‘to talk alone’: Communicative Fears in Beckett’s Correspondence and *Happy Days*

When the first volume of *The Letters of Samuel Beckett* was published in 2009, John Pilling announced that ‘in Beckett Studies a kind of indelible line has been drawn’. Six years later, three of the four proposed volumes have been published, but quite what this indelible line might constitute is still unclear.

In my paper I argue that the implications of Beckett’s correspondence for Beckett Studies goes beyond merely using them as biographical sources or as background material for historicist readings of literary texts. The publication of the *Letters* reveals to a public readership Beckett’s epistolary voice, and in turn these fragmented texts indicate new readings of Beckett’s other literary works.

I focus this argument by reading *Happy Days* in conjunction with Beckett’s letter-exchange with Barbara Bray. Beckett’s dramatization of the difficulties of dialogue in *Happy Days* and Winnie’s fear of not being heard can be seen as a development from his epistolary dialogue with Bray, in which he quoted draft portions of the play. Letter-writing had an important role in the genesis of this literary text, and the play can be read as a reflection on the communicative potential of language, both its possibilities and failures.

Beckett’s correspondence can be seen as part of what he described to Jérôme Lindon as ‘un volume à intituler *Merdes Posthumes*’ (letter, 20 January 1954). The growth of the grey canon in Beckett Studies is especially appropriate in studying an author who shows a sustained interest in what lies outside conventional markers of worth, inclusion and value. The communicative function of Beckett’s letters does not preclude their literary value but is essential to it. His epistolary exchanges with specific interlocutors created a private dialogic space which had a generative effect on his literary voice, and letter-writing influenced his exploration of the fragmentation and fragile contingency of interpersonal communication.