

# Beckett's Absent Paris: Malone Dies, Céline, and the Modernist City

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## Beckett's Absent Paris: *Malone Dies*, Céline, and the Modernist City

This article examines the relationship of Beckett's writing to the modernist topos of the alienated city and the "flâneur," making use of Walter Benjamin's work on the subject, and reading Beckett's early writing in English and French, in particular the poem "Rue de Vaugirard," in this context. The modernist valorization of Paris is seen as a crucial component in Beckett's negotiation with the precedent of Céline, whose style is strongly evident in the French prose of *Malone meurt*, even as that novel refuses the cityscape in favor of the solipsism of the enclosed room.

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*Cet article se propose d'étudier l'écriture beckettienne dans son rapport au motif moderniste de la grande ville, en tant que haut lieu de l'aliénation. Ceci implique un recours au travail de Walter Benjamin sur Paris et le flâneur, et une lecture du poème « Rue de Vaugirard », parmi d'autres textes de « jeunesse » de Beckett. La valorisation moderniste de Paris se révèle être un élément clé dans les échanges que Beckett établit avec le style de Céline, dont la marque se perçoit très clairement dans *Malone meurt*. Cependant, ce roman récuse le paysage urbain célinien au profit de l'espace solipsiste de la chambre close.*

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Samuel Beckett's reinvention of himself as a French writer in the nineteen-forties is undoubtedly one of the most well known and even well worn narratives we have about the extraordinary trajectory of this author, whose radical switches not only between languages but also between genres (prose and theater), along with his status in many accounts as the virtual hinge between "modernism" and "post-modernism," have left the critical corpus especially diffuse and scattered. Indeed, this instance of radical linguistic "self-fashioning" in which, first through the short "nouvelles" and then by way of the trilogy of novels, *Molloy*, *Malone meurt*, and *L'Innommable*, and the play *En attendant Godot*, Beckett made literal the trope of the author's need to find a "new language," rightfully stands out even in the context of the modernist movement, which emphasized such gestures to an extraordinary degree. Yet equally

remarkable is it that Beckett made himself over twice: first by creating a French idiom in which to work, and then again by translating the French works *back* into an English which one hesitates to call “native” considering that Beckett reaches it only by way of a detour through his French texts. That is to say, given that Beckett imprints his signature as forcefully upon the English “translations” of his French works as he does on both the French “originals” and on his early, pre-Francophone texts, such as *Murphy* and *Watt*, it seems reductive to consider, for example, the younger Beckett as primarily an “Irish” writer and the mature Beckett as a French one. The status of the English trilogy as a “translation” in no way diminishes the depth of its engagement with the prose traditions of the English language.

As such complexities signal, our over familiarity with the tale of Beckett’s bilingual production should not obscure the ironies inherent to it, notably those pertaining to Beckett’s relationship to Anglophone and particularly Irish literary antecedents. For example, if Beckett’s shift to French certainly provided him with an exit from the exuberantly baroque mock-realist verbal effusion of *Murphy*, itself part of the complex of post-*Ulysses*, post-*Waste Land* English-language writing practices which Tyrus Miller has helpfully considered under the heading of “Late Modernism,” the implications of this change with regard to the young modernist tradition from which Beckett is already breaking need to be thought through clearly. Notably, to simply accept the conventional wisdom that writing in French allowed Beckett to reject both his former master Joyce and the latter’s over emphasis on the “apotheosis of the word” (as Beckett designated Joyce’s project in *Finnegans Wake* in a letter from 1937 [*Disjecta* 172]) in favor of a leaner and more modest, ultimately cleaner style, is to miss an obvious yet crucial irony: such a program is itself already entirely Joyce’s. It is Joyce who, in the figure of Stephen Dedalus, suggested that the recipe for artistic liberation or even self-engenderment is relocation to Paris and rejection of Irish or even Anglophone parochial standards, and it is Joyce who, lest we forget, described the style of his first great work, *Dubliners*, as one of “scrupulous meanness” (Joyce 83). Thus, Beckett’s gestures of the forties, notably the turn to French, can be seen as much as a fulfillment of the Joycean project as its rejection, just as Macmann, unable to distinguish clearly transgression from punishment, finds his very suffering to be cause of “fear and trembling,” saying “This will cost me dear” (*Three Novels* 240). Indeed, nothing is more Dedalusian than the terms in which Beckett’s alleged “rejection” of Joyce’s examples is often posed, casting Beckett as the heroic artist who through linguistic exile and an aesthetics of silence casts off the shackles of a heritage that prevents his true self-expression. In such a context, the designation of Paris as site for the rebirth is hardly insignificant. Certainly, considering the enormous prestige of French literary and artistic culture in general, and the life of the French capital in particular, not only for the Joycean model but for Anglophone “High Modernism” as a whole,

any examination of the manner in which Beckett becomes a “French” writer, or at least, a writer of French, needs to be conducted in the light of another question, which carries equally important implications for Beckett as modernist: the extent to which he becomes a “Parisian” writer, or manages not to do so. Key here in both respects is the figure of Céline.

If Beckett’s enthusiasm for *Voyage au bout de la nuit* and *Mort à crédit* is well known, surprisingly little extensive work has been carried out on the crucial role Céline plays stylistically in Beckett’s French prose of the forties. An important exception to this tendency is Jean-Michel Rabaté, who in a highly suggestive consideration of Beckett as a “Parisian” writer evokes the “innumerable” parallels between Céline’s style and that of the later Beckett. In fact, one must add that these similarities at times reach a level of something akin to pastiche. Consider, for example, these opening lines: “Nous voici encore seuls. Tout cela est si lent, si lourd, si triste.... Bientôt je serai vieux. Et ce sera enfin fini.” They are from *Mort à crédit* (13) and not from *Malone meurt*, though one can be excused for thinking they might be. Beckett’s novel begins as follows: “Je serai quand même bientôt tout à fait mort enfin. Peut-être le mois prochain. Ce serait alors le mois d’avril ou de mai” (7). The short prefatory section which opens Céline’s novel ends this way: “Le facteur a ôté son képi. Je pourrais moi dire toute ma haine. Je sais. Je le ferai plus tard s’ils ne reviennent pas. J’aime mieux raconter des histoires. J’en raconterai de telles qu’ils reviendront, exprès, pour me tuer, des quatre coins du monde. Alors ce sera fini et je serai bien content” (14). Beckett’s novel ends its own short opening section like this: “On va pouvoir m’enterrer, on ne me verra plus à la surface. D’ici là je vais me raconter des histoires, si je peux.... Je m’en promets beaucoup de satisfaction, une certaine satisfaction. Je suis satisfait, voilà, je suis fait, on me rembourse, je n’ai plus besoin de rien. Laissez-moi dire tout d’abord que je ne pardonne à personne. Je souhaite à tous une vie atroce et ensuite les flammes et la glace des enfers et dans les exécrables générations à venir une mémoire honorée. Assez pour ce soir” (8-9).

What appears from even this very short comparison is that with regard to the question of Beckett’s shift into French and its implications for his creation of a style of his “own,” the conventional wisdom is largely backwards: in terms of potentially overweening stylistic influences, it is less Joyce who is in question for Beckett than Céline, and the shift into French may be seen as much as a flight *into* influence as a running from one. Rabaté crucially links this to the question of translation, “Tout se passe comme si Beckett avait eu besoin de passer au français aussi pour pouvoir écrire non pas ‘comme Céline’ mais ‘avec’ ou ‘après Céline.’ Beckett aurait donc ‘traduit’ Céline—non pas en anglais, mais en son français à lui” (77). At the same time, if *Malone meurt* is perhaps the work which, stylistically, bears Céline’s heaviest marks, it is also one which decisively breaks with one of the major Célinian motifs, the urban

or specifically Parisian novel, foregoing its cartography entirely for two of the loci which are the classic dialectical opposites of the urban: the enclosed space of the single room, and the country landscape we see at times in the tales of Sapo and Macmann.

Any consideration of Beckett as French writer, as “Parisian,” but also as an Anglo-American modernist, for whom the site of Paris could hardly be neutral, necessitates examining how the younger Beckett’s texts engage not only the French language and Paris, but also the high modernist topos of the city. For example, if Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* doubtless provided the most spectacular assertion for Beckett of the Anglo-American mystification of Paris as nodal point of modernity, the artistic vanguard, and erotic possibility, like portrayals could have been found in works like Henry James’ *The Ambassadors*, or, staying closer to Beckett’s period, Stein’s *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933) along with *Nightwood* (1936), by Beckett’s good friend, Djuna Barnes. The privileged relation between the city as such and “modern” writing or modernity tout court goes back, of course, to Baudelaire, and is firmly reiterated in texts like *The Waste Land*, *Ulysses*, and also in the poetry of Apollinaire and Jules Romains, the first of whom Beckett translated and the second of whom he read with interest.

Beckett’s “English” prose is interesting in this regard. If his early collection of stories *More Pricks than Kicks*, like Joyce’s *Dubliners*, restricts its action to the confines of Dublin and environs, the even earlier, posthumously published *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, from which much of the material of *More Pricks* was gleaned, contained lengthy Parisian episodes, inspired by Beckett’s sojourn as a foreign “lecteur” at the École Normale Supérieure in the late twenties, which were subsequently abandoned. His next work of fiction, *Murphy*, is very much a London novel, often siting its action with a great deal of precision. Following this is *Watt*, which, if transpiring almost entirely in the house and grounds of one mysterious Mr. Knott, nevertheless provides clues which allow those familiar with the locale to situate it in Foxrock, the Dublin suburb where Beckett grew up. Yet when we reach the Célinian French trilogy, aside from the occasional surreal and isolated reference, Paris and the city-space have all but disappeared.

This is not the case in what are, after all, Beckett’s earliest attempts at creative work in French: not the *nouvelles* or *Mercier et Camier*, but the poems which Beckett’s editors have dated between 1937 and 1939. Two of these, “Arènes de Lutèce” and “Rue de Vaugirard,” are Parisian down to their very titles. The first follows a familiar program of the urban uncanny almost to the letter, as the doubled and divided poet watches himself approach in the guise of another (“J’ai un frisson, c’est moi qui me rejoins, / c’est avec d’autres yeux que maintenant je regarde” [*Collected Poems* 50]). The uncanny, ghostly resonances of metropolitan alienation, familiar from Baudelaire or Eliot’s “unreal city” in *The Waste Land*, are unmistakable. The second, however, breaks

with certain conventions of the Paris poem, and the corresponding motif of the urban flâneur, in highly significant ways. I will quote it in full:

à mi-hauteur  
 je débraye et béant de candeur  
 expose la plaque aux lumières et aux ombres  
 puis repars fortifié  
 d'un négatif irrécusable (47)

The poem not only takes a street name for its title, but in its very first line stresses the speaker's progress along it, establishing the relation to the city as one above all of spatial negotiation, of motion and change. This is the familiar Paris of Baudelaire and Apollinaire, of course, or the New York of Whitman and Cendrars, and the poem immediately inscribes itself into the tradition so well described by Walter Benjamin, in which the city opens out into landscape, with the new, less scrutable signs of condensed exchange value and mechanical construction replacing those that Nature, through which the Romantic poet strolled, offered to an earlier generation of wandering observers. In fact, in his story "Ding-Dong" from *More Pricks than Kicks*, Beckett had already portrayed the experience of his protagonist in Dublin in similar terms, his metaphysical hermeneutics slithering into the ground of advertising's conditioned response, when he stops to "wait for a sign": "There were signs on all hands. There was the big Bovril sign to begin with, flaring beyond the Green" (39). Here, however, as the second line makes clear, the poem will not follow the leisurely pace of the flâneur, free to stop and turn his gaze wherever he likes; we are likewise removed from the Whitmanian and Baudelairean immersion in the anonymous, surging, confining, enticing urban crowd. We are, in fact, behind the wheel of a car, which implies a completely different relationship to the cityspace. Yet, the moment Beckett privileges here, not surprisingly, is not one of motion but of stasis, of disengagement in every sense, as he steps on the clutch in the second line, perhaps throwing the gear-shift into "neutral," or what in French is the no less significant "point mort." Hence, the "négatif irrécusable" he takes with him once he shifts back into gear.

Meanwhile, no less radical is Beckett's insistence on the "plaque," the license plate, within a poetic tradition which tends to emphasize the sudden shock of *recognition*, the stranger's mute but incisive address, be it Whitman's cognizance of the "living speech" buried in the city in "Song of Myself" ("What living and buried speech is always vibrating here, what howls restrain'd by decorum" [195]), the lightning bolt in which Baudelaire reads the desire embedded in the gaze of his "passante" ("Un éclair... puis la nuit! Fugitive beauté / Dont le regard m'a fait soudainement renaître" [126]), or Frank O'Hara's sudden moment of arrest when his cheerful round of errands is interrupted by dead Billie Holiday's gaze, stopping the breath of his memory as she looks up at him off the cover of the *New York Post*:

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of  
 leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT  
 while she whispered a song along the keyboard  
 to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing. (26)

Beckett gives us no voice and no gaze, but rather the mechanized reproducibility and purely mathematical, serial individuality of the license plate—a stark contrast, for example, with the brutally ghostly “apparition of these faces in the crowd,” which Pound had situated in “A Station of the Metro,” the full text of which reads as follows: “The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough” (287). Writing of hashish, but in a section of his *Arcades Project* dedicated to the “flâneur,” Walter Benjamin notes how under the drug’s influence “everything is face: each thing has the degree of bodily presence that allows it to be searched—as one searches a face—for such traits as appear. Under these conditions even a sentence (to say nothing of the single word) puts on a face...” (418). This searching and reading of faces, such as of those which impose themselves on Pound, is replaced by Beckett with a material object which is at once entirely inscrutable in Benjamin’s sense, yet more legible to any police officer or civil servant than any face could ever be; indeed, the license plate is a mark or sign which regulates the laws of circulation precisely through its recording of theoretically absolutely interchangeable components. In this way, “Rue de Vaugirard” can be said to deface the entire tradition of the poetry of the flâneur, voiding its dialectic of anonymity and individuality, while also preparing the way for the sheer exercise in serial movement and displacement which is *Quad*.

Of course, the poem also works according to an entirely different figural register—not that of motion, distance, and time, but of photography, and the frozen instant. Here, the light and shadows fall upon the “plaque” as photographic plate, providing the “negative” or template, the “cliché” to be reproduced mechanically *ad infinitum*, in the place, perhaps, of the sheer emptiness, the gaping white blank, of the subjective position. The reversed, reproducible image of the negative, the cliché itself, very type of the automatic and anti-individual, replaces the face of the flâneur, now an empty whiteness, just as the gears of the car replace the rhythm, gait, and carriage of the stroller. Thus, the poem posits the relationship between the urban wanderer and the cityscape entirely as one of prosthesis, as the automobile mediates the stroller’s circulation through space, and the camera replaces the eye, the gaze, but also the memory, in its role as recording device. The logic of denaturalization and alienation inherent to the entire tradition of urban poetry is pushed forward here by Beckett, as machines and the mechanical are no longer one term of the urban relationship but the mediators by which any relationship is made possible in the first place. It is only out of gear, when the motor, should it spin, will do so to no purpose, that between a chiaroscuro of “lumières” and “ombres” the space of the subject can assert itself, and even so, in the Beckettian mode of failure.

Prosthesis is also, of course, central to *Malone Dies*. Malone, irreversibly bed-ridden, is able to retrieve his various belongings only thanks to his long, hooked stick. Even more, he goes so far as to define as “his” only those objects within his prosthetic reach: “For only those things are mine the whereabouts of which I know well enough to be able to lay hold of them, if necessary, that is the definition I have adopted, to define my possessions” (249). Thus, when Malone loses the stick with which he “lays hold” of these objects, he is forced to conclude that none of the objects outside of his bed remain “his”: “In the meantime nothing is mine any more, according to my definition, if I remember rightly, except my exercise-book, my lead and the French pencil, assuming it really exists” (255). However, if the stick thus clearly functions as an extension of the “self” or possessor, enlarging his dominion, this logically prior “self” which would be making use of the prosthesis is granted no ontological priority either. Speaking of his “pots,” Malone continues: “They are not mine, but I say my pots, as I say my bed, my window, as I say me” (252). The fact that the “me”—that which should guarantee the subsequent claims to possession—is itself no more than a possession or “object” among the series is crucial, as it extends the question of prosthesis and representation (already opened by the story of Macmann, which resembles so strongly Malone’s own), down to the grammatical pronoun. That is to say, it is not simply a question of wondering whether, when Malone writes of Macmann, he is writing of himself, or even if “Malone” is simply a pseudonym for Molloy or Moran, as various textual elements might lead us to believe. Rather, we are progressively led towards what will become the central question of the last novel of the “trilogy,” *The Unnamable*: whether the “I” which could assume a name or pseudonym, and the “me” which these names would represent, can in any way be prior to or originary for a “name” which would be attributed to them, or are rather simply other “names” within the series itself. The opposition pronoun/name is deconstructed, which leads to a vast troubling of all the distinctions between “self” and “mask” or “pose” through which the regimes of self-representation are usually governed.

For these reasons, it is hardly coincidental if Malone’s “stick,” through which his material possessions are defined, is consistently put in parallel with his pencil, with which he both writes the stories of Sapo and Macmann, and records information about “himself” (assuming that “himself” is unequivocally distinguishable from Sapo and Macmann, something Malone himself throws into question). Like the stick, then, the pencil extends Malone, marks him, and becomes a tool for marking a boundary between what is still “him” and what is “without,” even if, especially if, one of Beckett’s chief concerns is to deconstruct everything that makes such boundaries seem possible. In other words, if the pencil is the ultimate prosthesis, it is also that which is attached to nothing, should we see subjectivity in Beckett as not constative but performative, that is, as instantiated by the act of the writing rather than represented

by it, as Porter Abbot has argued by way of his neologism, “autography” (x). The relationship between the pencil and murder is also one *Malone Dies* emphasizes, as in its last lines, Malone confuses the hatchet with which Lemuel is killing his wards, who also bear a strong resemblance to certain characters from other works by Beckett, with his own pencil and stick:

Lemuel is in charge, he raises his hatchet on which the blood will never dry, but not to hit anyone, he will not hit anyone, he will not hit anyone any more, he will not touch anyone any more, either with it or with it or with it or with or  
 or with it or with his hammer or with his stick or with his fist or in thought in dream I mean never he will never  
 or with his pencil or with his stick or  
 or light light I mean  
 never there he will never  
 never anything  
 there  
 any more (288)

Naturally, the confusion between Malone and Lemuel, who finds himself now endowed with the pencil and stick previously attributed to the former, only contributes to the possible conflation of the name “Lemuel” with the paratextual element on the book’s cover, the “Samuel” Beckett which signs the text. It is, then, not by car and camera but by stick and pencil that Malone navigates through *Malone Dies*, situating himself both “physically” within his room and “subjectively” with regard to his various narratives, in a system which also places in parallel the room and the exercise book, transforming the former into a surface of inscription. The room itself bears an equivocal relationship to the cityspace delineated outside it. Early on, Malone is clear about the setting: “My bed is by the window. I lie turned towards it most of the time. I see roofs and sky, a glimpse of the street too, if I crane. I do not see any fields or hills” (184). Yet the room, window, and city beyond are quickly fixed more as transcendental abstractions than as actual places. Realizing he has described both the rising and the setting sun as seen through his window, Malone laconically remarks, “It is no ordinary pane, it brings me sunset and it brings me sunrise” (209). If the room is also likened in one place to a hollow head (“indeed sometimes it seems to me I am in a head and that these eight, no, six, these six planes that enclose me are of solid bone” [221]), shortly thereafter appears a somewhat different figuration, in which the window is described by Malone as his “umbilicus” (223), or “ombilic” (81) in French. Several things are in play here. First of all, shortly before this reference to the window, Malone describes how he lost his pencil, which both the French and English texts name as a “Venus” (222 in English; 79 in French). Now, in French, one of the notable early occurrences of the word “ombilic” is in botany, where in 1590 the plant name “ombilic de Vénus” is a simple demotic transposition of the Latin “Umbilicus Veneris”; this might

partially explain why Beckett opts for this term rather than the more common French “nombriil” or English “navel.” In any event, in both French and English Beckett’s word has stronger connotations than either alternative with the umbilical cord, and thus emphasizes that aspect of the navel’s anatomical history. Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary* has a particularly evocative definition of “umbilicus”—“the place where the extraembryotic structures are continuous with those of the body proper of the embryo”—while the *OED*, which Beckett actually cited without attribution in *Krapp’s Last Tape*, also proposes “the part of a seed by which it is attached to the placenta,” while adding a geometrical sense: “a point in a surface through which all its lines of curvature pass.” As Beckett uses it here, however, it has two clear functions above and beyond those that the histories of the word might suggest. First, it reinscribes the relationship between Malone’s body, Malone’s “mind,” and the space both those inhabit. The room is no longer a “head” (which Malone had defined, in any event, as certainly *not* his own), but now, perhaps, a giant abdomen, feeding off the light that courses through the umbilicus of the window. Which leads us to the second function: despite the novel’s extended trope of “birth into death,” here, the room is in no way a womb from which Malone will be delivered into his mortality. That is to say, if the claustrophobic room is to be likened to a uterus, with the great outside figuring the world, then the window can not logically be the umbilicus. Rather, given Malone’s formulation, the bustling city beyond is the *placenta*, from which Malone derives sustenance, but with which the relationship must be brought to an end, if birth (which here is death) is to take place. In other words, for Malone to be born, or to die, means not his expulsion from the womblike room. On the contrary it would mean the closing or shuttering of the window, the severing of that connection, and his further recession within the confines in which he finds himself.

The umbilicus, also, emphasizes the contrast of Beckett’s project with the autotelic Joycean one of self-engenderment. That the umbilical scar is figured by the passage way between interior and exterior in the guise of room and city again shows the retreat from the experiential cartographies of *Ulysses* as much as from those of Céline. If Beckett removes the labyrinthine city with its chance encounters, it is not so much to bracket the contingent in favor of the absolute or ideal, but rather to bracket the idealization of contingency as model of experience. The commodification of experience as such, the sense of experience as an exchangeable commodity, is no less crucial to expressivist and realist models of writing than to the tourist industry, and let us note how consistently Beckett’s work, like Céline’s, flirts with autobiographical structures and tropes. By recusing the city, Beckett dodges the motif of the lucky find, the “trouvaille,” the “payoff” which leads Benjamin to liken the flâneur to a gambler: “And doesn’t he [the flâneur] transform the arcade into a casino, into a gambling den, where now and again he stakes the red, blue, yellow *jetons* of feeling on women, on a face

that suddenly surfaces (will it return his look?), on a mute mouth (will it speak?)” (882). But at the same time, he also eschews the entire dialectics of the alienated encounter, or the encounter with alienation, which dominate the swathe of modernist writing ranging from Baudelaire to Joyce and Eliot. The commodification of experience, including failed experience, or the experience of failure, is consistently located by Modernism in the urban space, itself the site of the experience of commodities. On the contrary, for Beckett, the founding division of “Arènes de Lutèce,” with its “c’est moi qui me rejoins,” will henceforth be staged not in the haunted space of Paris’ palimpsestic Roman ruins, but in the solitary chamber, or better yet, within the anonymity of the regulated institution—a space neither urban nor properly suburban, following regimes neither of city life nor of that of the country, but those ordered by numerical systems of spacing and scheduling, as *Murphy* emphasized even more than *Malone Dies*.

Meanwhile, the parodic inventory of *Malone* only accentuates Beckett’s rejection of the aesthetics of collecting and collection, be it of objects or privileged moments, and mirrors the impossibility of *Malone*’s “stories” to in any way belong to or represent their “creator,” or to attain any self-sufficient artistic autonomy beyond him, that is, objectify themselves. The umbilical window of *Malone Dies* is the mark of Beckett’s link to and break from the haunted cities of High Modernism. At the same time, what Beckett takes from Céline is not primarily what one might now call the “postmodern” positing of the authorial prosopopeia as quite literally a mask, from behind which one casts many others in the form of stories tagged, to a greater or lesser extent, as autobiographical. Certainly, as Céline’s “Ferdinands” bear a suggestive relationship with the “Louis-Ferdinand” who signs the novels in which they appear, “Lemuel” suggests “Samuel,” as we have seen. But such questions of authorial representation, doubling, and masking, also go back to Dante and the *Commedia*, to say nothing of other key authors for Beckett, such as Yeats, Joyce with his Stephen Dedalus, or Proust with his nameless narrator, to name only a few. What Céline brings to Beckett, as the first paragraphs of *Mort à crédit* make clear, is the sense of first-person discourse not only as “self-representation” or self-supplementation, positioning or in fact writing and thereby enacting a “subject,” but also and above all as a form of *address*, interpellating a second person and constructing a position for him or for her. It is precisely the perlocutionary aspects of address, the possibility not of conveying information or representations but of creating an effect on an addressee, which Céline stresses in his opening lines: “J’en raconterai de telles [histoires] qu’ils reviendront, exprès pour me tuer....” (14), and which distinguish Céline’s first-person narrational practice from others equally crucial to Beckett, like those of Proust, Descartes, or Augustine. Céline’s decisive intervention for Beckett’s own writing, too easily catalogued in terms of “register” and “tone,” derives more precisely from the permutations and modulations it permits in the construction

of the appeal to the other, whose desire to identify with the literary subject's experience is the first convention refused. Yet not entirely, for the ultimate addressee of Céline's provocation is not the second person, but the third-person "ils," the absent figures on whom rage and blame is conveniently displaced in a complicitous arrangement the reader, accompanying Ferdinand, is encouraged to share. For Beckett, the reader is asked to be company of a different sort.

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