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A Brief Note on Samuel Beckett's "Brief Dream"

Jeanne Collieran

With the inauguration of a new series of the *Journal of Beckett Studies*, the journal returned to the tradition established by James Knowlson of publishing previously unpublished material by Beckett. For the first volume of the new series, the *Journal of Beckett Studies* published a poem in French, "Là," and one in English, "Brief Dream."

"Brief Dream," however, had appeared previously, and the circumstances of this publishing is of special interest to Beckett scholars who debate Beckett's political commitments. The poem appeared first in the collection *For Nelson Mandela*, edited by Jacques Derrida and Mustapha Tlili, published by Seaver Books (New York: Henry Holt), in 1987.

In 1981, at the invitation of Tlili, a Tunisian writer, Ernest Pignon-Ernest, a French painter, and Antonio Saura, a Spanish painter, 85 prominent artists responded to the call to set up an international art exhibition in protest against apartheid. Derrida's famous essay, "Racism's Last Word," was his contribution to the catalogue accompanying the exhibition. The exhibit opened in Paris in November, 1983, and has moved restlessly around the world to other venues, remaining homeless until that time when a South African government is elected by universal suffrage: then the exhibit will be offered to the new South African government. Until then, it remains, in Derrida's phrase, a "memory in advance."

The collection in English, *For Nelson Mandela*, is an expanded version of the earlier, French edition (*Pour Nelson Mandela*, Editions Gallimard, 1986). At the invitation of Derrida and Dominique Lecoq, a French journalist and specialist in African affairs, writers were asked to contribute an original text for a *Festschrift* to be offered to Nelson Mandela. Beckett does not appear to be included in this first volume. In the English edition, however, his contribution is prominently placed, appearing immediately after Nadine Gordimer's tribute and Derrida's honorific essay, "The Laws of Reflection: Nelson Mandela, in Admiration."

Although the majority of contributions specifically denounce apartheid or pay explicit tribute to Nelson Mandela's long imprisonment, some of the texts are less directly referential. Beckett's piece is, characteristically, the most elusive; yet, in the context of the collection, the "Brief Dream" becomes imbricated with other descriptions of Mandela's courage, making, perhaps, the poem's title into a tribute to Mandela's own extraordinary preservation of what at times might have seemed the slightest of possibilities, the briefest of dreams. That Mandela made this preservation possible by literally

embodying it — by becoming first the changeless face of apartheid imprisonment and now the indisputable face of African freedom — is something the Beckett of *Catastrophe* would certainly have recognized. There is much in common between Beckett's account of political manipulation and individual defiance and the historical debacle of Mandela's treatment by the South African government. The final lines of the poem read, in true Beckettian form, as a round, and darkly suggest the cyclic, inexhaustible return of oppression. Yet, they suggest too, the respite born of tenacity, of going on when one cannot go on. Which is, the world knows, what Nelson Mandela did.