

【論文】

Samuel Beckett's First French Fiction (1)

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S・ベケット1946年フランス語作品(1)

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Abstract: In the four novellas and the novel that he wrote in 1946 Beckett employed first-person narration for the first time in his prose fiction. In the novellas the narrator is also the protagonist, while in the novel the narrator talks about protagonists other than himself. Of these two modes of narration the first one, which is retained in his later prose fiction, seems to suit better the author's newly reached conviction that his works should exclusively address what is inside his mind.

Key words: Beckett, four novellas, first-person narration, authenticity, authority

This short article is an introduction to the instalments to follow concerning a major change in direction in Samuel Beckett's prose fiction that coincided with the author's adoption of French as the language for literary composition. By the time Beckett made Paris 'his permanent home for the next fifty-two years' (Knowlson, 274) in 1937, his publications in English had included an essay (*Proust*), a collection of short stories (*More Pricks Than Kicks*) and a novel (*Murphy*). When World War II came to an end he had already finished another novel (*Watt*) but had not yet found a publisher for it. The switch from English to French took place in 1946, when Beckett wrote four novellas (or 'stories' in his own later translation) and a novel, all of them originally in French inside a single

year in what Beckett himself later described as a ‘frenzy of writing’ (Knowlson 358). It will be useful to bear in mind that the order of later publication does not match the order of Beckett’s composition during this period immediately after the war. The first of his French fiction to be published were *Molloy*, which was written in 1947 and published in 1951, and *Malone meurt*, written in 1947-48 and published in 1951. The perhaps most celebrated *En attendant Godot* was penned in 1949 and first published in 1952. On the other hand, three of the four novellas written originally in French in 1946, *La fin*, *L’expulsé* and *Le calmant*, had to wait till 1958 when they were first published included in *Nouvelles et Textes pour rien*. Moreover, it took the novel *Mercier et Camier* and the novella *Premier amour* almost twenty years before the author finally consented to have them published in 1970.¹ In sorting out the total output of Beckett’s 1946 frenzy of creativity Ruby Cohn is very informative and helpful:

When the scholar John Fletcher attempted to date Beckett’s first sustained French fiction, the author wrote him: ‘*Mercier et Camier* was first attempt at novel in French and cannot have preceded *Nouvelles*’ . . . However the dates on Beckett’s manuscripts contradict his memory. The French section of the story *La Fin* was begun in March 1946; the novel *Mercier et Camier* was penned between May and September, the story *L’expulsé* between October 6 and 14, and the story *Premier Amour* between October 28 and November 12. The story *Le calmant*, begun on December 23, terminated Beckett’s first postwar year, along with that phase of his vision (Cohn, 128).

The English titles of the works in the order established above by Cohn are: *The End*, *Mercier and Camier*, *The Expelled*, *First Love* and *The Calmative*. The protagonist-narrative mode of the four novellas, something never seen before in Beckett’s prose fiction, seems to have opened up a wide range of new possibilities

for the author. The lessons he must have learned from all his attempts in 1946, successful or not, undoubtedly paved the way for his later works.

If time, assuming there is indeed such a thing for a moment, flies, it will fly in Beckett's four novellas in the face of the generally received notion that cause precedes effect. That is why the reader would be well advised to honour the order of composition when reading these stories, which begins with *The End*. About halfway through this first story the reader stops short at this sentence: "It was here I found the phial in my pocket" (20).² Going back to page one, the reader pores over the story afresh, this time on the lookout for any previous reference to a 'phial' that will account for the definite article in the above citation—in vain. The sentence is a *non sequitur* and, moreover, the sole occasion for the occurrence of the mysterious container in the whole story. But at one point in *The Calmative*, penned last of all in December, 1946 and decidedly the most bizarre of the stories Beckett spun that year, the protagonist narrates of his encounter with a strange man who, among other things, is possessed of phials galore and eager to sell him one. The protagonist is not particularly game and says that he has no money. The stranger then asks first for his hat, desists in the face of a vehement refusal and asks next for a lace, which is also turned down. In the event the peddler settles for a kiss in exchange for one of his wares. The bilabial remuneration is delivered squarely on the bared forehead, as non-negotiably specified by the strange peddler, who puts his hat back on.

I turned away and looked across the street. It was then I noticed we were sitting opposite a horse-butcher's. Here, he said, take it. I had forgotten. He rose. Standing he was quite short. One good turn, he said, with a radiant smile.

What changed hands here is evidently a phial, although the transaction had no

sooner been concluded than it was forgotten by the narrator. The two passages discussed above exhaust the references to phials in the four novellas. The reader cannot but decide that the narrator of *The End* was harking *forward* (who doubts it?) to an episode in *The Calmative* a good nine months before it actually materialized in black and white. To read the stories the reader must thus reckon with a hyperspace where an event can sometimes take place long after a tiny segment of it is remembered first in a widely distant and separate text.

The phial episodes have only to do with two of Beckett's four novellas, but not so the sequence involving the narrator's hat, which occupies a very prominent place in the stories probably for reasons of metonymy. *The End* opens with a scene where the protagonist (relatively old) is thrown out of a charitable institution, clothed and bestowed with money. The clothes he was given had belonged to somebody else. He asked for his own back but was told that they had all been burnt, the hat included. In the second story *The Expelled* the protagonist (relatively young) is dislodged again, this time from his own room in a house that presumably used to belong to his now dead father. The people who hurled him down the steps onto the street threw his hat after him. It was, he says, the hat that his late father had bought him when his head had attained 'its maximum dimensions' (34), and that he was profoundly attached to it. Two different accounts of his hat (the first worn in old age and the second in youth) are thus offered in the course of the first two stories. As early as at the close of *The End* the narrator says that his hat is tied to his buttonhole with a string. It is no doubt this hat that "flew off, but did not get far thanks to the string" (55) in *The Calmative*, the fourth and last story. And it may also be the same hat that the eponymous hero will be seen sporting in the novel *Molloy*,³ for example, which was still a year in coming at the writing of *The Calmative*. That is about all that the common reader could have hoped to know for a long time about the narrator's hat which, seeing its recurrent and detailed discussions in story after story, was at

best presumed to be something of capital importance to the protagonist.

In 1970 Beckett finally consented to have his third novella *Premier Amour* published, and its English version followed it three years later in the author's own translation. *First Love* unexpectedly filled in the missing link and the common reader was finally allowed to obtain the definitive account of the protagonist's hat.

I wrote somewhere, They gave me . . . a hat. Now the truth is they never gave me a hat, I have always had my own hat, the one my father gave me, I have never had any other hat than that hat. I may add it has followed me to the grave (74).

This kills more than just two birds with one stone. The two conflicting versions of the narrator's hat are brought together here and out of them emerges the final authorized version, so to speak, explaining the important nexus between his father and his cherished hat to the reader's satisfaction. It establishes beyond a shadow of doubt that one single protagonist narrates all four stories. It further confirms the importance of the four stories being read in the original order of composition. Also, last but not least, the concluding sentence, which would have us believe that it is a dead man who speaks here, hammers home the fact that the novellas do have a bone to pick with the conventions of plausibility and verisimilitude. As to the father-hat nexus, in the original French the negated subject 'they' (whoever that may be beyond the immediate referent) appears in double diamond brackets, "Or jamais « ils » ne me donnèrent un chapeau" (*Premier amour*, 30), demonstrating how vital this reminder of the history of his hat is, above all to the narrator himself and to the reader too by the way.

The long-overdue *First Love* clarified another fact of importance touching the protagonist's hat. At the outset of *The End* the narrator says that his skull was in such a state that he could not possibly go about without a headgear of some kind

or other. Discharged from the institution and compelled to hunt for a roof over his head, he had to perfect a method of taking off his hat, “at once courteous and discreet, neither servile nor insolent”(14). Doffing his hat without allowing his skull to give an unfavorable impression to the person addressed turned out to be quite a challenge for him. At his wit’s end he wraps up the sore subject by saying that, in order to altogether avoid baring his head, he procured a kepi and took to ‘saluting in military fashion’ (14). But then in the same breath the statement about the kepi is cancelled: “no, that must be wrong” (14). Here the kepi is immediately dropped presumably because it is on the wrong side of the line the narrator draws. But where exactly he draws the line was not to be known until 1970, when *Premier amour* was dug out and supplied the following long-coveted illumination.

But I have always spoken, no doubt always shall, of things that never existed, or that existed if you insist, no doubt always will, but not with the existence I ascribe to them. Kepis, for example, exist beyond a doubt, indeed there is little hope of their ever disappearing, but personally I never wore a kepi. (74)

The voice heard here is of someone who has made a discovery, and a decision based on that discovery. He did not know enough to be articulate before. He could only say, “that must be wrong.” Now he knows and is resolute to toe the line he draws, and the line drawn lies between what he thinks is and what he thinks is not. His voice holds a tone of deep personal conviction. Verisimilitude or no, it rings true and authentic. This is the voice we hear in the next and last story *The Calmative*, which is about authorship and authenticity.

The novel *Mercier and Camier* whose first person-narrator proposes to talk about the eponymous ‘pseudocouple’ (*The Unnamable*, 13) is outside the scope of

this short article. But as it has much to do with authority, a problematic aspect of authorship, it must be looked at very briefly here. The novel opens with a declaration of authority: "The journey of Mercier and Camier is one I can tell, if I will, for I was with them all the time" (7). This opening remark already sounds ominous enough. The narrator has the power to decide whether to tell or not to tell, and he alone is in possession of all knowledge on the subject of Mercier and Camier. The reader faintly recognizes this tone of voice, having detected something similar to it in Beckett's first English novel, which opened with much the same flourish: "The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new. Murphy sat out of it, as though he were free, in a mew in West Brompton (*Murphy*, 1)." If both narrators here seem to claim a shade more attention than their due, it is probably because they have difficulty keeping their authorial privilege or verbal pyrotechnics under control.

Authority is an important aspect of authorship and, as the narrator of *Mercier and Camier* is at pains to remind us, it comprehends omniscience and omnipotence. In *Mercier and Camier* both these aspects of authority tend to be overindulged in. At the beginning of the novel the narrator draws up a diagram according to which he can contrive to have Mercier and Camier keep missing each other until they can finally have the joy of finding themselves in each other's arms three quarters of an hour behind the appointed time. On successful completion of his machinations, the narrator puts down a comment in mild disgust: "What stink of artifice!" (*Mercier and Camier*, 9). The reader hardly needs to be told that.

This narrator makes himself invisible after a while, only making his presence felt in occasional excursions. But the narrator's erudition (omniscience) and verbal virtuosity (omnipotence) resonating in his excursions threaten to bend the reader's ears too long, both parties altogether oblivious to the protagonists. Some of these excursions contain observations that shed invaluable light on the arcane

mechanism of authorship at work in the four novellas.

That's it. It takes a little time to grasp more or less what happened. It's your sole excuse, the best in any case. Enough to tempt you joking apart to have another go, another go at getting up, dressing up (paramount), ingesting, excreting, undressing up, dressing down, and all the other things too tedious to enumerate, in the long run too tedious, requiring to be done and suffered. No danger of losing interest, under these conditions. You cultivate your memory till it's passable, a treasure-bin, stroll in your crypt, unlit, return to the scenes, call back the old sounds (paramount), till you have the lot off pat and you all at a loss, head, nose, ears, and the rest, what remains to snuff up, they all smell equally sweet, what old jingles to play back. Pretty beyond! And all that can still happen to you! Such things! Such adventures! You think you have done with it all and then one day, bang! full in the eye. Or in the arse, or in the balls, or in the cunt, no lack of targets, above all below the waist. And they talk of stiffs being bored! (*Mercier and Camier*, 108).

The narrator's candid and ebullient scorn for the tediousness of life, his idiosyncratic treatment of memory as a treasure-bin and his insinuation that dead men are too busy to be bored, among other things, are all topics that have directly to do with the central focus of the four novellas. The 'pretty beyond' of the English version above is "Ah le joli outre-tombe" in the French original (*Mercier et Camier*, 189), and the reference to the postmortem state of elated bliss is perhaps even more explicit there. But, invaluable as they are, passages like the above do not in the last analysis belong in the lives and opinions either of the novel's protagonists or of the people they encounter on their journey. The reader cannot escape the feeling that the narrator is crowding himself into the pages that should rightly belong to Mercier and Camier and their fellow travellers alone.

But when the narrator chooses to make himself invisible, on the other hand, page after page of direct discourse with “said Mercier” or “said Camier” tagging behind soon begin to look like a play script. Here an idea suggests itself, anachronistic as it admittedly is. Why does the narrator not let his protagonists talk about themselves? Why not copy the celebrated Mr Godot, who makes himself conspicuous by his very absence. Mr Godot will put his pseudocouples not on pages but on the stage and let them strut and fret there as much as they will? A Beckett protagonist-narrator deserves a hyperspace all to himself.

The protagonist-narrator is thrown out of a charitable institution in *The End*, of a family house in *The Expelled*, and in the third story *First Love* he opts out of a marriage situation of his own accord. Each of the first three stories tells of his estrangement from living beings around him at three different periods in his life. That the narrator cannot have told these stories while he was alive was hinted at in *The End*. In that story he is last seen sitting in a boat drifting down a river under the stars toward the open sea. The boat has a small hole pierced with his own hands in the floorboards and the water is rising slowly: “The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told” (31). Intertextual references make it irrefutable that the same narrator also wrote the second and the third stories after his death. But insofar as the first three stories have the appearance of being ‘recollections’ of how it was with the protagonist in his old age, youth and middle age respectively, they read like conventional short stories, albeit they are sprinkled with such easily overlooked irregularities as were discussed at the beginning of this article. The fourth and last story *The Calmative*, however, which can arguably be called the culmination of Beckett’s 1946 creative frenzy, tells of what it is like for the dead man to tell a story.

When it opens the narrator says that he does not remember when he died. He is in total desolation, lying in his ‘icy bed (47),’ frightened at his own decomposition,

and “waiting for the red lapses of the heart, the tearings at the caecal walls, and for the slow killings to finish in [his] skull (47).” Telling a story is his way of calming himself.

The story is told in the past tense: “I speak as though it all happened yesterday” (48). Here neither French nor English allows him a sentence construction where ‘I’ (the teller) and ‘it’ (the told) would be one and the same. Nor is it possible for him to fuse the two tenses into one: “Yesterday indeed is recent, but not enough. For what I tell this evening is passing this evening, at this passing hour” (48). In the French original this passage is concluded with a statement which is left out in the author’s own English translation.⁴ (It would be a good exercise for the reader to transcribe the whole story into the present tense and ponder on the differences that would make.)

The story takes place in real time. The words that draw themselves from the narrator’s mouth simultaneously pour themselves into the story. The narrator means to present a story that does not stand for, copy, represent or depend on anything outside of itself.

But it’s to me this evening something has to happen, to my body as in myth and metamorphosis, this old body to which nothing ever happened, or so little, which never met with anything, loved anything, wished for anything, in its tarnished universe, except for the mirrors to shatter, the plane, the curved, the magnifying, the minifying, and to vanish in the havoc of its images. (49)

In that it is not intended to be a mirror the story distinguishes itself very sharply from a dream, for example, which the narrator says is “nothing, a joke, and significant, what’s worse” (61). If the story is not meant to signify then trying to ‘interpret’ it would be barking up the wrong tree. Rather, it is to be enjoyed just like a good piece of music, say, a *scherzo fantastique*, so diverse in its moods and

melodies.

The overall pattern of the story follows that of one of the narrator's childhood stories which his father used to read to him, evening after evening: "the adventures of one Joe Bream, or Breen . . . a strong muscular lad of fifteen . . ." (50). Like all adventure stories, it will have 'the setting forth, the struggle and perhaps the return' (50). The setting forth, always in the evening or at night, of this old, weak postmortem man will be from a 'refuge,' alternately called 'dens' or 'ruins' (47) in a little wood. He will head for the city near by, the only place where encounters with people and things are available to him. The reader hears him repeatedly assuring himself saying, "[That] is what I have come out for" (52, 63). And, as in all adventures and campaigns, there will be talk of 'spoils' (62) afterwards.

As soon as the adventure story gets going the narrator's words begin to interweave themselves as both warp and woof, simultaneously calling things into existence and being delighted at the wonders of their own making: "But little by little I got myself out and started walking with short steps among the trees, oh look, the trees!" (48) People too come into existence at the beck of his words, in much the same way as in the first Book of the Old Testament: "I must indeed have been moving fast for I overhauled more than one pedestrian, there are the first men" (54). The reader can see that the narrator's authorship in this story is truly enjoyable and enjoyed in full measure.

But his authorship is far from being authoritative. It is in his skull that this dead old man seems to find all his words for the things, people and events that they cause so delightfully to come into being. The skull is presumably something very much like the treasure-bin the narrator of *Mercier and Camier* was talking about above. The narrator admits that his story is not entirely free from contradictions, but he does not seem to be particularly embarrassed about it: "It is not my wish to labour these antinomies, for we are needless to say in a skull . . ." (57). In fact he

is always at pains to steer clear of logic or reason: “All I say cancels out, I’ll have said nothing” (48). This may throw some light on the mystery of the phials discussed at the outset of this article. The phials certainly made a mockery of our cherished concept of time flowing in one direction only. Equally worthy of note is the fact that topics capable of bewildering the narrator himself are seen to crop up in his story here and there: “Into what nightmare thingness am I fallen?” (55).

All the above goes to show that the narrator is simply not master of all the elements that find their way into his own story. This is not omnipotence nor is it omniscience. (Already in his last story but one, when he puts a kepi on his own head on the spur of the moment, for example, he knows that that must be wrong somehow, and he is honest enough to let his listeners know that. This is not verisimilitude nor is it plausibility. It is authenticity.) The story told by this dead narrator is not meant to be true to life. It’s told by a dead man after all. But weak and old as he is, this postmortem man is true to the promise he makes to himself, and to the reader. As he personally never wore a kepi, so will he always speak only of things that never are.

In *The Calmative* the word ‘reality’ occurs just once, toward the close of the story, when the nightmarish adventure is practically over for the moment for the narrator. But what a strange load that word is burdened with, and that with heavy reservations, and how it disperses like a mist in the blinding void of light within the blink of an eye! This is how the last piece of music in the four novellas ends.

Then at last, before I fell, first to my knees, as cattle do, then on my face, I was in a throng. I didn’t lose consciousness, when I lose consciousness it will not be to recover it. They paid no heed to me, though careful not to walk on me, a courtesy that must have touched me, it was what I had come out for. It was well with me, sated with dark and calm, lying at the feet of mortals, fathom deep in the grey of dawn, if it was dawn. But reality, too tired to look

for the right word, was soon restored, the throng fell away, the light came back and I had no need to raise my head from the ground to know I was back in the same blinding void as before. I said, Stay where you are, down on the friendly stone, or at least indifferent, don't open your eyes, wait for morning. But up with me again and back on the way that was not mine, on uphill along the boulevard. A blessing he was not waiting for me, poor Old Beem, or Breen, I said. The sea is east, it's west I must go, to the left of the north. But in vain I raised without hope my eyes to the sky to look for the Bears. For the light I steeped in put out the stars, assuming they were there, which I doubted remembering the clouds (63).

Beckett's next prose work to be started half a year later will be *Molloy*,⁵ in which the eponymous narrator shares many parallelisms with this old man, although in many important respects the two characters exhibit as many dissimilarities. The old man in *The Calmative* totters back to his den and the icy bed in it where he will presumably remain dying until his need for another dose of 'calmative' lures him into the world of living people again. Molloy will find himself in his mother's room and, as good as glued to the bed there, he concentrates on putting down his recollections in black and white, although he may not consider himself a professional writer. Also, what immediately strikes the reader-listener about the 1947 novel is, as compared to the pressing and pressed effusion of the old man in *The Calmative*, Molloy's markedly relaxed, almost negligent, rumination.

It was on a road remarkably bare, I mean without hedges or ditches or any kind of edge, in the country, for cows were chewing in enormous fields, lying and standing, in the evening silence. Perhaps I'm inventing a little, perhaps embellishing, but on the whole that's the way it was. They chew, swallow, then

after a short pause effortlessly bring up the next mouthful. A neck muscle stirs and the jaws begin to grind again. But perhaps I'm remembering things (*Molloy* 8-9).

Here the narrator-protagonist seems to have relinquished living or, perhaps more precisely, dying and taken up writing (remembering) instead. My instalments to follow will try to examine this transition process a little more closely.

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1 It is perhaps the deference to this now legendary reluctance on the part of the author that accounts for some of the otherwise inexplicable peculiarities surrounding the various publications and editions of the four novellas in question. For example, Penguin's *First Love and other Novellas*, one of the latest to bring together all four novellas in Beckett's own English translation,

disregards the order of composition and places *First Love* behind the other three.

- 2 The bracketed numbers unaccompanied by book titles or author names are page citations from *First Love and Other Novellas*, edited by Gerry Dukes, Penguin, 2000.
- 3 “I took off my hat and looked at it. It is fastened, it has always been fastened, to my buttonhole, always the same buttonhole, at all seasons, by a long lace” (*Molloy*, 74).
- 4 “Ah je vous foutrai des temps, salauds de votre temps.” (*Nouvelles et Textes pour rien*, 41.) Since Beckett's own decision was not to translate this rather unrestrained sentence, it will be wise to leave it untranslated here as well.
- 5 “Written in four notebooks dated May 2-November 1, 1947...” (Cohn 161).