

## **“Traduttore, traditore”: Samuel Beckett’s Translation of *Mercier et Camier***

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Most of the writers who have turned their attention to the strange phenomenon of Beckett’s self-translation have concentrated upon the extraordinary facility he displays in this, by all accounts, unenjoyable task. There has been some disagreement about such matters as the relative proportions of obscenity or humour in the French and English versions of his work, but most critics have stressed Beckett’s uncanny ability to reproduce the effects of the originals in his translations, reinventing puns, and compensating with new material for anything which resists translation. Most critics therefore feel that it is safe to assume for Beckett an *oeuvre* consisting of a number of pairs of new-identical twins.<sup>1</sup>

Close examination of Beckett’s self-translation reveals this idea to be mistaken. Certainly, there is very close (though rarely complete) correspondence between the French and English versions where Beckett has set about the translation immediately upon—or even, in some cases, before—completion of the original.<sup>2</sup> But in cases where there is a time-lag between the two versions there is considerable evidence in the translations of changes in Beckett’s outlook, stylistic priorities and attitude towards his originals. The amount of variation is particularly great in the French versions of *Murphy* and *Watt* and the English version of *Mercier et Camier*; and the translations of the novels of the Trilogy, which also experienced some delay in being translated, show more variants than such texts as *Company* or *Ill Seen Ill Said*. A. R. Jones has shown how the alterations in the French *Murphy* register Beckett’s philosophical dissatisfaction with the first of his fictional self-embodiments,<sup>3</sup> and the English *Mercier and Camier* has a large number of revisions of the same kind. Many of these are due, no doubt, not only to the fact that there was a long gap between writing and translation, but also to the delay before Beckett would allow even the French version to be published. (*Mercier et Camier* was written in 1946 but not published until 1970. The English translation occupied Beckett intermittently from 1970 to 1974 and appeared in 1974. (See Admussen, 66-8.) Examination of the revisions of *Mercier et Camier* reveals more than just a badly-curbed impatience on Beckett’s part, however; Beckett’s awareness of the philosophical implications of the act of self-translation means that he can use the exercise to explore the problems raised by the successive reconstruction of the self in language and fiction, problems which are already a central concern in his work.

The most obvious difference between the two texts of *Mercier and Camier* results from the amount of material that Beckett omits in the English. The omitted material varies from the odd line or phrase to two or three pages at a time, and amounts at a conservative estimate to a loss of about 12% of the material in the French version. These losses are compensated for only by the addition of a few phrases here and there. A large proportion of the omissions seems to result from Beckett’s impatience with passages which he considered ineffective or repetitious. Thus, two pages of dialogue are lost early in the first chapter in which Mercier and Camier try to make sense of the commands of the park ranger,<sup>4</sup> and Beckett shows a tendency throughout to compress or drop altogether the more laborious passages of bewildered wrangling between the two. (See, for example Minuit, 95-97, 121-24, 125-27, omitted, Calder, 60, 75.)

It might be claimed that the English version of the novel is crisper and more forceful than the French as a result of these excisions. I am not altogether sure about that myself; but what is more important is that Beckett's excisions seem to have a thematic as well as a cosmetic purpose, and that, as such, they have important consequences for the reader. Already, in the French version, Mercier and Camier are strangely cut off from the world of ordinary people and objects, hardly communicating and finding it easier to discard than to retain possessions. Beckett intensifies this divorce in his translation by the frequent omission of details which might link Mercier and Camier to the ordinary world. At the beginning of the book, we are told that "Things were getting ponderously under way" (Calder, 12), but the specification "et notamment les véhicules lourds, tels camions, charrettes et transports en commun" (Minuit, 15) is lost. Similarly, the omission of passages in which Mercier and Camier plan the retrieval of their luggage, or plot their course forward (Minuit, 151-2, 173-4, omitted, Calder, 90, 101) serves to focus attention upon the couple's poverty of purpose no less than of equipment. And at one point, Beckett omits a reference to Camier paying for his drink (Minuit, 104, Calder, 63), a change which seems wanton and incomprehensible unless seen in the context of other moves made in the translation to detach Mercier and Camier from ordinary physical affairs.

There are two other ways in which Beckett tries, if not exactly to spiritualize, then to "discarnate" his two heroes. The French version of the book has a number of references to food and drink and episodes of comic by-play involving them, and Beckett takes care when he can to remove these. The conversation in chapter 2, for example, about what the two have eaten, and the altercation following Mercier's request for a "massetain" are completely left out (Minuit, 46-7, Calder, 30). The relish with which the barman in the pair's first port of call describes the food he has available is much diminished—we are told that he "raffled off a list" (Calder, 44), but not that he has "beaucoup de bonnes choses" (Minuit, 68). Camier's request for a "petite collation" is omitted (Minuit, 71, Calder, 46), as is Mercier's demand "Donnez-nous à manger" (Minuit, 67, Calder, 44) and throughout the book Beckett makes similar changes. Some of these involve only shifts of emphasis, but are the more convincing because of this—as when, in the French, Camier reassures the vomiting Mercier "Ca te fera du bien" (Minuit, 105), but reinforces the prejudice against food in the English by saying "You'll feel better without it" (Calder, 65).

In a series of related revisions, Beckett also seeks to diminish the prominence of sexuality in the book. Though enough survives to make it clear what kind of services are available in Helen's hotel, a couple of substantial omissions reduce Camier's involvement with them. In the French chapter 7 (chapter 5 in the English), Camier disappears a second time up the stairs and keeps his comrade waiting around even longer than he has done previously, before reappearing with the sheepish apology "C'est toujours un peu plus long la deuxième fois" (Minuit, 125, omitted Calder, 75) and, towards the end of their journey in chapter 7 (chapter 10 in the French), an interchange is left out in which Mercier upbraids Camier for his lasciviousness (Minuit 171-2, Calder, 100).

Ruby Cohn has observed that Camier seems to be the slave of his senses much more than the intellectual Mercier, and has suggested that, like Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot*, they dramatize the relationship of body and soul.<sup>5</sup> But, in fact, this distinction between the two is deliberately much less apparent in the English version, which, of course, did not exist at the

time that Ruby Cohn was writing. There are signs, too, of Beckett's attempts to make the friendship of Mercier and Camier much more fragile in the English version. The two seem less solicitous for each other's health after the omission of passages where Camier asks how Mercier is feeling (Minuit, 42, 92, Calder, 28, 58), or where Mercier shows a kindly interest in the state of Camier's cyst (Minuit, 172, Calder, 100). No doubt, the same motive impels another omission when, in the English, we are told that Mercier and Camier 'raised their glasses and drank', but not, as in the French, that it was 'à la santé l'un de l'autre' (Minuit, 140, Calder, 83). It is probably in order to make the relationship of the two colder and more remote that Beckett also omits the following from the final English version; in it we see the rapport which remains in some of the exchanges between Vladimir and Estragon in *Godot*, but which the grimmer vision of the older Beckett cannot accommodate:

I personally to be quite frank see nothing whatever anymore,  
neither the road, nor my feet, nor my legs, nor my chest  
(admittedly hollow). A wisp of beard, perhaps, to be quite honest,  
a snow-white wisp. We might have passed before the Scala, a  
night of gala, and I none the wiser. It's a wreck you are towing,  
my dear Carder, with your customary loving-kindness.

And I went a wool gathering, said Camier. It's unpardonable.

You have every excuse, said Mercier, every excuse, with no  
exception. Don't let go my hand whatever you do. The  
gymnastics of despair, by all means, to your heart's content, they  
help, while they last, but don't let go my hand.

For Camier had been suddenly seized by a sort of convulsion.

Poor Camier, said Mercier, you're done in, don't deny it.

I'll show you if I'm done in, said Camier.

Your little arse is hurting you, said Mercier, and your little penis.

No turning back from now on, said Camier, come what may.

(translation of Minuit, 177-8, omitted, Calder, 102)<sup>6</sup>

Beckett even seeks to diminish the bonds of memory between the two; when they discuss their pasts, the narrator remarks in the French version that "Ils ne se connaissaient pas alors, mais depuis qu'ils se connaissaient, ils en avaient parlé, de cette époque, trop parlé, par bribes, suivant leur coutume" (Minuit, 13). Beckett translated this in his second draft as "They had not known each other then, but ever since they knew each other they had spoken of those days, immoderately, sporadically, after their fashion"; but even the habit of shared recall is denied them in Beckett's final version, where he omits all but the bald comment that, in those days, they "did not know each other" (Calder, 11).

There are many other kinds of changes made in the translation of *Mercier et Camier*, and, as we might expect most of these are the symptoms of Beckett's deepening pessimism and bitterness; the Beckett who set to work in 1970 on the translation of what John Fletcher describes as a "warm and funny book"<sup>7</sup> had escaped the celebrated impasse reached after *L'Innommable* and had begun to produce the calm, scrupulous, but uncompromisingly bleak texts which characterized the 1960s and 1970s—*Le Dépeupleur*, *Bing*, *Imagination Morte* *Imaginez*. Thus, the voices which speak to Mercier and Camier in the English version of the book have become as unreliable as they are for the Unnamable; "la petite voix implorante ... qui nous parle parfois de vies antérieures" of which Camier speaks (Minuit, 94), becomes "the faint imploring voice ... that drivels to us on and off of former lives" (Calder, 59), and the voice "qui veut me faire croire que je ne suis pas encore mort" (Minuit, 94) is, for Mercier, "the one that tries to cod me I'm not yet dead" (Calder, 59). Christopher Ricks pointed in an early review of *Mercier and Camier* to some other comic intensifications and diminishment; Camier "had felt even worse" for "il ne sentait pas trop mal" (Calder, 110, Minuit, 191), and Mercier's cry of "Speak up ... I'm not deaf" for "Je n'entends rien" (Calder, 85, Minuit, 143).<sup>8</sup> In a similar way, it is the "plus fort" of the two who gives the "plus faible" to drink in chapter 2 of the French, but the "less weak of the two" who gives "the weaker" in the English (Minuit, 33, Calder, 23) and it is not of "leurs déboires... leurs espoirs" that the couple speak to Helen, but of "their hopes both shattered and forlorn" (Minuit, 114, Calder, 70).

Revisions such as the ones discussed so far do not radically alter the direction or purpose of the book, of course, though they are certainly disconcerting. Even in the French we see Mercier's and Camier's quest gradually foundering, as they are stripped of their possessions and come to lose their sense of their relationship and identity. In this, the book looks forward to the concentrated studies of decay and renunciation to be undertaken in Beckett's later fiction and drama, and his revisions clearly accelerate the process of decay of the characters and narrative of *Mercier et Camier*. The dwindling of energy, purpose and certainty which Beckett emphasize in his translation resembles particularly the entropic running-down which is represented in those two-act plays like *Waiting for Godot*, *Happy Days*, *Play* and, more recently, *Quad*, in which the second act is a repetition and a contraction of the first act. There are interesting resemblances between the self-repetition involved in these plays, especially *Happy Days* and *Play*, where the actual words of the first act are repeated, and the self-repetition involved in translation. In both cases, the repetition is the same as and yet different from the original utterance, an addition to it and yet also a diminution of it.

The relationship between the original and the translation, is, like the relationship between the first act and the second act which repeats it, a problematic one. This is because the translated text has two levels of reference or signification; its signified is both the story that it tells, with its actual characters and events, and also the previous version of that story represented by the original text. The translated text alludes all the time to its dependence upon this earlier text. In the case of Beckett's self-translations, there are interesting forms of "interference" which can be set up between the two levels, as the second text not only tamely reproduces the original but comments upon it and upon the act of translation. Much of this commentary is given to the narrator of the book, who seems in the English version a great deal more intolerant and even disdainful of the characters of the book and the book itself than in the French (though the French

narrator is also prone to fits of exasperation with them). At one point in *Mercier et Camier* the narrator, true to his opening promise that he was with his heroes “all the time,” reflects on the necessity for reader and narrator to cleave closely to them:

Suivons-les attentivement, Mercier et Camier, ne nous en éloignons jamais plus que de la hauteur d’un escalier, ou de l’épaisseur d’un mur. Qu’aucun souci d’ordonnance, ou d’harmonie, ne nous en détourne jamais pour l’instant.

(Minuit, 96)

The English narrator has no such scruples about this, apparently, for, taking a hint from the uncertainty of “jamais, pour l’instant,” the whole passage is omitted (Calder, 60). Beckett’s translation of the passage was actually retained until his final typed draft, but already reflects the narrator’s growing distance from his characters, with the sly hint in its penultimate phrase of the unworthiness of his subjects:

Let us now follow them closely, Mercier and Camier, never lose them by more than the height of a stairs, or a wall’s breadth, never again let our love of ordinance, or of harmony, divert us to worthier objects, for the time being.

The attitude of the narrator to his characters and the narrative itself become more problematic in the English version of *Mercier and Camier*. In fact, the narrator does not come merely to despise his characters, and the revisions of the English version give evidence of a complex mingling of sympathy and criticism. At the end of the French version there is a passage in which the taste and culture of the two heroes are admired:

Domage que Dumas Père ne puisse nous voir, dit Watt.

Ou l’un des évangélistes, dit Camier.

Mercier et Camier, c’était tout de même une autre qualité.

(Minuit, 195)

Of course, the final comment is sourly ironic, but there is a kind of affectionate admiration there too, which is magnified by its context in the elegiac last section of the book. In the English version this admiration is more mixed, however, for the oblique and conceding “tout de meme” becomes, more explicitly, “for all their faults” (Calder, 112).

At times, the friction between the new, more critical narrator and his French predecessor is brought out into the open. The new narrator has the advantage of being able to see the book whole from start to finish, and so can hint at oddities and mistakes in the design, as when, reporting the plans which Mercier and Camier are making for their journey, the narrator remarks “No mention of the sack” (Minuit, 27). This is an addition made in the translation, and a

comment upon the French version, which, indeed, makes no mention of a sack (Minuit, 27), until later, when there is an agitated discussion as to the value and purpose of the sack and its contents—though Beckett omits this discussion in the English version! The comment which the English narrator makes is directed at the French narrative, and has no meaning except by reference to this other, absent version of the text. This is a small but telling example of the kind of logical paradox which the act of self-translation is liable to generate, paradoxes which reflect Beckett's sense of the "issueless predicament" that is experience and narration.

We can find the English narrator commenting elsewhere in the book on the shortcomings of his French predecessor; at one point the English narrator seems to draw attention to the shortcomings of the French narrator in providing circumstantial detail, when Camier says to Mercier, "I was on the point of not keeping our appointment" and the English narrator sniffs "So they had an appointment" (Calder, 91, Minuit, 153). At other times the excessive fastidiousness of diction is mocked; Mr. Gall informs Mercier and Camier that his inn is *gemütlich*, "in a tone of tentative complicity, whatever that sounds like" (Calder, 43). There is a double joke here, however, because, though this looks like a rebuke to a previous version of the text, the French in fact reads, unexceptionably, "d'une voix basse et comme tâtonnante" (Minuit, 66). The over-elaborate "tentative complicity" is only added in the second draft of the English translation, with the sneering aside only appearing in the third draft. The comment refers us to a previous, but absent text (the manuscript draft) in the same way as the comment about the sack, and, in doing so, seems to open up the prospect of even more, hitherto undetected, previous "versions" or translations of a text, each of which may add a layer of self-reflection to it. So the "final" text comes to seem less like a end-point than just a stage in a continuing process of self-division and self-modification.

Where the English narrator of *Mercier and Camier* makes the most telling interventions, however, is in the ordering and editing of his material. Ways have frequently to be found in the translation of knitting together passages where substantial amounts of material (often dialogue) have been omitted, and ways of shortening passages which have come to seem tediously long to Beckett. An example of how this is done is an extended passage in the French in which Mercier and Camier give detailed accounts of their states of health, which is shrunk down in the English to the dry comment that "Before going any further they asked and told each other how they felt" (Minuit, 92, Calder, 58). There are a number of ellipses like this in the English, and it is striking that they are rarely neutral; rather they convey the narrator's disapproval or disdain of the original, and therefore provide, not an elegant concealment of the ellipsis, but an elaborate allusion to it. At one point, for example, a passage of conversation about Mercier's desire for a "masepain" is omitted, but the translation alludes to the absence by telling us wearily that "an altercation ensued, too foolish to be recorded, so foolish was it" (Minuit, 46, Calder, 30). Other examples of the translator alluding to his own revisions can be found in passages where the direct speech of the French is rendered in indirect speech in the English:

Quand ils eurent fini de courir, Camier [sic] dit:

Nous allons arriver chez Hélène dans un bel état, mouillés  
Jusqu'aux os.

Nous nous déshabillerons aussitot, dit Camier. Nous mettrons nos vêtements à sécher, devant le feu, ou dans l'armoire à linge o passent les tuyaux d'eau chaude.

(Minuit, 37)

When they had done running Mercier deplored the nice state, soaked to the buff, in which they would arrive at Helen's, to which in reply Camier described how they would immediately strip and put their things to dry, before the fire, or in the hot-cupboard with the boiler and hot water pipes.

(Calder, 25-6)

Here, the indirect construction clearly results in no economy at all. In fact, the construction seems to exhibit its own redundancy, and the devices of style indirect libre "The nice state, soaked to the buff") to clash with the bureaucratic formality of "described" and "deplored," and the specifications "in which," and "to which in reply" so that the editor's presence is not obscured but make fussily obtrusive. And again we are given the impression that what is being described for us here is not an event from the narrator's memory, or anything that has ever happened in the real world, but a passage from a previous text, with which the present text is in conflict, even as it colludes with it.

Of course, this sort of thing is by no means a new departure in Beckett's writing. From the very beginning he had been fond of representing the vexed relationship between an author, or editor, and his texts, and in a novel like *Watt* seems deliberately to create a narrator who is out of control of his material. Similarly, there are plenty of indications in the French *Mercier et Camier* that the narrator's testimony is unreliable. The poker-faced "résumés" which are placed after every pair of chapters do not succeed in hiding beneath their blandness the caprice which governs the choice and emphasis of material. In the résumé of chapter 7, for example (chapter 5 in the English), nothing is said of one of the most interesting episodes in the book, Mercier's encounter with an old man who looks like the narrator of "The Calmative," while the extraordinary passage of meditation following this encounter is shrunk ruthlessly down to the designation "Cerveau de Mercier" (Minuit, 163, Calder, 95). In the résumé of the next chapter, there is an outright distortion, when the murder of the police-constable becomes the prim "Mort de l'agent" (Minuit, 164; the English goes further in omitting this item altogether, 96).

Hugh Kenner has rightly seen these summaries as anticipation of Krapp's entries in his ledger of tapes;<sup>9</sup> like the non-committal entry "Farewell to Love," the dry résumés seem like attempts to control and neutralize the unruliness of the preceding material. Indeed, we might also see these as anticipations of Beckett's own attempts to shrink down his fiction in the search for a hardness and abstraction to replace the molten intensity of the earlier "battle of the soliloquy." And since the résumés are repetitions which are at the same time revisions, they are rather like intermittent self-translations within the original French text. This is an example of the way that self-translation can highlight instabilities within language and narration, for the French is shown to be different from itself in something of the same way that it is different from the English text which follows and revises it.

Repetition itself has, of course, an important function in Beckett's work. Usually its function is to embody the drive to make an end, often by "unsaying" what has already been said once. But if the compulsion to repeat has the need to close off at its basis, then it also has, as an unlooked-for consequence, the need to carry on repeating as long as the tiniest anxiety remains that the original may not have been satisfactorily unsaid. Already, in the French *Mercier et Camier*, Beckett seems to be demonstrating, by the imperfect correspondence between narration and summary, that the desire for consummation through repetition is always liable to be baulked. As we might expect, the summaries provided in the English version continue to differ from the text they summarize; Beckett omits more material from the summaries, sometimes, it is true because material has vanished from the main chapters, but also, apparently, as the result of changes of mind as to the relative importance of various incidents. Thus, the reference to the "Colère d'un barman" (Minuit, 54), is changed to "The bicycle" (Calder, 35) and the reference to the "départ des fermiers" (Minuit, 112) is resolved (Calder, 68), as are references to Mercier's arrival in the bar, the wind, and the death of the policeman (Minuit, 163-4, Calder, 95-6).

It might be claimed that all the changes that I have been discussing could not possibly be evident either to a French or English reader, for whom the text would be single and self-sufficient. But, as we have seen, the effect and purpose of these changes and omissions is not merely to revise and repress, but also to draw attention to those processes. And, what is more, the revision and repression are always imperfect in Beckett's translations, since he never changes his originals to bring them into line with his second thoughts. The original is therefore always left as witness to the gaps and differences of the translation.

The problem really comes from the fact that the two versions of the text, though they are incompatible with one another in various ways, are both "definitive," too. Oddly, the effect of this is to reduce the autonomy of each version of the text. Each becomes merely a version of the other, and is apprehensible as itself only by virtue of its differences from the other text. Indeed, another of the striking effects of Beckett's self-translation is that it abolishes the priority of original and copy, since the English text is not only a "mutilation" of the original, but also, in some senses, an improvement upon it, so that the French might be considered as in some respects as an inferior, derived version of the English. To put it in the terms suggested by Derrida, the translation is a "supplement" or sequel to the original text which, while appearing to guarantee the integrity of the original, actually subverts that integrity by opening up areas of absence, or "lack" in it.<sup>10</sup> As we have seen, this lack of priority is instanced within each text itself, with the oddly unreliable résumés, which give us translations into a different idiom of events that have already been narrated, but do not give us the means of deciding which version to prefer.

The structure is one of double-bind, because there is no way of breaking out of the vicious circle of the relationship of the two texts without reproducing it. This is borne out by my own practical difficulty in referring to the novel in this essay. I have the feeling all the time that I ought to be able to refer to a text which lies somehow behind, or prior to both versions, but there is no way of referring to this text except in its manifestation either as "*Mercier et Camier*" or "*Mercier and Camier*." For the book only exists in versions of itself, and there is no Platonic Ur-text which will account for and resolve the contradictions between them. The text consists in its inconsistency, and is only itself by being congenitally not-itself.

The issue of Beckett's self-translation is closely related to his actual style and language in his work. One of the most interesting things about Beckett's turn to French is the way that it connects with the decided shift in his style, after 1946, from the baroque elaboration of the earlier work to the conversational directness which characterize the Trilogy. However, by 1970, when Beckett began to translate *Mercier et Camier*, his style had moved into a third phase, one of calm, exact austerity; in *Bing*, *Le Dépeupleur*, *Imagination Morte* *Imaginez*, and *All Strange Away* Beckett's energies have been devoted to the stylistic control of the resonances of language, rather than the multiplication of associations and implications. With the simultaneous shriveling of narrative content, style has become more and more important as the bearer of meaning in Beckett's work, and he has become ever more scrupulous and exacting in his translations, seeking to exert the same rigorous control over both versions of a text. One might expect to find signs of this new stylistic austerity in the translation of *Mercier et Camier*, but, remarkably, this does not seem in general to be the case, apart from the obvious excision of material which he finds to be flabby or unnecessary. In fact, the general tendency in Beckett's translation of this work is to emphasize the similarity between *Mercier et Camier* and his early works, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, *Murphy*, and *Watt*, rather than to try to draw it into line with his later stylistic practice. Time and again, Beckett takes the opportunity of increasing the range of obscure allusions, introducing archaism, compressing, polishing and even distorting the language of the original. Where the French version is pitched more or less in the solid middle ground of ordinary colloquial language (though with a few quirky departures from it), the idioms of the English are drawn from much more wide-spread and often incompatible sources, ranging from philosophical jargon to the fierce obscenity of the street. Beckett often shows a preference in the English for inkhorn Latinisms, which can seem very awkward when compared to their French equivalents:

Il tenait du dédale, le petit square, on y circulait avec gêne, et il  
fallait bien le connaître pour en pouvoir sortir à la première  
tentative.

(Minuit, 11)

It had something of the maze, irksome to perambulate, difficult of  
egress, for one not in its secrets.

(Calder, 9)

The early drafts show Beckett working towards the ironic and self-defeating elevation of this sentence. His first translation of the end of its last phrase was "difficult to leave, for one not knowing it well" which is closer to the original, but also flatter and less effective. A similar comic elevation of language is brought about by the translation of the description of Mercier's and Camier's frequent collapses on the road; "ils s'effondraient tous les deux en même temps, comme un seul homme, sans s'être concertés et dans une parfaite indépendance l'un de l'autre" (Minuit, 179-80); in the English, Mercier and Camier collapse "simultaneously, as one man, without preconcertation and in perfect interdependency" (Calder, 102).

Although the French version of *Mercier and Camier* is sometimes itself very elaborate and very funny, it seems nowhere to match the range of comic discontinuity between registers and idioms to be found in the English. The piece of description which begins chapter 7 (chapter 10 in the French) shows this clearly: throwaway asides (“a thousand feet above sea-level, two thousand if you prefer,” Calder, 97) alternate with self-conscious poeticism like “the sea ... pale plinth as pale as the pale wall of the sky” (Calder, 97), the alliterative density of which contrasts with the more conventional and explicit syntax of the French—“elle n’a guère plus de couleur que le ciel qui n’en a guère, elle est comme une cimaise” (Minuit, 165). At times, Beckett approaches lampoon: “des deux ports, ils avancement bras minuscules dans la mer vitreuse, on les sait a plat mais on les voit levés” (Minuit, 166) becomes “tiny arms in the glassy sea outflung, known flat, seen raised” (Calder, 98). It is difficult to decide whether Beckett has adopted this compression in order to charge up the sublimity of his description or actually to debunk it. The latter seems to be suggested by the draft versions of this passage which show Beckett working towards parodic intensification, with “the tiny arms stretched out in the glassy sea” as first attempts. The ugly grinding of gears in the cadence of “known flat, seen raised” seems deliberate, too, with the substitution in Beckett’s second draft of “known flat” for the smoother “known level.”

It is often as though Beckett is trying deliberately to hamstring his language in the translation, as though, like Molloy speaking the name of his mother, he wished to abolish his words in the act of uttering them.<sup>11</sup> Beckett shows in the translation a fondness for mixed metaphors which reveal the artificiality and inadequacy of language, as when Mercier is left “on fuming tenterhooks” (Calder, 31) where the French has the less concrete “guet rageur” (Minuit, 48). And where there is awkwardness in the original, Beckett will often highlight rather than amend this in the translation; the description of Mr. Graves’ voice has a certain jingling oddity in the French—“sa voix basse et grasse de patriarche pastoral débutant” (Minuit, 73)—but the clotted English version—“his incipient pastoral patriarch’s tick bass” (Calder, 47)—is deliberately and desperately strange.

Similarly, the language of characters in the English version of the book is much quirkier and less realistic than in the French. Perhaps the most extraordinary language in the book is that ascribed to Mr. Madden. This already has strange features in the French version, including the frequent use of the aorist tense, normally confined in French, of course, to written language.<sup>12</sup> But the violent agitation of Mr. Madden’s language is much more marked in the English version, with collision of extreme formality of diction with casualness and crudity. Indeed, it is very often difficult in the English to make out what the furious Mr. Madden is saying:

The truth is I had that too in my bleeding blood. . . Oh I gave it to them! *Potopompos scroton evohe*. Like that, hot and strong. . . . Step out of here, I said, with a stout heart and your bollocks in your boots and come again tomorrow, tell the missus to go chase apes in hell. There were delicate moments. . . Brats the offscourings of fornication and God Almighty a cheap scent in a jakes. . . .

(Calder, 39-40)

Il faut dire que j'avais de qui tenir. . . . Potopompos scroton évohé, que je leur disais. . . . Sortez d'ici, que je leur disais, la queue basse et la tête haute, et revenez demain. La bourgeoise, au pilon, qu'elle se démerde. Des fois je me faisais attraper. . . . Les enfants, que je leur disais, c'est la scorie de l'amour. Dieu aussi, il en prenait pour son grade.

(Minuit, 59-60)

Watt is another character who picks up the contagion of the narrators verbal oddity, and his language mingles angry obscenity with Elizabethan courtliness; instead of “les agents, les” he speaks of “dogberries and kips” (Minuit, 197, Calder, 11 3), but, a little later, can declare “Bugger like!” and “Fuck like!” (Calder, 114-118—the French is as virulent, but less obscene—“La vie au Poteau!” and “La vie aux chiottes!” [Minuit, 200-204]).

Mercier and Camier themselves speak a language in the English which is much less realistic and more contentedly mandarin than that of their French counterparts. Camier’s “Soyons francs” becomes “a truce to dissembling” (Minuit, 24, Calder, 16), while Mercier’s remark about the dogs—“Abrutis par l’amour ils n’y avaient pas pensé”—becomes “Less rut-besotted they would have thought of it themselves” (Minuit, 23, Calder, 16). The convolution of their language can be very sustained in the English:

Do I ask, said Mercier, how exactly you came to break the umbrella?. . . I combed innumerable sites, questioned innumerable parties, made allowance for the invisibility of things, the metamorphoses of time, the foible of folk in general, and of me in particular, for and fibbery. . . . Do you not inkle, like me, how you might adjust yourself to this preposterous penalty and placidly await the executioner, come to ratify you?

(Calder, 89)

Est-ce que je demande comment tu as fait, exactement, pour casser le parapluie? dit Mercier. . . . Moi j’ai inspecté un grand nombre d’endroits, j’ai interrogé de nombreuses personnes, j’ai fait la part de l’invisibilité des choses, des transformations qu’opère le temps, du penchant des gens, dont moi, à la fable et au mensonge. . . . N’entrevois-tu pas, comme moi, le moyen de t’accommoder de cette absurde peine, d’attendre le bourreau avec placidité, comme l’entérinement d’un état de fait?

(Minuit, 149-50)

The pomposity of Mercier’s diction (“innumerable parties”), combined with the superbly fatuous alliteration (“foible of folk in general ... for and fibbery”) and anxious neologism (“fibbery,”

“inkle”) hardly conceals the underlying desperation which gives the language its nervous inventiveness. Mercier’s language, in the English, at least, is stretched to breaking point, and threatens to collapse at any moment into more noise. The fragility of language is suggested, too, by the hair-raising jokes that Beckett plays in the translation of *Mercier et Camier* by allowing the leakage of one language into another. Just as some critics have seen the evidence of Anglicism in Beckett’s early French writing, so *Mercier and Camier* is studded with imperfectly-digested Gallicisms—Mercier tells Camier that he has looked for the umbrella “longly” (“longuement”—Calder, 89, *Minuit*, 149), and later says to the manager of a bar, “Your whisky likes us” (this looks like a bungled translation of “il nous plait,” but the French has the equally odd—“Votre whisky est succulent,” *Minuit*, 201, which Beckett translated literally in his second draft.) These may, of course, represent Beckett’s grim revenge on himself for the embarrassing Anglicisms to be found in his early French work. But, at the same time, these intentional slips form part of an elaborate network of allusions to the absent French text, allusions which remind us of the dependence of the two texts one upon another.

One feature of Beckett’s work since the Trilogy has been the tendency to try to damp down lyricism and poeticism in the language, and to narrow its evocative range. Indeed, Beckett has given instructions to this effect to translators of his work into other languages,<sup>13</sup> so we should not be surprised to find the same tendency at times in the translation of *Mercier et Camier*. Certainly, there is evidence in both versions of the weary lyricism developed in *L’Innommable* and *Textes Pour Rien*, with the marvellous sustaining and variation of rhythm by the use of successions of commas:

Les voilà donc sur la route, sensiblement rafraîchis quand même, et chacun sait l’autre proche, le sent, le croit, le craint, l’espère, le nie et n’y peut rien. De temps en temps ils s’arrêtent, l’oreille dressée vers le bruit des pas, des pas reconnaissables entre tous les pas, et ils sont nombreux, qui vont doucement foulant les chemins de la terre, jour et nuit.

(*Minuit*, 183)

There they are then back on the road, appreciably recruited in spite of all, and each knows the other is at hand, feels, believes, fears, hopes, denies he is at hand, and can do nothing about it. Now and then they halt, all ears for the footfalls, footfalls distinguishable from all the other footfalls, and they are legion, softly failing on the face of the earth, more or less softly, day and night.

(*Calder*, 104)

Beckett’s translation of the wonderful widening series of vowels in “le sent, le croit, le craint, l’espère, le nie et n’y peut rien” stutters rather, but he has surely improved in the English upon the final words of the passage, with its controlled diminuendo, echoing the end of Joyce’s “The Dead” (this assisted by the change in the second draft of the translation of “ears cocked” to the gentler “all ears” and the literal “many” to the evocative “legion.”)

But there is also evidence in the translation of *Mercier et Camier* of attempts to diminish the prominence of this lyrical strain, or to break it up with harsher, more sardonic writing. At the end of chapter 5 (chapter 7 in the French) there is a long meditation on the horrors of time which, in the French version, concludes:

La main de Mercier lâcha le barreau de la grille auquel l'avait cloué ces renvois, supportés avec courage, d'époques révolues, comme on dit. Oui, il les avait supportés avec courage, car il savait qu'ils cesseraient à la fin dans une lente chute vers le murmure et puis le silence, ce silence qui est aussi un murmure, mais inarticulé. La porte se ferme, ou la trappe, dans l'oubliette ce sont toujours les mêmes propos, mais dans la prison proprement dit le calme est revenu.

(Minuit, 130-1)

The translation in Beckett's second draft shows him already trying to sour the language of the French, especially in the case of "ces renvois," "époques révolues" and "les mêmes propos":

Mercier's hand let go the railing round which {these eruptions— deleted} this attack of wind had fastened it, bravely borne from the sewers of the past so called and gone. Yes, bravely, for he knew they would die down in the end, slowly down to murmur and then that silence which is murmur still but wordless. The door shuts, or the trapdoor, in the dungeon it's still the same old {blather— deleted} moan, but the prison proper is quiet again.

In the end, though, Beckett's impatience seems to have been too much, for all that remains of the passage in the final version is the sentence "Mercier's hand released the railing to which this attack of wind had fastened it" (Calder, 77).

It seems, therefore, that the act of translation is a means, for Beckett, of distancing himself from the original *Mercier et Camier*, even though, in another obvious sense, it is translation which reacquaints him with his previous work. Like many of his characters, Beckett reaches into his own past but finds there no confirmation of the singleness and continuity of his identity but rather evidence of otherness, of the divided nature of experience and memory. The act of translation, like the act of memory, recalls the past in order that it may be rejected; Beckett, in translating *Mercier et Camier*, deliberately makes the text different from himself, remaking it in the manner of his earlier works, like *More Pricks Than Kicks*, *Murphy*, and *Watt*, rather than in the manner of any of the works that he was composing in the late 1960s and early 1970s. It is perhaps significant that Beckett had spent some considerable time revising the translation made by Ludovic and Agnes Janvier of *Watt* before embarking on *Mercier and Camier*, this may be a further indication of Beckett's sense that to have done with, or unsay the past it is necessary somehow to repeat it. It may account, too, for the peculiar intensity of the style of *Mercier and*

*Camier*, compounded as it is of equal parts of fascination and loathing,<sup>14</sup> which seems the result of a curiously double impulse to repudiate the earlier work, even as it is being repossessed.

This is very close to the narrative principle within Beckett's works themselves, especially *The Unnamable*, where previous narrative incarnations (including those of *Mercier and Camier*) are relentlessly recapitulated in order that they may be annihilated; and there is a close correspondence between the exploration within Beckett's work of the metamorphoses and multiplications of personality and his own practice of self-reconstruction in translation. The relationships between Molloy, Moran, Malone and the Unnamable are oddly like those between the successive translations of a text—it is no accident that Molloy has an Irish name while Moran's is French, or that Malone has a spare pencil somewhere in the bed “made in France, a long cylinder hardly broached” (Trilogy, p. 223)—just as the relationships of many of Beckett's couples, including Sam and Watt, and Mercier and Camier, remind us of the strange similarity-in-difference obtaining between his twin texts.<sup>15</sup>

But the compulsion to repeat leads continually to the recognition that repetition is endless. We should remember that Beckett does not confine himself to two languages, for he takes an interest in the German and Italian translations of his work, and has, of course, directed plays in German as well as in French and English. (Beckett's direction of his own plays presents itself too as an interesting example of self-repetition or self-translation, for each new production is in a sense different from the text which it repeats, even as Beckett strives to make it definitive.) But, in the echo-chamber of Beckett's *oeuvre*, nothing can be unsaid, except by being perpetually reiterated, and therefore no character, no story can ever be brought to conclusion, as Henry seems to acknowledge in *Embers*: “stories. . . . I never finished any of them, I never finished anything, everything always went on for ever.”<sup>16</sup> Beckett's translations dramatize the gnawing sense that “le langage n'est qu'une fiction, une traduction sans original”<sup>17</sup> where both the identity of texts and relationships of priority between them are annulled, leaving us only with multiplying alternative versions of the self, its memories, its fictions and its language.

## NOTES

1. There have not been many sustained studies of Beckett's self-translations, but among the best essays on the topic is Hugh Kenner's “Beckett Translating Beckett Translating Beckett: *Comment c'est*,” in *Delos: A Journal On and Of Translation*, 5 (1970), pp. 194-211. Kenner comments interestingly on certain aspects of the translation of *Mercier and Camier* in *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), pp. 83-91. Also of interest and importance are Ruby Cohn's “Samuel Beckett Self-Translator,” in *PMLA*, 76 (1961), pp. 613-2; Harry Cockerham, “Samuel Beckett, Bilingual Playwright,” in *Samuel Beckett the Shape-Changer*, ed., Katherine Worth (London: Routledge and Kogan Paul, 1975), pp. 139-59; John Fletcher, “Ecrivain Bilingue,” in *L'Herne Beckett*, ed., Tom Bishop and Raymond Federman (Paris: Editions de L'Herne, 1976), pp. 212-19; Erika Ostrovsky, “Le Silence de Babel,” *ibid.*, pp. 206-11. I have also learnt much from two unpublished dissertations, A. R. Jones's “Samuel Beckett's Prose Fiction: A Comparative Study of the French and English Versions,” PhD, Birmingham, England, 1972 and Yolande Cantu's “Samuel Beckett Self-Translator,” MA, Birkbeck College, London, 1984.

2. There is evidence from the MSS that this happened in the case of *Comédie* and of *Va et Vient*, there are signs, too, that the rendering of *Company* into French resulted in changes in the original version. See Richard L. Admussen, *The Samuel Beckett Manuscripts: A Study* (Boston: G. K. Hall and Co., 1979), pp. 30, 87.
3. A. R. Jones, "The French *Murphy*, from 'rarebird' to 'cancre'"; *Journal of Beckett Studies*, 6 (Autumn, 1980), pp. 37-50.
4. *Mercier et Camier* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1970), pp. 151-2; omitted in *Mercier and Camier* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1974), p.90. The Calder and Boyars edition has the same pagination as the 1974 Grove Press edition. References hereafter are to "Minuit" and "Calder" and are incorporated in the text.
5. Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (Brunswick: New Jersey, Rutgers U.P., 1962), pp. 97-8.
6. This quotation is taken from Beckett's drafts for the translation of *Mercier and Camier*. The Samuel Beckett Collection in the Reading University Library holds what seems to be a complete run of the manuscripts and typescripts of the manuscripts and typescripts of Beckett's translation of this text, consisting of a first manuscript draft in a series of notebooks, a second draft in typescript, which is heavily corrected and in which much of the material which is now absent from the final translation is first struck out, and a final typescript, which is very close to the printed version of the text. I am grateful to the Reading University Library for permission to consult this material and to Samuel Beckett for permission to quote from it.
7. John Fletcher, *The Novels of Samuel Beckett* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1972), p. 115.
8. *Sunday Times*, 13 October, 1974, p. 34.
9. Kenner, *Reader's Guide*, p. 89.
10. On the "logic of supplementation," see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 141-64.
11. *Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnameable* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1959), p. 17.
12. The play between *récit* and *discours* the written and the spoken, which this brings about is discussed in Niels Egebak, *L'écriture de Samuel Beckett* (Copenhagen: Alademisk Fodag, 1973), pp. 32-4.
13. A. R. Jones reports that Beckett urged Elmar Tophoven, his German translator, to use a vocabulary of low emotional intensity, and a syntax as unemphatic and as elevated as possible," "Samuel Beckett's Prose Fiction," p. 5.

14. Beckett wrote in a letter of 1973 to Barney Rosset that the translation of *Mercier et Camier* was not going well and that he was “bogged down through loathing of the original” (quoted in Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1978], p. 634).
15. Erika Ostrovsky remarks that “dans les reformulations bilingues d’une oeuvre, les deux versions se poursuivent en gardant toujours un léger écart et revelant un itinéraire aussi frustrant que celui de Mercier et Camier qui rend impossible toute rencontre mais nécessite une quête continuelle,” “Le Silence de Babel,” p. 210.
16. *Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), p. 94.
17. This striking formulation is Niels Egebak’s, in *L’écriture de Samuel Beckett*, p. 120.