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A TONGUE NOT MINE

BECKETT AND TRANSLATION



Sinéad Mooney

OXFORD ENGLISH MONOGRAPHS

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Beckett and Translation

SINÉAD MOONEY



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A TONGUE NOT MINE

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For Ian

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“‘others’ words”: Traces of Translation in the *Trilogy*’, *The Beckett Circle* 30.1 (Spring 2007).

‘Kicking Against the Thermolaters: Beckett Reading “Recent Irish Poetry”’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 15 (2005): 30–42.

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“‘an Atropos all in black’ or, Ill Seen Worse Translated: Beckett, Self-Translation and the Discourse of Death’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 12 (2002): 163–77.

“‘A Roving Cancellation’”: Samuel Beckett’s (Self)-Translation as Self-Divestiture’, *Journal of Beckett Studies* 10 (Fall 2001/Spring 2002): 222–34.

“‘Integrity in a Surplice’”: Samuel Beckett’s (post-)Protestant Poetics’, *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd’hui* 9 (2000): 223–39.

Abbreviations

ALP	'Anna Lyvia Pluratsel'
BBR	<i>Beckett in Black and Red: The Translations for Nancy Cunard's Negro</i> (Friedman 2000)
C	<i>Company</i>
CDW	<i>The Complete Dramatic Works</i>
CH	<i>A Samuel Beckett Chronology</i> (Pilling 2006)
CP	<i>Collected Poems 1930–1978</i>
CSP	<i>The Complete Short Prose 1929–1989</i>
D	<i>Disjecta</i>
DF	<i>Damned to Fame</i> (Knowlson 1996)
DFM	<i>Dream of Fair to Middling Women</i>
E	<i>Eleutheria</i>
FW	<i>Finnegans Wake</i> (Noyce 1976)
G	<i>Waiting for Godot/En attendant Godot</i>
HII	<i>How It Is</i>
IN	<i>L'Innommable</i>
IS	<i>Ill Seen Ill Said</i>
L	<i>The Letters of Samuel Beckett 1929–1940</i> , vol. 1
LD	<i>Le Dépeupleur</i>
M	<i>Murphy</i>
MAC	<i>Mercier and Camier</i>
MEC	<i>Mercier et Camier</i>
MF	<i>Murphy</i> (French)
MM	<i>Malone meurt</i>
MO	<i>Molloy</i> (French)
MPTK	<i>More Pricks Than Kicks</i>
MV	<i>Mal vu mal dit</i>
NA	<i>No author Better Served: The correspondence of Samuel Beckett and Alan Schneider</i> (Hormon 1998)
NO	<i>Nohow On</i>
NT	<i>Nouvelles et textes pour rien</i>
NRF	'Anna Livie Plurabelle' (<i>Nouvelle revue française</i>)
P	<i>Proust</i>
PA	<i>Premier amour</i>
PTD	<i>Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit</i>
S	<i>Soubresauts</i>
T	<i>The beckett; Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable</i>
TM	<i>Têtes-mortes</i>
TQ	<i>This Quarter</i> Surrealist special number
W	<i>Watt</i>
WH	<i>Worstward Ho</i>

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Introduction

'Neither a native nor a foreign accent': Beckett in French and English

The European who belonged to no one country would be an abstract man—a blank face speaking every language with neither a native nor a foreign accent.

T. S. Eliot, 'Goethe as Sage'¹

'Heavenly father, the creature was bilingual!'

MPTK, 182²

To Georges Duthuit, in a letter of March 1949, Beckett stated the predicament of the artist as one '[f]eeling himself to be plural, while all the time remaining one single being'.³ Not alone is the relationship between the artist and his objects one of rupture for Beckett, but the artist's self is plural, fractured, problematic. Beckett himself always disclaimed the traditional presumption of authorial privilege; recoiling from the role of omniscient author, he projected for himself instead an image of authorial impoverishment, indigence, and impotence, a diminished authority more akin to the conventionally 'invisible', second-order role of the translator. Indeed, the Samuel Beckett who thus viewed the crisis of the artist as one of aporetic plurality and singleness was himself in 1949 curiously suspended between the roles of author and translator. He began to write exclusively in French some three years earlier, but his three French novels were still without a publisher, and though he was typing up a final version of *En attendant Godot*, its eventual role in acquiring him the English-language audience that had formerly eluded him—and whose absence had precipitated his move to French—was still some way in the future.

No longer writing in English and not yet established as a French novelist or playwright, he remained, at this point, better known in Paris

¹ T. S. Eliot, 'Goethe as Sage', *On Poetry and Poets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), 216.

² Beckett, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1974 edn).

³ Letter from SB to George Duthuit, 9 March 1949. Quoted in S. E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann (eds.), *Beckett after Beckett* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2006), 2.

as a translator of Joyce, the surrealists, and varied material for Nancy Cunard's *Negro* anthology and the journal *transition*,⁴ than for his original work.⁵ Beckett's contemporary statement of the artist's predicament thus resonates strongly with his own equivocal position, 'one single being' who nonetheless disperses himself by lending, in translation, his voice to 'others' words', as he would characterize it in the novel he was about to begin, *L'Innommable*, and who would continue to be singular and plural across his career-long self-translation between French and English. It is not surprising, then, that his writing foregrounds, exploits, and examines the condition of translation, in the same way as it tended to engage critically with every artistic medium in which he worked.

The resultant 'trace' of translation is left throughout Beckett's work. His early work as a translator of Joyce and the surrealists chimes with a recurrent fascination with Ovid's Echo, a figure of translation in that she can repeat, but not originate, speech. His assumption of the schizoid voice via surrealism's impostures of states of psychosis, and the black voice in his translations for *Negro*, in turn give way to the dislocated, hybrid and unplaceable voices that leak into the trilogy, uneasily mingling the French language with Irish names, and the Unnamable's anguished desire to 'find a voice of my own, in all this babble' (*T*, 320). Molloy and the speaker of *Comment c'est/How It Is* operate sadistic bodily codes of translation, whereby various blows equate to commands. The title character of *Watt*, the English novel Beckett wrote immediately before his post-war shift to French, appears to undergo a traumatic experience of the arbitrariness of the signifier, in a text which itself reads at times like a work of faulty machine-generated translation. Beckett's creatures compulsively tell stories which may be their own, or cited or echoed, translator-like, from another source—'I say it as I hear it' as the speaker of *How It Is* periodically insists (*HIII*, 7)—so that to speak, in Beckett, often appears to be the same as ventriloquizing the words of another. What is said, or heard, or repeated, appears to need to be interpreted or translated as if from an alien source; speakers draw attention to their own foreignisms, linguistic oddities, and mispronunciations—'awful English this', as the narrator of *From*

⁴ *transition*, when it was founded by Eugene Jolas and Elliot Paul in 1927, had a lower-case 't' in its title, according to Jolas 'because Paul and I thought it might be fun to bait the critics with this innocent enough innovation', but later reverted to a capital letter. Here I follow the convention of using the lower-case title for Jolas's pre-war magazine and the capitalised title for Georges Duthuit's revamped post-war version. See Eugene Jolas, 'Transition: An Occidental Workshop (1927–1938)', in Eugene Jolas (ed.), *Transition Workshop* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1949), 13–18, 14.

⁵ He had just translated Apollinaire's *Zone*, was undertaking large amounts of translation into English for *Transition* 49 and UNESCO, and had three English poems in the April 1949 issue of *Poetry Ireland*. See *CH*, 104 and following.

an Abandoned Work remarks detachedly (CSP, 164)—deictically making language visible both *as* language and *as a* language.

At times, as when Molloy describes the speech he hears as ‘pure sounds, free of all meaning’ (T, 47), there is a disturbingly complete absence of relationship between sound and sense. The ‘icy words [...] icy meanings’ that hail down on him, as he recounts a period of former wordlessness—‘I had been living so far from words for so long [...] even my sense of identity was wrapped in a namelessness often hard to penetrate’ (T, 30–1)—suggest a self-estranged subject assailed by a stubbornly material and opaque language which comes unsettlingly close to mere noise of the kind that continually haunts the edges of Beckett’s discourse, as ‘mewl, howl, gasp and rattle’ or when the Unnamable promises to fix the alien ‘gibberish’ he has been taught by improvising onomatopoeic nonsense: ‘I’ll practise, nyum, hoo, plop, psss, nothing but emotion, bing bang, that’s blows, ugh, pooh, what else...’ (T, 308, 376). Not surprisingly, for a writer who comes to French with habits and linguistic impulses formed in English, or Hiberno-English, Beckett’s writing consistently constructs itself in terms of an untranscendable materiality of language whose limits are shaped by its essential foreignness in relation to speaking subjects who attempt, compulsively, to construct themselves within it in a series of never-ending, unsettling skirmishes with words.

Writing in a foreign language, and a concomitant conception of *all* language as foreign, wrenches his work away from pre-determined modes of subjectivity. Rather than positing an author who is somehow prior to the text, writing about an independent, pre-existing reality of referents which linguistic signs are then ‘naturally’ able to name, Beckett’s writing jolts the reader because the semi-obsured presence of the translator in the work makes visible, via an intimation of competing, incommensurable linguistic systems, an intrinsic separation of language from its unnameable objects. Accordingly, attempting to state the ‘space that intervenes between him and the world of objects’ is the major task facing the artist for the Beckett of the 1934 essay ‘Recent Irish Poetry’ (D, 70). The moments where a form of translatorly consciousness erupts into the work create an imperfection in the transparency of language, as a form of residua from Beckett’s specialized knowledge as a translator, and that slight opacity disconcerts our reading and, significantly, *de-authorizes* it.

That Beckett began his career as a translator, chose to adopt a foreign language in mid-career, and subsequently wrote virtually all his work in both French and English makes itself felt in the way in which his writing refuses the unproblematic transmission of ‘truths’ associated with classic realism. It insists instead on foregrounding its own discursive practices and problems. His texts’ meanings are intimately bound up with their

exceptional meta-linguistic position astride two languages, and his recognition of translation's systematic and inevitable infidelity. It is hardly surprising that a writer who wanted to institute an 'art of failure' should exploit the potential of a practice traditionally considered by definition inadequate, but which is nonetheless continually performed, despite a circumambient discourse that continually laments its necessary incompleteness, belatedness, even impossibility.

Translation, even more than the 'original' writing of which it is traditionally held to be a pale copy or unfaithful simulacrum, cannot escape the impasse of what Beckett in his *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* describes as the 'nothing to express' (*D*, 139). The ubiquity of mathematical references in Beckett's work testifies to an underlying concern with the adequacy of linguistic representation, mapping the world through words, the 'hairbreadth departure' of language from its objects lamented by Watt (*W*, 78). From the very beginning, his work is consumed by an interest in the gap between the aspirations of representation and language and their object, which is unnamable, a gap it regards as axiomatic. The chasm between word and world is a matter of an inherent expressive failure of language, but Beckett's work, by seizing on writing in a foreign language, constitutes an idiosyncratic attempt to speak the limits of language as a paradoxical opportunity *for* writing. His bilingualism allows him to generate novel responses to the threat of an unsayable void.

Beckett's writings' deep-rooted scepticism about notions of truth or subjectivity being accessible through or inherent in language originates less in any kind of purely philosophical grounding than in the fact that their author became imaginatively engaged by the ways in which translation, and later, self-translation, allowed for different, enablingly alien, relations between language, selfhood, and origins. As Marina Warner suggests in her consideration of Beckett by way of Mallarmé—another sometime English teacher and translator, and another writer who seeks out the estrangement of a foreign tongue—Beckett breaks with representation by a 'foundational severance of the word from the world'.⁶ This lack of natural 'fit' between word and world, as crystallized in Watt's anguished encounter with the common pot that refuses to be securely named, and the Franco-Irish hybrids of the trilogy, marks a departure from any form of ontological stability. The Beckett of *Proust* (1931) writes of Habit as 'the guarantee of a dull inviolability [...] the ballast that chains the dog to his vomit' (*P*, 8):

The old ego dies hard. Such as it was, a minister of dullness, it was also an agent of security. When it ceases to perform that second function, when it is

⁶ Marina Warner, 'Who Can Shave an Egg?', *TLS* (29 February 2008): 14–17, 14.

opposed by a phenomenon that it cannot reduce to the condition of a comfortable and familiar concept, when, *in a word*, it betrays its trust as a screen to spare its victim the spectacle of reality, it disappears, and the victim, now an ex-victim, for a moment free, is exposed to that reality... (*P*, 10 [emphasis mine])

Here, Beckett's conceptions of Proustian habit develop a metaphorical proximity to a 'word' which is itself a screen sparing the individual the 'spectacle of reality'; the foreign, non-habitual word, on the other hand, does not, in its strangeness, 'screen', and thus does not bolster this 'compromise effected between the individual and his environment' (*P*, 7).

This, of course, has less to do with Proust than it does with an initial sketch of the coordinates of Beckett's own aesthetic. If the Proustian forces of Habit and Memory stabilize, Beckett's own interest in linguistic estrangement, its practice still at this point some years in the future (in the shape of his French poems of the later 1930s), foregrounds heterogeneity, ambiguity, the discordant and unfamiliar. To write in a foreign language refuses this deadening 'guarantee' and evades the 'old ego' of selfhood as posited by being inviolably 'at home' in one's language. (Beckett would later say as much to Charles Juliet, admitting that French had 'an aura of unfamiliarity about it' which 'allowed him to escape the habitus inherent in the use of a native language'.⁷) In 1937, Beckett would lament to Axel Kaun that literature was lagging behind in the 'old lazy ways' long abandoned by music and the visual arts, apparently held back by 'something paralytically holy in the vicious nature of the word' (*D*, 172). The interim solution he proposes as a form of reinvention of the modalities of literature—which, for Beckett, have something of the anachronistic quality of a 'Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman' (*D*, 171)—is precisely that of foreignizing it: 'Only from time to time I have the consolation of sinning willy-nilly against a foreign language, as I should love to do with full knowledge and intent against my own—and as I shall do' (*D*, 173).

This well-known Beckettian manifesto is also, it should not be forgotten, a letter about translation, written by a young translator turning down a potential commission to translate the work of the German poet Joachim Ringelnatz, whom he dismisses as a 'rhyme coolie' (*D*, 171), and his credo is couched in translatorial terms. He also explicitly cites and approves in his *Proust* Proust's narrator's insistence that the goal of artistic activity is itself a form of deciphering or translation: 'Le devoir et la tâche d'un

⁷ Charles Juliet, *Conversations with Samuel Beckett and Bram Van Velde*, trans. Janey Tucker (Leiden: Academic Press, 1995), 143.

écrivain sont ceux d'un traducteur.⁸ If, therefore, Beckett participates in the widespread cultural anxiety about the limits of representation of the first part of the twentieth century, and the high modernist belief in the necessity to remake language, then he does so as a writer with a self-chosen, anomalous relationship to language or languages. The Beckett text in French or English, after he has become what Nancy Huston calls an 'écrivain français anglophone', is in an idiolect of a disturbing strangeness and materiality that mistrusts the habitual nature of language in which a writer is fully at home.⁹

The key to an understanding many of the linguistic and temperamental oddities of Beckett's writing throughout his career is, thus, a recognition both that it emerges from a substratum of translation of the work of others, *and* that Beckett continued to translate his own work throughout his writing life. The Janus-faced, elusive nature of a subjectivity distributed asymmetrically across two languages and two imperfectly-matched texts meant that there was never, for Beckett, any unproblematic sense of a primordial or intrinsic selfhood. As Linda Collinge argues, his self-translation generates an encounter 'entre Beckett et Beckett, Beckett auteur et Beckett traducteur'.¹⁰ When the centrality of translation to his writing is taken into account, the prevalence of ghosting, doubles, and otherness—instances of dictation, overheard or alien voices, visitations, split selfhood, ventriloquism—are more than recurrent metaphors. They emerge as some of his work's most common tropes in problematizing the subjectivity of the author as supposed intentional source guaranteeing the meanings of a text, and replacing it with a depleted version of the writing self as what André Breton, in Beckett's *This Quarter* translation, calls 'the silent receptacle of many echoes'.¹¹

What Lori Chamberlain terms the 'ambidextrous' nature of his writing in English and French is hardly unrelated to his work's general sense of provisionality, its ability to apparently occupy simultaneously what would appear to be mutually exclusive positions in time and space, slipping across the boundaries of various classificatory systems. Chamberlain's description of the reception of this state of affairs as 'unnatural, monstrous even', dubbing Beckett a boundary-crossing 'species of centaur'—who

⁸ Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, 4 vols. (Paris: Pléiade, Gallimard, 1987–9), IV, 469. Beckett quotes this in his monograph *Proust* as follows: 'The duty and task of a writer (not an artist, a writer) are those of a translator' (P, 64 [Beckett's parenthesis]). See also Michael D'Arcy, 'The Task of the Listener: Beckett, Proust, and Perpetual Translation', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 12 (2002): 35–52.

⁹ Nancy Huston, *Nord perdu, suivi de Douze France* (Montreal: Leméac, 1999), 46.

¹⁰ Linda Collinge, 'Auto-Traduction et auto-censure dans *Malone meurt/Malone Dies*', *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 7 (1998): 57–73, 57.

¹¹ *TQ*, 18 (emphases in original).

cannot easily be accommodated in traditional classifications according to language or national canon—illustrates a remarkably consistent aspect of the Beckett oeuvre insofar as it accommodates what Anna McMullan calls ‘strange reciprocities, metamorphoses and inversions of identities and corporealities’.¹² This study aims to respect these ‘strange reciprocities, metamorphoses and inversions’ in recuperating the processes of translation and self-translation—themselves an unstable binary in a Beckett oeuvre haunted by what he called ‘butin verbal’ derived from other people’s work—into a reading of Beckett which privileges the traditionally marginal.¹³

To reinstate the shadowy translation canon of the works of others in Beckett’s oeuvre, which, inevitably, interacts with or redefines (even from, or especially from) the margins of the more traditional Beckett canon, is also to foreground, to *read for*, the translatedness of the second versions of his self-translated works. Rather than being an ancillary, essentially practical task of linguistic transfer, translation, in its play with repetition, belatedness, and difference, emerges as an integral component of his work’s exploration of uncertainty, ambiguity, and failure. Translation, thus, is not simply external to the intimate processes of Beckett’s work; rather, it comes to generate some of the most characteristic effects of an oeuvre traversed with alien voices, splittings, hauntings, and simulacra.

The rough outline of Beckett’s bilingual corpus is relatively familiar: the English period (1929–45), the great French creative period, in which the trilogy and two major plays were composed, and its immediate aftermath (1945–58), and the period of writing in both languages from the end of the fifties to Beckett’s death in 1989. He began writing in English, as was natural for a Dublin-born Protestant with no taste for the language revival movement. From the late 1920s to the outbreak of the Second World War, as he moved between Dublin, London, Germany, and Paris, where he would finally settle, he published a number of poems, reviews, articles, a monograph on Proust (1931), a collection of short stories, *More Pricks Than Kicks* (1934), and a novel, *Murphy* (1938)—all in English. While he experimented with writing French lyrics in the late 1930s, his first French publication was his commissioned essay on the painting of the Van Velde brothers, ‘La peinture des Van Velde’, in *Cahiers d’art* in 1945. This was followed in 1946 by early versions of two of his novellas in French in Sartre and de Beauvoir’s *Les temps modernes* and *Fontaine*, and a group of

¹² Anna McMullan, ‘Irish/Postcolonial Beckett’, in Lois Oppenheim (ed.), *Palgrave Advances in Samuel Beckett Studies* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 99.

¹³ SB, letter to Thomas MacGreevy, 8 November 1931: ‘I can’t write anything at all, nor take notes. I have enough “butin verbal” to strangle anything I’m likely to want to say’ (L, 93).