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Encounters, in Spite of All  
Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan

Francesco Adriano Clerici

Humboldt University

**Abstract** – The paper investigates from a literary perspective the question of the ‘missed encounter’ between two crucial authors of 20<sup>th</sup> century: Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan. Although both living in Paris for the most part of their adult life, sharing acquaintances and friendships, Beckett and Celan never met in person. A last chance presented in March 1970, as the poet and translator Franz Wurm, a mutual friend, invited Celan to come along and meet Beckett. The meeting never took place; few weeks thereafter, Celan drowned unobserved in the Seine. In this paper, I propose a retrospective reading of the ‘missed’, or ‘failed’ encounter between Beckett and Celan within a psychoanalytic framework. I will analyse it as a *negative event*, re-elaborating thus an expression used by André Green in his interpretation of Henry James’ *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903). What Green calls *negative event* does not provide a patho-biographical category. On the contrary, it bridges the reverberations of the psychic work on absence with the creative process of writing and the dynamics of sublimation. Shifting the attention from the bare biographical data to the textual dimension of such ‘missed encounter’, I aim to show how the writings of the two authors may be read as an articulation of an *après-coup* of a non-encounter which, instead of taking place in ‘real life’, opens new margins of representation of an alterity within the ‘life of writing’. As such, writing becomes—between poetry and psychoanalysis—that ‘thirdness’ harbouring the very possibility of an encounter beyond phenomenological categories, bearing testimony for an unknown transgenerational reader.

**Keywords** – Samuel Beckett; Paul Celan; André Green; The Work of the Negative.

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# Encounters, in Spite of All Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan<sup>1</sup>

Francesco Adriano Clerici  
Humboldt University

*I shall transmit the words as received*  
(Beckett, *The Unnamable* 63)

*Ihr das erschwiegene Wort*  
(Celan, *Gedichte* 87)

*Fais en sorte que je puisse te parler*  
(Blanchot, *L'attente, l'oubli*)

The circumstances of the «failed», or «missed» encounter between Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan are nowadays relatively well known. Documents such as letters, biographical studies, testimonies, personal memoirs, and critical monographies published in the last twenty-five years have enriched the knowledge of a context initially characterized by a lack of precise accounts (Dogà 228).

Now, apparently, we know more. We do know, for instance, that Beckett and Celan did not only often show mixed feelings of genuine personal curiosity and respectful distance towards each other. They were also familiar with their respective works, and aware of the deep affinity between their writings (228). We know that Celan once fantasized about bumping into Samuel Beckett at the Closerie des Lilas in Paris—«une petite idée bien idiote», he writes to his wife Gisèle Lestrangé, in a letter Bertrand Badiou dates back to March 1961 (*Correspondance* 132). We know that Celan, who lectured in German language at the École Normale Supérieure from 1959 to 1970, once chose for his students a passage from Beckett's *L'Innommable* (*The Unnamable*) to translate into German (Felstiner, *Celan Beckett* 38):

And yet I am afraid, afraid of what my words will do to me, to my refuge, yet again [...] If I could speak and yet say nothing, really nothing? Then I might escape being gnawed to death.  
(*The Unnamable* 13)

Moreover, we do know of Beckett's discretion towards the work of the Bukovinian Jewish poet, as in March 1984—fourteen years after the last chance of a personal meeting between the two—he declined the invitation of the Irish writer Brian Lynch to pen an introduction for an English edition of Celan's selected poems (Lynch).<sup>2</sup> Finally, we know of how Beckett

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<sup>1</sup> A first draft of this paper has been presented at the international conference *Samuel Beckett and the Non-Human* (02.07 – 02.08.2019, Vrije Universiteit Brussel). I am grateful to Prof. Jean-Michel Rabaté and Prof. Shane Weller for our constructive and encouraging conversations during the congress. Many thanks to Megane Mazé for proofreading this article.

<sup>2</sup> «In March 1984 I asked Samuel Beckett would he consider writing an introduction to Paul Celan: 65 Poems, a volume of translations done in collaboration with Peter Jankowsky [...]. Beckett replied *inter alia*: "I never met him and could not write about his work." That "could not" bears thinking about» (Lynch). See also a brief note by Bernold: «Beckett said: "Celan is beyond me" [*Celan me dépasse*], and

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learned of Celan's death in May 1970 (Craig 232), and of the words he chose to write to Franz Wurm on May 18<sup>th</sup>, 1970: «I have thought of you these last days and the sadness that you must feel at the loss of such a one» (233).<sup>3</sup>

However, beyond the scattered biographical details of a meeting which never took place—and which keeps puzzling and fascinating many scholars—what does remain, today, of the failed encounter between Beckett and Celan?

Introducing his paper on the two authors, Ulisse Dogà rightfully observes that «the bare biographical data proves [...] insufficient to reconstruct meaning and sense of such a missed encounter—as it is often the case when we confront us with literature and its protagonists» (Dogà 228). Indeed, if considered from a mere biographical standpoint, the failed encounter between Beckett and Celan would not be much different from many other examples in the history of literature, nor more meaningful.

Let us think—to mention just one example—to the striking case of Walter Benjamin and Franz Kafka, who almost met on November 10<sup>th</sup>, 1916 in Munich, at the Galerie Hans Goltz. In that occasion, Kafka gave a reading of the back then still unpublished novel *In der Strafkolonie* (*In the Penal Colony*). Walter Benjamin, who was supposed to be in the audience with Gottfried Kölwel, Eugen Mondt, and allegedly even Rainer Maria Rilke, never attended the event. Benjamin would have met Kafka through literature only years thereafter. This crucial encounter would have taken place too, after all—in spite of all—leaving furthermore an indelible mark on Benjamin's friendship with Gershom Scholem, who more than once went back with the imagination to that evening, speculating «upon what an encounter between two such men would have meant» (Scholem 47).

What about Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan, then? How can we read this missed encounter and contextualize its meaning beyond the 'biographical' unfulfillment?<sup>4</sup> What if the failed encounter between Beckett and Celan—an 'event' that, from a factual or phenomenological perspective, remains irreparably voiceless—could retrospectively, and *only retrospectively* allow us to learn more about the legacy of these two protagonists of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature?

To address these themes, I propose to formulate otherwise the question *what remains*, namely by shifting the attention from the bare biographical data to the works the two authors left us, re-examining the question of their failed encounter on the basis of their writings and of the complexity of their creative processes. I thereby situate at the centre of my analysis the text, rather than just the biography of the author (Green, *La letter et la mort* 14), the *Leerstelle*, i.e. the vacant space (Felstiner, *Paul Celan* 273 ff.; 328, n. 31), the *wound* left by a non-encounter, rather than its phenomenological 'truth'.

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one day we were all together he wanted to know from Elmar Tophoven if Celan manifested his desperation in his daily life» (Bernold 58). Elmar Tophoven (1923-1989) was a German translator and writer. He translated from French to German the works of authors such as Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, and especially Samuel Beckett. In autumn 1970, until 1988, he officially took over Celan's position as lecturer at the École Normale Supérieure.

<sup>3</sup> Franz Wurm (1926-2010) was the mutual friend who invited Celan to meet Beckett few weeks earlier, in March 1970. He is also the intermediary who reported what would have retrospectively represented the last failed attempt to organize a meeting between the poets: «In the afternoon I have an appointment with Beckett. I would like him to come along. He hesitates tempted, then he declines: "Unannounced? That's not right." And what if I call B.? "Like so? On the last minute? Forget it." When I return in the evening with insistent greeting from him, he turns sad: "That is probably the only man here I could have had an understanding with". Could have» (Celan-Wurm 250). My translation from the German text. Henceforth, if not otherwise specified, the translations into English are mine.

<sup>4</sup> In order to avoid any misunderstanding: In the following reading, I'm intentionally excluding any direct or indirect stylistic influence between the two authors.

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Hence, what remains, in the writings of Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan, not quite of *their* failed encounter, but rather of *a* failed encounter? How such a ‘failure’, such a ‘delay’ allows us, in turn, to cast new light on their works by reading there a particular intermediary semantic matrix (Green, *La Lettre et la Mort* 20 ff.)? In other words, what of such a ‘failure’ does survive and transforms into writing?<sup>5</sup>

Drawing from André Green’s researches on literature and on the work of the Negative, I aim at translating the ‘failure’ of the encounter between Beckett and Celan, rethinking it as a trace of a meeting that *may* take unwittingly place in a textual threshold. An *entretien* in the distance by means of literature, *in absentia* of the other. My purpose is therefore to reflect upon the poetic power of writing to articulate the unaccomplished, the unpunctual, the absent, and to *transmit* it as textual presence of an absence, preparing and preserving, in *après-coup*, the possibility of an encounter. This would allow us, on the background, to speculate about the relationship between poetry and psychoanalysis, in particular about how poetry may allow us to think the poetic within psychoanalysis and how psychoanalysis would help us to listen to the psychic articulated by poetry.

Analysed as a sort of meta-literary and meta-psychological *topos*—i.e. a margin of self-reflection upon the interplay between the work of writing and the psychic work of representation—the missed encounter between Beckett and Celan would enable us to read their works as what Green calls *transfert d’existence* (Green, *La réserve de l’incroyable* 164-67). That is, on the one hand, as a form of ‘sacrifice’ (in the sense of sublimation: *Le Travail du négatif* 301; *La Lettre et la mort* 63-90) *for* and *in the name* of the work, according to which the writer devotes his life to the *exigence de l’œuvre* (*the demand of the work*; Blanchot, *L’espace littéraire* 43-81). On the other hand, as a form of translation of the limits of life into «the life of writing» (Green, *L’aventure négative* 10), through which the work sets out towards an alterity that is unknown addressee and receiver of the text. From this particular standpoint, the work is what is *created*, but also what

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<sup>5</sup> John Felstiner already suggested this shift in an inspiring article published in 2004, in which he reconstructs the context of the last missed encounter between the two authors in March 1970, offering a precise account of Celan’s last weeks, and charting the biographical parallels between them. Nevertheless, Felstiner’s article goes beyond that, and establishes rich and suggestive connections between the works of the two authors in the light of their failed encounter. «He does not meet him» (Felstiner, *Celan Beckett* 38): so Felstiner’s 2004 article *Paul Celan meets Samuel Beckett* begins, with a striking irony that, still, conveys the awareness that an understanding between the two had been going on for a long time, *elsewhere*. «[...] Hadn’t there already been an understanding, hadn’t they been meeting all along, those years in Paris—the older man a more-or-less voluntary Irish exile to France and French, the younger man, orphaned, homelandless, reaching Paris but cleaving to German: Beckett chipping away at silence with “this dust of words,” Celan with his “gasping words,” with the “prayer-sharp knives / of my / silence”»? During the 1953 opening run of *En attendant Godot*, where Didi and Gogo go on “blathering about nothing in particular,” Celan composed *The Vintagers*, in which “bent toward blindness and lamed,” a “latemouth” thirsts for wine, a “crookstick speaks into / the silence of answers”» (Felstiner, *Celan Beckett* 38). Felstiner’s article has played a crucial role in the reception of the relationship between Beckett and Celan, influencing many recent studies (Dogà 227-42; Nixon 152-68; Weller, *From ‘Gedicht’ to ‘Genicht’; Language and Negativity*). However, it was no doubt Theodor W. Adorno one of the few firsts who recognized and reflected on the affinity between the writings of Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan, who represented for him «the only writers capable of negotiating the survival of literature after Auschwitz» (Nixon, *Text-void* 153; Zilcosky 670-91). Their writings did not only resonate «the most extreme horrors of the century» (Adorno, *GS* 10 506), but bore a form of witness, whose corrosive potential could not find place in the historiographical archives (Nixon, *Text-void* 157), being the very immedicable wound of memory, the trace of the very absence of the witness—what remains of testimony in the exile of the word (Blanchot, *Le dernier à parler* 43): «Niemand / zeugt für den / Zeugn» (Celan, *Gedichte* 198). Sadly, Adorno’s project to substantiate his views in two essays on Celan’s *Sprachgitter* and on Beckett’s *The Unnamable*—as testified by the annotations Adorno penned on the books of the two authors (Adorno, *GS* 11 708)—remained unfulfilled due to his death on the August 6<sup>th</sup>, 1969.

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would have been found (*La Lettre et la Mort* 112). Writing becomes guardian and bearer of a promise of encounter, which is constantly delayed inasmuch as prepared by the text. And this is, I think, not only the (apparent) ‘paradox’ that marks the missed encounter between Beckett and Celan, but also, in a wider sense, what characterizes the subterranean rhythmic by which literature is underway towards the Other.

In this sense, the «life of writing» is not only what we may call ‘literature’. It represents, on the one hand, the inner, hidden rhythmic according to which a work *would have developed* as trace of a subjectivity. On the other, the unwitting intention of the *poetic* to speak, as Celan reminds us, beyond a discourse, outliving the limits of the subject, towards an alterity that finds, in turn, voice in the text «*im Geheimnis der Begegnung*», «in the secret of the encounter» (Celan, *Meridian* 9). There, «A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine» (Beckett, *Company etc.* 3)

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«The life of writing», in the original French «la vie de l’écriture», is an expression that André Green uses, among others, in a passage of *L’aventure négative* (*The negative adventure*), one of the studies he dedicates to the work of Henry James, namely to the novel *The Beast in the Jungle* (1903).<sup>6</sup>

Green’s researches on the Negative—and, more generally, his contribution to the reorientation of contemporary psychoanalysis—are inseparably intertwined with the exploration, or the «listening» (*The unbinding Process* 17) of literary texts. To avoid any simplification of this complex topic, I will confine myself to a brief remark.<sup>7</sup> Beyond providing a territory of theoretical elaboration and meta-psychological conceptualization, the numerous, wide-ranging studies Green devotes to literary, poetic, and dramatic texts<sup>8</sup> suggest that literature—and especially the work of authors such as Henry James, Marcel Proust, William Shakespeare, Joseph Conrad, and Jorge Luis Borges—represents also a sort of *Doppelgänger*, which accompanies and deeply *affects* Green’s intellectual adventure. In this sense, I think, the literary text provides a ‘reservoir’ of a possible *poetic* of the theory, which, however, deploys such poetic possibility

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<sup>6</sup> Originally appeared in 1986 on the *Nouvelle Revue de Psychanalyse*, then re-printed in the 2009 homonymous collection of papers, the essay *L’aventure négative*—whose title borrows an expression by Henry James himself (Green *L’aventure négative* 13, note 2)—was written by Green in a crucial period of clinical observation and theoretical elaboration. As Urribarri notices, this very intellectual season would have subsequently led to a meta-psychological renewal «beyond the limitations of Freudian and post-Freudian theoretical models» (Urribarri, in Reed and Levine 67). I am therefore inclined to consider *L’aventure négative* as a crucial step in the development of Green’s theory of the Negative. In 1982, Green published the paper *La réserve de l’incréable*—devoted to a rich analysis of Proust’s *La recherche du temps perdu*—as well as the book *Hamlet et Hamlet: Une interprétation psychanalytique de la Tragédie*, focused on the Shakespearian work. The year thereafter, in 1983, Green would have published another important collection of essays: *Narcissisme de vie. Narcissisme de Mort (Life narcissism, death narcissism)*, in which he expands the research in the clinical context of borderline states and narcissistic disorders (Urribarri, in Reed and Levine 67), developing the relationship between narcissism, love drive (*Eros*), and death drive. In 1993, after decades of clinical and theoretical research, Green will publish *Le Travail du négatif (The work of the Negative)*, which represents one of his most important contribution to contemporary psychoanalysis.

<sup>7</sup> A precise account of the relationship between psychoanalysis and literature in André Green’s intellectual journey justifies a much more articulated contribution, which I am currently developing as part of my doctoral research.

<sup>8</sup> From *Un œil de trop: le Complexe d’Œdipe dans la tragédie* (1969), to capital studies such as *La Déliaison* (1971) and *La réserve de l’incréable* (1982), to the 2009 re-press of a selection of essays on Henry James, written between 1980 and 1994. For a wider perspective on the question of the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis see the collection of interviews hosted by Dominique Eddé, published with the title *La Lettre et la Mort* in 2004.

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only in an uncertain, deferred dimension. In other words, the literary work gives form, for Green, to a dimension of knowledge *en souffrance*, trace of a *discours vivant* whose reverberations doesn't cease to deploy as remnants of a fascination (*The unbinding Process* 18) that the intellectual effort of theorization cannot simply exhaust.

*L'aventure négative* is a remarkable testimony of such living exchange at the 'threshold' of theorization, between the poetic within literature and the poetic articulated by psychoanalytic theory. In one of the most interesting pages of this essay, Green reflects upon the meta-literary relevance of *The Beast in the Jungle* for his understanding of James' work. Green articulates here a fundamental element for my reading of the failed encounter between Beckett and Celan:

With *The Beast in the Jungle*, James does not only tell a story, he writes *the* story of his work. In other words, he chooses for theme, for representation, the very representative of his writing: the tale where nothing happens. Therefore, the negative event is not anymore the accident, however important, of a life, it is the life itself of writing, which makes 'nothing' happen in real life, and yet it does make of that 'Nothing' the indefinitely repeated event of the life of writing. (*L'aventure négative* 50)<sup>9</sup>

What Green defines as *événement négatif*<sup>10</sup> allows us to highlight a multi-layered semantic matrix, in which absence locates at the very core of the creative process, remaining inscribed in the text as a *Leerstelle*, or vacant place on the page: a «place of indeterminacy» or «structural gaps», as Felstiner writes (*Paul Celan* 328, note 31), where the poetic is at work: «it's merely a pause, *it's a word-gap, it's a vacant space* [*Leerstelle*], you can see the syllables all standing around».<sup>11</sup> And in a poem Beckett subsequently included in his novel *Watt* as *addendum*, we read:

who may tell the tale  
of the old man?  
weigh absence in a scale?  
mete want with a span?  
the sum assess  
of the world's woes?  
*nothingness*  
*in words enclose?*  
(*Watt* 274; my emphasis)

Particularly interesting in Green's text is the repetition of the word «r/Rien» («nothing»/«Nothing»), that Green writes both in lower- and uppercase letter. The double form «rien» (of what happens in «real life») and the «Rien» («the indefinitely repeated event of the life of writing») is indeed all but accidental. By that, Green articulates, I think, a fundamental aspect, which pertains the dynamics of sublimation: through the work of writing the absence, the negation, is reacquired in a different form in the textual dimension. In the creative process,

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<sup>9</sup> «Avec *La Bête dans la jungle*, James ne raconte pas seulement une nouvelle, il écrit la nouvelle de son œuvre. C'est-à-dire qu'il choisit pour thème, pour représentation, le représentant de son écriture : le récit où il ne se passe rien. Alors l'événement négatif ce n'est plus l'accident, si exceptionnel qu'il soit, d'une vie, c'est la vie même de l'écriture, qui ne fait rien advenir dans la vie mais qui fait de ce Rien, l'événement indéfiniment répété de la vie de l'écriture».

<sup>10</sup> The apparent de-contextualization of Green's quote, which in fact, has been written with specific regards to Henry James' work, does not affect its appropriateness for my analysis. Green's reflections acquire validity and importance inasmuch as they tell us something about the double relationship between the layers of the psychic work of representation of absence and of the work of writing.

<sup>11</sup> My emphasis. I quote here Felstiner's translation of Celan's passage (Felstiner, *Paul Celan* 328, note 31).

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the work on absence involves a transformation through which the subject at work creates a new object, which is in turn at work within the text. The absence of the object becomes, through the work of sublimation, that very object that doesn't stop to call for the representation of what is irrepresentable—i.e. what of the representation remains un-bound (in the sense of Green's concept of *dé-liaison*; Urribarri, *Dialoguer avec André Green* 45).

In this sense, the negative event becomes not only the core of the creative process, but also its *reason*. That is, not only what puts writing into motion, but also the limit around which the work of representation revolves—a 'blankness' that acquires a new status, 'marked' by the work of sublimation, and towards which the psychic function of writing does not cease to return: its intellect, a latent 'logic' *d'ordre inconscient* that articulates through writing.

This very semantic constellation recurs also in two important passages in which Beckett and Celan reflect (interestingly, both in German) on the liminal relationship between language and absence:

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write in an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. [...] To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through [...]. (Beckett, *Disjecta* 171-72)<sup>12</sup>

The Poem – the trace of our breath [Atem] in language.

The breath [Hauch] of our mortality, with which a fragment of language goes over in Nothingness and thereby generates that vacancy that gives form to the New. (Celan, *Der Meridian* 115, note 315)<sup>13</sup>

Beckett's quote is a passage from the famous 1937 German letter to Axel Kaun; Celan's is a note from the preparatory material for the 1960 speech *Der Meridian*. Both texts are far from being programmatic statements of an aesthetic that is already 'performed' and put on the page. They are rather crucial meta-poetic reflections that encapsulate the traces of a germination, which will embody, in new creative seasons, a *corpus* yet to be written, yet to come to the world by means of language.<sup>14</sup>

Allow me to insist here, again, on that «Nothingness» [Nichts], that «marque de manque» (Green *L'aventure négative* 51), which emerges in the reflections of both authors, and that bridges these texts with Green's formulation of the negative event [r/Rien]. In this context, «n/Nothingness» should not be considered in ontological terms as an opposition to a 'being'. The «Nothing» [«Rien»] in capital letter (such as Beckett's and Celan's «Nichts»), represents the name, or rather the *provisorium* of an absence which acquires, through writing, a *structural* and

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<sup>12</sup> «Es wird mir tatsächlich immer schwieriger, ja sinnloser, ein offizielles Englisch zu schreiben. Und immer mehr wie ein Schleier kommt mir meine Sprache vor, den man zerreißen muss, um an die dahinterliegenden Dinge (oder das dahinterliegende Nichts) zu kommen. [...] Ein Loch nach dem andern in ihr zu bohren, bis das Dahinterkauernde, sei es etwas oder nichts, durchzusickern anfängt [...].»

<sup>13</sup> «Das Gedicht – die Spur unseres Atems in der Sprache. / Der Hauch unserer Sterblichkeit, mit dem ein Fragment Sprache hinübergeht ins Nichts und damit jene Vakanz entsteht, die dem Neuen Form gibt.»

<sup>14</sup> In Beckett's case, the letter to Axel Kaun bears the fingerprint of a creativity marked by a liminal work to invent a way to articulate a body, the body of the work, of the subject of writing, at the threshold of language and different languages (Clerici 145-62; Maletta 103-46). This journey of invention would allow him to return, retrospectively, to his mother tongue to re-discover it, at the end of his life, almost untranslatable. In Celan's case, *Der Meridian* opens his last creative season, in which he will push to the limit the capability of German language to name an absence, a surviving trace, a void as deep as the loss of a people, of a world—«Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen», «The world is gone [The world is far away], I have to carry you» (Celan, *Die Gedichte* 210).

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*structuring* function. Around that absence will revolve a new organization of the inner life of the creating subject and of his representational capability. This attempt of nomination—which is, at once, a linguistic process and a psychic movement of deflection from the «real life» towards the «life of writing»—represents the challenge through which the author invents a journey towards an elsewhere: *a life of the work*. In Green words: «It is necessary to pass through the Negative in order to carry the work to the positivity of writing, whose power would be of representing that absence of representation that is the work of the Negative» (*L'aventure négative* 50).<sup>15</sup> That «Nothingness» marks therefore the space of an alterity that defies the domain of language: An elsewhere of language that delays and escapes nomination, and that is nonetheless vital to the very creative process—such as an *a*-symmetric psychic activity<sup>16</sup> that defies the domain of consciousness, and still acts in *tandem* with it (*The work of the Negative* 17).

Indeed, as the 'modes' of thought of psychoanalysis apparently, and just apparently escape the domain of reason, proving instead the existence and the *coexistence* of different forms of rationality in the human mind (*On private Madness* 29), writing puts at work a multi-layered relationship between the dynamics of creativity and the progressive invention of a form of subjectivity that continuously escapes immediate and punctual recognition. The literary word, such as the psychoanalytic, is at once *poly-semy* and *poly-chrony*.<sup>17</sup> That means that the work of writing allows to highlight forms of organization of the inner experience (*L'aventure négative* 61) of a subjectivity marked by a rhythmic of the uncovered, of the undisclosed, latently and perpetually at work. It constitutes the receptacle, the latent linguistic and extra-linguistic reservoir of the poetic of the subject, *à l'insu du sujet*: «je est un autre»—«I is an other» (*La Lettre et la Mort* 98).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> «Il faut passer par le négatif pour amener l'œuvre à la positivité de l'écriture, dont le pouvoir sera de représenter cette absence de représentation qui est le travail du négatif».

<sup>16</sup> «One difficulty facing us in our reflections lies in the opposition between the philosophical perspective (of Hegel), which locates the negative in the movement of consciousness itself, and the psychoanalytic perspective which traces the negative back to a subsumable un-conscious by means of a freer deployment of conscious activity. The unconscious, let us remember, does not occupy a position of pure symmetry with respect to consciousness; it is not like a figure of the development of reflective consciousness which engender the adverse position by its own movement alone; it cannot be identified either as being solely opposed to the positions taken by consciousness. The psychoanalytic unconscious goes beyond these different aspects, more or less explicitly, by ceasing to be identifiable as such by consciousness. For, as Freud reminds us, the unconscious cannot be seen, it can only be deduced» (Green, *The work of the Negative* 40).

<sup>17</sup> In such coexistence of *poly-semy* and *poly-chrony*, which interlocks literature and psychoanalytic through the poetic, echoes a Freudian passage that played a crucial role for André Green (*Avant-coup / Après-coup* 23). In an epochal letter to Wilhelm Fließ dated December 6th 1896, thus written only few weeks after the death of Jacob Freud, Sigmund says: «Du weißt, ich arbeite mit der Annahme, daß unser psychischer Mechanismus durch Aufeinanderschichtung entstanden ist, indem von Zeit zu Zeit das vorhandene Material von Erinnerungsspuren eine Umordnung nach neuen Beziehungen, eine Umschrift erfährt. Das wesentlich Neue an meiner Theorie ist also die Behauptung, daß das Gedächtnis nicht einfach, sondern mehrfach vorhanden ist, in verschiedenen Arten von Zeichen niedergelegt» (Freud – Fließ 217). «As you know, I am working on the assumption that our psychic mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory traces being subjected from time to time to a rearrangement in accordance with new circumstances—to a retranscription. What is essentially new about my theory is thus the thesis that memory is present not once but several times over, laid down in various kinds of signs».

<sup>18</sup> During one of Dominique Eddé's interviews with Green, we read: «Je ne me considère pas comme un écrivain mais j'ai quand même beaucoup écrit et il m'arrive en rouvrant l'un de mes livres, parfois à vingt ans de distance, de me dire, étonné : "Ah tiens, c'est moi qui ai écrit cela... c'était déjà là!"» (Green, *La Lettre et la Mort* 98). «I don't consider myself a writer, but at least I wrote much; and it occurs to me

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It is precisely the red thread of a work *on* an absence and *in the name* of an absence that leads us to the core of the *événement négatif* and of the work of the Negative. As conceived by André Green, and as it emerges in the works of Beckett and Celan, the work of the Negative cannot thus be reduced to a form of linguistic scepticism or to the articulation of the unknown. The work of the Negative doesn't simply represent a «necessity of confronting the inexpressible, of bearing witness to the void» (Nixon, *Text-void* 164), nor a performative commitment «to the impossible», in order to «bear witness to a vision of ruination, disaster, calamity, the monstrosity of what happened, and what continues to happen» (Weller, *Language and Negativity* 247). The linguistic dimension of the Negative represents just a particular layer of the work of the Negative, or rather, its surface: the linguistic trace of something which structurally «inhabits the subject» (Green, *The work of the Negative* 266) on a much deeper layer (14-25), or rather orchestrating and structuring the subject on a complexity of levels.<sup>19</sup>

The writings of Samuel Beckett and Paul Celan can be read as *negative adventures* because they bear inscribed a latency of the possibility of the encounter, which emerges in the «life of writing» as the 'future in the past' of the nomination of the otherness. In this respect, Beckett and Celan construct by means of literature a wait, a form of attention, of delay of the encounter. Not the encounter as 'factual event', but rather as possibility and promise of its nomination. The deferred resonances of their works prepare what cannot but remain «a space, in which the object *may* be capable presenting itself» (Anzieu 255; my emphasis), hence a *possibility* of an encounter with an otherness—the possibility of *making the encounter happen* by nominating it as *provisorium*, articulating the linguistic measure of what transcends language.<sup>20</sup> Writing means here: what doesn't cease to write its own unaccomplishment:

[...] I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, I 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, perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on. (Beckett, *The Unnamable* 134)

THE TO-BE-RESTUTTERED WORLD  
where I would have been  
guest, a Name,  
sweated down from the Wall  
on which a Wound licks up.<sup>21</sup>  
(Celan, *Die Gedichte* 321)

Therefore, by reading the failed encounter between Beckett and Celan through Green's formulation of the *événement négatif*, I do not mean, of course, that the fact that Beckett and Celan never met personally made them write the way they wrote and what they wrote.<sup>22</sup> Their

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to tell myself stupefied, reopening a book of mine, perhaps after twenty years: "Look at that, it was me who wrote that... it was already there!"»

<sup>19</sup> I analysed this very subject also in another paper on Franz Kafka and Beckett (Clerici 145-62).

<sup>20</sup> Let us not forget, on this point, the capital pages that Green dedicates to the question of affect in Freud (*Discours vivant*).

<sup>21</sup> «DIE NACHZUSTOTTERNDE WELT, / bei der ich zu Gast / gewesen sein werde, ein Name, / herabgeschwitzt von der Mauer, / an der eine Wunde hochleckt».

<sup>22</sup> André Green never dedicated any systematic study to the works of the two authors. I am inclined to think that this is not due to a lack of knowledge or interest for Beckett's or Celan's work (Beckett is mentioned e.g. in a crucial passage of the essay *La déliaison*, thereby suggesting that Green was at least familiar with the French prose of the author). On the contrary, the answer to this question might be

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failed encounter, however, can function, in a synecdochical sense, as an interpretative resource to shed retrospectively light on that dimension of absence, on the work of the Negative, which is already specifically operating in their respective creative processes, and whose traces are deeply inscribed in Beckett's and Celan's writings, albeit recognizable only in the unpredictable retroactive reverberations of the *opus*. It is therefore in the encounter between *poly-semy* and *poly-chrony* within the poetic that we may imagine an encounter between Beckett and Celan.

Green's *événement négatif* offers thus a new, original possibility to read the question of the event that *radically diverges* from a phenomenological perspective, according to which «there [could] be no thinking of the event which is not at the same time a thinking of phenomenality» (Dastur 187). How so? Probably because literature, rather than allowing a convergence of *phenomenon* and *event*, operates as the very form of delay of the 'arrival' of the other. Writing articulates the wait of an alterity that yet comes always 'too late', or better, which becomes recognizable only *a posteriori*. It is in such sense that the 'event' does not occur but as constant *après-coup* [*afterwardsness*; *Nachträglichkeit*] of the work of writing. In Green words: «[...] The moment in which *that* occurs it is not the moment in which *that* signifies [...]» (Green *Avant-coup / Après-coup* 22; my emphasis).<sup>23</sup>

Interestingly also, Green's reflections on the *événement négatif* are part of a series of subsequent *addenda* integrated in the book *L'aventure négative*, in sections called, significantly, *Après-coup*, which the author alternates with the texts of the original essays previously published. By intertwining these different layers of textual analysis and reflections—that articulate the oscillation of the analytic thinking—Green offers a crucial meta-psychological and meta-literary hint as to how not only his interpretation of Henry James' writings, but also psychoanalysis,<sup>24</sup> alike literature, is characterized by the generative and creative power of a rhythmic of the *après-coup*, through which the work of literature escapes its own completeness, as outcome of an endless germinative process (*L'aventure négative* 57):

I think it is important to remark that [the concept of *après-coup*] absolutely questions the idea of a linear developmental conception. That is, of every process based on continuity: It equally opposes to the idea of a unique, momentary acquisition of a given instant of development, for it

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found in a peculiarity of the relation between literature and psychoanalysis, promptly noted by Green himself in 1972, while reflecting on a «mutation» within literature, which is «contemporaneous with the birth and development of psychoanalysis». Green writes: «[...] The great majority of literary works which have been the object of psychoanalytic studies were written before this mutation took place. It is therefore legitimate to explore [...] the meaning of this curious phenomenon whereby psychoanalysis turns toward the works of the past rather than toward contemporary works, as if shying away from the latter, or even declaring its incompetence to deal with the literature of its own age» (*The Unbinding Process* 11-12). I am willing to return upon the crucial importance of this 'theoretical *après-coup*' characteristic of the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis in another contribution.

<sup>23</sup> An English translation of this text cannot render how much that *ça* carries for Green. «[...] Le moment où *ça* se passe n'est pas le moment où *ça* se signifie [...]» We will have to re-read this sentence again in a different work.

<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the *Nachträglichkeit* does not only represent an essential feature of the work of the Negative (Green, *The work of the Negative* 11) and thus of the *événement négatif*. In a more general sense, it is «co-naissant» with psychoanalysis (*Avant-coup / après-coup* 22), and co-existent with writing. Let me highlight here Green's fascinating lexical inventiveness. With the expression *co-naissant*, he plays with the almost homographic kinship between the words *naissance* (*co-naissant* i.e. *born together*) and *connaissance* (*connaître* i.e. *knowing*). By that, Green suggests here that the concept of *après-coup* coincides, on the one hand, with the birth of psychoanalysis. On the other, it represents an indispensable aspect of its clinical and theoretical development, i.e. of the ways wherein the hardly accessible, too often misunderstood complexity of clinical praxis can be translated into the construction of theoretical knowledge—which is on its own a continuous work in progress of elaboration and mutual interrogation with the clinic dimension.

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does not constitute a continuity, but rather a structure that creates sense and which is based upon a breakage of the progressive approach. It relativises thus the observational approach; and what is extremely important [...] it presupposes within the psychic apparatus a temporal generative potentiality, a potentiality of semantic order. That means that every utterance stands for something else which is yet to come, and which pertains that or that element of the past, as well as that given phantom of the future. (*Avant-coup / Après-coup* 22)<sup>25</sup>

In other words, the concept of the negative event does not provide a patho-biographical category, nor can it be reduced to a fictionalization of life experience. It rather allows us to rethink the psychic function of writing as the interminable work in progress of the «objectivation of the subjectivity by means of writing» (*La Lettre et la Mort* 99). Writing, for Beckett and Celan, is indeed not a form of representation of the psychic ‘among others’: it is rather what dictates and enables the invention of a way for the subject to leave and transmit a trace of the world, in the world: A form of life, of *another* life. It is the form that the subject might have retrospectively ‘chosen’ in order to invent a way to give birth to itself as a subject.

The literary work becomes the project of a filiation, which acquires form in writing as psychic space of an encounter that remains open, *en souffrance*, and that as such must be transmitted. The ‘no’, the absence, the emptiness that marks the (non-)encounter between Beckett and Celan, read as a negative event, does not reduce to the ‘opposite’ of the encounter. The ‘event’ becomes that *otherness* of the encounter, which remains entangled in the web of writing as the possibility of a memory, a memory of the future: «I invented my memories» (Beckett *The Unnamable* 114); «DEN VERKIESELTEN SPRUCH in der Faust, / vergißt du, daß du vergißt» (Celan *Gedichte* 201). In the translation by Pierre Joris: «THE SILICIFIED SAYING in the fist, / you forget that you forget» (*Breathturn*, 73). In this sense, negative hallucination (*hallucination négatif*), i.e. the representation of the absence of representation, and ‘event’ are reciprocally interlocked in sublimation (Green *L’aventure négative* 50).

In this coexistence of presence and absence embodied by language, the work carries retrospectively the traces of the representation of something that never happened, transforming it in something that does not stop to be possible: The rest of something that *could* incessantly have been, a ‘meaning’ that defies temporal linearity and restructures past and future of the work. And in this sense, writing saves a remnant of the subject. Not quite a content of the subject, but an inscription that defies language, and that yet doesn’t cease to call for an attempt of representation: the very matrix according to which the subject constructs itself as an *Other* by means of writing.

If ‘biography’, or rather ‘real life’ ‘fails’ in making an encounter happen, writing is that which, quoting Beckett, «fails better» (Beckett *Company etc.* 81), for it represents the filiation of a possibility of an encounter that structurally inhabits the writing. The poetic word, in its counterfactual potential—which unpredictably bridges *praxis* and *poiesis*—opens and invents a subterranean channel through which a *rendez-vous* can *possibly* take place in the «life of writing». Maurice Blanchot promptly grasped such unique power of the poetic, which embodies the mandate of transmission as he wrote in his 1973 book *L’attente, l’oublie* a phrase that recurs,

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<sup>25</sup> «Il me semble important de souligner que [le concept d’après-coup] conteste absolument l’idée d’une conception développementale linéaire. C’est-à-dire toute démarche fondée sur la continuité [...] Il s’oppose également à l’idée d’une saisie momentanée unique d’un quelconque instant du développement, puisqu’il est pris non pas dans une continuité mais dans une structure qui fait sens et qui est basée sur une rupture de la démarche progressive. Il relativise donc la démarche observationnelle, et ce qui est extrêmement important [...] il présuppose dans le psychisme une potentialité générative temporelle, une potentialité d’ordre sémantique, c’est-à-dire que tout énoncé est gros de quelque chose d’autre qui reste à venir, et qui peut concerner tel ou tel élément du passé que tel fantasme de l’avenir».

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almost as a prayer, page after page: «*fais en sorte que je puisse te parler*»— «act in such a way that I can speak to you.»

\* \* \*

*als könnten wir ohne uns wir sein*  
(Celan *Gedichte*)

*One day! In the end. In the end you will utter again.*  
*Yes I remember. That was I. That was I then.*  
(Beckett *Company etc.* 13)

From the text, from that threshold where an encounter is still possible—remnant of the subject, of the otherness, and of that otherness which is the subject of the life of writing—can we attempt to recompose a way ‘backwards’? Backwards towards life, a new life? If the «life of writing» is haunted by a phantasmatic (*fantasme*) dimension which organizes the inner experience of the life to come, how can we cast such light on ‘real life’? Green writes:

The literary criticism of our time, however daring it might pretend to be, always limits itself to deal with writing within the space of a closure. Whether the text is confined within itself in the intra-textual perspective, or closed in the letter of the texts through intertextuality: in both cases there is a closure on life. And even when the very work extends itself until it accepts to enclose life, here, again, the closure is directed only towards the past. The writing is not considered but in a regressing perspective, never in a progressing one. As if it would be definitely too daring to give it a function of premonition or anticipation of the life to come. When a writing finds its seed in a phantom of the life that one can sometimes borrow from another, the writing becomes in turn the phantom which organizes the life to come. Not quite its events, but the inner experience which will organize its contents. (*L’aventure négative* 61)<sup>26</sup>

While writing this paper, I tried to keep in mind these capital words by André Green. I am persuaded that the construction of a retrospective meaning of the missed encounter between Beckett and Celan cannot but go hand in hand with a reflection upon what literature and poetry may save of the human, of the memory, of the past *and* the future, in the space of the text. That is also what makes Beckett and Celan *necessary* for us.

We will never know why, in that March 1970, Celan refused the offer of his friend Franz Wurm to meet Samuel Beckett. But that is probably of secondary importance. I think Ulisse Dogà touches an important point as he speculates that it was perhaps already clear to Celan that no personal meeting, no word murmured *vis à vis* with the Irish poet could add anything to an exchange, in which the writings of the two authors had already been taking part all along (228). At that point, Celan was probably aware that only his poetry had to speak for him as that representative, that ‘unannounced announcement’ towards Beckett.

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<sup>26</sup> «La critique de notre époque, si audacieuse qu’elle se veuille, se borne toujours à traiter de l’écrit dans l’espace d’une clôture. Que l’écrit soit refermé sur lui-même dans la perspective intra-textuelle, qu’il soit enclos dans la lettre des textes par l’intertextualité, il y a fermeture sur la vie. Et quand bien même l’ouverture s’élargit jusqu’à accepter de l’inclure, ici encore la clôture se referme sur le passé. L’écrit n’est envisagé que dans une perspective régrédiente, jamais progrédiente. Comme si l’on trouvait décidément trop osé de lui accorder une fonction prémonitoire ou annonciatrice de la vie à venir. Quand un écrit trouve son germe dans un fantasme de la vie qu’on peut même parfois emprunter à un autre, l’écrit devient à son tour fantasme organisateur de la vie à venir. Non de ses événements mais de l’expérience intérieure qui en ordonnera les données».

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*He doesn't meet him.* Felstiner's sentence may apparently sound final. But it is not, at least for those who, while reading the works of authors such as Beckett and Celan, cannot help but letting them resound together, in a sort of 'entertaining' which 'keeps together' (*inter-tenere*) the citadel of the literary affects. Literary affects are not 'free'—as much as the associations that the analysand articulates during a *séance* are not simply 'free'—but they retrospectively respond to a psychic causality of the subject that *I* would have become. 'Causality', however, doesn't mean that the path is already 'there', nor that such *après-coup* may enable any form of identification. The *I* is always an *other*.

But also another encounter can still happen in 'real life'. It is the encounter of readers and listeners with words that open and invent new worlds: A silent, unexpected reader, towards which authors such as Beckett and Celan casted, with their works, a *Flaschenpost*—a message in the bottle. Would not thus a failed, or rather a *delayed* encounter represent the *poetic*—the reason of the poetic—of their writing? Or is it rather the poetic of a new way to read and let them speak to each other? The literary word, as much as the literary silence, is a counterfactual, testimonial, spermatic word: It generates life, it rediscovers moments undreamt of.

Somewhere, somewhen, hidden in between the breath of the generations, there would have awaited the imagination of a reader to become the soundboard of an 'event' that takes place over and over again: A memory without remembrance. A *handshake*, as Celan hoped, happening in the mind of a *thirdness* no one would have expected. Wouldn't that mean to inherit the irrepresentable hosted within a work, within a wound that marks an encounter?

*What becomes of the words in our books when we no longer read them?* (Green, *The work of the Negative* 21) wondered an analysand. The question left a lasting impression on André Green, who took note of it during a session: He is right, when he writes that these words convey a «matter of life and death» (21). While imagining how to close this work, I often let resound in me the words Derrida wrote at the beginning of his essay *Béliers*. Back then, he was writing about Gadamer. I surprised myself imagining Beckett and Celan as two friends, missing the chance of a last encounter, which survives through the page «after the end of the world»:

[...] One of us two *will have* had to remain alone. Both of us knew this in advance. And right from the start. One of the two *will have* been doomed, from the beginning, to carry alone, in himself, both the dialogue, which he must pursue beyond the interruption, and the memory of the first interruption.

And carry the world of the other, which I say without the facility of a hyperbole. The world after the end of the world. (*Sovereignties* 140)

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