

Robert Scholes

“PLAYING WITH THE CRIES”

There is a page on the World Wide Web called “Play It Again, Sam.” If you should visit that page, you will find a solid black background, with the words “I Can’t Go On” written there. If you click on those underlined words, you will find yourself on another black page, on which the words “I Must Go On” appear. A click there and you are back to the black page with “I Can’t Go On” inscribed thereon. You can continue this as long as you wish. Play it again, Sam, indeed. The URL for the first page, for those interested in experiencing this phenomenon, is <http://www.soros.org/kfish/gogo.html>.

I mention these pages because they afford some insight into the way that Beckett appears in the modern cultural text—and because, like the words of any durable writer—they speak *for* us as well as *to* us. In my case, they speak for me. I have read my assigned text, Beckett’s “First Love” many times, and I have nothing to say about it. And yet I must. I am back in school, a place I never really cared for, and the class is waiting for my book report. I am stalling, of course, trying not to begin, but I must begin. Carolyn Ayers has asked me to speak to you about “First Love,” and to speak “semiotically,” if possible, and I have accepted that task, so here I am, about to speak, which I shall certainly begin to do—in a moment or two.

Actually, I would rather speak about my own first love, and would certainly do so if I were sure which one it was. I think it must have been Carrie, who worked for my parents, was beautiful, I believe, and made wonderful cookies—of that I am certain. Yes, Carrie and her cookies would be a much pleasanter subject than Beckett and his “First Love,” but, come to think of it, Carrie left me—I must have been eight years old at the time—for a man. She married, had a child, and that was that. As Beckett says at the end of “First Love,” “either you love or you don’t.”

I seem to have begun speaking of Beckett and his story (though perhaps not “semiotically”), but not because Carolyn is insisting that I do so. No, it is rather because Beckett is insisting. His words, as he

almost said himself, can be applied to our situations. Yes, despite everything, these disgusting and somewhat boring post-Kafkaesque narratives of despair and degradation have something to say to us about our ordinary lives. And what's more, they are often funny—yes, amusing. You have to like a man who can say, “I have no bone to pick with graveyards.” What, then, is Beckett saying to us in “First Love”? How should we read this text?

We can take what we might call the pigeon's-eye view, flying high over this story, noting its broad outlines, and dropping our little messages upon the text, as pigeons do with monuments, thereby obscuring some of its words and meanings. Or we can take the worm's-eye view, grubbing around in the moldering text, chewing on this or that bit to see if there is anything in it that can nourish us, but never seeing the whole picture. Let us not, however, get too caught up in our own grubby metaphors. Let us be eclectic—a little flying and dropping, with a little grubbing and chewing. From up above, we can see that this text has just seven paragraphs. Let me, like a good semiotician, list them, in order, with their size noted, and their opening phrases:

1. (four lines) I associate, rightly or wrongly, marriage with the death. . . .
2. (fifteen lines) I visited, not so long ago, my father's grave, . . .
3. (a page and a half) Personally, I have no bone to pick with graveyards. . . .
4. (almost two pages) But to pass on to less melancholy matters, . . .
5. (over nine pages) But to pass on to less melancholy matters, . . .
6. (almost three pages) There were in fact two rooms, . . .
7. (about three pages) Gradually, I settled down, in this house. . . .

Very irregular paragraphing, notes our pigeon: Splat! In fact, the fifth paragraph is just about as long as all the others combined? Splat! A semiotician might find these matters interesting and revealing—but not this semiotician, at this moment. Our pigeon's flight over the text has not been in vain, however, for it has called our attention to the fact that the two central paragraphs in this text begin with exactly the same phrase: “But to pass on to less melancholy matters.” Given what is recounted in these paragraphs, it is clear that we are in a universe

divided between more and less melancholy matters, like that Hegelian night in which all cows lose their colors. This repetition is also a clue, however, as to how we should be reading this text. It suggests that we should attend to repetition—of which, it turns out, there is a lot in these few pages. Let us return, then, by this commodious vicus of recirculation, to the beginning.

The first words of the text, after the title, are: “I associate.” Stop right there, please. Hold that phrase. (The semiotician, as Roland Barthes told us too long ago, breaks up the text! And where is our Roland? Where is the author of *A Lover’s Discourse* and other lovelorn, melancholy texts? Where is the great apologist for *écriture*?)

He sleeps with kings and counselors and other scribes, including our Sam, whose corpse, if I may borrow some words from our narrator at the end of paragraph 4, has finally come “up to scratch.” Am I being macabre? Am I being impious to our great dead writers? I am being nothing that Samuel Beckett has not taught me to be, and my point is that these lessons are useful. Sam carried his heavy burden lightly, which is why he could indeed play it again and again.) But back to those first words: “I associate”—indeed you do, Sam, indeed you do—and so, then, must we, your readers, in our own attempts to come up to scratch. The first paragraph, I am suggesting, is, among other things, telling us how to read this text and others: by associating, by finding links. Even, as the text suggests, “other links on other levels.”

Finding links! How hypertextual! Like other postmodernist writers, Beckett seems to have been writing for hypertext *avant l’ordinateur*. Let us try to come up to scratch ourselves, however, and attend to our own itches. This text offers us—nay, insists upon—two orders of association, which semioticians once liked to call the metaphorical and the metonymical. Unhappy with the confusions evoked by those two terms, I shall refer to these two orders of association as simply the semantic and the syntactic. The semantic is based upon words, as they lie quietly in dictionaries and thesauruses—words, that is, referring to one another by similarity or opposition of meaning, like *live* and *quick* (semantic, based on similarity), or *quick* and *dead* (semantic, based upon opposition). The syntactic order, on the other hand, is based upon linkages established outside the dictionary, in the world and its texts, like death and the grave, the grave and the tombstone. I would say, “Let us

get back to Beckett," but death and graves and tombstones have already brought us back. Let us, in any case, look more closely at the words of "First Love."

The first paragraph begins not with narration, as the seventh paragraph does ("Gradually, I settled down"), nor with description, as the sixth paragraph does ("There were, in fact, two rooms, separated by a kitchen"), but with a meta-discursive statement (that is, a statement about the discourse itself): "I associate." The one who is recounting this narrative (the author? the speaker? the narrator?) is telling us how his mind and, by extension, his text, work. And what does this "I" associate? He—let us call him "he," for various reasons—he associates marriage with death. Marriage and death—not your standard pairing of concepts—or mine either. This unusual combination, because of its oddity, offers us food for thought. The text, as early as the next paragraph, clarifies this odd association by supplying a middle term: birth. The entire narrative has in fact been organized as a working out of variations on the themes of death, marriage, and birth, in their various combinations and permutations—and Beckett, as a reading of *Watt* will remind us, is a virtuoso of the *combinatoire*. He takes pleasure—perhaps gives it, too, to readers who share his own combinatorial perversion—in expressing all the possible combinations of a few simple elements—often playing them over, again and again. At the beginning of "First Love," however, Beckett's narrator poses for us the problem of what death and marriage may have to do with one another, and, in particular, what his father's death may have to do with his own marriage. Our reading thus becomes motivated by the desire for answers to these questions—which the text will indeed supply.

(Dear old Roland, in the heady days of early structuralism, when narratologists were scrambling around, pasting labels on every narrative device or code, offered us a name for this kind of motivation—but I have forgotten it. Does this mean that Barthes and others labored in vain? No more than we all do, no more than we all do. The codes offered to us in *S/Z* could never be the last word in the study of narrative. Like other rhetorical and critical terms, they serve to call our attention, as readers, to certain aspects of texts that might otherwise escape us. Breaking up the text, as Barthes did in that justly famous reading of Balzac's *Sarrasine*, also serves a great interpretive pur-

pose, in that it forces us to awaken from our narrative slumbers, induced by the teleological charms of realistic narration. By breaking up the text arbitrarily we experience the kind of alienation or estrangement that enables us to stop, for a moment, reading, and start, for a while, thinking. A late [or post-] modernist writer like Beckett, however, is likely to alienate us himself, needing no critic to break up his text. Beckett, needless to say, is very good at this. Having broken up my own text, which was never seductive enough to lull the critical faculties of its audience, though perhaps capable of lulling in a more somatic sense, I must now find my way back to Beckett's. Ah, yes, we were talking about the way that the opening conundrum of "First Love"—that association of marriage and death—works to rouse a curiosity that only the text could supply.)

These supplements begin in the second paragraph, in which the narrator recounts his visits to the graveyard, to read a tombstone and thus obtain the dates of his father's death and birth. He does so, apparently, by way of research for the account he is offering us, in order to ascertain his own age (about twenty-five) at the time of his marriage. Knowing that he married shortly after his father's death, he will be able to calculate his age by subtracting his birth date from his father's death date. But he can look at no tombstone to find the date of his own birth. Where, then, does that date repose? It is, he tells us, "*graven* on my memory." You will forgive the semiotical "aha" which caused me to emphasize that word "*graven*." To engrave is to scratch, to dig, and, of course, to write in a durable way, to produce writing that cannot be easily erased, like the words scratched upon tombstones. If you look for me tomorrow, says the dying Mercutio to Romeo, you will find me a grave man. Well, this is a grave man who is writing our story here, a man who believes that, if his dead Papa could see him, he would find his "corpse not yet quite up to scratch" (para 4, last line).

To "come up to scratch" is a term from the old days of bare knuckle boxing. It referred to a line scratched in the earth, to which a fighter who had been knocked down had to return or lose the fight. In English idiom now, it signifies, loosely, being ready, measuring up. In Beckett's text, the dead father, "in his great disembodied wisdom," may see "further than his son, whose corpse was not yet quite up to *scratch*." The living son is, paradoxically, a corpse, but not yet a finished one, not yet

perfected, not yet ready to be disembodied, to cross the line graven between life and death—"not yet quite up to scratch." "Scratch," then, signifies, at this textual moment, a line between being bodied and being disembodied, corpsed and decorsed. One thinks of Yeats and his soul, "sick with desire and fastened to a dying animal"—that is the line of thought embodied or engraved in Beckett's prose, here. To be alive, in this textual universe, is to be a corpse, dragging the flesh around, whereas to be dead is to be disembodied, freed from the drag of the flesh, which prevents one from "seeing." And the drag of the flesh is very much what this story is about. It is also, of course, about scratching, engraving, in a word: writing.

(Semioticians are always finding out that texts are about writing, about how they were written. How boring! How stultifying! And yet—I did not choose this text. It was selected and given to me by a member of the audience. Look! I have nothing up my sleeve. The references to writing are *in* Beckett's text. *He* put them there. And this is important. If *I* were bringing these meanings to the text all by myself, the whole process would be trivial and silly. Why bother? Interpretation is a game in which both the writer and the reader are players. "No symbols where none intended," says Beckett at the end of *Watt*, knowing full well that intention is a slippery notion, extending, as it does, from conscious purpose to unconscious revelation. I am pausing here, in parenthesis, to address the larger issue of this conference, the question of interpretation itself. My view of the matter rests on a relatively simple set of propositions: 1. The reader must respect the author's intentions. 2. The author whose intentions must be respected is a fictional creation of the reader. 3. The reader must imagine the author "realistically," respecting all the relevant circumstantial and textual evidence. We can discuss these three points later, if you wish. Now—back to Beckett's text!)

In the third paragraph our narrator concentrates on graveyards, telling us he prefers the scents of the dead to the odors of the living, but we mustn't let the shock of this revelation distract us from the attention paid to writing in this paragraph. For it is here that we discover our narrator to be a writer. He enjoys, he tells us, wandering among the slabs, "culling inscriptions." He never wearies of these, since he always finds a few that are so amusing, "of such drollery," he says, that he has "to hold on to the cross, or the stele, or the angel, so as not to

fall.” More important for our interpretive purposes, however, is the revelation that the narrator has composed his own epitaph, which he inscribes not on stone but in our text, and that he has written other things that he finds revolting as soon as they are “dry.” This is a curious moment, for the narrator’s life, as revealed in the subsequent paragraphs, seems to be that of a homeless person, expelled from his father’s house after his father’s death, briefly taken in by a woman, driven out again at the moment of his own dubious paternity by the cries of his newborn child. There seems to be no place in this life for pen, ink, and paper—for “writing” in the physical sense suggested by that expression: “My other writings are no sooner dry than they revolt me.”

I am inclined to read this curious allusion to “other writings” as a kind of break in the text, in which the author’s voice is inscribed over that of the narrating character. If we attend to what I have called the “circumstantial” evidence about this text, we can note that Beckett did not like it very much when he wrote it in French, nor, again, when he translated it into English. (I learned this from a recent biography, too expensive to purchase, which I scanned, standing on one leg, in a book store. [Let this parenthesis represent my unfulfilled desire for more proper documentation.]) This story, “First Love,” is, no doubt, one of the “other writings,” that our narrator/author finds revolting. Of this pairing, author/narrator, it is the author, Sam, who writes on paper. Our narrator, who tells us (para 5) that he should have made a note “on paper” of Lulu’s proper name, did not in fact do so, though, in the throes of first love, he finds himself “inscribing the letters Lulu in an old heifer pat,” or, as he also puts it, “tracing her name in old cowshit” (para 5). When our narrator writes (inscribes, traces—how many words he has for writing!), he writes on dung. But who has written this story—and on what? There are other moments, as well, when what we might call the register of this account shifts from the abjection of a dispossessed vagabond, to a different level, where the abjection and dispossession are on a grander scale, seeming to mirror, in however distorted a manner, the life of a citizen of modern Europe, who is, in fact, an exiled (self-exiled, like Joyce, no doubt) Irish writer, who has wandered through Europe, writing, in a foreign language, texts he finds revolting.

Our narrator is not the only one whose words are writ in cowshit, and cowshit is not the only kind of shit in this text. It seems that history also excretes. In one of the few passages that serves to locate these events in a specific place, the narrator speaks of his native land in this way:

What constitutes the charm of our country, apart of course from its scant population, and this without the help of the meanest contraceptive, is that all is derelict, with the sole exception of history's ancient faeces. These are ardently sought after, stuffed and carried in procession. Wherever nauseated time has dropped a nice fat turd you will find our patriots, sniffing it up on all fours, their faces on fire.

Many a nation, not excluding my own, has had its moments of worship for the droppings of history. But that scant population, achieved without birth control, seems to point to Ireland more clearly than to any-place else. (The text's most specific geographical reference, of course, is to the Ohlsdorf graveyard, in Hamburg, which is present by association, as the complete opposite of the graveyard visited by our narrator. Beckett, of course, did indeed spend some time in Hamburg early in his career.) The mask of this character/narrator is being worn loosely by the author, whose voice repeatedly makes itself heard, though the story is clearly too absurd, too beautiful, too neat—to be literally his. History's "ancient faeces," of course, are themselves signs, already traces, inscriptions—which is why they are worshipped. By positioning them within his account of inscribing the word Lulu on cow pats, the author/narrator compares his own behavior, when crazed by "first love" to the behavior of his crazed compatriots, sniffing up the droppings of history: "Would I have been tracing her name in old cowshit if my love had been pure and disinterested? And with my devil's finger into the bargain, which I then sucked? Come now!" He sucks his sticky finger, the devil's finger, too, like the patriots, sniffing up the feces of history with their faces on fire.

A pretty pass, to which our narrator was led by the events that took place on a bench by one of the town's two canals. These events, nar-

rated in paragraph 5 (the second devoted to “less melancholy matters”) may be said to reach a climax when he stretches out, with her “fat thighs” under his “miserable calves.” Let us follow the event in his own deadly prose. (I will need to quote at some length, here.)

She began stroking my ankles. I considered kicking her in the cunt. You begin to speak to people about stretching out and they immediately see a body at full length. What mattered to me in my dispeopled kingdom, that in regard to which the disposition of my carcass was the merest and most futile of accidents, was supineness in the mind, the dulling of the self and of that residue of execrable frippery known as the non-self and even the world, for short. But man is still today, at the age of twenty-five, at the mercy of an erection, physically too, from time to time, it's the common lot, even I was not immune, if that may be called an erection. It did not escape her naturally, women smell a rigid phallus ten miles away and wonder, How on earth did he spot me from there? One is no longer oneself on such occasions, and it is painful to be no longer oneself, even more painful if possible than when one is. For when one is one knows what to do to be less so, whereas when one is not one is any old one irredeemably. What goes by the name of love is banishment, with now and then a postcard from the homeland, such is my considered opinion, this evening. When she had finished and my self been resumed, mine own, the mitigable, with the help of a brief torpor, it was alone.

One may pause to note the misogyny of this text. Our narrator, like many male modernists and postmodernists, wants to associate the female with the body and the male with the mind or soul. Unfortunately for him, however, he has a phallus, which ties him to woman, reminds him that he has a body, that he shares “the common lot.” “Even,” he says, “even I was not immune.” Of course, this narrator and his world being what they are, his erection is nothing to brag about—“if *that* may be called an erection.” But this is a strangely philosophical passage, is it not? The actual physical act, to which the title of the story may refer,

seems to have taken place here, somewhere in or behind this paragraph, between the erection and the torpor, while the narrator was philosophising about the self and the nonself in his enervated existentialist jargon. "What goes by the name of love is banishment," says this Irish exile. And he says it at the present moment, "this evening." And which evening is that? We may well ask. Is it the evening of this first act of "love"? Probably not. That would be "then." This is now, *this* evening. But the text also situates this moment as "today, at the age of twenty-five," the age, that is, which the narrator was *then*. Uh-oh! Beware, interpreters! Traps and snares are being set for you. Is it the evening of the act of narrating? Perhaps. Is it also the evening of the writing? Possibly. Or of the translating? Maybe. Or is it no actual evening at all, but just the word "evening," a signifier, with a signified, but no referent? Almost certainly. And yet, to read is to assign not only signification but reference to words, even if to read fiction is to assign fictional reference.

It is possible that this particular reference to "today, at the age of twenty-five" is intended only to describe how men in general, at the age of twenty-five, even in the present era still behave. But "today" and "this evening," in association, reinforce one another in their apparent reference to a present time. This is a text that both invites and undoes the assignment of specific reference to its significations. But let us look more closely at certain other features of this paragraph. "She began stroking my ankles. I considered kicking her in the cunt. You begin to speak to people about stretching out and they immediately see a body at full length." Notice first the pronouns: She, I, You, they. Two sentences of narration, referring to the two characters in this little drama, followed by two clauses of generalization, in which "you" and "they" have replaced "I" and "she." This late modernist narrator generalizes almost as much as Balzac or George Eliot. But these generalizations do not reach us with the same ethical authority, because the narrator is neither steady nor reliable, and the author has been contaminated by the narrator—or vice versa.

That "stretching out" should lead to visions of "a body at full length," should come as no surprise to any late modernist with T. S. Eliot's "The evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherized upon a table" always hovering in the intertextual background. Which

ought to remind us that another major intertext for Beckett's story is *The Waste Land*.

While I was fishing in the dull canal,
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck
And on the king my father's death before him.
White bodies naked on the low damp ground . . .
(lines 189-192)

In Eliot's world, however, one doesn't consider kicking one's neighbor in the cunt. Such are the advances of late modernism over its predecessor. The narrator of "First Love," in his own "dispeopled kingdom," is not fishing in the canal near which he is positioned. He becomes, rather, to his own disgust, one of the "white bodies," though neither naked nor on the ground. Unlike Eliot's mythical Fisher King with his sterilizing wound that will not heal, our narrator's wound is precisely his unsterility—that is, both his erection and his potency, his ability to engender. Or, perhaps better, his *inability not* to engender, his inability to terminate the absurd dance of corporeality so as to avoid passing it on to the next generation. His corpse, unable to come up to the scratch of decomposition, must continue to itch with the fever of procreation—and of composition. He must, in short, fuck and write.

He, that is his consciousness, cannot remain in the realm of pure thought but is "banished" by love to the badlands of the body, where his active corpse continues the gross joke of human existence. This is why the birth of his child is the final, unendurable indignity. Before that dreadful event, things had begun to get better for our narrator: "Already my love was waning. . . . Yes, already I felt better, soon I'd be up to the slow descents again, the long submersions, so long denied me through her fault." At this time he also began to hear his voice uttering unintended sentiments: "I was so unused to speech that my mouth would sometimes open, of its own accord, and vent some phrase or phrases, grammatically unexceptionable but entirely devoid if not of meaning, for on close inspection they would reveal one, and even several, at least of foundation. . . ." He does not say what his words are devoid of. Which makes this particular utterance, written not spoken, grammatically exceptionable. But here again, where there is no narra-

tive need for a discussion of expression and interpretation, the text finds it necessary to introduce the topic—and to leave it very much up in the air. The utterances of this speaker are alien to him, they may be full of meanings but they are (a) not really his, and (b) only “foundational”—whatever that may mean. I take it to mean that interpretation, working on these “foundational” meanings may indeed rise to others, but that these other meanings will be doubly detached from the author of the words being interpreted. Another warning from the author. Not only, no symbols where none intended, but also a guarantee that the utterances are cut off from any intention whatsoever. They will be the interpreter’s responsibility. We must respect that thought, I believe, and take responsibility for our interpretations of this text and others—but we must also try to pin them on the author as a blindfolded child tries to pin a cardboard tail on a cardboard donkey—which means that we may pin our interpretive tails to the author’s ear, or his haunch, or completely off the authorial image, but the goal is clearly to pin the tail to the author’s ass, where it belongs.

Coming back from this metadiscursive excursion into the larger topic of our conference, I want to pick up the interpretive thread of the birth/death connection. After Lulu/Anna begins speaking about “our” child in her womb, the narrator tells us that, “From that day things went from bad to worse, to worse and worse.” And then, the worst happened—not something like the death of mother and child that gives a modern novel like Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* its pathetic ending, but a perfectly normal live birth: “But I did not know yet, at that time, how tender the earth can be for those who have only her and how many graves in her giving for the living. What finished me was the birth. It woke me up.” He leaves a house for the second time in this narrative, driven out of his first home by the death of his father, and out of the second by the birth of his child. From this second house, however, he takes something with him—or rather something accompanies him. He is pursued by the cries of the newborn. He looks to the stars for orientation, if not for consolation, but he cannot even find the one he used to remember out of the many that his own father had shown him. He discovers that he cannot hear the cries when he is walking. His footsteps drown them out. But, whenever he stops he hears them. Then, he tells us, he “began playing with the cries”—play-

ing a kind of fort-da game, “on, back, on, back, if that may be called playing.” The cries became fainter as he distanced himself in space and time from the dreadful event of the birth, but, like the beating of the tell-tale heart in Poe’s gothic tale, they never stopped altogether. And what, he asks, does it matter, that they grew fainter: “cry is cry, all that matters is that it should cease. For years I thought they would cease. Now I don’t think so any more. I could have done with other loves perhaps. But there it is, either you love or you don’t.”

With these final words the narrator brings us up to the present again, and the author’s voice once again seems to be heard. “Playing with the cries” is an apt description of everything this author has written, text after text, in which we are allowed to hear the cries of corpses who have not yet come up to scratch. All of which would be unbearable for us as readers, if it were not for the fact that Beckett is indeed playing, that the texts are full of jokes and other verbal gifts, and that this author does not stand aside and sneer at his characters, nor blame the cosmos for its structure, but recognizes his own implication in his texts and allows us to see and share it, too. For this kind of playing with the cries of human existence, however imperfect, however, in Beckett’s own word, “revolting,” we must simply be grateful. There is much more to be said about a rich text such as this one. There are scenes and episodes I have left unconsidered, and I have not said nearly enough about “the dread name of love.” But limits are limits, and I must now abandon my own text, which I assure you, revolts me as much as Beckett’s revolted him.