PERSONAL APPEARCEPTION:
Samuel Beckett, Gertrude Stein, and Paul Cézanne’s
La Montagne Sainte-Victoire

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This paper examines Gertrude Stein and Samuel Beckett’s respective engagements with Paul Cézanne’s late landscapes; specifically those from his late La Montagne Sainte-Victoire watercolour series. Placing their respective engagements with the Mont Sainte-Victoire landscapes side-by-side and in the context of their literary aesthetics, I argue that Beckett’s admiration of Cézanne’s work, as expressed in 1934, can be aligned with, and seen as an aesthetic antecedent to, his comments on Stein in the 1937 letter to Axel Kaun.

On 5 May 1934, Samuel Beckett wrote to Morris Sinclair about his growing struggle with the English language. The letter, appropriately enough, was written in German, so what follows is a translation: “No sooner do I take up my pen to compose something in English than I get the feeling of being ‘depersonified’” (2009a, 205). Three months later, in September 1934, Beckett moved to 34 Gertrude Street in London and continued what was to become an intense and extensive study of visual art, immersing himself in the collections of the Victoria and Albert, Tate, and National Gallery. From his arrival at Gertrude Street, Beckett saw his surroundings with an art critic’s eye. In a letter to Thomas MacGreevy on 8 September 1934, Beckett describes his room as having “linoleum like Braque seen from a great distance” (2009a, 220). Later in the same letter, he describes in detail his experience of seeing Paul Cézanne’s La Montagne Sainte-Victoire (1905/06), a late watercolour from Cézanne’s extensive Mont Sainte-Victoire sequence. Beckett’s encounter with this painting therefore roughly coincides with the beginning of this very intense period of study. As he tells MacGreevy:

What a relief the Mont Ste. Victoire after all the anthropomorphised landscape – […] or paranthropomorphised […] or hyperanthropomorphized [landscapes]. Cézanne seems to have been the first to see landscape & state it as material of a strictly peculiar order,
incommensurable with all human expressions whatsoever. Atomistic landscape [...] there is no entrance anymore nor any commerce with the forest, its dimensions are its secret & it has no communications to make.

(2009a, 222)

Cézanne was undoubtedly a refreshing encounter for Beckett, who had at this stage become weary of “landscapes ‘promoted’ to the emotions of the hiker, postulated as concerned with the hiker” (222; emphasis in the original). In his correspondence Cézanne articulates a similar distaste for scenes depicting, as Beckett puts it, “snapshot puerilities” (223). During a stay in Annecy in July 1896, for example, Cézanne comments in a letter to Joachim Gasquet that the terrain is “still of nature, of course, but a little bit as we have learned to see it in the travel sketchbooks of young ladies” (1976, 250). The natural landscape appears contrived, as in the landscapes Beckett criticised for appealing too much to the hiker.

Beckett refers to the Mont Sainte-Victoire as an “atomistic landscape.” It is a landscape characterized by alienation, one bereft of connections (either within the internal dynamics of the painting’s composition or externally with the viewer); instead, it consists of dissociated elements or entities. Again and again throughout this letter, Beckett returns to the atomisation of landscape. He continues:

How far Cézanne had moved from the snapshot puerilities of Manet & Cie when he could understand the dynamic intrusion to be himself & so landscape to be something by definition unapproachable, unintelligible arrangement of atoms […]. Even the portrait beginning to be dehumanised as the individual feels himself more & more hermetic & alone & his neighbour a coagulum as alien as a protoplast or God.

(223)

Just as the portrait becomes “dehumanised” so too is the landscape form “[an] unintelligible arrangement of atoms.” The “snapshot puerilities of Manet & Cie” have been replaced with a landscape that exists rather as an “unintelligible arrangement of atoms”; a landscape wherein, to paraphrase Stein, each part is as important – or, unimportant – as the whole (1971, 16).