

the end of the novel a new character, Shultz, like Henry before him, “plays himself some device with dice” (p. 234).

Henry’s withdrawal from the last chapter represents his artistic decision to detach himself from his creation. If he is wrong or insane, then it follows that so is Coover and God, Himself, the Ultimate Author. Clearly, neither Henry, Coover, nor God find it imperative or even desirable to reveal any presence or confirm any moral position. Instead, *The UBA* implies that fiction is one of a never-ending series of creations within creations moving forward from Coover to Henry to Schultz, ad infinitum, and backward from Henry to Coover to God in an infinite regress. Henry finally discovers that the key to fiction lies in the process of creating, “and the process was transformation” (p. 212). Thus, he has not lost his balance but redefined it, and Coover, certainly, has not killed the novel but attempted to transform it.

Orpheus Returning: The Nature of Myth in Samuel Beckett’s “Still” Trilogy

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It would, of course, be quite absurd to argue that Beckett’s writing is “hidden behind a veil of Orphic esotericism.”¹ Nothing could, in fact, be further from the truth: the myth of Orpheus in Beckett must be regarded in terms of what he has called “the need that is the absolute predicament of particular human identity,”² namely, that of the artist figure who struggles to integrate his various selves. An appreciation of these more affirmative dimensions of Beckett’s writing has been hampered by, among other things, the fact that contemporary readings of the Orpheus myth have increasingly stressed the negations contingent upon a descent into the self and into language itself. Walter Strauss, whose *Descent and Return* exemplifies this approach, concludes that Beckett has “abandoned the Orphic ideal altogether,” that his “vision of a hopelessly fragmented and absurd universe would surely render the Orphic obsolete.”³ But this essentially negative reading of the myth could only be convincingly applied to Beckett if we needlessly restricted ourselves to a consideration of what may now be called his “middle period,” particularly the “disintegration” he has so often spoken of with reference to *The Unnamable* (1958) and its “hell of stories.”

In Beckett’s later prose works there is a movement towards a regeneration of the Orpheus myth with an emphasis upon its first stage in which the archetypal artist once again directs his words towards the world. Myth now reappears in its original sense as a “true story” or exemplary model that creatively combines “facts” and “fantasy,” to use Vico’s definition which Beckett so very enthusiastically endorsed in

¹ John Fletcher’s apt judgment in *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1964), p. 239.

² Beckett’s important statement on the nature of the artistic enterprise in “Denis Devlin,” *Transition*, No. 27 (1938), p. 289.

³ Walter Strauss, *Descent and Return: The Orphic Theme in Modern Literature* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 269.

his early essay on Joyce (1929). If, as the myth tells us, Orpheus descended to the underworld and was after his death raised to the stars, it is also evident that he must again return to this world.⁴ A myth has no ending, only countless possibilities for new beginnings, and in Beckett's writing the "Still" trilogy is just such a new point of departure.

"Still" (1973) depicts a man in a room who, "sitting quite still at valley window," meditatively watches the sun, "bright at last close of a dark day."⁵ This familiar Beckett scene is, however, the starting point for one of his most successful resolutions of the celebrated "impasse" in which he found himself at the conclusion of his famous *Trilogy* of novels. There is no longer the vexed questioning of the very reality of this "something" located in the room, box, rotunda etc. which has for so long been a hallmark of Beckett's writing. For Beckett to be able to present an "other" that is not only admitted as real but human, is, in the context of his so-called "residual" works, a revolutionary act whose significance can easily be overlooked. The "stillness" which this protagonist ostensibly seeks should not be construed as an attempt to intuit a so-called true void of the self. The text makes clear that no such stasis is possible within our earthly purgatory, "Close inspection namely detail by detail all over add up finally to this whole not still at all but trembling all over" (p. 48). The tremulous equilibrium into which hand and head are brought in the second half of "Still" is not merely self-reflexive, but rather a recognition of the need for a connection between the "inside" and "outside" worlds. The self must come face to face with its bodily reality and with the world of nature outside the "open window." Even in the dark the self cannot avoid seeing itself: there is no refuge from "suffering that opens a window on the real, and is the main condition of the artistic experience," as Beckett asserted in his early study of Proust.⁶

This new orientation allows, in turn, for the development of a number of authentic mythological analogues. The sun in "Still" is not, like that in the opening sentences of *Murphy* (1938), scientifically confined to a set course, "having no alternative," nor is this protagonist like *Murphy* sitting "out of it, as though he were free." The "old gods," as the allusion to Memnon makes clear, are still alive. This man is, like Belacqua of Beckett's first unpublished novel, "Dream of Fair to Middling Women" (1932), a "trine man: centripetal, centrifugal and ... not. Phoebus chasing Daphne, Narcissus flying from Echo and ... neither. . . . The third being was the dark gulf."⁷ It is significant to note that the only "details" from the "outside" mentioned in "Still" are the sun and the "tree or bush" and "that beech in whose shade once" (p. 49). Like the narrator of *From an Abandoned Work* (1957), this man is also fascinated by "all things still and rooted," with the difference that now there is the suggestion that a human relationship with them is possible, especially with the tree which was throughout "Dream of Fair to Middling Women" called a "column of quiet," Belacqua's favorite phrase for his vision of the ideal woman. The identification becomes explicit in "Sounds," the sequel to "Still," where the man embraces the tree "as if a human" (p. 155).

Phoebus is indeed still chasing Daphne. The "reversed metamorphosis" of *Watt*

⁴ Vega (or "the falling vulture"), the brightest star in Orpheus's constellation of Lyra, is referred to several times in "Dream of Fair to Middling Women" (e.g. pp. 63, 64; Reading University Beckett Collection).

⁵ Samuel Beckett, "Still," number seven in the collection *Fizzles* (New York: Grove Press, 1976), p. 47. All future quotations are from this text (pp. 47-51). The even shorter "Sounds" (1973) and "Still 3" (1973) are printed as an appendix to John Pilling's "The significance of Beckett's 'Still,'" *Essays in Criticism*, 28, No. 2 (1978), 155-57. All references are from this source.

⁶ Samuel Beckett, *Proust* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1931), p. 16.

⁷ Samuel Beckett, "Dream of Fair to Middling Women" (Reading University Beckett Collection), p. 107.

(1953) which so disgusted Arsene—"The laurel into Daphne. The old thing where it always was, back again"⁸—is viewed here in a positive way as this solitary tries to repeople his world. Nor is Narcissus any longer flying from Echo. The last sentence of "Still" pictures the man "listening for a sound." There is still a "centripetal" and "centrifugal" movement in "Still"—eyes open and close "in what if not quite a single moment almost." But there is an ineluctable tropism that draws the man in "Still" towards the world and away from the "dark gulf." The phrases, "that beech in whose shade once," nostalgically echo the first line of Virgil's first eclogue ("The Dispossessed") and "of all the mythic figures in the poetic theology Orpheus is the one most important to pastoralism."⁹

"Head in hand listening trying listening for a sound" (p. 155) the man in "Sounds" has fully transferred his attention from the problematical status of his own stillness to the stillness of the world around him. If there are no longer any sounds in his room (or head), he must seek them outside the building. The central part of the work describes his to and fro visits to the tree, "with his arms round it certain moods" (p. 155), as Apollo did the laurel. An important source of Beckett's handling of this strange and moving scene is found in Robert Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*. In the section on "Cure of Love-melancholy," Burton discusses marriage as a means of overcoming solitude and cites the case of a famous scholar who has formerly heaped "dicteries against women," but who now recants, "A good wife is a good portion" (*et* xxxvi, 24), "an help, a pillar of rest," *columna quietis; Qui capit uxorem, fratrem capit atque sororem* (Who takes a wife takes a brother and a sister). Et. v. 25, "He that hath no wife wandereth to and fro mourning."¹⁰ But the *mea culpa* of "Sounds" has come much too late and the allusion from Burton must finally be read ironically. A lost loved one has indeed become a tree, a literalization of the proverbial "column of quiet" that is made possible by Beckett's adaptation of the myth of Apollo and Daphne. Whereas in "Dream of Fair to Middling Women" Beckett railed at women and desired an ideal "column of quiet", the man in "Sounds" is one of those unfortunates of fable who are cursed by their wish come true and who cannot now reverse the metamorphosis. To do so he would have to be an Orphic poet with the power to make nature speak, to make the trees move.

The failure to achieve this magical turnabout results in the introduction of a temptation to which many of Beckett's "people" have previously succumbed, a desire to be carried away from the cares of this world, "or if none [sounds] hour after hour no sound of any kind then he having been dreamt away let himself be dreamt away to where none at any time away from here where none come none pass to where no sound at any time no sound to listen for none of any kind" (p. 155). In "Still 3," the man has finally returned from this "dreamt away" state, "Whence when back no knowing where no telling where been how long how it was" (p. 156). Although these phrases remind one of *The Unnamable's* opening flurry of questions, this protagonist does not question his actual presence (the "who now" of *The Unnamable's* opening sentence is significantly absent). The fruitless queries of "how long how it was" underline that it is impossible for art to deal with a "place" in which the self is "dreamt away." The real subject of art is "how it is" with its investigation of being in time.

"When, in the second half of "Still 3," the world of the imagination does come "alive," it is so internalized and so discontinuous that any Orphic relationship of man

⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (New York: Grove Press, 1959), p. 44.

⁹ Richard Cody, *The Landscape of the Mind* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), p. 12.

¹⁰ Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, ed. Holbrook Jackson (New York: Vintage Books, 1977), Pt. 3, Sec. 2, Mem. 5, Subs. 5, p. 249.

and nature is necessarily forfeited, "Till in imagination from the dead faces faces on off in the dark sudden whites long short then black long short then another so on or the same" (p. 157). The stillness dealt with here does not bear comparison with that of "Still" and "Sounds," vibrant with a potential connection between the man's column of air, his breath, and the tree, "column of quiet." In "Still 3" the stillness is that of death ("marble still"), of human beings turned into statues with whom the man in his vision scorns (and fears) any "embrace." Eurydice has been lost and is resolutely kept at "arm's length"; this "Orpheus" will himself remain a spectral presence until he can through words connect his "dreamt away" state and his vision of the "dead faces" with the world outside himself. The fizzling out of "Still 3" must not, however, be prematurely taken as a summary judgment that the Orphic vision is no longer a factor in Beckett's continued development. The "fact" that Beckett can depict a man, and not some intermediary fictive self, a Molloy, Malone, or even an Unnamable, supplies the existential basis for further reconstructions by "fantasy," the imaginative faculty.

Black Women in Black Francophone Literature: Comparisons of Male and Female Writers

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The black woman has often intrigued and mystified writers of various cultures, who have attempted to capture her essence in their literary works. Some of the more well-known examples are the black women in William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (1936); the "mulâtresse" Jeanne Duval in Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* (1857); the sensuous black dancers in Luis Pales Matos' *Poesia* (1915-1956); or the mulatto female characters in Charles Chestnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900). Although some of these portrayals were flattering, most were stereotypical one-dimensional literary types, rather than full-fleshed individuals. As a result of two significant literary movements, however, (the 1930s Harlem Renaissance in the United States and the 1940s Negritude movement in black Francophone Africa and the Caribbean), the black woman came to occupy a more significant place in black literature throughout the diaspora.

Both the Harlem Renaissance and the Negritude movement encouraged a sense of cultural solidarity, a fresh commitment to the expression of black values, and, thereby, influenced the creation of a new black aesthetic. Inspired by the works of such eminent black writers from the United States as Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, W. E. B. DuBois, the young black Francophone literati from Africa and the Caribbean, studying in Paris, began to denounce their literary imitation of French styles and themes. By developing their own thematic portfolio, they ceased to sing praise to the fair skin and chestnut tresses of European women, and to begin to draw from their own cultural reality.¹ Through the vehicle of their poetry and novels, these writers evoked visions of their own women on the hills of Martinique, in the towns of

¹ Lilyane Kesteloot provides an in-depth discussion of the Harlem Renaissance in relationship to the Negritude movement in her study, *Les Ecrivains noirs de Langue Française: Naissance d'une Littérature* (Brussels: Université Libre de Bruxelles, 1965), pp. 63-82.