

Samuel Beckett and Anthony Burgess: A Literary Encounter

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It is not my intention in this paper to 'compare and contrast' Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) and Anthony Burgess. They were very different writers - indeed very different individuals - so nothing is to be gained from subjecting them to a comparative analysis. Moreover, Beckett never seems to have known much about Burgess. The biographies of Beckett by Deirdre Bair, James Knowlson and Anthony Cronin do not mention him. So if there was a literary encounter - as I contend there was - it was all one-way. Burgess held Beckett in very high esteem; it is not certain that Beckett had even heard of Burgess, although Georges Belmont, Burgess's French translator, who was an old friend of Beckett's, may have brought Burgess's name up in the course of conversation.

Beckett did not have an extensive personal library. After the 1930s he never did any book reviewing, so he did not accumulate books that way (as Burgess did, although he also sold some of his review copies). Admirers - chiefly fellow-writers and academics - would send Beckett copies of their books, but he appears rarely to have kept them. (An association copy of, say, *The Caretaker*, inscribed by the author, Harold Pinter, to 'Sam', would fetch a tidy sum at Sotheby's, but is unlikely to come on the market.)

Anthony Burgess, on the other hand, did have a large personal collection of books, and many of them are now housed in the library of Angers University. These are the works by and about Beckett - most of them review copies - held there, with their catalogue numbers:

Beckett at Sixty (BUR 347)

The Testament of Samuel Beckett (BUR 348)

The Novels of Samuel Beckett (BUR 352)

Poems in English (BUR 644) So far as I have been able to check, drawing upon my Beckett bibliography (*Samuel Beckett, His Works and His Critics*, 1970), the resources

of the Templeman Library at the University of Kent and of the Bibliothèque Universitaire d'Angers, and information kindly supplied to me by Andrew Biswell, there are some eleven items in the bibliography of Anthony Burgess which relate to works by or about Samuel Beckett (for full details, see the Appendix below). I will take them in order.

The first is brief, but finds room for a typically arresting phrase which sums up Samuel Beckett's fiction rather well: 'the endless monologue that grates life like cheese'.

Next comes Burgess's characteristically generous review of my own first book. His general conclusion in that piece - about Beckett's lasting significance - can hardly be bettered:

Beckett is not an attractive author, but he is immensely important. He has dared to incarnate everybody's true suspicions about the real nature of the universe, and to do this he has turned his back on the richness of his own literary inheritance and forged a highly personal language out of a tongue not his own.

The comment about 'a tongue not his own' is a reference to a point made earlier in the review, namely that Beckett began writing in English before turning to French. In illustration of his belief that Beckett's English was 'very satisfactory', Burgess quotes this passage from *Murphy* (1938):

The leaves began to lift and scatter, the higher branches to complain, the sky broke and curdled over flecks of skim blue, the pine of smoke toppled into the east and vanished, the pond was suddenly a little panic of grey and white, of water and gulls and sails.

I quote this same passage on page 42 of my book in support of my assertion that a notable feature of *Murphy's* style is its poetic quality, which springs from Beckett's ability to fix in striking images the beauty of natural things. Burgess evidently found this passage as impressive as I did, because he quotes it several times in his various writings on Beckett. There is no copy of *Murphy* in his library at Angers, so it is reasonable to assume that he remembered the quotation from having read it in my book. He has not marked his copy of *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* at that point (nor indeed at any other), so he probably memorised the excerpt (Ben Forkner has testified to the fact that Burgess had a phenomenal memory and was word perfect in his recall of many literary passages, some of them of course much longer than this one). In the second line of item no. 2, Burgess quotes the words 'merde universelle' which, translated into English, give his review its title. The words come from Beckett's *Nouvelles* (written ca. 1945), which I discuss in ch. 4 of *The Novels of Samuel Beckett*, and I quote them on p. 107. Burgess remembered this vivid phrase and used it again some twenty years later, in his *Times* profile of Samuel Beckett (item no. 10 in the bibliography below).

Before I go any further, let me emphasise that this paper is not about me but about the way a talented and prolific author (Anthony Burgess) used a book on a great figure (Samuel Beckett) written by an academic (myself, as it happens, but it could have been anyone). Burgess was doing nothing improper or illegitimate here, but a close examination of his writings on Beckett reveals much about his working methods and particularly about the short cuts which tight

deadlines forced upon him. My argument in brief is that Burgess was a literary magpie who garnered material wherever his wide and eclectic reading led him: I just happened to be the person he picked ideas up from where Beckett was concerned. Burgess always made a little go a long way, but he was a gifted writer and a first-rate critic (I especially admire *Here Comes Everybody*

which in my view is one of the best and certainly one of the most accessible books on Joyce), so I want to make it clear before continuing that in taking short cuts he may have made the odd mistake through haste, but that he was no vulgar plagiarist; indeed, in my case, he put the argument in

The Novels of Samuel Beckett

better than I did (could) myself.

Item no. 3 on the list below is a brief acknowledgement in the Foreword of *Here Comes*

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(1929), 'twelve essays by twelve men, behind all of whom the prodding master seems to stand', one of the twelve of course being the 23-year-old Samuel Beckett, author of the article on Joyce's debt to Dante, Bruno and Vico.

'The First JJ' (item no. 4) is, as its title implies, mainly about Joyce, but in the course of his review of *A Question of Modernity* Burgess quotes admiringly Cronin's astute comment on Beckett's writing: 'However terrible its truths may appear, it is full of the gaiety that is born of the courage to contemplate and indeed to outface reality'.

The fifth item is one of Burgess's longer meditations on the work of Samuel Beckett, which perhaps explains why it was reprinted in *Urgent Copy*. It uses the same quotation from *Murphy* once again, but it is chiefly notable for introducing the idea of what is pithily called 'Beckett's enduring Saturday', seen as a fundamentally Christian notion:

If in Camus we catch echoes of the stoicism of Seneca, in Beckett we smell the leavings of Christian hope. This is not to say that *Waiting for Godot*, with its allusions to the thieves who were crucified with Christ, is to be regarded as a Christian morality: very far from it. But the symbols of Christianity are drenched with suggestive richness. And so Beckett's enduring Saturday is the one that comes between Good Friday and Easter Day, except that time has a stop after Christ's crucifixion. Saturday refuses to become Sunday, and we are stuck with a 'large measure of despair and a small measure of hope'. The thing to do is to wait, even though we can be quite sure that the waiting will not be rewarded. Life is a wretched grey Saturday, but it has to be lived through.

The next piece (item no. 6) wastes few words on the rather silly *festschrift* celebrating Beckett's sixtieth birthday and concentrates instead on the prose works collected in

No's Knife

. Once again Burgess captures the essence of Beckett's achievement in these beautifully resonant short texts:

Beckett's mastery of a kind of poetry of deprivation has a quality of miracle in it. His heroes have nothing but sores, smells, poverty, impending dissolution, but their language is

rhythmically rich and their cries thrill like trumpets.

The couple of pages devoted to Beckett in *The Novel Now* (item no. 7) use that quotation from *Murphy*

again, and indeed all Burgess's other quotations are to be found in my book (on pages 225, 232-3, 188 and 210). This is unlikely to be a coincidence, especially as Burgess provides a characteristically brilliant summary of the argument of

The Novels of Samuel Beckett

. This is of course not plagiarism; rather, it is inspired précis:

All of the wretches who give their names to Beckett's novels are reductions of mankind - tramps, outcasts, poverty-stricken old men. They wear rags, they are diseased, they smell, they are rejected by us, thrown out of doss-houses, told to get off the bus. They are not only disgusting, they are absurd. And yet they are human beings like ourselves, humiliated by charity, demanding something better than condescension or contempt. The point about them is that they manage to survive, finding the odd hole in the ground to sleep in, the odd crust to gnaw. Ultimately they are stoical, expecting nothing from God, aware that the stars they sleep under are indifferent, insentient matter. Indeed, neither religion nor philosophy can offer any comfort. Beckett does not believe in God, though he seems to imply that God has committed an unforgivable sin by not existing. To write about characters who have so little requires very great literary skill. Beckett is a master of form: his books have a shape that suggests music. Out of the nothingness of life he can call up fantasies of great power, and his unheroic heroes grow, by the very starkness of their lives, into genuine pieces of mythology. His novels, like all important works of art, have the stamp of the inevitable upon them: they had to be written and, though we suffer reading them, we are glad they have been written.

That I am not deluding myself about the extent of Anthony Burgess's debt to my book is revealed by an interesting slip. Burgess thinks that 'Belacqua' is the title of one of Beckett's early novels. It is not, of course. Belacqua is the hero of *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1932) and

More Pricks than Kicks

(1934), but in my book chapter one is entitled 'Belacqua', because I there discuss both works; chapter two is headed 'Murphy' and chapter three 'Watt', which are, at one and the same time, the names of the heroes and the titles of the novels in which those heroes appear. In his haste to write the Beckett section of

The Novel Now

, Burgess evidently overlooked the difference. Like many readers, he must have skipped my explanatory preface, in which I point out that 'this book is an attempt to provide a guide to Beckett's fiction, by tracing the evolution of the hero in his novels'. In other words, it is not the title of the novel in which the hero appears, but the name of the hero himself which provides the heading for the chapter concerned. That is how Burgess came to assume that 'Belacqua' was a Beckett title.

The allusion to Beckett in *Joysprick* (item no. 8) is a passing one, and the brief references in *English Literature*

(item no. 9) repeat the points already noted about 'eternal Saturday' and Beckett's fascination

with 'the world of the totally deprived'. The last item in the bibliography is a short piece on Waiting for Godot written for the 1987 National Theatre staging by Michael Rudman which starred Alec McCowen as Vladimir; the essay expands the few lines on the subject in English Literature to seven paragraphs, repeating the remark about 'Saturday refusing to be come Sunday', but adding little else except a mistake in French, a language Burgess seems to have known less well than he was wont to claim. Retelling the well-worn

canard

that Beckett once heard an Air France pilot announce '

Le capitaine Godot vous souhaite la bienvenue à bord

', Burgess misremembers this as '

Le capitaine Godot vous accorde des bienvenues

', which is not a phrase a French native speaker would use.

Item no. 10 in the bibliography, however, is altogether more substantial and worthy of note. It is *The Times*

's profile of the great author, who was 80 that week. In it 'life is a wretched grey Saturday' is given yet another airing by Burgess, as is my excerpt from

Murphy

(unfortunately the speech marks were omitted in error from the quotation by

The Times

's sub, which must have baffled readers who did know their

Murphy

). But Burgess goes on to pinpoint eloquently the 'Beckettian view of the world as a place of pain':

Given less to philosophical pessimism than to a realistic disillusionment...the Molloy trilogy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable present the last gasp of human despair qualified by a dogged determination to survive for the mere sake of survival. The characters have nothing to live for, but they are not suicidal. The curious thing about these monologues of desolation is that they are not depressing. There is even a kind of exhilaration in their rhythms. The human condition, which is always presented as terminal, is absurd. We ought not to be entertained, but we are.

This is first-class criticism. It is the kind of writing, at once terse, clear and acutely perceptive, which can be put within inverted commas and set before students to 'discuss'.

In his biography of *Shakespeare* (1970), Anthony Burgess points out that a born author picks up the information he or she needs in the most unlikely places:

You may know the fiction-writer by his library, whose contents flatter neither the eye nor the owner's capacity for systematic reading. Instead of phalanges of rich uniform bindings, there are old racing guides, dog-eared astronomical almanacs, comic periodicals, secondhand dictionaries, unscholarly history books, and notebooks full of odd facts (p. 39).

Allowing for a touch of comic exaggeration, this account gives an indication of Burgess's own methods as a literary critic and reviewer. Writing to tight deadlines, he took short cuts, and who would blame him? He was always generous in acknowledging his debts to scholarly works by academics like Richard Ellmann and Carlos Baker. He could after all afford to be magnanimous: he wrote better than many professors do. Haste did however lead him to make the odd venial mistake; I have already mentioned 'Belacqua', and in *The Times* profile he says that Winnie in the play *Happy Days* (1961) is

'buried up to her waist in rubbish', whereas in fact she is embedded in a mound of earth. The circumstance of his mentioning this play at all, though, explains why in

Honey for the Bears

(1963) he got angry when 'formication' was mistakenly corrected by the copy-editor to 'fornication', and why Burgess insisted that the original reading be restored. He must have remembered this unusual word (a medical term to describe a nerve disorder and its characteristic symptom, the sensation of ants crawling on the skin) from Beckett's play, where it provokes laughter between Winnie and Willie and gives rise to the question 'how can one better magnify the Almighty than by sniggering with him at his little jokes, particularly the poorer ones?' (p. 24). The pun - ants, according to Willie, lay their eggs after indulging in 'formication' - is indeed rather feeble, quite deliberately so, but it amused Burgess enough for him to use the word in a book published a couple of years later.

In the eternal order of things - the 'everlasting Saturday' of which we hear such a lot - the literary encounter between Samuel Beckett and Anthony Burgess may in the end not amount to much, but it sheds useful light on the work of the great writer, and it constitutes an interesting footnote to the bio-bibliography of his prolific near-contemporary.

[Text of a paper read at the International Symposium on Anthony Burgess held at the University of Angers, France, in December 2001]



Appendix

Anthony Burgess: Bibliography of Writings on Samuel Beckett

- (1) 1962 'Reprints for Novel Addicts' (review *inter alia* of the Penguin reprint of *Malone Dies*). *The Observer*, 30 December, p. 11
- (2) 1964 'The Universal Mess' (review of *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* by John Fletcher). *The Guardian*, 24 July, p. 9
- (3) 1965 *Here Comes Everybody*, p. 12
- (4) 1966 'The First JJ' (review, *inter alia*, of *A Question of Modernity* by Anthony Cronin, which concentrates on Joyce and Beckett). *The Spectator*, 18 March, p. 332
- (5) 1966 'Enduring Saturday' (review of *The Testament of Samuel Beckett* by Jacobsen and Mueller). *The Spectator*, 29 April, pp. 532-3; reprinted in *Urgent Copy* (1968), pp. 85-7
- (6) 1967 'Master Beckett' (review of *No's Knife and Beckett at Sixty*). *The Spectator*, 21 July, pp. 79-80.
- (7) 1967 *The Novel Now*, pp. 72, 75-7, 79
- (8) 1973 *Joysprick*, p. 126
- (9) 1974 *English Literature: A Survey for Students*, pp. 206, 228
- (10) 1986 'The Master of Erudite Silence', *The Times*, 10 April, p. 10
- (11) 1987 'Neither God nor Fish nor Flesh' (programme article on *Waiting for Godot*, National Theatre, London)