Beckett on Stage: Catalan Translations

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Thank you very much for inviting me to take part in this conference. Before such an audience of experts in Irish Literatures, my contribution to the study of Beckett may seem scarcely relevant. I can only give a personal view of his dramatic works, as a reader and translator of eight plays for the publication of his *Teatre complet* (Beckett 1995 and 1996), within the framework of the interest Beckett has roused in Catalonia for many years. I intend to illustrate a few points on language and translation with examples taken from his plays, focusing my attention on Beckett's Irish cultural background (Irish roots are present in his works in spite of the distancing mode of his art), projected into several languages—Catalan in our case—through translation.

1. Beckett in Catalonia

Apart from some trips and readings, before translating Beckett I had paid some attention to a part of the Irish world by translating Joyce's *The Cat and the Devil*, *Ulysses*, *Dubliners* and *Giacomo Joyce*.[1] One thing that brought me to translate Joyce was curiosity about the loss of Gaelic in Ireland, and Joyce's use of English, which, though it was his everyday language, was kept at a distance; an instrument for building a style of his own. As a Catalan, it was a challenge for me to try and express the complexities of his language without abandoning my own.

We must consider Beckett's literary merits in the first place, but his bilingualism is also interesting insofar as it raises the question of identity and diversity, not, of course, necessarily incompatible. In any case, the great weight of Beckett and Joyce, not surpassed in western literature of this century, justifies the attention to any one of these writers, fundamentally Irish in spite of their European exile.

The first time I came into contact with Beckett was before going to university. It must have been in 1959 when I heard *Esperando a Godot*, in Spanish, on the radio, and something attracted me despite the strangeness of the plot, and my godmother's grumbling at my taste for queer 'modern' things like those. I must say she let me listen in to the play, though. Probably it was Trino Martínez Trives's translation, which had been published in *Primer acto* 1, in April, 1957. In 1961 there appeared another translation by Pedro Barceló in *Teatro francés de vanguardia* and, as Barceló points out in the preface (11), it is curious that a volume on French theatre brought together an Irishman (Beckett), a Lebanese (Schéhadé), a Russian (Adamov) and a Rumanian (Ionesco), all of them representing a revolution in the modern theatre (after the previous bouts of Ibsen and Pirandello). The

volume offers food for thought about language-shift and the use of a prestigious language for literary purposes at a given time.

From those years to the time of the performance of *Beckett shorts* by the Royal Shakespeare Company, which I saw in Barcelona in December, 1997, I have revisited Beckett from time to time. The opportunity of translating some of his plays increased my interest in him.

I had translated John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* and Harold Pinter's *The Homecoming* for the theatre, and liked the idea of undertaking Beckett's plays. My early practice of translating for the stage, the place where a play must work, led me to avoid footnotes, and not only in plays but in novels as well, where an equivalent effect was looked for, without statements beyond the text, which interrupt the course of action. The question of footnotes is to be taken into account where different types of translation are concerned.

Beckett was soon known in Catalonia, and when original books in Catalan and Catalan translations were no longer forbidden, Beckett was known among us in our language. Joan Oliver's *Tot esperant Godot* was first performed at the Teatre Romea, Barcelona, on 7 April 1966, directed by Josep M. Minoves, and has been performed on several occasions, the last of which recently, produced by the Teatre Lliure, directed by Lluís Pasqual. Anna Lizaran was superb in her role of Vladimir, the only instance I know of a woman playing this character.[2]

Oh, els bons dies (*Happy Days*) was translated from Beckett's French version by Vicenç Altaió and Patrick Gifreu, and first performed on 28 February 1984 at the Teatre Regina in Barcelona, directed by José Sanchis Sinisterra, with Rosa Novell as Winnie, and it was published the same year by Edicions del Mall.

At the Institut del Teatre in Barcelona there are typed translations: by Jordi Sarsanedas, undated, *Fragment de Teatre, II*; and four plays, *Catàstrofe*, *Impromptu d'Ohio*, *Non-non* (*Rockaby*) i *El Què, l'On* (*What Where*), dated in 1986, translated by Ferran Dominguez i Garcia.

In the late eighties the Sala Beckett was created in Barcelona, promoted by the director and playwright José Sanchis Sinisterra, assisted by other people connected with theatre, to help produce contemporary and experimental plays, organize workshops, and investigate and make known modern dramatic trends. They had a review, too, *Pausa*, and the theatrical enterprise was dedicated to the emblematic name of Beckett, who was much obliged, as shown by the following letter:

Paris, 23-3-87

Dear Señor Sinisterra,

Thank you very much for your letter of the 19th and for remembering that remote Good Friday (?).

I'd love to be among you next month, but helas out of the question. Travels are ended for me.

Good luck to your *Oh les B.J.*

I accept with pleasure that your sala bears my name. And that your *Gestos para nada* is dedicated to me. Repeatedly honoured.

Cordially to you all.

Samuel Beckett[3]

The Sala Beckett organized a "Memorial Beckett" from 19 September to 28 October 1990. It consisted of an exhibition, a series of lectures, round tables, film and video projections, radio plays, a workshop for actors of Beckett's plays directed by Pierre Chabert, dramatic readings (some of them organized by Joan Cavallé, Catalan translator of most of Beckett's French plays), and performances in several languages. *Tot esperant Godot* directed by Frederic Roda and *Passos* (*Footfalls*), directed by Sergi Belbel, were in Catalan.

From the beginning and under the auspices of the Institut del Teatre, there was an interest in the idea of publishing Beckett's complete dramatic works. Sanchis and Ramon Simó, both theatre directors and teachers at the Institut, contacted a few translators through Francesc Castells, to carry out the project: Sergi Belbel, Joan Cavallé, Victor Batallé and myself. The plan was to translate Beckett's plays according to the language of his first versions, French or English. A number of plays were assigned to each translator, who would be responsible for the plays assigned to him, but we also read and commented on each other's results. Cavallé and Belbel were to translate the French plays, although the playwright Sergi Belbel could only translate one because of his many commitments, while Batallé and I took charge of the English plays. As a homage to Beckett's first translator into Catalan, Joan Oliver, who died in 1986, we preserved his version of *Tot esperant Godot*.

We translated from the language in which the plays were originally written, but took into account Beckett's own versions from English to French and viceversa, as well as other translations, mainly into Italian and Spanish. We were to meet regularly to unify criteria and revise our results. Although the meetings were not as frequent as we had intended, we read all of our translations and exchanged views. Apart from the help of a colleague, Francesca Corazza, who lent me some books on Beckett, Víctor Batallé and Joan Cavallé furnished me with very useful materials, which I have been able to use even for the present lecture.

The translation had to be faithful to the text and to the stage requirements, as the stage was the ultimate aim the Institut del Teatre had in mind. The two volumes of Beckett's *Teatre complet* appeared in 1995 and 1996 respectively. At the beginning of 1990, *Fi de partida* (*Endgame*), translated by Joan Cavallé, had already been performed by "La Gàbia", a

company based in Vic, directed by Jordi Mesalles. (The same company had performed another version of the play, by Lluís Solà, in 1980.) The translators of the English works broadened our experience by directing a play each: Víctor Batallé directed *Aquella vegada* (*That Time*) at the Sala Beckett, in March 1991, and I did the same with *Dies feliços* (*Happy Days*), first performed in the Teatre Bartrina in Reus, in June 1997 by the group "La Vitxeta", with a magnificent Dolors Juanpere in the leading role. Colum Banus, an Irish actor who has spent periods in Catalonia from time to time and acted at the Dublin Theatre Festival (in *Krapp's Last Tape* among other plays), offered to present my Catalan translation, which he did last April in the Teatre Bartrina. It has been a rich and wonderful experience altogether.

2. Beckett's language and landscape

I will not talk much of the possible Anglo-Irish features of Beckett's language. From the outside, this is difficult to perceive—and translate. Some colloquial expressions, rather than local, can do the job in translation, but a deep knowledge of Irishisms is required even to recognize them as such. I simply want to hint at the presence of features coming from Beckett's Irish background, especially in his plays written in English. I suspect that the fact that Beckett chose French for a significant part of his work was due to his desire to reflect a detached view of human nature, and that was why he wanted to keep apart from too concrete a personal experience, a coherent attitude when "every effort is made ... to avoid the expression of autobiographical data" (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 243).[4] He preferred to adopt a foreign language, which he could dissect and recreate at will. French, because of its structure and because it was not his mother tongue, favoured this direction.

Beckett's bilingualism has been alluded to by many (among others, Bishop 1994, 84–85; Ellman 190, 136; Knowlson 1990, 654–59; Ostrovsky 1976, 190–200; and Seide 1994, 80), but both Bishop and Knowlson think it has not been studied according to its importance. Ramon Simó, in the preface to the Catalan edition, says, "To renounce one's own language is an act of voluntary dis-avowal, of abandonment, perhaps to have a free hand when one wants to start a demolition. Or to come back later with cleaner hands".[5] As Mr.Rooney says in *All That Fall*: "sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language" (Beckett 1986, 194). Rather than dead, French had still to be given life for Beckett's literay purposes. To build up his new, naked, essential language, he worked on a new "jeu de sonorités" (Janvier 1976, 105), kept apart from his first language and his first landscape, which he would meet again, after his French experience of distilling language, when coming back to English.

Popular roots may be seen in the tendency of his characters to tell stories. The use of narrative is a dramatic device in contemporary drama, as the plays of Beckett and Pinter show (Morrison 1983). And, on the other

hand, Irish names and places are scattered here and there in Beckett's works. "Croker's Acres" in *Not I*, "Boghill" and the "twenty-six counties" in *All That Fall*, expressions like "boreen" in *Cascando*, "jizz" in *Happy Days*, the way of speaking in *Embers* and in *All That Fall* "is often Anglo-Irish in idiom" (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 138) and it reflects, maybe, "our own poor dear Gaelic",[6] a phrase of Joycean echoes. Beckett liked the Irish accent of Patrick Magee, Mary O'Farrell and Marie Kean, who played leading roles in his plays. On adapting *La Manivelle*, "Beckett ... skillfully transposed into pure Dublin the colloquial French of his friend Robert Pianget" (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 145). When he translated his French works into English, he tended to give them "an Irish inflection" (Ellmann 1990, 136), like the "Get up till I embrace you" in *Waiting for Godot*, or reflected his English cultural background, as we see in the fact that he "is fond of rendering his demotic French by quotations from the Bible or Shakespeare" (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 53–54).[7]

Perhaps even some situations spring from English idioms. I am not sure, but the tendency to chew turnips, or carrots or bananas, by some of his characters (in *Waiting for Godot*, *Acte sans paroles*, *Krapp's Last Tape*) might be an illustration of "to give anybody turnips" or "to give cold turnips", that we find in colloquial expressions.[8] Something worth considering perhaps.

Wellwarth thought *Murphy* was "the first, the most understandable and the best of [Beckett's] novels" (1966, 73). The judgement is open to question, but the use of English could help create such an impression. About *Molloy*, the first novel written in French, Ramon Lladó, one of Beckett's translators, writes: "The country of Molloy is an Ireland more than stylized, very approximate", seen as "rural" both by Molloy and Moran. There Beckett keeps alive "assisted idiomatic expressions, that is, overloaded with poetic values, characteristic of Beckett's style. The peculiar prosody of the phrase, full of expressive shades difficult to grasp, must be said aloud rather than read. Here there has been seen a trace, not always involuntary, of his mother tongue" (Beckett 1990, 9–10).[9]

Stylization, without losing the strength of *orality*, so important on stage, are two permanent qualities of Beckett's works. The words and music of his youth, full of "rural" overtones: the sound of rain, of the sea, of soil falling on a tomb, of footfalls, of a rocking chair, but also of old tunes, poems and prayers, are 'distant bells' concentrated into a work, where not all roots are easily hidden. Beckett built a wall around his house[10] to keep away from the anecdotes of everyday life and give force to the inner nature of his art and thought, but there are some colourful local strokes, with which we can identify, through experiences shared by many people and languages, and so, paradoxically, they become recognisable. The translator must try and recover the original situation in another language, and concentrate on the expression of basic fragments, as Beckett does. I would say that the deeper the author

plunges into his experience, which is extremely distilled through his art, the deeper he plunges into the human nature of language, so that it may be perceived and enjoyed by a foreign audience. We shall limit ourselves to illustrating this with a few examples of two plays I translated, where some elements of Beckett's biographic and cultural background can be seen.

3. *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Happy Days*.

Krapp—a very similar name had appeared already in *Eleutheria*—doubles as two: the old Krapp we see on the stage, a lonely man of 69, and the Krapp of thirty years before, whose voice he recorded in a sort of oral diary. He reads the précis of the tape he will listen to: "Mother at rest at last ... The black ball ... Slight improvement in bowel condition ... Memorable equinox... Farewell to love" (Beckett 1986, 217).

The story becomes more precise as we listen to the tape together with Krapp. The living quality of the memories reflects some details of Beckett's life. May Beckett's death in a hospital on Dublin Grand Canal (O'Brien 1990, 651) has its echo in the play (Beckett 1986, 219). Many critics have seen, often told by Beckett himself (Bair 1976, 63–72; Ellmann 1990, 140; Juliet 1986, 16),[11] that "the vision" (Beckett 1986, 220) that decides the literary career of Krapp, corresponds with a decision of Beckett's when he was thirty-nine, as the Krapp on the tape is. The vivid details of the love affair (Beckett 1986, 221), the longing to "Be again in the dingle on a Christmas Eve, gathering holly, the red-berried. *Pause.* Be again on Croghan on a Sunday morning in the haze, with the bitch,[12] stop and listen to the bells," and minor details like the sum of "one pound six and something, eight I have little doubt", which refers to "the standard lowest solicitor's fee before the war", as Beckett told Ruby Cohn (quoted in Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 130), are, to be sure, traces of Beckett's recalled experience.

The popular fragments from the Bible ("the grain from the husks"; Beckett 1986, 217), from songs of his "Protestant upbringing", like the hymn by Sabine Baring-Gould:

> Now the day is over,
> Night is drawing nigh-igh,
> Shadows of the evening
> Steal across the sky. (Beckett 1986, 222)[13]

And the echoes of Herrick (Beckett 1986, 219), and of the novel *Effi Briest* (Beckett 1986, 222) are "gruesome P.M's" (Beckett 1986, 218), elements that make up a grim story of failure, with some moments that give to the character a human quality.

The registers are varied. The younger Krapp tends to be rhetorical: "Memorable equinox", "a-dying" (Beckett 1986, 219), which contrast with more vulgar expressions in the older Krapp—"this old muckball", "better

than a kick in the crouch" (Beckett 1986, 222). The suggestive sound of the word "spool", or the rhythm of the love scene reach moments of beauty, expressive of Beckett's art: "We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently, up and down, and from side to side" (Beckett 1986, 221).

In the translation, *Krapp: última gravació* (Beckett 1995, 241–53), an equivalent effect was intended with the use of the word "bobina"—the name Beckett uses in his French translation too—and the music of his prose: "Jèiem sense moure'ns. Però sota nosaltres es movia tot, i ens movia, suaument, amunt i avall i d'un costat a l'altre" (Beckett 1995, 253). And the hymn quoted above:

> El dia s'acaba,
> s'acosta la ni-it,
> les ombres s'allarguen
> pel cel adormit. (Beckett 1995, 252)

To keep the rhythm and tempo of the play was my first concern, without forgetting the literal rendering that Catalan allows in the expression and in the details, as was the case in "vidua or weaver-bird" (Beckett 1986, 219), "viuda o teixidor" in Catalan (Beckett 1995, 248), the *Ploceus cucullatus* of the ornithologists. I tried to keep the appropriate registers: "wind-gauge" was rendered by "marcavent" rather than by "anemòmetre", and I adapted idioms to the Catalan equivalents: "Sound as a bell"(Beckett 1986, 217)/ "una salut de ferro" (Beckett 1995, 245; "iron health"); "the biting wind" (Beckett 1986, 219) / "un vent que tallava" (Beckett 1995, 248; "a cutting wind"). To adapt meant to keep the intensity of "good God" (Beckett 1986, 216), in Catalan "Redéu" (Beckett 1995, 244), and "olivina" (Beckett 1995, 248) is a variety of "chrysolite" (a word inspired in *Othello* V, ii, 14), which suggests the "pale green" of olives as well. Forty-eight is better understood among us than the corresponding "size ten" of Krapp's shoes.

A few notes on another play, *Happy Days* (*Dies feliços*; Beckett 1996, 37–76), will complete the picture I have tried to show. The translator has to take care of Winnie's broken sentences, quotations and literary allusions, very often poorly remembered, but of important rhythmic and poetic effects.[14] The title, *Happy Days*, seems inspired by Vaughan, as the French title was inspired by Verlaine. The well-known waltz from Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* has to be translated so that it can be sung in Catalan. A Catalan version exists for the morning prayers Winnie says when she wakes up, "For Jesus Christ sake Amen", "World without end Amen" (Beckett 1986, 138), as well as the fragment from the Gospel "when two are gathered together" (Beckett 1986, 149, Matthew 16:20). For the literary quotations in the play I had recourse to the best known Catalan translations

in verse, Morera i Galícia's *Hamlet*, Sagarra's *Romeo and Juliet*, *Cymbeline* and *Twelfth Night*. Translations by Manent and Boix i Selva served me well for the allusions to Keats and Milton respectively. And I tried to translate, in a way that suggested verse through rhythm and rhyme, the quotations from writers for whom I could not find a Catalan translation: Robert Browning, Gray, Herrick, Yeats, Charles Wolfe.

Some plays on words are intended: "A Mr. Johnson, or Johnston, or ...John*stone*" (Beckett 1986, 142) has its Catalan counterpart, however looser, in the series of possessives "John*son*, John*ston*, John*smon*". "Them or it?" (Beckett 1986, 146) is a play on the French plural *les cheveux* for 'hair'; a similar confusion occurs in Catalan between the plural 'cabells' and the influence of Spanish collective singular 'cabello', which allowed the same solution. "Formication" (Beckett 1986, 150) is likely to be associated with 'fornication', and since "Mr Shower and Cooker" recall the German words *shauen* and *kucken*, both meaning 'to look' (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 163), I adapted "Clisser" and "Sotger", suggesting English surnames, from Catalan 'clissar' and 'sotjar'. And again, I am told, Beckett uses some Anglo-Irish expressions, like "what ails you?" and "put a bit of jizz into it", which can always be translated by popular expressions or slang words, rather than by local dialect forms.

Beckett draws some details from his own experience: Winnie may have been modelled on the author's aunt Cissie, a cripple for a number of years; the story of Mildred and the mouse may be drawing on childhood memories (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 151 and 166). The story itself has the rhythm of a children's story, with its overtones of danger:

> Suddenly a mouse ran up her little tight and Mildred, dropping Dolly in her fright, began to scream—(*Winnie gives a sudden piercing scream*)—and screamed and screamed—(*Winnie screams twice*)—screamed and screamed and screamed and screamed till all came running, in their night attire, pappa, mamma, Bibby and ... old Annie, to see what was the matter ... (*pause*) ... what on earth could possibly be the matter. (*Pause.*) Too late. (*Pause.*) Too late. (Beckett 1986, 165)

This becomes, in Catalan:

> De sobte una rateta li va pujar per la cuixeta i Mildred, deixant anar la Ninona de l'espant, va començar a xisclar—(*Winnie fa un xiscle brusc i penetrant*)—i va xisclar i xisclar—(*Winnie xiscla dues vegades*)—va xisclar i xisclar i xisclar i xisclar fins que tots van venir corrents, en camisa de dormir, el papa, la mama, la Tata i ... la vella Annie, a veure què passava ... (*pausa*) ... què dimoni podia passar. (*Pausa.*) Massa tard. (*Pausa.*) Massa tard. (Beckett 1996, 72)

But, as it is late to go on much longer, I will, with your permission, leave it here. Sleep well. Don't have nightmares. And many thanks for your kind attention.

NOTES

[1] Some aspects of Sterne—whose works *Tristram Shandy* and *A Sentimental Journey* I have also translated—have possibly had an influence on me, insofar as Sterne's Irish childhood may account for his peculiar sense of humour.

[2] Vladimir being performed by an actress is consistent with the opinion that the character "has a more 'feminine' personality" (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 44).

[3] The letter, written in French, reads:

> Paris, 23-3-87
>
> Cher Señor Sinisterra
>
> Merci de votre carte du 19 et de vous être souvenu de ce lointain Vendredi Saint (?).
>
> J'aimerais bien être des vôtres le mois prochain, mais hélas pas question. Finis pour moi les voyages.
>
> Meilleurs voeux pour votre *Oh les B.J.*
>
> J'accepte avec plaisir que votre sala porte mon nom. Et que vos *Gestos para Nada* me soient dédicacés. Souvenment[sic] honoré.
>
> Affectueusement à vous tous.
>
> Samuel Beckett

The Good Friday refers to the date of Beckett's birth. The question mark is his own. As indicated above, Sanchis Sinisterra had directed *Oh, els bons dies*, to which Beckett alludes.

[4] The authors refer to *A Piece of Monologue*, quoting Nicholas Zurbrugg. But on the previous page, they point out: "The speaker is preoccupied with autobiographical reminiscences, almost certainly Beckett's own" (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 242).

[5] "Renunciar a la pròpia llengua és un acte de voluntari des-coneixement, d'abandonament, potser per tenir les mans més lliures a l'hora d'iniciar un possible enderroc. O per tornar més endavant amb les mans més netes" (Beckett 1995, 23).

[6] Fletcher and Fletcher (1985, 85) point to this phrase from *All That Fall*.

[7] Literary and biblical fragments are recurrent in Beckett's works.

[8] Cf *turnip*, OED.

[8] Cf *turnip*, OED.
[9] "Aquest país de Molloy és una Irlanda més que estilitzada, molt aproximativa"; "expressions idiomàtiques assistides, o sigui, sobrecarregades amb valors poètics, característiques de l'estil de Beckett, i la particular prosòdia de la frase, plena de matisos expressius dificils de capir, i que més que llegir s'hauria de recitar, i en la qual alguns han vist una petjada no sempre involuntària de la seva llengua materna".
[10] "Continuerà ad habitare a Parigi con la moglie, oppure in campagna dove ha una casa intorno alla quale ha fatto construire un muro che gli impedisce di vedere i luoghi circostanti, in verità molto belli" (Rebora in Beckett 1969, 8).
[11] Normally critics set the action on the long jetty at Dun Laoghaire, the "Kingstown Pier" in Joyce's *Ulysses*, where in 1991 I imagined the scene as I was looking at the word ANEMOS engraved on the base of the anemometer Beckett must have seen and Krapp recalls. Unluckily, O'Brien (1990, 642) says that Beckett alluded to Greystones: "Samuel Beckett me dit une fois que la 'revelation' avait en réalité eu lieu sur la jetée moins grandiose à Greystones, où sa mère avait une maison de vacances dans les années trente et quarante". But the "great granite rocks", "the lighthouse and the wind-gauge spinning like a propeller", sum up the literary landscape of the passage in *Krapp's Last Tape*.
[12] "One of Beckett's early English poems, 'Serena II', commemorates a walk in the hills near Dublin with a Kerry Blue Terrier bitch" (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 131).
[13] "Beckett now feels that the allusion is too self-conscious and omits it from productions he is associated with" (Fletcher and Fletcher 1985, 127) . This attitude is consistent with his progressive search for a naked language.
[14] Fletcher and Fletcher (1985) allows me to identify the quotations. For a complete list, see Gontarski (1977, 59–77).

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