

Interview with Rachel Burrows, Dublin, Bloomsday, 1982

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Rachel Burrows: I had gone to Paris in the summer of 1931 ... to stay with a French family. My first time away. I was only nineteen. Then I came back to find that a Mister Beckett was our junior French lecturer for "Racine and the Modern Novel." We knew nothing about him. I came back and there was this man, and the point I wanted to bring out really was that Rudmose-Brown, our professor, was so keen on Sam Beckett that he gave him his lectures on Racine, and what I remember best from the classes are his lectures on Racine because, you see, he was fascinated by this "modernity" he found in Racine. One quotation in particular I remember about *Andromaque*: "A loves B, and B loves C, and C loves D. The great pagan tiger of sexuality chasing its tail in outer darkness," which is pure Sam Beckett. I think it's absolutely marvelous.

Now, why he hated Corneille and why he did *Le Kid*, which was a skit on Corneille, was that he felt that Corneille was utterly artificial. He was distorting the real by his heroics, showing people as they were meant to be. Racine, on the other hand, painted men as they were. Within the framework of classicism, he was extraordinarily modern, and Sam loved finding little bits of what he called "liminal consciousness," rather than the subconscious, within Racine. Little innuendoes. He made Racine seem very modern by picking out these things, and he used the words "liminal consciousness" all the time because, he said, if you talk about the pure subconscious, you can't really use that in literature. The pure subconscious would destroy the integrity of the real, whereas "liminal consciousness," the half of consciousness, that was the thing he really wanted. But what is so interesting about him is what he liked then and the things that he writes now. He started the course with Dostoevski; that was for him the "clair-obscur," the characters "mal dégagés de l'ombre," and then he felt that Proust and Gide were the successors because they too did not distort the incomprehensibility of the real. He hated Balzac, of course. He hated what he called the snowball act, which means that you do something that has causes, causes, causes, causes so that it's all perfectly consistent.

Eds.: Is that Beckett's term?

RB: Yes, that's what he said: The "incomprehensibility of the real."

Eds.: But what is the snowball act?

RB: It's rolling, rolling rolling.

Eds.: The other metaphor he uses is the pool table.

RB: Yes, the pool table and pulling things onto it and making them all go the way you want them to, superimposed to your design. For Beckett art was a discovery of the real, the progressive discovery of the real. The artist himself was changing all the time and his material was constantly in a state of flux, hence you had to do something to organize this mess, but not to make puppets and

set them in motion, and not to fantasize in the way the Romantics did. He's concerned with digging into the real as he sees it at that moment, and even that was relative, because the artist is changing, the material is changing, and the moment is changing. So you see, you have absolutely nothing but his real aesthetics. Now I shall tell you something here. I've already told you that Professor Rudmose-Brown had such admiration for his junior lecturer that he gave him his lectures on Racine, which he usually took himself. Beckett shared his liking for Racine and his dislike for the heroics of Corneille. I remember so well his search, as I've just said, for the subconscious in Racine, his pinpointing the solitary nature of every human being. In his essay on Proust, which began, "the Proustian equation is never simple," he said, "We are alone. We cannot know and we cannot be known," a theory which could be applied to his own work. But in those days, you see, we didn't think of Beckett as a writer. I still possess a rather battered exercise book on the first page of which I've written in pencil "Michaelmas 1931, Mister Beckett." I could not have foreseen then that that small black book would be placed among the many exhibits connected with the Modern Language School in 1977. It was placed on a shelf open at a page, like the *Book of Kells*. And at the time when I recorded his lectures, none of us could foresee that our tall, taciturn, rather self-effacing young lecturer was going to revolutionize the form of European theatre. I don't believe any of our year know him well, except perhaps Leslie O'Daikin, who wrote to me shortly before he died saying, "Sam is in London. We are having great fun." Seems an odd word to use in connection with Sam Beckett. He seldom smiled. His Valentine in TCD, February 1931, reads as follows: "An exhausted aesthete who all life's strange poisonous wines has sipped and found them rather tedious." He was a very impersonal lecturer. He said what he had to say and then left the lecture room. But he was very courteous and always willing to elucidate a point, if anyone had the courage to ask him a question.

I believe he considered himself a bad lecturer and that makes me sad because he was so good. Many of his students would, unfortunately, agree with him, and they made little effort to try and understand him. Another Valentine said, "I wish he would explain his explanations." This may have been why we so seldom saw the genial side of his personality. He probably felt that we were as bored with him as he was with us. In my case, it was far from the truth. Looking back, I'm glad, as young as I was, I was just nineteen, I was aware that here was a brilliant mind. Here was exciting material that could not be found in a book, and I made it my business to take down his lectures as fully as possible.

He had an odd delivery. He would make long pauses between phrases, or very often pause in the wrong place, after a word which might make you lose the thread of his thought. But the pauses enabled me to take down four sentences as he dropped them into the silence. In lecturing, some people like Beckett, are creating as they go along. Suddenly he would come up with something better than what he'd been going to say. One of these sentences which I treasure is the one I just told you. It's the assessment of the Racinien situation, "A loves B, B loves C, and C loves D, the great pagan tiger of sexuality chasing its tail in outer darkness." As a lecturer at the Sorbonne once said to me when I told him this, "Oh but (he said) Racine was Christian." And I said, "Was He?" And he said, "Yes, Phèdre had a sense of sin."

So in the light of his own work, it's interesting to remember his likes and dislikes in those early days. He loved the "clair-obscuré," the light comes in at one moment to leave the rest in shadow. He quoted Gide as saying "Balzac paints like David, Dostoevski like Rembrandt." He saw Gide

and Proust as the successors to Dostoevski because they dared to preserve the complexity of the real, the inexplicable, unforeseeable quality of the human being. He rejected the naturalistic novels of writers like Balzac, which only depict the surface which he said had been peeled off by Proust. The full impact of Joyce was yet to come, and yet, I think he must already have been influenced by him.

Eds.: Did he ever mention Joyce?

RB: No, not to my knowledge, or if he did I didn't catch on to it because Joyce would have meant nothing to me. His main preoccupation was with Proust and Gide, and in between, Stendhal was the poet and Dostoevski the great master of everything. Of complexity.

Eds.: Would Beckett have been the one who chose to have the interest in the modern novel?

RB: Yes.

Eds.: In Gide?

RB: Yes. Yes he would.

Eds.: No set books?

RB: We did have set books probably, but he would obviously stress the things that appealed to him. I think that Dostoevski was not required but certainly Gide and Proust were, so probably, in dealing with Gide and Proust and the modern novel, he would have taken what he thought were the predecessors like Dostoevski, you see. And then he would link that up with Racine, which was also set.

Eds.: But if he had wanted could he have easily chosen, say, Anatole France?

RB: Oh yes, yes, or Balzac. Very few of us really knew him because he was very aloof. Rudmose-Brown did know him and loved him, and he talked about his personal kindness, and, of course, he told us he was a fine pianist, which is not surprising. You see, at the moment, John Beckett is very active in the music world. The Becketts are a very musical family. As a person I remember him in his long dark overcoat, collar turned up, thick hair standing stiffly "en brosse." His pale blue eyes fixed you with complete attention and yet with a strange remote quality.

Eds.: Could you comment on this sentence in the notes about an opening sentence containing the whole essay.

RB: I'll tell you something, this is important. People would say he couldn't teach, but he even got down to the nitty-gritty of showing us how to write an essay on the lesson, with proper headings. He was really trying to help us pass the exam. And this is what people will not give the man credit for.

Eds.: Are these your categories?

RB: No, they're his.

Eds.: Those are his headings? And is this your first sentence or his?

RB: His first sentence.

Eds.: Really?

RB: Yes. He'd show you how to write an essay on Oreste. "Developement Racinien." Hermione as an example. "Complexité finale d'Oreste," because Oreste was one of the few Racinien characters who never reaches one of the polarized sides. He ends up in complete lack of orientation. "Pessimisme, je ne sais.... Modernité psychologique." "Inaccessible mind, stays complex, can't be analyzed." Now here is the first sentence. This is an example of what a first sentence should be. "Le pitoyable Oreste, en tant que Racine, se sépare du mouvement de clairvoyance progressive auquel il soumet la plupart des personnages, qui, répondent aux exigences de la psychologie moderne." Now that is really a summing up of what he was trying to do for us in Racine. He was trying to show how modern Racine was in all his concepts, you see.

Eds.: Here's one of the physics metaphors that we were talking about earlier: "Not flower value but footpounds."

RB: Yes, that's right. "Not flower value but footpounds," work! You must make every word work. Then he goes into... "English sentence can justify itself by looking well, the French can't." That's another little pointer. Possibly why he found the French language so exciting. The French language is more of a work language.

I can see in this little notebook the germ of what Beckett became, that's why it's so exciting. "The French, cerebral transmission, statement rare, the English climactory," and, as I said, I took it down whether in English or French. I knew quite well that I couldn't understand what he was saying in the classroom because of the depth of it.

Eds.: You were a scribe.

RB: I suppose I was. Yes, I think I was a scribe. But the only credit I take for it is that at nineteen, and a very young nineteen, I had the wit and the intuition to know, "This is pure gold. This I will never find again. This is not out of a book." And there were so many people with great names and professors that I loved for whom I would never have done this. This man, this strange, rather glum character, I said, "My God this is wonderful." You can say this is wonderful and not know what it means.

Eds.: Rachel, if we could go over some of this material on page sixty-seven here that talks about the didactic quality in Racine: "Art is only didactic to this extent.... lifting one's personal impression to the level of absolute values. Freedom of mind in Racine. Capable of modification from fragmentation to unity."

RB: You see, he said that the creator should have freedom of mind and Gide, of course, said he didn't know what his characters were going to do. He started a book, he didn't know where it would end. He felt that he and his characters had freedom of mind. And.... now, "freedom of mind in Racine capable of modification from fragmentation to unity... only action, not physical. Inner integrity that precedes collapse, the tragedy of the clairvoyant." In other words, in Racine there's little action (in Corneille there's a great deal), and it really is an inner action. And of course there are all those long speeches. And where he found the humor was in the confidant, the real reason behind somebody's speech. Now, this is lovely, I think. "Racinien background," did you get that? I adore this vision. He talked about background in different ways. The background is like the overtone of a note. It gives depth. Whereas, of course... Balzac's background explains everything. He saw background as giving in depth, and I think this is lovely. "Racinien background provides the reader with a greater depth. In *Andromaque* you have Troy, smoke, blood, Hector, Priam, in the first place. Secondly, you have an almost mystical palace on the sea. "*Je sais de ce palais tous les détours obscurs, vous voyez que la mer en vient battre les murs.*" Beautiful! All to create atmosphere, not the explicatory background of Balzac. "Artistic, not psychological value... doesn't want to guarantee the character by it." He's situating them. He doesn't want to guarantee the characters by situating them in facts that would "explain" them. The characters are victims of fatality and, therefore, cannot be explained. But Troy, et cetera, "gives substance and harmonics to living characters worth more than their face value... Depth to character as overtone is to note.... Only interesting use of background is perspective." In Racine the mind grows into unity without reference to Crete or Troy. The mind grows into unity except for Oreste. But the mind usually grows into unity without necessary reference to this. But in Balzac it's always because of this.

Eds.: There's that startling metaphor of the cave where he says one can either respect the cave or go walking about it with an electric torch.

RB: Ah yes! That's just it. The electric torch is what he doesn't want. It is Balzac and Corneille, the floodlit thing, absolutely floodlit, and not the "clair-obscur." "Racine, occasional absence of character gives glimpse of background. Balzac, the protagonist is devoured, annexed by his background." Annexed by his background! You see, you don't know really what is character and what is background. So reality is destroyed. Anyhow there's no free will at all because they're all puppets on a string, moving along. "Racine throws his light on the front of the stage where the protagonist is. Balzac behind. The "essence of Racine is antagonisms."

Eds.: The whole notion of "will" is fairly important to Beckett from the thirties to *Godot*. Did he talk much about "will" and intention in characters in these lectures?

RB: I don't think so, except free will. He was very keen on free will. That they mustn't be... just on a board being tossed about.

Eds.: Did he talk much about, or do you remember his talking much about, Freud or Jung?

RB: No, he didn't. He didn't talk about Freud or Jung at all, to my knowledge.

Eds.: Do you remember any discussions of spatial arrangements on stage as they might have occurred in these plays or performances?

RB: No.

Eds.: Did he ever discuss these plays as something to be performed?

RB: No.

Eds.: But he did diagrams, didn't he?

RS: Yes, I remember thinking of the diagrams as being terribly mental things because you see, he was dealing with Racine, and action is not terribly important. I mean with Racine... it's an inner action. You're in a dustbin; perhaps it's important where the dustbin is placed. But we were brought so far into the inner minds of these people that I don't think I was ever conscious of stage action.

Eds.: Did he show contempt for the whole notion of revealed motifs?

RB: Yes. Well, progressively revealed motif, no, but for preconceived motif, yes. That's why he really had got contempt for Balzac and Zola and the naturalistic school. That was *not* nature. That was something which was artificial. The Romantics were so artificial in their fantasies and their dreams, and the Naturalists were only natural in their falsification because they seem to be describing everything, but they were only describing themselves.

Eds.: Did he ever say anything about Gide and *The Counterfeiters* as an anti-detective novel?

RB: He loved Gide's *Les Faux Monnayeurs* partly because, as you know, it is like diaries of various people. And again it's seeing things from various angles and reaching a truth that way, *Les faux Monnayeurs* was one of the works he talked about most, because I think, of the relative planes of the same thing. I mean Lawrence Durrell does the same thing, doesn't he, in the *Alexandria Quartet*? And Joyce, of course.

Eds.: He found that sort of perspective attractive at the time?

RB: Yes, very attractive. Anything complex seemed to be attractive to him. Because simplification, he felt, was falsification.

Eds.: Of interest also is that distinction he makes between comedy and tragedy.

RB: I have it here. "Comic resolution is establishment of equilibrium. Tragic resolution is the abolition of any need for equilibrium. The finality of divine justice. No longer plurality, therefore, no need of equilibrium. Andromaque, no longer lack of equilibrium, therefore, plurality disappears." Anyhow, comic resolution is the establishment of equilibrium. Tragic resolution is the abolition of any need for it.

Eds.: Were you aware that what you were getting was a very personal view of literature, one that might be perhaps eccentric?

RB: No, I'm afraid I regarded him rather as a god. I never thought of him as being eccentric.

Eds.: Did you get a sense from other students in the class that you were getting fairly objective material?

RB: Students in the class, you see, were just simply a nuisance because none of them appreciated him. I was sitting there writing away, and they were all polishing their nails. The other students weren't even interested. They weren't trying. He was the teacher teaching rather immature students, and he had to guide us. He did that. But in addition, he gave us so much more than the set books. By showing us what they came out of, by giving us what to him was the history of this type of writing and soon. So I don't think I ever criticized him or thought he was eccentric.

Eds.: Could you comment on that note on page 21 where you say "absurdity of getting to know yourself from an artistic point of view."

RB: I have it here, actually... "Absurdity of getting to know yourself from an artistic point of view at the risk of finding yourself." And then you have, "cold works, fear of being inconsequential, not of being insincere—'Levéritable artiste reste toujours à demi inconscient de lui-même (like Bergson).'" The real artist must always be not fully conscious of himself. Well, that's what I said before, you see," not artificial Romanticism, fabricated model. Romantic, fabricated model which precedes the artist." It's not preconceived if the artist doesn't fully know himself and knows that he is changing; not only changing in viewpoint but changing from moment to moment of his life, and his material cannot be put in a jelly mold. That his material is also in constant flux. There we have something which the artist has to come to terms with, and as such the artist is a discoverer. He is unearthing... He's using a spade really, but ... he can't anymore discover essential values.

Eds.: He also talks about the "integrity of incoherence."

RB: Oh yes, it's very important. "Integrity of incoherence." This is what art must keep. "Gide preserving integrity of incoherence—*Les tendances les plus opposées n'ont jamais réussi à faire de moi un tourmenté. Cet état de dialogue, qui pour tant d'autres est à peu près intolérable, devenait pour moi nécessaire.*" In other words antagonistic dialogue. Here are some other points which I vividly recall:

1. "Stendhal and Flaubert real ancestors of the modern novel, not Balzac. Duality of Balzac is not organic. They're two separate things which don't interfere."
2. "Proust says that the real material, whether approached empirically or imaginatively, remains hermetic. Because when approached imaginatively it is absent, it lacks actual reality: when approached empirically (direct perception) the surface is also hermetic. Therefore, a screen of self-consciousness established by the subject between himself and the object."
3. "Between the incandescent body and the damp body, says Proust. No real tangency between the subject and the object."

4. “Whole problem—how to apprehend the real. In a sense of grace which depends on the repudiation of past sensation in the present: Ideal real—not merely function of the present or the past, but extra-temporal.”
5. “Participation between the real and the ideal-entire Proustian solution. No such solution in Stendhal. Incoherent entity of the two components. One abolishes the other. They coexist in a state of incoherence. Another implication linking Stendhal with the modern novelists is that the psychologically real can’t be stated. It’s imperceptible from every point of view. The conclusion is negative.”
6. “In Balzac all reality is a determined, statistical entity, distorted, with total reality not respected.”
7. “Power of transcribing surface-cataloging-detail apprehended—but whole interest on the surface makes one impatient not interested. Proust baffled by the surface wants to get below. Artistic statement extractive of the essential real. Reality unavailable; therefore, let us state the struggle between the artist who is moving, and the moving material—*Les faux monnayeurs*—Relation between the artist and the material is important. Not just the material.”

Eds.: Do you remember Becket talking about any secondary material, any background sources or perhaps other essays or books on Gide or Proust?

RB: No, I don’t think he gave us other things; you see, there was very little time. What Beckett was doing, really, was to introduce us to these writers in depth, in *profondeur*, you know: he wasn’t trying to prepare us for exams in the ordinary way. His concession was that page I showed you on how to write an essay. That was his concession... to normal teaching. But in fact, he was told to give these lectures, and he conscientiously gave them, and he was really trying to interpret these people for us, which he succeeded in doing. I wish, when you see him, you’d tell him I have always had a great sadness in my heart that this brilliant man, Sam Beckett, still thinks he was a bad lecturer. And I’m the only person I suppose that can correct that image.