Iulia LUCA

Universitatea „Lucian Blaga“ din Sibiu, Biblioteca Centrală Universitară
“Lucian Blaga“ University of Sibiu, Central Library of the University

Samuel Beckett and the Writing Genius

Samuel Beckett and the Writing Genius

Samuel Beckett wrote enduring works of art the imperishability of which is proven by the widely read body of original material and by the numerous reviews and critical approaches to his work. Thus, a unique dimension of his entire creative life, represented by the capacity, structure and movement of the language remains impressive even today, twenty years after his death. What is it thus that makes this author so controversial and widely debated at conferences and congresses? Is it the mysterious air of his work or rather the windings and the ups and downs that transform our reading into a potent experience which enables the reader “to come alive in his mind,” to quote from *Murphy*? To this author’s mind, in the end it is the intellectual and emotional exaltation elicited by his novels and short stories which is most important. Some reasons are: his workings are accounts of memorable events in time and space that captivate the reader with their comical implication and inquisitive problematic tone. These are dimensions of our reading that elicit an emotional response quite hard to resist. However, are these features numerous and relevant enough to account for his success? Are there enough translations for the Romanian reader to attain a fair perspective on Beckett’s creative genius? These are some of the main questions that I will answer in this essay.

Keywords: writing, imperishable, comic, idyllic, tragic, reception, translation, lyrical
Institution’s address: str. Lucian Blaga, nr. 2A, st. IV, Sibiu, România, tel: +40753206456, +40269446077
Personal e-mail: *iulia.Luca@ulbsibiu.ro*

Introduction

Samuel Beckett adopted several features of James Joyce’s style and narrative technique while searching for an original and authentic manner of expressing his struggle to represent the alienation of modern mind. Consequently, he gave is he gave the form of the narrative almost exclusive attention. Thus, the idyllic, the comic and the dreamlike presented in contrast with the tragic and the melancholic way of life were his main instruments to confer shape and form to a narrative that was to express the feeling of nothingness in an ever changing world.

Melancholy influenced Beckett’s writings most. He stated in his German Diaries that he felt most happily melancholic. However the tragic, the dreamlike, the comic and the idyllic play a good part in his dealing with modern themes, the alienation of modern man in particular. His own temperament opened his work to romantic influences. His literary work has been translated into 20 languages ensuring recognition that its enduring features are of a universal nature. This paper’s main aim is to analyze the extent to which the tragic, the idyllic, the humoristic and the dreamlike features of his short prose writings are addressed by Romanian translations and original literary Romanian workings, in order to prove the imperishable dimension of Beckett’s artistic work.

1. The Struggle for Originality and the Indebtedness to the Master

Samuel Beckett’s novels were originally written in French and translated by the author himself into English, only 2, *Murphy* and *Watt* being originally written in English. The missing translation of Beckett’s third novel of the trilogy “The Unnamable” might pertain to a larger comprehension of the genius’s artistic creation. However, the movement of the language, the meticulous attention to details, the use of the painted word and the use of the stream of consciousness technique in “Mollloy” confirm the indebtness to his predecessor, James Joyce. Moreover it was repetition, allusive addressing, unreliable narrative, unrealistic settings, and interconnected extended metaphors that his style was associated with. Andrei Dârliu translated a chapter of *Texts for Nothing* entitled ”Povești și texte pe nimic” in *Suplimentul Scânteii Tineretului*, no. 47, in 1987.



Samuel Beckett

http://thebsreport.files.wordpress.com/2009/04/samuel-beckett-paris-cafe.jpg

Hence, the period 1969-1990 witnesses the publication 8 translations of Beckett's short prose with Andrei Dârliu translating a chapter of *Texts for Nothing* entitled "Poveşti şi texte pe nimic" in *Suplimentul Scânteii Tineretului*, no. 47, in 1987.

The reception through translations remains focused only on the absurd and senseless condition of man in an uncaring world.

"Molloy" was translated by Pavai Mihaly in *Utunk*, No.44, in 1972. Fragments of *Watt* were translated by György Dragoman in *A Het*, vol.2, no.15-16 in 2006. The first encounter in German with the translation of "Krapp's Last Tape" was enabled in "Volk und Kultur", no.6 in 1970. Critical material is to be found in the magazine "Neue Literatur", hence especially referring to the play "Warten auf Godot" [Waiting for Godot].

2. The Importance of Beckett's Notebooks and Diaries in his Literary Writings and the Search for his own Voice

On one hand there were the German diaries that attest to the acceptance and rejection of various literary motifs of Romanticism and on the other hand, a relevant thing worth mentioning would be the existence from the 1930s of Beckett's philosophy notes incorporated into "All Strange Away". The 'Sottisier' notebook that Samuel Beckett kept in 1976 attests to the fact that he not only relied much on the erudite material that he took from his reading but also dragged it further below the surface of his texts.

During the 70s and the 80s he used to write whatever inspired him on old diaries, metro tickets, envelopes or parts of the box of a whisky bottle. The collection of letters starting with the late 1970s and ending with the 80s attest to his final turn into an original writer that did not renounce his struggle to continue writing. He described the profound change he went through when rereading his notes on Dante when he was a student at Trinity College: "Only reading Dante again with memories of student reading…" (Nixon)

In his notes to *Whoroscope* from the early 1930s there could be found among the layers of "sediment" several striking expressions like: "geology of conscience" and "Cambrian Experience".

These ideas are repeated in the notebook to "Watt" where Arsene and the narrator are in the middle of a conversation[6]: " 'Never mind that now' cried Arsene. Dig! Delve! Deeper! The Cambrian! The uterine! The pre- uterine!

'The pre-uterine' we said. 'No. That reminds us of the rocks at Greystones.' "(Nixon)

The rocks at Greystones represent the place where Beckett's father William was buried in 1933. An interesting fact worth mentioning would regard the completion of the creative process on the scrap if he finalized his work in the 'Sottisier' notebook.

The fact that Beckett was always returning to his inspiration sources, the classical, the romantic or the modern is mirrored in his narratives. The form of Beckett's narratives resembles the classical search for a solid architectonics of the literary discourse he was so keen of to attain. The fact that his inspiration reaches back to Dante Alighieri and to the 14century's artistic models attests to his multi layered and complex scheme of construing his narratives. Hence, without a meticulous explicitation of the inspirational sources of Beckett's narrative there is no consequent and exact understanding of his creative genius possible.

Samuel Beckett's favorite romantic writer being John Keats it was natural for his work to be infused by romantic literary motifs. Thus, it was in a letter to Thomas McGreevy that he expressed his kind of romantic frame of mind:

I like that crouching quality in Keats-

squatting on the moss, crushing a petal,
licking his lips+rubbing his hands,
counting the last oozings, hours by hours!
I like him the best of them all, because
He doesn't beat his fist on the table.
I like that awful sweetness and thick
Soft damp green sickness. And weariness
"Take into the air my quiet breath"
(TM, undated [6 April 1930]) .

3. General Characteristics of Samuel Beckett's Shorter Prose with a Special Reference to "Company" and "The End"

It is known for a fact that Beckett's short prose is embellished with poetic tonality and with lyrical power. The lyricism of his narratives is the most evident in "Texts for Nothing 1":

I had heard tell I must have heard tell of the view the distant sea in hammered lead the so called golden vale so often sung the double valleys, the glacial loughs, the city in its haze. It was all on every tongue. Who are these people anyway? […]I am down in the hole the centuries have dug, centuries of filthy weather, flat on my face on the dark earth sodden with the creeping saffron waters it slowly drinks. (Beckett 101)

The first to offer Beckett's poetry the merited attention was Lawrence Harvey in his book entitled *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (1970). The book presents a complex reading but does not refer to its modernist genealogy. Patricia Coughlan's study *The Poetry is Another Pair of Sleeves*: *Beckett, Ireland and Modernist Lyric Poetry* is worth mentioning, too.

The taboo on human interaction mixed with a sense of a haunting presence conveys to some of his writings the character of dreamlike visions. The "thwarting" of the sexual instinct, conferring of a point of painful contact with the world of the "ghostly female" and the constant "need for movement as a stay against paralysis and death". (Wheatley) features Beckett's early oeuvre. This fact is more pronounced in "Assumption" when the male character or artist disturbed by the female powerful presence dies. The image of the artist in constant need of light and objectivity in order to create, is pronouncedly developed in "More Pricks than Kicks". The best example of the constant movement in search for an ultimate meaning or truth is to be found in Mercier and Camier: "What does it matter […] where we are going? We are going that's enough." (Wheatley) The landscape in the entire body of narratives and poems is rather hostile and inimical:

As a Beckett landscape, in other words it could hardly be more ideal. Further, if the lone wanderer of these poems is invariably in a state of profound alienation from his surroundings, their status as public spaces in post-independence Ireland does not disappear, but becomes all the more claustrophobically insistent.(Wheatley)

3.1. Major Irish Landmarks and Innovatory Attempts in Beckett's Writings

The trilogy *Nohow On* is a courageous attempt to give an ultimate form to being. This form is nevertheless hard to be attained. As Beckett's creed was that each exploration should be excavatory, his texts pertain a documented original, dimension, starting with geographical data and ending with the realm of sports, cricket with predilection. Relevant landmarks that point to Ireland are omnipresent: Dun Laoghaire, Wicklow, The Forty Foot Hole.

Hence, a contrastive pattern of reception presents the idyllic, comical and dreamlike features of a visionary mind to counter the tragic condition of the alienated modern man. The subsequent model that tends to cancel itself by the ironic implication takes a vivid exemplification in workings like: "Company" and "The End".

3.1.1. The Idyllic Implication in Company (1980)

"Company" is an autobiographical novella judging by the short length size presenting a single episode and a situation in the life of the protagonist. The philosophical essence remains a poignant dimension of the narrative:

Looking up at the blue sky and then at your mother's face you break the silence asking her if it is not in reality much more distant than it appears. The sky that is. The blue sky. Receiving no answer you […] ask her if it does not appear much less distant than in reality it is. For some reason you could never fathom this question must have angered her exceedingly. For she shook off your little hand and made you a cutting retort you have never forgotten. (Beckett, Nohow On 6)

However, the recurrent element of the text remains the sheep who are the most vital participants in the unfolding of the action: "Out no more to walk the little winding back roads and interjacent pastures now alive with flocks and now deserted. With at your elbow for long years your father's shade in his old tramping rags and then for long years alone" (Beckett, Nohow On 45)

Nevertheless, sheep remain most probably a company for the boy. These are his benchmarks for a tumultuous and vivacious life that stands as a replacement for the failure of finding any sense in the

immediate reality for the time being. By their "innocent" appearance sheep confer the lonely wanderer a special kind of piece and calmness. It is their presence that provides an equilibrium and harmony to the boy by replacing the loss of meaning and sense in the immediate world. On the other hand one must take into account that the solitude of the boy is profound and his reaching out to his mother does not offer him any escape from the contingent dimension of life. His searching for answers maintains a stubborn rhythm as he does not seem to be easily distracted from his major aim, that of finding a way to relate to a superior dimension of life.

Beckett's method of presenting the quasi autobiographical material in "Company" works at the strengthening of the degree of comprehensive reading. The reader can follow by means of a chronological unfolding of the action a coherent development of the plot. The broken coherence of the text becomes overt after the fifteen paragraphs when it is not clear if the memory is of the speaking voice or not. There is not made any further reference to the memorized image as the speaking voice continues on a long monologue which makes it ponder on the need and the ultimate form of company. There is thus a gradual decrease of clarity and cohesion around a central nucleus: "Even still in the timeless dark you find figures a comfort. You assume a certain heart rate and reckon how many thumps a day."(Company 29)

However, the illusion fades and eventually he realizes his being alone as always.

In "Company" the reader was faced with the sorting out of the different layers of the narrative. Firstly, the moments were evoked in which the protagonist, addressed in the second person singular, came out of Connolly store with his mother. Secondly, the moment of his birth was envisaged when his father terrified by the image of his suffering wife preferred a stroll through the woods of the mountains where he could ponder freely on the birth and eat his favorite egg sandwiches. On his return at night he was told by the maid that the labor was over at last.

The passage of the crawling being is depicted to contrast the first one of the birth of the son. It may stand for the unborn fetus as it describes the movements and crawls in the dark. What interests more the reader is the interweaving and mixture of all the imagined moments with the layers of reality. The moments of the fancy imaginings and the real dreams of getting to know the truth, accumulate to the realization that "[Next] thing you are on your way across the white pasture afrolic with lambs in spring and strewn with red placentae." (Beckett, Nohow On 25)

The presence of lambs is alternating with the image of barren or empty pastures representing the change of life's direction and horizons. The details about the location where the so long expected event was supposed to happen and indications to original Irish brands or makes of car, the De Dion Button car owned by the boy's father are meticulously jotted down.

The voice that comes to the person that lies on his back reminds the interlocutor of a far away childhood and of nearly forgotten places. This voice is supposed to keep him company. It reflects upon the accuracy and authenticity of the remembered events. Beckett's assault on words in "Company" highlightens once again his artistic creed. The play at syntactical level marks his struggle to obtain an aesthetic effect: "Till finally you hear how words are coming to an end. With every inane word a little nearer to the last. And how the fable too. The fable of one fabling of one with you in the dark. And how better in the end labor lost and silence. And you as you always were. Alone." (Beckett, Nohow On 46) Thus, the speaking voice is confused with the addressed character to such an extent that "[It] appears that all the pronominal additions were fictive employments to give linguistic credence to an indefinable, nonverbal subject." (Finney)

3.1.2. The Tragic Destiny of Man in The End (1946)

The novella "The End" exhibits the first person narrative's imagining his last moments of life pulling the plug hole in the bottom of his boat. This vision deteriorates as the man degenerates physically more and more. However, the pawky imagination and the continuous rattle of the "chattering" soliloquy do not cease.

The boat where he found his final refuge from the local rats is in a shed:

> The reader must not confuse the physical or economic or social state of this narrator with a similar mental condition; he is not mentally destitute […] The casual reference to Arnold Geulincx, a seventeenth century philosopher concerned with the relation of mind and body, comes naturally to the old man in "The End" and is consistent with his attempts to make some sense of his physical degeneration by imposing a lively mind on the question. As a result, the basic vulgarity of a tramp's life […]the awareness of the problem of personal hygiene, all the problems of hobo life are shot through with bits of scholarly knowledge, touches of obsessive rationalization, a lunatic sense of humor, and an occasional wide-eyed innocence about the way of the world. ("The Story")

The oral style is loose and patches up a mixture of different styles that recur to low dialect. The reader finds pleasure in the direct and furtive comment:

> Every once in a while the prose picks up lyric

power, particularly in the descriptions of nature. Tonally it is, then, all over the place, sometimes sad, sometimes lugubrious, often offensive, but also very amusing. It is an example of putting a character at the end of his tether but with energy enough to pull cheekily on the rope.

The image projected in "The End" embraces many connotations on the metaphorical level. The tone is grave and uncompromising. The recurrence to the Irish custom of "gorse burning" is a rather powerful attempt at rendering the advancing beyond the limits of human suffering and pain which is sometimes probably more than a living being can endure. The effect on the reader is crispy, electrifying and immediate. The image is "unimaginable" reaching under the skin of the reading instance. One can not withhold from participating in the sincere and solemn tonality of the narrative voice. It is almost as if once trapped you get the impression that the narrator transcends space and time. The vivid image grabs with all its might in its created net and keeps a strong hold on the implied reader. However, in Beckett's writing there is no hope for the transcendent.

The revolt and indignation that the reader experiences on the mental level by means of the projected image is of a unique kind:

Don't think I'm being unkind, he added. I could live here, with the pig, I said, I'd look after him. The long month of peace, wiped out in an instant! Come now, come now, he said, get a grip on yourself, be a man, get up, that's enough. After all it was no concern of his. He had really been most patient. He must have visited the basement while I was sleeping. (Beckett, The Complete Short Prose 86)

The pig is portrayed rather as endowed with a more superior value than a human being almost resembling Jonathan Swift's "Houyhnhnm", the renowned horses that possessed divine qualities. Man becoming objectified, a mere "degraded" object does not have any other choice left than witness his own degradation and futility. Furthermore, the image becomes eventually more scaring:

He said he needed the room immediately for his pig which even as he spoke was catching cold in a cart before the door and no one to look after him but a stray urchin whom he had never sat eyes on before and who was probably busy tormenting him. (Beckett, The Complete Short Prose 86)

Thus, adding this shattering and tormenting element to the narrative Beckett reaches his highest peak of the narrative aesthetics of ugliness in the terms of "Le Fleur de Mal" ever since Baudelaire (1857) and the aesthetics of the Romanian poet Tudor Arghezi.

The structure develops on three imaginary levels: the first when the narrator is thrown out of the house whose lodging was managed by a so called Greek or Turkish woman that leaves him penniless and homeless offering him a housing in which he is preferred to a pig eventually, the level of the existence in the dwelling of a cave which is an imaginary level and eventually the "existence" on the edge of the last limit of survival in the boat that unites the other levels.

The intention to execute the grandiose was the main tendency of an aesthete in the twentieth century. Samuel Beckett applied the general concepts of aesthetics to his creative work and developed them originally to the point of undermining them without losing the personal touch and the enduring sobriety and solemnity. His intricate, ambiguous manner of expression must be a replacement of the idyllic, romantic style more exactly an alternative to the consecrated, established norms of the time. The furrowlike and waving mode of expression gained importance between 1960 and 1989, the year of his death. The projected images become terrifying but are gradually released towards the end. The nightmare goes on only to be projected at the second turn of events on a secondary level, when it registrates a change in intensity and feeling. The original treatment of the theme of the nightmarish and tragic destiny of man reaches a climax in "The End". Hence the attempt shows a certain amount of lucidity and complacency of the author towards the imagined catastrophe.

3.2. Modern Reception Patterns Based on Nina Cassian's poem "Pe o temă de Beckett"

N. Cassian's poem issued in *Luceafarul* in 1994 is an ode addressed to Beckett. It definitely stresses the numbness of the lyrical ego that has lost all its human dimensions. Animality becomes a completing process with the transformation into a reptile.

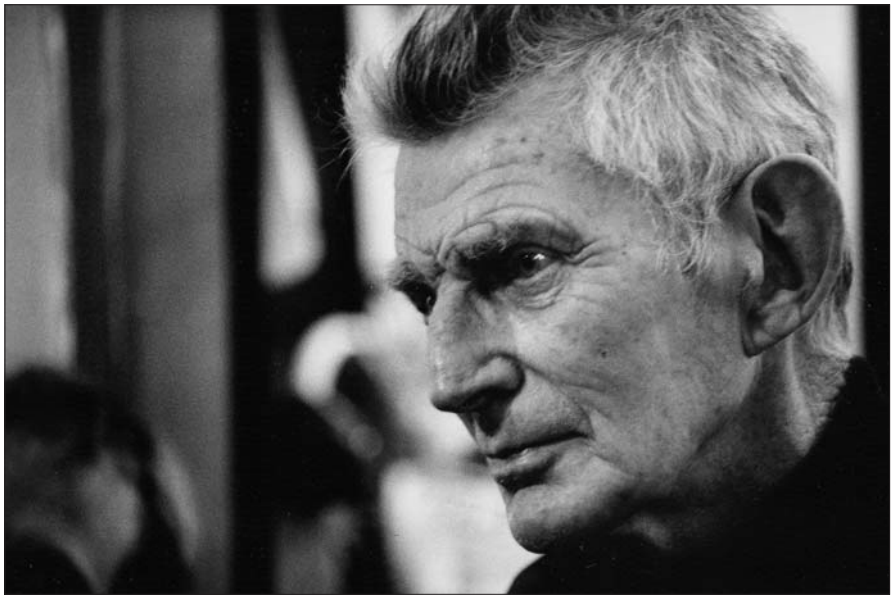
Pe o temă de Beckett /On a Beckettian theme

Îmi lipsesc ochii/ My eyes are gone
Mâinile, picioarele,/ My hands, my feet-

De când nu mai merg,/ Since I do not walk,
Nu mai văd, nu mai pipăi/ I do not see, I do not touch
Încep să semăn cu tine, Molloy/ I begin toresemble you
Molloy
târâtoarea mea adorată./my adored/beloved reptile.

Conclusion

Beckett adhered to Joyce's aesthetics for a while but beyond that he chose his own writing style that was to become more auto ironical, ondoyant and minimalist. Hence, he made use of paradoxes and half symbols to express his personal dealing with the alienation of modern man in a meaningless world that lost its human dimensions. The comic, dreamlike and idyllic element was to become a solution to the tragic destiny of modern mind.



Samuel Beckett, Londra 19845

http://www.johnminihan.com/resources/images/beckett/large/Samuel%20Beckett,%20London%201984%20%285%29.jpg

Notes:

1. See also parts of Samuel Beckett's letter to Thomas McGreevy in Mark Nixon (ed.) "Beckett and Romanticism in the 1930s", *Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui* 18 (2007), Rpt. in *'All Sturm and noDrang" Beckett and Romanticism.Beckett at Reading 2006*. 61-70. Print.
2. See also: Un regizor dorit acum ca in anii '60. 05. Nov. 2009,<http://www.interceptor.ro/module-Pagesetter-viewpub-tid-3-pid- 68269.phtml>
3. See also Samuel Beckett, "Fără", Trans. Ioana Crețulescu. *Viața Românească* 3 (1970): 91-93.
4. See especially: Anca-Maria Rusu. *Eugen Ionescu și Samuel Beckett în spațiul cultural românesc.* (Iași: Timpul. 2000). After 1990, the reader interested in the interpretations to Beckett's work benefited only from the preface and post-face of the volume of translations published by "Univers" publishing house and from the commentaries and essays published by the cultural press.
5. See especially Greenwald Hebert, "Reimt Charlot auf Godot? Samuel Beckett." Warten auf Godot" National Theater „I.L. Caragiale", *Neue Literatur* No.5,35(1983),p. 81-82, Print.
6. See also Samuel Beckett, *Watt* London, John Calder, 1976 in Mark Nixon, *'Guess where': From Reading to Writing in Beckett*. 20 Oct.2009,<http://www.antwerpjamesjoycecenter.com/GJS6/GJS6Nixon.htm>.
7. see *German Diaries*, 7 Nov. 1936, Beckett International Foundation, Reading University Library in Dirk van Hulle, Mark Nixon ed. *"All Sturm and no Drang* Beckett and Romanticism. Beckett at Reading 2006*" ,Samuel Beckett Today/Aujourd'hui*, Amsterdam: Rodopi. 2007, 33- 40, Rpt. In Print. Print.
8. see Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose.* 1929-1989. New York, Grove Press. Ed. S.E. Gontarski, 1995.
9. Samuel Beckett, *Mercier and Camier*, p. 90. But cf. Camier on the same subject: 'We are notfaring for the love of faring, that I know of […] Cunts we maybe, but not to that extent' (Beckett 67)
10. Wheatly, David, "Slippery Sam and Tomtinker Tim" Web. 15Sept.2009,<http://georgiasam.blogspot.com/search?q=samuel++beckett>
11. See also Eoin O'Brien, *The Beckett Country. Samuel Beckett's Ireland*,Dublin, The Black Cat Press, Faber and Faber,1986.
12. See Samuel Beckett, *Nohow On.Company. Ill Seen Ill Said.Worstward Ho.*(NewYork: Grove Press.1996.)
13. Finney, Brian. "Samuel Beckett's Postmodern Fiction". 29 Oct. 2009.<http://www.Csulb.ed/~bhfinney/-beckett.html>
14. See"The Story":<http://www.enotes.com/end-samuel-beckett-salem/end>14Oct.2009.
15. Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose* 1929-1989, New York, Grove Press.Ed.S.E.Gontarski, 1995.
16. See Tudor Arghezi, 26.Jan.2010< http://art-zone.ro/literatura/comentariu/flori_de_mucigai_tudor_arghezi_referat.html/>
17. Cassian, Nina, "Pe o temă de Beckett",*Luceafarul*, 5 (1994):6.
18. Nina Cassian, "Pe o temă de Beckett", *Luceafărul*, 5 (1994):6. ourtranslation.

Bibliography:

Beckett, Samuel. *Nohow On.Company. I'll Seen I'll Said. Worstward Ho*. New York: Grove Press, 1996. *The Complete Short Prose.* 1929-1989. New York: Grove Press. Ed. S.E. Gontarski. 1995.