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THE PROXEMICS OF “NEITHER”

Garin Dowd

The conceptual vocabulary provided by Philippe Hamon for the analysis of the interrelationships of writing, building and body in the nineteenth-century novel remains partially capable of accounting for the conjunctions of text, structure and inhabitant as these are present in Beckett's post-war oeuvre. The specific challenges posed by Beckett's late prose, however, require a supplementary critical vocabulary. In this context, Beckett's "Neither" is read as exemplary of the distinctive proxemics of the late prose.

> It is impossible to think or write without some façade of a house at least rising up, a phantom, to receive and to make a work of our peregrinations. Lost behind our thoughts, the *domus* is also a mirage in front, the impossible dwelling. Prodigal sons. We engender its patriarchal frugality.
> Lyotard, *The Inhuman*

> Once the generative is thought outside of an inexorable teleology of construction, then the *archē* no longer has its absolute hold on the tectonic.
> Andrew Benjamin, *Architectural Philosophy*

Proxemics is the study of the spaces between, whether between people or between buildings; it assesses the appropriateness of the spaces between. Without proxemics, understood as *betweenness* as such, there could be no relation of one to other, of here to there, or interior to exterior. In his landmark study of architecture and text, *Expositions: Literature and Architecture in Nineteenth-Century France*, Philippe Hamon adopts the term in its customary signification in order to summarise those aspects of architecture that serve to regulate our relationship to ourselves and to others (21). Thus, architecture is the art of organising interior and exterior, up and down, private and public. In Hamon's words: "every building, once completed, concretizes a sort of social and natural proxemics" (30). When the architectural imagination is at work in literature, however, proxemics

needs to consider other spaces between, such as the space between writing and building, between textual structure and construction, between character and writing and between character and edifice. Hamon suggests that, owing to the grounding and matricial origins it provides, architecture gives literature its start (*archē*): "writers start out from the building, the cadastre, the parcel, in other words, from a static system of distinctions (be these real houses, or the fictive abodes of memory) and *then* subsequently imagine the travels and adventures of the characters" (30). Hamon's study focuses on the interrelationship of architecture and text in nineteenth-century French literature. However, his opening section, on "Text and Architecture," remains indispensable to an understanding of the interrelationship of these in literature in general. Of particular interest, as far as the writing of Beckett is concerned, is Hamon's claim that architecture comes into play "at those decisive moments when the very notion of mimesis is either being promoted or discredited by Western thought" (22). The following reflections take their inspiration from Hamon's study. Beckett's writing, radical in its challenge to mimesis though it may be, does not by any means escape the *archē* of architecture. At their most radical, however, Beckett's experiments with the textual and architectural require another critical vocabulary to supplement Hamon's, which the present study begins to sketch.

Hamon argues that architectural motifs are deployed in literature as much more than merely stylistic devices. Rather, these motifs form part of a discursive stratum. For Hamon, architecture is "an art of constructed, measured and articulated space, that establishes distance and proximity, but also borrows from similes and metaphors which make it possible to 'transfer' meanings around in lexical space" (19). Being known for his work in the structuralist tradition of the journal *Poétique*, it comes as no surprise that Hamon's discussion of text and architecture pays particular attention to the status of character within the context of the generative force of the architectural.[1] The connection is prompted by concerns that inhere in architecture as such. As the name for the organisation of the "interplay of exterior and interior, of public and private" (19) architecture may be regarded as an art of the body. In this context, when one considers the conjunction of architecture and text in literature, as far as characters are concerned, "all desire may be reduced to a sort of proxemics that architecture makes concrete" (20). More prosaically, "characters," he writes, "cannot be imagined without their architectural settings" (22). In an example that has great resonance for the work of Beckett,

Hamon states that housing a body *in something* is often reversed as housing *something in* the body (20).[2]

In Hamon's account, the interpenetration of architecture and text takes on other forms. Most notable among these, as far as my argument is concerned, is the multiple semantic register offered by the concept of 'exposure.' The epigraphs to his book point to Hamon's interest in the semantic richness of the term *exposition* in French, some, but not all of which are present in English. In summary, *exposition* yields: (1) the idea of exhibition or fair, the exposure of objects or merchandise to the public gaze; (2) the abandonment of a child in a public space; (3) orientation, situation in relation to the points of the compass; (4) that part of a literary work in which the theme or subject is presented, exposing various matters which, once dispensed, allows for the development of the subsequent action or ideas. In the first of these meanings we find an index of Hamon's interest in locating literature and architecture within the context marked by the great exhibitions of the nineteenth century, new forms of visibility and consumption in modernity. Foregrounded in the second signification is the dislocation and divestment from the *oikos* which would be explored so often in naturalist literature of *les bas-fonds* (the lower depths). The third signification is where the interpenetration of literature and architecture becomes most metaphorically suggestive as far as Beckett is concerned.

Beckett's late prose texts frequently ask us to imagine the body and the building or shelter together. Consider the opening sentences of *Worstward Ho*: "Say a body. Where none. No mind. Where none. That at least. A place. Where none. For the body. To be in. Move in. Out of. Back into. No. No out. No back. Only in. Stay in. On in. Still" (7). The addressee is asked to conjure a body and a structure. As in the opening phrases of *The Unnamable*, injunction is simultaneously hypothesis, and thus the task identified is constitutively aporetic. The inaugural phrases of the text coincide with the construction, short phrase by short phrase, of the shelter for those very phrases and for their putative and absconding referents. These are built as the writing unfolds, a writing which simultaneously ordains and constructs. In this we are reminded that the *archē* of 'architecture' is both 'ground' and 'commandment.' In the example from *Worstward Ho*, here regarded as indicative of strategies common in the late prose work, one of the notable qualities of the programme set out in the opening sentences is that body and structure do not retain self-identity in the course of the operations to which they are subjected in the elaboration.[3] In the

process of being assembled and constructed, body and structure are subject to intermingling. Each glides into its complements. In architectural terms the three components identified – text, inhabitant, edifice – are subjected to mutual *interpenetration*.

A consideration of *Watt*, *The Expelled*, *The Calmative*, *The End* and the Trilogy in the light of Hamon's definitions of the relationship between narrative and architecture would elucidate a uniquely Beckettian presentation of narratives of dispersal, which entail the protagonist setting out from dwellings or shelters, and which, to a degree, offer continuity with nineteenth-century fiction.[4] In *The Expelled* for example the narrator embarks on his narrative by presenting the difficulty of determining the precise number of steps that comprise the construction on which he first fell and from which he subsequently set out. The story ends with the narrator not knowing where he is. All he knows is that he is "abroad," out and going about in the world. *The Calmative* begins with the narrator positing a "kind of den," which may just as easily be a refuge as a "ruined folly" (Beckett 1995, 61), and ends with his shifting his body amid a cityscape and falling facedown to leave him "at the feet of mortals," then, having resumed "the way which was not mine, on uphill along the boulevard" (76), with attempting in vain to perceive the stars in the firmament. In *The End* the narrator finds himself in a cloister, before setting out via a garden to the street in a trajectory which culminates in a sublime exposure: "The sea, the sky, the mountains and the islands closed in and crushed me in a mighty systole, then scattered to the uttermost confines of space" (1995, 99). In texts such as these, the architectural object – which category for Hamon includes "city, garden, house, machine, clothing, furniture, building or monument" (26) – provides the setting for a narrative of dispersal, albeit without the gathering function common to nineteenth-century fiction in a classic realist mode. A further, and as we shall see, related, architectural element, which can be said to be nascent in *Watt*, is also present in the novellas and the Trilogy. For Hamon, the architectural inflection in literature marks the point at which the literary text incorporates a metalanguage: "It is by means of architecture that the text begins to speak of what basically defines it as a structure, as a fiction, or as a structured fiction" (24). Thus in the novellas, which, as we have just seen, conform to the dictates of the architectural imagination, in their endings, all located (and thus dislocated) in dispersal, there arises a moment of the text's recognition of its own status as a fiction. "I don't know why I told this story. I could have

told another" (*The Expelled*; Beckett 1995, 60); "The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life" (*The End*; 1995, 99). Thus, the moments in *The Expelled* and *The End* when the narrative is exposed to its contingency (why this story when it could have been another?) can itself be seen as part of the architectural imagination, working as this does with the notion of the text itself as an architectural container. This consciousness of the shell, specifically the architectural shell, the beginning of all literature, or all fiction for Hamon, with the three criteria which architecture must fulfill – functionality, shelter and standing – abounds in Beckett's writing generally. In the case of the late prose works, however, Hamon's typology can no longer capture the proxemics involved. In these texts it is not just the edges of the narrative that are subject to what Blanchot called *désœuvrement*. Here the edges of a designated space are also invoked and rendered tangible only to be dissipated, as for example in the "verge upon verge" of "The Cliff" (Beckett 1995, 257). In such gestures the texts themselves indicate that they, along with the body or inhabitant and with the designated spaces are being at once made and unmade.

Imagination Dead Imagine should be mentioned in this context. This new variant of the architectural imagination, however, is present in the majority of the short texts written after 1950. "The Image," "All Strange Away," "Enough," *Ping*, *Lessness*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *The Lost Ones*, the *Fizzles* and "As the Story Was Told" – all of these display to varying degrees the interpenetration of body, structure and text. Let us consider two examples. In *Ill Seen Ill Said*, the architectural imagination is focalised on the questions of dwelling, structure and environs: "The cabin, Its situation. Careful. On" (58).

Ill Seen Ill Said reformulates in more abstract terms the choice of ruins or refuge already mentioned in relation to *The Calmative*.[5] The refuge in *Ill Seen Ill Said* is partly constructed out of materials salvaged from a "ruined mansion" (84). The ruin also forms a central concern in *Lessness*, the opening paragraph of which couples the word with its antonym in the phrase: "Ruins true refuge" (Beckett 1995, 197). *Lessness* advances, however, by divesting the space of partitions, boundaries and locatable thresholds. Within the plane (understanding the space in geometrical terms), on the plain (featuring on "all sides endlessness" [197]), the flat, the space where sky and land cannot be distinguished, and where no borders or limits are in force, but which an eye and ear scrutinises, there is a bearer of a beating heart which is the terrain's "only upright" (199). This sole

human, or only anthropoid, is also the only prop, support, and in a certain sense the only vestige of the architectural. This curious vestige and foundation (for, with an upright in place, the human can create a shelter: animal skin tethered to tree) will come to have a homologous relationship to its dwelling, such that either/and/ors of this nature will proliferate as we consider the text's movement as well as its *writing of place.* Indeed the upright surveys a collapsed edifice (but one perhaps open to the sky) which is said to be "fallen open four walls over backwards" (199). This collapsed edifice, coterminous and coextensive with both the geometric plane and the landscape's plain is another manifestation of the "true refuge." A Beckettian clearing rarely qualifies for a Heideggerian reading however, and the opening is quickly corrected by a systolic movement.[6] This clearing, paradoxically, has no exits: it is "true refuge issueless" (199).

In Beckett's experiment with the architectural imagination, then, the *archē* is itself generative of a pervasive aporia. One might also propose that Beckett's answer to the grounding and commanding architectural imagination takes the form of a general antinomy. This antinomy is most concisely revealed in the short prose piece "Neither."

"Neither" begins with a characteristically ambivalent statement which is at once description, proposition and prescription: "To and fro in shadow from inner to outer shadow / from impenetrable self to impenetrable unself by way of neither" (Beckett 1995, 258).[7] The preposition-laden first and second lines are verbless. The gaps where a verb might be placed invite possibilities, among them 'to go,' 'to venture,' 'to vacillate.' The text continues by proposing two illuminated dwellings, or at least shelters, furnished with doors. Thus the movement to and fro takes place "as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, / once turned away from gently part again" (258). The shelters or dwellings with their doors give metaphorical foundation to the notion of an "impenetrable self" occupying one pole and an "impenetrable unself" occupying the other. It is important to note, however, that the recourse to an architectural object (dwelling or shelter, with doors) is qualified as explicitly hypothetical. The structure is conjured as a simile: the movement is "*as* between two lit refuges" (my emphasis). In order to found or to ground the action, Beckett defers to the architectural matrix and support. As in the other texts discussed above, "Neither" begins with a spatial problem or conundrum which in itself demands spatial articulation, orientation and exposition both of and in a setting or

environment. The body which one might hypothesise as the potential agent of observation, displacement, and dwelling, is, in conformity with Hamon's analysis, already *like* a building; it is already, metaphorically, like an architectural object. For, the self as container in "Neither" is a shell. The hypothetical embodied agent of observation, displacement and dwelling will, metaphorically, be the generative source of the proxemics to which it itself will be subject. It is the embedding of this reflexive gesture that marks the difference between the classic realist exposition and that which is found in Beckett's work. This aporia is signalled in the very title of the text and in the role played by the word 'neither' within it. The refuges, which are posited as hypothetical analogues for the "self" and the "unself," are at once joined and separated. The two refuges, albeit facing one another and thus held apart, are subject to a potential coming together: "as between two lit refuges whose doors once neared gently close, once turned away from gently part again" (258). The doors almost yield one communicating corridor to conjoin the two refuges. It is the act, undertaken by the (hypothetical) observing, shuttling and exposing agency, of turning away from the doors ("beckoned back and forth and turned away") that causes them to part again, which in effect means that each closes. Hence the closure of the doors when turned away from is in fact described as an opening: the near touching doors "gently part again." The cognitive and intentional activity (of the hypothetical agent) operative between the refuges conforms in key respects to the idea of exposition endorsed by Hamon in his epigraphs, understood as "that part of a literary work in which the theme or subject is presented, exposing various matters which once dispensed allows for the development of the subsequent action or ideas" (Hamon citing Larousse). The specific type of exposition is a mixture of what Hamon (in his typology for nineteenth-century fiction) identifies as the exposition characteristic of vertical realism – flushing out the real from behind the facades – and horizontal realism – which clears the grounds, furls and unfurls. The exposures to which Beckett's creatures are subject in the late prose are very closely linked to Beckett's concern with the image in those same works (and hence with the imagination: to make an image is the work of the machinery he calls the imagination, as in "imagination dead imagine"). The body oscillates and vacillates in the space of exposure: "then gently light unfading on that unheeded neither" (258). A space here that hosts an upright ambulant body, held in the opening the text calls "neither." "Neither" is the name Beckett gives to this space between. The way

between the poles is *unheeded* according to the text: “heedless of the way, intent on the one gleam or the other” (258). Direction, orientation and measurement are no longer applicable to the ‘situation’ at hand. The body, or the agent of observation, displacement and articulation goes to and fro, from its presence to its absence, from its being to non-being, from its formation to its emptying, by way of the space called ‘neither,’ which is also the space of neither itself, the space of exclusion via the logical and spatial relations upheld and described by proxemics.

Hence this textual exposition may be read as much a traversal of a word, and a concept as it is of a being – recall that a being possesses and is dispossessed by its non-being. This is an oscillation which is marked in the nomenclature too: the text is called “Neither.” A text called “Neither” makes the word give way to a space that it founds by way of naming. Once named the space departs from the word: it is exposed and made to go adrift of significatory anchorage.

Such a space defies articulation; it is “unspeakable home” (258). “Home” is under the erasure of being unsayable, unspeakable. Such a space, one could add, is an example of what Beckett refers to elsewhere as “such the dwelling ill seen ill said” (1992, 84). *Ill Seen Ill Said*, as noted above, is another late work concerned with a refuge facing into the space of its approach by a questing body moving between zones of perceptibility and imperceptibility.[8]

The body posited by “Neither” stops, within the metaphor which appropriately has transported us to the sparest of built environments: two refuges, the requirements for community? It arrests itself or is arrested in a state of abeyance which continues, which abides.[9] Thus the arrest is incomplete. The protagonist remains exposed in the space between; s/he or it is at home. S/He or it hangs a sign indicating “home unspeakable home,” or he would do so if there were anything to hang it from, but there are no uprights in a space characterised as only *metaphorically* architectural.

It is important to return to the inaugural phrases of the text, in order to be reminded that “Neither” as a work begins by way of founding gestures governed by metaphoricity. The text is an exposition within a space of metaphor. Beckett’s architectural imagination proposes a space in order to expose, to unfurl the concept of an oscillation between inner and outer shadow, between the interior and the outside. The recourse to the metaphor, which is flagged up here, is pervasive in the late prose. Indeed this short piece can be

considered a *mode d'emploi* of the others with which it shares Beckett's particular architectural imagination.

I have argued that Hamon's basic delineation of the relationship between text and architecture in the nineteenth-century novel remains operative and can be identified in vestigial form within the workings of Beckett's own architectural imagination in the post-war oeuvre. In the case of the prose experiments with compression that followed, however, a supplementary critical vocabulary can assist in assessing the specific deployment of the architectural imagination in Beckett's late prose. To conclude, I will suggest some ways forward in this regard. The particular synthesis offered by Benoît Goetz in his study *La dislocation: architecture et philosophie* advances the notion of a 'between' habitation and inhabitation (the nuanced 'dislocation' of his title). Goetz asserts that in its manner of regulating the play of spaces – by creating separations, openings, thresholds, passages, superimpositions, enclosures and interpenetrations – architecture itself is a mode of "dis-location" (182). Turning Heidegger's thinking about dwelling 'against' itself, Goetz situates architecture between 'habitation' and 'inhabitation.' To inhabit, from this perspective, is to reside (or to be immured, paradoxically) in *atopia* or non-place. Goetz takes inspiration from Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's distinction between earth (*terre*) and territory (*territoire*) as developed in section 11 of *A Thousand Plateaus*, "1837: Of the Refrain," and the distinction named in the title of section 14, "1440: The Smooth and the Striated."

Deleuze and Guattari's discussion of territoriality and earth is undertaken with reference to music, and in particular to romantic music.[10] If territory has to do with proxemics, as is the case with a bird using song (in order, sonically to 'mark' its territory), then the earth is what produces the "singing that rises to drown out the territorial song" (339). Although movements of coming and going (i.e., the refrain) in music and in space are still "under the earth's command, the repulsion from the territory is produced by the attraction of the earth" (339-40). In the section on space as such the authors once more turn to music, adapting the distinction made by the composer Pierre Boulez between *espace lisse* (smooth space) and *espace strié* (striated space). The act of occupying smooth space, where mensuration and cardinality fall away, means that as far as orientations are concerned, "there is no visual model for points of reference that would make them interchangeable and unite them in an inertial class assignable to an outside observer. On the contrary, they are tied to any number of

observers, who may be qualified as ‘monads’ but are instead nomads entertaining tactile relations among themselves” (Deleuze and Guattari, 493).

The space evoked in “Neither” and other late prose pieces with which it shares spatial and orientational or vectorial concerns is non-Euclidean. It is by no means the case that *Watt*, *The Four Novellas* and The Trilogy – to cite once more only the examples discussed above – remain Euclidean in these respects. In these works, however, vestiges of striated space remain, and there are sufficient of these to enable the emergence of intermittent central perspectives, and for a proxemics of (perhaps ruined) settled sites to be sustained. The proxemics of “Neither” and of the late prose of which it is representative, however, comprehensively belong to the smooth space of dislocation. The unnamed and ungraspable agency of “Neither” is, to borrow the words of Edward Casey, “the bearer of an unhoused inhabitation, the very vehicle of a space without conduits or settled sites” (307).

Notes

1. Hamon is also the author of *Le personnel du roman* (Geneva: Droz, 1983).

2. “You may say it is all in my head, and indeed sometimes it seems to me I am in a head and that these eight, no six, these six planes that enclose me are of solid bone” (*Malone Dies*; Beckett 1979, 203).

3. There is an element of this already as early as the short story “Ding Dong”: “But as for sites, one was as good as another, because they all disappeared as soon as he came to rest in them” (Beckett 1974, 35).

4. In a previous study I have read *Watt* in the context of the house as situated within an infrastructure of utilities and transport, and of the dwelling as subject to centripetal and centrifugal forces, here reformulated in the present argument as dispersal and gathering. See Dowd (2008).

5. Beckett’s interest in ruins is open to being read as and example of post-Romantic lyric subjectivity, a theme to which. Hamon devotes a sub-chapter in his book.

6. “Man is never first and foremost man on the hither side of the world, as a ‘subject’, whether this is taken as ‘I’ or ‘We’. Nor is he ever simply a mere subject which always simultaneously is related to objects, so that his

essence lies in the subject-object relation. Rather, before all this, man in his essence is ek-sistent into the openness of Being, into the open region that clears the 'between' within which a 'relation' of subject to object can 'be'" (Heidegger, 252).

7. Beckett did not attempt to translate "Neither." One might argue that its linguistic play on a figure of exclusion, which names a space of possible community (it names the space between), is untranslatable. Considered as an object "Neither" refuses to be moved and transferred across the mediating straits of translation.

8. In *Ill Seen Ill Said* a cabin made of stone is located, with echoes of "Neither," at "the inexsistent centre of a formless place" (58).

9. This verb is fundamental for Beckett, with its close links to abode. See, for example, the opening sentence of *The Lost Ones*: "Abode where lost bodies roam each searching for its lost one" (Beckett 1995, 202).

10. It is appropriate to conclude with a conceptual framework indebted to music, since the work published as "Neither" has a distinct existence as the words written by Beckett in response to a request by the composer Morton Feldman. Feldman's work for chamber orchestra and soprano was performed at the Rome Opera in 1977

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