

In the air

Beckett, traveller in language

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To begin, a favourite Beckett story and two random memories. Paris, 1952. Richard Seaver, a young American, has written to Beckett asking if he can read the manuscript of his unpublished English novel, Watt, with a view to printing an extract in *Merlin*, the literary review he runs with a group of expatriate writer friends.

No reply, but a few days later, he opens his door to „a tall, handsome man with a neat grey crest of hair“ who says: „Beckett.“ (Pause.) „Watt.“ (Pause), hands him a typewritten manuscript and leaves. ⁽¹⁾

Toronto, 1976. A message scrawled on the wall of the restroom in a downtown pub: „Wait here, I'll be back soon. Godot.“

London, 1999, the studio stage at the Barbican. The lights go up to reveal ... Samuel Beckett, sitting behind an old-fashioned tape recorder. Except it isn't him, of course, but John Hurt, his hair a neat grey crest, his face handsomely lined; Hurt, who, together with former music-hall artist, Max Wall, was surely one of the greatest Krapps ever.

Three snapshots of a writer whose plays are as woven into my language-self as Shakespeare. His plays in English, that is. Your reactions to a text in your mother tongue are always going to be different – more immediate, intense, more spontaneous – than in any other language, however familiar. It may be a neurological phenomenon. Perhaps the sounds of your „born“ language stimulate different physical responses in the neurons, or bypass the conscious mind and produce a so-called „gut reaction“.

I laugh more, or more heartily, at *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, for instance, than at *En attendant Godot* and *Fin de partie*.

It may be the effect of the rhythms, the blunt runs of monosyllables English-speakers feel at home in.

Or the familiar cultural context: Didi and Gogo / Hamm and Clov, descendants of Shakespeare's philosopher-clowns, are double acts straight from the music-hall stage; the language of *Godot* and *Endgame* is shot through with the repartee of stand-up comedy, with its mixture of erudition: (Lucky's „Mr Memory“ monologue), salacious innuendo: („I've made a balls of the fly.“ – „Good, at a pinch, a smart fly is a stiff proposition“) and knockabout humour: („Why don't you kill me?“ – „I don't know the combination of the larder“). Are the characters really the same men in English as in French?

Or the texture of the language, threaded through with familiar quotations and allusions, from Hamm's Shakespearean „Our revels now are ended“, and his Swanee River reference to „the old folks at home“, to Lucky „putting on his thinking cap“.

These bright strands are as densely and as naturally interwoven in the text as can only be the case – or so it seems to an English-speaker – with someone whose mother tongue is English ... Most of them are absent from the original French play: Beckett's cultural references change, as is natural, with the language he is writing in.

Where does Beckett stand in relation to Ireland, Europe, English and French?

The centenary exhibition in Reading calls him the „Irish European“, which says something essential. When asked by one French journalist whether he was English, his dry reply was: „au contraire“ (although his thoughtful, finely modulated voice sounds more English than Irish). And the references that form the warp and weft of Beckett's prose, while

deeply coloured, obviously, by his Irish background are drawn from the literature, music and art of Europe.

Yet you can't really call him a bilingual European author, writing indifferently in English and French.

One explanation (among several) Beckett gave for his decision to abandon English for French was that he wanted to write in a language not his own, to avoid yielding to facility – to the „gift of the gab“, the famous linguistic brilliance of Irish writers.

Writing in French was to be a way of limiting his possibilities. Language was to become a means not an end, a window through which to look at the world and not, as in Joyce, a mirror in which the world is reflected. Joyce had gone as far down that road as it is possible to go. Beckett, with his deep response to language and his passion for words, could so easily follow in his wake ... He was not just referring to his admiration for the author of *Ulysses* when he declared: „I vow I will get over J.J. ere I die. Yessir.“

But Beckett's practice of writing a text in French or in English and later producing an English or French version of it causes problems – not least for translators, forced, where the texts diverge, to choose between versions. He is often said to have found translating his own work distasteful (he said the same, at times, of writing anything at all), considering it a „chore“ – although he took an active part, for instance, in the Tophovens' German translations. He himself didn't so much translate as rewrite. (It is significant that when Patrick Bowles sent him a sample of his English version of *Molloy*, Beckett said: „Bowles isn't a translator. He's a writer. That's what I want.“) Yet the result was neither a new text nor an other-language version of the original one.

Perhaps, finally, you have to qualify Beckett as a bilingual writer, whose mother tongue is English; who emigrates to French, with frequent visits home, before finally returning to settle down in his native language ... transformed, of course, by time and distance.

Settle down, more or less. His last published text is a poem in French, *Comment dire*, which becomes in English *what is the word*.

So Beckett has the last word in English; it is, aptly enough, „word“.

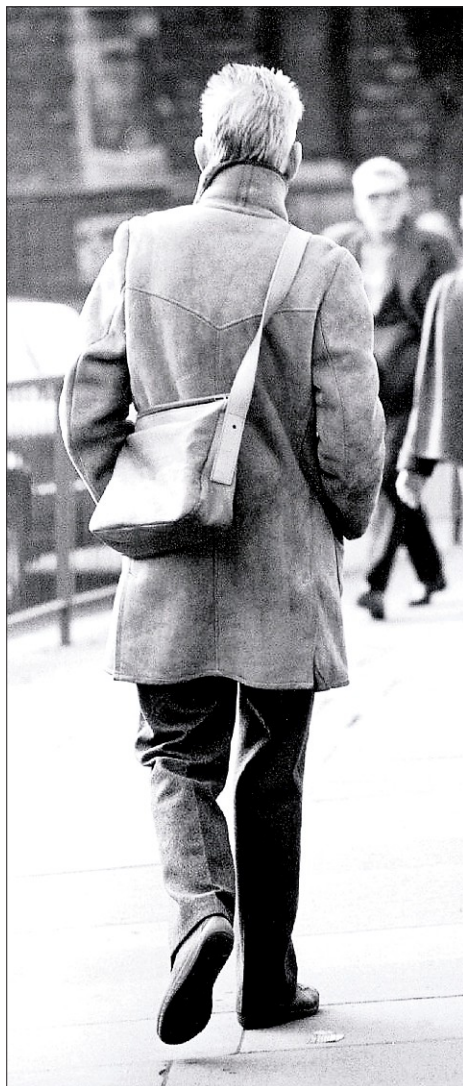


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-> (1) from *Prince Charming, A Memoir* by Christopher Logue