Beckett, de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic 1944-49

*L’Innommable* and *En attendant Godot*¹

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In a letter he wrote to Thomas MacGreevy on 4 January 1948, just before beginning the trilogy, Beckett declared that ‘The news of France is very depressing, depresses me anyhow. All the wrong things, all the wrong way. It is hard sometimes to feel the France that one clung to, that I still cling to. I don’t mean material conditions’, he added, pointedly (Beckett to Thomas MacGreevy; qtd. in Knowlson, 354). This seems clear enough: Beckett deeply disliked the direction the Fourth Republic was taking whilst feeling a degree of nostalgic affection for the values of the Third. Far from being incidental to Beckett’s work in the mid- and late 40s, this response to the culture immediately around him seems to me to be central to it. As is well-known, there have been two major traditions in Beckett scholarship. The first, the more established one, has been humanist in its orientation, and has always tended to merge with biographical and positivist work. The second has been abstract, and came out of philosophy and, later, literary theory. The humanist tradition has recently been given a formidable new...
lease of life by some excellent biographical work and some powerful archival research. The trouble with it is that there are difficulties with reading Beckett’s work before 1960 if not 1970 as pursuing any sustained or serious humanist project at all. A certain kind of abstract commentary, on the other hand, self-evidently appears to be eminently commensurate with Beckett’s famously abstract modernist art. But the more abstraction spawns brilliant models, the more one wonders whether the approach is not troubled by a lacuna, since nothing appears to endstop the process of abstraction in its infinite variety. What has been squeezed out of the middle of the humanist-abstract sandwich is history. Various scholars have recently begun to remedy this lack, perhaps the most obvious example being Séan Kennedy. But Kennedy’s focus is on Beckett and Ireland, and though certain pioneers have shown the way, there is still a very great deal of work to be done on Beckett and France, particularly during the 1940s, work that will require attention to the historical (as well as the Beckettian) archive. Importantly, historical work by no means supersedes commentary in the abstract or speculative tradition. It rather seeks to place Beckett’s labour of abstraction as precisely as possible in relation to the historical materials from which it abstracts, not least in the case of language. I myself hold a specific theoretical position on Beckett exemplified in my book *Beckett and Badiou*, and would not wish to discard it. My chief interest now, however, is to situate Beckett’s work of abstraction as I understand it in relation to his historical contexts, taking as my ground certain passages in *Beckett and Badiou*, but above all in my more recent short, minimalist anti-biography of Beckett.

Charles de Gaulle rode to power in France on the back of the juggernaut of the Allied invasion. In September 1944, he became President of the
Provisional Government of the French Republic. By then, France was a shattered, demoralized, humiliated, impoverished country many elements in which had either passively endured, turned a blind eye to or been deeply complicit with Fascism. The only forces not in some degree tainted by the wartime years were, on the one hand, de Gaulle and the FFL, the *Forces Françaises Libres* or Free French Forces, who had continued to oppose Germany from outside France, and of course the Resistance. Both gained enormously in prestige as a result. France was in fact a deeply and malevolently divided country. Some of the divisions went back to the 1930s, when various paramilitary organizations had already been in operation. But internecine conflict had been given a huge additional impetus by Vichy. Historians describe parts of Vichy France as effectively existing in a state of civil war, as Pétain’s militia fought the Resistance, especially the Communists. But the Resistance itself, of course, was fiercely divided. There was a left Resistance and a right Resistance, a strong Communist but also a reactionary and even a monarchist Resistance. These divisions were to some extent forgettable during the war. They were no longer so after its end, when France went through the agony of *épuration*, the Purge. The most famous images of this are of course of women with their heads shaved, but they pall alongside the accounts that have increasingly surfaced of widespread judicial murder of both women and men, which in itself was only a symptom of much more widespread mayhem. Of course, Beckett worked for the Resistance; he had some contact with the *maquis*, the rural guerrillas, during his years in Roussillon, 1942-44; and we should also note that he returned to Paris at a time when, in the words of the historian Herbert Lottman, because of the Purge, the atmosphere was one of terror.6
What de Gaulle wanted in late 1944, perhaps above all, was to put an end to division, disorder, chaos. He wanted France to transcend its recent ignominy, though, to his credit, was unwilling to impose his own will in Napoleonic fashion. Initially, the imperative was order. ‘Order had to be enforced or all would be lost’, he wrote later, in his *Memoirs* (772). Secondly, his policy was one ‘of unity’ (781). De Gaulle set great store by national unity. He wanted to expunge what his French biographer calls ‘the demons of division’ (Lacouture, 4). As France ‘became free again’, de Gaulle wrote, ‘I realized with chagrin that her political forces were making great efforts to divide her’ (*Memoirs*, excerpted Maier and White, 32). He feared this was part of ‘the natural Gallic temperament’ (Bayeux Speech, 16 June, 1946; in Maier and White, 43). He was appalled by internal disputes, which he thought had been responsible for France’s weakness. France must enjoy a government of ‘national unanimity’ (Lacouture, 18), which should be underwritten by the values of permanence, continuity and reconciliation.

This meant emphatically rejecting ‘the polity of the Third Republic, with its divisive parties, all-powerful parliament and weak executive’ (Gildea, 32). De Gaulle sought rather to centralize and bureaucratize power. Thus whilst in larger terms he urged the French to return to reason, he also emphasized the need for a specific form of it, instrumental reason, rationalization in general and rational planning in particular, what Lacouture calls ‘the supremacy of structures over historical turmoil’ (9). In the post-war years, this would be ever more closely bound up with the emergence of a new technocracy and a new kind of French bourgeoisie. De Gaulle also wanted France ‘purified’ (his word); purified, in particular, of the elements in the culture that had made for its degradation, its fall into indignity (Lacouture, 28). He and his supporters even invented a new concept, *indignité nationale*,...
for which the punishment was dégradation nationale: shame, loss of status, the proclamation of one’s ‘unworthiness’. He sought to ensure this through an exalted rhetoric. This rhetoric subsequently conditioned the language both of enthusiastic Gaullists (like Malraux) and colleagues (like Mendès France), and percolated widely through French culture.

Order, unity and unanimity, reason and rationalization, purification, exaltation: these values had a determining effect both on the immediately post-war French society in which Beckett produced his greatest works, and on its dominant discourses. Thus, in Jean Lacouture’s phrase, the hegemonic State was restored, without compromise, and the various forces working against it were ‘crushed, though squealing all the way’ (24). That squealing is repeatedly audible in Beckett’s work of the late 40s, above all, in L’Innommable. One might object, here, that de Gaulle in fact resigned from power on 20 January 1946, and that the Fourth Republic that emerged in his wake looked strikingly like the last years of the Third Republic: parliamentary democracy, coalitions, a rapid succession of governments. But in the early stages of the Fourth Republic, at least, the three dominant parties (the Communists, the Socialists and the MRP, the Popular Republican Movement) all pledged themselves to the Gaullist imperative of solidarity and unity. Like de Gaulle, they were associated with the struggle against Germany. They were also in favour of the same kind of economic and social reforms as de Gaulle. They agreed with de Gaulle on the need for a strong interventionist state as essential to post-war regeneration. The MRP, who after the 1946 elections displaced the Communists as the leading party in France, were widely regarded as Gaullist and adopted de Gaulle’s slogans. But equally, the Communists were under orders from Moscow not
to rock the boat: Stalin wanted a strong France, united under de Gaulle, to serve as a counterweight to America and Britain. According to Robert Gildea, the Party was therefore soon ‘at the forefront of those for whom the Liberation meant the inauguration of a new, purified republic, staffed by a new political class forged by the Resistance’ (59). In any case, de Gaulle returned to prominence in April 1947, launching the Rassemblement du Peuple Français, which was dominated by Gaullist rhetoric, quickly scored great successes and was a formidable force until he dissolved it in 1953. De Gaulle might have finally balked at an undemocratic seizure of power. French society and culture nonetheless felt his influence everywhere.

Furthermore, and this is crucial, since the 1970s, historians have increasingly shown that, in the late-40s and 50s, the French effectively rewrote their history. Unable to face the truth of either their miserable defeat or their own internecine schisms and conflicts, they took refuge in myth. There was a huge drive to ‘reconstruct French identity and French history in a way that restored French pride’ (Gildea, 50). France needed ‘to create unity, national unity’, as even a great crusader like Jean Paulhan argued (378). This would involve restoring a conception of supposed continuity to French history. Thus De Gaulle sought to present an image of France from 1914 to 1944 as having been involved in a Thirty Years’ War in which Vichy was a minor aberration. This meant a major redescription of the Vichy years: de Gaulle stoutly asserted that ‘apart from a handful of wretches the vast majority of us were and are Frenchmen of good faith’ (de Gaulle 1970, 455). All in all, the French had not ceased to be a heroic people. De Gaulle, the Resistance, Resistance historians, politicians, academics and ‘the architects of the New Republic’ imposed this
“‘Liberationist’ version of history’ very successfully. The Communists followed suit, neatly writing the Hitler-Stalin pact out of history. Indeed, in their efforts ‘to construct a continuous pedigree of revolutionary-patriotic activity’, they even forged a document purporting to have been produced in June 1940 calling for a war of popular insurrection and national liberation (Gildea, 59, 61).

The myth of 1940-44 thus created was not confined to Gaullism. ‘Rather it was crucial to the legitimacy and survival of the Fourth Republic’ (Hewitt, 286). The Resistance was placed at its centre, but again, according to a myth. This involved four articles of faith: firstly, that the Resistance had been always and everywhere involved in a heroic struggle; secondly, that its pedigree went back further than Vichy, to de Gaulle’s appeal to the French nation in 1940; thirdly, that the Resistance had the support of more or less the whole French nation and represented a national unity; and fourthly, that, in political terms, the Resistance was not and had not been profoundly split and fissured but had maintained ‘a coherent ideology’ which centred on ‘the rights of man’ (Gildea, 64). All those who participated in the Resistance, whether Republican, Communist, Socialist, monarchist or other, shared the values involved in this ideology, signed up to them and gave them pre-eminence for the duration of the war.

In Jean-Pierre Rioux’s account, then, the ideology or at least the rhetoric of the Resistance was often strongly humanist, though this belied the political realities that lay just beneath the surface (See Rioux, 149). According to Nicholas Hewitt, the humanist ‘glue’ was also what ‘held post-War French ideology together’ (294). Rioux points out, for instance, that, in
1945, Communists, Socialists and the MRP together appointed Félix Gouin as head of the French government precisely because he was a humanist who would smooth over partisan conflicts. In the French Assembly of the time, the debates were of ‘une haute tenue intellectuelle’ (i.e. loftily humanistic) and kept returning to the theme of the rights of man (Rioux, 142-44). This was the case, not least, because the Assembly had reverted to the extension of the principles of the Declaration of the Rights of Man in 1789 as proposed by the Ligue des droits de l’homme after its foundation in 1936. One very important aspect of this trend was Sartre’s identification of existentialism with humanism in his famous lecture of 1946. For existentialism reached the height of its popularity in the aftermath of the Liberation. Indeed, Hewitt suggests that, ‘because its recognition of situation, choice, action, responsibility seemed to express the ideals of the Resistance’, existentialist humanism ‘became the official philosophy of the Fourth Republic’ (90).

De Gaulle’s rhetoric itself was by no means untouched by humanism. He described the vocation of the writer, for example, as being ‘to explore and express man’ (1972, 798). It might seem typical of him that he should conceive of literature in such august and unitary terms. But in fact this was merely part of his official rhetoric. He clearly felt enormous respect for literature, and had an almost superstitious conviction of its power. But he was also fearful of it. Writers were all too likely to promote dissension and disagreement. They were all too often unlikely to serve State interests. This was not at all what France needed in the mid- to late forties, or so de Gaulle thought. ‘[T]he entire world of literature, arts and the theatre’, he wrote later, ‘was living under a turbulent sky.... For in literature as in everything
else talent is a kind of responsibility’ (1972, 799). De Gaulle expected his writers to be responsible. Thus within two weeks of formally assuming power, he had held interviews with François Mauriac, Valéry, Duhamel, Bernanos and Malraux, and would have included Claudel, if the latter had not still been confined to the Alps. He swiftly made Claude Mauriac one of his inner circle, and later his secretary. Meanwhile, the transgressors, those deemed (not always rightly) to have been collaborators, Fascist sympathizers or apostles for Vichy ideology, were punished or fled: Henry Béraud (pardoned), Charles Maurras (pardoned), Jean Giono (blacklisted), Beckett’s contemporary at the École Normale Supérieure Robert Brasillach (executed), Drieu la Rochelle (in hiding; subsequently committed suicide), Céline (escaped to Germany). This did not smother dissent, however. The Existentialists were hardly likely to let that happen (though they could of course sound as grandly moralizing as de Gaulle himself). For every Malraux who asserted that ‘It is not up to us to question de Gaulle’, there was a Camus who asserted that ‘We are under no obligation constantly to approve of [him]’ (qtd. in Lacouture, 11, 106). Under the pen-name ‘Indomitus’, Philippe Viannay published Nous sommes les rebelles, which questioned de Gaulle’s seizure and exercise of power. Right-wing, non-aligned, independent and anarchist novelists and disaffected ex-Resistance men Marcel Aymé, Roger Nimier, Jacques Laurent, Antoine Blondin satirized the Fourth Republic, refused to forget the savagery that followed hard upon the Liberation, and raised awkward doubts about the narratives of Resistance heroics.8

Thus, in the France of the mid- and late 40s, literature and politics, or cultural politics, were inseparable. In the Bruneval speech of 30 March
1947, de Gaulle spoke again of the Resistance and France itself as ‘one and indivisible’, in contrast to ‘the voices of division, that is, of decadence’ (qtd. in Crozier, 416). But if division spells decadence, there was no world more decadent than that of French literature in the 40s. It fizzed with furious differences. Everyone was drawn in. If Beckett had indeed been oblivious of or indifferent to this, he would have been alone among Francophone novelists. The point is rather that, as a writer intimate with the culture but also an outsider, he sets his work of the 40s at a very specific angle to contemporary events, and takes up a very specific position relative to the culture of the Fourth Republic. This angle and position are at their clearest in \textit{L’Innommable}; and are then to some extent sustained but also adjusted in \textit{En attendant Godot}.

Where de Gaulle and the Fourth Republic were intent on vigorous and rapid regeneration, even at the price of deception, L’Innommable remains doggedly unregenerate. Where they aimed high, it persistently keeps low. Where they talked everywhere of change, it resists all thought of it (explicitly raising and dismissing the idea). Where the Republic insisted on the need for integration, L’Innommable stays obstinately disintegrated. This emerges, above all, in the relationship with the voices about which it spends much of its time telling us, and which urge upon it positions, identities and values which it cannot or will not assume. In a speech of 24 May, 1945, de Gaulle declared that ‘there is no influence in confusion, or progress in chaos’ (1972, 955). But L’Innommable has no interest whatever in exerting influence or making progress, and chaos is its element. Progress is something the voices expect of it. But their expectations come to naught. The best it can say is ‘je vais continuer’ (213). L’Innommable rather articulates a sense of chaos and
confusion pushed to the limits of breakdown as what it calls ‘brass[ant] les vocables’ (40). It is a shattered creation, the very obverse of de Gaulle’s great principle of order. In so far as it achieves any form of order – and it does talk about order, early on – it is an order produced by stillness, silence, paralysis, extreme abnegation, the interminable repetition of a strictly limited set of variants.

So, too, if there is one thing to which L’Innommable is resistant, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, it is the Gaullist value of unity. It tells us incessantly that it is incapable of being drawn into unity with others, into believing itself to be one of them, however ironically it is continually drawn back into admitting that it cannot altogether hold itself apart from them either:

Les pauvres. Ils me colleraient un anus artificiel au creux de la main que je ne serais pas là, vivant de leur vie d’homme presque, d’homme tout juste, d’homme assez pour pouvoir être un vrai, à leur image, un jour, mes avatars accomplis. Pourtant il m’a semblé être là, moi, aux endroits incriminés, croulant sous mes attributs de seigneur de la création, à bout de vœux de prompte la crève. (48)

As far as unity is concerned, there can scarcely be a work of French literature of the period that more stoutly and insidiously opposes the Gaullist imperative and the grandiose language in which it was couched, though there were others that were far more explicitly and obviously anti-Gaullist. The experience of unanimity is utterly beyond L’Innommable. ‘Comment faire, comment vais-je faire, que dois-je faire, dans la situation où je suis, comment procéder?’ it asks. ‘Par pure aporie ou bien par affirmations et négations infirmées au fur et à mesure, ou tôt ou tard’ (7-8). How could it
conceivably experience oneness of mind with others, when its own mind is so broken, so chronically dispersed? In this respect, too, it is the obverse of the good Gaullist citizen.

Again and again, L’Innommable subjects the idea of a contemporary return to reason to hilarious scorn. On the one hand, Beckett mocks what I would call the ‘Enlightenment revival’ in post-war France:

...il me faut y aller aussi, de ma petite convulsion, vagir, chialer, ricaner et râler, dans l’amour du prochain et les bienfaits de la raison.... Ils espèrent qu’un jour ça changera, c’est normal. Qu’un jour il me poussera sur la trachée ou sur un autre point quelconque de la trajectoire un beau petit abcès avec une idée dedans, point de départ d’une infection généralisée. Ce qui me permettrait de jubiler comme tout un chacun, en connaissance de cause. Et je ne serais bientôt qu’un réseau de fistules charriant le pus bienfaisant de la raison. (81, 111)

In fact, it just sees its tormentors as ‘luminaires...pissant sur l’obscurité à tour de rôle’ (47). ‘Luminares’ of course suggests ‘Lumières’, men of the Enlightenment. On the other hand, L’Innommable remains exterior to all discourses of rationalization, or what it refers to as its tormentors’ ‘programme’ (48): ‘s’ils pouvaient s’arrêter de raticiner’, it exclaims, ‘sur eux, sur moi, sur le but à atteindre’ (163). Interestingly, Beckett also jeers at another rationality, the post-war culture of ‘reasonable desire’. The purpose of the ‘programme’ is to persuade L’Innommable that it can be useful, and that it should therefore take the reasonable course, and care for its own well-being: ‘Il est capable de vouloir que je sois content, ça c’est vu, paraît-il. Ou que je serve à quelque chose. Ou les deux à la fois, comme un méli-mélo incroyable’ (44). But L’Innommable itself is beyond the reach of such
persuasions, hardly understands them, is elsewhere altogether, screeching ‘loin derrière ma dissertation’ (46).

L’Innommable also subjects de Gaulle’s fetish of purification to some sardonic treatment. ‘Tels reçus, par l’oreille’, it declares of its voices, ‘ou hurlés dans l’anus, à travers un cornet, tels je les redonnerai, les mots, par la bouche, dans toute leur pureté’ (104). It is hard to think that a word so important in contemporary Gaullist discourse, ‘pureté’, does not appear deliberately, here. L’Innommable’s own discourse is endemically, radically impure. But it is also a discourse that gives itself out as the dark underside of those discourses that would seek to smother it, an underside, a discourse always inextricable from the very discourse of reason. ‘Ce ramassis de conneries, c’est bien d’eux que je le tiens, et ce murmure qui m’étrangle, c’est eux qui m’en ont farci. Et ça sort tel quel, je n’ai qu’à bailler, c’est eux que j’entends, de vieilles assurances suries, où je ne peux rien changer’ (81).

De Gaulle saw his country as urgently needing to transcend its ‘abasement’, the ‘diminution of [its] substance’, its ‘moral depression’ (qtd. in Maier and White, 28, 30, 31). L’Innommable by contrast wallows and to some extent revels in all these features of its situation. De Gaulle wanted to put an end to ‘national indignity’. He launched the Rassemblement du Peuple Français expressly to combat ‘the “degradation”’ of France (Gildea, 37). There must be ‘no return’, he said, ‘to yesterday’s ways and weaknesses’ (de Gaulle 1972, 995). L’Innommable parades, even flaunts its indignities and degradations, its flaws, feeblenesses and lapses. The reality of France in the immediately post-war years was that it was a country of massive poverty and destitution, haunted by hunger and cold. Under de Gaulle’s vision of its restored glory and splendour, it was morally and economically extremely weak.
L’Innommable emerges out of that historical reality, in stark opposition to the myth of France that so many French leaders, bureaucrats and intellectuals were intent on promoting.

As we have seen, this myth was partly a humanist one. Shortly after the war, Beckett described “l’humain”, as ‘un vocable, et sans doute un concept aussi, qu’on réserve pour les temps des grands massacres’ (1983, 131). L’Innommable repeatedly follows up on that view, frequently playing off scraps of humanist rhetoric against images that call the war to mind: ‘Les hommes aussi, qu’est qu’ils ont pu me chapitrer sur les hommes, avant même de vouloir m’y assimiler’ (62). ‘Élève Mahood, répète après moi, L’homme est un mammifère supérieur. Je ne pouvais pas. Toujours questions de mammifères, dans cette ménagerie’ (84). ‘Repeat after me’: precisely the point about L’Innommable is that it cannot manage to repeat its humanist pensum: ‘Ah mais un petit filet de voix d’homme forcé, pour murmurer ce que leur humanité suffoque, aux oubliettes, garrotté, au secret, au supplice, un petit halètement de condamné à vivre’ (64). On occasions, the joke at the expense of humanism seems explicitly anti-existentialist, as when a Heideggerian/Sartrean terminology unexpectedly intrudes: ‘Je sens que ça va commencer’, as it announces at one point. ‘Ils doivent m’estimer suffisamment abruti, avec leur histoires d’être et d’existence’ (103).

However, crucially, L’Innommable’s scorn for other discourses never becomes Olympian. Were it to do so, it would precisely run the risk of replicating the structure which, in Beckett’s terms, allowed the discourses of the Fourth Republic to lift themselves above the ordinary humanity for which they claimed to speak. L’Innommable rather repeatedly expresses a
conviction, not of transcending but of being below reason, of never having got that far. The point is evident not least in the anti-rational irony that pervades the text. This irony everywhere turns back on L’Innommable itself, exhibiting its delinquency as a rationalist in a repeated collapse into absurdity. Beckett’s willing espousal of an absurd logic is, again, precisely a rejection of the grandiose language of regeneration. Where he most differs from other critics of the Fourth Republic is in situating his antipathy primarily at the level of language and everywhere expressing it through a practice in language, a kind of anti-rhetoric. In that respect, the famous ‘siege in the room’, as he called it (to various people at various times; qtd. in Cronin, 364), the period when he wrote the trilogy, was indeed a siege, a tenacious struggle with an increasingly well-fortified discourse authorized in the first instance by a distinguished ex-military leader. If, as L’Innommable says, ironically, ‘leurs grand mots doivent sortir aussi, c’est du tout-venant’ (86), there is also a battle to be fought. ‘M’avoir collé un langage dont ils s’imaginent que je ne pourrai jamais me servir sans m’avouer de leur tribu, la belle astuce. Je vais le leur arranger, leur charabia’ (63). Beckett’s text does indeed fix their ‘charabia’. It refuses to sound like it, whilst also picking it up and recasting it in comically inane, vacuous, broken or ironized forms. This counter-discourse, ferocious, extremely funny, continually foundering into nonsense and non-sequitur, affirms nothing. But it is precisely as an art of negation that it reduces a set of specious positivities to a pile of detritus or rubble.

What does all this amount to, though? More than I can cover here: to be very brief: L’Innommable constitutes an obstinate refusal, repeatedly evident in Beckett’s work, to get up to speed. In the trilogy, I suggest, he was
specifically refusing to adopt a glib language of recovery. He radically rejects the work and the discourse of redemption, reconstruction, renovation so dominant in post-war France. But why? In his biography, Anthony Cronin supplies what I take to be not only one of the most significant stories about Beckett, but one of the most revealing in the context of my argument. Just a month before Beckett’s death, the Berlin Wall of which he had been so conscious for so long finally came down. By then, Beckett’s own particular corner of the new world order was Le Tiers Temps, an old people’s home. Rather than rejoicing with the optimists, or indeed, celebrating at all, he appeared to be acutely anxious. Having watched some television footage from Berlin in his room, ‘he emerged very agitated’ and exclaimed to the directrice, Madame Jernand, “Ça va trop vite” (Cronin, 591). “Ça va trop vite” might appear to have been one of Beckett’s major injunctions to European culture after 1945.

It certainly was so in the mid- to late 40s. One might speculate like this: a man of harrowingly exquisite sensitivities, Beckett was unable promptly to transcend or erase a wartime experience which included everything from weeping haplessly as a refugee in Cahors to the wholesale destruction of St-Lô in Normandy to the murder, torture and suicides of Resistance friends and colleagues, most notably, perhaps, the death of his good friend Alfred Péron in Mauthausen. He therefore has no time for the Gaullist reassurance. L’Innommable has an exact retort to the Gaullist insistence on (to quote Lacouture again) ‘the supremacy of structures over historical turmoil’ (9): ‘Celui qui cherche son vrai visage, qu’il se rassérène, il le trouvera, convulsé d’inquiétude, les yeux écarquillés’ (100). Beckett therefore inaugurates a form of the purgatorial art which he had long claimed he adhered to; an art
which dismisses all shallow progressivisms out of hand in the interests of an arduous working through of the legacy of historical catastrophe. Not surprisingly, the trilogy in general and *L’Innommable* in particular are strewn with imagery of the battlefield and ruin. De Gaulle himself admitted that ‘France’s condition [in 1945] was a balance sheet of ruins’ (qtd. in Maier and White, 29). Beckett insists on staying with that ‘balance sheet’, on thinking from within its statements, rather than at once effacing it in yet another spasm of the modern drive to move history swiftly onwards and upwards.

A similar disposition is evident in *En attendant Godot*. Indeed, its very first sentence aims a slap in the face of the post-war French culture of reconstruction, its mood of uplift, rousing positivity: ‘Rien à faire’. This was hardly the kind of declaration that de Gaulle wanted from his responsible writers. From the very first minute, too, reason and reasonability are terms that have taken on an ironical weight (we might note in addition the presence of the word ‘combat’, so loaded in the 40s):

 Estragon. Rien à faire.

 Vladimir. Je commence à le croire. J’ai longtemps résisté à cette pensée, en me disant, Vladimir, sois raisonnable, tu n’as pas encore tout essayé. Et je reprenais le combat. (*Il se recueille, songeant au combat...*)

 (3)

The play also contains little forays into what is in effect satire on the post-war culture of rationalization, rational management:

 Estragon. Qu’est ce qu’on lui [Godot] a demandé au juste?...
VLADIMIR. Eh bien... Rien de bien précis...
ESTRAGON. Qu’il ne pouvait rien promettre.
VLADIMIR. Qu’il lui fallait réfléchir.
ESTRAGON. À tête reposée.
VLADIMIR. Consulter sa famille.
ESTRAGON. Ses amis.
VLADIMIR. Ses agents.
ESTRAGON. Ses correspondants.
VLADIMIR. Ses registres.
ESTRAGON. Son compte de banque.
VLADIMIR. Avant de se prononcer.
ESTRAGON. C’est normal.

(12-13)

The idea of sensible proportion to which the tramps whimsically refer, here, of controlled and prudent deliberation, was very much part of what the post-war culture was trying to substitute for what the years 1940-44 had actually told it about itself.

It is of course not hard to show that Beckett insists on indignity in Godot, that he revels in what in Gaullist terms was a `degraded’ view of man. From Vladimir’s undone flies and furious agonies with his bowels to the smell of Pozzo’s fart to Vladimir and Estragon’s talk of achieving orgasm by hanging themselves and, above all, the stream of little, comic meannesses, like Estragon booting a prostrate Lucky, Beckett refuses the ‘purified’ terms for culture on which de Gaulle insisted. The very materials on which Beckett draws pusillanimity, gross animality were precisely materials that had been pervasively evident in wartime France but that the apostles of virtue
and cleanness restored were now trying busily to sweep under the carpet again. The attitudes at stake here are likewise reflected in small, satirical or at least humorously ironical treatments of the language of exaltation. Take Pozzo, for instance, on the beauty of the sunset, or on the consolations of company: ‘Plus je rencontre de gens, plus je suis heureux. Avec la moindre créature on s’instruit, on s’enrichit, on goûte mieux son bonheur’ (23). But what is true of the language of exaltation is true above all of humanist discourse: ‘Voilà l’homme tout entier, s’en prenant à sa chaussure alors que c’est son pied le coupable’ (5). This was not the kind of discourse on man that, in its official dimension, the Fourth Republic wanted to hear. So, too, with Vladimir and Estragon’s casual attitude to ‘the rights of man’:

   ESTRAGON. On n’a plus de droits?...
   VLADIMIR. (avec netteté) Nous les avons bazardés.
   (13)

The lines seem present in the play deliberately to counter an official post-war dogma. It is abundantly clear that Vladimir and Estragon cannot aspire to humanism. Vladimir may express a conventional moral outrage at Pozzo’s relation to Lucky: ‘Traiter un homme (geste vers Lucky) de cette façon… Je trouve ça… un être humain… non… c’est une honte!’ (21). But Lucky is soon kicking Estragon, Vladimir expressing outrage about that, Estragon thinking of giving Lucky a beating, and so on. This is a world that dare not think as high as ‘man’ and does not encourage its audience to do so either. As a result, for all concerned, any humanist rhetoric floats free from reality, and becomes mere mouthing off.
But in one respect the relation between the dominant ideologies and discourses of the Fourth Republic and Godot clearly differs from the relation between them and L’Innommable. L’Innommable has no fellows and no sense of solidarity with any other or others; in that respect, it is the anti-type of the will to unity that the grander voices in the Fourth Republic wished to promulgate. But in Godot, by contrast, as has often been said, Vladimir and Estragon do have a flawed, ambivalent conviction that they belong together. They also support each other, however unreliably:

ESTRAGON. Tu vois, tu vas moins bien quand je suis là. Moi aussi, je me sens mieux seul.
VLADIMIR. (piqué) Alors pourquoi rappliquer?
ESTRAGON. Je ne sais pas.
(51)

This brings me to the aspect of my first quotation that I have so far conveniently avoided: what appears to be Beckett’s affectionate nostalgia for the Third Republic.

It is worth noting, firstly, that Beckett’s judgment goes very much against the grain of the mid- to late 40s; but also that it coincides with what historians have been saying since the 1970s. If Pétain and the Vichy regime, and after 1944, de Gaulle and the Gaullists, the MRP and the Communists all agreed on one thing, it was that France had crashed to failure and defeat because of the final mediocrity and incompetence or what was called the ‘decadence’ of the Third Republic. A range of academic, sub-academic and popular discourses gave massive support to this view. However, recent historians have progressively challenged it, not least, as having been heavily
overdetermined by Vichy propaganda on the one hand and Gaullist ideology on the other. The point about the Third Republic in its later years, the Third Republic of Jaurès and Blum, dominated by the Radical Socialist Party, was that its commitment was to the small-scale: in the words of Maier and White, to ‘the small town and the small operator’ (10), the little man: the farmer, artisan, shopkeeper and worker. As the Radical publicist ‘Alain’ put matters, the Third Republic represented ‘the ordinary citizen against the eternal conspiracy of the strong, the rich, the powerful’ (qtd. in Maier and White, 9); as opposed, that is, to the constituencies represented by the greater powers in France, the royalists, Bonapartists and the Catholic church.

Furthermore, it has become increasingly clear that, however much official voices in the culture of the Fourth Republic denounced the Third, ordinary people maintained a considerable fondness for its memory, and particularly for the promise of the Front Populaire when it was elected in June, 1936. French historians Philippe Bernard and Henri Dubief, for example, describe a mood of considerable euphoria after the election at what appeared to be the final triumph in France of the spirit of democracy and the common man. The mood was to some extent sustained by the raft of enlightened legislation which followed hard upon the election: wage increases, union rights, annual holidays guaranteed, a 40-hour week, pensions, benefits and so on. That the Front Populaire finally collapsed under severe political and economic pressures did not alter the retrospective, popular identification with it. Bernard and Dubief write that, although ‘[in the end] it had been unable to direct the course of history after 1930’, ‘the Front Populaire continued to bulk large in the collective memory’ as ‘a mythical golden age
for the people’ (337). Beckett’s letter to MacGreevy seems to reflect at least something of that nostalgia.

I am not about to turn Godot into a restatement of later Third Republic ideology in the Fourth Republic. But up to a precise point, the play reflects Beckett’s loyalty to ‘the France that I still cling to’. One may object that the characters in the play are tramps, not little men in Maier and White’s sense. But of course through the war and up to the end of the 40s many of the ‘little men’ (and women) in France were reduced to a level of life not very different from that of Vladimir and Estragon. Consider Parisian glovemaker Georges Mazeaud, for example, the dominant feature of whose diet during the Occupation was turnips (Gildea, 110). Cartoons of broken-down citizens looking like tramps on the roads of France appear in the journalism of the Vichy period (Veillon, 188). Critics have long noticed that Vladimir and Estragon appear to have come down in the world. As Vivian Mercier remarked, they seem like victims of a dégringolade (a word that appears, or almost appears, in L’Innommable) or tumble down the social scale, with destitution thrust upon them (Mercier, 52, 58). ‘La main dans la main on se serait jeté en bas de la Tour Eiffel, parmi les premiers’, says Vladimir. ‘On portait beau alors. Maintenant il est trop tard. On ne nous laisserait meme pas monter’ (4). I would suggest that a strain of value on which the Third Republic and particularly the Front Populaire prided themselves is present in the play, but filtered through what the experience of the war, Vichy, the Liberation and de Gaulle had taught Beckett. The strain of value is therefore also filtered through irony, irrationalism, mordant laughter and the absurd. This gives it a new, caustic and disabused complexion, but by no means comprehensively disqualifies it.
In nearing my conclusion, I want to turn to a text that appeared just two years before Beckett began the trilogy: Léon Blum’s *À L’échelle humaine* (*On a Human Scale*). Blum of course had been Prime Minister and Leader of the Front Populaire. As a socialistic Jew disinclined to flee France, he was deported to Germany and imprisoned in Buchenwald. He returned to France in April 1945. His book is by no means exempt from the tenor of the times. Blum too is caught up in the spirit of post-war humanism, and preaches of man and reason. But underneath that, as in *L’Innommable*, there is a smaller voice. In Blum’s case, this voice is concerned to defend the Front Populaire’s conception of peaceful democracy and the sovereignty of the unassuming, those who do not imagine that they have inherited the earth. ‘Above all’, Blum writes, no-one should ‘try to usurp the place of the people’ (47). There are clear points of closeness between Blum’s book, and Beckett’s work of the same period.

Finally: in his *German Diaries*, Beckett declares that ‘I am not interested in a “unification” of the historical chaos any more than I am in the “clarification” of the individual chaos, + still less in the anthropomorphisation of the inhuman necessities that provoke the chaos. What I want is the straws, flotsam, etc.’ (entry for 15th January 1937; qtd. in Nixon, 115). Between 1944 and 1949, he was drastically at odds with the modes in which history, particularly contemporary history, was being narrativized in the Fourth Republic. He did not hold at all with any progressive model of history, and notably did not subscribe to the kind of progress narratives that were so pervasive in post-war France. As I argue in much more theoretical terms in *Beckett and Badiou*, he thought of history,
rather as Walter Benjamin did, as a wasteland, what I call a remainder, occasionally illuminated by bright shafts of truth and possibility, or at least by the thought that Godot may just possibly arrive after all. What is remarkable in Beckett is how very little such a thought becomes an elitism or an aristocratism, as it can easily do. This is abundantly clear in his pervasive identification with the ‘little man’, against whom the odds are always stacked, but who hopes against hope and also despairs against it. In that respect, one can see just how far, with whatever complications and reservations, Beckett’s art remained faithful to at least a certain mentality in the Third Republic.

1 A version of this paper was given as the annual Samuel Beckett lecture, Trinity College Dublin, 10 April 2010.
7 See Jean-Paul Sartre, L’existentialisme est un humanisme (Paris: Nagel, 1946).
8 For a fascinating and very suggestive account of these writers – the Hussards – which has large implications for the study of Beckett in the 40s, see Hewitt, pp. 289-90.
Works Cited


