

Beckett's fingerprint

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In June 1957, the Serbian writer Radomir Konstantinović and his partner Kaća Samardžić spent an evening with Samuel Beckett in Paris. Konstantinović had seen the first official production of *Waiting for Godot* in Belgrade in 1956, and now – the previous evening – they saw *Fin de partie* at the Théâtre des Champs Elysées. It overwhelmed them: “magical, demonic”, written in “sonorous poetry, shattered into dialogue”.

Konstantinović edited a series of novels in translation for a publishing house where Samardžić also worked. When they asked Beckett for one of his novels, he suggested *Molloj* (1951). The rights were secured and Samardžić’s excellent translation was launched as *Moloa* at the Belgrade book fair in November 1959. Danilo Kiš probably visited the fair; he had spent September in Paris (his first visit to the city which would be his last home), and was now writing his first novel, *Mansarda*. He was a prolific literary journalist at this time, and references in his reviews during 1960 suggest that he had lost no time before reading *Moloa*. Any reader of Beckett’s novel, he wrote, “becomes, inevitably, a victim of fear and nightmare” because *Molloj* “deals with nothing other than the defeat of being [*poraz bića*]”. [from *Varia* [1995], p. 93] Elsewhere he likened Beckett to Kafka as a diffuser of “hopelessness and absurdity”. [from *Varia* [1995], p. 95]

On the other hand, when he reviewed a Serbian avant-garde novel, Kiš had to admit that *Molloj* had not, after all, touched the experimental limit. Compared to *Pustolina* by Vladan Radovanović, Beckett’s novel was a “classic story”. Kiš’s dismay at this evidence of the “dehumanisation of literature” led to this fine avowal, almost a manifesto:

As an admirer of all adventures of the spirit and rebellions of the mind and heart, I am full of admiration for anyone who despises the sentence “The Marquise went out at five o’clock”,¹ yet I am convinced that there is more art and more life in that sentence than in a muffled crunch of sand with no human footprints or human voice. As an admirer of experiments and suffering, faithful to the idea of rebelling against convention, I draw the line at stammering, even if I am obliged to start my own novel with the sentence: “This morning I found human footprints in the sand.”

[**Pascale knows this passage for sure, from *Homo Poeticus*:** Poštovac svih pustolovina duha, pobuna razuma i srca, ostajem pun poštovanja prema onome ko je prezreo frazu *Markiza je izišla u 5 sati*, no i duboko uveren da u toj frazi ima više umetnosti i više života nego u krckanju peska u kome nema ljudskih stopala i koji ne govori ljudskim jezikom. Poštovac eksperimenta i trpljenja, odan ideji pobune protiv konvencija, zastajem na granici gde počinje mucanje, makar morao da započnem svoj roman rečenicom: “Zatekoh ujutru ljudske tragove u pesku.”]

¹ According to André Breton, this was Paul Valéry’s pastiche of conventional fictional utterance.

In a much later year, Kiš explained that he had been afraid in 1960 that the novel as such was being led into a “dead end” and a “wasteland”. He had been troubled by “novelistic stammering in the style of *Molloy*”. Yet *Molloy* never stammers, however much it drones. It abounds in lyricism, wit, tenderness and humour, as well as compassion (and irony about compassion). Above all, it narrates drifting perceptions and sluggish motions of consciousness – modernist material which still counted as avant-garde.

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When he read *Molloy*, Kiš was learning how to connect in writing the visible world with his interior world. Naturalist techniques were a problem: they swept away the webs of connotation that consciousness and our unconscious spin around people and things. Joyce and Proust had made the webs hum with energy, yet their masterpieces were too remote and immense for direct help. Beckett’s novel spoke in a voice urgent and contemporary, yet independent of the literary scene. This voice ruminated on family, abandonment and abjection, consciousness and representation. Dwelling in memory as medium and subject, it bridged the gulf between young Kiš and the Olympians of modernism.

Beckett’s effects and traces are evident in the opening pages of *Garden, Ashes*, of *Early Sorrows* and of *Hourglass*. It is as if a muscle memory of *Molloy*, with its innovating energy, helped to ignite these books.

But the traces are first visible in a story called “Noah’s Ark (From Mr Poppy’s notebook)”, published at the end of 1959. The third in a series inspired by Joyce’s *Ulysses*, it dwells on transitions between external and internal worlds.

Rain on the windowpane, evening rain beating down, and wind – on *that* side – while you lie down with a fragrant cigarette and a book, safe behind a Wertheim lock, which is now just a symbol of your warm peace of mind. And outside the rain beating crazily beyond the tightly drawn Venetian blinds ... [from *Varia* (1995), 50: Kiša u prozoru, večernja kiša koja šiba i vetrar – s *one* strane, a ti ležiš s mirisnom cigaretom i sa knjigom, zaključan sigurnosnom Wertheim-bravom (brave homme), koja je sada samo simbol tvog toplog spokoja. A napolju kiša, besomučno šiba u čvrsto zaklopljene žaluzine...]

This negotiation between outer and inner – new in Kiš’s prose – owes something to *Molloy*, in particular to a magical passage where interiority materializes from contemplation of the world:

From there he must have seen it all, the plain, the sea, and then these self-same hills that some call mountains, indigo in places in the evening light, their serried ranges crowding to the skyline, cloven with hidden valleys that the eye divines from sudden shifts of colour and then from other signs for which there are no words, nor even thoughts. But all are not divined, even from that height, and often

where only one escarpment is discerned, and one crest, in reality there are two, two escarpments, two crests, riven by a valley. But now he knows these hills, that is to say he knows them better, and if ever again he sees them from afar it will be I think with other eyes, and not only that but the within, all that inner space one never sees, the brain and heart and other caverns where thought and feeling dance their sabbath, all that too quite differently disposed. [From p. 11 of *Molloy* in the Serbian translation]

Realist description gets things wrong. What looks singular to the naked eye turns out to be double. Distrust in the visible scene becomes trust in that which cannot be seen. The spectator's knowledge lets him see "with other eyes". Then the narrator delves into "all that inner space one never sees"; for the spectator's knowledge is also shaped by his internal organs, in "those caverns where thought and feeling dance".

Here is the Beckettian fingerprint in Kiš's story:

Serenity is born in the complex mechanism of the heart, which is simple at the same time; the Double who emerges when he's left alone with you, ... never mind all the locks and alarms, can be found in one of those quarters called ventricles and auricles, sealed behind a Wertheim lock. Tranquillity's home is one of these reddish purple chambers, bright portraits of all the loved ones and warm impressionist canvases are hanging there, glowing like music from an imaginary museum of memories. A Platonic world of ideas hides in these red rooms ... [from *Varia* (1995), 48]

The world in Kiš's story shrink to an enclosed domestic space; he was already probing how to write fiction about his family. His narrator a Beckettian path from into the viscera, with their images of loved ones – the parents and sister who would feature in Kiš's novels and stories over the following decade.

There is another echo from *Molloy* where Beckett writes:

... in my cave, and even sometimes at night, when the storm raged, I felt reasonably secure from the elements and mankind. But there too there is a price to pay. In your box, in your caves, there too there is a price to pay. And which you pay willingly, for a time, but which you cannot go on paying forever. [From p. 107 of *Molloy* in the Serbian translation]

In Kiš, this vague price takes concrete shape as a menacing yet familiar "Double", a metaphor of self-knowledge:

Rooms are oases in the grey wastes of a dubious world, havens of tranquillity, shells of security, warm wombs of sleep, places for bold encounters with ourselves, our *alter ego* ... That solid Wertheim lock may prove to be as vain and deceitful as the whole gilded and polished Biedermeier lie, for you cannot escape from yourself, cannot lock yourself out. [from *Varia* (1995), 47]

A few years later, Kiš wrote the first page of *Garden, Ashes* (1965), evoking with Proustian sensuousness the narrator's boyhood days:

On late summer mornings my mother came silently into the room, carrying a tray. The tray had already begun to lose its thin coating of nickel. Around the edge, where the flat surface curves up to form a raised rim, traces of bygone splendour were still visible in the flaky patches of nickel, looking like tinfoil rubbed flat under a fingernail. The narrow, level rim ends in an oval trough that curls downward and is dented and misshapen. Tiny swellings—a necklace of little metallic grapes—decorate the upper edge of the rim. [**The first lines of *Jardin, cendres***]

Again, Beckett provided a fertile precedent. Here is Molloy, recalling home comforts, long gone:

Now with regard to my food, it seems to me I ate it as, when and where it best suited me. I never had to call for it. It was brought to me, wherever I happened to be, on a tray. I can still see the tray, almost at will, it was round, with a low rim, to keep the things from falling off, and coated with red lacquer, cracking here and there. [**From p. 77 of *Molloy* in the Serbian translation**]

At the start of *Early Sorrows* (1969), Andi Sam – grown to adulthood – is trying to find his childhood home:

Excuse me, sir, can you tell me where to find Chestnut Street? You don't remember? It has to be around here somewhere, I forget the names, but I know for a fact that it is here somewhere. What's that – there aren't any streets around here lined with chestnut trees? Well there has to be one, sir, memories could not possibly play so false. [**First lines of *Chagrins précoces***]

Here is Molloy, struggling to remember his birthplace:

And now it was a name I sought, in my memory, the name of the only town it had been given me to know, with the intention, as soon as I had found it, of stopping, and saying to a passer-by, doffing my hat, I beg your pardon, Sir, this *is* X, is it not? X being the name of my town. And this name that I sought, I felt sure that it began with a B or a P ... **From p. 42 of *Molloy* in the Serbian translation**

The first pages of *Hourglass* (1972) evoke in several details and atmosphere the hushed opening of *Molloy*'s second half. Here is Beckett:

It is midnight. The rain is beating on the windows. I am calm. All is sleeping. Nevertheless I get up and go to my desk. I can't sleep. My lamp sheds a soft and steady light. I have trimmed it. It will last till morning. ... My son is sleeping. Let him sleep. The night will come when he too, unable to sleep, will get up and go to his desk. I shall be forgotten.

My report will be long. Perhaps I shall not finish it. **From p. 131 of *Molloy* in the Serbian translation**

And here is the start of *Hourglass*, where the character ‘E.S.’ settles to complete a letter to his sister, watching the play of shadows change his “cube” of a room (the metaphor is also in *Molloy*) while his wife and children sleep:

Gusts of wind blow soft flakes and sharp icy crystals by turns against the windowpane. The square, embrasure-like window is stuffed with a disembowelled pillow ... Attracted by the flame, the gaze makes for the lamp ... various objects scattered over a table hitherto rendered invisible by the shadow or the light. ... From the other side of the door, however, no breathing can be heard. ... As though frightened at the thought that the lamp would go out, he hastens to start writing again, to continue what he has begun and win his race with darkness. **[From the first pages of *Sablier*]**

And on the last page: “...Perhaps it will be my son who will some day publish my notes...”.
[From the last page of *Sablier*]

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As an apprentice writer, the 25 year-old Kiš was defenceless before *Molloy*. Yet Beckett’s phantasmagoria and savage comedy were never to his taste. Perhaps, too, he needed to protect himself against scorching affinities which might harm his emergent gifts. Anyway, he probably never read another of his books. After 1960, he named Beckett in print only once, some 20 years later, apropos the poetry of Marija Čudina. Describing her poems as “made of nonexistence”, Kiš reached for a simile: “like Beckett’s characters, a commotion of human suffering and human dust”. **[from the essay about Marija Čudina in *Homo poeticus*]**

It was Kiš’s good fortune that he encountered *Molloy* when he did, and it was his genius that found there what he needed: a model of fearless anti-realism, an irrepressible voice, metaphorical inventiveness, a direct address to existence and the limits of language, and eventually a template that helped to form E.S. in *Hourglass* as a hapless, often rancorous and absurd man: cross-grained, haunted, moving in near isolation through hallucinatory settings, free nowhere outside his imagination.

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