BECKETT'S LITERARY CATHEDRALS: Speculation on Beckett’s Achievement as a Writer of Prose Fiction

In this paper I attempt to come to grips with Beckett’s achievement as a writer of prose fiction, to try to answer the question: what exactly is the nature of that achievement? The relevance of such a question for Beckettian studies must surely be obvious. The tenor of my remarks will be speculative. Their speculative character explains my recourse to metaphor and the process underlying any recourse to metaphor: analogical thinking. What I have to say is, of necessity, speculative since once one sets out to examine the status of Beckett’s life work, one enters into wholly unfathomed waters. An initial yet systematic exploration of those waters is to be found in my book Beckett and Babel, and the following remarks represent a further development of the reflexion pursued in its pages as well as of that contained in a published paper entitled “Pour une édition critique de l’oeuvre de Beckett” given at a Colloquium on “Manuscripts and Literary History” in Bellagio, Italy, in 1988.

A further reason for the speculative nature of the following remarks today lies in the fact that the established scholarly disciplines are of very little help in elucidating the status of the outcome of Beckett’s literary enterprise. In Beckett and Babel, I called upon the resources of a range of different disciplines: translation theory, hermeneutics, linguistics, philosophy, text grammar, literary criticism and manuscript studies, to bring them to bear upon the problem at hand. All to little avail, for the conclusion to my study remained, in the final analysis, inconclusive, that is, open-ended as far as the exact status of Beckett’s prose writings were concerned. The discipline with which the present discussion will have the most affinities will be, rather surprisingly, that of so-called “genetic criticism” (inappropriately named, as it happens, since the study of manuscripts it involves can have nothing to do with literary criticism as such). This is then a new thesis I am proposing today.

I must first of all resume, very rapidly, the results of my previous research. The crucial conclusion to emerge from that research was that Beckett’s second versions are not translations in any accepted sense of that term. That is because the first versions do not constitute the originals forming the source-texts on which the second versions are based. Beckett in fact draws on all the various manuscript drafts of the first versions in his writing of the second versions. Now, no translator of a literary work ever takes as his
source-text anything other than the definitive text of the original: not only would he not feel authorized (in the etymological sense of that word) to draw on manuscript material but he would not normally have access to such material either. Beckett’s second versions are the outcome of a reworking of the sum total of manuscript material leading up to the definitive, published first version in addition to the latter. Two other important conclusions emerged from Beckett and Babel. First, the fact that the texts of the two versions did not evoke the same fictional universe: the world the reader of the English version conjured up in his imagination was not, by any means, identical with that imagined by the reader of the French version. Second, the difficulty involved in attempting to merge two texts couched in different languages so as to constitute a single text or, in Henri Meschonnic’s term, a “text-system,” due, for example, to the incompatibility of signifiers belonging to different linguistic systems or langues.

I propose to proceed by demonstrating how what I shall refer to as Beckett’s literary artifacts or constructs problematize the most basic concepts on which literary studies are grounded and render them inoperative.

Let us begin by considering the pair of concepts: the text and the work. First of all, a definition: the text is the object of our reading whilst the work is its result. To take the work first. The literary work is the outcome of the interaction between the reader and the text, as German reception theory has demonstrated at length. That being so and given the fact that the fictional worlds experienced by the readers of the French and English versions are never the same, then contrary to my findings in Beckett and Babel, each version would appear to constitute a work in its own right. Now such a claim clearly flies in the face of common sense and so we have to conclude that the concept of the literary work is not operative or, if you prefer, pertinent here. Now what about the text? It is even more obvious that we are faced with not one text but two (that, be it said in passing, is the self-evident reason why Anglo-Saxon criticism on Beckett does not tally with its francophone counterpart: simply because they are not studying the same texts). It is not possible to speak of a single Beckettian text corresponding to Bing/Ping or L’Innommable/The Unnamable, for example. Once again, the concept of the text does not serve to elucidate the unique phenomenon we are studying. At the very least, that concept has to be replaced by Meschonnic’s: that of the aforementioned text-system, or what we might define as a textual construct made up of heterogeneous textual matter coming from different texts.

But what would such a construct consist of? This question brings us to the heart of the present discussion. From the exploration of possible forms of