

Notes

THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE 'F—' STORY, RE-EXAMINED

IN 1949, *transition* 48 (number 4) published a short story titled 'F—', which was attributed to Suzanne Dumesnil, Samuel Beckett's future wife, and bears a striking resemblance to Beckett's style.¹ It is quite likely that even if Dumesnil wrote the story, she wrote it in French and Beckett translated it.² Adding to the intrigue, the story directly preceding 'F—' is 'To right nor left' by Henry Michaux—translated by Beckett, also unsigned.³ Beckett may have also written some of the notes on the contributors, including the one on Dumesnil, which lists her as 'Forgotten in musical, unknown in literary circles'. As far as we know, she did not publish any writings before or after 'F—'.

The *Grove Companion* suggests that the story's 'motif of two travelers on the road to an uncertain destination, prose and syntax with uncertainties, ellipses, absence of motive, all point to Beckett'.⁴ Indeed, *point to* does not necessarily connote an attribution—it can be as much accusatory (involved in?) as it is querying (so did he?), akin to saying that the revisions, design, and brilliance of *The Waste Land* point to Pound. While scholars such as Martin Esslin have suspected Beckett's collaboration on the piece, James Knowlson's biography does not mention the story, Cronin calls it a 'subterfuge' uncharacteristic of Beckett, and Bair spends a full page on it, concluding

¹ I am grateful to Christopher Ricks for gifting me a copy of *transition* 48 (with 'F—' appearing on pages 19–21) and suggesting that I study further the question of the authorship of 'F—'.

² Beckett told his bibliographers Federman and Fletcher he was 'certain' of having translated the story. In *Samuel Beckett: His Works and His Critics: An Essay in Bibliography* (Berkeley, 1970), 98–9, Federman and Fletcher attribute authorship to Dumesnil and list Beckett as the translator.

³ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York, 2004). This also counters Ruby Cohn's comment on page 41 that 'it is unlikely he would be linked with an anonymous translation.'

⁴ C. J. Ackerley and S. E. Gontarski, *The Grove Companion to Samuel Beckett* (New York, 2004), 190.

that 'one wonders where the writing ended and the translation began'.⁵ Ruby Cohn was the first, in a very short article, to seriously address the authorship of 'F—', acknowledging its critical response and showing that very little attention has been paid to the story. Yet it seems the discussion has ended since Cohn's piece.

As no manuscript of a presumed French original version or English translation of 'F—' is known to survive, the task of determining authorship is speculative. That said, no one has yet demonstrated the parallels between 'F—' and contemporaneous publications by Beckett—such as the novels from the Trilogy, *Waiting for Godot*, and 'The Expelled'—to bolster the case for Beckett's authorship.

On the surface 'F—' resembles the Trilogy in many ways. First, an unnamed 'he' and 'I' bump into each other much like A and C early in *Molloy*. The characters in *Molloy* are in an unnamed place much like F—. They are also given internal monologues; the first, by Molloy, is rather short, as he rests in his room to 'finish dying', and the second is by Moran, who is responsible for finding Molloy. The parallels between plots are noteworthy but ultimately not convincing in themselves, as plots really do not make either piece; but the style and motifs in the Trilogy illustrate significant parallels with 'F—'.

In *The Unnamable*, the narrator records the dim perception and the desire to understand corporeal objects; in the following case, talking about urine, he says

In it the eye can see, otherwise the eye, but dimly, that's right, no superfluous particulars, later to be controverted. A man would wonder where his kingdom ended, his eye strive to penetrate the gloom, and he crave for a stick, an arm, fingers apt to grasp and release, at the right moment, a stone, stones, or for the power to utter a cry and wait, counting the seconds, for it to come back to him, and suffer, certainly, at having neither voice nor other missile, nor limbs submissive to him, bending and unbending at the word of command, and perhaps even regret being a man, under such conditions,

⁵ Quoted in Cohn, 'The "F—" Story', *Beckett versus Beckett, Samuel Beckett Today*, 7 (Rodopi, 1998), 41–2.

that is to say a head abandoned to its ancient solitary resources.⁶

Not only is this passage cloaked in Arthur Schopenhauer's thought (a well-documented influence on Beckett),⁷ but it also expands upon 'F—', where 'His eyes closed probably. If they had been open he would have seen me in front of him, in spite of the night. Dimly no doubt.' A similar difficulty in 'F—' also arises when 'I' and 'he' see each other after their initial encounter. The narrator in 'F—' then posits a worry:

Had I not gone wrong when I turned left after the last turn. I was on my way to F—. Are we on the road to F—, he said, I am on my way to —, he named a locality in the neighborhood of F—. Since the last turn I had seen nobody but him. I thought, Have we lost our way, he and I, is it possible that we are alone on a so frequented road.

'F—' emphasizes the connection between sensual experience, the will (or desire, in this case), and suffering in a fraught life path, suggesting further that Beckett played a role in shaping this story.

The first line of 'F—', 'I was on my way', suggests a source for *The Unnamable*, especially when the narrator declares: 'I who am on my way, words bellying out my sails, am also that unthinkable ancestor of whom nothing can be said.'⁸ One who is on the way, though not quite going anywhere, one who is merely expressing out of sheer will yet still expressing nothing—these ideas not only parallel the happenings in 'F—', but they also anticipate Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot*.

Also in 'F—' the narrator continues to complicate uncertain roads: 'Nor did he understand what was happening. Nor I. We were on the same road at the same moment, that was the only certainty.' The beginning of *Molloy* has a similar structure, where Molloy says, 'For I did not know if it was the right road. All roads were right for me, a wrong road was an event, for me. But when I was on my way to my mother only one road was

right, the one that led to her, for all did not lead to her. I did not know if I was on one of those right roads and that disturbed me, like all recall to life'.⁹ And yet, in 'F—' the characters express uncertainty about the notion of going on, or moving along, as is illustrated when 'He shouted, Where are you, don't leave me. I had not intended to go on, to continue on my way without him. But I was struck by the thought he thought was mine'.

The narrator says toward the end of 'F—' that in the cold windy night, the only thing to do was continue on—I saw us go on. I. Us'. The expression of 'I' and 'us'—first continuous in one sentence—then proceeds to a separation of the two subjects in between full stops. They commonly stand together and alone: 'I' and 'Us'. When they finally get to a shelter (a roadside ditch), the narrator goes through the standard anticipation-and-disappointment motif that anticipates *Godot*: 'His steps resounded in my ear, in my ear pressed against the earth. When I heard his steps no more I said, He has arrived, now he has only to return. This thought gave me great pleasure. . . . In the sorry light of dawn I rose. There was nobody on the road. My eyes stung. I closed them'. This also mirrors the 'anguish of return' from *Molloy*—namely, how the idea of a lost one returning causes suffering, and the senses anticipate a return with the aid of inadequate memory, which reveals the disappointment.¹⁰

Perhaps the best clue for Beckett's authorship of 'F—' comes from a rambling inner monologue delivered in *The Unnamable*, where Beckett also illustrates his playfulness:

he speaks of me, as if I were not he, as if I were not he, both, and as if I were not he, for he is not far, he is here, it's he who speaks, he says it's I, then he says it's not, I am far, do you hear him, he seeks me I don't know why, he calls me, he wants me to come out, he thinks I can come out, he wants me to be he, or another, let us be fair . . . then he says I, as if I were he, or in another, let us be just, then he says Murphy, or Molloy, I forget, as if I were Malone, but their day is done, he

⁶ *Three Novels: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York, 2009), 354.

⁷ See Knowlson, ch. 5, 'The Paris Years, 1928–30'.

⁸ *Three Novels*, 346.

⁹ *Three Novels*, 31.

¹⁰ *Three Novels*, 38.

wants none but himself, for me, he thinks it's his last chance, he thinks that, they taught him thinking, it's always he who speaks, Mercier never spoke, Moran never spoke, I never spoke, I seems to speak, that's because he says I as if he were I, I nearly believed him, do you hear him, as if he were I, I who am far, who can't move, can't be found, but neither can he, he can only talk... it's the fault of the pronouns...¹¹

Here is the style of 'F—' embellished, expanded (and lacking in question marks), in addition to a catalogue of names, of non-referential, easily confused pronouns (T. S. Eliot does a fair amount of this in 'Gerontion', what with Miss Cammel and so on, as well as the explosion of names in 'Animula'). The interplay between he and I recalls the characters of 'F—'; but only in 'F—' does 'he'—or He?—speak throughout the entire story.

The problem of pronouns is also manifest in reading 'F—', as *he* and *I* eventually melt into *we* and *us*; yet according to the previous passage from *The Unnamable*, it hardly seems to matter, for all the stories—and the people—are indistinguishable. Perhaps it is best to look at an intriguing clue from the conclusion of 'The

Expelled', to let Beckett's words speak for themselves:

I made towards the rising sun, towards where I thought it should rise, the quicker to come into the light. I would have liked a sea horizon, or a desert one. When I am abroad in the morning I go to meet the sun, and in the evening, when I am abroad, I follow it, till I am down among the dead. I don't know why I told this story. I could just as well have told another. Perhaps some other time I'll be able to tell another. Living souls, you will see how alike they are.¹²

May these instances now compel scholars to add the 'F—' story to Beckett's list of works? It is plausible to say in any case that Beckett's collaboration or authorship of 'F—' inspired his published work in the 1950s.

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¹¹ *Three Novels*, 403–4.

¹² *Collected Short Prose: 1929–1989*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York, 1995), 60.