"My Italian is not up to more": Samuel Beckett, Editor of 'Immobile'

At the end of December 1971 Luigi Majno, the owner of the Milanese art gallery M’Arte, asked Beckett for a “new text” for a livre d'artiste with Stanley William Hayter, the founder of Atelier 17. At the end of July 1972 Beckett announced that he had the right text: 'Still'. This collaboration is quite remarkable in terms of Beckett’s involvement: he closely followed the progress of Hayter’s etchings, the printing process of the manuscript and, when the moment of translating the text into Italian came, he made numerous corrections to Majno’s ‘Immobile’. He went through the drafts, thanking Majno for “all the pain” he was taking with a writing that, as he put it, lent itself “with but an ill grace” to Majno's “reasonable language.” Although claiming that his Italian was “not up to more” Beckett provided corrections so punctilious that Majno described a typical note as follows: “page 2, line 7, word 3 and so on.”

Even though Beckett provided other Italian translators with feedback, these “corrections and suggestions” constitute his most extensive direct engagement with an Italian translation of his work. This paper explores Beckett’s editing work, analysing the quality of the contribution and the ways in which it can inform our reading of 'Still'. It studies the difficulties of translating into a "reasonable language" a writing in which, as the Italian translator Gabriele Frasca notes, “the author heavily exploited the analogical tendency of the English language," which Beckett himself lamented when, in a letter dated 17 July 1975 he told Cohn: “Trying in vain to translate Still.” Ultimately it gives a glance at the way Beckett's French responded to the problems he had seen raised in Italian.