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Killing His Texts Dead: Beckett's Hiberno-English Translations

The very existence of two versions of almost all of Beckett's texts, one in French and one in English (or – and this is one of the questions this paper hopes to address – is it not rather in Hiberno-English?), opens up a whole area of investigation relating to translation, translation theory, bilingualism, and the *double* inscription of each text: two texts united by their similarities, but always differentiated by their language. In his seminal work on translation, *After Babel*, George Steiner remarks that the essence of translation is repetition: a translated text is a repeated text, repeated in a different language, but repeated nonetheless. While any translation, and all the more so a self-translation, is always something slightly more than a simple “repetition” in a different language of the same text, there is a temptation, when discussing Beckett, to reformulate Vivian Mercier's famous comment on *Waiting for Godot*, and say that Beckett's self-translations are texts in which nothing happens, twice: first in French, and then in English, in the case of *En attendant Godot / Waiting for Godot*, or first in English, and then in French, for *Not I* and *Pas moi*, for example.

The other-language repetition that is the translation echoes the thematic and stylistic repetitions that are so inherent to Beckett's prose and theatre. That repetition is so prevalent in all of Beckett's work has not escaped the attention of psychoanalytical critics, among other reasons because, according to Freudian theory, exposed in particular in “Beyond the pleasure principle”, repetition is always related to the death instinct. Beckett's texts, in both of his creative tongues, are almost always concerned with death, and are very often constructed around or through internal

repetitions. It should therefore come as no surprise that such a work be subjected, by its author, to a death-like repetition in the form of self-translation.

The question this paper would like to ask is whether it is possible to make Beckett's "dying words", to quote the title of Christopher Ricks' study, die again, die "better" second time around, through the process of translation. The paradoxical possibility of dying "better" is, of course, suggested by the parallel with Beckett's own expression that his texts are attempts to fail again, fail better. But it is also suggested, in the texts of the *Trilogy*, for example, by the difficulty experienced by Beckett's characters to successfully accomplish their own demise. *Malone meurt* with difficulty. Might *Malone Dies* be an attempt to help him die better: to kill him dead?

With this hypothesis in mind, we undertook a re-reading of the English and French versions of the novels of the *Trilogy*, in search of death-related language, specifically attempting to determine if there was more or less of it in the second (in this case, English) version. While a very great majority of the mentions of death from the original French are maintained in the translation, there is also a literal multiplication of references to death in the English versions, many of which had had little or no equivalent in the original French.

Sometimes the reference to death had been veiled or euphemistic in the French, and was made much more explicit in the translation into English. The following are examples of this practice: Molloy describes how a caged animal can simply "attendre tranquillement la fin de ses jours au jardin zoologique" (Beckett 1951a: 111). The meaning is clear, but the euphemism will not survive in translation. In the English text, the foul beast "can live on *till he dies* in the peace and quiet of our zoological gardens" (Beckett 1959: 67, our italics). Similarly when Molloy wonders what disease he might end up dying of, in French "ce n'est pas à moi que l'urémie fermera les yeux" (Beckett 1951a: 134). English does not beat about the bush: "uremia will never be *the death* of me" (Beckett 1959: 81, our italics). In *Malone meurt*, Macmann imagines how "on se met tout simplement à tousser et à éternuer" (Beckett 1951b: 108), without suggesting any fatal outcome. In English "you merely *die* of pneumonia" (Beckett 1959: 239, our italics). Speaking of Worm, the narrator of *L'Innommable* has this to say: "A eux tous il a survécu, à Mahood aussi, si Mahood n'est plus" (Beckett 1953: 85). In *The Unnameable*, "He has survived them all, Mahood too, if Mahood *is dead*" (Beckett 1959: 340,

our italics). In all of these cases, the translation simply brings out more clearly a mention of death which had been present in the original text, in diluted form.

There are, however, other instances in which the translation introduces, more or less explicitly, the idea of death, where it had been absent in the first version. In the French *Molloy*, a cloud “recouvrait [le ciel] du zénith jusqu’aux horizons” (Beckett 1951a: 101). In English, the verb “recouvrir” is replaced by a verb with a more deathly connotation, most likely suggested by the cloud/shroud assonance: “a vast cloud was *shrouding* the heavens from the zenith to the skylines” (Beckett 1959: 62, our italics). In the third volume of the *Trilogy*, the verb “shroud” reappears in a similar passage where, again, a deathly connotation had been absent in the original French, when the narrator of *The Unnamable* describes how he would like his incarnation in the jar to be treated: “I have tried to make her understand, dashing my head angrily against the neck of the jar, that I should like to be *shrouded* more often” (*Ibidem*: 333, our italics). The French verb had been “occulté” (Beckett 1953: 71). As always in Beckett, references to death are not devoid of humour, as in the following physical description of Moran. In French, his legs are “[g]rêles et cagneuses” (Beckett 1951a: 206). In English, they are “[k]nock-kneed and *skeleton* thin” (Beckett 1959: 124, our italics).

Must one consider these translation choices as simply coincidence, or is translation being used as a second attempt, a repetition, an opportunity to see these texts through to the death? Of course, a number of the aforementioned expressions added to the English versions are no more than clichés (but clichés are dead language if ever there was one, as Christopher Ricks brilliantly showed in his *Beckett’s Dying Words*). Indeed, some of Beckett’s more deathly translations include clearly self-conscious use of death-related clichés such as “I made *no bones* about telling her I needed neither her nor anyone else” (Beckett 1959: 34, our italics) for “je ne me gênai pas pour lui dire que je n’avais besoin ni d’elle ni personne” (Beckett 1951a: 53), “in spite of the *dying day* when I always felt most alive” (Beckett 1959: 47, our italics) for “malgré l’heure qui était celle de ma vitalité maxima” (Beckett 1951a: 75), “to *kill time*” (Beckett 1959: 154, our italics) for “pour que le temps me parût moins long” (Beckett 1951a: 256), “scurrying from *cradle to grave*” (Beckett 1959: 227, our italics) for “prenant des billets, chargés de bagages” (Beckett 1951b: 86) and “they would *stop me dead* forever” (Beckett 1959: 319, our italics) for “ils m’arrêteraient pile” (Beckett 1953: 51). Is it possible

that these were not conscious translation choices, and that English is simply a more death-obsessed language than French in its clichés, and that there simply are more such idiomatic expressions in English than in French? The bilingual dictionary tells a very interesting tale: while French does have plenty of deathly idioms like “en vouloir à quelqu'un à mort”, “plus bête que lui, tu meurs”, “mort aux vaches”, “la place du mort” or “la petite mort” where the equivalent English idiom makes no reference to death, English does seem to like referring to death slightly more than French does, in expressions such as “never say die”, “a body to die for”, “to die hard”, “to die the death”, “to die away”, “to die down”, “to die out”, “a dead duck”, “dead in the water”, “I wouldn't be seen dead”, “dead calm”, “a dead loss”, “dead ahead”, “dead easy”, “dead end”, “dead letter”, etc. One might almost be “sick to death of” so many idioms which often have, apart from linguistically, nothing, in fact, to do with death.

However, one hesitates to conclude that the brio of Beckett's translations is simply the result of a statistical prevalence of certain forms or lexical fields in the language he is translating into. Even though as a translator, he obviously masterly exploits the different resources of his different creative tongues, and is always on the lookout for translation possibilities which go even straighter to the point than the original had, the English language simple being more “morbid” than the French does not seem a satisfactory explanation for the translation choices to be seen in the *Trilogy*.

It must not, however, be forgotten that in this bilingual oeuvre, French is not the only language hiding behind Beckett's English. Although Irish as a language is not actually present in Beckett's oeuvre as the French language is, Beckett's English is most often recognisably Irish, and not only in the early works such as *More Pricks than Kicks* and *Murphy*. Indeed, when Beckett translates his standard French into English, it is not always into standard English, but often into an English which, while it might not be as markedly Irish as that of an O'Casey or a Synge, is certainly recognisably so.

This is particularly true of some of the later translations, such as those of *Premier amour* and *Mercier et Camier*, which are among Beckett's earliest French prose texts, but which were not translated (or indeed published in French) until shortly after Beckett won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. In the English versions of these texts, it is not only in lexical terms that we hear a slight Irish brogue; it is also

syntactically. At various points during his writing career, and including in the English translations of the novels of the *Trilogy*, we find the following Hibernicisms under Beckett's pen: "gab", "gob", "to cod", "lepping", "butty", "to whinge", "blarney".

Beyond such lexical Irishisms, Beckett's syntax regularly obeys what Seamus Heaney called "the wrong grammar" (*apud* Dolan 1998: xix) of Hiberno-English, as exposed by T.P. Dolan in his *Dictionary of Hiberno-English*. One example of a structure which is recurrent in Beckett's prose is that of "cleft" sentences. The explanation is the following:

In Irish the verb normally stands first (...), whereas the basic word order of Standard English is subject-verb (...). In Irish there are two verbs "be": "tá" (...) and "is" (...). The latter is used at the head of sentences involving relative clauses, e.g. "Is inniu atá an bhainis ann," the wedding takes place today, literally "Is today (on)-which-is the wedding in-it." The placing of the copula "is", at the beginning of such sentences preserves the verb-subject rule for the word order in Irish sentences; it also allows for flexibility in marking the speaker's intentions (...): "It is today the wedding is taking place"; "It is the wedding is taking place today"; or even "It is taking place the wedding is today." Usually in these "cleft" sentences the relative pronoun "that" is omitted. (Dolan 1998: xxiii-xxiv)

This structure appears regularly both before and after the "French period". Before, in *More Pricks than Kicks*, for example: "It's a small thing, Hairy' he said, and his voice, after so long silence, grated on his ear, 'separates lovers.'" (Beckett 1972: 136); and after, in *First Love*: "It was things made me weep" (Beckett 1995: 99)

What difference might the fact that Beckett's English is clearly Hibernicised make in terms of his deathly translations into English? As English had appeared more deathly than French, might Hiberno-English be even more so? The bilingual Irish-English dictionary again tells an interesting tale: when English fixed expressions containing the words "dead" or "death" are translated into Irish, the Irish word for "dead", "marbh", appears almost systematically, but it also appears in a host of entirely new expressions, where this time it is English which shuns the word "death". Thus, in Irish a "pian marbh" (literally a dead pain) means a dull pain, a "feoil marbh" (a dead muscle) means an undeveloped muscle, a "lá marbh" (a dead day) means a heavy dull day, and "uisce marbh" (dead water) means stagnant water.

This last example is particularly interesting, and makes one wonder whether Beckett was not aware of the deathly connotations of the Irish expressions behind much of Hiberno-English. Indeed, one of the

extremely rare examples in a comparative reading of the novels of the *Trilogy* in which it is the original French text which is the more death-like (rather than the English one), is a passage in *Molloy* where Moran describes the “strangled creek” (Beckett 1959: 134) of Ballyba as having “leaden water, you would swear it was stagnant, if you did not know it was not” (*Ibidem*: 134-5). Beckett’s own English version might have been more deathly and “Beckettian” if it had been as reminiscent of the Irish “uisce marbh” as the French version is: “Quelle beauté alors que cette eau plombée et qu’on dirait *morte*, si l’on n’était pas averti du contraire!” (Beckett 1951a: 223, our italics). The water might be thought to be dead, if one did not know it was not, much as one might be mistaken in thinking Beckett’s narrator dead at the end of *Malone meurt*; or in thinking that at the end of the French version of one of the novels, the narrator had had his final say, and was not going to return in a different language, to try to better polish off his death.

That Beckett’s French description of stagnant water as dead water be close to the Irish is obviously no more than a coincidence, but if the Irish language is rarely mentioned in Beckett’s work, when it is, it is as a dead language. Perhaps it is the survival of the dead language of Irish behind Maddy Rooney’s Hiberno-English which makes her husband complain that “sometimes one would think [she] were struggling with a dead language” (Beckett 1986: 194), to which Mrs Rooney replies that it is only a matter of time before English goes the way of “our own poor dear Gaelic”. Mrs Rooney even seems to suggest that dying is the best way for a language to be, as she says of her English, “it will be dead in time, just like our own poor dear Gaelic, there is that to be said” (*Ibidem*: 194).

If a panegyric of a dying language is specifically Beckettian, it should perhaps not come as a surprise that this should be evoked in the context of the Irish language. Indeed, when Irish lives on in Hiberno-English, it is often in a very deathly way. In one of the earliest works devoted to Hiberno-English, P.W. Joyce’s *English as We Speak it in Ireland*, the author devotes a chapter to “Exaggeration and Redundancy”, in which he examines repetitive structures and expressions in Hiberno-English in general, and in particular how frequently they occur in relation to death. He mentions two expressions which are derived from middle Irish: “dead without life” (found in versions of the saga of Diarmuid and Grainne), and the expression borrowed for the title of this paper: “killed dead”.

P.W. Joyce also recounts the following anecdote: “A young man died after injuries received in a row, and his friend says: ‘It is dreadful about the poor boy: they made at him in the house and killed him there; then they dragged him out on the road and killed him entirely, so that he lived for only three days after. I wouldn’t mind if they shot him at once and put an end to him: but to be murdering him like that – it is terrible” (Joyce 1910: 134).

Beyond the compassion we must feel for the “poor boy”, this anecdote is rich in lessons on how death is described in Hiberno-English, and on how such an expression is revelatory of how death is envisaged in traditional Irish society. In her essay on death in ancient Greek and modern Irish drama, *Dying Acts*, Fiona Macintosh quotes this same anecdote and comments that “there is no apparent reason to invoke conscious exaggeration as an explanation for this curious usage. It seems that the verb ‘kill’ in this context, as it is in the circumlocutory expression ‘to kill someone dead’, is being used in a way that is not very different to the Indo-European sacrificial ritual pattern in which the triadic killing is a means of guaranteeing that death is accomplished in the fullest possible way” (Macintosh 1994: 75-6). The need to triply insist on the “success” of the death process is related, according to Fiona Macintosh, to the conception of death shared by ancient Greek and Irish cultures, in which death is not an event, but a process, and a process requiring strenuous effort to accomplish.

The link between on the one hand the tradition of banshees, wakes and keening very much represented in the modern Irish drama of authors such as Synge and O’Casey, and the prolonged death scenes in the tragedies of Euripides or Aeschylus, and on the other hand the self-translations of Beckett may not seem immediately obvious, but it is undeniable that death in Beckett’s oeuvre, be it prose or theatre, is an arduous process, of which both beginning and end are difficult to identify with any certainty.

In the opening line of *Malone Dies*, “I shall soon be quite dead at last in spite of all” (Beckett 1959: 180), “soon”, “quite”, “at last” and “in spite of all”, can be seen to function in a similar way to the “killed”, “killed entirely” and “murdered like that” of the anecdote about the man killed in a brawl, as does the opening line of *Endgame* in which Clov glumly announces: “Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished” (Beckett 1986: 93). However, the man describing his friend’s death in three instalments, so to speak, uses such repetition in

the hope of convincing himself that death *has* actually occurred. The opposite is the case for Malone and Clov – death is such an uncertain event for them that there is no expression capable of convincing them. The additions serve not to confirm death, but to make its accomplishment even more doubtful.

As in the tradition of Greek and Irish drama, “[the] dying individual’s separation from the world of the living is a long and painful undertaking” (Macintosh 1994: 78), so much so in Beckett’s fictional universe that the characters’ attempts to affirm it are contradictory and insufficient. The process of dying is thus not only prolonged from one novel of the *Trilogy* into another, so from *Malone meurt* into *L’Innommable* for example, but in an ultimate attempt to make sure that, for example Malone, has been “killed dead”, it is also prolonged from *Malone meurt* to *Malone Dies* and from *L’Innommable* to *The Unnamable*. The original text is an attempt to kill Malone; the repetition that is the translation is an attempt to kill Malone dead, but as the translation is into English, which may have a stronger penchant for deathly idioms, and more specifically into Hiberno-English, which carries with it a whole tradition of death as a process, the opportunity is seized to kill him dead entirely without life, at last, in spite of all.

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