

SPANISH BECKETT¹

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The aim of this paper is twofold. Firstly, it will attempt to establish and catalogue the appearances of the Spanish language, and of Spanish-language literature, in Samuel Beckett's literary output. Although not essential for a full understanding of his larger body of work, this connection will be found to have left an indelible mark on some of Beckett's early works. Secondly, the paper will expand on Beckett's translation of Spanish-language poems in his *Anthology of Mexican Poetry*, a singular work that, considering his literary production as a whole, stands out as a strange episode in Beckett's writing career.

The first reference to Spanish language or literature in Beckett's work appears in *Proust*, a 1931 essay on the French novelist, in which a Calderón line from *La vida es sueño* ("Pues el delito mayor/Del hombre es haber nacido") is found unattributed (540). Beckett most likely did not read this line in the original, but rather in Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Idea*. As Rupert Wood writes, "half-remembered snippets of these expressions of pessimism, all taken from Schopenhauer, reappear with some regularity in Beckett's later drama and prose" (6). The central idea behind the Calderón quote, that man's greatest crime is being born, re-emerges in Beckett's second novel, *Murphy* (1938), when Neary leans "against the Pillar railings and curse[s], first the day in which he was born, then – in a bold flash-back – the night in which he was conceived" (46). A similar reflection appears in the famous dialogue from *Waiting for Godot*:

VLADIMIR: Suppose we repented.

ESTRAGON: Repented what?

VLADIMIR: Oh... [He reflects.] We wouldn't have to go into the details.

ESTRAGON: Our being born? (13)

Echoes of the same idea can be found as late as 1979 in *A Piece of Monologue* when the speaker begins by saying:

Birth was the death of him. Again. Words are few. Dying too. Birth was the death of him. Ghastly grinning ever since. Up at the lid to come. In cradle and crib. At suck first fiasco. With the first totters. From many to nanny and back. All

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the way. Banded back and forth. So ghastly grinning on. From funeral to funeral. (425)

These are just a few examples of how pervasive Calderón's idea and formulation are in Beckett's work. However, while the primary source may be a Spanish author, it cannot truly be said to point to a larger influence of Spanish literature in Beckett's work.

The next reference to the Spanish language in his work is taken from more direct sources. Beckett wrote his first novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* in Paris in the first half of 1932 in a state of deep personal crisis. He had abandoned his promising career as an academic at Trinity College Dublin and recent sentimental affairs had ended unsatisfactorily. The prospects of becoming a writer and, more pressingly, the decision of what kind of writer he wanted to be were matters of great distress to him. This may go some way to explaining why the novel is so self-deprecating, particularly towards Belacqua, the main character based on Beckett himself, yet a feeling of unease is extended to all characters. One of the female characters in the novel, the Alba, is based on Ethna MacCarthy, a girl with whom Beckett fell in love at Trinity College. "She was probably the first woman for whom he felt real love," writes James Knowlson, "and the fact that this love was never consummated, as his later amorous relationships with women mostly were [...], may well have ensured that his own feelings would remain in a different category from the rest" (61).

Ethna MacCarthy was a student of Modern Languages and specialised in French and Spanish, and most of the Spanish Beckett acquired in his youth most likely came from her.² In the novel, the Alba is prone to speaking in Spanish, as exemplified by her uttering the words "Adios" [sic] (175) and "niño" (194), as well as giving way to vulgar expressions such as "hijo de la puta blanca!", "Carajo!" (152), "Trincapollas!" (154), "Mamon!" [sic] (171). She is described at one point as "our Lope flower," thus connecting her character with the heroines in the plays of Lope de Vega (Pilling, *Companion* 263) and stressing her Spanish roots. More surprisingly, the Alba is depicted singing to herself an extremely vulgar and obscene Spanish "jota":

No me jodas en el suelo
 como si fuera una perra,
 que con esos cojonazos
 me echas en el cono [sic] tierra ... (209)

2 Ethna MacCarthy provided Beckett with more than just a basic knowledge of the Spanish language. In a letter to his friend Tom McGreevy (dated 5 May 1935), Beckett wrote that Ethna had lent him two piano scores of Isaac Albéniz (Beckett, *Letters* 265). By this time he was already acquainted with the music of Manuel de Falla.

It is uncertain where Beckett might have become acquainted with this old ditty. Camilo José Cela, in his *Diccionario Secreto*, attributes the same verse with a slight variation to the eighteenth-century writer Tomás de Iriarte (57), although de Iriarte probably found it in popular folklore. John Pilling suggests that Beckett learnt it from Ethna MacCarthy, who “may possibly have come across the poem by way of Walter Starkie” (*Companion* 329). What is clear is that Beckett knew the obscene nature of the verse and that it fitted his conception of the novel he was writing, as he wanted to produce a violent reaction to the long-standing tradition of the novel. With the inclusion of such marginal, distasteful, and illogical excerpts, he would explode the whole concept of the novel from the inside.

Another more subtle influence of Spanish literature exists in the novel. Beckett includes the poems “Calvary by Night” and “Night of May” in this atypical narrative text, which, according to Mary Lynch, are based on passages from mystic poems by St. John of the Cross (65-66). This fact by itself would not be extraordinary, as the novel abounds in allusions to Beckett’s readings at that time. Texts from St. Augustine, Robert Burton, and many others are interspersed throughout the text without acknowledgement of their origin. As Daniela Caselli highlights, “in *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* intertextuality is both a dismantling practice and a verbal game. By establishing a constellation of texts of reference while reacting against that same literary legacy, *Dream* constructs a canon in order to question it” (35).

In his notes on the book, Pilling does not make any reference to the influence of St. John of the Cross on these two poems, mentioning instead the influence of Joyce’s villanelle in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Ruby Cohn does not comment on this possible influence either, although she admits that the poem “Calvary by Night” might be based on the apocryphal legend of Christ’s death by drowning (41). In any case, the presence of St. John of the Cross in these poems might not be completely misplaced. When *Waiting for Godot* was performed for the first time in Spain, by a small independent company on 28 May 1955, Walter Starkie, the director of the Instituto Británico in Madrid, who as a Professor of Modern Languages at Trinity College had taught Beckett Italian literature, wrote a few lines on the young author for the theatre programme. There he stated that Beckett had been inspired to translate the Spanish mystic poets (London 132; Monleón 127). Some justification can be found, therefore, that Beckett might have read St. John of the Cross and that he had felt inspired by him in the composition of his poems “Night of May” and “Calvary by Night.” Mary Lynch first established the connection between these two poems and some fragments of St. John of the Cross’s poetry

in an English translation, and here the same comparison is established with the original Spanish poems:

NIGHT OF MAY

At last I find in my confused soul,
 Dark with the dark flame of the cypresses,
 The certitude that I cannot be whole,
 Consummate, finally achieved, unless

I be consumed and fused in the white heat
 Of her sad finite essence, so that none
 Shall sever us who are at last complete
 Eternally, irrevocably one,

One with the birdless, cloudless, colourless skies,
 One with the bright purity of the fire
 Of which we are and for which we must die
 A rapturous strange death and be entire,

Like syzygetic stars, supernely bright,
 Conjoined in the One and in the Infinite!

(Beckett, *Dream* 70-71)

CALVARY BY NIGHT

the water
 the waste of water
 in the womb of water
 an pansy leaps
 rocket of bloom flare flower of night wilt for me
 on the breasts of the water it has closed it has made
 an act of floral presence on the water
 the tranquil act of its cycle on the waste
 from the spouting forth
 to the re-enwombing
 an untroubled bow of petal and fragrance
 kingfisher abated
 drowned for me
 Lamb of my insustenance
 till the clamour of a blue flower
 beat on the walls of the womb of
 the waste of
 the water

(Beckett, *Dream* 213-214)

GLOSA A LO DIVINO

Sin arrimo y con arrimo,
sin luz y ascuras viviendo
todo me voy consumiendo.

1

Mi alma está desassida
de toda cosa criada
y sobre sí levantada
y en una sabrosa vida
sólo en su Dios arrimada.

2

Por esso ya se dirá
la cosa que más estimo
que mi alma se vee ya
sin arrimo y con arrimo.

3

Y aunque tinieblas padezco
en esta vida mortal
no es tan crecido mi mal
porque si de luz carezco
tengo vida celestial
porque el amor da tal vida
quando más ciego va siendo
que tiene al alma rendida
sin luz y ascuras viviendo.

4

Haze tal obra el amor
después que le conocí
que si ay bien o mal en mí
todo lo haze de un sabor
y al alma transforma en sí
y assí en su llama sabrosa
la qual en mí estoy sintiendo
apriessa sin quedar cosa,
todo me voy consumiendo.

(San Juan de la Cruz 268-269)

CANTAR DE LA ALMA QUE SE HUELGA
DE CONOSCKER A DIOS POR FEE

¡Qué bien sé yo la fonte que mana y corre,
aunque es de noche!

(San Juan de la Cruz 272)

ROMANCE V. DE LA CREACIÓN.

Regad nuves de lo alto
que la tierra lo pedía
y ábrase ya la tierra
que espinas nos produzía
y produzga aquella flor
con que ella florecía.

(San Juan de la Cruz 280)

The “confused soul” of Beckett’s “Night of May” is similar to the “Mi alma está desassida” of the Spanish mystic poet. St. John of the Cross refers, of course, to the union with God, and Beckett’s voice in the poem expresses his desire to be united with his lover, but the characteristic state of “being” and “not being,” living in a state of anxiety caused by love (here expressed in “mi alma se vee ya / sin arrimo y con arrimo” or in the opposite concepts of light and darkness in “Y aunque tinieblas padezco [...] su llama sabrosa / la qual en mí estoy sintiendo”), is found in Beckett’s poem in the oppositions “I cannot be whole” – “be entire”; “finite essence” – “Conjoined in the One and in the Infinite”; “Dark with the dark flame” – “bright purity of the fire.” Finally the line “I be consumed” finds a correspondence in “todo me voy consumiendo.”

Similarly, “Calvary by Night,” with its titular religious connotations and references to a source of water that runs at night and produces a flower, evokes fragments of at least two poems by St. John of the Cross in which “la fonte que mana y corre, / aunque es de noche” and “Regad nuves de lo alto [...] y produzga aquella flor.”³

Despite the obvious commonalities between the poems by St. John of the Cross and Beckett in *Dream*, many elements surrounding the poems suggest that the influence of the Spanish religious poet was not taken seriously. In Section Three of the book, Belacqua, back in Dublin after his stay on the Continent, learns from a newspaper report that his friend Nemo has drowned in the

3 In an unpublished short story, “Echo’s Bones,” written in 1933, Beckett includes two words in Spanish, “aguas” and “iluminaciones,” which also bring to mind the themes in St. John of the Cross’s poems.

river. Afterwards he undergoes a “mystical experience” in a pub where he even floats and feels “disembodied” (185). In the comment that follows this experience, there are unambiguous references to the Spanish saint:

On this emotion recollected in the tranquillity of those celebrated bowers he scaffolded a theory of the mystical experience as being geared [...] to the vision of an hypostatical clysterpipe, the apex of ecstasy being furnished by the peroration of administration and of course the Dark Night of the Soul. (185)

Belacqua later mockingly describes himself to “Mr. Beckett,” the author of the novel as a character, as “a dud mystic [...] John [...] of the Crossroads, Mr. Beckett. A borderman” (186). According to Pilling, Beckett found this material in W.R. Inge’s *Christian Mysticism* (*Companion* 304-305; *Dream Notebook* 100) and also took material from the article on “Mysticism” in the 1929 *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (*Dream Notebook* 88). Therefore, while he might have read St. John of the Cross in the original, it seems more likely that Beckett constructed this piece of baroque prose from factual information he obtained from reliable sources. Indeed, most of the Spanish literature he read probably consisted of translated texts.⁴ The so-called “Whoroscope” notebook, for example, which contains notes on his readings of the mid-1930s, refers to Cervantes’s *Don Quixote* in a French translation.⁵

A related issue is his knowledge of the Spanish language. Beckett, as is well known, did not study Spanish for his Arts degree, but rather Italian and French. He also studied classical Italian literature: Machiavelli, Petrarch, Ariosto, and, above all, Dante (Knowlson 52), as well as Latin, English literature, and contemporary French poetry. While Beckett did not take Spanish as an academic subject, we do know for certain that he studied it on his own, as evidenced by a 1933 letter, in which he wrote that “he started to ‘work hard at Spanish’” (Knowlson 226), and further suggested by the fact that in the mid-1930s he had been thinking of going to Spain, although in a letter dated 8 October 1935 he wrote to his friend Tom McGreevy that the journey was “unlikely for some time” (Beckett, *Letters* 283)

Opinions differ as to his command of the language. When Spanish theatre director Trino Martínez Trives visited Beckett in his Paris flat in 1959, he was able to say that the Irish author spoke Spanish (Martínez Trives 39), and Beckett

4 Beckett makes Belacqua decline a list of “dark” poets in a moment when he feels particularly low of spirit. Among them there are two Spanish Romantic poets: “Espronceda” and “Becquer” (62).

5 According to Fernando Arrabal, Beckett had a great sense of humour. Laughter was present in his writings and in their private conversations, too. For Arrabal this was because they alluded to other humorous writers, Cervantes included (4).

also corrected Martínez Trives's first versions of his plays. Beckett's first biographer, Deirdre Bair, however, believes that Spanish for him was "a language of which he knew only a smattering" (398). Probably the truth lies somewhere in between. He had an ample command of Spanish grammar, but perhaps he was not fluent or did not feel confident enough to do serious work with it. Antonia Rodríguez Gago, a translator of Beckett's work and a personal friend of his, offers this intermediate and likely explanation: "I know that he understood Spanish because of his remarks in answer to my questions about my own translations. But he did not speak it" (qtd. in van der Weel and Hisgen 351).

For at least some periods in his life, Beckett kept an interest in what was happening in Spain. He was, for instance, aware of the fratricide war that began in 1936. He famously expressed his views against the rebellious army in Nancy Cunard's pamphlet *Authors Take Sides on the Spanish War* (published in *The Left Review* in 1937) with his coinage "¡UP THER REPUBLIC!"⁶ Later on, he did not remain indifferent to the establishment of a Fascist regime by General Franco in the first years after his victory in the Civil War. In the summer of 1967, Beckett wrote a letter to the president of the Court of Justice, who was in charge of the case against his friend Fernando Arrabal. He even offered to appear in the trial for the defence, although ultimately this was not necessary (Knowlson 552-553). Arrabal was accused of having offended the Spanish nation for something he had written to a reader when signing one of his books. In his letter, Beckett praised the literary merits of Arrabal and insisted on the Spanish character of his work, stressing the fact that he was not a traitor to his country: "Elle va juger un écrivain espagnol qui, dans le bref espace de dix ans, s'est hissé jusqu'au premier rang des dramaturges d'aujourd'hui, et cela par la force d'un talent profondément espagnol. Partout où l'on joue ses pièces, et on les joue partout, l'Espagne est là" (qtd. in Arrabal 8). It should be noted, however, that Beckett always expressed his disgust and horror of injustice regardless of the kind of government it came from: "It did not matter to him whether the regime perpetrating the oppression was left-wing (like the Communists in Eastern Europe) or right-wing (like the Fascists in Spain or the

6 Years later, Beckett included the same expression in *Malone Dies*, when the narrator-protagonist says: "I simply believe I can say nothing that is not true, I mean that has not happened, it's not the same thing but no matter. Yes, that's what I like about me, at least one of the things, that I can say, Up the Republic! for example, or, Sweetheart! for example, without having to wonder if I should not rather have cut my tongue out, or said something else" (*The Beckett Trilogy* 216). The phrase here obviously loses a great part of its force, as Leslie Hill writes: "While on one level it still no doubt functions – as slogans do – as a memory of political conviction or commitment, it does so with evident scepticism, not to say mocking irony" (912).

National Party in South Africa). It was enough that they were behaving with inhumanity, barbarity and injustice" (Knowlson 641). In spite of his interest in Spanish current events, I have not found any records that may prove that he ever visited Spain, not even after the arrival of democracy.⁷

The story of his 'Mexican Anthology' (1958) may prove illustrative of his ambiguous relation to the Spanish language and to the larger Spanish culture. Early in 1950, the UNESCO commissioned him to translate around one hundred Mexican poems compiled by Octavio Paz, and in a few months he had finished the work.⁸ According to Deirdre Bair, he asked a friend who could speak Spanish to translate the poems into English, and Beckett later gave them poetic form (the earnings would be split among both of them) (409). He then asked Gerald Brenan to revise the final result and in the printed book included a note of gratitude to him: "I should like to thank Mr Gerald Brenan for kindly reading the entire manuscript and for making a number of useful suggestions."

Beckett had accepted the task of translating the Mexican poems into English solely for economic reasons. Years later he wrote to a friend, "that lousy Mexican anthology was undertaken to take the chill of [sic] the pot in the lean winter of 1949-50 and with scant Spanish" (qtd. in Cohn 184). Beckett nevertheless undertook the task of translating with great professionalism. The Sam Francis Notebook manuscript at Reading University Library testifies that he had done some work on the language.

The original corrected typescript of the Mexican anthology resides at the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin, and is preceded by a handwritten note by Beckett addressed to Jake Schwartz, a bookseller and manuscript dealer. In this note, written in Paris in February 1959, Beckett gives a few basic dates relating to the translation and the publication of the book.⁹ The document is also preceded by two handwritten sheets of paper with lists of words and notes on the language. All of them are words taken from the poems

7 When the "Beckett Festival" was held in Madrid from 28 March to 5 May 1985, Beckett sent a note to one of the organisers, Jesús Campos, thanking them for honouring his work and lamenting not being able to attend (Campos García 105). As is well known, Beckett avoided any public event in which he might be the centre of attention.

8 Apparently, there had been a previous translation made by Beckett for UNESCO. According to Deirdre Bair, before the Mexican anthology he had translated a number of essays and poems for a celebration of Goethe's anniversary, among them a poem in Spanish by Gabriela Mistral (398). On that occasion Beckett would have asked Octavio Paz and Gerald Brenan for help for the first time.

9 I am grateful to the staff at the Reading Room of the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center for their help.

that he translated and which he had doubts about (some of them are Mexican Spanish terms). The first sheet has the heading of "PAZ," and the second has as its title the word "SELF," both in capital letters. The words are written in blue ink and the corrections are marked in red. He probably took these papers to Octavio Paz and asked him questions about the words, which Beckett himself copied in a disorderly manner, mostly with arrows pointing to the meaning of the terms. According to Deirdre Bair, Paz met Beckett a few times in a café, "where Beckett explained that he had taken the job because he, too, needed the money" (695).

The translation of the Mexican anthology must have been an extremely demanding and tiring job. There are poems by thirty-five authors, and in most cases more than one poem is assigned to each poet. Some of the texts are of the utmost complexity and probably Beckett spent long hours working on them. In the final document there are some handwritten corrections even on the typed poem, which indicates that Beckett kept revising them until the end. It is no wonder, then, that, after finishing the translation, he decided he would do no more jobs of that kind in the future. In an unpublished letter to Aidan Higgins, dated 24 March 1959, he bitterly wrote that the Mexican anthology was not worthy of his attention, adding that most of the poems were "shit."

Samuel Beckett's last important experience with the Spanish language left him exhausted and the anthology remains an atypical item in his list of works. The very process of composition, a mixture of duty and necessity, of professionalism and disgust, illustrates his ambiguous relationship with the Spanish language and Spanish literature, characterised by an indirect approach and a lack of real engagement on his part.

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