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Introductory Note on Samuel Beckett

David Hayman

Mercier et Camier, which Beckett refused for many years to publish, is the first of his novels written in French (1946). It was preceded, however, by the *Nouvelles* and *Premier amour*, reflections on isolation that represent the refinement of some of his earliest themes. If *Watt* is his war novel, these early French fictions, characterized by grim humor and a spartan style, are in a sense post-apocalyptic. *Mercier et Camier*, poised between joy and despair, between the active quest and the aborted action, replete in objects and phrases which were to become his bywords, is the most “novelistic” and “entertaining” of these mid-period works. Perhaps this explains Beckett’s reluctance to see it in print, this and the fact that it represents a pre-projection of later, subtler states of mind. Whatever the case, we are delighted that now, two years after its publication in French, Beckett has consented to let us print this remarkable extract from his half-completed translation.

The novel from which our passage is taken concerns the peregrinations of two inept clowns, figures located half-way between Flaubert’s auto-didactic clerks, Bouvard and Pecuchet, and the millennial tramps of *Godot*. As a record of false starts on a senseless voyage, it is full of mini-adventures, encounters, *contretemps* which suggest the minimization of the picaresque quest in an elaborately Irish vein.

This self-portrait of Mr. Madden, the syphilitic clown, gives us a sense of the quality of the book as a whole, and of Beckett’s strategy as a translator from loosely argotic French into Anglo-Irish. Above all we sense the spirit of verbal play, the explicit manipulation of words which animates so much pointlessness and despair, which indeed justifies both the life of Beckett’s fiction and its creation. Here this quality is manifest in the vitality of a semi-credible and frequently distasteful speaker, who, like so many of Beckett’s later characters, *talks* himself into existence, reversing traditional novelistic modes (except those springing from Sterne) which put belief before doubt as a priority. It is precisely to the dubious humanity of Mr. Madden that we owe our delight in a growing, but frequently undermined, belief and sympathy and our surprise at the impact of the final ambiguous pathos.