

## ASTRAL INCOHERENCE OF THE ART SURFACE

Michael Coffey. *Samuel Beckett is Closed*. Foxrock Books, 2018. *The Business of Naming Things*. Bellevue Literary Press, 2015.

*Thomas McGonigle*

With the name “Beckett” in Michael Coffey’s inviting and engagingly “experimental” new book, *Samuel Beckett is Closed*, one is prompted to re-visit Samuel Beckett, by way of the original Faber edition of *From an Abandoned Work*, read when I was nineteen years old, sea-sick on the night ferry from Glasgow to Dublin in September, 1964, a trip that allowed me later to receive from the poet James Liddy Samuel Beckett’s own copy of *FUCK YOU: A JOURNAL OF THE ARTS*, which had been sent to Beckett in Paris by its editor, Ed Sanders, in New York City, since Beckett, not wishing to keep it, passed it on to the poet John Montague, who brought it to James, knowing Liddy’s interest in the Beats and, in particular, Jack Kerouac and Jack Spicer, which, in turn, is a reminder of Montague’s last visit to Beckett when both of them were old men and, as Montague recounted, when aged Irish people get together the conversation often turns to the question—And the arrangements?—which was answered by Beckett in his *In the Ground...* and of course it had to be in the ground, as fire would not do, since one always remembers that the smell of decomposition in cemeteries is something to be treasured, as Beckett records in *Fire Love...*

But from Coffey:

—Where’s Coffey?

*I first heard of Samuel Beckett when I was a teenager living in a small town in upstate New York. My job was to stay out of the way, a skill I found easy to master.*

(21)

Coffey moves by glances through most all of the works of Beckett and makes stops at the usual critics, including, “Lawrence Harvey, in his seminal early study of Beckett’s early poetry” (156), but I was sad in some way as this was not the actor of the same name who gruesomely died so young and had been so handsome in *The Manchurian Candidate*, among others, but such detours are written into Coffey’s book, via contemporary transcriptions of interrogation snippets with accused terrorists, borrowed from his fellow Notre Dame graduate, Larry Siems—like so many relevance gaps—from

some years ago and already probably needing a footnote, since indeed much of Coffey's book could and would upon reprinting as the reader is always close to, and distant from, a writer who invited intimacy—as was attested to by many in Dublin who could recount notes sent to Beckett and a reply coming back and once it was even said Beckett included the name of an autograph dealer in London who was paying for his signature.

From Coffey: "...I skimmed in my leisure at a rural English university the sixteen-volume *Nouvelle Revue Francaise* edition of *A la Recherche du Temps Perdu* owned by one Samuel Beckett, a handwritten notation on the very last page of the very last volume that read thus: 'Arabian nights of the mind' and 'Thought: jellyfish of the spirit.' I determined in an instant that this described my commission for my nocturnal narratives—to be spineless, amorphous, a translucent substance in a transparent medium, the transit of dreams adrift. This would out anyone to sleep."

Like many, I have my hand-written notes from Beckett, as I wanted him to be in *Adrift: Irish and Irish-American Writing*, notes declining the possibility, but kind always, and even supplying the address of Brian Coffey an old Dublin friend like the better known Thomas McGreevy, but by the time I got to him he was in a nursing home in England after his exile in Missouri, of all places, where he had been teaching university mathematics and writing poetry and translating Mallarme and, in particular, *Dice Thrown*.

And, it must be remembered, by 1964 Beckett was part of the Irish export literary world of Joyce and Yeats, while, for domestic Irish consumption there was Flann O'Brien, Ralph Cusack and Francis Stuart, the latter who always claimed that Beckett was one of the first to greet him warmly after he was released from a French detention camp, where he had been jailed for having broadcast from Berlin back to Dublin during World War Two, while Beckett had worked for the underground in France and later with the Irish Red Cross as the war came to an end.

Coffey (about Beckett in Germany in the 1930s): "He was a demanding critic who knew what he was looking for: he condemned the work of one painter for the sin of having perspective in the painting—'the optical experience post rem, a hideous inversion of the visual process, the eye waiving its privilege,' he said of Max Klinger."

In the other university in Dublin, University College, Dublin, far distant, though on the same side of the Liffey, where James Joyce and Flann O'Brien had been students, whereas Beckett, good Protestant that he

was, attended Trinity College and became for a while a lecturer in French literature and, quickly bored, created imaginary French poets and schools of French poetry that students dutifully noted, while later, in 1965 at UCD, the DramSoc put on the first student production of *Endgame*, but asked Thomas McGonigle to write and put on a short curtain-raiser, *A Good Beautiful Wholesome Girl* at the same time, but this play was roundly denounced by a critic in the student newspaper.

All of this is my delight in Michael Coffey's book that would be destroyed by analysis and can only be read and read along with Pascale Casanova's book *The World Republic of Letters*, where Beckett comes just after William Faulkner as two greatest world writers of the last century and, for now, they continue to be the only ones in recent memory so designated.

But the singular reason for reading Coffey on Beckett is finally to have in print Coffey's statement: Samuel Beckett is likely the actual blood father of the "American writer," generally presumed to be the poet Susan Howe...a child from the love affair with Mary Manning and thus Beckett becomes the uncle to the other Howe women writers also...and this was virtually verified by myself, who on first meeting Susan Howe in person in a hotel room one January in NYC during a MLA meeting now many years ago, at which Dalkey Archive was in attendance, and, seeing her and meeting her, I had to hold my tongue as the resemblance trespasses beyond coincidence... the delicious tenacious struggle of Sam's sperm was denied evidently only to his own wife, but ironic nature had its will, it would seem...but this presumed fact of course leads to remembering a long conversation with Kay Boyle in 1971 at Hollins College and her telling me of her affair of the heart with Beckett and the long, long exchange of letters with him—all of which would not be allowed by his estate to be published, as a line has been drawn around this aspect of his life, which is in such contradiction of who he has been presented to the world, starting with the crush of James Joyce's daughter on him, to Peggy Guggenheim, and on and on, via Deirdre Bair's biography, and then of course there is THE FRENCH WIFE living in an adjoining apartment in Paris who helped him in the beginning, but was never seen in public, as they had adjoining apartments and was said—at least in Dublin—to be spending her time buying expensive furniture that Sam could easily afford: as strange as Beckett at the beach in Tunisia when HE gets the Nobel prize.

This is what Coffey unleashed as he brings his book to something like an end with a sort of play:

*"...and the company of voices, as Beckett did, is the all of what we have. And it just might make the end something less bitter, less inglorious, perhaps even less*

*certain. Perhaps we'll go on. That's why Beckett."*

Possibly no ending is really possible for such a book as an ending (because of the nature of the pages before it) can only partially succeed, given what is missing, I would argue, in a passage which contains the most disturbing story Coffey has ever published, "Sunlight", in his first published work of fiction, *The Business of Naming Things*, which starts out as a statement about both being interested in, and then disinterested in, the work of Harold Brodkey, a writer famous for the complexity of his relationship with his dead birth-mother and the adopted parents he was brought up by, mirroring Coffey's own situation, but the story has a remarkable passage, a sort of strange preface to the center of the story, which is a careful smug observation of the dying Brodkey, who Coffey had sought out to visit, obviously wanting some inarticulated thing, this intimate, cold and heartless prefacing in a peculiar arrogant way, yet demanding sympathy simultaneously:

"Could I be faulted for abandoning my young son? He was now a teenager; he lived in Indiana. He has two younger half-brothers. I saw them all at his mother's funeral—my first wife's funeral. She died brutally of hypothermia, alone, drunk, in a cold January rain. Could I be faulted for having moved on, to other marriages, now my third with a new son? These questions hadn't vexed me much, but they would."

The reader of Coffey's new book on Beckett closes the book in a very distressing and distrusting mood and shall one be curious as to how it all will turn out? Is this what Coffey is looking for, or not looking for? The "what" is missing in both the story and the book now reviewed...but I both hope he will find it, but doubt he will, unless he lives to a great age and is given the chance to revisit these pages and thus to begin, again, finally. And while these are not the last lines of his book, but occur earlier (159), they might really be what he means to say:

*"Astral incoherence of the art surface,' that's Beckett at twenty-six years old. That's a young man deeply troubled by the fact that we are all of what we see and we see so little, who is keen to deduce what we don't see from what we do. Beckett would continue, for six decades, to test the limits of what it is possible to see or say or say is seen and then to see or say what can be said or seen of those limits, which toward the end, became his sole subject."*