Self-Irony as Drama:  
Samuel Beckett’s “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit”

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I

Samuel Beckett’s “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit,” published in December, 1949, in the Parisian English-language magazine *transition*¹, is a dialogic discourse between speakers B and D on three modern painters—Pierre Tal Coat, André Masson, and Abraham van Velde—based on many months of intimate discussion (Knowlson 336) in conversation or in letters, between Beckett and his friend Duthuit, the editor and art critic for the magazine from 1948 to 1950 (Oppenheim 81). Of all Beckett’s writings on art, written mainly between 1945 and 1952, this is the best known and most widely quoted. Anthony Cronin voices the wide-spread view that “the dialogues are the nearest Beckett ever came to writing a manifesto or a statement of what he felt to be his own position” (398), and Richard Coe derives the label “the art of failure” from these dialogues to characterize Beckett’s own art.

The fact that the writing of “Three Dialogues” coincided with that of his trilogy, especially of *L’Innommable*, tempts us to assume that by composing the piece Beckett tried to clarify and formulate his own aesthetics. However, in our eagerness to extract our author’s “manifesto,” we often fall into the trap of simplistic reduction harmful to our understanding of this complex piece of writing, which is much more than a hunting ground for some dry
Lois Oppenheim suspects from the evidence of the Beckett-Duthuit correspondence\(^2\) that “Three Dialogues” was a collaboration of the two friends, with Duthuit’s contribution much more substantial than usually assumed\(^{82}\). Even a cursory survey of the fragments from Beckett’s letters quoted by Oppenheim is enough to make us realize the persistent difficulty Beckett felt in writing the piece, in recalling and restating their debate and replacing Duthuit’s voice. However, the actual writing must have been done by Beckett alone, for he would not have told Martin Esslin that he “wrote it up” rather than “down” \((D\ 14)\). And writing “up” as thus consciously differentiated from writing “down” suggests writing very carefully and methodically and trying to make as clear as possible conclusions he had drawn.

Beckett’s writing “up” resulted in being quite dramatic, whether he wanted it to be or not. It is dramatic in the conventional sense, which quality he was rejecting for *En attendant Godot*, with traditional dramaturgical techniques of suspense, tension and characterization. At its basis is Beckett’s thorough awareness of the difference in taste and temperament between himself and Duthuit, reached through a reassessment of the whole discussion and through self-analysis sharpened by the presence of a contrastive personality. In his letter to his friend dated 9 June 1949 Beckett says, “I take advantage of a (passing) moment of lucidity to tell you that I think I see what separates us” \((Oppenheim\ 88)\). This awareness gives dramatic life to the dialogic form he adopted. Thus the two speakers B and D are not Beckett and Duthuit but Beckett and Duthuit as Beckett had come to see them in perspective. The characterization of B is of special interest, reflecting the author’s image of himself formed in contrast to Duthuit.
D’s characterization fits the description James Knowlson, Beckett’s authorized biographer, gives: “Tall, heavily built, with bright blue eyes, the extroverted Duthuit could fill a room with his laughter,” “a very cultured, extraordinarily brilliant man, with enormous charisma,” who impressed Beckett with “the exuberance and intelligence of his talk” (334-5). D assumes a somewhat superior, patronizing attitude toward B and tries to keep the conversation along its proper logical track, puzzled by but patient with B, who blurts out extreme ideas in abstraction which do not make sense to the older man. “Three Dialogues” is a comedy of cross-purposes; it is also a tragi-comedy of the desperate and vain struggle fought by B, placed “in the dock” (D145) and in need of defending and clarifying his ideas.

This paper, then, offers a reading of the “Three Dialogues” as drama, a focus which has been ignored in the general emphasis on its philosophical aesthetics; with the belief that this approach will help us see what context Beckett has created for his ideas and what perspective he maintains, at least in this piece, toward the verbal conceptualization of the aesthetic position B is made to voice.

II. Tal Coat

Tal Coat, born in Brittany and one of the founders of the French version of Abstract Expressionism in the mid-forties, was already admired by contemporary artists. D esteems him as a revolutionary while B, least interested in him among the three painters taken up, sees him to be traditional. The positions of the two speakers run parallel from beginning to end, without ever approaching or synthesizing into a satisfying discussion, which will also be the basic pattern for the other dialogues. It begins with B’s terse, almost aphoristic foregone conclusion and ends with a blunt admission of
the impossibility and futility of continuing any further.

In addition to the polarized difference in stance between the speakers, a main obstacle to integrated dialogue is language: such key terms as “nature” and “compromise” assume different meanings between the two and create confusion. The verbal difficulty first emerges in the disparate senses the speakers give to the concept of “nature.” When B says Tal Coat only achieves “a gain in nature” (138), he is using the word in the sense of “natural experience” made of “a composite of perceiver and perceived,” so that “a gain in nature” signifies an enlargement or enrichment of subject-object relationship that “the naivest realist” would understand. This puzzles D, who takes it commonsensically to denote the natural world and wonders how it is possible to say that an artifice achieves “a gain in nature.”

A similar comic situation is created when B uses the term “compromise” in describing Tal Coat’s achievement: that his painting only strains “to enlarge the statement of a compromise.” Since the use of this term goes against the ideal of artistic integrity, D is inflamed, asserting that the painter refuses to “compromise” his art to “truth nor beauty, twin tyrannies of nature.” To understand what B is indicating with the word, we need to consult Beckett’s own words in “Peintres de l’empêchement,”\(^3\) written two years before, where he says that there are inevitable obstacles between the artist and his object, whose essence eludes representation, that “one used to take these obstacles into account. There was compromise,”\(^4\) adjusting to the difficulties by avoiding unmitigated honesty, with the result that “the obstacles didn’t come into the representation, or scarcely did.”\(^5\) B’s summary of Tal Coat’s position placed at the beginning of this dialogue is: “Total object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object. Question of degree” (138). The missing parts suggest the painter’s awareness of the elusiveness of his object, but this
awareness is compromised and the painting shows the totality of the object “complete with missing parts”; hence Tal Coat’s art is “the statement of a compromise.”

The next occasion for verbal cross-purposes is perhaps the most important in the first dialogue. B’s main reason for regarding Tal Coat as traditional is that the painter stays “on the field of the possible” (139). “What other plane can there be for the maker?” D wonders, as anyone would. A work of art is created, made, produced, realized; the artist is by definition someone who makes, and the very idea of creation belongs to “the plane of the feasible.” B cannot help admitting there is logically no other plane for the maker than the possible.

Yet I speak of an art turning from it in disgust, weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road.

The semi-formal epic beginning—“I speak of an art,” if not “I sing”—presaging a grand matter to unfold, which may very well reflect Beckett’s humor, does seem to introduce an art venturing out of the safer “puny exploits” and into the realm of some great feats. And yet this connotation of courage and expansion is no more than faintly suggested in B’s words dominated by weariness and disgust.

At this point, D pertinently directs B to a positive orientation: “And preferring what?” B’s following reply is probably the most often quoted as representing Beckett’s aesthetics:

The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express.
This has been variously explained, but basically it has been interpreted in ways that give a coherent meaning to it. However, saying “there is nothing to express,” B is in effect affirming that there is a certain condition to express, the condition of there being nothing to express, etc., and the humanism and optimistic individualism implied in the Romantic concept of art as expression clash violently with the negation of “power” and “desire.” Goaded into the positive frame D imposes and adopting this concept of art as expression, B drives himself into contradiction, or at least to a flawed verbal construction of whatever he wants or is obliged to say. Occupying a position made irrefutable by rationality and practicality, D lightly dismisses this enigmatic description as showing a “violently extreme and personal point of view, of no help to us in the matter of Tal Coat.” B’s silence is dramatically eloquent: what indeed can he say? “Perhaps that is enough for today,” D cuts the discussion short as if he were a tutor to an unwieldy student who is stuck in self-contradiction.

III. Masson

D is at his best on Masson, who is usually counted as a major early French Surealist; he values the painter for what he sees as a quest for a point of final rest more thorough than any other contemporary painter he knows. B, showing more interest than in Tal Coat, nevertheless says Masson is yet another painter of the feasible. The two speakers are balanced in the weight of argument—B with his ill-explained, condensed language revealing he is attuned to anguish and D betraying his “extroverted” and exuberant character through his optimistic statements, basically logical and at times rhetorically expansive—until the end, where D overwhelms B with descriptive eloquence and sends him off “weeping” (142).
As in the first dialogue, B speaks first, measuring up Masson in two acerbic phrases: “In search of the difficulty rather than in its clutch. The disquiet of him who lacks an adversary” (139). B is acknowledging the gifted painter’s struggle for greater difficulties, but only as reflecting a dissatisfaction of one who is under the illusion that something can be and should be done about the “difficulty” of representation; that is, B regards Masson as another painter who works on the field of the feasible and compromises.

D characteristically picks up a phrase in B’s utterance with an upbeat ring to it (“in search of”) and agrees: “That is perhaps why he speaks so often nowadays of painting the void” in his desire to reach the ultimate. Verbal cross-purposes have started again, and we sense that Beckett is carefully distinguishing the speakers’ personalities through their word choice and the direction in which their concern points. B tries to explain what he means: that the painter suffers from “the malady of wanting to know what to do and the malady of wanting to be able to do it,” that these maladies have left “behind their canvases” their “scars of competence that must be most painful to him” (140). B intuits these “scars” “behind” the canvases, not on; the scars are not part of the painting. To call wanting to know what to do or wanting to be able to do it a “malady” is a preposterous view, upsetting the ordinary dualism of health vs sickness, and is not to be understood or accepted by D, who retorts: “But Masson’s declared purpose” is “to reduce these maladies, as you call them, to nothing,” and the painter “aspires” to free himself from “the servitude of space” and “demands” the restoration of the “vaporous.” The very employment of such volitional terms as “purpose,” “aspire,” and “demand” testifies he is totally missing B’s point.

B’s next speech continues to convey the coexistence of compassion for suffering and his strangely inverse, almost inhuman bias: “Here is an artist
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who seems literally skewered on the ferocious dilemma of expression. Yet he continues to wriggle.” B’s feeling for the painter’s anguish is clear from the very fact that he notices the pain; but what is surprising is his use of “Yet.” Read in the context of significance established by the immediately preceding reference to maladies, this conjunction conveys a negative implication. The specific physicality of the raw somatic terms appeals to our biological instincts, so that when B uses “Yet” we are deeply shocked, for he seems to go against survival instincts in shedding a negative light on the act of wriggling, of trying to get free of the “skewer.” The use of this metaphor may be dismissed as no more than unlucky, but it adds to the general characterization of B.

Following up the topic of “the void” D says Masson is seeking, B suggests it is perhaps “the obliteration of an unbearable presence” and not “the void.” This is interesting when read in connection with Beckett’s letter of 9 July 1937, addressed to his German friend Axel Kaun, where he talks of language as “a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or Nothingness) behind it” (D 171). Here Beckett’s “Nothingness” is a presence, some primal condition which has been there, while Masson’s “void” is, according to B, the yearned-for absence of unbearable presence. Masson suffers from the “anguish of helplessness” before this unbearable presence, but never states it “as such, on its own merits and for its own sake” (140), undoubtedly because “it seems to contain in itself the impossibility of statement.” This is a very difficult passage, and I am not at all sure how to read it, but it is possible to interpret the word “statement” in the sense B seems to be using in describing Tal Coat’s painting as a “statement of a compromise” (138), that is in the original sense of the term—an act of giving a place to something. What then B may mean is that Masson does not give a place to this anguish of
helplessness in his painting; he does not paint his dilemma, part of his anguish being the inability to do so. This is probably why B labels the painter’s attitude as “exquisitely logical” (140) and differentiates it from “the void.”

D’s ensuing description of Masson is simpler in syntax and smoother in its flow than B’s condensed abstraction, and what makes D’s speech easier to access is not only his descriptive capacity but also his propensity for possibilities and “openings” rather than for “anguish” and “impossibility.” D talks of liberation, richness, joy of life, power. Masson seeks, D says, “to break through their [objects’] partitions to that continuity of being which is absent from the ordinary experience of living,” where he may “frolic at his ease, in freedom” (141).

Noting Masson’s preoccupation with “the amenities of ease and freedom,” B concludes that the painter will never do anything different from what the best painters have already done, and his “intelligent remarks on space” contain the same “possessiveness” and confidence found in Leonardo da Vinci. In the first dialogue B found Tal Coat’s “Franciscan orgies” (139) to be a sign of his being a traditional painter; here it is Masson’s concern with “the amenities” of life that does not agree with B. “So forgive me if I relapse [. . .] into my dream of an art unresentful of its insuperable indigence and too proud for the farce of giving and receiving,” B says. The verb “relapse” conveys a sense of fading, of ebbing energy, in contrast to the vigorous possessiveness associated with both Tal Coat and Masson, and with D, who appreciates the latter quality in the painters. B’s withdrawal from this sort of painting is a withdrawal from the kind of disposition and basic attitude to life that enables such painting to be created and appreciated. B’s desire to relapse into his private dream of an art of indigence is thus presented to emerge from an almost constitutional, rather than rational or theoretical,
resistance to the world of vigor, joy, desire for expansion and possession, a world “tumultuous with incessant creation” (140).

D’s final speech is to the point. Beckett has made D sensitive and astute enough to penetrate to B’s withdrawal from joyful affirmation of life:

But must we really deplore the painting that admits ‘the things and creatures of spring, resplendent with desire and affirmation, ephemeral no doubt, but immortally reiterant’, not in order to benefit by them, not in order to enjoy them, but in order that what is tolerable and radiant in the world may continue? Are we really to deplore the painting that is a rallying, among the things of time that pass and hurry us away, towards a time that endures and gives increase? (141-2)

This impassioned plea, creating waves of full emotion with its climactic arrangement and repeated rhetorical questions, is an earnest prayer for salvation and meaning to be found in art in a world which has known the devastation of the war.

B leaves without a word, Beckett’s “stage direction” being “(Exit weeping)” (142). We could just enjoy this as the author’s trivial joke, but if he is joking he is doing so at B’s expense. The gap between this sudden weeping and B’s previous speeches about his new art as “too proud for the farce of giving and receiving” (141) is comic. But there is more to it than being a frivolous trick. A possible reading is that B is moved by D’s eloquence and thus reveals his longing and perhaps needs which can find no place in his art of indigence as a creed, but which may lie at the heart of Beckett’s art, the crystallization of the author’s total commitment as a human being of flesh and blood.

Thus the second dialogue ends with a strong sense of B’s inner split, between what D, Tal Coat, and Masson have come to represent and what B as their polemic opponent represents; or between what B says and what he
IV. Van Velde

As D rightly guesses, B’s view of the first two painters is shaped in comparison with van Velde, whom B adopts as his measuring stick, so that through the preceding dialogues some suspense and tension has been accumulated; we come to expect the last dialogue to offer the necessary resolution to B’s enigma. D has very little to say about van Velde and settles down to the role of a judicial moderator. B’s humorous banter begins the third dialogue—“Frenchman, fire first” (142)—probably reflecting the comfortable relation Beckett had with Duthuit. Actually D does not have to fire; all he does is ask questions, make requests, and summarize B’s words for clarity, and the Irishman fires at himself. B tries to free himself and van Velde from the pitfall of the expressive concept of art but for all his effort digs his own grave.

Requested to “state again, as simply as possible” what he thinks van Velde is, B repeats the formula he used in the first dialogue, only this time substituting “paint” for “express”:

The situation is that of him who is helpless, cannot act, in the event cannot paint, since he is obliged to paint. The act is of him who, helpless, unable to act, acts, in the event paints, since he is obliged to paint. (142)

Asked why the painter is “obliged to paint,” B answers, “I don’t know”; questioned why the painter is “helpless to paint,” he replies, “Because there is nothing to paint and nothing to paint with.” When in the first dialogue B said “there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express [. . .]” (139), that particular speech was self-contradictory and deeply puzzling, but not
ludicrous. Here, however, the substitution of “paint” for “express” magnifies the potential absurdity, for the physicality of painters’ materials invites literal reading. Surely a painter at least has paint and brushes or their substitutes to paint with!

Trying to explain what D calls the “sweeping distinction”(142) between van Velde and the other painters, B repeats another formula he used in the first dialogue: that the traditional assumption “underlying all painting is that the domain of the maker is the domain of the feasible.” He is then carried away by the urgency of his thought that this assumption works to create “the common anxiety to express as much as possible, or as truly as possible, or as finely as possible, to the best of one’s ability. [. . .]”(142-3), which again confuses D: “One moment. Are you suggesting that the painting of van Velde is inexpressive?” (143) Beckett’s “stage direction” is a caricature of the dramatic pause and silence technique: B’s reply is—“(A fortnight later) Yes.” Whether or not this is a faithful rendition of what actually happened during Beckett-Duthuit discussion, the effect is blatantly comic at B’s expense.

B is trapped in the theory of art as expression then prevalent. “During the early twentieth century, influential theories in philosophical aesthetics deepened the Romantic perspective by identifying personalized expression as the very foundation of art” (Smith and Wilde 161). What B should have said is that van Velde is not “inexpressive” in the sense of “wanting in expression,” but “an-expressive” or “non-expressive,” meaning he is outside the dimension of art as expression. Beckett then makes D encapsulate within this expressive theory what seems to him to be the gist of B’s assertion, highlighting the ludicrousness of what B has been saying:

What you say amounts to this: the form of expression known as painting, since for obscure reasons we are obliged to speak of painting
[he is mimicking B’s “obligation to express” or paint], has had to wait for van Velde to be rid of the misapprehension under which it had laboured so long and so bravely, namely, that its function was to express, by means of paint.

Finally, B seems to realize what has been obstructing their communication and manages to make himself clearer: “Others have felt that art is not necessarily expression.” Introducing the sophisticated and comprehensive concept of “occasion”—whose meaning can cover anything “that contributes to produce an effect” (OED n1), from the desire to paint or a particular object or image to a certain situation or condition, internal or external to the painter, “ideal as well as material”(143)—B once more tries to explain what is uniquely new about van Velde: that the painter is the first whose painting is “bereft” (choosing this passive term rather than the active “rid” which B knows D prefers) of every kind of occasion, an impasse which would paralyze other painters, and “the first whose hands have not been tied by the certitude that expression is an impossible act.” However, not persuaded, D converts B’s “fantastic theory” back into a version manageable under the expressive theory: “the occasion of his painting is his predicament, and [. . . ] it is expressive of the impossibility to express.” B denies van Velde is in a “predicament,” for, he says, the term refers to the state of being “short” while the painter has stepped beyond this “mere misery” into “ultimate penury”; but D once again indicates B’s self-contradiction—“But you have already spoken of the predicament of van Velde,” and so he has. He has been talking about the painter’s “helplessness,” which is ordinarily a predicament, an undesirable lack of help. B is caught in the same kind of verbal fix as when he was framed to use the term “inexpressive.”

For all his arduous effort at verbalizing his ideas, B has only given D the
right to mock him for a flagrant contradiction in terms: “You prefer the purer view that here at last is a painter who does not paint, does not pretend to paint. Come, come, my dear fellow, make some kind of connected statement and then go away” (144).

B wants to disappear right away but is stopped by D, ever tolerant and edifying: “No. You have begun. Finish. Begin again and go on until you have finished. Then go away.” D humorously adds, playing on what seems to him B’s basic fault: “Try and bear in mind that the subject under discussion is not yourself, not the Sufist Al-Haqq, but a particular Dutchman by name van Velde, hitherto erroneously referred to as an *artiste peintre*.” This demand for objectivity, that B place himself in the subject position and look at van Velde as his object, is perfectly legitimate if taken on the practical level. On the epistemological and representational levels, however, it is impossible to answer if this perceiver-perceived relation is no longer maintainable, either because of the way the perceiver is or because of the elusiveness of that which is to be perceived, or both. B makes a suggestion:

How would it be if I first said what I am pleased to fancy he is, fancy he does, and then that it is more than likely that he is and does quite otherwise? Would not that be an excellent issue out of all our afflictions? He happy, you happy, I happy, all three bubbling over with happiness.

B’s playfulness verges on hysteria and his style is oblique and evasive in sharp contrast to the rational detachment and blunt directness of D, who responds: “Do as you please. But get it over.”

B’s ensuing speech is the longest in all the three dialogues, three times the length of the longest so far. Though his foremost desire is to get it over with, and though he pretends frivolity, he becomes serious and strives to talk as
methodically, intelligibly, and thoroughly as possible. However, what distinguishes his proceeding from an ordinary verbal presentation is his initial announcement of the futility of the undertaking: “There are many ways in which the thing I am trying in vain to say may be tried in vain to be said.” Knowing it will fail, he will speak, “under duress, through faintness of heart, through weakness of mind.”

First, after giving an evaluative survey of the important points of discussion hitherto touched and proven ineffectual or boring, B describes the essence of the plight in which modern artists find themselves as consisting in the increasing instability of the relation between them and their occasion and the resulting sense of “invalidity, of inadequacy, of existence at the expense of all that it excludes, all that it blinds to” (145). Then he locates the driving force of the history of painting in “its attempts to escape from this sense of failure,” and says these attempts are impelled by a mechanism figuratively identifiable with the phototropism of plants and accompanied by the instinctive fear of “the irrationality of pi.” Van Velde, he maintains, is the first to desist from this estheticized automatism, the first to admit that to be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail, that failure is his world and to shrink from it desertion, art and craft, good housekeeping, living.

This another much-quoted statement cannot help suffering from opaqueness and mystifying contradiction in the eyes of those who, like D, associate a work of art with creation and the painter with “maker.” Whatever B is trying to say cannot be free from the linguistic context which alone gives sense to it, if it is to make public sense at all. “To fail” is here connected with the idea of going against the natural pull of tropism, and desisting from automatism involves effort. The only logical way to harmonize these contradictory
concepts is to say that failure is an inevitable consequence of over-daring and that “to fail as no other dare fail” is the other side of “to dare as no other dare dare.” Along this line, then, B’s statement can be tamed and normalized as “to be an artist is to dare the impossible as no other does and fail.” Such an artist registers his struggle and failure on canvas and the work will be witness to this daring destined to failure.

B knows this is a logical conclusion: “all that is required now, in order to bring even this horrible matter to an acceptable conclusion, is to make of this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, a new occasion, a new term of relation, and of the act which, unable to act, obliged to act, he makes, an expressive act, even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation” in a nutshell B is now hypothetically talking of an art “expressive of the impossibility to express,” a neat thesis already suggested by D (143). We remember that B himself first brought this basic idea into the discussion when he introduced the concept of his new art preferring “the expression that there is nothing to express [. . .].” but that he has been trying to get out of it. B’s argument is circular, a closed, autistic world leading to nowhere.

However, this is not the reason why B cannot conclude in this way; if it were, the inability to conclude would be a logical refusal to do so. He blames himself for this inability to take the logically obvious course, hinting that he is “perhaps an innocent” and a psychiatric problem, a weird echo of the image of B confined in his world and unable to externalize himself in an “acceptable” way.

For what is this coloured plane, that was not there before. I don’t know what it is, having never seen anything like it before. It seems to have nothing to do with art, in any case, if my memories of art are correct. (145)
Placed at a point where some sort of climax is due, this speech marks an anti-climactic moment of the “Three Dialogues.” The actual painting of van Velde, which must have been there during B’s absorption in abstract intellectual exercises, suddenly presents itself to his consciousness and deprives him of words. Whether descriptive or discursive, language conceptualizes and builds its own mental structure, which has nothing to do with actual painting. The gap is the greatest when one tries in words to capture something new, like van Velde’s painting, for neither “memories of art” nor “memories” of words and concepts can help, and all language is by nature pre-existent.

B’s inconclusiveness leaves his intellectual construction tentative and open to withdrawal. As if this were not enough, Beckett now reminds us, using D, of what B proposed to do:

I understood your number was to have two parts. The first was to consist in your saying what you—er—thought. This I am prepared to believe you have done. The second—

This is Beckett’s way of pressing home to us that all B’s talk has been about his fancy, none of it about the painter; furthermore, that the van Velde he imagines is “more than likely” not the painter himself. This admission that he is “mistaken” repeated twice ends the “Three Dialogues.”

V.

The three parts constituting the “Three Dialogues” can be summarized as follows in terms of B’s argument: the first and second dialogues are about Tal Coat and Masson as not being like van Velde and the third about what B, most probably mistakenly, fancies van Velde is. So where is van Velde? All B has exhibited is the “tongue-tied profanity” of mainly abstract discursive
language which fabricates a far-fetched fiction of his fancy, little or nothing to do with van Velde or the concrete experience of his “art.”

B’s inability to objectify what he is supposed to talk about reflects the Beckett as he emerges from his own letters to Duthuit: “I’ll tend irresistibly to bring Bram’s case back to my own, since that is the condition for being able to be there and speak of it” (9 March 1949), even though around that time (Oppenheim’s guess is early that year) he also wrote, “Bram and I, it seems to me, are not talking about the same thing. He wants to conquer [. . .]”(Oppenheim 87); and, later in 1954, “So you can’t talk art with me; all I risk expressing when I speak about it are my own obsessions” (Oppenheim 85). B is Beckett’s scapegoat, and through his mouth Beckett talks of his own obsessions, his own dream of new art. It is therefore permissible to draw Beckett’s aesthetic position from the “Three Dialogues.”

What is to be kept in mind, however, is that B’s abstract statements are embedded in and embodied, in the sense of given a body, by the drama Beckett has created. They are integrally connected to B’s personality and the total direction of the dialogues, so that isolating specific passages from the context and saying they compose the author’s aesthetic creed is ignoring an important part of his statement. Beckett shows whatever ideas B has as related to his moral, temperamental, and even deep psychic tendencies which seem to be split, and his ideas, obscurely rooted in his psyche, as finally inexpressible or incommunicable in words. B is trying to express something that, when verbalized, ends up in contradiction or absurdity. The essence of what is generally regarded as Beckett’s aesthetic creed of “failure” lies in its illogicality, its self-contradiction, which generates an endless back-and-forth movement between expression and impossibility of expression, between daring and failure, and between aggressive or optimistic impulses and
withdrawal from them.

B’s struggle with words is a prominent feature of the “Three Dialogues.” B tries to bend words to signify what they are not capable of signifying within the existent linguistic and cultural context. His words clash with each other and become “self-deconstructing” (Wood 2). He is out of control of the direction he is heading and his argument becomes repetitive and circular, corresponding to his solipsistic, self-absorbed world and going round in the circumference without touching the center: the ostensible object of representation, which is van Velde, and the ultimate object of representation, which is his own inner world of ideas mixed with emotion and instinct.

If B cannot reach van Velde, then the position from which B views Tal Coat and Masson is invalidated. B lacks a secure foothold from which to speak about the first two painters. Beckett has revealed B’s inner instability at the end of the second dialogue; neither is his theorizing presented as firm. Beckett writes in “Peintres de l’empêchement”: “Wisdom means knowing what you want to say. And the best way of knowing what you want to say is to want to say the same thing every day, patiently, and to familiarize yourself thus with the formula you’ve adopted in the middle of the quicksand” (D 134). This seems to be the reason why Beckett gives B the tendency to repeat the same formulas and similar phrases. B stands in “the quicksand” of shifting perceptions and opinions, so the only way to give the illusion of having an opinion is to repeat the same formula.

At this point we realize that the “Three Dialogues” is not so much “a manifesto” as a concrete example, an almost playful illustration, of Beckett’s aesthetic position. After all, “there is nothing to express” corresponds to van Velde being the void; “nothing with which to express” to language building a fictional wall around the reality one tries to reach through language for
lack of any other means; “nothing from which to express” to no secure foothold, all quicksand; and “no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” to B’s being obliged, though not desiring to do so, to go on at D’s request. Beckett’s so-called artistic creed is then better understood as an abstract description of his predicament as a writer, rather than as an attempt to theorize his vision of a new art.

And this condition cannot be told, it cannot be reduced to a finished, fixed creed; it can only be shown. Hence the drama in this case. Beckett’s attitude toward conceptualization and verbalization is consistently ironic and tentative. All through the “Three Dialogues” he keeps a half-amused distance from the comic complication of the discussion and the tragi-comic battle B fights in vain with commonsense, “estherized automatism” (145), and intractable language. D’s is the voice that reminds him that he is “not the only one involved here.”12 Using D as the moderator-antagonist and endowing him with the perspicacity of a sophisticated art critic and the sound practicality of the man of the world who enjoys life and whose command of language is superior to B’s, Beckett is able to ironize B and, through B, himself, to find humor in his own verbal performance and his own impossible condition as a writer. His scrupulously honest self-irony has thus worked on a form which is as old as the Platonic dialogues, endowing the “Three Dialogues” with the quality of drama, a medium he was to choose as the main vehicle for his creative needs and impulses.13
Notes

1. *transition* 49, No. 5 (Dec. 1949), pp. 97-103. The text of “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit,” hereafter abbreviated as “Three Dialogues,” is included in *Disjecta* (138-145), and quotations from this text will be given parenthetical page reference only when a page shift occurs. The page numbers for citations from writings by Beckett from *Disjecta* will be capped with *D*, for *Disjecta*, only when necessary for clarity’s sake.

2. A systematic and comprehensive publication of Beckett’s correspondence is ardently desired. For the time being I have to depend on what Oppenheim gives in his book.

3. “Peintres de l’empêchement,” which appeared in *Derrière le Miroir*, a Parisian publication, in June, 1948, is his second essay on the van Velde brothers, Bram and Geer, the first being “La peinture des van Velde ou le monde et le pantalon” (1946), and is more concise than its predecessor. All citations from the essay are given in English translation done by Jon H. Spence, to whom I am much indebted. Corresponding sections in French in *Disjecta* (133-7) are quoted in the Notes.

4. “Mais ces empêchements, on en tenait compte. Il y avait accomodation” (*D* 136)

5. “ Ils ne faisaient pas partie de la représentation, ou à peine” (*D* 136).

6. The letter, dated 9 July 1937, is printed in *Disjecta* in its original German (51-54); fortunately the editor has attached an English translation done by Martin Esslin (170-3). I am quoting from the translation.

7. In “Peintres de l’empêchement” Beckett describes the crisis modern painting is facing. “After its*[the school of Paris’s] long pursuit less of the thing than of its ‘thingness’, less of the object than of the condition of being” (“après sa longue poursuite moins de la chose que de sa choseté, moins de l’objet que de la condition d’être”[*D* 136]), now a painter has reached a situation where the object of representation is the elusive essence of being and his task is to “capture the conditions of this elusiveness” (“à représenter les conditions de cette dérobade” [*D* 136]). This is indeed an impasse. The “continuity of being” D asserts Masson is trying to reach is deprived of forms but is the source of forms, while Beckett’s *la condition d’être* is “the unrevealable, nothingness, the thing again” (“un dévoilement vers l’indévoilable, le rien, la chose à nouveau” [*D* 136]).

8. In “Peintres de l’empêchement” again, Beckett calls the van Velde brothers’ painting “a painting of acceptance, making out in the absence of rapport and in the absence of the object the new rapport and the new object” (“peinture d’acceptation, entrevoyant
dans l’absence de rapport et dans l’absence d’objet le nouveau rapport et le nouvel objet” \([D\ 137]\). Here his desire to support the brothers by emphasizing that they are the pioneers opening up the road ahead makes him take an optimistic turn, while in the “Three Dialogues” he is unable to let B make of “submission” “admission” nor “fidelity to nature.” In this sense it may be possible to say that Beckett reveals himself more in this dramatic “Three Dialogues” than in “Peintres de l’empêchement.”

9 A phrase from “Humanistic Quietism” \((D\ 68-69)\), originally published in Dublin Magazine \((July-September, 1934)\). Beckett wrote this essay for his Irish friend Thomas McGreevy’s Poems. It contains the following important passage: “All poetry [. . .] is prayer. A poem is poetry [. . .] in so far as the reader feels it to have been the only way out of the tongue-tied profanity” \((D\ 68)\).

10 That Beckett found Bram’s desire to “conquer” heterogeneous to his grain is suggestive. This term appears in Wassily Kandinsky’s Reminiscences \((1913)\). A typical example would be the passage where the painter talks of his “battle with the canvas”: “At first it [the canvas] stands there like a pure chaste virgin [. . .]. And then comes the willful brush which first here, then there, gradually conquers it with all the energy peculiar to it, like a European colonist, who pushes into the wild virgin nature [. . .] to shape it to his wishes” \((Herbert \ 35)\). When in the third dialogue Beckett touches upon Kandinsky in passing, slightly in a derogatory tone, as “the every man his own wife experiments of the spiritual Kandinsky” \((144)\), he might very well be thinking of this sexual-political colonialist imagery.

11 “Savoir ce qu’on veut dire, voilà la sagesse. Et le meilleur moyen de savoir ce qu’on veut dire, c’est de vouloir dire la même chose tous les jours, avec patience, et de se familiariser ainsi avec la formule employée, dans tous ses sables mouvants” \((D\ 134)\).

12 From a letter Beckett wrote to Duthuit. Oppenheim guesses it was written some time in June, 1949 \((82)\).

13 Beckett’s consistent belittlement of B as an art critic, to the extent of depriving him of words before the actual van Velde painting, may very likely have to do with his determination to make known “all the wrong I think of the role I played in the van Velde affair,” as he wrote to Duthuit, May 26, 1949 \((Oppenheim\ 88)\). If we assume, with Oppenheim, that Beckett feared the readers of his two preceding essays on the van Velde brothers, which he had written out of a friendly desire to support them, did not seek to see their paintings but tried to recover “some Beckett” in the written text \((Oppenheim\ 88)\), and if we also presume that the role he regretted having played is that of a mediator turning into an interceptor between the painting and its viewers, then the writing of “Three Dialogues,” where he makes his mouthpiece voice views
on modern painting basically similar to those expressed in “Peintres de l’empêchement” and then disqualifies him as an art critic, may have had a personal significance as a public act of confession of his own inability and failure and thus may have been partly an attempt to right the wrong he thought he had done to his painter friends. This explains why Beckett persisted in completing the difficult piece even though he could have given it up any time because he was “requested rather than commissioned” (D 14) to write it.

Works Cited