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PART I

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I

JOHN PILLING

Early Beckett

‘The One Looking Through His Fingers’

‘Where would I go, if I could go, who would I be, if I could be, what would I say, if I had a voice, who says this, saying it’s me?’¹

Being Seen

Given what Beckett was to say on the subject of fame, after he had acquired it in the mid-1950s – that success and failure had never mattered much to him – it seems safe to suppose that none of the early difficulties he experienced in finding a publisher for his first substantial fiction (*Dream of Fair to Middling Women*) would have been very much softened by a more sympathetic hearing than he was to receive; he was inured to failure before he could reasonably expect to succeed. But at the same time rejection left a lasting mark on a personality ill-equipped to cope with it, blest or cursed as he was with a personality already well on the way to being either unable or unwilling to constitute itself as a ‘synthesis’ (*Dream* 118) of the numerous disparate and warring elements which he could not control. In middle age Beckett remembered one of the many earlier versions of himself – a poet with only a few poems to his credit, and with only one published collection² – as ‘a very young man with nothing to say and the itch to make’ (Harvey 1970, 273); yet for the best part of thirty years – ‘both in public and in private, under duress, through faintness of heart, through weakness of mind’ (*PTD* 123) – he had been seeking to leave some trace of having been, since he could not easily or without irony claim that he was ‘Getting known’ (*KLT* 10). It was clear to Beckett that ‘the prospect of self-extension’ (*Dis* 19) had to be more than just a simple antithetical matter (‘nothing so simple as antithetical’, *Dream* 137). But he was quite unclear as to how to transcend the merely negative and destructive impulses intrinsic to his psyche, and thereby avoid each ‘forced move’ on the way to ultimate defeat and a resigned handshake across the board. It was early borne in on Beckett that, since even ‘At his simplest he was trine’ (*Dream* 120), ‘images of extreme complexity’ (*MC* 150) would inevitably be generated in the absence of any limitations imposed by considerations of purpose and utility. Indeed, with

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almost complete confidence (as ‘Mr Beckett’ says of his creature ‘Bel’, short for ‘Belacqua’), we can say of the young Beckett that ‘various though he was, he epitomised nothing’ (*Dream* 126).

Dream, for all its deficiencies and in spite of its recurrent assaults on conventional narrative pieties, reflects this variety very satisfactorily, albeit without ever suggesting that any point of repose will be easily achieved; what is naturally enough proving impossible to deliver by design is clearly not going to occur by accident. As Beckett had in fact anticipated before he had even begun the novel – in his book-length essay *Proust* (written over some three weeks in the late summer of 1930 and published in the spring of 1931) – the ‘perpetual exfoliation of personality’ could never amount to a ‘total soul’, which he could only envisage as a chimera possessing a ‘fictitious value’ (PTD 25, 41). A ‘lost reality’ and a ‘lost self’ were, apparently in mutual ignorance of each other, actively combining to frustrate any possibility of a ‘composite of perceiver and perceived’ – as it was to be described in the first of the *Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (PTD 101) – ever being established. Beckett was alive to the practical aspect that, whenever and wherever artifice could be brought into the mix, a ‘precise value can be assigned’ (*Dream* 119); but the imprecise fly in the ointment remained the fact that ‘nothing is less like me than me’ (*Dream* 77). Once we realise that almost exactly the same phrase occurs in the first paragraph of Diderot’s great dialogue *Le neveu de Rameau*, namely ‘nothing is less like him than himself’ (1976, 34), it begins to look as if even this self-cancelling admission has no option but to participate in a wilderness of distorting mirrors.

Dream leaves no turn, even the many which it has itself created, unstoned, largely because its ‘ramshackle’ structure (139) cannot help but upset the apperception. But Beckett in *propria persona*, without a Belacqua to steer by, as it were, is almost equally a being in need of *re*-construction, a spectral figure made up of alternatives hedged round by qualifications. In Beckett’s appointments diary for 1967, for example, he jotted down a fragment of Italian poetry from the lead poem in Camillo Sbarbaro, *Pianissimo*, published in 1914 (compare *Dream* 30: ‘pianissimissima’):

Nel deserto
io guardo con asciutti occhi me stesso
[In the desert
I look at myself with dry eyes] (Sbarbaro 1993, 169)

It was at about this time that Beckett liked to take brief holidays in Sbarbaro’s native Liguria, and no doubt the dry eyes of the desert seemed in some ways apt on discovering that the poet had died in October 1967. But an agenda

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more personal to Beckett was active even here, for this quotation is part of a dialogue of self and soul stretching back across the decades to a Beckett *not* in Italy, but in Germany, and looking at pictures the better to be able to look at himself. Here is Beckett in Berlin, in the bleak winter of 1936, looking at a famously enigmatic Brueghel canvas (*Dutch Proverbs*), and introjecting the experience as a kind of knife wound:

I am the pretty young man, shall I never learn to cease thinking of myself as young, as [in] Brueghel's 'Proverbs', *der durch die Finger sieht* [the one looking out through his fingers]. *Was sehe ich durch die Finger* [What do I see through these fingers?]. *Mich, übergehenden Augen* [Myself, in floods of tears]. (GD entry for 18 December 1936; amended quotation from Nixon 2011, 152)

And here, some ten weeks later, in Dresden, is what looks like a dry run for the *nine* 'irreconcilable' images of *Mercier and Camier* (qtd. in Nixon 2011, 150), with not a canvas in sight, but with an infinite regress threatening to create an exceptionally complex image:

When I take off my glasses and bring my nose as close to the mirror as my nose permits, then I see myself in my right eye, or alternatively my reflection's left eye, half profile left, and inversely. If I squint to the left I am full face in left eye, and inversely. But to be full face at once in the mirror and in my eye, that seems an optical impossibility. But it is not necessary after all to take off my glasses. By keeping them [on] I see myself 3 times at once, in the mirror, in my glasses and in my eyes.³

'Am I as much as ... being seen?', M asks himself some twenty-five years on: a question hardly requiring an answer in the circumstances in which he finds himself (the play *Play*), since neither W1 nor W2 can even hear him, let alone *see* him (*KLT* 64).

Catching the Eye

It was out of these self-staged regresses that the young Beckett emerged, or that the proxy prepared to speak for him spoke. Hence the succession of striking openings – in essay, poem, book review or fiction alike:

The danger is in the neatness of identifications ('Dante ... Bruno. Vico .. Joyce', *Dis* 19)

He could have shouted and could not ('Assumption', *CSP* 3)

The Proustian equation is never simple (*PTD* 11)

Exeo in a spasm ('Enueg I', *CP* 6)

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Behold Belacqua an overfed child (*Dream* 1)All poetry [...] is prayer ('Humanistic Quietism', reviewing *Poems* by Thomas MacGreevy in *The Bookman*, June 1934, *Dis* 68)It was morning and Belacqua was stuck in the canti of the moon⁴ ('Dante and the Lobster', *MPTK* 3)

As the revision of 'Dante and the Lobster' indicates, these special effects had to be worked for. But the best surviving evidence of how hard Beckett worked at them, as well as the best actual example of how effective they can be, is to be found in the first of the six manuscript notebooks in which Beckett wrote what became his first published novel (*Murphy*, 1938), where after nearly a dozen attempts at an opening sentence he came up with: 'The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new' (*Mu* 3). Here, at least, the 'pretty' young man – more often than not now the 'tired' young man (see GD entry for 19 December 1936) for whom 'the fatiguing lust of self-emotion' (*Dream* 24) had proved such a tormenting thorn in the flesh – could forget himself for a moment, by finding himself a pretty good sentence to set the ball rolling, even if his sense of himself *as himself*, beyond any alternative existence in the more or less distorting mirrors of words or pigment, could never hope to be very secure in the subjunctive domain of fiction.

At one level, Beckett of course knew himself much too well, which meant that his multiplying self-images tended to pursue each other endlessly in a series of echoes, initially as echoes of others for the most part, but even more tellingly echoes of himself by way of 'that most necessary, wholesome and monotonous plagiarism – the plagiarism of oneself' (*PTD* 33). At another level, he knew himself hardly at all, a factor which perhaps adds an extra poignancy to the detail jotted down in the '*Dream*' Notebook from the third book of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* ('He'll live to be old, said Tiresias, if he never know himself (*si se non noverit*)'),⁵ which is of course precisely the opposite of what actually happens to the Narcissus so besotted with himself that poor Echo can only waste and pine. Beckett's sallies into classical literature are few and far between, but Narcissus and Echo served him exceptionally well as a narrative constellation emblematic of his own spiritual condition, and indeed proved much more useful to him in the long run than the ragbag of doublets – Damon and Pythias, Pylades and Orestes, Nisus and Euryalus, Theseus and Pirithous – that he had found in a cluster in the third book of Robert Burton's *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (*DN* 813).

It was not so much the ragbag as the tag, the 'precious margaret' (*Dream* 48), that prompted Beckett to think in terms of catching the eye with a

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well-shaped phrase ('the sparkle') or a compelling image, as in a number of his very early poems. For example:

stooping to the prone

who must *soon* take *up* their life and walk ('The Vulture', CP 5; emphasis added)

Or:

and the mind annulled

wrecked in wind ('Enueg I', CP 6; emphasis added)

Or, from the same poem:

a *slush* of vigilant *gulls* in the grey *spew* of the *sewer* (CP 8; emphasis added)⁶

Once read, they are difficult to forget, irrespective of how well one understands them. But details can only become patterns within interactive and organised structures, and these are not often found in Beckett's early poems. This was a perhaps inevitable consequence of his determination to demonstrate that poetry is not, or ought not to be, a narrative art, even when a poem like 'Enueg I' suggests that the severity of this position permits exceptions. But if one tries, for example, to reintroduce narrative back into the four lines of 'Da Tagte Es':

redeem the surrogate goodbyes

the sheet *astream* in your hand

who *have* no more for the land

and the glass *unmist*ed above your eyes (CP 22; emphasis added)

the whole fragile delicacy of it evaporates; you have to supply your own story, your own 'aspirin' (see Harmon 1998, 24) if you want the poem to have the 'precise value' which it is seeking to do without.

We should not then, under the circumstances, be overly surprised that Beckett's hostility to narrative (as normally understood) left him dissatisfied by the writing of short stories. Yet it was here, however, in a medium which he could never really think of as much more than a commodity, that he was at least ready to compromise. Rather than conjuring brilliant beginnings he could favour memorable *dénouements*: a lobster about to be boiled ('Dante and the Lobster'), a suicide pact that fizzles out ('Love and Lethe'), a marriage ill-begun and about to go west ('What a Misfortune'), a minor operation gone disastrously wrong ('Yellow'). He was quite often fully prepared to equip these items with a 'punch line' to send them on their way:

It is a quick death, God help us all. / It is not. ('Dante and the Lobster', MPTK 14)

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In the words of one competent to sing of the matter [Ronsard], l'Amour et la Mort – caesura – *n'est qu'une mesme chose*. / May their night be full of music at all events. ('Love and Lethe', *MPTK* 91)

'Gone west', he said. / They went further. ('What a Misfortune', *MPTK* 140)

By Christ! he did die! / They had clean forgotten to auscultate him! ('Yellow', *MPTK* 164)

And equally rough treatment could be meted out to a succession of quirkily individual, if oddly negligible, characters who could be whistled up and whispered down almost in the same breath: 'She saw her life as a series of staircase jests' (of Ruby Tough in 'Love and Lethe') comes at us out of the blue, just as if it were itself a member of the category it designates,⁷ but cunningly positioned at the end of a paragraph precisely so that it cannot *not* be seen, much like a poet weighting the end of a line (compare: 'How like an epitaph it read, with the terrible sigh in the end-pause of each line' in 'What a Misfortune', *MPTK* 116). Unwanted 'attention', by contrast, is occasioned, especially in a medium like the short story – a genre in which there is rarely room for the kind of complexity which a novelist could take several paragraphs to explore – when Beckett is either writing in a tired and rather slipshod manner, or simply trying too hard to introduce a complexity to stimulate the mind – 'It is a tiring style', he had said of Proust, 'but it does not tire the mind' (*PTD* 88) – rather than hoping to catch the eye:

The Smeraldina, far far away⁸ with the corpse and her own spiritual equivalent in the bone-yard by the sea,⁹ was dwelling at length on how she would shortly gratify the former, even as it, while still unfinished, had that of Lucy, and blot the latter for ever from her memory. ('Draff', *MPTK* 180)

You can read this sentence several times and still be left without much sense of what is being said, probably because the one corpse (not to mention the one 'spiritual equivalent') Beckett would have liked to blot forever from his own memory at this time was precisely the one he could not forget: his father's, dead after two massive heart attacks in June 1933. In the event, or rather in the aftermath of the event, all that Beckett was prepared to do to help the reader of 'Draff' at this point was to add a footnote ('A most foully false analogy'), when arguably what is really 'false' here is not the analogy in itself – however hostile Beckett strives to be to 'analogymongers'¹⁰ – but rather the motive or corpus of motives that has led him to conceal his own deeply emotional involvement. The difficulty of negotiating between having nothing to say and having no way of saying something that you are

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reluctant to deal with openly has not been successfully resolved in this understandably delicate, but ultimately unsatisfactory, instance. There was a price to be paid for looking out through the fingers whilst keeping one's gloves on.

Multiplications of Tissue

Early Beckett hinges – except when undergoing ‘break down’¹¹ – on the unusual but potentially productive premise that in telling yourself you have nothing to say you are effectively giving yourself free rein to say anything you like.¹² Better still, you can say it in any number of ways, each of which can be easily abandoned and taken up again. So it was that, with *Murphy* effectively finished, Beckett was in a position to tell his friend MacGreevy: ‘I could do more work on it but do not intend to’ (*LSB I* 345). It was as if he could always tell himself that he had had ‘nothing’ in mind to begin with. But even this could not satisfy a radical scepticism which was always finding an exception to every rule, especially when there were no rules that seemed capable of being stated, despite recurrent invocations of an aesthetic of ‘statement’.¹³ From early on content to think of himself as ‘a postpicassian with a pen in his fist’ (*Dream* 46) – as clear a statement of Beckett’s onanistic and viciously circular aesthetic as could reasonably be wished for – Beckett could never in fact long remain at ease with ‘categories’ without ‘transelement[ing]’ them (*Dream* 35).¹⁴ There was always another way of looking out to find a way of looking back in; it was a case of being ‘doomed to a literature of saving clauses’ (*Dream* 46), because literature itself was precisely such a clause. There had to be something more than what came to seem like the merely optional or ‘*facultatif*’ products of the pen in the hand availing itself of the optional stops along the way, as distinct from what could be retrospectively assessed as scheduled stops or designated ports of call (*LSB I* 133). It was precisely in this search for something essential or ‘necessary’ that Beckett tried to devise a nondoctrinal doctrine of ‘need’ as seen most clearly in 1937–8 in the programmatic essay ‘Les Deux Besoins’ and in the semi-programmatic ‘review’ of Denis Devlin’s first collection of poems, *Intercessions*.¹⁵ By way of theoretically privileging this notion of ‘need’ Beckett could hope to keep his premises and his conclusions wrapped indissolubly around one another, and create in his best ‘infundibuliform’ manner. Whether, with or without this substitute for a doctrine, such an outcome would naturally have occurred of its own accord can only be guessed at. But for so long as it served to keep Beckett active, the doctrine could be continually varied to suit any impulse apparently offering a creative opportunity.

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The young Beckett stuck in the uncertain ruts of impending middle age could remember when he had been something of a rising star in the academic firmament of Dublin's Trinity College:

He is a university man, of course, said Mrs Nixon.

I should think it highly probable, said Mr Nixon. (W 17)

He had, in the eyes of his peers, if not in his own estimation, possessed an exceptional mind, at once plastic and absorbent, both alert to angles,¹⁶ especially those not ordinarily available to vision, and desperately self-involved. As has been seen, however, it was a mind inevitably sometimes at the mercy of the right kind of stimulus and the right kind of response. When it was furnished with sufficient (but not excessive) personal input, as for example in the 1931 poem 'Alba' or the 1936 poem 'Cascando', Beckett seems easily enough to transcend himself, as if he were capable of genuine metamorphoses rather than endlessly narcissistic echoes in a self-defeating vortex. But with too much personal input a carefully prepared firework simply fails to ignite (there are several in the 1929–30 poem 'Casket of Pralinen ...'), and when Beckett is too long 'held up' by what he knows to be 'the absurdest difficulties of detail' (Beckett 1936) he loses hold on what is salient, as anyone might. These difficulties are perhaps best seen in the *Murphy* notebooks, now thankfully (after seventy-five years exclusively in private hands) available for public scrutiny. In late January 1936 Beckett lamented to MacGreevy that 'all the sense and impulse [of *Murphy*] seem to have collapsed' (*LSB* I 306), and by mid-April things were not much improved. One does not need to read much between the lines of chapter 8 of *Murphy*, either as published or as it comes under revision and critique in the notebooks, to see that it was precisely the 'multiplication of tissue' operative there which was imperilling the *performative* aspects of the novel, its *brio* and *bravura*. As in the very different situation of a gallery and a hotel mirror in Nazi Germany, multiplication was bringing Beckett close to the impotence of self-division. As a failsafe against complete collapse, Beckett can, however, be seen, very late in the day, not just making plans as to how best to proceed – the refining fire of 'spontaneous combustion' having signally and significantly failed to serve his purposes (*LSB* I 134) – but actually putting his essentially simple plot (self-evidently the least of his concerns) under pressure to deliver the goods, or something like them, with the tempo and the direction of the narrative under distinctly better control in the wind-up to the conclusion of the novel, almost as if the sheer desire or need to get the thing finished was the finally enabling factor.

Murphy very impressively makes its rhetorical filigree more memorable than its homespun plot of pursuit and flight, asylum and exile, the merest pretext for embellishment: