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► **To cite this version:**

Hervé Serry. A Publishing Decision under Constraint. Samuel Beckett and Le Seuil Publishers in 1947. *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 2012, 21 (1), pp.65-87. 10.3366/jobs.2012.0034 . hal-03050666

HAL Id: hal-03050666

<https://hal.science/hal-03050666v1>

Submitted on 10 Dec 2020

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A publishing decision under constraint. Samuel Beckett and Le Seuil publishers in 1947.

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At the end of the 1940s, like several other Paris publishers, Le Seuil received manuscripts submitted for publication by Samuel Beckett, which, after examination, it rejected. The study of what seems in retrospect, given Beckett's subsequent reputation, to have been an error – recognised as such, as we shall see – reveals the complexity of the decisive role of the publisher as co-creator of a literary work, within a “circle of belief” which masks its revealing power (Bourdieu, 1980, 261-293). As a matter of fact, the rejection was part of the aesthetic-political line incarnated by Le Seuil, a recently-established and committed publisher at the Catholic and hence spiritual end of the publishing spectrum. Le Seuil's position in the field of publishing played a part in the rejection, as did factors internal to the firm, linked to the origins of its sponsors (Serry, 2008). The reception of Beckett's prose by the publisher's Readers at Le Seuil was influenced by the competitiveness which structured the intellectual world of their time. Studying this the episode offers a view of the way Samuel Beckett's writings, which in those days were known only to a very small circle of people, were perceived.

Through the few relevant archive documents preserved by Le Seuil, this episode also throws light on the process of selecting texts for publication, and the people involved in it. The different Readers' opinions lined up according to a hierarchy that had a part to play in the final decision. The process that ended up in a decision for or against publication, and hence the activity of the “publisher's Readers” (“*lecteurs professionnels*” in French), is largely unknown. However, this initial selection of works was decisive. It is known that a large number of manuscripts (or imported books) never got through this filter, no matter how they arrived on the publisher's desk (Fouché and Simonin, 1999). Each publishing house had its own method of operating this sorting process: internal or external Readers, who gave an expert judgement on manuscripts according to criteria that might or might not be formally set out, points systems, manuscript reading services, reading committees, and so on. In France, the role of series (or “Collection”) editor, linked to a rationalisation of publishing practices, came about in the mid-nineteenth century, with the invention of the figure of the modern publisher as represented by Louis Hachette (Mollier, 1999). The advent of a supply of books categorised by target audience and genres lay at the origin of this form of selection. During this period, the growing market for books, the professionalisation of the publishing sector, and the need to define criteria of profitability before risking any investment, gave rise to the emergence of these intermediaries in order to select titles from a growing supply of manuscripts. As underlined by the historian Linda Marie Fritschner, this stage of the publisher's work was essential for the construction of catalogues by means of the selection and revision/re-writing of texts, but was often decried, as in the first mention she found, from the pen of a British professional in 1833: “The reader was the skeleton in every publisher's house” (Fritschner, 2006, 45; Feather, 2006, 139-142). At that date, in Great Britain and the United States, the literary agent, another kind of “professional Reader”, made his appearance outside the confines of the publishing houses. The first identifiable representative of this profession in England, A. P. Watt, was an advertiser before becoming a Reader, and then an agent (Hepburn, 1968, 45-66; Thompson, 2010, 58-99). Later and in another context,

international book fairs combined these functions, which were decisive in compiling the supply of books on offer (Sora, 1998; David, 2006).

In the case of Paris publishers, reading committees developed between 1880 and 1920 (Mollier, 1990). These were authorities who institutionalised collective choice and were sometimes centres of power for defining what was literature – a function that could also evoke virulent criticism (Deguy, 1988). Networks of influence organising the circulation of texts were another mode of selection. Readers' reports preserved in archives, although rarely accessible (especially for this period), make it possible to gain “essential information on a publisher's editorial policy, the market for books in a given period, as well as tastes and fashions in reading-matter”, as summed up by Marie-Françoise Cachin, who conducted a study of the British publisher, Macmillan, in this regard (Cachin, 2002, 42).

At the time when it refused Beckett's texts, in autumn 1947, Le Seuil was an emerging publishing house trying to make its mark in the field of publishing, which was itself in the process of recomposition after the German Occupation. Originally founded by a Catholic priest in 1935, Le Seuil was re-started two years later by Jean Bardet and Paul Flamand. Endowed with considerable ambition and an intense desire to take part in contemporary intellectual debate, the two sponsors and proprietors aimed to build a “great” general publisher. Both springing from middle-class provincial families, from which they were estranged, they belonged to the sectors for whom culture is secondary. They discovered literature (and then the profession of publishing) as autodidacts (Serry, 2005). By the time of the Liberation of France, they had published fewer than twenty titles, but these included a best-seller in French Scouting circles, *Etoile au grand large* (1943) by the Catholic Guy de Larigaudie. This success brought in part of the money needed to finance a proper catalogue with an emphasis on literature. During the second half of the nineteen-forties, Le Seuil surmounted several important stages of growth, while French publishing was going through a crisis which reduced the competition. Publishing in Paris, for various reasons, was undergoing radical changes. The ideals of the Resistance gave rise to an intermittent zeal for corporate renewal. Some major companies were experiencing a changed position, linked to their attitude under the Occupation, such as Gallimard, temporarily, or Grasset, permanently. Finally, publishers born in the Resistance such as Minit were working hard at adapting to the new conditions (Fouché, 1987). Le Seuil, with its militant Catholic origins and identity, aimed to enlarge its supply of books as well as its sphere of influence. At the Liberation, its connection with the philosopher Emmanuel Mounier consolidated its re-launch, and provided Bardet's and Flamand's enterprise with a notable intellectual luminary. Le Seuil produced Mounier's journal *Esprit*, and in exchange put him in charge of several of its series, in which he published his own books and those of like-minded writers. Having launched a demanding series of essays and literature (a collection entitled “*Pierres vives*”, or “Living Stones”), religious works, series for young people, and collections of documents and essays, the little team was significantly strengthened by recruiting the critic Albert Béguin. Béguin, who became literary director at Le Seuil during the summer of 1947, was a Professor of Literature who had first made his name with his thesis on *L'Âme romantique et le rêve* (“The romantic soul and the dream”) (1938), showing a deep sensitivity towards the relationship between poetry and mysticism. He rapidly acquired a considerable reputation among his fellow essayists and literary critics. In 1940, after a long spiritual journey, he was converted to Catholicism. From Switzerland, he played a major role during the war by publishing in his “*Cahiers du Rhône*” series works by the great French poets who were banned in their own country for standing against the German Occupation and the Vichy regime (Sapiro, 1999). Béguin brought Le Seuil renewed literary prestige as well as a collection of intellectual authors and networks that would have been inaccessible to Jean Bardet and Paul Flamand. Among the writers connected with Béguin whose works Le Seuil could now publish was Jean

Cayrol, who was a young French poet and concentration-camp survivor, having been deported for his Resistance work. On returning to France Cayrol bore testimony to the concentration-camp experience first through poetry and then in prose. In December 1947 he brought out the novel *Je vivrai l'amour des autres* ("I will live the love of others"), co-published by Le Seuil and the "Cahiers du Rhône". The book was a sensation in literary circles and won the Prix Renaudot. Béguin's prestige and Jean Cayrol's success enabled Le Seuil to aim for new legitimacy in the intellectual world. The publisher, whose origins lay in a Catholic movement that was still very much present, and proud of it, though not yet fully established, found its name enriched by this first literary success of an avant-garde writer. With *Je vivrai l'amour des autres*, Cayrol took his first steps on the path of a literature rooted in the experience of the concentration camps, and constructed around a Lazarus-figure who had become a stranger to the world.

Too dark a genius

Jean Bardet and Paul Flamand were in the effervescent context of the success of Jean Cayrol's first novel when, in autumn 1947, Tony Clerx (Jacoba Van Velde), friend and translator of Samuel Beckett, deposited at Le Seuil's office at 27 rue Jacob, in the Saint-Germain-des-Prés district of Paris, a collection of Beckett's short stories. Beckett, soon actively helped by his future wife Suzanne Dumesnil to place his texts, was trying with little success to find a publisher. The couple regularly found themselves in difficulties at the month's end, in post-war Paris where penury was a normal feature of daily life (Bair, 1979, Knowlson, 1999, 555-578). For France, still in the process of reconstruction, 1947 marked the peak of an economic crisis that was to last for another two years. For long months Suzanne Dumesnil and Samuel Beckett, as he confided to Yvonne Lefèvre (letter dated 5 April 1948) led "a quiet and meagre life" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 355). This period of relative material poverty was a time of intense literary creativity for the exiled writer, and of a profound change in his literary style.

The stories offered to Le Seuil were titled *L'Amour (Premier Amour – First Love*, which remained unpublished until the 1970s), *L'Expulsé (The Expelled)*; *Fin (The End)* and *Le Calmant (The Calmative)*, formerly titled *Suite* ("Sequel"). Written contemporaneously with *Mercier et Camier* (which Beckett began in summer 1946), the short stories were the product of an aesthetic renewal initiated by Beckett's fundamental choice to abandon English and write in French (Bishop, 2006). We will see that this "brutal turn-around", which was also "a new creative facility" in the words of Pascale Casanova (1997, p. 123), influenced Le Seuil's perception, even though its reading committee naturally did not know about Beckett's change.

The first Reader at Le Seuil to look at Beckett's manuscripts was the writer and journalist Louis Pauwels. His first novel, *Saint-Quelqu'un* ("Saint-Somebody") had been well received by critics on its publication by Le Seuil in 1946. Paul Flamand thought a lot of the partly autobiographical novel, whose main character, caught up in a daily life that escapes him, questions himself on the place of the soul in the "new age" born of the war (Pauwels, [1946] 1970, pp. 24-25). Pauwels, from a modest background, had formerly been a schoolteacher and became a journalist at the Liberation. His intellectual apprenticeship was influenced by the writings of Louis-Ferdinand Céline and Henry de Montherlant, and was notable for a growing attraction for the esoteric (later he turned towards Catholicism) (Nikel, 2002). The Reader's notes written by Pauwels on Beckett's offering show that he was very appreciative of these "Four Short Stories" as he called them. He felt the author's "preoccupations" as his own. "Beckett sees man as he is 'naturally', i.e. when he doesn't care

about being (...). He does not give in to “the ‘temptation of angelism’,” because he renders the “flow” of existence with

his tragic art; his tortuous tragic art, the vague anguish that that brings with it and which is only expressed by filth, by recourse to scatology, to that taking pleasure in shit which comes from a barely lucid despair which is also, to take everything with love, like a very humble search, a baby’s cry for help when separated from ‘his loved ones’.

These prose pieces, he said, were “written as though from beyond death, if one understands death as our life subject to its natural inclination: i.e. absence.” According to Pauwels, Samuel Beckett and his reflection on man’s tragic condition deserve to be known. However, his statement of the strong qualities of Beckett’s inspiration did not lead him to recommend publication unconditionally. Pauwels pointed out that *Les Temps Modernes* and *Fontaine*, edited by Max-Pol Fouchet, had already published two of the texts now submitted for consideration by Le Seuil. The “benefit” for Le Seuil from republishing them in one volume would be reduced, unless they could obtain “a preface or study by Sartre, for example”. The reputation of Sartre, editor of *Les Temps Modernes* at that time, a very prolific theorist, and much in favour of revolutionary commitment brought about by existentialist writing (Boschetti, 1985, pp. 244-250), would be big enough to compensate for the fact that *Suite* and *Fin* had already been published elsewhere. A real concern for Pauwels was whether Le Seuil would be able to promote and sell a volume of partly unpublished short stories by an unknown author like Beckett. Another possible avenue, more favourable in all probability, was to obtain a novel by Beckett “if there is a novel”. Pauwels thus considered short stories to be a secondary genre, difficult to sell widely.

In a brief N.B. at the end of his note, Pauwels felt obliged to add that “all the same, it’s Kafka with the heaviness and childishness of an American. There’s an elephant walking over a set of crystal wineglasses inside it.”¹ This closing allusion to Kafka demands a digression about the reception of the Czech writer in France after the war, to clarify Pauwels’s judgement. Kafka’s popularity did not really take off in France until the beginning of the 1950s, but after the translation of the biography by his friend Max Brod came out in 1945, literary critics declared his work to be a “symbol of the despair of modern man abandoned to anguish” of spirit in a world that shows itself bereft alike of meaning and of the divine (Tabery, 1991, pp. 3-12). With regard to this darkness, a journal devoted to chronicling the social and political crisis of the times asked “Should we burn Kafka?” The provocative question elicited a range of reactions around the responsibilities of a man of letters when society was in turmoil. That said, metaphysical readings of Kafka predominate, holding that the search for the Absolute was his principle quest. Christian critics insist on the impossible access to Grace that fills *The Castle*, representing the impasse that characterises human destiny. Certain commentators, following the example of Albert Camus, pointed to the hope that emerged, despite all, from Kafka’s Absurd. A messianic horizon was also noted by several essays (including that of Claude Edmonde Magny, *Les Sandales d’Empédocle*, published by Le Seuil in 1945). The note of hope detected here is perhaps what moved Pauwels to grant a certain depth to Franz Kafka. By contrast, the dry radicality of Beckett’s short stories from this point of view places him on a (simplistic) level with American literature, popular at the time in France, notably thanks to Sartre – who claimed affinity with John dos Passos – and the American-style detective novels accused of being merely third-rate literature containing harmful values (Roger, 2002, p. 560). Indicative of this attitude, Albert Béguin, who knew the United States because he had lived there, confided to his friend Marcel

¹ Note by Louis Pauwels on “Four Short Stories” [September 1947], Editions du Seuil (EDS) archives (Imec, Caen).

Raymond that he saw in the “American social mechanism (...) a murder of the person” and a threat to European civilization (letter dated 9 October 1949, Béguin and Raymond 1976, pp. 225-226.)

For the selection of manuscripts the usual method was to take more than one opinion. Gennie Luccioni was asked for a second judgment. Translator from Italian into French, collaborator on the personalist journal *Esprit*, she was the author of a collection of short stories, *Cercles* (“Circles”), which came out in 1946 in a collection by the periodical published by Le Seuil. She was regularly asked to evaluate manuscripts received by Le Seuil. In this case her judgment relied on that of the first Reader. Very probably, Pauwels’ report was passed to her. Luccioni began her short note by saying that Beckett’s texts were “full of talent”. She regretted, however, “rather facile style effects” and “some vulgarities that are not as intentional as the author would have us believe”. All the same, she recommended publishing it.

Shortly after this Beckett’s short stories were passed to Albert Béguin. Having worked with the publisher in an advisory capacity, he was now in sole charge of the literary side. The critical acclaim which had greeted Jean Cayrol’s *Je Vivrai l’amour des autres* endowed his new position with undeniable authority. Béguin set out his opinion at the end of Luccioni’s report, on the same form (document reproduced in Serry, 2008, p. 35). There can be no doubt, he said, of Beckett’s “very great talent”. However, Béguin considered that Beckett “abused” that talent “to the point of making it into a system, a series of tricks of repetition”. Béguin admitted to a deep dislike for it:

And then it is hateful writing, everything that is most fashionable, done to make the Friday clientele of Rue Sebastien Bottin [Gallimard publishers] fall into raptures over it. A trap for language amateurs. The obscenities are not the worst of it (although the first story [*L’Amour*] is noxious), but the monotony of the “I don’t know”, “I’ve forgotten”, “I should know”, “Why am I saying this”, and all the rest which is systematic.

I am against publication, and will happily renounce the inevitable eulogies of the literary pages of *Combat*, *Les Temps modernes*, *Fontaine*, etc.

Samuel Beckett, said Béguin, possessed “extraordinary gifts” and a “view of the world”. These prized qualities, however, were not enough to weaken Béguin’s visceral and obviously incontestable rejection. In order to strengthen his rejection still more, Béguin explained that the unanimity of Louis Pauwels and Gennie Luccioni “does not make for the better of either of them”. Sure of his authority, he threw doubt on the opinions of his two young colleagues. His identification of Beckett with Jean-Paul Sartre and his publisher Gallimard was once again notable. Three journals and their foreseeable “eulogies” were rejected in advance. *Les Temps modernes* was at the height of its popularity at that time, while the other two, born of the struggles of the Resistance, were in decline. *Combat*, which had enjoyed great prestige up until then, was going through a crisis which resulted in Albert Camus breaking his ties with it in 1947. *Fontaine*, a small journal born during the war in opposition to the German Occupation, and with which Béguin had been associated, publishing articles in it in 1946, soon foundered, as did many similar journals that never succeeded in relaunching themselves.

Albert Béguin’s strongly-worded rejection note was the product of his new position. He had gained a considerable reputation during the Resistance years with his “Cahiers du Rhône”, publishing established writers and upcoming poets from all parts of the political and religious spectrum, such as Bernanos and Aragon. With his new position at Le Seuil he found himself at a very precise and still relatively marginal place in the literary field. That subordinate position was also shown by the “minority legitimacy” of *Esprit* with regard to *Les Temps modernes* (Boschetti, 1985, p. 200). By launching his journal *Les Temps modernes*, initially with the support of Gallimard, Sartre had demonstrated his omnipresence

in the fields of literature, philosophy and militancy, and relegated rival literary critics to the periphery. *Esprit*, the model of a “committed” (“*engagé*”) journal in the 1930s, had been successfully relaunched under Le Seuil’s aegis in December 1944. However, the group at *Les Temps modernes* with their defence of an existentialism stripped of all transcendence, adopted this stance of “commitment” (“*engagement*”), re-aligning it with the various standpoints of its renowned editor and his like-minded associates. Some years later, in answer to a question from a journalist about the commitment of his “master” Emmanuel Mounier, Albert Béguin expressed this transposition in his own way: “It is true that the word ‘commitment’ owes its currency largely to Mounier. He did not mean it in the way in which it is commonly understood today [in 1954], when what people demand is not so much commitment as recruitment” (Alter and Béguin, [1954] 1958, p. 756). As Anna Boschetti has shown, the social and cultural resources of the *Temps modernes* group were notably superior to those of the people behind *Esprit*, who were of a lower academic standard, often hailing from the provinces, and mostly Catholics – which was seen as a negative trait in the French intellectual field (Serry 2004). *Esprit*, despite some attempts after the war, had no presence in the literary world. Albert Béguin was “the only incontestable intellectual authority to whom *Esprit* could lay claim” (Boschetti, 1985, p. 194), and his position was overshadowed both by *Esprit*, the personalist journal he had been writing for since 1938, and Le Seuil, a firm of doubtful legitimacy still in the process of being reborn,. Before the war he had been a Swiss university professor specialising in German romantic poetry; in 1940 he had become a convert to Catholicism; neither of these personae could do anything but reject Sartre’s atheism and materialism. Based on his subjective theory of freedom, he was guided by his concepts of the responsibility of the writer, concepts that filled intellectual debates (Sapiro, 2010). The distance he maintained from “commitment” likewise went to strengthen his rejection; he had called Sartre’s *Les Chemins de la Liberté*, a manifesto-book which was also a sensation in autumn 1945, a “bad novel”. Béguin denounced the book’s propagandising of Sartre’s theories, and “the impression that life had not been described in its weight, but described heavily.” Sartre’s loose language and his explicit desire to touch a wide public reinforced Béguin’s negative judgment (Béguin, 1945). The connection he saw between Samuel Beckett’s prose and Sartre’s, and the similarity of his denunciation of Beckett to his denunciation of Sartre, show how much his rejection of Beckett’s short stories owed to the unequal rivalry between *Esprit* and *Les Temps modernes*. The subordination of *Esprit* to *Les Temps modernes* was seen by Béguin as the overriding expression of the declining influence that his own aesthetical and religious ideas exercised at that time. Le Seuil, the publishing house that provided him with access to the field of French literature – and a taste of success with Jean Cayrol – must not therefore be permitted support the directions that Beckett was exploring at that time. It should be added that in 1947 the existentialists and the personalists were still in dialogue with each other, as reflected in the presence of people connected with *Esprit* on the revolutionary democratic Assembly initiated by Sartre at the beginning of 1948. However, political stakes, beginning with closeness to the Communist intellectuals and their party, would soon create insurmountable chasms between the two groups with the onset of the cold war, which reshuffled the cards of political alliances in intellectual milieus.

After Albert Béguin’s categorical rejection, Paul Flamand felt an urgent need to follow the opinion of his editorial director:

Agree with Béguin, word for word. I will witness, additionally, to the overwhelming boredom caused by such fabricated, re-written, calculated writing, which becomes all the more revolting. See the author, because in all probability it is not a translation: the language is too magisterially maintained – someone is trying to reproduce the Boris Vian-Sullivan coup.

Tell him that he is on the wrong road: fashion is going to abandon w.c. souls. Suggest that he should describe model souls, the flower of souls, etc.... I bet he'll walk.²

In thus raising the stakes, the director of *Le Seuil* introduced a new dimension. Both in his case and in Béguin's, it was the current literary scene that determined his decision. After the reception of Sartre's "existentialist" novels, it was the scandal of the novel *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* that influenced him. Boris Vian, under the pseudonym of Vernon Sullivan, with his publisher Jean d'Halluin (Le Scorpion publishers) had made a huge hit with his "American-style" *roman noir* whose translator he claimed to be. Vian – who, moreover, wrote for *Les Temps modernes* – had in reality written the book in French, a fact that he revealed several months after its publication when sales, scandals and court cases had got *J'irai cracher sur vos tombes* onto the front pages of the newspapers (Schoolcraft 2009). Paul Flamand perceived certain signs in the French language that Samuel Beckett was using for the first time for his prose. The short stories evaluated by *Le Seuil*'s Readers were among the first products of this change, through which, in James Knowlson's words, he "gained a greater simplicity and objectivity" (Knowlson, 1996, p. 357). And it is known that in the versions of these stories initially published in French, Beckett had committed several "Anglicisms", which he corrected when the short stories were collected in one volume by Minuit in 1955 (Fletcher, 1964).

One can imagine that the idea offered by Paul Flamand of a possible change of direction for this unknown writer towards "the flower of souls", in order to get out of a dead-end literary and moral path, did not result in any request to meet. Contact was not altogether broken off, for, several weeks after the consideration of the short stories, Louis Pauwels was asked by *Le Seuil* to look at the manuscript of *Molloy*. This, as we now know, was one part of a trilogy whose other two parts were *Mallone Meurt* and *L'Innommable*. These texts notably foreground the quests of characters who speak in monologues, using the "I" already employed in the short stories, which was to be a permanent feature of Beckett's work from then on (Pattie, 2000, pp. 65-66; Mayoux, 1982). Despite being a novel, which was easier to sell, this work met with the same reserves as the previous ones. *Molloy*'s solitary and sceptical pilgrimage, and the second part of the book in which Moran sets off in search of him, wounded Louis Pauwels' sensibilities. His negative judgment chimed with those of Béguin and Flamand on the short stories, but sprang directly from his own literary goals, founded on an exploration of human nature. According to him, the "freedom" of inspiration of the "Four short stories", which explored the absence of faith, was no longer to be found in this novel which had been lowered to become a "purely systematic work".

And, despite Beckett's "vicious" talent, despite his ruses, it does not altogether escape being ridiculous. One can see that he has hold of the right end, which he will not release in exchange for an empire, that he knows the trick of the existential diarrhoea, and, taken with his own conceits, he falls into the clichés of the genre with a slight air of mocking the world.

The dynamic of Beckett's creation, which organises *Molloy*'s inner word as a systematic exploration, making no concessions, of being which is necessarily a stranger to the world, is reduced to mechanical algebra and duplicity. The liberties of its tone with regard to bourgeois decency are not perceived for the liberation that they permit, but rather for the transgressing of due order that they involve. However, and in some sort constrained anew to a paradoxical judgement, Pauwels admitted immediately that the vice of this cunning and accomplished writer nevertheless did not exclude the work from the field of true "experience". The

² Reader's note on "Four Short Stories" by Samuel Beckett, manuscript received on 30 September 1947, and rejection given on 28 November 1947 (EDS, Imec).

exceptional sharpness of Beckett's eyes was conceded, even admired, despite its attendant shamelessness. Sartre was again referred to negatively, in contradistinction to the opinion of certain critics, such as Jean-Jacques Marchand, who after the publication of *Molloy* by Minuit, defined this "book [as] the most promising currently on offer since *La Nausée*" (Mayoux, 1982, p. 245). For Pauwels, Samuel Beckett went even further than Sartre, because he expressed an "inexistence that is lived rather than thought". The limits of human knowledge assumed by the solitary Molloy were profoundly felt and depicted by the writer. Pauwels, in the name of his own explorations of the torments of the human soul – which formed the burden of his novel *Saint-Quelqu'un* as we saw earlier – rejected Sartre's concept of a man being his own freedom and conceded that Samuel Beckett abandons the reader of *Molloy* to "a real unease".

Above all, one cannot get rid of the impression that it is possible. I do not mean the situations, but the worldview. One feels that Beckett has touched the depths of the reality of being without faith. That is a fact. In that respect, his book deserves consideration. But one cannot get rid either of the feeling that, if he really had touched the depths, he would not dare to use his experience like that. That he would either have to die, or to resolve himself by summoning the language to serve this enterprise. But after all, it is possible that a being considers it worthy and sufficient merely to use, to avow. In that case, one also has the right to turn away from that man; to reject him. To refuse him. For my part, I refuse Beckett. I do not judge him, I condemn him.

This trenchant opinion shows a Louis Pauwels who was noticeably disoriented by Beckett's radicality, which he found unacceptable. He felt that the impasse of human destiny should not be thus postulated and, still more, revealed. In his novels and in his life, the esoteric path espoused by Pauwels as a way of re-founding the community of men – and the communication which inaugurates that community – aimed to offer an escape-route for the consciousness which would otherwise be forced back on itself by the impossibility of knowing the spirit of the world, as demonstrated by the monologues of Beckett's characters. The absence of direct reference to reality, enclosed in the impassable limits of the consciousness, left Pauwels paralysed. After his own efforts to reach a new apprehension of consciousness, he could accept Beckett's *coup de force*, i.e. the unveiling of "the reality of being without faith". But, still convinced of the possibility of finding a new path, he could not conceive how Samuel Beckett could make the choice he had, because in reality he shared in his initial reasoning, remaining at the stage of the unveiling. While Pauwels was far from sharing all its premises, he could not accept the rejection of human hope in any form at all. Here he found himself in agreement with Albert Béguin and Paul Flamand. The lines that united Louis Pauwels and the directors of *Le Seuil* were partly contradictory. The refusal of a doctrinal mediation of the relationship with the world (such as that provided by the Catholic religion) made Pauwels sensitive to the questions of the characters in the "Four Short Stories" and, later, *Molloy*. Nevertheless, what he saw as Beckett's nihilism, which French literary criticism noted on the publication of the novel in 1951 (Weller, 2009), constituted for him a powerful repellant. Pauwels, Béguin and Flamand shared a humanist moralism which enjoined upon them a belief in a solution linked the power of the spirit in the dialogue of consciences. The esoteric may have been largely absent from *Le Seuil*'s catalogue, but the publisher did publish discussions around the subject of mysticism, as witnessed for example by its publication of the journal called *Dieu Vivant* ("Living God") which, in the uncertain world of the post-war years, postulated a Christian eschatology that took a different track from militant incarnationism (Fouilloux, 1993). When Paul Flamand informed Tony Clerx of his rejection of *Molloy*, he acknowledged Beckett's "very great talent", but transmitted a toned-down version of his Reader's notes. And it was indeed on ethical grounds that he justified his decision:

Undoubtedly, one could say still more and accord more importance (in a certain sense) to his witness than to Sartre's. It is not on personal grounds that I reject the work, but on a question of principle. Mr Beckett has every right to use this experience and to proclaim it. I have the right not to accept it, but I maintain all my respect for him.

Was this negative decision about *Molloy* the subject of debate within Le Seuil? Unlike the case of the short stories, where the archives reveal the expert opinions of several Readers, no document exists indicating any conflicting voices. But Paul Flamand had not heard the last of these rejected manuscripts. Some years later, Sylvère Lotringer undertook a journalistic enquiry and another publisher, Jérôme Lindon, was interviewed. In this context, Paul Flamand was asked about his rejection of Samuel Beckett's manuscripts. So as not to cast doubt on his professionalism as a literary publisher, he said that the Readers' notes bore witness that the "qualities" of the writer "were recognised..." And he added, in an attempt to explain himself,

... personally, I did not want to take it, because I do not believe in that absolute blackness. It appeared systematic to me... but I don't deny its value; when one arrives at a testimony of that importance, one has the duty to be demanding. Notwithstanding, as a publisher, I recognise that I can make mistakes, and I am entirely prepared to admit that I was wrong not to take Beckett.

I simply couldn't believe it" (Jérôme Lindon)

Looking back at it, could it be said that Le Seuil made a "mistake"? In point of fact, Samuel Beckett's subsequent history is closely linked to the work of the publisher Jérôme Lindon (as it is in Great Britain to that of John Calder and in the United States to that of Barney Rosset). The success of the Editions de Minuit, as much as the publishing "mistake" of Le Seuil, are inscribed in parallel in the history of the two publishing houses and derive from the social and cultural characteristics of their respective directors, as reflected by the specific currents of the literary field and the competition within it at that period. Moreover, if it was a mistake, Paul Flamand and his colleagues were not the only ones to make it. Samuel Beckett was well accustomed to rejections, receiving a large number of them in the immediate post-war years. *Murphy*, his first book to come out in France, was published by Bordas, an academic publisher briefly tempted to widen its catalogue to include works of literature. Tristan Tzara, an author published by Bordas, was in favour of this new strategy and recommended *Murphy*. The book was brought out with an initial print-run of 3000 copies; just four copies were sold between the spring of 1947 and the summer of the following year... and fewer than 100 by 1951, when Beckett signed for Editions de Minuit (Bordas, 1997, pp. 186-187). Bordas reversed its agreement and did not publish Beckett's next works, including *Mercier et Camier*. Some critics gave favourable reviews to the texts which appeared in *Les Temps modernes* and *Fontaine*, but Beckett's refusal to participate in publicising *Murphy*, as Bordas insistently requested him to, may have contributed to the poor sales, and undoubtedly led to the break between him and Bordas. Editions K, a publisher of surrealist works, rejected Beckett. Then Gallimard did the same, following a verdict given by Albert Camus, whose moral commitment, it should be noted, was highly valued by the owners of Le Seuil. Anne Simonin quotes the testimony of Georges Lambrichs, a close collaborator of Jérôme Lindon, who considered that Beckett was "Gallimard's other great reject" together with Marcel Proust. Camus's negative decision was, according to Lambrichs, "not at all out of character", given that the works of Camus and of Beckett spring from "totally contrary" approaches (Simonin, 2008, p. 292). Acting on the suggestion of Robert

Carlier, a publisher with links to Gallimard who believed in Beckett's literary future, Suzanne Dumesnil sent some of Beckett's manuscripts to Maurice Nadeau, who was a series head with Corrêa. For reasons unknown, he never got them. Then they tried Le Seuil, with the result outlined above. Carlier then advised turning to Editions de Minuit, who accepted *Molloy* (Bair, 1979, p. 368). These successive rejections – Lindon lists six –, were noteworthy, but not “milestones of contemporary literary history” like the rejection of Marcel Proust by André Gide's *La Nouvelle Revue française* [Gallimard's name at the time] (Simonin, 2011, p. 111), even though Lambrichs, as mentioned above, reproaches both of them.

Jérôme Lindon, who had been working for Minuit for ten years, very quickly committed himself to getting Beckett's books published. It took just one reading of the manuscript of *Molloy* for him to experience a genuine revelation – human, literary, and professional.

I read *Molloy* in a few hours, as I had never read any book before. Now, this was not a novel brought out by one of my fellow-publishers, a recognised *chef d'oeuvre* that I would never have any part in as a publisher. It was an unpublished manuscript, and not only that: it had been rejected by several publishers. I simply couldn't believe it. (Lindon [1976], 1997, p. 95)

Concerning the feeling of affinity that he immediately felt for this writer, Lindon explained much later to the historian Anne Simonin that “If Editions de Minuit exist, it is to Samuel Beckett that they owe it, and especially to that day. Nothing happened before that, and everything that happened afterwards was due to that” (Simonin, 2008, p. 383). When *Molloy* came out in 1951, it was celebrated as an event by a fraction of the Paris literary critics. And although sales were at first low, the book aroused heated debates. They were sometimes not just heated but scandalised, very much like the way theatre plays were received (Derval, 2007). Nevertheless, the critics, like Le Seuil's Readers, acknowledged Beckett's immense talent.

How would Samuel Beckett's work have been received if his books, at least the first short stories and *Molloy*, had been published by Le Seuil? This is an unanswerable question, but starting from a reconstruction of the motives behind the publisher's selection of books, it is a question that enables one to examine the role of publishers in producing works of literary worth. The reduced standing of Le Seuil and *Esprit*, brought about by the hegemony of Sartre and his journal *Les Temps modernes*, provides the framework for the whole story. Paul Flamand's desire not to go against the opinion of Albert Béguin was decisive. The incompatibility put forward between the line taken by Béguin and Beckett's writings rests largely on Béguin's rejection of an “idealist scepticism” which Beckett manages to introduce into literature, under the influence, particularly, of Arnold Geulincx. Geulincx, inspired by Cartesian thought – a philosophy that is of great importance in Beckett's work, especially in the first part of *Molloy* (Mooney, 1978) –, developed a “philosophy of constraint and powerlessness, of the most total separation between the world, the body and the spirit”, which Beckett made use of in producing his own work (Casanova, 1997, pp. 89-92). Louis Pauwels and his esoteric mysticism, as well as the Catholic Albert Béguin, convinced of the imperative presence of men in the world, shared the same reasons for their rejection. Spirituality is very much present in Beckett's work. His characters' “obsession with God” has been discussed (Coe, 1963, p. 9). Further evidence is provided by the episode of the “revelation” of 1946 which opened the way to a period of fertile creativity (Casanova, 1997, pp. 121-131; Knowlson, 1999, pp. 579-629). Beckett's erudite familiarity with religious texts, and their theological or scholarly exegesis (Bryden, 1998) moreover, went unnoticed by Le Seuil's Readers. In the end, there was nothing, except the success of form, that could attract Le Seuil's directors, since they were aiming for “a view of civilisation”, i.e., to quote the

words of a close colleague of Béguin's, a commitment that included an "intellectual and moral critique of society, the concern to build an order and not just institutions: an order of values, a style of human relationships centred on the person as a free being in solidarity with others" (Domenach, 1958, p. 887). Such goals were incompatible with the reasoned inertia that Molloy's circumambulations offer as the way out. Charles Juliet, in a conversation with Beckett published in the 1980s, discussed the numerous rejections received by *Watt* and *Molloy*. Beckett conceded that it was understandable: "Yes, there was a sort of indecency... An ontological indecency..." (Juliet, 1986, p. 25).

With the help of Roger Chartier's works, Anne Simonin and Pascal Fouché defined very precisely the idea of an "editorial reading" with a single remit (Fouché and Simonin, 1999, p. 107). To make sense, this reading absolutely must be re-inscribed within the internal rationale of each publishing house, and then within that of the objective competitiveness that structures the field of publishing at a given moment of its history. The rejection of Samuel Beckett's prose works by Le Seuil's Readers defines negatively the aesthetic perimeter of this publisher. The effect of what was perceived by them as Beckett's blackness was to reveal Le Seuil's as a Romanesque catalogue which, with a few exceptions, could only flourish in the 1950s and 1960s with the publication of literature in translation which combined a demanding form in a classical framework, a spiritual dimension, and militant commitment, along the lines of the literature of the "New Germany" incarnated by Heinrich Böll and then Günther Grass (Serry, 2002). With the "Ecrire" ["Writing"] series launched by Jean Cayrol in 1956, Le Seuil was able to recruit young French writers such as Philippe Sollers, Jean-Pierre Faye and Denis Roche (Serry, 2009). Sollers quickly became a well-known literary figure, especially when his journal *Tel Quel* was launched in 1961. Paul Flamand, full of enthusiasm, believed that, with this literary group "full of future", he at last held in his hands the succession to the "*Nouveau roman*" school published by Jérôme Lindon at Editions de Minuit. Still, the *Tel Quel* group was characterised by a fairly conventional literary output and an equally conventional political commitment (Kauppi, 1990); and posterity does not retain any image of it as strong as the photograph taken by Mario Dondero in front of the Minuit offices, of "*Nouveau roman*" writers including Samuel Beckett, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, and Claude Simon, with their publisher (Simonin, 1990). This group photograph has become a sort of paradigm of a universally recognisable "literary school". Its unity was very much the result of the work of Jérôme Lindon, Minuit's first Reader.

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