

Fall 2002

Review of Beckett traduit Beckett: de Malone meurt à Malone dies: L'imaginaire en traduction

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Recommended Citation

Janus, Adrienne (2002). Review of "Review of Beckett traduit Beckett: de Malone meurt à Malone dies: L'imaginaire en traduction," *Bryn Mawr Review of Comparative Literature*: Vol. 3 : No. 2
Available at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/bmrcl/vol3/iss2/11>

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Linda Collinge, *Beckett traduit Beckett: de Malone meurt à Malone dies: L'imaginaire en traduction*. Geneve: Droz Press, 2000. 297 pp. ISBN: 2600003924.

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There is a certain sense in which all Beckett's writing, whether the "original" text or the subsequent translation of it, is in effect a translation, or mistranslation, of another work, an "ill-seen, ill-said," misheard and mistranscribed "ur-text." Linda Collinge's *Beckett traduit Beckett*, one of the latest contributions to the already quite overdetermined matter of Beckett and translation, may only address this idea explicitly in a passing remark. Such a premise, however, subtends her study as a whole and provides her with the space she needs to develop her own process of enquiry. The question which directs Collinge's approach is hinted at by her title's reflexive play upon Beckett as both subject and object of translation. That is, to what extent does the author play the role of an active translator, self-consciously engaging with, and controlling, the "genie de la langue" in order to capture the essence of the "original" French work, *Malone meurt*, in the English *Malone Dies*? Or, on the other hand, to what extent does the process of translating into the mother tongue (and Collinge endows "langue maternelle" with all the psychoanalytic weight it can carry) play upon Beckett's own unconscious obsessions and concerns, triggering a compensatory functioning of the imagination from which arise the often striking divergences between the original and its translation? In the latter case, Collinge suggests, it is Beckett himself who is "translated," and not simply the French text.

The bipartite structure itself of *Beckett traduit Beckett* nicely recapitulates the polarity Collinge sets out between active translator and passive "translated." The first section of her book analyzes the techniques responsible for producing the similarities between *Malone meurt* and *Malone Dies*, techniques governed by what Collinge, borrowing from reception theory, calls the ludic function of imagination. Associated with an adult, or independent, self-consciousness directed toward the real and the symbolic, the ludic function produces literal translation (the "degree zero" of the translating imagination) as well as "oblique" translation, the transposition of French idiomatic expressions, cultural contexts or aesthetic effects to their equivalent in English. Thankfully, Collinge doesn't spend much time analyzing transpositions necessitated by grammatical or cultural differences between French and English. She keeps her examples succinct and to the point, briefly showing how, for example, "tutoiement torrentiel" becomes "torrent of civility," the difference in English between the formal and informal second person obviously being stylistic rather than purely grammatical. And although she rightly draws attention to Beckett's efforts to maintain equivalences in the aesthetic effects produced by rhythm and tone, she doesn't, at this point, offer an extended close reading. Indeed, she seems rather in a hurry to get to the second part of her analysis dealing with the divergences between the two texts and with the passive, "translated" authorial imagination.

In some ways, the reader is well rewarded by Collinge's haste to move on to part II and the divergences between the two texts. Not only is the question of how the translation differs from the French original more interesting in itself, but the typology (which provides the chapter divisions to this section) developed around these differences is quite compelling. In Chapter I of

part two, for example, entitled "Humor and Self-derision," Collinge shows that translation from French to English entails the movement from less pain and more humor, to more pain and self-derisive mockery. Similarly, the next chapter, "Authority and Transgression," argues that the movement into the English language entails a movement from a relatively active, to a more passive (or passive-aggressive) relation to authority and an increased sense of menace. The last section, "Speech or Silence," claims for the French original a greater sense of expressive free-play, while the English version indicates a more restricted and controlled imagination that seeks to suppress transgressive or unnecessary expression. In order for such an argument to work, translation must be read in its widest sense, as the movement from one state of being to another: from the transcription of that mis-heard, misread "ur-text" into the original French, and from the foreign tongue which, for Collinge, marks Beckett's marginalization, exile and excentricity as an Irishman living in France, yet which allows the distance to cultivate the humor of jokes and word play; to the English mother tongue which marks the wounds of childhood trauma and parental authority and which triggers self-mockery as a self-objectifying defensive mechanism.

To her credit, Collinge offers a series of exhaustively detailed tables and some quite elegant close readings in support of her interpretation. Yet there is something a bit imbalanced in such a reading, particularly for those Anglophones who have come to know the English/Irish Beckett as manifesting an amount of imaginative playfulness equivalent to that which Collinge would reserve for the French Beckett. One thus wonders to what extent her readings are skewed by an insufficient understanding, not necessarily of English, but of Irish-English, and, more particularly, of the Anglo-Irish particular to the Protestant middle class in Dublin to which Beckett belonged. Beckett's caricature of "l'Anglais," for example, whose line, "Who is this shite anyway, any of you poor buggers happen to know," appears as such in the original French and the English translation, is read by Collinge as presenting the appearance of a humorously complicit (read passive-aggressive) jab at English hegemony, while actually being a "paradoxical" example of Beckettian self-derisive mockery: paradoxical, for Collinge, insofar as she sees Beckett's "phlegmatic" reserve as being much more English than what she refers to as the typically "bon vivant" Irish. Although Collinge is certainly correct in seeing this as an example of self-mockery, it is so, and paradoxically so, in a much more complicated way than she allows. For an Anglo-Irish Protestant of Beckett's milieu would never be associated, as Collinge suggests, with the Irish "bon vivant," an attitude always tagged as Catholic, and thus (or maybe therefore) of a different class. An Anglo-Irish Protestant of Beckett's class, would, however, inhabit the "paradoxical" socio-linguistic space that is at once identifiably "English" as well as "Irish": English, with its class-distinctive boarding-school slang "poor buggers"; Irish, by the use of the word "shite," a term more common to Anglo-Irish speakers than to English; and Anglo-Irish by the self-consciously ironic mixture of the two. This example of self-mockery would thus seem properly read not, as Collinge does, as the expression of Beckett's own individual need to objectify and thus distance himself from the trauma of his memories of Ireland. Rather, it is a characteristic example of a particular type of Irish humor, the type most commonly associated, as Vivian Mercier's study, *The Irish Comic Tradition*, shows, with the Anglo-Irish literary tradition running from Swift through Wilde to Beckett.

Collinge does present one of the more interesting offerings on Beckett and translation, managing to beautifully merge a wealth of detail with a general theory of Beckettian poetics. Her tendency to reduce Beckett to an object of his own individual obsessions, however, and to overlook the

specificity of the Anglo-Irish cultural context against which those obsessions take on larger literary as well as philosophical and political importance, not only weakens her own argument but deprives Beckett's writing of a great deal of its power. While one can productively read *Malone meurt* through the lens of a French, or continental, theoretical tradition, in order to do justice to *Malone Dies*, one would have to assume particular knowledge of the Anglo-Irish literary tradition as well. In other words, to talk of Beckett's translations, one must also assume the dual role of translator and translated.