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Reading Modernism in the Contemporary: Translation, Setting, Mnemonic Migration

This essay responds to the recent conceptualisation and reading of literature as a form of mnemonic migration; that is to say, as a vehicle which transmits experience into new frameworks of memory. Specifically, it addresses Jessica Ortner and Tea Sindbæk Andersen's research in this area, which has provoked me to meditate on the relationship between radically symbolic literary forms and travelling memories. Ortner's and Andersen's work (Ortner, Sindbaek Andersen, and Wierød Borčak 2022) has focused on Aleksander Hemon's short story "A Coin" (1997), and Saša Stanišić's novel *How the Soldier Repairs the Gramophone* (2006) as examples of literary memories of the Bosnian War. Hemon's and Stanišić's texts slide between moderately and radically symbolic textualities, borrowing from Roland Barthes's elucidations of these terms where the moderately symbolic text closes in on a signified, and the radically symbolic text is structured but off-centred and without closure. For Barthes, in *From Work to Text* (1987), literatures which correspond to a "work", or which are moderately symbolic, "close in on a specific signified and [...] function as a general sign and it is normal that it should represent an institutional category of the civilization of the sign" (1987, 158). In contrast to the "work", Barthes develops the idea of the "text" to describe acts of literature which accomplish "the very plural of meaning: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) plural" (1987, 159). The text is thus "radically symbolic" and is "approached, experienced, in reaction to the sign"; the field of the text "is that of the signifier and the signifier must not be conceived of as 'the first stage of meaning,' its material vestibule, but in complete opposition to this, as its deferred action" (Barthes 1987, 159). Thought of in such terms, we can locate Hemon's and Stanišić's work within a certain lineage of modernist-through-contemporary literature which is concerned to display a preoccupation with the relation between literary symbolism, form, and content. While Hemon's and Stanišić's texts lend themselves to being read in terms of the history of the Bosnian war, and thus validating a historicist interpretation of their narrative strategies, the question of mnemonic migration has compelled me to wonder how and if other radically symbolic literatures – texts which are ostensibly concerned with the field of the signifier and which practise the deferment of the signified – could be read through the lens of a similar or adapted methodology. That is to say, do such literatures – think James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (*L'Innommable*, 1953), Tom McCarthy's *Satin Island* (2015), Anna Burns's *Milkman* (2018) –

interrupt conceptualisations of fiction as a convenient mnemonic form? And moreover: do such literatures pose problems to invocations of literature as a mode of prosthetic memory, following Alison Landsberg's terms, where readers adopt stories told into their personal stock of memory and, in the process, establish affective connections between their lives and the lives of those represented in literary texts?

At their base, such accounts presuppose a referential memory that literature mobilises, a circumstance explicable by the prominence of aesthetic and literary realism in western culture since the nineteenth century. Realism has become such a familiar custom in culture at large that it has, for a long time, seemed a natural and unvarnished mode rather than a code of representation. Its dominance in culture has had a significant impact on criticism; it has enabled a default historicism to install itself as the base of literary and cultural studies, as is evident in Landsberg's account, which suggests that people can "take on memories of events not 'naturally' their own" because media representations "feel real" (2004, 18). Yet, as Roland Barthes suggests in *S/Z* (1970), realism is not a copy of the real, but a copy of a copy of the real. Literary and filmic representation operate at a double remove from the real, yet both modes produce the deception that they belatedly and referentially imitate the real. The literary device of setting, which seems to materialise history and index the extratextual world more than other aesthetic or narrative concepts, is crucial in this respect as it supplies historicist minded critics with a hermeneutic primer for assuming direct forms of imitation and referentiality in literary texts. Indeed, the idea of an indexical signifier suggests a connection between language and matter, and, when its implications are scaled up, between representation and (material) history. However, the relationship between a signifier and a purported signified has never been guaranteed. In this sense, we must not forget the foundational insights of deconstructive criticism, despite the decline in prominence of such methods of reading. As Paul De Man has concisely written: "Literature is fiction not because it somehow refuses to acknowledge 'reality,' but because it is not a priori certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are like those, of the phenomenal world" (1986, 11). This is not to suggest that literature is anti-mimetic, but it does complicate understandings of the registration of extratextual realities in literary texts as presupposing forms of direct referentiality. We may thus treat with suspicion, as Eneken Laanes (2021) has signalled, the idea of an originary or source memory that has not already been touched by (cultural) translation. Laanes takes the example of Rebecca Walkowitz's "born-translated" model to elucidate this point. While Walkowitz's idea finds voice through the globalised condition of contemporary literature, this circumstance is not unique to late-twentieth or twenty-first century literature. The problem of authenticity and translation is particular to both the history of twentieth century philosophy, as well as modernist literature,

coordinates which provide philosophical and literary antecedents to the question of mnemonic migration and the related role of fiction. My overarching question then is this: how do we read transcultural mnemonic migration, and where do we locate cultural memory, in relation to radically symbolic literatures that do not particularly close in on a specific signified and that build problems of translation and untranslatability into their forms?

My cue is taken from Jacques Rancière, who provides an illuminating account of the preoccupation with aesthetic scepticism that traverses modern literature in his book *Mute Speech* (2011). In contrast to the historicist assumptions operative at the intersections of the new modernist studies and literary memory studies, Rancière narrates the turn to aesthetic doubt in modern literature as inspired by the institution of literature itself, and thus not as determined by historical events, realities, or trauma. "Suspicion", Rancière writes,

> with respect to literature and the withdrawal before a more fundamental "unworking" [*désœuvrement*] were not born in the 1940s from historical trauma or the political demystification of the function of discourse. They belong to the system of reasons that make "literature", since the Romantic revolution, the name given to the productions of the art of writing. (2011, 170)

Notably, Rancière's description of the occurrence and proclivities of modernist form differ significantly from the reading strategies that have become orthodox in literary and cultural studies since the 1990s. Over the past thirty years, during which so-called high theory gave way to historicist, materialist and postcolonial modes of criticism, literary and cultural critics have often explained modernist aesthetics in terms of the conditions of textual production. One famous and influential example is Terry Eagleton's suggestion that the realist novel never happened in Ireland for economic reasons: "That the novel never flourished as vigorously as its English counterpart is surely no mystery. For culture demands a material base; and a society as impoverished as Ireland was hardly in a position to provide one" (1996, 145). Eagleton's comment was in tune with, and anticipatory of, a tide of criticism which would read the peculiarities of literary modes, and particularly the jagged shapes of modernist forms, as determined by historical events, realities and traumas, and the uneven development of modernity. Note, for example, Susan Stanford's claim in her magnum opus, *Planetary Modernisms* (2015), that modernism is the aesthetic expression of any given modernity. Such reading strategies and dictums have also been foundational to, and influential in, the field of memory studies. Indeed, memory studies emerged as a disciplinary field around the same time that postcolonial studies, new historicism, and cultural materialism became the dominant modes of inquiry in literary and cultural studies. The overlap between these fields has long been evident, and we can detect these influences at

the base of, for example, Landsberg's work, which tacitly incites a historicist understanding of cultural production as a belated and referential imitation of a historical referent or setting; a circumstance that tells us how art and media, in this disciplinary formation, become conceptualised and read as memory.

The implications of Rancière's argument establish a problematic concerning the motives behind the modern writer's aesthetic scepticism, and its growth or development across a corpus. Rancière offers an account of the writer torn between the history of literature and the history of their world: after Flaubert, "neither its object or its intention have ever served as a guarantee"; and because literature has the "misfortune of speaking only in words, it thus has to make the work both the realisation and the refutation of its intention" (2011, 175). As Rancière writes, "the weakness of the means at its disposal [...] is what taught literature to tame the myths and suspicions that separated it from itself to invent the fictions and metaphors of a sceptical art in the strict sense of the term" (2011, 174). In these terms, Rancière outlines a lineage of aesthetic *désœuvrement* [unworking] that is concerned with turning literature towards telling the story of the conditions of its own making. Rancière thus suggests that literature, extending through Flaubert, Joyce, and Proust, becomes an "ambiguous stage on which two anti-genres, the novel and the essay, double, oppose or intertwine with one another" (2011, 174). The ambiguous stage that literature has become serves to establish a response to literary, as well as to material and political, history. This circumstance makes modern literature, which is not necessarily anti-mimetic, an art that "investigates itself, that makes fictions from this investigation, that plays with its myths, challenges its philosophy, and challenges itself in the name of this philosophy" (Rancière 2011, 174).

Beckett and the historicist problematic

Samuel Beckett's fiction is a radical case in point for this interrogation of the capacity of radically symbolic texts, or literatures that correspond to Rancière's history of aesthetic scepticism, to act as forms of mnemonic migration. Beckett was a European migrant writer who wrote in English, French, and German and published in American, British, French, and German publishing houses and theatres, and his writing features a host of transcultural and trans-European traces of traumatic events, military activity, and war. His corpus thus constitutes a literary accumulation and dispersal of diverse historical traces which travel across languages and borders. Simultaneously, Beckett's writing prominently belongs to, and by many accounts represents an apotheosis of, a literary history of aesthetic *désœuvrement* which is concerned with turning the literary work against its own mak-

ing. Beckett's travelling traces thus occur in two overlapping frameworks: the framework of linguistic literary traditions, and the framework of a modernist history of aesthetic underdevelopment. In the following, I consider the implications of this dual aspect of Beckett's corpus for how we read radically symbolic literatures as examples of mnemonic migration and transmission. Similarly, I demonstrate how Beckett serves as an important precursor for the consideration of the styles and forms of certain experimental contemporary literatures and their relation to socio-political events and realities; like Hemon and Stanišić, we can nod to J. M. Coetzee and Anna Burns as obvious examples in this respect.

Though Beckett was once received as a formalist distant from cultural and political points of reference, the historicist turn in literary and modernist studies has allowed his corpus to be examined in relation to national and transnational European histories. Beckett is thus no longer an ivory tower modernist "assimilated to a vague metaphysics, in a strange, solitary place, or an existentialist [inhabiting] an inarticulate [or] shapeless language" (Casanova 2009, 9). Particularly, historicist work has lit up the cultural signifiers in Beckett's corpus to reveal a writer whose French, English and German texts offer oblique accounts of Irish histories of exile and republican nationalism, vestigial traces of French, German, and Belgian military histories, and faint references to the Second World War. *Mercier and Camier* (*Mercier et Camier*, 1970), for example, features references to Patrick Sarsfield, the murder of Noel Lemass, The Battle of Aughrim, The Flight of the Wild Geese, the Battle of Landen, Charles Chalmot de Saint-Ruhe, (a French cavalry officer who served Louis XIV), and Gestapo surveillance culture. Focusing on the origins of such traces, a branch of Beckett criticism has responded with a positive critical grammar for reading his work as presenting, remembering, and reconstituting aspects of the historical past. Indeed, as per Theodor Adorno, Beckett's writing is uniquely related to the history from which it emerges. Adorno writes: "Beckett has given us the only fitting reaction to the situation of the concentration camps – a situation he never calls by name, as if it were subject to an image ban" (1973, 380 – 381). Beckett, in one sense then, is undoubtedly a writer of the migration and relocation of memory. In turn, Beckett's bilingual corpus can be read as actively transmitting elements of Irish history into twentieth-century French literature, as well as traces of European military histories into Anglophone literature. In terms of such analytic lenses, radically symbolic literatures, which also partake in a history of turning the work of art against the conditions of its making, become amenable to determined historicist analysis.

Notwithstanding such advances in criticism, however, Beckett's writing still remains resistant to historicist reading strategies, despite their ever-increasing sophistication. The cultural traces littered in Beckett's work refrain from cohering around any fixed signified. Borrowing a memory studies vocabulary, we might

label such floating traces as mnemonic forms; that is, as Astrid Erll describes in her seminal essay "Travelling Memory", "condensed figures of remembering that enable repetition and are often themselves shorthands that are eminently transportable and thus powerful carriers of meaning. In their displacement, memory figures tend to be stripped of their complexity, detached from the details and contextual meanings to which they referred" (Erll 2011, 13–14). This can lead, as Erll writes, to a distortion and even a perversion of memories. Indeed, this distortion and perversion of memories, as well as their detachment from historical context, is one of the aesthetic features and legacies of modernist literatures, and of Beckett's writing more particularly. In *Mercier and Camier* and throughout his Trilogy – *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (*Malone Meurt*, 1951), *The Unnamable* (1953) – Beckett establishes his minimalist aesthetic of referential diminution (his paring back of historical traces in his texts) that would become typical of his corpus, and that would allow him to subvert the narrative and formal structures – unity, space, time – that had constituted and signalled the accomplishment of fictional and theatrical genres. In these novels, Beckett's styleless style – or writing degree zero, with its process of undermining a statement upon its assertion – destabilises the meaning of the historical traces within his textual operations.[1]

A particular example of this occurs in the first of Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* (*Textes pour rien*, 1955), which, as Sean Kennedy has suggested, is haunted by an uncompleted mourning for an Ireland still present as a spectral landscape. *Texts for Nothing* is comprised of thirteen short prose pieces which Beckett composed after the completion of his Trilogy. Following the complete disintegration of the subject across *Molloy*, *Malone Dies* and *The Unnamable* (the subject is in motion in *Molloy*, stationary and dying in *Malone Dies*, and disembodied in the *Unnamable*), the first story of *Texts for Nothing* signals a return to the body and, with that, landscape description. On the first page of the first story, the milieu – "Quag, heath up to the knees, faint sheep-tracks, troughs scooped deep by rains […]. Glorious prospect, but for the mist that blotted out everything, valleys, loughs, plain and sea" (Beckett 2010b, 3) – seems to signal an Irish landsape, one akin to the parts of the Dublin mountains which have often been dubbed "the Beckett Country". As does the subsequent suggestion that the narrator's "home" could be seen from his location: "[b]ut for the mist, with good eyes, with a telescope" (Beckett 2010b, 3). As is well known, Beckett's family home in Foxrock was within walking distance of the Dublin mountains. Similarly, Beckett's aphasic narrator has heard tell "of the view, the distant sea in hammered lead, the so-called golden vale so often sung, the double valleys, the glacial loughs, the city in its haze" (Beckett

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1 For more on Beckett as a proponent of writing degree zero, see Rabaté 2016b.

2010b, 3). These details, which seem to indicate the narrator's proximity to the Irish sea, Dublin city, and the glacial valley of Glendalough, *Gleann Dá Loch* [valley of two lakes] in Irish, further reinforce a reading of Ireland as the setting of the text. And pertinently, Beckett does not subject these descriptions to the process of epistemic qualification and negation – cancelling a statement as it is uttered – that became the signature of his style. Indeed, Kennedy reads these geographic details deterministically. Taking Beckett and the narrative voice to be related, he writes that this "is an Irish place, as the mention of the 'golden vale' makes clear, one that is close to the narrator's homeland" (Kennedy 2009, 17). Thus, for Kennedy, "Irish landscapes persist in the work […] partly because they sustain certain precious memories of the father" (2009, 17), for whom Kennedy reads *Texts for Nothing* as a nostalgic ode. Thus, "this subject is spoken by its ghosts, and all the voices that exert claims on him at various points in the *Texts* constitute elements of his personal hauntology" (Kennedy 2009, 17). Kennedy takes umbrage with the critic Jonathan Boulter, whose polemical reading of *Texts for Nothing* suggests that "trauma and mourning are deeply nostalgic concepts and processes that presuppose categories (self, history, memory) that themselves no longer have any operational viability" (Boulter 2004, 345). Against Boulter, Kennedy decries a (strawman) postmodern eradication of memory and history. Such ripostes were and are (unfortunately still) common to the perceived and misunderstood critiques of historicist methodologies in literary and cultural criticism. Notwithstanding, Kennedy has a good point, but so does Boulter, even if he generalises the implications of his cogent reading of *Texts for Nothing* too much when he suggests that the categories of self, memory, and history, because they are not readily applicable to Beckett, do not have broader operational viability in literary and cultural criticism. While Kennedy enables a model for personal and cultural memory to be read in *Texts for Nothing*, his reading sidelines the process of disintegration to which Beckett subjects his narrators. Thus, in pursuing his argument – Beckett's *Texts for Nothing* entails a difficult return to "painful landscapes of memory" (Kennedy 2009) – Kennedy's analysis risks deciding what remains undecidable in the text. His critique insists on *Texts for Nothing* as belated representation and bypasses Beckett's particular unravelling of the subject upon which the usual coherence of fiction is built. On this point, Boulter's argument is well taken: he suggests that the paradigms of trauma and mourning interact unconvincingly in *Texts for Nothing* because "we have a subject who cannot maintain with any certainty that the experiences he describes are in fact his own" (2004, 337). A pertinent feature of Beckett's texts with and after *Molloy* is a plural first-person narrative voice containing multiple speakers whose accounts overlap and disperse beyond the possibility of centralised accumulation. In the case of the narrator of the first story of *Texts for Nothing*, the self-estrangement particular to Beckett's character – "We seem to be more than

one" (3); "It's not me" (4); "I was my father and I was my son" (6) – undermines the possibility of a simple designation of a coherent subjectivity. Similarly, the narrator casts in doubt the consistency of its location: "How long have I been here, what a question, I've often wondered. And often I could answer, an hour, a month, a year, a century, depending on what I mean by here, and me, and being, there I never went looking for extravagant meanings, there I never much varied, only the here would sometimes vary" (4). Thwarting affiliation, Beckett's text dispenses with a coherent representation of a broader portrayal of an existing state of affairs in favour of a discontinuous and fragmentary narrative which is replete with absence and lacunae. While the account of the narrator's region invites a critical intervention to make it mean more than it relates, Beckett's ongoing *désoeuvrement* of the tenets of fiction makes the story overabundant and recalcitrant to deterministic explanation. Thus, what Boulter identifies – a split and unstable narrator that resists equation with an original subject or scene of trauma or loss – can only misleadingly be labelled a postmodern embrace of a free-play of difference. This notwithstanding, Kennedy is not wrong either to attempt to read the faint biographical, cultural, and historical traces in(to) Beckett's work. Beckett's text clearly invites investigation and consideration in this direction, though, crucially, it resists deterministic historicist explanation.

In turn, these facets of Beckett's writing raise an important question: is memory dependent on a stable subject or a geographical marker? In the case of Beckett, his styleless style, with its focus on absence, lacunae, and negation, defers the possibility of generating self-present meanings that would lead to the disclosure of historical referents. For this reason, Beckett's writing remains interminably open and resistant to contextual explication, and thus beyond accumulation to a historicist discourse that would complete and qualify the structural gaps of modernist literatures with historical details, or scale smoothly between the literary text and a macro historical metanarrative. As a result, Beckett's supposed referents are destinations that happen only after the fact of linguistic play taking place. This is not to deny the various important and real histories that precede the texts, but rather to suggest that these histories, because of the radical symbolism instituted through Beckett's aesthetic of diminution, can only arrive after the fact through the critical act, a circumstance which opens Beckett's modernism to radically different histories and ever new contingencies. Rendered through a strategy of epistemic qualification and negation, as well as a series of aporias, Beckett's text maintains an irreducible distance to any implied cultural predicament which it might be said to represent and thus can be read as both similar and irreducibly different to the cultural memories it supposedly transmits. In this sense, Beckett's text anticipates an insight which Jean-Michel Rabaté, whom we can perhaps position between Kennedy's historicism and Boulter's anti-traumatic reading, derives from Jacques

Lacan concerning the relation between truth, trauma, and fiction: "truth can only be brought to us through language; hence it is always 'half-said' [*mi-dite*] in a steady structure of fiction. Therefore, the part that has to be left unsaid, the other half of the half 'well-said', cannot be simply equated with the traumatic. The pathos of trauma is superfluous, for the 'holes' that any narrative contains are due to the structural conditions of language" (Rabaté 2016a, 160). Rabate's account of the relation between fiction and truth does not deny the potentiality of a historicist or traumatic reading of Beckett's (or any writer's) texts. Yet, with its focus on the status of fiction, it does not enable the accumulation of a traumatic or historical origin which would be the cause of linguistic abnormality or play. Simultaneously, Rabaté does not suggest that understandings of self, history, and memory are irrelevant to literary analysis. Rather, he indicates that these ideas, because of their grounding and communication in and through fiction, are always less transparent and more slippery than a deterministic historicist criticism allows. By these lights, Beckett's texts remain both similar and different to a memory of a personal or cultural event or history, a situation which is made even more complex and profound when we consider the question of (auto)translation which hangs over his corpus.

Lost in translation

Texts for Nothing was originally composed in French, wherein the potential Irish referents become less stable and more alien. The narrator's view of the landscape, when rendered as "la mer la-bas, au fond en plomb repoussé, la plaine dite d'or si souvent chantée, les doubles vallons, les lacs glaciaires, les fumées de la capital" (Beckett 1995, 117)[2] requires translation into an Irish context in order to operate referentially in terms of Irish history and geography. Thus, where the apparent Irish content of the first story of *Texts for Nothing* seems to allow for the text to be read in terms of specific criteria, the first text of *Textes pour rien* can problematise the stability of that mode of reading: the narrator's landscape is at an even greater remove from an Irish location in the French text. As such, Beckett's fictions always defer self-present meaning as they are elsewhere rendered in another language. Moreover, the self-translations confound the idea of the original text, as well

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2 "of the view, the distant sea in hammered lead, the so-called golden vale so often sung, the double valleys, the glacial loughs, the city in its haze" (Beckett 2010b, 3).

as disfiguring its structure.[3] In this sense, Beckett radically foresees the idea of the born-translated novel (Beckett composed and adapted his works in multiple languages; he practised self-translation; he built problems of translation into his works), and contributes an important aesthetic coordinate to an ongoing philosophical conversation on exile and dispossession in one's own language. Prominently, Martin Heidegger located this problem in relation to national paradigms of thought in *Hölderlin's Hymn "The Ister"*. Underlining the necessary role that translation plays for a people in relation to its 'own' literature, Heidegger writes:

> To the extent that we have the need to interpret works of poetry and of thought in our own language, it is clear that each historical language is in and of itself in need of translation, and not merely in relation to foreign languages. This indicates in turn that a historical people is not of its own accord, that is, not without its own intervention, at home in its own language. (1996, 65)

Thus, for Heidegger, a national language and poetry are that which require continuous translation, in the hermeneutic sense, in order to be understood; simultaneously, a national language or poetry are that which can never be absolutely translated. Translation, then, is a necessary and interminable intervention concerning being-at-home in one's own language.

This question of being at home in one's own language was pushed to its radical limit by Jacques Derrida in *The Monolingualism of the Other; or, the Prosthesis of the Origin* (1998). In that autobiographical text concerning the relationship between language and the origin which would apparently give it stable meaning, Derrida demonstrates, through his methodological deployment of aporias, that language is both alienation itself and that it does not alienate anything. In this autobiographical text he writes of himself as a monolingual French speaker that

> speaks a language of which he is deprived. The French language is not his. Because he is therefore deprived of all language, and no longer has any other recourse [...] because this monolingual is in a way aphasic [...] he is thrown into absolute translation, a translation without a pole of reference, without an originary language, and without a source language. For him, there are only target languages, if you will, the remarkable experience being, however, that these languages just cannot manage to reach themselves because they no longer know

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3 For example, Connor demonstrates that "Beckett's translation is concerned to bleed the two languages [French and English] together into a mixed or mongrel condition", where the act of "translation for Beckett would always seem to be at one and the same time an act of confederacy, and of secession, which always distinguishes two languages in the act of uniting them" (1988, 124). Mooney suggests that "we are forced into a realisation that Beckett's writings are never fully present to themselves, but are radically distracted from their textual moment" (2011, 19).

where they are coming from, what they are speaking from and what the sense of their journey is. (Derrida 1998, 61)

Deprived in the sense of lacking ownership, language, for Derrida, "is never purely natural, nor proper, nor inhabitable [...]. There is no possible habitat without the difference of this exile and this nostalgia" (1998, 61). Thus, where a language requires translation for Heidegger, translation is a habitat for Derrida. Derrida's never inhabitable, natural, or proper monolingualism, and its sense of translation-without-origin as the predicament and motivation of writing, indicates an irreducible distance between a literature categorised in national terms and its relation to that nation's social and political history.

Beckett's work is exemplary in this respect; for his narrators, who have been "thrown into absolute translation", language "lacks nothing that precedes or follows it" (Derrida 1998, 25). The condition of translation haunting Beckett's work – the substitutability of all language which inhibits one's ability to coherently locate identity – is replete throughout his corpus. In *Molloy*, the eponymous character struggles to communicate successfully: "It is perhaps one of the reasons I was so untalkative, I mean this trouble I had in understanding not only what others said to me, but also what I said to them. It is true that in the end, by dint of patience, we made ourselves understood, but understood with regard to what, I ask of you, and to what purpose?" (Beckett 2009, 49). It is continued in *Malone Dies:* "But I tell myself so many things, what truth is there in all this babble?" (Beckett 2010a, 63). And it is pushed further in *The Unnamable* to completely distort the origins of the subject: "Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others, I have to speak"; "these voices are not mine, nor these thoughts, but the voices and thoughts of the devils who beset me" (Beckett 2010c, 25). Beckett's imbrication of absolute translation as habitat into his writing, which destabilises the identity and subjectivity of his characters, further problematises how and where we locate cultural memory in relation to his texts. Beckett's literature thus presents foundational questions regarding how we read radically symbolic texts as carriers of memory: do these texts transmit cultural memory? Or is cultural memory located in the texts through analysis and critical reading, and then, in a certain transgression of the form and style of the text, located as preceding the text and underpinning its play?

Burns and mimetic contagion

This history of aesthetic underdevelopment does not begin or end with Beckett (though it does perhaps find its apotheosis in his corpus, particularly when we con-

sider the question of auto-translation which his work presents). And neither is it confined to texts which refuse to close in on any obvious geographical location. James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), which doubles Dublin with various other locations is a prominent case in point. In his book *Tense Future*, the critic Paul Saint-Amour provides a pertinent example of how *Ulysses* operates in this respect: L.E.O Charlton, a Royal Air Force Officer, reads Joyce's novel precisely at the same time as he is considering the parameters of aerial warfare in Mesopotamia in 1922. Uncannily, Charlton finds that *Ulysses* can serve as a guidebook to the region. The radical symbolism of *Ulysses* enables, as Saint-Amour (2015) suggests, the strange star of Mesopotamia to hang over the bough of the novel.

Moreover, we can see this lineage continuing in contemporary letters. One such example is Anna Burns's Booker Prize winning *Milkman* (2018), a novel which, since its publication, has garnered attention for its Beckettian influences. Like the indeterminacy of Joyce's and Beckett's texts, *Milkman*, as critics have recognised, "is both a story of Belfast and its particular sins but it is also a story of anywhere" (*Irish Times* 2018). Indeed, Burns has suggested that though *Milkman* is "recognisable as this skewed form of Belfast, it's not really Belfast in the 1970s" (*The Guardian* 2018). In an interview in *The Guardian*, Burns suggested that she "would like to think it could be seen as any sort of totalitarian, closed society existing in similarly oppressive conditions. I see it as a fiction about an entire society living under extreme pressure, with long term violence seen as the norm" (*The Guardian* 2018). Critics have thus read the novel as a response to other regimes and their modus operandi, including medieval witch hunts, Stalinist Russia, the operations of the Taliban, the Skripal poisoning, and the broader context of the #MeToo movement. Like Beckett, then, Burns's text invites multivalent referents, a circumstance which begs us to consider her textual operation in modernist terms.

Indeed, the reception of *Milkman* bears a likeness to that of J. M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), which critics have read as a representation of South African Apartheid, and also as a novel about the power mechanisms of any kind of totalitarian control. And notably, Coetzee is very deliberate about the Beckettian influences in his work.[4] Like the potential referents of *Texts for Nothing*, *Waiting for the Barbarians* is overabundant in terms of the colonial and postcolonial themes it can be made to connect with. The novel's setting is a remote outpost on the territorial frontier of "the Empire" where natives are con-

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4 In *Doubling the Point*, Coetzee writes: "Beckett has meant a great deal to me in my own writing – that much must be obvious. He is a clear influence on my prose. The essays I wrote on Beckett's style are not only academic exercises, in the colloquial sense of the word. They are also attempts to get closer to a secret, a secret of Beckett's that I wanted to make my own. And discard, eventually, as it is with influences" (1992, 25).

trolled by white and seemingly European forces, and so it remains translatable to extratextual historical referents. Notwithstanding, as Derek Attridge writes, "to allegorize is to translate the temporal and the sequential into the schematic: a set of truths, a familiar historical scene" (2005, 47). As Attridge suggests, Coetzee's novel is replete with moments and structures which both invite and defy critical equation with extratextual detail (manifested in the Magistrate's inability to understand his own setting), thus making the novel, like Beckett's work, both similar and different to the cultural memories it supposedly transmits.

Milkman is less referentially oblique than Beckett's *Texts* or Coetzee's novel. Simultaneously, it contains prominent features – a paranoid and digressive first-person style, a resistance to naming, a loss of stable difference between fiction and reality, an exploration of a society of spectacle – which make the novel recalcitrant and overabundant to accumulation in terms of an extratextual referent. In the following, I focus on Burns's resistance to naming the novel's location. More than an attempt to write Belfast or a universal novel relevant to any sort of totalitarian or closed society in oppressive conditions, Burns's text recounts a society lost in a generalised mimetism and ritualised behaviour, prominent features of what the critic Tyrus Miller has dubbed late modernism (for which Beckett serves as one of Miller's main examples). For Miller, a prominent characteristic of late modernism is the penetration of everyday life by mimetic practices. As Miller describes: "Such generalised mimetism was at once an involuntary process for individuals, a compulsory lowering of the threshold of difference between subjects and objects, their unconscious assimilation to an objective environment – and a social phenomenon consciously manipulable for political and commercial ends" (1999, 43). While Miller describes late modernism as an interwar phenomenon, many critics have expanded the temporal scope of the term since the publication of his book in 1999. Pertinently, his criteria are relevant to Burns's 2018 novel, wherein life and fiction merge into one another, making her characters imitators, and pre-programmed role-players in a social reality which has been depersonalised and deauthenticated to such a degree that the reality which middle sister, the novel's protagonist, inhabits seems more like theatre than a geographically locatable city.

Consider, for example, middle sister's description of the milkman, the eponymous character whose predations on her constitute the main arc of the novel:

> He may have been some chancer, some fantasist, one of those Walter Mitty people who, whilst not being in anything themselves, attempt, or even manage, to have built upon around themselves mythic reputations – in this case as some top renouncer intelligence gatherer – all based entirely on others' misperceptions of him. Could it be that this milkman had started off as one of the armchair supporters, the type who, in their ardour and fanaticism for

the renouncers, sometimes went batty and started to believe, then to hint, then boast, that they themselves were renouncers? (Burns 2018, 116)[5]

Here, middle sister contemplates if the milkman had any authentic motive for his involvement in paramilitary activity; that is, whether his identity and reputation is as much based on mimicry and performance as it is on a genuine concern for the cultural conflict. While she speculates about the milkman, she is certain some characters in her social orbit have become lost in total translation. One such example is Somebody McSomebody, who is romantically interested in middle sister: "it happened to Somebody McSomebody. Certainly, he'd be in the throes of considering that he was some top-drawer renouncer himself" (117). And as middle sister continues, to become a leading state renouncer was to become a local James Bond: "This was Bond in his irresistible, irrepressible, superhuman, bucking-the-trend demeanour, especially the higher up the renouncer-ladder of rank any individual prepared to die for his cause happened to be" (120). Notably, ritualised behaviour extends beyond superhero identifications in the male populace. According to middle sister, the female community promotes the imitation of James Bond-like celebrity in their community: "Those fast, breathtaking, fantastically, exhilarating rebel-men [...] were the very men then, through whom these ambitious women hoped to fulfil their own cause" (121). Indeed, so pervasive is the culture of imitation that it obscures all human relations. Middle sister, for example, finds herself accused of taking part in this general scenario, despite her intentions to the contrary. Her mother admonishes her for being "drugged to the eyeballs [...] with ambitions, aspirations and dreams" (122). Middle sister must thus realise, as per her mother's recommendation, "that these men were not movie stars, that this was no make-believe, no template of a grand passion such as foolishly I pursued in those old-time story books" (122). The theatre of the community has thus seeped into the family unit and determines perceptions and relations between its members, whether or not they are following the pre-programmed social script. So theatricalised and involved in a generalised mimicry has society become that a mother can only assume, following reports from observers that middle sister was seen with a supposed paramilitary soldier, that her daughter has already been swept up in this involuntary process of contagion role-playing.

In *Milkman*, then, the evaporation of the distinction between art and life ensures the total mimetic contamination of the subject. The present has been flattened into a scenario of general mimetism through which life has been derealised and replaced with simulacra and spectacle and is determined by caricature and

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5 In the following only page numbers of the novel will be given.

aestheticised social practices. The local, in this sense, is already alienated from itself; what Laanes calls "foreignising forms" (2021) – which interact with local memories to produce a global memory culture – are already integral to its structure. When middle sister suggests "these *were* the James Bonds" (120), she indicates that any original James Bond has been displaced by the total integration and assimilation of that character type in her community, so much so that the local James Bonds and any other James Bond are rendered on an equal and atemporal footing. In such terms, the locale is lost in a culture of total translation without a pole of reference. Already foreign to itself, the social world of Burns's *Milkman* bears strong similarities to Belfast throughout the 1970s and 80s, but also, because of the loss of stable difference which Burns represents, to other societies existing under oppressive conditions.

Burns's representation of the erosion of the subject may be read as provoked and determined by the historical condition of the Troubles in Northern Ireland; simultaneously, Burns's concern with the breakdown of the difference between fiction and life partakes in a broader late modernist preoccupation with a disintegration of symbolic unity, a circumstance which underpins the aesthetic scepticism of modern writing concerning imitative and realistic representation. In this latter sense, middle sister, her family, and her location all remain unnamed because modern literature, following the collapse of the myths of literary artifice, lacks the means to engage a re-presentation of reality in received and stable identitarian forms. Indeed, Burns invites us to question middle sister's account in this respect; when her mother admonishes her for conflating reality with "those old-time story books", we may wonder if the theatricalised society she represents is also dictated by the literary forms she is reading, and thus whether middle sister too is unable to sustain a difference between reality and fiction. In such terms, then, the textual operation of *Milkman,* like Beckett, Joyce, and Coetzee before, is both similar and different to the cultural memories it supposedly transmits.

Only the radically symbolic?

In conclusion, then: certain radically symbolic literatures, in the terms tended here via Barthes, Rancière and Beckett, are not so much moving memories but irreducible sites of attachment for a multitude of histories and memories. Through an investment in non-representation, aesthetic scepticism, a mobilisation of epistemological doubt, and obliquity, the respective and unique aesthetic modes of such literatures leave context and setting undefined rather than enacting and reinforcing their enclosure. As a result, we may suggest, such works remain untranslatable – in the sense that the untranslatable invites translation but is never satisfactorily

translated – to determined historical metanarratives. As such, we might often find more than one context, history, or memory which corresponds to, or seems to anchor, the play of the text in question.

Our critical bind in this instance thus asks us to consider whether historical memory proceeds or precedes the reading of the radically symbolic text. In turn, how we approach and understand mnemonic migration in literature becomes a question of methodology: do we locate the text in its context to enable the reading of literature as historical memory? This remains the obvious route in literary criticism today, even if ideology critique is on the wane. Indeed, the forms and styles of radically symbolic literatures will continue to be explicable and explicated through the histories of their places and times; Adorno, as we have seen, provides us with the validity of this perspective. Simultaneously, as I have been endeavouring to show, if we suspend certain historicist assumptions (within reason, of course), we might also analyse how a novel's formal and stylistic procedures resist signifying determined histories to enable the evocation of a host of other, perhaps hitherto unimagined, histories and memories. The texs by Joyce, Beckett, Coetzee and Burns cater for this possibility. For example, traces of distanced and dispersed cultures continue to be discovered in Joyce's *Finnegans Wake.* And perhaps the translatorial effects and over-nourishing signs of Beckett's prose also comprise the evasive and shameful means of dealing with his activity of expressing sympathy with former collaborationists – Georges Pelorson and Francis Stuart particularly – in the aftermath of the war. Such potentialities add another layer, less heroic and more bathetic, to the ethics of Beckett's fiction and his investment in a writing degree zero with its attendant distaste for pseudo-heroics.

Going one step further, and to end on a question: should we reduce such possibilities to radically symbolic literatures? And is Barthes's distinction between a moderately symbolic literature and a radically symbolic literature, though I find it very useful, really tenable? Thus, I am asking: can we read more moderately symbolic literatures as radically symbolic texts to show how such novels can also operate as irreducible sites of attachment for a multitude of histories and memories? Indeed, an answer to this question was already provided by Jakob Lothe in his wonderful talk at the "Mnemonic Migration" conference held in Copenhagen in 2023, from which this collection of essays springs. There, Lothe argued that Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* (1989), by refraining from qualifying the gaps in the text with historical details, resisted symptomatic and psychobiographical reading. Lothe followed the moderately symbolic textual operation of *The Remains of the Day* to show how Ishiguro's narrative omissions, which are secrets without secret and crypts without depth in the text, remain recalcitrant and overabundant to historicist explanation, in the process restoring the iterability of the literary work and its irreducibility to historical metanarratives.

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