

Beckett: Still Stirring

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Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition

edited by Paul Auster, with introductions by Colm Tóibín, Salman Rushdie, Edward Albee, and J.M. Coetzee
Grove, 4 vols., 2,077 pp., \$100.00

How It Was: A Memoir of Samuel Beckett

by Anne Atik
Shoemaker and Hoard, 129 pp., \$30.00

Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett: A Centenary Celebration

edited by James and Elizabeth Knowlson
Arcade, 313 pp., \$27.95

Beckett After Beckett

edited by S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann
University Press of Florida, 227 pp., \$55.00

How curiously this valediction rings, addressed as it is to a man who satirized every form of metaphysics and renounced any mental comfort that might subtract him from the exhausting experience of being alone with his conviction that the world was without meaning and expression futile, yet that all the same he was duty-bound to express the fact. But perhaps it is precisely in Beckett's repeated renunciations—of English for French, of a rich and traditional narrative facility for texts stripped of everything we would normally think of as plot or color—that we can find a link between these sometimes sentimental centenary remembrances and the core of the author's work, his special position in the literature of the twentieth century. "How easy," wrote Cioran, "to imagine him, some centuries back, in a naked cell, undisturbed by the least decoration, not even a crucifix." With Beckett, it is the persistence of a "religious" seriousness in the declared absence of any sustaining metaphysics that gives his work its special, for some, saintly, pathos.

Born in 1906, Beckett was brought up in a well-to-do Protestant family in County Dublin. Educated at private schools, he excelled in both academic work and sports and, after graduating in French and Italian at Trinity College, Dublin, in 1927, went back and forth between teaching posts in Dublin and Paris, where he met James Joyce, who was then writing *Finnegans Wake*. But Beckett soon decided he was not cut out for teaching and gave up his job, thus disappointing his parents. The ensuing and bitter arguments, with his mother in particular, plus what appears to have been a number of panic attacks, led to the decision to undergo psychoanalysis in London, where Beckett spent two years trying and failing to start a career as a reviewer. After an extended visit to Germany and another unhappy period in Dublin, he settled permanently in Paris in 1937.

In two essays written in his twenties Beckett declared his great admiration for Proust and Joyce, yet his first novel, *Murphy*, written shortly afterward, suggests a different inspiration. While Proust and Joyce share a confident commitment to the evocation of complex psychological reality within a densely described material world, Beckett seems embarrassed to present his story of a feckless, unemployed Irishman in London as "real" at all. Despite, or perhaps because of, the novel's evident autobiographical content, all kinds of strategies are used to prevent the reader from becoming immersed in plot and character in the traditional fashion. The book opens with a tone of mockery:

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. Here for what might have been six months he had eaten, drunk, slept, and put his clothes on and off, in a medium-sized cage of north-western aspect commanding an unbroken view of medium-sized cages of south-eastern aspect. Soon he would have to make other arrangements, for the mew had been condemned. Soon he would have to buckle to and start eating, drinking, sleeping, and putting his clothes on and off, in quite alien surroundings.³

The very etymology of "novel" suggests that the form brings newness. Echoing Ecclesiastes, Beckett renounces the idea. The solar system is a prison, ever the same, and the notion that Murphy might have achieved some freedom by

sitting “out of it” (out of the sunshine) is laughable. Nor is it the only prison. His room is a “cage” in the rigid grid of London’s terraced streets. Even the language aligns itself with this imprisoning environment as groups of words are repeated as though to form the walls that close Murphy in: “eaten, drunk, slept, and put his clothes on and off” is mirrored by “eating, drinking, sleeping, and putting his clothes on and off,” while in between “a medium-sized cage of north-western aspect” faces “medium-sized cages of south-eastern aspect.” Those compound, hyphenated adjectives—medium-sized, north-western—reinforce the sense of entrapment, making the irony that Murphy’s room might “command” a view even heavier.

In Joyce, Beckett had admired the fusion of word and sense. “When the idea is sleep, the words go to sleep,” he remarks, and he speaks of his compatriot as the heir to Shakespeare and Dickens in this regard, great masters of onomatopoeia and evocation. But a letter written to his friend Axel Kaun a year before the publication of *Murphy* suggests that Beckett’s sense of what could be achieved with language was changing quite radically:

It is indeed becoming more and more difficult, even senseless, for me to write an official English. And more and more my own language appears to me like a veil that must be torn apart in order to get at the things (or the Nothingness) behind it. Grammar and Style. To me they seem to have become as irrelevant as a Victorian bathing suit or the imperturbability of a true gentleman. A mask. Let us hope the time will come...when language is most efficiently used where it is being most efficiently misused. As we cannot eliminate language all at once, we should at least leave nothing undone that might contribute to its falling into disrepute. To bore one hole after another in it, until what lurks behind it—be it something or nothing—begins to seep through; I cannot imagine a higher goal for a writer today.

And he adds: “With such a program, in my opinion, the latest work of Joyce has nothing whatever to do.”

Interesting here is the way what at first seems the dissatisfaction of any adventurous young artist with current conventions is drastically extended to the whole of language, which, in the name of honesty, is to be attacked with “a mocking attitude towards the word, through words.” The position explains those odd slippages in the opening sentences of *Murphy* where first we hear of clothes being “put on and off,” rather than put on and taken off, and then more comically of “buckling to” not to finding a new apartment or a job, but “to eating, drinking, and sleeping,” three activities not usually considered onerous. Throughout the book Beckett misses no opportunity to exploit certain automatisms in the language which lead it to fall into error. It is as if he were constantly warning us that his own verbal brilliance is a matter of little import beside the threat of “quite alien surroundings.”

Murphy himself is implicated in the book’s linguistic waywardness when his girlfriend Celia remarks that his words “went dead” as soon as spoke, as if he didn’t believe in them. It is not difficult here to see a relation between the author’s denial of a traditional realism to his story and Murphy’s problems with language, his problems above all in taking seriously the world of employment in 1930s London, something that might well reflect Beckett’s own difficulty in engaging with the very conventional expectations of his parents.

Yet despite the air of mockery that hangs over *Murphy*, reality of the economic variety does impinge: if the hero is to make a living, and above all to stop his beloved Celia from prostituting herself to pay the rent, he will have to take the world of work seriously, even though he can’t. He simply cannot do it. But he must. It’s an early formulation of what would become Beckett’s motto, “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” This is not, as is sometimes supposed, a celebration of human resilience, but simply the contrast of an emotive conviction on the one hand—I can’t go on—and an inevitable fact on the other—willy-nilly life goes on. “No future in this,” says the narrator in *Worstward Ho*, and continues: “Alas yes.”

Needless to say, the only and ultimate solution to such a contradiction is death. At the end of the novel *Murphy*’s ashes will be flushed down the lavatory of his favorite pub. If Beckett later chose to end his novels and plays without anything so clear-cut as his main character’s demise, nevertheless his works always point in that direction, to the release of silence and nonbeing. There thus emerges a complicity between the plots he creates and his attitude toward language. So far as either leads to a resolution or final truth it lies not so much within the text as in the silence after its end.

Much is made in the academic world, and rightly so, of Beckett’s “deconstruction” of traditional realism, his constant undermining, that is, of the premises of conventional fiction. “He veritably hunted realism to death,” says Paul Davies with evident satisfaction in *Beckett After Beckett*. And indeed the writer’s second novel, *Watt*, makes fun of traditional narrative in all sorts of wonderful ways. In the following passage, for example, the bleakest possible pessimism is framed in a nursery rhyme sequence of rhyming monosyllabic anapests:

Personally of course I regret everything. Not a word, not a deed, not a thought, not a need, not a grief, not a joy, not a girl, not a boy, not a doubt, not a trust, not a scorn, not a lust, not a hope, not a fear, not a smile, not a tear, not a name, not a face, no time, no place, that I do not regret, exceedingly. An ordure, from beginning to end.

It is genuinely hard for the reader of this passage to respond to the unhappiness of the speaker, since his attention is captured by the trite ordering of experience into so many opposites—girl/boy, tear/joy—and in general by the bizarre manner of the expression which exposes language's inevitable tendency, as Beckett would see it, to mask reality.

Yet for all these aggressive experiments one is struck on rereading Beckett that he did not dispense with traditional realism *tout court*. Throughout his work we come across passages of haunting descriptive power in which we cannot help feeling the author has a considerable emotional investment. Deciding to fill the empty days before his death by telling himself stories, the character Malone, in *Malone Dies*, casually invents a family of ignorant farmers, the Lamberts. After some high comedy with Mr. Lambert's pig-sticking activities, we have this:

Then Mrs. Lambert was alone in the kitchen. She sat down by the window and turned down the wick of the lamp, as she always did before blowing it out, for she did not like to blow out a lamp that was still hot. When she thought the chimney and shade had cooled sufficiently she got up and blew down the chimney. She stood a moment irresolute, bowed forward with her hands on the table, before she sat down again. Her day of toil over, day dawned on other toils within her, on the crass tenacity of life and its diligent pains. Sitting, moving about, she bore them better than in bed.... Often she stood up and moved about the room, or out and round the ruinous old house. Five years now it had been going on, five or six, not more. She told herself she had a woman's disease, but half-heartedly. Night seemed less night in the kitchen pervaded with the everyday tribulations, day less dead. It helped her, when things were bad, to cling with her fingers to the worn table at which her family would soon be united, waiting for her to serve them, and to feel about her, ready for use, the lifelong pots and pans.

"Mortal tedium," announces Malone dismissively, after constructing this description. Yet surely mortal tedium is more the experience he has effectively evoked than the reader's reaction on reading it. Albeit with the small rhetorical flourishes that remind us of Malone's self-conscious, creative efforts, the passage is as convincing and moving as anything in conventional fiction.

What is new in Beckett, however, is the way these powerful moments of realism are never allowed to extend right across a novel or play, creating, as in a traditional work, a fully imagined and consistent world that the reader is invited to consider reality. Rather they appear in brief fragments, the vagaries of an idle mind, their intensities contrasted with the inertia of the moribund narrator who produces them; or they emerge as unreliable, fleeting memories to which no date or place can be attached—"afterimages," S.E. Gontarski and Anthony Uhlmann call them in their introduction to *Beckett After Beckett*, a book largely concerned with the many different relationships between Beckett's narrators and the images they half remember, half invent.

The consequence of Beckett's strategy is that we are never allowed to relax into the determined forward movement of the traditional story or the encyclopedically complete worlds of Joyce and Proust. Rather, something is given, then immediately taken away, as the mind tracks back and forth between engagement and disengagement, or in Malone's case memories of life and the more urgent reality of dying.

Remembering *Beckett* includes a few pages of notes that Patrick Bowles made of his conversations with Beckett while undertaking the translation of *Molloy*. Written immediately after the war, this was Beckett's third full-length novel, the first written in French, and the first of what would become the trilogy (*Molloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*), in which, as the work proceeds, we have the impression that each narrating voice—the bedridden Molloy, the detective Moran, the dying Malone—turns out to be actually no more than an invention or earlier manifestation of the next, until finally we arrive at the "unnamable," the voice behind and beyond all the others, unsure of anything except the interminable chattering of language in the mind.

In his notes Bowles recounts a conversation in which Beckett insisted that in order to represent the meaninglessness of the world it was necessary to allow chaos into the text and break down form, to declare the maker of the work as "blindly immersed" in "chance" rather than standing outside it. At the same time, all mere details of history or social setting must be stripped out of the work, so as to arrive at the ultimate reality of consciousness and being. We understand that it was partly in response to these convictions that Beckett decided to work in French, renouncing the greater control and facility he had in English, together with the powerful associations a mother tongue inevitably brings with it.

However, in the same conversation it is clear that author and translator take very great pains over the exact choice of the words in the English version of *Molloy*. Similarly, Richard Seaver, who translated the short story “La Fin,” recalls Beckett’s meticulous work on the English text. Reflecting on the sentence “They dressed me and gave me some money,” Beckett suggested, “What would you think if we used the word ‘clothed’ instead of ‘dressed’? ‘They *clothed* me and gave me money.’ Do you like the ring of that better?” “Yes,” replies Seaver, “‘clothed’ was the better word.”

So although facility must be shunned, form broken down, the creator shown to be subject to chance, etc., actually nothing was left to chance when it came to the ring of a word. “It was as far apart from machine translation as one could imagine,” writes Bowles.

Beckett was aware of course of the contradiction in his position, that it is inconsistent if not masochistic to talk, as he does to Anne Atik, of writing being a “sin against speechlessness,” and then to go on writing, perverse to apply such meticulous control in texts that seek to demonstrate the impossibility of control. Given this state of affairs, honesty (and sanity) demanded that he bring the contradiction to his readers’ attention, use its colliding energies—the yearning for expression and the conviction of its futility—to give his work pathos, and, in the end, realism, since it was this contradiction that lay at the core not only of Beckett’s experience, but of a whole strand of Western thought that declares the world without sense, but then finds that to go on living one is obliged to behave as if the opposite were the case. Looking for a voice for this modern state of mind, Beckett produced a style in which, with all its developments over his long career, lyricism and parody, affirmation and denial, are always fused together in such a way that each intensifies the other. Here are three examples.

2.

Watt was written during the war but not published until 1953. The eponymous hero of the book has spent many pages trying and failing to explain the world—at once elaborately structured and utterly incomprehensible—in which he finds himself at the house of Mr. Knott. Leaving, as he had arrived, in obedience to mechanisms beyond his ken, Watt is mocked and has water poured on him from a bucket at the railway station, where, after his departure, the abusive station workers look out across the countryside:

The sun was now well above the visible horizon. Mr. Gorman, Mr. Case and Mr. Nolan turned their faces towards it, as men will, in the early morning, without heeding. The road lay still, at this hour, leaden, deserted, between its hedges, and its ditches. From one of these latter a goat emerged, dragging its pale and chain. The goat hesitated, in the middle of the road, then turned away. The clatter came fainter and fainter, down the still air, and came still faintly when the pale had disappeared, beyond the rise. The trembling sea could not but be admired. The leaves quivered, or gave the impression of doing so, and the grasses also, beneath the drops, or beads, of gaily expiring dew. The long summer’s day had made an excellent start. If it continued in the same manner, its close would be worth coming to see.

Irrelevant to the progress of the book’s plot, the passage is a complex mix of lyricism, caprice, tease, and satire, though as so often with Beckett it’s not immediately clear what the object of that satire might be. At the center of the piece there is the goat, free, but not enjoying the fruits of freedom because still attached to the post he drags around, disappearing, but like so much in Beckett, never quite gone. There are the men, distinguished only by their undistinguished names, unconscious of being locked into the mechanisms of the universe where the day is described as a magnificent frame—dawn and dusk—but without reference to any content in between. And there is the language, a constant mingling of beauty and fatuity, including as it does the pretty play with “latter,” and “clatter,” “still air,” and “still faintly,” then the pomposity of “could not but be admired,” followed by the disturbing absurdity of “gaily expiring dew.” The genius of the passage is that the more the tone of address seems wayward, random, uncommitted, the closer it gets to the goat cut free from wherever he was chained but still dragging himself melancholically about, not unlike the book’s hero, Watt, who, now freed from his duties at Mr. Knott’s house, asks for a train ticket to “the end of the line” and when asked which end replied, “the nearest end.”

“No symbols where none intended,” Beckett wrote at the end of *Watt*. The object of his satire, it would seem, is our futile desire to attribute meaning to his prose.

Some years later, in *Malone Dies*, Beckett had now settled on the technique of dramatizing the act of narration and indeed speech in general as a stratagem for killing time, filling silence. Here, Malone has been trying to tell himself the tale of a young boy, Sapo, who, ill adapted to the world of his anxious middle-class parents, wanders alone about the countryside. Malone is finding it hard to keep up his interest in Sapo:

The market. The inadequacy of the exchanges between rural and urban areas had not escaped the excellent youth. He had mustered, on this subject, the following considerations, some perhaps close to, others no doubt far from, the truth.

In his country the problem—no, I can't do it.

The peasants. His visits to. I can't. Assembled in the farmyard they watched him depart, on stumbling, wavering feet, as though they scarcely felt the ground. Often he stopped, stood tottering a moment, then suddenly was off again, in a new direction. So he went, limp, drifting, as though tossed by the earth. And when, after a halt, he started off again, it was like a big thistledown plucked by the wind from the place where it had settled. There is a choice of images.

Only when Malone drops all the social considerations and finds a parallel between Sapo's uncertain style of perambulation and his own narrative hesitations is he able to go on. At once the tone shifts from comedy to lyricism, as we sense Malone's engagement grow. Ironically this can only happen when he ceases to believe in the story he was telling himself and turns back, however indirectly, on his own fragility and unease.

A hierarchy of reality thus begins to emerge in Beckett's work. Center stage is the purgatorial presence of the moribund narrator, the decrepit Krapp of the play *Krapp's Last Tape* being perhaps the most famous example. Any ultimate reality lies in the future with death and silence. Meantime, all vigor and purpose lost, the mind wanders oneirically over a past drained of substance or sense, except in those moments when it can be understood as foreshadowing the narrator's present state. Intriguingly, the original French of this passage from *Malone* does not include the final distancing remark, "There is a choice of images." It is as if, when he came to translate the piece, Beckett was uncomfortable with its poignancy and decided to add his characteristic gesture of denial.

Having renounced the extended and coherent plot, and reduced his characters to larvae, one of the problems Beckett faced after the trilogy was a difficulty sustaining the length of text we are used to in a novel. So the later works get shorter and shorter, and the form toward which they aspire is now the rhythm of breathing, something that was as close as one could get, on the page, to a representation of being.

In *Company* (1980), which is just twenty-three pages in the new edition, a consciousness in the dark speaks of another voice that it hears intermittently declaring a few spare facts which may or may not be memories. Any notion of identity, time, or place is gone; we have only voices speaking in darkness; nor is it clear whether these voices belong to the same person or to separate people. Yet even in this state of extreme deprivation, lyricism occasionally flowers, attended as always by bathos and comedy:

You are an old man plodding along a narrow country road. You have been out since break of day and now it is evening. Sole sound in the silence your footfalls. Rather sole sounds for they vary from one to the next. You listen to each one and add it in your mind to the growing sum of those that went before. You halt with bowed head on the verge of the ditch and convert into yards. On the basis now of two steps per yard. So many since dawn to add to yesterday's. To yesteryear's. To yesteryears'. Days other than today and so akin. The giant tot in miles. In leagues. How often round the earth already. Halted too at your elbow during these computations your father's shade. In his old tramping rags. Finally on side by side from nought anew.

Once again we have dawn and evening and nothing in between but footfalls, ditches. Deathly and grid-like, ditches are as omnipresent in Beckett as in Dante's *Inferno*. Irony and pathos are delivered simultaneously in the pun "sole sounds" or in the suggestion of "aching" behind "akin" ("Days other than today and so akin"), or again in the comic possibilities of "the giant tot." There is the typically Beckettian satire of the futile pursuit of descriptive precision ("Rather sole sounds for they vary from one to the next") and in the vain search for some kind of control in computation, the count of the footsteps being soon baffled by the sheer enormity of "yesteryear's...yesteryears'," whose lyricism, in turn, calls up the deceased father's shade, not in his winding sheet, but his "tramping rags." The rhetorical flourish of "Finally on...from nought anew," a refrain repeated throughout *Company*, is one of those wry gestures to an elegance, at once archaic and compressed, which give to the speaker the illusion of a stoic dignity, while at the same time reminding us of his counting obsessions. If language falsifies, we nevertheless indulge in its consolations and comic possibilities.

For those of us who were long ago enchanted by this prose and believe it second to none, there will always be a certain sadness in the reflection that Beckett achieved fame through the theater and will be remembered by a wider public only for his plays. Yet there are obvious reasons why Beckett's peculiar aesthetic was more immediately effective on stage. Some of the most intriguing pages of *Beckett Remembering, Remembering Beckett* come from actors

who recall the author traveling to theaters all over Europe to follow productions of *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Happy Days*, telling them not to play their parts realistically, never to inquire about the characters' lives outside of a text, and, in general, to deliver their lines so far as possible in a flat monotone. "Too much color" was his frequent, head-shaking objection during rehearsals. Once again he was uneasy with the potential for sentimentality in what he had written.

Yet the actors often felt he was quite wrong and that the plays worked better with a lively, realistic delivery, a position to which Beckett himself eventually began to come around. The fact is that the flesh-and-blood presence of the actors on stage creates for the spectators a sense of reality and identification which the absurd plots and dialogues then undermine, so that the tension behind all of Beckett's work between affirmation and denial is dramatized for us in the contrast between the believable actor and the inexplicable, disorienting world he is in. At the same time, the conventions of the theater, which trap us respectfully together in an intimate space for a pre-established time, make it far more likely that the skeptical will follow a Beckett work from start to finish and have time to be enchanted by the rhythms of his writing. If few get through *The Unnamable* or *How It Is*, almost everybody can watch *Godot* to the final curtain.

But most importantly of all, the theater allows both silence and physical movement to come to the fore in a way they cannot on the page. A blank space between paragraphs simply does not deliver the anxiety of a hiatus in a stage dialogue. Only in the theater, as the audience waits in collective apprehension for the conversational ball—between Didi and Gogo, Hamm and Clov—to start rolling again, could Beckett's sense that any deep truth must be located in something, or nothing, beyond speech come across with great immediacy. Likewise the actors' interminable and pointless movement back and forth across the stage is a more immediate statement than the words of a page-bound narrator telling us of his aimless daily wanderings. When we watch the plays, the impotence of language to explain the characters' experience is powerfully evident. Conversation serves above all to pass the time.

Exploding, with his multiple internal voices, the old fiction of individual identity, Beckett created one of the most identifiable literary voices of the twentieth century. Shunning inquiries into his life, he lived to see it given a well-defined shape in the public mind, raised to the status of myth almost: the mother obsession, the attachment to Joyce, the service in the French Resistance, the years of determined toil on the trilogy, the sudden celebrity after *Godot*, the Nobel Prize, and, finally, the years when everyone who was anyone wanted to be able to say they had spent an evening in a Parisian café drinking with "Sam"—the Sammists, as one old friend ironically dubbed these late arrivals.

Beckett rarely denied himself to them. For the truth that emerges from the biographies, and again now from *Beckett Remembering* and Atik's very lively *How It Was*, is that although everybody liked to see him as a solitary and even saintly man, "a withdrawn being who pursues an endless and implacable labour," as Emil Cioran put it, Beckett in fact loved company, particularly drinking company, and far from living alone spent most of his adult life with his partner and finally wife, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil. Her voice is conspicuous for its absence in *Beckett Remembering*, indeed she is hardly mentioned at all, as if there were some collective denial on the part of Beckett worshipers that their unworldly hero might have had a conjugal life at all. But in a breach of the general discretion, charming because unique, we hear this from the theater designer Jocelyn Herbert:

I think a lot of [Sam's relationship] with Suzanne... was gratitude and loyalty and I think that he felt remorse for the fact that he had so many friends whom he got drunk with. She didn't drink. And he had after all endless other women. And when people say to me he was a saint I say: "Oh no, he wasn't a saint at all. And thank God he wasn't."

How interesting that God is invoked even here where sanctity is denied. Beckett would have appreciated one more demonstration of meaningless linguistic inertia. Still, it is cheering to think that during all those trips to direct his own plays, urging the actors to avoid all color, Beckett was in fact—in another of the contradictions that make his work so real—actually seeking to add a little color to his own life. Certainly, Jocelyn Herbert seems very sure of what she is talking about; and those three words of hers, "after all endless," have a decidedly Beckettian ring to them.

3 Beckett's French translation of *Murphy* gives the "mew" in West Brompton as "*l'impasse de l'Enfant Jésus*," introducing a Christian reference into the city grid. The critic Christopher Ricks has pointed out that "mew" rather than the more correct "mews" is in fact an archaic word for "cage." ↵