

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Metalinguistic Awareness in Self-Translation: Samuel Beckett's "Ravens Eye"

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The erstwhile archetype of self-translation, Samuel Beckett, began to appear atypical a decade ago. It was pointed out that, first, his practice was not a product of endogenous bilingualism or urgent political necessity (Beckett acquired new languages in the classroom and as an adult in self-imposed exile) and, second, his principal language combination was symmetrical, French and English enjoying relatively equal prestige as literary languages (Beckett was not seeking an audience by gravitating toward a major world language [Grutman]). In looking beyond Beckett, scholars had begun to document the myriad ways that authors compose a work in one language and rewrite it in another; the collaborative *Bibliography: Autotraduzione / Autotraducción / Self-Translation* now lists almost two thousand entries for published research in the field, most of which dates from the turn of the millennium (Gentes et al.); and though a decade ago self-translation research resembled a colonial-era map of the world with vast territories ripe for "discovery," this is no longer the case (Cordingley, "Self-Translation").

Yet if Beckett's profile has cast him as the exception rather than the rule, in an age of globalization, with ever-expanding middle and upper middle classes accessing international travel and education, this is becoming less evident. Many sociological approaches to self-translation adopt a framework such as the "world language system" proposed by Abram de Swaan and developed within global literature studies, in which a language's prestige is heavily influenced by the traffic of translation into and out of it. The danger of this approach is that it risks replicating a capitalist equation of status with the quantum of capital accrued and generated by a language, which can override important cultural differences. Chinese, for instance, has little

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currency in Germain Barré's translation "système-monde" ("world-system"), yet in mainland China there is scant perception among Han Chinese, who speak an imperial language of hegemonic power, that their written language is culturally inferior to, or challenged by, any Western language (Shih). At the same time, bilingual Chinese-English schools have increased dramatically this century, and though this "runaway expansion of bilingual education" (Hu 219) has drawn criticism, it is becoming culturally entrenched within the privately educated classes and replicated at the university level (at the University of Sydney, from where I write, foreign Chinese student enrollments have reclaimed their pre-Pandemic trend). In China, one typically receives a bilingual English-Chinese education without belonging to an endogenous bilingual community (as one might in Hong Kong, Malaysia, or Singapore); Mandarin has the greatest number of first-language (native) speakers on the planet, two and a half times more than English ("What"); and the renewed cosmopolitanism of China's upper middle class is beginning to show signs of increased instances of both translingual writing and self-translation (Cordingley and Stenberg, "Collaboration" and *Self-Translation*).

The situation of a Chinese learner of English today is evidently quite different from that of an early-twentieth-century Anglo-Irishman learning French, but now the self-translator whose practice is exogenous with respect to their language community and who moves between major world languages is not a rarity. Beckett remains relevant for this translator type because unlike many authors who tried and then abandoned self-translation, he replicated almost the entirety of his oeuvre in a second language, archiving the development of an acute metalinguistic awareness, one sustained across different genres (novels, short fiction, dozens of plays and poems). Given that the growing mobility of the world population is likely to increase the number of exogenous bilinguals producing and rewriting their works for new or ancestral readerships, the crucial moment in Beckett's career, when his self-translated *I* encounters the mature expression of his translingual *je*, appears ever more prescient. To

appreciate the complexity of this encounter, one must leave distant reading behind. Below, as I zoom in on this moment and discover Beckett's unique figuration of self-translation within allegories of religious suffering and psychoanalysis, I am concerned not with restoring self-translation's traditional icon but with inquiring into how self-translation can harness the effects of displacement produced by experiences of exogenous bilingualism and foreign language learning to produce a distinct multilingual poetics animated by heightened metalinguistic self-awareness.

Self-Translation; or, The Practice of Ignorance

Before he was an established self-translator Beckett was a translingual, exophonic writer—that is, an author who writes works in a tongue other than their first language (Lennon; Wanner). Contrary to popular opinion, Beckett's mythical, postwar "frenzy" (Knowlson 358) of writing in French was not a revelation or ecstatic liberation provoked by the experience of composing in a new tongue: the multilingual exuberance of Beckett's early Joycean prose had already progressed into his brand of gallitized English, evident in the novel *Watt* (written for the most part when Beckett was hiding from the Gestapo in the south of France), whose narrator even claims to translate the inverted speech of its eponymous main character. Immediately after the war, the French novel *Mercier et Camier* was followed rapidly by the "trilogy" (so-called by the publisher) of French novels that have become modern classics, and the seismic theatrical events *En attendant Godot* and *Fin de partie*. A massive body of critical writing has explored how the trope of translation emerges differently in these works, from narrators haunted by past voices to the defamiliarized geographies populated with pseudo-couples, many of whom are indentured to each other like Hegel's slave and master, not to mention the imbricated nature of Beckett's English and French.¹

Toward the later stages of that first French "frenzy," in December 1950, after completing *L'innommable* (*The Unnamable*), Beckett began the first of thirteen short prose pieces that became

Textes pour rien. The French “Texte 1” was written at the most advanced stage of Beckett’s translanguaging writing, before his “original” composition was forever altered by the experience of sustained self-translation, when the author’s putting words on the page could not fail to generate the anticipation, perhaps even the specter, of their translation. The English “Text 1,” however, was composed by the seasoned self-translator who had spent much of the 1950s adapting his major works, as well as lesser-known pieces, into English. “Text 1” first appeared in 1959, though all thirteen “Texts” were not published until December 1966. The subject of “Texte 1” / “Text 1” recalls a series of symbolic encounters, childhood memories that generate oedipal allegories that reflect upon the emerging autofiction, especially toward the latter half of the story with an arresting sequence of self-reflexive images involving the speaker’s mother and father. His suffering from rheumatism provokes a memory of his mother’s own rheumatic eye: “Œil patient et fixe, à fleur de cette tête hagarde de charognard, œil fidèle, c’est son heure, c’est peut-être son heure” (“Eye ravening patient in the haggard vulture face, perhaps it’s carrion time”; “Texte 1” 131; “Text 1” 102). With a merciless verbal economy and reflective imagery Beckett renders into English the repetitive structure of the French “Œil . . . œil fidèle,” “heure . . . son heure”: in translation the watchful eye develops a more sinister *ravening*, a verb meaning to prey ravenously, which foreshadows an outline of the glowering, minacious bird, from which emerges the face of the vulture. The homophonic eye/I suggests that the speaker is preyed upon by the maternal vulture at “carrion time”—a rococo flourish in the English version that echoes with black humor a mother’s call to children, “Dinner time!”—implying that “I” has projected himself into the face and is ready to consume the mother-vulture, and himself. The recursive logic of this Möbius strip imagery is reinforced by the adjective *patient*, which scans as if it wants to be a noun—I [*am a*] *ravening patient*, or, *Eye [of the] ravening patient*—presenting an etherized body now subject to the rapacious but clinical self-scrutiny of the self-translator, who will cannibalize his own eye/I at feeding time. His

volition is questionable, however, because the introduction of “carillon” produces a bilingual pun on the French *carillon*, suggesting that this “I” obeys the call of church bells, as will soon become evident.

The *ravening eye*² generates an assonant and alliterative inversion of the earlier image of the “ravelled sky” in “the sun is blazing all down the ravelled sky” (101), an image that haunts the updated present, auguring an Icarian fall, the *sun* reflected in its homophonic *son*, who is heard now to blaze down from above, prefiguring his latent transformation within the mother/vulture. This potent, oedipal imagery is audibly muffled, if not dismissed, in the line following the image of the vulture: “Je suis là-haut et je suis ici, tel que je me vois, vautré, les yeux fermés, l’oreille en ventouse contre la tourbe qui suce, nous sommes d’accord . . .” (“I’m up there and I’m down here, under my gaze, foundered, eyes closed, ear cupped against the sucking peat, *we’re of one mind* . . .”; 131–32; 102; my emphasis). The “I” is not only preyed upon by his self on high but also sucked down into his past, where voices, his own included, are decomposed into a sediment of peat that nourishes his story: “ma vie et ses veilles rengaines” (“my life and its old jingles”; 131; 102). His predicament thematizes Beckett’s French prose in the postwar period, with its series of first-person narrators who become increasingly aware of other voices seeping into their thoughts, including voices from past works by Beckett. Words translate within this hermeneutic cosmology of self, suspending the “I” between Beckett’s author-self and a textual archive (cf. Sardin-Damestoy 217–24).

Yet as subject-object relations become unstable, the subject’s relationship to time is also confused: “Tout s’emmêle, les temps s’emmêlent, d’abord j’y avais seulement été, maintenant j’y suis toujours, toute à l’heure je n’y serai pas encore . . . je n’essaie pas de comprendre, je n’essaierai plus jamais de comprendre, on dit ça” (“All mingles, times and tenses, at first *I only had been here*, now *I’m here still*, soon *I won’t be here yet* . . . *I don’t try to understand, I’ll never try to understand any more, that’s what you think*”; Beckett, “Texte 1” 120; Beckett, “Text 1” 102; my emphasis). Grammatical relations are foregrounded in what appears to be a

convolution of conjugation exercises from days of foreign language learning. This rhetoric of language acquisition does not correspond with how one learns one's "mother tongue"; rather, it rehearses the rote learning of the classroom ("on dit ça" [the French is more like "as they say"]), which Beckett experienced under threat of the rod. Such rules resurface in French as the speaker's hold on objective reality slips, a dissonance that thematizes the plasticity of these foreign words and their malleable time, their substances having no inherent or "natural" relationship to things in time (cf. Beckett's linguistic skepticism and project of the "unword" in his famous 1937 letter to Axel Kaun). Beckett translated these lines into the English of "Text 1" as one might expect, but when the native speaker of English reiterates this loss of control over his "times and tenses" (102), it provokes a cognitive disturbance unlike that of the translingual author writing in a language acquired in the classroom. Two sentences later, when the French speaker is "toujours marmonnant, les mêmes propos, les mêmes histoires, les mêmes questions et réponses, bon enfant, assez, à l'extrême de mon monde d'ignorants" (121), the English speaker hears these stories emerge from within himself as "the same old mutterings, the same old stories, the same old questions and answers, no malice in me, hardly any, stultior stultissimo (103). In the Latin phrase "stultior stultissimo," meaning "the most foolish of fools," Chris Ackerley finds an echo of "Stultum Propter Christum" (82), a phrase Beckett noted into his *Dream Notebook* from his reading of Thomas à Kempis's *De imitatione Christi* (c. 1418–27; *The Imitation of Christ*) and used in his story "Echo's Bones." Beckett's creative translation of "à l'extrême de mon monde d'ignorants" as "stultior stultissimo" therefore inscribes his self-translation practice into a tradition of religious praxis. Little would lead a reader of the French text to connect the *monde d'ignorants* with à Kempis's doctrine of Christian humility and thus hear within the speaker's mutterings his ironic self-portrait in *imitatio Christi*. The English translation therefore allows one to reinterpret the relatively benign reference to *the ignorant* in the French text and see there an

ironic evocation of Beckett's cherished seventeenth-century Flemish philosopher, Arnold Geulincx, who championed ignorance as a virtue, and who more stridently than even à Kempis set out a path for following Christ's humility through rigorous self-inspection (*inspectio sui*) followed by a more ascetic self-humiliation (*despectio sui*).³ The speaker's "monde d'ignorants" thus situates him as the last in a long line of Beckett's would-be ascetics and parodic penitents.⁴

It is not only *in* translation that a latent intertext is made explicit, amplifying the global meaning of the bilingual text and revealing the complex linguistic negotiations that inform the two different meta-fictions, but also perhaps *because of* translation: "à l'extrême de mon monde d'ignorants" does not translate so easily into English if one is aiming to retain the key term *ignorant* as a noun, not an adjective. Discounting a cognate, such as *fools* or *the stupid* in favor of "the ignorant," because neither has the desired philosophical valency, is liable to produce a clumsy sounding phrase, such as "at the limit/ends of the/my realm/world of the ignorant." There are other possibilities, but all are rejected to privilege the rhetoric of the French phrase. The alliterated *m* and enveloping assonance of *on*, varied with *or* and *an* of "l'extrême de mon monde d'ignorants" finds its match in the iterative "stultior stultissimo," which not only expands the thematic range of the story but also shows Beckett reaching to Latin to solve a difficulty in English translation, at once registering and commenting on the impediment to fluid translation. Indeed, Beckett's solution echoes a common mnemonic that school children learn to decline Latin participial adjectives in the positive, comparative, and superlative—*stultus*, *stultior*, *stultissimus*—Beckett's English translation therefore drawing attention to its own ontology (he also learned Italian as a boy, another echo here) while designating the speaker to be one who likens his ceaseless storytelling—"the same old mutterings, the same old questions and answers" ("Text 1" 103)—to the rhetoric of rote learning and memories of foreign language learning. This delicious irony relegates the so-called mother tongue to a species of translation, and in a way that the straightforward

translation of the French text's conjugation rituals ("All mingles, times and tenses. . .") does not. If at the same time Beckett's metatranslation bestows a negative judgment upon its own performance, recasting its most pious aspirations and pretensions as mere schoolboy rituals, there is no doubting its prodigious originality.

The Oedipal Fantasy of Self-Translation

The French sentence that foregrounded language learning quoted above from "Texte 1" ends with the speaker affirming that he would no longer fear "des grands mots" ("big words"; 120; "Text 1" 103). This child's perspective on the acquisition of language—of big words—is however immediately revoked: "ils ne sont plus grands" ("they are not [read: no longer] big"; 120; 103). The narrator's reflection upon language acquisition, native and foreign, discussed above leads directly into a memory, of when the boy used to sit on his father's knee and be read a story over and over that he came to know by heart, of a lighthouse keeper, "Joe Broom, or Breen" (103) (the same story is evoked in Beckett's earlier story, "The Calmative"). Beckett confirmed that his father used to read him this story (Knowlson 776n66), yet doubt over Joe's surname signals the potential for misremembering and interference, for fiction and translation. In fact, to fictionalize this scene from childhood in French the Irishman needed to translate mentally a preexisting memory first encoded in English.

In this version, in "Text 1," there is no mention of the shark that Joe swims after to hunt "out of sheer heroism" in "The Calmative" (64); instead, the terrifying predator is unnamed and Joe appears motivated by the death of a mother, perhaps his own:

C'était un conte, un conte pour enfants, ça se passait sur un rocher, au milieu de la tempête, la mère était morte et les mouettes venaient s'écraser contre le fanal, Joe se jeta à l'eau, c'est tout ce que je me rappelle, un couteau entre les dents, fit le nécessaire et revint, c'est tout ce que je me rappelle ce soir, ça finissait bien, ça commençait mal et ça finissait bien,

tous les soirs, une comédie, pour enfants. Oui, j'ai été mon père et j'ai été mon fils . . .

("Texte 1" 134)

A tale, it was a tale for children, it all happened on a rock, in the storm, the mother was dead and the gulls came beating against the light, Joe jumped into the sea, that's all I remember, a knife between his teeth, did what was to be done and came back, that's all I remember this evening, it ended happily, it began unhappily and it ended happily, every evening, a comedy, for children. Yes, I was my father and I was my son . . .

("Text 1" 103)

This symbolic encounter evidently refracts the earlier images of son/sun and mother/vulture/I—the death of the mother precipitating the diving gulls that threaten to engulf the sun and so extinguish the eye/I. Joe conquers the vulture's avatars with heroism, leaping into the treacherous waters and performing the unnamed deed from which he returns victorious. In the dream logic of this allegory, the mother (*la mère*) overshadows the waters (*la mer*⁵) like the storm, generating the scene of this terrifying sublime. Within the mother's realm, the child's words are assumed to form a natural bond with things. Yet the natural order is unhinged: the *mer* is afflicted by a menace once embodied in the shark that is now linked to the death of the *mère*, signaling the potential for a rupture between Joe's *parole* and his *langue*. Instead of being left inarticulate, Joe ventures out into the *mer* to prove his mettle. The speaker has just affirmed, "I won't be afraid of the big words any more" (103), and his childlike register links this perspective to that of the boy who identifies with Joe, who conquers the menace within the *mer* and arrogates for himself the seat of the father. With this act, Joe fulfills the destiny inscribed into his name in the French, whose *symboliste* logic resonates when "Joe se jeta à l'eau" (121), implicating J+eau in the speaker's fantasy with its symbolic trinity of father—terrestrial Jo[seph] / heavenly J[éhovah]—and son, an unlikely Jesus resurrected with the father's tongue. Having conquered the threat linked to the death of the mother, "Text 1" aligns this speaker's mastery of "big words" with Joe's victorious wielding of

the fetishized, acquired tongue. Within this tale, which was preceded by the declaration of dissonance between words, tenses, and reality, not to mention the rhetoric of foreign language learning and translation (discussed in the section above), Beckett invites the reader to imagine the knife between the teeth as Joe's surrogate tongue, a phallic instrument associated with the law of the father that, once mastered, will allow him to declare, "I was my father and I was my son." Evidently, Beckett's private study of Freudian theory in the 1930s has led him to ponder his own practice of writing in French within the allegories of psychoanalysis. Yet he could never do so without irony, and he evokes this oedipal schema only to dismiss it as "a comedy, for children."

Many a critic has nonetheless taken the Freudian route, linking Beckett's translanguism and self-translation with matricidal instincts and a need to conquer the father. In this vein, for instance, Leslie Hill writes, "Dispossessed of the familial intimacy or security of his native language, Beckett is rewritten into a language to which he is no longer bound by filial obedience" (38). Whether or not Beckett's arguably defensive stratagem of anticipating the psychoanalytic assessment of his own work negates the validity of that judgment is a question for another occasion. Certainly, in "Text 1" he demonstrates a highly developed self-awareness when linking his voluntary translanguism to religious asceticism. In 1954, when Beckett commented that he began writing in French because of "le besoin d'être mal armé" ("the need to be ill equipped"; Letter to Hans Naumann 462–63), he produced an expert pun on the last name of the French poet Stéphane Mallarmé that showed him to be anything but a novice in the tongue. Yet one's sense of one's own ignorance is always subjective and relative to one's sense of what it means to *know*, such that a poetics of ignorance or unknowing is never a zero-sum game. While "Text 1" parodies the notion that its "I" may have successfully negotiated an oedipal romance and become like a Joe Breen, or Breen, *bien armé* ("well-equipped"), at this stage in his career, with a solid corpus of French writing behind him, Beckett nonetheless continued to affirm that he wrote in French because, as he related to Herbert Blau, "it had the right weakening effect"

(qtd. in Coe 14). To Richard Coe he said he feared English "because you couldn't help writing poetry in it" (qtd. in Coe 14). To others he identified an ascetic impulse. He had admitted to Ludovic Janvier, for instance, "À la Libération . . . je me remis à écrire—en français—avec le désir de m'appauvrir encore davantage. C'était là le vrai mobile" ("From the Liberation . . . I took up writing again—in French—with the desire to impoverish myself still further. That was the true purpose"; *Samuel Beckett* 27). If the French speaker of "Texte 1" no longer fears big words because he has acquired his own tongue, Beckett felt compelled to negate through irony any sense of self-satisfaction by rendering suspicious that very weakening. His interest in the inward path or *via negativa* of Christian mysticism, in Schopenhauerian renunciation of the will and in other forms of ascetic thinking, is well documented. Yet Beckett was evidently aware that his self-imposed regime of weakening, whose goal was to free his thoughts as much as his tongue from the sway of English, was itself silently directed by the heritage of his religious education. It is no surprise therefore that in just the section of the short story "Text 1" discussed above, the speaker twice belittled his own storytelling as a kind of parodic *imitatio Christi*. Indeed, Beckett should not be excluded from a history of the pursuit of ignorance or unknowing in self-translation, as suggested by Rebecca L. Walkowitz (329); rather, he is one of its primordial thinkers and practitioners.

"I'm the Brain of the Two Sounds Distant"

The themes of "Text 1" converge in Beckett's next prose work of substantial length, the 1961 *Comment c'est*, translated as *How It Is* in 1964, in which Beckett strove "to find the rhythm and syntax of extreme weakness" (Letter to Barbara Bray 211). Its narrator claims to have relinquished control over his speech entirely, merely quoting the "ancient voice" in his head. In multiple ways, this "I" links his submission and recitation to his religious education, within which his mother once again figures prominently. He remembers her "severe love" as they recite the Apostle's Creed: "her eyes burn down on me again I cast up mine in haste and repeat awry"

(Comment 15). These childhood experiences shape the narrator's imagination and account for his need to produce an elaborate fiction, the cosmology that occupies the book, within which couples crawl through an underworld of mud, alternating roles of torturer and victim in a series of sadomasochistic pairs who meet to extract a song from each other. This story becomes Beckett's most sustained allegory of his self-translation, and at one point his narrator asks himself, "[Q]uestion soudain si malgré cette conglomération de tous nos corps nous n'accusons pas encore une lente translation d'ouest en est on est tenté" ("[S]udden question if in spite of this conglomeration of all our bodies we are not still the object of a slow translation from west to east one is tempted"; Comment c'est 130; 131). The interlinguistic pun on *translation* is realized when Beckett's French is already inflected with his English; the idiomatic *conglomérat* is shunned for an eccentric *conglomération*, tempting the francophone reader to hear this term as a habitual English word. The French diction of the established self-translator now hints toward its already being a species of *traduction* ("translation"), which is to say a work in constant physical and linguistic displacement. And so, when the *je* of *Comment c'est* identifies himself as "moi le cerveau bruits toujours lointains," these pedagogical *noises* are compartmentalized bilingually in the mind of the self-translating "I": "I'm the brain of the *two sounds distant*' (114; 115; my emphasis), suggesting his transcending of difference. In the work's climax, "I" claims to have cast off his master, taking control of his voice. But even in triumphant self-affirmation he must confess to himself, as he interrogates himself, that he perpetuates his *imitatio Christi* alone in the wastes and wilds of his self-abased *translatio*, his *despectio sui*: "arms spread yes like a cross no answer LIKE A CROSS no answer YES OR NO yes" (193). Unable to free his thoughts from the legacy of his religious education and the rituals of foreign language learning, Beckett suggests that his choice to self-translate was not his alone.

NOTES

The argument I make in this essay will be expanded upon in my contribution "Beckett as Translator" for the *Oxford Handbook of Samuel Beckett* (2024). All unattributed translations are mine.

1. See, e.g., Cordingley, *Samuel Beckett's How It Is*; Hill; Mooney; Morin 79–129; Sardin-Damestoy; Scheinner.

2. Compare the "ravening eyes" in Beckett's "Fizzles 6" (238) and the poetics of the eye in the late trilogy *Nohow On*, especially *Ill Seen Ill Said*.

3. Geulincx outlines the negative path of *despectio sui* ("the disregard of oneself") in his *Ethics* (29–38). Beckett's reading notes register the connection with will-less-ness: "The chief axiom of Ethics . . . : *Wherein you have no power, therein neither should you will* (Note that this axiom includes both parts of humility . . . inspection and disregard). *Wherein you have no power; we read in this the inspection of oneself . . . Therein you should not will; we read in this . . . disregard of oneself, or neglect of oneself across the whole human condition, and resigning ourselves into the power of His hand, in which we are, indeed, whether we like it or not*" ("Samuel Beckett's Notes" 337).

4. On the intersection of self-translation, religious praxis, and ignorance in Beckett's writing see Cordingley, *Samuel Beckett's How It Is*.

5. The term *mer* is used explicitly in the "Le Calmant" version (75).

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