

Samuel Beckett's Poems and Poetry

The first line of 'Saint-Lô' reads 'Vire will wind in other shadows'. 'Vire' is a complex word, naming the river in Saint-Lô while chiming with *virer*, 'to swerve', in turn reiterated by 'wind', and echoed in the English homophone 'veer'. This multilingual intricacy sets up *wind* as intrinsic to Beckett's verse, *versus* itself being 'the act of turning', while going beyond a generic lyrical mimesis. *Molloy*, for instance, moves from 'his bedroom *window*' to 'up the *winding* stones'. After the winding-sheet in 'the sky was clearing, prior to its *winding* in the other shroud, night', Moran speaks the four letters with 'slowly *dwindles*' and then 'suffering a little from *wind* and cramps in the stomach'. While something is palpably shared with 'Vire will wind in other shadows', it is not a key-word, nor a rhyme, nor even a thematic overlap, but rather a simultaneity which enables Vire to name more than a river, giving the line a spectral presence in *Molloy*.

My research will examine how Beckett forges his own lyrical language in the 'lifetime's arc of writing'¹ traced by his poems from *Whoroscope*, his first work, to 'what is the word', his last, creating a poetry that runs beyond the poems. This would not be to read Beckett's poetry as a 'clarifier' of the 'more serious work', as John Pilling once did,² but instead to see the patterns of repetition and variance characteristic of the poetry resurfacing elsewhere. Recurrence, however, is not necessarily alignment and this research would not assume, as John Fletcher did, that 'On its own small and relatively modest scale, [Beckett's] poetry reflects the struggles of the other, more famous work.'³ Rather, we may find tension and contrast between the poetic and the prosaic. The anticipation of a poem's title in the recently published *Echo's Bones* (London, 2014), suggests a more complex and indirect relationship, as does the sharing of the title, 'Cascando', between an early poem and a late play. These transitions are inseparable from Beckett's translations, magnifying the kind of variance we saw with *wind*, and testament to how his poetic

¹ David Wheatley, *Selected Poems* (London, 2009), p. ix.

² *Samuel Beckett* (London, 1976), p. 159.

³ *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ, 1965), p. 24.

writing acts as memory across languages as well as forms.

Recent developments in the field, such as the Beckett Digital Manuscript Project, make this approach timely: the genesis of these textually fragile poems shows them to be moments in a dynamic process. Above all, the 2012 publication of Beckett's *Collected Poems* points up this multiplicity: 'imagine si ceci', for example, follows not the habitual text of the *mirlitonades*, but returns to the first publication in *Hand and Eye*. With this new collection, then, we re-encounter the poems as shifting and polyglot texts. The bibliography provided in this edition attests to the fertility of work on Beckett's poetry. Nevertheless, the only book-length study of the poems remains Lawrence Harvey's *Samuel Beckett: Poet and Critic* (Princeton, NJ, 1970), written before the composition of the *mirlitonades*, 'comment dire', or the discovery of Beckett's translation of Rimbaud. The field, then, though rich, is not definitive: more doctoral-length research on the place of poetry in Beckett's writing is now due.