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SELF-TRANSLATION AS LITERARY GENRE:  
BECKETT'S ENGLISH THEATRE  
AND FRENCH PROSE

Of the three authors most frequently associated with the phenomenon of literary bilingualism, Joseph Conrad, Vladimir Nabokov and Samuel Beckett, the Irish author is the only one whose work for the theatre is generally considered to be as significant, if not more so, than his work in the other genres. Some of Beckett's detractors have been known to go as far as to say that Beckett's 1969 Nobel was awarded on the basis of the play *Waiting for Godot* alone<sup>1</sup>.

The relationship between literary bilingualism and generic choices has thus rarely been explored, and work on Beckett's bilingualism usually concentrates on his prose writings as being those which are most comparable to the other cases of literary bilingualism that are Conrad and Nabokov<sup>2</sup>. The evidence which may be garnered on writings for the stage by other bilingual authors is contradictory and therefore largely unhelpful in determining what, if any, consequences changing languages has on such literary decisions as that of writing plays or novels. The

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<sup>1</sup> This is notably the case of Ronald Hayman's *Samuel Beckett* in the Heinemann Contemporary Playwrights series, for whom Beckett's post-*Godot* work is scrappy and laboured, and his achievement limited: "Beckett's achievement is comparatively small", Ronald Hayman. *Samuel Beckett*. London: Heinemann, 1968, p. 78.

<sup>2</sup> This is notably the case of Brian T. Fitch's *Beckett and Babel: An Investigation into the Status of the Bilingual Work* Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988, Linda Collinge's *Beckett traduit Beckett: De Malone meurt à Malone Dies, l'imaginaire en traduction* Genève: Droz, 2000 and *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett* edited by Alan Warren Friedman, Charles Rossman and Dina Sherzer London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987.



case of Joseph Conrad is somewhat simplified by the fact that all of his writings were in English, not Polish. Conrad did, however, make one foray into the theatrical genre early on in his career. He wrote one one-act play, which was an audience flop, and the experience was not reiterated. Vladimir Nabokov's bilingualism is closer to that practiced by Beckett, as both of the Russian author's literary languages co-existed over a large part of his career. Nabokov's theatrical writings, however, disappear with his switch to English. Indeed, Nabokov wrote no fewer than six stage plays, all in Russian. Between 1923 and 1924, he published 3 brief verse plays in Berlin, followed in 1927 by one five-act play entitled "The Man from the USSR". Finally, in 1938 he brought out two full-length plays, "The Event" and "The Waltz Invention". These English titles are both translations, as Simon Karlinsky reminds us, "Indeed, throughout his European periods, when he wrote in Russian only, Nabokov repeatedly attempted the dramatic genre"<sup>3</sup>. His dramatic production ceased with his decision to lead a bilingual literary career: "Vladimir Nabokov has not returned to the drama since his two important plays of 1938"<sup>4</sup>. Nabokov's bilingual production has thus been exclusively in prose.

Beckett's use of his second language for the theatre is not, however, unique. To be reminded of that fact one need only think of Beckett's compatriot Oscar Wilde, whose unique foreign language text, *Salomé*, was written in French, and is a dramatic piece. Wilde had his reasons for writing *Salomé* in French, notably because he wanted the title role to be interpreted by Sarah Bernhardt, but these were clearly more practical than literary.

The general impression one has, both from the above canonical examples of authors having chosen to write in a language other than their mother tongue, and from other more contemporary figures, is that prose is the preferred genre of language-switchers. The Greek Vassilis Alexakis, the Hungarian Eva Almassy, the Rumanian Maria Maïlat and the Canadian Nancy Huston, all currently writing in French, with over forty titles between them, count only one theatrical piece: Nancy Huston's *Angela et Marina*, a text which was not, in fact, initially written as a play, but is an adaptation of the author's 1994 novel, *La Virevolte*.

However, in a recent study of literary bilingualism, the Polish scientist and author, Aleksandra Kroh quotes two authors, one Chinese

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<sup>3</sup> Simon Karlinsky, "Illusion, Reality and Parody in Nabokov's Plays", 268-279. *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, Spring 1967, vol. VIII, No. 2, p. 269.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 279.



and one Hungarian, for whom writing, ultimately novels, in French had been made possible by a theatrical initiation, writing for the theatre in the foreign language appearing "easier". Gao Xingjian, who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2000, writes both in Chinese and in French. His best known work is the 1990 Chinese-language novel, *Soul Mountain*, but from 1993 he turned to writing plays in French, *Au bord de la vie*, *Le Somnambule*, *Quatre quatuors pour un week-end*. In an interview about writing in French he modestly insisted that "I didn't start writing a novel straight away all the same, for the moment I only write plays in French"<sup>5</sup>. The opinion that writing plays in a foreign language is easier than writing prose is shared by the Hungarian author, Agata Kristof, who is best known for her prose trilogy, *The Notebook*, *The Proof* and *The Third Lie*, but who is also the author of both theatre and poetry in French and Hungarian: "Then I started writing plays around 1971, because it seemed easier to me than to write a novel. In a play, you put the names of the characters and the dialogues, and that's all"<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, the Rumanian author Matéi Visniec who asserted his indebtedness to Beckett in his 1996 play *Le Dernier Godot*, has written dramatic texts in both Rumanian and French, but has not written prose in either language.

Thus, there is apparently no consensus as to the relative ease or comfort of writing dramatic texts in a foreign language. It would, however, seem that life in a foreign language can be assimilated to the theatrical experience of role-playing. This is, in any case, the opinion of both Nancy Huston and Vassilis Alexakis. The Greek author describes life in French in the following terms: "It's not a new identity. It's more like theatre than an identity change. It's about playing a role, creating a character which is a little different to what one is naturally. There is an acting effort to be made"<sup>7</sup>. Nancy Huston describes her decision to live her

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<sup>5</sup> "je ne me suis quand même pas lancé tout de suite dans l'écriture d'un roman, je n'écris pour l'instant en français que des pièces de théâtre [...]", my translation, quoted in Aleksandra Kroh, *L'aventure du bilinguisme*. Paris/Montréal: L'Harmattan, 2000, p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> "Ensuite j'ai commencé à écrire les pièces de théâtre, vers 1971 je crois, parce que cela me semblait plus facile que d'écrire un roman. Dans une pièce, on met les noms des personnages et les dialogues, et c'est tout", my translation, *ibid.*, p. 98-99.

<sup>7</sup> "Il ne s'agit pas d'une nouvelle identité, ça relève plus du théâtre que d'un changement d'identité. Il s'agit de jouer un rôle, de se composer un personnage un peu différent de ce qu'on est naturellement. Il y a un effort d'acteur à faire", my translation, *ibid.* p. III.



life through the French language as accepting to live in "imitation, pretence, theatre"<sup>8</sup>.

If Beckett never commented on the role-playing aspect of his life in a foreign language, his reputation as a bilingual author, and indeed his entire literary reputation, are based largely on his theatrical production, despite the fact that his first burst into French was, in fact, a burst into prose. In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and on his return to Paris, Beckett wrote in quick succession over the period generally referred to as 'the siege in the room' the *Nouvelles*, *Mercier et Camier*, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* and *L'Innommable*. It was only in search of respite after the gruelling writing of the prose of *L'Innommable* that Beckett turned to the theatre. He wrote *En attendant Godot* and *Fin de partie* still in French, even though at this point he had already undertaken the translation into English of the novels of the Trilogy. It was as if Beckett's language of creation was to be French, and his language of translation was to be English. This state of affairs would not last long however. Indeed, Beckett's first two stage plays, which are also his only two full-length plays, are also his only two completed plays with French as their language of original composition. The only exception to this rule, which in fact tends to confirm it, is *Catastrophe*, commissioned in 1982 specifically for the Avignon theatre festival, and written therefore in French. Incidentally, parallel to this concentration of Beckett's dramatic writings in English, he was continuing to write prose almost exclusively in French. Again one exception confirms this rule, in the form of the abortive attempt at a prose piece in English (Beckett's first since *Watt*) undertaken in 1954-55, subsequently published under the revealing title of 'From an abandoned work'. This piece was, not insignificantly, resuscitated as a dramatic text for the radio, and first broadcast by the BBC in 1957.

After *En attendant Godot* and *Fin de partie*, Beckett's play-writing in the late 1950s was prolific. He produced in quick succession two mimes (*Act without words 1* and *2*), two radio plays (*All That Fall* and *Embers*), two successfully completed 'shorter' (than *Godot* and *Endgame*) plays written in English, *Happy Days* and *Krapp's Last Tape*. All of the above were written in English. Over the same period he also

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<sup>8</sup> "Choisir à l'âge adulte, de son propre chef, de façon individuelle pour ne pas dire capricieuse, de quitter son pays et de conduire le reste de son existence dans une culture et une langue jusque-là étrangères, c'est accepter de s'installer à tout jamais dans l'imitation, le faire-semblant, le théâtre", my translation, in Nancy Huston, "Le Masque et la plume", in *Cahiers Charles V*, no. 27, 199, 15-28, 15.



wrote two abortive attempts at plays written in French, which were later published as *Fragment de théâtre 1* and *2*, and translated as *Rough for Theatre 1* and *2*.

While I do consider it significant that English should have become Beckett's theatre language while French remained his prose language, for reasons which I will be expanding upon in the following pages, there are undeniably purely practical reasons for this language/genre pairing, at least as far as theatre is concerned. If the staging of *En attendant Godot* was made possible by people like Jean-Marie Serreau, the then owner of the Théâtre de Babylone, and, of course, Roger Blin, after the writing of *Fin de partie*, dedicated to Blin, Beckett's theatrical contacts became less concentrated in Paris, and more so in London and the United States. Beckett's favourite actors (Billie Whitelaw, Patrick McGee and Jack McGowran, for example) and director, Alan Schneider, were all native speakers of English, and it was not surprising that he chose to privilege the English language to create the pieces they would be premiering. This was particularly true of the actors whose voices Beckett cherished above all, and which he imagined hearing when he was writing his later dramatic texts, of necessity in English. The case of Billie Whitelaw is particularly significant, as the British actress claims that Beckett wrote *Rockaby*, *Footfalls* and *Not I* with her in mind. Indeed, Beckett was soon to lack conviction in the foremost French actress of the time, Madeleine Renaud, who failed to reach Billie Whitelaw's high standards in *Pas moi*, and was passed over by Beckett when casting for *Berceuse*<sup>9</sup>. Finally, Beckett's foray into the genre of radio drama was also propelled by the English-speaking Martin Esslin, author of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, and then director of the radio drama department at the BBC.

However, beyond these practical reasons, the shift to English for future theatrical writing (as well as the "failure" of the two *Roughs for theatre* in French) may well be linked to Beckett's experimentation with the two annexe theatrical genres of mime and radio drama, which, in obviously different ways, bring the body and the voice to the fore, a shift which would have huge repercussions for Beckett's later theatrical production, and which may explain that this later production was written almost exclusively in English.

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<sup>9</sup> "[Beckett] had been very disappointed with Madeleine Renaud's *Pas moi (Not I)*", in James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, New York: Touchstone, 1997, 605.



The very nature of radio drama is for the characters to exist only through what they say, or to enact the voice/body separation Beckett was to put at the heart of some of his later plays, such as *That Time* or *Footfalls*. It must, however, be remembered that the voice in general, and the voice/body separation in particular had only become an issue in Beckett's work after his switch to French. Indeed, a fine toothcomb will not bring to the surface any particular significance attributed to the voice in Beckett's early Irish prose, such as *Dream of fair to middling women*, or *Murphy*. In *L'Innommable*, however, hardly a page goes by without the spoken voice being mentioned, questioned, criticised or denied. It is hardly surprising that it has been suggested that the Beckettian voice becomes problematic because the use of a foreign language can be seen to take one's voice away, to a certain extent. This is the thesis explored by Michael Edwards in his monograph on Beckett, when he says that "to really do justice to Beckett's work on language, and in particular on the French language, one must start with the spoken voice. 'This voice that speaks, says the Unnamable, is not mine' [...] Beckett's voice, however, is taken from him by the simple fact that he writes in French"<sup>10</sup>. Hearing a voice which is not quite one's own issuing from a body that one continues to recognise as one's own is indeed common to all bilingual subjects, a point made by Leslie Hill in his monograph on Beckett: "The non-native speaker, then, talks in the first person but speaks with a different voice"<sup>11</sup>. The separation of a voice and a body became the hallmark of Beckett's prose writings in French, and this phenomenon began to come to the fore progressively from the first novel of the trilogy onwards. The narrators of *Molloy*, *Malone meurt* and *L'Innommable* describe this situation in terms which become more and more explicit. Each narrator mentions a voice which is not his own, but which may be responsible for the words he is uttering. This voice makes its first appearance in Moran's report: "*J'ai parlé d'une voix qui me donnait des instructions, des conseils plutôt. Ce fut pendant ce*

<sup>10</sup> Michael Edwards, *Beckett ou le don des langues*. Montpellier: Editions Espace 34, 1998, p. 21-2. "[...] pour rendre justice au vrai travail de Beckett dans le langage, et particulièrement dans la langue française, il faudrait réfléchir à la voix qui parle. «Cette voix qui parle, dit l'Innommable, n'est pas la mienne» [...] La voix de Beckett, cependant, lui est enlevée par le simple fait qu'il écrit en français". My translation.

<sup>11</sup> Leslie Hill. *Beckett's Fiction: In Different Words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990, p. 38.



retour que je l'entendis pour la première fois." (*M*, 282)<sup>12</sup> If it is only towards the end of his peregrinations that Moran hears the voice, subsequent narrators will be more than familiar with it. Already for Molloy an external voice substitutes itself for the narrator's own, establishing a separation between what the narrator's body accomplishes of its own will, and the words forthcoming from his mouth:

Mais je me disais aussi, D'ici très peu de temps, du train où ça, va, je ne pourrai plus me déplacer, mais où que je me trouve je serai obligé d'y rester, à moins d'être porté. Oh je ne me tenais pas ce limpide langage. Et quand je dis je me disais, etc., je veux dire seulement que je savais confusément qu'il en était ainsi, sans savoir exactement de quoi il retournait. Et chaque fois que je dis, Je me disais telle et telle chose, ou que je parle d'une voix interne me disant, Molloy, et puis une belle phrase plus ou moins claire et simple, ou que je me trouve dans l'obligation de prêter aux tiers des paroles intelligibles, ou qu'à l'intention d'autrui il sort de ma propre bouche des sons articulés à peu près convenablement, je ne fais que me plier aux exigences d'une convention qui veut qu'on mente ou qu'on se taise. (*M*, 145)

In the second volume of the trilogy, *Malone meurt*, it is for Sapo, Malone's creation that the voice will become problematic. Indeed, his every gesture is determined solely by the diktat of the voice. His body is incapable of any movement not solicited by the voice:

Mais de Sapo qui s'éloignait en trébuchant, tantôt à l'ombre des arbres séculaires dont il ignorait l'espèce, tantôt dans la clarté de la haute prairie, tellement sa démarche était incertaine, de Sapo le visage était grave comme toujours, ou plutôt sans expression. Et quand il s'arrêtait ce n'était pas pour mieux penser, ou pour mieux regarder son rêve, mais c'était simplement que la voix qui lui disait d'avancer s'était tue. (*Mm*, 52)<sup>13</sup>

But it is in *L'Innommable* that the body/voice separation is fully accomplished, as the multitude of extracts one could quote to support this

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<sup>12</sup> Excerpts from Beckett's works will be quoted in the language of original composition, be it English or French. *M* will be used as the abbreviation for *Molloy*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1951.

<sup>13</sup> *Mm* will be used as the abbreviation for *Malone meurt*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1951.



theory amply proves. It is clear from the earliest pages of the novel that the narrator accepts no responsibility for the words being spoken – they are, in fact, being whispered in his ear and he is no more than a spokesperson. He is mere organ, the physical entity necessary for the voice to be heard: “*Ma voix. La voix. Oui, je l’entends moins bien. Je connais ça. Elle va cesser. Je ne l’entendrai plus. Je vais me taire. Ne plus entendre cette voix, c’est ça que j’appelle me taire.*” (I, 177)<sup>14</sup> The voice/body separation is asserted to the extent that the voice is even seen to be viable without an orifice to issue from: “*quelqu’un qui écoute, pas besoin d’une oreille, pas besoin d’une bouche, la voix qui s’écoute, comme lorsqu’elle parle, qui s’écoute se taire, ça fait un murmure, ça fait une voix, une petite voix.*” (I, 203) It is not insignificant that the voice/body separation enacted in *L’Innommable* is enacted in Beckett’s second creative language. The narrator says himself, “*M’avoir collé un langage dont ils s’imaginent que je ne pourrai jamais me servir sans m’avouer de leur tribu, la belle astuce. Je vais le leur arranger, leur charabia. Auquel je n’ai jamais rien compris du reste.*” (I, 63) Writing in French acted out that separation simply because French was a foreign language. Radio drama was another obvious means to separate voice and body. In fact, writing radio drama allowed Beckett to act out that same separation without using a foreign language, and using a foreign language may therefore have become unnecessary.

The absence of necessity of the use of the foreign language to explore the voice/body separation would not have been a sufficient reason for Beckett to abandon its use, and indeed, he did not. He simply abandoned its use for the creation of dramatic pieces, but continued to translate his plays into French and compose original prose directly in French. However, the references to the voice in the above comments have in fact been more specifically to the voice/body separation. If radio drama enabled Beckett to eliminate the body, leaving only the voice, in a move which he would extend to the stage in later plays such as *Not I*, the other theatrical genre he was experimenting with in the 1950s allowed him to eliminate the voice, leaving only the body. Beckett’s *Act without words 1* and *2*, both put the body at the centre of the dramatic experience, by simply eliminating the other elements habitually present, including, not insignificantly, the voice. The mimes, although both actually initially written in French, remove the language question which had so frequently been at the heart of Beckett’s writings in both languages by removing

<sup>14</sup> I will be used as the abbreviation for *L’Innommable*. Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1953.



the language and the possibility of expression, and thus removing the questioning of the correctness, source and verifiability of the words spoken which had so often been the preoccupation of the prose. In a sense, the mimes do, physically, what the choice of a foreign language had done linguistically. Limiting the expression of the speakers by having them speak a language they do not master (a situation the narrator of *Malone meurt* claims for himself, as in the passage in which he describes a woman's arm gestures as "*des mouvements difficiles à décrire et dont la signification n'était pas très claire. Elle les écartait de ses flancs, je dirais brandissais si j'ignorais encore mieux le génie de votre langue*" (Mm, 46)) was simply a first step towards limiting their expression even more radically by making them mute, as the mimes do. Beckett's next step was to limit still further his characters' expression, by reducing the body as source of gestural expression to body parts, as he would very shortly do, first with Winnie's gradual sinking into the earth, from buried up to the waist in act 1 to up to the neck in act 2 of *Happy Days*. The physical constraint experienced by Beckett's theatre characters would continue to be increased play after play, with the male character of *That Time* being reduced to an immobile (apart from the opening and closing of the eyes and a single toothless grin at the end) face as on a pillow, and the female character of *Not I* infamously being reduced to a mouth suspended in the air "upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level"<sup>15</sup>. Again these positions are the bodily equivalent of the linguistic amputation depriving one's self of one's mother tongue may be seen to operate. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that Beckett should have chosen to write these plays in his mother tongue, compensating, in a sense, for the physical amputation by restoring the characters a form of linguistic fullness in guise of the mother tongue, which would again explain the return to English for the dramatic genre, making it specific to the way in which Beckett's own theatre was evolving.

Beckett's comments on his shift to French and on his shift to theatre may be useful in understanding the language/genre interaction leading to the above-mentioned developments. In the article Beckett contributed to *Our Exagmination Round his Factification for Incamination of Work in Progress*, entitled 'Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce', Beckett commends Joyce on his deconstruction of the English language, which deserves nothing less according to the young Beckett, who claims

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<sup>15</sup> Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber and Faber, 1990, p. 376.



that it is "abstracted to death"<sup>16</sup>. Given the penchant shown in many of Beckett's writings, both in prose and for the theatre, for death, a language "abstracted to death" would seem much less negative when applied to Beckett's world than when applied by Beckett to Joyce's. Indeed, Christopher Ricks devotes significant space in his study of Beckett to showing how English serves better Beckett's deathly instincts, in particular in *Premier amour* / *First Love*, in which the original French "*Personnellement je n'ai rien contre les cimetières*"<sup>17</sup> becomes in the English translation, "Personally I have no bone to pick with graveyards"<sup>18</sup>. As Christopher Ricks puts it, "But the original French is not abstracted to death, rather it is abstracted from death, in comparison with the corpse-light corporeality of Beckett's English"<sup>19</sup>. However, if one leaves aside momentarily the supposed superiority of the English language for the representation of death and deathliness, and focuses on the posited abstraction of English, its use for the theatre, and more significantly for a theatre of bodily amputation, sheds an interesting light on the questions broached above. An abstract language would be a language which excludes the body, as Beckett's late theatrical language does. Interestingly, in many critics' eyes, it is Beckett's use of the French language which has this effect. This is the case notably of Christopher Ricks, for whom the French versions of Beckett's are "less corporeal"<sup>20</sup> than his English ones. This is perhaps unsurprising as one learns one's mother tongue without mediation, and the terms referring to the infant's body, for example, refer directly to that body. The second language does not have this immediacy, and words are learnt through the medium of the first language, and refer therefore to the body, again for example, at one remove. Speaking, and *a fortiori* writing in a foreign language, gives one, of necessity, only a mediated access to the body. This phenomenon is described by Julia Kristeva in her *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* in the following terms: "*Ne pas parler sa langue maternelle. Habiter des sonorités, des logiques coupées de la mémoire nocturne du corps*"<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce,' in *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn, New York: Grove Press, 1984, 19-33, p. 28.

<sup>17</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Premier amour*. Paris: Minuit, 1970, p. 8. 18 Samuel Beckett, 'First Love', in *The Complete Short Prose 1929-1989*, edited by S. E. Gontarski, New York: Grove Press, 1995, 88-108, p. 88.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words*, Oxford, OUP, 1993, p. 85.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>21</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes*, Paris: Fayard, 1988, p. 26-27.



Beckett's return to English via his experience of writing radio drama, which excludes the body as the French language had in Beckett's prose writings, and that of writing mimes, which exclude the voice, was primarily a return to English for the purposes of dramatic creation. It was mentioned earlier that Beckett wrote *En attendant Godot*, amongst other reasons, to escape from the obscurity of the prose he was writing at the time (*L'Innommable*). The unenviable situation of the narrator of *L'Innommable* is that, perhaps linked to his being cut off from his mother tongue, of being incapable of identifying not only where he is, but also the shape and position of the body from which words spew forth:

Moi, dont je ne sais rien, je sais que j'ai les yeux ouverts, à cause des larmes qui en coulent sans cesse. Je me sais assis, les mains sur les genoux, à cause de la pression contre mes fesses, contre les plantes de mes pieds, contre mes mains, contre mes genoux. Contre les mains ce sont les genoux qui pressent, contre les genoux les mains, mais qu'est-ce qui presse contre les fesses, contre les plantes des pieds? Je ne sais pas. Mon dos n'est pas soutenu. Je rapporte ces détails, pour m'assurer que je ne suis pas sur le dos, les jambes pliées et en l'air, les yeux fermés. Il est bon de s'assurer de sa position corporelle dès le début, avant de passer à des choses plus importantes (I, 29)<sup>22</sup>.

In Beckett's first stage plays written in French, he creates slightly less uncomfortable situations for his characters. This is undeniably also because on stage it would simply have been more difficult to create a character who resembled physically the description of the character created in *L'Innommable* ("je me donnerais volontiers la forme, sinon la consistance, d'un uf, avec deux trous n'importe où pour empêcher l'éclatement. Car comme consistance c'est plutôt du mucilage" (I, 30). This may well have been one of the reasons for which Beckett turned to the theatre. The concrete stage space, and the presence of fully-formed human actors initially forced Beckett into a more recognisably human representation of people and places in his plays than had been the case in the final volume of the trilogy.

<sup>22</sup> This is also the case of *Mouth* in the 1972 English-language play, *Not I*: "feeling so dulled... she did not know... what position she was in... imagine!... what position she was in!... whether standing... or sitting... but the brain-... what?... kneeling?... yes... whether standing... or sitting... or kneeling... but the brain-... what?... lying?... yes... whether standing... or sitting... or kneeling... or lying". Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, op.cit., p. 377.



However, if effectively in Beckett's early theatrical writings, there is a recognisable space – the “country road” of *Waiting for Godot*, or the “bare interior” of *Endgame* – and characters who are individualised enough to have names, however improbable – Didi, Gogo, Hamm, Clov – and who are physically intact, if not in perfect health – Gogo's feet and Didi's prostate hurt and Hamm is confined to his wheelchair – the temptation to take his theatre in the same direction as his French prose does not take long to reassert itself. Notably the bodies of the stage characters, in a move which belies my above comments on the difficulty of representing on stage a character resembling that of *L'Innommable*, become progressively reduced to the body parts already familiar to the readers of the prose. This movement is no more obvious than in *Happy Days*, in the first act of which Winnie is “[embedded] up to above her waist in exact centre of mound”<sup>23</sup>, only to find herself, at the beginning of Act 2 “embedded up to neck, hat on head, eyes closed. Her head, which she can no longer turn, nor bow, nor raise, faces front motionless throughout act”<sup>24</sup>. The visual aspect of the later *Play* is that of “three identical grey urns about one yard high. From each a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn's mouth. [...] Faces so lost to age and aspect as to seem almost part of urns”<sup>25</sup>. Besides *Not I*, Beckett's most limited stage character is the listener of *That Time*, whose “face [is] about 10 feet above stage level midstage off centre. [It is an] old white face, long flaring white hair as if seen from above outspread”<sup>26</sup>.

Despite the clear affinity between the mouth in *Not I* and the image of a mouth in *L'Innommable* (“l'image d'une grande bouche idiote, rouge, lippue, baveuse,” (I, 172)) one significant difference remains. However similar the characters which populate the pages of Beckett's late prose and the stages of Beckett's late theatre, the prose characters continue to be created in French, while the stage characters continue to be created in English. It is as if the theatre required a minimum bodily presence which could survive both physical dismemberment and the separation of the body and the voice, and which, in Beckett's case, could only be maintained, in creation, by that most resistant of links, the link between voice and body inherent to the mother tongue. The failures of the two *Roughs for Theatre* inaugurate Beckett's bilingual career along

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 138.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 307.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 388.



generic lines. While the dominant themes of Beckett's work are founded in his bilingualism, and more specifically in his writing in a foreign language, those themes could continue to be expressed in the foreign language in prose, but English was essential for their creation for the stage.

If the two *Roughs for Theatre* inaugurated this French prose/English theatre dichotomy, the 1977 prose text *Company/Compagnie* put an end to it, in ways which are not insignificant for the hypothesis exposed here. *Company* is the ultimate expression of the Beckettian voice/body separation, and it is also the first completed prose text written in English since 'From an abandoned work' in 1954-55. It explores in English the voice-body separation which had become Beckett's hallmark through his writing in a foreign language, and which he had explored at length in his French prose, and represented on stage in his English theatre:

A voice comes to one in the dark. Imagine. To one on his back in the dark. This he can tell by the pressure on his hind parts and by how the dark changes when he shuts his eyes and again when he opens them again. Only a small part of what is said can be verified. As for example when he hears, You are on your back in the dark. Then he must acknowledge the truth of what is said<sup>27</sup>.

*Company* thus weaves together the two threads which had coexisted over a thirty-year bilingual career by doing in prose and in English what he had previously only done in prose and in French or in English and for the theatre: bring a textual body to life even while denying it a voice and/or give a voice form even while depriving it of a body. Beckett's bilingual career finally comes full circle in 1981-2 with the writing, again in English, of a prose work, this time entitled *Worstward Ho*, the first sentence of which describes exactly what all of his previous work had been doing: "Say a body. Where none"<sup>28</sup>. This achievement of Beckett's English prose is all the more significant for his decision not to translate *Worstward Ho* into French himself. It is thus one of the rare texts, whether their original language of composition be English or French and whether it be prose or theatre, of which only one version can be considered original, and it is this original version which summarises the Beckettian project.

<sup>27</sup> Samuel Beckett. *Company*. Paris: Minuit, 1985, p. 7.

<sup>28</sup> Samuel Beckett. *Worstward Ho*. London: Calder, 1983, p. 7.



AUTOPRZEKŁAD JAKO GATUNEK LITERACKI:  
ANGIELSKI TEATR BECKETTA A PROZA FRANCUSKA.

Streszczenie

Artykuł ukazuje, w jaki sposób wybory gatunkowe Samuela Becketta są blisko związane z jego wyborami językowymi. Można łatwo zauważyć, że na ogół jego teatralne teksty są napisane po angielsku, a jego teksty prozatorskie po francusku. Choć niewątpliwie istnieją zupełnie praktyczne powody tych językowych wyborów, to może być interesujące zastanowienie się nad decyzją Becketta, by pisać utwory sceniczne w swym ojczystym języku. Wybór ten został przez autorkę zbadany w świetle zjawiska, które staje się typowe w późnych dramatach Becketta: na Beckettowskiej scenie, głos i ciało są często rozszczepione.

Jest to szczególnie zauważalne w sztukach, które zostały napisane w wyniku eksperymentów Becketta ze słuchowiskiem radiowym i pantomimą, w których podkreśla się oddzielenie ciała i głosu. Jednakże, to rozdzielenie może mieć swój początek w Beckettowskiej prozie pisanej po francusku i faktycznie może być bezpośrednio powiązane z wykorzystaniem języka obcego: gdy ktoś mówi w języku obcym, jego ciało mówi głosem, który jest nie całkiem jego. Głos stał się kluczowym elementem francuskojęzycznej prozy Becketta, może być wielce prawdopodobne, że tworzenie teatru rozdziału ciała i głosu w obcym języku wymagałoby rozdzielenia idącego zbyt daleko, dlatego Beckett powraca do angielszczyzny w pisaniu dla teatru. Jednakże, zarówno język obcy, jak i sceniczny podział głos/ciało wydają się być spełnieniem tego założenia, gdy, wraz z *Worstward Ho*, dwujęzyczne i dwurodzajowe dzieło Becketta powraca, zatoczywszy koło, do języka angielskiego w prozie.