychologically distressed man, and Holloway, a doctor and friend who comes to visit him. The text strongly suggests that Henry is Bolton when Ada tells him ‘There’s something wrong with your brain, you ought to see Holloway, he’s alive still, isn’t he?’ (Beckett 2009, 43), but more important for the present argument is the style of this particular story:

Dead silence then, not a sound, only the fire, all coal burning down, Holloway on the hearthrug, trying to toast his arse, Bolton, where’s Bolton, no light, only the fire, Bolton at the window his back to the hangings, holding them a little apart, with his hand looking out, white world, even the spire, white to the vane, most unusual, silence in the house, not a sound, only the fire, no flames now, embers. [*Pause.*] Embers. [*Pause.*] Shifting, lapsing, furtive like, dreadful sound, Holloway on the rug, fine old chap, six foot, burly, legs apart, hands behind his back holding up the tails of his old macfarlane, Bolton at the window, grand old figure in his red dressing-gown, back against the hangings, hand stretched out widening the chink, looking out, white world, great trouble, not a sound, only the embers, sound of dying, dying glow, Holloway, Bolton, Bolton, Holloway, old men, great trouble, white world, not a sound. (37)

This passage entirely consists of short and broken up lexical units, several of which are repeated exactly or with slight variations, some even more than once. As such, it stylistically conveys the paucity of Henry’s vocabulary and his difficulty to tell stories. Wanda Avila refers to the Bolton-Holloway passages as ‘the poem within the play’ (1984, 193; 204), approaching it as a live attempt to compose a poem – not unlike the poem that Stephen is trying to write on Sandymount Strand in ‘Proteus’ (see Lewty 2013). The fact that we are witness to Henry’s creative process, including what might be regarded as corrections and revisions, invites the interpretation that in *Embers* Beckett is deliberately using the same intertext as Joyce, but stressing the ‘fading’ rather than the ‘brightness’ aspect of Shelley’s coal metaphor.

That Beckett's choice can be read as a deliberate counteraction of Joyce's poetics – even his working method – is suggested by the revisions that were made to the ending of the radio play. When the story of Bolton and Holloway finally breaks down, Henry is standing at the water's edge again. In the published version he begins reading, in his by now familiar faltering style, from a 'Little book' that shows his appointments for the next few days:

This evening ... [Pause.] Nothing this evening [Pause.] Tomorrow ... tomorrow ... plumber at nine? [Pause.] Ah yes, the waste. [Pause.] Words. [Pause.] Saturday ... nothing. Sunday ... Sunday ... Nothing all day [Pause.] Nothing, all day nothing. [Pause.] All day all night nothing. [Pause.] Not a sound.
Sea. (Beckett 2009a, 47)

The pocketbook offers a dire prospect of empty days, with the exception of tomorrow, when a plumber is coming over to fix the waste disposal or the toilet. Henry is offered the choice of suicide through the final direction calling for the sound of the sea, the option preferred by his father – and his wife – before him, but the sure promise of 'Words' being exchanged seems to keep him from committing this desperate act.²² In the first draft of *Embers*, however, Beckett planned on using a different source of words. This final scene was not yet fully developed in the manuscript, but Beckett wrote down the word 'Newspaper' before Henry walks over to the water, suggesting that he originally intended to let the protagonist read to himself from a broadsheet.²³ Not only would this have ended the radio play on a much more positive note, amply satisfying Henry's constant need for stories, it is also the type of source from which Joyce snatched copious words and phrases to incorporate in his works, as genetic research on *Ulysses* and the *Finnegans Wake* notebooks in particular has shown. In the 1920s and 1930s Beckett mimicked Joyce's practice of notesnatching, but he turned his back on it in the 1940s. Therefore, the choice of a near empty pocketbook, as opposed to the overflowing pages of a newspaper, much better epitomizes his poetics of 'taking away' and 'impoverishment', so this is yet another site in the text of *Embers* where he struggled – and eventually managed – to keep a Joycean influence at bay.

Although the previous paragraphs suggest that Beckett was successful in his attempt, he did not think so himself. On 26 December 1957, shortly before abandoning *Embers* a first time, he told his American publisher Barney Rosset about the radio play's imminent failure: 'It is not coming off. There is something in my English writing that infuriates me and I can't get rid of it. A kind of lack of brakes' (qtd. in Zilliaccus 1976, 149). This 'lack of brakes' that

²² In both the Faber and Grove editions of *The Collected Shorter Plays* (1984), The Faber edition of *The Complete Dramatic Works* (1986) and *The Grove Centenary Edition* (2006) of Beckett's works, the crucial direction 'Sea' is omitted at the end of the text.

²³ Harvard Theatre Collection, MS Thr 70.3, 18r.

Beckett criticizes in his own text resembles his definition of Joyce's poetics, which was about 'knowing more' and 'always adding' material (qtd. in Knowlson 1997: 352). If Joyce's work represented 'an apotheosis of the word' (2009b, 519), as Beckett called it in the famous Axel Kaun letter of 9 July 1937, the goal for his own writing was to express a failure or crisis of language. Even though *Embers* signifies an important step in that direction, as the previous examples have shown, there are still many traces of the opposite Joycean tendency to be found in the text, which apparently proved hard for Beckett to avoid when writing in English.

In addition to the above-mentioned pun on 'see' and 'sea', the self-conscious and medium-specific reminder that seawaves are being broadcast across the airwaves could also be noted. In fact, many puns capitalize on the semantic richness of water-related words, an area also explored by Joyce in the *Wake*, especially 'Anna Livia Plurabelle' and the final soliloquy that flows back to the beginning of the book. For example, Henry's father calls him 'A washout, that's all you are, a washout!', before slamming the door shut and storming out (Beckett 2009a, 38). Henry's reply – 'Wish to Christ she had' (38), referring to his mother – makes clear that, in addition to being a disappointing failure, the term also connotes abortion, euphemistically paraphrased by John Fletcher as: 'I wish to Christ my mother had washed me out [e.g., with a douche] before I was conceived' (1978, 131). The verb 'to drown' is also used in multiple meanings, not just literally, but also in the sense of 'drowning (out)' noise, for example when Henry tries going to the beach and listening to the actual sound of the sea to cancel out the imagined surf in his head (Beckett 2009a, 43) – which in the criticism on *Embers* is usually interpreted as a sign of suicidal urges. As a result, the only way for him to 'drown out' the sound in his mind would be to end his life by drowning in the actual sea, although previously he had tried to 'walk about with the gramophone' stuck to his ear (44).

The wordplay comes to a climax at the end of the text, in a clash of fire and water images. Because the hearth in Bolton's room has gone out, Holloway lights a candle, which temporarily breathes new life into Henry's story. Nevertheless, pauses start eating into the narration and because the sea should be '*audible throughout what follows whenever pause indicated*' (35), as Beckett stipulated in the opening directions, the dwindling references to light are increasingly overflooded. On a textual level, this is accompanied by additional references to water, an aspect of the scene that Beckett revised in the drafts. As Holloway is holding the candle above his head, Bolton looks him straight in the eye, which is described as 'blue', 'very glassy' and 'swimming' (46). In the manuscript of *Embers*, Beckett considered the alternative 'swimmy' for Holloway's glassy look, and his eyes have a greyish colour, giving them a 'drowned' quality, like 'backwash'.²⁴ The clash of fire and water that is thematized in this closing section serves to illustrate that no matter how hard Henry tries to rekindle the story of Bolton and Holloway, or any other of his fictional constructs, it is bound to be extinguished by the sound of the sea, due to his fading imaginative power.

²⁴ Harvard Theatre Collection, MS Thr 70.3, 17r-18r.

Even though the principle that *Embers* tries to implement is Beckettian in nature, especially after the revisions that were made to the earlier drafts of the radio play, in terms of style it remains vulnerable to a Joycean penchant for imagery, metaphors and puns – i.e. the lack of restraint that Beckett himself alluded to in correspondence. The play on words even spilled over into his letters, when he promised Barney Rosset on 15 February 1958 to ‘return to the radio text and see if there is anything to be saved from that wreck’ (qtd. in Knowlson 1997: 790n1). In English, at least, it was still too easy for Beckett’s words to suddenly catch fire and flare up in brightness, however transitory.

***Cendres* and the weakening effect of French**

Beckett was – or at least felt – less vulnerable to this flaw in French, a language that enabled him to ‘write without style’, as he sometimes claimed (qtd. in Knowlson 2003, 37). Although it would certainly be wrong to say that his French works lack style, his adopted language was better suited to the kind of poetics he set out to pursue in contrast to Joyce, at least in the 1940s and 1950s. What Beckett described to Herbert Blau as the ‘weakening effect’ of French (qtd. in Mooney 2010, 196) can be discerned in the translation he made of *Embers* with Robert Pinget in late 1959. The title, *Cendres*, which could be used as a synonym for ‘embers’ but is usually associated with ‘ashes’, already takes some of the fire out of the text. The wordplay that characterizes *Embers* – and, to borrow Beckett’s words, partly ‘falsifies’ the radio play – is not recreated in French either. Take for example the pun on sea (‘la mer’) and see (‘voir’):

Ce bruit qu’on entend, c’est la mer. (*Un temps. Plus fort.*) Je dis que ce bruit qu’on entend, c’est la mer, nous sommes assis sur la grève. (*Un temps.*) J’aime autant le dire parce que le bruit est si étrange, ça ressemble si peu au bruit de *la mer*, qu’à moins de *voir* ce que c’est on ne saurait pas ce que c’est. (Beckett 2007, 38; emphasis added)

Similarly, Henry is called an ‘espèce d’avorton’ (46) by his father. The phrase means roughly the same as ‘little runt’ and ‘avorton’ can denote a miscarriage, but the association with water is lost. In this respect, *Cendres* came closer than *Embers* to realizing Beckett’s objective, but this is not to say that he preferred the French version to the English original. On 1 December 1959, when he had just finished revising the translation, he told Barbara Bray: ‘Hate the sight of it in both languages. Understand it better’ (2014, 260).

This ‘understanding’ may have included a better awareness of the role that both his bilingualism and the practice of self-translation could play in the realization of his literary project. Even though the *Wake* embeds multiple languages into an English substratum, Joyce was never attracted to the French idiom the way Beckett was. ‘I envy anyone who writes in French’, Joyce told Mademoiselle Guillermet on 5 September 1918, ‘not so much because I

envy the resources of that language (whose function I find to be for the most part a standard of moderation and criticism rather than one of innovation), but on account of the public to which one can appeal' (1957, 119-120). Whether Beckett shared Joyce's opinion about the French readership when going through his *Letters* is besides the point, but he certainly must have disagreed with the claim that French was unsuitable as a vehicle for literary innovation, which he sought to achieve exactly by exercising moderation in that language. Although the legacy of Joyce still interfered with Beckett's postwar writing in English, the mediation of French allowed him to gradually take a distance from his mother tongue that had previously been lacking or even impossible.²⁵ In doing so, Beckett eventually managed to transform it, as Joyce had done before him, though by different means.

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²⁵ The genesis of *Krapp's Last Tape*, the stage play that Beckett wrote immediately after abandoning the first draft of *Embers* in early 1958, shows a similarly complex relationship with the work of Joyce (see Van Hulle 2015, 167-168).

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