

**This item is the archived peer-reviewed author-version of:**

Beckett's Art of the Commonplace : The 'Sottisier' Notebook and mirlitonnades Drafts

**Reference:**

Van Hulle Dirk.- Beckett's Art of the Commonplace : The 'Sottisier' Notebook and mirlitonnades Drafts  
Journal of Beckett studies - ISSN 0309-5207 - 28:1(2019), p. 67-89  
Full text (Publisher's DOI): <https://doi.org/10.3366/JOBS.2019.0254>  
To cite this reference: <https://hdl.handle.net/10067/1593920151162165141>

Beckett's Art of the Commonplace:  
The 'Sottisier' Notebook and *mirlitonrades* Drafts

'Proust does not share the superstition that form is nothing and content everything [...]. Indeed he makes no attempt to dissociate form from content. The one is a concretion of the other, the revelation of the world' (Beckett, 1965, 88).

From Beckett's first published essays on Joyce and Proust onwards, the relationship between form and content has always been important to him. In the 1970s, when he wrote the short *mirlitonrades*, this relationship took a special shape. Explicitly conceived as minor or 'throwaway' poetry, the drafts of the *mirlitonrades* are jotted down on 'throwaway' material and everyday objects, such as envelopes, letters, a piece from a box of cigars, pages torn from notebooks and coloured notepads. This manuscript material is held at the University of Reading (UoR MS 2460). At the same time (between December 1976 and December 1978), Beckett also kept a small notebook, called the 'Sottisier' (UoR MS 2901), in which he gathered fair copies of his *mirlitonrades*. This notebook is the basis of David Wheatley's excellent analysis of the *mirlitonrades*, 'a close reading of the poems [...] following as far as possible the order of the *sottisier* entries' (1995, 52). On the inside of the notebook's front cover, Beckett jotted down a few descriptions and/or possible titles for the poems: 'Rimailles / Rhymeries / Versicule(t)s'. The notion of the 'sottisier' – a collection of jokes – conveys Beckett's customary self-deprecating attitude. By the time he wrote these poems, however, he was a celebrated Nobel Prize winner, and the self-deprecating attitude might thus be construed as a pose. It is true that Beckett also contributed to very expensive *de luxe* editions, which might suggest the throwaway gesture is too studied and therefore phoney. But there is another way of looking at this material, combining bibliography with genetic criticism.

As a material object, the 'Sottisier' is a beautiful little notebook. At first sight, it seems to have been Beckett's intention to use it as the place where he gathered the publishable, if not 'definitive', versions of his poems. This would somehow undermine the 'throwaway' gesture of the *mirlitonrades*. But rather than the place where the texts are established and fixed, the notebook turns out to be only an intermediary stage in the writing process. This essay tries to map the genesis of these poems in order to understand the 'throwaway' gesture of the draft material. Rather than focusing on the 'Sottisier' notebook, it foregrounds the 'everyday'

materiality of the *mirlitonnades* manuscripts (the scraps of paper). The use of these scraps bears a relation to the content of the poems, in which ‘death’ is the most ‘everyday’ element. It is so terribly omnipresent that it emanates from and takes shape in the most everyday objects, including any piece of paper that happened to be lying around.

The following table shows how Beckett first drafted his poems on the pieces of paper (with up to seven draft versions on a single scrap); he subsequently copied one or more versions and dated them in his ‘Sottisier’; and then – ‘bizarrely enough’ as David Wheatley points out (52) – he often returned to the original scrap to inscribe and establish the ‘final’ version of the poem, usually drawing a frame around it, but putting it among the rough drafts, as if he wanted to stress the ephemeral quality of his poems by means of the materiality of their initial inscription.

	<b>mirlitonnade</b>	<b>manuscript material</b>	<b>draft documents</b>	<b>page Sottisier</b>	<b>dates Sottisier</b>	<b>dates fair copies on draft documents</b>
2	rentrer	white envelope: sender ‘Akademie der Künste’; date stamp: 19.11.76	ms2460-m02-1r			Paris 24.11.76
3	somme toute	page torn from weekly calendar; heading: ‘Rendez-vous’	ms2460-m03-1r			
	somme toute		ms2460-m03-1v	02r	?2.77	13.2.77
4	fin fond du néant	page torn from weekly calendar; heading: ‘Rendez-vous’	ms2460-m04-1r	02v	?2.77	
5	silence tel que	page torn from weekly calendar; heading: ‘Rendez-vous’	ms2460-m05-1r	02v	18.2.77	18.2.77
6	écoute-les	page torn from weekly calendar; heading: ‘Rendez-vous’	ms2460-m06-1r	02v	20.2.77	20.2.77
	écoute-les		ms2460-m06-1v			
7	lueurs lisières	page torn from weekly calendar; heading: ‘Rendez-vous’	ms2460-m07-1r			
	lueurs lisières		ms2460-m07-1v	03r	21.2.77	22.2.77
8	imagine si ceci	part (ca. 1/3) of a white sheet of paper; watermark: ‘Alaska Extra Strong’	ms2460-m08-1r	03r / 09r	Ussy 26.2.77	Ussy 26/27.2.77
9	d’abord	part (ca. 2/3) of white sheet of paper; watermark: ‘Alaska Extra Strong’	ms2460-m09-1r	03r	U. 26/7.2.77	Ussy 26/27.2.77
	d’abord		ms2460-m09-1v			
10	flux	white sheet of paper; watermark ‘Alaska Extra Strong’	ms2460-m10_11-1r-v	03v	U. 7.3.77	Ussy 5.3.77 and U. 7.3.77
11	samedi		ms2460-m10_11-1r-v	03v	U. 7.3.77	U. 7.3.77
12	chaque jour	white sheet of paper; watermark ‘Alaska Extra Strong’	ms2460-m12-1r	04r	U.9.3.77 / U. 10.3.77	U. 10.3.77
	chaque jour		ms2460-m12-1v			U. 10.3.77
13	nuit qui fais tant	page torn from weekly calendar; heading: ‘Rendez-vous’	ms2460-m13-1r	04r	P. 19.3.77	
14	rien nul	page torn from weekly calendar; heading: ‘Rendez-vous’	ms2460-m14-1r	04r	-	P. 21.3.77

15	à peine	white sheet of paper; watermark 'Alaska Extra Strong'	ms2460-m15-1r	04v	U. 29.3.77	Ussy 29.3.77
16	ce qu'ont les yeux			04r/ 04v	U. 30.3.77/ U. 31.3.77	
17	ce qu'a de pis			05r	U. 31.3.77	
35	noire sœur	inside lid of cigar box 'Henri Wintermans'	ms2460-m35-1r	05r	Tanger 21.4.77	Tanger 21.4.77
		lid of cigar box 'Henri Wintermans Café Crème'	ms2460-m35-1v			
18	ne manquez pas à Tanger	piece of squared paper, torn from a ring notebook	ms2460-m18-1r	05v	T. 1.5.77	T. 2.5.77
	ne manquez pas à Tanger		ms2460-m18-1v			
20	ne manquez pas à Stuttgart	yellowed rectangular piece of paper	ms2460-m20-1r		S. 20.6.77	Stuttgart 20.6.77
	-		ms2460-m20-1v			-
21	vieil aller			06r	St. 25.6.77 / S. 26.6.77	
	one dead of night			06v	St. 26.6.77	
22	fous qui disiez	piece torn from a white envelope	ms2460-m22_23_24-1r	07r	Paris 6.7.77	Ussy juillet 77
23	pas à pas		ms2460-m22_23_24-1r	07r		
24	rêve		ms2460-m22_23_24-1r	07v	U. 14.7.77	
25	morte parmi			07v	P. 17.7.77	
26	d'où	corner torn from a white piece of paper	ms2460-m26-1r	07v	P 18.7.77	P. 18.7.77
27	mots survivants	inside lid of Johnny Walker Black Label packaging	ms2460-m27-1r	08r	Tanger 27.7.77	Tanger août 77
		lid of Johnny Walker Black Label packaging	ms2460-m27-1v			
19	plus loin	air mail envelope (front)	ms2460-m19-1r	08v	Cimetière St. André août 77	
	plus loin	air mail envelope (back)	ms2460-m19-1v			Tanger août 77
28	fleuves et océans	white card	ms2460-m28-1r	09r	Ussy Toussaint 77	Ussy Toussaint 77
	[draft "Birth was his death. Etc."]	white card	ms2460-m28-1v			
	du tiers œil	white envelope; stamped on 31.10.1977	ms2460-m01-1r	09v	U. 5.11.77	Ussy 5.11.77
1	en face	white envelope	ms2460-m01-1v	09v	P. 12.11.77	P.12.11.77
29	de pied ferme	top left corner of a UNESCO letter (verso)	ms2460-m29-1r	09v / 10r	P. 13.11.77	P 13.11.77
		top left corner of a letter with UNESCO letterhead (recto)	ms2460-m29-1v			
30	sitôt sorti de l'ermitage			10r	P. 22.12.77	
31	à l'instant	blue-green square piece of notepad paper	ms2460-m31-1r	10r	P. 13.1.77	P. 13.1.78 / U. 17.1.78
	à l'instant	blue-green square piece of notepad paper	ms2460-m31-1v			
	(ne) finira-t-elle / ne verra-t-il (early version of 'la nuit venue')			10v	U. 18.1.78 / U. -	
33	pas davantage			11r	T. 8.2.78	

34	son ombre une nuit	blue square piece of notepad paper	ms2460-m34-1r	11v	P. 11.6.78	Paris 10.6.78
	son ombre une nuit	blue square piece of notepad paper	ms2460-m34-1v			
32	la nuit venue	piece torn from white card	ms2460-m32-1v	11v	?	(Beckett's question mark)
	la nuit venue	piece torn from white card	ms2460-m32-1r			P. 14.6.78
	c'est l'heure	fuchsia square piece of notepad paper	ms2460-n01-1r	12r	P. 2.8.78	P. 2 8 78
	comme au berceau	piece torn from white card	ms2460-n02-1r	12r	Tanger août 78	
	comme au berceau	piece torn from white card	ms2460-n02-1v			Tanger 28.8.78
36	le nain nonagénaire	rectangular piece torn from a sheet of white paper	ms2460-m36(1)-1r			
	le nain nonagénaire	fuchsia square piece of notepad paper	ms2460-m36(2)-1v			
	le nain nonagénaire	fuchsia square piece of notepad paper	ms2460-m36(2)-1r	12r	P. sept. 78	Paris 9.9.78
37	à bout de songes	piece of ruled paper with one circular perforation	ms2460-m37(1)-1r			Ussy 5.11.78 / Tanger 21.12.78
	à bout de songes	piece of ruled paper with one circular perforation	ms2460-m37(1)-1v			
	à bout de songes	piece torn from a typed letter (verso)	ms2460-m37(2)-1r	12v	P. Nov. 78	Paris 19.11.78
	[piece of a typed letter]	piece torn from a typed letter, addressing SB as 'Dear Dr. Beckett' (verso)	ms2460-m37(2)-1v			
	par une faille dans l'inexistence	sheet of ruled paper torn from a notepad	ms2460-n03(1)-1r	13r	U. Juillet 79	
	par une faille dans l'inexistence	sheet of ruled paper torn from a notepad	ms2460-n03(1)-1v			Ussy 3.7.79
	par une faille dans l'inexistence	sheet of ruled paper torn from a notepad	ms2460-n03(2)-1r			Ussy 5.7.79
	qu'à lever la tête	rectangular sheet of white paper	ms2460-n04-1r			Courmayeur juin 80
	There the life late led			14v	23.3.81 / N.D. 17.9.81	
	<u>Ceiling</u> lid eye bid byebye			15r	9.4.81	
	on gone again all	yellow square piece of notepad paper	ms2460-n05-1r			Paris 9.9.81

The dates indicate the sequence of the reinscription among the drafts, sometimes with a delay of just one day (as in 'lueurs lisières' or 'ne manquez pas à Tanger'), sometimes of a few days (as in 'mots survivants'). The table also shows that this reinscription is not entirely systematic: when it happened on the same day, the sequence can only be established by means of variants, and sometimes the 'Sottisier' does contain the last handwritten version (as in 'noire sœur' and 'son ombre une nuit') or two versions, one preceding and one following the reinscription on the draft document (as in 'de pied ferme'), but those cases seem to be the exceptions confirming the rule that Beckett, in general, tried to put his finished poems back among the drafts, as if to indicate that this was where they belonged. By doing so, he presented his poems as part of a

process that did not necessarily go anywhere – ‘de pied ferme [...] allant sans but’ (Beckett, 2012, 217) as he writes in one of the *mirlitonnades*.

## Keeper of Scraps

The habit of making notes or writing rough drafts on everyday pieces of paper is not exceptional. But what is remarkable is that, of the numerous rough drafts in the Beckett archive, it is not until the mid-1970s that these scraps seem to have been preserved systematically. The act of writing the short poems on scraps of paper, keeping them and donating them to the University Library in Reading is a poetical gesture in and of itself. To try and find out what triggered this gesture, it is useful to take a look at one of the poems Beckett wrote shortly before the *mirlitonnades*: ‘hors crâne’.

As Seán Lawlor and John Pilling note, the earliest versions of ‘hors crâne’ were written on 1 January 1974 (Beckett, 2012, 441). Like other first drafts of the early 1970s such as the first version of *Not I*, the text is written in black ink on a white A4 sheet of paper, watermarked ‘Extra Strong’ (Burns Library at Boston College, MS 1991-001-ref48, Box 11, Folder 04). From a bibliographical point of view, it is rather unspectacular compared to most of the odd-shaped documents with first drafts of the ‘mirlitonnades’. The first version, dated ‘1.1.74’, opens with the words ‘Là quelque chose’ (‘something there’ – which is also the title of a contemporaneous poem in English). After four versions that seem to have been conceived as prose fiction, without line breaks or stanzas, the fifth version, dated ‘4.1.74’, features four numbered tercets, possibly inspired by the *terza rima* of Dante’s *Divina Commedia*, which also inspired the content of the poem. It explicitly mentions Bocca’s head immured in the ice of Antenora, in circle 9 of hell (Canto 32).

After these five versions on the earliest extant document, Beckett made a first typescript, again on a white A4 sheet of paper (BC MS 1991-001-ref71, Box 12, Folder 14). At that stage, the poem started with the words ‘là dehors’ (‘there outside’). The next two versions, opening with the words ‘hors crâne’ (‘beyond the skull’) are written by hand on a piece of graph paper, torn from a ring notebook. The second of these two versions is dated ‘Paris / 28.2.74’. After another typescript version, Beckett wrote two new versions on a similar piece of graph paper, the second of which is dated ‘4.3.74’. These versions are followed by two typescripts, numbered ‘III’ and ‘IV’. So far, the writing process alternating between handwritten and typewritten documents follows Beckett’s common practice.

Around the same time, however, Beckett made a handwritten fair copy in blue ink for Josette Hayden on the back of a torn Craven ‘A’ cigarette packet. As Lawlor and Pilling note, Josette Hayden was a heavy smoker who favoured Craven ‘A’ (441). In black ink, she added ‘Samuel Beckett / mars 74’ underneath the poem.

This version is part of a lot that was auctioned at Sotheby’s in London on 13 July 2006, consisting of six autograph poems, each one written on the back of a torn Craven ‘A’ cigarette packet. One of the poems is an epitaph by the seventeenth-century poet Mathurin Régnier (1573–1613):

J’ai vécu sans nul pensement  
me laissant aller doucement  
à la bonne loi naturelle  
et je m’étonne fort pourquoi  
la mort **pensa jamais** à moi  
qui ne pensai jamais à elle<sup>1</sup>

[I have lived without thinking/worrying, gently giving myself up to the good natural law, and I really wonder why death **never thought** of me who never thought of it.]<sup>2</sup>

The version of Régnier’s epitaph Beckett has copied contains a remarkable, substantive variant in the penultimate line. Many variant versions circulated throughout the centuries. In most of them, such as Régnier’s *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Jannet, 1853) the poet wonders why death ‘dared’ take notice of him who never took notice of death: ‘pourquoy / La mort **osa** songer à moy, / Qui ne songeay jamais en elle.’ (1853, 312; emphasis added) In Bescherelle’s *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française* (Paris, 1847), the entire epitaph is quoted under the entry ‘pensement’ (the act of thinking). Here the verb ‘osa’ (dared) in the penultimate line reads ‘daigna’ (deigned): ‘pourquoy / La mort **daigna** songer à moi / Qui ne songeai jamais à elle.’ (1847, vol. 2, 833; emphasis added)

The version Beckett copied occurs for instance in the *Bibliothèque de cour, de ville et de campagne, contenant les bons mots de plusieurs Rois, Princes, Seigneurs de la Cour, & autres Personnes Illustres* (Paris: Théodore Le Gras, 1746), where it is introduced with the comment that the epitaph Régnier wrote for himself demonstrates his libertinism (‘nous montre son libertinage’; vol. 1, 113). But due to what is most probably a transmissional error, this version – in which death never thought of the poet (‘pourquoy / La mort **pensa jamais** à

moi’) – actually could be the expression of a death wish. With the variant, the penultimate line almost sounds like a reproach: the poet does not wonder why death finally comes to fetch him but he implicitly rebukes it for not having thought of doing this much earlier, in the sense of ‘why didn’t death take notice of me?’ Not only content-wise, but also formally, ‘hors crâne’ thus anticipates the *mirlitonrades* in that it presents death as an everyday presence in everyday objects.

## Death and the Everyday

Death is one of the most everyday presences in the ‘mirlitonrades’. One of them opens with the words ‘chaque jour’ (every day). The first three versions show a remarkable zoom effect from ‘toute la vie’ (first version) to ‘tous les jours’ (second version) to ‘chaque jour’ (third version; UoR MS 2460-m12, 1r). The wordplay between ‘envie’ (desire) and ‘en vie’ (alive) is immediately contrasted with the regret of having been born:

chaque jour envie  
d’être un jour en vie  
non certes sans regret  
un jour d’être né (Beckett, 2012, 213)

[every day desire to be alive one day but not without regret of having been born one day]

In ‘noire sœur’ the poet seems to be asking death (‘noire sœur / qui es aux enfers’) what it is waiting for – ‘qu’est-ce que tu attends’. The form of the poem, alluding to the most common, ‘everyday’ prayer in Christianity (‘Our Father, who art in heaven’) emphasizes the quotidian presence of death in the *mirlitonrades*. Also in ‘la nuit venue’, the protagonist cannot wait to die:

la nuit venue où l’âme allait  
enfin lui être réclamée  
voilà-t-il pas qu’incontinent  
il la rendit une heure avant (Beckett, 2012, 218)



[The night his soul would finally be claimed, lo and behold, incontinent, he returned it one hour early.]

The protagonist's soul is presented as one of the bodily fluids. And when the time has come, he cannot wait to release it: he simply lets go, like an incontinent old man. This image involving incontinence comes very close to the last entry in Jules Renard's *Journal* – which was still part of Beckett's library at his death. According to Deirdre Bair, the last entry 'has had the most sustained and moving effect upon Beckett':

Renard had been ill and confined to his bed for some time. In the entry of April 7, 1910, he wrote: 'Last night I wanted to get up. Dead Weight. A leg hangs outside. Then a trickle runs down my leg. I allow it to reach my heel before I make up my mind. It will dry in the sheets.' It was this cold, hard, exacting look at oneself which struck Beckett, so that the first time he read this passage he spent hours repeating it over and over as he sat in his armchair sipping whiskey in front of the fire. (Bair 1978, 118)

Bair was writing her biography around the time of the composition of *Company*, but also of the *mirlitonnades*. Notwithstanding the dramatized image of Beckett sipping whiskey in his armchair in front of the fire, the material traces of the *mirlitonnades*' writing process do indicate that a bottle of whiskey was one of the everyday objects that was never far away during the creative process.



## Death's Black Label

On the back of the lid of a Johnny Walker Black Label box, death again turns out to be an everyday presence. The first draft of the poem 'mots survivants' opens with the words 'finie / ou peu s'en faut / la vie' [life finished, nearly] (UoR MS 2460, m27, 1r; Nixon, 2006, 118) – in other words, a variation on the theme of Clov's opening line in *Endgame*: 'Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.' (Beckett, 2009, 6) At the top of the scrap, Beckett has written – possibly by way of a title – 'la comédie'. It may be an allusion to Dante's *Divina Commedia* or to Beckett's own play *Play / Comédie*, but in the context of the 'everyday', the notion of 'comedy' also has a Yeatsian connotation. In the second stanza of 'Easter, 1916', Yeats refers to Dubliners' everyday lives before the 1916 rising as the 'casual comedy', until they change utterly, transforming into tragic heroes:

He, too, has resigned his part  
In the casual comedy;  
He, too, has been changed in his turn,  
Transformed utterly:  
A terrible beauty is born. (Yeats, 1996, 83)

In Beckett's poetry, however, no such transformation takes place. The tragedy here is that everything remains the same old casual comedy. Beckett's is a world of tragicomedy, of both Democritus and Heraclitus, both the laughing and the weeping philosophers together, as in the *mirlitonnade* that Beckett chose to give pride of place: 'en face / le pire / jusqu'à ce / qu'il fasse rire', facing the worst until it turns to laughter. And in this process, the surviving words keep one company. For that is how they are presented on the manuscript – in the guise of company (UoR MS 2460, m27, 01r; my translation).

While the first version began with the end ('finie'), the second, third and fourth versions open with 'life' ('de la vie'; Nixon, 2006, 118). But this life is presented as a protracted form of 'dying' – in line with the same theme that opens *A Piece of Monologue* (written in the same period as *Company* and the *mirlitonnades*): 'Birth was the death of him.' Every new version on the scrap of paper represents the latest stage in this life, as in *Comment c'est*: 'ma vie dernier

état' / 'my life last state last version' (Beckett, 2001, 2-3) – according to the principle that 'the individual is a succession of individuals' (Beckett, 1965, 19). In the poem on the Johnny Walker packaging, life is described respectively (in the second, third and fourth versions) as dead by words, dying by words, and dead under the words (UoR MS 2460, m27, 01r). In the fifth and sixth versions, still on the same piece of packaging, the words themselves ('mots') are what is dying ('mourant'). Beckett seems to have been – at least temporarily – satisfied with this version of the poem ('mots mourant / de male vie / un dernier moment / tenez-nous compagnie'; Nixon, 2006, 118) and entered a fair copy into the 'Sottisier' Notebook, dating it 'Tanger 27.7.77'.

But then he revised it again, replacing 'mourant' by 'survivants' (UoR MS 2901, 8r; Nixon 2006, 118). So the idea of keeping the notebook for the fair copies of the poems was discarded and instead Beckett returned to the original document. In the course of the next month (August), he added the 'final' version to the series of drafts on the back of the 'Black Label' packaging and drew a frame around it. He thus clustered more or less the entire genesis of the poem 'mots survivants', gathering no less than seven versions on a square decimetre. The date 'Tanger / août 77' coincides with the period in which Beckett was writing *Company / Compagnie*. Not unlike the 'empty words' (Beckett, 2010, 22) and the everyday objects in Winnie's bag in *Happy Days*, the surviving words are called upon to keep 'us' company ('tenez-nous compagnie') and 'to help [us] through the day' (Beckett, 2010, 23).

## Words for Company

The everyday words are also presented as the most basic elements to move on. They are compared to footfalls, moving 'on', one step at a time, as in the *mirlitonnade* 'Écoute-les'. The first draft starts with the mere accumulation of words – 's'ajoutent les mots', putting one word in front of the other (2460 m06-1r). Then the chronotope of the road is added, together with the old theme of inaudibility: the only sound from one silence to the other is that of the footfalls ('et sur la route seul son / de l'un silence à l'autre / les pas aux pas') – not unlike that other *mirlitonnade* mentioned above, 'de pied ferme [...] allant sans but' (Beckett, 2012, 217).

Thus the words walk 'on', without going anywhere, as in the *mirlitonnade* 'pas à pas / nulle part' – but they do so with obstinacy ('obstinément'; UoR MS 2901, 7r; Beckett, 2012,

216). On the same page of the ‘Sottisier’ Notebook, yet another poem on words has the same date: ‘Paris 6.7.77’:

fous qui disiez  
plus jamais  
vite  
redites (Beckett, 2012, 216)

[fools that said ‘never again’, quick, say again]

The geneses of these two poems (‘pas à pas’ and ‘fous qui disiez’) are intimately entangled on the same document, the back of an envelope (UoR MS 2460 m22-23-24, 1r). The first version opens with words that say ‘silence’. As Fritz Mauthner noted, ‘silence’ is still a word, so he suggested a ‘Nichtwort’ as a solution (1923, I.83). Whether or not this inspired Beckett to announce his plans for a ‘Literatur des Unworts’, he seems to have appreciated Mauthner mainly for pointing out the irony of his own enterprise, as he could not critique language without language. Similarly, Beckett seems to play on the same irony. In the ‘Sottisier’, he writes two versions. In the first version, ‘silence’ is replaced by ‘absence’ and ‘finis’. In the second version, the words (‘mots’) are called fools (‘fous’) who said ‘never again’ (‘plus jamais’) and are urged to ‘say again’ (Beckett, 2012, 216).

### Counting the Days, Hours, Minutes

Apart from words, there are also numbers to keep one company. Beckett was in his early seventies when he counted the number of days he had spent on earth (‘ $365 \times 70 = 25.550$ ’) – some 26000 days and nights, as his first draft (in English) of the *mirlitonnade* ‘somme toute’ indicates. At first sight, this is nothing but a pleasant pastime, in accordance with Samuel Johnson’s dictum ‘Nothing amuses more harmlessly than computation’, which Beckett noted down in his ‘Super Conquérant’ Notebook (UoR MS 2934, 01r; BDMP 1). But underneath the calculations and the first lines in English, Beckett continued in French, reintroducing the waiting theme of *En attendant Godot*: ‘600 000 hours / 3 and ½ million minutes / ~~d’attente~~ / chiffres ronds’ (UoR MS 2460-m03-1r; Wheatley, 1995, 53). The second version ends with

the words ‘sans compter / les temps morts’ (‘not counting the downtime’; see Beckett, 2012, 210). Again, the word ‘morts’ emphasizes the omnipresence of death in every single minute of life.

Eventually, Beckett chose not to work with hours and minutes, but with quarters of an hour. On the back of the same piece of paper, he wrote two more versions, but he did keep the ‘temps morts’ to end his poem. The last version on this piece of paper (dated ‘13.2.77’) is identical to the one on page 2r of the ‘Sottisier’ Notebook (dated ‘ ? .2.77’), which is preceded by a quotation from Voltaire’s *Poème sur le désastre de Lisbonne*: ‘Tristes calculateurs des misères humaines, / Ne me consolez point, vous aigrissez mes peines.’ (UoR MS 2901, 02r; Voltaire, 1835, 510). Voltaire’s ‘calculateurs’ are not as amusing and not as harmless as Johnson’s computation. They are the defenders of God’s ways, which Voltaire questions openly: ‘Pourquoi donc souffrons-nous sous un maître équitable?’ The ‘calculateurs’ are advocates of ‘meliorism’, the Leibnizians who claim that this is the best of all possible worlds, the ones that try to convince the poet that his suffering and misery is someone else’s blessing; that a thousand insects will profit from his rotting corpse – ‘Le beau soulagement d’être mangé des vers!’ (1835, 510).

The Voltaire quote in the ‘Sottisier’ Notebook is preceded by the line ‘moaning that the sparks fly upward’, a reference to Job 5:12: ‘man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward’. This bibliographic coincidence of quotations and versions suggests that the *mirlitonades* can be placed in a long tradition of counter-theodicies. In this sense, they fit in with Beckett’s poetics of pejorism (Van Hulle, 2018, 1) versus the theodicean belief in the steady progress of humanity. Beckett had added the marginalia ‘Pejorismus’ in his copy of Olga Plümacher’s *Der Pessimismus*, and he noted ‘pejorism’ in his ‘Whoroscope’ Notebook towards the end of the 1930s. Pessimism was too static; Beckett preferred to work with the comparative ‘*pejor*’ (Lat.: ‘worse’), as in the ending of the *mirlitonade* ‘ce qu’a de pis’: ‘le pis revient / en pire’ (Beckett, 2012, 215). And, as mentioned above, the worst (‘le pire’) opens the collection of poems with a tragicomic gesture:

en face  
le pire  
jusqu’à ce  
qu’il fasse rire (Beckett, 2012, 210)

Beckett thus put his *mirlitonades* in a tradition of pejorism, which he recognized in the scene of Gloucester's suicide attempt in *King Lear*. The 'Sottisier' contains a handful of Shakespeare quotations, notably 'The lamentable change is from the best, / The worst returns to laughter' and 'The worst is not / So long as one can say, This is the worst' (UoR MS 2901, 14v). Beckett also quotes one of Petruchio's lines from *The Taming of the Shrew*: 'Where is the life that late I led?' – followed on the same page by a sort of reply in the form of a short, *mirlitonades*-like poem in English:

There  
the life late led  
down there  
all done unsaid (UoR MS 2901, 14v; Nixon, 2009, 25)

As Mark Nixon notes, 'much of the tension in Beckett's late work is essentially between leaving the last things "unsaid," and giving voice to the end.' (Nixon, 2009, 25) Beckett's shortest poem (under the title 'Ceiling') briefly – and thus most aptly – touches upon the same fleetingness: no sooner has the eyelid opened than it has to bid farewell: 'lid eye bid / byebye' (UoR MS 2901, 15r; Van Hulle, 2008, 34). The 'Sottisier' Notebook thus appears to be not just the place where Beckett gathered the publishable, if not 'definitive', versions of his poems; it is a sort of 'commonplace book'. In Samuel Johnson's dictionary, 'commonplace' is mentioned as a verb: 'to reduce to general heads, to make notes'. The word 'commonplace' is based on the Latin term *locus communis* in the rhetorical sense of a passage of general application, a leading text cited in argument, or in the OED sense of 'a striking or notable passage, noted, for reference or use, in a book of common places or commonplace-book'. At the same time, the 'Sottisier' is also a book of commonplaces in the second OED sense: 'a common or ordinary topic; an opinion or statement generally accepted or taken for granted; a stock theme or subject of remark, an every-day saying. Slightly: A platitude or truism.'

The 'ordinary topic' that is so present in this notebook – but even more prominently on the scrappy drafts as the most common of places – is death, death as a commonplace, as 'a passage of general application' in the face of which one is kept company by the words or 'fools' ('fous') of the 'every-day sayings', saying 'This is the worst' as the best proof that the worst is yet to come. Against this background, it is only appropriate that Beckett's last commonplace in the 'Sottisier' notebook is a quotation by Mallarmé from *Brise marine*: '.. la

clarté déserte de ma lampe / Sur le vide papier que la blancheur défend' [the desolate light of my lamp / On the empty paper sheathed in its whiteness] (UoR MS 2901, 16v) – after which all the following pages (apart from the inside of the back cover) are appropriately left blank.

### Works Cited

Bair, Deirdre (1978), *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich).

Beckett, Samuel (1965), *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder).

Beckett, Samuel (2009), *Endgame*, preface by Rónán McDonald (London: Faber and Faber).

Beckett, Samuel (2010), *Happy Days*, preface by James Knowlson (London: Faber and Faber).

Beckett, Samuel (2012), *Collected Poems*, ed. Seán Lawlor and John Pilling (London: Faber and Faber).

Mallarmé, Stéphane. "Sea Breeze." trans. Kate Flores. *An Anthology of French Poetry from Nerval to Valéry in English Translation*. Ed. Angel Flores. New York: Doubleday, 1962. 147-149.

Mauthner, Fritz (1923), *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache* (Leipzig: Felix Meiner).

Nixon, Mark (2006), "'The Remains of Trace': Intra- and Intertextual Transference in Beckett's *mirlitonnes* Manuscripts' *Journal of Beckett Studies* 16 (1–2): 110–22.

Nixon, Mark (2009), "'Writing Myself into the Ground': Textual Existence and Death in Beckett' in Steven Barfield, Philip Tew and Matthew Feldman (ed.), *Beckett and Death*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 22-30.

Van Hulle, Dirk (2008), 'Becketts kortste gedicht', in Matthijs Engelberts and Onno Kusters, *Verder: Beckett en de 21<sup>e</sup> eeuw* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press), pp. 31-35.

Van Hulle, Dirk (2018), 'Negative Modernism: Beckett's Poetics of Pejorism and Literary Enactment' in Beloborodova et al. (ed.), *Beckett and Modernism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave), pp. 1-18.

Voltaire (1835), *Œuvres de Voltaire*, Paris: Furne.

Wheatley, David (1995), 'Beckett's *mirlitonnades*: A Manuscript Study' in *Journal of Beckett Studies* 4.2, pp. 47-76.

Yeats, William Butler (1996), *Selected Poems and Four Plays* (New York: Simon and Schuster).

---

<sup>1</sup> See Sotheby's website, <http://www.sothebys.com/fr/auctions/ecatalogue/lot.200.html/2006/english-literature-history-fine-bindings-private-press-and-childrens-books-including-the-first-folio-of-shakespeare-106404> (accessed on 12 December 2018); emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> All translations are mine, unless otherwise indicated.