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You Call this "Freedom"? The Fight to Publish and  
Produce Samuel Beckett's First Full-length Play

Stephen Graf

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*Samuel Beckett completed his first full-length play, Eleutheria, in 1947. Unsuccessful in his attempts to get it produced, Beckett consigned Eleutheria to "the trunk." The play did not fully emerge until five years after Beckett's death when his former American publisher, Barney Rosset, began a drawn-out battle with the Beckett estate to translate and then publish the work. The melodrama surrounding Eleutheria did not end with publication, as it has yet to see the stage.*



Samuel Beckett has not often been associated with melodrama. Following his breakthrough as a dramatist with *En attendant Godot*, Beckett's works for the stage were typically distinguished by sparseness of setting, threadbare plots, and characterizations whittled down to the absolute essentials that were often interpreted as a "static representation of a trans-cultural human condition" (Boxall 246). Prior to that breakthrough Beckett did produce one work—his first full-length play, *Eleutheria*—that has "several times [been] referred to as running to melodrama" (McMillan and Fehsenfeld 42). If the script contains some uncharacteristic elements of melodrama, it pales in comparison to the soap operatic drama surrounding the struggle to publish and produce the three-act play. David Tucker described it as a "saga of legal brinkmanship among old friends" (235), in his 2011 essay "Posthumous Controversies," and pointed out the struggle was "frequently spiteful, financial and reputational" (242). Intriguing as the story is, not many outside of Beckett studies are aware of this controversy

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because production of the play continues to be suppressed owing to several factors. Yet the story surrounding *Eleutheria*, though it lacks a definitive ending, nevertheless is a drama to which Beckett's fellow Anglo-Irishman, that noted master of melodrama Dion Boucicault, would have been proud to ascribe his name.

*Eleutheria* was written during an amazing explosion of creativity that took place during the four years following World War II, often referred to as "the siege in the room" (Knowlson 332). It was during this period that Beckett turned to writing in French full-time. The first works he produced were three long short stories and a novel, *Mercier et Camier*, which was completed in 1946 but not published until 1973. At the beginning of 1947, Beckett, as he explained to biographer Deirdre Bair in 1972, "turned to writing plays to relieve myself of the awful depression the prose led me into. Life at that time was too demanding, too terrible, and I thought theatre would be a nice diversion" (361). Between 18 January and 24 February of 1947 Beckett penned *Eleutheria* (Knowlson 328). The Greek word for "freedom," *eleutheria*, as Peter Boxall points out, "combines reference to the defence of political freedom with reference to a British colonial territory [the Bahaman island Eleuthéria]" (250). The plot is centered on a young man named Victor Krap who desires to withdraw from life along with all of the metaphysical implications that accompany such an aspiration. *Eleutheria* was, as Beckett used to say of his plays, "ready for the road" by March or April of 1947 (Knowlson 331). It did not find its way onto the stage in Beckett's lifetime, in spite of being "released in 1947–49 for circulation among Paris theatre producers, first by Jacoba van Velde, who, as Toni Clerckx, acted for a time as Beckett's agent in France, and then by [his future wife] Suzanne Dumesnil" (Knowlson and Pilling 23). Director Jean Vilar, who created the Festival d'Avignon and the Théâtre National Populaire, expressed interest in *Eleutheria*, but demanded a "root and branch re-write" which Beckett refused (Dukes, "Second Englishing" 75).

After Beckett completed *En attendant Godot* in January 1949, Dumesnil dutifully trudged the streets of Paris with a box containing the manuscripts of both plays. Dumesnil canvassed every director and producer who would talk to her, causing Beckett to acknowledge in a letter to Georges Duthuit on 30 July 1949: "Suzanne has been going to a lot of trouble over the two plays" (Beckett, *Letters* 172). Upon seeing Roger Blin's staging of August Strindberg's *Ghost Sonata* at the Gaité Montparnasse in the spring of 1950, Dumesnil took him the typescripts for *En attendant Godot* and *Eleutheria*. Blin admired both plays, but was originally going to stage the more traditional *Eleutheria* first because while he liked *En attendant Godot* he did not fully understand it. However, finances forced Blin to reverse that decision,

as he later explained, "*Eleutheria* had seventeen characters, a divided stage, elaborate props and complicated lighting. I was poor. . . . I decided I would be better off with *Godot* because there were only four actors and they were bums. They could wear their own clothes if it came to that, and I wouldn't need anything but a spotlight and a bare branch for a tree" (qtd. in Ackerley and Gontarski 63). So it was Blin's decision—based not on literary merit but rather on very practical reasons of finances and staging logistics—that brought about a theatrical revolution with *En attendant Godot*, and at that point resigned the other play to "the trunk."

Owing to prior commitments by both the director and the venue, as well as various other delays,<sup>1</sup> *Godot* did not actually find its way onto the stage of the Théâtre de Babylone until January 1953. Once it did, though, *Godot* quickly became the talk of theatrical Paris, and soon blossomed into an international sensation. Word of the play made its way across the Atlantic to a young American World War II veteran, Barney Rosset, who, after purchasing the fledgling Grove Press two years earlier, had transformed it into an alternative press. Under Rosset's watch, Grove would bring to the American reading public such previously censored works as the unexpurgated version of D. H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in 1959 and Henry Miller's *Tropic of Cancer* in 1961 in spite of legal action that was ultimately resolved in the Supreme Court.<sup>2</sup> He also introduced US readers to future Nobel Laureates Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, Kenzaburō Ōe, and Harold Pinter, among others. Before all of that, Rosset signed Beckett and built Grove Press around the unprepossessing Irish expatriate.

In the spring of 1953, Rosset traveled to Paris to meet with Beckett who, according to Rosset, "greatly intrigued me" (*The Subject*). After an impromptu session of drinking stretched into the early morning, Rosset secured the American publication rights for *Godot*. Grove brought Beckett's English translation of the play to the American reading public one year later. It eventually sold more than 2.5 million copies in the United States. Rosset became Beckett's exclusive American publisher and theatrical agent; the two forged such a close bond that Beckett would refer to Rosset as his American "spiritual son" (Beckett was sixteen years older than Rosset).

Thirty-three years later, Rosset would return to Paris to meet with Beckett under much altered circumstances. Rosset had sold Grove one year earlier to oil heiress Ann Getty and British publisher Lord George Weidenfeld. In spite of an agreement that Rosset would remain as editor-in-chief of Grove for a term of five years, the new owners dismissed him after the first year. John Oakes, a former editor with Grove, in a 2012 interview, said of the split that Rosset was "in a very brutal fashion kicked out." The drama surrounding Rosset's ouster from Grove set the melodrama of the fight to

publish and produce *Eleutheria* in motion. Thus, it was a dispirited Rosset who turned up at the Bar Américain, a little alcove in La Closerie des Lilas on the Boulevard du Montparnasse for Beckett's eightieth birthday celebration in the spring of 1986.

A young American academic, Stanley Gontarski, was at the Bar Américain that day. Gontarski, who went on to serve as the editor of the *Journal of Beckett Studies* from 1989 to 2008, recalled in a 2012 interview that Beckett "was visibly upset" to learn of the negative turn of events for his longtime friend and publisher: "Barney was sitting next to Beckett, but there were a lot of people milling around, so it was hard to hear the full conversation. But I had a discussion with Barney about it right afterward. And I had a discussion with Beckett about it, because we were living in Paris at the time, afterward." Rosset, who passed away in February 2012, wrote of the conversation in his as yet unpublished memoir, *The Subject Is Left Handed*,<sup>3</sup> that Beckett said: "Every author of [Rosset's] should offer [him] a manuscript."

What resulted from that conversation was that Beckett volunteered to "find something in the trunk to help Rosset begin yet again" (Gontarski, Introduction xiv). The two works discussed were *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, an unfinished novel in English from 1932, or *Eleutheria*. While *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* seemed the obvious choice, Beckett was uncomfortable releasing it at that point as it was a roman à clef and too many of the principals were still alive. So Beckett opted for *Eleutheria* and, according to Gontarski, "He inscribed a copy of the play to Rosset to seal the agreement" (Introduction xv). The signed copy of the typescript of *Eleutheria* that Beckett presented Rosset in 1986 was not the first he'd seen of the play. According to Rosset's memoir: "In 1963 we had a copy of *Eleutheria* in our possession, for some reason. In a letter dated February 7, 1963 to Grove assistant Judith Schmidt [Beckett instructed the publisher to] 'Please hold both original and copies of *Eleutheria* and *Mercier and Camier*'" (*The Subject*). Gontarski, who has edited an as-yet unpublished collection of Beckett's correspondence with both Rosset and Grove Press, observes that Beckett's letters indicate the manuscript had been with Grove since the 1950s:

The editors there, every once in a while because Grove moved so often, and there was a danger in the manuscript being thrown out, would write letters asking Beckett what they should do with this manuscript. And he kept saying: "Just hold onto it." What he *didn't* say—especially significant to me—what he didn't say was: "Chuck it in the trash," or "Burn it," or anything like that. He kept saying "Hold onto it," as if he never knew. (Interview)

After giving Rosset the typescript to *Eleutheria* during that meeting in the spring of 1986, Beckett then "withdrew to Ussy to take on the clearly distasteful task of translating the play into English" (Gontarski, Introduction xv).

The problem was the author did not mean to merely translate the work, which in itself was never a simple process with Beckett. Beckett intended to give the play the thoroughgoing revision he had spoken of in a letter to Christian Ludvigsen dated 23 April 1956 when he "decided [*Eleutheria*] can neither be produced or published as it stands. I may try to revise it some day, but I think this is unlikely" (Beckett, *Letters* 616). What seemed unlikely for a Beckett in the prime of his career quickly proved impossible for the octogenarian. He wrote to Rosset in June of 1986: "I had completely forgotten *Eleutheria*. I have read it again. With loathing. I cannot translate it, let alone have it published. Another rash promise" (qtd. in Rosset, *The Subject*). So the project had to be shelved. It is unclear what Rosset would have done with the play had Beckett, in fact, managed to translate it in 1986 as Rosset had signed a draconian non-competition agreement prior to departing Grove.

While *Eleutheria* remained a "trunk manuscript,"<sup>4</sup> it was perhaps the most widely read unpublished work in the literary world. Robert Scanlan, a professor of the practice of theatre at Harvard and director of the American Repertory Theater, said of the play at a symposium by the Samuel Beckett society on 29 December 1994: "We have all known about the play for years, I have actually discussed the play with Samuel Beckett, as early as the early eighties. He knew we knew about it; he talked to us about it and the decision not to publish it" (*Eleutheria: Publication*). It was Gontarski who reignited the process in 1993 because: "I had been thinking about *Eleutheria* for a long time—partly because, although it was technically not published, everybody I knew had a copy of it" (Interview). A lot had transpired since Beckett first promised Rosset *Eleutheria* in 1986. The author passed away in December 1989, and Grove Press had changed hands again, opening the possibility of Rosset independently publishing Beckett's work. Gontarski took it upon himself to translate the play into English. He forwarded his completed rough draft to Rosset, saying: "This may be the time. Just do it" (Interview).<sup>5</sup>

Rosset agreed with Gontarski, and took the translation to Beckett's heir, nephew Edward Beckett, in England. Edward Beckett rejected the translation for publication because, as Gontarski recalls, "it wasn't literary enough" (Interview). Rosset subsequently wrote to Edward Beckett on 22 April 1993 stating: "*Eleutheria* is an important seminal work by the one of the greatest writers of this century. . . . It is a key work to the understanding of the entire Samuel Beckett oeuvre" (Barney Rosset Papers). Rosset

suggested both sides take a month think about it, and then revisit the decision after they'd had time to "cool off" (Rosset, letter to Lindon 7 April 1994, Barney Rosset Papers). Rosset, however, did not cool off, as Gontarski notes: "Barney, in his usual way, didn't take it as a rejection. He said, 'Well, I'll get it re-translated'" (Interview).

Beckett, who married Dumesnil late in life and had no children, had constructed for himself as he rose to prominence a literary family of sorts. On one side of his literary family tree was his American "spiritual son," Rosset. The other side of that tree was firmly rooted in France. Having no less claim to Beckett was Jérôme Lindon, the widely admired head of Éditions de Minuit. Lindon signed Beckett in 1950 and had published the original French versions of the trilogy of novels and *En attendant Godot* all prior to Rosset ever encountering Beckett. Beckett named Lindon his literary executor, a position which Lindon "exercised assiduously (some might say excessively)" (Ackerley and Gontarski 320). In Paris, Lindon was aware of Rosset's desire to publish an English translation of *Eleutheria* and disapproved of the venture from the outset. On 27 April 1993 Lindon sent Rosset and his attorneys a curt letter meant to arrest the process before it could gain momentum: "I believe you ought to impart to your attorney the full text of Sam's holographic will hereunder photocopied. That should enable them to determine who, whether you or I, is the literary executor of Samuel Beckett's work" (Barney Rosset Papers). Rosset immediately faxed back a response, striking a conciliatory note, suggesting: "Perhaps it is similar to that which happened with *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*" (Rosset, letter to Lindon 27 April 1993, Barney Rosset Papers). Although he opted against giving Rosset *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* in 1986, Beckett subsequently changed his mind and signed off on the novel being published after his death. British publisher John Calder, with the consent of the Beckett Estate, sold the American rights for *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to Richard Seaver's Arcade Books in 1993. Rosset had felt, given his history with Beckett, that he should have been provided the first opportunity to publish the novel in the United States. It remained a sore point with Rosset for many years.

While he waited to see if Edward Beckett would change his position on *Eleutheria*, in late 1993 or early 1994 Rosset found a second translator, Albert Bermel, whom he would later describe to Lindon as "an esteemed member of our New York theatrical world" (Rosset, letter to Lindon 7 April 1994, Barney Rosset Papers). An Englishman who emigrated to the United States in 1955, Bermel was an accomplished translator, particularly of French drama, had published a number of works on European theatre and had been an associate professor of theatre at Columbia University and the City University of New York. As his son Derek recalled in 2012, Albert

Bermel agreed to undertake the translation "without the typical assurances you get" because "he loved Beckett" (Interview).

Bermel produced a complete translation, and, at Rosset's behest, would go on to travel across the country, presenting the play at scholarly conferences. Bermel's translation was eventually jettisoned for reasons that are not entirely clear. Derek Bermel recalls Rosset only saying that "there was a problem with the estate" (Interview). Gontarski affirms that Edward Beckett passed on the Bermel translation after Rosset presented it to him (Gontarski interview). The man who took over the job as translator from Bermel, Michael Brodsky, in a 2012 interview stated that Bermel "didn't understand why [he was replaced as translator]. He felt sort of like a jilted lover who was dropped." Rosset never attempted to publicly explain the change in translators, although he once succinctly told Marius Buning, "We didn't like it" (qtd. in Buning).

The cooling-off period that Rosset suggested stretched on for almost a year. In April 1994, the action of this melodrama began to rise toward a climax. Rosset wrote to Lindon informing him that the Irish Repertory Theatre wished to stage a reading of Bermel's as-yet uncompleted translation in the Walter Kerr Theater on Broadway on 23 May of that year. When Lindon flatly refused to allow this reading to take place, Rosset suggested that if the two publishers could not resolve the matter between themselves amicably, that they allow an arbitrator to decide the matter for them (Rosset, letter to Lindon 8 April 1994, Barney Rosset Papers). This series of correspondences set off what Rosset's attorney, Martin Garbus, in his foreword to the play, described as "a clash of moral and legal values, personalities, cultures and legal systems" (iii).

From a strictly legal perspective: "Under French law, there is substantial protection of an author's moral rights to control his own work during his life and after death" (Garbus iii). Whereas, there is less protection in the United States because, as Garbus explains, the First Amendment has created "an extraordinary commitment to the free exchange of ideas; in case of doubt, we say publish and let the reader judge the value of the art" (iii). Oakes, who would team with his former mentor Rosset in trying to bring *Eleutheria* to print, agrees that the market should be allowed to decide the fate of the work: "The question was not whether or not Beckett would've wanted it published. . . . If a guy like Beckett wrote it, I want to read it. People don't have to buy it, or attend the performance, but I want to know" (Interview). Oakes goes on to make several very cogent points: "This was not a play that was unfinished. It was a play that he wrote not as a whipper-snapper; he was in his forties at the time he gave this to Blin. He had a mature intellect when he wanted this to be onstage. If it had been scribbblings of Beckett when he was a teenager, I actually would be inter-

ested, but then I think you would have some legitimate point in saying this was not appropriate" (Interview). Beckett was forty years old when he composed *Eleutheria*, so Oakes is correct in noting that the play hardly qualifies as juvenilia. At the time he completed it, Beckett very much wanted to get the play performed and published. He even submitted it for consideration for the prestigious Prix Rivarol, which the French government awards to foreign authors who write directly in French. It is true that later, after achieving international fame, Beckett would write on a typescript of the play in a note dated 1969: "Never edition of any kind if I can help it."<sup>6</sup>

Edward Beckett, who both Oakes and Gontarski insist had initially appeared open to the idea of a translation, eventually became enmeshed in the legal wrangling. To generate publicity as well as keep pressure on the other side, Rosset scheduled a series of public readings of the play using Bermel's translation. After the Irish Repertory Theatre's presentation was scuttled, the New York Theatre Workshop stepped in and scheduled a reading for 26 September 1994. When Edward Beckett learned of the event, he told Mel Gussow of the *New York Times* that Rosset's claim of having been given the publication rights to *Eleutheria* was "a figment of his imagination." Edward Beckett went on to add: "All those who may be party to this New York event which deliberately transgresses the will expressed by Samuel Beckett, would of course expose themselves to legal proceedings" (qtd. in Gussow 11). This threat sufficed to frighten away the theatre, forcing Rosset to organize an informal reading in his loft in Greenwich Village.

The publicity surrounding Rosset's reading in New York, according to Scanlan, "started a tremendous interest in the play" (*Eleutheria: Publication*). Scanlan, who described himself as having been "a student of Beckett for most of my adult life," had "made it no secret that I would love to direct the play" (*Eleutheria: Publication*). Lindon, after learning of the American Repertory Theater's interest in producing *Eleutheria*, asserted in a letter dated October 1994: "Samuel Beckett told me again in the presence of witnesses a few days before his death that he deemed his play *Eleutheria* to be—a failure. He opposed it being published or performed on stage. He gave me the honor of being the literary executor, in order that I see to it that his will and wishes be respected" (qtd. in *Eleutheria: Publication*). Lindon then threatened Scanlan with a lawsuit if he proceeded with his intended production, thwarting the performance.

Most observers at the time viewed the situation as a power struggle primarily between Rosset and Lindon, with Edward Beckett trapped in the middle feeling, in Scanlan's words, "terribly split" (*Eleutheria: Publication*). Edward Beckett, as Tucker points out, "tried to convince Rosset to abandon the idea, but to no avail" (237). At this point, Beckett came to

way. As a result of Rosset's part in the second staged reading of the play on 13 October 1994, the Beckett Estate relieved Rosset of his position as Beckett's exclusive theatrical agent for North America—a duty Rosset had performed informally for more than thirty years prior to Samuel Beckett making the appointment official following Rosset's ouster from Grove in 1986. When the Samuel Beckett Society asked Edward to address them at their December 1994 symposium on *Eleutheria* in San Diego, he repeated "my uncle's well known comments that he considers this work to be a failure and that he was totally opposed to any publication or performance." To Edward, it was "quite unthinkable that one should try to override his wishes in such a blatant fashion" (*Eleutheria: Publication*). Lindon and Edward Beckett were intent on honoring the letter of Samuel Beckett's final wishes, as they understood them. Rosset, on the other hand, was determined to honor the spirit of Beckett's work.

On Rosset's side, a three-fold argument to publish existed that was equally compelling. First, from a purely academic perspective, Gontarski points out: "I believe it is an important work in the genesis of Beckett's technical development. Whether or not it is a successful play in and of itself is much less important than if the play has any genealogy of Beckett's" (Interview). Dougal McMillan and Martha Fehsenfeld, writing about the play in 1988, shared a similar attitude: "Though couched in the humorous language of dramatic parody, *Eleutheria* contains the serious theoretical underpinnings of the new kind of drama Beckett was to initiate in *Godot*. Many passages in it contain the seeds of Beckett's later work" (30). Beckett's work continues to generate enormous interest: there have been more books and essays written about Beckett's work than any other writer's except Shakespeare, and scholarly journals and a society devoted solely to his work exist. Demand for *Eleutheria* was great not only from what Oakes refers to as "the Beckett industry," but also from Beckett's fans outside of academia who were not privy to underground typescripts.

Second, as Rosset points out in his memoir, Beckett had a habit of changing his mind about earlier works. In 1964 Beckett had opposed a re-release of his long out-of-print 1934 collection of short stories, *More Pricks than Kicks*, but then relented in 1970. Beckett was against publishing *Mercier et Camier* in 1960, but changed that position ten years later.<sup>7</sup> He had even allowed excerpts of the original French version of *Eleutheria* to be published in *La Revue d'esthétique* in 1986.<sup>8</sup> So it is entirely possible that Beckett may eventually have reversed his position on *Eleutheria*. Indeed, in Rosset's mind that had already occurred when Beckett initially promised him the play in 1986.

Finally, as Oakes observed, artists are not always the best judges of their own work. Beckett was acutely critical of everything he produced. For

instance, on 31 October 1953 Beckett wrote to Pamela Mitchell: "I went to *Godot* last night for the first time in a long time. Well played, but how I dislike the play now" (Beckett, *Letters* 413). Three years later (on 3 December 1956), Beckett wrote to Mitchell concerning his recently completed English translation of his novel *Malone Dies*: "Don't buy a copy for God's sake and don't even read the one I've sent to you. My God how I hate my own work" (Beckett, *Letters* 606). Playing on this point, Rosset would often cite the anecdote of Franz Kafka and Max Brod.<sup>9</sup> Brod, Kafka's friend and literary executor, refused to follow the writer's deathbed instructions to burn his life's work, and instead had them published posthumously, leading Rosset to ask: "are we not the richer for that act of treason?" (Letter).

Rosset's motives for bringing *Eleutheria* to press were not purely altruistic. After the manner in which Rosset had been dismissed from Grove, Oakes speculates that Rosset "probably wanted to show the world that he was still publishing; that he hadn't just crawled in the corner and was sobbing himself to sleep" (Interview). When he had been unable to translate *Eleutheria* in 1986, Beckett had given Rosset the last independent prose work he was to write: *Stirrings Still*, a slight three-part work totaling less than eight printed pages. As Gontarski observed: "you can't build a publishing house on *Stirrings Still*" (Interview). A finished three-act play written in the prime of his career by one of the most original and powerful voices the literary world has known, on the other hand, might have been enough to fulfill Rosset's desire to demonstrate his relevance in the publishing industry.

What Rosset lacked at this point was a publishing house to produce the book. This was how his former protégé, Oakes, became involved. It was Beckett that first brought the two together. As Oakes explains, "I have always been interested in Beckett, and I did a senior thesis on Beckett in 1983.<sup>10</sup> Having the arrogance of the young, I contacted Barney Rosset, the publisher at Grove Press, never having met him, with some questions for Beckett. By God, he responded and passed along my questions to Beckett" (Interview). Oakes was working as a reporter for the Associated Press in New Orleans a couple years later when Rosset offered him an editorial position at Grove. After Rosset sold Grove, Oakes partnered with Dan Simon in 1987 to form Four Walls Eight Windows Press, which quickly became recognized within the publishing industry for its commitment to adventurous, edgy literary fiction as well as progressive politics. So Beckett, whose work first brought Oakes and Rosset together, reunited the two who, along with Simon, formed Foxrock, Inc., the name of the venture being a nod to the suburb of Dublin from which Beckett hailed.

By joining Rosset's undertaking, Oakes and Simon placed themselves in the midst of a controversy that was turning litigious. At the end of November 1994, Lindon wrote to Oakes and Simon echoing his prior warning to Rosset that the Beckett estate "would prosecute not only the publishers but all those—translators and distributors among others—who have been accessory to that illicit action" (qtd. in Gontarski, Introduction xviii). Oakes's response to the prospect of having been sued over this matter sounds as though it could have come from Rosset: "If you are in agreement that [Beckett] is one of the great intellects of our time—on a level with Picasso—it is genuinely obscene and wrong to try and say: 'Oh, well, you can't discuss this one. You certainly can't perform it or read it.' . . . That's worth going to court over, and that's worth defying anyone" (Interview). The effort to bring *Eleutheria* to the American reading public continued, in spite of what Rosset termed (in a 13 January 1995 letter to Lindon's American literary agent Georges Borchardt) Edward Beckett and Lindon's "campaign of intimidation, consisting of both open and veiled threats" (Barney Rosset Papers).

The decision to pursue yet another translation was made around the end of 1994. At that point, Rosset turned to Oakes to help him find a third translator. Both men felt it was important to, as Oakes explains, "get somebody who was not academic—who was first and foremost a literary writer—a committed literary writer, not a dilettante—somebody who had made this his life" (Interview). Oakes, who much like Rosset has made a career of daring, unconventional decisions, suggested his star author at Four Walls, Michael Brodsky. What made Brodsky an unusual choice was that while the author was fluent in French, he had never translated anything professionally. The task presented to Brodsky was daunting, as he observes Beckett "took a fiendishly deadpan pleasure in incorporating phrases that were so uniquely idiomatic as to be unworkable for the translator" (Interview). Oakes remains adamant that handing Brodsky the commission was "absolutely the right decision" because "a literal translation is a dead translation. It's got to have some energy, some impetus driving it. And Brodsky has that intensity, and it comes through in his writing. It always has" (Interview).

In addition to the threats of suits and counter-suits, both sides ratcheted up the rhetoric as the standoff proceeded. In a letter to the Samuel Beckett Society that he asked to be read at their December 1994 meeting, Lindon insisted that Rosset's desire to publish *Eleutheria* was "indefensible in a threefold way":

First, with full knowledge of the fact he [Rosset] betrays the man [Beckett] whose friend he pretended to be. Then he considered *Eleutheria* is a wonderful work, thus likening it to the author's other

writings, which gives rise to serious suspicions regarding his competence as a Beckett expert. And lastly, he publicly breaks the law established in favor of authors in all civilized countries. (*Eleutheria: Publication*)

Rosset did not directly respond to these allegations publicly. In his memoir, however, Rosset would tacitly question Lindon's motives:

I was quite aware that Lindon had not been treating me quite fairly, and his publication of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* could be construed as double-dealing. Lindon's blatant disregard for Sam's wishes in this instance made his later claim that *Eleutheria* shouldn't be published, because it would violate the letter of Sam's wishes, ring very hollow indeed. (*The Subject*)

Rosset saw Lindon's decision to authorize the sale of the American publication rights of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* to Seaver rather than himself as a calculated betrayal. Clearly, animosity and distrust existed on both sides prior to Rosset's attempts to publish *Eleutheria*.

In spite of Rosset's efforts to raise a popular groundswell to compel the estate to grant him the rights to *Eleutheria*, the two sides remained locked in a stalemate. Then Rosset made a bold gambit. In an article entitled "Free Beckett" that appeared in *The Village Voice* on 10 January 1995, Rosset announced his intention to publish a noncommercial edition of Brodsky's translation of *Eleutheria*. The plan was for a run of "several hundred copies to be given away, free, to scholars and others who would appreciate it" that was to appear "within the next several months" ("Free Beckett"). Lindon immediately contacted Garbus by both post and fax to enquire if the reports of Rosset's plan to publish a noncommercial edition were accurate (Lindon, letter to Garbus 11 Jan. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers). Rosset responded to this query personally that same day, faxing Lindon a copy of the *Village Voice* article. Two days later, Rosset wrote to Borchardt: "Georges, I hope you are considering carefully whether you want to be remembered as one of those who tried to suppress the publication of Beckett's first play" (Rosset, letter to Borchardt 13 Jan. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers). Borchardt retorted several days later, "If I am going to be remembered for having 'suppressed' the publication of Beckett's first play, I will be sharing this fate with Beckett himself, who successfully suppressed its publication during his lifetime, and left the responsibility for what would happen after his death to his executor" (Borchardt, letter to Rosset 16 Jan. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers). Oakes quickly joined the fray, writing to Borchardt that it was "a scandal" that *Eleutheria* was available only to scholars, regardless of "whether or not [Beckett] himself initiated that suppression" (Oakes, letter to Borchardt 18 Jan. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers).

A climax to this melodrama had been achieved, yet it remains unclear what finally convinced Lindon to reverse his stance. On 24 January 1995 Lindon wrote to Rosset authorizing the publication of a translation in the United States. Lindon's stated reason for acquiescing was that "Sam would not have liked us to fight against each other about him in a public lawsuit. My decision,—I should say: my renouncing—is essentially due to that" (Barney Rosset Papers). Negotiations for the publication of an English version of *Eleutheria* began in earnest shortly thereafter. Predictably, the falling action of this melodrama was not without acrimony.

First Borchardt wrote to Rosset on 1 February 1995 suggesting that Lindon would be willing to "lower his financial demands" (Barney Rosset Papers) if Rosset would agree to include in his edition an English translation of a Foreword Lindon had written explaining why reversed his decision to publish *Eleutheria*.<sup>11</sup> Oakes would not agree to this stipulation, forcing Rosset to decline. Rosset then requested that an addendum be added to their publication contract stipulating that for ten years following the appearance of his translation, no stage production of the play should take place anywhere in the world without Rosset's prior consent. Edward Beckett rejected this proposal (E. Beckett, letter to Rosset 16 Feb. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers). Regarding this matter, Lindon wrote: "I have never heard of any publication contract including any such clause, and I very much doubt the existence of any single one of the kind in the United States" (Lindon, letter to Rosset 21 Feb. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers). Rosset doggedly continued pushing for the addendum, causing Borchardt to respond provocatively:

If, for reasons I do not understand, you cannot publish the book without this addendum so be it. In that case, I believe Lindon will license the rights to another American publisher since circumstances are different now that his own French edition is about to be published (it will be out next week). (Borchardt, letter to Rosset 17 Feb. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers)

This correspondence contained several crucial revelations, not least of which was Borchardt's seemingly off-handed, parenthetical aside notifying Rosset for the first time of the imminent release of the original French version of *Eleutheria* by Lindon's Éditions de Minuit.

Rosset directed his reaction to Borchardt that same day: "Isn't Jérôme acting in a bit of unseemly haste in rushing out the play next week, especially in view of his intense desire to never have it published? Our version is in English, not French. Why expose the French reader SO soon to this play that Jérôme SO loudly proclaims should never be printed?" (Lindon, letter to Borchardt 17 Feb. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers). In a

separate correspondence, Rosset sarcastically told Lindon: "let me say that I and my confreres John Oakes and Dan Simon, are most favorably impressed by your ability to bring *Eleutheria* to press so quickly. We would be hard put to do the same. Bravo!" (Rosset, letter to Lindon 17 Feb. 1995, Barney Rosset Papers). What was upsetting to Rosset was not that the Éditions de Minuit French edition was going to arrive first, insisting in his 17 February 1995 letter to Lindon that: "We stated, from the beginning, that you should publish it first. That honor, and it is an honor, should go to you" (Barney Rosset Papers). What was galling to Rosset was his belief that Lindon had obfuscated over his desire to publish the play from the outset. Given the fact that Les Éditions de Minuit's edition of *Eleutheria* was only one week away from release, it appeared Lindon had been making preparations to publish the original French version even as he fought tooth and nail with Rosset to prevent the publication of his English translation.

Indeed, much of the problem throughout this process was an inability for either side to trust what the other side said. It began with the fundamental point of Lindon and Edward Beckett disbelieving Rosset's claim that Samuel Beckett had granted Rosset the right to publish *Eleutheria*. In his 17 February letter to Borchardt, Rosset essentially accuses Borchardt and Lindon of wanting to unfairly profit from stage productions of the play: "It becomes rather obvious why you could not 'entrust' me to be the agent for the production. As you said yourself, you could make a lot of money if the play is put on, even though at the time I thought you meant it only in jest" (Barney Rosset Papers). Lindon was angered in his 21 February missive over the fact that Rosset had announced to the press his intention to run a first printing of 20,000 copies which were to be sold for \$20.00 each. This figure would have quadrupled the \$5000.00 advance Foxrock, Inc. paid to the Beckett Estate for the rights to publish. Oakes today believes that something much deeper than these petty squabbles was "driving a lot of this. In the case of Lindon, he didn't want Barney to claim the Beckett mantle. And I don't think Barney was doing that. With Barney one can certainly list his faults and his issues, but he had a very generous spirit and he wasn't trying to claim Beckett" (Interview).

It is impossible to pinpoint what precisely may have been the basis of the confrontation between Rosset and Lindon. Tucker saw much of what was "driving" the situation as Lindon "being backed into a corner by the enthusiasm of a long-term friend and publisher of Beckett's work" (237), while Rosset was "not going to wait until Lindon could or would tell him 'When'" (236). Undoubtedly, a clash of two very big personalities came into play in this conflict. Both were strong-willed, courageous publishers each of whom felt he had Beckett's best interest at heart. It all boiled down to human nature for Oakes: "It was really more about who gets to do this

first: 'I am the first publisher of this.' I mean, the egos! Really, it's so stupid and childish, this stuff" (Interview). The general reading public does not typically consider the process driving publishing decisions. What is accepted or rejected is often based on a matter of personal taste by editors and publishers. As a young author, Beckett experienced the apparent arbitrariness of this process on more than one occasion. But something even literary scholars do not often consider is that what gets published or withheld can also be a result of the egos of the human beings holding these positions. Lindon, as literary executor, possessed the legal authority to decide whether or not *Eleutheria* got published. When he saw that Rosset was going forward with his translation in spite of legal threats, Lindon apparently made the decision to issue the original French version first. In the angry five-page "Avertissement" ["Caution"] included as a preface to the French edition, Lindon spelled out in no uncertain terms his objections, asserting: "*Ce n'est pas le texte littéraire qu'on attend, c'est l'objet de scandale*" ["This is not the literary text we might expect, it is the object of a scandal"] (10). Of course, in spite of Lindon's well-articulated distaste at being forced to release *Eleutheria*, Les Éditions de Minuit nonetheless published the play, and their version became public first.

The two sides eventually settled their differences and Rosset celebrated the release of Foxrock's *Eleutheria* with a book party and reading at the National Arts Club in New York on 30 May 1995. Rosset originally asked Harold Pinter and then David Mamet to write the introduction. When both declined, the task fell to Gontarski. Critical reception of Brodsky's translation was mixed,<sup>12</sup> and sales were modest. In total, the Foxrock edition sold only a few thousand copies according to Oakes, so that the venture ultimately lost money. Foxrock might have succeeded in selling more copies if the play had ever found its way onto the stage. But Lindon and the Beckett Estate were candid about their opposition to this from the beginning, as Borchardt's 16 February 1994 letter to Rosset attests: "Neither Edward nor Jérôme have any intention, however, of authorizing any productions of the play anywhere at this stage" (Barney Rosset Papers). Even after Lindon's death in 2001, the Beckett estate remains doggedly steadfast in that policy, thereby consigning *Eleutheria* to the stacks of a handful of university libraries. Thus, each side's suspicions of the other's attempting to profit unfairly from the play ultimately proved to be unfounded.

Readers have had very diverse reactions to the play. The director, Scanlan, described the first act as "a brilliant satirical sortie that can stand alone as a one act play" that "anticipates *The Bald Soprano* so much that it looks like the source for *The Bald Soprano*." The first act involves a gathering of relatives in the house of Henri Krap, Victor's father, which ends with most of the family, minus the infirm Henri, leaving to get Victor



to return home. Throughout this act, Victor is visible on the other side of the split stage, lounging in his bed and puttering about his room. According to Scanlan the play begins to “weaken” and “falls apart” in the second act. The act begins with Victor throwing his shoe through a window, causing a Glazier, who is more philosopher than glass-worker, to instantly appear to repair it. Throughout the act, Victor’s family and landlady are constantly in and out of the room, badgering Victor, culminating in Mme. Meck’s unsuccessful attempt to have her burly Chauffeur remove Victor from the room bodily (the Glazier foils this scheme by hitting the Chauffeur over the head with a hammer). The third act, in Scanlan’s opinion, goes on much too long. In the final act an audience member assaults the stage and general anarchy ensues, though nothing is ultimately resolved, and Victor remains in stasis. Scanlan sums up the entire experience as: “It is a very bold experiment and it could be extraordinarily irritating” (*Eleutheria: Publication*). Brodsky was more negative, asserting: “I don’t think it’s a great play. I think it’s very amateurish and adolescent in many ways. I think there is a lot of worry about how people are going to react” (Interview). Indeed, the objective of the play, as described on several occasions by the characters, was to “*amuser les badauds*” [“amuse the gawkers”]<sup>13</sup> (Beckett, *Eleutheria* 1995a 40). Knowlson notes in *Frescoes of the Skull*, which he wrote with John Pilling, that this Pirandellian concern for audience response was “ironic, however, in the case of a play that has never been performed” (30). It is an irony that continues to resonate to this day.

The play’s other translators were more generous in their responses to *Eleutheria*. Bermel thought the play was a “clear success” (qtd. in Begam 13).<sup>14</sup> Barbara Wright, the professional translator Faber and Faber commissioned for their United Kingdom edition of the play released in 1996, said of *Eleutheria* in her foreword: “Before involving myself, I read *Eleutheria* two or three or four times. With each reading I liked the play more, saw more in it, and in the end I couldn’t help feeling that Beckett was mistaken in wishing to suppress it as unworthy of him” (v).<sup>15</sup> Response to the play within the academic community has always been ambivalent. Long before the play’s publication, theatre scholar Ruby Cohn wrote of *Eleutheria*: “It is not surprising that Beckett refuses to make public this play written in 1947, but rather that he ever considered publishing or staging it.” What was most surprising to Cohn was “that Beckett should have written so relatively conventional a play shortly before creating *Godot*” (163). Boxall sees the lack of critical engagement with *Eleutheria* as attributable to more than simply “the general perception that it is not a very good play” (245). Rather, according to Boxall the play tends to be overlooked critically

because it is not easily accommodated into the hermeneutic frame-

developmental parabola that is conventionally grafted onto Beckett's oeuvre, *Eleutheria* is something of an anomaly. With its naturalistic Parisian locale, its elaborate set, its large cast, and at least the failed vestige of a socio-political plot, the play is deemed by many to be "un-Beckettian," and as such is often put to one side. (245–46)

This refusal to accept, or even acknowledge, *Eleutheria* as a mature, fully-realized work by Samuel Beckett has, inadvertently, been complicit in abetting the author's and his literary estate's desire to stifle the play by not creating a stronger popular groundswell to see it performed.

In the end, every opinion of *Eleutheria* has been formed by *reading* the play. Yet it is impossible to truly appreciate a dramatic work without seeing it *dramatized*. Nobody would argue that *Waiting for Godot* secured its international reputation onstage.<sup>16</sup> Rosset had written to Lindon on 19 February 1995: "The wellbeing of *Eleutheria* is intertwined with the publication of the book and the production of the play, whenever and wherever the latter takes place" (Barney Rosset Papers). To date, *Eleutheria* has been staged once—in Iran. A Persian version of the play (adapted from Brodsky's translation) by Vahid Rahbani was produced by Naqshineh theatre at the City Theatre of Tehran in 2005. Rahbani, who also directed the play, revealed that the show ran for forty-five performances and, contrary the Beckett estate's and general critical perception of the play, "the audience loved it. It was a very successful show" (Interview).<sup>17</sup> The major difficulty that Rahbani experienced was in convincing the Iranian public that Beckett had actually written *Eleutheria*. Rahbani was able to stage the play because "in Iran we do not have copyrights, which makes it a bit easier to do plays." However, Rahbani insists that "at that time I did not know that there was this big argument about doing this play" (Interview). It was Rosset who, several years later, informed Rahbani of the long battle he had waged to publish *Eleutheria*. Rahbani, who was briefly imprisoned by Iranian authorities for his 2011 production of Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* in Tehran, was never pursued by the Beckett estate, which he admits has been a bit of a relief "because who wants to get in trouble with them?" (Interview).

As Beckett's first completed full-length play, the importance of *Eleutheria* should not be understated. Boxall sees *Eleutheria* as not merely "the spawning ground of the Beckettian Beckett that is more familiar to his critics" (246).<sup>18</sup> Boxall sees great importance in *Eleutheria*'s concrete and tangible setting in twentieth-century Paris, which in turn calls into question critical consensus on Beckett through the play's "blatant preoccupation with the relation between political geographies and creative freedom" (247). McMillan and Fehsenfeld assert in *Beckett in the Theatre*, "we do

statement which clearly influenced his later plays" (29–30).<sup>19</sup> McMillan and Fehsenfeld see *Eleutheria* as Beckett's first attempt to "question the ability of existing drama to represent humanity" (30). This examination of dramatic tradition, which began with *Eleutheria*, would flower with *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, and would culminate in later, shorter dramatic works like *Play* and *Not I*. Yet only a select few readers have been exposed to this "statement" thus far—whether it is owing to blind fidelity to the author's dying wishes to not permit the play to be published and performed, to publishers' egos influencing the translation and production of the play, or to an inability by the critical community to accept a work by Beckett that is deemed to be "un-Beckettian." Without an opportunity to be performed, it is unlikely that the audience can grow much beyond Beckett scholars and devotees. On 18 March 1948, Beckett had written to his good friend Tom MacGreevy, "*Eleutheria* is hithering, thithering and beginning to be spoken of a little. I think it will see the boards in time, if only for a few nights" (Beckett, *Letters* 75). A lifetime has passed, and that prognostication remains essentially unfulfilled.

Unlike the resolutions to Boucicault's *The Colleen Bawn* or *The Shaughraun*, the story of *Eleutheria* does not wrap up neatly: no villains are punished nor is any moral order ultimately restored. Tucker wrote in 2011, "It remains to be seen what will become of" *Eleutheria* (241). That hasn't changed. Yet, in spite of all the impediments, Oakes is confident that the play will someday receive the recognition that he believes it deserves because "It's a very rich play, and it's just a series of historical accidents that it didn't get published—didn't get the kind of exposure that *Waiting for Godot* did" (Interview). In order for Oakes' prediction to come true, however, the play will have to, as Beckett put it, "see the boards" in a nation that recognizes copyrights. Until that time, *Eleutheria* will remain trapped in dramatic purgatory—an odd fate for a play entitled "Freedom."

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> The first roadblock *Godot* encountered after Blin accepted it was that Christine Tsingos, a Greek actress who had paid for the lease of Blin's Théâtre de la Gaîté-Montparnasse, did not like the play and refused to stage it (it has been speculated her reason was the play contained no female role for her to portray). The Théâtre des Noctambules was then selected, but Adamov's *Grande et Petite Manoeuvre* ran over. After securing a grant of 500,000 old francs from the Ministry of Education, Blin signed a contract on 23 July 1952 with the Théâtre de Poche to

search for a venue began anew (Knowlson 348). A contract was finally signed on 2 Nov. 1952 with Jean-Marie Serreau's 230-seat Théâtre de Babylone, with the opening set for the following January (Bradby, *Beckett* 51).

<sup>2</sup> On 22 June 1964, in the case of *Grove Press, Inc. v. Gerstein*, the United States Supreme Court reversed the earlier Florida decision that had found *Tropic of Cancer* obscene by a 5–4 ruling. Grove Press spent over \$100,000 defending the novel in both criminal and civil suits (Decker).

<sup>3</sup> The title, according to Rosset's widow Astrid, is "taken from an FBI file on him [Rosset]."

<sup>4</sup> As Deirdre Bair put it in her biography of Beckett: "what Beckett calls his 'trunk manuscripts' . . . [H]e does not want them to be published, yet he cannot bring himself to discard them" (347).

<sup>5</sup> Gontarski insists of his translation, "it was essentially a rough draft—a first draft—translation just to get something down and for Barney to have a sense of what he had" (Interview).

<sup>6</sup> Now contained in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center in Austin.

<sup>7</sup> With the English translation following in 1974.

<sup>8</sup> Tucker explains that "Lindon argued that Beckett had allowed these sections [in *Revue d'Esthétique* and in *Beckett in the Theatre*] to be published precisely in order to avoid publishing the entire work" (239).

<sup>9</sup> Tucker notes, "There were frequent references" to this analogy (238).

<sup>10</sup> Oakes's thesis, entitled "Beckett's Flight from Chaos," presented to Princeton University in 1983, won the Charles William Kennedy Prize for a senior thesis of "exceptional merit" from the English Department.

<sup>11</sup> To which Lindon had alluded in his correspondence to Rosset of 24 Jan. 1995 (Barney Rosset Papers).

<sup>12</sup> The negative reviews tended to drown out the positive responses. For instance, citing Brodsky's Americanisms, Gerry Dukes insisted in the *Irish Times* that the translation "should have been throttled at birth" ("A Version").

<sup>13</sup> My translation. This phrase was one of the points of contention in Dukes's reviews as Brodsky translated it with the Americanism "amuse the rubbernecks" (Beckett, *Eleutheria* 1995b 31). Wright's translation: "keep the punters amused" (Beckett, *Eleutheria* 1996 33).

<sup>14</sup> Bermel's translation, unfortunately, has apparently been lost.

<sup>15</sup> Critical opinion has tended to favor Wright's translation over Brodsky's. Dukes's analysis, in his review "The Second Englishing of *Eleutheria*" is a representative example: "What [Wright] has done is take a play generally held in low esteem, and next Brodsky is . . ."

engaging translation that gives the characters a feasible language to speak" (79).

<sup>16</sup> Although the original publication of *En Attendant Godot* by Les Éditions de Minuit did precede the play's first full theatrical performance by nearly three months.

<sup>17</sup> Rahbani explained the greatest difficulty in staging the play, as Blin saw more than fifty years earlier, was the sets: "There are two simultaneous sets appearing at the same time on stage. So I decided to put the play in the middle, and then make a view from both sides of the stage." The way Rahbani handled the Audience Member character was: "he came in with the audience members and was inconspicuous. . . . [H]e was among the audience members. But he was dressed like a blind person with a cane, with a seeing-eye dog, and sunglasses." When the character joined in the action of the play, viewers "were shocked at the time. It wasn't expected. They were like: 'Oh my God, what is this?' Someone just ran on the stage!" (Interview).

<sup>18</sup> Boxall is specifically referencing Ruby Cohn's chapter on *Eleutheria* in *Just Play: Beckett's Theatre* (1980).

<sup>19</sup> David Bradby takes issue with this assertion because at the time Beckett wrote *Eleutheria*, he was "not yet sufficiently sure of his method to come up with anything as definitive as a 'statement'" ("A Joke" 67).

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