

1. INTRODUCTION

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Introduction: All that Write

Lire, écouter, regarder Beckett, c'est alors découvrir la conjugaison de l'ordre et du laisser-aller, l'amointrissement systématique et l'événement imaginaire.

Bruno Clément / François Noudelman (2006: 9)

It is customary to think of 'difficulty' or 'obscurity' as being all about what we do not know. But Beckett proves that the experience of difficulty can come from simplicity as well as from complexity.

Rónán McDonald (2006: 4)

In 2004, the Instituto de Estudos Ingleses – a research unit located at the Faculty of Letters, *Universidade do Porto* – created a special team dedicated to Irish Studies, bringing together the efforts of researchers working at that same institution, but also from other Portuguese universities, like Coimbra and Lisbon¹. That team's commitment to the study of Irish writing and culture found a special focus in translation, taken both as an interlingual process, as a form of rewriting, and as a model for all intercultural and intertextual relations. Its first public initiative was the organization in November 2004 of a symposium entitled "Ireland, Memory, Translation" – with the participation of Michael Cronin as guest lecturer –, that derived its main impetus and rationale from the various Irish literary commemorations of that year, involving

¹ Besides the organizers of this volume, the two other researchers that are part of the Irish Studies group are Adriana Bebian, from the University of Coimbra, and Teresa Casal, from the University of Lisbon.

the memory and legacy of writers such as Oscar Wilde, James Joyce, Patrick Kavanagh, and also the centenary of the Abbey Theatre. In November 2005, another symposium followed, this time under the heading “Dislocations: Texts, Spaces, and Relations in Irish Culture”, and with the presence of Joe Cleary as keynote speaker. More recently, in 2007, again in November, the Oporto Irish Studies research team commemorated the Flight of the Earls with the organisation of another seminar, open to the literary manifestations associated with the impact of that historical event, under the broad title of “Evasion, Dispossession: Transit and Trauma in the Irish Imagination”, this time with Anne Fogarty in charge of the opening lecture. As in previous years, we were again fortunate to have the support of the Irish Embassy in Portugal.

Both the centrality of “translation” in this project, and the unabashed way in which this research team has been exploring the opportunities created by a series of commemorations associated with Irish history, culture and literature, made it inevitable for the group to organize, in 2006, a larger event exclusively dedicated to Samuel Beckett, apropos of the author’s centenary. This time in cooperation with the *Instituto de Literatura Comparada Margarida Losa* – another research unit of the Faculty of Letters, dedicated to comparative studies –, a two-day bilingual conference was held under the title *Plural Beckett Pluriel*, a title that signals the complex cultural and literary identity of the Irish writer. The conference included four plenary lectures – by Bruno Clément, Maria Helena Serôdio, Rónán McDonald and Steve Wilmer –, thirteen papers by a truly international panel of participants – coming from such different places as Norway and the U.S.A, France and the United Kingdom, as well as Portugal –, and a round-table with the participation of Portuguese translators and stage directors of Beckett’s works (Francisco Frazão, Manuel Portela, João Paulo Seara Cardoso and Nuno Carinhas). Delegates and other guests also attended a specially held preview of a theatre production that included four of the playwright’s “dramaticules” – *Come and Go*, *A Piece of Monologue*, *Rockaby* and *Not I* –, under the general title *Todos os que Falam* (*All that Speak*, playing upon the well-known title of Beckett’s first radio play, *All that Fall*), co-produced by the companies ASSÉDIO, Ensemble and the Teatro Nacional S. João. During the conference, the Faculty’s Library also hosted, in its entrance hall, a photographic exhibition on the life and work of Samuel Beckett that was commissioned and sponsored by the Cultural Division of the Department of Foreign Affairs of Ireland, which also produced an accompanying booklet with texts by Rónán McDonald.

The current volume collects most of the papers presented at that conference, held on the 23rd and 24th November 2006, pursuing its commitment to explore the bilingual condition of Samuel Beckett and the manifold artistic and critical manifestations of his work, in a wide variety of cultural and literary contexts. By taking up the goals of the first conference ever organised by a Portuguese university specifically to honour Beckett, one of the most important writers of the twentieth century both in drama and fiction, *Plural Beckett Pluriel* offers itself hopefully as a new departure for Beckett studies in Portugal.

Since the Portuguese première of *Waiting for Godot*, in 1959, Beckett has been a regular presence on our stages, as proved in Sebastiana Fadda's well-documented study of the reception of the theatre of the absurd in Portugal (1998), and confirmed by an updated list of stage productions of Beckett's plays that was recently published in the theatre journal *Sinais de Cena* (Fadda / Coelho 2006). Although Beckett's work for the stage was, from the late 1950's and through the 1960's and 70's, characteristically far from conveying the "optimistic" or even "revolutionary" message that many Portuguese theatre artists regarded as necessary to confront a repressive state like the one that existed in Portugal up to 1974, the fact is that Beckett soon acquired among us a reputation for (at least) a formal experimentalist, responsible for the creation of stark and unforgettable images of the human condition. The translation of some of his fictional work and poems reinforced the idea of an artist deeply committed to a questioning of his different – and in the case of theatre, plural – means of expression, up to the point of representing the conditions of the impossibility of representation. As happened in many other countries, following the sometimes hesitant pace of new translations of the writer's texts and the more ebullient stage experiments with his plays, the existentialist and humanist approach to Beckett has gradually given place to a more sophisticated and demanding exploration of an extraordinarily complex body of work.

Despite the influential presence of Beckett's drama in the Portuguese theatre and the important, although more timid, record of publications of the writer's prose and poetry, only in recent years has the Portuguese academic world shown some signs of an interest in the writer's work, in the form of some MA and PhD dissertations and theses. Those research projects, developed in the different but, in the case of Beckett, interconnected domains of French, English and Comparative Literature, reveal a clear preference for the plays, with some studies exploring the

“absurdist” dimension of the playwright’s first dramatic experiences (see Brito 1981); others concentrating rather on specific plays and some aesthetic or formal issues (see Rosa 1994, 2000; Pinto 1999; Teixeira 1999; Reis 2000); and still others concerned with the study of the translation of Beckett’s plays into Portuguese (see Seixas 2003). Attention to fiction has been scarcer, with some of his narratives, like *Enough*, becoming the object of detailed study (see Serôdio 1983), and his broader output sometimes considered in comparison with that of other European writers (see Martins 2002, and also 1992). This set of references to some of the more extended explorations does not, obviously, take into account the much more numerous, and in some cases more influential, essays and articles published in books, literary journals, or conference proceedings, that reveal a much larger, though nonetheless specialized, interest in Beckett’s work among Portuguese scholars.

Some of the essays collected in this volume are a significant example of the current variety of concerns and perspectives pursued by Portuguese scholars with an interest in Beckett. These range from an insistence on the association of the playwright with the absurdist tradition, as popularized by Martin Esslin at the beginning of the nineteen-sixties (Ana Isabel Moniz), to an interconnected reading of his work and that of other experimentalists like Harold Pinter (Carla Ferreira de Castro); and from a daring articulation of that same absurdist vein with developments in the visual arts, namely in the work of Dali (Filomena Vasconcelos), to an exploration of the Portuguese translations of some of the writer’s more influential plays, such as *Waiting for Godot* (Paula Seixas). Miguel Ramalheite Gomes is still concerned with drama, but from a more comparative perspective, briefly bringing some philosophical contributions to bear on the dramaturgical experience of Beckett and other contemporary writers (like Heiner Müller and Sarah Kane). José Domingues de Almeida contributes a long overdue update on French prose fiction, after the well-known revolution brought by the *nouveau-roman*, while Luís Dias Martins considers a wide variety of texts written by Beckett, broadening the scope of his considerations to include the writer’s attention not only to literature, but also to music and painting.

The decision to present all the contributions collected in this volume under five different headings resulted not so much from their exclusive concerns, but rather from the need felt by the organisers to clarify the way in which those very contributions can be better understood within the frameworks defined by fields of research that are currently active in

Beckett Studies, a domain, in the words of Lois Oppenheim, “still finding new directions today” (2004: 3). That is also the reason why the volume opens with a contribution by Bruno Clément – the author of *L’Œuvre sans qualités: Rhétorique de Samuel Beckett*, from 1994 – not so much on Beckett’s well known attraction to philosophy, but more directly on the attraction his work keeps exerting upon some of the more inquiring minds in contemporary – in this case French – philosophical thought, like Gilles Deleuze, Didier Anzieu and Alain Badiou. Through the discussion of these three authors’ explorations of Beckett, Bruno Clément elucidates one of the most peculiar traits associated with the writer’s relation with philosophy: the way Beckett’s literary work seems to go on stimulating deeply personal philosophical pursuits, a dimension which in itself functions as a confirmation of the power of literature to deal with issues that for some time philosophy regarded as its own exclusive domain.

Beckett’s “extraterritorial” condition, in George Steiner’s celebrated characterisation, together with both the existentialist paradigm and the more formalist approaches to the writer’s work explain the relative novelty of the importance accorded to the cultural and intellectual contexts that surround the various moments of his career. Rónán McDonald adds elsewhere: “The bare stages and stark images, the seeming investment in elemental and unmediated conditions of experience, reinforce the impression of a writer in quarantine from his historical moment” (2006: 23). In his contribution to this volume, the current Director of the Beckett International Foundation discusses the possibilities and the problems involved in the appropriation of Beckett by Irish scholarship – at a moment when Irish Studies is undergoing a significant expansion –, and reviews not only some of the decisive gestures towards that appropriation, but also the writer’s own pronouncements on his cultural allegiances. In a time so dominated by notions of hybridity and liminality, it somehow comes as no surprise that the way “Beckett’s work challenges national and linguistic alignments, the assumptions of biographical criticism, and notions of the relations between literature and culture” (Roof 2000: 146) should emerge as a renewed source of interest for scholars and theoreticians. In McDonald’s own words, certainly appropriate to our own comparative concerns,

In considering Beckett’s relationship with Ireland, we should make connections without making consolidations, applications rather than appropriations. Beckett is energised from many different national literatures – Irish, French, even German.

One does not necessarily exclude the other. It is a crude and sclerotic opposition to pit the metropolitan against the national, as if a writer can belong to one or the other. Joyce succeeded in merging both and so too does Beckett. Notwithstanding Beckett's resistance to "local" substance and accident, the Irish vein in his work runs deep, even when it is not visible on the surface. (McDonald 2006: 21-22)

To some extent, McDonald's essay introduces the first contribution to the largest section in this volume, the one that is more directly concerned with Beckett's drama. Steve Wilmer was, in 1992, the editor of a volume suggestively titled *Beckett in Dublin*. His essay in this collection considers the plurality of meanings generated by Beckett's works for the stage, not only in their more deracinated original condition, but also through the influential imprints they seem to have left both in Ireland and in drama in the English-speaking world at large.

Maria Helena Seródio's contribution pursues an attention to Beckett that is signally informed by concerns proper to Theatre Studies, insisting as she does on a renewed consideration of Portuguese stage work involving Beckett's plays. She takes the cue for her considered discussion of the playwright's work for radio from a recent award-winning production of the most clearly Irish of all the writer's plays, *All that Fall*, premiered in Lisbon in January 2006, produced by the company A Comuna and directed by João Mota. She surrounds her detailed characterization of that experience with a broader exploration of the appeal felt by producers, theatre directors and actors to cross borders, that is, to stage his radio plays, or to take his stage plays into the medium of radio.

In this section of the volume that focuses on drama, and besides some of the contributions that were mentioned above, one further essay introduces a Romanian playwright, Matéi Visniec, who wrote a play called *Le dernier Godot*. In her study of this text, Héléne Lecossois extends the range of the volume's concern with intertextuality and influence (which previously came to the fore in Steve Wilmer's contribution), an obviously productive addition to a volume organized under the aegis of plurality and rewriting.

The following section of the book is dedicated to Beckett's fiction and the relations both of his prose and plays with the other arts, particularly painting; this was, in fact, a constant referential dimension of his work – as eloquently demonstrated by the exhibition organized by the National Gallery of Ireland in 2006, in particular through a superbly documented catalogue, *Samuel Beckett: A Passion for Paintings*.

The decision to reserve a specific section of this volume for the issues of bilingualism and translation associated with Samuel Beckett reflects the wish to emphasize what has in fact become one of the most challenging and productive domains of Beckett studies, especially due to the scope and variety of its implications both for comparative and reception studies. While Nadia Louar discusses the larger meaning of the writer's bilingual *œuvre*, insisting on its more structural consequences and on the need for a simultaneous reconsideration of the two different sets of texts that the writer authored during his lifetime, Helen Astbury considers some instances of the literary recreation involved in the self-translation of some of his works into Hiberno-English, a variant that is different not only in its linguistic structures, but also in its specific cultural resonances. The very fact that this volume presents itself in two languages, English and French, written by native and non-native users of the two languages, works as a clear demonstration of the growing awareness that energises this area of research; further, it is also an acknowledgement of the writer's literary bilingualism as one of the essential "poetic" dimensions of his work. As Bruno Clément and François Noudelmann recently stated,

L'absence, dans l'état actuel des choses, d'une édition bilingue des œuvres de Beckett simplifie considérablement – et de façon très dommageable – l'approche qu'on peut en avoir. La critique française se réfère fort peu à la version anglaise des textes, ni l'anglo-saxonne à la version française. C'est évidemment très regrettable. Il faut souhaiter, nous le croyons sincèrement, que soit rapidement établie une édition des œuvres complètes de Beckett qui donne de chacun de ses textes les deux versions dont il est l'auteur. (Clément / Noudelmann 2006: 18)

From the point of view of all those cultures that only know the works of Beckett through translation, this dimension raises serious issues, not only for an understanding of the reception of his works over the past five or six decades but also for a more challenging consideration of the paths to follow in the renewal of that act of carrying over or "rewriting" such a wide variety of texts, both in the critical and translational sense. That is, after all, what also makes Samuel Beckett such a peculiarly plural artist, responsible for a body of work that keeps on functioning as a kind of prismatic object which refracts some of the most decisive critical debates of our time.

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