

Samuel Beckett and the Arts

Italian Negotiations

Edited by
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Chapter 3

‘J’AI EU L’IMAGE’: SAMUEL BECKETT AND GASTONE NOVELLI

Davide Crosara

Abstract

The Italian painter Gastone Novelli (1925–1968) met Samuel Beckett in Paris in 1960. The encounter was the culmination of Novelli’s long-lasting interest in Beckett’s work. The two artists established a collaboration that had a significant impact on their works. Novelli realized a series of lithographs designed to accompany *L’image* (1959), Beckett’s pre-publication excerpt from *Comment c’est* (1961). This partnership (the two met on several occasions, exchanged letters and commented on each other’s work) had important consequences on both Beckett’s and Novelli’s artistic journeys, well beyond the idea (which was never put into print) of *L’image* as a ‘livre d’artiste’. On the one hand, it entered – and probably changed – the genetic history of *Comment c’est*. On the other, it reoriented Novelli’s idea of painting as language towards the more radical concept of a painting made of – and not accompanied by – words. While retrieving the aural, Joycean quality of Beckett’s prose, Novelli established an interesting connection between Beckett’s prose, French Nouveau Roman and Italian Neoavanguardia.

Keywords: Letters; images; intermediality; materiality; embodiment

Beckett’s relationship with the visual arts, his observations on painting and his collaborative efforts with artists have been widely explored.¹ However,

¹ Beckett’s dialogue with the arts (music, painting, poetry, digital media) has found growing critical attention, from Lois Oppenheim’s seminal, comprehensive study (Oppenheim, 1999) to more recent contributions (Gontarski, ed., 2014, Lloyd, 2018). The field has progressively moved from a general inquiry into Beckett’s work to issues related to intermediality and embodiment (Maude, 2009, Tajiri, 2007), posthumanism and technology (Boulter, 2019, Kirushina, Adar, Nixon eds, 2021), and intersections with popular culture (Pattie and Stewart, eds, 2019).

while the less examined role played by Italian art in his work has gained critical attention in recent years,² his aesthetic partnership with Gastone Novelli (1925–1968) has yet to be investigated.

The Birth of Novelli's Artistic Vision

Novelli was born in Vienna in 1925, the son of Margherita Mayer von Ketschendorf, a woman belonging to the old Hapsburg nobility, and Ivan Novelli, military attaché at the Italian Embassy in Austria. The family moved to Rome, where Novelli graduated in sociology and political sciences from Sapienza University. His choice of a field of study not directly connected to the visual arts is particularly relevant to Novelli's cultural outlook. He was not a painter by trade, and even when he became one, he kept a sustained interest in political, social and anthropological issues. Another key element in his life is his involvement in the Second World War. When the war broke out, Novelli joined the Resistance. He became a member of a Partisan Brigade operating in Rome. In 1943, he was arrested and tortured by the Nazis. He refused to collaborate with the occupying forces and was given a life sentence. He was liberated on 4 June 1944, when the Allies entered Rome. His experiences during the war had a profound influence on his aesthetic and ethical perspective. As many artists of his generation, Novelli felt the need to rethink artistic form in a post-Auschwitz world. Poignantly, he became a painter only after the war, when he decided to move to Brazil.

He lived in Sao Paulo from 1948 to 1950 and from 1951 to 1954. Here, he started working in the fields of graphic design and setting up activities which would eventually lead him to painting. The 'discovery' of painting was accompanied by a profound interest in language. Novelli decided to embark on a journey along the Amazon River. Here, he met some native populations of southern Brazil. He lived for several months among the Indios and was profoundly fascinated by the 'Guarani' language. He spoke about his interest in this language in an interview (a conversation with Riccardo Nastasi and Verena Schütze, 1964) in which he also referred to his collaboration with Beckett. He states, 'I became interested in how it is possible to assemble several expressions with few phonetic means, how that language [the Guarani] operates exactly as a catalogue'.³ When these people need to add words to the catalogue, they do this with slight variations on the same linguistic pattern.

² See Mariacristina's Cavecchi's article on this volume.

³ Gastone Novelli, Conversation with R. Nastasi and V. Schütze, in Gastone Novelli, *Scritti* '43-'68, edited by P. Bonani (Roma, Nero, 2019), 157. All translations from the Italian are mine.

The Guaraní language is structured around 'families of words'. Novelli gives specific examples of this mechanism:

Sometimes a family of words provides slight variations of the sign, as is the case of 'going'. All the words in the family mean 'going somewhere', but they differ if they need to specify if one 'is going slowly or quickly, hunting or fishing'. Another family of words does not provide graphic, but only phonetic variations. In the family of words connected to 'going home or coming home' for example, the words are exactly the same. The only variation is provided by the speaker's tone. The last changes in order to indicate the arrival of an enemy or a friend. Or, if one wants to express the idea of someone that is gone (i.e. dead), she/he needs to use a sad tone. Even the identity of the person arriving is indicated by the tone of the voice.⁴

Novelli found in Guaraní a language that was, in his opinion, extremely individualized: this linguistic feature constituted an antidote to ordinary, codified linguistic habits; he saw it as an invaluable source of creativity. During the Brazilian years, far from the civilization that begot the camps, Novelli reimagined the relationship between images and words; he envisaged no hierarchical difference between the visual and aural fields. It is in Brazil that he most likely began to think of painting as a language. In his opinion, an artist can either invent a language – in 1964 he used Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* as an example of this – or he can devise 'a magical text by means of an ordinary language'.⁵ He thought of the latter as a language inhabiting a newly created universe. Where the first form responds to Novelli's search for magical, ritual elements in his art, the second reflects Beckett's approach and work. Novelli was probably fascinated by Beckett's use of repetition with slight variations, by the closed spaces, enclosed universes and modular structure of his post-*Trilogy* short prosés. His interest in Beckett and his collaboration with other writers with whom he felt a natural kinship or consonance (Georges Bataille, Claude Simon, Giorgio Manganelli, among others) accompanied his artistic life.

Novelli's use of words in his art was progressive. He took his first steps as a painter very close to Concrete art (he was certainly influenced by Max Bill) (Figure 3.1).

He soon turned to Informalism (Art Informel), although he retained some abstract and geometrical elements in these works. His interest continued to nurture the necessity to advocate for freedom of referentiality; Informalism

⁴ All the quotations in this section are referred to G. Novelli, *Scritti* '43-'68, cit., 157–58.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

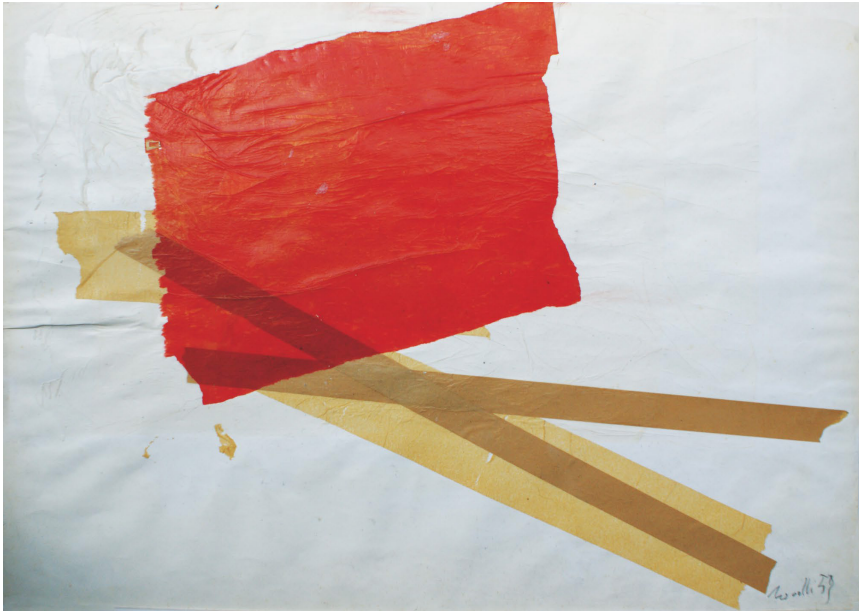


Figure 3.1 *Superficie grande (Broad Surface)*, 1959. Courtesy of Archivio Gastone Novelli.

does this through a deconstruction of both sign and meaning that is evident in Novelli's works of the 1950s, as exemplified in Figures 3.2 and 3.3.

Novelli's Use of Language and Graphemes

It is at this point that language begins to enter Novelli's art. The first typographical signs (graphemes or words) are discernible in these paintings, while the surface of the painting progressively turns into a wall. This innovation in Novelli's artistic vision was probably influenced by his collaboration with the Brazilian group O.D.A. (Oficina de Arte), a movement that advocated for the popularization of art (the group manifesto began with the line, 'art is not a privilege') and its circulation beyond the museum, together with the use of poor materials. However, it found its turning point in Novelli's first *livre d'artiste*, *Scritto Sul Muro (Written on the Wall)*, a book published in 1958 which contains 26 lithographs, each one dedicated to a letter of the Italian alphabet. Novelli's introduction to the book offers a succession of standard typographic characters and half-deleted words or phrases in bold type. Novelli imagines 'an alphabet written on 26 wall fragments, or 26 wall fragments with things written on them. [...] An alphabet that has yet to be invented'. [The artist has to]



Figure 3.2 *Il giardino dei ricordi* (*Garden of Memories*, 1957). Courtesy of Archivio Gastone Novelli.



Figure 3.3 *Pescasecoli (Fishing through Centuries)*, 1957. Courtesy of Archivio Gastone Novelli.

‘persevere in the effort of knowing nothing’.⁶ The conclusion of Novelli’s introduction significantly recalls Beckett’s *Trilogy*, specifically *The Unnamable*:

I will go on writing words, making spots and scratching them with my nails, until nails broke and refuse to grow back.⁷

⁶ G. Novelli, Introduction to *Scritto sul muro*, in *Scritti '43-'68*, 122–23.

⁷ *Ibid.*

You must say words, as long as there are any, until they find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already.⁸

Novelli's conception of words as stains or scratches on a surface (the wall, the canvas) also seems to anticipate Beckett's post-*Unnamable* short proses, namely the so-called *skullscapes*.

Novelli was certainly aware of Beckett's reception in French culture between the late 1950s and the early 1960s. *L'innomable* became a textbook (as *The Trilogy* as a whole, as well as Beckett's iconic plays) for the New Novelists. Beckett's novel is quoted by Claude Simon, one of Novelli's closest friend, in his essay *Novelli ou le problème du langage* (*Novelli and the Problem of Language*):

Sa peinture «raconte», comme par exemple celle de Jérôme Bosch, mais avec la différence que chez Novelli il n'y a jamais rien d'anecdotique, que rien n'est jamais imité mais plutôt signifié. D'une part, le magma confus de nos sensations, de nos émotions, de l'autre les mots, les sons ou les couleurs. De la rencontre des uns et des autres, de leur adaptation ou de leur non-adaptation les uns aux autres, de leur conflit ou de leur interaction, résulte ce par quoi l'homme se définit : le langage, irréductible compromis entre l'innommable et le nommé, l'informe et le formulé.

Aujourd'hui, étant donné que notre époque et les événements qui ont bouleversé le monde ont remis en question entièrement l'ordre social et les notions établies, ce problème se pose à nous de façon plus insistante que jamais. Ce n'est certainement pas par hasard que sont apparues, peu après la guerre, des œuvres aux titres significatifs comme *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture* de Roland Barthes et *L'Innommable* de Samuel Beckett, tandis que dans les mêmes années s'élaborait la peinture de Dubuffet, de Bissier, de Novelli...⁹

To try, while being perfectly aware of the futility of the attempt. To draw the unnameable and at the same time to know that doing so is an illusion, that it can never be immobilized, enclosed, fixed.¹⁰

Simon notes that Novelli's art is a painting about painting and that language is always a 'compromise between the namable and the unnamable, the unformed and the formulated'. He pairs Beckett's novel with the coeval *Writing*

⁸ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, preface by S. Connor (London: Faber and Faber, 2010), 134.

⁹ C. Simon, *Novelli ou le problème du langage* (1962), in G. Novelli, *Voyage en Grèce* (Lyon: Trente-trois morceaux, 2015), 91–99 (92).

¹⁰ C. Simon, *Gastone Novelli and the Problem of Language*, translation by Richard Howard, in *Gastone Novelli. Paintings*, Exhibition Catalogue, New York, Alan Gallery, 26 November-15 December 1962, 9.

Degree Zero by Roland Barthes (1953). His implicit question is whether, and to what extent, Novelli's art is a 'Painting Degree Zero'.

Simon is also one of the first to highlight the recursive presence of chessboards or grids in Novelli's paintings of the early 1960s. He also connects these paintings to the art of Paul Klee, a painter who has certainly influenced Novelli (the Italian artist was also the first to translate Klee's writings into Italian) and who was deeply admired by Beckett. Simon's words testify also to the growing interconnection between words and images in Novelli's works. In analysing an important painting by Novelli, *Museum Hall II* (1960, see Figure 3.4) he observes:

If we look at this grid a long time we discover that it constitutes a kind of 'explanation', an ordered commentary on the right-hand portion of the painting where, in the chaos of grisaille, half-effaced, blurred, diluted under the plaster and repainted areas, bits of forms and indistinct inscriptions appear. This 'explanation' is itself equally incomprehensible.¹¹



Figure 3.4 II *Sala del Museo* (*Museum Hall II*, 1960). Courtesy of Archivio Gastone Novelli.

¹¹ C. Simon, *Gastone Novelli and the Problem of Language*, in Gastone Novelli. *Paintings*, exhibition catalogue, New York, Alan Gallery, 26 November–15 December 1962, pp.4-5. The original version of the essay, initially unpublished, appeared as *Novelli ou le problème du langage*, in « Les Temps modernes », n° 628–629, nov. 2004–fév. 2005.

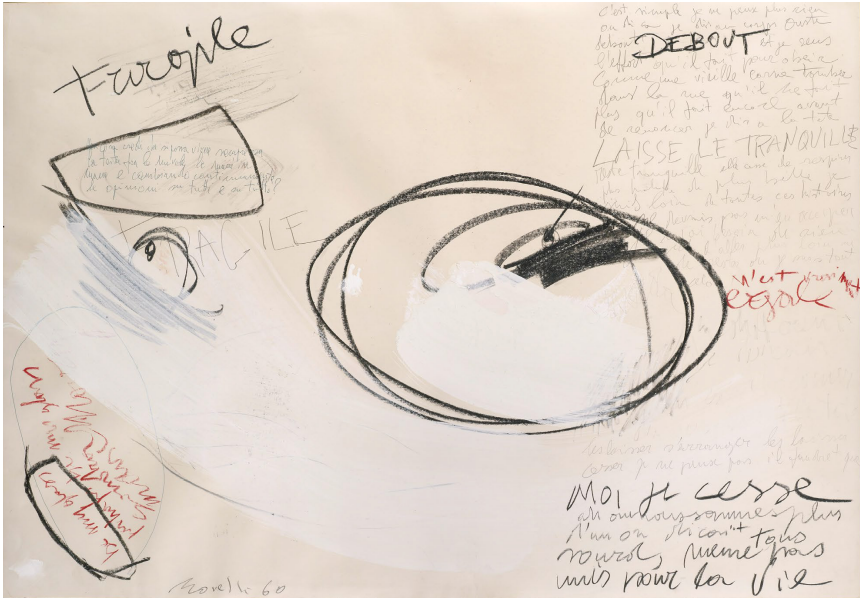


Figure 3.5 Untitled [*Fragile, Debout*], 1960. Mixed media on paper, 69 × 99.6 cm Signed 'Novelli 60' On the recto 'Fragile, Debout' On the verso 'for Barbara from Sam with love Paris May 1962' London, British Museum. Courtesy of Archivio Gastone Novelli

Novelli's paintings become labyrinths where the viewer has to find possible relations between signs and images, echoing the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified investigated by Michel Foucault (Novelli was fascinated by structuralist linguistics: he created a painting centred around excerpts from Claude Lévy-Strauss' *Wild Thought*).¹² More importantly, Novelli's technique aims at offering to the viewer a kind of stratification, a surface where layers of colour partially hide letters. The latter, almost suffocated by paint, strive to emerge under violent brush strokes. Novelli adopted this technique in the first works he drew from Beckett. *Fragile, Debout*¹³ is a drawing inspired by Beckett's *Textes pour rien / Texts for Nothing* (see Figure 3.5).

¹² The painting is *Il vocabolario*, 1964.

¹³ The work, which Novelli gave to Beckett, was probably donated by the latter to Barbara Bray. It is currently held by the British Museum.

Novelli's Relationship with Beckett

Novelli quotes an excerpt from *Text for Nothing I*:

Ouste, debout, et je sens l'effort qu'il fait, pour obéir; comme une vieille carne tombée dans la rue, qu'il ne fait plus, qu'il fait encore, avant de renoncer. Je dis à la tête, Laisse le tranquille, reste tranquille, elle cesse de respirer, puis halète de plus belle. Je suis loin de toutes ces histoires, je ne devrais pas m'en occuper, je n'ai besoin de rien, ni d'aller plus loin, ni de rester où je suis, tout cela m'est vraiment indifférent.¹⁴

I say to the body, Up with you now, and I can feel it struggling, like an old hack foundered in the street, struggling no more, struggling again, till it gives up. I say to the head, Leave it alone, stay quiet, it stops breathing, then pants on worse than ever. I am far from all that wrangle, I shouldn't bother with it, I need nothing, neither to go on nor to stay where I am, it's truly all one to me.¹⁵

While this quasi-literal quote (Novelli employs 'égal' (equal) instead of 'indifférent' (indifferent)) occupies the top-right hand of the composition, a sentence in Italian by Novelli representing commonplace language appears in the top-left corner. The direction of the composition is clockwise: it starts from the bottom left ('be my glass' in red, circled in black, in English), then moves top-left ('Che cosa credi che io possa vivere sempre con la testa tra le nuvole le mani in tasca e cambiando continuamente opinione su tutto e su tutti?'), then top-right (Beckett's text), and finally bottom-right, where we find a combination of misquoted Beckettian expressions. This itinerary underscores the complex relationship between the artist and his sources, but it also highlights the danger that any artistic style faces, that of becoming cliché. Further, it anticipates a direction that Novelli will pursue until the end of his life: the compresence of intermediality and bilingualism (or multilingualism, as is the case here). This is a lesson that Novelli probably absorbed from Beckett. The former was fascinated by the Beckettian idea that art was a constant struggle to find a voice, the artist lost into a plurality of languages and media.

It comes as no surprise to see Novelli playing on the phonetic ambivalence 'début/debout' (beginning and standing), an auditory doubling which can also be found in Beckett's *Comment c'est*. This phonetic game is complicated by the other word in the dedication, which indicates that Novelli's first work dedicated to Beckett could be seen as a fragile beginning. The question is whether the text can stand the painting's search for meaning, incarnated by the disquieting passage

¹⁴ S. Beckett, *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien* (Paris: Minuit, 1958), 116. The quote is from *Text* n.1.

¹⁵ S. Beckett, *Texts for Nothing, Text 1*, in S. Gontarski (ed.) *The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989*. (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 100.

from one shape to the other. This comparison could be expanded further, by also investigating it in light of Beckett's complex bilingualism and his troubled switching of forms in the twin texts *Comment c'est/How It Is*. The title itself is interesting: the English appears as a kind of commentary on the impossibility of translating the duality of the French: the homophony with 'commencer' ('to begin') is notoriously lost in the English version.

A dark circle and dark colours engulf the text in the painting *Homage to Beckett* (1958, see Figure 3.6). The letters on the top left corner are barely discernible.



Figure 3.6 *Homage to Beckett* (1958). Courtesy of Archivio Gastone Novelli.

Two years before ‘Fragile, Debout’, the struggle between words and images was already a key element in Novelli’s artistic journey. The words seem scratched or carved on the surface. At the same time, semi-human or semi-animal shapes are denied intelligibility by the dominant heavy black or white brushstrokes. The painting represents a form attempting to deny itself, a task that fascinated Beckett himself, when he recognized the same attitude in his beloved painter Bram van Velde. The words he used to comment on the latter’s work would also make an excellent commentary on Novelli’s painting:

Le frisson primaire de la peinture en prenant conscience de ses limites porte vers les confins de ces limites, le secondaire dans le sens de la profondeur, vers la chose qui cache la chose. L’objet de la représentation résiste toujours à la représentation...¹⁶

I mean only that the instinctive shudder of painting from its limits is a shudder toward the confines of those limits, and the reflective all in depth, from without to within. I mean only that the object of representation is at all times in resistance to representation.¹⁷

Novelli’s interest in Beckett is layered. The two paintings *Untitled (Fragile Debut)* and *Homage to Beckett* reflect Novelli’s knowledge of Beckett’s *Textes pour rien/ Texts for Nothing*, which laid the foundation for the ‘novel’ *Comment c’est/How It Is*. However, his interest in Beckett’s work started when he read *Molloy*. He says about this,

The starting point was his novel *Molloy*. I copied it, I drew a series of drawings from it. He then saw them, founding them very interesting, and at that point I told him that I would have liked to work on his texts. Our collaboration began in this way: I copied his text first, then I copied my copy, then I copied this second copy deriving from it a third copy and so on, several times, each time adding or removing something, in larger and larger types, till it became impossible to further modify the composition. It thus took a conclusive shape. My litographs were born that way, not very big but packed with things; here the text still exists, but scattered and torn into pieces. And that’s how Beckett himself began to look at his own work in a different light. This was *Comment c’est*, or at least a part of it, which later Beckett published.¹⁸

¹⁶ S. Beckett, *Peintres de l’Empêchement*, in *Disjecta. Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment* (London: John Calder, 2000), 135 (emphasis mine).

¹⁷ S. Beckett, ‘The New Object’, in *Modernism/Modernity* 18 (2011), 878–880 (879). The English version of the essay has not always been attributed to Beckett. See on the subject Peter Fifield’s introduction in the same issue of *Modernism/Modernity* (873–877).

¹⁸ G. Novelli, *Scritti ’43-’68*, 161.

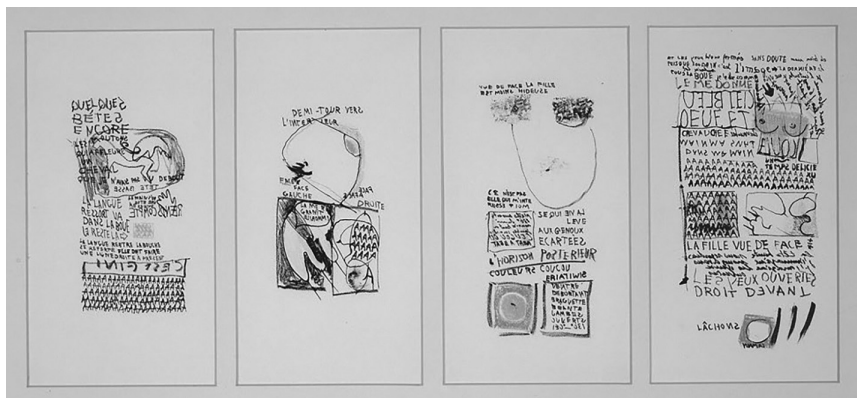


Figure 3.7 Gastone Novelli, *Comment c'est*, 1961. Courtesy of Archivio Gastone Novelli.

As testified by Beckett's correspondence, Novelli sent him drawings inspired by *L'image*, the fragment from which *Comment c'est* originated. In the same letter, Beckett describes painting as deeply correlated with 'montage'.¹⁹ Novelli will interpret *L'image* exactly as a setting up of words and images.

The Birth of *L'image*

Novelli's interest led to their collaboration for *L'image*, the first published extract from *Comment c'est*.²⁰ Conceived between 1960 and 1961, this project envisaged a *livre d'artiste*, which was to include Beckett's *L'image*²¹ set against four lithographs by Novelli (see Figure 3.7).

The lines quoted from Beckett are the following:

Fig. 1: 'quelques bêtes encore les moutons qu'on dirait du granit qui affleure un cheval que je n'avais pas vu debout immobile échine courbée tête basse les bêtes savent'.

¹⁹ Samuel Beckett to Gastone Novelli, 8 December 1960. The letter is unpublished. Courtesy of Beckett Collection, Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading.

²⁰ The 'roman' *Comment c'est* was composed between 1958 and 1961, the year of its publication with Minuit. It has a long and troubled genetic history, made of several rewritings and revisions. The English translation, an equally hard task, appeared in 1964 as *How It Is*. For a general overview of the subject, see S. G. Ackerley/S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 2004), 105.

²¹ *L'image*, the first extract from *Comment c'est*, appeared in 'X' on November 1959.

“some animals still the sheep like granite outcrops a horse I hadn’t seen standing motionless back bent head sunk animals know”²²

‘la langue ressort va dans la boue je reste là plus soif la langue rentre la bouche se referme elle doit faire une ligne droite à present c’est fini c’est fait j’ai eu L’image’²³

“my tongue comes out again lolls in the mud I stay there no more thirst the tongue goes in the mouth closes it must be a straight line now it’s over it’s done I’ve had the image”²⁴

Fig. 2: ‘nouveau demi-tour vers l’intérieur au bout de quatre-vingts degrés fugitif face à face transferts rattachement des mains balancement des bras immobilité du chien ce fessier que j’ai’²⁵

“again about turn introrse at ninety degrees fleeting face to face transfer of things mingling of hands swinging of arms stillness of dog the rump I have”²⁶

Fig. 3: ‘Vue de face la fille est moins hideuse c’est pas elle qui m’intéresse moi pâle cheveux en brosse grosse face rouge avec boutons ventre débordant braguette béante jambes cagneuses en fuseau fléchissant aux genoux écartées pour plus d’assise pieds ouverts cette trente degrés demi-sourire béat à l’ horizon postérieur figure de la vie qui se lève tweed verts bottines jaunes toutes ces couleurs coucou ou similaire à la boutonnière’²⁷

“seen full face the girl is less hideous it’s not with her I am concerned me pale staring hair red pudding face with pimples protruding belly gaping fly spindle legs sagging knocking at the knees wide astraddle for greater stability feet splayed one hundred and thirty degrees fatuous half-smile to posterior horizon figuring the morn of life green tweeds yellow boots all those colours cowslip or suchlike in the buttonhole”²⁸

Fig. 4: ‘et les jambes et les yeux les bleus fermés sans doute eh bien non puisque soudain c’est L’image la dernière soudain là sous la boue je le dis comme je l’entends je me vois’²⁹

“and the legs and the eyes the blue closed no doubt no since suddenly another image the last there in the mud I say it as I hear it I see me”³⁰

²² S. Beckett, *How It Is* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 25.

²³ S. Beckett, *Comment c’est* (Paris: Minuit, 1961), 48.

²⁴ *How It Is*, 25.

²⁵ *Comment c’est*, 46.

²⁶ *How It Is*, 24.

²⁷ *Comment c’est*, 46.

²⁸ *How It Is*, 24.

²⁹ *Comment c’est*, 44.

³⁰ *How It Is*, 23.

‘Je me donne dans les seize ans et il fait pour surcroît de bonheur un temps délicieux ciel bleu oeuf et chevauchée de petits nuages je me tourne le dos et la fille aussi que je tiens qui me tient par la main ce cul que j’ai’³¹ [Then 3 partially repeated].

‘I look to me about sixteen and to crown all glorious weather egg-blue sky and scamper of little clouds I have my back turned to me and the girl too whom I hold who holds me by the hand the arse I have’³²

The text is fragmented and dispersed around images that occupy the page in a similar fashion. Neither has any apparent orderly succession. In his Critical-Genetic Edition of *Comment C’est/How It Is* and *L’image*, E. M. O’Reilly chooses the term ‘fragments’ to indicate Beckett’s versets: ‘The term fragment does apply to *Comment c’est* and *How It Is*. Just as word groups do occasionally form discernible sentences, paragraphs can be recognized among the fragments. However, the thrust of fragmentation goes contrary to notions of paragraph. These fragments frequently do not coincide with semantic units and do not rely on the lexical tools of syntactic cohesion.’³³

Novelli works in a similar manner: he cuts and pastes the text, stripping it of its original structure. However, the fragments he creates appear as micro-units that remain readable, even if with some difficulty. Novelli applies here a kind of cut-up or automatic writing technique that testifies his dialogue with American abstract expressionism and anticipates his involvement in Italian Neoavanguardia. This technique not only anticipates the one adopted by Beckett in 1969 for *Lessness*, it also reproduces *How It Is*’s pauses and silences visually. Many words are erased or unreadable, sources are hidden, and images appear as doodles or sketches still awaiting a final form. Novelli’s approach to composition produces successive accretions (being in this respect closer to Joyce’s or to the early Beckett) but it also meets Beckett’s post-*Unnamable* narrative experiments.

Novelli’s version of *L’image* also underscores thematic aspects of the novel that are crucial to Beckett. The human figure is deformed as it is in Beckett’s pages: Novelli responds to Beckett’s crooked, half-human beings, by adding to their depiction a more explicitly grotesque element. The female figures and the words that accompany them (see lit. n.3) capture Beckett’s frequent use of a bitter irony in relation to the narrator’s love story and to human bonds

³¹ *Comment c’est*, 44.

³² *How It Is*, 23.

³³ E. M. O’Reilly (ed.) *Samuel Beckett Comment C’est/How It Is and / et L’Image. A Critical-Genetic Edition Une Édition Critico-Génétique* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016) English Introduction, X.

in general. As noted by Ruby Cohn, *Comment c'est/How It Is* presents tragicomic aspects as well. Cohn observes that 'quite farcical are the ungainly teenager and his ugly girlfriend, accompanied by her genital-absorbed dog'.³⁴

Conversely, an element that Novelli seems to neutralize or almost completely eliminate from Beckett's text is its lyricism: harsh and difficult to recite as they are, Beckett's versets or fragments, which include interesting variations of accents from French to English, are also characterized by rare but extraordinarily lyrical moments. The lyrical component is replaced in Novelli by figures, letters, and lines that evoke childhood sketches. This feature of his work is certainly influenced by his prolific relationship with avant-garde figures such as Tzara and Duchamp (he was often labelled as a 'new-Dada' artist), but it is also related to his enquiry into the primeval, elemental origins of language: Novelli's signs can also be read as prehistorical graffiti.

In the paintings immediately following *L'image*, words and letters interact with numbers, lines, doodles, organic and inorganic figures, and shapes alluding to this search for an archetypical language. This passage, which is also marked by the titles of Novelli's paintings (*Alphabet, The Great Language*), is also born as Novelli's response to Beckett's notion of a 'geology of the imagination'.³⁵ From *The 'Whoroscope' Notebook*³⁶ onwards Beckett identifies layers and sediments with strata of consciousness by copying in a notebook a geological table. This landscape of the mind is identified in *How It Is* with the mud, 'an amorphous plane between the rock below and air above'.³⁷ The artist 'peels off' layer after layer in an attempt to recognize the basic elements, the primal motion of the imaginative act: 'how it is' leads inevitably to 'how it was'. This process can also lead, as a young Beckett hypothesized in his *German Letter*, to discover the 'nothingness' possibly lying behind language. With different means but with a similar intent, Novelli digs back to the sign before it becomes meaning, dismembering the articulatory system of language. In his painting *The King of Words (Il re delle parole, 1961)* he writes about the need to 'turn over words, so confident of themselves, and reduce them to silence'. James Knowlson points out that Beckett loved stones and Novelli collected many

³⁴ R. Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2005), 259.

³⁵ See Mark Byron, *Samuel Beckett's Geological Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

³⁶ The notebook, used by Beckett from 1932 to 1937, contains a large variety of entries, sketches and quotations. It derives its name from the reference to the poem *Whoroscope* on the inside cover. It is currently part of the Beckett Collection, Beckett International Foundation, University of Reading.

³⁷ S. G. Ackerley/S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett*, 220.



Figure 3.8 *Le onde mentali (Mind Waves)*, 1962.

of them during his *Journey to Greece* (1964), where he composed one of his last *livres d'artiste*. Novelli's geological imagination began to appear after his work on *Comment c'est*, as it is evident from his painting *Le onde mentali (Mind Waves)*, see Figure 3.8).

Materiality and Embodiment

The last shared thematic issue uniting Beckett and Novelli is the deployment of a notion of materiality which will become increasingly pervasive in Beckett's work after *How It Is*. Drawing inspiration from Dante and reversing the structure of the *Commedia*, Beckett fills the English version of *Comment c'est* with a growing tension towards embodiment. In the novel, soul and memory acquire a peculiar weight and are subdued to the laws of gravity. The body, alternating utterance and suffocation, literally measures time and motion. The mud acts as a membrane, determining the tone and the direction of the narrative in terms of both space and memory. Novelli's signs and figures act accordingly: they trace a trajectory on the canvas, an itinerary that is far from being accidental; some art critics have observed that the spectator's eye is challenged to drawing a direction and a narrative from the web of words and

images, as happens in the case of a fresco. In Novelli's lithographs for *Comment c'est*, human and animal figures are both embedded among words, they are caught trying to cope with the limits of both space and frame. They seem to share the devouring, if unaccomplished, entropy that constitutes a leitmotif of *How It Is* and of Beckett's late prose and theatre in general; they address Beckett's 'loss of species'. Where Beckett's 'loss of species' suggests a loss of speech, Novelli's stretch into nothingness is less radical, retaining a more evident level of avant-garde playfulness and anti-system refutation.

Two further elements in the lithographs seem to suggest an even more profound dialogue between Beckett and Novelli. The first one is the presence of breasts, an image of joy and fertility (and of linguistic joyfulness) that progressively acquires sado-masochistic undertones. In lithograph 2, the breast bears some resemblance to a face, with an opening recalling a mouth diametrically opposite to the nipple. In lithograph 4, the breasts in the foreground (there are two and are less identifiable) are encapsulated among words and menaced by a deformed, grimacing figure below, whose nails seem to leave vertical scars at the bottom of the page. Novelli seems to anticipate Pim's education³⁸ in part two of Beckett's *How It Is*.³⁹

The second element is the recursive, quasi-obsessive presence of the letter 'A' in the lithographs. This presence will characterize many of Novelli's later works. Blocs of 'A' are found, for example, at the bottom of lithograph 1, significantly following a reversed 'c'est fini'. They occupy all the central parts of lithograph 4, absorbing the figures. This device is clearly connected to Novelli's linguistic research: the 'A' sound is the origin of the alphabet, the first word of the child, but also a cry, a conjunction of joy and pain. It seems to anticipate the engraving of capital letters on Pim's back in *How It Is*. One of Beckett's first titles for the novel was *Tout bas*, 'barely audible', alluding to these first sounds.

Both Novelli's and Beckett's *ars combinatoria* entail an element of sadism: the letter 'A' and the breasts constitute two sequences (1-2-4 and 2-3-4) in Novelli's lithographs. In this way, he replicates Beckett's sequences of 'versets' in *How It Is* with both visual and aural means.

Beckett and Novelli investigate the utopia of direct writing and painting, of saying things as you hear them, of the coincidence of 'première and dernière image', incorporating this search into a perceptive intermedial dynamic. But any utopia, as they both know very well, is both promising and dangerous. As observed by Alfred Simon, Novelli's sequence of 'A' sometimes recalls fences or barbed wires:

³⁸ Beckett was an attentive reader of Sade. He also planned a translation of his works.

³⁹ In 1962, Novelli also illustrated Georges Bataille's *History of the Eye*, another well-known re-reading of Sade.

sometimes using the handle of his brush, or a pencil, or a wider scraper, he would inscribe those superimposed lines of uneven letters, wavering like a scream, repeating themselves, never the same: 76 bearing witness
 AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
 AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA.⁴⁰

We are not far from the disquieting, post-Auschwitz resonances of Beckett's numbers and Roman capitals carved on the skin.

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⁴⁰ Claude Simon, *The Jardin des Plantes. A Novel* (Northwestern University Press, 2001), 187.

