Problems of Beckett's Early Poetics

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Abstract: *Samuel Beckett's first novel,* Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, has been generally defined since its publication in 1992 as Beckett's conscious departure from the narrative tradition in the West. Critics have pointed out the novel's disregard for unity, the absence of a central plan, the range of unstable characters or the undermining authorial interventions. The object of this essay is to extend the argument further by examining* Dream *in terms of Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas on the novel, as they were exposed in* Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. I will try to argue that* Dream *corresponds to the dismantling of an ideal in narrative art, defined by Bakhtin as the polyphonic novel. I will also highlight the features that make of* Dream *an anti-text in which the Irish writer explored the limits of the relationships he could have with his readers.*

This paper will be dealing with the principles that governed Samuel Beckett's first novel *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, written in 1932 but published six decades later, three years after its author's death. The title is of course borrowed from Mikhail Bakhtin's famous study Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics to be used as a starting point, since in the work of the Russian novelist Bakhtin saw an ideal in narrative art, a harmonic world governed by the fluency of relationships between author and characters, a realm of freedom where no one is granted the last word and Beckett's Dream might well represent the dismantling of this most perfect emblem of the novelistic environment envisaged by Bakhtin.[1] This paper does not aim to look for similarities in the work of authors with such radically different interests,[2] but rather to simply make use of a pivotal concept in the work of Bakhtin, the polyphonic novel, in order to analyse in greater depth this particular work by Beckett. According to James Knowlson this is an "extraordinary" novel,[3] which, it should be remembered, is one of the texts that draws most from the author's biography. In five very irregular parts, its tells the story of Belacqua, a character inspired by his namesake in Dante's Divina Comedia, and his complicated and fruitless relationships with three women, the fair to middling women of the title: the Smeraldina, the Syra-Cusa and the Alba. It takes place in Vienna, Paris and Dublin.

From the outset the narrator wants to exert an omniscient command of the story and sets himself the task of imposing some kind of discipline on his characters, but they will not obey. This means that from that moment on things will go awry, and the narrator

will not make a great effort to control a chaotic text in which, at times, he seems to turn his whimsical demands on the reader. In fact it will be my contention that, apart from the anarchic nature of this novel, one of the problems of *Dream* lies in what the narrator expects from the reader.

In the model that I have chosen to emphasize the subversive characteristics of Samuel Beckett's first novel, what Bakhtin values most in Dostoevsky's oeuvre is the independence of his characters. They are, above all, free people:

> A plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices is in fact the chief characteristic of Dostoevsky's novels. (6)

In the polyphonic novel that Dostoevsky created, the author was able to separate the characters' voices from his own intentions, to respect their individualities. This is why Bakhtin was able to speak of "the astonishing internal independence of Dostoevsky's characters" (13). At the other end of the literary spectrum we could place any monologically authorial stance in which the characters' words and actions would be directed to express eventually only one worldview, the author's. In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, however, what is taking place is the break-up of this narrative structure. It is not that in *Dream* the characters do not have independence. In fact, they act on their own and rebel against the authorial voice. The problem is that the narrator resents their freedom, mocks them and takes every opportunity to reveal their worst aspects.

In truth, it has to be said that the narrator knows, from the very beginning, that the characters will not behave as he says tongue-in-cheek that he would like them to act. Beckett's plan was to critique the novel as a genre by introducing, according to David D. Green (67), a disregard for orderly transition, self-conscious interjections of theory and an ironic treatment of the form. Beckett makes use of an unreliable narrator who in the first pages predisposes the readers for the uncertainty of the whole fiction. In the first long metafictional aside of the novel, after the revealing confession that "we [meaning the narrator] do not know where we are in this story" (9), the authorial voice tells a short parable in which he assigns to each character a part in a Chinese musical composition, a liu-liu, hoping to create a perfect combination of sounds:

> If all our characters were like that – liu-liu-minded – we could write a little book that would be purely melodic, think how nice that would be, linear, a lovely Pythagorean chain-chant solo of cause and effect, a one-figured teleophony that would be a pleasure to hear. (10)

The narrator hopes that some characters will act according to plan although he expresses doubts about the capacity of the main character, Belacqua, to obey his orders. One

hundred and fourteen pages later the narrator will finally admit: "We picked Belacqua for the job, and now we find that he is not able for it" (125).

According to John Pilling young Beckett was very much influenced by his history of failure in personal relationships, "he not unnaturally felt mixed emotions along the spectrum from anger to self-pity", and he intended to "inflict terrible damage" on Belacqua, the character who is closest to the author's own persona, as a way of "purging . . . a recent past" (61-62): when Belacqua wants to keep his relationship with the Smeraldina on platonic terms, she rapes him; when he seeks peace and solitude, he is disturbed by his friend Liebert; the only woman he might have a sexual interest in, the Alba, does not consider him an appropriate partner. He is thrown out of places, drenched under the rain on repeated occasions and subjected to the physical ailments of diarrhoea, stomach-ache and sore feet.

The women who surround Belacqua are not favoured by the narrator either. Although their descriptions ambiguously combine positive and negative features, the latter are stated with special poignancy. The Smeraldina's body "was all wrong, the peacock claws . . . definitely all wrong" (15). The Syra-Cusa had a perfect body, but "[H]er neck was scraggy and her head was null" (33). A general negative feeling, rooted perhaps in complex personal reasons, seems to infuse Beckett's narrative at this time and makes him deposit his anger in his fictional creatures. As a result, the narrator undermines the characters' freedom, treating them with utter disrespect. Well advanced into the action the narrator actually pauses to ponder whether the characters will fulfil their role, wondering whether maybe he should have been stricter: "so little have they been plucked and blown and bowed, so little struck with the little hammer", later to confess: "But they will let us down, they will insist on being themselves, as soon as they are called on for a little strenuous collaboration" (112). Alternately lenient and strict, the narrator embarks on a double game of false appearances which distracts our attention from the characters' fate and, eventually, disconcerts the reader.

Another essential feature that Bakhtin points out in Dostoevsky's novels is their dialogic quality. Dialogue is something more than a useful term to characterize a liberating literary genre, but "an obvious master key to the assumptions that guided Bakhtin's work throughout his whole career" (Holquist 15). In this context, the novels written by Dostoevsky are put forward as the maximum exponents of dialogic constructions. Bakhtin writes that the polyphonic novel does not portray a unique vision which incorporates other points of view into its own; rather it is formed "by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (Bakhtin 18). Following this scheme of things, dialogue is such a powerful force that, Bakhtin writes, nothing escapes its influence, everyone in the novel is involved in a dialogic relationship and there is simply no possibility of a "nonparticipating third person".

In Beckett's *Dream* dialogic relationships do exist, but they are under great pressure. The authorial voice will attempt to impose his will over that of the characters, trying to absorb them, even despising them as useless when they do not act or think

according to his wishes. When Belacqua compares two of the women, his thoughts do not run free, but are directed by the narrator. So a sequence of the protagonist's thinking is preceded and followed by the narrator's comments: "The burden of his argument was:", and "But, poor Belacqua, do you not realise that the essence of beauty is predicateless, trascending categories?", until finally the narrator chides the main character, "Unfortunate Belacqua, you miss our point, *the* point" (35), adding a contemptible "Put that into your pipe, dear fellow, and smoke it slowly" (35). Rather than a dialogue, this is more of a reprimand in which the narrator acts moved by anger and impotence, as when he remarks about the Smeraldina: "From now on she can hold her bake altogether or damn well get off the platform, for good and all. She can please herself. We won't have her" (115). The novel incorporates other languages from the social heteroglossia (see for instance the Smeraldina's letter or the Alba's comments on an admirer of hers: "Trincapollas!" (154)). At this early stage Beckett's prose was far from being the "monologic discourse . . . weirdly independent of any other source of speech, that proceeds by self-cancellation rather than interaction" (Lodge 98) that it would become. *Dream*, I insist, is not the opposite of the model envisaged by Bakhtin, it is not a monologic text, but an anarchic text, with the pull of forces in disarray, with a "weak enunciative voice" who "embodies a scrivener with no plans" (Bouchard 140), and a group of characters who appear at random.

In such an unconventional novel, even non-characters or fictional beings who do not engage in any interaction with the rest are given an unexpected relevance. Nemo is one such character. He is introduced in negative terms by the narrator in the initial assignation of roles in the aforementioned liu-liu:

> But what can you do with a person like Nemo who will not for any considera-
> tion be condensed into a liu, who is not a note at all but the most regrettable
> simultaneity of notes . . . Our line bulges every time he appears. (10-11)

After this presentation the reader expects Nemo to be a highly independent character who will disrupt the narrative whenever he turns up. But this is far from being the case. He is mentioned very few times, a solitary man leaning on the parapet of a bridge over the river Liffey in Dublin, joined on one occasion by Belacqua (157), and who drowns towards the end of the novel (182), without having had any impact on the narrative whatsoever.[4] The readers' expectations are defeated once more.

The polyphonic novel described by Bakhtin in Dostoevsky's work as a continuous dialogue of consciousnesses extends this quality to its very composition. "The polyphonic novel is dialogic through and through". Bakhtin writes. "Dialogic relationships exist among all elements of novelistic structure; that is, they are juxtaposed contrapuntally" (40). This brings us back to the structure of *Dream* where the different parts do not act in unison. As the narrator flaunts: "The only unity in this story is, please God, an involuntary unity" (132). John Pilling admits that

> by cunningly planting motifs that echo one another (for those who can hear the echo), Beckett 'exonerates' himself from the charge that he has written a completely chaotic book. (367)

Although of course there are connections between the parts, the irregularity of the book is remarkable, and not only in terms of length (with the first and last parts covering one and three pages respectively, and the other three intermediate sections of varying proportions), but in terms of content. The story of Belacqua does not follow a linear pattern, but is interspersed with digressions, disquisitions by the narrator, letters, poems, breaks in the narrative and texts of enormous difficulty. John Pilling, again: "Some passages are so impenetrable that is difficult to believe Beckett had any reader but himself in mind . . ." (2). As is well known, the author crammed into his novel all his knowledge of languages, so that there is hardly a page without an expression taken from German, French, Italian, Spanish or Latin. Beckett also coined his own expressions in purely Joycean fashion, producing as a result some abrupt and strenuous paragraphs: "*Dream*'s literary atonality and stylistic cacophony may grate on our eyes and ears" (Gontarski 20).

What hampers a fluent reading of the novel and what makes it, on the other hand, "a paradise for the literary jigsaw puzzle cognoscenti" (65) is the massive presence of other authors' work in the form of unacknowledged quotations that are inserted within the text. Beckett made extensive use of the entries he had made in a notebook in previous years, in which he had copied from his readings every sentence that had taken his fancy. The notebook, which was published in 1999, shows that the authors Beckett had read (from St. Augustine to Homer, from Robert Burton to Thomas À Kempis) were an amalgam of classics and eccentrics, from all of whom he took expressions which appear almost verbatim in the novel.[5] What concerns the topic of this paper, is that the quotations are another factor preventing the text from being a concordant unit, they are not fully integrated in the whole, as critics like Yohiki Tajiri (72) or David Pattie have pointed out:

> In Joyce, references are incorporated into the prose; in early Beckett, one sometimes gets the sense that references (and the more obscure the reference the better) are nailed into phrases and sentences that are already fully formed. page

What we have observed so far in *Dream*, compared with a model which approaches a kind of novelistic icon of cohesion and proportion, is a radical disruption of the principles that conform that model; it is not just the mixture of languages and quotations, or the interludes in the story that make the narrative appear as an artefact on display for its own sake, "a statement of itself" (Pilling 1997, 70), but "the irresponsible stance" of the narrator (Tajiri 79) as well, in a fictional structure that he has contributed to disjoint while complaining about it. All these factors work together to estrange the novel from the reading public.

Readers of this novel must indeed equip themselves with a flexible mind as, more than in any Modernist text, *Dream* requires a continuous adaptation to changing strategies and situations that are imposed upon them.[6] If in this novel Beckett turned upside down the foundations of the novel as a genre, he also twisted and deformed the contract that is implicitly established between authors and their readership every time a book of fiction is opened. "It is" writes James Knowlson "as if he were playing a game with the reader, talking to him, teasing him, even taunting him" (146-7).

Firstly, the demands on the reader are in some cases disproportionate. In the course of one of his extrapolations the narrator asks his readers to abdicate their right to be entertained, asking them to "suspend hostilities" (39), sensing theirs is going to be a problematic relationship. Later on the authorial voice will refer to his own writing as "a literature of saving clauses" (46), with the implication that it is not a naive kind of writing. On the contrary, it does not give itself easily to the reader, it is protected against intrusion, alert to any attempt towards deciphering, anticipating in fact what would become the most treasured quality of this author's whole literary production.[7]

Secondly, the narrator interferes in the readers' assumptions, trying to influence them in one sense or another. When he imagines the reader disapproving a digression on literary criticism, he writes "don't be too hard on him, he was studying to be a professor" (48), subverting his own pretensions at seriousness (and complicating things further by introducing the author in the narrative). The narrator's allusions to the readers may also be of an ironic nature, as when he remarks: "We would not wish our young hero to be misjudged, or hastily judged, by the reader, for the want of a few facts" (74). The narrator obviously knows that there is a dearth of facts among so much abstraction in the novel.

Finally, the narrator makes deprecating comments on his own work, inviting the reader to question the worth of the whole enterprise of reading the book. When the narrator imagines that the characters will let him down, he writes, for instance: "We call the whole performance off, we call the book off, it tails off in a horrid manner" (112-113).

In the third part of the novel ("UND"), the authorial voice is afraid "that the book is degenerating into a kind of Commedia dell'Arte, a form of literary statement to which we object particularly" (117). Later on he will admit that he is tired of the frills he has added to the narrative (162).

All these facts make of *Dream* a highly erudite, intertextual and learned book which does not seek to share its knowledge with its readers. Contradictory, indeterminate and limbo-like, it exacts an unconditional audience, while at the same time reacting against the knowledge that it may be understood. Here, as well, it represents another rupture with a model described by Bakhtin, this time an ideal of reading found in his essay "Discourse in the Novel." The concept of "active understanding" which he develops here stems from the dialogic orientation of his idea of language. The word in any dialogue is oriented toward the listener, although this figure is normally considered a passive recipient.[8] What Bakhtin (1981) modifies in this pattern is that every kind of discourse is oriented towards a responsive understanding, which he defines as

a fundamental force, one that participates in the formulation of discourse, and it is moreover an *active* understanding, one that discourse senses as resistance or support enriching the discourse. (280-1)

Active understanding, according to his view, approaches the word, adopts it and adds new layers of meaning.

Breaking again a Bakhtinian model of perfection, in *Dream* active understanding is not possible simply because the novel, in many cases, does not allow the reader an approach to the word in the first place. In any case, supposing the reader were willing and able to follow the author's meandering course of thinking, what we would have is not active understanding but exhaustive understanding, and in that case the reader would always be left far behind. Beckett tried, in his dealings with the readers too, to go a step further toward an anti-text.[9]

Wolfgang Iser wrote that Beckett's novels have an absurd effect, "for inherent in the process of presentation is the awareness that what is to be presented lies far beyond the capabilities of fiction" (264). As I have tried to show, this effect is already present in Beckett's first novel, and just as he tried to explore a new space for fiction, he also attempted to forge in this text a new relationship with the reader. He imagined a kind of relationship that was hardly feasible: it presupposes the existence of an ideal reader who would understand all the author's references, who would renounce (albeit temporarily) his/her rights and who would be prepared to stand an intrusive narrator and his comments on the uncertainty of the narrative itself. The connections that Beckett tried to establish with readers in *Dream* did not seem to achieve a final resolution, but the very attempt (radical, experimental) constitutes an integral part of the project that he initiated with the writing of this complex novel.

Notes

1   Naturally critics have introduced some distinctions into Bakhtin's somewhat idealized vision of the novelistic genre. Simon Dentith speaks of contradictions in his account of the polyphonic novel: "But in fact it is impossible to imagine a novelist who does not sort the words of his or her characters into some sort of hierarchy of significance" (Simon Dentith. *Bakhtinian Thought. An Introductory Reader.* London: Routledge, 1995. 45). David Lodge addresses the same topic from a different perspective, reaching similar conclusions: "Can there, in fact, be such a thing as an *absolutely* monologic literary text? Bakhtin himself came to doubt it" (David Lodge. *After Bakhtin. Essays on Fiction and Criticism.* London and New York: Routledge, 1990. 97).

2   Although in some striking sense Bakhtin, "a man who gave chief importance to being 'unfinalized' and 'becoming'" and whose account "cannot be conclusive" (Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist. *Mikhail Bakhtin.* Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1984. 2), touches a chord with Beckett's idea of the existential experience as "a succession of attempts to give shape to the void" (Martin Esslin, Introduction, *Samuel Beckett.* Ed. Martin Esslin. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1965. 9).

3   Knowlson writes about *Dream*: "It has been labelled 'picaresque' or episodic' but neither term does justice to the book's deliberate lack of coherence, let alone its verbal extravagance and

stylistic bravura" (James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame. The Life of Samuel Beckett*. 1996. London: Bloomsbury, 1997. 146).

4   John Pilling calls Nemo and Grock the demiurges of the story. Theirs are non-roles, sometimes watching the action from the distance but never interfering. (John Pilling. *A Companion to Dream of Fair to Middling Women*. Tallahassee: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2004. 33).

5   John Pilling emphasizes the importance of the quotations in the structure of the novel: "If the *Dream* notebook got in the way of the novel, it also enabled the novel to emerge. There were other conditioning factors, naturally enough; being out of Dublin was undoubtedly one of them. But without the notebook, it seems, there would in all probability have been no *Dream*" (John Pilling, ed. *Beckett's Dream Notebook*, Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1999. xix-xx).

6   Because of his radical departure from established conventions in writing Norma Bouchard assigns Beckett not a Modernist but an avant-gardist affiliation: ". . . since the Beckettian literary space is kept in a constant state of overdetermination and regress, it clearly marks a departure from the stability of sedentary symbolization informing the epiphanic moment of Modernist narratives." (Norma Bouchard 137).

7   Ronan McDonald, for instance, writes: "His [Beckett's] drama and prose are so opaque and indeterminate that it seems somehow misconceived to ascribe to them a 'vision' or 'worldview' – 'tragic' or otherwise" (Ronan McDonald. *Tragedy and Irish Literature. Synge, O'Casey, Beckett*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002. 131).

8   The terms used by Bakhtin to refer to the other participant in the dialogic exchange, reader, listener or understander are, according to David Shepherd, "essentially interchangeable" (David Shepherd. "Bakhtin and the Reader," *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*. 1989. Ed. Ken Hirsckop and David Shepherd. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2001. 136-154, 137).

9   Curiously enough, in his *Dictionary of Narratology* Gerald Prince mentions one of Beckett's novels, *Molloy*, as an example of antinarrative: "A (verbal or non verbal) text adopting the trappings of narrative but systematically calling narrative logic and narrative conventions into question" (Gerald Prince. *A Dictionary of Narratology*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1987. 6).

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