

Beckett's "neither" & Giacometti's *Figurine entre deux boîtes qui sont des maisons*

with discussion by James Olney

I am very grateful to the editors of *Dædalus* for permitting and even encouraging me to select two works – Samuel Beckett's "neither" and Alberto Giacometti's sculpture *Figurine entre deux boîtes qui sont des maisons* – for my discussion of influence. As I have been associated with literature departments throughout my career, I have chosen Beckett's for my primary text. But while I believe that what I want to say could be said from that work alone, I also believe that it will be more forceful, more convincing, and surely more graphic if I couple "neither" with Giacometti's *Figurine*. And as artists, Beckett and Giacometti had, in the final analysis, so much in common that when we read, as a summary judgment of a whole body of work, that "he is one of the few artists who has contributed fundamentally to the way the human condition is perceived," no one unfamiliar with the statement could say with any assurance which artist is its subject.

Had I been asked earlier in my career to consider texts that have influenced me and my own work, I would certainly have chosen differently. Indeed, looking through the index to my first book on what might best be called "life-writing," *Metaphors of Self*, I find no mention of Samuel Beckett. Yet today there seems to me an inevitability about the choice of Beckett, the only issue being which text to choose from the many that offer themselves. A major reason for this development is that *Metaphors of Self*, as its title implies, was a nonlinear exercise, a study of various writers in various times, and what each had to

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“neither”

to and fro in shadow from inner to outershadow
from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither
as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close,
once turned away from gently part again
beckoned back and forth and turned away
heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam or the other
unheard footfalls only sound
till at last halt for good, absent for good from self and other
then no sound
then gently light unfading on that unheeded neither
unspeakable home

—From *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929 – 1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 258. Copyright © 1995 by the Estate of Samuel Beckett. Used by permission of Grove/Atlantic, Inc. Any third party use of this material, outside of this publication, is prohibited.

say of the self. My most recent book on the subject, on the other hand, is profoundly linear, as its title would also imply: *Memory and Narrative*. Narrative is always, by its nature, linear, and so is memory, in spite of gaps and doubling-back and so on; thus there is a story of some sort recounted in each piece of life-writing, while there is also a history at-large of the entire genre. In effect, Beckett has grown on me and imposed himself as the quintessence, the endpoint (for now, for our time, not forever) of all earlier and all contemporary exercises in life-writing.

The great story of autobiography begins, for me and I believe for Beckett also, with St. Augustine. It passes by way of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his massive, unrelenting, and tortuous effort in life-writing to issue in a host of modernist writers who question and refuse the very premises of the genre, yet feel compelled to make the attempt again and again. For Augustine, however, the genre was a relatively new one, without the overlay of attempts from

his time to the twentieth century, and in him Beckett could find phrasing and *apercus* to turn to his own uses. As he tells us in an early letter, Beckett spent an entire day “phrase-hunting in St. Augustine,”¹ and elsewhere we hear that he kept a notebook devoted exclusively to quotations from Augustine, bits and pieces out of which to construct his own tale.

But it is not in bits and pieces (or “bits of pipe,” as Beckett once phrased it) that Augustine makes his greatest contribution to his twentieth-century descendant; rather, it is in the stichomythic structure of *Waiting for Godot* and almost everything else Beckett wrote, which was derived, or so the story goes, from a St. Augustine passage about the two thieves crucified on either side of Jesus, the one damned, the other saved. When questioned by drama critic Harold Hobson about his interest in the two thieves when he was very remote from professions of Christianity, Beckett, according to Hobson, “became eager, excited. . . . ‘I am interested in the shape of ideas even if I do not believe



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them. There is a wonderful sentence in Augustine. I wish I could remember the Latin. It is even finer in Latin than in English. “Do not despair; one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume; one of the thieves was damned.” That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters.”² No one has specified just where this “wonderful sentence” occurs in Augustine, but no matter: if Beckett wishes to credit the Great Progenitor for his own interpretation of the human condition as one situated always in-between – between salvation and damnation, hope and despair, hither and yon, between doors that “once neared gently close, / once turned away

from gently part again” – who would argue with him? It is this shape that rules his work in large and in small, from beginning to end. And being the dramatist he was, Beckett was nothing loath to turn the Augustinian “wonderful sentence” to farcical purposes, as in *Waiting for Godot*, when his Didi and Gogo, like the biblical thieves before them, assume places on either side of the fallen Pozzo, lifting him from the floor and carrying him about the stage as if they were all on Golgotha.

There were, of course, significant life-writers between Augustine and Rousseau – Giambattista Vico, for example – and between Rousseau and Beckett – Henry

Adams, for one – but Rousseau remains the essential and inescapable figure who, like all of Beckett's figures, lies in-between. And as with Augustine, so with Rousseau: Beckett's comments provide the best guides on how to read Rousseau. In a letter of 1932, Beckett points to "the madness and the distortion"³ in Rousseau's writing, and while the specific reference is to the *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, it could apply equally to Rousseau's *Confessions* or *Dialogues*, three volumes taken together that comprise Rousseau's massive, obsessive achievement in life-writing. But as any reader who comes to Beckett with innocent expectations of sanity and clarity in writing could testify, "madness" and "distortion" do as well for Beckett's texts as for Rousseau's.

The crucial difference is that the madness in Beckett's work is all in the character, never in the author, while there is no distinction between author and character in Rousseau. Even when he divides himself into multiple characters in *Dialogues* – J. J., Rousseau, and the Frenchman – it's all Rousseau, manic and distorted from beginning to end. Rousseau adopts three different forms for his life-writing exercises – narrative in *Confessions*, dialogue in *Dialogues*, and reverie in *Reveries* – but each in its own way spins out of control. The general movement of the three volumes is from social engagement, troubled though it may be, to absolute isolation and profound silence as Rousseau, turned away from door after door, seeks "that unheeded neither / unspeakable home" of Beckett's text. Giving a positive, if tragic, twist to Rousseau's isolation, Beckett, in a letter of 1934, declared, "I must think of Rousseau as a champion of the right to be alone and as an authentically tragic figure in so far as he was denied enjoyment of the right, not only by a society that considered solitude as a vice . . . but by the infantile aspect, afraid of the dark, of his

own constitution."⁴ This is a very subtle analysis of the fact and the logic of Rousseau's solitude, altogether worthy of the man who would conclude the 1950 novella *Company* with these lines:

But with face upturned for good labour in vain at your fable. Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one with you in the dark. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labour lost and silence. And you as you always were.

Alone.

One could think of no epilogue more fitting than this for Rousseau, and it describes well the hopeless situation he left for his successors in the life-writing venture: "you must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me . . . perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on."⁵ Beckett did go on, and so did many another modernist: inheritors all of the world that had so confounded Rousseau. Beckett once said that it is the task of the contemporary artist "to find a form that accommodates the mess."⁶ Though it is by no means the whole story, it would be fair to say that Rousseau bequeathed the mess to Beckett, his contemporaries, and his successors, while Augustine provided a form that might accommodate it.

If it be granted that Beckett is the key figure in life-writing in his time, there still remains the question of which text to choose to demonstrate this most persuasively. The virtues of "neither" are the

compactness of the piece, what we know of its genesis and evolution, and the reverberations set off by coupling it with Giacometti's *Figurine*. Beckett's mature art was one of elimination, concentration, shearing away to the essential and beyond as if to reduce the mess to that which might be accommodated by some vestige of form. Figures are gradually disembodied, as Winnie is in *Happy Days*; or they start out and remain disembodied, as with Mouth in *Not I*, or with the voice from offstage in *Footfalls* or from nowhere that can be discerned, as in *Ghost Trio*. This sort of reduction reaches its apotheosis with "neither," where there is no character – not even a pronoun for an absent name – although, as S. E. Gontarski tells us, "When the British publisher of Beckett's prose and fiction, John Calder, was about to publish the work in the *Collected Poems*, Beckett resisted because he considered it a piece of prose, a story."⁷ In a story without a character or characters, it seems fitting that the only sound should be "unheard footfalls." Unnamed and unseen, indeed nonexistent, characters and unheard footfalls: this is the art of irreducible reduction to suit a time and a condition otherwise a mess.

What we know of the origin of "neither" comes from a story told by the American composer Morton Feldman, a story of distinctly Beckettian tenor.⁸ Having been commissioned to write an opera, something he had never attempted before, Feldman contacted Beckett, who agreed to meet him at the Werkstatt Theater in Berlin, where Beckett was assisting in a production of *Footfalls* and *That Time*. Feldman, who had very weak eyesight, continues with the tale: "I was led from daylight into a dark theater, on stage, where I was presented to an invisible Beckett. He shook hands with my thumb, and I fell softly down a huge black curtain to the ground." One hardly needs to in-

voke Didi and Gogo, for they are so patently there. Later, over lunch, Beckett, clearly puzzled by what Feldman might be seeking from him, stated, "I don't like opera," to which Feldman responded, "I don't blame you." And so the two, in agreement but at cross-purposes, continued. Beckett: "I don't like my words being set to music." Feldman: "I'm in complete agreement. In fact it's very seldom that I've used words. I've written a lot of pieces with voice, and they're wordless." Beckett: "But what do you want?" Feldman: "I have no idea." After having declared himself clueless, Feldman came up with an intriguing formulation: "I said that I was looking for the quintessence, something that just hovered" – something that hovered, as it were, between words and silence, between to and fro, between light and dark, something, one might say, Augustinian in form.

Picking up from Feldman's hint, Beckett declared that there was only one theme in his life and work and jotted down what that was: "To and fro in shadow, from outer shadow to inner shadow. To and fro, between unattainable self and unattainable nonself." Remarking that this might need some more work, Beckett offered to send a reworked piece to Feldman, which he did shortly thereafter, with slight revisions to these first two lines and the rest of "neither" as we now know it. Feldman promptly set it to music and so fulfilled his commission.

Musicologists are divided on whether "neither" is to be called an opera or not. There is a single voice, who is not a character in any detectable story, singing the "libretto" of eighty-seven words – the words, however, not discernible as such. But then, if Beckett could call "neither" a story, why not an opera as well? Beckett and Feldman worked on "neither" quite separately, hence, as one music critic puts it, the piece cannot be called a collabora-

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tion, but should be thought of as a “collaboration”; it is “a work containing the input of two like-minded visionaries focused on a single theme: the endless and perhaps hopeless quest for understanding of the self and the universe, as carried out within the flash of a single life.”⁹ Beckett must have been more than satisfied with Feldman’s translating his words into “hovering,” for he later suggested Feldman as composer for his radio play *Words and Music*; Feldman – in turn and, as it were, in gratitude – followed *Words and Music* with a long piece (which was to be the last composition before his death), *For Samuel Beckett*. Feldman evidently found something innately musical in Beckett’s lines, and I think he was right; for what we have in “neither” is a markedly lyrical grace in a threnody for humanity moving toward that “unheeded neither / unspeakable home.”

Alberto Giacometti could not have known “neither,” nor Beckett’s claim that in it he realized the “one theme in his life”: Giacometti died in 1966, a decade before Beckett’s meeting with Feldman in 1976. Yet Giacometti’s *Figurine entre deux boîtes qui sont des maisons* could well stand, *avant la lettre*, as the most brilliant commentary we have – or could have – on that piece. And we do know that Giacometti and Beckett were in the habit of meeting for late-night drinks in one or another bar in Montparnasse before setting out on long, nocturnal rambles through the streets of Paris, sometimes chatting but just as often in silent communion. When they did converse, Beckett said that Giacometti often spoke of his torment in not being able to capture in paint or sculpture what he saw before him: it was impossible, he said, yet he went on hopelessly trying. Moreover, the figures he sculpted kept getting smaller and smaller until they disappeared in dust. (“But

wanting to create from memory what I had seen, to my terror the sculptures became smaller and smaller. . . . Often they became so tiny that with one touch of my knife they disappeared into dust.”¹⁰) Beckett’s advice was to embrace the impossibility of the task, as well as the incessant reduction in size, as his very subject.

To be a minimalist and in despair at the fact was not exactly Giacometti’s choice, nor was it Beckett’s, but rather their mutual destiny. As Giacometti’s figures dwindled to dust, the ego or the I correspondingly became impossible and disappeared from Beckett’s texts. It was this joint phenomenon, and its repercussions for the act of life-writing, that assumed such significance for me and my work. If the “autos” and “bios” of autobiography become unavailable, all that is left is *graphein*, which describes the desperate dilemma of contemporary life-writers and critics of the mode.

Most of the late-night conversations of Beckett and Giacometti are lost to us now, but one that occurred in unique and emotion-laden circumstances has been preserved through Giacometti’s telling. When *En attendant Godot* was revived in 1961 at the Odéon Théâtre de France in Paris, Beckett asked Giacometti to design the stage set, and what he produced, in addition to the full moon that rises at the end of Act I and again at the end of Act II, was what Beckett was later to call “the Godot tree”: a stark, plaster tree that seems to signify now life, when it unexpectedly springs new leaves, now death, when Didi and Gogo contemplate hanging themselves from its branches, and always the in-between that so dominates the play. After the tree was created in Giacometti’s studio, he and Beckett spent one whole night putting it in place on the stage, fiddling with it, adjusting it ever so slightly in one direction or another. “It was supposed to be a tree,” Giacometti later said,

“a tree and the moon. We experimented the whole night long with the plaster tree, making it bigger, making it smaller, making the branches finer. It never seemed right to us. And each of said to the other: perhaps.”¹¹ I have taken the liberty of translating the final word (*forse*) as *perhaps*, rather than the standard translation of *maybe*, simply to bring it into line with Beckett’s comment to theater critic and theologian Tom Driver: “The key word in my plays is ‘perhaps.’”¹² Neither yes nor no is possible to them, only perhaps; perpetually caught (in Giacometti’s phrase) “between being and non-being,” the two of them could only go on and on, “beckoned back and forth and turned away / heedless of the way.”

“The older I get, the more I find myself alone. I suppose in the end I will be entirely alone.”¹³ Beckett or Giacometti? Though it happens to be the latter, it could well be either. Were it Beckett, it would likely be the expression of a character rather than the author, but in either case, the remark recalls nothing so much as the utter isolation of the *Figurine*, an isolation made yet more terrible by the suffocating closeness of the “two boxes that are houses” – or, in a translation of “maisons” perhaps more to the point, “homes,” which returns us to “neither” and its “unspeakable home.” There is a striking anomaly about the *Figurine* in that, almost alone among Giacometti’s sculpted female figures, it is in motion, indeed in full stride: but moving where? Giacometti once called the piece “*Figurine in a box* between two boxes which are houses,”¹⁴ which points up the utterly constricted nature of movement for the figurine, boxed-in and with nothing but boxes, before and behind, to move to.

Every viewer of Giacometti’s sculpted figure must feel that there is some story behind it, a story that would account for

the agitated movement of the woman. This story comes to a terrible and poignant focus when we learn that in the figure Giacometti was probably recalling a 1945 newspaper photograph of “a naked Jewish woman being driven across the open space between the prisoners’ barracks and the gas chambers.”¹⁵ It is thus a very emblem of its time, quite like what Beckett says the Irish Red Cross volunteers received when they went to assist in rebuilding the city of St.-Lô after it “was bombed out of existence in one night.” Those volunteers, Beckett says, “will come home realizing that they got at least as good as they gave, that they got indeed what they could hardly give, a vision and sense of a time-honoured conception of humanity in ruins and perhaps,” he continues, in one of the most hopeful of all passages in Beckett, “perhaps even an inkling of the terms in which our condition is to be thought again.”¹⁶ That “inkling” is what gives us the work of Giacometti and Beckett, preeminently *Figurine entre deux boîtes qui sont des maisons* and “neither.”

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Martha Dow Fehsenfeld and Lois More Overbeck, eds., *The Letters of Samuel Beckett, Volume I: 1929 – 1940* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 62.
- ² Harold Hobson, “Samuel Beckett: Dramatist of the Year,” *International Theatre Annual* 1 (1956): 153.
- ³ Fehsenfeld and Overbeck, eds., *The Letters of Samuel Beckett*, vol. 1, 145.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 228.
- ⁵ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1991), 23.
- ⁶ Tom Driver, “Beckett by the Madeleine,” *Columbia University Forum* 4 (Summer 1961): 23.
- ⁷ S. E. Gontarski, ed., *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929 – 1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 284.
- ⁸ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996), 556 – 557.
- ⁹ Unsigned note under “Morton Feldman’s ‘neither,’” http://www.themodernword.com/beckett/beckett_feldman_neither.html.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in a catalogue accompanying a 1965 Giacometti retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, p. 28.
- ¹¹ James Lord, *Giacometti: A Biography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1953), 429.
- ¹² Driver, “Beckett by the Madeleine,” 23.
- ¹³ Lord, *Giacometti*, 427.
- ¹⁴ Catalogue of Giacometti exhibit, *Alberto Giacometti, 1901 – 1966* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1996), 167.
- ¹⁵ Reinhold Hohl, *Alberto Giacometti: Sculpture, Painting, Drawing* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1972), 304.
- ¹⁶ Beckett, “The Capital of the Ruins,” in *Complete Short Prose*, ed. Gontarski, 278.