LE TEXTE ÉTRANGER

« The sex goes on at the end » : translating corpora in Beckett's *Fin de partie* / *Endgame*

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IN his wonderfully selective "auto-biography," *Speak, Memory*, Nabokov remembers the way in which he learned to read English:

> I learned to read English before I could read Russian. My first English friends were four simple souls in my grammar – Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned. There used to be a great deal of fuss about their identities and whereabouts – 'Who is Ben?' 'He is Dan,' 'Sam is in Bed,' and so on. Although it all remained rather stiff and patchy (the compiler was handicapped by having to employ – for the initial lessons, at least – words of no more than three letters), my imagination somehow managed to obtain the necessary data. Wan-faced, big-limbed, silent nitwits, proud in the possession of certain tools ('Ben has an axe'), they now drift with a slow-motioned slouch across the remotest backdrop of memory; and, akin to the mad alphabet of an optician's chart, the grammar-book lettering looms again before me.[1]

Nabokov's likening his learning of English to the "mad alphabet of an optician's chart" may be compared with Beckett's adult call "to act like that mad (?) mathematician who used a different principle of measurement at each step of his calculation" in the famous letter he wrote in German to Axel Kaun in 1937. In this letter, whose sentiments he latter abrogated, Beckett expresses his frustration with the capacity of "official English" to move beyond what he calls the "materiality of the word surface"; he calls for the creation of a "literature of the unword,"[2] and his image of the irrational mathematician who changes his logic or indeed his grammar and language at each step of the calculation has been equated by many a critic with the author who wrong-foots himself by changing languages and self-translating between English and French. The ideas expressed in the letter to Kaun are today clichés in Beckett criticism but they were expressed just before Beckett embarked upon his last English novel, *Watt*, where his native tongue would reveal itself to be already saturated in foreign idioms, and before his incredible burst of writing in French in the post-World War II period. These comments offer someone writing about Beckett legitimate

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1 Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*, London: Penguin, 2000, p.63.

2 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, New York: Grove, 1984, p.173, 173.

terms for discussing his need to write *against* Joyce – Beckett's "unword" the opposite of Joyce's apotheosis of the hyperword. Or one might, as John Barth did in his seminal essay about post-modern fiction, write of Beckett as an exemplar of, "The literature of exhaustion."[3] Similarly, one could, as Gilles Deleuze did, use the sentiments of the German letter to justify Beckett's language as *épuisé*, exhausted of signification – for Deleuze, Beckett crafts a language composed of images rather than words. Beckett's comments are habitually coupled with those he made in French to Niklaus Gessner, responding the question of why he chose to write in French; Beckett offered the pithy reply: "parce qu'en français, c'est plus facile d'écrire sans style."[4] Beckett's celebrated *sans style* is understood here to be the lapidary dialogues of his theatre and the unique interior monologues of his post-World War II prose. The argument is usually complemented by Richard Coe's testimony that when he asked Beckett why he wrote in French, Beckett apparently replied that he was afraid of English because "you couldn't help writing poetry in it."[5]

Rather than characterize Beckett's writing in French as an ecstatic release from English, haunted with a lifetime of learning, reading or poetry, which allowed him to find a purity in French, "sans style", I'd like to highlight the indebtedness of Beckett's French in *Fin de partie* to the way in which Beckett was taught French as a young boy. I will show how the rhetoric of manuals of foreign language learning often intervenes at moments when Beckett's language appears redundant. This is precisely the rhetoric to which Nabokov refers and which involves characters which he so aptly described as, "Wan-faced, big-limbed, silent nitwits, proud in the possession of certain tools".

Aspects of the elementary French that one may detect within *Fin de partie* become far more exaggerated in Beckett's subsequent writing. Beckett's last work of any considerable length, his experimental novel *Comment c'est*, exemplifies the kind of language which Nabokov encountered when learning about Ben, Dan, Sam and Ned; it also realizes the sinister or

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3 John Barth, "The Literature of Exhaustion", *Atlantic Monthly* 222, 1967, pp. 29-34.

4 Niklaus Gessner*, Die Unzulänglichkeit der Sprache: Eine Untersuchung über Formzerfall und Beziehungslosigkeit bei Samuel Beckett*, Zurich: Juris, 1957, 32n [because in French it's easier to write without style].

5 Coe's comment is included in a useful list which Ruby Cohn has made of Beckett's statements about his own self-translation (*Back to Beckett*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001, pp. 58-59).

potential violence within such cartoon characters to which Nabokov alludes: "Ben has an axe." In *Comment c'est*, Beckett's characters Bom, Bem, Pim, Krim, Kram, Skom Skum and Pam Prim live in a hellish underworld of mud. Each being only ever relates to two others, circling in a Dantesque horror where they perform mechanical and ritualistic acts of sadism upon each other. The "I", for instance, will meet Pim, torture Pim, Pim will leave him, and he will be met from behind by Bom, who is going to torture him. The "I" retells his experience in a repetitive and fragmented speech which often breaks down, resulting in him trying to reconstitute order. The following example is typical of this attempt to recover order at his linguistic ground zero:

> comment c'était avant Pim comment c'était avec Pim comment c'est présente rédaction
>
> comment c'était avec Bom comment c'est comment ce sera avec Pim
>
> comment c'est comment ce sera avec Bom comment ce sera avant Pim
>
> comment c'était ma vie toujours avec Pim comment c'est comment ce sera avec Bom

> how it was before Pim how it was with Pim how it is present formulation
>
> how it was with Bom how it is how it will be with Pim
>
> how it is how it will be with Bom how it will be before Pim
>
> how it was my life still with Pim how it is how it will be with Bom.[6]

The novel is in three parts, centring on the encounter – "with Pim" – where Pim is a formless entity who is tortured until he can understand the speech of his master. This pedagogue's goal is apparently to make Pim sing – and for this reason the novel is usually read as comic allegory of the creative process. Yet, the French Beckett employs to perform this allegory of creation raises a different set of questions. His narrator is suffering from a kind of aphasia, constantly forgetting his language. This is not, however, complete disorder or incoherent language, for as his aphasia sets in the narrator's language reverts to ritualistic rotations and variations of simple formulations. The passage just quoted looks like it might have been produced by a non-native speaker repeating exercises to learn French.

[6] Samuel Beckett, *Comment c'est, How It Is and / et L'Image: A critical-genetic edition / Une édition critico-génétique*, ed. Édouard Magessa O'Reilly, New York: Routledge, 2001, pp.168-169.

Indeed in his manuscript notes to *Comment c'est* Beckett also offered a diagram of the novel's ending which looks exactly like an exercise in learning to conjugate French verbs and distribute appropriate prepositions :

I	Fin "c'était comme ça, avant Pim"				
II	" " "	"	", avec	" "	
III	" "c'est	"	", après	" ".[7]	

Without dwelling on *Comment c'est*, one notes that Beckett's deployment of this *style* of language is instructive in terms of showing that when he represents the aphasiac condition and collapse of logical relations, he uses a French which returns his narrator not to the kind of childhood babble or incoherent speech a French speaker utters when learning to speak, but rather to the French of one who encounters it as a foreign language. Foreign language learning involved the tedious and repetitive reading of French conjugation tables off the black-board and writing out innumerable boring exercises for school homework. This kind of learning had to be committed to memory for exams. Furthermore, Beckett's learning of French took place within a strict public school environment at the Portora Royal School, where errors where corrected with corporal punishment, where students worked under the threat of the rod or cane and would be struck lest they made a mistake.

Fin de partie opens with the submissive Clov in such a frame of mind. His dumb show of climbing the ladder, descending the ladder, climbing the ladder, descending the ladder, finds its accompaniment in his mechanical language. Clov pronounces the first words of the play : "Fini, c'est fini, ça va finir", further highlighting the formulaic rhetoricity of his tongue as he drops in an adverb, "ça va peut-être finir" (15). The tedium of this discourse is typical of that which many commentators have called Beckett's exhausted language, one that is said to be emptied of its signifying capacity. Yet, such formulations are full of meaning, for Clov's speech marks his relationship not only to Hamm but to Hamm's language, French.

Similarly, in *En attendant godot* Vladimir and Estragon's witty repartee often turns on this schoolboy play with French grammar. They are prone to bandy pronouns back and forth, playing teacher and student:

> VLADIMIR : Dis, je suis content.

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[7] Beckett, *Comment c'est, How It Is,* p. 200. This sketch is found in the "Été 58" notebook and reproduced in O'Reilly's critical-genetic edition.

> ESTRAGON : Je suis content.
> VLADIMIR : Moi aussi.
> ESTRAGON : Moi aussi.
> VLADIMIR : Nous sommes contents.
> ESTRAGON : Nous sommes contents. (Silence.) Qu'est-ce qu'on fait, maintenant qu'on est content ?

This kind of play with pronouns can be compared with Hamm's mastery of grammar in *Fin de partie*:

> HAMM : Je te remercie, Clov.
> CLOV : (se retournant, vivement). – Ah pardon, c'est moi qui te remercie.
> HAMM : – C'est nous qui nous remercions.[8]

These games betray the humour often employed by expatriated Anglophones in France, when they play with the malleable enchanting grammar of the foreign tongue. Yet, Clov's subordination is grammatical as much as it is political. Hamm delights in his linguistic mastery – "*Ça, c'est du français !*" (70) – and the opportunity to correct Clov's French. More complex than the polarized master-slave relationship between Pozzo and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, Hamm and Clov are bound by a perverse pedagogical rapport that also surpasses Vladimir and Estragon's role playing.

Hamm took Clov into his company many years ago, when somehow Clov became an orphan or was separated from his parents. Clov has had to learn Hamm's language, and if he spoke another language before meeting Hamm, he has had to translate himself into Hamm's tongue. Consider the hilarious scene when Clov discovers a flea in his trousers.

> *CLOV* : *La vache !*
> *HAMM* : *Tu l'as eue ?*
> *CLOV* : *On dirait. (Il lâche le carton et arrange ses vêtements.) À moins qu'elle ne se tienne coïte.*
> *HAMM* : *Coïte ! Coite, tu veux dire. À moins qu'elle ne se tienne coite.*
> *CLOV* : *Ah ! On dit coite ? On ne dit pas coïte ?*
> *HAMM* : *Mais voyons ! Si elle se tenait coïte nous serions baisés.* (48-49)
>
> CLOV : The bastard!

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[8] Beckett, *Fin de partie*, pp. 48-49 ; Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber, 1986, p. 108. Following quotations from these texts will be included in the body of the text.

> HAMM : Did you get him?
> CLOV: Looks like it. [He drops the tin and adjusts his trousers.]
> Unless he's laying doggo.
> HAMM : Laying! Lying you mean. Unless he's lying doggo.
> CLOV : Ah? One says lying? One doesn't say laying?
> HAMM : Use your head, can't you. If he was laying we'd be bitched.
> (*CDW* 108)

Clov's linguistic dependency is masked by the gag on "*coite*"/ "*coïte*" – as much as Beckett's wonderful, bawdy translation with "lying"/"laying doggo" – a fact reinforced when it leads into his reference to the fact that Hamm has been, and is, his language teacher:

> *HAMM* : *Hier ! Qu'est-ce que ça veut dire ? Hier !*
> *CLOV (avec violence)* : *Ça veut dire il y a un foutu bout de misère.*
> *J'emploie les mots que tu m'as appris. S'ils ne veulent plus rien dire apprends-m'en d'autres. Ou laisse-moi me taire*. (60)

Clov's phrase has attracted critical attention for its echo of Caliban's curse of Prospero and Miranda in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*:

> You taught me language ; and my profit on't
> Is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
> For learning me your language (I.2.365-67).

Taliban's curse has provoked debate, especially in postcolonial studies, for the way it encapsulates the paradox of the colonized who must speak the language of the colonizer. Beckett's allusion highlights the fact that he denies Clov the performative curse that Shakespeare offers Caliban, and while much of *Endgame*'s humour springs from the irony of Clov's responses to his master's orders, Clov cannot defeat his master with his deficient use of his master's tongue. In the play, his frustration explodes into a physical attack, beating Hamm over the head with the mechanical toy dog he had been building for him – inverting the roles of victim and aggressor ordained by the homographic and translinguistic puns in their names, Clov/*Clou* (nail) and Hamm(er), yet nonetheless reproducing the modes of imperial violence practised by Hamm, who has, lest it be forgotten, condemned his parents to live in dustbins. This object of Clov's devising affords him the chance of turning Hamm's rhetoric against him. The dog had vexed Hamm because it has only three legs – a complaint that manifests a linguistic anxiety debated since Plato's *Cratylus*, of the necessity for words to correspond with objects. The issue is less Hamm's risk of falling into nominalism with his objection to the nomination of Clov's

"dog" but his inability to categorise it; he accuses Clov of having "forgotten the sex", to which Clov retorts, "But he isn't finished. The sex goes on at the end". Clov's logic is hardly transparent, unless one sees Clov arming himself with the master's rule, as expressed by the "ventriloquist's dummy" in Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* 8: "it's the end gives the meaning to words"[9]. Hamm's hold on his grammar is shaken because he cannot know if he should correctly call this dog *un chien* or *une chienne*, male or female. Finally, through the rhetoric of the language primer Beckett finds a comic resolution to the drama of Clov's violent interruption of the cosmic order: Hamm immediately changes the subject, speaking of Mère Pegg, drawing himself out of the slippery world of Clov's objects, returning to his cerebral dominion where he is the master raconteur; Clov then reverts to his habitual mimicry and reformulation of his master's speech:

> *HAMM : Elle [Mère Pegg] était jolie, autrefois, comme un cœur. Et pas farouche*
> *pour un liard.*
> *CLOV : Nous aussi on était jolis – autrefois. Il est rare qu'on ne soit pas joli – autrefois.* (61)

And thus, Clov returns to the epistemology of the pensum: shifting Hamm's use of the third person feminine "*Elle*" with the first person plural "*Nous*", which, the student demonstrates, is equally "*on*", just as his repetition of "*autrefois*" draws attention to his repositioning of the adverb and the introduction of a variable "*aussi*"; finally, reformulating his master's sentence in the subjunctive (*Il est rare que...*).

Indeed, Clov embodies the process of linguistic as much as cultural translation: one of his principal dramatic functions is to translate Hamm about the stage, pushing Hamm's wheelchair to his master's precise and pedantic commands (the meaning of the verb "translate" as "displace" has lost currency in the "*traduire*" of modern French, yet this meaning of the Latin term *transferre* is the root of the verb for textual translation in both English and French). This function is perhaps even more evident when Clov commits errors of translation; he, for instance, once interprets *à la lettre* Hamm's order to "*laisse tomber*" (forget about it), literally dropping the objects in his hands, incarnating a figure of (mis)translation. And while Clov is well versed in his master's universe, knowing the difference between such obscure items as "*brodequins*" (buskins) and "*babouches*" (oriental

[9] Samuel Beckett, *The Complete Short Prose*, 1929-1989, ed. S. E. Gontarski, New York: Grove, 1995, p.131.

slippers), his occasional ignorance of common idiomatic expressions marks him as not only an apprentice translator but as one whose foreign language acquisition is hamstrung through limited contact with native speakers.
This disjunction fuels many of the play's comic moments, yet it also reveals the perversity of Hamm's teaching. Consider Hamm's little lesson:

> HAMM : *[...] C'est moins gai que tantôt. (Un temps.) Mais c'est toujours comme ça en fin de journée, n'est-ce pas, CLOV ?*
> CLOV : *Toujours.*
> HAMM : *C'est une fin de journée comme les autres, n'est-ce pas CLOV ?*
> CLOV: *On dirait.* (26)

Hamm would appear in fact to enjoy inculcating in Clov this calque from English, "at the end of the day" – in French one would have first used a phrase like "*au bout du compte*". Just as the play exploits many paradoxes of "ending", here the day's end enlists an interlinguistic pun underlining the absence of linguistic ends or certainties in this world. Not only does Beckett's French original present itself as the product of translation, but Beckett suggests that such deviant composition emerges out of a corrupted pedagogy.

In *Fin de partie* the scene closes with the elemental order re-established, and order which less resembles that bond between father and son—at an affective level, the mutual respect and frustration between Hamm and Clov more closely resembles a link forged in the smithy of relations between master and student, albeit verging on sadism and masochism. Curiously, virtually all of Beckett's recorded comments about self-translation express his disgust with the activity and the idea that it took him away from his "real work". Nevertheless, if Beckett found the activity so painful, one might ask of him, as Hamm asked of Clov: Why don't you leave me? If Clov's inability to leave Hamm is masochistic, one might say that so is Beckett's need to translate. In "Le froid et le cruel" Gilles Deleuze developed the theories of Freud and Theodor Reik on masochism by introducing the notion of the masochistic contract: "*Le masochiste n'est qu'en apparence tenu par des fers et des liens; il n'est tenu que par sa parole*" (76; "The masochist appears to be held by real chains, but in fact he is bound by his word alone" 72). Beckett also referred to the pain of his contractual commitments when on 3 July 1957 he lamented to MacGreevy about his first attempts to translate *Fin de partie* : "I find it [*Fin de partie*] dreadful in English, all the sharpness gone, and the rhythms. If I were not bound by contract to the Royal Court Theatre I wouldn't allow it in English at all". While he was certainly rushed by the tightness of the terms agreed

with the Royal Court Theatre, Beckett's decision to create *Endgame* was not taken by the theatre, rather, the contract of self-translation was signed by Beckett with himself. Yet it would be premature to read *Fin de partie* as a metatext about Beckett's activity as a self-translator, for this was not Beckett's entrenched practice when he composed the drama. On the other hand, he seems to be very aware of translating bodies and the effects which translation, both physical and linguistic, has upon subjects. In this sense the tropes of translation within *Fin de partie* negotiate the terrain of mature bilingualism, where the second language is mastered long after the first. Hamm and Clov refract Beckett's experience of French as mediated by strictures of control and servitude, mastery and apprenticeship.

Both Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man have written about the fact that the translation of a text shows that an original text calls out to be translated. When a text is signified differently in translation it is retrospectively seen to signify that difference. That is, in already containing the signification of its translation, the original text is already translated. Yet, in *Fin de partie* Beckett's original text wants to signify that it is already born out of the processes, rituals and rhetoric of translation. The critical reception of *Fin de partie* is almost unanimous in agreeing that the subject of the play is metatheatrical – that is, the play enters into a conscious discourse with the nature and conventions of its stage. It is no surprise then that Beckett's language displays a similar degree of self-awareness as born from the experience of foreign language learning, of translating the self. The move out of his native English and into French in order to write *Fin de partie* appears therefore to have had a strong hand in his division of labour upon the stage, his choice of characters and the language they use.

Nabokov is one of the few to respond to this dimension of Beckett's language. Nabokov believed that "Beckett's French is a schoolmaster's French, a preserved French", preferring in Beckett's English "the moisture of verbal association and of the spreading live roots"[10]. He was dissatisfied with Beckett's effort to weaken his language by depriving it of that very "moisture" which seeps in *a priori* from one's native tongue.

He felt that when Beckett changed the rules of the game to compose first in French and self-translate into English the result only intensified the presence of the "official" language from which Beckett expressed his desire

[10] Alfred Appel Jr., "Conversations with Nabokov," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 4.3 (1971), p 219.

to flee during that letter to Axel Kaun. Yet despite the uncanny similarity between Nabokov's description of his primers and the travails of Beckett's Pim, Bem, Bom, etc., the great (Russian) cosmopolitan did not sense that Beckett's "schoolmaster's French" might, in part at least, cast a knowing but ironic regard upon their common experience of the very rhetoric of foreign language instruction.

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